
A World Safe for Autocracy?

China's Rise and the Future of Global Politics

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The Chinese people, President Xi Jinping proclaimed in 2016, “are fully confident in offering a China solution to humanity’s search for better social systems.” A year later, he declared that China was “blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization.” Such claims come as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been extending its reach overseas and reverting to a more repressive dictatorship under Xi after experimenting with a somewhat more pluralistic, responsive mode of authoritarianism.

Many Western politicians have watched this authoritarian turn at home and search for influence abroad and concluded that China is engaged in a life-and-death attempt to defeat democracy—a struggle it may even be winning. In Washington, the pendulum has swung from a consensus supporting engagement with China to one calling for competition or even containment in a new Cold War, driven in part by concerns that an emboldened China is seeking to spread its own model of domestic and international order. Last October, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence decried China’s “whole-of-government” effort to influence U.S. domestic politics and policy. In February, Christopher Wray, the director of the FBI, went further: the danger from China, he said, was “not just a whole-of-government threat but a whole-of-society threat.” Such warnings reflect a mounting fear that China represents a threat not just to specific U.S. interests but also to the very survival of democracy and the U.S.-led international order.

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The view from Beijing: a Chinese-built bridge in Maputo, Mozambique, May 2018

This fear gets the challenge from Beijing wrong. Not since the days of Mao Zedong has China sought to export revolution or topple democracy. Under Xi, the CCP has promoted “the Chinese dream,” a parochial vision of national rejuvenation that has little international appeal. China’s remarkable economic growth under previous leaders came from experimentation and flexibility, not a coherent “China model.”

Since 2012, China’s growing authoritarianism and resurgent state dominance over the economy have dashed Western hopes that China would eventually embrace liberalism. And China’s actions abroad have offered alternatives to U.S.-led international institutions, made the world safer for other authoritarian governments, and undermined liberal values. But those developments reflect less a grand strategic effort to undermine democracy and spread autocracy than the Chinese leadership’s desire to secure its position at home and abroad. Its efforts to revise and work around international institu-

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tions are the result of pragmatic decisions about Chinese interests rather than a wholesale rejection of the U.S.-led international order. Beijing's behavior suggests that China is a disgruntled and increasingly ambitious stakeholder in that order, not an implacable enemy of it. In seeking to make the world safer for the CCP, Beijing has rejected universal values and made it easier for authoritarian states to coexist alongside democracies. And within democracies, the CCP's attempts to squelch overseas opposition to its rule have had a corrosive influence on free speech and free society, particularly among the Chinese diaspora.

These are real challenges, but they do not yet amount to an existential threat to the international order or liberal democracy. Successfully competing with China will require more precisely understanding its motives and actions and developing tough but nuanced responses. Overreacting by framing competition with China in civilizational or ideological terms risks backfiring by turning China into what many in Washington fear it already is.

NOT MADE FOR EXPORT

Although Xi has proudly advertised in his rhetoric a Chinese example that other societies could emulate, he has also qualified such statements. In 2017, two months after touting China's modernization at the 19th Party Congress, he told a high-level gathering of foreign leaders that "managing our own affairs well is China's biggest contribution to building a community with a shared future for humanity." He went on: "We will not 'import' a foreign model. Nor will we 'export' a China model, nor ask others to 'copy' Chinese methods." That statement was a reiteration of the Chinese leadership's line ever since it began to reform and open up the economy in the late 1970s. Chinese officials have consistently stressed the unique character of China's development path.

And no wonder: neither China's economic nor its political model is well suited for export. As the economist Barry Naughton has noted, China has benefited from at least three unique economic conditions: an enormous internal market, abundant labor, and a hierarchical authoritarian government committed to a transition away from a planned economy. None of these conditions will be easy for other developing states to copy.

If there is a general principle underlying China's development, it is pragmatism and a willingness to experiment, rather than any particular

economic orthodoxy. In the words of the political scientist Yuen Yuen Ang, “directed improvisation,” rather than state control, brought about China’s economic miracle. The introduction of markets and competition into a state-run economy drove much of China’s growth before 2012, when the state began reasserting its dominance over the economy.

Other authoritarian-minded leaders may look to the CCP’s long reign with envy, but they will have trouble emulating China’s political system. Xi and his predecessors have relied on the CCP’s pervasive reach in Chinese society to maintain their rule, backstopped by an internal security apparatus that by 2011 cost more than the Chinese military. Despite its Marxist-Leninist roots, the CCP has been ideologically opportunistic, embracing capitalism and alternately rejecting and celebrating traditional Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism. Responsiveness to public criticism has also helped the CCP survive policy mistakes and improve governance. But the party’s recent moves to dominate society and curtail public discussion risk returning China to a more brittle past.

Last year, the Chinese leadership proclaimed “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism With Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” as its guiding ideology, enshrining it in the Chinese constitution and promoting it to Chinese citizens with a smartphone app. Xi’s signature “Chinese dream” is a nationalist vision focused on delivering wealth and power to the Chinese people, with the CCP in command. As the legal scholar Margaret Lewis has written, “China’s Party-state structure is rooted in a particular history that does not lend itself to an easy copy-and-paste abroad.”

A HELPING HAND FOR AUTOCRATS

Yet China has still made it easier for authoritarianism to thrive elsewhere. The country’s four decades of rapid economic growth have demonstrated that development does not require democracy. In the words of the political scientist Seva Gunitsky, “Material success . . . often creates its own legitimacy: regimes become morally appealing simply by virtue of their triumph.”

Beijing also supports autocracies in more direct ways, especially through international institutions. Along with Russia, China has regularly used its veto in the UN Security Council to shield other authoritarian countries from international demands to protect human rights and to block interventions that would force governments to end abuses. China has styled itself as a conservative defender of interna-

tional norms, protecting state sovereignty against what it sees as unlawful humanitarian interventions. China's growing economic clout has also led other states, particularly those in Africa and Latin America that trade heavily with China, to join Beijing in opposing human rights resolutions in the UN General Assembly.

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But China has not always used its power in the UN Security Council to defend authoritarian states from international pressure. It has voted several times for UN sanctions resolutions against Iran and North Korea and has pushed other countries, including Myanmar and Sudan, to curb political violence. "Despite its equivocations," the political scientist Joel Wuthnow has pointed out, "China cannot be simply described as a patron of rogue regimes."

For example, in the early years of this century, when the Sudanese government was carrying out a campaign of genocidal violence in Darfur, China sold weapons to the regime and tried to temper international sanctions. But under international pressure in advance of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, China prevailed on Khartoum to accept a peacekeeping force that included Chinese peacekeepers.

In 2011, Beijing surprised many international observers by voting for sanctions against Libya and in favor of referring the Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi to the International Criminal Court. China then chose not to block a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the military intervention in Libya that led to Qaddafi's violent ouster. Having learned from that experience, during the civil war in Syria, China has reserved its veto for those resolutions it believes threaten forcible regime change. China's overall approach to the UN reflects a conservative position on the balance between sovereignty and human rights, tempered by a desire to avoid the political costs of taking unpopular stands.

Critics often accuse Beijing of supporting authoritarian countries by providing them with unconditional loans and aid. There is some truth to this claim, but the picture is more complicated than critics usually suggest. China's official development assistance tends to follow its political interests rather than target particular types of governments according to their level of democracy or corruption. China also provides an attractive alternative source of finance to governments

unable or unwilling to meet the requirements of other international lenders. Indeed, compared with other international sources of finance, Chinese loans may actually operate more effectively in badly governed places, as they are often tied to specific infrastructure projects, such as new roads, schools, power plants, or sewage systems. Complaints that Beijing's lending props up dictators can also ring hollow given the long record of the U.S. government, international banks, and multinational oil and mining corporations sustaining strategically important or resource-rich dictatorships.

China has also begun to introduce requirements on Chinese companies aimed at reducing the negative effects of investments on local communities and curtailing vanity projects, although Beijing's diplomatic and strategic interests can still override these concerns. Under international pressure, the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has adopted norms about the environmental and social consequences of its policies similar to those in developed countries. In April, Christine Lagarde, the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, applauded Beijing's announcement of a debt-sustainability framework in response to international criticism of Xi's Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese aid and finance may not improve governance in the developing world, but it's not clear that they will worsen it either.

China also rightly gets heat from Western observers for exporting surveillance and censorship technologies. China's heavy investments in these technologies have made it cheaper for other authoritarian and would-be authoritarian regimes to monitor their citizens. Chinese companies have sold surveillance systems, including AI-powered facial recognition technology, to several countries, including Ecuador, Iran, Kenya, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. Some government officials around the world look to China's example when it comes to managing the Internet and social media. As Tanzania's deputy minister for transport and communications noted in 2017, "Our Chinese friends have managed to block such media [Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram] in their country and replaced them with their homegrown sites that are safe, constructive, and popular. We aren't there yet, but while we are still using these platforms, we should guard against their misuse."

China's four decades of rapid economic growth have demonstrated that development does not require democracy.

Yet as with Chinese lending, the story of Chinese technology is more complicated than it first appears. The diffusion of digital authoritarianism is not the same thing as an intentional effort to remake other governments in China's image. And repression is not the only use for many of the technologies China exports. The Chinese telecommunications company ZTE, for instance, has been criticized for helping develop Venezuela's new national identity card system, which the Venezuelan authorities realized, after a visit to Shenzhen in 2008, would allow them to monitor citizens' behavior. But China isn't the only exporter of electronic identification systems. A recent article published by the Council on Foreign Relations, for example, praised British-made electronic ID cards that would "allow Rwandans to efficiently access government services." When the U.S. Commerce Department considered banning the export of technology that could be used for surveillance, many U.S. technology companies pointed out that such technology also protects digital networks from intruders.

Although these systems can help governments monitor and control their people, how exactly they are used depends on local politics. Cameras can replace more brute-force methods of surveillance, as in Ecuador, which, beginning in 2011, installed a monitoring system with China's help. But as *The New York Times* reported, many Ecuadorians have complained that the system hasn't done enough to cut crime, as the authorities haven't hired enough police officers to monitor the footage or respond to crimes caught on camera. And the Ecuadorian administration that came to power in 2017, which has pledged to reverse some of its predecessor's autocratic policies, has begun an investigation into alleged abuses of the monitoring system, including inviting the *Times* to review its records.

Ultimately, the political effects of technology can cut both ways. Just as the Internet did not bring democratic freedom to every country, so surveillance technology does not magically enable governments to control society. Technology can empower the state, but strong democratic institutions can also constrain the power of technology.

Many Western leaders also worry that Beijing is working to undermine democratic systems. The openness of democratic societies has allowed their adversaries, primarily Russia, to sow discord, paralyze debate, and influence elections. Although there is no evidence that China has illegally interfered in U.S. elections, despite allegations by U.S. President Donald Trump, some of the CCP's overseas activities

have stifled open discussion, particularly among the Chinese diaspora. Yet Beijing's aim is to advance its interests and portray Chinese actions in a positive light, not to export a particular form of government.

Beijing has devoted resources to improving China's image, sometimes in worrying ways. Since 2004, Beijing has funded several hundred Confucius Institutes, which teach Mandarin, around the world.

Concerns that the institutes infringe on academic freedom have led universities to close a number of them and academics to call for greater transparency in their operations. Beijing has also strengthened what it calls its "discourse power" by investing in English-language print and broadcast media, including the

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China Daily insert in *The Des Moines Register* that Trump criticized last year. The danger is that many people may not notice that the news they are reading or watching is paid for by the Chinese government. Beijing has become more aggressive in its use of what the National Endowment for Democracy experts Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig have called "sharp power." It has threatened to ban airlines, hotels, and other international corporations from operating in China unless they toe the party's line on Taiwan and Tibet. Last year, for example, American Airlines, Delta, and United all removed references to Taiwan from their websites at the insistence of the Chinese government.

Beijing has also used a variety of tactics to co-opt and intimidate the Chinese diaspora. In particular, it has bought or leaned on Chinese-language media outlets abroad in order to suppress criticism of the CCP. Some of the most alarming evidence of China's influence has come from Australia and New Zealand. In Australia, a storm of controversy around Beijing-linked political donations, pressure, and compromising relationships recently resulted in new laws against foreign interference.

These efforts to coerce the Chinese diaspora, combined with Beijing's campaign to shape the international media narrative about China, go well beyond so-called soft power. Although the CCP's primary purpose is not to undermine democracy, its activities threaten the healthy functioning of democratic civil society and the public's access to alternative sources of information. Yet Western countries should recognize that the threat comes from the CCP, not the Chinese people or the Chinese diaspora. If

governments pass and enforce laws against foreign interference, Chinese efforts need not constitute an existential threat to liberal democracy.

HOW THE PARTY HURTS ITSELF

In making the world safer for the CCP's interests, Beijing has projected a parochial, ethnocentric brand of authoritarian nationalism. That vision may be intended to help preserve the CCP's domestic rule, but it is more likely to repel international audiences than attract them. Xi's signature slogan, "the Chinese dream," reflects a self-centered CCP rhetoric that is likely to prevent Chinese political concepts from gaining universal appeal.

Growing repression at home is also tarnishing China's image abroad. Over the past two years, the CCP has built a dystopian police state in the northwestern region of Xinjiang and a network of internment camps to detain as many as one million of the Muslim Uighur community. The scale and intensity of the CCP's attempt to "reeducate" the Uighurs have drawn condemnation from the international human rights community, as well as statements of concern from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and political leaders in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey, all three of which are Muslim-majority countries important to Xi's Belt and Road Initiative.

Polls of global public opinion suggest that most people around the world still prefer U.S. leadership to the prospect of Chinese leadership. In a survey of people in 25 countries conducted by the Pew Research Center last year, respondents were asked to state whether U.S. or Chinese leadership would be better for the world. An average of 63 percent said they would prefer U.S. leadership; just 19 percent opted for Chinese leadership.

Even within China, many Chinese citizens are dubious of the CCP's heavy-handed nationalist propaganda and the personality cult growing around Xi. In 2012, the year Xi took the helm, a massive wave of anti-Japanese protests swept China. Since then, the Chinese government has kept a tight leash on grass-roots activism and promoted state-led nationalism in its place. The CCP has rolled out new holidays to commemorate World War II, blockbuster films to celebrate China's military prowess, and a smartphone app, Study the Great Nation, to promote "Xi Jinping Thought."

Blanketing the airwaves and the Internet with propaganda may foster the appearance of conformity, but it can also hide public disenchant-

ment. In my conversations with Chinese citizens and scholars, many said they felt paralyzed by the political climate; one scholar in Beijing even said that he was afraid of speaking honestly for fear of retaliation in “a new Cultural Revolution.” An extensive crackdown on corruption has also stifled policy initiatives at lower levels of government, as officials fear that taking any action will lead to retribution. Echoing the dismay of many Chinese elites at Xi’s move to scrap presidential term limits, the Chinese law professor Xu Zhangrun published an online critique of Xi’s turn toward one-man rule, which led to Xu’s suspension from Tsinghua University. Xu wrote that “people nationwide, including the entire bureaucratic elite, feel once more lost in uncertainty about the direction of the country” under Xi and warned that “the rising anxiety has spread into a degree of panic throughout society.” Despite this discontent, opinion polls in China show that the public is still quite hawkish, putting pressure on the leadership to stand tough in international disputes.

Overseas, China’s policies are arousing fear and suspicion in the very societies whose goodwill China needs if it is to maintain access to foreign markets, resources, and technology. In the South China Sea, Beijing has artificially enlarged islands to support advanced military capabilities and claimed the right to fish and extract oil and gas, stoking resentment and anti-China protests in the Philippines and Vietnam. Its actions have even aroused suspicion in countries, such as Indonesia, that do not have competing territorial claims in the South China Sea.

China’s state-directed efforts to dominate emerging technologies, such as its Made in China 2025 program, have added to fears that open trade, investment, and research will undermine U.S. national security. In the United States and Europe, trade deficits and a backlash against globalization have made China an easy target for resurgent nationalism. Many politicians, especially those who otherwise support free trade, have found it convenient to bash China.

GETTING CHINA RIGHT

If Beijing were truly bent on destroying democracy and spreading authoritarianism, containment might be the right response. But a U.S. strategy of countering Chinese influence everywhere it appears in the name of fighting an ideological battle against a hostile civilization would be dangerously misguided. Such a strategy would damage U.S. economic growth and innovation, limit the freedom and openness of U.S. society, and risk becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Democracy has retreated across the globe, but critics often exaggerate Beijing's role in that trend. The CCP welcomes democratic dysfunction abroad, as it makes the party look better by comparison. But democratic backsliding does not reflect a grand strategic plan in Beijing. The best approach for those who wish to counter the spread of authoritarianism is to defend and restore democracy. The United States should recommit itself to certain basic principles: the rule of law, fair elections, free speech, and freedom of the press. Where Chinese actions violate those principles, the United States should confront those responsible and join other like-minded governments to protect shared values. By recommitting to working with democratic allies and multilateral institutions, the United States could renew faith in its leadership.

When Chinese actions do not violate democratic principles, the United States should work with China to address common problems. Other countries will not be able to solve the greatest challenge humanity faces—climate change—without China's help. Under Xi, the Chinese public has acquired a taste for international leadership. Governments should welcome that trend when Chinese leadership promises to advance the global good, while criticizing Chinese actions when they fall short. Such a strategy has the added benefit of being more likely to win support from those within China who are seeking change.

At home and abroad, the CCP is fighting a defensive ideological battle against liberal norms of democracy and human rights, but so far at least, it is not engaged in a determined effort to spread autocracy. In order to respond to Beijing's actions effectively, the United States and its allies will need to be more precise about what exactly China is doing. In the end, the best way to respond to China is to make democracy work better. That would set an example for others to follow and allow the democratic world to compete with the true sources of China's international power: its economic and technological might. 🌐