



# Is China Challenging the Global State of Democracy?

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## **Pacific Forum**

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## ABSTRACT

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With its economic success, China seems to convey to the world that democracy is not a prerequisite for prosperity and social well-being. This paper seeks to explore whether and how the rise of authoritarian China may affect the state of democracy worldwide. It argues that at least for now, China may not intend to challenge the global state of democracy by actively blocking the expansion of democracy or promoting authoritarianism. However, China's growing global influence, along with its overseas activities in defending the Chinese Communist Party regime and seeking greater international status, have had a negative impact on liberal democracy.

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## INTRODUCTION

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For nearly a decade, Freedom House's annual survey has underscored a decline in democracy in most regions of the world.<sup>1</sup> While scholars are debating whether democracy is indeed in decline, there is a growing sense that the liberal democracies of Europe and the United States—which were once beacons of democracy—are in trouble with regard to political and economic performance at home, raising doubts about the desirability and legitimacy of democracy.<sup>2</sup> While Western democracies seem to have hit a rough patch, the early decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed the rise in power and self-confidence of one of world's leading non-democratic countries, China. With its continued economic success, China has demonstrated, by its own example, that democracy is not a prerequisite for prosperity and social well-being—an idea China has repeatedly attempted to convey to the world in recent years.<sup>3</sup> In particular, on the eve of the 19th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China's official *Xinhua* news agency published an English commentary, maintaining that Western democracy, which has brought “endless political backbiting, bickering, and policy reversals” is “showing its age.” In contrast, the Chinese political system has never been “healthier,” and there is “no need” for China to import the “failing party political systems of other countries.”<sup>4</sup> Such rhetoric has sufficiently alarmed Western analysts, who argue that China will not merely thwart the expansion of Western democracy but also spread and support the authoritarian regimes to “remake the world in its authoritarian image.”<sup>5</sup>

This paper seeks to understand whether and how the rise of authoritarian China may affect the state of democracy worldwide. Specifically, the main question: Is China challenging the global state of democracy? This question is addressed in four parts: 1) What has helped shape the impression that China is standing against democracy's global advance? Where does this concern come from? 2) Does China engage in any anti-democracy movements or the promotion of authoritarian values overseas? 3) How does China influence the current state of democracy in the world? 4) What will the world be like with *the emergence* of a *powerful* Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, who calls for the realization of the “Chinese Dream”

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, unless specified, when mentioning the word democracy, it refers to the Western concept of liberal democracy. As opposed to the concept of “Western democracy” (*xifang minzhu* 西方民主), China sometimes describes its political system as “Chinese-style democracy” (*zhongguo shi minzhu* 中国式民主) or “socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics” (*zhongguotese shehuizhuyi minzhu* 中国特色社会主义民主). That is, to suit its particular sociopolitical circumstances, China has built a socialist political democracy based on the Marxist theory of democracy combined with the reality of China, as well as the “useful” elements of Western democracy and Chinese traditional culture. For further details on Chinese-style democracy, see State Council of the People's Republic of China, *Building of Political Democracy in China* (Beijing: State Council Information Office, 2005), <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Oct/145718.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Marc F. Plattner, “Is Democracy in Decline?” *Democracy & Society* 13 (1): 4.

<sup>3</sup> Aijan Sharshenova and Gordon Crawford, “Undermining Western Democracy Promotion in Central Asia: China's Countervailing Influences, Powers and Impact,” *Central Asian Survey* 36 (4): 453–472.

<sup>4</sup> Laifang Li, “Commentary: Enlightened Chinese Democracy Puts the West in the Shade,” Xinhuanet, 17 October 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c\\_136685546.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/17/c_136685546.htm).

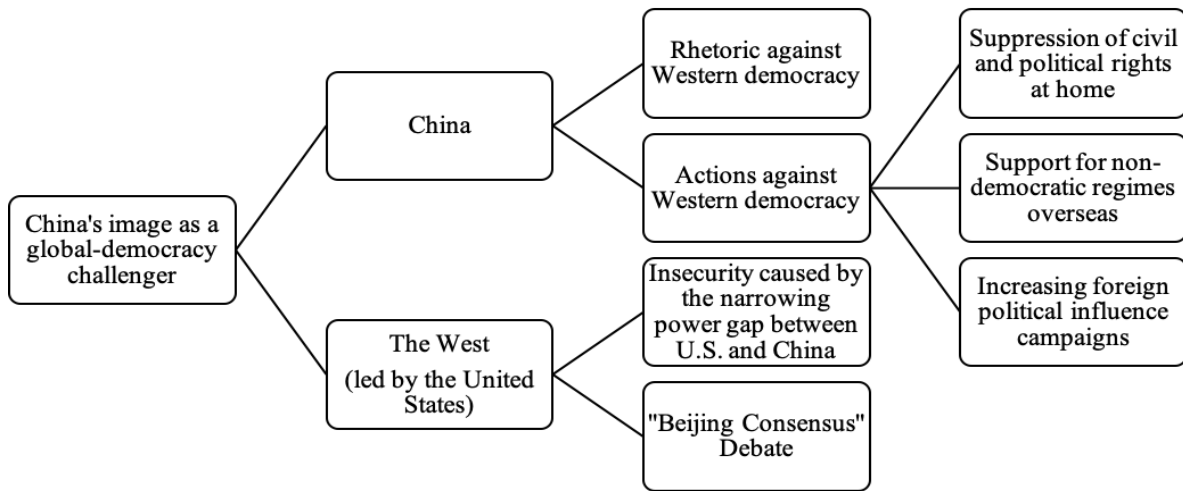
<sup>5</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “China's Challenge,” *Journal of Democracy* 26 (1): 156.

(*zhongguo meng* 中国梦)? This paper argues that at least for now, China may not intend to challenge the global state of democracy by actively blocking the expansion of democracy or promoting authoritarianism. Nonetheless, China’s growing global influence, along with its overseas activities in defending the CCP regime and seeking greater international status, have had a negative impact on liberal democracy. Looking forward, with the consolidation of President Xi Jinping’s power, China is on a path to proactively promoting a “China brand” to emphasize Chinese exceptionalism.

**Impression in the making**

What has helped shape the impression that China is challenging the global state of democracy? China’s image of a potential global-democracy challenger derives from a combination of sources, with both China and Western democracies, led by the United States, contributing to the creation of this perception. China’s own rhetoric and actions against the norm of democracy at home and abroad have given the impression that it has no interest in following the Western liberal democratic model. The concern about China’s anti-democracy movement worldwide is further compounded by insecurity of the existing dominant power caused by the narrowing power gap between the United States and China. Finally, the continuing debate over the China model, the “Beijing Consensus,” as an alternative to the Western model of modernization, has strengthened concerns about the prospect of China’s challenge to the global state of democracy. The formation of China’s image as a global-democracy challenger is summarized in Figure 1.

**FIGURE 1.** *Impression in the Making: China’s Image as a Global-Democracy Challenger*



## *China's Rhetoric against Western Democracy*

In Xi Jinping's first five-year term, China's official media outlet has never been short of criticism of Western democracy and praise for the Chinese political system. Content analysis of the number and the content of the editorials and op-eds that criticize Western democracy across a five-year timeframe results in three findings. First, the sudden rise in the number of such publications correlates with the Chinese government's heightened alert to pro-democracy movements at home. While in 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2017, *People's Daily*, a Chinese official media outlet, maintained an average of 20 editorials and op-eds per year that found fault with Western democracy. The year 2014, which featured Hong Kong's pro-democratic Umbrella Movement and the 25th anniversary of Tiananmen Square protests, witnessed a marked increase in anti-western democracy publication: 54 pieces were published, 2.7 times more than average. (See Table 1 below.)

Second, the content of such publications appears to also strategically reflect developments in international politics. In 2015, 78.9% of the pieces criticizing Western democracy made direct mention of the United States, which was the highest percentage of references to the United States from 2013–2017 (see Table 1 below). This was the year when candidates from the two major political parties in the United States began announcing their candidacies for the presidential primary. On July 26, 2015, *People's Daily* even dedicated a full page to explaining why American democracy is in trouble. It pointed to “money politics” and “a tendency toward oligarchy” in the U.S. political system. It also accused the US of having “double standards” concerning *human rights* and asserted that American-style democracy is not suitable for every country.<sup>6</sup>

Third, there seems to be a growing idea in China that the Chinese political system can be an alternative to the Western democracy. In 2013, only 64.7% of the editorials and op-eds that criticized Western democracy drew a comparison with the Chinese political system. By 2017, the data shows that 85% of the articles that disparaged western democracy made direct mention of (or more often, praised) the Chinese system as a contrast to the “failing” Western system. (See Table 1 below.)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total
Number of Articles criticizing Western democracy <sup>1</sup>	17	54	19	24	20	134
Mentioning “the United States”	12 (70.5%)	38 (70.3%)	15 (78.9%)	18 (75.0%)	11 (55.0%)	94 (70.1%)
Mentioning “China”	11 (64.7%)	38 (70.3%)	15 (78.9%)	19 (79.1%)	17 (85.0%)	100 (74.6%)

Source: People's Daily database, 2013-2017, <http://www.people.com.cn/>.

Note: 1. Articles refer to editorials and op-eds under the category of “guan dian” (观点) on the website.

**TABLE 1.** *Articles Criticizing “Western Democracy” (西方民主) in People's Daily, 2013–2017*

<sup>6</sup> “Meiguo minzhu zaoyu kunjing” (The Dilemma of American Democracy), *People's Daily*, 26 July 2015, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2015/0726/c1003-27360725.html>.

In sum, the data presented above demonstrate that China's official media has made consistent efforts to deprecate Western democracy and present the Chinese political system as a more efficient alternative. The media is, however, particularly sensitive to political situations at home and abroad. The content of anti-democracy articles often appears carefully planned to reflect domestic pro-democracy movements and developments in international politics.

### *China's actions against Western democracy*

In addition to China's criticism of Western democracy, analysts often cite three Chinese actions as proof that China matches words to deeds, undermining global democratic norms and working to spread authoritarian values. The three most-mentioned anti-democracy activities are China's suppression of civil and political rights at home, its support for non-democratic regimes overseas, and its increasing foreign political influence campaigns.

According to Freedom House's annual survey, China has been among the least free nations in terms of civil liberty and political rights for at least the past two decades.<sup>7</sup> Since Xi Jinping assumed CCP leadership in 2012, a revitalizing push for ideological conformity and Party authority has led to a series of crackdowns on political dissidents, lawyers, journalists, religious practitioners, grassroots activists, and ethnic minorities. Moreover, as China moves to becoming a digital society, with over half of its population now online, it also seems determined to expand its control to every corner of cyberspace. To effectively suppress dissent and prevent the Internet from being a tool for political organization and mobilization, China has gradually tightened its Internet controls over search engines and online news portals, blocked the use of virtual private networks (VPN), and in the latest move, has even extended the government's oversight of private online chat groups.<sup>8</sup> As the prominent political activist Mo Zhixu said in an article in 2016, "the system is swallowing up civil society" and has made this period "the toughest" for grassroots resistance.<sup>9</sup>

Looking abroad, China's support for non-democratic regimes seems to provide more convincing evidence of its ambitions to promote and support authoritarianism. Cross-referencing the dataset from Freedom House with that from AidData (a research lab at the College of William & Mary that tracks China's global development footprint) shows that

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<sup>7</sup> Arch Puddington and Tyler Roylance, *Freedom in the World 2017: Populists and Autocrats: The Dual Threat to Global Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2017), [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH\\_FIW\\_2017\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> "China Media Bulletin: Party Congress Censorship, VPN Crackdown, Surveillance Upgrades (No. 121)," *China Media Bulletin*, 11 September 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/china-media/china-media-bulletin-party-congress-censorship-vpn-crackdown-surveillance-upgrades-no-121>.

<sup>9</sup> Zhixu Mo, "Ti zhi zheng zai tun shi min jian she hui" (The System Is Swallowing Up the Civil Society), *Independent Chinese PEN Center*, 10 March 2016, <http://www.chinesepen.org/blog/archives/48820>.



among the top 10 recipients of China’s Official Development Aid (ODA),<sup>10</sup> 9 countries were marked as either “not free” or “partly free” (see Figure 2 below).<sup>11</sup>

In addition, China’s alleged political interference in democratic regimes overseas ignites the fear and concern about China’s intentions to undercut liberal democracy abroad. In particular, the recent focus of media attention has been on Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan, where policy makers and scholars are claiming China has been engaging in buying influence through political donations and monitoring overseas Chinese communities. As Anne-Marie Brady at New Zealand’s University of Canterbury indicated in September 2017, under Xi Jinping’s leadership, there has been a renewed push for foreign political influence under the concept of the “united front work” (*tongyi zhanxian gongzuo* 统一战线工作).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, President Xi called the “united front” one of the CCP’s three “magic weapons” (*fabao* 法宝)—the other two being party building and military activities.<sup>13</sup>

**FIGURE 2.** *Top 10 Recipients of China’s ODA by the Level of Political Freedom, 2000–2014*

Level of Freedom	Country
Not Free (n=4)	Cuba, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Cambodia
Partly Free (n=5)	Cote d’Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Tanzania, Sri Lanka
Free (n=1)	Ghana

Source: AidData (2000–2014) and the Freedom House (2017)

Note: Level of freedom is assigned according to the data from the Freedom House in 2017.

<sup>10</sup> The term ODA referred to here follows the definition of ODA used by AidData research lab, which uses the term in accordance with the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) explanation. According to the OECD-DAC, ODA is government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries. For detailed definition, see OECD, “Official Development Assistance (ODA),” April 2018, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/What-is-ODA.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Dataset from 2000–2014 by Freedom House. Axel Dreher et al. “Aid, China, and Growth: Evidence from a New Global Development Finance Dataset.” *AidData Working Paper #46* (Williamsburg, VA: AidData, 2017), [http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/WPS46\\_Aid\\_China\\_and\\_Growth.pdf](http://docs.aiddata.org/ad4/pdfs/WPS46_Aid_China_and_Growth.pdf); Puddington and Roylance, *Freedom in the World 2017*.

<sup>12</sup> According to Zhang Yijiong (张裔炯), the executive deputy head of the United Front Work Department, the United Front is “the political coalition of all parties, all classes, all ethnic groups, and all associations” (统一战线是中国共产党领导的团结各党派、各阶层、各民族、各团体、各界人士的政治联盟) and can be used both at home and overseas. See more at “‘Dang de tong yi zhan xian gong zuo he dang de dui wai jiao wang’ ji zhe zhao dai hui” (Press Conference on Party’s United Front Work and Its Foreign Relations), *People’s Daily*, 21 October 2017, [http://live01.people.com.cn/zhibo/Myapp/Html/Member/html/201710/9\\_103964\\_59e9a30d58bdc\\_quan.html](http://live01.people.com.cn/zhibo/Myapp/Html/Member/html/201710/9_103964_59e9a30d58bdc_quan.html).

<sup>13</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, “Magic Weapons: China’s Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping,” paper presented at “The Corrosion of Democracy Under China’s Global Influence” conference, Arlington, Virginia, 16–17 September 2017. [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/for\\_website\\_magicweaponsanne-mariesbradyseptember2017.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/for_website_magicweaponsanne-mariesbradyseptember2017.pdf).

## *Strategic distrust from the West*

China has appeared to stand against the values of liberal democracy in its words and deeds. Yet the West's—particularly the United States'—inherent strategic distrust has provided a base that bolsters the international image of China as a challenger of global democracy.

There are three fundamental sources of strategic distrust between China and the United States, as China experts Kenneth Lieberthal and Jisi Wang argue.<sup>14</sup> First, the distrust originates from different “political traditions, value systems, and cultures,” which are unlikely to drastically change over time.<sup>15</sup> Lieberthal and Wang explain that for the United States, China's “undemocratic politics with human rights violations and opaqueness” has cultivated an image of a less trustworthy China.<sup>16</sup> But is this cultural incompatibility the sole reason for strategic distrust, leading inevitably to a global world order defined by what scholar Samuel Huntington called “the Clash of Civilizations”?<sup>17</sup> The distrust between China and the United States goes deeper still.

The second source of distrust comes from a lack of understanding of each other's domestic situations. Because of the “insufficient comprehension and application of each other's policy-making processes and relations between the government and other entities,” each side tends to perceive the other's move as more “strategically motivated” and “internally coordinated than is actually the case.”<sup>18</sup> Lieberthal and Wang argue that this is why the United States tends to suspect the economic activities of China's state-owned companies in the United States as part of the Chinese leadership's grand strategy.

The third and most volatile source of distrust from the United States derives from its narrowing power gap with China. Lieberthal and Wang maintain that China's growing power has triggered widespread concern in the United States about how the more powerful China will use its growing capabilities and whether China will surpass the United States as the leading global power. The concern has turned into insecurity, as the United States tends to analyze China's actions as moves in a power game, interpreting them as China's attempts to reshape the world order. Similarly, political scientist Graham Allison, in his book *Destined for War*, highlights a structural crisis that accompanies a power transition between China and the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Allison cautions that China's growing power and sense of importance, along with the fear and pride of the United States to defend the status quo, are bringing the countries “toward a war neither wants.”<sup>19</sup>

The three elements—different political systems and cultures, perception of China's moves as more strategically motivated and internally coordinated than is actually the case, and a narrowing power gap with China—have nurtured US distrust toward China, forming its

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<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Lieberthal and Jisi Wang, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2012. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0330\\_china\\_lieberthal.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0330_china_lieberthal.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Lieberthal and Wang, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, 37.

<sup>16</sup> Lieberthal and Wang, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3): 22-49. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1993-06-01/clash-civilizations>.

<sup>18</sup> Lieberthal and Wang, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, xi, 36.

<sup>19</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

fundamental attitude of suspicion of China’s behaviors. With distrust at heart, the United States will likely doubt and ignore goodwill gestures from China, whereas China’s ambitious, if not assertive, actions will likely be taken at face value.<sup>20</sup> The United States therefore filters China’s seemingly anti-democratic rhetoric and actions through distrust, convincing itself that China is motivated and prepared to challenge the U.S.-led global state of democracy (see Figure 3 below).

**FIGURE 3.** *U.S. Perceptions of China’s Seemingly Anti-Democratic Activities*



In recent years, distrust toward China has put the United States on the defensive, triggering a series of US actions against China’s activities in the United States. These US actions have aroused criticism from China and caused a self-reinforcing spiral of distrust between the two countries. For example, responding to tougher US scrutiny of Confucius Institutes (Chinese-funded education programs at the universities in the United States) in an attempt to shut down “the malign influence of foreign propaganda,”<sup>21</sup> Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lu Kang says the US intent to “politicize” the Institutes shows “a typical Cold War mindset” that “may reflect their lack of confidence.”<sup>22</sup> While the mutual distrust between the United States and China has not yet created a “security dilemma” bringing about an arms race as intense as in the Cold War, the spiral of distrust between the two countries will inevitably damage the bilateral relationship.

### *The debate over “the China model”*

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, surprised by China’s rapid economic growth and disappointed about the crisis of the liberal world order, policy analyst Joshua Cooper Ramo proposed the concept of a “Beijing Consensus,” which should be seen as an alternative to

<sup>20</sup> This psychological mechanism can be broadly explained by political psychology studies of “cognitive consistency.” That is, when processing information to make a policy decision, policy makers tend to maintain a coherent belief system (in this case, the belief systems of U.S. policymakers have been animated by their distrust towards China.) Policymakers avoid information that is inconsistent with their beliefs to reach “cognitive consistency.” See more at Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Evanston, IL: Row-Peterson, 1957); Robert P. Abelson et al., *Theories of Cognitive Consistency: A Sourcebook* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968); William J. McGuire, “The Nature of Attitudes and Attitude Change.” In Elliot Aronson and Gardner Lindzey (eds.), *the Handbook of Social Psychology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969); Stuart Oskamp, *Attitudes and Opinions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977).

<sup>21</sup> Alex Fang, “U.S. Lawmakers Target Confucius Institutes in Schools,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, 1 March 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/US-lawmakers-target-Confucius-Institutes-in-schools>.

<sup>22</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Regular Press Conference on February 28, 2019,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, 28 February 2019, <http://bd.china-embassy.org/eng/fyrth/t1641847.htm>.

the “Washington Consensus.” Ramo’s main idea is that unlike the Washington Consensus with its doctrinal rigidity of liberal traditions and which advocates financial reforms, economic opening, and political liberalization to promote economic growth, China has found a unique way of modernization through innovation and experimentation under existing conditions. Ramo argues that China’s path to development can provide developing countries with a model of economic growth and relative political stability.<sup>23</sup> Ramo certainly is not alone in his fascination with the China model. Even Francis Fukuyama, the well-known American political philosopher who predicted free-market liberal democracy would become the world’s “final form of human government,” admitted in 2011 that “the first decade of the 21[st] century has seen a dramatic reversal of fortune in the relative prestige of different political and economic models.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet others scholars are not so optimistic about the China model. Suisheng Zhao, director of the Center for China-US Cooperation at the University of Denver, argued in 2010 that the China model was unlikely to be durable or to displace the Western model of modernization in the long run. The attractiveness of the China model, he suggests, comes with “the peculiar historical developments of the recent decade,” including the global financial crisis that hit the West’s economic leadership. The China model also has some pitfalls: the pragmatic model means that it lacks moral appeal, and it cannot effectively handle many “human development” issues at home and abroad. It is simply too early to judge the success of the China model as it has not been tested by any obstacles, he states.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the past decade, the debate over the viability and attractiveness of the China model has persisted, both in the West and in China.<sup>26</sup> The ongoing debate strengthens the insecurity of the United States—making more visible the concern about a powerful China that intends to replace its global leadership—and drives the United States to think the global state of democracy is endangered by the rise of an authoritarian China.

### **Promoter of authoritarianism?**

Judging from China’s past rhetoric and actions, it is fair to conclude that China is not a fan of Western democracy. However, does that automatically make it a promoter of authoritarianism? Is it actively trying to undermine the state of democracy worldwide? To prove China’s ambition to undermine global democracy, analysts often draw from examples of China’s actions that are not in line with the norms of democracy, as detailed in the first section. This section refutes three often-heard arguments that claim China to be a motivated

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<sup>23</sup> Joshua C. Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/244.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Fukuyama, “US Democracy Has Little to Teach China,” *Financial Times*, 18 January 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/cb6af6e8-2272-11e0-b6a2-00144feab49a>.

<sup>25</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “The China Model: Can It Replace the Western Model of Modernization?” *Journal of Contemporary China* 19 (65): 419–436. <http://gpepsm.paginas.ufsc.br/files/2014/11/The-China-Model.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> According to Suisheng Zhao, the China model debate has emerged in three waves since the 2000s. The first wave came with the publication of Ramo’s piece, a “Beijing Consensus,” in 2004; the second wave rose when China successfully mobilized the entire nation and its resources to host the Beijing Olympics and pull through the global financial crisis in 2008; and the third wave surged after President Xi Jinping assumed leadership and promoted the concept of the Chinese Dream. See more at Suisheng Zhao, “Whither the China Model: Revisiting the Debate,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26 (103):1–17, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670564.2016.1206277?needAccess=true>.

actor seeking to undermine the global state of democracy. It contends that China, at least for now, may not attempt to undercut the global state of democracy by intentionally engaging in anti-democracy movements or sponsoring authoritarianism overseas.

*Myth 1: China's moves overseas is an extension of its moves at home, in which it continues to work against the norm of democracy.* Domestically, the Chinese government may attempt to weaken political rights and civil liberties and silence the pro-democracy voices, but that does not mean that it works against democracy abroad. Furthermore, especially in recent years, Chinese foreign policy has not been completely shielded from domestic popular pressure. In fact, recent studies have found that there is a dynamic interaction between public opinion, mass mobilization, and the Chinese party-state in the context of Chinese foreign policy. In his book *Strong Society, Smart State* on anti-Japanese sentiment in China, James Reilly, a political scientist at the University of Sydney, indicates that while Chinese public mobilization could affect the government's actions and discourse, the Chinese government has proven capable of flexibly exerting a mix of responsiveness and repression to channel people's emotions.<sup>27</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss in her book *Powerful Patriots* similarly maintains that China's leaders have utilized a mixed approach of repression and tolerance in dealing with nationalist demonstrations in China: it selectively tolerates nationalist demonstrations to reinforce a tough diplomatic stand and represses protests to show its willingness to negotiate a solution in diplomatic bargaining.<sup>28</sup>

*Myth 2: China supports non-democratic regimes overseas.* As described above, out of the top 10 recipient countries of China's ODA, nine countries are marked as "not free" or "partly free" in 2017 based on Freedom House's standards. But there is still one free country, Ghana, that has made it to the list. In fact, both China and the United States offer official aid to a mix of free and unfree regimes. In fiscal year 2018, the US government planned to offer foreign assistance funds of 25.8 billion dollars. Among the top 10 recipient countries, only one country, Israel, was "free" in 2017 in terms of political rights and civil liberties by Freedom House's standards (see Figure 4 below).<sup>29</sup> This indicates that while China does not always favor non-democratic regimes for official aid, neither does Western democracy always support democratic political systems. Therefore, ODA support for countries cannot be read as support for their regimes. In addition, when analyzing the sectoral distribution of ODA, AidData research lab has found that, instead of focusing on promoting a certain type of political system through ODA, China's ODA has a "clear emphasis on infrastructure," with projects devoted to transportation, energy generation, industry, mining, construction, and communications.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> James Reilly, *Strong Society, Smart State: The Rise of Public Opinion in China's Japan Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>28</sup> Jessica Chen Weiss, *Powerful Patriots: Nationalist Protest in China's Foreign Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> "Which Countries Receive U.S. Government Foreign Assistance?" ForeignAssistance.gov., 10 November 2017. <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/>; Puddington and Roylance, *Freedom in the World 2017*.

<sup>30</sup> "China's Global Development Footprint," AidData. <https://www.aiddata.org/china-official-finance#first-panel>.

**FIGURE 4.** Top 10 Recipients of US ODA by the Level of Political Freedom, FY 2018

Level of Freedom	Country
Not Free (n=5)	Egypt, Afghanistan, Uganda, Zambia, Iraq
Partly Free (n=4)	Jordan, Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria
Free (n=1)	Israel

Source: ForeignAssistance.gov (FY 2018) and the Freedom House (2017)

Note: Level of freedom is assigned according to the data from the Freedom House in 2017.

*Myth 3: China tries to spread authoritarianism through foreign political influence activities.* China's growing political influence activities overseas have led many democratic countries to think that China is motivated to undermine their political systems and promote authoritarianism. While China's influence activities may adversely impact local democratic systems and boost the appeal of the Chinese political system to some, those effects may not be a deliberate aim of these activities. What, then, has compelled China to engage in political influence activities abroad? Currently, China's political influence campaigns can be divided into two categories based on purpose: activities for defensive reasons and activities for offensive reasons. In both cases, China tries to mobilize overseas Chinese communities and Chinese-language media, key officials from foreign governments, and think tanks, as well as academic and business communities, to achieve its goals.

In pursuing defensive activities, China only seems to interfere in affairs of local civil society, government, or overseas Chinese communities when there is "a situation that directly affects China's political interests." Such situations include activities of whistleblowers who try to highlight malfunctioning of the Chinese government and overseas campaigns from what China internally calls "the five poisonous groups" (*wu du* 五毒), which are perceived to pose threats to the stability of the rule of the CCP.<sup>31</sup> For example, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, in October 2017, when the Hudson Institute, a Washington D.C. think tank, scheduled a talk with Guo Wengui (Miles Kwok), a Chinese whistleblower and fugitive engaged in an international campaign to expose corruption in the top echelons of the CCP and China's espionage activities overseas, the Chinese embassy pressured them to cancel, threatening the visas of Hudson experts planning to visit China.<sup>32</sup> Two months earlier, several publications from Cambridge University Press were reportedly asked by the Chinese government to censor articles and book reviews related to Tibet, the Cultural Revolution, Xinjiang, Falun Gong, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> According to the website of Consulate-General of the PRC in Gothenburg, the five poisonous groups include members of Falun Gong, which China calls an "evil cult" (*xie jiao* 邪教); Tibetan separatists; Uyghur activists; Taiwanese independence supporters; and pro-democracy campaigners. Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Gothenburg, "Weishime shuo falungong shi xiejiao" (Why Do We Call Falun Gong an Evil Cult?), 28 September 2005, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cggb/chn/xnyfgk/t214104.htm>; Anne-Marie Brady Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping," 8; I.C. Smith and Nigel West, *Historical Dictionary of Chinese Intelligence* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 42.

<sup>32</sup> Cezary Podkul and Kate O'Keeffe, "Chinese Fugitive Guo Wengui's D.C. Event Postponed," *Wall Street Journal*, 3 October 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-fugitive-guo-wenguis-d-c-event-postponed-1507074391>.

<sup>33</sup> Arch Puddington and Tyler Roylance, *Freedom in the World 2017*.

As for offensive influence activities, China's growing confidence under Xi Jinping's leadership has prompted it to seek greater international influence in shaping global public opinion and to increase its international presence as a way to satisfy its desire for "international prestige and recognition as a great power" and reviving national pride.<sup>34</sup> To promote Chinese culture and traditions, China had established 513 Confucius Institutes and 1,073 Confucius Classrooms across 140 countries by the end of 2016, with more than 1.55 million classroom students and 597,000 online students.<sup>35</sup> To "build a bridge between China and other countries around the world," China encourages political engagement of the Chinese community overseas, in the hope that the overseas Chinese can help shape opinion favorable to the CCP.<sup>36</sup> Recently, media have continued to report that several prominent Australian-Chinese businessmen with connections to the Chinese government have made substantial contributions to Australian politicians and political parties.<sup>37</sup> These are just a few such activities. These influence activities certainly seem troubling to many, but they are not necessarily aimed at promoting authoritarianism. As Clive Hamilton, a professor at Charles Sturt University in Australia with a forthcoming book on Chinese foreign influence has commented, Chinese influence activities are "promiscuous," but "they are not interested in particular policies, they are interested in influence."<sup>38</sup>

### **China's impact on global democracy**

If, for the time being, China does not intend to undermine the global state of democracy and shows no missionary urge to promote authoritarianism, does that mean that Beijing has nothing to do with the current pushback against democracy? Does Beijing have any impact on global state of democracy? Premeditated or not, China's overseas activities in defending the CCP regime and improving its international status, along with its growing global influence, do have an adverse effect on democracy worldwide.

How China's overseas activities harm global democracy differs according to the regime types of targeted countries. To existing democracies, China's alleged political interference activities have the potential to curtail the integrity of the country's democratic system and threatens its sovereignty. According to Anne-Marie Brady, the effect of China's political influence activities on New Zealand has been "profound," as it directly affects "the rights

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<sup>34</sup> Denny Roy, *Return of the dragon: Rising China and regional security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 19-20.

<sup>35</sup> *Institute Annual Development Report 2016* (Beijing: Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), 2017), 3, <http://www.hanban.org/report/2016.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> "Jijirongru yonggankaituo haiwaihuaren yingde gengduo shijiezhangsheng" (Overseas Chinese Winning Applause from The World through Active Political Engagement), *People's Daily*, 21 September 2017, <http://www.zyztb.gov.cn/tzb2010/S1815/201709/491291f72ea644d6a9944c336db48381.shtml>; Jamil Anderlini, "China-born New Zealand MP Probed by Spy Agency," *Financial Times*, 13 September 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/64991ca6-9796-11e7-a652-cde3f882dd7b>.

<sup>37</sup> Nick McKenzie et al., "ASIO Warns Political Parties Over Foreign Donations," *ABC*, 6 June 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-05/asio-warns-political-parties-over-foreign-donations/8590162>.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Maley, "Chinese Influence at All Levels of Australian Politics, Says Clive Hamilton," *Australian*, 14 November 2017, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/foreign-affairs/chinese-influence-at-all-levels-of-australian-politics-says-clive-hamilton/news-story/77be3faf6ab6f40738fc5d7d5897d78b>.

of Chinese-New Zealanders to freedom of speech, association, and religion.”<sup>39</sup> To countries still building their own political system and development path, China’s emphasis on pursuing a policy of neutrality toward other countries’ regime types under the leadership of former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao compromises Western countries’ efforts in overseas democracy promotion.<sup>40</sup> In 2009, at a press conference on the sidelines of the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Ministerial Conference, former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said that neither the Washington Consensus nor the Beijing Model will suit Africa’s development path, which should be “based on its own conditions and follow its own path, that is, the African Model.”<sup>41</sup> In doing so, China is able to make friends around the world, avoid an ideological conflict with the West, and steer the international community away from being pro-democratic.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, China need not bother actively promoting authoritarianism. By the power of its own example, China has shown that democracy is not a precondition for prosperity and social wellbeing.<sup>43</sup> Its continued economic success may naturally convince non-democratic countries or countries still in the process of building their own political systems, such as South Sudan, that Beijing’s political model is a viable alternative to Western democracy.<sup>44</sup>

Apart from economic development, however, does China succeed in winning the hearts and minds of its own people? According to the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, the annual global trust survey revealed that while only 40% of Americans say they can trust the government “to do what is right,” 86% of Chinese express their trust in government.<sup>45</sup> To explain the high level of trust from the Chinese people in government, Bruce Dickson (2016), a professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, in his book *The Dictator’s Dilemma*, indicates that by skillfully utilizing a variety of policy tools, such as repression, propaganda, and economic development, the Chinese government is able to secure support and trust from the Chinese people. Chinese people’s high level of trust in government may offer another reason for leaders of other authoritarian states to continue to maintain their power over people, and China may lead “a circle of authoritarian states that pick up techniques of rule from one another.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Anne-Marie Brady Brady, “Looking for Points in Common While Facing up to Differences: A New Model for New Zealand-China Relations,” Research Project Policy Briefs for Small States and the New Security Environment (SSANSE) project, 14 November 2017, <http://libguides.nps.edu/citation/chicagoad#report-gov>.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s Challenge,” in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, and Christopher Walker (eds.), *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 2016), 34-36.

<sup>41</sup> “Wen Jiabao zai zhongfei hezuo luntan buzhangji huiyi qijian juhang jizhehui” (Wen Jiabao Held a Press Conference During the Ministerial Conference of the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation), Xinhuanet, 10 November 2009, [http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2009-11/10/content\\_1460418.htm](http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2009-11/10/content_1460418.htm).

<sup>42</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s Challenge,” *Journal of Democracy* 26 (1): 165.

<sup>43</sup> Aijan Sharshenove and Gordon Crawford, “Undermining Western Democracy Promotion in Central Asia: China’s Countervailing Influences, Powers, and Impact,” *Central Asian Survey* 36 (4): 453-472.

<sup>44</sup> Lily Kuo, “Beijing Is Cultivating the Next Generation of African Elites by Training Them in China,” *Quartz*, 14 December 2017, <https://qz.com/1119447/china-is-training-africas-next-generation-of-leaders/>.

<sup>45</sup> “2019 Edelman Trust Barometer: Global Report,” Edelman. [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-03/2019\\_Edelman\\_Trust\\_Barometer\\_Global\\_Report.pdf?utm\\_source=website&utm\\_medium=global\\_report&utm\\_campaign=downloads](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-03/2019_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report.pdf?utm_source=website&utm_medium=global_report&utm_campaign=downloads).

<sup>46</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s Challenge,” in *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy*, 30-31.



## China's Future under A Powerful Leader

China's lack of intention to proactively challenge the global state of democracy for now does not guarantee that it will not take up the challenge in the future. As Xi Jinping has consolidated power, he has made clear that China needs a greater international position *commensurate* with *its* growth. In his speech at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP National Congress, Xi Jinping clearly stated that this is an era that “will see China moving closer to the center stage and making greater contributions to mankind.”<sup>47</sup> Then the question is: what will this contribution be?

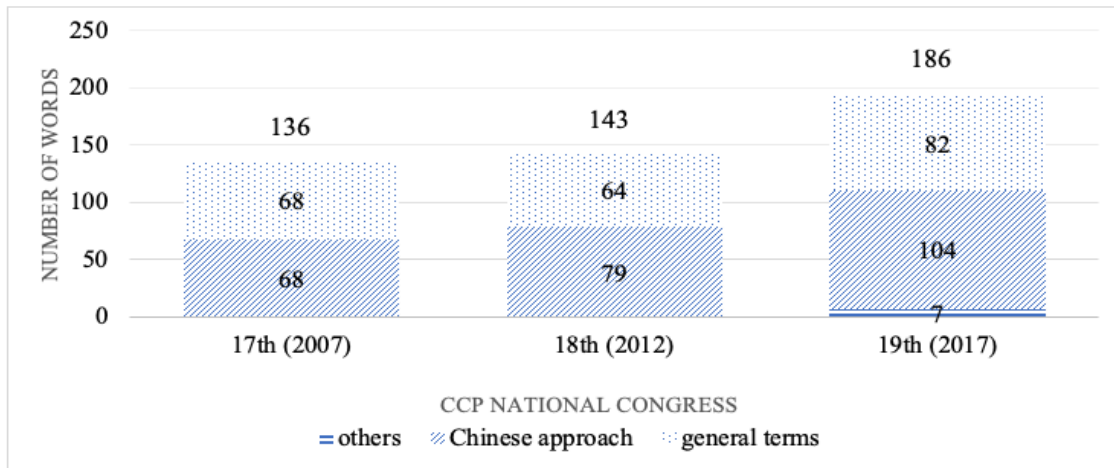
Xi has made clear that foreign models are not applicable in realizing the Chinese Dream. We also have seen in Xi's first five-year term that there is a heightened demand for ideological conformity and tightened control over political discourse. Although what exactly China would like to promote is still unclear, China's past approach to international politics—the ideologically neutral and flexible strategy—may not be in play for long. Instead, China seems eager to promote a “China brand” to emphasize Chinese exceptionalism. Compared to the past two political reports of the CCP National Congress, the term “China/Chinese” (*zhongguo* 中国) in the 2017 report appears 1.3 times more than that in the 2012 report and 1.4 times than in 2007 (see Figure 5 below). In particular, in the 2017 report, policy approaches with “Chinese characteristics” (*zhongguo tese* 中国特色) were repeatedly cited, including “Chinese wisdom” (*zhongguo zhihui* 中国智慧), the “Chinese approach” (*zhongguo fangan* 中国方案), and the political system of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (*zhongguotese shehuizhuyi* 中国特色社会主义). If China were to promote its ideas, how would it do so? Whether China will actively promote an alternative to Western democracy is unknown. However, as its global influence increases with its rise of power, it may not be necessary for China to take the initiative; instead, as Henry Kissinger once said, China may “let others come to seek them.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress,” Xinhuanet, 3 November 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c\\_136725942.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm).

<sup>48</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 17.

**FIGURE 5.** “China/Chinese” Mentioned in the CCP National Congress Political Reports, 2007–17



Source: CCP National Congress political reports, 2007–2017

Note: This table lists the number of times the term “China/Chinese” (*zhongguo* 中国) appears in the three most recent political reports of the Chinese Party Congress. It further analyzes the phrases preceding or succeeding the term and categories them by the nature of the complete expression.

- 1) *General terms* refer to terms such as “Chinese people” (*zhongguoren* 中国人), and “Chinese Communist Party” (*zhongguo gongchandang* 中国共产党).
- 2) *Chinese approach* refers to policy approaches with “Chinese characteristics” (*zhongguotese* 中国特色), such as “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” (*zhongguotese shehuizhuyi* 中国特色社会主义), and the Chinese Dream.
- 3) *Others* refers to specific Chinese policy goals (only in the 19<sup>th</sup> report), such as “Beautiful China” (*meili zhongguo* 美丽中国), and “Healthy China” (*jiankang zhongguo* 健康中国).

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