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A World Order Modeled by China

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In an address following the 19th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) National Congress, Foreign minister Wang Yi charted the course of China’s diplomacy and international relations in the “new era” in this way:

“General Secretary Xi Jinping made it clear in his report to the Congress that China will endeavor to foster a new form of international relations and build a community with a shared future for mankind (...).

These twin objectives are inspired by the *fine traditions* of the *5000-year Chinese culture* emphasizing the pursuit of the common good, by the *core values* championed by China's *peaceful foreign policy* for over six decades, and by the CPC's *global vision* of delivering benefits to the people of China as well as those of all other countries.”¹

These two sentences openly express Beijing’s overarching diplomatic objectives and priorities (underlined in the text above). Key words (in italics in the text above), no doubt carefully picked by Wang’s speechwriters, give faint indications of Beijing’s vision underpinning these goals. But Chinese official representatives have not openly offered more explicit descriptions of their ideal view of China’s role in a new world order under its helm - partly because they are not entirely certain themselves, partly out of obfuscation. Their vision for an alternative model can only be inferred from a close inspection of the internal cogitations of CCP strategists and theorists.²

What can be seen in plain sight is a clear objection to the prevailing system. Peeling off the layers of the official narrative, the Chinese regime’s preferred organizing principles start to appear. The overall shape of a new world order under China’s helm can only be broadly outlined with some degree of informed speculation.

¹Emphasis added. Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Opening of the Symposium on International Developments and China's Diplomacy, December 10, 2017, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/2461_663310/t1518130.shtml

² For a deep dive into these cogitations, see Nadège Rolland, *China’s Vision for a New World Order*, NBR Special Report 83, January 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order/>. This testimony is based on the research findings of my report.

1) Beijing's main objections to the current system

Clearer to the outside observers is the Chinese leadership's dissatisfaction with the current world order and its newfound eagerness to press for changes³ and shape the international order in ways that better align with its interests. Official pronouncements repeatedly take swipes at an "unfair and unreasonable" international order that has allegedly outlived its usefulness, has failed to adjust to the rise of emerging countries, and is incapable of addressing the problems of today's world.

Beijing's objection to the existing international order grows out of two main complaints:

- 1) The perceived discrepancy between China's material power and its international status and influence. As things stand, the order "unfairly" perpetuates the dominance of a U.S.-led West. A "fairer" order (sometimes described as "greater democracy in international relations") would allow China to have greater influence, commensurate with the reality of its material power, while the role and influence of the West should decline, in line with its dwindling relative power.
- 2) The existing order is rooted in norms intrinsically antagonistic to the organizing principles on which the CCP system is based and are thus an enduring threat to the regime's legitimacy. Whereas the West believes that the promotion of liberal democracy can help achieve global peace and prosperity, the CCP blames the global promotion of "so-called universal values" for conflict and disruption worldwide (from "color revolutions" in the former Soviet Union to chaos and violence in the Middle-East) - an obvious reflection of its own survival anxieties.

In short, Beijing wants a world order less threatening to the CCP regime's legitimacy and survival and more aligned with its own values and principles. It feels entitled to seek change based on its growing relative power.

2) China's foundational principles

Chinese elites believe that liberal values, starting with the emphasis on fundamental human rights, remain prominent and influential not because they are morally superior, but because they reflect the now waning power of the West. In their view, it was U.S. power that enabled Washington to dictate the rules and norms that still form the basis for the international order and

³ Xi Jinping declared for example in June 2018 that China will participate in "leading the reform of the global governance system." See "Xi Says China Must Lead Way in Reform of Global Governance," *Reuters*, June 23, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-diplomacy/xi-says-china-must-lead-way-in-reform-of-global-governance-idUSKBN1JJ0GT>

to create international institutions that continue to reflect and propagate “American” or “Western” values – in other words, it enabled the creation of an international order in which the United States is dominant. Chinese strategists call this ability to voice concepts and ideas that are accepted and respected by others, and by extension, the power to dictate the rules and norms that form the basis of the international order, “discourse power.”

As China’s power has grown, the Chinese leadership now feels entitled to follow a path similar to the U.S and to set the terms for institutions and norms that will reflect China’s preferences and serve as the building blocks of a new order. However, even though China’s material or “hard” power has undoubtedly increased, the leadership believes that it still lacks “discourse power.” It does not have any appealing substitutes to the existing set of international norms and values. Even at home, the CCP’s belief system has become difficult to characterize, with its mutating, idiosyncratic mix of canonical Marxist-Leninism, socialism “with Chinese characteristics,” nationalism, and sprinkled elements of Confucianism. One theme that has emerged clearly under Xi however, is the claim of Chinese exceptionalism. The promotion of China’s unique cultural, historical and national conditions is meant to demonstrate that any imported model of economic and political development will be unsuitable for China; only the Party can dictate the appropriate path.

CCP theorists are now using a similar line of argument to try to refute the idea of a universal model that fits all and to undermine claims for the universal applicability of liberal democracy. In a clever rhetorical twist, they now claim that *every* country is “exceptional” in its own way. Each should therefore have the right to choose its own model, including, if they wish, take inspiration from the “new option” embodied in China’s own approach to achieving economic growth while maintaining political stability.⁴ Those that follow Beijing’s formula will be able to “speed up their development while preserving their independence,” i.e. without succumbing to the dominance or the liberalization demands of the West.

Beijing does not stand *for* a coherent ideology, other than an enhanced confidence in its “ability to provide a Chinese solution to aid the exploration of a better social system for humanity.”⁵ The Chinese leadership feels that no other country is better qualified to become a role model to others: “The glorious 5,000-year history of the Chinese nation, the 95-year historical struggle of the CCP, and the 38-year development miracle of reform and opening up have already declared

⁴ At the opening of the 19th party congress, Xi stated that China’s path “offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind.” See “Socialism with Chinese Characteristics Enters New Era: Xi”, *Xinhua*, October 18, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/18/c_136688475.htm

⁵ “Speech at a Ceremony Marking the 95th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China,” *Qiushi*, 8(4), October-December 2016, http://english.qstheory.cn/2016-12/20/c_1120042032.htm

to the world with indisputable facts that we are qualified to be a leader” that can guide the international community to build a new order, claimed Xi Jinping in February 2017.⁶

However, Beijing does not want to push for replicas of the People’s Republic of China elsewhere in the world: the party’s ideology is not based on a theory of world revolution anymore. Nor is it promoting a “civilizational” model based on traditional Chinese culture and philosophy or a modernized form of ancient Chinese wisdom: despite the CCP’s efforts to cast itself as the sole inheritor of China’s civilizational greatness, the core of its system of beliefs is not benevolence, virtue or harmony, but power.⁷

Instead, it promotes an “anti-” ideology:

- anti-Western: the West is portrayed as irrepressibly aggressive and conflict-prone, in stark contrast with an inherently peaceful Chinese civilization and culture⁸;
- anti-status quo: the world economy is portrayed as seriously ill⁹ and global governance as irrevocably failing¹⁰ but China can provide solutions (based on its own successes) to a world in need¹¹;
- anti-liberal, not explicitly anti-democratic, and ostensibly value free: rejecting the idea of “so-called universal values,”¹² that are presented at best as “Western” or “American.” All socio-political systems should be respected as equally valid, i.e. democracies are not a model superior to authoritarianism. All should be able to “live and let live” side by side, with each accepting and not attempting to transform the

⁶ Speech at the February 2017 National Security Work Conference. See “Xi Jinping shou ti ‘liang ge yindao’ you shenyi” [Xi Jinping’s First Mention of “Two Guides” Has Profound Meaning], *Sina News Center*, February 20, 2017, <http://news.sina.com.cn/china/xlxw/2017-02-20/doc-ifyarrcf5036533.shtml>.

⁷ Or, as Lenin put it: “Who Whom?” – “who dominates whom, who does what to whom, ultimately who annihilates whom.” See Gary Saul Morson, “Leninthink,” *The New Criterion*, October 2019, <https://newcriterion.com/issues/2019/10/leninthink>

⁸ “Five Years On, Xi’s Vision of Civilization More Revealing in an Uncertain World,” *Xinhua*, March 26, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/201903/26/c_137925322.htm

⁹ See for example “Remarks by President Xi Jinping on World Economy at 10th G20 Summit,” November 15, 2015, <http://ie.china-embassy.org/eng/zlt/2d2/t1321121.htm/>. Beatrice Gallelli and Patrick Heinrich note that Xi’s Antalya speech “is framed by a ‘disease metaphor’” whereas China “presents itself in possession of the ‘medicine’ to cure the world economy.” See Gallelli and Heinrich, “Building a Community of Shared Destiny: The Belt and Road Initiative in the Political Speeches of Xi Jinping,” in Carmen Amado Mendes (Ed.) *China’s New Silk Road: An Emerging World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 21-37.

¹⁰ “Global Governance Deficit Calls for Broader Chinese Engagement,” *Xinhua*, April 6, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-04/06/c_136186941.htm

¹¹ “What Can China’s Solutions Offer to the World?” *CGTN*, October 23, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAB4dFQBn4U>

¹² “China Minister Warns Against Seduction of Values by Western Nations,” *Reuters*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-politics-culture/china-minister-warns-against-seduction-of-values-by-western-nations-idUSKBN1DH0AU>

others (an idea sometimes described as “harmony in diversity” or “harmony without uniformity”).¹³

This “anti-” ideology is at the core of Xi’s “community of shared future,” a typically ambiguous catchphrase that promises to build an “open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity.”¹⁴ The community is, in short, China’s riposte to the idea that liberal societies represent the pinnacle of human progress and the claim that their propagation will lead to perpetual peace. Xi’s vision for a desired future is a refutation of the notion of the end of history, and is designed to appeal to those, especially developing world elites, who feel estranged, disaffected or threatened by the prospect of liberal democracy.

3) The vision behind the smokescreen

China’s dissatisfaction with the existing international order goes back a long way. But whereas the leadership’s posture used to be mainly passive and defensive against the order’s most problematic aspects, it has shifted in a more proactive direction as China’s overall power has expanded. Not only does the Chinese leadership now more openly criticize the failures of the existing order, it has also begun to think about what it would want to see emerge instead. But other than China’s preponderance, the Chinese elites themselves have not fully articulated the various components of the order that they would like to call into existence, the institutional arrangements, principles and norms that regulate and frame the interactions between countries and underpin the overall architecture. Beijing’s vision is not complete, and most of it is not even openly expressed. However, some emerging features can be detected based on a close reading of internal discussions.

What the leadership seems to envision is not the complete overthrow of the current system, but rather a two-pronged effort. It seeks to shape the existing international system from within by weakening or subverting its most challenging elements while at the same time carving out some space over which China will be able to exert more control. This envisioned subsystem, nested within the global order, would reflect the principles of organization on which China’s domestic system is built: it is based on power and hierarchy instead of freedom and equality. This would be a hierarchical order, naturally organized around the biggest and most powerful country, China. But within this subsystem, power would not be exercised in the same way as under Western models of hegemony. Beijing does not appear to favor direct or absolute control over

¹³ Zhang Lihua, “China’s Traditional Cultural Values and National Identity,” Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, November 21, 2013, <http://carnegietsinghua.org/2013/11/21/china-s-traditional-cultural-values-and-national-identity-pub-53613> ; “Full Text of President Xi’s Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum,” *Xinhua*, May 14, 2017, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm ; Fan Yongpeng, “Harmony in Diversity,” *Beijing Review*, No.25, June 21, 2018, http://www.bjreview.com/Opinion/201806/t20180620_800133233.html.

¹⁴ “Backgrounder: President Xi’s Calls for a Shared Future,” *Xinhua*, January 24, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/24/c_136921390.htm

foreign territories or governments. The countries included under China's hegemony do not seem to be strictly defined along geographic, cultural, or ideological lines. Immediate neighbors and far-flung countries, Asian and non-Asian powers, and democracies and autocracies could all be included - as long as they recognize and respect the primacy of Beijing's authority and interests. In sum, the model Beijing seems to have in mind is a partial, loose and malleable hegemony.¹⁵

Those familiar with China's imperial history will recognize this model of interaction, based on a tacit deference and allegiance to a centrally positioned and powerful China, as the modern version of the ancient tributary system. It should not come as a surprise that the CCP elites, who are striving to realize the "dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049 along lines that favor Chinese exceptionalism, would consider a system that has prevailed in East Asia for over 25 centuries to be an attractive model of international power configuration.

In order to create this modernized version of the tributary system, a Chinese sphere of influence within the existing order, Beijing is focusing its efforts on the non-Western and mostly non-democratic world. Chinese leaders hope that their worldview and preferred rules, norms and standards will be more readily accepted, reproduced, and followed by countries of the global South rather than by well-established Western liberal democracies. It is in regions in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania that China is deploying its Belt and Road Initiative, with promises of infrastructure development, financial integration, expanded trade, policy coordination, and multilayered cooperation that tie them closer to China. China's diplomatic offensive towards the emerging and developing world also takes the form of home-grown organizations, forums and platforms in which Beijing can control the agenda and set its own rules and norms, implicitly or explicitly endorsed by participating countries.¹⁶

The CCP's outward facing narrative denies any intention of hegemony or leadership. It focuses instead on themes such as harmony and community. Although these are rhetorical devices carefully chosen to avoid international suspicions about the party's ambitions, they also reflect actual aspirations for a world where authoritarian regimes and the prominent role of the state over the individual are not stigmatized, and where the assumption that prosperity and peace can only be achieved with a democratic system of government is invalidated. Beijing hopes that this

¹⁵ Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order*.

¹⁶ One example is the "South-South Human Rights Forum." Organized in Beijing in December 2017 in response to recurrent Western "attacks" against China, the forum was meant to "unite developing countries around a common language," emphasizing the "right to subsistence and development as fundamental human rights." Over three hundred representatives from 70 countries and international organizations attended the forum, which concluded with the adoption of the Beijing Declaration that stresses the possibility for each country to foster human rights based on national conditions. See "Full Text of Beijing Declaration Adopted by the First South-South Human Rights Forum," *Xinhua*, December 8, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/08/c_136811775.htm.

worldview can become an appealing proposition for developing countries and the emerging world.

4) Additional reflections and recommendations to Congress

- *Strengthen expertise*

Congress should encourage and support institutions and individuals engaged in conducting such basic research on contemporary China and in training a rising generation of analysts able to exploit open-source material in the Chinese language. Properly analyzed, such material gives tremendous insights into the thinking of Chinese elites.

- Expertise is necessary to understand China on its own terms. Funding policy-relevant basic research in the field of sinology, contemporary strategic issues and international studies is the equivalent of investing in STEM basic research: the research process is cumbersome and slow, with little immediate return, but it is nonetheless indispensable for real-life applications.
- The new world order as seen through Beijing's eyes is a very different construct from anything we have known during our lifetime or in modern history. Trying to make it fit within familiar historical examples of expansion and empire would be misleading. The fact that it is different however does not mean that it should be dismissed as fanciful or doomed to fail. As external observers, we must do our best to try to understand it in its own terms, so that we can design an adequate response.
- Understanding the China model on its own terms also means refraining from falling into the CCP propaganda trap. The inclusion of elements of Chinese traditional culture in the official narrative should not be misread as the reflection of a genuine transformation of the CCP's nature and central system of beliefs. The CCP's worldview remains fundamentally Leninist, with power, not oriental wisdom, at its core.

- *Think ahead and be prepared*

Congress should ask the relevant U.S. agencies to examine the concrete implications for U.S. interests of a world order shaped according to Beijing's wishes.

- China's vision for a new world order is a work in progress, but it would be a mistake to wait until it is fully established to start thinking about potential U.S. and Western responses. Strategic foresight is a vital component of preparedness for a protracted US-China competition. If the first signs of China's ambitions in the ICT domain had been

subject to serious strategic foresight exercises, the United States and its allies might have been able to anticipate the security implications of the rollout of Chinese-built 5G networks, and could have come up with actionable policy options. The same applies to the slow response to the South China Sea situation and China's anti-access area-denial capabilities. Similarly, we are now only beginning to pick up weak signals of Chinese ambitions on the international stage. We should not wait for them to be fully implemented to start thinking about policy options.

- ***Focus on new areas of competition***

Both the global South and existing international institutions should be recognized as areas where the US-China strategic competition is unfolding and thus given greater attention by the US government.

- China's vision for a new world order points to two main areas of priority for Beijing: the global South and the existing international institutions. In both areas, Beijing's main objective is the weakening of liberal democratic norms, as a proxy for eroding U.S. influence and asserting China's instead.

- ***Deploy a proactive public diplomacy***

Congress should use their public platform in the United States and in their engagements abroad to highlight the distinctions between an international order led by a liberal democracy and by an illiberal authoritarian power. Congress should also encourage the Executive branch to strengthen cooperation with U.S. allies and like-minded partners.

- For many countries around the world, there may be no difference, a priori, between Chinese hegemony and an American leadership: "great powers will do what they always do." The U.S. should be more systematic in demonstrating the difference between international leadership exercised by a liberal democracy and by an illiberal authoritarian power.
- China's efforts put at risk not only the predominant U.S. position in the current system, but the fundamental principles underpinning the existing international order. Liberal democracies around the world should be made aware that the competition underway does not only affect the U.S., but the existing system as a whole.