

China's Brand of Communism

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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Communism is back in the news. That's in part because the Trump administration has made a national priority of informing the public about the China challenge. Earlier this summer four senior officials -- National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien, FBI Director Christopher Wray, Attorney General William Barr, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo -- gave a [series of speeches](#) highlighting the communist roots of China's autocratic conduct and of its ambitions to reconfigure world order.

Those speeches, however, did not include any scoops. They addressed a widely neglected -- and sometimes aggressively downplayed -- development stretching across the better part of a decade. Since his accession in 2012 to the position of general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi Jinping has ruled China with dictatorial powers while consistently reaffirming the centrality of communism to the CCP's quest to transform China into the world's most powerful and influential nation.

According to the "South China Morning Post," Xi [wrote](#) in an article published this month that "The foundation of China's political economy can only be a Marxist political economy, and not be based on other economic theories." Therefore, "The dominant position of public ownership cannot be shaken, and the leading role of the state-owned economy cannot be shaken."

Xi's opinions reflect party orthodoxy. In 1954 Mao Zedong, founder of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and first CCP chairman, could not have been clearer: "The force at the core that leads our cause is the Chinese Communist Party; the theoretical foundation that guides our thinking is Marxism-Leninism." In accordance with changing circumstances, the CCP has devised, in Xi's words, "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era." Yet the party remains dedicated to its communist foundations. In 2019, Xi lavishly celebrated the 40th anniversary of former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's announcement of the Four Cardinal Principles: "1) We must keep to the socialist road; 2) We must uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat; 3) We must uphold the leadership of the Communist Party; 4) We must uphold Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought."

Xi has been good to his word. On his watch, the CCP has adhered to 20th century communism's totalitarian fundamentals. In China, the party is supreme. It absorbs the state. It subordinates the individual to its dictates. It directs the economy. It purges counterrevolutionary forces from its ranks. It ruthlessly controls education, the media, culture, and religion. It maintains massive and brutal internment camps to compel minorities to profess the party's teachings. And it preaches the priority of socialism's battle to overcome capitalism and freedom.

Like communist dictatorships before it, the CCP dedicates vast resources to impose intellectual conformity. The party employs the latest in high-tech tools to maintain the Great Firewall of China, which limits the people's access to websites outside the country. It uses phone scanners to monitor information inside the country and facial-recognition cameras to surveil the population. At the same time, Xi has revitalized communist ideological indoctrination. "We will work harder to study and develop Marxist theory," he vowed in 2017. "We will foster a Marxist style of learning and make it regular and an institutionalized requirement for all party members."

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the Chinese Communist Party's communist bona fides, critics have charged that the Trump administration's emphasis on communism as a key to grasping the China challenge obscures the regime's true character and exaggerates the danger China presents. In a thoughtful and well-informed such critique, "[Xi Jinping is not Stalin](#)," which appeared this month in *Foreign Affairs*, Michael McFaul usefully elaborates a number of crucial differences between Stalin's U.S.S.R. and Xi's People's Republic of China. He rightly argues that competition with China should not be seen as a repeat of the struggle with the Soviet Union. And he convincingly contends that to meet the China challenge, the United States must strengthen freedom and democracy at home, not least by promoting education, particularly in science and technology.

But McFaul fails to heed his own salutary warning against "false analogies from the Cold War." Assuming that there's only one way -- and that is Stalin's way -- for communism to threaten the free world and the rules-based international order that it established in the aftermath of World War II, he neglects the distinguishing elements of the CCP's brand of communism and its intellectual sources. The failure to examine the "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new age" that Xi proudly touts leads McFaul to overlook crucial features of the CCP's conduct, underestimate its ambitions, and downplay the danger it poses to the United States and friends of freedom around the world.

A former U.S. ambassador to Russia and a professor of political science at Stanford (as well as my Hoover Institution colleague), McFaul accuses the Trump administration of warmongering, maintaining that "to accelerate a Cold War with China," the White House "seems intent on resurrecting" President Harry S. Truman's approach to the Soviets. However, argues McFaul, Xi is not "Stalin's heir." While acknowledging that "Xi runs a ruthless and oppressive dictatorship," McFaul insists that "Stalin's regime was far more totalitarian in its control over every aspect of Soviet citizens' lives."

When one looks to foreign policy, "the analogy unravels further," according to McFaul. "Stalin openly proclaimed his desire for a global communist revolution, hoping to create a network of socialist states under Moscow's rule." And the dictator acted on his desire. The Soviet Union conquered Eastern Europe, aided Mao, and supported communists in Greece. Eventually, the Soviets backed communist insurgents and regimes around the world.

"Xi, by contrast, has not orchestrated the overthrow of a single regime," writes McFaul. "Hong Kong comes closest," he recognizes, though he omits mention of the CCP's determination -- by force if necessary -- to bring free and democratic Taiwan under China's control and to claim sovereignty over the South China Sea far beyond the country's internationally recognized

territorial waters. McFaul notes, moreover, that “Beijing has also invested tremendous resources in propagating its ideas, most of which are antithetical to liberalism and democracy, and provided surveillance technologies and economic aid to sustain autocracies in other countries.” But none of this makes Xi Stalin, stresses McFaul: “Xi has yet to instigate a coup, arm insurgents, or invade a democracy and install a communist regime. Little suggests that he seeks to subvert American democracy.”

By analogizing America’s struggle against the PRC to the U.S. struggle against the Soviet Union, McFaul contends, the Trump administration fosters a recklessness reminiscent of those zealous prosecutors of the Cold War, who viewed “every leftist and national liberation movement as an enemy to be defeated.” Pursuing his own Cold War analogy, McFaul admonishes, “That mindset contributed to some of the worst American excesses during the Cold War, including McCarthyism, the fictitious ‘missile gap,’ the Vietnam War, and support for brutal right-wing dictatorships, including even apartheid in South Africa.”

The president’s foreign policy team, McFaul alleges, promulgates a bellicose, self-serving fantasy: “The Trump administration undoubtedly would like a Stalinist leader to be in charge in Beijing, if only to better mobilize and unite Americans against him.” Such wishful thinking, McFaul concludes, “gets in the way of developing a sophisticated, successful U.S. policy to contain, deter, and engage China over the long haul.”

The principal flaw with McFaul’s arguments is the conviction, based on the very sort of “lazy historical analogy” that he purports to reject, that because Xi has not subverted democracy, overthrown regimes, and established communist dictatorships in the manner of Stalin, China cannot present a serious and urgent threat to democracy in America and freedom worldwide. But imperial dictators can deprive countries of freedom and sovereignty in a variety of ways, some of which may prove more efficacious than those of the Soviet dictator.

In contrast to the Soviets who, in the first place, posed a military threat to the free world -- and notwithstanding Beijing’s massive military modernization, sophisticated global disinformation campaigns, and concerted efforts to transform international organizations from within in accordance with autocratic norms and standards -- the CCP pursues its global ambitions primarily in the economic sphere. The CCP seeks control over key international supply chains and essential materials and goods. It engages in massive intellectual-property theft. It aims to achieve global industrial dominance in the most advanced technological sectors. It strives to become the world’s essential provider of 5G wireless telecommunications services, thereby obtaining access to enormous amounts of data, which can be used to produce sophisticated AI algorithms and to maintain a global surveillance network. It uses Belt and Road Initiative projects -- ports, railroads, highways, and dams -- to expand foreign markets for China’s companies and to draw foreign elites and publics into Beijing’s geopolitical orbit. It leverages often-unfettered access to foreign capital markets to finance its largest companies. And it exploits the freedom of the world’s liberal democracies to undercut their governance, prosperity, and national security.

By means of these undertakings, schemes, and techniques -- and unfettered by a respect for human rights and the rule of law -- China creates dependence in nations on all continents. Such

dependence is in keeping with the traditional Chinese tributary system, updated for a high-tech, interconnected, globalized world. What Xi calls “the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation,” which he has elaborated in major speeches and authoritative writings, entails restoring China to the position that it has traditionally considered itself to hold at the center of world order.

The difference of opinion about world order between the United States and China is stark. For the United States and fellow liberal democracies, the aim is to preserve the freedom and sovereignty of nation-states by fortifying the established order, which is grounded in respect for human rights and the rule of law. For China, the objective is to transform world order. The CCP seeks to reconfigure the community of nations by placing China at the center while subordinating freedom, national sovereignty, human rights, and the rule of the law to socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Consequently, understanding the CCP’s brand of communism must be a U.S. priority.

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Links:

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<https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3097561/chinese-president-xi-jinping-says-marxist-political-economy>

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