

CHINA'S "ENLIGHTENED AUTHORITARIANISM" AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

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China wants a new world order, but not the new world order initiated in Ukraine by the Putin regime. China cannot endorse what Russia has done because the maintenance of territorial integrity is primordial in Chinese foreign policy, but China cannot align itself either with a US-dominated NATO that it sees as an instrument of US hegemony. The situation is fluid, but China is trying to maintain an equidistant stance and would prefer to broker a return to a pacific rules-based world order founded on a balance of power that favours neither NATO nor Russia, in alignment with China's own model of "benevolent authoritarianism".

China wants a new world order, but not the new world order initiated in Ukraine by the Putin regime. A **joint statement** issued by China and Russia before the invasion proposed to "uphold the outcomes of the Second World War and the existing post-war world order" and to "resist attempts to deny, distort, and falsify the history of the Second World War". The Cold War froze in place one aspect of that outcome—the Yalta agreement. The fall of the USSR eroded that example of Realpolitik. The Warsaw Pact disappeared but NATO expanded, claiming interests that run from Vladivostok to Vancouver. China is a nervous observer of this process.

The joint statement also proposes to "protect the United Nations-driven international architecture and the international law-based world order, seek genuine multipolarity" and to "promote more democratic international relations, and ensure peace, stability and sustainable development across the world". Implicit in this catalogue, in addition to a defence of the veto power of the victors in WWII, is a criticism of a world order dominated in the voting systems of the Bretton Woods institutions by the USA and Western Europe, and the elevation of the losing WWII enemies (Germany and Japan) to the status of NATO allies at the cost of two of the winning allies (then the USSR and the Republic of China, now Russia and the PRC). More important is the insistence on "genuine multipolarity", "more democratic international relations" and "sustainable development" without interference in the interest of developed countries.

China cannot endorse what Russia has done in Ukraine because the maintenance of territorial integrity is primordial in Chinese foreign policy, with special reference to the *reintegration* of Taiwan and resistance to secessionist movements within continental China. Ukraine is also an important partner for China in terms of raw materials and the Belt and Road Initiative. But China cannot align itself either with a US-dominated NATO that it sees as an instrument of US hegemony. The situation is fluid, but China is trying to maintain an equidistant stance and would prefer to broker a return to a pacific rules-based world order founded on a balance of power that favours neither NATO nor Russia. Such a stance is probably more in tune with the attitude of the developing world —the largest part of the world’s population— as long as China itself does not exhibit hegemonic tendencies.

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Uncertainty about the constancy and reliability of the USA as a world leader (NATO’s point of view) or as a hegemonic power (the point of view of Russia and China and developing countries) have eroded America’s moral authority in world affairs. “America First” and neo-isolationism could return to power in 2024 elections and the current opposition party flirts with and even endorses populist nationalism and white supremacy, defending a right-wing insurrection as “**normal political discourse**”. At the same time, Vladimir Putin’s return to a nineteenth century “Great Powers” vision of the world order as a response to NATO’s abandonment of the “Yalta Agreement” that cemented a post-World War II order is not the alternative that China wants.

Xi Jinping offers his “**China Model**” as **an alternative to neo-liberalism** in a new world order. China advocates a diverse and multipolar world as an alternative to US/NATO hegemony. The architect of Xi’s China Model ideology has been Wang Huning, a discrete member of the current Standing Committee of the Central Committee of the PRC, who together with Wang Qishan may be one of the most powerful leaders in China. It will be interesting to see what happens with both, Wang’s as well as Xi, in the renovation of the Politburo and Standing Committee later this year.

In a period when liberal democratic political systems have been riven by radical polarisation, lack of a broad consensus, hostile party politics and rampant inequality, China offers its version of an efficient technocratic “benevolent authoritarianism” as an alternative. Confucian political philosophy always advocated government based on 仁 *rén*, a concept with connotations of human, humane and humanitarian, as well as empathy, compassion and reciprocity. The associated concept 共 *gòng* emphasises the common good, the commonwealth, as opposed to 私 *sī*, private interest.

The Party's think tanks promote “**Studies on China's National Condition**” (国情研究 *Guóqíng yánjiū*), developing the idea that China is peaceful by nature and will not be aggressive but will pursue “benevolent pacifism”, “peaceful development”, “harmonious society”, a “harmonious world” and “harmonious inclusionism” or win-win diplomacy foreign trade and foreign policy. The Party insists that it is the only guarantor of social equity and peaceful sustainable development, rejecting a multiparty system with alternation in power among diverse political parties because each political “party” is “partial” and only “a part” of society — only the Communist Party is “common” to all of society.

Another key organic intellectual, **Wang Shaoguang**, distinguishes between “formal” democratic governance (“there are some political systems that, in terms of form, because they use competitive elections, appear to be ‘representative,’ yet their responsiveness may not be very high”) and “responsive” governance (“there are some political systems without multiparty elections but which are quite responsive to the people's demands”). He argues that, unlike Western liberal democracy, “what Chinese sages focused on ... was not the form of government or the form of the political system, but rather the way of government or the goals and methods in the functioning of the political system”. And he insists that the “China model” offers advantages over liberal democracy's “veto players” — political parties, lobbies, interest groups— in promoting social equity and responsiveness to popular needs. He also cautions that although having few “veto players” in the Chinese political system may be an advantage for a problem-solving system of governance, it can also become a danger if centralised control of power fails to be responsive to the needs of the common good, a problem not yet entirely solved in the case of the PRC.

It remains to be seen whether China's alternative can take hold in the face of NATO's attempt to forge a unified response to the Ukrainian war.