3 Power: The Centrepiece

Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.  
(Mao Zedong)

Power can be attained through controlling powerful institutions.  
(Jiang Zemin)

Power is the cornerstone of Chinese politics. Chinese politicians and diplomats are often recognised as masters of power politics, having inherited a well-spring of experience of power play over the millennia. Chinese society is organised in a hierarchical order, more so in traditional China than in modern times, with codes of conduct regulating personal relationships within an extended family, as well as among one’s peers, and in relation to one’s juniors and seniors. Even ordinary Chinese realise the importance of power and exercise it in their daily lives. The Chinese understanding of the concept of power is close to the Western orthodox meaning of power as ‘an authoritative allocation of values’ or ‘who gets what, when and how’. The exercise of power, however, differs substantially (see Chapter 5).

THE IMPORTANCE OF POWER

According to Professor Liang Shoude, dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University, power is the most important concept in the formulation of a Chinese theory of IR. The Confucian hierarchical structure of society is based on a reciprocal exchange of righteous behaviour between individuals. In an ideal situation moral virtues should form the basis upon which such behaviour is exchanged. However, in practice, power and authority, as legitimised by a common acceptance of the codes of conduct, are the underpinning structure reinforcing such behaviour. The Legalistic school of thought, which thrived amidst the blossoming of a hundred schools of thought in the absence of a single unified state power during the Spring and Autumn Period (722–481 BC) and the Warring States Period (480–221 BC), stresses the importance of using legal means (but reinforced by power and authority) to ensure adherence to righteous behaviour and to
maintain the hierarchical social order. In conceptual terms it has remained a distinct strand of thought in Chinese political philosophy, arguing that the realisation of beneficial policies depends on institutions rather than good intention. Over the years, however, the Legalistic school has fused with Confucianism in practice.

Mao Zedong’s famous saying that ‘political power grows out of the barrel of a gun’ rings true, especially in a crisis situation when the legitimacy of the CCP or the position of its top leaders comes under serious challenge. Mao also said that the gun must come under the control of the Party, so the Party is the ultimate source of authority, and the most powerful people in China are the seven standing committee members of the 22-member strong Politburo. The head of the Politburo – Mao and Deng in the past, and now Jiang – is the single most powerful person in China. They are modern equivalents of a Chinese emperor in the dynastic days. According to Mao’s long-time private doctor, Mao did liken himself to a Chinese emperor. To him morality had little place in politics. At the height of his long rule, only Mao had independent freedom of choice. Arguably his thoughts were influenced more by the kind of intricate power play that existed in Chinese imperial courts than by Marxism and Leninism.

Of the various kinds of reforms in China today, political reforms, especially when they threaten the control of the Party, are prohibited. Despite changes brought about by economic reforms and the process of decentralisation, regionalisation, and fragmentation of power in China, on the whole the country is still under the firm grip of the Party through various forms of social control and the scrutiny of the military and security establishments.

In political practice in China, power often refers to raw power or brute force. However, in academic circles, the concept of power has undergone some significant changes. In recent years Chinese scholars stress the importance of zonghe guoli (comprehensive national power) in international relations. To them it is essential to make an accurate assessment of the comprehensive national power (CNP) of nation-states and to develop such power in China. Only then can effective policies be made to deal with problems arising out of inter-state relations.

According to one Chinese analyst, before the Second World War, power in IP meant basically military power, of which ‘gunboat’ diplomacy was one form, and it became the heart of qiangquan zhengzhi (big-power politics). After the Second World War, the concept of power had changed to mean national capability and external influence. Following Japan’s rapid economic growth after the war, Japanese scholars