

# The World China Wants

*How Power Will—and Won't—Reshape Chinese Ambitions*

By Rana Mitter

Does China want to transform the global order to advance its own interests and to reflect its own image? That may be the most important question in geopolitics today, yet the answers it elicits tend to reveal more about modern biases than they do about what a future Chinese superpower would look like. Those who want to project forward to a malevolent, expansionist China point to evidence of aggression in Beijing's posture today. Those with a less apocalyptic view highlight more accommodating features in Chinese policy or note that China will face plenty of challenges that will keep it from reshaping the world even if it wants to. Many Western observers see a burgeoning new Cold War, with China serving as a twenty-first-century version of the Soviet Union.

Such projections are far too rigid and sweeping to usefully describe the complexity of China's rise—either to capture the inherent uncertainty in China's future aims or to recognize the essential elements that have shaped its aspirations. Chinese power today is a protean, dynamic force formed by the nexus of authoritarianism, consumerism, global ambitions, and technology. Call it the ACGT model: with the same initials as the nucleotides in DNA, these strands of Chinese power combine and recombine to form China's modern political identity and approach to the rest of the world. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wants to firm up its grip on Chinese society, encourage consumerism at home and abroad, expand its global influence, and develop and export China's own advanced technology. China's current standing and future prospects cannot be understood without seeing all four of those goals together.

The strongman leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping is important in understanding China today and its likely trajectory, as is the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But the four ACGT forces have a significance that extends beyond any one leader or crisis. They shape Beijing's idea of its place in a reconstituted world order, in which China would take a preeminent role in Asia and export its model of economic investment, which draws on communitarian ideas of development and is indifferent to liberal norms (although not always actively hostile to them). To legitimize its approach, China often turns to history, invoking its premodern past, for example, or reinterpreting the events of World War II. China's increasingly authoritarian direction under Xi offers only one possible future for the country. To understand where China could be headed, observers must pay attention to the major elements of Chinese power and the frameworks through which that power is both expressed and imagined.

## THE NEXUS OF CHINESE POWER

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, China's leaders have explicitly presented their authoritarian system of governance as [an end in and of itself](#), not a steppingstone to a liberal state. The CCP insists that it is a meritocracy: the benefit that Chinese society derives from the

party's effective leaders more than makes up for the lack of popular participation in their selection. At least in the short term, the COVID-19 crisis has boosted authoritarianism at home. In early 2020, China touted its suppression of the virus as a function of its top-down, coercive system of government. (It has been less keen to concede that its initial poor response was due to the party-state's inability to process unwelcome information.) The CCP's newly confident and antagonistic character marks a significant departure from the more hesitant version of authoritarianism that preceded Xi, when Chinese leaders even looked at democracies such as [Singapore](#)—however imperfect and illiberal—as potential models. No longer.

Chinese leaders don't simply want to consolidate their rule at home. Their ambitions are global. This is not wholly new: the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and his Communist counterpart, Mao Zedong, both had visions of a major international role for their country in the 1940s and 1960s, respectively. Xi's China, however, has combined international ambitions with economic, military, and technological power to achieve a genuinely global reach, from port facilities in Athens to a naval base in Djibouti to the rollout of 5G technology across the world. Xi [declared](#) in a 2017 speech to the 19th Party Congress that China would move unerringly closer to the “center stage” of world affairs.

To take that position, China has sought to boost the consumption of material goods at home. Since 1978, the CCP has worked to address one of the most notable flaws of the Soviet Union: the failure to cater to the needs and desires of domestic consumers. China's revolution has become a consumer revolution in the past four decades, building an increasingly cashless society where online purchasing inspires occasions such as the e-commerce platform [Alibaba's Singles' Day](#)—the biggest consumer event in the world, in which \$38 billion worth of goods were sold in 2019. Rising standards of living have fostered an expectation that the CCP will continue to deliver on its economic promises even after the Chinese economy contracted severely in early 2020 in the wake of the pandemic. Growing prosperity in China has also benefited countries in the West and in Asia that have welcomed millions of Chinese buyers of luxury goods, touristic services, and higher education.

It is in the realm of technology where China has truly taken a new direction in its global engagement. The combination of economic growth and massive spending on research in the past two decades has created one of the most innovative environments on earth. New Chinese-developed technologies boost the country's military and produce new goods for consumers, while also contributing to the establishment of a big-data surveillance state. China's impressive technological capacity forms the most potent and attractive part of its offer to the world.

## **PRESENT AT THE CREATION**

The various strands of Chinese power emerged not from whole cloth but from a set of historical frameworks that continue to weigh heavily on all Chinese decision-making. Chinese leaders draw from the past in understanding the country's growing role in the world. They now make a revisionist claim to a founding role in the post-1945 international order, espouse traditional Chinese norms of governance, seek leadership of the global South, and make use of explicitly Marxist-Leninist language and symbols.

China sat on the sidelines for much of the Cold War after 1960, neither in the Western camp nor in the Soviet one. In the past two decades, however, China has cast itself not just as a participant in but also as a pivotal founder of the international order that emerged in the wake of World War II. At the 2020 Munich Security Conference, Foreign Minister Wang Yi [reminded](#) listeners that

China was the first signatory of the UN Charter in 1945, a fact repeatedly mentioned in recent years by Chinese leaders. But to embrace that moment—when representatives of the ruling Nationalists (Kuomintang) dominated the delegation from China that helped establish the UN—the CCP had to reframe the very twentieth-century history that underpins its right to rule China. Since the 1980s, the party has acknowledged that its old enemies, the Nationalists and their Western allies, were crucial partners in winning the war against Japan between 1937 and 1945; previously, CCP leaders had taken sole credit for [fending off the Japanese invasion](#) of mainland China. That recognition has allowed the party to make a larger reinterpretation of Chinese history that sees the founding of modern China not just in the 1949 communist revolution—as originally imagined—but also in World War II itself.

This shift is not a matter of historical trivia; instead, it reflects how China imagines itself and wants to be understood. China now places itself centrally in the Allied victory and the creation of the post-1945 order. It played a crucial role in defending Asia and pinning down over half a million Japanese troops until the arrival of the Americans and the British after Pearl Harbor, at the cost of as many as 14 million Chinese lives.

This immense contribution underlies Beijing’s insistence that China was “present at the creation” of the postwar world. Its expanding international role in the twenty-first century rests on this assumed centrality in the twentieth century. Under Xi, China is now [the second-biggest financial contributor](#) to the UN and is in the top ten of contributors of personnel to UN peacekeeping operations. U.S. President Donald Trump’s perceived retreat from the obligations and norms of the liberal international order further bolstered China’s position that it is now the most worthy inheritor of the legacy of 1945. Evocations of World War II continue to be central in Chinese public life. For instance, CCP officials have described China’s supposed victory over the novel coronavirus last spring as the result of a “people’s war,” [echoing](#) the language Mao used during the war against Japan.

An even older history undergirds China’s sense of its global role. In recent years, influential Chinese scholars, such as Yan Xuetong and Bai Tongdong, have argued for an understanding of international order informed by [premodern, Confucian views](#). Western observers often interpret China’s behavior in international relations as purely realist. But the use of rhetoric that draws on traditional thought suggests that China, like all states, would prefer its choices to be understood as moral and not just realist ones. When Chinese leaders use terms such as *ren* (meaning “benevolence”), they ground the state’s interests and actions in ethical, idealistic language. These invocations of tradition will become more frequent as China’s influence grows. Chinese leaders will expound a modernized form of Confucianism that fits with globalized values, stressing “morality” and “a common future” while playing down more illiberal Confucian values, such as the belief in social hierarchy.

That vision of a fundamentally moral China supports another ambition: China’s wish to position itself as the leader of the global South. This aim is not original; during the Cold War, China sought to portray itself as a champion of what was then called the Third World, in contrast to a viciously capitalist West and a sclerotic Soviet Union. China regards itself not only as the new guardian of the post-1945 order but also as the inheritor of the non-Western anti-imperialism of the postcolonial world—an improbable double act that Beijing seems to be pulling off.

China today does not seek to spark revolutions across the global South. Instead, it sees poorer countries as proving grounds for a policy that emphasizes both economic development and the

principle of national sovereignty. This form of Chinese engagement doesn't necessarily lead to outright authoritarianism; countries such as Ethiopia and Myanmar are examples of how ostensible democracies (albeit illiberal ones) can gain from the Chinese development model. **But China's efforts overseas also dispense with any encouragement of liberalization or democratic reform.** China's supporters argue that its model of fostering development is more flexible than any model that would enshrine liberal democracy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's vast, if inchoate, international infrastructure investment program, is the principal vehicle through which it seeks to project its leadership abroad.

As China spends capital abroad, it has more firmly embraced the rhetoric of Marxism-Leninism at home. Chinese officials don't yet use this language in statements tailored to an international audience, largely because China is at pains to present itself as a nonrevolutionary state in the global order and wants to avoid recalling the ghosts of Maoism. But at home, the party peppers its communications with terms such as *douzheng* (struggle), which reflects the Hegelian notion that conflict has to precede an ultimate synthesis. The CCP also refers frequently to *maodun* (contradiction), the notion that tensions within society may produce constructive outcomes, an idea also frequently referenced by Mao and very much endorsed by Xi, who used the phrase in his 2017 speech to the 19th Party Congress to describe the new "contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life." This phrasing suggests that although many aspects of traditional Marxist-Leninist thought, including class struggle, are rarely heard in contemporary Chinese rhetoric, that ideology is not entirely absent. In the speech, Xi nodded to the fact that inequality between classes is still a reality in China and that the party sees that inequality as a blemish on the overall narrative of success it wishes to present.

## **AUTHORITARIAN DILEMMAS**

How Chinese leaders frame their vision of China's power and place in the world is, of course, no guide to how outsiders will perceive China. Under Xi, Beijing has made it more difficult for other countries to ignore the authoritarianism at the heart of the ACGT model. In 2013, for instance, Chinese leaders pitched the BRI in terms of the commercial and technological boon it would bring to recipient countries. Some Western observers even referred to the BRI approvingly as "[China's Marshall Plan](#)" (to the chagrin of many Chinese commentators who did not want to be associated with an American Cold Warrior). Seven years later, however, China's authoritarianism has come into fuller view thanks to both Beijing's actions and its rhetoric. During the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Chinese officials pointed to their ability to mobilize resources and gather data faster than their counterparts in democratic governments and declared that China would create a vaccine for the world.

But whatever its potential benefits, Chinese authoritarianism will not easily win hearts and minds around the world. As BRI programs spread, so, too, will concerns about Chinese economic and political influence. In nondemocratic client states, such as Cambodia, China may meet less pushback, but resistance is more likely in countries such as Kenya and Zambia, where parliaments and the media can debate Chinese involvement and where public attitudes toward China and its system are mixed or even overtly hostile.

That hostility may become all the more acute if the confrontational aspects of Chinese global power become more apparent. As China's overseas interests grow, Beijing will not be able to continue taking advantage of existing security umbrellas—as it did, for instance, in Afghanistan

in the first decade of this century, when NATO in effect helped protect Chinese assets. China's growing range of economic and diplomatic interests increasingly demands an expanded global Chinese security presence. The Indian Ocean, in particular, may see greater Chinese activity, as China seeks to boost its trading interests in the geographic triangle formed by crucial ports in Greece, Djibouti, and Pakistan. Responding to this possibility, Australia, India, Japan, and the United States (collectively known as "the Quad") [held joint naval exercises](#) in the Indian Ocean this past November.

Although many countries are content with Chinese investment, the arrival of People's Liberation Army troops would likely be a rather less welcome development. Chinese diplomacy can be very skilled, but its current often shrill and charmless tone is enough to put off many potential partners; China has an immensely long way to go to develop the necessary soft-power abilities to portray any future PLA expansion as providing common security rather than simply enforcing Beijing's desires.

China's handling of the COVID-19 crisis has irked many countries that had previously been courting Beijing. In the late 2010s, China achieved some success among wealthy countries in endowing its consumer products (such as the hugely popular TikTok app) with the kind of high-tech glamour previously associated with Japan. Yet China adopted a highly confrontational style of diplomacy after the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic and in the process shifted public attention in the West toward the authoritarian possibilities of Chinese technology. Western observers are alarmed by the use of surveillance technology to enable the repression of the Uighur minority group in Xinjiang and the potential use of this technology in Hong Kong to trace and prosecute nonviolent protesters.

The new global attention on China's authoritarianism will complicate the country's quest to project its model overseas. Consider, for example, China's struggle to get other major countries to firmly commit to adopting the 5G technology developed by the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei. Some countries in the global North—Australia, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States—have made it clear that they will not use Huawei's 5G technology because of [concerns](#) about the security of the 5G equipment and about being associated with China's authoritarian regime. The United Kingdom at first agreed to allow Huawei limited access to its 5G market but reversed that decision in July 2020. Shortly after the clash between Chinese and Indian troops in the Himalayan border area in June, the government of India announced that it would avoid the future use of Huawei products in its 5G network.

Still, countries in much of Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia have been more willing to accept Chinese 5G, and there remains [a large group of countries](#) that might still take it on because it is cheap and effective; for them, the economic advantages of embracing the technology outweigh any security concerns. This broad adoption of Chinese 5G would not usher in China's global dominance, but it would form a vast footprint. The implications of such a 5G bloc are considerable, as Beijing would have the capacity to control a key element in the economic development of many major states, as well as potentially the ability to gain access to huge quantities of data.

## **CHINA'S WORLD**

Achieving even that kind of partial hegemony may be difficult if Chinese leaders continue to ruffle the feathers of their counterparts elsewhere. Beijing's initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak suggested that under pressure, China's authoritarian tendencies trump its desire to



engage with the world. Various countries, notably Australia, proposed that there should be an international inquiry into the origins of the virus. Rather than welcome that idea, as a nimble power would have done, China immediately boycotted barley sales from Australia. When the British government hinted that it might reverse its decision to allow Huawei into the United Kingdom's 5G network, Chinese diplomats [threatened](#) “consequences,” sending a clear signal that investment from China was not simply a commercial transaction but also a political one—and bringing about exactly the ban they did not want. China's cantankerous reactions in the wake of the outbreak have made it easier for its critics to highlight what they consider its untrustworthy behavior, including the militarization of the South China Sea, probable cyberattacks against countries including the United States, and the exploitation of loopholes in World Trade Organization rules.

But even as many Western countries seek to define the ways in which China's current behavior is illegitimate, they avoid a more difficult question. What are legitimate aims for China in its own region and the wider world? China is a large, powerful state that has the world's second-biggest economy. A state of that size cannot be expected to participate in the global order solely on the terms of its rivals—not least because some of China's recent success owes much to Western failure. Criticism of Huawei may well be justified, but Chinese 5G technology is attractive to many countries because there is no obvious Western alternative. It is entirely appropriate to criticize China for expanding its influence in the UN in ways that degrade the importance of individual human rights, but China did not force the United States to reduce its funding to UN agencies and thus weaken them.

At the moment, China is hurting itself by arguing that any criticism of its internal politics is out of bounds. The United States found itself at a similar juncture during the 1950s. Its appalling record of discrimination at home against its Black population tarnished its international image and offered its rivals an easy target; Mao's government [invited Black intellectuals and activists](#), such as W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Panther leader Huey Newton, to Beijing. U.S. politicians argued strongly that the rest of the world had no right to criticize the United States' internal race politics. This position was unsustainable, and domestic resistance combined with external shaming changed laws in the United States.

As a rising power, China now also faces external criticism of its domestic politics. Joining the global economy has made it more vulnerable to scrutiny of its authoritarianism at home. But it can do something more creative than complain about Western scorn: China can draw on its recent history of reinventing itself. After China under Mao had become economically and politically moribund, in the 1980s, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, adapted an idea from former Premier Zhou Enlai termed “the Four Modernizations” (of agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology) to reshape China. Deng allowed farmers to sell parts of their harvest on the free market, gave scholars academic freedoms that had disappeared under Mao, and set up “special economic zones,” with governance and tax incentives designed to bring in foreign investment.

Much as Deng managed in the wake of Mao's passing, China will have to recalibrate in the coming decade to better incorporate—rather than reject—criticism from abroad. Despite the country's authoritarian reputation, internal debate has played an important part in China's rise. Until recently, liberal political thinkers and writers had space within the Chinese system to offer constructive criticism of their more hard-line colleagues; engagement with some critics abroad also helped test China's own ideas and policies. The shutting down of such debate in recent years

may not have held the country back in the very short term, but is likely to do so in future years when the rigidity of political thought prevents Chinese political elites from reevaluating policies. Granting more space to disagreement would not necessarily require the democratization of China. It would, however, mean a commitment to letting civil society flourish (reversing the alarming number of dismissals and detentions of lawyers, activists, and scholars in recent years) and to creating genuine transparency of government both at home and abroad.

China will need to do better than reduce its many minority groups to quaint exemplars of folk tradition. Instead, it should seek to convince these groups—including the Uighurs of Xinjiang—that participation in the Chinese project would affirm their sense of dignity and identity. When it comes to dissent in Hong Kong—another test of the CCP’s ability to build an inclusive polity—the new security law that outlaws so-called hatred of the government suggests an inability to hear and learn from a governing tradition that is authentically Chinese but different from that of Beijing. The CCP also lacks the willingness to present Taiwan with any vision of a joint future that the island might find a reasonable starting point for discussion. China does not claim to be liberal, but it does purport to be a meritocracy that values the frank debate of differing views (*shi shi qiu shi*: “seek truth from facts”). The party’s current actions are failing to win over the Chinese who live at the country’s borders, never mind managing to set China as an exemplar of successful development for the wider world.

### **ITS OWN GREATEST ADVERSARY**

The biggest obstacle China will face is not the hostility of the United States or other adversaries. It is instead China’s own authoritarian turn. Beijing’s commitment to that aspect of China’s core identity will make it far harder for the other three nucleotides—consumerism, global ambitions, and technology—of its DNA to recombine successfully, stoking hostility abroad and raising barriers between China and the world it strives to remake.

The increasing belligerence of Chinese foreign policy since the beginning of 2020 does not bode well. But it is not impossible to imagine a less antagonistic version of Chinese authoritarianism: in the first decade of this century, China boasted a burgeoning culture of investigative journalism, growing civil society, and very lively social media—together, an expanding public sphere even in the absence of full democracy. There may be no chance that the CCP will turn into a liberal democratic party, but that doesn’t mean that it couldn’t return to this earlier trajectory. The authoritarianism of a China of this variety—the China visible before 2012—would be less glaring to both domestic and foreign audiences.

Beijing is not seeking to impose a replica of its own system on other states. It is committed to burnishing its ideological prestige at home as a successful nationalist—and socialist—state, but it does not require other states to follow in its footsteps. China feels no obligation to maintain the liberal international order because of any principled belief in liberalism. Instead, an order based on Chinese preferences would likely contain the following elements: a commitment to very strong national sovereignty; economic development, quite possibly stressing renewable energy (a subject on which Chinese rhetoric currently outstrips Chinese action); the expansion and integration of a BRI system that would be strongly oriented toward Chinese economic needs; and a global technology landscape dominated by Chinese norms. This amalgam would have few attractions for committed democrats, to be sure, but it could form a sustainable alternative proposition to at least part of the existing liberal order.

China's growing stature in Asia might lead to the strengthening of the authoritarian tendencies among the region's democracies. With Chinese influence, the thumb would fall on the nondemocratic side of the scale in countries with fragile democratic structures, such as Myanmar and Thailand. Countries such as the Philippines have already become [more vulnerable to Chinese norms](#) as their politics have become more authoritarian; South Korea, much more liberal in its politics, would become vulnerable to a form of Cold War-era Finlandization—that is, the bending of a democracy to the influence of a powerful authoritarian neighbor—because of its proximity to China in the event of the retreat of the United States from East Asia.

China benefits from the fact that no other actor in the world can channel its unique ACGT nucleotide combination. India, Japan, Russia, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations cannot replace China's influence in Asia, let alone the world. China is by far the largest actor in the region, which gives it the heft to dominate. But the opacity of China's current system and its assertive, sometimes confrontational posture generate regional and global mistrust. The United States is tolerable to most in Asia (except China and North Korea) because its presence in countries such as Japan and South Korea has won democratic consent. In an era of largely democratic and highly nationalist states, China must make its international ambitions palatable to others, even if they will never be fully embraced. The states in South America dominated by the United States in the 1950s, or in Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union in the same period, were poor and undemocratic. It will be much harder for China, over time, to maintain popular acceptance of its growing involvement in wealthy Asian states with lively public spheres, even if it can use its military might to pressure its neighbors and try to influence their practices.

The political structures of China will also change considerably in the next few decades and will reveal the divergence between the open and closed elements of its society. The CCP has encouraged young Chinese professionals in academia, business, and law to study overseas. But in the ranks of the party itself, overseas experience has far less value and can even hurt one's prospects for advancement. Few among the next generation of China's political leaders seem to have significant international experience, although they are no doubt advised by people who do. China will likely develop a political elite that is inward-looking alongside a professional elite that is globally connected and outward-facing. That contrast will present a major challenge, because it suggests a contradiction, to use a Marxist term, between two key goals, internationalization and the maintenance of party power.

In addition, seismic demographic change is around the corner. Beginning in 2029, China's population will contract by around five million people per year, making China a much older society before it reaches high-income status. China will need to pay for the welfare of millions of older people without having the same resources of an aging rich society such as Japan. The unexpected economic shock of the coronavirus has made it more difficult for China to expand its commercial ties with neighbors in the region, although its control of the virus seems to be leading to a steady recovery. Chinese officials now speak of a "dual circulation" economy that is global in reach while maintaining a protected domestic market. But this balancing act is unsustainable in the long term. A better approach would see China be much more sensitive to the needs and desires of its partners, displaying a tact that it has not exhibited in recent years in its relations with neighbors.

An ACGT-based bid to reshape the international order demands a more concerted Chinese diplomatic effort overall. Chinese officials now often invoke saccharine platitudes before veering at breakneck speed toward more coercive and confrontational broadsides. Instead, China needs to



better understand that global leadership requires concessions, generosity, and a willingness to entertain criticism: a hard realization to achieve in a country where the domestic political culture encourages the suppression, rather than the celebration, of dissent. The major obstacle to China's rise on the international stage is not U.S. hostility or internal foes. Rather, it is the authoritarian strand of the CCP's core identity. That authoritarianism and at times confrontational expansionism has the effect of tarnishing the other components of China's model—the emphasis on consumerism and improvements in material lifestyles, the flawed but sincere commitment to global development and poverty reduction, and China's truly astonishing capacity for technological innovation.

The key elements of China's ideological mixture—Marxism-Leninism, traditional thought, historical analogy, and economic success—have largely eclipsed the always limited power of Western liberalism to influence how the CCP sees the world. But China's global future depends on how it can successfully recombine the other aspects of its ACGT model. At the moment, Chinese authoritarianism threatens to limit Beijing's ability to create a plausible new form of global order.

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