

China Is Gnawing at Democracy's Roots Worldwide

The Communist Party is putting ideological battles first.

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The 20th century may have been the world's bloodiest, but in the end democracy was triumphant. A political system that was an aberration among monarchies in 1900 cut a swath through empires, fascism, and communism to emerge as the dominant political system by the end of the century.

But while the world celebrated the fall of authoritarianism in Russia and Eastern Europe in 1989, China was carefully studying how to avoid the same fate. The Chinese Communist Party concluded that its Soviet counterpart had collapsed not only because it failed to adapt to the changing world but also, more importantly, because it had turned its back on its own historical and ideological experiences. Even as China firmly went down the path of economic reform and the spectacular growth that came with it, it doubled down on its core ideology: socialism with Chinese characteristics under the absolute leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

Thirty years on, the world, according to the Chinese Communist Party, is undergoing a once-in-a-century change that will turn the tide of global power from the West to the East, thus transforming the nature of post-World War II international order. China's experience of the coronavirus pandemic has reaffirmed this assessment of faltering American global leadership, the failing capacities of the West to address the challenges of the new century, and the resilience of China's socialist economy in comparison to capitalism; most importantly, they think it has also validated the superiority of their political system. In a nutshell, the Chinese leadership seems convinced that China's national experience and the international situation have proved a fundamental premise of the 20th century to be wrong, namely that democracy is superior to other forms of governance and most conducive for national development and prosperity.

Since assuming the office of general secretary, Xi Jinping has called upon the Communist Party to prepare for the upcoming ideological battle. In a speech he delivered in January 2013, Xi described socialism with Chinese characteristics as "our party's most fundamental, unifying program" which had "allowed China to stand tall and stride far," and which would eventually prove to be superior to all other models. His speech was seen at the time as an exhortation to party cadres and of the younger generation in China not to forget what China had achieved because of the Communist Party, because outside forces wanted to confuse the people and incite them into overthrowing the regime in China. As often with such exhortations, it was a mix of insecurity, amid what the party saw as the dangerous growth of Western culture and media in China, and confidence, born out of China's economic growth and its relative

success at tackling the financial crisis of 2008. But of late, the foreign-policy implications of Xi's address are more apparent.

Although China's successful economic model has won admirers and friends around the world, its ability to move to the center of the world stage depends upon whether its political or ideological model becomes a world standard. The United States is referred to as the "leader of the free world" due as much to the attractiveness of its political model as its economic power; it owes as much to Hollywood as to the dollar. The Chinese Communist Party's problem is that its model of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" is, by its very definition, exclusive to China. Or as Xi put it himself in his address in 2013, the idea is "imbued with characteristically Chinese features bestowed by the conditions of the time." Its adoption as a global standard becomes difficult since it is virtually impossible to replicate Chinese conditions in other societies, and thus it is difficult for other polities to emulate.

Since the failed Soviet experiment has dampened any desire in the Chinese leadership to go down the path of exporting communist ideology as a means of building its own political brand, discrediting democracy as a political system appears to be the option of choice for the Chinese Communist Party. It appears to be moving from a defensive strategy of preventing the subversion of the communist state in China through so-called peaceful evolution by democratic means to an offensive strategy of undermining democracy abroad as the better political model. It is a turning of the tables.

The Chinese famously claim that they never interfere in the internal affairs of others. That is a good principle, but it's one that should no longer be taken at face value. The Chinese Communist Party appears to be influencing the politics of democracies in many different ways. The more obvious ones include the manipulation of the principles of freedom of speech and assembly while denying the same tools to others. China denies the American and European ambassadors in China the right to publish their unedited views in the Chinese mainstream media, even as their own diplomats have unfettered access to the media in democracies. China is happy to use Western social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook—where party newspaper People's Daily maintains one of the most followed accounts on the site—while banning the platforms from China itself.

The lack of access for foreigners to Chinese decision-makers in government as well as opinion-makers in the strategic community stands in sharp contrast to the readiness with which democracies allow access in the name of openness. Chinese state media abroad are using the same openness to collate and present information that portrays the host democracy in negative light, such as the performance of democratic governments in handling COVID-19, whereas it denies access to foreign media even to report on the facts about how China handled the same crisis domestically or its social and economic consequences. Even the small pockets of openness that once existed have been closed off, with numerous journalists kicked out of China and the country's own social media, such as WeChat, more heavily censored than ever.

But these are only the more obvious ways. Less obvious are the activities of the International Liaison Department of the Communist Party, virtually a parallel foreign office, which not only systematically cultivates foreign personalities and their families in traditional ways but also plants its people as diplomats inside Chinese embassies so they can influence politics and policies in democracies under legal cover. Originally designed to work with fellow communist parties, it's become a much broader group targeting any organization it thinks might prove a useful tool.

While the International Liaison Department targets foreigners, the United Front Work Department—a long-standing body whose power has swollen with new responsibilities under Xi—targets the Chinese diaspora, putting social, financial, and personal pressure on communities for the party's ends. As with all efforts at propaganda nowadays, China's efforts are digitalized, including the use of big data and artificial intelligence. For many years, the world's democracies believed that their triumph made them secure. They are still hoping that China implodes, as it well might. The Chinese are keenly aware of the fragility of their own political system. There is no ideology left beyond the idea of prolonging the Communist Party's absolute dictatorship over China. Painful economic slowdown loomed even before the impact of COVID-19; even as China can point to an early recovery thanks to its successful control of the coronavirus, it still faces an unprecedented year of recession.

While democracies dither, China is silently undermining the roots of democracy throughout the world like a river systematically erodes the bank—until even the mightiest tree must fall. The Chinese authorities are fond of saying that they do not play zero-sum games, but Xi Jinping's self-declared historical mission for China to become the world's leading power by 2049 will remain incomplete unless its model supplants democracy as the leading idea in this century. Democracies can no longer afford to rest on their laurels.

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