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Presenting The Chinese Dragon As A Giant Panda

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Chinese President Xi Jinping wants a reset for his country's image. In early June he told a Chinese Communist Party meeting that they needed to do a better job selling China. Apparently even he realized that "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy wasn't working overseas, however much it excited nationalists at home.

Opined Xi: "We must pay attention to grasp the tone, be both open and confident but also modest and humble, and strive to create a credible, lovable and respectable image of China."

It is a worthy goal. However, it also is utterly unrealistic. It's a bit like Mao Zedong, in the midst of the Cultural Revolution—part civil war, part party purge, part power struggle—calling on diplomats for the People's Republic of China to put a prettier face on the torture, imprisonment, and murder of hundreds of thousands of people across the country.

Or it's like Joseph Stalin, on taking a break from signing lengthy death lists of party faithful and common citizens, urging his foreign minister to present the Soviet Union's record as respectable and unexceptional. Or Adolf Hitler, the morning after Kristallnacht, the infamous attack on synagogues and Jewish schools, homes, and businesses, instructing his nation's representatives to present the modest, even humble ambitions of the Reich government.

The problem in this case is not China. It is the *People's Republic* of China. It is the regime constructed by Mao and the CCP. And reinforced by Xi Jinping.

The fact that the PRC still calls itself Communist is not itself a worry. After Mao's death in 1976 China ceased to be anything resembling Marxist. The CCP shifted dramatically under "paramount leader" Deng Xiaoping toward market economics. Although the Tiananmen Square crackdown suppressed pressure for political reform—absent Deng's almost monomaniacal determination to disperse demonstrators with force the outcome could have been very different—the Chinese people continued to enjoy far greater personal autonomy and economic freedom.

Moreover, until Xi took power even controls over political discussion were more relaxed. There were academic exchanges, NGO activities, active churches, local protests, independent journalists, and looser restraints. The PRC was not a free society, but it was vastly better than during the deadly madcap rule of Mao. Indeed, Western engagement with China should be viewed as a success. Although it did not deliver a free, democratic system, it helped enlarge

spaces of liberty within an otherwise authoritarian system. And that offered long-term hope for development of a more liberal society.

Alas, Xi Jinping changed that. Originally hailed by some as a possible reformer, Xi turned out to be a Mao-wannabe. Perhaps a modest exaggeration, it nevertheless accurately reflects Xi's commitment to repression and reaffirms the CCP's and his personal authority. Although less susceptible to wild, even mad flights of fancy and causing mass starvation as a result, Xi has centralized control and insisted that 1.4 billion Chinese grovel when he speaks.

It is worth considering the sort of pigs upon which China's diplomats are supposed to apply prodigious layers of lipstick. Here are seven.

First is the end of the CCP's attempt to balance and limit power. Most dramatic was the removal of term limits for China's president. Although that is a less powerful position than CCP general secretary, there is no indication that Xi is prepared to voluntarily leave either position. He appears to be returning the PRC to lifetime dictatorship as under Mao, who died in his dotage but was still capable of wreaking havoc on the party and society.

Second is the government enforced closing of the Chinese mind. The regime has been actively attempting to banish free thought in the PRC. Policy debate is effectively banished, academic cooperation is restricted, CCP conformity is enforced, independent journalists have been dispersed, critical local media coverage has been eliminated, activist NGOs have been closed, social media is more closely monitored, and online offenses result in greater punishment. What once was but a loose authoritarian system has steadily reduced the space available for independent thought, and even more so criticism of authority.

Third is the suppression of religion. Mao's death eased official attacks on faith. By the 2000s, increasingly, there was unofficial tolerance of even house churches, so long as participants avoided political activity. However, under Xi the CCP launched a national campaign to both Sinicize and communize religion, including Christianity, Islam, and traditional faiths. Worship facilities have been destroyed, minors have been barred from religious services, faith leaders and churchgoers have been arrested, and religious communities have been forced to display Xi pictures and party propaganda, treating the CCP general secretary like a secular god.

Fourth is the destruction of the human rights bar. Hundreds of attorneys, many Christians, once sought to defend the Chinese people from state abuse in court. Although they generally lost, they attempted to use the PRC's rule *by* law to promote the rule *of* law. However, in 2015 Beijing launched a general crackdown, arresting, imprisoning, and disbaring lawyers. The campaign against attorneys who defended people persecuted by the government continued earlier this year by disbaring two lawyers who offered to represent a dozen Hong Kong residents arrested last year when they attempted to flee the territory for Taiwan after the brutal CCP crackdown there. Today Beijing makes no pretense that the law is anything but a political tool to oppress.

Fifth is the destruction of civil and political liberties in Hong Kong. At the start of 2020, the Special Administrative Area had Western standards of civil liberties and rule of law and limited but important democratic political freedoms. By the end of 2020, after passage of the National Security Law, Hong Kong's internal liberties were no greater than those of any mainland Chinese city, with simple criticism of and protests against the CCP resulting in arrest, trial, and imprisonment. A reign of terror was instituted against protestors from 2019 and before, as the

authorities wreaked revenge on democracy activists who had previously thwarted attempts by the CCP's local minions to suppress protests. Today Hong Kong remains economically freer than the mainland, but even that liberty may not survive Beijing's new determination to suppress independent thought.

Sixth is the crackdown on alleged separatism and "splittism" in both Tibet and Xinjiang. The Xi regime has employed ruthless repression and surveillance as well as Han resettlement in both regions. Xinjiang also uses reeducation camps and forced labor in an attempt to remake the mostly Muslim Uyghurs into a Han-lite people. The PRC has even threatened Uyghurs living elsewhere with harm to their families still in China if the expatriates criticize the Xi government's cruel depredations.

Seventh is a more aggressive international policy. That includes using minacious "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy, mimicking Washington's use of economic power as a political weapon, manipulating production of personal protective equipment for political advantage, aggressively pressing territorial claims throughout Asia-Pacific waters, and engaging in military intimidation against Taiwan. Whatever the merit of the PRC's legal claims, China is increasingly seen by its neighbors as well as nations as far away as Africa and Europe as a threat.

That's quite a herd of hogs to expect even a bevy of trained diplomats to beautify. An occasional dubious action here or there might be explained away or skillfully obfuscated. But such a long train of abuses? Tossing people in jail, punishing others for speaking their mind, threatening war and acts of war against countries, and otherwise attacking people's lives, liberties, and dignity?

Beijing poses a significant challenge to the U.S.; the issues are not primarily military, however. There is no present threat of aggression against America. The tyranny of distance affects the PRC no less than America, limiting any Chinese efforts to extend its power beyond East Asian-Pacific waters. Although the U.S. should defend freedom of navigation in the western Pacific, that is best accomplished by helping to empower friendly states to advance their own interests.

Other issues should be addressed with recognition of the limits of U.S. power, too. In practice, Washington can do little to force China to respect human rights. There is more hope of making economic gains through negotiation, especially if Washington works with major Asian and European states. In general, the greater the agreement, the greater the pressure that can be applied on Beijing to moderate its excesses and cooperate with Western states.

Through it all, Beijing so far has proved to be the greatest ally of China's critics. The PRC has done almost everything possible to present itself as a threat to existing states, agreements, and norms. Even the European Union and governments previously friendly to China, such as Germany, have come under increasing pressure to toughen their stance.

Despite his past defiance, Xi Jinping apparently recognizes that his foreign policy has been hurting China. However, he imagines that his nation's problem is simply poor PR, that all will be well if only his nation's diplomats "make friends" around the world and convince others that the PRC wants "nothing but the Chinese people's well-being." He underestimates the difficulty of disguising unabashed tyranny.

Instead of attempting to cover up his regime's many depredations and abuses and explain "why Marxism works," Xi should focus on protecting "the Chinese people's well-being." His government should be uplifting and empowering them, not subjugating and imprisoning them.

Then he wouldn't have to try to whitewash Beijing's policies. The PRC would naturally appear "credible, lovable, and respectable," as he expressed, and in so doing "make friends extensively, unite the majority and continuously expand its circle of friends with those who understand and friendly to China."

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