

Book Reviews

Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping

DAVID M. LAMPTON

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David M. Lampton is one of a very small number of people who have had extensive interaction with China's top leaders – starting in 1971 as a member of a delegation that met with Zhou Enlai – more or less continuously for four decades. What is a bit unnerving is to realize that he has taken notes on all those meetings and not only knows where he has kept them but now has organized them into a data set. Would that we were all so conscientious! One thing that comes out of observing China for that long is perspective. As Lampton notes, that meeting with Zhou Enlai, who was accompanied by Yao Wenyuan and Zhang Chunqiao, gave “no inkling” of today's China or of the importance of contemporary Sino-US relations (p. 11). It is that sense of perspective that gives Lampton's book depth. For one thing, Lampton's meetings with Chinese leaders suggests that governing China is extremely complex; the demands on the political system are extraordinary and the progress made over these past four decades not easily won.

What makes China complex is, in part, its policy process, composed as it is of a complex grid of often competing interests. Building on his previous work (such as *Policy Implementation in Post-Mao China*), Lampton argues that issues that cannot be resolved at lower levels are kicked up to higher levels – often overwhelming leaders at that level. To illustrate his point, Lampton discusses, among other things, the long, ongoing effort to pass an atomic energy law, a regulatory step that is seemingly needed but, because of competing bureaucracies, something that has not been accomplished after more than 30 years of discussion (pp. 87–89).

Moreover, as China has developed, interests have multiplied, public demands have increased, and the media environment has become more complex. It is simply impossible to imagine the Chinese propaganda system covering up a major earthquake today, as it did in 1976 when the Tangshan earthquake happened. Meeting with Wang Hairong, Mao's grandniece then serving as vice minister of foreign affairs, Lampton and his group found her remarkably uninformed about the magnitude of what had happened (p. 95). The flood of information in contemporary China, both official and non-official, marks the growth of a better informed, more involved and more demanding public. Indeed, the policy-making environment has grown more complex.

Nowhere is the policy-making environment more difficult than in foreign policy. One example Lampton uses to illustrate how competing interests affect foreign policy is the very delicate situation that existed in Hong Kong following the June 4 crack-down in 1989. At that time, Xu Jiataun was head of the Xinhua office in Hong Kong and was trying to be reassuring to the people in Hong Kong while telling his superiors in Beijing that they needed to reassure the people of Hong Kong that reform and opening would continue. At the same time, however, Zhou Nan, the conservative vice minister of foreign affairs, and Lu Ping, the director of the Hong Kong and Macau Office in Beijing, were taking a much less conciliatory approach. Indeed, before long, Zhou Nan had set up a committee to investigate Xu, and Xu,

understanding the precarious nature of his position, left for the United States. The connection between domestic politics and foreign policy is always close, sometimes very close (pp. 116–17). That anecdote will no doubt resonate with those watching the recent protests in Hong Kong.

Perhaps no area concerns Lampton more than the military. When talking to former general secretary Jiang Zemin in 2002, Jiang explained that he retained the chairmanship of the powerful Central Military Commission because “*all the people in the military wanted me to keep it*” (p. 174, italics added by Lampton). Assuming that the initiative really did come from the military, it was, as Lampton points out, an instance of military interference in Party affairs and was undermining civilian control of the PLA. Indeed, the PLA seems less and less reluctant to express its own needs – for more arms and for better salaries – and its own policy preferences. As the US “rebalances” to Asia even as the growth of the Chinese economy slows, there are likely to be real pressures from the PLA to maintain budget increases in this heightened “threat” environment (p. 183).

Although Lampton is overall optimistic about China’s political trajectory, there are issues that concern him greatly. Noting that China is “under institutionalized” (p. 50), he worries that domestic and international trends might overwhelm the system. “China is at an inflection point,” he observes, noting that pulling together this book led him to a “greater, and to some degree unanticipated, appreciation of the fragility of the successes thus far achieved as well as the enormous challenges lying ahead” (p. 220). As he notes, “China is becoming vigorous in terms of economic and military power but brittle in terms of governance” (p. 221). Lampton worries about the corruption that has become “a cancer on the regime” (p. 226) and about a military-industrial complex that is likely to become progressively more central to the Chinese economy, and hence more influential” (pp. 227–28). Perhaps most tellingly, Lampton concludes that “[a]ny meaningful liberalization and constitutional development will involve a redefinition of the PLA’s relationship to the Communist Party” (p. 228). If Lampton’s surmise is correct, the challenge to China’s political future is great indeed.

One might think that four decades would indeed be enough time to sit back and reflect on the course of Chinese development, but one has to wonder whether the tone of the book might have been different if Lampton had waited just a couple more years. He was writing just as Xi Jinping had been named general secretary and there was no sense then of the degree to which Xi’s behaviour would challenge some of the assumptions in the book. Lampton argues that over the course of four decades Chinese governance and leadership have moved into an “*entirely different political space* from that of 1977” (italics in original) in which today the leaders are no longer the “transformational and charismatic” sort that Mao was or exhibit the “strongman leadership” of Deng Xiaoping but rather mark “a more transactional, system-maintenance type of leader.” At the same time China has established a “collective system of leadership” that is not without fissures but nevertheless governs by committee (p. 53). The emergence of Xi, however, challenges the common assumption that each leader is weaker than his predecessor and that China is becoming a “normal” country (in an institutional sense). Is it really true that “Xi’s authority rests on a selection process that involved many in a ‘selectorate’” and “[w]hat the selectorate has conferred, the selectorate can withdraw” (p. 63)? As of this writing, some 45 ministerial-level officials and 74,000 lesser cadres have been cashiered in the current campaign against corruption. Xi may have embarked on a high-risk strategy, but one guesses that a combination of his pedigree and a sense of the fragility of the system has motivated Xi and his colleagues to challenge many of the trends of the

past 40 years. It seems, for the moment at least, that the “uninstitutionalized” characteristics of the Chinese system are prevailing over the trends toward a more regularized polity. If so, I fear that some of Lampton’s concerns may prove prescient.

Overall, this is a wonderful overview of the past four decades of Chinese development and engagement in the world. Written with Lampton’s usual facility, it is suitable for graduate and undergraduate courses, as well as a broader public.

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Beijing’s Power and China’s Borders: Twenty Neighbors in Asia

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Bilateral relations between neighbouring countries are usually treated with particular attention in the study and practice of international politics. This is not only because these interactions provide insights into the foreign policy calculus of each of the partners, but also because they illustrate the fragility and/or stability of regional patterns of order. When one of the partners is a country tipped to be the next superpower, then the interactions it has with its neighbours gain particular significance. The implication is that the relations a rising power has with its neighbours are indicative of the impact and trajectories of its global influence. This volume, edited by Bruce A. Elleman, Stephen Kotkin and Clive Schofield, provides probably the most comprehensive overview to date both of China’s interactions with its neighbours and the kind of power relations that these reveal. It has to be acknowledged that attempts (if not the desire) to understand the motivations underpinning Chinese foreign policy are gaining increasing urgency in what is nearly universally acknowledged to be the “Asian century,” and this volume makes a meaningful contribution to this conversation.

As the contributions to this collection demonstrate, China’s bilateral relations are part and parcel of broader region-building strategies in its neighbourhood. The volume discerningly draws attention to the increased prominence of China’s regional arrangements – formal and informal – for the resolution of border disputes. It seems that in all the case studies included in this collection, Beijing’s intention is the establishment of stable, peaceful and not least predictable relations with its neighbours. These would ensure not only China’s security and prosperity, but also an environment conducive to its rise to global prominence. In this setting, the contributors to *Beijing’s Power and China’s Borders* examine the extent to which an emerging pattern of global politics can be gleaned from the interactions between Beijing and its neighbours.

In a nutshell, the query then is whether China’s nascent bilateral relations suggest a foreign policy outreach whereby Beijing’s agency initiates idiosyncratic discourses and practices through which global neighbourhoods begin to perceive themselves as distinct regional actors. In this respect, this volume maps the shifting perspectives on China’s international agency by providing detailed and unusually perceptive accounts of China’s relations with its 20 neighbours: Afghanistan (Artemy M. Kalinovsky), Bhutan (Paul J. Smith), Brunei (Ian Storey), India (Brahma Chellaney), Indonesia (I Made Andi Arsana and Schofield), Japan (June Teufel Dreyer), Kazakhstan (Stephen Blank), Korea (Charles K. Armstrong), Kyrgyzstan