

The Northeast Asian Regionalism Context

by Gilbert Rozman

Gilbert Rozman (grozman@princeton.edu), a senior fellow at FPRI, is the Musgrave Professor of Sociology at Princeton University and author of *Northeast Asia's Stunted Regionalism: Bilateral Distrust in the Shadow of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming June 2004).

The study of democratization often elicits wishful thinking, from both advocates, who can always find reasons why it is coming soon, and resisters, who make excuses why a nation is not ready for it. In recent years, China has become the foremost object of this debate. Social science theories of systemic change are inadequately developed to resolve this discussion, and the evidence from China's quarter-century transformation away from Maoist rule is mixed. This paper therefore restates four theoretical frameworks with attention to how China's evolution and current situation fit into them: 1) modernization theory; 2) comparative communist theory; 3) civilizational theory with Confucianism; and 4) national identity theory linked to ideas of globalization, all interpreted in the context of emerging Northeast Asian regionalism.

The evolution of postwar social science can be traced through each of these theories, as they were applied to China and shaped perceptions of it. In the 1950s China, along with the Soviet Union, appeared to be a test for modernization theory, with claims of successful five-year plans and then the Great Leap Forward that defied the logic of balanced modernization. The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) masqueraded as reform of socialism, but after 1978 China really led the way to theorizing about reform, that is, market socialism. Over the course of the 1980s and '90s it came to epitomize the special legacy of Confucian values for development. Since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, China has provided a test for globalization theory centered on converging national identities. In each case, China offers a prime case for theories of large-scale social change.

Modernization Theory

In its heyday (1955–67), modernization theory was favored as an alternative to market economics theory (which was suspicious of convergence in which national legacies matter) and neo-Marxist thought (which was unsympathetic to prospects of reform tied to the international relations of capitalist countries). It served as a backdrop for U.S. efforts to transform less-developed states around the world by showing the way to upgrade the overall quality of life while forestalling the appeal of communism. Many economists had been advising states to drop all barriers to the free market; political scientists urged them to grant citizens full democratic rights, or made the transition seem easy once a takeoff stage had been reached.¹ By contrast, mainstream modernization specialists focused on balanced development that accorded with existing conditions and the level of transformation. But in the backlash from the Vietnam War, academics tended to oversimplify modernization theory, as if it had made Washington too confident that it could remake South Vietnam without paying much attention to the country's actual conditions. As a result, the essence of the theory was obscured. But some theorists kept their focus. They continued to follow Japan's "economic miracle" from this perspective. China's association with the theory kept growing, first as a rival model in the Cultural Revolution and then as a showcase of the theory in 1978–89, when its transformation under the slogan "the four modernizations" lent substantial support to the theory.²

Modernization theory is an optimistic framework that sets tough conditions. In contrast to the dependency theory that is popular among Latin American specialists, it holds that the international environment offers opportunities for marketing diverse exports. One by one, East Asian territories proved that. It also argues that if political stability and orderly competition are assured, individuals will seize new opportunities. This proved easy in East Asia, where strong civil-service and entrepreneurial traditions existed. The theory also stresses the advantages to be gained from developing human resources, through, for instance, providing education and social mobility. Chinese dynastic history had proven this, and in the second half of the twentieth century, China followed other East Asian nations in demonstrating it again. While the theory left no doubt that the means exist for countries far behind in development to catch up, it also made clear that to do what is necessary poses onerous demands. Leadership change may help, but democracy is not a panacea unless the population is well prepared.

During the 1980s, Chinese modernization theorists largely agreed that the theory supported gradual democratic liberalization in step with changes

¹ W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

² Richard Baum, ed., *China's Four Modernizations: The New Technological Revolution* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980).

such as urbanization and improved education. Yet from 1989 on, the critique of short-term political reforms hardened, ignoring the question of how a single-party monopoly contributes to rampant corruption.³ Extraordinary rates of economic growth through 2003 lent some plausibility to the case that yielding to democracy early in the reform of a traditional socialist system, as Moscow had done, could threaten the appropriate balance for revitalizing and sustaining a modern transformation.⁴ The controversy over timing turned on how much political liberalization suited the legacy from uneven initial modernization under Mao's socialist system and the rapid catch-up modernization of the 1980s and 1990s. If the fit is poor, China may give a short-term boost to growth by delaying democratization, but the overall complex of modernization will slow. The fact that China long remained at an early stage of modernization and wrestled with the distorted legacy of socialism must be considered in any assessment of how democracy best serves economic growth.

In 1987–89 Chinese actively considered the link between the stage of modernization, as well as the stage of socialism, and democracy. By 1982–84 criticisms of the Soviet system pointed to exaggerated claims by Soviet leaders about the stage of socialism, without adjusting social relations and political participation to the realities of economic life. Much was written in 1987 about how the lack of democracy in the USSR put a brake on development and how many positive effects were resulting from steps toward democracy.⁵ Even before 1989, however, censorship tightened coverage of Gorbachev's political reforms.

Modernization theory argued that functional linkages exist among the different aspects of social change that accompany sustained economic development, such as the transformation of the political institutions that support a market economy, a more diverse society, and the widespread dissemination of information. The Cold War boosterism that replaced social science analysis led some to insist that maximum democracy as soon as possible, regardless of local conditions, would produce the fastest economic growth. This ignored evidence that latecomers to modernization benefit from reforms launched from above by the state, which can more quickly remove some of the negative legacy of the earlier society or narrow the gap by

³“Xiandaihua lilun he shijie xiandaihua jin Cheng xiwen cankao wenxian mulu xianbian (Modernization Theory and World Modernization Process—Selective Bibliography) (Beijing: Peking University, Center for Studies of World Modernization Process, May 1990); Xintian Yu, “A Survey of Modernization Research in China,” *China Report*, April 1991, pp. 9–15.

⁴This became the mantra of Chinese authorized publications, conveying a negative image of Russia, as for a time in the journal *Dongou Zhongya yanjiu* (East European, Russian, & Central Asian Studies).

⁵Wang Qi, “Sulian shehui minzhuhua: quzhe er manchang de licheng” (Democratization of Soviet society: Ups and downs and lengthy process), *Sulian Dongou wenti*, No. 6, 1987, pp. 19–25, 86; Zhou Biwen, “Bashi niandai yilai Sulian guanyu minzhu wenti de ruogan lunshu,” *Sulian shebuixue yanjiu*, Jan. 10, 1988, pp. 11–17.

borrowing from already highly modernized societies. Democratizing was arguably unpopular in China by 1950—before land reform, educational expansion, and a buildup in national industrial and military power—because it threatened some priorities of national elites and could not be justified by analyses of recent rapid modernization in such latecomers as the USSR and Japan. Of course, the horrendous costs of the policies that were adopted, from the anti-rightist campaign and Great Leap Forward to xenophobia and the Cultural Revolution, made many wish that checks and balances had been in place.

From 1978 to 1989, state policies wavered between broadening elite participation in official decision-making and reinforcing Communist Party control over an increasingly diverse society. Students demonstrated when they sensed that Party leadership was tilting to the latter in 1988–89. The brutal response set back the incorporation of elites by a decade, until Jiang Zemin, as one of his final acts as Party secretary, officially opened the Party to businessmen. This act can be seen either as too little too late or as a tentative step that would later be bolstered by a change of course for political balance in modernization.

Much of the old modernization theory has been incorporated into recent theories of globalization.⁶ When some chose to add a distinction between postmodern and modernized societies,⁷ social science writings questioned the essence of the theory. Rejecting cultural relativism, in which economic growth no longer appears to matter much, globalization, especially as understood in East Asia, has brought renewed attention to competitiveness. The emphasis in academic writings has shifted away from largely autonomous states buffeted by international forces that exposed military weakness and poverty, such as China through the 1970s, to deeply interconnected states whose populations are bombarded with the fruits of new information technology, such as China today. Thus, the global dimension driving change has grown, and with it pressure to democratize.

China's entry into the WTO and its rapid adoption of advanced information systems reduced the chances of state-controlled, unbalanced development over a long period. Modernization theory always insisted that political liberalization is required and democratization eventually occurs if there is not to be stagnation. Globalization accelerates the urgency of democracy, both through a demonstration effect and as a means to renew rapid modernization. The principal message from modernization theory some fifteen years after political reforms were put on hold is that, although catch-up reforms have worked for a quarter century, China's prolonged economic spurt is in jeopardy unless a sharp turn occurs in the leadership's

⁶Timmons Roberts and Amy Hite, *From Modernization to Globalization: Perspectives on Development and Social Change* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).

⁷Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

political calculations. Even if the theory is not precise about how best to time democratization, it supports the argument that the imbalances that China shows no sign of addressing successfully—in income, etc.—will lead to a slowdown unless democratization follows. Since the 16th Party Congress in late 2002, China's leaders have raised the priority of “social modernization,” and with the SARS epidemic of 2003 they belatedly discovered transparency, but rumors of political reform have not been confirmed.

Comparative Communist Theory

Beginning in the early 1960s, Nikita Khrushchev's reform initiatives aroused interest in another field of social science with links to modernization theory. This was comparative socialism, which despite its potentially broad range actually concentrated on reform away from the traditional model. The field gained a boost from the Sino-Soviet split. Beijing and Moscow contrasted idealized versions of their own societies with demonized images of the other. Although foreign scholars considered neither to be democratic, they found evidence of interest groups forming in the USSR and of mass participation in China.⁸ While both indicated shifts away from totalitarianism, neither embraced political liberalization. The widening differences opened researchers' eyes to opportunities for comparisons. With a more educated and urbanized populace, the USSR appeared to have the advantage in borrowing from the West, but China's greater ease of market reforms later put it ahead.

If interest centered largely on the USSR through the mid-1970s, the field took an abrupt turn after Deng Xiaoping made China the most innovative reform state and approved scholarship on comparisons of socialist reforms as a guide to policy making. When Mikhail Gorbachev pressed reforms in his country, it began a widespread revival of comparative socialism that lasted into the early 1990s, providing some of the best material for evaluating the two cases together. Some studies narrowly centered on one social group.⁹ Others searched for an overall message useful for assessing China's prospects for democracy.¹⁰ The two giants of communism were thought to be sure to offer useful lessons for each other. They shared many of the same obstacles to establishing a market system and removing the stranglehold of a political elite unprepared for modern methods of leadership.

One approach to comparing reforms was to look systematically at the stages of building and dismantling socialism in China and Russia. Through

⁸ Donald W. Treadgold, ed., *Soviet and Chinese Communism: Similarities and Differences* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1967).

⁹ Constance Squires Meaney, *Stability and the Industrial Elite in China and the Soviet Union* (Berkeley: University of California, Institute of East Asian Studies, 1988).

¹⁰ Minxin Pei, *From Reform to Revolution: The Demise of Communism in China and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

looking at structural similarities and differences, researchers could gain evidence beyond the conventional coverage of the leadership styles of Deng and Gorbachev. On the basis of differences in the societies and in the international environment, leaders adopted contrasting logics of economic reform.¹¹ Gorbachev's turn to intellectual reformers opened discussion and spurred elections for office, while Deng's unleashing of entrepreneurial energies created a groundswell of decentralized economic activism that left officials scrambling to join forces and share in the gains. Different structural foundations for democracy, as well as different available logical strategies, gave Russians a head start in democratization.

China's fascination with comparative socialism is apparent in sources showing how Chinese assessed the reasons for the collapse of the USSR and the fate of its new, noncommunist order. Inside China, comparative analysis centered on change that breaks away from an existing system, taking for granted that the USSR started from a similar model of traditional socialism.¹² During the early 1980s, when social scientists, including Soviet experts, in China were instructed to draw lessons from Soviet politics, they warned of irregularities in democratic life within the party and praised the positive impact of a strong state on domestic social order and increased national power.¹³ A decade later, they were still ambivalent in evaluating the historical lessons of dramatic changes. There was renewed justification of central power to purge domestic counterrevolutionaries mixed with harsher condemnations of extreme use of centralized power.¹⁴ While the criticism of Soviet mistakes had intensified, reform thinkers who were most assertive about Moscow's need for political reforms had been silenced.¹⁵

The issue of whether China should democratize in order to avoid the fate of the USSR would not die. Despite Jiang's efforts to restore a positive image of Chinese socialism, now grafted onto a market economy, critics kept insisting that blocking democratization left corruption unchecked and vast numbers of people subject to arbitrary authority, and made China likely to follow in the footsteps of Eastern Europe and the USSR.¹⁶ Since 2001, Russian economic revival and cooperation with the U.S. war on terror under President

¹¹ Susan L. Shirk, *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹² Yan Sun, *The Chinese Reassessment of Socialism, 1976–1992* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹³ Liu Daichang and Liu Yanyu, "Sulian zhengfu tizhi qianxi" (Modest analysis of the Soviet political system), *Sulian Dongouweni*, No. 6, 1983, p. 4.

¹⁴ Ge Linsheng, "Luelun Sulian Dongou shuabian de lishi jiaoxun" (Overview discussion of historical lessons of the transformation of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe), *Dongou Zhongya yanjiu*, No. 1993, pp. 33–38.

¹⁵ See the issues of *Makesizbuyi yanjiu (Marxist Studies)*, such as No. 3, 1986, for lively exploration of democratic themes.

¹⁶ Barrett L. McCormick and Jonathan Unger, *China after Socialism: In the Footsteps of Eastern Europe or East Asia?* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1996).

Putin have left Chinese rehashing doubts of the early 1990s that their country was becoming isolated and falling out of step with global currents. Apart from China, socialist states were extinct or moribund. Haste in democratization could bring disorder, but delay might lead to collapse. Comparisons with Russia continued to resonate as guideposts for China's options.

Looking back on former socialist countries years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Chinese could see mixed results. Many states that had reverted to authoritarianism were floundering in stifled reform and stagnant economies. Chinese analysts displayed no support for such states. In lively discussions, they disdained self-induced social crises even when censorship deflected forthright coverage of these issues in publications. For instance, North Korea is roundly condemned for its politics as well as its economics, even if articles on these themes rarely appear. In contrast, East European states that made quite substantial democratic reforms drew praise for the effects on public support as well as economic growth.¹⁷ If the literature on comparative socialism stops short of sensitive overviews of how differences in political reform decide the fate of states, it at least looks skeptically on resistance to political liberalization. Whereas in the 1990s Chinese judged negatively the chaos of Gorbachev's political reforms and the economic decline of Yeltsin's first years, recent Chinese arguments support gradual, guided democratization. Putin's moves away from democratization are not reassuring to Chinese; after all, the idea that Russia's democrats are anti-Chinese was discredited in the 1990s, and Chinese suffer no less than others from the corruption that undercuts foreign investment and trade.

Memories of the decade from 1987 to 1996, which brought the collapse of the USSR and freefall for the Russian economy, still loom large in theoretical writings on comparative socialism. Democratizing precipitously may permit a few well-connected individuals to pick up prized pieces of the old order while the majority are left impoverished and powerless. This logic favors stages of democracy with checks and balances. If a case can be made that in the 1980s and even the '90s China still lacked some conditions that serve democratization, the current stage of modernization, at least in the coastal areas, along with globalization, brings China to a stage where further delay in democratization would likely carry greater costs in economic growth as well as in social injustice and the potential for social instability.

Civilizational Theory

Theorizing about East Asian development against the background of the regional cultural heritage offers another angle for reflecting on China's

¹⁷ Gao Ge, "Dongou guojia jingji zhuangui yu zhengzhi zhuangui guanxi" (The relationship between economic transition and political transition in East European countries), *Dongou Zhongya yanjiu*, No. 4, 2001, pp. 62–66.

limited political reforms. In the second half of the 1980s, democratization in Taiwan and South Korea, as well as increased scrutiny of differences between Japan and the United States, raised the profile of social science writing on East Asia as a region. After June 4, 1989, Chinese officials, considering it essential to overcome isolation and later to keep pace with the EU and NAFTA, approved steps to integrate their country into a wider region.¹⁸ They took more seriously the significance of “Eastern civilization” as a factor in shaping modernization.¹⁹ Until the Asian financial crisis, positive coverage of “East Asian modernization” and “Asian values” persisted. Often, one of the lessons drawn was that individualism is largely a Western phenomenon that leads to a particular pattern of contestation that shapes one region’s democratization. In East Asia, a different pattern results from an emphasis on harmony coupled with less litigious state-society relations. China’s leaders had found a new rationalization for delaying democratization, embedded in rejecting universal theories drawn from the historical records of the West and instead giving attention to theories cognizant of regional civilization.

As late as the seventeenth century, the idea that any major civilization had created a tradition for democratic development would have found little support. State-building resulted in clearly vested central authority, as the state sought to reduce the risk of invasions and rebellions; in a more regularized bureaucracy, in order for the state to be able to ensure the stability of life; and in a differentiated public domain, in order for it to be able to maintain vital public services such as irrigation works and granaries. Democracy was not seen as a means to these ends. While succeeding in continuous state performance of these functions beyond what was accomplished anywhere else, China also set limits on centralization and arbitrary rule greater than was customary elsewhere. The Qing dynasty encouraged Confucianism in order to inculcate its version of morality and sponsor its own social ethics. Confucianism provided a blueprint for family-centered morality reinforced by community autonomy. China’s lack of separation of church and state lessened its chances for indigenous democratization. Rival forces normally appealed to state officials, lacking any alternative authority. Confucianism gave the Qing a moral force that could urge reform and oppose aggrandizement by ambitious rulers, even if that force was undercut by the fact that imperial Confucianism, which concentrated on bolstering the emperor’s position, overwhelmed reform Confucianism, which favored the ideals of scholar-officials eager to solve existing problems.

¹⁸Yang Xiyu, “Shijie jingji jiduanhua de tedian, yingxiang yu diaozheng woguo duiwai kaifang zhanlue de jidian jianyi”(Features of forming groups in the world economy: some suggestions to influence and adjust China’s foreign open door strategy), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi*, No. 1992, pp. 1–7.

¹⁹Luo Rongju, “Shenru tantao Dongya Xiandaihua jinchengzhong de xin jingyan,” *Zhongguo shehuikexue jikan*, No. 2, 1995, pp. 166–81.

The debate about Confucianism's impact on modernization and democracy was renewed in the 1980s. It began in literature on Japan and what were labeled the "four little tigers" (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore). There was a growing consensus that shared traditions in East Asian populations (work diligence, aspirations for education, family strategies for savings and mobility, etc.) favor rapid modernization but delay challenges to authority that boost civil society and lead the way to democracy. Once liberated from the fetters of a transitional era, the economic culture excelled in producing Confucian capitalists, while deference in the political culture left longstanding hierarchical relations inimical to democrats.²⁰

In the "cultural fever" of the 1980s, Chinese evaluated the alternative choices for a "spiritual civilization" to accompany and boost the material civilization emerging with rapid modernization. One position held that the Cultural Revolution had its origin in an autocratic tradition linked to Confucianism and that, in order to prevent other disasters and advance to a new stage of modernization, China should make a break with the past. By the early 1990s, however, after leaders had railed against "bourgeois spiritual pollution," they settled on praise for "Eastern civilization." Singapore and South Korea became models for public policies and management. Japanese culture was a lively interest for a while, as studies pointed to the cultural roots of management and to the way foreign and domestic culture were combined to further modernization, including giving it a political foundation.²¹

The Asian financial crisis shifted the burden from explaining why adversarial means associated with the West should replace harmonious ideals that brought growth and order to arguing why Asian crony capitalism should persist when it leads to inefficiency, unfairness, and a high risk of failure. Boosters of Asian values lost ground across East and Southeast Asia. The case for a shared East Asian civilization also was fading in the mid-nineties in the wake of rising nationalism, which pointed to differences within the region. Tokyo had counted on improving ties with Beijing as it recovered from its isolation after June 4, 1989 and again in the first years of the Clinton administration. It now found Chinese nationalism targeting its aspirations for regional leadership even as Japanese nationalist writers increasingly criticized China while justifying their country's own wartime conduct. Division over how to interpret the occupation and wars of the 1930s–40s eclipsed commonality over a millennium of Confucian civilization. Even without the Asian financial crisis, Tokyo's appeals to a shared worldview had no future

²⁰ Gilbert Rozman, "The Confucian Faces of Capitalism," in Mark Borthwick, ed., *The Emergence of Modern Pacific Asia* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 310–22; Lucian W. Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies 59, 1988).

²¹ Liu Tianchun, *Riben xiandaihua yanjiu (Studies of the Modernization of Japan)* (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 1995).

when they masked high levels of distrust and served for states such as China as a way to rationalize the refusal to share power through democracy. The year 1997 provided a wake-up call.

Eventually, regionalism may return to the symbolic unity of Confucianism, but at present, with old models of modernization being replaced with new ones, more de-Confucianization is needed. Advocates of traditional values are often the most active opponents of democracy and civil rights, including those for women, migrants to cities, and rising elites. Only further globalization may pressure the state to reduce subsidies and easy credit for the old elites while favoring the aspirations of new generations of better-educated, more cosmopolitan individuals. Theories of civilization that credited Confucian values with permitting national achievements became justifications for slow democratization that threatens future achievements. Yet clearly democracy works well in East Asia and among Chinese populations, such as in Taiwan, and comparisons across the region since 1997 reinforce this point.

National Identity Theory Linked to Globalization

The 1990s saw a new worldwide wave of theorizing on changing national identities in an era of accelerated globalization. Analysts identified many reasons for the changes in identity being observed: the formation of new nations, altered national goals after the end of the Cold War, loss of the rigid socialist worldview as the communist bloc crumbled, and nearly universal exposure to the reach of global forces. Having started in the 1970s with little integration into the world order, China may be the country most buffeted by financial globalization, the information revolution, and even the new security interdependence since 9/11. Once the veneer of Cold War thinking was stripped away, identity challenges obliged nations to face more directly the ideal of democratization, which symbolizes the modern state. The more globalization proceeds in other respects, the more foreigners and even Chinese apply the standard of democratization in evaluating a country.

From 1989 to 1995 the United States viewed globalization largely through the lens of human rights and democracy. Managing relations with China proved difficult. Beijing was alarmed by these pressures, fearful that China would lose leverage in the world.²² The jolt to national identity was severe for a political elite accustomed to boosting China's national power, including its will to counter other countries' enhanced power. Beijing accepted economic integration as a necessary force of globalization, but refused to embrace the twist that Americans, triumphant in the Cold War and angered by Tiananmen, gave to it.

²²David M. Lampton, *Same Bed Different Dreams: Managing U.S.-China Relations 1989–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

Looking for some key to gaining China's future cooperation with the United States, U.S. scholars searched for China's national identity in history, recent cultural trends, state-society relations, and foreign policy.²³ But a rapidly globalizing world was changing the context for expressing identities. Increasingly, Jiang Zemin was catering to nationalism, accentuating China's great-power identity. As the Clinton administration concentrated on financial globalization through its second term, China appeared to be a strong potential partner. It was praised for not devaluing its currency in 1997–98. It recycled its huge trade surpluses into dollars through purchases of treasury bonds and other actions warmly welcomed in Washington. If Beijing's emphasis on great-power maneuvering, especially during the Kosovo war in 1999, annoyed Americans, it did not undercut the overall assessment of China as a globalizing state that deserved entry into the WTO and permanent normal trade relations, which would logically be followed by democracy. Even China's nationalist outbursts and military warnings against Taiwan's independence did not shake Clinton's faith in its evolutionary path.

A discordant note came from Clinton's critics on both the Right and the Left who sought a different U.S. national identity and found China a useful vehicle to achieve it. The fact that Beijing continued to delay democratic reforms and was recidivistic in its human rights record gave credibility to these critics. Few, however, evaluated China's struggle for a viable national identity against the weight of changes occurring in China and its annual double-digit foreign trade growth while preparing for WTO membership. China's third-generation leaders were fighting an uphill struggle trying to solidify a national identity capable of blocking the spread of economic globalization into political globalization. The potential for social unrest was mounting as laid-off workers, farmers far from commercial markets, and, by 2003, an expanding wave of college graduates with few job prospects were blaming state policies and questioning the legitimacy of Communist Party rule. The leaders' claim to be defending national identity lost credibility as great-power competition receded before the dual force of economic integration and common threats to global security.

The Bush administration, especially after 9/11, identified globalization with the struggle against terrorism and WMD. The national identity choices narrowed. In the late 1990s China had explained its pursuit of a separate identity by reference to forces of cooperation that exceeded those of competition. To behave like a normal great power would not interfere with the thrust of globalization. To oppose the United States would cast doubt on China's acceptance of globalization in a polarized world where serious threats existed to security. When the North Korean nuclear crisis arose in 2002, Chinese felt obliged to contribute to finding a solution that would

²³ Lowell Dittmer and Samuel S. Kim, eds., *China's Quest for National Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

eliminate the North's weapons. This served its identity as a responsible participant in globalization, albeit one opposed to the United States' imposing its blueprint for the world. China was shifting, but this did not mean that it could find common ground with unilateral U.S. positions that unnerved other states, too.

The transition from third- to fourth-generation leadership in Beijing began at the November 2002 Party Congress. Differences over political liberalization quickly separated the two groups. The Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao leadership became identified with more open information in the fight against SARS, less coddling of corruption, and more sympathy to the losers in the unequal economic system. To consolidate power, they could use closer relations with the United States, which, in turn, could create a positive environment for democratization and cooperation in the war on terror. Already it was clear that Beijing's shaping of national identity for domestic and international reasons was different than it was in the 1990s. But the Jiang faction counterattacked, calling a halt to the summer 2003 intra-leadership discussion on political reform that was raising such themes as separation of Party committees from government offices, constitutional reform, direct election of representatives in labor unions and other bodies, and even reconsideration of the verdict on the Tiananmen incident.²⁴

The new U.S. interpretation of globalization puts greater strain on China's lasting search for a national identity that boosts its standing in the world and the region without sacrificing its quest for regaining a central place in East Asia and recovering Taiwan. If China sees the United States as standing in its way, Chinese reformers will have a tougher time. Steps toward democracy will be difficult if they are inconsistent with China's national quest. The Bush administration must steer a fine line between partnership and pressure in order to support democratic currents, and China's fourth generation cannot stray far from identity themes raised by the third generation if it is to consolidate its hold on power.

The Search for Northeast Asian Regionalism

Besides national identity, regional identity is becoming important worldwide, albeit more slowly in Northeast Asia than in Europe. In 1986, Gorbachev's Vladivostok speech, which brought "new thinking" to cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, signaled a new opportunity for nations in Northeast Asia. Soon Japanese anticipated that they could "reenter Asia" and lead their own region, including a still economically undeveloped and presumably dependent China. After June 1989 they renewed their efforts, culminating in the first visit by a Japanese emperor to China. In return for accepting the new regional order, China could expect a buffer from the

²⁴ John Pomfret, "China Orders Halt to Debate on Reform," *Washington Post*, Aug. 27, 2003.

fallout of historic currents and isolation. Regional partners frowned on rising nationalism in China, but they placed few demands for political reform as long as economic relations were expanding. Regionalism promised substantial economic gains and less pressure for democratization.

In 1990–93 Beijing encouraged regional cooperation, steering it toward local economic linkages. Deng Xiaoping reinvigorated economic reform, while keeping the lid on political reform. Before long, criticism of Japan's intentions intensified in China, and the Clinton administration's human rights pressure put Beijing on the defensive. Beijing sought an answer in encouraging greater nationalism. During the mid-nineties, approaches to regionalism gave priority to pride in civilizational ties, but under the weight of nationalism Sino-Japanese differences grew more obvious. Great-power maneuvering in the late nineties contradicted China's efforts to advance regionalism, such as agreeing to establish ASEAN +3. Until the end of the decade there was no reason to view regionalism as a force for domestic transformation, and especially not for democratization in China. Despite the growing appeal of regionalism in China, faulty reasoning across East Asia assumed that it could be advanced without solving basic questions of trust.

During the second half of 1999 Beijing took a fresh look at globalization and regionalism. It became more realistic about great-power relations and “smile diplomacy” toward Japan. Now Chinese face a global economic transition, as the growth patterns of the 1990s end and WTO membership begins; a global geopolitical transition, as the U.S. leads the war on terror and WMD; and a generational transition as the fourth generation under Hu replaces Jiang's generation. The Northeast Asian region, compared to the global community, offers some prospect of relief in each area. This regionalism may delay democratization, but not for long.

In September 2001 China's strategy of giving priority to a strategic partnership with Russia unraveled when Putin firmly sided with the United States in the war against the Taliban. Having only recently stabilized relations with the United States after the turbulent first months of the Bush administration, which included tensions over the downing of a U.S. reconnaissance plane, China gave its support to the war too. Ties have kept improving, but Beijing keeps facing new tests, especially over North Korean nuclear weapons. Even as it took additional steps to meet U.S. expectations, the need to find balance in regionalism became ever more apparent. The call for regionalism grew louder in Chinese academic circles.²⁵ By itself, China is too small an economic power and a security force to have a lot of leverage on the United States and the partners the United States can muster. By working closer with neighboring states, China can take advantage of the global trend

²⁵ “2001 nian Yatai diqu zhengzhi jingji xingshi yantaohui zaijing juxing” (Beijing academic discussion is conducted on the year 2001 Asia-Pacific region political and economic situation), *Dangdai Yatai*, No. 1, 2002, p. 63.

toward regionalism. This cannot be done on the basis of a closed region or one hostile to U.S.-led global forces. The new realism cautions that China accept a balance of countries and a predominantly global orientation in order to forge a region that can become a mechanism for checking some unilateral global forces.²⁶

The path to regionalism, after a solution is found to the nuclear crisis in a manner that boosts security, must first cross the North Korean divide. What deserves attention is the meaning, for democracy, of a multistage breakthrough toward regionalism over the next decade. Instead of concentrating exclusively on U.S.-Chinese relations as the stage for China's democracy, Washington should also consider how China's rapid economic integration within its region, joint efforts to resolve security uncertainties, and a vision of regionalism might influence Beijing. East Asian pressure for political change is likely to be more indirect than U.S. pressure, with Japan and South Korea being the two regional forces.

Beijing has been concerned to reverse the downturn in Japanese public opinion toward China since 1995, but has little to show for its efforts, nor is increased economic interdependence leading to better ties. Beijing must appeal to the Japanese public by taking confidence-building security measures, starting with management of the North Korean crisis, and by projecting a trustworthy image. The United States and Japan combined can overwhelm China's ability to gain flexibility in international relations. Japan, too, is eager to bolster its international leverage and gain a larger voice in Asia. Some Chinese scholars have already begun to develop this argument.²⁷

China has had greater success with public opinion in South Korea, but this is not enough to solidify Beijing-Seoul ties. After all, Seoul seeks less dependency on any one power, not China as a new hegemon. It is sensitive to Chinese ambassadors' throwing their weight around, and close to half of the electorate did not support the past two presidents' taking a soft stance toward North Korea in a step that accommodated China. Any steps toward Korean unification would make it even more imperative for China to keep on the good side of the South Koreans, in order to shape the outcome. The more democratic China's image, the more likely that South Koreans will be persuaded of a special relationship with China that will endure as integration of their peninsula proceeds.

Under Putin, Moscow has been open in trying to use its energy resources and newfound influence with North Korea to shape regionalism so that China will not gain dominance. Under President Bush, Washington has

²⁶ Wang Yizhou, "Zhongguo yu duobian waijiao" (China and multilateral diplomacy), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi*, Oct. 2001, pp. 4–5; Pang Zhongying, "Zhongguo de Yazhou zhanlue: linghuo de duobian zhuyi" (China's Asian strategy: flexible multilateralism), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi*, Oct. 2001, pp. 33–34.

²⁷ Shi Yinhong, "[Japanese-Chinese drawing close' is the new task of Chinese diplomacy]," *Sekai Shubo*, May 6–13, 2003, pp. 46–49.

more actively aimed to boost Japan as a regional leader, limiting China's influence. More eager about its pursuit of regionalism, China has little choice but to improve its image and forge relations of trust. Regional aspirations within China's elites have become a restraint on Chinese politics and may, before long, emerge as a driving force for more transparency and democracy.

Resistance to democratic reforms in China will continue. When modernization theory spread there in the first half of the 1980s, the leaders twisted it to justify excessively slow political reforms. Then, when comparative communist theory addressed Gorbachev's reforms in the second half of the 1980s, Beijing distorted it to rationalize the suppression of the Tiananmen demonstrators. Similarly, in the first half of the 1990s, notions of Eastern civilization supported neo-authoritarianism as a superior regional variant in development. Finally, as globalization accelerated, Beijing has grasped national identity claims as a mechanism to boost China as a great power. The discussion about regionalism promises to yield other rationalizations for one party's monopoly on power. Beijing was right to question the overconfidence in theory of many in the West who made economic development at all stages conditional on democratization. But the opposite extreme found in Chinese conservative circles—minimizing the need for democratization in the next stage—reflects no less overconfidence in theory. Even if social science theorizing remains insufficient for showing the ideal timing for democratic reform, the evidence suffices to cast serious doubt on further lengthy delays by Beijing.

