

The Myth of the Chinese Authoritarian Model

By John H.S. Aberg

With the United States under President Donald Trump appearing to retreat from Washington's traditional role as a global promoter of democracy, fears that China under President Xi Jinping is set to make gains as a global champion of Beijing's brand of authoritarianism are gaining currency in many quarters.

John H.S. Aberg argues that those fears are grossly misplaced.



¹ Naazneen Barma and Ely Ratner, "China's Illiberal Challenge: The Real Threat Posed by China Isn't Economic or Military it's Ideological," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, No. 2 (2006), available at: <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/2/chinas-illiberal-challenge/>

² Alexander Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2015), pp. 49–63.

³ Joseph S. Nye, "The Rise of China's Soft Power," *Wall Street Journal Asia*, Dec. 29, 2005.

⁴ Cho Young Nam and Jong Ho Jeong, "China's Soft Power:

Discussions, Resources, and Prospects," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2008), p. 465.

⁵ Kejin Zhao, "China's Rise and Its Discursive Power Strategy," *Chinese Political Science Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (2016), pp. 539–64.

⁶ Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014), pp. 153–84; John H.S. Aberg, "A Struggle for Leadership Recognition: The AIB, Reactive Chinese Assertiveness, and Regional Order," *Contemporary Chinese Political Economy and Strategic Relations: An International Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2016), pp. 1125–71.

CHINA'S RISE HAS long been represented as a threat. After the US-China rapprochement in the 1970s, the Maoist ideological threat gradually dwindled until it was supplanted by a transfigured "China threat" thesis, which gained strength after the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. With China's rapid economic development and military modernization, the adversarial logic started to revolve around economic and military threat discourses. Recently, however, the notion of China as an ideological threat has been resurrected. The notion of "China's illiberal challenge" is returning with a vengeance, and with President Xi Jinping in power, Beijing is promoting authoritarianism and leading a third reverse wave of de-democratization.¹ In other words, with China's rise, authoritarianism is going global and challenging the liberal world order.² It is a nicely plotted tragic narrative, but does it resonate with reality?

THE IDEOLOGICAL CHINA 'THREAT'

The myth of the so-called Beijing consensus as not only an economic model but also a political one ready for international export continues to thrive. "In terms of political values," as Joseph Nye put it more than 10 years ago, the Beijing consensus "has become more popular than the previously dominant 'Washington consensus.'"³ Scholars argue that the "dissemination of the Beijing consensus bestows upon 'Chinese-style socialism' greater international recognition, not only as an economic development model but also as a new model of a political system and social structure."⁴ Others are more skeptical about there being a Chinese model in the first place; about China obstructing the promotion of democracy by the US and EU; about the diffusion of Chinese norms; about China's ideological commitment to create a new "authoritarian international;" and, finally, about the effectiveness of China's soft power.

Yet, after the Chinese Communist Party's 19th

National Congress in October last year, and with US President Donald Trump supposedly surrendering US global leadership, the message of Chinese authoritarian influence reverberates with ever greater force, giving rise to expectations of increasing Chinese political assertiveness and scenarios of a post-American order. Four factors account for the understanding of China as an *intentional* authoritarian promoter.

First, China's official "discursive power" strategy, which arguably aims "to create a new political model, rather than just follow the established order" — as expressed in China's calls for a new type of international relations and a community of shared destiny — demonstrates China's international political intentions.⁵

Second, the strategic political shift from Deng Xiaoping's dictum of "keeping a low profile" to Xi Jinping's emphasis on "striving for achievement" involves a foreign policy move from self-restraint toward a more active pursuit of leadership.⁶

Third, appeals to political, cultural and civilizational diversity coupled with a strict interpretation of the Westphalian norms of sovereignty and non-interference indicate, on one hand, a foreign policy that does not seek to impose or spread its political model to others, yet, on the other, serve as "counter-norms" to liberal democracy.

Fourth, if popular narratives about Trump surrendering US global leadership in the promotion of democracy are true, then it leaves the center stage open for China. This begs the question: Is China an authoritarian norm entrepreneur?

PROMOTING AUTHORITARIANISM

A cursory glance at the mainstream literature in the field shows that it will not be easy for Chinese actors to become authoritarian norm entrepreneurs. In terms of norm diffusion, three stages are identified: norm emergence, norm acceptance/norm cascade, and norm internalization.⁷

7 Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (1998), pp. 887–917.

8 Salvatore Babones, American Tianxia, *Chinese Money, American Power and the End of History* (Policy Press, 2017).

9 Lucrezia Poggetti, "China's Charm Offensive in Eastern Europe Challenges EU Cohesion," *The Diplomat*, Nov. 24, 2017.

10 Yun Sun, "Political Party Training: China's Ideological Push in Africa?," Brookings, Nov. 30, 2001, available at: www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2016/07/05/political-party-training-chinas-ideological-push-in-africa/

11 Felix Horne, "How US Surveillance Helps Repressive Regimes—the Ethiopia Case," Human Rights Watch, Oct. 3, 2017, available at: www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/03/how-us-surveillance-helps-repressive-regimes-ethiopia-case

12 Christine Hackenesch, "Not as Bad as It Seems: EU and US Democracy Promotion Faces China in Africa," *Democratization*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2015), pp. 419–37.

13 Matthew Taylor King and Ian Kim, "Don't Freak Out About China in Africa," *The American Interest*, July 7, 2016, available at: www.the-american-interest.com/2016/07/07/dont-freak-out-about-china-in-africa/

14 Alexander Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global." *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (2015), p. 50.

15 Thomas Ambrosio, "The Rise of the 'China Model' and 'Beijing Consensus': Evidence of Authoritarian Diffusion?" *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2012), pp. 381–99.

16 Christian von Soest, "Democracy Prevention: The International Collaboration of Authoritarian Regimes," *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2015), pp. 623–38.

In the first stage, non-governmental organizations, social movements and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) are considered the central norm-diffusing actors. Chinese NGOs spreading authoritarian norms are very rare, and the influence of Beijing's Confucius Institutes, which do not fit into the NGO category, is greatly exaggerated. Chinese social movements are more a threat to the Chinese regime than carriers and promoters of authoritarian norms abroad. The most aspiring, educated and rich Chinese prefer to migrate and enjoy the fruits of liberal individualism in the Anglosphere.⁸

Meanwhile, Chinese-led IGOs such as the BRICS institutions and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have embedded the Bretton Woods system into their institutional frameworks and adopted its best practices. They are not arenas for Chinese authoritarian norm diffusion. That Brazil, India or South Africa would adopt a Chinese political model is so unlikely that it is even hard to imagine. The influence of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization is worth considering, yet the "Shanghai Spirit" does not preach Chinese-style transformational diplomacy. It is not about an ideological crusade, but rather what we could term "authoritarian fortification" — necessary to protect against the universal liberal individualist headwinds.

Even if Chinese state and non-state actors alike engage in lobbying, activism and persuasion, they will only be capable of influencing countries such as Cambodia, Laos or Sri Lanka, and even that is hard at times. Stories about Chinese influence in the so-called 16+1 countries, a Beijing-led initiative linked to its One Belt, One Road infrastructure project, are unreasonable.⁹ And countries where it might indeed be relevant to speak about democratic reversal, such as in Hungary, Thailand or Turkey, have nothing to do with any Chinese political influence. If one

is going to take the diffusion of a "China model" seriously, a good starting point is to think counterfactually about whether the China model is persuasive: are states establishing one-party rule, nationalizing major industries, embedding the ruling party into those nationalized state-owned enterprises and establishing "socialist consultative rule"? The answer to that question is clearly "No!" It is uncertain, to say the very least, whether Chinese actors qualify as authoritarian norm entrepreneurs. Nonetheless, this does not change the fact that various states have been highlighted as receptive to a political China model, especially in Africa.

RECEPTIVE STATES?

Ethiopia, among other African countries, has been portrayed as receptive to China's so-called ideological push.¹⁰ Indeed, China and Ethiopia have stepped up party-to-party exchanges, and Ethiopian leaders are reiterating that they desire to learn from China's development experience. But does the intensification of Chinese-Ethiopian relations really represent evidence of a Chinese-induced third reverse wave of de-democratization? No. It rather represents a strengthening of ties between two like-minded states. Ethiopia, a *de facto* one-party state, has not changed the nature of its regime due to its relations with China; in many ways, it has simply remained the same.

Shallow depictions of Chinese influence ignore the intimate relations between the United States and Ethiopia. The US has long provided surveillance capabilities to the Ethiopian state, which play a significant part, alongside the Chinese-developed national telecom system, in facilitating the Ethiopian government's criminalization of dissent.¹¹ Ethiopia's restrictive 2009 NGO law is another example of authoritarian policies seen to develop due to Western neglect and Chinese encouragement. However, research indicates that

China's presence in Ethiopia and Angola (another African state ostensibly in China's hands), has not made it more difficult for the EU and US to implement their strategies to promote democracy. Instead, it is domestic-level factors, and particularly the issue of regime survival, that affects whether governments are willing to work with the EU and the US.¹² Zimbabwe, the country that perhaps has gone furthest in its emulation of China, has done so more because of sanctions-induced necessity than ideological conviction, which illuminates the challenges of Chinese authoritarian promotion more than anything else.¹³ And following the ousting of Robert Mugabe, the new leadership has declared that it is ready to do business with the world. Other research demonstrates how China-Africa narratives often disregard the agency of African political elites — agency that certainly can go both ways, but that clearly indicates that African states are no mere puppets with Chinese strings attached.

Venezuela is another example of a state enticed by the Chinese model, but that example also misses the mark. The Venezuelan regime under Hugo Chavez was, in fact, largely democratic, although the goal of its revolutionary ideology indeed was to end liberal bourgeois democracy. Yet this was not an attempt to follow a so-called Chinese model, but an endogenous process inspired by a long history of radical Latin American social and political movements. Perhaps China has an interest in propping up Nicolás Maduro's failing regime, but this has no effect on liberal democracy, because Venezuela serves more as a horror story than a success story in the eyes of the world.

READING REALITY AS IT IS

The arguments about authoritarian diffusion are often supported by a power shift logic: "Counter-norms are thus grounded in changing power

balances, as the post-Cold War era of US hegemony gives way to a more multipolar world — a shift often summed up [not without irony] as the 'democratization of international relations.'"¹⁴ Yet such arguments grossly underestimate existing global power structures, US influence in Latin America, the Asia-Pacific and Africa, and French neocolonial schemes in Francophone Africa. Domination is not what you "make of it."

Scholars and commentators who cry wolf on China cannot read the signs of the times. Overall, the existence of a third reverse wave of de-democratization lacks empirical support, as does the specific claim that a China model of authoritarian politics is diffusing across the world.¹⁵ Instead, Beijing pretty much supports anyone who will support China, in line with a simple quid pro quo logic of transactional foreign relations that is best depicted as self-serving, in terms of regime survival and development goals, rather than being driven by an ideological commitment to create a new "authoritarian international."¹⁶ Democracy is indeed facing global challenges, but alarmist views about a worldwide crisis of democracy are off the mark. This is not to deny a gradual erosion of civil liberties in many countries, but instead of looking to China, we should turn our gaze to ourselves.

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