

## **Harsh light shines on the state of China leadership**

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The Australian  
16 May 2012  
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For at least a decade, think tanks and chanceries have echoed with tales of China's rise.

The narrative is familiar. China has remade its economy and is now eating the US's lunch. The country is growing rapidly, laying roads and high-speed rail at a frenetic pace. The Chinese authorities sit atop a hoard of foreign exchange reserves that would make Croesus envious.

Increasingly, China's economic strength is mirrored in its military capability. It is, according to its boosters, destined for hegemony in the Asia-Pacific. Soon, they say, it may even be a peer-competitor of the US.

China's recent performance has certainly been impressive. Yet recent official conduct in China, by turns baroque and brutal, should give observers pause for thought.

We now know that Bo Xilai, former Communist Party secretary of mega-city Chongqing and a rising star in the party, systematically terrorised and rorted his municipality. Bo and his wife allegedly sent hundreds of millions of dollars out of the country; she is the prime suspect in the murder of a British businessman; he is said to have plotted to kill his own police chief. Abuse of power was practised throughout their extended family, of which Bo was merely the capo di tutti capi.

Bo's behaviour may have been more rococo than that of most senior officials. But corruption is widely entrenched throughout the country. There are Bo Xilais in other cities and provinces, too. This has deleterious consequences for government revenues, business efficiency and social harmony -- all important elements of national power.

Nor is corruption limited to the civil authorities. Recent reporting by John Garnaut in Foreign Policy magazine reveals that the People's Liberation Army is riddled with it.. The practice of buying promotions is common. Garnaut's sources describe a "web of military cliques, factions and internal knots of organised crime" that "sounds more like the workings of warlord armies before the communist revolution than the rapidly modernising force that is currently rattling China's neighbours".

The implications of this corruption for the PLA's discipline and morale are serious, and raise sharp questions about its effectiveness as a war-fighting machine.

The Bo case has also shone a light on the effectiveness -- or lack thereof -- of China's leadership. In recent times, some Western analysts who wished for a more orderly politics than that found in their own capitals have glimpsed it in Beijing.

China has moved adroitly to protect its environment, reduce pollution and invest in renewable energy, they note, in contrast to the policy paralysis in Washington. They even praise the long-termism of China's five-year plans compared to the short-termism of Western politics.

China's senior leaders, some observers conclude, are freer than Western politicians to pursue their country's national interest and maximise its national power.

There is some truth to this. But the larger truth, exposed by Bo, is that politics in China is still a vicious and occasionally deadly game. Paranoia and intrigue stalk the leadership. Even the President of China, Hu Jintao, is spied on by his rivals.

The milieu within Zhongnanhai, the Chinese leadership compound, is probably less like the collective of brilliant technocrats its admirers imagine and more like The Hunger Games. This is not a promising environment for steady and far-sighted leadership.

The case of the blind lawyer and activist Chen Guangcheng is, in many ways, just as telling as that of Bo.

Chen's mistreatment by local authorities, who were infuriated at his campaigns against forced abortions and sterilisations, reveals the feebleness of China's rule of law, the tensions between the centre and the periphery, and the discrimination and abuses that can be a part of Chinese life. His escape from house arrest and its unfolding consequences demonstrate that, despite Beijing's wishes, these blemishes are not purely an internal matter.

China's mixed human-rights record is not just bad for its citizens. It is a strategic weakness that complicates its foreign relations and diminishes its soft power. The state's harsh treatment of individuals and minorities regularly disrupts its bilateral relationships. Evidence of internal repression disillusioned China's friends and makes its neighbours wary. The human-rights issue is a pebble in China's shoe, and the country may never hit its full stride unless it is removed.

China is clearly a global player, and it will remain so. The country is finally achieving an economic position befitting its huge size. That is good news for the hundreds of millions of Chinese people who have been lifted out of poverty -- as well as for the rest of us.

With this economic weight comes a new ability to project power, and a rightful claim to foreign policy influence.

But China's challenges in the areas of corruption, governance and human rights have the potential to check its rise.

The political and economic problems of the West, with which we are all familiar, can hardly compare.

The Bo and Chen affairs tell us much about modern China. They should also inform our calculations about China's power.

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