

Authoritarianism in the 2020s

By: Michael Spilg

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Introduction to Authoritarianism;

The early 2010s was an economic surprise for the world after the 2008-09 recession. The economy slowly recovered following several bank bailouts from the government and the effects of globalization and free trade were widely accepted by the international community.

Globalization was seen as a cause for economic prosperity, liberal freedoms, and global peace.

This changed halfway through the decade though when the liberal world was shaken to its core by the unexpected rise of authoritarian regimes. The direction of authoritarianism is seen by the spread of extremism of political parties of left progressivism and right populism. The impact of authoritarian governments varies by their investment to develop a cybersecurity strategy,

recognition of international institutions to build a national vision, and response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Authoritarianism and Extremism;

The rise of political extremism has aided the rise of authoritarian regimes around the world.

Lawrence Kudrow, Assistant to the President for Economic Policy spoke at the Council of Foreign Relations about “The Global Economy in an Age of Populism.”¹ He argued that the ideologies behind President Donald Trump and Senator Bernie Sanders were two sides of the same populist coin. He argued Trump’s economic policy is derived from a Neo-Reagan “trickle down” policy, whereas Sanders’ economic approach is to “milk the cow,” without much concern for the health of the cow. Nobel Laureate and former President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, spoke at a panel at the London School of Economics, titled “Building A World Fit For Future Generations” where he argued the answer to political divisions around the world wasn’t extremism, but political moderation. He suggested this would be a more successful approach to governance and could be achieved through “collective courage” by the people.²

¹ Kudrow, Lawrence. 2019. “The Global Economy in an Age of Populism.” Lecture. Council of Foreign Relations, 5 Dec. 2019.

² Santos, President Juan Manuel. 2019. “Building A World Fit For Future Generations.” Lecture. London School of Economics, 29 Oct. 2019.

British political commentator and Guardian columnist, Steve Richards, suggested in his book *The Rise of Outsiders* that populists have been successful due to their outsider status. Regardless of their economic background, the lack of political experience ironically seems to aid them in democratic elections, referencing examples in President Trump and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US, President Macron in France, and President Tsipras in Greece. This outsider identity allows them to vaguely define themselves as representatives of “the people,” leaving the voters to question who conventional candidates really represent.³

The influence of political extremism may have contributed to the rise of authoritarianism, but the influence of authoritarian governments heavily depends on the world’s acceptance, normalization, and tolerance of authoritarian regimes. At the Charles Newhauser Memorial Lecture by Harvard’s Fairbank Center, former Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, gave a lecture titled “China, the UN, and the Future of Human Rights.” She focused on the significance of China in the international community, how their acceptance of human rights violations, and how their view of human rights as a privilege that shouldn’t be prioritized over economic goals will weaken the meaning and protection of human rights abroad. As China invests in Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America, they bring their ideology and business tactics. Power argued that democratic governments need to counter Chinese influence by strengthening partnerships between democracies and “internal workings of democracy at home.”⁴

³ Richards, Steve. 2018. “Rise of Outsiders: How Mainstream Politics Lost Its Way.” Atlantic Books.

⁴ Power, Samantha. 2020. “China, the UN, and the Future of Human Rights.” Lecture. Harvard Fairbanks Center for Chinese Studies, Charles Newhauser Memorial, 4 Feb. 2020.

An emphasis on collaboration between democracies is also critical since authoritarian regimes seem to support each other on the international stage. For example, Polish President Andrzej Duda violated Poland's constitutional process by appointing judges by pressuring or removing, then illegally nominating judges supportive of his political party, PiS. The European Court of Justice has raised concern about the European Union continuing to provide funds to Poland given this blunt violation of the country's democratic process. "You can't be a member of the European Union if you don't have independent, impartial courts," argued ECJ's Chief Justice Koen Lenaerts. Zbigniew Ziobro, Poland's justice minister, counter-attacked the EU by accusing them of applying different standards on eastern members than western members.⁵ However, autonomous consent is needed for the EU to invoke sanctions or revoke funds to a member-state. Hungary, led by authoritarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban of the conservative populist party Fidesz, vetoed the decision to dock aid in the next EU multi-year budget, thus protecting Duda from having to answer to the ECJ.⁶

Authoritarianism and Technology

In addition to developing a vision based around political extremism, authoritarianism threatens the potential of technology to serve as a catalyst for freedom of speech and representation of minorities. Authoritarian regimes, particularly President Xi's China, uses technology and cybersecurity to suppress freedoms and increase surveillance. Ambassador Power mentioned how China has sold surveillance technology used in over 200 cities abroad, and particularly noted Ecuador's use of facial tracking systems. Built in 2016 and funded by a \$240 million Chinese loan, Ecuador used Chinese surveillance systems to build a nationwide 4,300 camera security system. The project named ECU911 inspired governments in Bolivia, Peru, Zimbabwe, and Cambodia to build similar facial recognition and security camera networks with Chinese technology.⁷

⁵ "The Lawless and Injustice Party." Jan. 2020. The Economist.

⁶ "Poland is pushing the EU into crisis." 2018. VOX. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8MQTgdjLE>

⁷ Rollet, Charles. "Ecuador's All Seeing Eye is Made in China." 9 Aug. 2018. Foreign Policy.

As tensions between the US and China intensify, other countries feel pressure to pick a side. Since decisions related to trade and diplomacy ripple into future negotiations, most developed countries are careful not to alienate themselves from either power. One distinctive line drawn in this neo-Cold War is related to technology. The US and China are pushing trade partners to use their 5G networks and not their opponents. Many Western countries, disappointed with Trump's pressures on them to pay their fair share in joint-defense institutions, are not enthusiastically denouncing an interest in Chinese technology. Many European countries have actually an interest in Chinese technology as they are less concerned about long-term commitments related to cybersecurity infrastructure and more interested in the immediate economic growth potential from 5G networks. Nonetheless, some agree to work with the Americans. For example, Latvia was one of the first European countries to partner with American 5G developments, but did not make the agreement exclusive nor did they explicitly denounce an interest to work with China.⁸

Authoritarianism and Vision:

Similar to fears that the Chinese may be softly infiltrating Western democracies by exporting new technological infrastructure, the Chinese may be buying developing countries through "debt-entrapment" schemes. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insists Chinese trade in Latin America is tainted with "corrosive capital." Although the Chinese deny this practice, they intentionally ignore quality standards in their infrastructure projects abroad. When countries aren't able to use the infrastructure, they are still indebted to the Chinese. In Venezuela and Ecuador, debt is negotiated in other forms, such as oil. Roughly 80% of oil exports from Ecuador are shipped to China. Mexican Ambassador to China Jorge Guajardo suggests the region knows of the risks "paternalistically warned" by the Americans, but also claims the US has shunned Latin America. Though some welcome China, such as Chilean Ambassador to China Jorge Heine, who notices "Americans only talk about China. China talks about trade and investment."⁹

⁸"The Latvian Foreign Minister and the United States Secretary of State sign a United States-Latvia Joint Declaration on 5G Security." 28 Feb. 2020. Embassy of the Republic of Latvia to the United States.

⁹"Competing for Influence: China in Latin America." Mar. 2020. Foreign Policy Association.

China's interest in investing in developing countries and potentially building a new world order differs from the power struggle of the Cold War, and may be derived by national interests in the preservation of the People's Communist Party. President Deng Xiaoping announced that China would become "xiaokang," an egalitarian Utopia, by 2000. This was defined by quadrupling the GDP and GDP per person by 2000, compared to 1980. By 1995, China successfully quadrupled the GDP and by 1997 achieved its benchmark goal for GDP per person too. In 2012, President Xi reintroduced the xiaokang, announcing China would achieve "moderate prosperity" by 2020, defined by eliminating poverty or achieving GDP per person of 2,300 yuan/year, or \$340/year. These visions helped remake China. Compared to the 775 million Chinese below the poverty line in 1980, only 16.6 million remained by the end of 2018. Due to the pandemic, xiaokang was pushed back to July 1, 2021, coinciding with the centennial of the Communist Party. The next target goal is for China to become a modern socialist country by 2035. By 2049, China will be a "prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, and beautiful" nation.¹⁰

To achieve its next goals, China needs resources and acceptance by the international community. Ambassador Power noted how China's foreign affairs budget has doubled since 2013, passed the US in the number of diplomatic posts in 2019, and contributes the largest number of peacekeepers to the United Nations - 2,500 personnel, three times as many as the United States. China currently gives out more loans to developing countries than the IMF. Power speculates this will benefit China when they look for support for questionable behavior, such as human rights violations in Hong Kong and the Chinese Western province Xinjiang. Though, Power's speculations may already be a reality. For example, Uganda owes \$1 billion to China, and in October 2019, Foreign Affairs Minister Okello Oryem denounced Hong Kong's protests in October 2019, on behalf of Ugandan authoritarian President Yoweri Museveni.¹¹ Power also noted that if foreign opinion "can't be bought," then China discredits them. An example is being a Chinese intelligence task force intervening in anti-Chinese protests at Australian universities.

¹⁰ "All things in moderation." Jan. 2020. The Economist.

¹¹ Athumani, Halima. 2019. "Uganda states Support for Beijing." 8 Oct. 2019. Voa.

Lastly, China may be taking a proactive approach to reshaping the current world order. One side of this approach involves spreading the Beijing consensus to developing parts of the world. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China is reshaping “a world order more to its liking” through a focus on “economic engagement and clever diplomacy.”¹² Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China can build new alliances with other authoritarian regimes, such as the Philippines. President Duterte, notoriously known for his aggressive drug war, directed orders against drug dealers such as, “If they resist, kill them all,” continues to be immensely popular. Against popular opinion, though, he has formed a strong friendship with China. He has secured \$9 billion in Chinese infrastructure contracts, though only \$900 million has been formally signed over. China may see common aims between their Belt and Road Initiative and Duterte’s “zeal for construction” as an opportunity to build support on other sensitive issues. As opposed to Duterte’s predecessor, President Aquino, who challenged China’s claims in the South China Sea, or the West Philippine Sea, Duterte jokes about the Philippines becoming a province of China.¹³

Although the Belt and Road Initiative provides China with the framework to build their world order, they may not want to build one entirely from scratch. In pursuit of national preservation, China does not necessarily want to emulate America and would prefer to avoid domestic disputes of other countries.¹⁴ China may benefit from infiltrating the Bretton-Woods model of the Western world order centered around institutions, such as the United Nations, by assuming strategic leadership positions. China recently obtained leadership positions in agencies at the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, International Telecommunications Union, and the Human Rights Council. Against US opposition, China was selected to lead the Food and Agriculture Organization, to join a panel that chooses investigators for the Human Rights Council, and became a judge on a tribunal on Law of the Sea disputes at the United Nations.¹⁵

¹² “Return to Center: China Belt and Road Initiative.” 8 Feb. 2020. The Economist.

¹³ “Still the people’s choice.” 20 Feb. 2020. The Economist.

¹⁴ “Is China winning?” 16 Apr 2020. The Economist.

¹⁵ Gladstone, Rick. “UN to face 75th Anniversary Facing Questions.” 21 Sep. 2020. New York Times.

Authoritarianism and COVID-19:

The coronavirus outbreak of 2020 may be the defining event of this new decade. Following a rise of authoritarian regimes at the end of the 2010s, the response and effectiveness to minimize the outbreak in each country was heavily influenced by their early decisions. Three political theories; Utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Libertarianism, define the general approaches used.¹⁶

Utilitarianism favors the sacrifice of the few for the many. This approach was the initial response by some European countries, including the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, which strongly favored economic growth. Following British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's recovery from the coronavirus in late March, at the height of the pandemic, the UK completely reversed their approach. Nonetheless, Johnson was still heavily criticized for doing "too little, too late," whereas, French President Macron's approval ratings soared due to his quick decision to invoke restrictions on movements and price controls to minimize the impact of the virus.¹⁷

Kantian philosophy proposes that protection of the dignity and health of the individual is the most important indicator of civilized society. Related to government responses to coronavirus, German philosopher Genzelin Schmid Noerr argued "the efforts of the state to save every single human life must have absolute priority over a utilitarian offsetting of the undesirable economic costs."¹⁶ For example, Colombian city Medellín entered a lockdown five days before the rest of the country. Mayor Quintero, an engineer by trade, locked down the city five days before the rest of the country. He led the creation of a data collection program, Medellín Me Cuida, or Medellín Takes Care of Me to distribute payments to the city's population. People had to provide sensitive information, including the size of their household and details of their electricity bills, but the billing information prevented families from getting more than one aid package. More than 3 million people, nearly 90% of the population, signed up.¹⁸

¹⁶ Delanty, Gerald. "Six political philosophies in search of a virus: Critical perspectives on the coronavirus

perspective." May 2020, London School of Economics, LEQS No. 156/2020.

¹⁷ "Everything's under control." Mar. 2020. The Economist.

¹⁸ "How Colombia's second largest city." June 2020. The Economist.

The third approach, Libertarianism, strongly prioritizes the liberty of the individual by suggesting that the enforced social distancing as a remedy for the lockdown is worse than the disease itself. Giorgio Agamben, an Italian philosopher, commented on the pandemic-related restrictions that “A society that lives in a permanent state of emergency cannot be a free one.”¹⁶ The coronavirus may have enhanced some of the negative effects authoritarian regimes have on their respective society. For example, the coronavirus enhanced the idea of a new “Other” similar to Muslims during the war on terror. It excuses governments to target specific groups, such as unwanted minorities. Indian President Modi used selective testing on Muslim populations, stigmatizing them as “unclean.” Modi justified this decision since there were larger Muslim gatherings pre-quarantine, regardless of continued large Hindu gatherings continued during quarantine. In Nigeria, more people have been killed by police violence to ensure strict lockdown protocol than by the coronavirus. In other under-developed countries, such as Brazil, an adequate place of refuge for many is unavailable due to the dense homeless populations in the favelas, or slums, that populate many cities.

Nonetheless, the global effect of the coronavirus has been so far reached that liberal idealists suggest the biopolitical securitization created out of this health crisis could be applied to tackle another critical global issue - the climate crisis. “Once the crisis is over, [society] does not bring back the same old climate regime,” as hoped by French philosopher Bruno Latour.¹⁴ An unanswered question remains for many governments though, when will government COVID-related tracking end. Similar to welfare programs, income tax, and nationalism, which were also produced out of conflict or crisis, will these mandates continue post-quarantine?¹⁷

Conclusion about Authoritarianism:

The rise of China has irreversibly reshaped the power structure of the world with a share of global GDP at 16 percent, up from two percent four decades ago. In contrast, the European Union dropped from 35 to 21 percent, Japan fell from ten to six percent, and Russia slipped from three to two percent. The United States maintained a steady share from 23 to 25 percent. Though China has rapidly grown during the preceding decades, it is unlikely to surpass the United States. Even if China was to maintain its reported 2019 nominal GDP growth rate of six percent, and the US maintained her four percent growth rate, China would not catch up to the US until around

2050. If China's growth slowed by one percent, it would not catch up until 2090. The US dollar is also greatly valued around the world. The number of countries that weigh their currency against the dollar has risen from around 30 percent in 1950 to about 60 percent today. The world also benefits from a reserve currency. The US dollar is used for roughly 90 percent of global financial transactions. Regardless of who leads the United States in the 2020s, global elites trust US institutions.¹⁹ Regardless, America cannot take advantage of their current position as a superpower. As noted by Yale Economics professor, Stephen Roach, while speaking at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, foreign policy is critical to American economic growth. Roach noted that trade makes up roughly a third of American GDP, which is three times what it was in 1930, suggesting that "we're far more vulnerable to a policy mistake on the trade front today than back then."²⁰ Therefore, the US must adapt to the modern world by accepting the loss of primacy, recognizing regional leaders, and working to avoid a violent war with China.

The unexpected rise of authoritarian regimes has spread around the world. The direction of authoritarianism is seen through the spread of extremism of political parties of left progressivism and right populism. The impact of authoritarian governments varies by their investment in a cybersecurity strategy, their recognition of international institutions to draft national visions and their response to the coronavirus outbreak. American foreign policy for the next decade will be shaped by her response to authoritarianism. To combat authoritarianism, and preserve her prosperity, America must rethink global strategy, rebuild historic alliances, and rejoin international agreements to maintain a respectable, proactive role in global affairs.

Michael Spilg has degrees in Mechanical Engineering from Colorado State University and International Relations from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He currently works in the medical device regulatory industry. His interests are in technology, geopolitics, and diplomacy.

¹⁹ Sharma, Ruchir. "The Comeback Nation: US Economists Supremacy Has Repeatedly Proved Declinists Wrong." 31 Mar. 2020. *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 99 No. 3, p. 70-81.

²⁰ Roach, Stephen. 2019. "US Conflict: From Trade War to Cold War." Lecture. Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 5 Dec. 2019.