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Hearing on “China’s Digital Authoritarianism: Surveillance, Influence, and Political Control”

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Chairman Schiff, Ranking Member Nunes, and distinguished members of the committee: thank you for the invitation to testify. It is a privilege to share with you my thoughts on how domestic politics in China are shaping its international behavior and the importance of being more precise about the size and shape of the challenge from Beijing, including its digital authoritarianism.

Last October, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence decried China’s “whole-of-government” effort to influence U.S. domestic politics and policy. In February, F.B.I. Director Chris Wray went further: the danger from China was “not just a whole-of-government threat but a whole-of-society threat.” And in April, Kiron Skinner, the State Department’s policy planning director called competition with China a “fight with a really different civilization.” Such warnings reflect a mounting fear that China represents a threat not just to specific U.S. interests, but to the very survival of democracy and the U.S.-led international order.

These fears get the challenge from Beijing wrong. Since 2012, China’s growing authoritarianism and resurgent state dominance over the economy have dashed Western hopes that China would eventually embrace liberalism. And China’s actions abroad have undermined liberal values, made the world safer for other authoritarian governments, and offered alternatives to U.S.-led institutions.

But the cause has been less a grand strategic effort to undermine democracy and spread autocracy than the Chinese leadership’s desire to secure its domestic and international position against potential threats at home and abroad. Not since the days of Mao Zedong has China sought to export revolution or topple democracy. Today, the Chinese Communist Party is working overtime domestically to preempt challenges to its rule. Discontent is rife within China—as are hawkish attitudes and popular distrust of U.S. intentions.

An effective strategy for dealing with China will require more precision in identifying Beijing’s intentions and a more nuanced set of policies to respond to the challenge. A new policy of containment would be a strategic error and could backfire by making China into what many in Washington already fear it is.

My testimony today will cover two issues: first, how Beijing has made the world safer for autocracy without a determined effort to export a particular mode of governance; and second, the role of public opinion and rising nationalism in Chinese politics and foreign policy. The first draws on my forthcoming essay in the July/August 2019 issue of *Foreign Affairs*; the second draws upon two research articles, “How hawkish is the Chinese public? Another look at ‘rising nationalism’ and Chinese foreign policy,” published earlier this year in the *Journal of*

Contemporary China, and “Authoritarian Audiences, Rhetoric, and Propaganda in International Crises: Evidence from China,” forthcoming in *International Studies Quarterly*.¹

Making the World Safe for Autocracy, But Not Exporting a Particular Mode of Governance

Beijing has made it easier for authoritarianism to coexist alongside democracy, but it has not been bent on spreading autocracy around the globe. Xi Jinping and his predecessors have relied on the CCP’s deep penetration of society to maintain one-party rule, backstopped by an internal security apparatus that by 2011 cost more than its military. Despite its Marxist-Leninist roots, the Chinese Communist Party has been ideologically opportunistic and flexible, embracing capitalism and alternately rejecting and celebrating traditional philosophies like Confucianism. Xi Jinping’s signature slogan, “the China dream,” reflects a self-centered CCP rhetoric that has little international appeal.

Growing repression at home is also tarnishing China’s image abroad. Over the past two years, the CCP has built a dystopian police state in the northwestern region of Xinjiang and a sprawling network of internment camps to house as many as one million Uighurs. The scale and intensity of the CCP’s attempt to “reeducate” its Muslim Uighur minority has drawn condemnation from the international human rights community as well as from political leaders in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey, all three of which are Muslim-majority countries important to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Polls of global public opinion suggest that most people around the world still prefer U.S. leadership to Chinese leadership.

Even if China’s political model is unappealing and would be difficult for others to replicate, Beijing has still made it easier for authoritarianism to thrive elsewhere. Above all, the country’s four decades of rapid economic growth have demonstrated that development does not require democracy. China is supporting autocrats in more direct ways, especially through international institutions. Along with Russia, China has regularly used its veto on the UN Security Council to shield other autocracies. China has styled itself as a conservative defender of international norms, protecting state sovereignty against what it sees as unlawful humanitarian interventions. Under international pressure, China has also supported sanctions against North Korea, Libya, and Iran, and Beijing has used its influence to curb political violence in the Sudan and Myanmar.

Critics often accuse China of supporting authoritarian countries by providing them with unconditional loans and aid. There is some truth to this claim, but the picture is more complicated than critics usually paint. China’s official development assistance tends to follow its political interests rather than targeting particular types of governments according to their level of democracy or corruption. Under international pressure, the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has also adopted developed-country norms concerning environmental and social impacts. In April, the International Monetary Fund director Christine Lagarde applauded Beijing’s announcement of a debt-sustainability framework in response to international criticism of Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese aid and finance may not improve governance in the developing world, but it’s not clear that they will worsen it either.

China also rightly gets heat from Western observers for exporting surveillance and censorship technologies. China’s heavy investments in these technologies have made it cheaper for other authoritarian and would-be authoritarian regimes to monitor their citizens. Yet as with Chinese

¹ Full text of both papers available at www.jessicachenweiss.com.

lending, the story of Chinese technology is more complicated than it first appears. The diffusion of digital authoritarianism is not the same thing as an intentional effort to remake other governments in China's image.

Although these systems can help governments monitor and control their people, how exactly they are used depends on local politics. Cameras can replace more brute-force methods of surveillance, as in Ecuador, which installed a surveillance system with China's help. But as the New York Times reported, many Ecuadorans have complained that the system isn't effective against crime, as there aren't enough local personnel to monitor the footage or respond to crimes caught on camera. And the Ecuadoran administration that came to power in 2017, which has pledged to reverse some of its predecessor's autocratic policies, has begun an investigation into the system's abuses, including inviting the Times to review its records.

Ultimately, the political effects of technology can cut both ways. Just as the internet was not a universal harbinger of democratic freedom, technology does not magically enable governments to control society and repress opposition. Technology can empower the state, but strong democratic institutions – including legislation to restrict surveillance and protect citizens' privacy – can also constrain the power of technology.

Many Western leaders also worry that Beijing is working to undermine democratic systems. The openness of democratic societies has also allowed U.S. adversaries, primarily Russia, to sow discord, paralyze debate, and influence elections. As a concerned American, I thank the committee for its work in bringing Russian interference to light. Although there is no evidence that China has illegally interfered in U.S. elections, despite allegations by U.S. President Donald Trump, some of the CCP's overseas activities have stifled open discussion, particularly among the Chinese diaspora. Beijing aims to advance the Chinese Communist Party's interests and portray Chinese actions in a positive light, not export a particular form of governance.

Beijing's efforts to coerce the Chinese diaspora, combined with its campaign to shape the international media narrative about China, go well beyond soft power. Although they are not an assault on democracy for the sake of undermining democracy, they threaten the healthy functioning of civil society and access to alternative sources of information. This threat emanates from the Chinese Communist Party's "United Front" activities, not the Chinese people or diaspora. Where appropriately constrained or prohibited by legislation against foreign interference, these influence activities need not constitute an existential threat to liberal democracy.

Domestic Discontent and Hawkish Nationalism Lie Beneath Xi's One-Man Rule

Within China, many Chinese citizens are dubious of the CCP's heavy-handed nationalist propaganda and the personality cult growing around Xi. Many are afraid of speaking honestly for fear of retaliation in "a new Cultural Revolution." An extensive crackdown on corruption has also stifled policy initiatives at lower levels of government. And a Chinese law professor in Beijing wrote before his suspension that "rising anxiety has spread into a degree of panic throughout society" over the direction of the country under Xi Jinping.

Despite this discontent, opinion polls show that the Chinese public is still quite hawkish, putting pressure on the leadership to act tough in international disputes. As President Xi Jinping told

party leaders in 2013: “Winning or losing public support is an issue that concerns the CPC’s survival or extinction.”

In a recent paper, I looked at five different surveys of Chinese foreign policy attitudes, including the mass public, elites, and internet users. Collectively, the five surveys indicate that Chinese attitudes are generally hawkish, with a majority of respondents endorsing greater reliance on military strength, supporting greater spending on national defense, approving of sending of troops to reclaim disputed islands in the East and the South China Sea, and viewing the US military presence and reconnaissance in East Asia as threatening.

Generationally, hawkish views were more common among younger citizens, those who grew up after the CCP launched a “patriotic education” campaign after the 1989 Tiananmen crisis. Beliefs that the government relies ‘too little’ on military strength were more common among the younger generation, as were perceptions of the US military presence as a threat to China’s well-being. Hawkish views are especially pronounced among elites and netizens, who represent the most visible and vocal segment of the Chinese population. Across multiple surveys, younger respondents were also more willing to express their opinions on foreign affairs, as they were far less likely to say ‘don’t know.’

Public threats and calls to counter the “whole of society” or “civilizational” threat from China are likely to backfire by redoubling domestic pressure on the Chinese government to act tough. These polls indicate that while there is considerable resentment of Xi’s growing repression and personalistic rule, the public is still quite hawkish.

While the US government and others rightly criticize China’s destabilizing actions in the air and waters around China, Beijing has so far resisted the most hawkish demands from its people to teach foreign powers a lesson. In doing so, the government has shown its ability and willingness to bear or minimize public opinion costs. One strategy the Chinese government has used is what I call “bluster”—tough but vague talk, which conveys strength to a domestic audience without accompanying military action. One example of bluster is the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that China declared over the East China Sea in 2013.

Even though Beijing may be able to placate domestic demands to stand up to foreign powers without using force, hawkish sentiments may still affect the government’s calculus in international disputes. The threat of public disapproval may factor into the CCP leadership’s decisions to keep international tensions from escalating to outright conflict and to minimize publicity when handling potential crises, lest the public demand a decisive victory.

What the CCP leadership fears most is a domestic cascade of criticism that coalesces into protests against the regime—with diffuse attitudes providing the kindling and vocal opinion sparking a torrent of criticism and even collective action. As such, public opinion may matter most during major crises and conflicts. It may also play a role in public deliberations over grand strategy. Other research has shown that a majority of Chinese support a shared rather than exclusive world leadership role. Beijing could burnish its domestic image by striving to lead in international institutions rather than more combative or militaristic policies.

It is common to speculate that an economic slowdown could tempt Beijing to divert attention from problems at home by acting more aggressively abroad. But a slowing economy could also

encourage the government to focus on domestic problems such as pollution, inequality, jobs, and social welfare. Military conflict is risky and could backfire; historically, when China has faced internal instability, it has been more likely to compromise internationally. At the same time, international pressure in the form of tariffs or other penalties could give the Chinese leadership a ready excuse for poor performance at home.

Getting the China Challenge Right

Ultimately, Beijing's behavior to date suggests that it is a disgruntled and increasingly ambitious stakeholder in that order, not an implacable enemy of it. In seeking to make the world safer for the Chinese Communist Party, Beijing has rejected universal values and made it easier for authoritarian states to coexist alongside democracies in the international system. The Chinese Communist Party's efforts overseas to squelch opposition to its rule have had a corrosive influence on democratic civil society, particularly among the Chinese diaspora.

These are real and potent challenges, but they do not yet amount to an existential threat to the present international order or the survival of liberal democracy. A successful strategy for competing with an ambitious, opportunistic China will require a more precise understanding of its motives and operations and a commensurately tough but nuanced response. What the CCP is doing in Xinjiang is far more egregious and pressing for the United States and other governments to highlight than the challenge posed China's infrastructure loans and technology exports.

If Beijing were truly bent on destroying democracy and spreading authoritarianism, containment might be the right move. But a strategy of countering Chinese influence everywhere it appears across the globe, in the name of fighting an ideological battle against a hostile "civilization," would be dangerously misguided. Such a strategy would damage U.S. growth and innovation, harm the freedom of speech and society, and risk becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Democracy has retreated across the globe in recent years, but critics often exaggerate Beijing's role and intentions. The CCP welcomes evidence of democratic dysfunction abroad, as it makes them look better by comparison at home. But democratic backsliding and growing authoritarianism outside of China do not reflect a grand strategic plan in Beijing.

The best approach for those who wish to counter the spread of authoritarianism is to restore democracy. The United States should recommit itself to certain basic principles: the rule of law, fair elections, free speech, and freedom of the press. Where Chinese actions violate these principles, the United States should confront those responsible and join other like-minded governments in protecting shared values. A recommitment to working with democratic allies and multilateral institutions would also renew faith in U.S. leadership.

Where Chinese actions do not violate these principles, the United States should work with China to address common challenges. Other countries will not be able to solve the greatest challenge humanity faces—climate change—without China. Under Xi, the Chinese public has acquired a taste for international leadership. Governments should welcome Chinese leadership when it promises to advance the global good while criticizing the ways in which Chinese actions fall short. Such a strategy is also more likely to win support from those within China who want change.

At home and abroad, the CCP has been engaged in a defensive ideological battle against liberal norms of democracy and human rights, but it has not been engaged in a determined effort to

spread autocracy. Effectively responding to the China challenge will require being more precise about its shape and scale. In the end, the best way to face China is to make democracy work better. That would set an example for others to follow and allow the United States to compete with the true sources of China's international power: its economic and technological might.