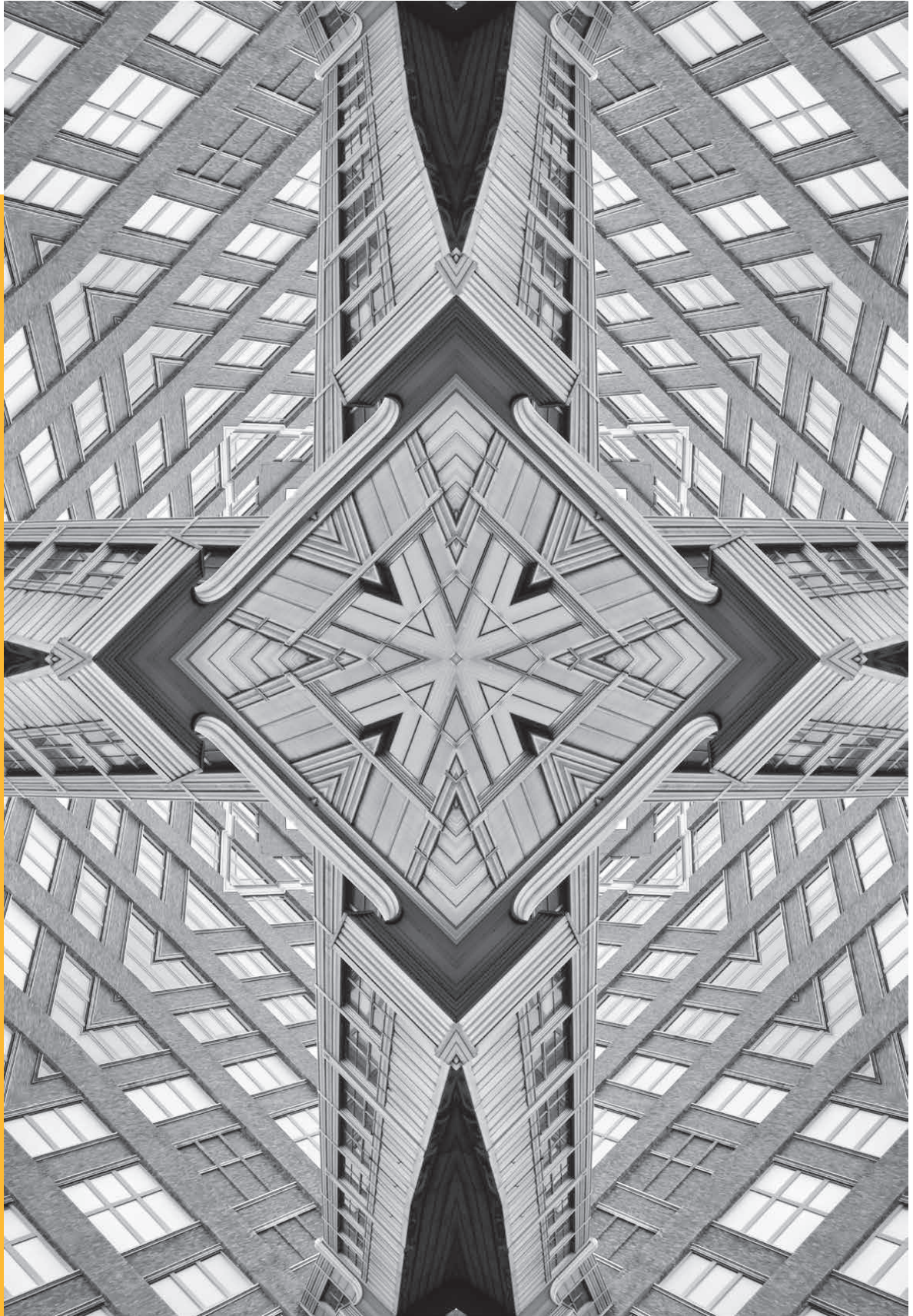


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The West Wanes, China Grows: What's at Stake for the Liberal Order?

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Abstract

As liberal democracies struggle to deal with their own domestic crises, China is finding it opportune to fill the gap in global leadership. China's economic growth in four decades—called by many analysts as a “miracle”—has made its “state-controlled capitalism” model attractive especially to countries facing massive development challenges. More importantly, President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have their eyes set on defining global governance norms. This paper navigates the question of whether China's perceived threat to the liberal order is overstated. If it is real, can it be checked and by what means?

In less than four decades the People’s Republic of China, embracing landmark market reforms, lifted more than 800 million of its people out of poverty and became the second largest economy in the world, second only to the United States (US). This success has arguably become the world’s favourite 21st-century ‘economic miracle’.¹ As China’s feat was achieved by opening up the economy, many Western analysts had assumed that the country’s leaders will open up politically as well. However, China has only emerged as an increasingly authoritarian state in the recent years, shutting all doors to political reform.

Had China kept its focus solely on economic growth and social progress, the international community (more precisely, the countries espousing liberal democratic principles) would have probably co-existed with its variant of authoritarianism. What has occurred, however, is that China’s economic turnaround has run parallel to the sharp decline of advanced liberal democracies led by the US—and this has placed the middle kingdom in a pole position to spread its authoritarian influence beyond its borders. China under President Xi Jinping—who has appointed himself president for life—is showing its appetite for expansionism in Asia and beyond. The country is using its massive accumulation of economic might, particularly through ambitious infrastructure projects under the flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to advance its geopolitical interests in Asia, Europe, and the farther regions of Africa and Latin America. Its “influence operations” that assiduously use party and state instruments have created political storms in democracies like Australia and New Zealand in the recent years.

At a time when America and the West are “withdrawing” from their global commitment to democratic values, Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have their eyes set on defining global human rights and democracy norms. In the guise of advancing a nationalistic vision called “Chinese Dream”, Xi Jinping has marshalled the military to enforce territorial claims in disputed South China Sea, put hundreds of thousands of Uyghur Muslims in internment camps, and curb political freedoms in Hong Kong. China is using the geopolitical vacuum created by the relative decline of the West, to reorder global governance and the rules-based order.

This raises important questions. What are the fundamental implications of the rise of China’s “authoritarian capitalist” model? Will the success of this template encourage governments in other parts of the world, especially those veering towards populism and are led by ‘strongman rule’, to reject Western democratic principles? How does China’s handling of the initial spread of the novel coronavirus potentially unite the democratic order against it? Can the Chinese authoritarian challenge to liberal democracies be checked?

Indeed, the liberal democratic order has never been in such dire crisis in the past 70 years than it is today. While there are reasons peculiar to each country, some of the challenges are similar in nature. According to democracy scholar Larry Diamond, “Across continents many democracies are hanging by a thread and autocrats are preparing more savage assaults on what remains of freedom.”² For political theorists Roberto Foa and Yascha Mounk, “signs of democratic dysfunction are everywhere, from Athens to Ankara, Brussels to Brasilia.”³ Many other countries are experiencing their own manifestations of such a “dysfunction”: Britain, the US, countries in Western Europe, Turkey, India, Poland, Hungary, the Philippines.⁴

According to the 2021 Freedom House Report, the year 2020 marked the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom while populist and nationalist forces made significant gains in democratic states. Of the 195 countries assessed, 73 countries declined in the freedom index, while only 28 gained. As many as 54 countries (home to 38 percent of global population) were found to be “not free”,⁵ and less than 20 percent reside in countries that can be truly called “free”. These findings are echoed by the V-Dem report: “Over the last ten years the number of democratizing countries dropped by almost half to 16, hosting a mere 4% of the global population.”⁶ Brazil, Turkey and India lead the top 10 declining democracies.⁷ Some analysts draw a comparison between the current global democratic decline to the era beginning with the Second World War.⁸

According to Freedom House Report, the most malignant influence on liberal democracies has been that of China, “the world’s most populous dictatorship ...undermining human rights accountability in international forums and strengthening alliances between autocratic governments.”⁹ The influence reached its peak in 2020 when the regime ramped up its global disinformation¹⁰ and censorship campaign to counter the fallout from its mismanagement of the outbreak of COVID-19, and the demolition of liberties of the people of Hong Kong in the midst of the pandemic.

This paper explores and analyses the rise of China, and the nature and extent of the threats it poses to the liberal democratic order. It aims to contribute to a more nuanced scrutiny of the various options available to the international community to check China’s belligerent expansionism, particularly in Asia.

Xi Jinping and the Rise of ‘Authoritarian Capitalism’

As liberal democracies struggle to deal with their own domestic crises, China has found it opportune to fill the gap in global leadership, especially under President Xi. Since taking over the position of General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, Xi has long abandoned the doctrine of Deng Xiaoping—“hide your strength and bide your time.” In 2017, Xi exhorted his people that the time was ripe for China to take global leadership and demonstrate its unique economic model. He said, “a flourishing economic model of socialism with Chinese characteristics offered a new choice for the world.”¹¹ According to China observer, Shen Dingli, a 2017 speech by Xi marked his departure from past policy. Shen linked such change in China’s behaviour to “populist isolationism” and the relative geopolitical decline of Europe and America.¹²

Beyond the geopolitical vacuum—with the US preoccupied with a series of wars in West Asia—the transformation in China’s external behaviour was facilitated by key domestic factors. According to Cai Xia, former professor at the Central Party school of the CCP who was in-charge of political training when Xi emerged as General Secretary, the party, which enjoyed relative autonomy under previous leaders, has come under the heavy hand of Xi.¹³ Since taking over the reins, Xi has skilfully worked to establish himself in Party history as the third greatest leader after Mao Zedong and Deng. One of the ways by which Xi has done this is by eliminating his key rivals.¹⁴ As a testimony to his dominance, in the 19th National Congress of the CCP in 2017, Xi was declared “the most powerful leader since Deng Xiaoping”; the same Congress enshrined the “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”.¹⁵ The implication of this move is that the “Xi Jinping thought” supersedes all doctrines popularised by past leaders, with wider ramifications for the party, state and society.¹⁶ A turning point in the transformation of leadership and state was the removal of the two-term limit in 2018, thereby allowing for a lifelong presidency.

Therefore, Xi has dismantled the collective leadership convention that acted as a sort of restraint on the regimes of both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao.¹⁷ Deng’s intent in promoting collective leadership—and concomitantly, separating the party from the government—was to prevent any authoritarian rule as experienced during Mao’s long tenure. Going against established convention, Xi has not only ensured for himself the title of “Core Leader”, he has amassed the titles of party chief, head of the government, and commander-in-chief. Xi used two key drivers: hypernationalism and collective anxiety. According to legal scholar Jiang Shigong, Xi is well aware that post-Tiananmen,¹⁸ economic momentum for ensuring legitimacy would not last forever, and therefore the party needs something else to exercise control.¹⁹ This is where nationalism has come as a tool. In 2012, Xi first floated the slogan, “The Great Rejuvenation of

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the Chinese nation” which would become his regime’s signature, along with a host of other rhetoric such as “Chinese Dream of rejuvenation”, “getting rich” to “becoming powerful”.²⁰ Analysts say such oratory was meant to divert people’s attention from the sluggish economy.

The CCP under Xi has also continuously used fear of external threats (i.e., Hong Kong and Xinjiang) or powers envious of Chinese prosperity to target rival power centres as well as exert control over key institutions such as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).²¹ This has resulted in the transformation of the CCP and greater emphasis on doctrinal Marxism-Leninism which had lost its shine as China moved towards economic liberalisation and openness.²² Such control and indoctrination has been extended to private firms as well by issuing guidelines and opening party cells within them.²³

Exporting the ‘China Model’

In the recent years, particularly since the ascendancy of Xi Jinping to power, China observers have witnessed a pattern of Chinese state and state-owned agencies taking an aggressive posture in influencing the internal policies of democratic countries in different regions across the globe. Under Xi, China has made systematic efforts to move away from its low-profile foreign policy stance to a more proactive one, often involving covert and overt interference in other countries’ internal affairs.

The most widely reported episode in recent years was the alleged role of China in the fall of the 37-year-old Robert Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe in 2017. An investigation by *Reuters* that same year revealed that Mugabe, a long-time friend of China, had become a liability for Beijing because of his indigenisation law that barred Chinese companies from getting majority ownership of businesses in Zimbabwe. Meanwhile, Angola and Ethiopia have both come under heavy Chinese influence. While the CCP over the years has created direct access to key political actors in these countries, providing training and sensitisation sessions on the Communist Party, its state-owned companies and private firms are getting involved in infrastructure and other key sectors of the economy.²⁴ Similarly, in Ghana and South Africa, the Communist Party’s International Department wing—whose mandate is to win support for the party from foreign political parties) has been providing trainings to senior officials to enhance their “ideological skills”.²⁵

In its immediate neighbourhood, China has been working to dislodge democracies in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Its record of honouring democratic principles—which it had supposedly agreed to at the time of accession from Britain in 1997 in its own territory Hong Kong—has come under heavy criticism

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after it introduced a security law to suppress the Umbrella Movement.²⁶ Activists and political dissidents demanding better democratic rule in Hong Kong have since been arrested and jailed by Beijing.²⁷

With regard to Taiwan, apart from the repeated threats of forcible reunification with the mainland, the Chinese government is using its trade leverage and the large Chinese diaspora to mute anti-Chinese and pro-democracy activities in the small island nation. For example, in 2017, leaders of the Umbrella Movement, Nathan Law and Joshua Wong were physically attacked by pro-China groups in separate violent incidents on their return from Taiwan.²⁸ In more recent times, Beijing has used trade restrictions, surveillance, and military threats to force the country to toe pro-China policies and abandon its pro-democracy agenda.²⁹

Beyond its own region, China’s belligerence is being seen in its extended neighbourhood, particularly in Southeast Asia. Over the years, China has exerted its influence on the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) largely in the form of business and investment. Most ASEAN countries that earlier shared a strong relationship with the US and its Western allies—whose legal frameworks emphasise principles of justice, and recognition of civil and political rights—have found it more profitable to do business with China instead. For example, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia are drawing closer to China. With support from China, Hun Sen, Cambodia’s strongman leader has been clamping down on democracy and basic freedoms by restricting media and jailing opponents. In another example in the region, China is the only big country which has defended the Myanmar military before the United Nations Security Council and Human Rights Council voting on the issue of the displaced Rohingyas. China showed the same pattern when it blocked the UNSC’s resolution condemning the military coup in Myanmar.³⁰

China is keen on South Asia as well. In Pakistan, for example, the massive China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) worth more than \$60 billion in Chinese investment has ensured the strong influence of Chinese capital on the poor and war-torn country.³¹ China has also taken deep inroads into Nepal’s politics and democratic processes by influencing the fate of certain regimes. In an unprecedented interference in the country’s domestic politics, the Chinese ambassador in Kathmandu in 2020 held a series of meetings among the warring factions of the Nepal Communist Party to save the pro-China K.P. Oli government.³²

In the Maldives, the previous government of Abdulla Yameen leased many islands to Chinese companies and drove the tiny island country into a massive debt trap.³³ A new Maldives government that won the elections in 2018 mainly on the platform of arresting Chinese interference and debt diplomacy, has

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openly called for support from other regional powers to cut down its exposure to Chinese money and influence.³⁴ Sri Lanka, too, has become dependent on Beijing, through infrastructure projects and soft loans.³⁵ So has Bangladesh, which has come under China’s influence through big-ticket investments, soft loans and infrastructure projects under the BRI. Like Sri Lanka, China is luring Dhaka in multiple ways.³⁶

Within South Asia, India continues to be the main target of Chinese authoritarian influence and hegemonic ambitions. While both nations have experienced visible improvement in their bilateral relations and their trade has risen in the last two decades, China under Xi Jinping has been working with India’s closest neighbours and rivals, like Pakistan, to keep New Delhi trapped in South Asia. Beijing has been creating what analysts call a “string of pearls”³⁷ strategy—that of encircling India within its own region. While China sees India as a secondary challenge to its national security priorities,³⁸ it is willing to go to any extent to limit India’s rising geopolitical profile. This is evident from frequent transgressions by Chinese troops into demarcated borders and the border stand-offs that have happened in recent times. Running parallel to Beijing’s anti-India policies (e.g., blocking India’s entry into the Nuclear Security Group, and supporting Pakistan on the listing of Masood Azhar as a ‘terrorist’³⁹) is New Delhi’s increasing assertive position.

“Under Xi, China has made systematic efforts to move away from its low-profile foreign policy stance to a more proactive one.”

India is opposing China’s military adventurism in South China Sea, has refused to join the BRI, and working to stem China’s interference in the domestic affairs of neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Maldives and Sri Lanka.⁴⁰ What India fears the most is likely Chinese interference in its democratic politics, given the country’s exposure to telecommunications and other sensitive infrastructure run by Chinese companies. Some analysts are of the view that the CCP is well-positioned to interfere in India’s political and social spheres.⁴¹ They cite the recent instance of Chinese-owned microblogging site WeChat interfering in Canadian politics, and Chinese-owned UC Browser filtering specific news on Android handsets to shape the perceptions during the Doklam standoff. Indeed, India’s decision⁴² to cut down its dependency on Chinese technology and sensitive telecom infrastructure and diversifying its trade relations with *Atmanirbhar*⁴³ (self-reliance)—were made in response to the increasingly opaque and authoritarian China.

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Belt and Road Initiative: Encroachment by Stealth

Perhaps the real game-changer in institutionalising Chinese footprint in the internal affairs of other countries is Xi's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Billed as an equivalent of, if not bigger than the Transatlantic Marshall Plan following the Second World War, the BRI underpins China's economic and geopolitical goals and involves as many as 80 countries in Eurasia. With a current budget of more than US\$ 1 trillion, the BRI includes several ongoing projects including the CPEC, the trans-Eurasian railways network, ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Djibouti, and Ethiopia's Eastern Industrial Zone.⁴⁴

Together with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)⁴⁵ that aims to rival the Bretton Woods institutions in disseminating development funds, BRI hopes to stabilise China's western peripheries, sustain its high growth trajectory, gain influence in other countries, and propel the clout of non-Western international economic institutions. Many analysts believe the BRI can challenge the very foundations of Washington's post-World War-II hegemony.⁴⁶ The BRI projects are financed mostly by loans and not grants, and they lack transparency and do not follow sovereign lending principles involving multilateralism. With countries not being aware of the long-term financial consequences of China's terms of lending, and many accepting such conditionalities governed by democratic compulsions of winning elections, the ballooning debt would take a heavy toll on these countries.

Sri Lanka, for one, has seen 95 percent of government revenue being diverted for debt repayment to China.⁴⁷ Other countries such as the Maldives, Djibouti, Laos, Montenegro, Tajikistan, and Pakistan are now under a debt cloud via BRI.⁴⁸ The potential destructive consequences of such mercantilist and geopolitical project are many: recipient countries would find their foreign policy choices constrained, and face explosive domestic contentions as already witnessed in Sri Lanka over Hambantota port.⁴⁹ Thus, BRI offers China critical controlling stakes in strategic ports, railways, even satellite navigation systems which can give China the upper hand in powering the next generation geo-economic narratives. BRI can act as a vector through which China can exert influence well beyond countries' foreign policy choices.⁵⁰

New-Age ‘Influence Operations’

China under Xi Jinping has been making efforts to spread its influence among (and therefore, challenge) key members of the liberal order especially the Anglosphere led by the US and the United Kingdom.⁵¹ This is being done through a systematic strategy and via multiple pathways. First, the CCP: even private companies have come under its radar as party committee members sit in their decision-making bodies.⁵² Importantly, CCP has been empowered in recent years to use enormous amounts of state resources (estimated at US\$ 10 billion per year) to continue its influence operations abroad.⁵³ Second, a significant development under Xi’s tenure is the heightened role of the once marginalised United Front Work Department, called ‘Magic Weapon’ by analysts⁵⁴ in launching ‘influence operations’ abroad. To intensify these operations, Xi has elevated United Front to co-opt Chinese diasporas and build relationships with Western sources so as to ensure the “foreign serve” the CCP well.⁵⁵

In a growing number of cases, United Front-funded NGOs have embedded within the Chinese diaspora in the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.⁵⁶ Finally, CCP and United Front-connected funding is finding its ways into the realms of idea production, influencing think tanks and premier universities, NGOs, newspapers and other related media outlets in these regions.⁵⁷ The net outcomes of such influence operations by CCP and United Front are revealing.

The most striking case of Chinese influence operations in recent years is that in Australia. Investigations by Fairfax Media and ABC brought to light CCP’s alleged role in trying to buy up influence through political donations. Sam Dastyari, an influential Labour Party MP, has had to resign after it was revealed that a Chinese donor had paid for his personal debts. Dastyari was seen arguing with his party to “respect” China’s claims in the South China Sea dispute, apart from persuading his party’s foreign affairs spokesperson to avoid meeting a pro-democracy activist in Hong Kong.

While the focus of press attention has been on Australia, China’s attempts to buy political influence abroad cut across many regions of the world. For instance, the CCP has tried to meddle in the New Zealand Parliament. As reported by the *Financial Times*, a China-born MP serving in New Zealand’s key parliamentary select committee on foreign policy, defence and trade had spent 15 years in Chinese military intelligence.⁵⁸ There are also reports that suggest a near-complete takeover of Chinese-language media in these two Western democracies.⁵⁹

Similarly, in the US, media practitioners and influential members of the Congress in recent years, particularly during the Trump presidency, have debated and critiqued the growing influence of hundreds of Confucius Institutes and overseas Chinese students and business. The Trump administration launched a series of crackdowns on these centres, accusing them of indulging in ideological indoctrination and espionage.⁶⁰ Over the past decade, China has set up some 1,000 Confucius Institutes in 120 countries—these are directly funded by the Chinese government's outreach arm. Complaining about growing Chinese interference in the US, the Congressional Executive Commission on China chaired by Senator Marco Rubio hosted a public hearing in 2017, titled, "The Long Arm of China: Exporting Authoritarianism with Chinese Characteristics."⁶¹ The list of predatory Chinese influence across the America goes longer and these have extensively documented by scholars and analysts.⁶²

Threats to Human Rights and Press Freedoms

In 2019, China used its influence to bar hundreds of NGO representatives from attending President's Xi Jinping's speech at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). It also managed to have Dolkun Isa, well-known Uyghur activist, ejected from the UNGA floor.⁶³

These were only two of the instances when China displayed its clout in various UN bodies. Indeed, as the US under Trump withdrew from various multilateral forums, most notably the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), China expanded its reach by becoming members of these forums.⁶⁴ Most importantly, China has emerged as the second largest financial contributor to the UN system, including its entities that guard the protection of human rights, second only to the United States.⁶⁵

Watchdogs such as the Human Rights Watch (HRW) have documented a growing incidence of China's repression of activists.⁶⁶ According to HRW, China to a good measure has used its membership in the UN Economic and Social Council's NGO Committee to block civil society organisations from getting UN accreditation. The country has sought to blacklist accredited human rights activists and deprive funding for UN rights officers.

A parallel pattern is China's expanding media control. The CCP is not only pouring billions to project its propaganda and censorship priorities around much of the democratic world, it is successfully expanding its footprint in influential foreign media outlets. For instance, the number of radio stations broadcasting China Radio International programmes has shot up from 33 stations in 2015 to

58 in as many as 35 countries in 2018.⁶⁷ Another development with potentially insidious ramifications is that Chinese companies are taking over foreign media outlets. For instance, Chinese billionaire and CCP member Jack Ma took over Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* in 2015. Analysts have observed recent incidents including contentious editorial decisions that indicate increasing Chinese influence on the prominent daily to mute its anti-China content.⁶⁸ In the African continent, too, Chinese business is building media infrastructure and content delivery. In 2017, the Chinese television distribution firm *StarTimes* emerged as a critical player in the continent's digital transition, accruing more than 10 million subscribers in 30 countries. With its growing footprint in media outlets, the CCP and its proxies are now able to tilt other countries' internal debates about their relationships with China.⁶⁹

The Power of Example

The new dimension to 'influence operations' is the growing attractiveness of the Chinese State-Capitalism Model. Other than the Soviet Communist model, which had considerable mass appeal in many parts of the world in the 1980s particularly among the impoverished countries, perhaps no other political and economic model has challenged the liberal democratic order⁷⁰ and its type of market capitalism than the current Chinese variant of "authoritarian capitalism". China's visible success stories today enjoy great appeal among populists and strongman rulers around the world.

As Andrew Nathan, a long-time China observer wrote some years back, "China encourages authoritarian regimes elsewhere by the power of example. By demonstrating that advanced modernisation can be combined with authoritarian rule, the Chinese regime has given hope to authoritarian rulers everywhere."⁷¹ The efficiency of the Chinese state in executing big-ticket projects and its ability to take swift decisions made influential *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman remark that the US "could be China for a day" in order to get things done. Meanwhile, Canadian political scientist Daniel Bell wrote a book praising the "meritocratic" advantages of China's political system over the democracies that rely on a "one person, one vote system."⁷² And most recently, analysts are praising China for what they call its "efficient" handling of Covid-19 in Wuhan and other parts of the country.⁷³

While the liberal democratic order is facing a growing crisis of legitimacy as citizens in these countries question the effectiveness of the democratic system in delivering economic growth, jobs and higher incomes, the Chinese 'state-capitalist' model is gaining popularity including in America's own backyard.

New-Age ‘Influence Operations’

More and more democracies, especially those under populist leaders are now embracing Chinese authoritarian tools to hasten economic growth. While each country has its own variant of authoritarianism, democracies like Turkey, Poland, Hungary and many others have openly embraced the surveillance model to control the internet and social media, and regulate other key spheres of social and public life.

Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines’ strongman president has openly praised the Chinese model.⁷⁴ In another part of the world, Viktor Orban, the Hungarian leader has been mocking liberal democracy while seeking solace in the Chinese style of governance. The Chinese state-guided capitalism and its huge success has its following in India as well. While a recent survey by Pew Research Centre⁷⁵ found a majority of Indians supporting “strong leader” or even military rule, a section of the elite is hankering for imitating the Chinese economic model, powered by centralised decision-making.⁷⁶

Even as there are no overt claims of hard-selling the Chinese political model across the world, Xi Jinping’s China is open to change. The clearest indication of departure from the CCP’s past stance of not advertising China’s political and governance model came in Xi’s address to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017. There, he recommended that it was time for other countries to draw on “Chinese wisdom” and follow “a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.”⁷⁷

There is little doubt around heightening Chinese aggression barely imagined by many Western analysts and political observers a decade ago. Its carefully camouflaged soft and “sharp” power push, backed by massive financial prowess and robust surveillance infrastructure, as well as its growing appeal as an alternative model through “power of example”—have courted many takers among new democracies and authoritarian regimes in different parts of the world.

“An influential analyst in the US once remarked that his country ‘could be China for a day’ in order to get things done.”

Checking the Authoritarian Challenge

China's rise in the economic, military and technology dimensions, the popularity of its state-capitalist economic model, and the sharp uptick in its soft and sharp power projections across countries and continents in various forms and intensities, have raised strong alarms among the champions of the liberal order. Many analysts and strategic experts are calling for a serious response to China's growing threats to liberal democracies and the rules-based order.⁷⁸ Some leading democracy scholars and key thought leaders⁷⁹ have pleaded with the US and the European Union (EU) to put their act together to check China's soft and hard infrastructure building, including its influence operations and ambitious geopolitical projects like the BRI. The task is not easy.

First, the China challenge is too big and a vastly complicated case to deal with using containment strategies or threats of sanctions. It is a bigger beast, much bigger than the former Soviet Union. The Western bloc could successfully contain Soviet Russia because even if it was a military superpower, it had a smaller economy that was least integrated globally. China today is the second largest economy (and likely to overtake the US in less than a decade) and remains at the centre stage of current global trade and economic order. It is also a tech superpower whose military arsenals and forces are undergoing single-minded modernisation. Thus, containing China would not be easy and may even prove to be counterproductive for the world economy.

China cannot be so easily isolated, either, and the example of surveillance fear and banning of 5G network by Huawei can attest to this improbability. While some advanced democracies such as Australia, Germany, New Zealand and the US, UK and much later, India, have taken the decision to disallow Huawei from setting up 5G networks in their territories, there are many countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and South America who are more than willing to invite Huawei into their telecommunications ecosystems.⁸⁰ It is the same with the BRI: many European countries have openly sought Chinese investment in critical infrastructure and the recent free trade agreement between China and EU is a case in point.⁸¹

A more important question is who can check the Chinese juggernaut. The standard response would be the Western liberal order led by the US and EU. Yet, if the trends of the last few years are to be the parameter, the biggest promoters of democracy and human rights are in retreat.⁸² It needs to be reiterated that the seven decades of dominance by the liberal order, which saw the steady expansion of free market principles and spread of universal principles of human rights, was largely financed and secured by the United States. The unprecedented spread of democracies (Third Wave)⁸³ was funded and facilitated by the US and its security architecture, especially the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

Checking the Authoritarian Challenge

(NATO) and military alliances in multiple regions. All that went through a great stress, owing largely to the inward-looking US president Donald Trump.⁸⁴ The US under Trump did not only emphasise on the parochial policy of *America First*, pulling out of multilateral bodies that are critical to rules-based order and liberal democracies—the world’s richest and most powerful torch-bearer for democracy is showing little enthusiasm to support democratic struggles around the world.⁸⁵ The EU, for its part, is engaged in its own existential battle where populist leaders and xenophobic parties have taken centre stage.⁸⁶ The recent signing of the Comprehensive Investment Agreement with China exposes the EU’s vulnerability.⁸⁷ Needless to say, liberal democracy must put its house in order, as China’s successes in recent decades are as much the result of its own labour as they are of the West’s failure.⁸⁸

In such a situation, China and any other aspiring great power would find it easy to exploit the situation to its own advantage. China has already done it in Asia (in the context of the disputes in the South China Sea, and its growing clout with the ASEAN), as well as in Africa and in Europe, particularly the Central and Eastern European countries. The China-led initiatives, especially the 16+1 forum with European countries, and the loud defence by Greece and other EU member countries of China’s human rights record—are a clear reminder that it is not an easy task to ostracise a rising super power. The Transpacific Partnership (TPP), which could have been an ideal counter-weight to China on trade issues, remains a non-starter after the unexpected US pull-out.⁸⁹

Efforts to tackle the Chinese threat can no longer be postponed. The Covid-19 pandemic, and China’s response, has raised awareness regarding the nature and ambitions of the Xi regime. While China’s authoritarian capitalist model is yet to become a direct and equal competitor to the liberal democratic system, it has become a matter of serious concern that the People’s Republic is growing in belligerent power. What options are left for the liberal order to check the authoritarian threat?

Getting the Quad to Deliver

An effective counter to China’s interventionist agenda and authoritarian influence needs to be hinged on a stable extra-regional geopolitical bloc. In this regard, the much talked about Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the ‘Quad’) of four Indo-Pacific democracies—the US, India, Japan and Australia—holds relevance. Not only can it act as a bulwark against Chinese expansionism and authoritarian intrusions in Asia, it has the potential to serve as an anchor for other democracies, particularly from Southeast Asia.⁹⁰

Checking the Authoritarian Challenge

While the first iteration of the Quad remained in limbo for about a decade after the idea was articulated by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007,⁹¹ it has gained traction in the last few years largely linked to the growing Chinese expansionism.⁹² The stagnation between 2008 and 2017 owed primarily to China coming down heavily on the forum and accusing it of being nothing more than an attempt to stifle Beijing.⁹³ After Xi assumed full control of the CCP and the government, the four maritime middle powers restarted the Quad on the sidelines of the East Asia Forum.⁹⁴ The Quad received its most aggressive push from the Trump administration, which singled out China as a threat and went all-out for the resurgence of the forum.⁹⁵ The new Biden administration called for a heads of state meeting on 12 March to push the Quad towards more tangible goals. In many ways, the meeting silenced a growing tribe of ‘Quad-sceptics’. While it is still unclear what form or shape this grouping would eventually take (some call it the “Asian NATO”), with China becoming an even graver threat to the rules-based order, the Quad is akin to a geopolitical insurance against Beijing’s authoritarianism. As Jeff Smith, a known strategic analyst puts it, “the goal to win without fighting.”⁹⁶

An India-Led Asian Response

While the authoritarian challenge needs a comprehensive global effort in a manner like the Quad, the most decisive resistance has to be from Asia—after all, it is the key theatre of current Chinese expansionism. As mentioned earlier, most countries in Asia particularly the ones in East, Southeast and South Asian regions have come under China’s widening radar on multiple fronts including its maritime expansion, border disputes, and claims over South China Sea and East China Sea. Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia are witness to Chinese hegemonic ambitions.⁹⁷ Yet within the larger Asian region, one country that is potentially placed to challenge the Chinese agenda, is India.

First, there is no other democratic nation in Asia that faces the same level of threat and challenge from China than India does. India shares more than 3,500 demarcated borders with China. While both nations have seen a massive jump in their trade relations despite live border disputes, China has been working with India’s closest neighbours to keep New Delhi trapped. China has been heavily into creating what analysts call a “string of pearls”⁹⁸ strategy—that of encircling India within its own region. In recent years, India has been at the receiving end of Chinese military adventurism near its border (the Doklam standoff of 2017,⁹⁹ and in east Ladakh in 2020¹⁰⁰). What worries India more in the longer term is China’s geostrategic positioning via the elemental projects under BRI, including the China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor which passes through the borders that New Delhi claims as its own.¹⁰¹

Checking the Authoritarian Challenge

Second, while India is still not a match to China's economic power (India's GDP is one-fifth that of China) nor its conventional or nuclear arms arsenal, it still holds considerable material power. A nuclear power with the second largest army in the world, and a maritime power in the Indo-Pacific region, India has grown manifold in its global clout in the past three decades.¹⁰² After coming to power in 2014, the Narendra Modi government has shown political will and pragmatism to enhance India's national power.¹⁰³ This is demonstrated in the dramatic turnaround in India-US defence cooperation (India is the only non-NATO country to have entered a Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement with the US) and other initiatives particularly giving momentum to the Quad in the last few years. Furthermore, it has shown political will in standing up to China, refusing to get on-board the BRI, taking a clear stance about the disputes in the South China Sea, and backing the demand for an international enquiry into the origins of SARS-CoV-2 in China. This prompted a Chinese strategic expert to remark, "India's resolve and focus on China are significantly stronger than those of China."¹⁰⁴

It is equally important that India has emerged as a key actor in strengthening the pushback against China on multiple fronts. While India's firm and consistent opposition to BRI has convinced supporters like the US and Japan to reconsider their positions, New Delhi's decisions—banning more than 118 Chinese Apps including the massively popular TikTok, putting a pause to Huawei to unroll 5G connectivity—are also cutting down on sensitive infrastructure projects, trade and supply chains dependency with Beijing. While it would create little impact in terms of revenue, such moves have had remarkable network effects.¹⁰⁵ Further, they have had salutary effects on other countries in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁰⁶

Finally, for the Quad to make a mark against an authoritarian China, it needs India and its willingness to shoulder a significant degree of responsibility as the other three Quad members have shared deep alliances for a long time. After years of hesitation—mainly to avoid antagonising Beijing—¹⁰⁷ India has shown strong interest and taken several key initiatives including pushing it to ministerial level dialogue in 2019.¹⁰⁸ However, the real push from India came only after China's border intrusion in the middle of a raging pandemic in May 2020. Interestingly, India enjoys the trust and confidence of all three members of the Quad. The most recent instance of further cementing ties among the Quad members is New Delhi's invitation to Australia for the Malabar maritime exercise. In short, the most decisive resistance to Chinese expansionism and its authoritarian threat in Asia is largely going to be a story made in India, albeit with active support and backing of the Quad and other like-minded democratic partners.

Checking the Authoritarian Challenge

The Role of U.S. Leadership


While India and other Asian democracies face serious threats from China, the ultimate goal of the middle kingdom is to challenge America.¹⁰⁹ China's exponential growth in national power and increasing hegemonic ambitions under Xi was to a large extent facilitated by American naivety and its visible decline as a global power.¹¹⁰ While the US has acted as the magnate of democracy and liberal values since the end of Second World War, its preoccupation with endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has drained its resources and attention in the last two decades.¹¹¹ China and other authoritarian regimes like Russia took advantage of the American void and rapidly enhanced their strengths and influence.¹¹² This received further boost under the Trump administration which was not only disruptive and transactional with long-time alliance partners, but also literally pulled America out of the very same multilateralism which the country had advanced for more than seven decades.¹¹³ While it raised a strong anti-China pitch in multiple ways and gave a critical push for the revival of the Quad, US leadership experienced a steep drop in global confidence.¹¹⁴ The United States' visible disengagement from global affairs allowed China and other authoritarian powers to fill the vacuum, unhindered.¹¹⁵

Still, the US remains among the best defence against any Chinese misadventures.¹¹⁶ By most indications, the Joe Biden administration is well aware of the threats from the hyper-nationalistic vision of China. Since assuming power, Biden has taken steps with an intention to send a message to Beijing. His call for holding a Summit of Democracies and initiating to host the first heads of government meeting of the Quad on 12 March are early signals that America has not left the ring. Additionally, the Biden administration has shown its seriousness to put in place a holistic strategy which moves beyond the Quad. It has already begun setting up coalitions with the objective of cutting down Beijing's dominance in critical technologies like AI, semiconductors, quantum computing, and surveillance technology, among others.¹¹⁷ The United States is also looking at repairing the country's relations with key members of the EU and get them to support the collective efforts against the growing authoritarian threats. The US, EU, Britain and Canada's coordinated sanctions on senior Chinese officials on 22 March over human rights abuses in Xinjiang, is proof of growing cooperation on China.¹¹⁸ Finally, what may help the US in maintaining a hardline stance on China is a robust bipartisan consensus¹¹⁹ between the Democrats and the Republican lawmakers, notwithstanding the country experiencing its most severe political polarisation yet in decades.

Conclusion

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The Chinese authoritarian threat, particularly after Xi's complete control over the party and the government, has become much more serious than many might have first imagined. Its response during the initial months of Covid-19, its aggression against India and Hong Kong in the middle of the pandemic, and its behaviour in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits have rung the alarm bells. While proponents of the liberal order need not shore up an overtly anti-China hysteria, the threats cannot be ignored. Australia, New Zealand and some European democracies have already shown leadership by standing up to Chinese threats; others need to follow.¹²⁰ In Asia, India has stood up to the China challenge in many ways, from decoupling trade dependency to banning sensitive digital technology, to standing its ground at the borders. The US has taken initiatives to check the unrestrained Chinese march.

The best counter-measure for liberal and open societies is to maintain vigil and counter China's illiberal threats by exposing and blunting them. The liberal democratic order can use the instruments of law, independent media, and counter-intelligence to expose the Chinese disinformation war and influence operations. As *The Economist* pointed out, "All three need Chinese speakers who grasp the connection between politics and commerce in China. The Chinese Communist Party suppresses free expression, open debate and independent thought to cement its control. Merely shedding light on its sharp tactics and shaming kowtowers would go a long way towards blunting them."¹²¹ This can be undertaken by information dissemination, and investing in improving the capacities of key actors engaged with China including key government departments, universities, think tanks, and democracy and human rights watchdogs.¹²² Public awareness should be raised on Chinese aggression—including its human rights record, the BRI debt trap, lack of transparency, and the environmental impacts of its activities. While China can still use its robust surveillance infrastructure (what analysts refer to as 'The Great Firewall') to prevent its citizenry from learning of these instances, in an ever-interconnected world, this could act as a huge safeguard for liberal democracies. Its growing diaspora will access this information. Indeed, what liberal democracies will need to build is a Great Wall of Democracy. 

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Endnotes



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