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### David Shambaugh, China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation

Berkeley, UC Press; Washington, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008,  
234 pp.

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# David Shambaugh, China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation

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- 1 David Shambaugh's volume concentrates on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as an institution. It attempts to answer the following key questions:
- 2 (a) Why has the CCP survived in power? (b) What lessons has the CCP learned from the collapse of other ruling communist parties? How have these lessons been applied in China since 1989? (c) How has the CCP analyzed its own conditions? and, (d) Will it endure as the ruling party in China?
- 3 Shambaugh argues that the CCP as an institution has been in a progressive state of atrophy. Globalisation has undermined its control over society. It also faces serious challenges of increasing social stratification and inequality, widespread corruption, pervasive unemployment, rising crime, and rural unrest. At the same time, however, the CCP is also showing itself capable of significant adaptation and reform in a number of key areas. In practice, the CCP in recent years has been engaging in a historically unprecedented political experiment.
- 4 This experiment is partly based on the lessons absorbed by the Chinese leadership from the collapse of the Soviet and East European regimes, and partly based on its study of other modernising and newly industrialised states such as Singapore. Chinese leaders today realise that economic growth alone is inadequate to maintain the legitimacy of the regime; a basic social security net and a range of core public goods plus improvement in governance are called for. Is this formula for political stability going to succeed? The Tibetan riots in March 2008 seem to suggest the negative, given that since 1999, Tibet has enjoyed above-average economic growth rates relative to other provincial units, better social security because of substantial subsidies from the central government, and arguably better governance because local cadres are more restrained

from indulging in corruption and the abuse of power. At the same time, the Chinese people clearly realise that there is no credible alternative to CCP rule in the foreseeable future.

- 5 Shambaugh observes widespread agreement over the CCP's state of atrophy, but sharp disagreement among analysts over how successful the CCP's reform attempts have been in re-legitimising its rule. The author labels the two groups "optimists" and "pessimists" and offers a summary of their views while avoiding taking sides.
- 6 Shambaugh analyses in detail the views of six Chinese scholars from official think-tanks regarding the collapse of the Soviet Union and the East European regimes. While the analysis is interesting, it is not possible for the author to trace what impact these views have had on the Chinese leadership, and he has not taken the trouble to establish links between the release of these views and the introduction of relevant domestic and foreign policies.
- 7 As CCP analysts have not limited their studies to authoritarian or single-party states, Shambaugh could only limit himself to a small sampling of their discourse on the lessons drawn from a wide variety of ex-communist systems, including "colour revolutions," single-party authoritarian systems, multiparty authoritarian systems, and multiparty democratic systems. These analyses have been remarkably eclectic, and Shambaugh's important observation is that the Chinese party-state is evolving into an eclectic entity. However, maintaining the CCP in power remains the bottom line, and maintaining as well as improving its legitimacy and "ruling capacity" is the principal challenge.
- 8 Since 1978, the CCP has been adapting its ideology to suit policy decisions taken on non-ideological grounds. The author gives special attention to four recent political campaigns: Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" campaign launched in 2001, Hu Jintao's "Scientific Development" and "Socialist Harmonious Society" campaigns, launched in 2003 and 2005 respectively, and a campaign launched in 2004-5 on the CCP's "Governing Capacity." Shambaugh has not, however, analysed the evolution of these campaigns in response to major challenges to the CCP at various stages; nor has he attempted to assess how the campaigns have contributed to the CCP's survival in power in the foreseeable future.
- 9 Shambaugh argues that the essence of a Leninist party is its organisational penetration and domination of society, and he believes that most of the initiatives in this area occurred since 2002, and especially after 2004, i.e., in the era of Hu Jintao. Shambaugh does not explain why such organisational initiatives did not emerge under Jiang Zemin or Deng Xiaoping. Fighting corruption, for example, certainly isn't a recent challenge.
- 10 The author considers that the leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao "appears to be very stable" (p. 157). He is correct in stating that it has done nothing to loosen coercive controls on dissent, the Internet, or other political challenges to CCP rule. This stability is expected to last until at least 2012. The CCP provides protection and resources to the government and the military in exchange for corporatist professionalism and allegiance. At the membership and organisational level, however, the CCP encounters major problems of corruption, cronyism, and nepotism, as well as the declining appeal of its ideology and the growing moral vacuum in society. The Chinese government attempts to improve its governance capacity, while the CCP tries to create better

channels for articulation of interests, but there is no convincing vision for future direction; in its stead, the Hu-Wen regime offers a populist agenda.

- 11 On this basis, Shambaugh rules out the scenario of Western-style democracy coming to China. Systemic collapse is also unlikely, as is prolonged stagnation, devolution into a fascist-type system, or a return to the Maoist system. Adaptation alone, however, may not rescue an atrophying regime. The author's recommendation is to institute greater political competition within the political system, with the expectation that the CCP will pursue political reform incrementally.
- 12 In sum, this is an interesting though cautious book, which contributes to our understanding of the Chinese regime's own trajectory on a well-researched basis.