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China and its Challenge to Liberal Democracy



Humphrey Hawksley is an author and journalist specializing in global issues. A revised and expanded version of his latest book *Asian Waters: The Struggle Over the Indo-Pacific and the Challenge to American Power* was published by Abrams Press in June. He will be giving an evening talk on these issues on 14 September to the National Liberal Club in London.

The terminology used to encapsulate China's expansion is increasingly revolving around scenarios for a new Cold War.

On the surface, with anti-China naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific, gulag style camps in the predominantly Muslim region of Xinjiang and a crackdown against political dissent in Hong Kong, comparisons to the 20th Century Cold War may seem obvious.

But beneath that surface lies a misleading and dangerous mindset, much of it propelled by a political commentariat which so far has failed to define what exactly China is as a nation and what it is attempting to achieve.

Parallels are emerging to the whipping up of sentiment around the War on Terror and Arab uprisings when complexities of cultures and societies were concertained into simplistic causes and cartoon-style characters of evil be they Iraq's Saddam Hussein, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi or Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

Anti-China rhetoric is moving in a similar direction. President Xi Jinping is being held up as a communist dictatorial threat to the rules-based international order with an implication that once Xi has gone all will be fine again.

This is far from the case, yet we may be sleep walking toward a trap from which it could take years to escape. Western governments would be wise, therefore, to adopt reverse thinking and establish what their own values are, what they wish to achieve and where those aims share common ground with China and where they risk conflict.

Over the past two decades, Western values have been justifiably questioned at two levels. Democracy was once heralded as a beacon for delivering security and freedom. Failure in the Middle East and North African conflicts has shredded that reputation.

Democracy was also held up as a political mechanism that delivered material needs better than a dictatorship. Yet it has been China, far more than the West, that has been meeting those needs in swathes of the developing world with roads, hospitals and infrastructure.

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The Indian essayist, Pankaj Mishra, floridly reflects the view of many when he describes the 'moral, political and material squalor' of Britain and the United States. These two wealthy and powerful nations that pioneered the concept of liberal democracy now run on 'delegitimised political systems, grotesquely distorted economies and shattered social contracts.'

Such sentiment cannot be simply brushed under the carpet.

This brings us to the muddled thinking about what the West actually wants to achieve with China.

Back in 1989, Beijing stood condemned as a pariah for its violent repression of the Tiananmen Square democracy protests. Twenty years later, the same one-party state with the same repressive policies was welcomed as a saviour in the 2009 economic crisis. In 2015, during President Xi Jinping's lavish State Visit, Britain went as far as declaring a "golden era" in UK-China relations.

The result in Britain, at least, was an open door for increased Chinese involvement in the nuclear power industry and ports and airports. Similar situations are replicated throughout Europe.

Yet, this was precisely the time Beijing was building its military bases in the South China Sea, drawing up plans for the mass imprisonment of Xinjiang's Uighurs and, Communist Party documents, defining the future international landscape as a struggle between two systems.

Western democracies turned a blind eye as they prioritized access to Chinese money over upholding their own values and watching out for national security.

The unravelling began with Donald Trump's 2018 trade war and its accompanying rhetoric.

In Britain, the lightning rod was the tech giant Huawei which, unbeknown to most, began to be embedded in its communications systems with contracts signed without scrutiny some fifteen years ago.

Britain found its relationship with Huawei was about far more than upgrading mobile phone networks. It is now buffeted inside that American vortex of either being for or against U.S. policy in a way that splays across its trans-Atlantic relationship.

Political leaders with a wider intellectual bandwidth might have drawn up guidelines on dealing with rising China that addressed both economic and national security needs. But they haven't, and we are where we are.

"If the British government has a China strategy it is not apparent to the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) or to others," argues veteran diplomat Charles Parton in a report for the Policy Institute at King's College London. "We have been slow to recognize the need for new thinking and slower to implement new policies, because we find it hard to balance the benefits and disbenefits of working with China."

The task ahead is to separate off strands of the China relationship as alluded to by Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab when condemning Beijing's new security law in Hong Kong. He told the House of Commons in July: "China has undergone an extraordinary transformation in recent decades....We want to work with China. There is enormous scope for positive, constructive, engagement."

The shared common ground includes areas such as climate change, terrorism and trade where Chinese values and Western values can work together for a common good.

There are areas where Chinese investment may pose a risk to national interests such as in power stations and telecommunications for which lines must be drawn as clearly as possible.

And there are issues of obvious contention as with the Xinjiang camps, South China Sea military bases and Beijing's threats to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

To move forward confidently Western nations would be wise to reexamine and reestablish their own understanding of what their values represent and where that sits on the shifting global stage.

One question that is already arising is to what extent can the West continue business as usual with a government holding a million of its citizens in concentration camps because of their ethnicity.

Rather than answer it on the hoof against the backdrop of a crisis swept along by a 24-hour news cycle, it would be wiser to know red lines and avoid surprise and miscalculation.

One watchword in Beijing's political thinking is 'stability' which must be secured in order to avoid the 'chaos' wrought by constant upheavals under Mao Tse-tung. Another is 'humiliation' as in its occupation by Japan and European powers.

China now faces those same foreign powers sending warships to humiliate it once again while the trade disputes threaten millions of jobs that could lead to social instability and the chaos that Beijing so fears.

It seeks to avoid both and, as of now, China still needs the West more than the West needs China.

Therefore, this is not a new Cold War. Nor is it containment or appeasement.

The process underway is to create a mindset in which Chinese and Western values can coexist without conflict, to establish how to work together without crossing moral lines and, in areas where national security is at stake, make clear that Chinese money and technology will not be prioritized over values and is neither needed nor welcomed.

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