

Hypothetical Federalism in China

The Imperativeness of Perception

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INTRODUCTION

The Great Leap Forward. The Cultural Revolution. The June 4th Massacre. China's political history is certainly well checkered with numerous turbulent events. And while the past thirteen or so years have witnessed a relative lull in terms of political fireworks, those who take up residence in Zhongnanhai have not settled into any sort of complacency. The stark reality is that under the veil of stability and normalcy, swept under the carpet during WTO accession parties and press conferences announcing phenomenal figures of economic growth, lie many temporarily dormant political crises that threaten the very continued existence of the Chinese Communist Party, and perhaps even the People's Republic of China. As Baopu Liu informs us, "Even Chinese leaders admit that its regime is 'stable but not secure'."¹

While relatively few of the numerous problems that threaten the political norm in China are currently visible, the PRC's political framework does not seem to hold any viable solutions to any of these potential political flash points. The lid of coercion, currently the CCP's favoured method of ensuring political stability, may be sufficient for the moment; however, the increasing liberalization of the political climate in China, as well as potential future turbulent events, both undermine the usefulness of coercion alone to deal with the PRC's problems over the longer term.

The popularity of the idea of implementing a federal framework in order to help address some of China's political problems has come and gone in several brief cycles over the past century or so. This paper shall re-examine the usefulness of a federal system in China once more; however, it shall take a slightly different twist. Rather than assuming a Chinese federation must necessarily coincide with multi-party democracy, free market capitalism, or a Western-style judicial framework (basically the three big pillars Western countries are currently based upon), I will attempt to build a federal arrangement based upon the PRC's political and economic realities. Instead of longing for a complete overhaul over China's political system, this paper will instead build a federal framework that is based upon the PRC's current authoritarian tendencies. No efforts to promote democratization are included in this study.

Many past efforts at examining the potential of federalism in China have concentrated on the hypothetical benefits of such a system; however, few have attempted to thoroughly and systematically answer the criticisms that exist in regards to such a proposal. As such, a significant portion of this paper will attempt to address such criticisms.

Federalism will not be portrayed as the final and concluding answer to all of China's woes. It will not be alluded to as a silver bullet that will solve virtually of the PRC's political dilemmas. Instead, this paper shall attempt to explain why federalism would be an *improvement*, especially in regards to the long-term, of the current political status-quo. It will not be a perfect fit, as no simplistic political system can ever hope to thoroughly and entirely answer all of the needs and demands complex human societies have. But, as I shall argue, a federal framework would likely function better than continued coercion under an unresponsive unitary system of government, as it exists in China at present.

SETTING THE SCENE

The People's Republic of China is home to 55 officially recognized minority ethnic groups, with the actual number likely in the hundreds. Many of these groups feel a strong sense of resentment toward the titular ethnic Han population, due to decades of state-sponsored discrimination from the Chinese government. Beijing, determined not to allow for territorial aggrandizement, has remained in an antagonistic and often hostile relationship with many of the minority groups since the founding of the PRC. To ensure political compliance from the numerous minority populations, the Chinese government has attempted to assimilate and co-opt many of these ethnic groups. Such government practices as encouraging titular Han to move into areas of dense minority populations to water down minority resolve has led to a feeling among many of China's minority groups of being under siege from Beijing.

While some of the more enthusiastic members of ethnic minorities may dream of independence from China, like all non-titular populations around the globe, most of these peoples simply view increased autonomy as their primary goal. The ability to engage in and protect one's distinct culture, language,

¹ Liu Baopu, "Reality Check."

religion, heritage, and so forth, is of utmost importance to all of China's unique minority groupings. Asking for such basic rights from Beijing may not seem to be highly contentious for the outsider looking in; however, for the Chinese government, delineating power to the regions contains a historical connotation of danger and destabilization, and is viewed as a slippery slope toward demands for outright independence, ultimately resulting in anarchy and warlordism across the country.

With such a catastrophic, although perhaps farfetched, scenario in mind, those who pull the strings in the Chinese government have been simply unwilling to download a great degree of power to the various minority groups. And yet, China's minorities will continue to remain in an antagonistic relationship with Beijing as long as they feel they are unable to run their own affairs to a satisfactory degree. Thus, a catch-22 emerges: no power has been delineated for fear of inciting secessionist uprisings, and yet such pro-independence sentiment will never relax as long as the relationship between the centre and the minority populations remains antagonistic and paternalistic.

Diversity and Antagonism

Despite the fact that the dominant nationality, the Han, make up more than 91 percent of China's people (according to the November 1991 national census), the PRC can be said to be richly populated by numerous minority groups. Officially, 56 ethnic groups exist; in reality, the figure is likely in the hundreds. 106.43 million persons, or 8.41 percent of the PRC's population, belong to these various national minorities. While the Hui and the Manchu mostly speak Mandarin, the rest of the groups predominantly use their own spoken and written languages.

One good example of just how "ethnic" China's regions can be is the province of Yunnan. According to official figures from 1999, Yunnan's population is composed of 25 of the 56 officially sanctioned ethnic groups. More than 38% of the province's people belong to a minority group, including the Yi, Bai, Hani, Zhuang, Dai, Miao, Lisu, Hui, Lahu, Va, Naxi, Yao, Tibetan, Jingpo, Blang, Pumi, Nu, Achang, Jino, Mongolian, Drung, Manchu, Shui, and Bouyei. According to China.org.cn,

"Ethnic groups are widely distributed in the province. Some 25 minorities live in compact communities, each of which has a population of more than 5,000. Ten ethnic minorities living in border areas and river valleys include the Hui, Manchu, Bai, Naxi, Mongolian, Zhuang, Dai, Achang, Bouyi and Shui, with a combined population of 4.5 million; those in low mountainous areas are the Hani, Yao, Lahu, Va, Jingpo, Blang and Jino, with a combined population of 5 million; and those in high mountainous areas are Miao, Lisu, Tibetan, Pumi and Drung, with a total population of 4 million."²

As picturesque as official portrayals of China's multiculturalism may appear, the reality is often starkly different. Systematic discrimination against minority populations seems to be more often the norm than the exception. For example, in Xinjiang, children may not attend Islamic mosques until they reach the age of eighteen.³ Taking part in such normal Muslim customs as praying or fasting during the month of Ramadan can often result in Uighur workers finding themselves out of a job.⁴ Turdi Ghoja, president of the Washington-based Uighur American Association, has little forgiveness for Beijing: "The Chinese have always been treating the Uighurs as enemies."⁵

Not surprisingly, the antagonistic relationships between Beijing and the various minority groups have roots that go far back into, and even before, the early years of the PRC. Two such examples, Beijing's relations with the predominant minority groups of the provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet, will be briefly mentioned in order to convey the historical roots of antagonism between the central government and many of China's provinces and regions.

The people of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, officially founded on October 1, 1955, found themselves in Beijing's bad books soon after their inclusion into the PRC. As the second World War was winding to a halt, Muslims in Xinjiang successfully launched a rebellion against Guomindang rule in 1944. Immediately afterward, the region was re-established as the independent Eastern Turkistan, and soon found itself on the receiving end of Soviet aid. The Soviets willingly gave up their influence and informal control of the region to the PRC, since the USSR was promised by the CCP that the region would be

² See China.org.cn's "Yunnan" website.

³ TimeAsia.com, "One Nation – Divided."

⁴ Gluckman, "Strangers In Their Own Land."

⁵ Gluckman, "Strangers In Their Own Land."

retained as “the exclusive sphere of influence of the Soviet Union”.⁶ Once informal control of the region shifted to the PRC, the region was quick to re-assert its independence, afraid of Chinese hegemony. Sure enough, Beijing went into the region with guns blazing, and forcibly incorporated what became known as Xinjiang into the PRC.⁷

Tibet also found itself forcibly included into China, thanks to steady CCP resolve to re-classify the region as a part of China (in reality, Tibet only became a part of China as of the mid-Qing dynasty, and even then was under Manchu, and not Han, rule). Beijing resolutely denies that Tibet was incorporated into the PRC against its will, and asserts that the region was “liberated” from the dark forces of feudalism. One official PRC website talks of the “peaceful liberation of Tibet”, and yet unwittingly mentions on the same page the Qamdo Battle that was waged between the local Tibetan government and the People’s Liberation Army of the PRC.⁸ An anti-Beijing rebellion was launched soon thereafter, causing the region’s political leader, the Dalai Lama, to flee to India.

These various centre-periphery relationships, most often antagonistic since their very inception, have not improved over the decades. In most minority regions of China, Beijing is seen as an outsider, a hegemonic force that interferes with the normalcy of daily life. These minority-dominated regions often come to the conclusion that they have little control over their own affairs; a significant amount of blame is placed upon Beijing for their political and economic problems, regardless of whatever Beijing is actually to blame.

The Growth of Anti-Systemic Nationalism

This paper uses a conception of nationalism that mirrors the idea employed by Benedict Anderson: a force that is both instrumental (opposed to “primordial”), and imagined (since most members of a national “community” never meet each other).⁹ As Anderson notes, this version of nationalism depends upon the confidence members of these “communities” have in the homogeneity of others within their nation.¹⁰ If Anderson is indeed correct that the creation of a more positive form of nationalism depends upon national homogeneity in any given society, then this would be a big factor in the social alienation among, for example, the Uighurs of Xinjiang, both because of the Han influx over the past several decades, and because of the perception of “traitorous” fellow Uighurs who help the central Han government do its dirty work (the latter invokes feelings of great resentment and “national betrayal”, as was the case among Chinese against Wang Jingwei after it became common knowledge he helped the Japanese set up a puppet government in China at the end of 1939).¹¹

Anderson notes how the concept of “Indochina” did not outlast the withdrawal of Western imperialist forces from Asia, while “Indonesia” did. He asserts that this is due to the fact that Indonesians perceived themselves as being racially equal to one another, while the Vietnamese saw themselves as being superior to Laotian and Khmer peoples, a perception that effectively prevented the notion of “Indochineseness” from ever cementing.¹² All of this relates to China, for if the minority populations of the PRC *perceive* themselves to be of lesser status than the ethnic Han, Beijing’s efforts to develop a “national consciousness” that transcends ethnic lines has likely been in vain. Thus, Beijing’s attempts to co-opt nationalism into a positive sentiment among all of China’s numerous ethnicities has failed. Instead, nationalism in China has resorted to its other, darker version.

David Henley has also examined these two perpendicular versions of nationalism, which he contrasts as being either “integrative” or “exclusive” in nature.¹³ He notes how these two opposed versions of nationalism often have to contend against each other in the same political arena, citing the example of India.¹⁴ This contest between two antithetical forms of nationalism also takes in China. For example,

⁶ Wang, p. 385-386.

⁷ Oster, “China Seeks Help In Taming Its Wild West.”

⁸ See *China.org.cn*’s “The Historical Status of China’s Tibet.”

⁹ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁰ Anderson, p. 26 and p. 35.

¹¹ For more information on Wang Jingwei, see Gerald E. Bunker’s *The peace conspiracy: Wang Ching-wei and the China War, 1937-1941*.

¹² Anderson, pp. 122-131; and Henley, “Ethnogeographic Integration and Exclusion.”

¹³ See Henley.

¹⁴ Henley, p. 312.

while the PRC is attempting to construct a state-wide, common PRC citizenship among all the various ethnic groups, which would help build a form of “integrative” nationalism, in reality alienated ethnic minorities such as the Uighurs of Xinjiang have promoted (albeit in an underground environment) an “exclusive” form of nationalism, one that wishes to see the independence of Xinjiang, or “Eastern Turkmenistan” as they call it, and perhaps even the ousting of ethnic Han from the territory they claim as their own.

A considerable amount of official rhetoric that speaks of all ethnic groups being equal in China exists; however, these official praises are merely formalities, unable to sufficiently mask the systemic discrimination that frequently persists against minority peoples. Beijing’s official claims of ethnic equality become immediately irrelevant; all that matters is whether China’s ethnic/peripheral peoples *perceive* themselves as being systematically discriminated against. And as long as this perception ensues, anti-systemic sentiment will continue to flourish within the PRC.

As Ron Gluckman argues, such minority groups as the Uighurs of Xinjiang do indeed perceive themselves as being less than equal to the ethnic Han in Xinjiang province.¹⁵ One Western diplomat in Beijing reckons that 20-25% of Xinjiang’s population are Han police and army officers, stationed primarily to quell any potential anti-PRC movements.¹⁶ So when Uighurs look around as see themselves living in a virtual police state, what are they to think? Doesn’t Beijing’s overly heavy-handedness feed into the already existing notion among Uighurs that they are strangers in their own land?

The notion that Uighurs should feel as outsiders within their traditional homeland under PRC rule should not come as a surprise. As one recent *TimeAsia* article put it, Xinjiang has a

“...distinctly schizophrenic personality, as can be seen on a stroll through Kashgar’s bazaar. Caucasian Uighur men in embroidered hats sit on hand-woven carpets hawking fearsome knives, gaudy jewelry, kebabs and figs in a guttural language received from their Turkic forebears. Their script is Arabic, their staple is bread, their worship is performed in a mosque on Fridays. The Chinese in Kashgar, part of a group that has grown from almost zero half a century ago to 40% of Xinjiang’s total population of 17 million now, live in modern apartments, eat rice—and shop in new department stores, not in the bazaar. The worlds are so separate that the two sides can’t agree on what time the sun rises. Uighurs set their watches to Central Asian time; Chinese to Beijing’s two hours earlier.”¹⁷

If Beijing truly wishes for China’s ethnic/peripheral areas to become politically stable, obviously attempting to lessen this perception of state-fostered discrimination and ethnic tension is of paramount importance. By downloading significant autonomy to these disgruntled regions, a federal political framework carries with it the potential to help ease some of these such highly antagonistic relationships between Beijing and the regions. Obviously a federal solution is not the only possible answer, but a significant delineation of power to the provinces would likely alter currently held perceptions against Beijing for the better.

Anti-System Secessionist Movements

As a consequence of the great deal of grievances the numerous minority groups in China have built up over the decades as part of the PRC, many secretive independence movements have been established. Several underground separatist movements have begun or re-emerged in recent years in China, most noticeably from the peoples of Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia. Members of these secessionist groups have led numerous vocal protests and have even resorted to armed resistance to further their respective causes. As one store owner in Xinjiang was recorded saying, “Uighurs have to fight for everything. Better to fight the Chinese.”¹⁸

A significant number of groups have been fighting a periodic campaign against Han rule in Xinjiang for more than a decade.¹⁹ As Louise Hildago notes, “demands for self-determination by the Uighurs of Xinjiang have been growing ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union and the emergence across the border of the Central Asian States, which are home to millions of Muslims very like

¹⁵ Gluckman, “Strangers In Their Own Land.”

¹⁶ Gluckman, “Strangers In Their Own Land.”

¹⁷ TimeAsia.com, “One Nation – Divided.”

¹⁸ TimeAsia.com, “One Nation – Divided.”

¹⁹ See BBC News, “China denounces separatists' Bin Laden 'link'.”

themselves.”²⁰ Over the years, various instances of outbreaks of separatist violence have occurred. 1996 and 1997 were particularly heavy years, “when riots erupted in several towns and bomb blasts rocked Urumqi, and even Beijing.”²¹ Beijing responded with a crackdown against any Uighurs suspected of having any involvement in anti-Beijing activities, culminating in 2000 with a large number of arrests, most notably of prominent millionaire Uighur entrepreneur Rebiya Kadeer.²²

It remains a matter of contention as to whether these secessionist movements are “naturally occurring” (meaning primarily due to widespread social sentiment), or are the product of power-hungry individuals egging on their fellow citizens for their own personal benefit. Philip Roeder argues that regionalist identity politics occurs simply because of politicians trying to ensure their own personal political survival. He sees ethnic rhetoric being employed by local leaders simply to ensure their own continued political support among members of their own national group.²³ Abby Innes, in her recent book that argues the decision to split Czechoslovakia into two independent states, Czech Republic and Slovakia, was not a publicly endorsed effort, also sees the drumming up of support for independence movements as primarily the result of concerted efforts by individuals to increase their own political status within their given ethnic grouping. Innes argues that the breakup of Czechoslovakia was a ploy by two regional leaders who made a secretive deal with each other in order to ensure their respective continued political survival.²⁴

Perhaps social support for independence movements among ethnic minority groups comes more from a common and widespread sentiment shared within such a national group, and need not be exacerbated by the actions of a small handful of national leaders. Could it be that while ethnonationalism is likely primarily a product of instrumentalism in the Russian Federation, such sentiment is more “genuine” and primordial in the PRC? Many political scientists of Russia have come to the conclusion that the majority of minority ethnonationalism in the Russian Federation is the product of the behaviour of a small group regional political heads. These politicians are said to have created political waves in order to gain appeasement handouts from Moscow, taking advantage of what was a weak federal system prior to Putin’s accession to the Russian presidency in 2000.²⁵ Seeing as these Russian regional heads are independent of Moscow, and need to procure public support within their region in order to become successfully re-elected, such politicians would certainly have significant incentive to fan the flames of ethnonationalism for their own personal career gains. In China, however, regional bosses are appointed by Beijing, and thus have more to lose from promoting minority ethnonationalism in their respective provinces. If some individuals are indeed purposely encouraging the expression of ethnonationalist sentiment in China, they certainly do not have access to the official corridors of power in the PRC.

Whatever the case may be, either that ethnonationalism is “naturally occurring” or is spurred on by a handful of individuals with their own personal vested interests in mind, secessionist sentiment certainly exists in the PRC to such an extent that it has become a matter of grave concern for those who reside in Zhongnanhai.

The Façade of “Autonomous Regions”

Despite the official existence of numerous “autonomous regions” at the provincial, county, and township levels where high numbers of ethnic minorities reside, these national groups have little control over their own affairs in practice. The designation of autonomy is a façade in virtually all of these regions; the vast majority of people from these areas actually enjoy less autonomy than their Han counterparts outside of these supposedly “autonomous” areas. As was already mentioned, many of the areas are under virtual police/military rule, firmly kept under the political thumb of Beijing. With apologies to Mao Zedong, the “autonomous regions” are nothing but “paper tigers” in practice.

And yet, calls for Beijing to download significant autonomy to the regions are often rebuffed with the remark that these minority ethnic groups already enjoy “autonomous region” status. Clearly, little

²⁰ See BBC News, “China executes 11 Uighurs.”

²¹ Gluckman, “Strangers In Their Own Land.”

²² See BBC News, “Uighur millionaire jailed in China,” as well as the numerous other stories by BBC News regarding mass arrests of Uighurs during 2000.

²³ Roeder, “Post-Soviet Institutions and Ethnopolitics.”

²⁴ Innes, *Czechoslovakia: The Short Goodbye*.

²⁵ From private discussions with two Russia specialists in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto: Donald Schwartz (November 2001) and Peter Solomon (March 2002).

autonomy exists in practice; if anything, the obvious lack of autonomy, combined with Beijing's heavy-handed behaviour in governing most of these regions, further exacerbates anti-PRC sentiment in many of the regions.

Even Han Regions are Under-Represented

So far I have addressed mostly the social plight of and hegemonic rule over the minority ethnic groups in the PRC. This should not lead the reader into thinking that the regions of predominantly titular Han peoples enjoy a much better scenario. While they do not face the level of abuse that minority regions tend to incur, Han areas are also under-represented by the current unitary form of government in place in the PRC. Not only are the more impoverished and non-Han provinces left out of the decision-making process at the political centre, but so too are such economic powerhouses as Guangdong.²⁶ The logic of the central government tending to turn a blind eye of the peripheral regions of China can be understood in the context of Beijing's short-term goal of building up the coastal provinces of China into economic powerhouses; however, under-representing the interests of even the core economic areas with the PRC, due mostly to the top-down, unitary government in practice in China today, obviously cannot be conducive to keeping China's economy growing at its current impressive rate.

No Long-Term Political Solution

At the present, there is simply no coherent or thorough strategy for ensuring the defusion of secessionist sentiment. Nor is there any concrete or well thought-out plan for giving more voice to the various regions within China despite the apparent liberalization of the economy (and increasingly even the political system), a factor which would seem to depend on the promotion of greater regional diversification and expression of local interests. The simplistic and short-sighted solution Beijing continues to employ to ensure stability is merely heavy-handed coercion, a strategy which may not hold up in light of China's rapid transition and social changes. If a political crisis were to occur in the future, and Beijing's ability to crackdown upon such a scenario were limited, there would be little the CCP could do to prevent catastrophic problems, including territorial aggrandizement. Seeing as many of the PRC's areas are involuntarily part of the PRC, common sense would lead one to believe such regions would pounce at the opportunity to leave the PRC should such an opportunity arise. With this in mind, Beijing's strategy of keeping China together with the barrel of a gun alone seems a rather short-sighted solution.

Every once in a blue moon, the CCP does indeed get an excuse to crack down upon whatever it asserts is the political enemy of the day. However, these windows of opportunity are becoming increasingly infrequent in light of the PRC's liberalization of the economy and numerous international ties. Recently, Beijing has been able to fairly successfully use the September 11th incident to its political advantage, alleging that the separatist forces in Xinjiang are just as deserving of the label "terrorist" as the Al-Qaeda. Fortunately for Beijing, the Uighurs also happen to be Muslim.²⁷ By tying Xinjiang groups to Bin Laden, Beijing hopes to be able to circumvent not only the incessant ostracization by numerous international human rights groups,²⁸ but also to avoid upsetting the U.S. political administration. As Willy Lam notes: "It seems that in return for Chinese acquiescence in America's exploits in Central Asia, the Bush Administration has obliged Beijing to some extent." And, the U.S. "...has largely kept quiet over ... the detention of more than 2,000 Uighurs in western and southern Xinjiang since late September."²⁹ Over the past eight months, in addition to the massive arrests, Beijing has imposed new restrictions on freedom of religion and cultural rights in Xinjiang.³⁰ Dru Gladney notes that Beijing wants "to take advantage of this situation and clean house" of any and all people it sees as contributing to the secessionist element.³¹ A massive public relations campaign to convince the international community that Uighurs are akin to

²⁶ Lary, p. 194.

²⁷ TimeAsia.com, "One Nation – Divided."

²⁸ See BBC News, "China denounces separatists' Bin Laden 'link'."

²⁹ Lam, "China plays waiting game with U.S."

³⁰ See Amnesty International's "China: Extensive crackdown on Uighurs to counter 'terrorism' must stop."

³¹ Gluckman, "Strangers In Their Own Land."

terrorists is one of the few options Beijing has left in attempting to curtail secessionist efforts in Xinjiang.”³²

Such opportunities for Beijing to aggressively deal with its unofficial political opposition are few and far between. But even when such windows do arise, such efforts at re-asserting Beijing’s dominance likely only serve to further exacerbate current anti-PRC sentiment, not only in Xinjiang but in other oppressed ethnic minority areas as well. Obviously, heavy-handed efforts at dealing with political subversion cannot be said to be anything other than a simplistic short-term solution, making relations between Beijing and the minority peripheries even further strained in the longer term. Beijing incessantly claims to wish to realize political stability³³; and yet, all of their tactics seem at best to be half-hearted efforts that simply do not strive to produce long-term solutions.

Recentralization via Force Fading as an Option for Beijing...

As was already briefly mentioned, Beijing’s ability to use coercive force in order to undue decentralizing trends is quickly disappearing. Historically, the drawbacks of reuniting China by force were relatively few to the regimes intent on realizing territorial reintegration: costs in terms of financial capital and human lives.³⁴ Even as late as the Mao era, the political regime in China has often viewed the country’s large population as a dispensable tool that could be sacrificed for political purposes. But in today’s global world of high-tech communications, worldwide media, international human rights conventions and monitoring agencies, and “humanitarian interventionism”, changing perceptions within and without China make pursuing re-centralization with the barrel of a gun a most difficult notion to conceive. Such a brutal crackdown in the contemporary era would risk both the loss of legitimacy overseas (threatening such prospects as foreign direct investment), and much more importantly, the loss of legitimacy at home.

Strong-arm tactics of assimilation simply do not work: they have often spurred minority groups to more aggressively protect themselves, causing an unintended backlash which can strengthen secessionist resolve, exactly the opposite of what Beijing intends. Furthermore, a considerable degree of international condemnation has met the assimilationist tactics of Beijing, especially in the case of the ethnic Tibetan population.

Unlike in decades past, Beijing faces much more significant consequences for using overt and blunt force, both internationally and domestically. As already alluded to, Beijing’s increasing international connections and commitments make using the barrel of a gun much less viable an option than ever before in the history of the PRC when it comes to putting down political subversion. Having already witnessed the international ramifications for the June 4th massacre by an appalled West, China today more than ever in the past 50 years is fully aware of the importance of staying in the good books of its foreign partners. Beijing risks losing a significant amount of trade and foreign investment if it would to once again engage in such bloody tactics. As a member of a rapidly growing list of international organizations, Beijing can barely afford to upset the global community like it has done in the past. Perhaps most importantly, the new international norm of neo-interventionism that NATO (read the United States) selectively uses against regimes that engage in widespread systematic oppression of their minorities can be said to give those in Zhongnanhai much to think about.

There is an equally lengthy list of domestic reasons as to why Beijing’s ability to use force as a tool to quell political subversion has rapidly dried up in recent years. An increasingly outspoken press has emerged, and despite cycles of Beijing muzzling China’s media over the past fourteen or so years, it seems that the CCP’s ability to temporarily reign in the media has dramatically decreased in recent years. A large number of Chinese have strong connections outside of the mainland, thanks in part to the use of the internet,³⁵ which limits Beijing’s ability to minimize outside knowledge of its internal affairs. More and

³² In early 2002, PRC Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzhao claimed there was proof linking Uighur agitators with ‘the bin Laden clique’. See Gluckman, “Strangers In Their Own Land.”

³³ A recent example of this can be found in a political resolution adopted at the recent Fifth Session of the Ninth CPPCC National Committee. See *Xinhua*, “CPPCC session closes, adopts political resolution.”

³⁴ Lary, p. 186.

³⁵ Despite periodic efforts to clamp down on political subversion on the internet, the CCP seems to be failing to control this flow over information in and out of China. See BBC News, “China loses grip on internet.”

more mainlanders are coming to support what have seemed until recently to be “outside” values, such as human rights and democratic norms. Attacks on minority regions would effectively put the final nails into the coffin of the relationship between Beijing and its ethnic minorities, instantly painting such recent constructive and positive efforts as the “Go West” campaign in Xinjiang invalid with the stroke of a brush. If Beijing had to depend on coercive force to keep order once again, it would highlight the regime’s inability to properly retain control over the PRC without resorting to violence, which would greatly jeopardize the CCP’s legitimacy to rule over China.

...Yet, Secessionism Unlikely to Occur in Practice

Despite Beijing’s reluctance to resort to blunt force in recentralizing its power and quelling political subversion, minority ethnic groups that entertain secessionism are unlikely to actually announce their independence from Beijing and the PRC anytime soon. A key problem facing the regional secessionist challenges in China lies in the fact that China’s provinces are not even remotely close to being ethnically homogenous. For example, while Uighurs are the titular ethnicity in Xinjiang, they make up only a relatively bare majority: the November 2001 national census notes that approximately 40% of Xinjiang’s inhabitants belong to the Han ethnic group. To complicate matters even further, many of the minority groups live in more than just a single province, making efforts to secede from China rather difficult to formulate. For example, a considerable percentage of ethnic Tibetans in the PRC reside in Qinghai, Sichuan, and even Gansu. Thus, if the Uighurs or Tibetans wanted to declare their independence from the PRC, it would be much more difficult than declaring that Xinjiang or Tibet, respectively, were to leave China.

But regardless of the lack of feasibility for a province to secede from the PRC, many ethnic minorities are determined to realize their autonomy from Beijing. This tension has existed for decades among the minority groups within China, and will likely witness an explosion of support before it ever begins to dissipate. While secession may not ever be realized, the mere existence of such widespread anti-system sentiment should be enough to cause considerable concern for the higher officials in Beijing. Some form of outlet is needed to prevent the relations between Beijing and its peripheries from further deteriorating to a point of no return. A political system that would give regions more autonomy to address their unique local concerns is necessary if the PRC is to remain politically intact in the longer term.

Unitary Government Does Not Serve the Diverse Needs of the PRC

With all of these many issues in mind, one could logically argue that the current unitary political system in China does not adequately serve the needs of both the government and of society. For starters, China is simply too large for unitarism, both geographically and demographically. The country has a massive landmass, spanning as large as some continents. China’s population is more than one-sixth of the planet’s total, and is composed of a mind-boggling diversity of linguistic and cultural groups. To attempt to run such an entity efficiently with a unitary system of government seems absurd. How can Beijing possibly claim to be able to run such a massive country efficiently under a unitary political structure, given the particularistic differences in each and every locale?

Furthermore, a unitary system of government gives little formal voice to regional interests. It prevents local areas, especially those of ethnic minorities, from being able to have an effective say in the administration of their own areas. While there are obviously distinct provincial levels of government at the present, and also local township and village levels (even democratically elected ones, at least at the two lower levels of government in rural areas), these tend to be simply top-down representatives of Beijing, groups of yes-men whose job is to ensure the capital’s dictates are realized at the local level. The idea that there exists an efficient and democratic transmission belt system in China that delivers information both up and down the vertical hierarchy of levels of government effectively is ridiculous.

While many officials are indeed simply servants of Beijing, a significant number do attempt to primarily serve the needs of their local area, especially officials based at the village level of government in rural China. Unfortunately, their freedom to experiment with policy is severely limited, so much so that such leaders must often reformulate policy behind Beijing’s back, to their own personal risk. Beijing generally is unaware of such discrepancies in policy until months or even years after the fact. Also available to local leaders in their deception against Beijing is the option to present faulty statistics to the upper levels of government in order to curry favour and rewards. While best known for occurring in mass

proportions during the Great Leap Forward campaign, this behaviour still continues to this very day, much to the chagrin of such economic powerhouses as current premier Zhu Rongji. Many economists have argued that the high national growth rates China has bragged about over the past several years come as the result of embellished local and provincial statistics on aggregate.

Obviously, Beijing is unable to successfully gauge the political and economic realities of the local regions due to such deceptive practices. Where this really hurts the local level is when Beijing thinks that its policies and efforts have been successful because of a lack of negative feedback from the local level. This leads the political centre to a false sense of satisfaction over the actual outcomes of its dictates at the local level. Just as this led to calls for further increased productivity from Beijing during the Great Leap when peasants were already starving, this top-down system and its inherent deception hurts the local level more than Beijing.

Admittedly, Beijing has downloaded a certain amount of autonomy to the local level since the beginning of the post-Plenum era in 1978. Unfortunately, most of this granted autonomy has been limited to the economic realm. Thus, despite the massive reform efforts since the death of Mao, the deceptive practices continue. The resulting inefficiencies continue to plague the Chinese political system, and are a breeding ground for corruption and other shady practices.

In light of the corrosive effects on political stability that the lack of autonomy granted to the PRC's minority regions has, would it not be wise for Beijing to extend the logic of its economic decentralization to the political realm as well? I do not advocate that China should consign its current gradualist transition to the scrap heap; rather, a significant yet manageable degree of political decentralization, more so than has already occurred since 1978, would have the potential to ease some of the animosities between Beijing and its peripheral regions. Obviously, this does not have to equate into full-scale emulation of the West: we've all seen the disastrous result that overly rapid and ill thought-out political reform had on Russia. Instead, perhaps Beijing could adopt a political system that would continue the current authoritarian nature of the PRC regime, and yet designate a higher degree of autonomy to the regional levels. This arrangement could prove satisfactory to both those who reside within the walls of Zhongnanhai, as well as to the more pragmatic and realistic members of ethnic minority groups who currently hold a significant degree of grievances against Beijing.

A second manner in which Beijing could extend the logic of its decentralization concerns the village (and now township) popular leadership elections in China's rural areas. A primary reason Beijing has permitted these elections is because it feels that downloading the responsibility of local affairs down to the local levels take some of the responsibility for administration off of Beijing. The central government argues that centrally appointed policies crafted specifically for the local level are less efficient than policies crafted by local citizens themselves, therefore cleverly assigning the blame for local problems to individual local politicians. According to this same logic, wouldn't allowing the various diverse regions in the PRC to craft their own policies also take some of the heat off of the CCP? And so too wouldn't such a downloading of political powers result in greater efficiency at the regional levels?

Unfortunately, most of the senior leaders in Beijing refuse to even conceive of the PRC changing from its current unitary political structure. Because China's history has been checkered with devastating territorial aggrandizement, and the resulting bloody reunification campaigns, those in Zhongnanhai who are up on their country's past have historical precedent they can point to as a means of throwing doubt on the feasibility of federalism in China today. One need not look less than a hundred years back into China's history to see the catastrophic results of excessive decentralization. We would be wise to remember that the CCP itself as one half of the bitter civil war that ripped China apart during the mid-twentieth century.

But regardless of these emotional barriers against adopting a federal framework, the bottom line is that a unitary system is not suited to keeping the PRC a stable political entity. Because of a lack of regional political (and even economic) room to maneuver, China's various minority groups are virtually silenced, exacerbating tensions with Beijing. While those in Zhongnanhai like to believe that a unitary system helps maintain stability, in practice such a system serves to drive a wedge through the country, establishing antagonistic relations between not only the centre and the peripheries, but also between the Han and ethnic minority groups.

Obviously, a federal arrangement is not the only possible alternative that the CCP has to chose from for dealing with these issues. For example, China could simply announce a shift to democracy. But such alternatives are simply not feasible, nor even desired, under the current regime. And for good reason: the overnight democratization transitions in Russia and Eastern Europe devastated that part of the world, both politically and especially economically. Furthermore, China is deep in the middle of a complicated

transition, and thus the idea of adopting a Western political framework, which many Western-based political scientists seem to advocate, seems farcical at best.

As we attempt to brainstorm alternatives to China's current political setup, we should be looking for changes that would have significant positive benefits while ushering in a minimum of negative consequences. Thus, a system that would enable the CCP to continue to enjoy the upper hand in Chinese politics would be advisable, for any system that attempts to radically remove the CCP's potential to assert its dominance would almost surely be ignored by Beijing. An alternative arrangement needs ensure the CCP's dominance is preserved, despite any potential devolution of political and economic authority to the regions; otherwise, senior leaders simply would not even conceive of adopting such an approach. Arguably, an authoritarian federalism could prove to be one of the better systems that could deliver the downloading of autonomy, while keeping the CCP as the ultimate authority in the PRC.

The details of what such a political framework would look like will be discussed later in this paper. For now, we should examine the prospects for significant change in the PRC, both economically, and more importantly, politically.

PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE

China can still be fairly accurately labeled an "authoritarian" state, and the CCP has indeed remained adamant about avoiding fundamental political change despite its ongoing efforts to revolutionize its Leninist economic system and to implement popular leadership elections at the rural local levels. Despite this, it would be foolish to write off the possibility of significant political change from occurring in the near future. The upcoming shake-up of the central leaders within the Politburo this autumn at the 16th Party Congress will likely see Hu Jintao take the helm of the PRC, an individual with significant connections with members of the so-called Communist Youth League faction, which has included such moderate former leaders as Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang. Village-level direct elections for selecting local cadres in rural areas, once considered a risky experiment by Beijing, has become the norm, planting seeds of accountability in the lower rungs of the Chinese political system. The Communist Party's decision to allow entrepreneurs to procure party membership, a logical extension of Jiang Zemin's Theory of Three Representatives, virtually casts ideology aside in favour of pragmatism. Other repressive political policies once seen to be the framework of keeping stability and order, such as the infamous *hukou* system that prevented rural citizens from venturing into urban areas, have been discontinued. Increasingly laissez-faire economic policies, while not necessarily causing overnight political changes, will almost certainly increase pressure on Beijing for more accountable and "hands-off" forms of governance. The continually expanding middle class, admittedly at the moment made up mostly of those dependent on the current political framework for their new-found wealth, is becoming increasingly infiltrated by those who are not co-opted into the "system", individuals who have become successful without having to rely on the CCP or the benefits of state corporatist co-optation.

As reforms are ushered in, and the authoritarian lid that has traditionally been used to hold the PRC begins to be lifted, the need for something more than a heavy-handed political centre is needed to keep stability in a rapidly changing PRC. Yet this new system must let Beijing retain the ability to crack down against secessionist movements that threaten to tear China apart.

A "NEW DEAL" IS REQUIRED

Admittedly, various recent heavy-handed campaigns by Beijing have succeeded at quelling separatist acts. But as this paper has already argued several times, such actions simply hide the *symptom* of antagonism and secessionist sentiment, rather than curing the actual disease of alienation itself. If there is no permanent solution, sooner or later, perhaps during a moment of political turbulence, Beijing will find itself up against insurmountable odds. Admittedly, such developments as the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have made it increasingly difficult for regionalist independence movement, since supporters of such underground campaigns face more difficulty funneling their operation through states

neighbouring China. But again, these kinds of organizations only treat the symptoms of regional alienation, and *not* the causes.

The question for the central Chinese government becomes how to satisfy the demands of these minority peoples in China while avoiding unintentional encouragement of independence movements and forms of territorial aggrandizement. If strong-arm tactics and assimilation are not credible options for the central government, what other alternatives can Beijing turn to?

Any new political system would have to satisfy a long list of requirements. First, it would have to ease the current ethnonationalism and support for secessionism that exists among so many of the PRC's ethnic minority groups. It would also need to help foster less antagonistic relations between the centre and periphery regions, as well as between the Han and ethnic minorities. Such a framework would need to contain a significant downloading of political (and economic) controls to the regional level, in order to satisfy the demands for autonomy made by China's ethnic nations. At the same time, such a system would have to incorporate barriers against territorial aggrandizement and separatist movements. Hopefully such a task could be accomplished by encouraging China's periphery regions and minorities to choose to voluntarily remain within the framework of the PRC. Hence, such a system would need to promote a more *long-term* form of stability than what is in place today.

Convincing China's numerous minorities they would be better off remaining in the PRC on their own free volition could prove a rather difficult task. For starters, they need to be offered genuine and significant autonomy. To put it quite bluntly, Beijing needs to make it worth their while to stay in the PRC. Obviously this is no easier matter, given the various emotional scars related to past repression and various animosities. Whatever offer Beijing eventually makes to the peripheral provinces in order to convince them to remain in China had better include a significant package of concessions, lest such an offer be refused.

It thus becomes clear that *real* autonomy must be granted to the regions by Beijing in order to curry their favour. Areas such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia need to have more say and control over their own affairs if they are to ever conceive of remaining within the PRC if given the chance to leave. This would mean a significant change from the current political status-quo: Beijing would need to back off and let regions have more control over their own local political and economic affairs.

REVISITING THE FEDERAL PROPOSAL

The idea of a Chinese federation is certainly nothing new: as far back as during the Republican era, various intellectuals flirted with the notion of such a political framework within China. In the late 1910s and early 1920s federalism became popular among intellectuals (and even some Republican warlords) as a method to catapult China out of its post-dynastic dilemma.³⁶ Supporters included scholar Ma Xiangbo and late Qing revolutionaries as Zhang Taiyan, Cai Yuanpei, Zhang Qian, Zhang Qianji, and Tang Shouqian.³⁷ Additionally, such historical notables as Zhang Jian and Liang Qichao, while not specifically calling for federalism, argued for "national strength based on local self-government."³⁸ One-time President Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen) advocated a federal and democratic "United States of China" to transcend China's incessant cycles of unification and division.³⁹ Political theorist Chen Jiongming was also a key proponent of Chinese federalism during the early Republican period, eventually transcending the nation-state in his calls for world federalism.⁴⁰

Proposals for a Chinese federal political framework have tended to emerge when the country was decentralized and on the verge of collapse into outright anarchy. Federal proposals fell upon the deaf ears of what were most often militaristic leaders during the Republican era, determined to reunify the country in order to consolidate their own personal political power. Federalism, a system inherently based upon compromise, had little to offer to the various actors involved in the zero-sum contestation of complete political control over China. Despite the widespread social popularity of forming a Chinese federal political

³⁶ Waldron, p. 116.

³⁷ Zhu, pp. 65-66.

³⁸ Waldron, p. 117.

³⁹ Hui, "Rethinking the 'One China' Claim," p. 49.

⁴⁰ Chen, *Chen Jiongming and the Federalist Movement*.

system at various times in China's modern history, federalism was never realized also because the country's past leaders had found it more accommodating to their plans to unite China by force rather than by compromise.⁴¹ Furthermore, federalism was often seen as being a distinctly Western invention, and as Victoria Hui argues, was therefore portrayed as being "alien to Chinese history and culture."⁴²

Additionally, decentralized political control in China carries with it a historically-based negative connotation. The collapse of the Qing dynasty in the early 20th century led to a brief period of regional warlordism, banditry and chaos. The demise of dynastic regimes previous to the Qing also tended to be immediately followed by a short term of destructive anarchy that resulted from the lack of central control. Understandably, politicians in China have had good reason to be nervous of proposals to willingly decentralize political control, whether in the form of federalism or any other model.

Over the past decade, the idea of a Chinese federation has again come to light, yet not quite with the same enthusiasm the initiative once carried. What is unique about the more recent arguments for a Chinese federation is that they come at a time when the country is *not* facing any immediate or grave threat of collapse. Instead, such proposals seem to be geared toward *preventing* China from falling into a state of irreversible disintegration. Proponents of such a federal political system in the past have tended to be made up mostly of notable mainland intellectuals. Today, however, advocates tend to be comprised mostly of political dissidents (including Yan Jiaqi of June 4th fame, and the Dalai Lama) and overseas scholars (initially primarily from Taiwan, but increasingly from Western states). Prasenjit Duara's *Rescuing History from the Nation* (1995), a book intended to be a postcolonial re-ordering of Chinese historiography, contains a brief chapter on the Chinese federalism. Michael Davis penned an short article in 1999 briefly outlining what some of the details of federation in China, and even what a confederation between China and Taiwan⁴³ might look like. Victoria Hui's 2001 article "Rethinking the 'One China' Claim" calls for "a democratic and federal China,"⁴⁴ a goal similar to the one promoted by Sun Zhongshan more than 80 years earlier.

Many of these contributions over the past one hundred years to the idea of Chinese federalism have gone a long way in carefully crafting a form of federalism that would best suit China. Unfortunately, all of these articles assume federalism and democracy go hand in hand. Without fail, each and every book or article written on the subject presumes that federalism cannot be implemented without the presence of what apparently seems to be its political Siamese twin: democracy.

Asking or expecting the CCP to democratize anytime soon is to engage in wishful thinking. The CCP shows no signs of adopting a democratic political framework anytime soon, and thus writing about *democratic* federalism is simply irrelevant to the realities of China today. I hope to steer the federal debate away from the calls for democracy, and to look at the potential for federalism to become a part of the gradualist approach to the transition taken by the CCP.

A FEDERAL BLUEPRINT FOR CHINA

The federal political structure is generally employed in states that are either large in landmass, or contain a citizenry that is heterogeneous and diverse, or a combination of the two. William H. Riker cites three fundamental components of federalism:

- 1 – if two levels of government rule the same land and people,
- 2 – each level has at least one area of action in which it is autonomous, and

⁴¹ Yan, "China's National Minorities and Federalism," p. 144 and Lary, p. 185.

⁴² Hui, "Rethinking the 'One China' Claim," p. 49 footnote.

⁴³ The idea of using a confederal political framework to reunify China and Taiwan has also been suggested as a method of reunifying two other Asian states, North and South Korea. Seoul promoted the notion of a confederation during summit talks in Pyongyang from June 13-15, 2000, which culminated in the South-North Joint Declaration. To see the document in its entirety, see the United States Institute of Peace's "Peace Agreements Digital Collection: North Korea-South Korea." No confederation states exist anywhere in the world at present.

⁴⁴ Hui, "Rethinking the 'One China' Claim," p. 49.

3 – there is some guarantee (even though merely a statement in the constitution) of the autonomy of each government in its own sphere.⁴⁵

Despite the reluctance of Beijing's senior officials to warm to the federal idea, the downloading of autonomy to the regional level is by no means a foreign political concept to China. In fact, Victoria Hui has made argument that divided authority is in fact indigenous to China.⁴⁶

The Social Perception of Federalism Versus “Autonomous Regions”

Why would it be in Beijing's interests to start a Chinese federation? Wouldn't simply granting more autonomy to the regions and yet remaining a centralized and unitary state be just as effective (and more importantly, much less of a headache than implementing formal federalism)? Why should Beijing willingly give up jurisdiction over certain areas of the economy or political system? Why not just give actual autonomy to the currently existing “autonomous regions” of China, and remain a unitary state?

The primary reason why the shift to a formal federation would be necessary, and that simply attempting to rebuild the “autonomous regions” would be insufficient, is due the critical importance of perception. If the CCP were to make a large, formal change to its current political structure, the minority peoples and peripheral regions might be convinced that such a package contained *genuine* efforts by the CCP to delineate autonomy to lower levels of government. If the CCP were to spend considerable effort dressing up such a package with lots of pomp and a great deal of public relations efforts, the new package would stand a chance of not only being accepted by the various aggrieved social groups, but perhaps could also serve to lessen tension and antagonism both between the centre and peripheries, as well as between Han and ethnic minority groups. If the CCP aims to have these disgruntled social groups actually *perceive* that significant change will have been implemented with the introduction of such a package, the CCP's goal would be accomplished with much greater ease if the political system was visibly altered after such an implementation. If Beijing were to simply announce that the “autonomous regions” had been lacking in genuine autonomy in the past, but would hence force procure real autonomy, the social groups would have good reason to doubt the CCP, since the central government has been claiming that these “autonomous regions” have had legitimate and significant autonomy for several decades. Considering that disgruntled peoples are used to hearing from official channels that their minority regions enjoy considerable autonomy when they obviously do not, why would such peoples believe a word of the CCP if it were to merely tinker with an already flawed political structure? Even if the CCP had the full intention of downloading thorough autonomy to these regions, one would expect their inhabitants to be highly skeptical of Beijing's official announcements of change. And as such, social perception that the CCP intended to embark upon a “new deal” would likely be meek at best. The CCP needs to adopt a new framework for downloading autonomy; attempting to salvage what are already perceived as tarnished political structures would most likely prove to be a futile exercise.

Extending Current Political Logic

As has already been done earlier in this paper, it may be useful to extend the logic of the PRC's rural village (and now township) leadership elections to the idea of implementing federalism. If the rationale of such elections is to both increase efficiency, as well as to download greater responsibility for the successes and failures of local policy, then the primary concepts behind federalism cannot be said to be alien to today's PRC. Even within the upper leadership of the CCP exist calls, in the name of political stability, for the government to become increasingly receptive to public sentiment, and to respond with according policies. For example, premier Zhu Rongji reportedly remarked “cadres must be quick to respond to voices in society”, and told his subordinates, “Go and listen to what the masses have to say -- and then you'll know what to do.”⁴⁷

While downloading some political responsibilities to the regions would certainly take some of the heat off of the CCP, it would also mean the central government giving up a degree of power. For those in Zhongnanhai, this is one of the primary drawbacks of the federal proposal. Yet, in spite of this dilemma, we should realize that the CCP may one day come to find such an “exchange” (downloading autonomy in

⁴⁵ Riker, p. 11.

⁴⁶ Hui, “Rethinking the ‘One China’ Claim.”

⁴⁷ Lam, “Zhu Maneuvers for Succession.”

part for greater political stability) a necessary evil that it reluctantly decides to implement. If Beijing would be able to reflect enough blame for policies gone wrong onto lower levels of government, the CCP's image would be a little less tarnished than under a unitary political arrangement, preserving its role as the guiding light of the PRC's reform programme and transition.

For Each, Their Own Communist Party

If China were to shift to a federal arrangement, who or what would run the administration of the provinces and regions? Assuming that the CCP would be mostly removed from the day-to-day operations and policy formulation of the regional level of government, what would fill the void left by the CCP? And even more importantly, with the CCP pulling out of regional administration, what ensures (or at least persuades) the regions into continuing to follow the overall objectives of the central government as it continues the long-term transition of the PRC?

The answer, quite possibly, would be independent communist parties for each province and region. The regional parties would not be directly run by the CCP, for if they were merely provincial offshoots of the central government, such communist parties would be no different than they are at present. However, the CCP would still want the new regional governments to adhere to its overall reform and transition efforts, and would thus wish for the government of each region to be of a similar disposition as Beijing, despite the lack of formal connections or command structures.

If this were to be the case, each province would then have its own unique and independent *nomenklatura* system, and would assumingly adopt its leadership on its own accord. The idea of each region acting so independently is likely to worry Beijing; however, if successfully implemented, this federal framework need not encourage secessionist tendencies. Significant autonomy is likely to alleviate many grievances social groups have with Beijing; however, some groups may wish to exploit this new-found freedom and push for independence from the PRC, much like what happened with the Soviet republics under Gorbachev during his reform efforts. With this in mind, Beijing would retain control over the military, and could enthusiastically emphasize that while the new federal deal would mean a genuine and significant downloading of autonomy, any secession movements after the federal shift would not be tolerated, and would be promptly stamped out by Beijing without second thought. While the CCP would tolerate regions experimenting with new policies, it would flat out refuse to allow for parts of the PRC to engage in territorial aggrandizement.

This strategy could prove to take the wind out of the sails of the various underground secessionist movements in China. Since nationalism is obviously an emotional topic, some individuals will accept nothing less than full autonomy from Beijing no matter how generous Beijing's concessions may be. The Chechen warlords, determined since the collapse of the USSR to witness such independence for their nation whatever the odds, come to mind. But beyond this small fringe element of militaristic leaders hell-bent on independence, would the average citizen in Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, or the like wish to be drawn into a long and bloody war after the shift to federalism? If the CCP were to deliver genuine regional autonomy during the shift to a federal framework, all that would be gained from a long and drawn out nationalist war would be the ability to say one had become independent, and that is assuming that such a war would end in victory for the ethnic minority attempting to leave the PRC. If the currently disgruntled national minorities were to procure genuine autonomy under a federal framework, they would suddenly have control over most of the elements of the region that they so badly desire. Having already procured most of these controls from a federal shift, the costs of launching into a post-federal independence war against Beijing would far outweigh the benefits of what would likely be such a long and bloody struggle. While the most emotional and hardcore of leaders may wish to seek independence no matter the costs, the average person would likely come to accept the CCP's concessions, especially in light of the devastation that has been done to the would-be independent Russian region of Chechnya.

Beijing would also retain the ability to step into regions and change local administrative tactics for other "emergencies" besides just independence movements. For example, if provinces were to systematically discriminate against a particular ethnic minority group, Beijing would reserve the right to become involved. The CCP would continue to play the role of an enforcer, able to police the actions of each regional regime in case of anti-system or some other unacceptable form of behaviour. And yet, as I will argue later in this paper, the central government would be unlikely to abuse this power, for it would have irreversible damaging effects to the *perception* of the federations' legitimacy in the minds of the regions.

Symmetrical or Asymmetrical Federalism?

Although a perfectly homogenous federation, summed with a single constitutional document, is obviously the most preferable way to delineate power between the centre and regions, the case of the Russian Federation (with its bilateral and asymmetric treaties between republics and Moscow prior to Putin's accession to the presidential helm) shows that this may be a pipe dream, especially in multi-ethnic countries with histories of ethnonationalist hostilities. If the PRC were to adopt a federal framework, Beijing would perhaps be smart to refrain from attempting to sum up the entire federal framework with a single document, and instead simply sign bilateral treaties with each province. This is especially true since this freedom to sign bilateral agreements with each region gives the central government the ability to draft unique agreements for every area, taking the distinct needs of each region into account in such agreements.

And yet, if Beijing resorts to bilateral agreements, as did the Russian Federation initially, it engages in an asymmetrical form of federalism. Such a system might cause tensions between provinces and against the CCP, since provinces might feel jealous and express outrage when they discover they did not receive as many concessions from Beijing as another region had. Would it be possible for Beijing to partake in bilateral treaties with the regions of the PRC, and yet still avoiding squabbles based upon jealousy? One potential way to enjoy the benefits of bilateral treaties while also preventing tensions over asymmetry would be for Beijing and the provinces to keep the details of their treaties undisclosed. Only Beijing, the particular province, and perhaps a constitutional court (if such an institution were to be created) would be aware of the contents of such a treaty, such preventing antagonistic competition among China's regions.

This tactic is likely also flawed, since if the details of the secret treaties were to somehow become "leaked", not only would there be squabbles over the difference of treaty rights, but provinces that realized that had gotten the short end of the stick, relatively speaking, would feel betrayed by Beijing. Obviously, such an outcome would not be complementary to any efforts at promoting warmer ties between centre and periphery.

And so, asymmetry and bilateral treaties are likely not viable strategies, since they do not appear conducive to stable and healthy federal competition, but rather create antagonism and tensions within and among the two levels of government. A federation based upon symmetry seems the most feasible approach. If a symmetrical federation based upon a single constitutional document that is to represent the relationship between Beijing and all of the regions is preferred to bilateral treaties, how does this final article come about being drafted? As I will argue later in the paper, Beijing and the regions need to come together to co-formulate such a document, most likely in the form of a federal constitutional conference.

Addressing Regional Disparities

Large regional economic disparities exist across China. For those similar with post-Plenum Chinese economics, such a statement should not come as any surprise. Soon after Deng ascended to the political helm in China, the investment focus was radically changed, with the coastal provinces emerging as the key beneficiaries of national capital. Special Economic Zones were established, and numerous coastal cities were given preferential treatment by Beijing.⁴⁸ The result of this effort, while resulting in an economic boom for eastern China, led to regional inequalities of unprecedented proportions in PRC history. Differences between the booming coastal and Yangzi river valley regions, and the impoverished areas of inland and western China, are stark at best.

Beijing soon began to realize with grave concern that the massive disparities between China's regions had the potential to spark political instability. As Li Si-ming notes,

*"...most authors hold that there has been a consistent and substantial enlargement of regional disparity in China since the launching of the reforms. Many are worried that such a trend, if it continues, will bring about an element of instability, both socially and politically."*⁴⁹

Willy Lam also illustrates how vital the program to eradicating inland regional disparities has become in recent years:

⁴⁸ Li Si-ming, p. 158.

⁴⁹ Li Si-ming, p. 159.

*"Development of provinces with high concentrations of ethnic minorities such as Tibet, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Guianxi and Inner Mongolia is considered key to maintaining political stability."*⁵⁰

Indeed, the CCP has made tackling regional disparities one of its highest priorities in recent years. The Ninth Five Year Plan (1996-2000) and the Year 2010 Long-Term Development Plan of 1996 both focused on alleviating the economic divide between China's regions,⁵¹ and have been highly paraded by Beijing in an effort to signal the CCP's resolve at curbing this alarming trend. The "Go West" campaign, announced on 5 March 2000, was established in order to target "Western China", which included Chongqing Municipality; Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai provinces; and Tibet, Ningxia Hui, Xinjiang Uygur, Inner Mongolia and Guangxi Zhuang autonomous regions. But despite all the grand announcements of thorough efforts at tackling regional disparities, has much actually been accomplished in practice?

The current Tenth FYP (which began in 2001) has continued the recent inland emphasis with even more enthusiasm,⁵² leading one to believe that little progress has occurred in alleviating regional disparities. As Penny Crisp and Rose Tang have shown, the exultant "Go West" campaign has only succeeded in "encouraging mainly tourism and road-building".⁵³ Just after a year subsequent to the beginning of "Go West", "...the number of multinationals going to the poor and relatively inaccessible provinces such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, Gansu and Guizhou ha[d] been minimal."⁵⁴

A bizarre as it might initially seem, a federal political framework may have a role to play in addressing regional disparities in China that would prove much more successful than Beijing's officially trumpeted campaigns of recent years. Such a proposition might at first sound ludicrous to the Westerner living in a federal state: for example, federations have not translated into economic bliss and the removal of regional disparities in such countries as Canada, where provinces such as Newfoundland remain in relative poverty compared to other provinces. However, we would be wise to realize that such relatively impoverished provinces as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia currently do not receive the financial benefits of their natural resources, as they are extracted and effectively owned by the central level of government. For example, when oil was discovered in Xinjiang a little more than a decade ago, the province of Xinjiang did not get to keep the rights over its natural resource. Beijing claimed ownership, and Xinjiang was only given the promise of a vague share of some the profits.⁵⁵

If the impoverished areas of China were able to retain ownership over their natural resources, the perception of Beijing coming in and pilfering what little economic advantages these regions have would be greatly reduced. Regardless of the fact that some compensatory capital is given to provinces whose natural resources are claimed by the central government under the current system, Beijing is likely seen as stealing these region's few resources: a similar situation as took place in the USSR, where individual republics were outraged when their resources were claimed by Moscow. If each region was under the impression that they would be able to keep their nest eggs under federalism, it is likely that such a change would make a considerable difference in lessening antagonism between Beijing and the peripheries.

Local ownership of resources might not seem like a major tool in combating regional disparities; however, what is likely to be better for the development of inland areas of China in the long run: "Go West"-style campaigns run apparently half-heartedly by the centre, or, instead, the ability for each region to own and exploit their own regional resources without interference from Beijing? Undoubtedly, there would be more economic incentives for inland areas to develop and exploit their natural resources if they felt that they alone would be the benefactor of the fruits of such labours. Seeing as oil deposits have recently been found in Tibet and Inner Mongolia,⁵⁶ the benefits of letting each province retain ownership of its own natural resources could prove a major factor in the battle against poverty and regional disparities in China.

⁵⁰ Lam, "China's Hard Sell in the Mild, Mild West."

⁵¹ Li Si-ming, p. 160, citing the State Council Development Research Centre Study Group (Guowuyuan Fazhan Yanjiu Zhongxin Ketizu), *Zhongguo: Kuashiji Quyu Xietiao Fazhan Zhanlue* (China: Cross-Century Regional Development Strategy), Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe, 1997, p. 7.

⁵² The Economist, "Economic Structure."

⁵³ See Crisp and Tang.

⁵⁴ Lam, "China's Hard Sell in the Mild, Mild West."

⁵⁵ Christoffersen, "Xinjiang and the Great Islamic Circle."

⁵⁶ Rigzone. "Large Gas Discovery Made In Northern China."

Regularized Transfer Payment System

While letting the more impoverished provinces retain ownership of their natural resources would go a long way in alleviating regional disparities, such a move alone is not likely to eliminate the problem altogether. In addition, the transfer payments system currently in place needs to be regularized. More specifically, it needs to be reconstructed under the fundamental premise that monies are sent to regions most in need, rather than to regions that are demarcated as investment priority zones. Which is likely to have a more beneficial impact on the PRC's stability: transferring capital to the coastal regions that are already booming in the name of even higher productivity and prosperity there, or transferring capital to the more impoverished areas of China, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia?

Thus, a transfer payment system based on merit, which is currently in place in such Western countries as Germany, would be ideal. How can the more impoverished areas of China (which coincidentally are the areas which are the biggest threat to the PRC's political stability) improve their economies and standards of living if they are being bled of their resources, and do not receive the capital they deserve due to their impoverished conditions?

AN AUTHORITARIAN FEDERATION

So far, our hypothetical Chinese federalism gives provinces significant and genuine autonomy over the control of their own regional affairs. And yet Beijing has the final say over national matters, yielding the figurative club, able to smash any form of independence efforts. With this in mind, it would be safe to label such a federal arrangement as being one based upon an authoritarian co-ordinating central government. The central government under the CCP would remain a "soft authoritarian" entity subsequent to the implementation of a federal framework, refusing to let any region of the PRC engage in territorial aggrandizement. It would give guidance to the provinces as to how the overall reform and transition programme would proceed, but other than that, the CCP would butt out of the regional government's way in terms of formulating local policies.

Is the idea of an *authoritarian* federation a contradiction? Since the intention of a federal political framework is to decentralize power, whereas authoritarianism strives to centralize power, wouldn't an authoritarian federation be an inherently unstable political device? Some have argued that perhaps even a *parliamentary* federal system is too much of a contradiction of terms. One such example is Bhagwan D. Dua, who notes "it may be argued at a theoretical level that the marriage between a federal system which tends to diffuse power and a parliamentary system which tends to concentrate power is at best an inconvenient one."⁵⁷

However, upon closer reflection, an authoritarian federation should not be written off for promoting both centralization and decentralization, since the reality is more complex than that alone. The decentralization of federalism is not necessarily intended to foster a weak national level of government, as much as it is to give each region a distinct voice vis-à-vis the federal government. The delineation of autonomy inherent in a federal political framework acknowledges that particular regional issues and problems are best tackled locally. Meanwhile, the centralization of a parliamentary system is not so much a ploy to take power from the regions as it is a system that is more empowering for the central government. In the Canadian government, for example, there is no troublesome executive-legislative deadlock such as there often is in presidential systems, as in the United States. We can see that, in practice, a parliamentary federation clearly makes sense, and is by no means self-contradictory. A system in which the central level of government is strong, and yet where the regions have a powerful voice and clearly delineated areas of constitutional jurisdiction is, if anything, a stable compromise. If a parliamentary federation is not a contradictory idea, and is arguably a stabilizing factor in those countries that employ such a political framework, should an authoritarian federation be any less desirable? Would such a system not bring with it a calming influence if introduced into states that are currently unitary and authoritarian?

⁵⁷ Dua, p. 272-273.

THE SHORT LEAP TO FEDERALISM

One of the biggest probable fears about shifting to a federal framework would concern the immense formal changes that would need to be implemented. If the political and economic systems at work within the PRC would need to be radically re-adjusted in order to suit federalism, wouldn't such a paradigm shift cause more trauma than it would stability? Fortunately, the shift to federalism would not be the monumental shift it may initially appear to be. Many trends in recent years in the PRC have already taken China toward something quite different from its pre-Plenum past. The leadership in Zhongnanhai have been steering the PRC toward greater regional autonomy, both economically and politically, for years now.

Economic Trends

The idea of downloading economic ownership of regional resources to the provincial level of government may sound a rather large jump to those in Zhongnanhai. However, in light of all the myriad efforts at economic decentralization that have been carried out since the inception of the post-Plenum era, the shift to a federal state might not be quite as large as it may appear to be. Various economic matters and responsibilities have already been delineated to the lower levels of government in the PRC, thus making the change to a federal framework not quite so jolting to the current status quo as it could have been had less economic decentralization been pursued quite so fervently over the past fifteen or so years.

Under closer scrutiny, China's economic realm has become decentralized to such an extent that the PRC's economy has come to take the moniker of "federalism: Chinese style". Various articles by Qian and Weingast dissect what they see as China's "market preserving federalism". Wang Yijiang and Chun Chang share similar dispositions, claiming that the PRC has already become a "semifederalist" state heading toward the privatization of its economy.⁵⁸

Since the jump to federalism would surely mean yet another nail in the coffin of China's command economy, would the CCP be willing to give up its command economy supervisory role that is perhaps inherent in the jump to federalism? Beijing has found it to its advantage to be able to steer investment into what it sees as key locations. Without this ability, the CCP would not have been able to have strategically funneled capital into the coastal areas as it has done since the inception of the post-Plenum period, a significant factor in the region's current booming economy. Would Beijing be willing to give up its ability to move capital around China's large economy?

One viable argument is that Beijing's command economy role had less to do with the southern coastal region's boom than we tend to believe. Perhaps the coastal boom is less about Beijing being able to successfully steer money around the country than we might be inclined to think (since the CCP's overall record of economic manipulation is far from perfect). It could very well be that China's southern coastal explosion came about more because of two other key factors:

- 1) because overseas Chinese decided to invest close their home locales specifically because of emotional ties to such regions, and not just a random region someone told them was hot, and 2) because of the strategic location of the coastal areas: in close proximity to the economic powerhouses Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia.

If this is partially true, then the ability of the CCP to pump money into Xinjiang and other currently impoverished areas will not have the same substantial benefit that transfer payments had for the southern coastal region. As has been obvious, China's ability to address regional inequalities, specifically attempting to tackle the poverty of China's poorest regions, has had little if any result, despite being an official national priority since 1995.

All of this talk assumes that China needs to be under a command economy in order for Beijing to be able to spread capital to regions in need of such financial infusions. However, the reality is that the command economy is an extreme version of a state being able to move around capital: China need not retain this arguably arcane economic paradigm in order to spread wealth around the country. All that is necessary for such a process is a mere transfer payment system, an economic trait that can obviously exist in a federal political system, as the example of Canada clearly illustrates.

⁵⁸ Wang Yijiang and Chun Chang. "Economic transition under a semifederalist government: The experience of China."

In light of China's recent accession to the World Trade Organization, it appears that the CCP has conceded defeat in regard to heavy central engineering of the national economy, and is looking forward to realizing the fruits and prosperity of implementing thorough market forces. In light of the CCP's waning command role over the economy, as well as greater decentralization of economic powers to the regional levels of government, the changes inherent in the shift to a federal state do not seem quite so insurmountable.

Furthermore, in regards to the WTO, it may not be viable for Beijing to permit certain "key" provinces to offer substantial tax breaks in an attempt to promote their economic development, since such behaviour would be in violation of WTO principles. The CCP might be wise to simply play the regulatory role of harmonizing provincial economic traits, and letting the regions have more autonomy regarding the formulation of their own economic policies.⁵⁹

The end to southern China's stranglehold on rapid economic growth and expansion will also likely make the jump to federalism an easier journey for Beijing to swallow. Had Guangdong and its immediate coastal neighbours still reaped by far the most economic rewards of all of China's areas (as they did well into the 1990s), it would give this particular regional bloc a significant amount of leverage over Beijing. If any one particular region were to have such a large economic clout over Beijing during a hypothetical transition to a federal arrangement, such a bloc would have far too much power over Beijing vis-a-vis the other regions, and thus would threaten to pull the federation into asymmetry. Thus, fortunately for the possibility of federalism in China, the southern coast has gradually been losing its monopoly. Areas such as Shanghai are seriously challenging the Guangdong region as far as economic supremacy is concerned.⁶⁰ Had the south been China's only prosperous areas, it would have possibly have had the ability to demand that Beijing play by its rules, potentially putting the entire federation into jeopardy. Since China's economic development has spread to more diverse geographical regions in recent years, this scenario is no longer likely to occur.

Thus, we can quite clearly see that the PRC has already greatly liberalized and decentralized China's economy, and is obviously headed toward a market economy, albeit at a gradualist pace. As such, the downloading of economic autonomy to the regional level of government inherent in federalism would likely not cause such economic tremors as those in Beijing might fear.

Politics Trends

Numerous political trends in China over recent years seem to suggest that a shift to federalism would not be quite as shocking as many would fear. For example, China has recently moved toward a much more constitutional form of governance. As Mao Sulong's recent article "Recent development of constitutional government in China" clearly illustrates, the CCP is moving away from the unpredictable personality politics it has become known for in favour of a more regularized and legalistic form of administration and politics.

The recent regionalizing of the Central Committee also makes one wonder how turbulent a shift to federalism in China would actually be in practice. Some of the more "rubber stamp" entities of the Chinese political system, such as the national parliament, have already been based upon regions for years, if not decades. Until recently, the bodies that held actual power, such as the Central Committee, were not reflective of any form of regional representation. However, this is quickly beginning to change. Over the past year, half of China's provinces and centrally administered regions have had their top officials changed. As Willy Lam speculates, this is most likely because their replacements will be appointed to the Central Committee this fall at the upcoming 16th Party Congress. Lam notes how it is likely the membership of such bodies as the Central Committee will become reflective of China's regions over the next several years.⁶¹ My point for mentioning this change is to suggest that if China is moving toward having Central Committee and other powerful bodies structured largely around individuals representing each region's particular interests, that the move to a federal framework, which would inherently mean more regional representation, would be less of a shock.

Many of China's political institutions are likely in the next few years to become more "democratic" in nature. This would benefit a hypothetical Chinese federation not because federalism need

⁵⁹ Lam, "China's Hard Sell in the Mild, Mild West."

⁶⁰ See "Investment tug-of-war in China."

⁶¹ Lam, "New breed of leader emerging in China."

be partners with full Western-style democracy, but rather because a system more open to regional political freedoms would likely ease the transition to a federation, a system based upon regional governments that are relatively autonomous of the central government.

An example of such an institution potentially becoming more democratic relates to the probable elevation of Li Ruihuan to head of the National Peoples' Congress (NPC) at the upcoming 16th Party Congress later this autumn. During his nine years as head of the Chinese Peoples' Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) he "...successfully fought for more opportunities for members of the consultative body to participate at least in provincial-level decision-making."⁶² While this points to his desire to see China's political bodies procuring real power, it also points to his interest in seeing a further delineation of power to the provincial level, and that he is likely to push for a change away from the rather top-down sort of decision making that the CCP has become renowned for.

Even if Li simply strove to witness the creation of powerful governmental bodies and institutions that would serve to act as a check and balance on executive power, such a reform alone might prove to be of benefit come the implementation of our hypothetical federation. Allowing for these bodies to become powerful shows an appreciation for the idea of the executive having less unchecked power, and shows a preference for a system based upon more systemically legitimized power, rather than upon mere personality politics. If a greater number of decisions were decided by large bodies instead of by individuals, and if transparent government bodies came to take precedence over individuals or cliques within the party as checks and balances of Chinese government, this would obviously help normalize the entire process of Chinese politics.

The PRC has also witnessed a gradual shift toward a bureaucratic meritocracy in recent years. Bureaucrats are today hired less by personal connections and more due to their personal abilities than ever before in the PRC's short history. As Lam notes, "a substantial proportion of government positions up to the level of heads of bureau and department are now being recruited through open examinations."⁶³ This trend would likely make the shift to federalism easier, since it helps eradicate the national *nomenklatura* system. Obviously, if each region handled their own administration and hiring of officials under a federal framework, the implementation of such a political arrangement would put an end to the unified, nationwide *nomenklatura* system. If this political trait of the PRC is to be faded out before any such transition to our hypothetical federalism is made, it would mean one less reason for the CCP to write off federalism as a viable alternative political option.

Having meritocracies rather than various *nomenklatura* systems in place at the provincial level would also have a beneficial impact on the stability of a federal arrangement. If the *nomenklatura* system was simply downloaded to the provincial level, rather than replaced with a meritocracy, each province would have its own independent *nomenklatura* system. If such a setup were to take hold, and intra-provincial bickering were to occur within a province, various factions within a single province might find themselves dueling over control of the *nomenklatura*, and could lead to large problems that Beijing might need to step in and resolve. As I will later argue, Beijing would be most reluctant to interfere in provincial matters after the transition to a federation. Thus, a more regularized form of bureaucracy based upon a meritocracy is favourable to a provincial *nomenklatura* system, as it would promote greater intra-provincial stability.

Despite the myriad reforms that have taken place in China since 1978, the party and state are still two tightly intertwined political entities. The CCP has continued to place its agents to watch over the shoulder of the executive government in order to ensure policy is implemented according to central party dictates. Unfortunately, this has led to numerous problems, one of which being significant and common party-executive deadlock. As Willy Lam notes:

"In the past year or so, bitter power struggles between the party boss and the head of executive wing of government have erupted in cities and provinces including Shanghai, Chongqing, Hainan and Yunnan. All four instances called for the personal mediation of top leaders including President Jiang and Premier Zhu Rongji."⁶⁴

With this situation in mind, is there likely to be an easing of the CCP's supervision over the executive arm of government in China? Lam thinks not, pointing out that Jiang has been putting increased emphasis on

⁶² Lam, "Political sparks set to fly."

⁶³ Lam, "Dictatorial decision-making?"

⁶⁴ Lam, "New breed of leader emerging in China."

the familiar ideal of “party leadership” in recent months.⁶⁵ And yet, Lam himself admits that top leaders have had to step in to settle such party-executive disputes recently. This system of deadlock encourages political instability, especially if such matters require the very highest of leaders to have to personally get involved. Thus, even if it is party-executive tension is not publicly announced, at the very least there is surely great concern, if not perhaps even an orchestrated effort, to attempt to fix this political loggerheads. If the shift to federalism were to include a lessening of the CCP’s responsibility to provide “leadership” (which means more than just “leadership” in this instance) for the regional levels, perhaps a federal shift could help ease this party-executive dilemma, likely already a priority for Zhongnanhai.

THE PROS AND CONS OF FEDERALISM

Many of the results of a federal system in China have already been alluded to. Below is a brief sketch of what some of the likely pros and cons for all players involved in a federal transition would look like (ideally, at least).

Pros for Beijing

Beijing potentially has much to gain from the implementation of a federal framework in China. If minorities became more satisfied with their existence within the PRC due to procuring greater local autonomy over their own regional affairs, support for overt anti-system nationalism and secessionist movements would likely decline, especially if Beijing were to make it clear that splitist tendencies would simply not be tolerated. Widespread promotion for territorial aggrandizement would surely plummet if China’s ethnic minorities were to perceive the CCP’s delineation of autonomy as being a genuine gesture of reconciliation. If all of this were to occur, centre-periphery relations would remarkably improve, and thus the need for Beijing to spend copious amounts of capital policing and supervising what are currently the politically subversive areas of the PRC (especially Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia) were greatly decline. If increased efficiency of provincial administration and economies were to result after the downloading of autonomy to the regions, Beijing would clearly benefit from the aggregate result of increases in productivity from all the regions. The CCP’s neck would no longer be on the line regarding many of the responsibilities that would be downloaded to the regional level, and thus Zhongnanhai’s air as the legitimate leadership of China would be preserved more than under the current system. While China would obviously not simply become a beacon of stability simply for adopting federalism, any significant increases in stability would be greatly welcomed by a central government nervous over the safety of its own continued political supremacy.

Implementing federalism could potentially prove a clever way for the reformers within the CCP to promote efforts to depoliticize and strengthen the judicial system in China. Much like how Zhu Rongji took advantage of China’s WTO accession to convince the party leadership that several significant economic liberalization reforms were necessary,⁶⁶ the more reform-oriented leaders of the CCP could use the shift to federalism as an impetus to introduce greater promotion and protection of the rule of law in China. Perhaps even the move to federalism itself, given its delineation of autonomy to regional bodies, could help promote the rule of law in China. As Meixin Pei notes, “...the greatest weakness of China’s legal system is political: The unchallenged power of the CCP undermines the authority of the judiciary and limits its effectiveness.”⁶⁷

Pros for Minorities

A federal system has the potential to benefit minority peoples in numerous ways. Procuring increased control over various economic, political, cultural and social jurisdictions would allow these peoples the satisfaction of having autonomy over their own local affairs. A likely result would be a decrease of tensions between the minority peoples and Beijing, leading to a less antagonistic relationship

⁶⁵ Lam, “New breed of leader emerging in China.”

⁶⁶ Fewsmith, “The Politics of China’s Accession to the WTO.”

⁶⁷ Pei., p. 102.

between the centre and its peripheries. The removal of the *perception* of being “under siege” culturally, linguistically, religiously, and so forth, would go to great lengths at pleasing disgruntled ethnic minority groups. Provinces containing significant numbers of minority peoples would likely be administrated with increasing efficiency if given greater autonomy over their local issues.

Cons for Beijing

Beijing would certainly stand to lose control over numerous realms if significant and genuine autonomy were to be delineated down to the provinces. While Beijing would still remain the political top dog overseeing the entire federation, it would not have as much power on paper as it currently enjoys. Perhaps the central government would transform from a tradition authoritarian entity to a “soft authoritarian” body, something similar to the central government in Singapore.

As is mentioned elsewhere in this paper, the shift to a federal framework would likely mark the loss of the current national *nomenklatura* system enjoyed by the CCP. The result would mean the loss of a great deal of influence over appointments to the provinces. Obviously, this loss of power would be a major psychological sacrifice for Zhongnanhai to make. However, as this paper has already tried to argue, such a sacrifice would likely entail more benefits than losses for the CCP in the overall grand scheme of things if federalism were to in fact usher in greater political stability.

The central government would also find that it would have significantly less control over how money was spent by each individual regional government. Each province would have the ability to spend capital as it felt best in regards to areas of provincial jurisdiction. Beijing’s influence in provincial economies would be unlikely to completely diminish, however: as the example of the Canadian federation shows, central governments could tie monies, such as transfer payments, to promises made by the provinces to the centre. This tactic allows for some central input, and encourages negotiation and compromise.

Another drawback of a federal system for the CCP would be that its realization would likely mark the end to Beijing’s central “nation building” efforts. The PRC, with its massive number of national ethnic groups, is much akin to post-colonial Indonesia: a geographically massive entity, composed of myriad ethnic groups. Much like the Indonesian government attempted to encourage all of its citizens to see themselves as “Indonesian” first, and belonging to their distinct ethnic group second,⁶⁸ so too have those in Zhongnanhai attempted to create common nation building efforts in China. Beijing has hoped to foster an identity of “Chineseness” that was not exclusive to the ethnic Han, and that transcended racial boundaries. For example, last year the CCP ruled that Mandarin would be the only official language, and as such would be the only language of instruction all at primary schools throughout the country. Additionally, Beijing even banned television and radio presenters from speaking in regional accents.⁶⁹

Obviously, if Beijing were to enter into a federal arrangement and expect for the regions to perceive its sincerity in downloading authority to the provincial level, the CCP would certainly have to discontinue this exercise of building a single common identity. However, Beijing may gain more from the fruits of federalism than from its current “nation building” campaign. Seeing as part of this campaign includes suppressing the linguistic, cultural, and religious systems of China’s minority nationalities, it likely contributed to the sense of grievance felt by China’s disgruntled minorities. Ethnonationalism tends to flare when a society feels its customs are under attack, which is occurring as part of Beijing’s “nation building” process. Thus, it may be more beneficial for Beijing to discontinue this campaign, and instead to permit the people of China’s peripheral regions to employ their own titular customs.

In addition to all the unwelcome features of federalism that would likely be witnessed by Beijing after the implementation of federalism, more dire scenarios, although unlikely, also must loom in the back of the mind of those who reside in Zhongnanhai as they contemplate a federal arrangement. Such potential horror stories as the loss of control over the national army, reform spinning out of control in a manner similar to the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, regionalism/warlordism, and even the Balkanization of China, surely spook the upper leadership in Beijing from wanting to adopt a federation. All of these unlikely consequences will be addressed later in the paper, as I shall attempt to explain why none of them would be likely realized.

⁶⁸ Anderson, pp. 122-131; and Henley, “Ethnogeographic Integration and Exclusion.”

⁶⁹ See BBC News, “China ‘bans’ regional accents on TV”; and Voice of Tibet’s “Reporters Without Borders April 2000.”

Cons for Minorities

Luckily for China's various ethnic minorities, they would probably not witness any drawbacks from federalism. Minorities would be the immediate key benefactors of the fruits of federalism. However, we should realize that any content that comes to the minorities is likely to translate into a more stable political system overall for both Beijing and the regions. The fact that the minorities have little to lose and much to gain from a federation should not be seen in zero-sum terms vis-à-vis the central government, since the CCP would indirectly benefit from gains procured by the regional levels.

FURTHER POINTS OF IMPORTANCE

How to Prevent Infringements?

Of crucial importance for the regions of the PRC considering a federal agreement with the CCP concerns how to ensure that the central government would not overstep its constitutional bounds, violating the terms of the federation. If the CCP were to remain the political linchpin, and would retain an overall co-ordinating role in the federation, how would such a system ensure that the central government would not abuse its powers?

Quite frankly, there is no method to guarantee that Beijing would not infringe upon boundaries set in our hypothetical federal agreement, and this should come as no surprise. A stipulation formally limiting the central government's power could be written into the constitution, but obviously, the CCP could still violate such a barrier if it truly wanted to, since no piece of paper is enough to tie the hands of an authoritarian government willing to violate formal agreements as a means to an end. There would be no formal method of ensuring that the central government would not renege on its pledge to respect the federal "deal".

With this in mind, why would the provinces of the PRC believe that Beijing would be genuinely sincere in their promise not to step over certain jurisdiction boundaries? What would convince China's regions that the CCP would not arbitrarily step in and violate the terms of the federation anytime if felt like it? The answer is quite simple: the central government would refrain from overstepping its bounds in a federation not because of any formal restrictive document or institution, but instead because of the need to protect the *perception* among the various provinces of the legitimacy of such a federation. If Beijing were to overstep its bounds, the provinces would perceive the federation to be a sham, and would subsequently call the CCP's bluff, likely culminating in provinces wanting out of such a disgraced federation.

Obviously then, Beijing would have to control its behaviour more out of fear of displeasing the provinces than anything else. The CCP would need to censor its own actions, lest the provinces come to the conclusion that nothing has really changed despite the shift to a federation and Beijing's pledges to respect the newly downloaded autonomy. Allusions would be drawn between the old sham "autonomous regions" and the new federation, sending the entire exercise of federalism into a state of collapse. With all of this in mind, the CCP would need to prevent itself from stepping in and violating the terms of the federation whenever it found the option of interfering in regional affairs to be rather tempting. Perhaps this need to censor itself is the best possible way for the CCP's hands to be tied regarding potential federal infringement.

Make no mistake: this self-conscious CCP would retain the ability and power to step in and take action at the regional level if an emergency were to arise (such as a province clearly violating the federal bargain). In fact, the CCP might be wise to exclaim with great enthusiasm it would be willing to do just that if provinces were to overstep their bounds. However, other than in such emergency scenarios, Beijing would be unwilling to break its promise not to interfere in regional matters, lest the provinces perceive the entire federal arrangement to be but a "paper tiger".

Federalism: a One-Time Shift

Of utmost importance in the actual shift to federalism is that such a transition must be perceived as being a one-time event, and must *not* be perceived as a gradual and incremental process. If Beijing appears

to be granting autonomy in several stages over a period of time, ethnic minorities would be likely to begin making demands for more and more autonomy with each incremental juncture, since gradually downloading power in numerous pieces does not have a clear and non-arbitrary end. This would likely spiral out of Beijing's control and into the hands of the minority groups, opening the flood gates to whatever demands the disgruntled groups decide to request. If Beijing is perceived to be appeasing each and every request, the peripheries and minorities would doubt push their luck as far as possible, until demands became so unreasonable as to border on calls for full and outright independence. Once the appeasement process had begun, Beijing would only have three options available to it: engage in appeasement, ignore the demands, or, if demands spiraled out of control, resort to military force to curb such regional demands.

Thus, Beijing must ensure the shift to federalism is a one-time transition, and that the regions do not *perceive* the CCP to be engaging in a process of appeasement. A one-step transition is far less likely to be *perceived* by minority groups as Beijing "opening the flood gates" to their demands than a multi-layered shift. The collapse of the USSR under Gorbachev was partially due to the Soviet transition being multi-staged and answering to the dictates of the regional republics. The transition to federalism in China must allow little room for extra pushing once the initial package is delivered.

If the transition is not to come in several stages, then the CCP is likely to wish to refrain from making repairs to the federal package, lest such "repairs" be perceived by the regions as actually being secondary and tertiary installments of the shift to federalism. With this in mind, the package that the CCP is to offer the regions had better be sufficient, lest the provinces refuse to accept it and demand further reforms, which would open the door to regional demands and possibly initiate appeasement efforts by the centre.

Change Must Be Significant

While the shift to federalism must be perceived as a one-time change, it must also be perceived as an actual new system with significant and visible changes. The regions must perceive thorough change to have been ushered in, lest they interpret the entire exercise as being a "public relations" deception by Beijing. If it is seen as being anything other than genuine and sincere, the secessionist forces obviously would not buy into such a federal offer. And as just mentioned previously, the CCP would not wish to make repairs to the federal agreement soon after its implementation, for chance of the regions misconstruing such actions as Beijing engaging in a process of appeasement.

Thus, the CCP needs to offer a significant delineation of autonomy in its one-time transition to a federal arrangement. Change needs to be visible in practice, and not just concessions that remain on paper, or the entire exercise would surely end in failure. The CCP cannot simply announce the creation of autonomy; they need to visibly demonstrate their sincerity to the regions in order to convince the currently disgruntled minorities that their offers of downloading autonomy are genuine. If the CCP's concessions in the federal deal are not perceived as being significant enough by the regional peoples, they would interpret this federal offer as being a glamorized version of the current "autonomous regions", or as a Chinese version of the old Soviet "fictitious federalism".⁷⁰ China's minorities have been under supposed "autonomy" for years now; more than mere contracts with ribbons must be presented for these peoples to buy into any federal "deal" that the CCP would have to offer.

Beijing's Favourable Position

Would Beijing be forced to enter into a process of appeasement if the PRC's regions were to make demands for the further delineation of autonomy from the centre? Likely not. Due to the fact that the central government would continue to be dominated by a single political party, Beijing would find itself in a position of strength, able to counter any regional calls for further downloading of power with firm authority. Unlike post-transition Russia, in which Moscow was forced to concede defeat to the regions and resort to appeasement due to the political split at the centre,⁷¹ a federal central Chinese government would

⁷⁰ Gleason, "The Federal Formula and the Collapse of the USSR," p. 146.

⁷¹ Moscow witnessed a power struggle in early 1990s between those who advocated President Yeltsin's presidential model, and Parliamentary Speaker Khasbulatov and his mixed parliamentary-presidential system. The more the Moscow elite quarreled, the bolder the regional leaders became, and power soon

still remain run under the CCP and the CCP alone. Thus, Beijing would be in a position of strength if it needed to deal with any regional demands after the paradigm shift.

This advantage that Beijing is likely to enjoy should such a tension arise with its regions would no doubt help to stabilize such events. As has already been argued, if Beijing were to enter into a process of appeasement, such an exercise could possibly become a slippery slope toward calls for secession from the provinces. Decentralization of power in the early Russian Federation as the result of Moscow appeasing the regions did not cause systemic collapse in that country, but nevertheless, such a process could prove fatal to a young Chinese federation. Conditions did indeed appear worrisome for several years in the Russian Federation during the 1990s. Just as the second Russian republic was beginning, regions and republics were getting more and more aggressive in their demands of Moscow. The President of Tatarstan and a host of other regional leaders were heralding the “compact theory” of federalism, calling for the implementation of a form of federalism that held most of its power *from below* on the basis of treaty relations between the subjects and the federal government.

This “bottom-up” form of federalism, based upon bilateral treaties, did indeed eventually come into play. Yeltsin had preferred a more “national” federalism, based merely upon the Constitution. He unfortunately lost this battle of demands against the regions, and eventually had to give in and appease Russia’s regions. If it were not for the strong-arm tactics of recentralization preferred by President Putin, who ascended to the Russian political helm in 2000, the Russian Federation might have collapsed due to too excessive decentralization. Obviously, the alarmingly close proximity Russia had come to systemic collapse should be enough to convince those in Zhongnanhai that Beijing’s delineation of power must be a one-time process.

The Marketing of the “Deal”

As this paper has already argued, the CCP’s hypothetical federal deal offered to the regions would have to include concrete and visible results, lest it be interpreted by the provinces as being yet another sham “public relations” offer of autonomy. Nevertheless, in addition to ensuring the actual components of the deal would be sufficient for the provinces, Beijing would also be wise to enthusiastically promote the federal package being offered. The CCP would need to effectively *communicate* that the “deal” would be a genuine and actual downloading of significant autonomy, and that Beijing would fully intend to respect the details of such a commitment.

The reason I stress the importance of communicating the “deal” is that Beijing’s ability to win support from the regions for a federal framework would arguably be much more important than the details of the deal itself. This is especially true in light of the antagonistic relationship between Beijing and many of China’s ethnic minority groups that has gone on for decades. Seeing as the two sides have employed deceptive tactics and have been mistrusting of one another, Beijing’s need to procure regional support for a federal package becomes a task of monumental proportions. The CCP could include every conceivable concession to the regional level in its federal proposal; however, if the regions *perceive* the offer to be yet another gimmick by Beijing, the entire exercise will meet a futile end. Thus, the need for Beijing to candy coat and effectively market the federal offer becomes the paramount task.

If the promotion of the federal offer suddenly becomes more important than the details of the actual plan itself, would this mean that Beijing would be conning the regions into such a federal arrangement? If presentation was more vital than substance, would Beijing’s federal proposal be nothing more than a façade? The answer is that Beijing’s offer would still need to be significant enough to satisfy the regions, regardless of whether or not the provinces “bought into” such a proposal. If such a “deal” did not include enough provisions to the regions, the federation would likely fail soon after its inception.

Beijing has just as much reason as the regions to ensure the package is significant, for the federal arrangement would not be a zero-sum game: both sides depend on the success of the deal, seeing as Beijing only wins if the regions become satisfied with the tangible results of the federal framework. The genuineness of Beijing’s offer would determine the central government’s very own potential indirect gain from the proposal (indirect because the regions gain directly from the downloading of autonomy, and Beijing indirectly).

The “Federal Conference”

If Beijing intends to have its federal offer accepted by China’s ethnic minorities, including those groups that have been the more oriented toward secessionism, the central government needs to be able to gauge what kind of package would be acceptable to the regions. How would Beijing be able to know with certainty that such an offer would be sufficient enough for the regions before implementing it? What options would Beijing have for attempting to ensure its offer would receive the greatest possible support from the regions?

The best tactic Beijing could employ to ensure such support would be to hold a “federal conference” with all of the provinces. At such a meeting, both sides could put forward proposals regarding the finer details of the federal arrangement. China’s ethnic minority groups could air their grievances in a secure environment, voicing what they feel must be contained in the federal arrangement. Beijing would become furthered enlightened as to the needs of the provinces, and would be in a better position to understand the sentiment of the minority groups.

Perhaps most importantly, such a conference would have a significant psychological impact on the provinces: they would likely be much more willing to accept a package if they were to play a meaningful role in its creation, rather than having a package thrust upon them by Beijing. China’s various regions are unlikely to approve of any proposal Beijing sets upon them from above, regardless of how generous it is, because of the long-standing animosities between Beijing and many of China’s provinces. Their refusal would be psychological and emotional; without provincial involvement, any proposal is likely to end in failure. By ensuring all the provinces were included in such a conference and played a role in the formation of the federal arrangement, the ethnic minority groups would be much less inclined to resent the federation and “pull a Chechnya” after its implementation.

Having all the provinces together and included in such a conference could greatly benefit Beijing’s hypothetical effort at bringing China’s regions on board such a federal proposal: if all the provinces had to agree to a single symmetrical framework and would all procure the same rights and autonomy from a federal package, this would prevent antagonistic jealousy among the provinces over differences in procured autonomy, as was the case in the young Russian Federation. Additionally, if all the provinces had to come together and present a unified proposal to Beijing, it is probable that the more extremist provinces would have to tone down their rhetoric and agree to a more pragmatic package, since there would almost certainly be pressure from the more moderate provinces to compromise with Beijing.

The only potential problem with the concept of having all of the provinces coming together and participating in a “federal conference” would be if some of the more extremist-leaning provinces felt they had been overly pressured by the more mainstream provinces not to make many demands. If this were to happen, a rift could develop among the provinces, resulting in the creation of two camps of provinces, one radical and one moderate, that would refuse to come together. The possibility that provinces would refuse to sign onto the federal proposal would greatly increase if such a scenario were to unfold. And yet, despite the fact that the idea of a “federal conference” might be not an infallible plan, such a meeting is likely to give the ethnic provinces a greater voice in the formulation of a federal framework compared to what happened in the Russian Federation. Even if the Chinese ethnic provinces do not procure considerable concessions they might wish for, the very psychology of the fact that they were at least at the bargaining table would likely mean more success than was the case with Russia’s Federative Treaty, which was formulated solely by Moscow. Additionally, the need for the provincials to rally behind a unitary position vis-à-vis Beijing would ensure a symmetrical federal framework, preventing squabbling among provinces subsequent to the implementation of a federal framework.

The Role of the Fourth Generation

Would members of the so-called “fourth generation”, who are about to ascend to the higher echelons of CCP leadership at the upcoming 16th Party Congress later this autumn, be more receptive of the idea of a Chinese federation than their predecessors have been? Some would say yes, arguing that the younger generation are more inclined to favour significant reform due to their unprecedented experience with the outside world, technocracy, and meritocracy. Others would dispute this assertion, noting that the fourth generation grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and thus arguing that these incumbents are most likely to be fairly conservative when it comes to political change, and will be quite apprehensive about any form of significant political decentralization.

After greater reflection, predictions that the incoming generation of political leadership will resort to conservative tactics hold little water. They have witnessed first-hand the detrimental repercussions, both domestic and internationally, that such conservative actions as the June 4th crackdown can have on the PRC (not to say they necessarily disagree with the June 4th crackdown, but may take exception to the brutal manner in which it was exercised). They have noticed how Asian states that have opened (relatively speaking), such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Singapore have boomed, while those that cling vainly to an idealized past are in grave trouble (e.g. Cuba and especially North Korea). While the fourth generation will obviously not be jumping up and down for rapid political reform as many Russian officials had in 1991, they are likely to be much more willing to reform the PRC than were their predecessors. It is still likely to be gradual reform, but their end-goals are perhaps to be much more daring in their ambitions.

Another argument that the fourth generation are likely to display conservative colours relates to the Cultural Revolution. Several prominent China experts have argued that, due to the experience of the fourth generation growing up during the Cultural Revolution, this incumbent group of politicians is likely to be rather apprehensive of thorough political change.⁷² This would be especially true of any large-scale plans to decentralize significant political autonomy, for memories of near-anarchy during the Cultural Revolution would come to mind. Unfortunately, this argument fails to hold water: Zhu Rongji, China's current premier, was himself a victim of the Cultural Revolution, forced to work on a pig farm for many years. And yet despite this unpleasant experience of his, he has been one of the more pro-reform senior officials in China, even indirectly admitting his dream of long-term democratization in the PRC.

Regrettably for those who wish to witness a more liberal fourth generation, even if predictions that the incumbent batch of Chinese officials will act conservatively proves false, one characteristic of the PRC's political culture is likely to hamper any potential support for federalism, at least in the short term. Unfortunately, even if Hu Jintao does turn out to be a reformer, it is highly probably that current leader Jiang Zemin will remain the paramount leader of China for a while to come, and that Hu's efforts will be constrained within the outlook of Jiang.⁷³ Despite the generation gap in political point-of-view between the third and fourth generations, the likelihood that the third generation will still be shuffling around behind the scenes after the 16th Party Congress will mean their influential presence will continue for some considerable time to come. Even if Hu were to personally agree with the idea of a federation, he is likely to find his hands tied for at least several years while Jiang unofficially continues to dominate Chinese politics.

In 2012, however, the fifth generation will likely take over the helm of power, with the sixth generation filling the lower posts of officialdom. By this time, such elder officials as Jiang Zemin and Li Peng might already be deceased; at the very least, they are likely to have faded from the political scene by then. Even if the prominent role of unofficial "paramount leaders" still exists in 2012, Hu Jintao is likely to be the paramount leader then, rather than still Jiang Zemin. And if it is true that Hu is as liberal as many argue (pointing to his connections with the Communist Youth League clique), the idea of Hu overseeing a fifth and sixth generation CCP in 2012 as paramount leader is likely to be much more conducive to adopting federalism than what will come of the 16th Party Congress later this autumn.

All of this is not too suggest that a federation cannot or should not be adopted before 2012. However, the ideal of a federal framework implemented in China is much more likely to fall upon favourable ears in 2012 rather than now, not only because Chinese politics will likely have liberalized more after ten additional years of reforms and opening, but also because of the ascension of the younger and what are more likely to be more liberal generations.

What this does suggest is that if each subsequent generation does indeed prove to be more and more liberal and conducive to opening China's political system, then with each and every year that passes, the Chinese leadership would become more receptive to federalism. Obviously Hu's power will not likely be the same between 2003 and 2012: it is probable that it will constantly increase and he gradually shakes off Jiang's oversights, cementing his own personal leadership.

Implementation: the Sooner the Better

If Beijing is to eventually come to conclusion that the current political status-quo cannot hold up, and that the central government will gradually fail in its efforts at preventing political subversion via

⁷² Cheng Li, one of the more well-known proponents of this line of thinking, has published his opinions in his book *China's Leaders: The Next Generation*.

⁷³ Lam, "Jiang's staying power."

heavy-handed tactics, then it would be in its best interests of Beijing to adopt a federal framework as soon as possible. This is unlikely to happen, however, as Beijing is more than likely to look at thorough political change as a last resort, especially due to all the emotion baggage Chinese history attaches to significant decentralization of political power. As such, relatively radical changes, such as implementing a federal framework, are only likely to be realized once Beijing foresees a political crisis.

Beijing, however, would be smart to adopt such a federal system *now* if it believes it might not have the chance of re-affirming its strength within the current political paradigm. If those in Zhongnanhai wait until the very bitter end before starting up a federal system, they are likely to lose out: Beijing would arrive at the bargaining table with the provinces in a weak position, and thus would have to give in to many more regional demands than had it bargained in a position of strength. The result would most certainly be a highly decentralized and unstable federation, one unlikely to stand the test of time. Beijing would be wise to look back in history and realize that the Qing's exceptionally late efforts at ushering in significant reform resulted in that regime's swift political demise.

Of course, for the CCP to implement federalism now would mean the central government assuming and admitting that it would be unable to hold onto power. In the short-term, this is an improbable scenario, especially considering how well the CCP has done with state corporatism and other reform efforts. The most likely thing that would "sell" this idea to the CCP is that, unlike the current political paradigm that relies on coercion to retain power, a federal arrangement would be much less likely to collapse because of an unforeseen crisis.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS OF FEDERALISM

Federalism: More Change Than Necessary?

If Beijing wanted to address the grievances of the various minority groups, and not necessarily the provinces themselves, why implement a federal framework? Why shouldn't the CCP simply just begin to treat the ethnic minority groups better? Why not just grant them some autonomy and avoid the hassle inherent of converting the PRC into a federation?

As has already been mentioned previously in this paper, if the CCP suddenly says, "sorry, the autonomous regions were a sham before, but now they're legitimate – trust us on this one", the minorities would not be inclined to perceive Beijing's offer as being genuinely sincere. Making minor adjustments to the current political status-quo is not likely to be enough to convince the regions into buying into a federal proposal, seeing as many of China's ethnic minorities have grown accustomed to hearing deceptive pronouncements about autonomy. If the CCP suddenly stands up and says "we'll be nice now", the minorities are likely to perceive such an announcement as being yet another of Beijing's misleading tactics.

Thus, mere words are not enough. I have argued that the "marketing" of the federal deal is vital earlier in this paper; in fact, I even predicted that such efforts would be more important than the minute details of the federal proposal itself. However, as I have mentioned, "marketing" alone is not sufficient; Beijing must have significant visible structural changes if they hope to win over the support of the ethnic minority groups for a federation. The selling of the proposal is but the icing on the cake; without the significant delineation of autonomy in a highly transparent fashion, China's regions are unlikely to rally behind a federal framework.

Regions Based Upon Geography, Or Ethnicity?

Considering China's provinces (especially the more peripheral ones) are so ethnically diverse, should the regions of our hypothetical Chinese federation be altered from the current provincial setup? Should regions be based more upon ethnic makeup than upon geography or other relatively arbitrary cleavages? Since China's more "ethnic" provinces are not even close to being ethnically homogeneous, would retaining the current provincial map of the PRC for use in a federal arrangement spell trouble?

Most federalism experts agree that ethnofederalism generally leads to problematic outcomes. If a federal PRC were to be divided primarily upon ethnic lines, the possibility of highly antagonistic tensions looms above. Having more ethnically diverse regions within a federation tends to foster greater political stability. For example, the Russian republic of Chechnya, virtually a homogenous entity, has led a civil

war against Moscow that has lasted for more than a decade. In contrast, the republic of Dagestan, with its myriad of component ethnic groups, has remained an island of calmness and stability in what can be said to be a sea of political chaos in the Russian Federation (at least up until the Putin ascension).

Multi-ethnic federal regions would likely help prevent territorial aggrandizement, should such efforts still be present after the implementation of a Chinese federation. If a single ethnic group wished to secede from China, it would find itself having to convince the other ethnic groups within its federal region to leave with it. If such a nation would be unable to convince its neighbours to leave, suddenly the potential for such a group leaving China would become rather arduous. Hopefully such a dilemma would end in the aforementioned group giving up on its secessionist movement, rather than leading to a bloody Balkan-esque situation.

If such problems were to arise, we should remember that Beijing would have the ability to step in play a mediating role, if not a military role, in quelling such political subversion. Beijing would be unlikely to simply sit on its hands if such a scenario were to unfold. With the knowledge of Beijing's determination to keep the federal intact in mind, such secessionist efforts may fizzle out before leading to political problems.

The Historical Failure of Communist Federations

All previous attempts at forging communist federations have ended in grim failure. Why should a federal arrangement in the People's Republic of China prove any different than the USSR, Czechoslovakia, or Yugoslavia? It is quite likely that all these past efforts at federations within communist states all shared such an abysmal record due to the fact they were what can only be described as "fictitious federalism".⁷⁴ All three of these entities, although officially federations, were in reality unitary states. Once the authoritarian lid began to disintegrate, these heterogeneous nations broke apart (with the exception of Czechoslovakia, which was divided due to political deal making, and not widespread desire for such a split). Nothing in the political framework was altered as the coercive devices that held these states together collapsed, and thus the hypocrisy of the deceptive federal labels were revealed, ultimately culminating in the disintegration of these sham federal states.

Why should China be any different, one might ask? First, China has never attempted to portray itself as a federation. While official pronouncements from the PRC may gush over China's heterogeneous ethnic makeup and "autonomous regions", Beijing has never attempted to position the PRC as being a federal entity. The China did indeed make the shift to a federal arrangement, it would be radically different from its communist federal predecessors for one key reason: China would actually be a legitimate federation.

Can China Avoid the Secessionism Plaguing the Russian Federation?

The young Russian Federation has had its figurative hands full dealing with various secessionist efforts. The Western world is most familiar with the case of Chechnya, which has led a civil war against Moscow in an attempt to become an independent state since the collapse of the USSR; however, numerous other anti-system movements have endeavored to rip regions of Russia apart away from Moscow. Would Beijing be able to prevent such movements from plaguing a federal PRC?

Because the Soviet republics were a part of a sham federation during the USSR, many post-Soviet regions wanted out of any and all federal arrangements once the Soviet Union had collapsed. Efforts by Moscow to establish a Russian Federation were met with disdain from many of the former Soviet Union's ethnic minority groups. The PRC equivalent, if one can imagine the allusion, would be if China had created an empire run under sham "autonomous regions", and then once the said empire had collapsed, attempted to salvage its state core by convincing the component regions that it would be establishing a new, smaller China based yet again upon "autonomous regions". Obviously, for many of Russian's regions, such an offer was simply inadequate, hence the various tensions between Moscow and the regions had plagued the 1990s, and even continue today, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Since China has never claimed to be a federation, a federal China might not fall victim to the same fate of the Russian Federation. A federal proposal by Beijing, if indeed sincere and genuine, would deliver a political structure new to the PRC. If perceived by China's ethnic minority groups as being an institution

⁷⁴ Gleason, "The Federal Formula and the Collapse of the USSR," p. 146.

altogether different than “autonomous regions”, a federal PRC stands a chance of avoiding initial outright refusals by regions in joining such a political arrangement.

Beijing’s Fears of Decentralization

We should ask whether the central Chinese government would even conceive of any such significant delineation of power. While there are numerous advantages on paper for the state to embrace a federal framework, we might be foolish to think that those in the central Chinese government today would make such considerations purely out of logical reasoning. The idea of a weak, divided and decentralized China that existed over much of the twentieth century would provoke emotional barriers to the idea of Beijing willingly downloading power to the regions. How could the current leadership be expected to become excited over the prospect of delineating power to the regions, especially when images of highly antagonistic regionalism and even militaristic warlordism in China during the early 1900’s come to mind? With the even more recent precedent of the collapse of the Soviet Union partly due to uncontrolled downloading of political power, the prospect of giving power to China’s regions remains a highly dubious exercise to those in Zhongnanhai, fraught with potential dangers. Nothing could guarantee that the regions would not demand further concessions after the implementation of a federation, despite the move to a federal framework being a supposedly one-step affair.

As was already mentioned, the federalist option would be a last resort by the CCP. With the above ideas in mind, Beijing would be unlikely to turn to such a political option until the time came that those in Zhongnanhai felt their times had become numbers. Nevertheless, while the federalist option is likely to be a last resort, postponed for as long as logically possible by the CCP, a time may come when Beijing feels the status-quo will not be able to maintain long term political stability. If such a scenario unfolds, Beijing will need to adopt an alternative political framework.

China’s Transition Requires Firm Authority from the Centre

The CCP sees itself currently at the helm of an absolutely crucial juncture in China’s history, a time when the state is being shifted from a revolutionary entity to a more “normal” sort of state. This shift, it is believed by many in Beijing, demands the presence of a strong government. The effort to shed off China’s last remaining elements of Leninist economics by closing or reforming its state-owned enterprises is occurring at a breakneck rate, and has led to an unprecedented unemployment rate of 132 million people, according to the BBC. This figure is expected to increase considerably before it begins to decline.⁷⁵ China’s recent accession to the World Trade Organization, while promising to aid the transition of China’s economy, will prove to make jobless statistics even more alarming, causing fears in Beijing of potential social instability. China’s leaders feel for good reason that such a critical time in China’s transition demands a strong, unitary state. The appeal for a federal state at the current time seems minimal at best, especially considering that the potential benefits of such a political framework remain just that – *potential*.

While the argument that a strong government is needed to paddle China through its current tricky period of economic transition in order to avoid a catastrophe, proponents of a federal framework could argue with equal merit that such a period *demand*s a delineation of power. In these times of economic restructuring and efficiency, wouldn’t the PRC’s economy become more efficient if each region has able to take responsibility for its own local affairs? Regions can adopt their own path toward transition, and whichever province ends up producing the most efficient system can be emulated by the other regions. This is arguably the only way to find the best economic paradigm for China, since the PRC wishes to retain a mix of socialist traits and market characteristics in its new economy. Leaders in Beijing could *guess* which economic system would work best, but they would only be doing just that – guessing. If Beijing were to formally download considerable leeway to the provinces in their respective economic transitions (more so than has already been delineated), potentially successful paradigms that remain undiscovered or not under consideration by the centre would be able to prove their merit in practice.

Would a Federal China Fall Victim to “Balkanization”?

⁷⁵ BBC News, “China says unemployment still rising.”

Beijing may be apprehensive to the thought of a political system that encourages China's regions to directly compete with one another. The notion of provinces battling it out, figuratively speaking, to curry favour and gain assets from the central government, might be misconstrued as the first step in a slippery slope toward confrontational regionalism. This concept becomes especially worrisome due to the fact that provinces as Xinjiang and Tibet contain large numbers of non-Han minority populations, and thus Beijing would worry competition could shift from between provinces to between ethnic groups. Such a result could lead to unspeakable consequences, and perhaps even a Balkanization of the People's Republic of China. The thought of areas with primarily minority ethnic groups turning upon local Han populations, a turn of events that occurred in the former Yugoslavia, perhaps is enough to make Beijing think twice about encouraging its regions to compete with each other instead of simply following a Beijing-led banner. Valeriy Zor'kin, the Russian Federation's first Chief Justice of the Constitution Court, felt the consequence of such a federal collapse in Russia would be a scenario "a hundred times worse than Yugoslavia."⁷⁶ Such a situation would likely prove equally devastating to the PRC if it were to unfold within China's borders.

There are three reasons why a federal China is unlikely to witness a process of "Balkanization." First, as already mentioned, a federal China would likely not be an ethnofederation. Rather than re-drawing China's map based upon racial lines, an exercise that almost always ends in misery, a federal PRC would most probably retain its current political structure, lumping ethnic groups together, forcing them to work together. The CCP would likely assert that provinces belonged to no single ethnic group, but were instead equally the territory of all those ethnic groups who resided in them. Unlike in Yugoslavia, where each federal state was clearly associated with a single ethnic group and religion, China's more heterogeneous and complex demographics would likely prove too complex to result in Balkanization, due to the PRC's regions mostly being of ambiguous "belonging".

Second, as previously noted, while Yugoslavia was a sham federation, a federal PRC would most certainly contain true federal characteristics. As Serbia's authoritarian control began to slip in the Yugoslav Federation, the country's non-Serb regions began to seek independence in light of the fact that the country was not effectively representing their interests, due to Yugoslavia's unitary structure in practice. If Beijing were to enter into a federal arrangement, for reason already mentioned, it would most certainly delineate significant autonomy to the regional level, limiting the impetus for China's regions to wish to secede.

Third, Beijing would be unlikely to rally behind any single ethnic group after the transition to a federation (for fear of alienating other groups, which would unravel the entire framework), and would most probably remain an ethnically neutral central government. The big problem was that the "federal" government was not truly a national government: Slobodan Milosevic was more a representative of Serbia than of all of Yugoslavia, and hence an almost empire-like arrangement within the Yugoslav federation was apparent. The CCP, under a federation, would have to ensure it represented all of the PRC, and not some specific bloc (e.g. the coastal regions) or ethnicity (e.g. the Han).

Would Continued Control Over The PLA Be Ensured?

Another dilemma for Beijing would be its ability to ensure the People's Liberation Army remained loyal to the central government during times of turbulence. At least twice during the short history of the People's Republic of China the PLA's support of the central leadership has been shaky at best: during periods of the Cultural Revolution and during June 4th. If decentralization were to suddenly spiral out of control and Beijing needed to curtail independence and/or ethnonationalist movements with the use of force, surely the army would be the central government's primary source of enforcement. With PLA forces situated throughout the country, how could the central government ensure that its military forces would remain loyal to Beijing rather than to the regions in which they would be situated? This question becomes especially crucial if a regionalist and/or ethnonationalist movement were to sweep across China: would individual troops be prone to falling to ethnonationalist fervor and siding with their locale instead of with the central government?

Two potential solutions for Beijing exist in attempting to ensure the continued loyalty of the PLA. First, it could post military personnel in regions other than their actual home provinces. This policy already exists for many officials within the national bureaucracy, and far pre-dates the formation of the PRC. Second, Beijing could make sure that the military procured all of its funding and other resources from the

⁷⁶ Sharlet, "The Russian Constitutional Court," p. 16.

central government. If military officials were financially dependent on the region in which they were stationed, they would likely be much more willing to side with such a region over Beijing. Making all funding a federal jurisdiction would help prevent the PLA's loyalties from slipping to the regional level.

Federalism: an Inherently Western Concept?

Some might argue that federalism is inherent a Western invention: that it is a Western solution to what were past Western political problems. This method of thinking would point out that China lacks the democratic political culture or Western-style judicial system necessary for operating a federal framework. Proponents of this viewpoint would likely argue that China should devise its own political system in solving its unique problems. It should not try to adopt cookie-cutter solutions to its particular political needs. Julianar Green is one such advocate of such a point of view: "Present models of federalism presuppose a transparent democratic framework, a strong and independent judiciary to resolve jurisdiction disputes, and parties willing to bargain without resorting to violence ... If it is to work, a purely Asian solution must be devised – one not based on experiences in North America and Europe, but on the more complex and violent conflicts of [Asian states]." ⁷⁷

First, federalism need not be so closely associated with all of the aforementioned Western political baggage. As this paper has already argued, federalism in China would indeed be unique to the needs of the PRC: it would likely be an *authoritarian* federation. Simply because federalism began in the Western world does not mean that it is exclusively under its jurisdiction alone. Second, despite Beijing's current reluctance to warm to the federal ideas, the downloading of autonomy to the regional level is by no means a foreign political concept to China. In fact, as was previously noted, Victoria Hui has already made this very argument: that divided authority is in fact indigenous to China. ⁷⁸ The concept of delineating power should not be misconstrued as a Western concept: it is a universal notion.

Who Would Represent the Provinces at a "Federal Conference"?

To put it quite simply: who would negotiate on behalf of provinces at our hypothetical "federal conference"? The regions of the PRC are currently run by officials carefully selected and appointed based upon their loyalty to Beijing. If these officials represented the regions as such a conference, and signed onto a federal arrangement on behalf of their regions, it would be perceived as Beijing signing a deal, in effect, with itself! Ethnic minority groups would accuse the current provincial leaders of making cozy deals with Beijing, likely regardless of how generous the concessions of such a federal package would be.

Thus, leaders of the ethnic minority groups, including the more politically subversive unofficial national leaders, would have to be a part of the formulation process. However, their invitation would mean Beijing indirectly admitting current provincial leaders are simply puppets of the centre, something those in Zhongnanhai might be wary to do, due to worries over political instability. Even if the heads of secessionist movements were to be invited to such a conference by Beijing, would they perceive such an offer as a trap? Would they see Beijing's offer to attend the conference as a sincere gesture, or as an deceptive tactic employed by Beijing to arrested them?

This question is extremely difficult to answer; in fact, this paper offers to solution to this troublesome dilemma. Perhaps Beijing would be willing to swallow its pride and invite the informal leaders of the politically subversive underground movements out of the pragmatic need to ensure a federal arrangement would be accepted by all of China's ethnic minorities. In either case, this dilemma presents some very difficult decisions for Beijing, should the CCP ever become interesting in implementing a federal framework.

Would SOEs Prove a Problem?

One of the primary reasons the Chinese central government is still so involved in the national economy is that it feels the need to continue to manage the SOEs. ⁷⁹ Rapid privatization led to massive economic problems in such post-communist countries as Russia that opted for "overnight" economic

⁷⁷ Green, "The Federalism Option."

⁷⁸ Hui, "Rethinking the 'One China' Claim."

⁷⁹ Wang and Chang, "Economic transition under a semifederalist government", p. 15.

transitions. Beijing obviously wishes to prevent the same economic hardships that occurred in Russia from being realized in China, and thus is attempting to privatize its SOEs gradually in order to avoid some of the problems (e.g. nomenklatura capitalism) that have plagued the Russian economy as of late.

If China were to adopt a federal arrangement, would this mean that the CCP would have to give up its efforts at slowly privatizing the SOEs? Would the CCP have to download the responsibility for SOE privatization to the provincial level of government? Likely not. The federal level of government, run by the CCP, would still remain the overall political and economic co-ordinator of the country, ensuring a smooth transition. Simply because the PRC would become a federalism would not mean the CCP would fade into oblivion. Obviously central governance would still be necessary after the implementation of a federal arrangement. The CCP could continue its ownership and gradual selling off of the SOEs after the shift to federalism. Thus, Beijing's handling of SOEs need to witness any alterations, since the SOEs are currently nationalized anyway. Besides, in light of the CCP's recent decision to sell off most of the remaining SOEs to foreign companies,⁸⁰ the privatization of SOEs should not become an issue of contention after the shift to a federal framework.

Difficulties Regarding Corruption

Would current difficulties over systemic corruption in the PRC plague a future federal arrangement? Oddly, to a certain extent, corruption is a welcomed trait in the Chinese economy. Because of the inducements it offers, corruption has been responsible for a significant degree of China's recent economic success. As Chengze Fan and Herschel Grossman have found, "corruption ... serves as a method of compensation that ... provides an effective inducement to local officials to promote economic reform."⁸¹

However, if corruption reaches epidemic proportions, obviously it begins to have a detrimental impact upon the health of the economy. Corruption has indeed become systemic in China, due to the lack of centralized and organized monitoring systems.⁸² As Meixin Pei asserts, China has "uncontrolled, systemic corruption", and carries the honour "of being one of the most corrupt countries in East Asia."⁸³ All of this weakens transition to market economy, promotes the theft of public assets (especially from the already faltering SOEs, and most importantly for our study, weakens state capacity.⁸⁴ This systemic level of corruption could also provide significant insurmountable difficulties to the transition toward federalism.

The problem with striving to eliminate corruption in China is that such efforts would result in the CCP would be shooting itself in the foot, at least in the short term. If it were engaged in a genuine and no-holds-barred effort to weed out corruption, such an effort would result in tremendous turbulence, since almost the entire organization is, to some level, under the thumb of corruption.⁸⁵ In fact, as already noted, the central government likely desires to maintain at least a minor level of corruption as an incentive for local officials to promote economic reform and productivity.⁸⁶ And yet, in the grand scheme of things, such "institutional corruption" has a clearly negative effect on state integrity, hurting regime legitimacy, and giving the entire system the image of being internally rotten.⁸⁷

In light of this major potential barrier to successful federal implementation, should we expect China's highly systemic corruption to result in a turbulent transition to federalism? Perhaps not; in fact, federalism could actually turn out to be an effective tool in the battle against China's corruption spiraling out of control. First of all, once China has adopted a federal arrangement, provinces would no longer be able to simply blame Beijing for all its woes! Since China's regions would assume responsibility for numerous economic jurisdictions, they would suddenly become accountable for a great deal of the systemic

⁸⁰ See *Business Weekly*, "China loosens grip on SOEs".

⁸¹ Fan and Grossman, "Incentives and Corruption in Chinese Economic Reform," p. 196.

⁸² For an account of how institutional corruption has impacted China's agricultural sector, see Andrew Wedeman's "Stealing From the Farmers: Institutional Corruption and the 1992 IOU Crisis." For examples of how China's financial sector has been devastated by corruption, see X. L. Ding's "Systemic Irregularity and Spontaneous Property Transformation in the Chinese Financial System," and Richard McGregor's "Priceless tales of Chinese bank lending."

⁸³ Pei, p. 95.

⁸⁴ Pei, pp. 98-100.

⁸⁵ Pei, pp. 101-102.

⁸⁶ See Fan and Grossman's "Incentives and Corruption in Chinese Economic Reform".

⁸⁷ Wedeman, pp. 806-807.

corruption in the CCP. Provinces would no longer be able to privately promote corruption while publicly lambasting Beijing for the existence of such systemic corruption. Each province would become responsible for reigning in their own corrupt institutions, removing their ability to simply blame the higher level of government as they had in the past. This is not to suggest federalism is a silver bullet in the fight against corruption; however, federalism would see the provinces becoming more accountable due to their increased jurisdictional responsibilities.

Second, while many Chinese economic experts suggest one answer in curtailing the CCP's high levels of corruption would be the establishment of better regulatory structures⁸⁸, federalism may provide a less visible but equally (if not more) effective solution at fighting corruption: improving and speeding up the demand for legal culture in China. What good would it be for the CCP to implement regulatory structures if there was little demand for them, and if the legal culture had not evolved to a point where China's judicial system would be able to effectively enforce such structures?

Interference with State Corporatism?

Today's authoritarian order in China rests upon the use of local state corporatism to ensure that the new middle class and the rapidly evolving economy both remain under direction of the central government. In this system, government cadres and entrepreneurs are in bed together, economically speaking, allowing the CCP to prevent such a social group from resorting to political subversion. As such, Beijing has been fairly successful at procuring the support of this new business elite for its overall "game plan".

Would the shift to federalism destroy this arrangement between the government and China's entrepreneurs? Not necessarily; in fact, state corporatism and a genuine federal arrangement might prove to be mutually reinforcing (or, at least, state corporatism aiding the consolidation of the federation). One potential problem Westerners might see with a hypothetical authoritarian federal framework in China is that there would be a lack of a "check and balance" system. From a Western point of view, there would be no multi-party system, and thus little way of ensuring the protection of provinces from a powerful and authoritarian central level of government. However, in addition to all of the previously mentioned reasons why Beijing would be reluctant to crack down upon the regions after the transition to federal, the existence of state corporatism might also make Beijing think twice before infringing upon the federal "deal". Currently, state corporatism in China has resulted in the entrepreneur class hopping in bed with the central government. If the federal shift would split the unitary government in two levels, central and regional, entrepreneurs would likely simply find themselves getting cozy with both levels of government. If this were to occur, the central government would have much to lose by cracking down on the regional level of government, as such actions would have dire economic repercussions. Beijing would undoubtedly feel such a hit as well, since if the two levels of government and the entrepreneurs enter into a sort of triangular economic relationship, any detrimental impact on the regions would be sure to have great effect, even if indirect, on Beijing.

Federalism Fails to Address the Falun Gong Problem

One potential criticism of this federal proposal is that it does not address one of the gravest political threats to the PRC at the moment: Falun Gong. This religious movement has been shown to potentially be a massive threat to Beijing's rule, given the organization's unprecedented ability to gain followers and employ impressive organizational skills in spite of official political oppression. Recent efforts to hijack CCTV television stations in order to publicly promote the movement on state TV has Beijing up in arms over how to respond to this subversive movement. If our hypothetical federation is supposed to cure what ails the PRC, shouldn't it be contain a framework for dealing with the Falun Gong?

Such a criticism of this federal vision is indeed valid, for this paper has not dealt with how such a federal political system would directly deal with the Falun Gong. However, this system would not attempt to direct combat the Falun Gong for one simple reason: the Falun Gong should be treated as a symptom of a poor political status-quo in China, rather than as the disease itself. If people in China are angered off with the current corruption, inefficiencies, unresponsiveness, and unaccountability of the current political setup, should it surprise us that they join a "religion" that is rather anti-system in its nature in such large numbers? How would the CCP be best to respond to the Falun Gong threat? Should it go into battle with clenched

⁸⁸ For example, see Ding, p. 675.

fits, which seems to have been the CCP's only tactic thus far? Or should it attempt to solve the problems that have helped cause this movement to gain such popularity and widespread social recognition? The federal system outlined in this paper is an attempt to improve the overall political experience in China. If it is indeed true that many turn to the Falun Gong out of spite for the CCP, and the CCP were to radically change things for the better by implementing a federal framework, support for the Falun Gong would likely dry up, as its political message would gradually run out of steam.

CONCLUSION

A Chinese Federation would still see the PRC enjoying an authoritarian government. As this paper has attempted to make clear, no radical paradigm shift, such as a sudden change to and emulation of Western-style democracy, would be necessary to successfully implement such a federation.

Regardless of the potential power the central CCP would still wield in a Chinese federation, this new PRC would likely see the central government practicing a self-censoring form of authoritarianism. Beijing would be reluctant to abuse its powers and violate the goodwill of the federation, not because of the presence of any formal or visible institutions as favoured by the West, but rather because of the psychological damage such actions would have upon the legitimacy of a federation. Were the central government to overstep its bounds and violate the federal agreement, China's regions would likely perceive the federation as entering a state of disrepair.

While downloading some political responsibilities to the regions would certainly take some of the heat off of the CCP, it would also mean the central government giving up a degree of power. For those in Zhongnanhai, this is one of the primary drawbacks of the federal proposal. Yet, in spite of this dilemma, we should realize that the CCP may one day come to find such an "exchange" (downloading autonomy in part for greater political stability) a necessary evil that it reluctantly decides to implement in order to ensure its own long-term political survival.

Federalism alone is obviously not a panacea for all of China's political problems. However, such a political system could hold the possibility for satisfying regional demands for self-autonomy, even eventually making secessionist movements relatively irrelevant over the long-term. While federalism on its own is certainly not a magic bullet, federalism could perhaps be one part of a multi-faceted approach at repairing the antagonistic relations between Beijing and China's regions.

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