

***China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation.* By David Shambaugh. Washington DC & Berkeley: Woodrow Wilson Center Press & University of California Press, 2008. Hardcover: 234pp.**

Ever since the Tiananmen Square massacre nineteen years ago, predictions about the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) impending demise have been repeatedly made by Chinese and foreign observers. Yet while the 87-year-old party has been plagued by serious problems including endemic corruption, it has continued to defy doomsayers by not only attracting more members but also boosting its control over 1.3 billion Chinese.

Veteran Sinologist David Shambaugh has advanced a persuasive argument for explaining the CCP's staying power: while certain values and traditions of the party may be undergoing irrevocable decay, the world's largest political organization seems resilient enough to make adaptations that will at least serve to prolong the proverbial mandate of heaven. These changes have prevented the CCP from going the way of the Soviet Communist Party or the Korean Workers' Party of North Korea. Shambaugh argues that, beginning with late patriarch Deng Xiaoping, the CCP leadership has drawn the correct lesson from the dissolution of the Soviet bloc. "The lesson is clear: Adapt and change — or atrophy and die", he writes. "The CCP has clearly chosen the former option" (p. 178). The Sinologist notes, for example, that while the leadership has refused to share power with other elements in the polity, it has increased consultation with a broad spectrum of intellectuals and experts both in and out of the party.

It is however, difficult to pinpoint the extent to which the limited political reforms that the CCP has undertaken will enable the tradition-bound party to transform itself into a better, more responsive and efficient entity — or just to hang onto life. Shambaugh suggests two options that the CCP might take in the coming decade. One is to empower the National People's Congress (NPC), China's legislature, by buttressing its checks-and-balances function. The other is to give greater authority to the eight so-called "democratic parties" which are essentially adjuncts of the CCP dependent on the party's patronage. As the CCP is about to mark the 30th anniversary of Deng's reform and open-door policy, however, very little movements have taken place on these and other fronts. For example, while two leaders of "democracy parties" were made ministers recently, most affiliates of these parties remain servile recipients of CCP largesse.

While comparing the current regime, led by President Hu Jintao, to the era of former President Jiang Zemin (1989–2002), Shambaugh has given the Hu team more credit for daring to ring in the new. This, however, does not seem to square with the facts. During the latter half of the Jiang administration, the head of the so-called Shanghai Faction made the crucial decision to admit private businessmen to the CCP; he also experimented with elevating the level of popular elections from the villages to that of towns and townships. Since Hu came to power in late 2002, however, almost all aspects of political liberalization have been shelved. Instead, the 4th-Generation leader seems to be focusing on beefing up the CCP's already formidable control mechanisms. And it seems most improbable that this prediction made by Shambaugh, that “the CCP is most likely to pursue political reform *incrementally*: experimenting with new methods here and there, expanding them gradually horizontally and vertically within the country ...” will come to pass in the foreseeable future (p. 181).

While there is no danger of the party collapsing in the near or even medium term, the prospects for a higher degree of political pluralism — not to mention genuine power sharing and checks-and-balances — seem to be diminishing. The truth of the matter is that only some forms of adaptations made by the CCP under Jiang and Hu are geared towards ushering in — eventually — what Shambaugh calls an “eclectic state”. Other adaptations, made particularly by the conservative Hu, such as strengthening the party's authority over judicial organs, have amounted to turning back the clock. This essentially means that the CCP's ability to keep the fate of atrophy at bay has been achieved at the expense of the most fundamental rights of the populace.