

What Kind of Regime Does China Have?

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Xi's totalitarian model has precedents in both modern and ancient Chinese history. But it was not—and still isn't—inevitable.

In order to understand how the United States and other Western countries should deal with China in the coming years, we need to understand what kind of society we are dealing with. Such an understanding needs to be derived both from Chinese history and from its more recent behavior.

We need to separate this discussion from the noise generated by the recent deterioration of U.S.-China relations. In trying to deflect attention from its own poor handling of the COVID-19 crisis, the Trump Administration has been needlessly provocative in its stance towards China, insisting, for example, that COVID-19 be referred to as the “Wuhan virus.” This is not a serious approach to policy and needs to be replaced by a more dispassionate assessment of where we stand.

China has one of the world's longest continuous histories as a society, and there are a number of continuities between its different dynasties and the present. To the extent that many Western observers are familiar with China's pre-20th century history, knowledge usually extends only as far as the late Qing Dynasty, when the country was still under the rule of a decaying foreign regime.

China was the first world civilization to create a modern state. By modern, I mean a state that was impersonal in its treatment of citizens. Most early states were what Max Weber labeled “patrimonial”—that is, the state grew out of the household of the ruler and was based on personal relationships between the ruler and his friends and family. An impersonal state, by contrast, is centralized, bureaucratic, and operates according to rules rather than being governed by the mere whim of the ruler.

A modern state first emerged in the western realm of Qin, which became the Prussia of Chinese unification by defeating its rivals in the Warring States period and establishing the first unified Chinese dynasty in 221 B.C. Qin created a uniform system of weights and measures, a taxation system, a bureaucracy to administer it, and engaged in large-scale social engineering. The succeeding early Han Dynasty added a strong Confucian element, stressing the need for educated officials to run what was at the time one of the largest empires in the world. This strong Chinese state never developed counter-balancing institutions of constraint, like a rule of law or democratic accountability, relying instead on moderating rulers through education.

These institutions have continued to characterize Chinese government through the more than two subsequent millennia. Chinese regimes have been centralized, bureaucratic, and merit-based. Regions were not allowed to create their own elites; there was nothing like the blood aristocracy of medieval Europe. Instead, the Emperor dispatched, and then rotated, prefects to rule over provinces and counties to prevent them from being politically captured by local elites. The

Chinese “Tiger Mother” who today enforces ruthless discipline on her children in places from Shanghai to San Francisco is a distant cultural echo of a society in which success in a demanding civil service exam was the one clear route to upward social mobility.

This form of top-down management created certain typical kinds of governance dilemmas. The Emperor used bureaucrats to run the country, but who would control bureaucrats who could easily be corrupted? For that reason, Emperors used their household eunuchs to monitor the bureaucrats. But then how did you control the eunuchs? In the Ming Dynasty, one Emperor created a “eunuch rectification bureau” to oversee the eunuchs. Today, the Chinese Communist Party watches over the government; the Party’s Organization Department watches over the Party, and, under Xi Jinping, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection was empowered to watch over the Organization Department and purge the system as a whole of corruption.

While Chinese Emperors may have asserted total authority, in practice their power was very limited. With an estimated population of 60 million at the time of the birth of Christ, they ruled over a vast territory that the technological means at their disposal did not permit them to truly control. Authority had to be delegated downwards to provinces and counties which were often weeks away from imperial capitals like Chang’an or Luoyang. At a local level, governance was really not exercised by the state but remained in the hands of the large lineages that characterized much of Chinese society at the time.

But while there are certain points of continuity between the rule of the Chinese Communist Party today and dynastic China, there are also important areas of difference. The most important of these are the aspirations of Xi’s CCP to achieve a level of totalitarian control over Chinese society of a sort that has never been attempted in previous human history. In this respect, it borrows more from Stalin’s Soviet Union than it does from anything in earlier Chinese history.

In the middle of the 20th century, Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski coined the term “totalitarian” to characterize the Soviet and Nazi regimes and distinguished them from mere “authoritarian” dictatorships. Such regimes were led by a disciplined party, animated by an overarching ideology, used police power to ruthlessly enforce their will, and sought to control the most intimate aspects of their citizens’ lives. Such regimes hoped to break all preexisting social bonds and bind people directly to the state. The resulting atomization of society was symbolized by Pavel Morozov, the young monster celebrated by Stalin for reporting his own parents to the secret police. In a “circular flow of power,” the Party would “brainwash” people such that they wouldn’t even recognize the chains that bound them.

The 20th-century totalitarian experiment ultimately failed for a variety of reasons. The social control technologies available at the time—agitprop, re-education camps, the Gulag, pervasive surveillance and use of informants—in the end turned out to be insufficient to keep tabs on the Soviet Union’s vast population. Economic growth and innovation require a degree of personal freedom. But the underlying totalitarian aspiration—to achieve complete control over the bodies and minds of the entire population—never died, and was passed on from the Soviet Communist Party to its Chinese offshoot.

Mao Zedong tried to replicate the totalitarian model with similar tools, an effort that reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution. Fanatical Red Guards espousing “Mao Zedong thought” were unleashed with religious fervor on all of the institutions of the society. This effort, like the Soviet one, also ended in failure, and the Cultural Revolution’s horrendous costs—particularly to the very elites that made up the Communist Party—paved the way for the “capitalist roader” Deng Xiaoping to begin dismantling the totalitarian state and replacing it with one more like a garden-variety authoritarian regime.

It is possible to look back at the years from 1978 to 2012 with a certain nostalgia, since the Chinese people for the first time since the Revolution were given a degree of personal freedom—freedom to buy and sell, to move around, to express opinions, to travel abroad—that made comparisons between dynastic China and modern China plausible again. Indeed, Chinese intellectuals were given the freedom to recover their own national history, and to explore the damage that had been done to those traditions by the foreign virus of Communism. The Party loosened its control over the economy and the state, and regulated its own behavior through rules like collective leadership, mandatory retirement, and regular ten-year term limits for top leaders. In sharp contrast to most other authoritarian regimes, China’s was highly institutionalized.

What has happened since Xi Jinping’s designation as CCP General Secretary at the 18th Party Congress has been an attempt to revive parts of the old Maoist model. Xi Jinping is a “princeling,” the son of one of the founding members of the CCP, who with his family was nonetheless “sent down” to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution. Unlike other elites who experienced this trauma, however, Xi seems to have remembered this period with nostalgia and has done everything in his power to rebuild as much of the Maoist model as possible. The Party has been reinserted into every facet of Chinese life; Marxism-Leninism in the guise of “Xi Jinping thought” was inserted into the Constitution and once again taught in every school; and police power has been used on an unimaginable scale. Today there are more than a million Uighurs who have been put into re-education camps in Western China, in a massive effort to reprogram their minds and eliminate Islam from their consciousness. Even the songs sung by the Red Guards have been revived.

While the aspiration of totalitarian control remains the same, there are several differences between the efforts of Mao and Xi. “Xi Jinping thought” is a pale substitute for Mao’s Red Book. Xi has not been able to come up with a coherent ideology to inspire fanaticism in his followers, other than a generic Chinese nationalism. On the other hand, Xi has at his disposal technological tools that were simply unavailable to 20th-century totalitarians. The “social credit” system combines all of the methods of artificial intelligence, big data, and pervasive sensors, and puts them in the hands of the Chinese state. Neither Stalin nor Mao could look directly into the day-to-date movements, words, and transactions of each of their subjects the way that the Chinese party theoretically can today.

The other big difference between the old and new forms of totalitarianism is Xi’s greater use of positive incentives. Stalin and Mao used outright terror and compulsion to win compliance with their policies. Xi has the benefit of the world’s second-largest economy, and the opportunities that provides to create positive incentives for compliance. Xi’s China relies more on a contented and complacent middle class than on a terrified peasantry. But the coercive hand of the state lies behind every seemingly innocent opportunity offered to Chinese citizens.

Another big difference between Mao and Xi has to do with foreign relations. Once the Cultural Revolution kicked into high gear, China was so preoccupied with its own internal affairs that it presented little threat to the outside world. Xi, by contrast, has set an ambitious external agenda for the CCP. It aims to shift the center of the world economy to Eurasia through the Belt and Road Initiative, away from the current trans-oceanic one centered on the United States. It has for the first time staked out expansionist territorial claims through its creation and militarization of islands within the “Nine-Dashed Line” in the South China Sea. Xi has stated very clearly his intention to re-absorb Taiwan within the decade, if necessary by the use of force. And, in sharp contrast to the period before 2012, he has touted the “China model” as one that is available for export.

While having been imported from the former Soviet Union, totalitarianism is not without precedent in Chinese history. The state of Qin developed a form of proto-totalitarianism under the guidance of its chief minister Shang Yang. It was underpinned by the doctrine of Legalism and the writings of Han Fei, who held that human beings were fundamentally bad and could be kept in line only under the threat of severe punishments. This doctrine was put into effect by the first emperor of a unified China, Qin Shi Huangdi, whose tomb in Xian with its terra cotta warriors is visited by tourists today. Shang Yang set the precedent for massive efforts at social engineering that abolished the “well-field” system and uprooted tens of thousands of peasants in order to put them under the direct control of the state. The Qin Emperor reportedly burned Confucian books and buried 400 Confucian scholars alive in order to kill their ideas. It is no accident that one of Shang Yang’s greatest admirers was Mao Zedong, who revived study of that period in Chinese history.

But the Qin Dynasty was so repressive that it lasted only for sixteen years. The Qin Emperor had decreed that any officer losing a battle would be executed, so two lieutenants who found themselves in that position felt they had nothing to lose by turning on their boss. The Qin Dynasty was replaced by the great Han Dynasty, which in two phases lasted for the next five hundred years. Legalism was tempered by a revived Confucianism, which restored respect for education and provided greater autonomy for the family.

Xi’s totalitarian model thus has precedents in both modern and ancient Chinese history. But it is important to remember that it is not the only available one. Most dynastic governments in pre-communist China did not aspire to anything like the level of total control sought by Shang Yang, Mao, or Xi. They were much closer to the kind of authoritarianism practiced under Deng Xiaoping or Jiang Zemin. In sharp contrast to Legalism, the Confucian tradition believes that human beings are fundamentally good, and can be perfected by education. It recognizes the importance of other types of human relationships, and not simply those binding atomized individuals to a pervasive state. Many later Chinese historians regarded the Qin Dynasty as a kind of perversion of tradition to be avoided rather than emulated. The Marxist-Leninist Soviet inheritance embedded in the practices of today’s CCP provided a new ideological justification for totalitarianism, but one that was at odds with many deeply rooted Chinese traditions.

Xi’s China is thus not the inevitable culmination of prior Chinese history. When he was elevated to head of the Party in 2012, many Chinese elites hoped that he would deal with mounting corruption—which he did, in a highly authoritarian fashion—but also lay the ground for a more liberal China that would permit more freedom to talk, think, interact, and even criticize their government. They were

bitterly disappointed when he moved in the opposite direction, placing priority above all not on the welfare of the nation as a whole, but on the survival of the Chinese Communist Party. Why he did this was the result of his personal quirks and history; another leader may have gone in a very different direction. There was no historical inevitability to the present outcome.

The dangers of a regime that seeks totalitarian control were laid bare in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, when speaking honestly about the unfolding epidemic, as Dr. Li Wenliang did, was severely punished. For all we know, the flow of misinformation is continuing today. It is wrong to hold up the CCP's totalitarian approach in dealing with the virus as a model to be emulated by other countries. Nearby South Korea and Taiwan, both healthy liberal democracies, achieved even better results in the pandemic without the draconian methods used by China. One of the great dangers today is that the world looks to Xi's totalitarian model, rather than a broader East Asian model that combines strong state capacity with technocratic competence, as the winning formula in facing future crises.

How then should the United States and other Western democracies deal with Xi's China? The starting point is to recognize that we are dealing with an aspiring totalitarian country like the mid-20th century Soviet Union, and not with some kind of generic "authoritarian capitalist" regime. There is no true private sector in China. Although there are quasi-property rights and ambitious entrepreneurs there, the state can reach into and control any one of its supposedly "private sector" firms like Tencent or Alibaba at any point. Although the Trump administration's campaign against Huawei has been clumsy and in many respects self-defeating, the goal is essentially correct: It would be crazy for any liberal democracy to allow this firm to build its basic information infrastructure, given the way it can be controlled by the Chinese state.

More broadly, the United States and other liberal democracies need to begin a gradual economic disengagement from China. The pandemic has demonstrated how both Europe and North America have become dangerously dependent on the manufacturing capabilities of a hostile power. There are today plenty of other places around the world where supply chains can be located. Squeezing every drop of efficiency out of them needs to give way to consideration of resilience, diversity of inputs, and regard for capabilities that are better kept under the control of countries that share democratic values. The atrophy of Western providers of end-to-end 5G infrastructure is something that should never have been allowed to happen.

In foreign policy, the United States has legal commitments to support the security of Japan and South Korea, and has extended implicit guarantees to countries like Taiwan and Singapore. In addition, it seeks to defend a global principle of freedom of navigation. But the military balance within the "first island chain" has been shifting very rapidly with the steady growth of Chinese military capabilities, and America's ability to meet its commitments will gradually attenuate. It needs to confront this gap forthrightly, and either adjust those capabilities or find a way of scaling back its objectives.

The CCP's aspiration toward total control unfortunately now reaches into liberal democracies around the world. The hundreds of thousands of Chinese who study, work, and live abroad do so because they want to better their lives, and find that foreign countries offer better opportunities than their own. But the CCP through

its United Front department wants to keep them loyal to China and use them where possible to advance the interests of Chinese foreign policy. This exercise of what has been called “sharp power” has threatened academic freedom on many Western university campuses, where pressure from Chinese student groups and other organizations has been palpable. This then unfairly casts suspicions on ethnic Chinese citizens and leads to prejudice and unfounded charges of dual loyalty.

But while we need to understand that Xi’s China is a totalitarian power, we should temper that understanding with the realization that this is not a necessary or inevitable future for China. The regime is totalitarian in aspiration, but not necessarily in reality. We do not know how effective the new technological methods of control like the social credit system will ultimately be. Chinese citizens still have more personal freedom today than citizens of North Korea. Earlier dalliances with totalitarian control proved self-defeating: The Qin Dynasty lasted only for 16 years, and the Cultural Revolution exhausted itself within a decade. Compliance with the CCP’s rules is today often voluntary rather than the product sheer terror, but as the Chinese economy slows or even goes into reverse, the regime’s room for using positive incentives for cooptation will decrease. And unlike Mao, Xi does not have a strong ideology to give him legitimacy; “socialism with Chinese characteristics” or “Xi Jinping thought” are not ideas that many people will want to die for.

How might China change in the future, both with regard to the mechanism of change, and the long-run outcomes we might hope for?

With regard to mechanisms, it would appear very unlikely that change will come from below in a broad, grass-roots movement of the sorts we have seen in the different color revolutions or in the early days of the Arab Spring. Given the CCP’s existing level of control, and the sheer size of the country, it would be extremely difficult to coordinate a mass mobilization. The regime has plenty of repressive power that it has not been reluctant to make use of when necessary.

If change were to come, it would have to originate within the upper reaches of the Party itself. In a certain way, the people most affected by Xi Jinping’s rise to power are his fellow members of the Politburo Standing Committee. Deng Xiaoping left a legacy of collective leadership, in which no single individual could amass dictatorial power of the sort exercised by Mao. This system served the country well for over 30 years, but Xi has upended it completely, sidelining other senior leaders, revoking the term limits that would have forced him to step down after 10 years, and building a cult of personality around himself. An elite conspiracy like the one that brought down Nikita Khrushchev in the former Soviet Union would be very hard to pull off, but under uncertain economic conditions, internal leadership divisions could increase sharply.

If China were to change, what should the Chinese people hope for?

The optimal path would be a sequenced transition in which the country first liberalized, and then began to democratize—the path followed by many European countries in the 19th and 20th centuries. The beginning point would be a transition from rule by law to rule *of* law. Clear rules need to apply not just to ordinary citizens and to lower levels of the government, but to the Party itself. There should be true constitutional constraints on the Party-State’s exercise of power, and an increase in genuine judicial autonomy. The existing constitution

could be a starting point, but it would have to be stripped of the “Four Principles” that give the CCP ultimate political authority. The Party would have to withdraw the tentacles it has extended into every nook and cranny of Chinese life, and return authority to the government and the National People’s Congress. Citizens would need to be given much more freedom to speak, think, organize, and criticize, at least to the extent they could in the good old days pre-Xi Jinping.

A near-term transition to multi-party democracy of the sort that happened in Taiwan or South Korea in the 1980s would be much more problematic. The 90 million-member CCP is not just a political grouping that directs the government from above, as in a parliamentary democracy; it *is* the government for all intents and purposes, and contains a large part of the capacity required to make the state work. Democratization would have to begin within the Party itself, with greater autonomy given to lower-level organs whose authority would flow upwards to the higher levels, the reverse of the current situation.

There is limited value to speculating in great detail as to the kinds of reforms that might take place in a future China. Pushing China in these directions should not be part of U.S. foreign policy except at the most general level. Pressure from a weakening and in many respects discredited United States in the wake of the global pandemic will almost certainly be counterproductive. These changes must come from the Chinese people themselves, and specifically from Chinese elites who understand the way their present system works and what the potential pressure points for change may be.

What Americans need to keep in mind is that their enemy and rival right now is not China, but a Chinese Communist Party that has shifted into high-totalitarian mode. We are not dealing with the China of the 1990s or even the 2000s, but a completely different animal that represents a clear challenge to our democratic values. We need to hold it at bay until some point in the future when it returns to being a more normal authoritarian country, or indeed is on its way to being a liberal country. That will not necessarily eliminate the challenge that China represents; a more liberal China could easily be more nationalistic. But it will nonetheless be easier to deal with in many ways.

Unfortunately, over the past three and a half years, the United States has been doing everything it can to weaken itself. It has elected a leader who revels in demonizing his domestic opponents far more than his foreign rivals, who has blithely thrown away the moral high ground that used to be the foundation of American global power, and who has governed the country with such incompetence during the largest crisis of the past three generations that it is no longer taken seriously by either friends or enemies. While democracies as a group have not done worse than authoritarian governments in controlling the crisis, China is able to present itself as having outperformed the United States, and that bilateral comparison is the one that people are paying attention to around the world right now. Before we can think about changing China, we need to change the United States and try to restore its position as a global beacon of liberal democratic values around the world.

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