The Myth of the Chinese Authoritarian Model

By John H.S. Aberg

With the United States under President Donald Trump appearing to retreat from Washington’s traditional role as a global promoter of democracy, fears that China under President Xi Jinping is set to make gains as a global champion of Beijing’s brand of authoritarianism are gaining currency in many quarters.

John H.S. Aberg argues that those fears are grossly misplaced.

CHINA’S RISE HAS long been represented as a threat. After the US-China rapprochement in the 1970s, the Maoist ideological threat gradually dwindled until it was supplanted by a transfigured “China threat” thesis, which gained strength after the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis. With China’s rapid economic development and military modernization, the adversarial logic started to revolve around economic and military threat discourses. Recently, however, the notion of China as an ideological threat has been resurrected. The notion of “China’s illiberal challenge” is returning with a vengeance, and with President Xi Jinping in power, Beijing is promoting authoritarianism and leading a third reverse wave of de-democratization. In other words, with China’s rise, authoritarianism is going global and challenging the liberal world order. It is a nicely plotted tragic narrative, but does it resonate with reality?

THEIDEOLOGICAL CHINA ‘THREAT’
The myth of the so-called Beijing consensus as not only an economic model but also a political one ready for international export continues to thrive. “In terms of political values,” as Joseph Nye put it more than 10 years ago, the Beijing consensus “has become more popular than the previously dominant ‘Washington consensus.’” Scholars argue that the “dissemination of the Beijing consensus bestows upon ‘Chinese-style socialism’ greater international recognition, not only as an economic development model but also as a new model of a political system and social structure.”

Others are more skeptical about there being a Chinese model in the first place; about China obstructing the promotion of democracy by the US and EU; about the diffusion of Chinese norms; about China’s ideological commitment to create a new “authoritarian international;” and, finally, about the effectiveness of China’s soft power.

Yet, after the Chinese Communist Party’s 19th National Congress in October last year, and with US President Donald Trump supposedly surrendering US global leadership, the message of Chinese authoritarian influence reverberates with ever greater force, giving rise to expectations of increasing Chinese political assertiveness and scenarios of a post-American order. Four factors account for the understanding of China as an intentional authoritarian promoter.

First, China’s official “discursive power” strategy, which arguably aims “to create a new political model, rather than just follow the established order” — as expressed in China’s calls for a new type of international relations and a community of shared destiny — demonstrates China’s international political intentions.

Second, the strategic political shift from Deng Xiaoping’s dictum of “keeping a low profile” to Xi Jinping’s emphasis on “striving for achievement” involves a foreign policy move from self-restraint toward a more active pursuit of leadership.

Third, appeals to political, cultural and civilizational diversity coupled with a strict interpretation of the Westphalian norms of sovereignty and non-interference indicate, on one hand, a foreign policy that does not seek to impose or spread its political model to others, yet, on the other, serve as “counter-norms” to liberal democracy.

Fourth, if popular narratives about Trump surrendering US global leadership in the promotion of democracy are true, then it leaves the center stage open for China. This begs the question: Is China an authoritarian norm entrepreneur?

PROMOTING AUTHORITARIANISM
A cursory glance at the mainstream literature in the field shows that it will not be easy for Chinese actors to become authoritarian norm entrepreneurs. In terms of norm diffusion, three stages are identified: norm emergence, norm acceptance/norm cascade, and norm internalization.
In the first stage, non-governmental organizations, social movements and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) are considered the central norm-diffusing actors. Chinese NGOs spreading authoritarian norms are very rare, and the influence of Beijing’s Confucius Institutes, which do not fit into the NGO category, is greatly exaggerated. Chinese social movements are more a threat to the Chinese regime than carriers and promoters of authoritarian norms abroad. The most aspiring, educated and rich Chinese prefer to migrate and enjoy the fruits of liberal individualism in the Anglophone.1

Meanwhile, Chinese-led IGOs such as the BRICS institutions and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have embedded the Bretton Woods system into their institutional frameworks and adopted its best practices. They are not arenas for Chinese authoritarian norm diffusion. That Brazil, India or South Africa would adopt a Chinese political model is so unlikely that it is even hard to imagine. The influence of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization is worth considering, yet the “Shanghai Spirit” does not preach Chinese-style transformational diplomacy. It is not about an ideological crusade, but rather what we could term “authoritarian fortification” — necessary to protect against the universal liberal individualism in the Anglophone.2

China’s presence in Ethiopia and Angola (another African state ostensibly in China’s hands), has not made it more difficult for the EU and US to implement their strategies to promote democracy. Instead, it is domestic-level factors, and particularly the issue of regime survival, that affects whether governments are willing to work with the EU and the US.3 Zimbabwe, the country that perhaps has gone furthest in its emulation of China, has done so more because of sanctions-induced necessity than ideological conviction, which illuminates the challenges of Chinese authoritarian promotion more than anything else.4 And following the ousting of Robert Mugabe, the new leadership has declared that it is ready to do business with the world. Other research demonstrates how China-Africa narratives often disregard the agency of African political elites — agency that certainly can go both ways, but that clearly indicates that African states are no mere puppets with Chinese strings attached.

Venezuela is another example of a state enticed by the Chinese model, but that example also misses the mark. The Venezuelan regime under Hugo Chavez was, in fact, largely democratic, although the goal of its revolutionary ideology indeed was to end liberal bourgeois democracy. Yet this was not an attempt to follow a so-called Chinese model, but an endogenous process inspired by a long history of radical Latin American social and political movements. Perhaps China has an interest in propping up Nicolas Maduro’s failing regime, but this has no effect on liberal democracy, because Venezuela serves more as a horror story than a success story in the eyes of the world.

**READING REALITY AS IT IS**

The arguments about authoritarian diffusion are often supported by a power shift logic: “Countrynorms are thus grounded in changing power balances, as the post-Cold War era of US hegemony gives way to a more multipolar world — a shift often summed up [not without irony] as the democratization of international relations.”5 6 Yet such arguments grossly underestimate existing global power structures, US influence in Latin America, the Asia-Pacific and Africa, and French neocolonial schemes in Francophone. Domination is not what you “make of it.”

Scholars and commentators who cry wolf on China cannot read the signs of the times. Overall, the existence of a third reverse wave of de-democratization lacks empirical support, as does the specific claim that a China model of authoritarian politics is diffusing across the world.7 Instead, Beijing pretty much supports anyone who will support China, in line with a simple quid pro quo logic of transactional foreign relations that is best depicted as self-serving, in terms of regime survival and development goals, rather than being driven by an ideological commitment to create a new “authoritarian international.”8 9 Democracy is indeed facing global challenges, but alarmist views about a worldwide crisis of democracy are off the mark. This is not to deny a gradual erosion of civil liberties in many countries, but instead of looking to China, we should turn our gaze to ourselves.