

The Pattern and Purpose of China's Actions

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor
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Foreign policy, it is said, seldom determines U.S. elections. Nevertheless, external threats – and the measures adopted to counter them -- often carry far-reaching implications for America's ability to secure freedom at home. That is one reason Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has made a priority of explaining the scope and urgency of [the China challenge](#) to fellow Americans and of traveling the world to discuss the challenge with friends and partners.

Owing in part to the secretary's efforts and in part to China's egregious conduct -- not least its dishonest and disastrous handling of the outbreak in Wuhan of the new coronavirus, which resulted in a global pandemic -- awareness has been growing in the United States and in nations around the world that Beijing has triggered a new era of great-power competition. Still, few appreciate the pattern in China's inroads in every region of the world, much less the specific form of preeminence to which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aspires.

As the State Department's Policy Planning Staff argues in "The Elements of the China Challenge," a long paper to be published next month, the CCP aims not merely at preeminence within the established world order -- which is grounded in free and sovereign nation-states, flows from the universal principles on which America was founded, and advances U.S. national interests. Beijing's long-term goal is to fundamentally revise world order, placing the People's Republic of China (PRC) -- with some 1.4 billion people, the world's most populous nation -- at the center and serving Beijing's authoritarian goals and imperial ambitions.

The widespread failure to understand China's conduct results in no small measure from neglect of the CCP's governing ideas and guiding aims. Just as the United States' commitment to a free and open international order composed of sovereign nation-states arises out of America's dedication to "[unalienable rights](#)" -- the language that our nation's Declaration of Independence uses to describe the rights inherent in all persons -- so too does China's determination to reorganize the international order to comply with socialism's dictates stem from the CCP's communist ideology and extreme nationalist convictions.

The conventional wisdom, however, has long supposed that China is best understood in terms of reasonable state behavior. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's decision in the late 1970s to incorporate capitalist elements into China's state-controlled economy spurred rapid modernization, generated enormous economic growth, and catapulted China to great-power status. It was thought, in line with the conventional wisdom of political science, that China's economic liberalization and the new affluence it generated would bring political liberalization.

For decades, moreover, influential observers in and out of government viewed China's rise as an opportunity to substantially enlarge the world market and thereby benefit all nations through

increased global commerce. Indeed, China's prodigious economic growth yielded substantial benefits not only to the Chinese people but also to nations around the world. Even after the CCP's bloody June 1989 crackdown on hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square and throughout the country, many in the United States and around the world clung to high hopes for China's steady integration into the international order. But the highly anticipated political liberalization did not occur.

China might have chosen the democratic path of former dictatorships in East Asia like South Korea and Taiwan. Speculations about "the end of history" -- that liberal democracy, owing to its reasonableness and universal appeal, was spreading around the globe -- inflated the hope. But the CCP has stuck to its authoritarian convictions. At every opportunity, the party affirmed its fidelity to socialism -- the state control of economy and society -- as the model not only for China but also for a world order dominated by China.

It was always unreasonable to assume that Chinese Communist Party leaders -- who take pride in being heirs to a great and ancient civilization, and who espouse a 20th-century ideology and political system whose cruelty and repression have left tens of millions dead -- comprehend domestic politics and world affairs as do the United States and other liberal democracies. In recent years, the CCP has consolidated authority and -- by nefarious means ranging from digital surveillance to sweeping indoctrination to concentration camps for religious and ethnic minorities -- intensified the subordination of the Chinese people to CCP-defined collective interests. The CCP has developed -- and acquired through intellectual property theft of massive proportions -- advanced technologies not only to control its own population but also to build a world-class military and to collect data on persons across the globe. The CCP has pursued extravagant claims in the South China Sea in brazen defiance of international law while crushing freedom in Hong Kong and threatening to do the same in Taiwan. The CCP has undertaken major infrastructure and investment projects around the world, the better to induce or compel sovereign nation-states, particularly their governing and business elites, to participate in China's reshaping of world affairs. And the CCP has leveraged its integration into international organizations to infuse them with norms and standards rooted in CCP authoritarianism. All this enables the CCP to credibly pursue the quest -- proceeding outward through the Indo-Pacific region and encompassing the globe -- to remake world order in Beijing's image.

China's ambitions for global supremacy flow from the CCP's overarching sensibility. That sensibility is authoritarian, collectivist, and imperial. Two streams of ideas nourish it. Seminal CCP writings and speeches proclaim cardinal tenets of Marxism-Leninism as interpreted by all five Chinese communist leaders beginning with Mao Zedong, CCP chairman from 1943 to 1976 and founding ruler of the People's Republic of China. These writings and speeches also advance an extreme interpretation of Chinese nationalism.

Daniel Tobin -- a senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and a faculty member in China Studies at the National Intelligence University -- has [underscored](#) the continuity of the party's commitment to socialism: "In his first speech to a Politburo group study session as general secretary in November 2012, Xi [Jinping] echoed each of his post-Mao predecessors in insisting: 'Only socialism can save China, and only Chinese socialism can lead our country to development.'"

According to Xi, that overarching socialist commitment has always had a vital nationalist dimension. At the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, the CCP amended its Party Constitution to enshrine his [concept](#) of “the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.” Xi highlighted the fidelity of his synthesis of Chinese communism and Chinese nationalism to the party’s fundamental teachings: “At its founding,” he said, “the Communist Party of China made realizing communism its highest ideal and its ultimate goal, and shouldered the historic mission of national rejuvenation.”

In a 2019 [speech](#), Xi emphasized that the nation’s flourishing is indissolubly bound up with communism’s ultimate victory: “In today’s China, the essence of patriotism is the complete combination of our devotion to the country, to the Chinese Communist Party and to socialism.” The patriotic work of national rejuvenation, as Xi explains it, culminates with China’s dominance of a globe-spanning socialist order.

A politics grounded in 20th-century communist dogma and an extreme interpretation of Chinese nationalism was by no means inevitable in China. Indeed, prominent alternatives to CCP authoritarianism, collectivism, and imperialism have prospered in the region. No less steeped in Confucian civilization than the population of the People’s Republic of China, the people of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea embraced freedom and democracy.

Notwithstanding its authoritarian rule at home and the threat it presents to freedom around the world, China under the CCP is marked by a variety of vulnerabilities. These begin with the [disadvantages endemic to autocracy](#): constraints over the long-term on innovation, difficulties forming and maintaining alliances, and the costs of internal repression. They also include vulnerabilities specific to the PRC: economic instability; demographic imbalance; environmental degradation; persistent corruption; oppression of ethnic and religious minorities; daunting expenses incurred in monitoring, censoring, and indoctrinating China’s 1.4 billion people; separation of the armed forces, controlled by the party, from the people; and -- particularly in the wake of the illness, death, and social and economic devastation wrought worldwide by the COVID-19 pandemic born in Wuhan -- mounting international anger at the CCP’s contempt for human life, indifference to other nations’ well-being, and disregard for international norms and obligations.

Understanding the China challenge depends on a clear-eyed assessment of the CCP’s conduct at home and around the world; its basic beliefs and long-term goals; and its vulnerabilities, both those it shares with all authoritarian regimes and those specific to the CCP. Meeting the China challenge will require the United States to return to the fundamentals.

To safeguard a free and open international order, the United States must, in the first place, secure freedom at home by honoring the nation’s founding principles and constitutional traditions. The United States must also maintain the world’s best-trained and best-equipped military. In light of the China challenge’s distinctive features, it must revitalize its alliance system by developing new groupings and coalitions to handle particular problems and by reforming international organizations so that they serve the interests of free and sovereign nation states. It must pursue opportunities to cooperate with China but based on fairness and reciprocity, while constraining and deterring China where necessary. It must cultivate a diplomatic corps that understands the

American spirit and American government while appreciating the diversity and common humanity of the peoples and nations of the world. It must foster an informed and engaged public. And it must, through the many forms of diplomatic power at its disposal, champion human rights.

This multi-pronged approach will demonstrate for all to see that the United States stands, and stands with those who stand, for freedom.

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