

China's Expansive Strategy

by [Enzo Reale](#) (May 2020)



That the speech on China has been connoted for three months now by the coronavirus emergency is certainly a problem for the dictatorial regime led by Xi Jinping. Despite attempts to reverse the initial debacle by accentuating the results of the containment of the epidemic at home and the proactive role of the country abroad, evidence about censorship, delays in sharing information, and doubts on the origin of the virus (possible leak from Wuhan laboratories) are undermining the foundations of the alleged Chinese “*soft power*.” This definition—already deceptive in itself given the nature of the system that promotes it—becomes yet another proof of the disorientation that has long characterized the narrative on authoritarian regimes in the West where, instead of defending

the principles upon which liberal democracies are based, many look with understanding, if not with admiration, at political and social experiments built in opposition to those same principles. It is not by chance that governments (and not the public opinion) were the first to react to the dominant version promoted by Beijing in recent months. Even if late, Washington, then London, Paris and Berlin have struck a blow on a table hitherto monopolized by the propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).



In general, however, the necessary consideration of the differences between political regimes continues to be lacking in the political debate and, consequently, in the strategies of democratic nations. If communism is no longer the ghost that wanders Europe, ideology continues to influence the

basic choices of countries in the 21st century, especially those governed by illiberal systems. The underestimation of the role of ideology, the nature of regimes, leads to enormous misunderstandings in the context of international relations, because of the tendency to deal with any interlocutor only in a “*realist*” (or presumed such) perspective, renouncing to ponder the internal dynamics that actually drive its global projection. It’s impossible to understand China’s vision of the world if we don’t analyze how China sees itself. At the same time, attempts by much of the Western press to conceal or relativize repression, the absence of the rule of law, the denial of fundamental freedoms, the imprisonment of entire ethnic groups for political reasons, to provide the image of a

superpower too complex to be judged, condition not only public debate but also the actions of politics. The results are there for all to see: China becomes not only a “*normal country*” but even a potential ally, while the danger of the expansion of its authoritarian model on a global level is taken as a mere detail of the history. History is stubborn.

On April 19th, the Beijing Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a [document](#) titled “*Following Xi Jinping: Thought on Diplomacy, to Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind Through International Cooperation Against COVID-19.*” The content consisted of a series of rather obvious considerations on the role of China and its President in coordinating the international response to the pandemic and on the need for cooperation among nations to fight it. But it is on the title that we must dwell and, especially, on that call to “*a community with a shared future for mankind.*” It is a key concept to understand the interaction between the Chinese political system and the foreign policy of the People’s Republic under Xi Jinping, so that the statement underlines that it was formulated by the Supreme Leader seven years ago, at the beginning of his mandate. Why is it important? To try to explain it, I draw inspiration from an [article](#) by David Bandurski, published last year, which analyzes the implications of this declaration of intent of the Chinese regime, defined by the official press “*the flag under which China is guiding human civilization in the direction of progress.*” A universal mission, therefore. It is essential to understand what this mission consists of. Bandurski explains, with generosity of arguments, that the message conveyed by the slogan “*a shared destiny (or future) for mankind*” is actually the updated version of the *doublespeak* China has accustomed us to in these decades. The reading that we would be tempted to give, based on our democratic traditions, implies the overcoming of national egoisms in a perspective of global integration, starting from the free will of association of individuals. It is the transnational discourse we grew up with

since the end of WWII. But it would be a mistaken reading. In Beijing, the concept takes on exactly the opposite meaning—that is, the reaffirmation of the principles of national interest and non-interference in internal affairs for the purpose of legitimizing its political structure. To perform this reversal of meaning, the official ideology uses an abstract concept of Chinese nation, which is based not on the constant renewal of the consensus by the individuals who assemble it (Renan), but on a rigid idea of sovereignty that surpasses and overwhelms the will of the people and puts the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at center stage. When China declares to pursue a “community with a shared Destiny,” it is referring to a notion of a national state whose objectives must always prevail over individual rights, to be interpreted exclusively according to the political, economic and social context in which they are framed. So far nothing particularly new, to be honest. It is the defensive approach always followed by authoritarian states to justify violations of fundamental freedoms in the name of a “*national way to development*.” The novelty introduced by Xi Jinping’s “*thought*,” through his insistence on the concepts of “*community*” and “*shared destiny*,” consists in the attempt to export the state-centric vision of the Chinese communist tradition: his mandate represents the transition from the defensive phase to an offensive one, from the legitimization of the domestic approach to its affirmation on a global scale, from the consolidation of internal stability to the international promotion of the Chinese system. Authoritarianism as a development model, based on the repudiation of individualism and the prevalence of state power over every other aspect of society.

This is the fundamental turning point by which the traditional principles of sovereignty and non-interference become the start of a new assertiveness of Chinese power, and it’s this

passage that wields China's perception of itself (the nature of the regime) with the pretension of modeling a world in its image and likeness. For the first time in history, the two aspects merge to the point of becoming inextricable, so much so that we can assume that a possible Chinese retreat from the world stage would cause internal repercussions of great importance. It is therefore explained—I mentioned it at the beginning—that the pandemic represents a double challenge for the CCP, calling into question its international credibility and its leading role, as it exposes the weaknesses of a system that needs to continually reaffirm its strength by closing all doors to criticism and dissent. Hence the intensification of the repression, with the detentions of activists and journalists and the censorship imposed even on research laboratories and, above all, the enormous anxiety generated in the *nomenklatura* by the warnings of the main financial entities on the spectacular contraction of Chinese economy. Jobs defense is today the Party's priority in the economic field, as Xi himself [reiterated](#) in his recent visit to Shaanxi, the basis of the social pact that so far has guaranteed its survival in exchange for development. Again, a strong and feared China beyond its borders is functional to maintain this delicate internal balance, allowing the party-state to present itself to the national community with an apparent message of cohesion: *We have the situation under control, we are a model for the whole world, you can trust us.* But insecurity hides behind the mask of ambition, and fear of instability behind superpower projects.

The CCP's global affirmation strategy aims exclusively at maintaining and expanding its power. In single-party regimes, in the absence of weights and counterweights to government action, the objectives of the ruling class coincide with those of the State. It is certainly true that modern China is not the ideological monolith of the Maoist era, but a society

connected with the external world and in constant evolution. But it is precisely the contrast between a dynamic social context and a sclerotic political apparatus that gives the measure of a potentially critical failure. Despite the proclamations of the official doctrine, the “*harmonious society*” looks more and more like the utopia of the realization of communism in the real socialism countries, a constant step towards an ideal that will never materialize. In fact, the China model, which Xi Jinping would like to expand, is far from the realm of celestial harmony:

- it’s a system that lists its citizens through a social credit program that measures their level of compliance with the regime’s directives;
- it’s an omnipresent surveillance apparatus, from factories to universities, which uses the most advanced technologies for an unprecedented monitoring program;
- it’s the largest concentration camp for religious minorities on the planet (Xinjiang and Tibet cases);
- it’s the suffocation of the rule of law in Hong Kong;
- it’s the persecution of the Catholic church and Falun Gong;
- it’s the systematic suppression of political and civil liberties; it’s the kidnapping of nonconformist journalists, independent voices, human rights activists;
- it’s the subordination of culture, art, scientific research, literature, teaching to the party-state doctrine or, in the updated version for the “*new era*,” to the “*thought of Xi Jinping for a socialism with Chinese characteristics*”;
- it’s total control of the media, the Internet police, state censorship, the blocking of unauthorized online communication platforms.

When the principle of non-interference in internal affairs—whose respect China demands from others—is not

implemented in the opposite direction, the way the CCP rules the country automatically becomes a problem for the rest of the world, also because the Chinese do not play with the normally accepted rules but aim to build a system of relations with an increasingly large group of internationally compliant vassals and organizations (see for example the World Health Organization) favourable to its national interest and the maintenance of its authoritarian system. The hope that the transition to a capitalist economy would lead to progressive political liberalization has faded long time ago. Any strategy to contain the new Chinese power inevitably passes through the promotion of changes in the command structure in Beijing—a horizon that at the moment seems difficult to conceive, given the stalemate and confusion that the Western front is facing. The level of acceptance of Beijing's influence shown by some States traditionally committed to Atlantic alliances, first of all Italy, represents an existential risk for the years to come. As long as China has limited its aspirations to the African continent or some Asian regimes dependent on its protection, the scope of the challenge was not so intimidating. However, the shift of the Chinese axis towards Europe has changed the landscape. I discover nothing new by stressing that the combination of the *Belt and Road Initiative* with the preponderance of the civil and military intelligence apparatus (which will inevitably go along economic penetration through the Eurasian axis) can be considered the most serious threat to the security of liberal democracies since the end of the Second World War. When Beijing moves, it's not only diplomacy that paves the way. The strong public control over the economy, in a capitalism managed and directed by the State, makes large industrial companies look like divisions of an army that also enlists science, university and technology. The control and the draconian conditions imposed on foreign companies inside the Chinese territory, in terms of economic blackmail, political censorship and of appropriation of know-how, goes hand in hand with the role of the big Chinese corporations abroad—real tools of the security apparatus of

the People's Republic, with purposes of collection and transmission of sensitive information. The National Intelligence Law, approved by the Chinese People's Assembly in 2017, is explicit in this sense, making "every citizen or organization" a potential agent serving the political organs of the State and the Central Military Commission.

It is not surprising that an authoritarian state tends to interpret the reality according to its own parameters and to impose its own rules on those who are inclined to accept them. Even Russia—withstanding the undeniable differences—often demonstrates this temptation, although it is not able to exercise the same level of influence, given its nature of regional power and its poor economic projection. Rather, it's surprising the widespread inability to counter the disinformation and propaganda actions that follow Chinese offensives on the diplomatic, political, military and commercial ground. Much has been said and written about the concealment of Chinese responsibilities in the spread of the coronavirus: in a few weeks Beijing has managed to establish itself as an example of crisis management, and only recently we have witnessed a multi-headed counter-offensive by the United States and Europe. But the repercussions of acquiescence are even more evident if we enter the geopolitical stage. When China demands and obtains the exclusion of Taiwan from international organizations and no one protests, CCP interprets the signal as a green light to further dig in. The controversy over the past few weeks about the role of the island in the World Health Organization has been followed by activities by the Chinese Navy in the Strait, while the Council of State website published a threatening article on the annexation of Taiwan to the territory of the motherland. The question is, again, connected with the internal dynamics of the regime: Taiwan is a thorn in the side for Beijing because it represents an emblematic case of

economic progress in an open society close to home, the most evident denial of the authoritarian "*but efficient*" model that the CCP would like to promote. Also, in the Chinese perspective of a world divided between complacent friends and ungrateful enemies, the possibility that less powerful nations will oppose its agenda and hinder its interests is not contemplated. While Hong Kong is the mirror of its internal contradictions, Taiwan is the reflection of its external ones.

There's no reason to think that China's course will become somewhat milder in the near future. The route is now drawn and, even if in Zhongnanhai they try to conceal their real intentions with slogans that refer to universal brotherhood, it would be unforgivable to continue to underestimate the real extent of the challenge that the CCP dictatorship is launching to the liberal system. The pandemic, a (supposedly) involuntary weapon in weakening the opponents, has been used by the regime to conquer ground and present itself as a superior alternative to the Western model of electoral democracy and civil rights. As the *Belt and Road Initiative* intends to place China at the center of trade routes by creating an economic clientelist network, the new system of political alliances that the CCP is building in parallel has the objective of occupying the traditional role of the United States at the center of the international landscape. In the absence of a coherent strategy by Washington, Europe and the democratic nations, we will witness an increasing assertiveness from Beijing and a progressive shift of world balances in its favor. The answer must take into account the nature of the regime we're facing with the objective of promoting internal changes, without which it will be difficult to curb the spread of its authoritarian model. The cost of inaction, in terms of democratic quality, civil and economic freedoms and political dependence, would be far greater than the health emergency which, starting from China, brought the

planet to its knees.

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