

## **China: how the West can counter the rise of an authoritarian superpower**

China's global ambitions are unbridled and dangerous. To contain them, first we must understand them, argues President Trump's former national security adviser HR McMaster  
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On November 8, 2017, Air Force One touched down in Beijing, marking the start of a state visit hosted by China's president and Communist Party leader, Xi Jinping. From my first day on the job as President Trump's national security adviser, China had been a top priority. The country figured prominently in what President Obama had identified for his successor as the biggest immediate problem the new administration would face — what to do about North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. But many other questions about the nature and future of the relationship between China and the United States had also emerged, reflecting China's fundamentally different perception of the world.

Since the heady days of Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, the assumptions that had governed the American approach to our relationship with China were these: after being welcomed into the international political and economic order, China would play by the rules, open its markets and privatise its economy. As the country became more prosperous, the Chinese government would respect the rights of its people and liberalise politically. But those assumptions were proving to be wrong.

China has become a threat because its leaders are promoting a closed, authoritarian model as an alternative to democratic governance and free-market economics. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is not only strengthening an internal system that stifles human freedom and extends its authoritarian control, it is also exporting that model and leading the development of new rules and a new international order that would make the world less free and less safe. China's effort to extend its influence is obvious from the South China Sea, where its navy stepped up attacks to advance specious territorial claims, to the East China Sea, where the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA) increased incursions into Japanese territorial waters near the Senkaku Islands, to China's Himalayan border with India, where the PLA violated the Line of Actual Control multiple times and last month bludgeoned 20 Indian soldiers to death. It is also obvious in China's heavy-handed "Wolf Warrior diplomacy", which uses disinformation to obscure its responsibility for the Covid-19 pandemic and portrays European and American responses to the crisis as indicative of the West's ineptitude, corruption and incompetence. But the integrated nature of the CCP's military and economic strategies is what makes it particularly dangerous to the United States and other free and open societies.

The Forbidden City was the perfect backdrop for Xi to showcase his determination to "move closer to the centre of the world stage"

John King Fairbank, the Harvard historian and godfather of American Sinology, noted in 1948 that to understand the policies and actions of Chinese leaders, historical perspective is “not a luxury, but a necessity”. During our state visit Xi and his advisers relied heavily on history to convey their intended message. They emphasised certain historical subjects. They avoided others.

The American delegation — which included President Trump and the first lady, and Rex Tillerson, the secretary of state — received its first history lesson as it toured the Forbidden City, the seat of Chinese emperors for five centuries. We were accompanied by Xi, his wife and several other senior Chinese leaders. The message was consistent with a speech Xi had given three weeks earlier: the CCP was relentlessly pursuing the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”. As Xi described it, “rejuvenation” encompassed prosperity, collective effort, socialism and national glory — the “China dream”. The Forbidden City was the perfect backdrop for Xi to showcase his determination to “move closer to the centre of the world stage and to make a greater contribution to humankind”.

The Forbidden City was built during the Ming dynasty, which ruled China from 1368 to 1644 — a period considered to be a golden age in terms of China’s economic might, territorial control and cultural achievements. It was during this dynasty that Zheng He, an admiral in the Ming fleet, embarked on seven voyages around the West Pacific and Indian oceans, more than half a century before Christopher Columbus set sail. His “treasure ships”, among the largest wooden vessels ever built, brought back tributes from all parts of the known world. But despite the success of the voyages, the emperor concluded the world had nothing to offer China. He ordered the treasure ships scuttled and Chinese ports closed. The period that followed — the 19th and 20th centuries in particular — is seen by Xi and others in the leadership as an aberrational period during which European nations and, later, the United States achieved economic and military dominance.

The tour of the Forbidden City was meant, it seemed, as a reminder that Chinese dynasties had long stood at the centre of the earth. The emperor held court in the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the largest building in the Forbidden City. The grand throne is surrounded by six golden pillars, engraved with dragons to evoke the power of an emperor whose state ruled over tianxia (“everything beneath heaven”).

While the images broadcast to China and the rest of the world during our visit were meant to project confidence in the CCP, one could also sense a profound insecurity — a lesson of history that went unmentioned. In its very design the Forbidden City seemed to reflect that contrast between outward confidence and inner apprehension. The three great halls at the city’s centre were meant not only to impress, but also to defend from threats that might come from both outside and inside the city’s walls. Like Xi, the emperors who sat on the elaborate throne in the heart of the Forbidden City practised a remote and autocratic style of rule vulnerable to corruption and internal threats.

Our guide showed us where the last royal occupant of the Forbidden City, Emperor Puyi, was stripped of power in 1911, at the age of five, during China’s republican revolution. Puyi abdicated in the midst of the “century of humiliation”, a period of Chinese history that Xi

had described to Trump when the two leaders met for dinner at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida seven months before our tour. The century of humiliation was the unhappy era — from the 1840s to the communist victory in the Chinese civil war in 1949 — during which China experienced internal fragmentation, suffered defeat in wars, made significant concessions to foreign powers and endured brutal occupation.

Our last meeting of the state visit, in the Great Hall of the People, was with Li Keqiang, the premier of the state council and the titular head of China's government. If anyone in the American group had any doubts about China's view of its relationship with the United States, Li's monologue would have removed them. He began with the observation that China, having already developed its industrial and technological base, no longer needed the United States. He dismissed American concerns over unfair trade and economic practices, indicating that the US's role in the future global economy would be merely to provide China with raw materials, agricultural products and energy to fuel its production of the world's cutting-edge industrial and consumer products.

Leaving China, I was even more convinced than I had been before that a dramatic shift in US policy was overdue. The Forbidden City was supposed to convey confidence in China's national rejuvenation. But for me it exposed the fears as well as the ambitions that drive the CCP's efforts to extend China's influence along its frontiers and beyond, and to regain the honour lost during the century of humiliation. The fears and ambitions are inseparable. They explain why the CCP is obsessed with control — both internally and externally.

The party's leaders believe they have a narrow window of strategic opportunity to strengthen their rule and revise the international order in their favour — before China's economy sours, the population grows old and other countries realise that the party is pursuing national rejuvenation at their expense. The party has no intention of playing by the rules associated with international law, trade or commerce. China's overall strategy relies on co-option and coercion at home and abroad, as well as on concealing the nature of its true intentions. What makes this strategy potent and dangerous is the integrated nature of the party's efforts across government, industry, academia and the military.

#### Socialism with Chinese characteristics

Inside China the party's tolerance for free expression and dissent is minimal, to put it mildly. The repressive and manipulative policies in Tibet, with its Buddhist majority, are well known. The Catholic Church and the fast-growing Protestant religions are of deep concern to Xi and the party. Protestant churches have proved difficult to control because of their diversity and decentralisation. The party has forcefully removed crosses from the tops of church buildings and even demolished some buildings to set an example. Last year Beijing's effort to tighten its grip on Hong Kong sparked sustained protests that have continued into 2020. Earlier this month, in a particularly callous rejection of international agreements, the CCP implemented a national security law in Hong Kong to end the one-country-two-systems agreement. In Xinjiang, northwestern China, where ethnic Uighurs mainly practise Islam, the party has forced at least one million people into concentration camps. Uighur prisoners are subjected to systematic brainwashing and forced labour. Many males are sterilised and many females are forced to have abortions or have contraceptive devices implanted into

their bodies. The combination of these actions has reduced the Uighur birth rate by 60 per cent.

Party leaders have accelerated the construction of an unprecedented surveillance state. For the 1.4 billion Chinese people, government propaganda on television and elsewhere is a seamless part of everyday life. Universities have cracked down on teaching that explains “western liberal” concepts of individual rights, freedom of expression, representative government and the rule of law. Students in universities and high schools must take lessons in “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”. The chairman’s 14-point philosophy is the subject of the most popular app in China, which requires users to sign in with their cellphone number and real name before they can earn study points by reading articles, writing comments and taking multiple-choice tests. A system of personal “social credit scores” is based on tracking people’s online and other activity to determine their friendliness to Chinese government priorities. People’s scores determine eligibility for loans, government employment, housing, transportation benefits and more.

The party’s efforts to exert control inside China are far better known than its parallel efforts beyond China’s borders. Here again, insecurity and ambition are mutually reinforcing. Chinese leaders aim to put in place a modern-day version of the tributary system that Chinese emperors used to establish authority over vassal states. Under that system, kingdoms could trade and enjoy peace with the Chinese empire in return for submission. China intends to establish a new tributary system through a massive effort organised under three overlapping policies, carrying the names Made in China 2025, Belt and Road Initiative and Military-Civil Fusion.

Made in China 2025 is designed to help the country become a largely independent scientific and technological power. To achieve that goal, the party is creating high-tech monopolies inside China and stripping foreign companies of their intellectual property by means of theft and forced technology transfer. In some cases, foreign firms are forced to enter into joint ventures with Chinese companies before they are permitted to sell their products in China. These Chinese companies mostly have close ties to the party, making routine the transfer of intellectual property and manufacturing techniques to the Chinese government.

The Belt and Road Initiative calls for more than \$1 trillion in new infrastructure investments across the Indo-Pacific region, Eurasia and beyond. Its true purpose is to place China at the hub of trade routes and communications networks. While the initiative at first received an enthusiastic reception from nations that saw opportunities for economic growth, many of those nations soon realised that Chinese investment came with strings attached.

The Belt and Road Initiative has created a common pattern of economic clientelism. Beijing first offers countries loans from Chinese banks for large-scale infrastructure projects. Once the countries are in debt, the party forces their leaders to align with China’s foreign-policy agenda and the goal of displacing the influence of the United States and its key partners. Although Chinese leaders often depict these deals as win-win, most have just one real winner.

For developing countries with fragile economies, Belt and Road sets a ruthless debt trap. When some countries are unable to service their loans, China trades debt for equity to gain control of their ports, airports, dams, power plants and communications networks. As of 2018 the risk of debt distress was growing in 23 countries with Belt and Road financing. Eight poor countries with Belt and Road financing already have unsustainable levels of debt.

In Sri Lanka, the longtime president and current prime minister, Mahinda Rajapaksa, also incurred debts far beyond what his nation could bear. He agreed to a series of high-interest loans to finance Chinese construction of a port, though there was no apparent need for one. In 2017, following the commercial failure of the port, Sri Lanka was forced to lease it for 99 years to a Chinese state-owned enterprise in a debt-for-equity swap.

The Military-Civil Fusion policy is the most totalitarian of the three prongs. In 2014 and then again in 2017 the party declared that all Chinese companies must collaborate in gathering intelligence. “Any organisation or citizen,” reads Article 7 of China’s National Intelligence Law, “shall support, assist with and collaborate with the state intelligence work in accordance with the law.” Chinese companies work alongside universities and research arms of the People’s Liberation Army. Military-Civil Fusion encourages state-owned and private enterprises to acquire companies that have advanced technologies. It fast-tracks stolen technologies to the army in such areas as space, cyberspace, biology, artificial intelligence and energy.

Chinese cybertheft is responsible for what General Keith Alexander, the former director of the National Security Agency, described as the “greatest transfer of wealth in history”. The Chinese Ministry of State Security used a hacking squad known as APT10 to target US companies in the finance, telecommunications, consumer-electronics and medical industries as well as Nasa and Department of Defense research laboratories, extracting intellectual property and sensitive data.

China’s military has used stolen technologies to pursue advanced military capabilities of many kinds and drive US defence companies out of the market. Chinese espionage is successful in part because the party is able to induce co-operation, wittingly or unwittingly, from individuals, companies and political leaders. Companies in the US and other free-market economies often do not report theft of their technology because they are afraid of losing access to the Chinese market, harming relationships with customers or prompting federal investigations.

Co-option crosses over to coercion when the Chinese demand that companies adhere to the Communist Party’s world view and forgo criticism of its policies. When an employee of the Marriott hotel group “liked” a pro-Tibet tweet in 2018 while using a company social media account, the Marriott website and app were blocked in China for a week, and the employee was fired under pressure from the Chinese government. Last October, when Daryl Morey, the general manager of the Houston Rockets basketball team, tweeted his support of the Hong Kong protesters, Chinese state-run television cancelled the broadcast of Rockets games.

Through Chinese eyes

Americans tend to view the world only in relation to the United States, and to assume that the future course of events depends primarily on US decisions or plans, or on the acceptance by others of our way of thinking. The term for this tendency is strategic narcissism, and it underlies the long-held assumptions I mentioned earlier: about how greater integration of China into the international order would have a liberalising effect on the country and alter its behaviour in the world.

But there's another way of thinking about how countries behave: strategic empathy. According to the historian Zachary Shore, strategic empathy involves trying to understand how the world looks to others, and how those perceptions, as well as emotions and aspirations, influence their policies and actions. An outlook of strategic empathy, taking into account history and experience, leads to a very different set of assumptions about China — one that is borne out by the facts.

The CCP is not going to liberalise its economy or its form of government. It is not going to play by commonly accepted international rules — rather, it will attempt to undermine and eventually replace them with rules more sympathetic to China's interests. China will continue to combine its form of economic aggression with a sustained campaign of industrial espionage. It will continue to seek control of strategic geographic locations and establish exclusionary areas of primacy.

Any strategy to reduce the threat of China's aggressive policies must be based on a realistic appraisal of how much leverage the United States and other outside powers have on the internal evolution of China. But we do have important tools, quite apart from military power and trade policy.

For one thing, those "western liberal" qualities that the Chinese see as weaknesses are actually strengths. The free exchange of information and ideas is an extraordinary competitive advantage, a great engine of innovation and prosperity. Freedom of the press and freedom of expression, combined with robust application of the rule of law, have exposed China's predatory business tactics in country after country — and shown China to be an untrustworthy partner. Diversity and tolerance in free and open societies can be unruly, but they reflect our most basic human aspirations.

Beyond a focus on strengths that the CCP regards as our weaknesses, there are explicit protective steps we must take. They include the following:

- Many universities, research labs and companies in countries that value the rule of law and individual rights are witting or unwitting accomplices in China's use of technology to repress its people and improve its military's capabilities. For dual-use technologies, the private sector should seek new partnerships with those who share commitments to free-market economies, representative government and the rule of law, not with those acting against these principles. Companies that knowingly collaborate with China's efforts to repress its own people or build threatening military capabilities should be penalised.
- Many Chinese companies directly or indirectly involved in domestic human-rights abuses and violation of international treaties are listed on American stock exchanges. Those

companies benefit from US and other western investors. Tougher screening of US, European and Japanese capital markets would help restrict corporate and investor complicity in China's authoritarian agenda. Free-market economies like ours control the majority of the world's capital, and we have far more leverage than we are employing.

- China's use of big telecommunications companies to control communications networks and the internet overseas must be countered. There should no longer be any dispute concerning the need to defend against the multinational technology company Huawei and its role in China's security apparatus. In 2019 a series of investigations revealed incontrovertible evidence of the grave national-security danger associated with a wide array of Huawei's telecommunications equipment. Huawei technicians have used intercepted cell data to help autocratic leaders in Africa spy on, locate and silence political opponents. A priority area for multinational co-operation among free societies should be the development of infrastructure, particularly 5G communications, to form trusted networks that protect sensitive and proprietary data.

- We must defend against Chinese agencies that co-ordinate influence operations abroad. At the same time we should try to maximise positive interactions and experiences with the Chinese people. The United States and other free and open societies should consider issuing more visas and providing paths to citizenship for more Chinese — with proper safeguards in place. Chinese who engage with citizens of free countries are the ones most likely to question their government's policies.

Without effective pushback from the United States and like-minded nations, China will become even more aggressive in promoting its statist economy and authoritarian political model. For me, the state visit to Beijing — and exposure to China's powerful combination of insecurity and ambition — reinforced my belief that the United States and other nations must no longer adhere to a view of China based mainly on western aspirations. If we compete aggressively, we have reason for confidence. China's behaviour is galvanising opposition among countries that do not want to be vassal states. Internally, the tightening of control is also eliciting opposition. The bravado of Li Keqiang and other officials may be intended to evoke the idea of China as sovereign of "everything beneath heaven", but many beneath heaven do not, and must not, agree.

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