

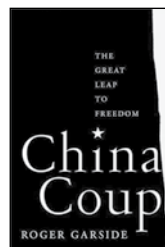
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*China Coup: The Great Leap to Freedom*

Roger Garside

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*“Through painstaking efforts, the Party has found a second answer to the question of how to escape the historical cycle of rise and fall. The answer is self-reform. We have significantly boosted the Party’s ability to purify, improve, renew, and excel itself, addressed the problem of lax and weak self-governance in Party organizations at the root, and steadily fostered and developed a political atmosphere of integrity within the Party. By doing so, we have ensured that the Party will never change its nature, its conviction, or its character.”*

The above lines were spoken by Xi Jinping in his speech at the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC). In China, there is a belief that what rise ultimately falls and what falls ultimately rises, and there is no escaping this cycle. This was aptly depicted in the ‘Romance of the Three kingdoms,’ written during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) by Luo Guanzhong.

The central theme of “China Coup: The Great Leap to Freedom” is the change in the political structure of China. The author, Roger Garside, lays out a hypothesis that there will be a coup d’Etat in the CPC, perpetrated by none other than the outgoing premier Li Keqiang. The

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book states that the coup will start with the United States Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) announcing ‘suspension of trading on all US exchanges of the securities issued by five of the Chinese companies with the highest capital valuations. The suspension of trading sets into motion a plan laid out by Li and Wang Yang that ultimately leads to Xi’s forceful resignation backed by the Standing Committee of the Politburo.

However, the coup is not the boldest claim or the most far-fetched idea of the author. The author further goes on to claim that the coup will bring forth political and economic reforms in China that would include democracy, economic liberalisation, and rule of law. As far as wishful thinking goes, the author’s assertion of China becoming a democratic country takes the cake.

Xi Jinping is the most powerful leader in CPC since Mao Zedong. His dominance in the party has made him a modern-day ‘emperor’ after he abolished the term limit for the President and virtually became China’s “President for Life.” The author predicted a coup in the party before the 20th Party Congress. However, the party congress has happened and not only did a coup not take place, the author’s protagonists i.e., Li Keqiang and Wang Yang have been excluded from the politburo. Although to the author’s credit, some anomaly did happen before the Party congress with rumours of a coup d’Etat.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The first and the last chapter are a semi-fictitious accounts of the coup and its aftermath based on real people. The eight chapters in between form the main body of the book and deal with the underlying reasons for the coup. The main body talks about the apprehensions of the Party, the proliferation of individualism in China, the lack of morality in public, the huge internal debt, and corruption. If the body of the book is summarised in a sentence it can be termed as “Everything that is Wrong with China.”

Garside’s analysis and theory are backed by his experience as a long-time diplomat who served in Beijing during the cultural revolution (1966-

1976), a stint at the World Bank and the London Stock Exchange, and as a Professor of China Studies at the US Navy Post-Graduate School. Garside has pointed towards a combination of factors that can lead to a coup within the Party. First, he draws a historical parallel where he compares Xi with Mao Zedong. He states the mayhem brought forth in the Party and China due to Mao's hard-line campaigns and economic stance and compares them to Xi's outlook on economic and foreign policy and their effect on the Party. The second factor is Xi's assertive stance on foreign policy. The Party believes that Xi's "Wolf-Warrior Diplomacy" has put China on a collision course with the US. Due to China's assertive foreign policy, autarkic economic policy, and emphasis on ideology under Xi, the US deems China as a challenge to the rules-based world order established after the second world war.

Garside's book will have a huge appeal among those who believe in the far-fetched idea of China becoming a liberal democracy with an open economy, rule of law, human rights, and follower of rules-based order. However, the argument seems unconvincing seeing the current scenario in the Party. While the idea of an internal coup in the Party can be entertained up to an extent, imagining a democratic China in the short-term is merely wishful thinking.

Coming to the prospects of a coup in the Party. Xi Jinping has become the most powerful leader in the Party since Mao. He has packed the politburo with loyalists in the 20th Party Congress. The people Xi has chosen have no source of power other than Xi and are unlikely to even show dissent against him, conspiring a coup is virtually impossible. Second, even the Central Military Commission (CMC) has filled Xi with a loyalist, patrons, and people with similar ideological leanings. This also makes it very difficult for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to go against Xi. Albeit there is large-scale public anger against Xi due to Zero Covid Policy. However, in the absence of a leader, China's population doesn't have the capability or the capacity to organise a revolution against

Xi. While the protests in China are not being ruthlessly suppressed yet, Xi is likely to follow the Hong Kong playbook and deal with the perpetrators surreptitiously. And as Garside has mentioned, China's internal security budget under Xi has superseded the external security budget thus indicating Xi's iron hold over the public.

However, political change is not impossible in China. It is bound to happen sooner or later. As mentioned earlier in the review, China follows a 'cycle of rise and fall' and the Party is at its zenith. It is rife with corruption, is out of ideas, and is averse to change. This rigidity in the Party and aversion to change will surely be responsible for its fall. Although that doesn't mean that China will become a democracy. The fall of the Party can bring forth chaos and instability in China. It can also result in hardliners taking over and taking China backwards, rather than forward. In conclusion, the possibilities are interminable, and it is not necessary that a political change will bring forth democracy, it can bring a power much worse than Xi Jinping.

All said and done, Garside's book makes up for an interesting read. It is a melting pot of fantasy, information, scenarios, and exciting ideas. The book reminds us that the Party is not a cohesive unit and there are deep divisions within. It raises a pertinent question of political instability in China. Usually, Party leaders have chosen their successors, even Mao chose Hua Guofeng. But Xi has been averse to choosing a successor, and that can result in a political struggle and instability in case of his sudden death or incapacity. With China's current political and economic standing in the world, that instability can have consequences for the whole world.

The book is an interesting read for beginners in China Studies. Moreover, the highly dynamic nature of China's Political system doesn't completely rule out the possibility of a Coup but such a Coup, if it happens, will be to reassert the dominance of the Party rather than bring about democracy.