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THE RISE OF CHINA: NARRATIVES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND CIVILIZATIONAL DIFFERENCES WITH THE WEST

*David Garciandía Igal*¹

Abstract: A new world emerges to the detriment of the unipolar world led so far by the United States. In this context, what the new global order will look like, due to China's growing influence in the international arena, is a major topic of discussion for internationalists. The debate is mainly based on two alternative standpoints: China will adapt itself to the international system or China will build a new one according to its own values and norms. The aim of this research is to trace the line between (1) the narratives and debates on China's rise, and (2) the civilizational differences between the Asian country and the West, thus providing a framework for identifying possible ways in which China could impact the international system.

Palavras-chaves: China, rise, international system, global order.

A ASCENSÃO DA CHINA: NARRATIVAS NAS RELAÇÕES INTERNACIONAIS E DIFERENÇAS CIVILIZACIONAIS COM O OESTE

Resumo: Um novo mundo emerge em detrimento do mundo unipolar liderado até agora pelos Estados Unidos. Neste contexto, como será a nova ordem global, devido à crescente influência da China na arena internacional, é um tema de discussão importante para os internacionalistas. O debate baseia-se principalmente em dois pontos de vista alternativos: A China irá adaptar-se ao sistema internacional ou a China irá construir um novo de acordo com os seus próprios valores e normas. O objetivo desta investigação é traçar a linha entre (1) as narrativas e debates sobre a ascensão da China, e (2) as diferenças civilizacionais entre o país asiático e o Ocidente, proporcionando assim um quadro para identificar possíveis formas de a China poder ter impacto no sistema internacional.

Palavras-chave: China, ascensão, sistema internacional, ordem global.

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I. INTRODUCTION

After World War II, the world was divided into two main blocs. On the one hand, the United States of America (USA) leading Capitalism. On the other hand, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) leading Communism. The West, with the USA as its reference, constructed an architecture of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) or the World Trade Organization (WTO). This international system fosters a specific view of the State and human beings. Societies should be based on three pillars: (1) In politics, the establishment of Democracy and the Rule of Law; (2) In economics, the development of Capitalism as the economic system; (3) In morals, the respect and promotion of Human Rights. This Democracy & Rule of Law - Capitalism - Human Rights paradigm has been the model for most developing and developed countries since then.

Moreover, after the dissolution of the USSR in the 1980s and 1990s, the world became unipolar. Those mentioned international organizations enjoyed great prominence since the end of the Cold War and constituted the international system that has been joined by almost all countries in the world. Apparently, there was no alternative for the Western model. This period, which has been called “Pax Americana”, allowed the USA (and, to a less extent, some European countries and Japan) to shape the international order and deal with the most relevant international affairs at they please. However, this time seems to have passed. With the rise of China and the increasing presence of other countries in the international arena, such as Russia, a profound shift of power from the West to the East is taking place.

In this context, the aim of this research is simple: To compile and synthesize the main current narratives about China’s rise and trace the line with the main civilizational differences between China and the West. What are the differences between China and the West and, applying those international relations narratives, how can these differences help us to figure out the future of the international system? In trying to answer this question, the reader will be confronted with open questions and given key elements to suggest possible future paths of the current international system. It is not the goal of this paper to provide definitive answers to the questions that will be raised, but rather to link the narratives and debates on China's rise to the civilizational differences between the Asian country and the West, thus creating a framework that allows the reader to better understand the ways in which China could alter the global order.

For this purpose, the study is structured around three main edges. First, a brief introduction to China’s recent history and economic development. Second, the analysis of

China's rise through (i) the main current debates and narratives in international relations, (ii) China's new pro-active foreign policy, and (iii) China's traditional vision on international relations (how the 'Tributary system' differs from the Westphalian system). Third, the study of some main civilizational differences with the West, focusing especially in (i) the notion of State, (ii) its relationship with society and (iii) the role of rights and freedoms.

These ideas have been studied under a multidisciplinary approach, due to the nature of the debates and the issues involved. The reader will find concepts from International Relations, Law or Economy. Under the descriptive method, an extensive review of academic research (books and articles), political official discourses, specialized press, and reports from international organizations and foundations, has been conducted. In addition, quantitative analysis of existing data provided by international organizations, private companies and other international entities, has been used in order to illustrate qualitative arguments.

II. Recent history of China: Political turbulences and economic development

The 20th century has been one of the most turbulent in China's recent history. After the Boxer Rebellion (拳亂), China was a defeated and humiliated Imperial State with overwhelming internal and external conflicts. This situation led to the Xinhai Revolution (辛亥革命), which finished with 2.000 years of imperial governance in China after the abdication of Puyi (溥儀), last Chinese Emperor. The new Republic of China (中華民國) was born under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen (孫中山) and Chiang Kai-shek (蔣中正), both representatives of the Kuomintang (國民黨), the Chinese Nationalist Party (see FAIRBANK, 2014).

Nonetheless, in 1921 the Communist Party of China (中國共產黨, CPC) was established. Its popularity grew rapidly and, in 1924, a civil war between communists and nationalists started. This conflict lasted until the 30s, when it cooled down to focus on the Second Sino-Japanese War (中國抗日戰爭). After the Japanese defeat, civil war continued. Eventually, Mao Zedong (毛澤東) proclaimed the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1st October 1949. The Kuomintang get into exile in Taiwan (台灣), controlling the island until our days. Taiwan still claim the authentic legitimacy of the Government of the Republic of China. As a result of these events, Taiwan is still nowadays in an extremely complicated diplomatic and geopolitical situation with an uncertain future² (see EBERHARD, 2004).

² Taiwan was considered as a full Member State in the United Nations until 1971, when it was replaced by the People's Republic of China. In 2019, only 15 States continue recognizing Taiwan as the legitimate Republic of China.

After the triumph of the Communist Revolution (解放战争) in 1949 (Called ‘War of Liberation’ by the communists, and ‘National Protection War against the Communist Rebellion’ by the nationalists), the CPC’s dictatorship began. The first major challenge was the Korean War, where China joined the North Korea-USSR alliance. After the 1953 armistice, China's relations with the USSR improved. Indeed, the soviet regime collaborated in the elaboration of China’s First Five-Year Plan (五年计划). However, despite the initial economic takeoff, serious problems appeared in the development model. In order to address this issue, Mao designed a campaign known as the Great Leap Forward (大跃进). Its aims were to increase production and to strengthen communist values. Nevertheless, the outcome was terrible, with millions of deaths and devastating consequences, both economically and socially³. This point represented a shift in the Sino-Soviet relations. Moreover, relations continue deteriorating over time, eventually breaking down after the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命). This period has a transcendental significance in the history of modern China, since it was an internally convulsive era that ended the isolation policy.

After Mao’s death in 1976, the Chinese regime followed an opening process in almost all fields and an approach to the West. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (邓小平), the economy experienced a period of modernization and development. The so-called Four Modernizations (四个现代化) were goals focused on strengthening agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology. From this moment, China has transitioned from a State dominated planned socialist economy to a mixed market socialist economy (see NAUGHTON, 2006).

This reform period has allowed China to experience one of the most impressive economic developments in human history. “In the 1980s, China was an impoverished backwater, struggling to escape the political turmoil and economic mismanagement of the Mao era” (KROEBER, 2016, p. 324). However, today is the largest economy in the world in terms of GDP PPP, the largest manufacturing and trading country, it consumes half of the steel and coal available in the world, and it is the biggest source of international tourists and one of the most important investors in developing countries (see KROEBER, 2016).

The average GDP growth rate during the last four decades has increased by nearly 10% (see Figure 1). We could compare this fact with another extraordinary economic development period: The Industrial Revolution in England. However, the British income growth rate between 1770-1815 was 1.7%, and between 1815-1841 it was 3.4% (HARLEY, 1982, p. 271). As we

³ Available data on the number of deaths varied substantially depending on the studies. However, the majority of them agree on the range between the 20 to 50 million deaths. See, for example, research conducted by authors such as F. Dikötter or R. J. Rummel.

can observe, the national income growth was lower during the first decades of the Industrial Revolution than during the last ones (WILLIAMSON, 1984, p. 688-689). Even more, when the United States developed its industry between 1889 and 1919, the GNP annual growth rate increased by 4% (KENDRICK, 1961, p. 79), however, this trend breaks around 1910 (VATTER, WALKER e ALPEROVITZ, 1995, p. 591). Both historical examples are far from the Chinese growth rate between 1976 and 2018, as Figure 1 shows.



Figure 1. China's GDP Growth Evolution (1976 – 2018)

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of data supplied by the World Bank.

The comparison between the GDP of China and India since 1990 is also very representative. At that moment, both economies had a similar size. Whereas China had a GDP (measured by current US \$) of 360.858 billion, India had 320.979 billion. Nevertheless, only 28 years later, China's GDP is almost five times that of India (13.608 billion vs. 2.726 billion) (see Figure 2). This disparity highlights the unparalleled growth of China. Many causes explain this difference. However, it is not the aim of this study to analyse them. The point is only to evidence that, starting from the very situation, the Chinese economy takeoff has been spectacular.

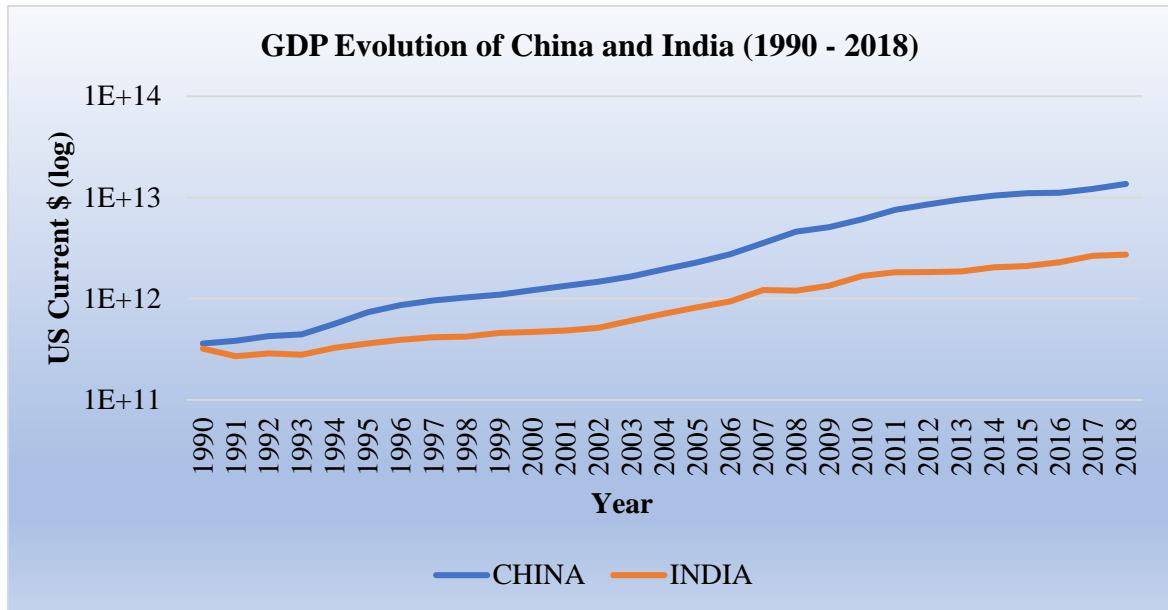


Figure 2. GDP Evolution of China and India (1990 – 2018)

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of data supplied by the World Bank.

Other interesting comparison could be done between China's GDP PPP and that of the USA (see Figure 3). The surprising result we obtain is that China surpassed the USA in 2014. We could say that, gauging economic power through this specific measure, China is already the world's first economic power. Although it is true that there are other indicators (such as GDP with constant 2010 US \$, or GDP with current US \$) where the USA is still on top, empirical evidence clearly suggests that Chinese economy has come to stay. Especially, China has bridged the gap with the USA after the 2008 economic crisis, whose effects have had little impact on the Chinese economy compared to Western countries. Much has been written on the effects of the 2008 Crisis on China's economy. However, despite the fact that China's large stimulus programme has partially offset negative effects on its economy, undoubtedly the global recession generated by the 2008 financial crisis has hit fairly hard to Chinese economy (see LI, WILLETT & ZHANG, 2012).

Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that China is still far from the USA GDP per capita level (see Figure 4). Although China's GDP PPP per capita without the purchasing parity power effect is not so far from that of the USA, taking in account this effect, the USA GDP per capita is 6.4 times larger than the Chinese one. This could represent the possibility for China to keep on going with its economic development, until this indicator reaches Western levels.

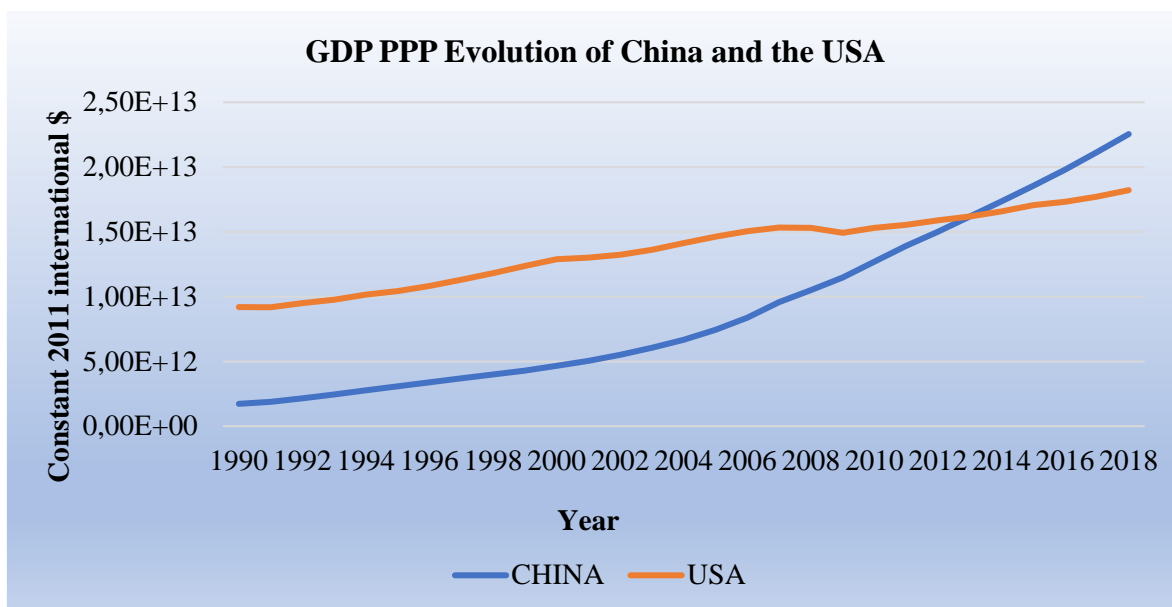


Figure 3. GDP PPP Evolution of China and the USA

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of data supplied by the World Bank.

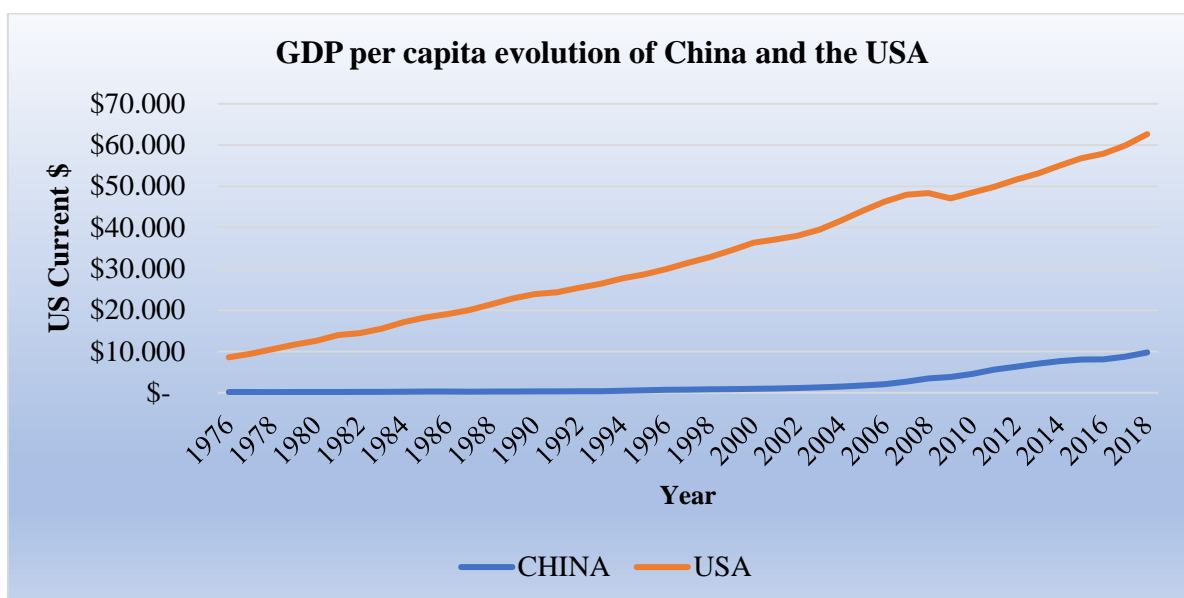


Figure 4. GDP per capita evolution of China and the USA

Source: Compiled by the author on the basis of data supplied by the World Bank.

Some authors highlight numerous uncertainties in the economic model of China. The largest danger has been, and remains, the level of dependence on trade, which makes China vulnerable to external affairs. In this sense, the trade war initiated with the USA could produce negative effects. Other concerns have been raised, such as environmental issues, regional imbalances, banking viability (JUNEJA, 2015), frozen domestic real estate market, local government debt, collapse of non-bank capital markets and public stock markets, or RMB value (DICKINSON, 2019). Additionally, political freedoms as a limitation to economic and

technological progress could represent another limitation (see MONSHIPOURI, WELCH JR. & CRUZ, 2011).

III. China's rise: Compromising the established world order?

III.1. Recent debates and narratives in international relations

As the above data show, the People's Republic of China has experienced one of the largest and fastest economic developments in History over the last forty years. The Asian country has the largest population in the world, the largest GDP (PPP) in the world, the largest standing army in the world, the largest political party in the world, a manned space programme and a nuclear arsenal. In addition, it is the third largest country in terms of territorial extension, it has a permanent seat on the United Nations (UN) Security Council, Mandarin Chinese is one of the six official languages of the UN and it has a growing influence on different regions and international organizations. It is clear that China has risen (CALLAHAN, 2005, p. 701).

The assumption that a unipolar world has passed is becoming widely accepted in International Relations, although we still do not have an extended theory of unipolarity (see MONTEIRO, 2014). Nonetheless, it seems clear that a profound shift of power from the West to the East is taking place. Indeed, we are not experiencing a shift but a re-shift: the world was mostly Eastern (in terms of population, production, trade or technology) before the dawn of industrialization (see POMERANZ, 2000). To this extent, the world is returning to what it always was: an Asian centric world. In this regard, one of the current debates is based on whether we are moving towards a multipolar world (with different superpowers competing with each other) or towards a non-polar world (where several regional powers coexist without colliding with each other).

Over the last decades, whether China would become a superpower or not used to be one of the main debates in International Relations. However, this debate is not alive anymore since China is already considered a superpower in the international arena (see FISHMAN, 2006). The current debate is to what extent is China going to change the world as we know it. What role would China play in the future as a superpower? Would China engage in the pre-established world order or would it create a new one? How is the new relationship between the West and China going to be? If China does create a new world order, would the current world powers lose their privileged positions? These are some of the main questions that constitute the current debate around China's rise. In this scenario, some authors have highlighted the necessity of

containing the rise of China (see SHAMBAUGH, 1996), while others accept that the USA cannot stop China's ascendance but it can encourage China exercises its power within the rules and institutions that the USA and other Western powers have created during the last decades, believing that the international system can be maintained (see IKENBERRY, 2008). In addition, there are those who argue that the shift in power is a natural and unstoppable process (see JACQUES, 2012), while other scholars are less sure about China's inevitable hegemony (see FENBY, 2014; CALLAHAN 2012, 2013). Chinese scholars also joined this debate and different concepts, such as 'responsible power', 'great power diplomacy' or 'China's peaceful rise', were created. In this sense, for example, in the speech 'Turning Your Eyes to China', at Harvard University on 10th December 2003, ex-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao argued that while Euro-American States used violence to expand their empires, China is using "scientific and technological progress to solve the problems of resources and the environment. Here lies the essence of China's road of peaceful rise and development." The logic under the creation of this concepts is to counter arguments that show modern China as a threat (CALLAHAN, 2005, p. 702).

To summarize these narratives under an International Relations theoretical framework, the debate is between offensive realists who argue that China is going to challenge the current global order (see MEARSHEIMER, 2010, 2014; KAGAN 2015), and liberal internationalists who suggest that, even though global leading position may pass to Beijing, the international liberal system will resist (see IKENBERRY, 2018; FOOT, 2019; HURRELL, 2006). In other words, the ongoing debate is explained from two different approaches: the pessimistic one and the optimistic one. Whilst the first one argues that China would profoundly alter the international standards (citing South China Sea's conflicts, the expansion of Chinese state-controlled firms, or the new Belt and Road Initiative), the second one supports the idea that China is adapting itself to the Western order (as evidenced by China's membership of the WTO or its increasing cooperative attitude in the UN Security Council) (KACZMARSKI, 2016, p. 9).

However, over the last years, "optimism has been replaced with pessimism and fears of 'China's assertiveness' and of rising Chinese-American rivalry" in Western international forums (KACZMARSKI, 2016, p. 9-10). An increasing uncertainty on Chinese affairs is growing in Western thinking. More and more Western authors are skeptical about the rise of China and the possible negative consequences of it (ultimately, war). Nevertheless, some people inside the PRC, with Xi Jinping (习近平) among them, argue that China will not fall into the

‘Thucydides's trap’⁴. This theory states that when one power rises, it challenges the existing world order. And, when one power threatens to displace another, conflict is almost always the result (see ALLISON, 2017a). Nonetheless, other Chinese authors and leaders argue that China has the moral duty to model global institutions to better represent the interests of emerging powers and the non-West, somehow challenging the peaceful narrative.

Notwithstanding this fact, how is that global order that seems to be challenged? After World War II, the world was divided into two main blocs led on the one hand by the USA, and on the other hand by the USSR. However, the fall and subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1980s and the 1990s resulted in a unipolar world. This was the so-called “Pax Americana” period, which allowed the USA (and Europe and Japan to a less extent) to establish its vision of the world. This Western world view steams from a structure of international organizations such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank or the World Trade Organization. These institutions, which have enjoyed great prominence in the world configuration since the end of the Cold War (CHICHARRO, 2017, p. 30), constitute the international system that has been joined by almost all countries in the world. Nevertheless, “these postwar institutions did not simply solve functional problems or facilitate cooperation” but they have also been mechanisms for the West “to lock other states into a favorable set of postwar relations and establish some measure of restraint on its own exercise of power” (IKENBERRY, 2000, pp 4-5). And, in addition to international institutions, this post-Cold War order has been reinforced by America’s soft power through more subtle ways, such as films, music or the media (see RUIXUE, XIULING & LI, 2016).

This global order supports and fosters a unique vision of humankind and society. This vision on how societies should be is based on three pillars: (1) In politics, the establishment of Democracy and Rule of Law; (2) In economics, the development of Capitalism as the economic system; (3) In relation to values, the respect and promotion of Human Rights (SOLANA, 2014). This Democracy & Rule of Law - Capitalism - Human Rights paradigm has been the model for developed and developing countries. However, could this paradigm morph due to the rise of China? Would China actively encourage a different type of model for developing countries? What would that model look like? Within the above-mentioned broad debate on China's rise, these specific questions are some of the most relevant. China, as the rest of great powers, could

⁴ This concept was coined by Graham T. Allison (1940), Harvard professor, to describe the situation where a rising power challenges an established dominant power. This circumstance usually ends in conflict between both powers. The term is taken from Thucydides, an Athenian historian and general that wrote ‘The History of the Peloponnesian War’, where he described the series of wars between Athens and Sparta with its subsequent change in the balance of power in Greece.

“see the world in terms of its own history and values, and seek to shape the world in accordance with them” (JACQUES, 2012, p. 334). However, to what extent or in which direction would China change the Democracy & Rule of Law - Capitalism - Human Rights paradigm is a matter of controversy that only time will clarify.

One of the key points in this discussion is the relationship between politics and economy in China’s foreign policy. Unlike the European Union (EU), China do not vividly promote its values through trade⁵. In this sense, China wish to establish and strength trade links irrespective of politics. Some could say that the PRC is more respectful than the EU, due to the fact that the former does not usually interfere in internal affairs while trading. Nevertheless, others could argue the contrary: China trades with everyone, regardless of their circumstances, and is not ashamed to trade with despotic States. However, whatever approach we take, what is clear is that China has increased its trade relations, growing its market shares in countries along the New Silk Road, “while European Member States have both lost market shares and even seen their exports shrink in absolute terms” (HOLSLAG, 2017). As a result, the EU's scope for promoting values through trade is shrinking, as its position of strength in world terms, at least in relation to China, is declining.

Notwithstanding this fact, in order to change the Democracy & Rule of Law - Capitalism - Human Rights paradigm, China would require at least two main successive conditions: First, to create a new architecture of international organizations based on different values. Second, to promote Chinese values and China’s society model among developing countries through its international influence (which lies in different sources, such as those new international organizations, the so-called soft power or trade pressure). Some authors (YU, 2017, p. 360) defend that China is following a joint strategy in this regard. On the one hand, China is creating a new international architecture (with the establishment of organizations such as the Asian Infrastructure Bank or the Silk Road Fund). And, at the same time, China is working together with emerging countries such as the BRICS to reform the existing one. However, even if this strategy eventually shifts the international system to the East, the second condition would still be necessary. China would have to exercise a kind of attraction power towards developing countries. The likelihood of this possibility is low, due to the fact that Chinese civilization conceive itself as superior to the rest of regions in the world. This Sinocentric view entails an

⁵ One of the most important aspects of the European Union’s trade policy, at least in theory, is the promotion of its principles and values through trade. As stated in the Treaty on European Union (art. 2) and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Preamble), these values are: Human Dignity, Freedom, Democracy, Equality, Rule of Law and Human Rights.

autarchic and isolationist attitude towards external cultures (JACQUES, 2012, p. 92). Under this traditional Chinese idea, there is no point in crossing the borders of the Middle Kingdom and interfere in internal affairs of third countries. Nevertheless, different situation would be that were the developing countries imitate *motu proprio* China's society model, instead of the Democracy & Rule of Law - Capitalism - Human Rights paradigm. In this scenario, the future of this paradigm would be uncertain.

III.2. China's new foreign policy

It is clear that the new proactive foreign policy established by Xi Jinping represents the end of Deng Xiaoping's 'bide and hide' strategy. The current Chinese leader has changed China's approach towards international relations as hitherto applied. After largely centralizing power in his person, he has abandoned two basic principles followed by the country since the late 1970s. In domestic politics, China has rejected the 'collective leadership' principle, which represented the division of decision-capacity and shared responsibility among members of the Standing Committee of the CPC. In international affairs, China has renounced to the 'keeping a low profile' principle, which meant a not-highly involvement in international affairs (KACZMARSKI, 2016, p. 10). "The grand strategy is ambitious: to use economic leverage to build a Sinocentric 'community of shared destiny' in Asia, which in turn will make China a normative power that sets the rules of the game for global governance" (CALLAHAN, 2016, p. 3).

This change in China's foreign relations is clearly appreciated in different facts: the role taken by the Chinese Government in combating climate change, the proactive involvement in diplomatic forums such as the UN, the prolific tours of Xi Jinping in numerous countries, the increase of foreign investment in China, the actions taken in the East and South China Seas (especially, the establishment of the Air Defense Identification Zone and the creation of artificial islands), the foundation and promotion of multilateral economic institutions (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or BRICS Development Bank) and security institutions (Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia), the development of the most ambitious project for the 21st century, the Belt and Road Initiative (一帶一路) (KACZMARSKI, 2016, p. 11-12), or the recent leader's role performed in the coronavirus crisis.

This new narrative has been presented through different slogans such as 'rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation', 'China dream', 'Asia dream', 'new type of relationships between

powers’, ‘win-win cooperation’ or ‘new concept of security in Asia’. Some of these expressions are result of Xi Jinping’s aim to introduce his own personal glossary, as past leaders used to do decades ago. Others are too general and have just propaganda intention, although some of them show a Sinocentric view of the world, involving a suggestion to change international relations (KACZMARSKI, 2016, p. 14).

One of the most important ideas in this new form of foreign policy is the ‘peripheral diplomacy’ strategy (see CALLAHAN, 2016). This concept embraces not only diplomacy, but also economic, cultural and security aspects. The key idea is to deepen friendly relations with neighboring countries through economic cooperation and the building of closer security ties (see XI, 2018). This approach grants more importance to relationships with neighbors than with specific powers (KACZMARSKI, 2016, p. 14), and represents an important shift in Chinese foreign policy. The main goal for Mao Zedong was national liberation and world revolution. For Deng Xiaoping, the aim was to develop domestic economy whilst guaranteeing the survival of communist party leadership. He established a second-line approach in world affairs that was followed by Jiang Zemin (江泽民) and Hu Jintao (胡锦涛). Both of them focused Chinese foreign policy more on the West and on the ‘China going global’ or ‘Go Out Policy’ (走出去战略) than on neighboring States (see SHAMBAUGH, 2014). However, Xi Jinping wants to create “an alternative notion of regional order”, due to tensions (especially, maritime conflicts in the East and South China Seas) with its neighbor States (CALLAHAN, 2016, p. 7). Although this strategy seeks to remodel regional areas, this could represent a starting point for a global horizon.

Current Chinese Premier Xi Jinping usually uses the expression of ‘community of common destiny’ (人類命運共同體) to refer to the Chinese approach on international affairs. This idea, which was delivered by the ex-Chinese Premier Hu Jintao (it first appeared in the report signed by Hu Jintao to the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in November 2012, where he stressed that “mankind has only one earth to live on and countries have only one world to share”), aims to build a new framework of international relations through the promotion and improvement of global governance. The only way to achieve these goals is through the establishment of “a new type of global development partnership that is more equitable and balanced, stick together in times of difficulty, both share rights and shoulder obligations, and boost the common interests of mankind” (CHINA DAILY). Nevertheless, this egalitarian vision of international relations clashes with China’s own experience, as explained in the next section.

III.3. China's traditional concept of international relations: How does China see the rest of the world?

After the Peace of Westphalia, the international system was built around the concept of nation-state⁶. During the emergence of modern Europe, the 'Westphalian system' has dominated international relations: States with equal rights, similar population and akin economic power. Nevertheless, the Chinese experience is far from this idea. Instead, the 'Tributary system' was the basis of relations between China and the rest of regions. This idea arises from the fact that China was a country with an overwhelming population, and cultural, military and economic superiority over other countries or places. Aside from this immense size of China in comparison with its neighbors, the other key point was the "mutual acceptance of and acquiescence in Chinese superiority" (JACQUES, 2012, p. 508). China, which considered itself the most advanced and sophisticated civilization, used to see the rest of the world as less developed. In point of fact, in Mandarin Chinese, 'China' is translated as *zhongguo* (中国), which means 'Middle Kingdom'. It doesn't require a further explanation: Imperial China adopted a Sinocentric view of the global order, considering itself the centre of the world (JACQUES, 2012, p. 303).

Beijing was the epicenter of the Empire, with concentric areas that progressively moved from civilization to outer darkness (JACQUES, 2012, p. 304). The *Yugong* (禹贡), a chapter of the Classic of Documents (书经)⁷, describes the relation of different territories through five concentric zones emanating outwards from the capital: *Dian* (royal domains), *Hou* (princely domains), *Sui* (pacification zone), *Yao* (zone of allied barbarians), *Huang* (zone of savagery) (YEE, 1994, p. 76). In one of its maps, the five geographical areas are represented in rectangular form, according to the cosmological notion of a square earth. This Sinocentric view entailed a submissive attitude from barbarians to civilized China. At this point, the Middle Kingdom subjected the rest of the territories through a mix of culture and military power (JACQUES, 2012, p. 304). Similarly, we can also observe the famous 1602 map called *Kunyu Wanguo*

⁶ Although there are different theories that explain the defining elements of a nation (and the legitimacy and right, or not, of constituting its own State), it is usually considered that a nation stems from a series of elements shared by a population (common language, culture, history, etc.) (see SÁNCHEZ FERRIZ, 2009, p. 152).

⁷ The Classic of Documents (also called 'Book of Documents' or 'Classic of History') is one of the five classics of ancient Chinese literature. It is dated, despite much controversy, in the sixth century BC.

Quantu (坤輿万国全图)⁸, drawn by Matteo Ricci (利玛竇)⁹ and its Chinese collaborators Li Zhizao and Zhang Wentao, in which China is located as the centre of the world. It is the oldest surviving map in Chinese to show the Americas and had a crucial importance in expanding Chinese knowledge of the world (UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA, 2017).

In this context, the rise of China is somehow challenging the Westphalian system of nation-states. As Chinese influence increases in the world, the approach to international relations could be affected by this Tributary system viewpoint. Nowadays, the majority of countries are aiming to strengthen their relationship with China, just as they have done for centuries under the Tributary system (see KANG, 2003). As evidence points out, States in East Asia, Africa or South America, are likely to depend on China due to financial and trade opportunities (see ALDEN, 2007). In this regard, what would be the result of this sphere of influence for international relations is one of the greatest questions of our time. Countries dependency is important to understand the future of international relations. For example, in Brazil's case, where China is the first trade partner, the partnership between both countries “goes beyond economic interests”, and it “will deeply influence how Brazilian society is likely to evolve and change in the next decades” (FERREIRA & ALBUQUERQUE, 2013). However, tensions with other parts of the world (such as the USA-China tariff war) are also decisive. Although it seems unlikely that international organizations shift from the one-country-one-vote system to a new system where countries do not have same rights, the likelihood that the current system will be influenced by the international relations Tributary system framework is high. To some extent, this Chinese international attitude will impact the current Westphalian system. For this reason, it is important to analyze the most significant differences between the Chinese civilization and the Western one, in order to figure out the way in which China could alter some notions of the international order.

III.4. China differs from the West: Civilization and State

⁸ Also called ‘Map of the Myriad Countries’, ‘Mappamondo’ or ‘The Impossible Black Tulip’. In addition to this model, there are five more known complete examples of the 1602 printing (Vatican Apostolic Library Collection I; Japan Kyoto University Collection; Collection of Japan Miyagi Prefecture Library; Collection of the Library of the Japanese Cabinet; private collection in Paris).

⁹ Matteo Ricci (1553-1610) was a Jesuit missionary that arrived China in 1583. He established the first Christian mission in China. He is considered one of the founders of the Catholic Church in China and his contributions to bring Chinese culture to the West are of transcendental importance. In opposite direction, he brought Western culture closer to China, coining non-existent terms in Mandarin Chinese at that time, such as God (上帝) or Heaven (天).

In relation to Chinese goals in international relations, some authors like Graham Allison have argued that rising powers develop an increasing pride and demand more influence and respect. According to this view, the established power tends to be insecure and fearful due to the emerging power challenge, and the natural reaction is to get defensive. Within this psychological atmosphere, slight misunderstandings are magnified. Small issues that would be solved without problem in other situations could lead to large conflicts and even to war. And, in the case of the USA and China, these differences could be even worse due to the contrast between civilizations (ALLISON, 2017b). This is the reason to analyze in this section the main civilizational differences between China and the West in relation to the way the State is conceived: If we understand these differences, we can figure out more precisely how China could impact the global order.

Therefore, there are main concepts that we should bear in mind while talking about Chinese civilization. First of all, China is not a nation-state but a civilization-state. This means that, unlike what happens in Europe, China represents a whole civilization under one State (JACQUES, 2012, p. 287). The notion of civilization should not be considered as a mere culture characteristic of a particular time or place, but as a unique complex system that differs from other kind of simpler societies, and that it is distinguished by their means of subsistence, types of livelihood, forms of government, social stratification, economic systems, or literacy, among others (see GORDON CHILDE, 2016). Although the concept of civilization is a matter of controversy between sociologists and globalization is challenging the traditional definition, however, it is a widely accepted fact the recognition of the existence of different civilizations along History (Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian, Mesoamerican, Arabian, Roman and Greece, etc.). In this sense, a fair comparison would be that between China and the whole Europe, as a Western civilization, under one State (taking in account that even in that situation, China doubles the population of Europe). It would not be symmetrical to compare China with a nation-state such as Spain, France or Italy. These nation-states should be compared with Chinese provinces such as Hebei (河北, 75 million people), Shandong (山东, 100 million people) or Guangdong (广东, 114 million people).

Secondly, the idea of State in China differs significantly from the Western way of thinking about it. The Chinese State is not considered as something external from individuals which should be limited in order to enjoy more individual freedom (as the liberal vision has traditionally considered). The State is seen as the *paterfamilias* of the civilization. Is the guardian of Chinese culture and values, enjoying “something akin to a spiritual significance” (JACQUES, 2012, p. 266). To the extent that the State is able to promote and defend Chinese

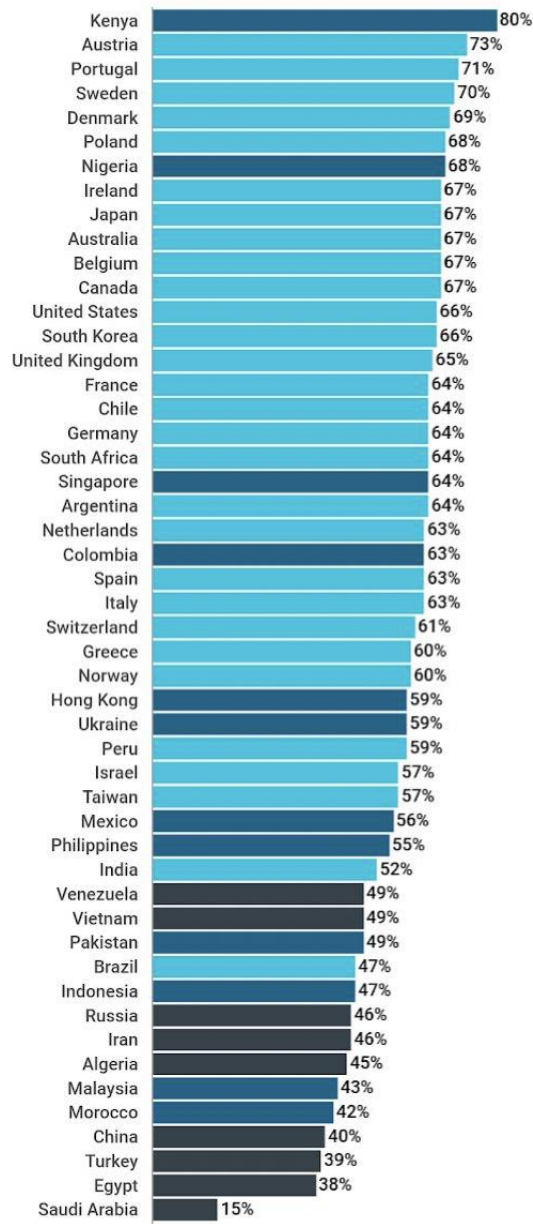
culture, it enjoys legitimacy. In this regard, sovereignty resides in the State itself rather than in people. Popular sovereignty was replaced by State sovereignty (see YONGNIAN, 1999). This is radically different to what happens in the West. Under a traditional Western vision, the State enjoys legitimacy if it respects two pillars: Democracy & Rule of Law, and Human Rights. Only if the State is democratic and does respect Human Rights, people grant legitimacy to it (see SAPHIRO, 2012). And, in any event, in Western States sovereignty resides with the people, not with the State.

Not only is the idea of State or its legitimacy dissimilar, but the way to understand the relation between individuals and the State. Whilst in Europe rebellions and revolutions have not been uncommon during most part of its history, respect for the State has been the general rule in Chinese history (although this idea has been countered by different authors - see CALLAHAN, 2016, p. 2). The State in China is contemplated as the embodiment of civilization. For this reason, any attack to it is considered as a direct attack to Chinese culture. The Chinese State, conceived as the guardian of Chinese culture and values, enjoys high authority and legitimacy (JACQUES, 2012, p. 266). Research has revealed high social acceptance of the Government and the State among Chinese society. For example, this is case of the Democracy Perception Index (DPI) 2018 (an annual research project conducted by Dalia Research, in collaboration with the Alliance of Democracies and Rasmussen Global, to measure citizens' trust in Governments). This study was published in June 2018 and was based on 125,000 surveys conducted around fifty different countries. It concludes that there is a lower percentage of people in China who feel their Government 'never' or 'rarely' acts in their interest than in the USA, the UK or Spain (see Figure 5). In the same way, the percentage of Chinese that feel the voice of people 'never' or 'rarely' matters in politics is lower than that of Americans, British or Spanish, once again (see Figure 6). China, despite being a non-democratic State, enjoys higher levels of satisfaction with the Government than many Western countries, as the DPI findings point out¹⁰.

¹⁰ Although the data in the above-mentioned report are clear, scientific rigor requires us to take them with caution. There are several factors that must be taken into account when analyzing the DPI's conclusions, such as the fact that most Chinese have never known any other system, so they do not have complete information to be able to compare. Moreover, the media in China is more biased than in the West, so propaganda has a key role in shaping society. And it should also be noted that in the West the critical spirit is precisely a consequence of freedom.

Do you feel that your government is acting in your interest?

% who responded "Never" or "Rarely"

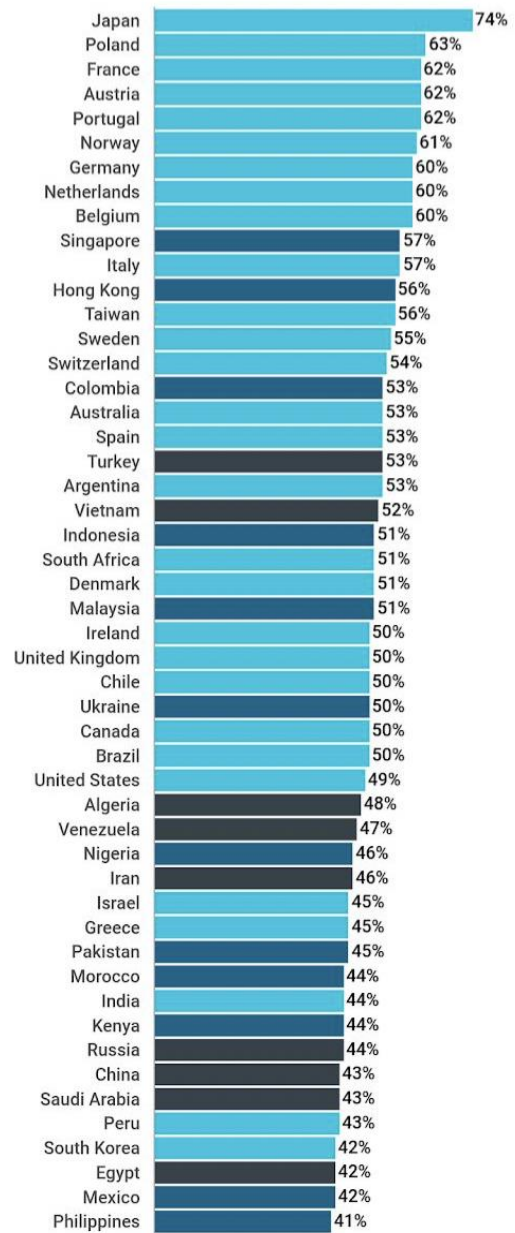


Freedom House Ranking ■ Not Free ■ Partly Free ■ Free

Figure 5. Survey – Do you feel that your government is acting in your interest?

Do you feel that the voice of people like you matters in politics?

% who responded "Never" or "Rarely"



Freedom House Ranking ■ Not Free ■ Partly Free ■ Free

Figure 6: Survey – Do you feel that the voice of people like you matter in politics?

Source: Democracy Perception Index 2018 – Dalia Research (<https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Democracy-Perception-Index-2018-1.pdf>)

In order to develop Chinese culture, unity is essential. Historical examples have stressed that when power was centripetal (with a strong Chinese Government and a united China), the experience has been positive. On the other hand, when power was centrifugal, China has suffered (as evidenced during the so-called century of humiliation, from 1839 to 1949). This is why unity is on the top of the scale of values. Its importance is deeper than freedom, which is the idea that inspires Western States. In this respect, individual rights in China are below collective rights (PÉREZ AYALA, 2005, p. 55). The community, as an extension of family, is more important than individuals. In relation to unity, political stability has also a great weight in Chinese politics (JACQUES, 2012, p. 264). Deng Xiaoping, in line with Confucian thinking, was in no doubt about its significance: “[China’s] modernization needs two prerequisites. One is international peace, and the other is domestic political stability [...]. A crucial condition of China’s progress is political stability” (recovered from YONGNIAN, 2004).

The importance of unity in Chinese culture can be observed in the language. Whereas in English or Spanish we use different words for ‘State’ (*Estado*, in Spanish), ‘country’ (*país*, in Spanish) and ‘nation’ (*nación*, in Spanish), in Mandarin Chinese they use the word *guojia* (国家) for all these concepts. ‘Country’, ‘State’ and ‘nation’ are closely connected ideas. Mandarin Chinese uses largely the same characters for all of them, which are part of the same notion. In addition, the Government is the top representative of the State. In this regard, the Communist Party monopolizes the Government, and therefore the State. For this reason, as mentioned above, an attack to the Government or to the CPC is conceived as a direct attack to their nation. However, unlike Western democracies, the Government does not have different ideologies depending on who leads the country. Although there might be different views on particular topics, individuals are always under the “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色社会主义) political theory. This way of organizing the political system leads to a more perdurable and consistent idea of Government.

In the same line, another language fact that represents very accurately the importance of unity in the Chinese civilization is the idea of nationality. The Chinese Constitution embraces two different concepts. On the one hand, the nationality without capacity of constituting a different State (民族 *minzu*). And, on the other hand, the idea of nationality (国籍 *guoji*) as the relationship with the country (国家 *guojia*). This last notion, under a Western vision, is associated with the sovereign nation and its capacity of constituting a State. Therefore, ethnic groups in China own that kind of non-sovereign nationality (民族 *minzu*), but not that kind of nationality with the capacity of constituting a different State (国籍 *guoji*). Neither in English nor in Spanish

do we use different words for these ideas. We use ‘nationality’ for both concepts, even though it is a controversial constitutional concept. A classic example could be that of Spain: The current 1978 Constitution recognizes something similar to a *minzu* to Catalonia, but not *guoji*, which would entail the famous self-determination right.

Nevertheless, despite the importance of unity in Chinese culture, there is a great heterogeneity in many fields: ethnic minorities¹¹, cuisines, languages... Even more, there are large political differences, for example, between citizens in Hong Kong and those of the Mainland China. Precisely, the safeguard of unity is the element that permits to overcome these differences. In other words, the Communist Party accepted the “one country, two systems” principle so as not to lose Hong Kong. In order to guarantee unity, different political and economic systems were accepted within the same State (which is unconceivable in Western systems - no Western State admits the possibility of embracing different political and economic systems within it). This fact reinforces the idea of civilization-state, as opposed to that of nation-state.

In addition, the authority of the Chinese State is endorsed by its historical experience regarding the lack of division of the decision-making capacity. It is true that during several epochs the Emperor have depended on a huge bureaucracy and, during Han dynasty for example, the distribution of power with the Chancellor had been one of the greatest problems in the Chinese governance (MU, 2000, p. 3). However, at least during the last millennium, the Emperor never shared power with other entities, such as the nobility, the Church or businesspeople (JACQUES, 2012, p. 260). Moreover, Confucian ideas established as desirable that participation in politics should correspond only to an elite and not to the rest of social strata. The coexistence of different sources of authority was regarded as ethically wrong. Participation in politics, however, entitled a high moral requirement (PYE, 1992, p. 24-25). Indeed, this perception of limited political involvement lasts until today. Chinese people don’t crave after active participation in politics. In China (with the exception of Hong Kong and Macao), democracy is not a social demand according to the DPI 2019 (see Figure 7). Despite the authoritarian character of the State, Chinese people seek democracy to a less extent than people in most part of Western countries. As highlighted before, satisfaction with the Government in China is high. For this reason, democracy demands in Mainland China are almost non-existent. Nevertheless, what would happen if China suffers an economic breakdown? Would respect for

¹¹ According to official Chinese Government statistics (http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/china_abc/2014/08/27/content_281474983873388.htm), in addition to Han majority, there are 55 ethnic minority groups (that compromises near 8% of the mainland population).

the State and all the theoretical ideas explained above outweigh a decreasing economic output? I believe this is one of the most important questions for China's future and one of the main concerns of the Communist Party in order to preserve power. Only time will give us the answer.

Where do people around the world want more democracy?

— "I think there is not enough democracy in my country."

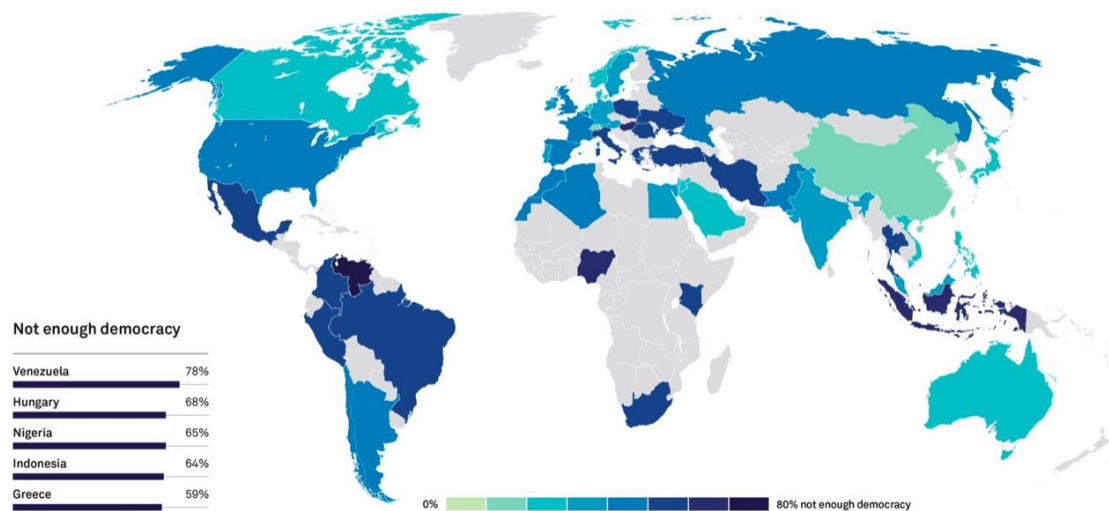


Figure 7. Survey – Where do people around the world want more democracy?

Source: Democracy Perception Index 2019 – Dalia Research (<https://daliaresearch.com/democracy/>)

Finally, another extremely important aspect to understand the idea of State in China in relation to the West is the way in which time is considered. Unlike the West, where progress is the horizon, China has had a continuous culture for five millennia (in contrast, the USA was constituted only 250 years ago). Continuity of the legacy and repetition are key features in their civilization¹². China has a meaning in time and history. For this reason, the Chinese Government distinguish the immediate measures from the structural ones (ALLISON, 2017). In this sense, the nature of the Chinese system fosters a long-term thinking, unlike many Western democracies, where Governments seem to focus only in short-term concerns (in most cases, until next elections). The Communist Party, at least since Mao's death, is above individuals. As a consequence, policies last longer than politicians, as explained above.

IV. Conclusions

¹² This point is clearly appreciated in the business world: while Western companies were characterized by innovation, Chinese companies were characterized by copying. However, this have changed radically, and Chinese firms are currently developing new technologies and investing heavily in R&D. For example, in the smartphones market, some of the largest companies are Chinese (such as Huawei, Xiaomi, Vivo or Lenovo).

The time of a unipolar world led so far by the United States has passed. The world moves forward to the next step. However, whether this new global order will look as a non-polar world (where several regional powers coexist without colliding with each other) or as a multipolar world (with different superpowers competing with each other) remains unknown. There are two main Western approaches on the rise of China under an international relations theoretical framework. On the one hand, offensive realists argue that China will challenge the current system and that the Asian country might create a new architecture of international organizations according to its own view of the world. These authors cite examples such as the conflicts in South China Sea, the expansion of Chinese state-controlled firms, the new Belt and Road Initiative and its surrounding institutions, or the leadership role played during the coronavirus crisis. On the other hand, liberal internationalists suggest that, even though the world order could be modified to some extent, the liberal system will resist because China will adapt itself to Western norms. These authors cite China's membership of the WTO or its increasing cooperative attitude in the UN Security Council.

In the same line, there are two main narratives supported by Chinese experts. The official discourse, endorsed primarily by the current President Xi Jinping, states that China's peaceful rise will reinforce cooperation between countries, helping to strengthen the common interests of humankind. However, other authors defend that China has the moral duty to model global institutions to better represent the interests of emerging powers and the non-West, thus taking a more aggressive approach.

In view of the facts, it seems clear that China's shift in foreign policy responds to a new pro-active attitude towards international affairs. China has put the 'bide and hide' low-profile strategy aside. The establishment of international financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Silk Road Fund, are proof of this new position. Nevertheless, China's traditional vision of international order is different from the Western one. Whereas the current international system was created according to the Westphalian system of nation-states, where multilateral relations between countries are based on equal rights and obligations, the 'Tributary system' was the pattern for relations between China and the rest of regions. This concept of international relations arises from the fact that China was a country with an overwhelming population and cultural, military and economic superiority over other countries or places. The 'Tributary system' was based on unequal bilateral relations between China and the rest of regions, which were regarded as less developed.

It is unlikely that countries' attitudes in international relations shift radically from the Westphalian system, especially within international organizations (which are based on the

principle of one country, one vote) to the Tributary system. However, to some extent, this Chinese view of the international order will impact the current Westphalian system. In this regard, regional integration initiatives (such as the European Union) are desirable for nation-states in order to establish equal relations with China. For example, let's think in France or Spain trying to reach a particular trade agreement with China if the EU did not exist. What position of strength in the negotiation would either of the two countries have?

In order to figure out the way in which China could alter the international order, this research has studied the most significant differences between Chinese and Western models of State. First, China is not a Western-style nation-state but a civilization-state. That is, it unifies under the same State an entire civilization. Therefore, symmetric relationships would be those between China and a State that knits together the whole Europe, and not those between China and Portugal, Spain or France. These European States should be compared with Chinese provinces such as Hebei (75 million people), Shandong (100 million people) or Guangdong (114 million people), for example.

In line with the above, the Government in China is not conceived as a foreign agent whose power must be limited, as traditionally understood by liberal positions in the West, but rather as the pinnacle of its civilization. In other words, the guardian of its culture and the promoter of Chinese values. As a consequence, an attack on the Chinese State is akin to an attack on the Chinese civilization itself. In this context, the social acceptance of the Government is very high. According to data presented in this study, the level of satisfaction of Chinese society with Chinese Government is higher than that of Western societies with Western Governments. It is true that some elements could help to understand the context of these results, such as the fact that most Chinese have not experienced other political systems beyond the CCP dictatorship, or that foreign news has a higher level of control and censorship than in Western systems. However, the data are still very revealing.

In China, the sovereignty of the State does not come from the people but lies in the State itself. The legitimacy granted to the Government is not based on Democracy or respect for Human Rights. Legitimacy comes from the ability of the Government to maintain the unity of the State and promote Chinese values. Therefore, individual liberties are subject to this general interest. The Chinese Government has social acceptance to limit individual rights and freedoms if those measures help to safeguard Chinese culture. Freedom is not at the top of the scale of values that the Government should protect and promote, as in Western systems. Unity is the most important value. The notion of Government is endorsed by its historical experience regarding the lack of division of the decision-making capacity during centuries, in addition to

the high morality expected from politicians and the long-term thinking that characterizes Chinese politics.

All these features represent significant differences between China and the West. According to authors such as Graham Allison, established powers tend to be insecure and fearful about emerging powers, and the natural reaction is to get defensive. Within this psychological atmosphere, slight misunderstandings are magnified. Small issues that would be solved without problem in other situations could lead to large conflicts and even to war. And, in the case of the United States and China, misunderstandings could be even worse due to the contrast between civilizations. As explained in this research, these differences are especially important in three fields: the model of State, the way both civilizations understand individual rights and freedoms, and the vision on international relations (Westphalian system vs. 'Tributary system').

In the context of China's rise, due to its economic and geopolitical development, what would happen with the Western Democracy & Rule of Law - Capitalism - Human Rights paradigm fostered by the established international system is another significant question. However, at least two main successive conditions would be necessary in order to change this paradigm: first, to create a new architecture of international organizations based on different values. Second, to actively promote Chinese values and China's society model among developing countries through its international influence. Even if China creates a new international system (through new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Bank or the Silk Road Fund), it would have to exercise a kind of attraction power towards developing countries. This attraction power should not be generated only through the so-called soft power (such as the politics followed by those recently created international organizations or cultural influence) but also through trade influence.

In this regard, whereas the West promotes democratic values while trading with other countries, China does not interfere in the political internal affairs of other countries, focusing mainly on the economic aspects of the agreements (although this doesn't mean that Chinese companies are not privileged in those trade agreements). For example, in the financial sphere, China usually lend money without demanding democratic reforms. In this context, China could meet the first condition (creation of an alternative international system), but not the second one (promotion of that newly created international system). Therefore, it is unlikely that China will create a new global paradigm supported by a new international system for developing States.

Nevertheless, different situation would be that were developing countries imitate *motu proprio* China's society model, instead of the Democracy & Rule of Law - Capitalism - Human

Rights paradigm promoted by the West. In this case, if China becomes the model for emerging countries, those paradigmatic ideas of Western societies could become blurred and not continue to expand. Or, in a similar situation, developing countries could stop applying that Western model because no financial institution is demanding such reforms (due to the fact that these countries are now asking for money from China, which doesn't demand reforms), and simply develop their own traditional paradigms, without taking the Western model into account. In any case, what is clear is that China will alter somehow the Western paradigm. However, to what extent or what the new paradigm would be, in such a case, are questions that only time will answer.

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