

# A NEW WORLD ORDER, ACCORDING TO BEIJING

**After seven decades of liberal order and three decades of American unipolarity, it may be difficult to imagine that the current rules-based international system, supported by liberal norms and values and organised around a set of multilateral institutions, could eventually give way to something radically different. But in Beijing, political and intellectual elites have engaged in intense discussions about building a new world order.**

## DISSATISFIED AND OPPORTUNISTIC

Their collective deliberations are taking place for two main reasons. First, China is dissatisfied with the existing system. This is not new. In late 1988, Deng Xiaoping was already pointing out to Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi that it was time to think about “appropriate new policies to establish a new international order” and to build an alternative to “hegemonism, bloc politics and treaty organizations” that “no longer work”.<sup>1</sup> Today, the Chinese leadership regularly complains about the existing order being “unfair and unreasonable” and calls for the reform of global governance and of the international system. Beijing’s seemingly bland formulations are not without substantial implications. Although China has been gradually integrating into international institutions since the mid-1970s, it has continued to feel estranged and alienated from a Western-led system that it did not participate in building. Promoting a “fairer” order means advocating a system that would allow more space and influence for countries other than the Western ones. The Chinese leadership seems to nurture

hopes that China will eventually replace the predominant role and influence of the West over the international system. Promoting a “more reasonable” order means in effect rooting out the norms that are seen as problematic, and even threatening, by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). These include liberal democracy and universal human rights, which the Chinese rulers believe are causes for conflict and disruption worldwide (from “colour revolutions” in the former Soviet Union to chaos and violence in the Middle East) rather than viable sources of world prosperity and peace.<sup>2</sup>

The second reason for active deliberations among Chinese elites about the shape and form of a new world order is their assessment of China’s power relative to that of the United States. Since at least 2008, Chinese elites have assumed that a global power transition is under way, facilitated both by China’s growing material power and by a presumably ongoing American decline. Over the course of the last four years in

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particular, the Chinese leadership seems to have concluded that the US decline has accelerated, clearing the way for its own rise to predominance.<sup>3</sup> Xi Jinping has been making open references to this paradigm shift, asserting that the world is “undergoing profound changes unseen in a century”.<sup>4</sup> Beijing is growing increasingly impatient about the gap between China’s material power and its authority in and

control over international affairs. It believes that the US established the current order to serve its own purposes, and that China is now strong enough to create a system better suited to its own preferences and interests.

## A WORLD ORDER WITH CHINA AT THE HELM

For fear of fuelling potential counter-responses, the party-state has avoided making its alternative vision clear, other than officially calling for the building of a “community of shared future for mankind”. However, a close reading of the ongoing internal discussions and debates gives some indications about the defining features of a world order with China at the helm.<sup>5</sup>

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The collective intellectual effort mostly draws inspiration from China’s philosophical and historical traditions, combined with elements of the CCP’s Marxist-Leninist system. Despite Beijing’s official denial of any intention of hegemony, China seems to want to dominate what might come to resemble a Sinocentric sphere of influence, in which other countries would tacitly recognise and respect the primacy of its authority and interests. This subsystem is inspired, in large measure, by the ancient tributary system, a distinct model of international relations that existed in much of East Asia for many centuries. In this past model, China—the dominant military and economic power—allowed its vassals to manage their internal and foreign affairs as they wished, as long as they recognised its superiority and accommodated its preferences. The emperor was content with a loose form of control over its vassals, but also occasionally forced compliance through the threat or use of military coercion. Trade, and the direct material benefits derived from it, offered a powerful incentive for vassal states to remain within the system, as pulling out would have come at great economic cost. Given the manifest military and economic asymmetry

between the vassal states and China, challenging the system from a position of strength was almost impossible.

What the current CCP leadership seems to have in mind is a similar hierarchical order, albeit applied to a 21st-century context in which a secretary-general, not an emperor, sits in Beijing. China, the dominant economic and military power, would sit at the top as well as at the centre of a system that would include, rather than a contiguous geographical sphere, countries around the world that defer to the primacy of its own economic, security and political interests. China’s control over this sphere of influence would be exercised loosely, rather than directly, through the creation of dependences that could be used either as incentives or as coercive tools. Instead of a “rules-based” order founded on the primacy of the rule of law and on legally-binding treaties and arrangements, the system would favour informal negotiations, agreements and partnerships, conducted in the shadow of China’s disproportionate power. The system would also reject the sanctity of human rights and their universal applicability in favour of the right of individual states to follow their own socio-political development path, suiting their particular needs and authoritarian inclinations without being subject to democratic moral opprobrium or pressure to liberalise.

## FROM VISION TO IMPLEMENTATION

To execute this vision, the CCP is following a two-pronged strategy. Rather than dismantling the current system entirely, Beijing seeks to co-opt, subvert and reshape elements of the existing architecture, including some of its institutions and norms. It is, for example, proactively challenging the current international human rights framework within the UN Human Rights Council, promoting instead its own preferred concept of “right to development”.<sup>6</sup> In addition, in direct contradiction of the UN’s professional guidelines, Beijing is using its influence over some UN agencies to promote its own political and foreign-policy objectives.<sup>7</sup> In parallel, the CCP attempts to circumvent the existing system by creating organisations within which it can set

the agenda and promote its alternative vision of the global governance norms. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in late 2013, is the backbone of the CCP's vision for a Sinocentric order. The BRI not only draws the notional map of China's desired sphere of influence but also serves as a testbed for the subsystem envisioned by the Chinese leadership, in which China is at the centre of a new economic and political order and exerts increasing leverage over dependent countries.

China's desired sphere of influence does not stop at East Asia but extends along the BRI's economic corridors, spanning the Eurasian continent and its adjacent waters, and beyond to the developing and emerging world. A hierarchical

order, characterised by power asymmetry, is not in the interest of small countries lying along those corridors. At a time of severe post-pandemic economic strain, it would be tempting for governments to accept China's offers of

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investment and increased commercial exchanges. But Beijing's economic "gifts" are part of a strategic bundle that ultimately runs counter to the interests of the democratic West.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "[A New International Order Should Be Established with the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence as Norms](#)", in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3, 1982–1992 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> For a straightforward elaboration on these points by a senior Chinese official, see [Fu Ying's July 2016 speech at Chatham House](#).

<sup>3</sup> Rush Doshi, "[Beijing Believes Trump Is Accelerating American Decline](#)", *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2020; Julian Gewirtz, "[China Thinks America is Losing](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, November–December 2020.

<sup>4</sup> "[Changes, Challenges and Choices: China is Driven by the Path It Takes](#)," *Xinhua*, 28 August 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Nadège Rolland, "[China's Vision for a New World Order](#)", NBR Special Report 83, January 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Andréa Worden, "China at the UN Human Rights Council: Conjuring a 'Community of Shared Future for Humankind'?" and Malin Oud, "Harmonic Convergence: China and the Right to Development", in Nadège Rolland (ed.), [An Emerging China-Centric Order](#), NBR Special Report 87, August 2020, pp. 33–48 and 69–84.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations International Civil Service Commission, [Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service](#) (New York: United Nations, 2013).

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