Interview – Chris Ogden

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/10/28/interview-chris-ogden/

Chris Ogden is a Senior Lecturer in Asian Affairs at the University of St Andrews, where he teaches on the international relations of China, India and the broader Indo-Pacific region. His research interests concern the interplay between foreign and domestic policy influences in East Asia (primarily China) and South Asia (primarily India), Hindu nationalism and the BJP, emergent great powers, world order and global authoritarianism. Chris' most recent books concern *The Authoritarian Century: China's Rise and the Demise of the Liberal International System* (Bristol UP, 2022), and an edited 15 Chapter book on *Global India: The Pursuit of Influence and Status* (Routledge, 2023). He has published numerous peer-reviewed articles on Asian international affairs, as well as several policy briefs, provides comment to various global media bodies on Asian security issues, and gives myriad public talks.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The biggest debates from my perspective within contemporary IR revolve around major changes to the international order. Changes to the balance of power between the leading actors underpin this dynamic (mainly China versus the United States but also with an emergent India having an impact), as well as how these shifts are resulting in fundamental changes between regions. The clearest example here is the continued ascendancy of Asia, and the relative decline of the West, as more and more economic activity is being focused upon the Indo-Pacific region. The steady translation of this economic power into military, institutional and diplomatic power is speeding up this shift, and indicating the potential curtailment of the Western-led liberal international order.

Apart from making us think about what world order actually is, who decides its parameters, and how cultural values and identities impact upon these terms of reference, there also appears to be a clear authoritarian tilt occurring. Most often we associate this with China and Russia, but more and more we can see domestic autocratic proclivities being apparent in established democracies from the US and India to the UK and Japan. In my most recent research, these simultaneous currents are not only debasing democracy globally but are signalling a wider convergence around authoritarianism. In time, I believe this will see a *Pax Autocratica* surmounting *Pax Democratica*, thus heralding a new form of world order that is, in the main, China-centric and China-inspired.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In my research and teaching I try to keep an as open a mind as possible concerning how I regard and analyse IR. Often this is to the consternation of my students, but we should remember that IR theory is a useful toolbox that is able to provide us with very differing perspectives on the same issue. The book that really shaped my thinking is this regard was Peter Katzenstein's *The Culture of National Security* that argued for understanding and appreciating state-specific, and identity-based, viewpoints on how security and foreign policy are formulated and implemented. Robert Jervis' *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* was also highly formative for me.

It is also vital to remember that the world is in considerable flux as relative power balances shift and change. Underpinning this perspective is that in recent years, we have had many totally unexpected events such as the election of Donald Trump as US President, the UK's Brexit referendum and the Covid-19 pandemic. The invasion of

Interview – Chris Ogden

Written by E-International Relations

Ukraine by Russia was also something that appeared to counteract much teaching in strategic studies, which had claimed that conquest was now effectively taboo. We would all do well to remember these events and not take any prevalent conditions in IR as given or inalienable. Everything is in flux and we need to always think as such – by having such flexibility and open-ness, IR as a discipline can be much enhanced/improved.

What are the key values of China's authoritarianism? What appeal does it have for countries adopting it?

Broadly, authoritarianism in China can be characterised by the following factors. Firstly, a lack of political pluralism, with political discourse being typified by highly limited political participation and the domination of politics by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Secondly, China possesses a legal system based upon rule by law, that the government applies to its population but not to itself. This contrasts with systems based upon rule of law that have an independent judiciary, fair and open rules that uniformly apply to all citizens, as well as a transparent and predictable legal process that holds ruling elites accountable. Thirdly, China has a moribund civil society that is unable to adequately lobby for national causes, and fourthly a lack of truly nationwide democratic elections and universal suffrage. Finally, there is a high degree of control that deeply limits and constrains the political, economic and social lives of the population, which includes Beijing's ability to deploy highly-equipped security forces nationally and a system of mass state-led surveillance.

When coupled with China's incredible economic success, which fuses with the above elements to form an "authoritarian-capitalist" economic model, Beijing acts as a powerful example for other authoritarian countries to adopt, especially those that wish to modernise and develop. China has also arguably used such a system to largely curtail dissent against the CCP (including in Xinjiang and Tibet, but also nationally via the Social Credit System) and to eradicate all forms of political and social opposition in order to stay in power for the last 70 plus years. Beijing's selling of related surveillance technologies to other countries bolsters such an export. Overall, this phenomenon is also providing a clear questioning and a clear alternative to the international liberal world order.

In The Authoritarian Century, you argue that the world is on the verge of a capitulation to China's preferred authoritarian order, which implies giving up or surrendering. How have you observed this capitulation?

Much of the writing of the book occurred during the throes of the pandemic, which as it progressed showed how many countries were willing to implement strict social and economic controls upon their populations. Across the great powers, mainly the US, Russia and India, as discussed in this book, there were also autocratic currents that were becoming ever-more visible. In each of them, political pluralism came under attack, as were rights to protest, to free speech and to free assembly, as well as more evidence of the judiciary being used as a political tool by those in office. All of these factors reduced the collective strength of these countries' civil societies, have undercut their claims to universal suffrage and have been accompanied by greater surveillance.

The vital conclusion I came to, was to note that democracy and authoritarianism are not exclusive or binary terms but are actually connected upon a single continuum. As such, democratic countries can simultaneously display authoritarian tendencies (and vice versa). From this, as Western countries evidence democratic back-sliding and more autocratic propensities, the overall balance of this continuum is tipping, perhaps irrevocably, towards authoritarianism. Western countries that are engaging in autocratic practices, no matter how small, are thus essentially legitimising wider authoritarian practices in China and elsewhere, and can therefore be seen to be facilitating and, moreover, capitulating to Beijing's preferred authoritarian-based world order.

What responsibility, if any, do Western democracies have for rising authoritarianism around the globe?

What is also of note within these debates is that many of the core elements of the current liberal international order are in themselves authoritarian. The US's pursuit of hegemony, a key pillar of this order, is essentially anti-pluralistic. Thus, Washington's use of military power projection to stabilize and strengthen the US's desired international order, intrinsically does not tolerate any peer-competitors in its quest for domination. Such a strategy, in much the same way as the US's unquestioning international imposition of universal human rights, a neo-liberal economic model and

Interview – Chris Ogden

Written by E-International Relations

US dominated institutions (from the IMF and the World Bank, to NATO), is intrinsically authoritarian in that it rejects political and economic difference, desires absolute control and fundamentally aims to not allow any rivals to emerge that could possibly challenge its supremacy.

The US has deployed such a mindset since 1801 (against Ottoman Tripolitania, which was the first attempt by Washington to replace a hostile foreign government) until the present day, and politically has been involved in myriad attempts at regime change. Despite assertions that democracy is an important pillar for a more non-violent system, the US intervened at least 81 times (both overtly and covertly) in foreign elections from 1946-2000. It also engaged in 64 covert and six overt attempts at regime change against both authoritarian and democratic governments during the Cold War. Such actions were intended to create extra-regional, and wider global, stability in order to favour US interests, in particular regarding economics, trade and commodities. Such actions have at best protected, and at worst fomented, authoritarianism internationally.

Have recent events such as China's handling of the initial Covid-19 outbreak and Russia's invasion of Ukraine impacted the appeal of authoritarianism?

The coronavirus pandemic pulled back the curtain on how countries would act in times of extreme national emergencies and the powers that they would be willing to use. That China was at the epicentre of the pandemic, was the first to react to it and the first to be scrutinized for its reaction, also focused the world upon its authoritarian basis. As the virus spread in China, we saw doctors silenced, apartment blocks sealed, quarantines enforced, entire cities and regions shut down, and internal and external communications blocked. But, as deaths and infections subsided in China, the raw efficacy, even the essential necessity, of the CCP's autocratic rule was made clearly evident. Through this positive demonstration effect, it became rapidly obvious that the methods of authoritarianism, although not necessarily deployed to the same degree as in China, were going to be inevitable within global responses to combat Covid-19, which then took place.

At the same time, a curtain was pulled back upon the deep-seated power underpinning China's authoritarianism, and the willingness of Beijing to enact such measures that simply extended their existing practices. It also revealed that Beijing was willing to do whatever it could to severely control a large and restive population, so as to achieve their political, economic and global ambitions to be a great power in global politics. This awareness was coupled in the West with framing China as a threat to the existing liberal international order, and accompanying narratives of Western decline. Russia's invasion of Ukraine appeared to further augment these perspectives, with many suggestions of Moscow and Beijing being in league with each other to destroy the current world order and democracies across the west, amidst a "Second Cold War". Notably here, many countries outside of Europe have a neutral or positive view of Russia's actions, which suggests that support for authoritarianism is higher than Western leaders can openly admit to.

Few countries have the economic power that has been foundational to China's rise as a global power. How might having fewer resources compared with China impact a country's shift to authoritarianism?

The success, as it were, of China's high degree of social and political control is undoubtedly helped by its wider, and ever-expanding, economic power. Of particular note in this regard is that China's spending on its internal security *exceeds* its external military budget, and that the cost of other systems relating to physical and online surveillance are also large. These costs though are also heightened by the vast size of China, its mammoth population and its long borders. From this basis, having a strong economy definitely provides the resources necessary for autocratic rule but would be much reduced for far smaller (and less developed) countries. Electronic surveillance mechanisms are also very scalable after the initial outlays are paid for. Crucially, any shifts to authoritarianism require the political will to do so, or at the very least having a set of elites who are not concerned by the negative consequences of democratic back-sliding.

Increasing rejection of Chinese funding seems to signal that countries are leery of Chinese investment, representing a pushback of sorts. Will this, in your view, impact the spread of authoritarianism?

Interview – Chris Ogden

Written by E-International Relations

Reduced Chinese investment and, by extension, less influence from Beijing in countries would logically reduce the export of China's political systems and values. The crucial point about a new illiberal international order, what I have dubbed *Pax Autocratica* or *The Authoritarian Century*, is that it is not wholly dependent upon China. This contrasts it to the current liberal international order that rests upon US leadership and US hegemony. At best, *Pax Autocratica* is China-inspired and China-centric in the sense that its driving essence emanates from Beijing but which is either then replicated elsewhere or converges with other forms of autocracy in other countries / regions. China will not call for countries to be authoritarian in the way that the US promotes democracy.

Importantly, authoritarianism will have the same hallmarks and core elements, but will always reflect a country's particular history, identity, interests, leadership traits and style in terms of how it is eventually realised and manifested. Chinese autocracy is thus not the same as UK autocracy, or US autocracy or Indian autocracy, nor are these other forms dependent upon Beijing' lead. The larger observation would be that democracies frequently invest in authoritarian regimes (and vice versa) and perhaps it is overall levels of investment and where it goes that is important. Even with reduced ties with China, autocratic tendencies in the UK, the US and India abound, which tells us more about the dominant core of their political tendencies than of Beijing's apparent influence.

What implications might the increasingly widespread adoption of authoritarianism have for human rights?

While China has signed the two core United Nations Covenants relating to human rights in 1997 and 1998, the CCP insists that China is entitled (along with all other countries) to understand the international law of human rights in harmony with the traditional values. Such an understanding undercuts Western arguments and Western claims concerning there being "universal" human rights. Just as China does, other countries can use such a stance to protect themselves from unwanted legal interference from the West in their internal affairs. China's attitude also reflects a cultural adherence to collectivism that stresses the importance of the group over the self, which is a mindset that is prevalent across East Asia, as well as parts of South Asia, and thus challenges Western human rights conceptions as being the only way for such values and practices to exist.

A major caveat here is that China will not seek to make all countries authoritarian in nature and that it has a long tradition of seeking a multipolar system, not one based upon hegemony. As such, for Beijing, democracies and autocracies can live side by side, as can different conceptions of human rights, provided that the internal political basis of all countries (including China's) is respected. This very open position of course though, tacitly allows non-democratic regimes to flourish and also serves to significantly undercut Western claims as per the universality of democratic systems.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

My biggest advice is to be as tolerant and curious as possible in your thinking, research and discussions. Read as much as possible (from all possible perspectives), respect difference and avoid thinking that there is any one answer out there (there isn't!), and don't accept something because "it just is". Most issues are a matter of perception (and mis-perception), often magnified by mis-information and egotism. Finally, believe in something, even if your political affiliation is unclear, as Mark Thomas noted "you don't need an ideology to be an idealist" – and get things done: surmount existing barriers *now* to be the radical change that our world so urgently needs.