

# THE MARSHALL PAPERS

## Soviet Lessons for China Watching

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### THE ISSUE

*Edited by Jude Blanchette of CSIS and Hal Brands of SAIS, the Marshall Papers is a series of essays that probes and challenges the assessments underpinning the U.S. approach to great power rivalry. The papers will be rigorous yet provocative, continually pushing the boundaries of intellectual and policy debates. In this Marshall Paper, Ford Hart argues that Chinese Communist Party (CCP) political institutions, the CCP's practical behavior, and continued veneration of Marxism-Leninism in the CCP constitution highlight the Soviet model's deep influence on Beijing. As such, lessons from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) can help us understand the CCP's approach to governance today.*

Soviet-origin governing institutions and processes exert enduring influence on the People's Republic of China (PRC). Its substantially imported political structure arguably has at least as much practical impact on Beijing's behavior as the ideology it also imported from Moscow. While the PRC is not a carbon copy of the USSR, Soviet lessons still have much to teach observers about Chinese governance.

PRC policy shifts over the past two decades have reinforced the relevance of these lessons, and the increased opacity of the Chinese political system makes it necessary to exploit all available tools to assess its behavior. The Soviet experience illuminates, for instance, the impact of the Leninist apparatus on PRC regime behavior, the challenges for understanding China, and the future of its political system. Key insights include the following:

- The Leninist system's functional requirements substantially account for China's conservative departure in recent years.
- The PRC system is opaque by design, with information deployed solely to advance the party-state's current goals.
- China will ultimately transition from Leninist rule but under unpredictable circumstances and probably only after many more years.

The Soviet model is not China's destiny; it is only one of several factors that have shaped PRC history and will continue to influence its future. Nonetheless, understanding it is indispensable to making sense of China's behavior and prospects for change.

## THE LENINIST SYSTEM

The CCP embraces a Leninist apparatus that exhibits strong continuity with the party-state transferred to Beijing by the Bolsheviks and the Soviet Union between the early 1920s and 1950s. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin pioneered its operating norms before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and led the system's improvisational build-out during its early years in power. Other Soviet leaders, especially Joseph Stalin, contributed to its development.

Leninist regimes—especially the surviving communist states (China, North Korea, Laos, Vietnam, and Cuba) and the two former European ones established principally through indigenous struggle (the USSR and Yugoslavia)—represent a category of authoritarianism with characteristic institutions and processes that manifest recurring patterns of behavior. (The Leninist regimes of other East European communist states were largely external creations that ended with the USSR's demise.) All authoritarian regimes are repressive, and some practices of Leninist regimes are common among them, but most of them are not Leninist.

A Leninist system features an authoritarian regime in which the ruling elite monopolizes political power in the name of a revolutionary ideology through a highly articulated party structure that parallels, penetrates, and dominates the state at all levels and extends to workplaces, residential areas, and local institutions. Party members are subject to strict discipline and ideological indoctrination, regardless of whether they work in the party apparatus or, like most, outside it.

In its struggle to seize and then hold power, the Bolshevik Party pioneered hallmark institutions long familiar to outside observers: a Central Committee, a secretariat with specialized departments (e.g., propaganda, personnel, and internal discipline), and a supreme leadership body at the very center commonly known as the Politburo—all mirrored at subordinate levels.

From the capital to the most distant locality, a Leninist party controls leadership appointments and transfers not merely within itself and the state but also among the military and security forces, the economy, academia, the media, the arts, religious institutions, social organizations, and beyond. Classic Soviet operational practices—such as centralization, mobilization, united front operations, and cadre self-criticism—endure in China. A ruling Leninist regime always seeks to maintain robustly coercive security services that are loyal, first and foremost, to the party itself. It also exhibits high levels of intervention in the economy, ranging

widely from state capitalism to command economics. Control of the economy is as important to party dominance as it is to overall national strength or the popular welfare.

The foundations of CCP ideology also came from Moscow. This body of thought combined a Marxist, class-based economic interpretation of history progressing inexorably toward utopia, Lenin's own theoretical revisions to Marxism, and, crucial to governance, his advocacy of an elite revolutionary party's unique role in leading the masses. To a ruling communist party, Marxism-Leninism's single greatest ideological value may well be in granting the secular equivalent of divine right rule through its role as the sole interpreter of "laws" of history.

Karl Marx's thoughts on social and economic justice remained enormously appealing, but it was Lenin's ruthless pragmatism that enabled communist regimes to seize and hold onto power. Chinese communists learned from Moscow that although the content of the ideology could vary substantially, its mere existence was functionally vital to the party's survival. It is telling that while communist regimes around the world have extensively revised their ideologies, they have been less liberal in modifying core structures, norms, and processes.

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The leadership's ability to require all party members to embrace its shifting interpretations of reality was and remains an indispensable component of rule. Among the tools at the top leader's disposal, command of the ideology is a brass ring of power, enabling him not only to legitimize shifting priorities but also suppress opposition and impose unity. Pity the poor Chinese communist who, over a long membership, has been expected to accept unconditionally the "scientific" need for, variously, a Soviet command economy, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, "reform and opening," and now a New Era of economic statism and intensified political control.

No notion of limited government constrains a Lenin-

ist party. Like the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), CCP official doctrine explicitly **extols** the concentration of power in its hands and rejects external restraints. Through the party's penetration of the state, society, and the economy, it can mobilize markedly disparate powers to advance its goals. Its core ruling institutions tend to be very durable: The Central Committee is now over a century old, and the CCP itself has governed all of China for over 75 years. Central Party officials operate within longstanding administrative norms, draw on time-tested doctrine, and have the luxury of long-term planning horizons.

Unfettered by legal or normative limits to the regime's reach into society or abroad, expedience in the service of the party is the North Star of decisionmaking at all levels. Political interests and vulnerabilities are always front and center in internal deliberations, reflecting the CCP's origin story—it understands subversion all too well—and the internal surveillance system's daily reminders of threats great and small.

Therefore, a ruling Leninist party like China's is permanently on alert to threats to its power. It is paranoid by design. This is in part ideological (e.g., the assumed hostility of "counterrevolutionary" forces at home and capitalist countries abroad) but is more a habit of rule in a system that brooks no challenge. Like most Leninist party-states, the CCP eschews an independent civil society and seeks to dominate all institutions. A Leninist party seeks not merely its survival but its unbroken monopoly on power.

Like all political systems, Leninist regimes can adapt to changing circumstances to a considerable extent without losing their essential characteristics. Yugoslavia, driven by existential threat, managed to sustain significant economic and social liberalization. Understanding tensions and tendencies within the Leninist model nonetheless helps explain why China has experienced a historic conservative shift over the past 20 years toward reinforced centralization, sweeping internal discipline campaigns, ideological orthodoxy, and suppression of civil society.

Observers naturally contrast these policies with those of the preceding "reform and opening" period, which Deng Xiaoping launched in 1978. Deng was, in fact, no less committed to Leninist rule, as he demonstrated brutally on June 4, 1989. Amid the rubble of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1970s, however, desperation to save the party-state drove him and his peers to radical experimentation: agricultural decollectivization, the gradual introduction of market forces, and a retreat of the party from the average

citizen's daily life. While democracy was never on offer, the changes at the time were remarkable and exhibited a surprising tolerance for risk to Leninist prerogatives.

While reform and opening delivered on growth and revitalization, it also diluted the system's controls, reduced discipline, and unleashed pressures for liberalization. The Tiananmen Square crackdown put a halt to official consideration of political change, but continued economic reform and attendant societal developments in the 1990s and 2000s further undermined the Leninist system.

Once reform and opening propelled China to a certain level of wealth and power, however, the arguments for further gambling with party equities were bound to encounter increasing opposition. The principal forces behind this counterreform were internal to the CCP, organic, and flowed from longstanding discomfort with the political effects of reform and perceptions of a shifting cost-benefit ratio. This resistance began to coalesce well before Xi Jinping's 2012 ascent to power. As Professor Susan Shirk **argues** in her important volume *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise*, the process likely began in earnest no later than the mid-2000s.

For governments that represent themselves as innately progressive, communist regimes are, in practice, notably conservative and intolerant. The CPSU's Leninist threat perceptions extended far beyond the conventional political sphere, so it was logical that the Kremlin would reject not merely explicit opposition but also unsanctioned manifestations of ethnic identity, religious faith, women's and other human rights, sexual identity, artistic creativity, intellectual exploration, and economic activity.

China's reform and opening period affirmed that some liberalization in all these areas was possible under a Leninist system. Nonetheless, limits always remained in place; the control apparatus never disappeared, and the party elite ultimately united against a growing threat to the system's very existence. Conservatism and intolerance in today's China reflect not merely Xi Jinping's whim but the same logic that drove Soviet behavior.

Recognizing the PRC party-state as a familiar political model, in fact, helps deepen understanding of Xi Jinping himself. Xi is the ultimate company man. However much his tumultuous youth informs his views, his professional life has been one of a decades-long ascent through a complex, established institution. Xi is the product and beneficiary of a distinct bureaucratic culture. His comparators are not revolutionaries like Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, or Deng

Xiaoping but leaders who came of age under ruling Leninist orders—say, Leonid Brezhnev or Jiang Zemin. The former were innovators: often visionary, necessarily iconoclastic. The latter were creatures of established bureaucracies in which institutional interests and preservation of the system were paramount. While not necessarily the gray apparatchiks of Western fancy, neither were these bureaucratic autocrats likely to challenge the fundamentals of a system that defined their very perceptions of threat.

National power, wealth, and popular welfare are important to Leninist leaders, but internal dominance—not mere survival—ultimately takes precedence. No liberal democracies and comparatively few authoritarian systems judge policy by such a broad scope of aspirations for regime control. China's affirmation of a **statist economy** at the July 2024 Third Central Committee Plenum makes sense in this context, and it is unlikely that Beijing's subsequent **stimulus measures** will represent a fundamental change to this course.

Indeed, it is entirely reasonable that the CCP today willingly takes a pass on the higher growth rates genuine market reforms could yield, correctly recognizing them as intrinsically dangerous politically. A systemic rebalancing of the economy to favor consumption is off the table for the same reason. If Beijing doubles down on state control, technology, and officially sanctioned innovation as economic drivers, it is largely because the regime's political imperatives rule out structural alternatives.

Meanwhile, Beijing's leftist shift has deepened the conformism typical of Leninist systems. From 1978, reform and opening gradually introduced greater willingness among leaders at all levels to take risks to promote growth, then their primary goal. Party members today operate in a climate of sharply reduced risk tolerance and appreciate that everything is political again—or could be at any time.

Xi's perpetual anti-corruption campaign has raised the stakes for all leaders and penalizes not merely malfeasance but also failure to perceive and implement the Center's will—*itself* harder to divine than before, with security in myriad forms having been prioritized to the same extent as economic development. At the very time subordinate officials are under pressure to obey and please, economic malaise robs them of tools to satisfy their political masters and increases the chances that poor local performance will invite punishment.

Striking the optimal balance between power and the requirements of governing an immense, diverse, and relatively open society is a constant challenge for today's

CCP. Over a decade into the Xi era, the average Han citizen (though decidedly not their fellow Tibetan and Uyghur citizens) remains freer and more affluent than they were in the early days of reform and opening, to say nothing of the high noon of Maoism. So far, Beijing still appears to understand that applying crude mobilization and control techniques to its ethnic majority is less likely to yield the regime's goals.

Beijing nonetheless appears willing to accept a balance that involves substantial economic and social costs: A vibrant national economy for its own sake is unacceptable, dissatisfied elites strive to move themselves and their wealth abroad, and the treatment of the Uyghurs confirms the party's willingness to revive totalitarianism as necessary.

A reversion to reform and opening is unlikely. Barring a successful leadership challenge (rare in established Leninist systems) or ill health, Xi Jinping is in charge indefinitely—and, if anything, his views will grow more illiberal as he ages. Moreover, while Beijing faces many difficulties, it is unlikely to confront challenges anytime soon on the scale that necessitated and enabled Deng Xiaoping's great gamble. Barring extraordinary developments, today's CCP will remain in a defensive crouch for the foreseeable future and respond to challenges conservatively to protect its Leninist order.

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## **CONFUSED OBSERVERS**

Opacity, disinformation, and foreign influence operations are enduring PRC practices with deep Soviet roots that have long impaired comprehension of China. An understanding of the mechanisms of governance Moscow transferred to the Chinese communists helps illuminate this area as well.

Under Lenin's leadership, propaganda was always a strategic asset in pursuing control of the Russian state. Formalizing party practice, the Bolsheviks established a propaganda department within the Central Committee soon after they seized power. The CCP today retains propaganda organs at all levels of administration, and the shaping of

public opinion and suppression of dissent are obligations for all party members. Soviet principles for the operation of these bodies and the regime as a whole remain very much alive. Leninist parties are highly secretive by norm and regulation. The party does not see itself as obliged to keep its own citizens—much less foreigners—informed of its intent. Control of popular opinion is its top public relations goal; transparency is innately suspect.

Reflecting their Soviet heritage, Chinese propaganda organs are under no obligation to respect truth or consistency. They are not subject to legislative, judicial, or media oversight. As CCP entities, their priorities, unsurprisingly, are party rule and advancement of party goals. Also copying Bolshevik practice, Chinese official rhetoric is freighted with ideological pronouncements that can be variously obscure, ambiguous, and (as necessary) dishonest. Even what appear to be routine statements can stump party members and long-term observers.

China's ruling party habitually speaks of its place in the world in triumphalist terms. Short foreign attention spans, especially in democracies, guarantee Beijing has international audiences that are periodically refreshed. Out of practice since the Soviet Union's demise, overseas observers are less likely today to recognize Xi Jinping's dramatic assertions of PRC ascendancy as (at least in part) echoes of Mao's claims to leadership of the “**third world**” and Lenin's celebration of the Bolshevik spark to the global revolution. This is how Leninist parties speak to the world and, just as importantly, themselves.

Leninist propaganda also obfuscates by repurposing liberal references to serve authoritarianism. Thus, like the USSR before it, the PRC **avers** that its repressive system is democratic—indeed, more perfectly so than Western liberal democracies. Beijing represents itself as a champion of human rights, but the CCP categorically rejects universal rights (such as those of speech or assembly) that China has nominally embraced in international covenants and, for that matter, its own state constitution (as opposed to the party constitution). While the party extols its commitment to sexual equality, for example, Xi Jinping in October 2023 used the All-China Women's Federation meeting to **exhort** Chinese women to marry and have babies. In the world at large, an autocratic, mercantilist China improbably represents itself as the champion of a “democratic” global order and free trade.

Denial of information is also a powerful tool for shaping

opinion at home and abroad. While the PRC remains more open today than the USSR was for most of its history (or China itself was 40 years ago), restrictions on data, always robust, have sharply revived in recent years. Foreign businesses, academics, and others have found it increasingly difficult to access previously available information. Meanwhile, Beijing has sharply **reduced** Western media presence in China, removing critical reporting about the PRC from the front page in many markets and enhancing the ability of CCP-originated stories to shape public opinion.

An additional inheritance from the USSR is interference in other countries' internal affairs. The creation of the CCP was itself an exercise in covert Soviet external operations: Comintern agents helped **organize** the Chinese Communist Party's 1921 underground founding congress in Shanghai and provided indispensable funding, equipment, and expertise during the CCP's early years. For their largesse, the Bolsheviks exacted strict obedience from what was at the time merely the Chinese branch of the Moscow-centered world communist movement. Soviet interference in other countries' internal affairs extended around the world and continued throughout the USSR's history, varying in content and intensity. While Leninist states have no more of a monopoly on foreign interference than they do on misleading state propaganda, they are noteworthy for the formal institutional and normative drivers of these activities and the absence of restrictions on them.

This is yet another area in which ideology flavors and justifies behavior: styling itself as the sole interpreter of “scientific” historic forces, a Leninist party operates with a deep sense of exceptionalism. It observes international rules and norms only insofar as they advance the leadership's goals. The law is no more a constraint on the party's overseas behavior than it is at home.

Observers therefore cannot be surprised that there is an unbroken link between, say, PRC direction of **communist insurgents** in colonial Malaya in the 1950s and Beijing's contemporary **efforts** to manipulate democratic elections and local media around the world. All have been directed by enduring CCP institutions to shape an international order to Beijing's liking.

While never an unvarnished success, China's influence operations over time have promoted a positive view of the PRC in many countries and certainly obscured understanding of its intent and ambitions in others. Xi Jinping has substantially invigorated foreign influence operations but

remained within the orthodox boundaries of the system CCP founders accepted from Moscow a century ago.

## RUSSIA'S PAST AND CHINA'S FUTURE

The Soviet Union's history can also help observers anticipate aspects of the PRC's future. The demise of the USSR confirmed that communist regimes are not immortal. The CCP's party-state could nonetheless rule China for an extended period yet, and the system is unlikely to end the same way the Soviet one did.

Leninist systems are extremely tough and can survive tremendous internal and external abuse. In countries where such regimes arose through indigenous struggle, the mortal vulnerability has been internal elite discord, not foreign pressure or popular revolt. Indeed, the peaceful collapse of the USSR along republic lines was arguably one of the least likely major political events of the twentieth century.

If North Korea and Cuba have survived the decades after coming off the Soviet dole, surely the USSR, with all its advantages, could have muddled on longer had it not been for the unintended consequences of Mikhail Gorbachev's reformist zeal. The **assertion** that U.S. pressure was the principal driver of the USSR's demise is unfounded. A more conventional general secretary would have exploited the foreign threat to extend the system's life—albeit at further cost to prosperity and human rights.

The CCP is unlikely to follow the CPSU's road to oblivion, if for no other reason than that Beijing is obsessed with the lessons of the Soviet collapse and on watch to prevent its replication. Moreover, China's party-state has assets Gorbachev's did not—in particular, a massive economy that is likely to grow well into the future, even if at a slower rate. When China eventually transitions from Leninist rule, it will be via a different route than the one the Soviet Union took.

The USSR's collapse nonetheless can still be helpful to anticipating change in China.

First, surprises happen. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 was not remotely inevitable and could have been avoided at many points. Nonetheless, it did happen, despite the best intentions of the Soviet leadership and, until quite late in the process, the loyalty of the military and security

forces. History is replete with political change driven by surprise, confusion, and compounded errors. This almost certainly will apply to CCP dominance someday. One of the biggest questions, perhaps, is whether it will occur through a sudden convulsion or prolonged evolutionary processes. For now, this is unknowable—though the evolutionary route seems unlikely in the years immediately ahead.

Another insight from the Soviet experience is that the diversity of party membership ensures there is a huge range of perspectives within the ruling class once citizens perceive a genuine prospect for systemic change. Leninist parties' conceit that they are elite revolutionary vanguards contributes to foreign misunderstanding on this point. In fact, with **nearly 100 million members**, the CCP is second only to India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party as the world's largest political party. China's Soviet-style "mass" organizations—such as those for workers, women, and young people—link yet hundreds of millions more to the CCP. Despite a daunting appearance of uniformity in thought and goals, the party's faithful in fact represent a huge cross-section of the PRC's 1.4 billion people.

As long as a ruling Leninist party remains a well-lubricated, disciplined operation, most citizens "go along to get along." When a serious prospect for change augurs, however, the diversity lurking behind party control, personal self-interest, and ideology's wall of sound can become evident. In the case of the CPSU, a huge, apparently monolithic party disintegrated in less than seven years, with many of its members joining the range of political parties that emerged. Suggesting similar diversity in China, foreigners who lived there in the 1990s and 2000s often encountered communists who in private articulated sharp dissatisfaction with CCP rule for a range of reasons. Those people are still there, and it is difficult to believe others aren't joining them—however much their public behavior currently suggests otherwise.

Regardless of its bravado, China's Leninist system displays ample awareness that its survival depends on perpetual vigilance. Whether it be **stock market instability**, mishandling of a **pandemic**, or protesters holding up **blank sheets of paper**, the CCP needs to treat every surprise as a potential threat to the entire system.

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## CONCLUSION

The adoption of the Soviet model by communist parties around the world was never a simple cookie-cutter process. As parties came to power, local histories, circumstances, and interests profoundly shaped the new regimes. There was considerable variation in Leninist practice; the PRC's ruling party is not the identical twin of the USSR's.

It has been important for CCP rule that China's pre-1949 political history was overwhelmingly authoritarian, its philosophies skewed toward hierarchy and control, and its culture conservative. These conditions provided fertile soil for communist rule in general and the particular nature of the Chinese Leninist state.

Those conditions did not, however, preordain CCP rule as we know it. It is significant that the party's founders modeled themselves not on just any Western Marxist party but on one of the most ruthless. The CCP's internal wiring chart today, its practical behavior, and the continued veneration of Marxism-Leninism in the Party Constitution make abundantly clear that the Soviet model still deeply informs PRC governance. ■

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