

CHINA'S PATH:

# WHERE DOES THE CHALLENGE TO WESTERN LIBERAL DEMOCRACIES LIE AND HOW TO APPROACH IT?

Dr. Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova  
Rīga Stradiņš University China Studies Centre

*As China, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, presents challenges to the Western liberal outlook and enters into ideological and developmental competition with the West, this briefing argues that China has become a challenger to the Western liberalism during the Xi Jinping era. It describes how China aims to gauge the innovation of Xi Jinping's policies and the effect on the current world order(s). To conclude, this report provides policy recommendations on how to respond to China's assertiveness in the West.*



- Xi Jinping's approach emphasizes nationalism at home and attractiveness abroad, combining self-confidence and the telling of China's story well to gain support both domestically and internationally.
- China aims to elevate its political and ideological system as a global competitor to Western liberalism, presenting the Chinese model as responsive, effective in delivering economic growth, and capable of selecting competent leaders.
- The main challenge posed by China to Western liberal democracies lies in its claim that its system delivers tangible results, rather than presenting itself as more democratic or free.

**Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova** is Head of the China Studies Centre at Rīga Stradiņš University, Head of the Asia Programme at the Latvian Institute of International Affairs, a member of CHOICE and European Think-tank Network on China. She is the author of *Perfect Imbalance: China and Russia* (World Scientific, 2022), and the editor of *Discourse, Rhetoric and Shifting Political Behaviour in China* (Routledge, 2023).

## US-China Engagement Policy: At the Root of the China Challenge?

When Richard Nixon, the Republican President of the United States of America, visited Beijing to meet with the Chairman of the People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong, on February 21, 1972, the move was nothing short of unbelievable: "the hard-line, anti-communist president was taken away in a black limousine to meet the ruthless champion of global revolution"<sup>1</sup>

How do such different sides even begin to have a conversation? The meeting transcripts, declassified decades later, reveal some of the answers. Both sides began by acknowledging that domestic political support for rapprochement was fragile. "I like rightists. People say you are rightists, that the Republican Party is to the right," said Chairman Mao. "I think the important thing to note is that in America, at least at this time, those on the right can do what those on the left talk about," picked up Nixon after a few phrases.<sup>2</sup> To this, Henry Kissinger added: "There is another point, Mr. President. Those on the left are pro-Soviet and would not encourage a move toward the People's Republic, and in fact criticize you on those grounds"<sup>3</sup>. PRC Chairman Mao Zedong was no stranger to opposing factions, both real or imagined, and joined in: "Exactly that. Some are opposing you. In our country also there is a reactionary group which is opposed to our contact with you".<sup>4</sup> Still, domestic opposition aside, the meeting set in motion one of the largest geopolitical developments of the 20th century, and was to have a continuous impact into the 21st century.

This historic meeting is also the foundation of a bitter debate in the West: did China become a challenge to Western liberal democracies then and there, or is China's challenge something more recent, something devised by Xi Jinping?

In 2020, standing at the Richard M. Nixon Memorial Library, Michael R. Pompeo, the then-Secretary of State under Donald Trump, had nothing positive to say on the matter: "President Nixon once said he feared he had created a 'Frankenstein' by opening the world to the CCP, and here we are".<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the new Republicans were tracing the problems with China's rise all the way back to the seventies. Wrong were the believers that the US-China issues would evaporate once a Democrat President came to power in 2021. **The US-China dispute proved to be the one consistent foreign and security policy item tying the Trump and Biden administrations together,**<sup>6</sup> because it ran deeper than US political ideologies. Does it then mean that 1972 was a mistake, as Pompeo had suggested, or is the current impasse a result of more recent developments in China?

The seven-document transcripts of the talks between Nixon and PRC Premier, Zhou Enlai, following the conversation quoted above demonstrate that the naiveté ascribed to Nixon's move today was not present on the American side.<sup>7</sup> The engagement certainly had aimed at a different long-term outcome, and perhaps was misinformed at times. But the policy should not be dismissed as gullible or harmful: it legitimized Deng Xiaoping's approach and subsequently led to decentralization, development and engagement.

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/02/20/nixon-china-mao-visit-1972/>

2. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/memorandum-conversation-between-chairman-mao-zedong-and-president-richard-nixon>

3. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/memorandum-conversation-between-chairman-mao-zedong-and-president-richard-nixon>

4. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/memorandum-conversation-between-chairman-mao-zedong-and-president-richard-nixon>

5. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2/index.html>

6. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/bidens-china-policy-is-emerging-and-it-looks-a-lot-like-trumps-11623330000>

7. [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSA/PUBLICATIONS/DOC\\_readers/kissinger/nixzhou/](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSA/PUBLICATIONS/DOC_readers/kissinger/nixzhou/)



China's competition with Western liberal democracies is not a consequence of that meeting. It is a consequence of a much more recent turn in how China tells its story domestically and internationally: via Xi Jinping's nationalism and a strive for a Chinese attractiveness through a mix of soft power and assertiveness.

## The Xi Jinping Approach: Nationalism at Home, Attractiveness Abroad

What is the world view pioneered by Xi Jinping and how much does it differ from the ideological belief of China's first generations of Communists? In his October 22, 2022 Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping pronounced:

*We must maintain self-confidence and stand on our own feet. The Party has led the people in independently blazing the path to success over the past century, and the success of Marxism in China has been realized by Chinese Communists through our own endeavours. One point underpinning these successes is that China's issues must be dealt with by Chinese people in light of the Chinese context.*<sup>8</sup>

There is an argument that China's youth, or the generation born after 1990 – the 'jiushi hou' – is nationalist.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this generation may well be nationalist and subject to state propaganda when it comes to China's global role, but that should not automatically imply that they are ready to suffer in its name. Just promising international respect and regaining China's rightful place is not enough for the Party's legitimacy, especially if gaining said

respect threatens the quality of life for China's vast, young second-generation middle class. The response, then, is to fight for the attractiveness of the 'China model': increasing legitimacy and support domestically, and fighting for China's 'discursive power' abroad are two sides of the same coin. To argue the validity, even supremacy (especially evident during the early COVID-19 messaging of the PRC's foreign policy communicators)<sup>10</sup> of the China model, both are needed.

Therefore, aside from calling for internal support and trust in the system, Xi Jinping is employing one more crucial component. China fights for the solidarity of outside audiences by investing in foreign media,<sup>11</sup> by claiming the diasporas (Xi Jinping: "no matter where a Chinese is, he always bears the distinctive brand of the Chinese culture, which is the common heritage of all the sons and daughters of China"),<sup>12</sup> as well as by boosting an image of a strong and successful China through a mix of soft power and assertiveness. "Building self-confidence" at home, coupled with "telling China's story well" abroad is a powerful combination, and it can be argued that it is this characteristic that puts Xi Jinping's People's Republic of China at odds with the Western liberal democratic world view.

In other words, the challenge to Western liberal democracies is that China has decided to not just position its political and ideological system as an alternative, but to elevate the status of the Chinese model to the level of a global competitor to liberalism.

8. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx\\_662805/202210/t20221025\\_10791908.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html)

9. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2021/01/21/how-nationalism-is-shaping-chinas-young>

10. [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-10/15/c\\_1126614978.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-10/15/c_1126614978.htm)

11. <https://osf.io/5cafd/>

12. Xi Jinping, The Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation Is a Dream Shared by All Chinese\*, The Governance of China I, June 6, 2014, [http://en.qstheory.cn/2020-10/04/c\\_607586.htm](http://en.qstheory.cn/2020-10/04/c_607586.htm)

13. Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.

One could ask, how efficient has this story been? Daniel Mattingly et al. have argued, based on data from nineteen countries across six continents,<sup>13</sup> that the efforts to sell the 'China model' as the most attractive have been fruitful in countries where the audiences find China's messaging about "poverty alleviation, infrastructure, and innovation appealing and that China is a role model for development",<sup>14</sup> notably in Africa and Latin America.

*Why do audiences find the China model attractive? Our experiments show that Chinese media does not move audiences very much on thinking the Chinese system is somehow democratic, but rather persuades audiences that the system is responsive and effective at delivering economic growth. While audiences value civil liberties and democracy, they also find messages about the performance of the Chinese government convincing. The Chinese government's self-professed ability to select competent leaders, foster growth, maintain stability, and respond to citizen demands make the system attractive.<sup>15</sup>*

Perhaps China's assertions that its system is more just, more inclusive, more democratic and less hypocritical than the rival West do not fully resonate with global audiences.<sup>16</sup> Still, when Western powers focus on the futility of the PRC's global soft power attempts, an important detail tends to be forgotten: as the authors above demonstrate, China's strength lies not in claiming its model to be more democratic or free than the Western one. Instead, it is in claiming that it delivers. Herein lies the immediate challenge to the Western liberal order.

## Living in the New Era of China's Challenge: Conclusions and Recommendations

In this new age of an assertive and ideologically competitive PRC, several policy solutions could provide Western liberal democracies with leverage, including:

1. If a dedicated China strategy, either open or classified, is not a prerequisite for all Western nations, a *national level-coordinated China policy* should be. Currently, a disruption among domestic state actors, e.g., Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Prime Minister's Office versus the Ministry of Transportation or the Ministry of Economy has been reported in several EU member states.<sup>17</sup> Good practices to balance and inform stakeholders include 'China champion'/'facilitator' positions (e.g. the UK, the Netherlands).
2. Given China's relationship building as a foreign policy tool and the United Front push for informal ties resulting in hard-to-track network influence, workshops must take place in Western democracies on national and supranational levels of policies along the spectrum of informing/regulating various communities, including academia, tech and culture. Good practice includes a contact point for knowledge security, such as that adapted by the Netherlands.

14. <https://osf.io/5cafd/>

15. <https://osf.io/5cafd/>

16. [http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanqu/2021-10/15/c\\_1127962266.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanqu/2021-10/15/c_1127962266.htm)

17. European Think Tank Network on China Report, 2023

[https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/ETNC\\_Report\\_2023\\_final.pdf](https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/ETNC_Report_2023_final.pdf)

3. National China knowledge networks must be supported and fostered. As the issue grows in importance, so should the capabilities. Currently, the situation is reversed: due to the rising China challenge, the limited access to the PRC, and the decreasing market for China research and expertise, young professionals decide to steer clear of China research.

China's challenge to Western liberal democracies lies in its ability to present its political and ideological system as a viable alternative that delivers tangible results. Under Xi Jinping's leadership, this message has been shaped into the promises of alternative modernity, backed by China's financing as well as attempts at global norm-setting. To effectively respond to China's assertiveness, Western nations should navigate the new era by developing coordinated and active domestic China expertise to safeguard their own interests.