

The Architecture of a Dual-Track World. We can Plan it: Can We Do It?

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Chinese power has been a somewhat abstract notion for most of modern history (that is to say, the period from the Industrial Revolution and the era of European colonisation which started from the 17th century onwards). Imperial China appealed to the imaginations of figures like the European philosophers Leibniz, Voltaire, Montesquieu, even Hegel and to some extent (disparagingly mostly) Marx. But it was both geographically and intellectually remote and peripheral.

Today, we see the paradox of a China that has acquired most of the qualities and attributes that should qualify it as a powerful state. It has a huge economy (currently the world's second largest), an emerging middle class, and a large, new military. It is starting to figure in certain areas of technological innovation. Many of these, in different and complex ways, have taken ideas and processes from what can be called the Enlightenment West (broadly Europe and North America) though with significant adaptations. Even politically, the use of Marxism in the People's Republic manifests this. The sinification of these, so that they all accord to 'Chinese conditions' is crucially, and constantly stressed in domestic Chinese discourse. This indiginisation of outside ideas to China is culturally, politically and philosophically hugely important.

The irony is that the more that China has sought to become modern like the Enlightenment West with its commitment to universal norms and values, the more its economy has appeared on the surface like the West's, and the more it has integrated into the global system at least practically in terms of supply chains, trade flows, and finance, student movements, etc, the more problematic this phenomenon has become. China has ended up partially duplicating Western practices and modes of economic and technological behaviour. It has taken on many of the developed outside world's social and other habits as it has industrialised and modernised. Its cities look often like modern western ones, with the sole difference that they are frequently even more modern. But while China has undertaken this partial duplication, it has not sought to follow the West as many originally assumed it would in key areas of its political identity and values. This deployment of some aspects of Western norms and processes but in a way strictly circumscribed and conditioned by Chinese assertions of its own uniqueness has posed far bigger problems. In doing this it has raised uncomfortable question of the comprehensiveness and completeness of Western practices and their underlying rationale. China is neither profoundly different, or wholly similar. It is disconcertingly somewhere between these – a mixture of both.

This is because clearly while in some aspects (industrialisation, economic development, etc) China is similar, in the realm of politics, and in identity, China has not become remotely like the Enlightenment West. The Xi Jinping era shows this starkly. In actions and words, the era since 2012 has shown an increasingly assertive rebuttal of the legal, cultural, social and political standards of the Western liberal order. China follows global rules, up to a point, but it is increasingly clear that it does so with a very different structure of intention than a power like the US or the UK who have come to feel the rules are inextricably interlinked and embed deep values expressing individual freedoms, rule of law, and other norms. The norms and the values were presumed to be intimately part of each other. China clearly engages with entities like the World Trade Organisation and International Monetary Fund in ways which show that while it might act in the right way, for the West at least it does not do it for the right reason. Like Aristotle showed 2400 years ago, a good action is only good when it is done for the right reason. China acts in an orderly way, sometimes, but its political values and the way in which they have been expressed under Xi show it does so for self-interest, for preservation of stability and order that work for it, with a different notion of

responsibility. It acts on the basis of utility. These rules work for China, it seems to be saying through its behaviour, and they work for now. Happily they also work for most others. But there is nothing absolute or eternally binding about them and the current situation where they are in place won't necessarily prevail for ever. In essence, while it is implicit rather than explicit, China's attitude can best be characterised by saying that it does not believe there is anything ontologically necessary about the current 'order' and its being premised on universal validity. China follows a different notion of what rules are for, and one that violates the assumption of their absolute validity and necessity through its clear display of regarding them as contingent and expedient. They have utility. They help to get things done. But they are expendable.

The situation the global system is in now, therefore, is that a power that has mimicked but not really believed in the underlying values of the global order that has existed broadly since the Second World War, and particularly since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, is now in a position of becoming the largest economy in the world. This is a little like someone winning a competition who clearly does not have much time for the competition they entered, and has some different, but at the moment undefined, longer term objective which prompted them to take part. China is seemingly about to win the game of capitalism – but with a political system which shows it does not really believe this game is of final importance. It has another one – nationalistic, or Utopian, or collectivist – where victory as a capitalist is only a staging post, not the final victory itself.

The challenge is whether a new global order can be created that can somehow accommodate this inconvenient happening. Can we all start to think of rules in a utilitarian rather than a normative, final way? Can the final grand aim that China might be making towards be seen simply as something that works for it and can have space in the new global order, rather than something that is going to carry weight and meaning in ways which change the values of the outside world? Can we witness this sort of deep pluralism? Isn't China's attitude to global norms and rules and the prevailing global order something that, just by it existing and succeeding in its own space, necessitates a change for us, even if that is passive rather than active? We are, in the very process of needing to change our minds because of the approach China has taken and its economic success till now, by definition also being changed. Is this something that is political and diplomatically palatable.