

Open Future

The Chinese Communist Party's fear of its people spells trouble

To suppress views of China that it does not like, the party is trying to replicate its domestic censorship on a global scale, says Isabel Hilton



This is a guest contribution to our debate: [Should the West worry about the threat to liberal values posed by China's rise?](https://debates.economist.com/debate/china) (<https://debates.economist.com/debate/china>)

KISHORE MAHBUBANI urges “Western minds” to seek the key to why once-robust Western societies now under-perform, not in China but at home (read our online debate and Mr Mahbubani’s piece here). But liberal democracy’s current ills have opened an unprecedented opportunity to an increasingly confident and authoritarian China, which has seized its chance. As the liberal order staggers, China is building an extensive network of influence that will inhibit its recovery.

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Globalisation helped China go from poverty to the world’s second-largest economy. The question now is, what next? Thus far, China has followed a familiar script, albeit on a huge scale: urbanisation of rural populations, and investment in infrastructure, low-cost manufacturing and exports. At an equivalent moment, Asia’s smaller tigers—notably South Korea and Taiwan—moved up the value chain

and made a political transition away from authoritarianism and becoming more democratic, with civil and legal institutions that contributed to stability and enabled them to be responsible players in a global system.

Ten years ago, China, too, seemed to be on that path. Its ruling Communist Party had retreated from many state functions and had withdrawn from many aspects of its citizens’ lives. Thinking too radically was still a crime, as the case of the late Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo painfully illustrated, but the party-state had largely put aside the coercive imposition of dogma. There was more transparency in many areas of policy, some accountability in governance, and a legal state seemed possible.

Had China continued on that path, its further rise would be welcomed. But today, for the first time, liberal democracies are confronted by an

authoritarian Leninist state with a powerful economy. Arbitrary detention, censorship, ideological coercion, intolerance of debate, secrecy, a leader cult, religious and ethnic persecution, maritime expansion and bullying of its smaller neighbours are China's new order. It is not a recipe for harmonious co-existence.

To be a great, rather than just a big power, China needs the world's acceptance. More open domestic markets, fewer hidden subsidies and less dumping, less industrial espionage and less aggression in the South China Sea would all help. But even then, China's domestic order lacks appeal. American diplomats joke that virulent denunciations of the evils of their country did nothing to diminish the demand for visas. With China, it's the reverse: admiration for its achievements rarely translates to a queue of would-be immigrants.

Outwardly confident, an increasingly authoritarian party manifests mounting mistrust of its people, treating its own citizens as a potentially hostile force to be controlled and, if necessary, subdued. The digitally enabled domestic security system potentially links every aspect of daily life and social interaction to compile a picture of citizen's political reliability – a technological attempt to rerun the old Maoist model of pervasive control. Rival belief systems are once again persecuted and the inner workings of the party remain profoundly secret.

While Xi Jinping appears on the global stage as a model of calm, his regime feels the need to suppress women who want an end to harassment on public transport, and Muslims in Xinjiang who resist the party's orders to drink alcohol in "re-education" camps. In 2013 the party issued a list of seven topics that could no longer be discussed with students: universal values, a free press, civil society, civic rights, the party's past "mistakes", corruption and an independent judiciary. This



Sam Kerr

speaks of fear rather than confidence. That fear should be of concern to liberal democracies.

A confident power permits debate to flourish, unthreatened by ideas; a fearful one will seek to manipulate or shut it down. The party is increasingly obliged to try to replicate its domestic censorship on a global scale, to suppress views of China that the party does not like, wherever they are manifested. Sustained investment in propaganda in Chinese-language media and in Western media, subtle and unsubtle attempts to exert influence through the party's United Front Work Department, pressuring business partners to support political positions on Taiwan and the South China Sea, buying political influence and muscle-flexing on Western campuses—all have caused alarm in several countries recently, notably in Australia and New Zealand.

In the Association of South-East Asian Nations, of which China is not a member, Cambodia will block any measure that China does not like. China's influence in Europe is built through poor and vulnerable states, such as Greece, and investment in larger states like Britain. The origins of Chinese investment, like the ownership structure of Chinese companies, is hidden behind many walls.

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China can count on Greece, Hungary and the Czech Republic to look after its interests in return for promises of investment. This has rendered the EU unable to uphold its key values on several occasions. In 2016 Hungary and Greece tried to block an EU statement when China lost its case on the South China sea; in March 2017 Hungary refused to join an EU denunciation of the torture of lawyers in China; in June that year Greece blocked an EU statement at the UN Human Rights Council that was critical of China's human rights record. Greece and the Czech Republic tried to water down new European Commission rules on screening foreign investment on security grounds, which might have inhibited China's investment in EU defence and telecommunications.

In “16+1”, a Chinese initiative, China exerts influence on eleven EU members and five non-members. The arrangement buys support for China’s political positions and tempts Europe’s populist politicians to play the China promise against EU unity. Hungary’s Viktor Orban, for example, now rejects the universal values and concern for human rights that are foundational principles of the EU.

At the 19th Party Congress last November, President Xi said that he wanted to export “Chinese wisdom” to the world, a clear challenge to the liberal order’s normative power. By weakening Europe’s ability to defend its values, China has taken its first important steps.

Isabel Hilton is a London-based writer and broadcaster. She studied at the Beijing Foreign Language and Culture University and at Fudan University in Shanghai before taking up a career in written and broadcast journalism, working for the BBC, The Sunday Times, The Independent, The Guardian, and the New Yorker.