

China's Terrifying Return to Maoism

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One of the few issues on which Democrats and Republicans agree is that the People's Republic of China (PRC) has turned back toward Maoism. Xi Jinping's regime is committed to eradicating the merest possibility that someone might have an independent thought.

The economy remains a socialist-market hybrid, while the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made little effort to limit personal autonomy except where politics intrudes. However, just a hint of ideological disobedience now brings down the full weight of a vast domestic-security regime that spends more money than the People's Liberation Army.

There are no easy policy answers for Washington. Repression is an essential part of today's Chinese political system. It's how current officials, starting at the top with Xi Jinping, retain their power, perquisites, wealth, status, and everything else that sets them apart from normal people. If there is an existential interest for the Chinese state, it is maintaining repression. The regime isn't going to yield, irrespective of sanction, since its elites prefer power to anything else.

Violations of human rights are the norm in the PRC. In practice, civil liberties, free speech, and political freedom simply don't exist there. China has essentially returned to the era of Mao Zedong, one of the CCP's founders, who emerged atop the party after unceasingly brutal power struggles that shaped the party's evolution.

The rungs on the CCP ladder were slippery indeed, as many once-dominant figures missed a step, plunging into the political netherworld below. Even Mao's rise was sometimes interrupted. But he mixed determination, skill, and ruthlessness and ultimately outshone his rivals. He famously announced the creation of the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen Square on October 1, 1949, and was responsible for virtually every brutal step taken by the CCP in its early years.

Mao's most famous murderous episodes were the misnamed Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It is impossible to know how many people died owing to his misrule — estimates range out to 100 million, but 35 to 65 million is probably closer to the truth. The terror felt even by his close colleagues, many of whom were exiled, imprisoned, or killed during the Cultural Revolution, did not end until his death in 1976.

Associates cowed by the Great Helmsman, as he was known, quickly moved against his widow and other radical associates, and summoned Deng Xiaoping back from exile to the capital. As

Deng rose to preeminence, he freed an economy that once took socialism seriously. Equally important but less noted at the time, the CCP loosened controls over personal life. People gained power over their own lives.

There also was strong support for political liberalization, including from CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang. However, he opposed the bloody 1989 crackdown on demonstrators in Tiananmen Square and ended up under house arrest for the rest of his life. China's hope for democratic reform faded, but otherwise the Chinese people remained far freer than before. The system, though authoritarian, was loose. So long as one did not challenge Communist rule, a certain amount of debate was allowed. There were independent journalists who reported primarily on provincial misdeeds and human-rights lawyers who fought repression in court. Foreign academic exchanges were common. Nongovernmental organizations could carefully critique government policies.

All of this began to change a decade ago and repression accelerated under Xi Jinping, chosen as party General Secretary in 2012. He focused on strengthening personal and party authority, and then on expanding state control over virtually every aspect of Chinese political life. Intellectual freedom has essentially disappeared.

The United Kingdom's Conservative Party recently addressed this state of affairs in its Human Rights Commission (HRC) report on the full-scale, wide-ranging assault against individual liberty in almost all of its aspects. Explained the U.K. HRC: "The Chinese Communist Party regime has intensified an assault on all human rights throughout China — not only the atrocity crimes perpetrated against the Uyghurs and Tibetans, and the dismantling of Hong Kong's promised freedoms, but violations [of] all human rights affecting every group and individual throughout the country."

The breadth of the assault detailed by the report is extraordinary:

- Fear of Muslim Uyghurs has led to the incarceration of a million or more people, mostly Uyghurs but some other nationalities too, in reeducation camps. Whether the term genocide rightly applies — the regime is essentially killing a culture, not a people — the hardship suffered is immense.
- "Repression in Tibet has intensified" as well. Occupied in 1950 by the PRC, Beijing has sought to restrict the practice of Buddhism, crush separatist sentiments, and control the Buddhist hierarchy. That means "arrests of Tibetan activists, monks and nuns, and severe restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief and other human rights."
- Hong Kong's travails have been in the news over the last couple of years. After slowly expanding Beijing's authority in the former British colony in recent years, the PRC last year imposed a brutal national-security law "containing severe restrictions on basic freedoms" on the roughly 7.5 million Hong Kongers. The result was to dismantle in surprisingly short order "Hong Kong's promised freedoms, human rights, the rule of law and autonomy." Censorship is fast descending upon what formally remains an autonomous special administrative region.

- “Torture is endemic, widespread, systematic and conducted with impunity.” Brutal imprisonment is common around the world but has extra impact when practiced in the world’s most populous state.
- “Forced televised confessions are now commonplace.” They are procured through threats of harsher punishment and maltreatment of relatives. The practice has been used to discredit Westerners who are ultimately released.
- “The Chinese Communist Party regime’s silencing of ‘whistleblowers,’ especially doctors and citizen journalists, at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in serious human rights violations and the spread of the virus.”
- “Freedom of religion or belief in China is under the most severe crackdown since the Cultural Revolution.” Only a few years ago, in many provinces, churches were left alone if they avoided politics; in Beijing I snapped a picture of a car with a Christian “fish” on its bumper. Today, ministers are arrested, churches are closed or destroyed, members are barred from bringing their children and forced to display communist agitprop, and the CCP even wants to rewrite Scripture. Islam, Buddhism, and Daoism are also under sustained attack.
- The CCP is above the law. The regime emphasizes rule by law and rejects rule of law as in the West.
- “Arbitrary arrests and disappearances are commonplace.” During the early stages of the coronavirus spread, citizen journalists reporting on the pandemic were detained or even quarantined.
- “The China Tribunal concluded ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ that forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience is perpetrated in China and amounts to a crime against humanity.”
- Forced labor is widely used, and not just in Xinjiang. At least 83 Western brands may include such products in their supply chains.
- “The Chinese Communist Party regime is building an all-encompassing surveillance state, and Chinese technology companies such as Huawei are at the heart of this operation.”

The report offers individual chapters filled with excruciating details on these and other examples of the CCP’s broad offensive against independent thought and action. Nothing on this list is new, though many of the problems are worsening. Moreover, the list is not exhaustive. For instance, Beijing has essentially destroyed the human-rights bar, once made up disproportionately of Christian attorneys. Most have been dispersed, disbarred, and/or imprisoned.

Independent NGOs such as the Unirule Institute have been shut down. Unirule was established in 1993. It advocated market-oriented economic reform, publishing articles full of Ph.D.-speak and holding conferences filled with academics and policy nerds, like me, while carefully avoiding the red line of challenging CCP rule. When I met with the staff in July 2019, their office had been closed, their executive director had been prohibited from traveling to America, their books had been banned from publication, and they were a month away from having their business license

pulled. Such was the fear of the great and powerful Xi Jinping of any ideas about freedom being discussed by anyone anywhere in China.

Even noncontroversial academic cooperation is carefully scrutinized, and speaking invitations must be approved by Beijing. I discovered this when I showed up in Shanghai two years ago to speak at a maritime conference, only to be told that the organizers had neglected the final step, which had not been previously required. I spent the weekend playing tourist rather than discussing American policy toward the Indo-Pacific.

The so-called social-credit system monitors behavior and punishes those who do not faithfully follow regime dictates, including political dissenters. Beijing has sought to export this system. The PRC's pressure has been growing on Taiwan, which China wants to turn into another subservient territory like Hong Kong.

For those interested in addressing the Chinese challenge, there is both good and bad news. The latter is simple: There is very little that the U.S. and West can do to force the PRC to change its internal policies. Maintaining control is an existential interest of the CCP, which will resolutely resist outside interference.

Specific targeted measures — barring suppliers from using forced labor, for instance, and insisting upon reciprocal press access — can achieve some positive results. Sanctioning specific Chinese officials delivers emotional satisfaction but doesn't change policy. For instance, Hong Kong's chief executive Carrie Lam, a CCP puppet, has had trouble finding a bank after Washington threatened financial penalties against any institution doing business with her. But the destruction of Hong Kong liberties continues apace.

On the positive side, China is a vulnerable not-yet superpower. Its weaknesses are manifold: hidden but pronounced political division, profusion of inefficient state enterprises, growing political interference with the economy, a rapidly aging population with a decided and destabilizing male imbalance, massive income gaps between coastal/trading centers and interior provinces, minimal soft power, absence of friends and allies, growing third-world resentment of Chinese commercial practices, and a vulnerable geographic position. It remains important not to underestimate the PRC's potential. However, it would be foolish to bet against America and other free societies.

Most important may be the simple fact that what is will not ever be. That is, today's rapid race to totalitarianism is a product of one man, Xi Jinping. At age 67, and with many enemies, he will not rule forever. And when he is gone, "Xi Jinping thought" might disappear as rapidly as Maoism dissipated after the Great Helmsman's death. The Chinese couldn't wait to dump overboard the reality of the mad Red Emperor's rule even while preserving his image as the nation's founder. Xi serves no similar foundational national role, and therefore could be almost instantly consigned to obscurity.

The U.S. and West should play the long game by focusing on expanding access to information in the PRC and appealing to rising generations. This is one reason it is important, despite security concerns, to keep American high schools and universities open to Chinese students. Young Chinese like their personal freedoms but are nationalistic. They aren't interested in being told what to do or think, especially by the U.S. government. (I feel the same way!) Frankly, the ostentatiously maladroit and sanctimonious Mike Pompeo was no asset in this fight.

The PRC poses the greatest current international challenge to U.S. policy. It is vital to get America's response right. The nature of the U.S.–China relationship will affect the rest of the world for years and potentially decades to come. The last previous great-power transitions — the rise of Germany and the Soviet Union — had catastrophic consequences. A prolonged violent struggle between America and the PRC could, in an unimaginable worst case, be even more costly.

Finding the right strategy is not just important for America. It also is important for the Chinese people. Before the pandemic, I visited China regularly. Set aside today's totalitarian challenge for a moment: It is an extraordinary civilization and fascinating country. Once the PRC is free, it will be an even better place. Ultimately, only the Chinese people can transform the system that controls them and limits their future.

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