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China’s Threat to Global Norms
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Introduction

Thank you to the Commissioners for the opportunity to testify today. Thank you, also, for organizing a hearing on this topic critical to U.S. interests and the future of democracy, human rights, and prosperity around the world.

China is increasingly promoting its authoritarian “model” of governance and development—robust economic growth under an authoritarian political framework—as a viable alternative to liberal democracy.¹ The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views this endeavor as critical to its efforts to weaken norms around universal human rights and democracy that underpin the current international order, paving the way for China to take a more central role in that order under CCP leadership.

China is not promoting a coherent ideological alternative to democracy, nor is the Chinese Government encouraging other countries to adopt wholesale its approach to governing China. The CCP nevertheless is creating conditions conducive in many countries to the weakening of democratic institutions and the express or gradual adoption of autocracy. China need not engage in a concerted effort to “export” its model to undermine democracy and human rights protections in countries around the world.²

China’s popularization of a model starkly different from that advocated by the US and other developed democracies is not of purely academic concern. The CCP intends to use its growing power in the international system to shape the twenty-first century, much as the U.S. shaped the twentieth. China’s leaders seek to determine which features of the global status quo to preserve and which to reject, not only in business, culture, and politics but also in such basic values as human rights, free speech, and privacy.³

In the testimony that follows I will address Chinese leaders’ view of the current liberal international order and the opportunity presented by China’s growing power to transform that system from the inside out, hollowing out the norms upon which it is based. I will then turn to how China is promoting its authoritarian approach at both the international and national levels, contributing to democratic decline across the world. I will close with some recommendations for how the United States can take action to reverse these trends.

¹https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/chinese_malign_influence_report.pdf

² Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, “How Russia and China Undermine Democracy: Can the West Counter the Threat?” *Foreign Affairs*, October 2, 2018.

³Evan Osnos, “Fight Fight, Talk Talk,” *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/13/the-future-of-americas-contest-with-china>.



China's View of the Current International Order

China, like all rising powers throughout history, is dissatisfied that the current distribution of benefits in international politics does not represent its growing power in the international system. China expects greater representation in international institutions, changes in the governance of those institutions, and, in some cases, changes to their underlying rules.⁴⁵

- China asserts that it, in comparison to the U.S. and its democratic allies, remains committed to key principles of the UN Charter such as the inviolability of national sovereignty. China's approach to revising the current international order is also driven by a sense that it is regaining a rightful place of status.⁶
- In 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated at a rarely convened government conference on foreign policy that China should now lead "the reform of the global governance system."⁷

While China's demands to change the framework of the existing system appear selectively revisionist, it is Chinese leaders' intent to topple the normative structures inherent to the current liberal order—viewed as a complication for China's emergence as a great power under the CCP—that render China's challenge to the order a revolutionary one.

- At the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi left no doubt that he regards China's illiberal concepts of political and economic order as superior to so-called Western models, and that he seeks to popularize "Chinese wisdom" to the world as a "contribution to mankind."
- China's efforts to refashion the current international order are driven not by a "positive" vision for a coherent set of alternate norms or a missionary zeal to install copies of the CCP system in around the world -- or even to operate in a world of like-minded states.

Power and Values

⁴ Evan Feigenbaum, "Reluctant Stakeholder: Why China's Highly Strategic Brand of Revisionism is More Challenging Than Washington Thinks," Macropolo, April 27, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/04/27/reluctant-stakeholder-why-china-s-highly-strategic-brand-of-revisionism-is-more-challenging-than-washington-thinks-pub-76213>.

⁵ Yang Jiechi, "Working Together to Build a World of Lasting Peace and Universal Security and a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind," speech at World Peace Forum at Tsinghua University, July 14, 2018, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1577242.shtml.

⁶ Zheng Wang, "The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context," *Journal of Chinese Politics*, no. 19 (2014).

⁷ "Xi Urges Breaking New Ground in Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," *Xinhua*.

Chinese leaders have long presumed that the U.S., determined to maintain its status atop the international system and prevent China's rise, uses norms around universal human rights and democracy as a cover for naked great power competition and to overthrow the Chinese Communist Party's rule.⁸⁹

- Xi on numerous occasions has called for vigilance against the West's intent to use its ideology to attack and overthrow the CCP.¹⁰ Chinese authorities, wary of the wavering of "ideals and convictions" to which Xi has attributed the fall of the Soviet Union, have stepped up efforts to prevent the "infiltration" of outside values and ideas that could threaten the Party's preferred narrative, while waging an intense effort to revive CCP-friendly ideology at home.¹¹
- The CCP has always defined itself as being in perpetual struggle with the "hostile" forces of Western liberalism, but judge that the United States is ramping up its efforts now that China's rise increasingly threatens US interests in Asia and globally.

Chinese leaders judge that, by weakening existing global norms, they can accelerate the decline of Western influence and advance China's geopolitical goals, including in its presumed zero-sum competition with the U.S. for global leadership. China's promised rejuvenation as a great power, a key pillar of the Party's legitimacy, requires expanding its normative power.

- China views a decline in U.S. dominance over the international system and oft-cited "trends toward multipolarity" as presenting an opportunity to erase the intolerable edge the normative aspects of the global order have long granted the U.S. in its competition with China. Beijing notes the importance of building its "comprehensive national power" to achieve the greatest advantage from these trends.¹²
- Chinese leaders understand power as the true determinant of any international order and judge that the so-called "democratization of international relations" in which no

⁸ Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (2019: Princeton University Press).

⁹ Document No. 9, "Communique on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere", <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

¹⁰ Wang Jisi and Hu Ran, "From cooperative partnership to strategic competition: a review of China-U.S. relations 2009-2019," *China International Strategy Review* 1; 2019.

¹¹ Evan Osnos, "Fight Fight, Talk Talk," *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/13/the-future-of-americas-contest-with-china>.

¹² "Full Text: China's Military Strategy," Xinhua, May 26, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-05/26/c_134271001.htm.

country can dictate norms will result in a flatter, values-neutral order that will advantage a China projected to soon be the world's largest economy.¹³

Weakening Norms at the International Level

Chinese leaders view the country's growing power as offering an opportunity to craft a new global order untethered to inconvenient liberal norms. China has greater leverage to weaken human rights protections and processes in international institutions and promote values-neutral narratives. Countries that support China's interests, or at a minimum do not challenge it on sensitive issues in international forums, receive benefits; conversely, countries that oppose China are denied access to these rewards and might even be punished.¹⁴

- China is whittling away at international institutions that instill democratic norms and creating new ones that do not.¹⁵ The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's strategic global infrastructure program, poses a fundamental challenge to established norms around development financing and investment practices. China's annual hosting of the World Internet Conference grants it the opportunity to legitimize China's approach to emerging norms around Internet freedom.¹⁶
- China is using its clout to shape key international institutions such as UN standards-setting bodies and to undermine human rights protections at the UN Human Rights Council and other mechanisms. China has installed its officials in top posts in four of the 15 specialized UN agencies, skewing their approach to issues involving China's interests and its approach to rule-setting. Beijing has also sought a host of entry-level jobs to bolster its advancement at the UN in the long term.¹⁷
- Democratic states are displaying faltering support for freedom on the international stage, taking few steps to rally international opposition or apply meaningful collective

¹³ Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Edoardo Saravalle, "China's Use of Coercive Economic Measures," Center for a New American Security, June 11, 2018, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/chinas-use-of-coercive-economic-measures>; Liza Tobin, "Xi's Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and its Allies," *Texas National Security Review* (Vol. 2, Issue 1), November 2018.

¹⁴ David Shullman, "Protect the Party: China's Influence in the Developing World," Brookings, January 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/protect-the-party-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-developing-world/>.

¹⁵ Wang Jisi and Hu Ran, "From cooperative partnership to strategic competition: a review of China-U.S. relations 2009-2019," *China International Strategy Review* 1; 2019.

¹⁶ Melanie Hart and Blaine Johnson, "Mapping China's Global Governance Ambitions," Center for American Progress, February 28, 2019, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2019/02/28/466768/mapping-chinas-global-governance-ambitions/>.

¹⁷ "US-backed candidate nominated to lead UN body after anti-China campaign," *Financial Times*, March 4, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/71364d76-5d8c-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4>.

pressure to halt China's rights abuses. An increasing number of governments that have received significant Chinese investments support China in the face of incontrovertible evidence of its human rights abuses at home.¹⁸

The CCP also seeks greater control over the formulations and ideas that underpin the international order, or “discourse power”, to water down norms around liberal democracy as China takes on a more central global role.¹⁹ China is enshrining its own ideological concepts and foreign policy strategies into international statements of consensus, substituting Chinese concepts such as the “right for development” and “internet sovereignty” for universal values.

- Beijing is also promoting a particularist view of human rights, in which governments can cite “unique” local conditions to justify disregard for individual or minority claims, and defining democracy in terms of so-called “economic and social rights,” rather than inalienable civil or political rights.²⁰

Popularizing Authoritarianism at the National Level

As it neuters the “liberal” presumptions resident in global institutions created by developed democracies, the CCP is simultaneously looking to popularize its governance and development model in individual countries throughout the developed world, hollowing out the normative roots of the current order from the bottom-up. Chinese leaders recognize that to achieve legitimacy as a responsible great power without democratizing—a prospect not welcomed by the developed West—they must first popularize China's model in the developing world.²¹

- Adoption of an illiberal or at least values-neutral approach in emerging countries – approximately two-thirds of humanity – would go a long way toward undermining the notion of a liberal foundation to the global order and conveniently smooth a path for an expanded Chinese sphere of influence.²²

China is exacerbating doubts about democracy and extolling the virtues of its authoritarian model in numerous countries across the developing world. Beijing is encouraging governments to emulate and adopt elements of China's system while criticizing the West's promotion of

¹⁸ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>.

¹⁹ Nadege Rolland, “China's Vision for a New World Order,” NBR Special Report no. 83, January 27, 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order/>.

²⁰ <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/peoples-republic-of-the-united-nations>

²¹ David Shullman, “Protect the Party: China's Influence in the Developing World,” Brookings, January 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/protect-the-party-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-developing-world/>.

²² Nadege Rolland, “China's Vision for a New World Order,” NBR Special Report no. 83, January 27, 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order/>.

liberal ideals and human rights as self-righteous meddling that violates countries' right to choose their own path.

- China's success in advancing an alternative "model" rests partly in its promises of BRI-related investment unconditioned on measurements of governance and human rights, creating a permissive context for illiberal leaders and presenting them the opportunity to claim credit for delivering on promises of quick infrastructure development, no matter the long-term costs for a country's prosperity.
- China portrays its economic success as a demonstration that the road to prosperity no longer runs through liberal democracy. As Xi put it in 2017, China's model offers "a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence." This message is highly attractive to leaders who, lacking popular support and afraid of what open political space could pose for their control, hope to achieve economic success without answering to the demands of democratic societies.
- The CCP conducts large-scale trainings of foreign officials about its governance model, including on how to guide public opinion, control civil society, and implement China-style cybersecurity policies. China also provides increasingly sophisticated surveillance technology and internal security training to established authoritarian and fragile democratic governments, enabling them to better suppress dissent and control their own citizens through censorship and surveillance.²³

Capitalizing on the Corrosion of Democracy

The impact of China's promotion of its authoritarian system cannot be separated from its expanding malign influence tactics throughout much of the world. China is advocating for authoritarianism in countries where it is weakening democracy by undermining governance, prosperity and open discourse. Beijing's authoritarian messaging is more likely to be attractive in contexts where democracy's "brand" is already damaged.

- China's opaque and corrupt investment practices through the BRI contribute to the corrosion of democratic institutions, facilitating countries' slide into unsustainable debt and leaving countries increasingly beholden to their Chinese creditors. The deals struck

²³ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "How Russia and China Undermine Democracy: Can the West Counter the Threat?," *Foreign Affairs*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-10-02/how-russia-and-china-undermine-democracy>; <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>.

by Chinese policy banks and SOEs encourage a more corrupt and unaccountable class of political elites eager to undermine their country's long-term prosperity in return for personal enrichment.²⁴

- China is simultaneously manipulating countries' political and information environments – what the National Endowment for Democracy has termed “sharp power”, coopting local civic groups or journalists to stymie negative portrayals of its engagement and protect ties to corrupt elites.²⁵ China is increasingly interfering directly in the political systems and elections of countries around the world to support China-friendly politicians and policies.²⁶
- Such efforts tilt the playing field to advantage illiberal leaders who are open to adopting elements of China's model. China's interference is also furthering the erosion of democratic rules and norms at the hands of democratically elected incumbents. Such “authoritarianization” is a major change in the ways that democratic governments have traditionally collapsed.²⁷

Lastly, China's success in weakening liberal democratic norms will in large measure be determined by its ability to lead technological innovation and – critically – shape the related norms, rules, and standards upon which the future international order will be based. As the former CEO of Google Eric Schmidt writes, “Americans should be wary of living in a world shaped by China's view of the relationship between technology and authoritarian governance. Free societies must prove the resilience of liberal democracy in the face of technological changes that threaten it.”²⁸

- Beijing seeks a greater say over the norms, rules, and structures that govern the internet; digital infrastructure; data; digital privacy; and emerging technologies like bioengineering, quantum computing, and machine learning. China wants to determine ethics around technologies like facial-recognition and the use of biometrics that it has employed in its detention and control of more than a million Uighur Muslims, in addition to tracking the rest of its population every day. China's exporting of this model of

²⁴https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/chinese_malign_influence_report.pdf

²⁵ “Inside China's Secret ‘Magic Weapon’ for Worldwide Influence,” *Financial Times*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/fb2b3934-b004-11e7-beba-5521c713abf4>.

²⁶ David Shullman, “Protect the Party: China's Influence in the Developing World,” Brookings, January 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/protect-the-party-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-developing-world/>.

²⁷ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz, “How Democracies Fall Apart: Why Populism Is a Pathway to Autocracy.” *Foreign Affairs*, December 5, 2016. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-05/howdemocracies-fall-apart>.

²⁸ Eric Schmidt, “Silicon Valley Needs the Government,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2020, A25.

population control to governments around the world demonstrates the stakes in the future of intrusive technologies.²⁹

Recommendations

China's promotion of its authoritarian model poses a clear challenge to the liberal international order and U.S. interests inextricably tied to upholding the values that have defined that order since its inception. The CCP, tapping into perceptions of the inevitability of its growing power in the international system, is rapidly shaping governance, discourse, and economic realities at the international and national level. For this reason, it is critical that Washington prioritize responding to China's efforts now.

A strategic U.S. approach to this challenge requires prioritizing where to focus limited U.S. resources and energy given China's larger role in global institutions and growing influence in nations around the world.

- Washington's priorities should be determined by the conviction that we are engaged, first and foremost, in a competition of systems and ideas with the CCP – wherein the U.S. is advocating for human freedom and the right of peoples to choose their own leaders— rather than a values-neutral great power competition.
- Not only will such a distinction clarify how Washington should shift resources, but it will also serve to convince U.S. allies of the necessity of aligning to counter China's upending of the universal norms which we all hold dear. Chinese officials have had some success in convincing democratic partners, including in Europe, that the U.S. uses values arguments as a mere tool to enlist them in Washington's campaign to prevent China's emergence as a peer competitor.

At the international level: The U.S. must recommit to multilateral forums and institutions. Countering China's efforts to use its greater leverage in international institutions to erase liberal norms from those institutions is a profoundly difficult challenge that will be rendered impossible if Washington is not leading at the multilateral level. Absent U.S. leadership, Beijing will fill the vacuum and expand its influence even further.³⁰

²⁹Evan Osnos, "Fight Fight, Talk Talk," *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2020,

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/01/13/the-future-of-americas-contest-with-china>.

³⁰<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/01/22/us-state-department-appoints-envoy-counter-chinese-influence-un-trump/>

- The U.S. and its allies and partners should continue to aggressively seek leadership in organizations with critical standards-setting roles and develop rules for emerging domains such as space, cyber, and artificial intelligence. It came as good news recently that China had failed to place its candidate atop the World Intellectual Property Organization, due in part to US efforts.³¹

Washington, together with allies in Europe and Asia, should loudly and frequently underscore its commitment to defending universal human rights and democracy as core international norms, contrasting the hollowness and repression of China's own system with the success of vibrant democracies around the world, including in Taiwan.

- The U.S. must also continue to press for greater and more reciprocal media access in China and the freedom to report without fear of expulsion for work the Chinese government deems unacceptable.³² China limits that access in part out of recognition that the CCP's image – and advocacy of its authoritarian model – is complicated by how it governs at home, including its repression of dissent, crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong, and detention of more than one million Uighur Muslims.

At the national level: Washington should make democracy assistance a central component of its strategy to counter the impact of China's efforts to promote authoritarianism and shore up the liberal international order. This should involve using foreign aid to help make countries more resilient to CCP coercion and, hand in hand with diplomacy, champion the superiority of democracy to China's authoritarian option.³³

- Congress should maintain strong support for external democracy assistance, anti-corruption work, and helping journalists and civil society in individual countries to identify and expose China's efforts to promote authoritarianism and manipulate their information spaces. Washington should prioritize assistance for government and nongovernment actors that are deemed particularly vulnerable to CCP influence.
- The U.S. and its democratic partners should build upon nascent efforts to offer united alternatives to Chinese investment and financing through the establishment of the Development Finance Corporation and launching of the Blue Dot Network with Japan

³¹<https://www.ft.com/content/71364d76-5d8c-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4>

³²“Control, Halt, Delete: Reporting in China under threat of expulsion,” Foreign Correspondents Club of China, March 2, 2020, <https://www.dropbox.com/s/gky8352xue74kuh/control-halt-delete.pdf?dl=0>.

³³ Patrick Quirk and David Shullman, “Want to prevail against China? Prioritize democracy assistance,” *The Hill*, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/463646-want-to-prevail-against-china-prioritize-democracy-assistance>.

and Australia. The U.S. Government should also build on success in assisting local governments in financing and investment negotiations with Chinese entities.

- In these efforts Washington and its partners can capitalize on mounting pushback against aspects of China’s global ambitions and malign influence efforts, with public resistance to the harmful effects of Chinese investment projects intensifying in host countries, and some politicians growing more vocal about protecting their countries against Beijing’s encroachment.³⁴³⁵
- The U.S., as it confronts China’s efforts to shape global norms, must simultaneously increase its commitment to supporting democratic actors inside China who are facing increasing repression at the hands of the Chinese Government. It is critical that the U.S. and its democratic partners work to counter the CCP narrative and drive for complete ideological control within China, preserving space for independent voices and civil society.

Conclusion

None of these efforts to counter China’s efforts on behalf of authoritarianism will be easy or achievable without a sustained U.S. dedication both to promoting universal values and working with and assisting fragile developing democracies. There is no alternative, however, if Washington hopes to prevent the continued decline of democracy globally. As Freedom House’s latest “Freedom in the World” report notes, China’s expanding influence and simultaneous assault on liberal norms is contributing significantly to that decline.³⁶

The argument in favor of upholding universal values and the democratic norms underpinning the current international order remains compelling. China’s increasing reliance on repression of its own citizens and ideological indoctrination to ensure allegiance to the CCP under the leadership of Xi Jinping reveals the inherent failings of its autocratic system and the ideas it intends to infuse into the existing international order.

We need only look to the events of the last few months for a clear demonstration of the dangers to humanity of a CCP-driven, values-neutral international order. The Party’s decision to control information at the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak undermined not only China’s own ability to deal with the crisis but the international community’s ability to prevent a

³⁴https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/chinese_malign_influence_report.pdf

³⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>.

³⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>.

global pandemic. China's leverage over the World Health Organization, as its second largest donor, appears to have skewed the organization's judgment on China's handling of the crisis and its severity.³⁷

- Beijing is now trying to shape the global narrative, not only to replace criticism of China's failure to contain the epidemic with stories of its rapid reaction to "save the world" weeks later, but also to credit that reaction to the superiority of the CCP's system of governance. As the *People's Daily* put it, China's battle against the epidemic demonstrates the CCP is "by far the political party with the strongest governance capability in human history."³⁸ The government is now suggesting the virus may not have started in China, all evidence to the contrary.
- This is a real-world demonstration of the tangible risk posed by the popularization of China's model across a growing number of countries, from any of which the next transnational crisis could emerge. In an increasingly connected world, the U.S cannot afford to have a growing number of governments prioritize their grip on power above the safety and security of their citizens, nor can we afford to have international institutions place their fealty to such governments over the execution of their duties.

The free and open nature of the current international order is essential to its continued success. The challenge the United States and our democratic partners face is to adjust to China's greater role in that order while contesting its moral vision for the future. At stake is the potential erosion of fundamental human rights and self-governance, as well as human security in an increasingly connected world. The United States must recommit to the hard work of defending democracy around the world.

³⁷ "China censored virus news for weeks, say researchers," AFP, March 3, 2020.

³⁸ Dong Yuzhen, "CPC most important source of confidence for Chinese people," *People's Daily Online*, March 4, 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2020/0304/c98649-9664589.html>.

