

# **Jagannath P. Panda, China's Path to Power: Party, Military and the Politics of State Transition, New Delhi: Pentagon Security International, 2010.**

*Prashant Kumar Singh\**

It is not very often in India, that comes across a book about China that goes beyond the traditional subject of India-China relations. Jagannath P. Panda's book *China's Path to Power: Party, Military and the Politics of State Transition* does exactly that.

The nuances of this statement may be debated, but his larger point that Western academia applies concepts and tools which may not be useful in understanding the Chinese context is correct.

As a researcher at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), Panda has travelled extensively in China and has interacted with Chinese scholars and policy-makers. The insights drawn from these travels and discussions inform his work. He argues that the Western scholars tend to take extreme a view on China and judge China on Western parameters and their ideological and political biases are quite apparent in their writings. According to him: "Most of these writings (Western) are intransigent, obstinate, and based on agenda setting, exposing only the downbeat side of China". The nuances of this statement may be debated, but his larger point that Western academia applies concepts and tools which may not be useful in understanding the Chinese context is correct.

He underlines the need for understanding China on its own merit. He discusses the ideological and political churnings that are taking place within China, and highlights how these churnings are reflected in the institutional transformation of China. His core argument is that China is following a policy of "systemic incrementalism" which is working in every state-organ at every level. "Systemic incrementalism" implies that China remains cautious and alert politically while upholding its balanced and systemic changes at different levels" (p.1). He is of the opinion that China has moved beyond being a 'totalitarian' and 'party-state' in the

---

\*Dr Prashant Kumar Singh is an Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi.

China is following a policy of “systemic incrementalism” which is working in every state-organ at every level. “Systemic incrementalism” implies that China remains cautious and alert politically while upholding its balanced and systemic changes at different levels” (p.1).

classical sense of the terms. In a strict constitutional sense, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is still supreme and the official pronouncements made by the authorities sound as if China is still a party-state. However, one should not overlook the fact that many new trends like semi-competitive local elections have emerged in the Chinese political system over a period of time under the overall rubric of the CCP. These trends are an anomaly in a communistic totalitarian state and a pure party-state would not have allowed these to develop. According to Panda, these new trends, in fact, indicate that the Chinese political system is undergoing a transformation. Unlike typical communistic totalitarian system, it is accommodating hitherto ideologically unkosher elements.

The book under review first traces the evolution of the Chinese discourse on politics and governance, and analyses decision-making in China. Then, it

identifies the changes that are taking place in the realm of economy, military and civil-military relations.

He argues that although the CCP is not going to concede its supremacy at least in the foreseeable future, it has adopted a more accommodative approach. It has permitted civil society to grow. Panda points out that the emergence of market economy in China has also occasioned a debate on “Rule of Law” versus “Rule by Law” in China. China has been more familiar with “Rule by Law”. However, the nature of present economic setup demands “Rule of law”. He argues that although China’s journey towards “Rule of Law” will take a different trajectory, there are important voices emanating from within the CCP who favour “Rule of Law” as a tool for governance (p.35). Panda identifies many “sprouts of democracy” in the Chinese political system. But he stops short of predicting the future of this transformation which, in the eyes of many, is still in a very nascent stage. However, he is convinced that the party’s attitude towards this transformation is benign.

**Although the CCP is not going to concede its supremacy at least in the foreseeable future, it has adopted a more accommodative approach. It has permitted civil society to grow.**

He avers that decision-making in today’s China is not in the hands of the few, unlike in the Maoist period. It has become considerably broad-based and is being

influenced by various party, government and popular institutions and actors.

**Decision-making in today's China is working under various checks and balances within the Party and from outside the Party. Therefore, it is not correct to assume the CCP to be a monolith in present times.**

He underlines the significance that nationalism and the Internet have assumed in China. In the decades after the economic reforms and opening up, nationalism has emerged as a new ideology in China replacing Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Interestingly, the Internet has emerged as favourite instrument for contemporary Chinese nationalism to express itself. He argues that decision-making in today's China is working under various checks and balances within the Party and from outside the Party. Therefore, it is not correct to assume the CCP to be a monolith in present times.

Panda has devoted two chapters to the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). He analyses its relationship with the Party and tries to establish

that the PLA has moved beyond the phase when it was completely a 'party-army'. He argues that although the PLA is still faithful and committed to the supremacy of the CCP, it has gradually become depoliticised in its normal institutional functioning. Furthermore, he stresses the very visible waning of military representation in the Party's top decision-making bodies the politburo, standing committee, and the CMC. It appears to be a two-way process. On the one hand, the PLA is coming out of the shadow of the Party, and its representation is becoming less in the top party bodies on the other. Panda appears to suggest that military modernisation has initiated the process of army and party separation. This is a valid point because military modernisation is not all about weapons. It requires a modern and professional organisation as well.

**Although the PLA is still faithful and committed to the supremacy of the CCP, it has gradually become depoliticised in its normal institutional functioning.**

Panda has rightly identified the information gaps and made a good attempt to fill them. However, there are some repetitions which could have been avoided. Besides, the implications that he draws for India do not fit in a book that is focusing on China's internal ideological and institutional churn. Finally, the book should be read because it gives a fair overview of Chinese political and ideological debates and their ramifications on various institutions.

