

## **How China Exports Authoritarianism**

### **Beijing's Money and Technology Is Fueling Repression Worldwide**

By Charles Edel and David O. Shullman

In a speech to senior Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials in July, Chinese leader Xi Jinping declared that China must do more to share the “story” of the party’s success with the rest of the world. In order to enhance the international influence of both the country and the party, Xi effectively asserted, Chinese officials should extol the virtues of China’s model of authoritarian governance abroad.

Although some analysts continue to argue that China does not pose an ideological threat to prevailing democratic norms and that the CCP does not export its ideology, it is clear that the CCP has embarked on a drive to promote its style of authoritarianism to illiberal actors around the world. Its goal is not to spread Marxism or to undermine individual democracies but rather to achieve political and economic preeminence, and its efforts to that effect—spreading propaganda, expanding information operations, consolidating economic influence, and meddling in foreign political systems—are hollowing out democratic institutions and norms within and between countries.

To respond to Beijing’s ideological challenge, advocates of democracy must have a better understanding of what China aims to achieve by exporting its political model and how its actions are weakening democracy globally. Only then can they effectively design policies that will reinvigorate democracy at home and abroad while selectively seeking to counter Beijing’s promotion of authoritarian governance.

### **RIGHT TO BE RULED**

Beijing seeks less to impose a Marxist-Leninist ideology on foreign societies than to legitimate and promote its own authoritarian system. The CCP does not seek ideological conformity but rather power, security, and global influence for China and for itself. To this end, the party has issued stark declarations of confidence in its own ideology and in the country’s antidemocratic political path. Xi has made clear that he regards China’s illiberal model of governance as superior to so-called Western political systems and that he seeks to popularize this “Chinese wisdom” throughout the world as a “contribution to mankind.”

Xi and other Chinese leaders frequently portray China’s economic success as proof that the road to prosperity no longer runs through liberal democracy. As Xi put it at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, China’s model offers “a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence”—while ignoring external pressure to democratize. This message is highly attractive to leaders who hope to achieve economic success without answering to the demands of their people. Chinese officials now commonly speak of the “right” of nations to choose their political systems, be they democratic or authoritarian—and the arrogance of countries such as the United States that assume that democracy is the preferable option.

Advocating the right of countries to be ruled by nondemocratic regimes is clearly different from forcibly installing autocratic leaders around the world, as the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. But the CCP's increasingly full-throated promotion of authoritarianism as a superior governance model presents no less of a challenge to democracy than did Soviet interference, particularly when paired with China's economic and political measures that bolster authoritarian regimes and weaken democratic ones around the world.

## **TOOLS OF THE TRADE**

China's international efforts to subvert democracy fall into three broad categories. The first includes its attempts to shape the narrative about China in developed countries. In nations ranging from Canada and Germany to Australia and Japan, Beijing aims to silence critics of China and amplify the voices of individuals and institutions that promote closer ties with Beijing or a more positive portrayal of China. Beijing wields both threats and inducements to this end, rewarding positive portrayals and punishing criticism. As the Chinese ambassador to Sweden admitted in 2019, "We treat our friends with fine wine, but for our enemies we have shotguns."

China offers preferential market access to friendly governments, academic institutions, and businesses but retaliates financially against those it sees as hostile to China's interests. It also threatens Chinese dissidents and their families, monitors Chinese students abroad, attempts to silence academic discourse deemed offensive to Beijing, and seeks to control how foreigners are educated about China. Beijing has also sought to expand its foreign media footprint, control Chinese-language media abroad, and turn Chinese diaspora citizens against parties or candidates it deems threatening to its interests. Taken together, these actions form a comprehensive strategy to inform, shape, and ultimately control perceptions of China throughout the world.

The second category of antidemocratic actions are those that take place in developing countries. Unlike in the developed world, where China's political and economic coercion and "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy have engendered a growing backlash, Beijing has received a warmer welcome in many developing countries, where elites hope to learn from a political system that has enabled China's transformation into the world's second-largest economy. In a growing number of fragile democracies, Beijing has captured small coterie of corrupt elites and helped them centralize power by insulating them from the demands of civil society and deploying Chinese technology to repress their citizens and help them maintain power indefinitely. This is how the CCP is exporting authoritarianism around the globe: not through seminars on Marxist ideology, as some analysts have claimed, but through a broad range of antidemocratic activities.

China does so less out of a desire to spread its ideology than to expand its influence and economic advantage. Its favored partners are not fervent adherents of Marxism-Leninism but rather officials, business leaders, media tycoons, and others who view the adoption of a nondemocratic governance model that concentrates power in the hands of the few—and shuts out the many—as a route to long-term influence. This preference for antidemocratic collaborators, coupled with China's opaque and corrupt investment practices, further corrodes democratic institutions, as murky deals struck by Chinese banks and state-owned enterprises encourage a more corrupt and unaccountable class of political elites all too eager to undermine their country's long-term prosperity in return for personal gain.

China offers more than simple inspiration for a nondemocratic governance model: it provides the tools, training, and resources that permit leaders to ignore democratic countries' demands for good governance and respect for individual rights as a condition of aid and

investment. The CCP regularly conducts large-scale training programs for foreign officials on how to guide public opinion, control civil society, and implement Chinese-style cybersecurity policies in their home countries. A growing number of countries have drawn inspiration from China to pursue laws controlling social media or to build Internet firewalls modeled on China's own "Great Firewall." China also provides increasingly sophisticated surveillance technology and internal security training to established authoritarian and fragile democratic governments, enabling them to better suppress dissent and control their own citizens. In countries such as Uganda and Zambia, CCP-linked organizations have shared technology and training with autocratic and autocratic-leaning governments, allowing them to monitor their citizens, muzzle media and civil society, and impose repressive Internet rules.

The CCP has also engaged in more explicit political intervention by interfering directly in the political processes of other sovereign countries to support China-friendly politicians and policies and by co-opting local civic groups and journalists to stymie negative portrayals of China's international engagement and to protect its ties to corrupt local elites. These efforts are not intended to overthrow democracies or other ideologically dissimilar regimes but to help ensure that China-friendly policies and investment climates will prevail regardless of who is in power. Nevertheless, such efforts erode the accountability of leaders to their citizens, weaken the independence of the media and civil society, and ultimately tilt the playing field to favor illiberal leaders looking to import elements of China's model of governance into their countries' political systems. This kind of political encroachment maintains the form of a democratic system while hollowing out the actual substance of a functioning democracy from the inside, making the slide toward authoritarianism harder to detect.

It should come as no surprise that the CCP's vision of successful governance has no room for independent checks on state power, such as a substantive civil society or healthy opposition. In the model that Beijing is selling and that more and more countries are buying, dissent is not a legitimate expression of individual interests but an attempt to sabotage collective nation-building efforts. Opposition, in other words, is not political participation but state subversion. The popularization of these ideas in a growing number of developing countries is helping the CCP realize its vision for a revised global order in which a plurality of governance models—democratic and authoritarian alike—can exist as equally legitimate political choices.

The last category of international antidemocratic actions involves those aimed at weakening international institutions that instill democratic norms and creating new ones that do not, thereby neutering the liberal presumptions that prevail in the current global order. China uses the clout it has gained by consolidating influence in UN agencies to ensure institutional alignment with Chinese priorities: it has wielded its authority in the International Telecommunications Union, for instance, to promote policies that facilitate the authoritarian use of technology to repress citizens. Beijing's efforts to topple the current liberal order—which China views as an obstacle to its emergence as a great power—are unprecedented. China is enshrining its own ideological concepts and foreign policy strategies into international statements of consensus, substituting Chinese concepts, such as the "right to development" and "Internet sovereignty," for more widely held values. It is also promoting its own view of human rights, in which governments can cite supposedly unique local conditions to justify disregard for individual or minority rights and in which civil or political rights are secondary to so-called economic and social rights.

Taken together, Beijing's illiberal efforts undercut democracy in the developed world, the developing world, and in international institutions amount to an assault on the norms, rules, and

ethics by which the world is governed. They threaten to usher in an increasingly undemocratic world populated by regimes that are beholden to Beijing and unsympathetic to the interests of the United States and its allies. Such regimes would be less accountable to their populations, less committed to individual rights, less responsible to international institutions that uphold democratic norms and universal values, and more dedicated to controlling and suppressing information. In short, if Beijing isn't trying to remake the world in its image, it is trying to make the world friendlier to its interests—and more welcoming to the rise of authoritarianism in general.

## **STEPPING UP**

The CCP's challenge to democracy requires a concerted and well-resourced effort to shore up democratic institutions in vulnerable countries around the world. This effort should prioritize support for independent media and civil society, aggressive anticorruption and anti-money laundering measures, and investments in technologies that can penetrate closed digital spaces and lend transparency to political processes. The United States and its allies should also work to offer democratic alternatives to the autocratic technologies and conditional lines of credit China is selling. The Biden administration's Build Back Better World initiative, a G-7 project aimed at providing infrastructure development in low- and middle-income countries that will help counter China's Belt and Road Initiative, is an important step in the right direction. But democratic nations can—and must—do more to collectively strengthen vulnerable democracies around the world.

Such efforts can work only if developed democracies rededicate themselves to making sure that their own political systems deliver: to retain its global appeal, citizen-centered governance that welcomes civil society must be seen as functional. Developed democracies must also shore up their own political defenses and proactively identify and expose CCP efforts to undermine the principles of free speech, interfere in political processes, and co-opt political and business elites. They can do this by working together to tighten foreign influence and investment laws and to encourage elites to prioritize the independence of their own democracies over their personal economic interests in China.

The United States and its allies must also maintain leadership and leverage in the international institutions that will shape the world's economic and technological future. Ceding U.S. leadership in these institutions provides Beijing with easy wins. China is wielding its position as the host of the World Internet Conference, for instance, to legitimize its (very restricted) definition of Internet freedom. The United States and its allies need to do more than simply show up. They must undertake an aggressive and united effort to secure leadership in these critical organizations across the board.

## **NO QUICK FIX**

Today's China is not yesterday's Soviet Union. But Beijing is nonetheless working to amplify authoritarianism around the world. It is hollowing out democratic institutions and enhancing the tools of repression in developing countries. And Chinese leaders are working to dilute the liberal norms and erode human rights protections that are enshrined within many international institutions to make themselves—and like-minded autocrats the world over—more powerful and less accountable.

There is a legitimate debate to be had about whether China is acting offensively to forge a more illiberal world or defensively to make the world safe for China's brand of autocracy. That distinction, however, may prove irrelevant if Beijing feels driven to reach into democratic societies, undercut their institutions, suppress and censor speech it deems offensive, and erode the foundations of liberal society the world over.

At a time when governments are searching for quick solutions to massive pandemic-related challenges, China's provision of illiberal answers and the means to achieve them without relinquishing power is fueling authoritarianism's global resurgence. China is not fanning the flames of violent revolution or even advocating for one-party rule. But that is not the right metric by which to judge its actions. A better measurement is to look at the totality of the ways Beijing is corrupting democratic governments, societies, and individuals.

The United States and its allies must shore up their defenses and push back against China by cultivating democracy at home as well as abroad. Failure to do so could imperil the current international order—and make the future unsafe for democracy.

CHARLES EDEL is a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center and a Senior Fellow at the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney. He previously served on the U.S. Secretary of State's Policy Planning Staff and is a co-author of *The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order*.

DAVID O. SHULLMAN is Director of the China Global Hub at the Atlantic Council. He served as Deputy National Intelligence Officer for East Asia on the National Intelligence Council from 2016 to 2018.