



# Democracy or Autocracy?

excerpts from *The Authoritarian Century*  
by Chris Ogden

The UN's 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the liberal international order sought to guarantee rights on an individual level. These promoted freedom of thought and expression, of religion, of movement and association and of sexual orientation, whereby 'any particular freedom is to be respected only insofar as it does not violate the equal freedom of others.' Within a liberal international order, such 'rule by the people' encompassed freedom of political participation, representation, expression and association. It also included having regular free, inclusive and equal elections, the presence of accountable and transparent political institutions to guarantee the individual liberties and rights of citizens, and access to competing information. At its core, the US endorsed electoral democracy as the central and unquestionable pillar of its preferred international order. Such social and political rights are seen as being generalizable to the internal basis of all countries, and hence the whole international system. They also produced a sense of solidarity among Western countries concerning the preservation of a common social and political basis.

For the economic realm, and as the world's dominant power after 1945, the US arranged the world economy in line with its broader security and political interests. After the Second World War, economic growth and trade liberalization went hand in hand with the creation of modern social democracy, whereby economic prosperity would enhance individual social and political – especially democratic – rights. Economic liberalism thus upholds 'the rights of individuals to make any choices they please in the exercise of their labour and the use of their wealth and income, so long as they respect the liberty, property and contractual rights of others.' Key to this vision were open global markets and free trade practices enshrined by anti-protectionist institutions through the rule of law. Such a basis married with a focus on cooperation, shared gains and interdependence, backed up by domestic welfare states. Underpinning this system was the US dollar as the premier international currency, with access to the US market and technology provided to countries that would be reliable partners and allies. Through the Washington Consensus, first posited in 1989 (and investigated further in Chapter 3), these ideas metamorphosed into the mantra of neoliberalism, which promoted free-market capitalism via policies that included privatization, deregulation and globalization, as well as lower government spending and austerity.

The final realm of the US-dominated liberal order rests on the use of force as a means to stabilize and strengthen its desired international order, with military intervention being regarded as necessary to protect and enforce liberal democracy and human rights. In this way, the 1950-53 Korean War sought 'to establish the rule of law in the world', while the 1955-75 Vietnam War aimed to 'defend the frontiers of freedom'. Defence planners also saw military power as vital to securing global markets and resources via the threat or use of military force, as well as a worldwide alliance system between the US and its regional partners, built on institutions and formal agreements. The US's 800 military bases across 80 countries (versus 70 held by all other countries) underscores the centrality of military force to its international order, and its use to promote its goals, values and interests, whereby, as a former US president noted, if you 'speak softly and carry a big stick, you will go far'. Compounding this importance, many of these bases were also established following demands by US allies for protection and deterrence against aggression. Military power has thus been used to strengthen the other realms of the US-led liberal international order, making 'access to resources and markets, socioeconomic stability, political pluralism, and American security interests – all . . . inextricably linked'.



# Dominance, hubris, and China's challenge



The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War signalled the zenith of the US-led international order, which was unchallenged at the close of the 20th century. American thinkers proclaimed the irresistible triumph of the West's liberal international order as marking 'the end of history' – that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'. Moreover, with its main strategic competitor sidelined, and a dearth of viable alternatives, the liberal hegemony narrative presumed that rising powers such as China could be co-opted into the US-led international order. Such dominance led to an unashamed dawning of Pax Americana, with observers arguing 'Why deny it? Why be embarrassed by it? Notably, these claims entailed elements of myth and presumption, as not all the world – including China, India, the former Soviet bloc, much of the Islamic world and many developing countries – had been subsumed into such a concept. This divergence indicated that the Western order was pre-eminent but not omnipotent and was thus a dominant *international order* but not necessarily a sweeping *world order*. It also overlooked the US's periodic support of various authoritarian regimes (such as in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Iran), and its overthrow of democratic regimes (across South America, for example).

As the 21st century began, the liberal international order experienced three major crises that called into question its global legitimacy and reputation. The first of these came after 9/11 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the resultant long period of occupation, instability and widespread deaths, which effectively undercut the acceptability of deploying overwhelming force in geopolitics. The use of torture, clandestine jails (known as black sites), and rendition, as well as the pursuit of dubious political reforms, further questioned the validity of the military, social and political pillars of the US-led liberal international order. Washington's departure from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, which led to the rapid political return of the Taliban – whose removal had been cited as the major aim of the US's 2001 invasion, and who retook the country in weeks – further undercuts this legitimacy and in many ways signalled the death of liberal military interventionism'. In turn, the 2008 credit crisis served to challenge the core rationales of the Western-based international financial system, and hence the liberal economic pillar of the current international order. Going further still, the current coronavirus pandemic which began in 2020 has also revealed the seeming inability of the US (and other Western states) to comprehensively protect the wellbeing and security of their citizens. It also asked if the privileging of individual rights is the best basis for a society versus protecting the collective health of a population as a whole (as has been the norm for many other countries, especially in China and across East Asia).

As the credibility of the Western liberal international order has been called into question, the rise of China has presented a clear challenge to it – and an alternative vision of international order. Socially and politically, China bears the hallmarks of an authoritarian system as it inhibits political pluralism, sanctions political participation, imprisons opponents, and uses state apparatuses to monitor, control and command the population. In turn, the country's slow embrace of liberal economics – but merged with state control and a blurring between public and private ownership – has resulted in an economic system defined as being *authoritarian-capitalist*. China's creation of different multilateral regimes, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), also act as mechanisms to further project China's values into the global system. Together, these elements have produced a social, political and economic basis that contrasts to the core dynamics of the current liberal international order. They also act as an inspirational and non-ideological developmental model for other countries to follow, and by extension are engendering a new – China-inspired – *illiberal world order*.



# World leaders are flocking to China just like they flocked to Germany 80 years ago.



Volkswagen, which has more than 40 plants in China, announced a new effort to tailor models to Chinese customers' wishes, with features like in-dash karaoke machines, and will invest billions in local partnerships and production sites. It's part of a theme unveiled by the German automaker last year: "In China for China."

BASF, with 30 production facilities in China, is pushing ahead with plans to spend 10 billion euros (\$10.9 billion) on a new chemical production complex that would rival in size its massive headquarters complex in Ludwigshafen, which covers about four square miles.

Throughout Germany, executives are aware that such investments run contrary to efforts by the United States to isolate China economically. They counter that revenue from China is essential for their business to thrive.

Trump's 2020 election loss to Joe Biden heralded a return to politics as normal in the US. The defeat did not remove the threats and social changes that trigger the 'action side' of authoritarianism. The authoritarians will still be there ... [and] will still look for candidates who will give them the strong, punitive leadership they desired. '

When this observation is combined with a Republican Party that refuses to accept the result of the 2020 election and continues to accept the result of voter repression as well as attacking the media and academia, the spectre of another election victory by Trump or a Trump-esque successor is highly possible. More tellingly, either eventually could result in a more experienced, better organized and more ideologically driven Republican leader, who as president would rule as a competent demagogue who quickly and irrevocably disassembles the pillars of US democracy.

Such a leader would govern not via rule of law but by rule of law, would seek to eliminate the plurality of US policies, jail all political opponents and dismantle the universal human rights essential in a correctly functioning and accountability-inducing civil society. In particular, if Trump were to return as president in 2024, we can expect such a dismantling to be extremely rapid, and to be driven by a deep-seated vengeance against any and all of his political and media opponents. From this basis, it is entirely conceivable that American democracy could collapse by 2028, heralding a populist autocratic regime and potentially resulting in a wider civil war. As a leading civil rights activist said of Trump, 'He's willing to kill democracy. ... He is willing to kill America's international and global relationships. He is a destroyer.' If a similar leader were to emerge, and an authoritarian (even fascist) US to emerge, then a new authoritarian international order would also be swiftly confirmed along with a China-inspired authoritarian century. At the time of writing (in April 2022), the Democrats' water-thin majorities in the Senate and the House provide little succour that such unwelcome eventualities will be avoided.

# Global panopticon

The major unifying factor between authoritarianism in China and that being increasingly manifest in other countries across the world is the use of increasingly powerful surveillance technology. Driven by Big Tech and advances in AI, they are fusing together the social and economic lives of the world's population with authoritarian and outlooks centered on monitoring, manipulation and control. At the forefront of this fusing are social media companies whose interest in market share, data harvesting and acquiring content are increasingly surmounting political and moral considerations.

First among them is Facebook, which in 2019 exempted political advertisements from a ban on making false claims, and which along with Twitter and Google allow the propagation of extremism and misinformation – including the glorification of violence during the 2020 election and the attack on the US Capitol in January 2021. Such actions by Facebook have, for example, subverted freedoms of expression and speech in Vietnam and Thailand, and have enabled authoritarian regimes to attack civil rights activists and political opponents, as well as to incite violence in Myanmar, whereby Facebook follow[er]s state-sponsored censorship so that it can conduct operations, businesses, and sales in that country. Collectively, these authoritarian practices influence billions of daily social media users across the world, which in April 2021 included 27.97 billion on Facebook, 2.291 billion on YouTube, 2 billion on

WhatsApp, 1.287 billion on Instagram, 1.225 billion on Weixin and WeChat, 0.732 billion on TikTok and 0.600 billion on Douyin, among others. The neoliberal business practices of Big Tech are also anti-pluralistic – and hence authoritarian – as they protect their monopolies by buying up smaller companies, and from 2005 to 2020 Alphabet, Apple, Amazon and Facebook were all prolific in this regard as they reportedly acquired 385 other US companies between them.

Such capabilities are backed up by increasing political sway in the West. Big Tech firms are now among the biggest corporate donors in the US, outstripping Big Pharma. Big Tobacco and the arms industry. In 2020, Amazon and Facebook also spent nearly twice as much as Exxon and Philip Morris on lobbying, had the highest number of lobbyists and spent \$124 million in lobbying and campaign contributions during the 2020 presidential election. All of these elements point to these companies' increasing supranational influence that is able to shape global politics and opinion, and which aims to permanently cement the presence of Big Tech into the political, social and economic fabric of the world.

Their actions are also reflective of the key themes relating to international order in this book, in that they are actively *facilitating*, *assimilating* and *normalizing* authoritarian tendencies. In these dynamics, their owners possess incredible power, whereby, for example, Mark Zuckerberg alone can decide how to configure Facebook's algorithms to determine what people see in their news feeds, what privacy settings they can use ... he can choose to shut down a competitor by acquiring, blocking or copying it. Such control over vast swathes of the global population points to a future wherein the power of Big Tech exceeds that of most – if not all – countries, especially if it is intertwined with the maintenance of authoritarian-oriented regimes. In 2005, Zuckerberg pertinently noted a preference for 'companies over countries', and in 2004 called users' 'dumb fucks' for trusting him with their data. With ever cheaper and more advanced technology, and more countries like China and Russia willing to use it to watch and control their populations, Edward Snowden noted in 2015 that 'if we do nothing, we ... sleepwalk into a total surveillance state where we have both a super-state that has unlimited capacity to apply force with an unlimited ability to know about the people it is targeting] ... that's a dark future. Such a future would be unrelentingly authoritarian and would confirm the authoritarian international order, both economically as enabled by Big Tech, and politically when such technology is widely used. With Beijing as its key harbinger, it would also consecrate a China-inspired authoritarian century and international order.'







# Descent, resistance, and re-learning

As H.G. Wells noted in another era, 'There will be no day of days when a new world order comes into being. Step by step and here and there it will arrive. . . . ' In this way, and as this book has consistently evidenced, we are now on the cusp of – if not already descending into – an authoritarian international order. When we recall that this shift is occurring not just in China and like-minded autocracies but also across the world's largest and most powerful democracies, the prognosis is astonishingly bleak. Such a scenario is reinforced by the prevalence of social media and technology that have become omnipresent surveillance tools across the world's population and which globally magnify – frequently hate-fueled and divisive – authoritarian desires. Set against a neoliberal background, the logic and attraction of such inclinations has never been higher and, as shown by hyper-crises such as COVID-19, are proving irresistible – even necessary – to many of our leaders, be they in autocracies or democracies.

In terms of resisting the world's wholesale descent into authoritarianism – a descent which would be exponentially difficult, if not impossible, to extricate ourselves from – what is therefore needed is the maintenance and protection of democratic practices and values. Part of this process requires countries to confront China concerning its own authoritarian practices, but also involves nurturing democratic ones at home and making them attractive for other countries to work with and to imitate. As former US President Barack Obama has argued, in democracy, there has to be citizens who insist on it and participate to make

sure it happens. Democracy is a garden that has to be tended'. Such cultivation not only requires dissuading policies and political entities that are authoritarian or proto-authoritarian but also making sure that all individuals and groups embrace and respect key liberal norms. We must also remind ourselves that, in the words of John Buchan, democracy is primarily an attitude of mind, a spiritual testament, and not an economic structure or a political machine.

As such, liberal democratic societies 'require more than the formal institutions of democracy'. They also depend on a broad and deep commitment to the underlying values of a liberal society, most notably tolerance. 'In order to prevent any slippage towards authoritarianism, national political, social and moral values require regular maintenance. Populations need to be actively (and regularly) informed through publicity campaigns and mandatory ongoing civic education classes (for both children and adults) of their rights, and how such rights were originally won historically. Influential individuals – such as television producers, directors, authors, artists, musicians, teachers, journalists and any kind of elected official – need to pre-emptively use their positions now to insist on the production and promotion of such educational campaigns. Without a knowledge basis concerning what democracy is, citizens will be ever-more vulnerable to alternative narratives, especially in periods of tumult – in the form of profound social or economic shocks and depressions – that frequently only serve to further accentuate and speed up a country's assimilation to authoritarianism and populism. We must also remember that -with enough time, and as in modern China, any dissenting voices will be targeted by a control-hungry authoritarian regime and thus we all need to take action regardless of our political beliefs. Such action is necessary against any democratic backsliding, so as to maintain all democratic systems to the very highest standards.

Most fundamentally of all, what this bolstering requires are virtuous leaders who reject intolerance, division and self-interest and who can focus our national energies to create positive change that celebrates and augments liberal democratic politics. These leaders must also help us to re-learn the tools of reason, logic, clarity, dissent, civility, and debate ... those things [which] are the non-partisan basis of democracy... without them you can kiss this thing goodbye'. Deprived of such leaders – and without such re-learning and individuals actively facilitating it – our global autocratic descent and the dawn of a new Pax Autocratica may well be irrevocably complete.

– excerpted from *The Authoritarian Century* by Chris Ogden