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Caution on branding China's new-style dictatorship



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The recent vote by China's National People's Congress allowing President Xi Jinping to remain in office indefinitely caps a period in which China has propelled itself robustly onto the world stage. Since 2013, Xi has implemented his massive trade and development Belt and Road Initiative across Asia and Europe, while simultaneously turning reefs and islands in the South China Sea into military bases which are illegal under international law and could threaten global shipping.

In many respects, Xi can be viewed as an archetypal dictator, projecting power, creating a cult of himself and using a rubber stamp parliament to do his bidding. But such stereotyping carries high risk, particularly among Western democracies dealing with the simplistic narratives of the 24-hour news cycle. All too easily they can conflate Xi into a Mugabe, Assad or Putin whose actions must be stopped.

A confidently authoritarian China has now created a situation whereby the extent to which any government can exercise leverage depends largely on its economic and military muscle.

Cambodia, Laos and other weak Asian countries are now little more than client states and even the United States must balance priorities. Long gone are the days when Western leaders lectured China about its democratic deficit and a row over an airbase on a remote island should not prevent cooperation in preventing nuclear war with North Korea.

Beijing's seven new bases in the South China Sea have become a high-profile fault line between China and Western democracies, symbolizing international law against illegal hegemony. The US regularly carries out Freedom of Navigation operations to test Chinese military resolve.

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Any confrontation would have global consequences and, should this happen, whether by intent or miscalculation, it is crucial that the response is not driven by media-headlines, but remains calm, fact-based and measured.

The US and its allies carry immense leverage with China. European and American trade is the bedrock of China's success meaning that Beijing needs them more than they need Beijing.

In the starkest terms, a 2016 Rand Corporation report estimated that a year-long Sino-American conflict would lead to only a 5-10 per cent loss of US gross domestic product, but a 25-30 percent drop for China. This would risk civil unrest and challenge the Communist Party leadership that Xi Jinping wishes to hold for many more years.

Unless he becomes riddled with hubris, Xi will avoid such a scenario at all costs, and there are already signs that he is rowing back from his previous stance of openly challenging the current US-led world order.

In two key speeches last year, in Davos and then in Beijing for the Belt and Road summit, Xi made no mention at all of international law, the bedrock of the current rules-based system that he had been dismissing as invalid.

Yet, in January this year, when announcing its policy in the Arctic, that new frontier for shipping and fossil fuel extraction, China cites international law fifteen times with ten direct references to the United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea, the very statute that Beijing has violated over the South China Sea.

It may then be the case that China is adopting a time-honoured practice among rising powers. In the South China Sea, Xi is securing his own back yard with guns while opting for trade and diplomacy in the wider world. Unlike the US and European colonialism before it, China has so far achieved its global expansion without a shot being fired in anger. Xi's intention, for the time being at least, is that this track record continues.

Insightful Reading

Kerry Brown, *China's World: The Global Aspiration of the Next Superpower*. New York: Tauris, 2017.

Bill Emmott, *Fate of the West: The Decline and Revival of the World's Most Valuable Political Idea*. London: Economist Books, 2017.

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