

Opinion – The Civilisation Narrative: China’s Grand Strategy to Rule the World

Written by Mangesh Sawant

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MANGESH SAWANT, MAY 10 2020

China’s entry into the international system was supposed to usher in an era of cooperation between the liberal order and the communist party. Instead, Beijing, through its foreign and military policy, is planning to establish an international ‘civilizational narrative’ which is a superior, united and stable governance system. Till the end of the Warring States period, China was not considered as a single country. The ‘Warring States’ period, was a time of social and political changes as China was separated into seven states that were at perpetual war with each other. The period was characterized by turmoil, instability, conflict, disunity and warfare between local rulers. The first dynasty to bring the region under a single government was the Qin dynasty in 221 BC. The Qin dynasty unified the warring states and brought stability through military, manipulation and coercive diplomacy. Today China views the international system as warring states characterized by failed states, ethnic conflicts, inter and intrastate conflicts, fragmentation, instability and power politics. China wants to replicate Qin’s policies and strategies by converting the democratic order and the compliant authoritarian regimes to its vassal states through soft power and One Belt, One Road (OBOR). China is planning to export the soft version of its communist ideology.

China’s thousand-year objective is to overthrow the democratic order through peaceful and divisive means. China is spreading its narrative through coercive diplomacy, OBOR, propaganda and disinformation campaigns legitimizing Chinese authoritarian governance shrouded in historical values and ideals. Its objective is to alter democratic governance, norms and the established rule-based world order and replace it with the Chinese version of an illiberal order and authoritarian rule. China is making inroads in democratic countries like Poland, Greece, the United Kingdom and Italy by buying or investing in companies and critical infrastructure like ports and bidding for 5G network contracts. Chinese companies doing business overseas have links to the communist party or the People’s Liberation Army. Through these companies and 5G technology, China will be able to collect and harvest intelligence for diplomatic and trade negotiations, launch cyber warfare against critical infrastructure and classified government networks, gather confidential information from companies, launch disinformation campaigns and understand warfare plans and military preparedness of host states. The United States of America (US) has banned Huawei as the country considers the company a threat to national security. Many countries worldwide are likely to prohibit Chinese companies from investing in critical areas like defense and telecommunications.

Coercive and opaque instruments of diplomacy have been an integral part of China’s foreign policy. China engages in information warfare by concealing, misrepresenting and fabricating information, and spreading false news. Under President Xi Jinping’s leadership, the foreign service, military, academia, media and the business community are all working to promote the civilizational narrative. China does not accept international rules; instead, it works to undermine and replace the liberal order with rules conforming to its interests. The communist party is working towards a China-centric world.

China’s foreign policy is devoid of transparency and shared values. Chinese foreign ministry speaks about peaceful coexistence but on the other hand, violates international laws and conventions. China is constructing military infrastructure in the South China Sea, a region also claimed by Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Indonesia. China has a sinister plot as a part of its foreign policy. Its strategy has been to create a crisis or a dispute with a country, play the victim card, blame the other country and then seek concessions. When the country launches a diplomatic

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protest against China for violating international law, China responds with hostility. In response, the communist party launches a vitriolic campaign against the country through various means like economic coercion and inciting Chinese citizens to boycott goods imported from the country.

China's strategy is to export soft power through OBOR and nation-building in poor countries and authoritarian states. As a quid pro quo, China expects their support against the democratic order in international and multilateral organizations. China's allies are authoritarian and socialist countries like Cambodia, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Venezuela and Serbia. China has been selling surveillance technologies and techniques to authoritarian regimes, thereby strengthening the autocratic rule. Authoritarian regimes are far more amenable and open to China's false narratives and economic assistance. China seeks smaller nations from Africa and, Central and Eastern Europe to provide legitimacy to its manipulative and coercive diplomacy while blocking a democratic Taiwan from international organizations.

The international democratic order is led by the US, whose members include European states, India, Japan and Australia. Countries which view China as a common threat are also a part of the democratic order. These include semi-democratic countries like Singapore and Vietnam. It is on the democratic side that productivity, inventions and advances in technology take place. The rule of law is guaranteed by an institutional framework of a vibrant constitution, free and a vigilant press, free and fair elections, democratic military, independent judiciary and parliament and presidential form of democracy. The Democratic order guarantees collective security and complies with international laws, rules and regulations. Democratically elected governments are responsible and accountable to the people. In democracies, people are governed rather than ruled. Libertarian values are ingrained in the democratic world. As compared to communist ideology, the democratic institutional frameworks are a potent binding factor for a nation-state. This democratic framework is absent in China and its civilizational narrative.

Throughout history, world powers have been economically and militarily self-sufficient. While China qualifies as the second largest economy in the world, it lacks the indigenous military and commercial manufacturing capacity. China is involved in intellectual property thefts and technology transfers from multinational organizations investing in China, stealing military technologies from the US and Europe and buying technology intensive companies in Europe. China's economy is dependent on the US, Europe and India. Democratic countries will stop doing business with China if the communist party exports the civilizational narrative. This will have an enormous impact on China's foreign investments into China and other business interests, like OBOR. China's financial aid for propping up the authoritarian regimes may lead to a collapse of the Chinese economy.

Democratic countries will not subscribe to China's authoritarianism and manipulative politics. Poorer, semi-authoritarian and socialist regimes will be the ones falling in the ambit of China's propaganda machinery. The ruling class of the authoritarian regimes are amenable to cooperating with China. Given an option of electing their leaders in authoritarian states an overwhelming majority of the electorate will vote for democracy. The credibility and the trust between the government and the governed that democratic order brings, outclasses the authoritative, intrusive and a secretive form of Chinese governance. World Wars were fought to establish democracy and peaceful coexistence. The Post-1945 era saw the establishment of the democratic order, collective security and international organizations. Yet, there were islands of authoritarian rule amidst an ocean of democracies. East European and South American nations experienced the coercive methods of authoritarian rule. People's preference for a democratic order led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Historically, leaders in the US and India have fought for independence from colonial rulers. In the 21st century, leaders have been replaced by powerful nation-states led by democratic societies with robust militaries and international organizations to defend against the possible onslaught of authoritarianism.

Post-World War II, authoritarian regimes have resorted to all possible methods from exporting soft power to invasions but have been thwarted by the democratic order. US exceptionalism has guaranteed international security in the post-cold war era. The US leads the liberal international order based on shared values. Global peace has been maintained by the presence and projection of US power around the world. The two most likely contenders for expansion are North Korea and China. Both nations have expansionist inclinations but have not invaded their neighbors due to overwhelming US military superiority. In 1990 the world community led by the US responded militarily when Saddam

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Hussein invaded Kuwait. In the 20th century, authoritarian countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and South Africa turned democratic. Since 1945 the world has not experienced a democratic country turning into an authoritarian state.

The Chinese civilizational narrative, however, cannot be stretched beyond its limited value. This limited value may be accepted by Venezuela, Pakistan or Zimbabwe but will be rejected by members of the democratic order. Even China’s allies prefer autonomy in internal affairs of their country. China’s allies would want to exercise power and not be governed from Beijing. Soft power cannot hide the unscrupulous intentions of China. Henry Kissinger, in his pivotal book ‘Diplomacy,’ writes that civilizations are not permanent in history. Throughout history, democracy has endured various critical narratives, historical events and the upheavals of the international system. The world community will reject a world order defined by deceit and conceit.

About the author:

Mangesh Sawant has a Masters degree from Columbia University where he concentrated in international security policy, is a subject-matter expert on military and homeland security. Mangesh has more than 17 years of experience in military strategy and tactics, weapons systems analysis, studying warfare, global security, country and political risks, policy analysis and formulation and developing case studies and lessons learned. Mangesh’s articles are published at National Interest and Small Wars Journal.