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## Don't Fear China



*The Middle Kingdom acts according to its national interest, not some universal ideology.*

**By Leon Hadar**

Now that it is in the process of emerging as a leading economic power, some politicians and pundits are warning that not unlike the Soviet Union in its heyday, China is becoming a champion of a universal ideology that aims at supplanting the western political and economic model represented by the US. Intertwining with legitimate concerns as well as with plain scare-mongering about China's growing economic and military power, the tendency among these observers is to assume that China is exporting its political-economic model worldwide as part of a strategy to win international legitimacy for its stands. That several governments have joined China in boycotting the ceremony in Oslo in which Chinese democracy advocate [Liu Xiaobo](#) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize was supposedly an indication that the Chinese campaign was achieving its goal.

This line of thinking ranges from the less bombastic notion that China has been successful in utilizing its "soft power" as part of a concerted effort to extend its regional and global influence, to the more fear-inducing view that American interests and values are under assault by an aggressive global strategic and ideological challenger. China, according to this view, has the intentions and the capabilities to promote its brand of "authoritarian capitalism" as a substitute for the liberal-democratic model, especially in the developing world — and bring about the end the American Era.

It is one thing to employ statistics demonstrating an increase in Chinese military spending or to accuse Beijing of pursuing mercantilist strategies and demand that Washington "do something" about that. But it is another thing to propose (as Martin Jacques does in [When China Rules the World](#) or Stefan Halper does in [The Beijing Consensus](#)) that China is a carrier of a set of values that could be used to create an

alternative political-economic model that would displace the reigning western one—and that China has the interest and the ability to do that.

The belief that values like democracy and liberalism, rather than geo-strategic and economic factors, affect the competition between global powers tends to reflect a post-Enlightenment western bias that supposes the existence of an ultimate universal truth and assumes that history is a continuous ascent towards progress. That march towards progress manifests itself through conflicts between ideals—enlightenment and freedom vs. their opponents—and the people, groups, and nation-states that represent them. That has certainly been a crucial theme in the narrative about foreign policy advanced by neoconservative and liberal ideologues.

Hence, as Francis Fukuyama proposed in [The End of History](#), since the French Revolution and until the collapse of the Soviet Union, a clash between major universal ideologies was a dominant feature of the national and international politics in the west. The ideological confrontation had reached a peak during the twentieth century when liberal democracy and communism were competing for the hearts and minds of men and women in the west.

U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and the leader of the Russian Revolution Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, who were the prophets of these universal ideologies, insisted that they were advancing alternative models—incompatible and destined to engage in a long and fateful struggle—for managing political and economic life in the modern age. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union had established huge and expansive operations and front organizations to disseminate their opposing messages, and to create the conditions for political change and revolution worldwide.

But one can make the argument that consideration of national interest ended up overriding the goal of promoting of ideological transformation in the foreign policy of both Washington and Moscow—with the strategic alliance between the two during World War II being the most dramatic demonstration.



And while the narrative of the Cold War portrayed the revolutions backed by the Soviets in China, Vietnam and Cuba — as well as the opposition to Soviet control in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Tito's Yugoslavia — as part of the ideological competition between liberal democracy and communism, these historical developments—not unlike anti-American French [Gaullism](#) and Ceaușescu's Romania anti-Soviet policies—were driven more by nationalism and strategic interests than by universal ideologies. In fact, the strategic alliance between Mao's China (which was going at the time through the radical "cultural revolution") and Nixon's America was just another proof that the bottom line of international relations will always be interests of nation-states and not the ideologies they are supposed to represent.

Moreover, while there has been a tendency to regard European Fascism—or for that matter Japanese imperialism—as elements in the ideological competition of the twentieth century, the two phenomena were, in fact, manifestations not of universal ideologies trying to export their political and economic models around the world, but of nationalist and imperialist forces.

Indeed, until his decision to ally Italy with Nazi Germany, Benito Mussolini was not regarded as an "anti-western" figure. Winston Churchill called him "the greatest living legislator." Sigmund Freud sent him an autographed copy of one of his books, inscribed to "the Hero of Culture," and he was even given a plug in the British version of Cole Porter's ["Anything Goes"](#) ("You're the Top/You're Mussolini/ You're Mrs. Sweeney").

And as historian Mark Mazower pointed out in his [Hitler's Empire](#), Hitler and his followers had no interest in promoting Nazism as a universal ideology and as a political and economic model to be embraced by other nations and societies. It was meant first and foremost to carry out a monstrous nationalist and imperialist project and create a Greater Germany (Which explains, according to Mazower, why Hitler had never even tried to win the support of the anti-Soviet population in Eastern Europe).

In any case, what ever remained of the ideological struggle between the Soviet Union and the U.S.—as opposed to the geo-strategic competition between the two—was probably over long before the fall of the Berlin Wall. And the end of the Cold War should have buried the enduring myth of a global collision of ideologies. Instead, nation-states seemed to be searching for the most effective way to create wealth and provide for political representation and social stability.

But in the U.S. the Unipolar Moment helped ignite the illusion that Americans had the obligation to export their liberal democracy values

around the world through “color revolutions” or military-driven regime changes. Islamic terrorism, propelled mostly by opposition to American foreign policy and deprived of any government support — the exception being the Taliban’s Afghanistan — was seized by politicians and intellectuals as the manifestation of the new global ideological challenge.

In reality, the Muslim religion (or a version of it) is being exploited by political movements (Al Qaeda) and nation-states (Iran) that are trying to advance their respective strategic interests on the regional level (Middle East) and have certainly no capability to convert westerners to Islam (unless one believes that that is exactly what the Muslim immigrants in Europe are trying to do).

From a perspective that assumes that interests and not values the main driving force propelling foreign policy, China’s economic and geo-political ascent should be seen as just another chapter in a long history involving a “global pattern” of “competition, collaboration and coexistence” between great powers in search for strategic advantage, territory, economic resources, and access to markets—a process of exchanging and amassing of power, as British historian John Darwin argues in [After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire](#). In that context, Darwin refers to the resurgence of China and the rest of Asia after less than three centuries during which European powers were playing a preeminent role; although a declining Ottoman Empire and a rising Japan were members of the global concert of power.

And Darwin emphasizes that contrary to the conventional narrative, the rise of Europe and the U.S. (aka the West) should not be celebrated as a triumph of western values so much as the ability of western governments to use their human and natural resources and geographical advantages—including industrialization and scientific progress—to develop their economic and military power. And that is exactly what China is attempting to do now.

In a way, what is being described as a “Chinese model” is nothing more than a trial and error exercise during which the Chinese are attempting to figure out which administrative styles, economic systems, technologies, educational programs, and electoral schemes—some of them grounded in Chinese traditions while other borrowed from western and non-western cultures—would help them maximize economic prosperity and political stability at home and help protect their security and economic interests abroad. At this stage, Chinese foreign policy is focused not on achieving global preeminence—but on maintaining access to energy resources and on creating a regional sphere of influence in East Asia.

The evolution of a Chinese model should be regarded as a work in progress—there will be many failures along the way and the Chinese are bound to change direction sooner or later. And very much like the Japanese, German, French, Scandinavian, Indian, or, for that matter, the Anglo-Saxon or American “models” the Chinese “model” cannot be “exported” to, say, Somalia, Brazil, or Iran (which are developing their own “models”) or even to its neighbors in East Asia.

In short, China is pursuing a policy based on what it considers to be its national interest. The Chinese want other nations to trade with them and to respect and even fear them, and do not necessarily share in the American hope that other people around the world would or should be “like us.” Perhaps the Americans should try to borrow that part of the Chinese model.

*Leon Hadar is a Cato Institute research fellow in foreign-policy studies and author of Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East.*

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## 7 Responses to “Don’t Fear China”

1. **Captain America**, on [December 17th, 2010 at 7:03 pm](#) Said:

It’s pretty clear that the Chinese are quietly laughing at the (now-discredited) notion of “free trade.”

2. **NY Teacher**, on [December 18th, 2010 at 9:10 am](#) Said:

The dirty-war campaign against China is no surprise. Even 50 years after we molded Japan as our “reliable ally,” we recurrently take malicious stabs at those “japs” when such yields political mileage. Reagan did it with the “voluntary” auto “quotas” in the 80s, Clinton ensured its “stagnant 90s” by diverting “Free trade” (a la southern factories, & illegal immigration) to Mexico, and Obama-Bush did it recently by conjuring up the Toyota recall — while buoying a gas-guzzling and corrupt Ford and GM.

So now China threatens us thanks to its carefully-adjudicated capitalistic growth. Hey, who said scapegoating never worked?

3. **David Lindsay**, on [December 18th, 2010 at 12:46 pm](#) Said:

Both American parties have pushed through globalization in general, and things like Most Favored Nation Status for China in particular, with barely a whimper of dissent. Now, they seem to be waking up to what they have done. The problem is really even deeper. Like those of the West in general, America’s relations with China have been conducted, because they have been defined, in exactly the wrong terms. Essentially, those terms are Marxist, because that is what is the definition of politics in terms of economics is by definition: Marxism.

China still makes things, builds things and mines things, putting the jobs, heat and light of her people first. She is emerging from the gangster capitalism that always follows Communism by returning to her own culture, which is firmly centered on the family and the local community, which reveres tradition and ritual, which upholds government by moral rather than physical force, which affirms the Golden Rule, which is Agrarian and Distributist, which has barely started an external war in five thousand years, and which is

especially open to completion by, in, through and as the classical Christianity that is spreading like wildfire there. She is like the Classical writers and the Church Fathers in that she takes Africa seriously, even going there to secure the food supply necessary for her to give up the extremely anti-Confucian one child policy.

Nothing remotely approaching any of this can be said of America, or of Britain, or of numerous other Western countries. And that is the real problem, the root of all else in this context.

4. **Jane Marple**, on [December 18th, 2010 at 12:49 pm](#) Said:

“The Middle Kingdom acts according to its national interest, not some universal ideology.”

Pity America no longer does. We'd be a happier nation again if our “leaders” stopped being ideologues and returned to putting our nation's interests first.

5. [Tweets that mention The American Conservative » Don't Fear China -- Topsy.com](#), on [December 18th, 2010 at 1:34 pm](#) Said:

[...] This post was mentioned on Twitter by AmericanConservative, David Lindsay. David Lindsay said: Don't fear China – <http://www.amconmag.com/blog/dont-fear-china/> [...]

6. **Captain America**, on [December 18th, 2010 at 3:39 pm](#) Said:

Ditto Jane. “Globalization” is a policy for multinational corporations, not individual states.

7. **YeaSayer**, on [December 19th, 2010 at 11:19 pm](#) Said:

It's not just globalization, Captain America, it's the whole package: multiculturalism, diversity, “free trade”, immigration on a scale unknown to any other period in history. And it's not just multinational corporations that benefit, it's the world-imperial system, which China joined enthusiastically a few decades ago and of course intends to dominate.

Empires recruit officers and citizens who are neutral or opposed to nationality, compromised or divided in their national or parochial loyalties, they want “cosmopolitans” or strivers from anywhere who owe their citizenship or other status to imperial patronage. Nation, ethnicity, race, non-state religions have always threatened imperial stability.

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