



Toward Sino-American Ideological Clash? The Lasswellian World Revolution Approach

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Abstract

The power competition between the USA and China engrosses the profound fascination of scholars, beckoning them to delve into its intricacies, nuances, causes, and implications for world politics. Regardless of their perspectives on whether normative dimensions are seen as factors solely fueling strategic competition, operating autonomously, or existing within a mutually constitutive relationship with institutions and material capabilities, conventional wisdom such as realism, critical theory, and holistic approach affirms the centrality of material elements in power competition. This article adopts a constructivist lens to analyze complex patterns of international relations and power competition, acknowledging the inherent normative dimensions of power, as much more pervasive, as inherent and independent attributes of any complex, persistent pattern of international relations and, particularly, power competition. In particular, this article introduces an underexplored insight from Lasswell's "world revolution" concept, termed the "Lasswellian world revolution." According to this approach, no ideologies remain ascendant indefinitely, they change over time, and the ideology of a rising power often challenges that of an established power. The article contends that this framework provides a fresh lens to understand the intricate interactions between American liberal democracy and socialism with Chinese characteristics, shedding light on the dynamics of power transition and the evolving international landscape. In conclusion, the article posits that we are witnessing the "interregnum." Unfolding in the interstice between the waning yet dominant American liberal democracy and the nascent yet fragile socialism with Chinese characteristics, this phase marks a period of rivalry and uncertainty between the USA and China.

Introduction

Since the formal normalization of diplomatic relations between the USA and China in 1979, the two countries have embarked on a journey of economic integration and geopolitical cooperation that laid the foundation for a symbiotic relationship or "Chimerica."¹

¹ Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, "'Chimerica' and the Global Asset Market Boom," *International Finance*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2007), pp. 215–39.

However, since the 2010s cooperation between Washington and Beijing has significantly deteriorated, and tensions and competitions between them have escalated over the South China Sea, Taiwan, trade, and technology. The world's two largest economies find themselves with antagonisms, leading both sides to engage in a strategic "power competition" for global preponderance.²

Power competition has long engrossed the profound fascination of scholars, beckoning them to delve into its intricacies, nuances, causes, and implications for world politics. First, notably, realists like Organski and Kugler,³ Gilpin,⁴ and Kennedy⁵ attribute the power competition to the narrowing power gap between rising and established powers. Allison's "Thucydides Trap" further underscores the heightened risk of conflict when an established power feels threatened and overtaken by an ascendant one.⁶ Realists, predominantly focusing on material dynamics such as changes in economic and military capabilities, regard normative dimensions of power as secondary factors intensifying power competition. Such realist approach prominently shapes debates on the power competition, decoupling, de-risking, and the likelihood of conflict between the USA and China. Second, critical theorists such as Cox and Hung, who are steeped in the Gramscian/Hobsonian approach and also associated with post-Marxism, incorporate concepts like social forces, historical structures, macrostructural shifts, "hegemony," the "cultural turn,"⁷ and a "Weberian conception"⁸ when examining great power competition. Nonetheless, they argue that power competition and cultural-ideological struggles often stem from the "social relations of production"⁹ or a "crisis of overaccumulation."¹⁰ This implies that regardless of their perspectives on normative dimensions that are viewed as operating autonomously, in essence, they see material dimensions of power as independent variables, with normative elements acting as intervening or mediating variables. Third, proponents of a holistic approach like Knutsen and Sum and Jessop propose a more comprehensive understanding of power competition by emphasizing the mutually constitutive relationship between ideas, politics, and economy or ideas, institutions, and material capabilities. Particularly, they integrate normative dimensions of power such as "moral appeal"¹¹ and "sentiment of prestige"¹² into the analysis. But while they offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of power competition, their tendency to view the causes of power competition solely as a "functional response to changes in capital"¹³ suggests an inclination toward emphasizing material elements in power dynamics.

This article adopts a constructivist lens to analyze complex patterns of international relations and power competition, acknowledging the inherent normative dimensions of power, as much more pervasive, as inherent and independent attributes of any complex, persistent pattern of international relations and, particularly, power competition. It advocates for

² Stephanie Christine Winkler, "Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2023), pp. 333–56.

³ A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁴ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁵ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Power: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

⁶ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

⁷ Robert Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

⁸ Ho-fung Hung, *Clash of Empires: From "Chimerica" to the "New Cold War"* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁹ Cox, *Production, Power, and World Order*.

¹⁰ Hung, *Clash of Empires*.

¹¹ Torbjørn Knutsen, *The Rise and Fall of World Orders* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1999).

¹² Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop, *Towards a Cultural Political Economy: Putting Culture in Its Place in Political Economy* (London: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013).

¹³ Bentley Allan, Srdjan Vucetic, and Ted Hopf, "The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China's Hegemonic Prospects," *International Organization*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (2018), p. 842.

a nuanced understanding of ideological competition—drawing on historical, comparative, and dialectical analyses—rather than solely focusing on competition in economic, military, and technological aspects, particularly within the context of USA–China power dynamics. At the heart of this analysis lie Harold Lasswell’s seminal works, notably *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*¹⁴ and *World Revolutionary Elites*,¹⁵ where he introduces the concept of “world revolutions,” against the backdrop of the period when the Soviet Union and the USA were in confrontation. Building upon Lasswell’s foundational concept, this article develops the “Lasswellian world revolution” approach, positing that ideologies unfold in cycles characterized by the regular patterns and phases of rise, decline, and rebirth. In other words, ideologies evolve cyclically, with no ascendant ideology remaining indefinitely. The ideology of an established dominant power undergoes gradual changes over time, often facing challenges posed by the ideology of a rising power. The Lasswellian world revolution approach provides a comprehensive framework for exploring the broader historical trajectory of ideological competition among major powers, akin to a cartographer mapping out the vast terrain of temporal landscapes—sketching the plains, plateaus, and mountain ranges of the event continent, spanning across past, present, and future. In essence, this Lasswellian world revolution approach captures the world’s revolutionary patterns of ideological competition and sheds light on the path forward, accentuating the temporal axis—the journey from rise to decay.

More specifically, through the lens of the Lasswellian world revolution, this article attempts to offer a robust and nuanced analysis of the patterns of rise and decline of American and Chinese ideologies. It comprehensively addresses the competition between American and Chinese social–philosophical, political–philosophical, and economic–philosophical ideas—such as American liberal democracy and socialism with Chinese characteristics—contextualizing them within the broader historical context of ideological competition between the two powers. Particularly, it aims to answer the following questions: (1) To what extent does the American liberal democracy demonstrate resilience, and does the socialism with Chinese characteristics outperform it? (2) Is there a diminishing global influence of the American liberal democracy, and can China gain international backing for its socialism with Chinese characteristics? (3) Are we witnessing the “fizzle” of the American liberal world revolution and the concurrent success of the Chinese socialist world revolution, signaling a transition in the international balance of power? (4) What does the future hold for international relations?

Meanwhile, it is important to note that this article does not seek to replace conventional wisdom such as realism, critical theory, and holistic approach. Instead, it acknowledges their contributions; my purpose is to complement them, offering a fresh perspective to enrich the discourse. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. In the second section, I present the theoretical background of the article, elucidating the meaning of the term “Lasswellian world revolution.” Following this, the third section offers an in-depth exploration of the Lasswellian world revolution, dissecting the trajectories of the American liberal world revolution and the Chinese socialist world revolution, respectively. Relatedly, the fourth section delves into the evolution of USA–China relations within the American and Chinese world revolutionary cycles. In the penultimate section, a prospect on four probable scenarios that may materialize in the near future is discussed. Finally, the last section encapsulates the notion of the “interregnum,” positing it as the most probable scenario among the four contenders. This envisioned interregnum unfolds in the interstice between the waning yet

¹⁴ Harold Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

¹⁵ Harold Lasswell, “The World Revolution of Our Time: A Framework for Basic Policy Research,” in Harold Lasswell and Daniel Lerner, eds. *World Revolutionary Elites: Studies in Coercive Ideological Movements* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), pp. 29–96.

dominant American liberal democracy and the nascent yet fragile socialism with Chinese characteristics, marking a phase of rivalry and uncertainty between the USA and China.

The Lasswellian World Revolution: A Theoretical Framework

International relations extend beyond mere tangible interactions, unfolding as a dynamic flow of “political-philosophical and economic-philosophical ideas, or ideologies”¹⁶ across political, territorial, communal, and cultural boundaries. Such flow takes place in what Lasswell termed “sentimental areas” or “political symbols,” which refer to the spaces, not physical but ideological and cultural.¹⁷ The flow of thoughts and ideologies within these sentimental areas significantly steers international relations. It sculpts the very essence of humanity and wields long-lasting and all-important impacts on global events: for instance, the sweeping influence of Confucianism across East Asia, the rich tapestry of ideas, religions, and philosophies exchanged between the East and West via the ancient Silk Road, the 20th century’s fervent dissemination of Marxism, and the global reach and resonance of American liberal democracy. These ideological flows, akin to mighty rivers, have charted the course of human civilizations and international relations. It is paramount, therefore, to grasp the intricacies of the flow of ideologies within the sentimental areas. Put simply, recognizing how ideologies flow and exert influence is essential to decoding the collective human behaviors in the international arena. Particularly, ideology meandering within the sentimental areas—transcending traditional frontiers and nation-states—holds the key to deciphering the enigmatic facets of power competition, or transition, in international relations. Scholars, attuned to the flow of ideologies and the significance of sentimental areas, have demarcated two predominant perspectives: the linear process model and the cyclical process model.

The linear process model suggests that ideologies undergo a transformative or “cosmic” evolution over time, with each successive epoch exhibiting qualitative differences. This model offers a thorough understanding of how a dominant ideology radiates from its core area, gradually influencing and culminating in a convergence of global perspectives toward this prevailing ideology or paradigm. Influenced by Enlightenment thinkers and aligned with the convergence theory, development theory, and America’s “constructive engagement policy,” it asserts that the flow of ideologies is “directional and perhaps even teleological,”¹⁸ foreseeing a future as an extension of the present—labeled the “politics of inevitability” by Snyder.¹⁹ This model views Western historical trajectories as emblematic of a linear evolution, forecasting perfection for historical entities in the future. Specifically, this model argues that Western-conceived ideas of freedom, democracy, and free markets have permeated globally, leading to a belief in “an inevitable process whereby all societies will turn to the same type of Western institutions.”²⁰ In the same context, scholars like Bull and Watson²¹ interpret the contemporary history of international relations as a spread of Western foundational ideas for an international society. According to Mandelbaum, the diffusion of these ideas had contributed to the defeat of conservatism on the European continent and ushered in an extraordinary new reality, namely, the obsolescence of war

¹⁶ Donald Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 56.

¹⁷ Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*, pp. 3–39.

¹⁸ Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations*, p. 53.

¹⁹ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: The Duggan Books, 2018), p. 7.

²⁰ Daran Acemoglu, “Trump Poses a Great Risk to US Democracy,” *Der Spiegel*, 10 December 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/business/economist-acemoglu-trump-poses-risk-to-u-s-democracy-a-1300376.html>.

²¹ Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

among great powers following the Cold War.²² Notably, Fukuyama's "The End of History" asserts that the Cold War's end marked the triumph of Western liberal democracy, which represented "the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government"²³ and the absence of apparent competing ideologies.

Consequently, the linear process model, positing that the flow of ideologies follows a purposeful trajectory and "nature brought the market, which brought democracy, which brought happiness,"²⁴ suggests that rising powers, particularly China, will eventually adopt the prevailing American liberal democracy and assimilate into the American hegemonic order. Liu contends that the diffusion of American liberal democracy is anticipated to prompt China to "take a number of meaningful lessons from the American experience in order to speed up its own process of modernization"²⁵ and to become a full participant in the overarching fabric of the American hegemonic order. Ikenberry similarly opines that the "expansive and integrative logic of liberal international order creates incentives" for China "to transform into liberal state."²⁶ Meanwhile, Kroenig—who frames the history of Western civilization as a succession of liberal hegemony, moving from Athens to Rome, then to Venice, Amsterdam, London, and finally finding its current focal point in Washington, D.C.—contends that "democracies" themselves carry distinctive moral, economic, diplomatic, and military "advantages in long-term geopolitical competitions," which contribute to positioning the USA favorably over China to uphold global leadership.²⁷ By and large, there seems to be a consensus among them that despite possessing significant economic and military power, China, as a participant in the American hegemonic order, is unlikely to challenge American liberal democracy. Rather, over time, China is gradually moving closer to American liberal democracy, driven by market reforms that have improved living standards and fostered the emergence of a growing middle class, which in turn has cultivated a desire for political representation. This convergence is perceived as the triumph of American liberal democracy due to laws of progress.

However, the linear process model struggles to explain the gradual erosion of American liberal democracy itself and the unwavering halt of its appeal to the world which might bring an end to the Pax American era. That is, this model—which is "not a treatise on the universal, but the untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute"²⁸—fails to consider the setbacks of democracy and free markets in regions like Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Moreover, this model leads us to overlook China's "deep roots in historical tradition and its own prevailing ideology,"²⁹ which are a significant barrier for China to adopt American liberal democracy. Put simply, we might lose our capacity to recognize the fact that China is conceiving and diffusing an alternative ideology reflecting its unique cultural, political, and socioeconomic experiences.

The cyclical process model, in contrast to the linear process model, posits that ideologies unfold in cycles, characterized by the regular patterns and phases of rise, decline, and rebirth. One of the pioneering figures in advocating the cyclical process model is the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico who places significant emphasis on the "cyclical theory

²² Michael Mandelbaum, *The Ideas That Conquered The World: Peace, Democracy, and Free Markets in The Twenty-first Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

²³ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *National Interest*, No. 16 (1989), p. 4.

²⁴ Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, p. 7.

²⁵ Guoli Liu, "Economic Development, Political Stability, and Social Harmony: Can All Good Things Go Together?" in Sujian Guo and Baogang Guo, eds., *China in Search of a Harmonious Society* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

²⁶ John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 9.

²⁷ Matthew Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy Versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the US and China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 3–4.

²⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 41.

²⁹ Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf, "The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order," pp. 839–69.

of historical process, with its *corsi* and *ricorsi*.”³⁰ According to him, society progresses toward perfection but never attains it completely, as history undergoes interruptions and returns (known as “*ricorso*”) to more primitive states. Vico’s foundational insights influenced numerous scholars, such as Spengler,³¹ who likens cultural progression to the life cycle of organisms, and Toynbee,³² who analyzes the ascension and descent of civilizations. Diamond³³ furthers this perspective, exploring the lifespan of entire societies.

Lasswell—being hailed as the “most original and productive political scientist” of the 20th century and, importantly, drawing from a rich tapestry of intellectual traditions, including his Presbyterian upbringing, Freudian psychoanalytic framework, and Marxist-sociological perspective³⁴—adeptly navigates the debate between linear and cyclical process models of historical and political change. He cautions against assuming the perpetual dominance of any ideology including liberalism, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of evolution of ideology over time. By challenging linear narratives of progression, Lasswell underscores the cyclical nature of diffusion and transition of ideology within international relations, positing that no ideology can endure indefinitely but instead undergoes evolution and decay over time.³⁵

Lasswell, while conceptualizing international relations as a study of the ever-changing sentiments, symbols, values, ideologies, and cultures intertwined with power dynamics, introduces the notion of “world revolutions.” These revolutions are defined “those which inaugurate ... the new reigning ideologies in the political life of humanity.”³⁶ He also suggests that “significant political changes” in human history are typically marked by world “revolutionary patterns,” characterized by competition and transition between emerging and established ideologies, often sparking “bipolar conflict” between “progressive” and “traditional and reactionary” forces.³⁷ Lasswell specifically illustrates how clusters of ideas originate from dominant centers and then transcend national borders, influencing and inspiring other parts of the world. Additionally, Lasswell characterizes world revolution as not only the emergence and diffusion but also the subsequent decline, or “fizzle,” of dominant ideology.³⁸ The fizzle of the world revolution occurs as it drifts further from reality and dissatisfactions and doubts emerge regarding its viability and its associated institutions’ effectiveness. This fizzle extends internationally when the principles, values, or policies of the ideology are no longer seen as attractive or relevant to other nations or societies, further weakening its influence on the global stage. Consequently, dominant ideology becomes vulnerable to being challenged and ultimately replaced by new or emerging ideology. The rise of alternative ideology reflects not only a response to the perceived deficiencies or inadequacies of prevailing ideology but also its ability to offer essential “qualities” like “consensus, community, legitimacy, effectiveness, and stability,”³⁹ solutions, or visions that resonate with changing societal and global realities. Ultimately, the outward diffusion of social, political, and economic ideology from core areas and its eventual truncation, followed by subsequent diffusion of alternative ideology, serve as key drivers behind the power competition, and transition.

³⁰ Giambattista Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), pp. 71–2.

³¹ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

³² Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

³³ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017).

³⁴ Gabriel Almond, *Harold Dwight Lasswell, 1902-1978: A Biographical Memoir* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1987), p. 249.

³⁵ Lasswell, “The World Revolution of Our Time,” p. 32.

³⁶ Lasswell, *World Politics and Personal Insecurity*, p. 3.

³⁷ Lasswell, “The World Revolution of Our Time,” p. 42.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁹ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New York: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 1.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of power competition within the normative dimensions, it is crucial to analyze the five distinct phases of the Lasswellian world revolutionary cycle, which have usually occurred over centuries. The first phase sees a new global power consolidating its governing ideology. The second phase is characterized by the global diffusion of this ideology from its core stronghold to other societies. The third phase marks the decay of the dominant ideology, evident in growing dissatisfactions, doubts, and a loss of confidence in its effectiveness among the populace, as the gap between cherished ideals and reality widens. This indicates the beginning of the fizzle of the dominant ideology's world revolution. Concurrently, a new global power, while being well equipped with material capabilities, consolidates its own new ideology and initiates its first phase of world revolutionary cycle. In the fourth phase, the dominant ideology no longer holds absolute global dominance, failing to achieve universalization due to increasing skepticism, diminishing appeal, and outright "rejection" toward its underlying principles. These phenomena stem from dissatisfaction with its unfulfilled promise (mirroring the disillusionment felt by the populace in its core stronghold as the chasm between ideals and reality widens), lingering historical legacies, clashes with diverse cultural backgrounds, and perceived ineffectiveness in addressing new challenges.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the new global power diffuses its ideology to gather support for its own international order—entering the second phase of its world revolutionary cycle. This phase is identical to what Arnold Toynbee calls the "interregnum," periods of uncertainty between the decline of one civilization and the emergence of another.⁴¹ The final phase occurs when the rising power's ideology gains attraction, ultimately supplanting the old ideology and ushering in a new international order. This phase marks the end of the existing global power's world revolution or the complete transition from the dominance of one ideology to the ascendancy of another, reshaping global power dynamics.

In the intricate landscape of international relations, analyzing the dynamics of the Lasswellian world revolutionary cycle poses formidable challenges. Positivistic science, prioritizing empirical observation and verifiable facts, reveals a dearth of established theories on this matter. Despite generations of scholarly endeavors, definitive laws governing human affairs here remain elusive.⁴² Subjective evaluations and value judgments—referred to as "preferential constructs" by Lasswell—significantly influence scholars' analyses, complicating the accurate prediction of historical processes. Therefore, this complexity necessitates the adoption of a heuristic approach, offering probabilities or guiding principles rather than conclusive predictions. Lasswell's "probability constructs" or "developmental constructs" exemplify such a heuristic method, depicting potential sequences of events from a chosen past scenario to a future scenario and then describing the trajectory of world revolutions.⁴³ This method, akin to Weber's *Gedankenbild*—a "mental construct" that helps to comprehend complex social structures and processes⁴⁴—aims to enhance understanding by discerning past developments and future probabilities based on rules of thumb, intuition, past experiences, or observable patterns rather than strict mathematical principles. In other words, Lasswell's notion offers a structured framework delineating probable paths of events or world revolutions, spanning from a specific snapshot of the past to an envisioned moment in the future and, particularly, identifying distinct phases characterizing power competition in the context of ideology, as discussed earlier. It is imperative to acknowledge

⁴⁰ Lasswell, "The World Revolution of Our Time," pp. 75–6.

⁴¹ Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 249.

⁴² Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations*, p. 53.

⁴³ Harold Lasswell, *A Pre-view of Policy Sciences* (New York: Elsevier, 1971), pp. 68–9; Lasswell, "The World Revolution of Our Time," pp. 33–4.

⁴⁴ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Science*, trans. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (New York: The Free Press, 2017), pp. 86–90.

the limitations of Lasswell's notion of probability constructs in that it does not furnish precise predictions. Nonetheless, discussions surrounding the probabilities employed through the Lasswellian world revolution approach remain fruitful in navigating the complexities of power competition and international relations.

The American Liberal World Revolution

The Lasswellian world revolution revolves around the ebb and flow of ideologies. One historical illustration is the American liberal world revolution which began at the end of the 18th century with the emergence of the USA not only as a new nation but also as a champion of liberal democracy, advocating for democratic principles, free markets, and freedom, all considered "universal values." As America ascended politically and economically, so did its liberal democratic ideas. Particularly, the 20th century, marked by two world wars and the Cold War, witnessed the USA standing as a stalwart defender of liberal democracy against the threats of fascism and communism. However, since the 1970s, signs of internal decay in the American liberal democracy have emerged, evidenced by a loss of confidence and trust. Moreover, American liberal democracy faces a decline in appeal and a surge in global criticism and rejection on a global scale in these days. This may not only indicate the decline of the American hegemonic order, to which the world has become accustomed, but also underscore the potential challenge posed by a rising power's new ideology, socialism with Chinese characteristics, on a global scale, thereby presenting a fizzle of the American liberal world revolution.

The Consolidation of American Liberal Democracy

The origins of American liberal democracy can be traced back to the arrival of the pilgrims in the New World. Departing from Europe, they sought to break away from traditional sources of authority such as the church and monarchy, laying the groundwork for a new society built on principles of liberal democracy. Importantly, major events like the American Revolution and the Civil War not only spurred profound economic, political, and social transformations but also facilitated the consolidation of American liberal democracy.⁴⁵

The American Revolution, born from resistance against English colonial rule, stands as a watershed moment in its history. It served as the crucible wherein the American nation was forged, leading to the crafting of the Constitution embodying the principles of American liberal democracy. Nonetheless, as Huntington notes, it is vital to recognize America's inheritance of political institutions and practices from 17th-century England. That is, because "Americans never had to worry about creating government," the Constitution, grounded in Lockean philosophy, uniquely focused on limiting the national government's powers through checks and balances rather than creating authority and concentrating power.⁴⁶ Moreover, the essence of American liberal democracy transcended procedural matters, championing "a defense of individual liberties and property rights, an appeal to reason over custom," and "free trade for the sake of limited government, prosperity, and peace."⁴⁷

The American Civil War, labeled by Beard as the "Second American Revolution," stands as another defining moment,⁴⁸ resulting in the preservation of the Union, followed by significant economic and political reconstruction, a rapid growth in American industrial capital, and profound consequences like the consolidation of American liberal democracy.

⁴⁵ Knutsen, *The Rise and Fall of World Orders*, p. 174.

⁴⁶ Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The US and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), pp. 14–5.

⁴⁸ Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (Clark: The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd, 2001).

Lincoln's fervent advocacy for human equality reshaped American politics, asserting that every individual, irrespective of race, possesses inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Moreover, the aftermath of the Civil War saw the formation of greater federal unity and a strengthened federal government, instilling not only a unified national identity but also a shared liberal-democratic and industrial culture, that is, the establishment of a modern and dynamic political structure grounded in the principles of liberal democracy.

Over time, America witnessed significant milestones in advancing civil rights, challenging systemic injustices, and extending voting rights to all citizens. From the mid-1930s to the 1960s, the convergence between Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the civil rights movement led to a society characterized by expanded social welfare, a relentless pursuit of justice and equality, and middle-class prosperity. This era, known as the "golden age" of American liberal democracy, saw a surge in confidence in liberal democracy and trust in the government, with nearly two-thirds of Americans believing in 1964 that the government served the interests of all.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, throughout its history, America has grappled with the complex and painful legacies of slavery and the oppression of Native Americans. Alexis Tocqueville vehemently condemned slavery, denouncing it a "fatal," "unjust," and "immoral" institution that shamelessly violated the most sacred rights of humanity.⁵⁰ Despite these dark chapters, America emerged as a leading model of vibrant democratic culture, citizen empowerment, political freedom, and economic prosperity. This was made possible by embracing American liberal democracy as a sociopolitical-economic philosophical framework, which enabled America to establish itself as the land of opportunity and achieve unparalleled levels of social, political, and economic development compared to other global powers.

The Diffusion of American Liberal Democracy

The second phase of the American liberal world revolution coincided with America's commitment to spreading liberal democracy worldwide to shape a "world in which democratic values and respect for human rights" are ubiquitous, and "the democracies ... are geopolitically supreme."⁵¹ This expansive, outward-diffusing phase of its historical cycle emerged following the Gilded Age (about the 1870s to the late 1890s), paralleling its rise to global prominence driven by unparalleled material capabilities. In 1898, the USA alone accounted for about 30% of the world's industrial output (akin to China's share of manufactured goods in 2018).

While presenting itself as the "child of a revolt against British imperial rule,"⁵² morally superior to European empires, and even anti-imperialist in contrast to European powers, in the post-Gilded Age, the USA witnessed expansionism, imperialism, a heightened sense of national identity, and a growing confidence in the diffusion of liberal democracy worldwide, perceiving itself as "an exemplary nation endowed with the moral superiority of a capitalist economic system, democratic institutions, and Protestant values."⁵³ This confidence in diffusing American liberal democracy became particularly evident during Woodrow Wilson's presidency (1913–1921). Wilson, especially during World War I, infused America's mission to the world with a new vigor and pledged to make the world a safe place "for

⁴⁹ The American National Election Studies, "The ANES Guide to Public Opinion and Electoral Behavior," <http://electionstudies.org>.

⁵⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2010), p. 581.

⁵¹ Hal Brands, "Democracy vs Authoritarianism: How Ideology Shapes Great-Power Conflict," *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 5 (2018), p. 72.

⁵² Michael Mandelbaum, *Mission Failure: America and the World in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 5.

⁵³ Wang Dong, *The United States and China: A History from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), pp. 101–2.

every peace-loving nation,” enabling them to “determine its own institutions” and to live free from the threats of “force and selfish aggression.”⁵⁴ However, Wilson’s idealistic vision faced challenges during the peace negotiations at Versailles in 1919. European leaders were hesitant to embrace Wilson’s proposals. Knutsen metaphorically likens America’s capacity for foreign-policy decision-making during this period to the “giant dinosaur which possessed only a walnut-size brain,”⁵⁵ pointing out America’s lack of experience and capability in navigating global affairs.

The First World War laid the groundwork for the global spread of American liberal democracy, but it was the victory in the Second World War that truly propelled it forward. In particular, during wartime coalition diplomacy, the USA earned the trust of its allies through collaboration and coordination, significantly shaping the conditions of diffusing American liberal democracy and furthering the postwar American liberal world revolution. Moreover, the defeat of anti-liberal ideologies, particularly Nazism and Pan-Asianism, in Germany and Japan led to the establishment of democratic governments and liberal economies in these regions. This implies that the USA emerged as the pre-eminent moral force of the era, championing liberal democracy, which was disseminated globally. However, despite its successful diffusion, American liberal democracy internationally encountered challenges of rejecting or restricting of it. First, the post-World War II era was not solely characterized by liberal democracies; it was overshadowed by the “ideological contest” with Soviet Marx-Leninism, commonly referred to as the Cold War. This ideological confrontation posed a significant obstacle to diffusion of American liberal democracy. Second, challenges emerged from post-colonial nations in the Third World. While America’s allies and Western European states increasingly turned to American liberal democracy to address the complexities of multicultural societies, emphasizing values such as minority rights, voluntary affiliation, and tolerance of multiple identities, the Third World partially, or largely, rejected American liberal democracy due to the recognition that America prioritized cultivating anti-communist regimes and engaging in military intervention—such as in Vietnam—over nurturing stable, legitimate governments equipped with effective political institutions. This situation presents a tragic irony as the USA—historically associated with defending anti-colonial causes—found itself increasingly militarily intervening in the Third World. The American foreign-policy elites claimed that it was necessary to protect a liberal international order based on democracy, human rights, and free markets. Yet, military intervention disastrously undermined the credibility of the diffusion of American liberal democracy.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, during the 1980s the “Reagan doctrine” emerged as a presidential pledge to nourish and defend democracy and freedom worldwide. This doctrine included support for anti-Soviet rebel groups, with the aim of not only countering Soviet Marx-Leninism but also actively promoting American liberal democracy and furthering the American liberal world revolution. Indeed, Ronald Reagan, alongside Britain’s Margaret Thatcher, wielded a remarkable influence on transforming their own countries and others worldwide by diffusing neoliberal ideals of privatization, deregulation, fiscal conservatism, and small government. Ultimately, the end of the Cold War in 1991 marked a remarkable triumph for America over its ideological rival. Even socialist regimes began embracing free-market capitalism and liberal democracy. The global spread of liberal democracy from its American core was nearly comprehensive. By the late 2000s, a substantial portion of the global population lived under democratic governments, experiencing freedom, prosperity, and reduced

⁵⁴ Woodrow Wilson, “President Wilson’s Message to Congress,” *National Archives*, 8 January 1918, <https://www.archives.gov>.

⁵⁵ Knutsen, *The Rise and Fall of World Orders*, p. 182.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

interstate conflicts.⁵⁷ This triumph was the epoch-defining “true world revolution of our time,” seemingly validating the linear process model.

The Decay of American Liberal Democracy

The first and second phases of the American liberal world revolution demonstrated notable successes in its world revolution, with American liberal democracy showcasing its resilience and progress. However, the signs of decay of American liberal democracy have been evident since the 1970s. The lofty goals of racial equality, democratic empowerment, and government transparency, championed amid the Vietnam War protests and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, often fell short and encountered significant roadblocks. Notably, during the contentious cases of Vietnam and Watergate, the trust in political authorities and institutions had declined sharply. Against this backdrop, the 1970s marked both the end of its “golden age” and the beginning of the decay of American liberal democracy.

Today the symptoms of its decay are readily observable: disillusionment with democratic ideals such as “equality of opportunity” and “liberty and justice for all,” deepening partisan divides, eroding compromise traditions, widening wealth disparities, a shrinking middle class, the rise of populist extremism, disdain for democracy, mismanagement of the Covid-19 response, the January 6th Capitol insurrection, and disputes over election legitimacy. Moreover, an excessive focus on individual rights, while well intentioned, has eroded social cohesion and excluded many Americans from equal access to essential social welfare; the “one person, one vote” principle has had unintended consequences, leading to the election of unqualified leaders like Donald Trump; the checks and balances system, intended to thwart elite dominance, has grown rigid, causing political gridlock; and the commitment of American liberal democracy to genuine representation has been undermined by well-organized and influential interest groups, devolving into a system that caters to the privileged few. Furthermore, the dwindling confidence and trust in American liberal democratic institutions are more worrisome. Particularly, in 2020, only a fifth of Americans trusted their government: confidence in Congress dropped to 20% in 2021 and the Supreme Court to 25% in 2023.⁵⁸

Katzenstein and Kirshner attribute the downfall of American liberal democracy to neoliberalism, advocating for “unrestrained market fundamentalism” which emerged during the “second American order,”⁵⁹ while some observers point to Trump’s illiberal leadership. However, the decay of American liberal democracy is fundamentally rooted in the widening gap between its cherished ideals and reality, compounded by the frequent failure of its ideology to fulfill its advertised promises.⁶⁰ The widening gap not only breeds dissatisfaction but also raises doubts about the viability and effectiveness of American liberal democracy, ultimately eroding confidence in American liberal democracy and public trust in vital branches of government and political institutions. This erosion severely impacts the nation’s democratic system, opening the door for populist leaders who exploit the dissatisfaction and frustrations of a significant portion of the American populace. Consequently, this process

⁵⁷ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2019: Freedom in Retreat* (Washington, D.C.: Freedom House, 2019), <https://freedomhouse.org>.

⁵⁸ Jeffrey Jones, “Last Trump Job Approval 34%; Average Is Record-Low 41%,” *Gallup*, 18 January 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/328637/last-trump-job-approval-average-record-low.aspx>; Jeffrey Jones, “Confidence in US Supreme Court Sinks to Historic Low,” *Gallup*, 23 June 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394103/confidence-supreme-court-sinks-historic-low.aspx>; Megan Brenan, “At 43%, Biden’s Job Approval Rating Highest Since August,” *Gallup*, 26 June 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/507863/biden-job-approval-rating-highest-august.aspx>.

⁵⁹ Peter Katzenstein and Jonathan Kirshner, eds., *The Downfall of the American Order?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), p. 3.

⁶⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* (New York: Profile Book, 2015).

undermines the unity of American society and leads to a departure from American liberal democracy principles, thereby accelerating its decay.

The Halt of the Diffusion of American Liberal Democracy

The triumph of American liberal democracy over communism in 1991 reignited America's commitment to diffusing American liberal democracy, leading to a renewed and intensified promotion of its principles. This commitment was prominently demonstrated under Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, both of whom wholeheartedly championed American liberal democracy on the international stage. They articulated America's vision of fostering a "more secure world where democracy and free markets know no borders,"⁶¹ with a "cherished goal" of making "planet Earth a richer and more vibrant home."⁶² However, since the late 2000s, the tremendous efforts to diffuse American liberal democracy have not only drained America's energy and resources but also uncovered disheartening repercussions. Accordingly, the American liberal world revolution fizzles out short of universalization, failing to sweep across the globe as anticipated. This outcome can be attributed to the increasing skepticism, declining appeal, and rejection surrounding the underlying principles of American liberal democracy. These sentiments primarily arise from dissatisfaction with its unmet assurances of democracy and prosperity, the lingering historical legacies in newer democracies, and its conflicts with diverse historical and cultural contexts, along with its perceived inadequacy in tackling global challenges.

The first noteworthy trend indicating the halt of the diffusion of American liberal democracy is the growing skepticism toward liberal democracy within the West, driven by dissatisfaction with its outcomes and processes. This skepticism is exemplified by the rise of populist leaders in France, Italy, and Germany, indicating that even robust democratic institutions are vulnerable to populist ideologies. It suggests that the actual practice of democracy often falls short of the idealized notion we might have in mind.⁶³ Pew Research Center's 2021 surveys underscore this dissatisfaction, showing that 56% of citizens in 17 advanced economies are dissatisfied with their democracies—although there remains a preference among citizens to advocate for reforms within the framework of liberal democracy rather than seeking alternative systems.⁶⁴ This dissatisfaction is encapsulated by the Dutch historian Reybrouk, who aptly observes, "There is something strange going on with democracy. Everyone seems to want it, but no one believes in it any longer."⁶⁵ This quote poignantly reflects the contemporary challenges facing liberal democracy within the West.

The second trend encompasses the proliferation of illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in many newer democracies and in countries traditionally allied with the USA—Poland, Hungary, Brazil, Venezuela, the Philippines, Thailand, and India. Guriev and Treisman coin the term "spin dictators" to describe leaders who appeal to illiberal and authoritarian norms, prioritizing manipulative methods to control public opinion over upholding liberal democratic principles.⁶⁶ The roots of appealing to not liberal but illiberal norms can be traced to the enduring legacies of colonial rule, communism, dictatorship, or authoritarianism in these countries. This implies that such legacies persistently influence political culture and institutions, nurturing a preference for strongman leadership or centralized authority while hindering the diffusion of liberal democratic ideas.

⁶¹ Brands, "Democracy vs Authoritarianism," p. 70.

⁶² Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry*, p. 1.

⁶³ Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2017), p. 12.

⁶⁴ Richard Wike and Janell Fetterolf, "Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety," *PEW*, 27 May 2022, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/spring-2022/global-public-opinion-in-an-era-of-democratic-anxiety>.

⁶⁵ David Van Reybrouk, *Against Elections* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2016), p. 1.

⁶⁶ Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2023), p. 22.

The third trend is the emergence of the BRICS bloc (Brazil, Russia, China, India, and South Africa, alongside other emerging nations) that fosters increased skepticism or partial rejection toward the principles of American liberal democracy and further complicates its diffusion. The BRICS bloc, with ideologies diverging from Western liberal democracies, has not only outpaced the G7 in economic size but is also actively challenging against American liberal democracy. Initially, the BRICS bloc viewed the USA as a beacon for liberal democracy, expecting it to provide solutions to an array of pressing global challenges such as health and pandemics, climate change, energy crisis, the war in Ukraine, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. However, skepticism, or partial rejection, has set in due to perceived inconsistency and ineffectiveness on the part of the USA in addressing these challenges. Consequently, the BRICS bloc advocates for autonomy in defining its own principles. In other words, it is increasingly challenging the perceived American hegemonic order and seeking to reshape it according to its own interests and principles.

The fourth noteworthy trend is evident in an increase in rejection to the principles of American liberal democracy in the Middle East and beyond. For instance, contrary to American expectations, the diffusion of democracy, free election, human rights, and free markets—often associated with American interventions or the so-called “color revolutions”—in countries like Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and others, has instead crumbled into instability and conflict. In numerous instances, power has frequently shifted to anti-American Islamist parties rather than liberal democratic entities.⁶⁷ As previously noted, America’s unique historical experience shaped its focus not on the creation and accumulation of power but on limiting authority and dividing power. This inclination led to the imposition of one-size-fits-all solutions, such as the belief that free and fair elections alone can rectify all problems. This reflects America’s blindness to the challenges of establishing effective authority in the Middle East. Therefore, it has become clear to political elites and populace in the Middle East that the American liberal democracy does not align with their system characterized by different cultural and historical backgrounds.⁶⁸ A survey of Arab youth in the Middle East shows that young Arabs think that American “democracy will not work” and that “the best way to get achieve autonomy and economic prosperity is to first seek stability in an ordered political system.”⁶⁹ This sentiment suggests that both political elites and populace resist or even reject the American liberal democracy due to its tendency to foster civil unrest and instability and its discordance with systems rooted in varied historical and cultural contexts. This rejection “makes the process of spreading liberal democracy around the world extremely difficult”⁷⁰ and ultimately marks a significant setback to the once-promising diffusion of American liberal democracy.

The last and most important trend is the increasing influence of China’s ideology on the global stage, as will be expounded upon further.

The indications mentioned earlier serve as a sobering reminder of the limited reach of the diffusion of American liberal democracy. This implies that the linear process model suggesting the perpetual extension of the reach of American liberal democracy is being questioned and the foundations of “ideological agreement among the main sponsoring powers,” crucial for American hegemonic order, are beginning to crumble, leading to the “collapse” of

⁶⁷ Shadi Hamid, *The Problem of Democracy: America, the Middle East, and the Rise and Fall of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁶⁸ Paul D’Anieri, *International Politics: Power and Purpose in Global Affairs* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2010), pp. 383–5.

⁶⁹ ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller, “Inside the Hearts and Minds of Arab Youth,” *Annual ASDA’A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey* (2016), p. 26.

⁷⁰ John Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2019), p. 42.

the “superstructure of rules, norms, and institutions.”⁷¹ This halt is a poignant marker of a diminution in the USA’s ideological influence—the ability to persuade others to align with its wishes without resorting to force—and a decline in the effectiveness of the American hegemonic order itself. On the other hand, while the USA’s prowess in disseminating its liberal democracy has faltered, China has been not only consolidating but also diffusing its own ideology, thus mounting a challenge to the American liberal democracy and American liberal world revolution.

The Chinese Socialist World Revolution

Amidst the intricate tapestry of unfolding implications within the landscape of the Lasswellian world revolution, a notable phenomenon emerges: a rising power’s concerted efforts to solidify and diffuse a competing ideology, which may herald the beginning of a new era or cycle of the Lasswellian world revolution. Indeed, the Chinese socialist world revolution, as another historical precedent of the Lasswellian world revolution, began in the latter half of the 20th century, coinciding with China’s remarkable achievements in poverty alleviation, economic growth, and political stability. These feats have not only propelled China into the echelon of economic powerhouses but also, significantly, positioned it as a proponent of alternative sociopolitical–economic philosophical ideas. This positioning has been driven by Chinese leaders’ perception of their country’s enriched indigenous ideology, their lack of appeal toward American liberal democracy, and their deliberate distancing from liberal democratic ideas.⁷² On the other hand, since the mid-2010s, the diffusion of socialism with Chinese characteristics, providing alternative pathways to development and governance, has significantly evolved, shaping the international order in alignment with China’s ideological principles. This diffusion evokes both admiration from the non-Western world and apprehension and rejection from America and Western liberal democracies, which view it as a challenge to their liberal democratic principles. This dynamic underscores that, fundamentally, the diffusion of socialism with Chinese characteristics represents a departure from the prevailing American liberal world revolution, consequently fueling heightened tensions and competition between socialism with Chinese characteristics and American liberal democracy.

The Consolidation of the Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

The inception of socialism with Chinese characteristics can find its roots in the establishment of the first Republic of China in 1912. As the Qing Dynasty faded into history, anti-Manchu Chinese elites initially viewed American-style liberal democracy as a promising departure from Confucianism. However, amidst the turbulence of the era, Chinese revolutionaries turned to the potent allure of Marxist–Leninist ideology, which emanated from Moscow, leading to a rejection of American ideals of liberty, democracy, and free markets. This ideological shift laid the groundwork for China’s Communist Revolution in 1949, which aimed to forge a socialist state grounded in Marxist–Leninist–Maoist ideology. However, the ensuing decades were marked by significant political upheavals, notably the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which profoundly disrupted China’s sociopolitical fabric. Additionally, the fracture in China’s relations with the Soviet Union served to intensify the nation’s quest for a distinct path of modernization, or what would be termed the Chinese socialist world revolution.

⁷¹ Michael Mazarr et al., *Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order* (Santa Barbara, CA: RAND, 2017), p. xviii.

⁷² Odd Arne Westad, “Legacies of the Past,” in David Shambaugh, ed., *China and the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 26–7; Roland Boer, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: A Guide for Foreigners* (Cham: Springer, 2021), p. 37.

In the late 1970s, finally, the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) like Deng Xiaoping navigated the new encompassing sociopolitical–economic philosophical ideas. Rather than rejecting Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought, Deng introduced socialism with Chinese characteristics, an ideology often described as the Sinification of Marxism–Leninism, to tailor Marxist principles to China’s unique circumstances. Deng acknowledged that socialism’s establishment would take longer than Mao anticipated, placing China in the “primary stage of socialism” for a prolonged period. Thus, the central aim of socialism with Chinese characteristics was to cultivate national strength through a unique socialist path, merging Chinese traditions with Marxist–Leninist principles, temporarily adopting Western values, and integrating into the American hegemonic order.⁷³ This Deng’s socialism with Chinese characteristics was officially declared in his inaugural address at the 12th National Congress in September 1982: “We must integrate the universal truth of Marxism with the concrete realities of China, blaze a path of our own and build a socialism with Chinese characteristics.”⁷⁴

In detail, Deng’s socialism with Chinese characteristics, emphasizing China’s unique characteristics as a populous, economically underdeveloped country, sought to modernize China and elevate its citizens’ living standards through the “reform and opening-up” and an “export-led development strategy” leveraging foreign capital and low-wage labor. Deng also embarked on the socialism with Chinese characteristics based on a cluster of legitimating ideas that prioritized one-party dominance over a checks and balances system, emphasized meritocracy or “the right man for the right job (*shicaishisuo*)” as opposed to democratic elections, advocated for a state capitalism rather than the unrestrained power of markets, and cherished social harmony over individual freedom and human rights.⁷⁵ This socialism with Chinese characteristics, which starkly contrasted with the principles of American liberal democracy, encompassed the comprehensive objectives of achieving robust economic growth, ensuring political stability, and fostering social harmony within Chinese society.

Deng’s socialism with Chinese characteristics had “proved to be flexible and protean enough to absorb everything that has been thrown at it, to the surprise and horror of many in the West.”⁷⁶ This pragmatism has enabled the continuous development and integration of new elements and policy directions, ensuring relevance in changing circumstances. Each generation of Chinese leaders has contributed to this evolution while maintaining the core principles. Hu Jintao introduced “social harmony,” and Xi Jinping expanded the socialism with Chinese characteristics into “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era” and the “Chinese Path to Modernization,” showcasing a dynamic progression of China’s guiding ideology.

Under Xi’s leadership, socialism with Chinese characteristics has been profoundly transformed, with socialism being reinstated as the predominant guiding framework for all of China’s endeavors.⁷⁷ Xi has ambitiously redefined these values with long-term goals, aiming to establish a “modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious can be achieved by 2049 ... and the dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”⁷⁸ The redefinition of the socialism with Chinese characteristics reflects

⁷³ Boer, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*; Colin Mackerras, Pradeep Taneja, and Graham Young, *China Since 1978: Reform, Modernisation and “Socialism With Chinese Characteristics”* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994).

⁷⁴ Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1994), pp. 2–3.

⁷⁵ Frank Dikötter, *China After Mao* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), pp. 369–70.

⁷⁶ Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China’s Communist Rulers* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), p. 273.

⁷⁷ Deng Chundong, “Work Hard to Construct a Discourse System in Philosophy and Social Sciences under the Guidance of Marxism,” *Marxist Studies in China* (2014), pp. 68–81.

⁷⁸ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), p. 38.

a revamping of Deng's strategy, "reform and opening-up," shifting toward a genuine pursuit of "socialist project" or a Chinese socialist world revolution. This shift, placing greater emphasis on socialism than on "Chinese characteristics," reflects Xi's belief in socialism as an inevitable historical development.⁷⁹ Xi also recalibrates the pro-market stance in favor of "common prosperity" and "protecting the environment," marking a move away from relentless growth toward balanced and harmonious socioeconomic progress.⁸⁰

The reasons why profound ideological shifts happen under Xi are as follows. Internationally, the US-led global financial crisis (2008–2013) exposed flaws in American capitalism, contributing to a worldwide democratic backslide and emboldening China to seek a more assertive role on the global stage, with a renewed interest in Marxism.⁸¹ Domestically, challenges such as social disparities, economic imbalances between affluent coastal regions and poorer inland areas, corruption, and environmental issues necessitated a re-evaluation of Deng's strategy. Xi highlighted these issues in his 19th Party Congress Speech in October 2017, stating that "As socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, the principal contradiction facing Chinese society has evolved. What we now face is the contradiction between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life."⁸² In response, there were calls within the CPC for a return to stricter ideological control to address these issues. Individually, Xi's diehard belief in Leninist principles and the importance of ideological guidance and political discipline as the foundation for effective governance, national stability, and the success of the socialist project has played a significant role in shifting China's ideological landscape. In sum, these factors culminated in the introduction of "Xi Jinping Thought," which was incorporated into the CPC Constitution in 2017, solidifying Xi's power and marking a significant ideological shift. Furthermore, they also resulted in the inception of the "Chinese Path to Modernization," a concept officially introduced by Xi Jinping in early 2021.⁸³ This path emphasizes principles such as equitable income distribution, peaceful national development, and ecological sustainability, distinguishing it from the historical trajectory of Western modernization or American liberal world revolution. These developments represent a critical juncture in China's political development, with significant implications for its future trajectory and pursuit of the Chinese socialist world revolution.

To fulfill the objectives of socialism with Chinese characteristics, Xi strategically embraces the "dual circulation approach," aiming to boost domestic consumption, innovation, and self-reliance, while also maintaining engagement with the global economy.⁸⁴ In his leadership style, Xi seamlessly blends elements of Mao's charismatic authoritarian style with Deng's commitment to political stability and traditional Chinese statecraft.⁸⁵ This blend aims to solidify the authority of the party and instill confidence in the nation's direction. In the value aspect, Xi aligns the socialism with Chinese characteristics with nationalism, exemplified by the "China Dream," and also emphasizes the "Core Socialist Values" which

⁷⁹ John Fitzgerald, *Cadre Country: How China became the Chinese Communist Party* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2022), p. 305.

⁸⁰ Kerry Brown, *Xi: A Study in Power* (London: Icon Books, 2022), p. 163.

⁸¹ Joshua Kurlantzick, *Beijing's Global Media Offensive* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 21.

⁸² Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," *Xinhua*, 18 October 2017, p. 9–10, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf.

⁸³ "The CMP Dictionary: Chinese-Style Modernization," *China Media Project*, 4 March 2023, https://chinamediaproject.org/the_ccp_dictionary/chinese-style-modernization/.

⁸⁴ Xi Jinping, "Guojia zhong changqi jingji shehui fazhan zhanlue ruogan zhongda wenti" ("Several Major Issues for the National Economic and Social Development Strategy in the Medium to Long Term"), *Qiushi*, No. 21 (2020), pp. 4–10.

⁸⁵ Fitzgerald, *Cadre Country*, pp. 17–8; Andreas Mulvad, "Xiism as a Hegemonic Project in the Making: Sino-communist Ideology and the Political Economy of China's Rise," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2019), pp. 449–56.

consist of 12 values (categorized into national, societal, and citizens' values) that combine socialist principles with traditional Chinese thought. The CPC actively promotes these values to garner consent and support among the Chinese population.⁸⁶

In essence, Chinese leaders view the socialism with Chinese characteristics as a robust alternative to American liberal democracy, capable of fostering unique social and global orders. This conviction stems from four key factors. First, socialism with Chinese characteristics has spurred four decades of rapid growth, poverty eradication, and a boost in economic and military strength, debunking predictions of a slowdown or collapse. It has been “better at serving Chinese people than any Western political systems.”⁸⁷ Additionally, it has enabled the overcoming of inherent problems brought about by Western modernization or American liberal democracy, including “capital supremacy, polarization, ecological destruction, and foreign aggression.”⁸⁸ Second, socialism with Chinese characteristics has enabled China to implement economic reforms while maintaining political stability and steering clear of the turmoil often seen in radical transformations in non-Western nations.⁸⁹ Third, socialism with Chinese characteristics allows China to carve its own future, enact decisive policies, and plan for the long term, contrasting with the short-sightedness of American liberal democracy and perpetual debates tied to election cycles. Last, socialism with Chinese characteristics helps to transform China from a “Fast Follower” to a “First Mover” and to position it as a global power rivaling the USA, while setting the stage for ambitious societal goals like “common prosperity” and advancements in artificial intelligence, digital economy, quantum technology, etc.⁹⁰

Although not all citizens are supportive of current government policies or socialism with Chinese characteristics,⁹¹ Cunningham et al., based on public opinion surveys, focus groups, and interviews in China, discovered that the socialism with Chinese characteristics has garnered relatively substantial support and satisfaction among Chinese citizens as indicated by a 93.1% satisfaction rate with the CPC and its policies in 2016.⁹² This alignment of views between the public and the CPC has significantly contributed to the regime's confidence and stability. This is a stark contrast to the erosion of faith in American liberal democracy observed among the American populace. Accordingly, at the 19th National Congress of the Party in 2017, Xi underscored the “Four Self-Confidences,” highlighting “China's confidence in its chosen path, guiding theories, political system, and culture.”⁹³ Despite a current multitude of challenges such as an elevated level of local government debt, a real estate crisis, weakened exports, declining foreign investment, a shrinking population, and high youth unemployment, China still positions socialism with Chinese characteristics as a robust alternative to American liberal democracy, believing that American liberal democracy is not necessary for political stability and economic prosperity.

⁸⁶ Michael Gow, “The Core Socialist Values of the Chinese Dream: Towards a Chinese Integral State,” *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2017), pp. 92–116.

⁸⁷ Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, “Has Xi Jinping Made China's Political System More Resilient and Enduring?” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2022), p. 229.

⁸⁸ Gong Yun, “The Chinese Path to Modernization and Its Implications for the World: A Historical Perspective,” *International Critical Thought*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2023), p. 175.

⁸⁹ Chas Freeman, “China's National Experiences and the Evolution of PRC Grand Strategy,” in Shambaugh, ed., *China and the World*, p. 44.

⁹⁰ Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 133; Kurlantzick, *Beijing's Global Media Offensive*, pp. 21–2.

⁹¹ Ilaria Mazzocco and Scott Kennedy, “Public Opinion in China: A Liberal Silent Majority?” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 9 February 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/public-opinion-china-liberal-silent-majority>.

⁹² Edward Cunningham et al., “Understanding CCP Resilience: Surveying Chinese Public Opinion Through Time,” *Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation*, 6 July 2020, <https://rajawali.hks.harvard.edu/resources/understanding-ccp-resilience-surveying-chinese-public-opinion-through-time/>.

⁹³ Xi, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” p. 14.

The Diffusion of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics

The second phase of the Chinese socialist world revolution aligns with China's concerted efforts to disseminate socialism with Chinese characteristics on a global scale. However, since initiating reforms, China, while underscoring its unique development path, hesitated to proclaim the universal applicability of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In 1980, Deng admonished that "there should be no reason at all to require other developing countries to make revolutions by following the China model. This should become an important principle."⁹⁴ Moreover, China officially denied intentions to "export" its socialism with Chinese characteristics or models, with Xi asserting in a 2017 high-level gathering of foreign leaders for the CPC's dialogue with world political parties that "We do not 'import' foreign models, nor do we 'export' the Chinese model, and we will not demand other countries to 'replicate' China's practices."⁹⁵ This stance reflects China's strategy to avoid escalating tensions with the USA and minimize accusations of assertive global ambitions.⁹⁶ Simultaneously, unlike American liberal democracy, socialism with Chinese characteristics is rhetorically moving away from universalism, as it champions the principle of "non-interference" and encourages others to develop approaches suitable to their own conditions.⁹⁷

However, contrary to China's official statement, under Xi's leadership, China has increasingly diffused the socialism with Chinese characteristics highlighting the one-party system, meritocracy, state capitalism, and social harmony, through a wide range of tools.⁹⁸ In fact, prior to Xi's 2013 inauguration, China had already exported its development model, like special economic zones, to non-Western countries.⁹⁹ However, Xi's promotions of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and his efforts to roll back the influence of American liberal democracy, are deliberate and systematic. Under Xi's leadership, China has intensified its "soft power" campaign, propagating an "economic success story"¹⁰⁰ and disseminating socialism with Chinese characteristics across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Latin America through its economic and technological prowess. Xi has positioned China at the forefront of rulemaking in emerging areas of global governance, particularly in domains like cyberspace. Xi actively seeks support for these initiatives from developing countries that have benefited from Chinese aid, which Xi views as "China's 'natural allies' in international affairs."¹⁰¹ Particularly, in Africa, the diffusion of socialism with Chinese characteristics has significantly evolved. For instance, China systemically promotes socialism with Chinese characteristics through education (research exchanges, funding for African researchers, and Confucius Institutes), training (capacity building program for African officials and young leaders to learn China's development models), and media (building digital infrastructure by companies like Huawei).¹⁰²

⁹⁴ Deng, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, pp. 318–9.

⁹⁵ Xi Jinping, "Xi Jinping chuxi Zhongguo Gongchandang yu shijie zhengdang gaoceng duihua hui kaimushi bing fabiao zhuzhi jianghua" ("Xi Jinping Attends the Opening Ceremony of the High-Level Dialogue between the Communist Party of China and World Political Parties and Delivers a Keynote Speech"), *Xinhua*, 1 December 2017, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-12/01/content_5243832.htm.

⁹⁶ Zhang Weiyang, "Zhongguo Moshi Lun shi Zhong-Mei guanxi jinzhang de zhongyao genyuan" ("China Model Theory' Is a Crucial Source of Tension in Sino-US Relations"), *Zhong Ping Zhou Kan (China Review Weekly)*, No. 111 (2019), p. 15.

⁹⁷ Zhao Suisheng, "Whither the China Model: Revisiting the Debate," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 26, No. 103 (2017), pp. 1–17.

⁹⁸ Jessica Chen Weiss, "Ideological Contest in US-China Relations? Assessing China's Defense of Autocracy," in Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein, eds., *After Engagement: Dilemmas in US-China Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), p. 137.

⁹⁹ Daniel Large, *China and Africa: The New Era* (London: Polity Press, 2021), p. 115.

¹⁰⁰ Joseph Nye, "Power and Interdependence with China," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (2020), p. 15.

¹⁰¹ Xi Jinping, *Xi Jinping tan zhiguo lizheng Vol. 3 (Xi Jinping: The Governance of China)* (Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 2014), p. 429.

¹⁰² Large, *China and Africa*, pp. 5–6, 26–7.

The CPC utilizes various channels to promote socialism with Chinese characteristics, particularly, the International Department of the Communist Party of China (ID-CPC), the official agency responsible for party-to-party diplomacy. Since Xi's tenure began, the ID-CPC has significantly broadened its role in Chinese diplomacy.¹⁰³ This entity is proactive in fostering relationships with not only socialist nations like Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Cuba, but also with over 600 political parties and organizations across around 160 countries worldwide. With a substantial number of delegations dispatched and received yearly, the ID-CPC's mission extends beyond influencing foreign elites; it actively disseminates "China's experiences in socialist development, known as the China model,"¹⁰⁴ contributing to the global diffusion of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

More broadly, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 under Xi's leadership, represents a pivotal shift in China's global interactions and in a way to diffuse its socialism with Chinese characteristics. Positioned as Xi's flagship foreign-policy initiative, the BRI ambitiously has sought to interconnect continents, including Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Beyond infrastructure development, this multifaceted grand strategy has addressed domestic capital overaccumulation, while strategically molding global governance to echo Chinese values and interests and thus prioritizing economic growth and political stability over democracy and human rights.¹⁰⁵ It has further strived to establish China as a normative power. Parallely, China has championed other international platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, directly challenging US-led liberal institutions. Initiatives like the donation to the "ten big Sino-African cooperation projects" and the offering of Chinese vaccines to the Global South have served dual purposes: reforming the American hegemonic order and institutions and winning the hearts and minds of the global population, all without adhering to the principles of American liberal democracy.

Several factors have fueled this outward diffusion. First, China became the second-largest world economy in 2010. Second, the CPC interpreted the diminishing appeal and influence of American liberal democracy after the 2003 Iraq War and its evident shortcomings during the 2008 financial crisis as indicators of a shifting global power balance. Therefore, driven by the conviction that the 20th century was deemed the "American Century" while the 21st century is destined to belong to China and "history is on China's side,"¹⁰⁶ China has strategically seized the strategic opportunity to lead the nation onto the path of becoming a great power and to diffuse socialism with Chinese characteristics outward. Third, and consequently, under Xi's leadership, China has grown more confident, asserting that its tangible achievements of political stability and economic development—attained without replicating American liberal democracy—could serve as a model for countries seeking economic progress and political stability based on their own national conditions and historical traditions while maintaining their independence. In the CPC's 95th anniversary in 2016, Xi confidently declared that the "members of the CPC and Chinese people are fully confident in providing China's solutions for the exploration of a better social system for humanity."¹⁰⁷ This implies that Xi has been very clear that the socialism with Chinese characteristics is worth emulating and that promoting it can help not just China's foreign policy and economic

¹⁰³ Christine Hackenesch and Julia Bader, "The Struggle for Minds and Influence: The Chinese Communist Party's Global Outreach," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2020), p. 731.

¹⁰⁴ Zhao Suisheng, "China's Foreign Policy Making Process Players and Institutions," in Shambaugh, ed., *China and the World*, p. 99.

¹⁰⁵ Zhou Weifeng and Mario Esteban, "Beyond Balancing: China's Approach towards the Belt and Road Initiative," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27 (2018), pp. 487–501.

¹⁰⁶ Jae Ho Chung, "Homework for Beijing: Five Hurdles on China's Path to Becoming a Responsible Great Power," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2021), pp. 114–5; Dikötter, *China After Mao*.

¹⁰⁷ Xi Jinping, "Xi Jinping: Wanquan you xinxin wei renlei dui geng hao shehui zhidu de tansuo tigong Zhongguo fangan" ("Xi Jinping: Fully Confident in Providing China's Solutions for the Exploration of a Better Social System for Humanity"), 1 July 2016, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1492012.

interests but address global challenges as well. Fourth, as America's enduring ambition has been to cultivate a world conducive to democracy in order for it to "feel safe in a world populated by democracies" by diffusing American liberal democracy outward, Xi's China also aspires to establish a world that is safe for its socialism with Chinese characteristics—namely, to pre-empt "color revolutions" that can spread to China.¹⁰⁸ Fifth, Xi has never departed from a sort of Sino-centrism. Given the rich ideological resources within China's cultural reservoir, for Xi it is natural and reasonable to diffuse its ideology—resorting to Sino-centrism as a narrative. Finally, and importantly, the dissemination of socialism with Chinese characteristics aligns with the logic of the Lasswellian world revolution, suggesting that a rising power's clusters of ideas are likely and naturally to spread globally.

China's efforts to diffuse its socialism with Chinese characteristics have somewhat captured the attention of non-Western leaders, particularly in authoritarian regimes that have found American liberal democracy troublesome. Notably, inspired by the socialism with Chinese characteristics, Vietnam has already significantly reformed its economy through "*Doi Moi*" (Renovation), achieving substantial poverty reduction and economic growth. During Xi's 2015 visit, former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe praised China's poverty reduction progress, expressing interest in learning from its experience: "China has made the most progress over the past several decades in reducing poverty. That experience is of great interest to us."¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Gwede Mantashe, Secretary-General of South Africa's African National Congress, expressed that "the ANC ... is willing to learn from the CPC's 65 years of governance in China."¹¹⁰ In Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen recommended Xi's book, *The Governance of China*, urging "officials and ordinary Cambodians to read the collection of speeches and policy directives" and suggesting that "it could promote a better understanding of good governance."¹¹¹ Raphael Tuju, Secretary General of Kenya's Jubilee Party, also expressed admiration for the CPC in June 2020: "The Chinese Communist Party is the biggest political party in the whole world. Jubilee Party can only aspire, and where possible learn some lessons ... what is wrong with learning from the most successful and the best run?"¹¹² These statements reflect a broader trend of admiration and interest in socialism with Chinese characteristics among leaders in diverse countries, particularly in regions grappling with economic underdevelopment and governance challenges, recognizing socialism with Chinese characteristics as a viable alternative to American liberal democracy.

In essence, the diffusion of socialism with Chinese characteristics and its acknowledgment as a potential alternative to American liberal democracy not only challenge the conventional belief, that American liberal democracy is the only route to prosperity, but also heighten the geopolitical rivalry between the USA and China, opening a new chapter in their global competition.

The Evolution of US–China Relations within Two World Revolutionary Cycles

The relationship between the USA and China has been shaped by centuries of a complex interplay involving not only political and economic but also ideological dimensions. From the mid-19th century to the early 21st century, these two global powers have traversed divergent paths in their respective world revolutionary cycles—a phenomenon characterized by

¹⁰⁸ Brands, "Democracy vs Authoritarianism," p. 78.

¹⁰⁹ "Habao hikasu chukokudeki kachikan" ("The Outward-Diffusion of Chinese Ideas"), *Asahi Shinbun*, 1 May 2018.

¹¹⁰ Hackenesch and Bader, "The Struggle for Minds and Influence," p. 731.

¹¹¹ Kuch Naren and Ben Paviour, "Prime Minister Promotes Chinese President's Book," *The Cambodia Daily*, 12 April 2017, <https://english.cambodiadaily.com/news/prime-minister-promotes-chinese-presidents-book-127935/>.

¹¹² "Tuju Admits Jubilee Party Has Its Challenges," *Sunday Nation*, 7 June 2020, <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/politics/tuju-admits-jubilee-party-has-its-challenges-534248>.

the “principle of unequal development of ideologies.” This principle acknowledges that different global powers may undergo varying phases of ideological evolution, resulting in disparities in sociopolitical–economic philosophical ideas. These disparities have significantly shaped the relationship between the USA and China, fueling dynamics of power competition and shaping the broader global landscape.

In the initial phase of the American liberal world revolution, the interaction between the USA and China unfolded amid divergent revolutionary trajectories: the rise of the American liberal world revolution coincided with the end of the Chinese Confucian world revolution. While the USA, as a young nation-state, experienced euphoric social, political, and economic progress, China, as a decaying empire, faced immense challenges and setbacks, enduring a period marked by dysfunction, misery, and desperation. For the USA, this period marked the consolidation of American liberal democracy, characterized by a conscious pursuit of national greatness and an era of relentless progress. In stark contrast, China encountered a tumultuous period marked by ideological turmoil and the “century of humiliation” from 1843 to 1949. Once endowed with a rich history of self-referential political, economic, and cultural traditions, China grappled with the pervasive influence of Western liberalism and imperialism. Moreover, despite earnest efforts at modernization, the pathway to progress remained elusive, frustrating successive generations of Chinese elites.

In the second phase of the American liberal world revolution, from the post-Gilded Age to the late 2000s, the relationship between the two global powers underwent significant evolution. This period saw a divergence between the diffusion of American liberal democracy and China’s pursuit of its own ideological framework which ultimately culminated in the consolidation of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the late 1970s. These contrasting paths led to wide-ranging encounters, encompassing early engagement, subsequent disillusionment, ideological tensions, and renewed engagement, alongside a hope that China’s integration into the American hegemonic order would lead to an “organic evolution” toward a more liberal-democratic system within China.

In fact, starting from the end of the 19th century, the USA endeavored to disseminate its ideology through geopolitical, commercial, and cultural expansion in China. Utilizing diplomatic strategies like the “Open Door” principle in 1899–1900, alongside missionary endeavors and educational exchanges, the USA aimed to shape China’s modernization along with American ideals. Esteemed American liberal intellectuals such as John Dewey played a significant role in guiding these efforts. Meanwhile, China faced formidable challenges, as it sought to establish its own ideological framework amid periods of turmoil. Indeed, the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 marked a pivotal moment, leading to the establishment of the first Republic of China in 1912. Initially, American-style liberal democracy garnered traction among anti-Manchu Chinese elites. However, Chinese expectations for modernization and liberal democracy with American support were dashed by perceived betrayals. For instance, the USA’s refusal to support China’s demands—the abolition of the unequal treaties and the return of Germany’s possessions in Shandong—at the Versailles meeting in 1919 dealt a significant blow: however, as previously discussed, during that period, America was deficient in the requisite capacity to adeptly steer global affairs. America’s recognition of warlord commanders in Beijing further fueled resentment toward the USA, shifting Chinese perceptions of the USA as no different from other imperialist powers and then leading Chinese revolutionaries to embrace Marxist–Leninist ideology propagated from Moscow. In the 1950s, therefore, to counter the American liberal world revolution, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), influenced by the Soviet Union, aimed to develop as a socialist state based on Marxist–Leninist–Maoist ideology, setting the stage for geopolitical tensions and ideological competition that persisted into later decades.

Meanwhile, following World War II, the USA—viewing the Communist victory in China in 1949 as a deviation from historical progression, or a challenge to American liberal world revolution—assumed global leadership in the anti-Communist crusade, intensifying efforts

to promote American liberal democracy in Asia. Consequently, Sino-American relations deteriorated as both countries entrenched themselves in their Cold War camps. By the 1960s, relations between the two nations were further strained amid America's involvement in Vietnam and China's domestic upheavals like the Cultural Revolution. China's rift with the Soviet Union further isolated it internationally. Importantly, neither Mao nor his followers had a clear ideology guiding the nation's future direction.¹¹³ This prompted to reassess its Marxist–Leninist–Maoist principles. The turning point came in the early 1970s with Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing and the onset of the Third Wave of liberal democracy, facilitating the spread of American liberal democracy. The policy of “constructive engagement,” envisioning China's integration into the international community, had shaped China's policy for both Republican and Democratic administrations for the past half-century. Departing from the derogatory term “Red China,” for instance, Nixon extended the gesture of reconciliation: “... we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations.”¹¹⁴ This logic of engagement was built upon the premise of the linear process model, positing that free markets, economic growth, and trade would eventually lead to political reform and the adoption of American liberal democracy in China.

During the phase of the diffusion of American liberal democracy, particularly in the post-Cold War era, China experienced substantial economic growth, boosting its “cultivation of national strength.” This growth heavily depended on American technology, markets, and capital, facilitated by the spread of American liberal democracy. As a result, China emerged as a paramount beneficiary of the American hegemonic order steered by the USA. Concurrently, the USA had exhibited a lenient stance to China, with the expectation that China would naturally evolve toward becoming a liberal-democratic nation.

The third phase of the American liberal world revolution, which began in the 1970s, marked a pivotal moment, exposing the vulnerability of American liberal democracy to internal decay. Concurrently, China embarked on firm consolidation of its ideological narrative, heralding the emergence of the Chinese socialist world revolution. Specifically, throughout this phase, America has grappled with the decay of American liberal democracy, evident in political polarization, socioeconomic disparities, and democratic erosion. This decay reinforced the beliefs of Chinese elites who have closely observed it. They viewed American liberal democracy as an ideology rooted in Western imperialism, representing only one portion of the global population, and cloaking its inherent Western bias under the guise of universal values. Additionally, American liberal democracy appeared ill-suited for a populous country, culturally and historically misaligned with Chinese values and experiences, and insufficient in addressing China's specific issues like poverty alleviation, political stability, and social cohesion. Therefore, China has strategically consolidated its own ideological framework, leveraging its rich cultural, political, and socioeconomic heritage. Under leaders like Deng, China initiated domestic reforms, anchoring its commitment to socialism with Chinese characteristics which prioritized the leadership of the Communist Party over liberal democracy, endorsed state capitalism over free-market capitalism, and upheld social harmony above individual freedom and human rights. Xi further bolsters this socialism with Chinese characteristics, contending that China achieved modernization without replicating American liberal democracy and, moreover, the Chinese path offers remedies to the inherent challenges of Western modernization and American liberal democracy.

Meanwhile, amid the internal decay of American liberal democracy, America remained confident that China lacked the ideological prowess to consolidate a “positive, well-articulated ideology analogous to liberal democracy.”¹¹⁵ This perspective led to underestimation of China's capacity to craft a compelling ideology, overlooking crucial aspects of the

¹¹³ Wang, *The United States and China*, pp. 157–8.

¹¹⁴ Richard Nixon, “Asia after Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (1967), pp. 111–25.

¹¹⁵ John Owen, “Liberalism and Its Alternatives, Again,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2018), p. 315.

“China story” or the Chinese socialist world revolution, which means that China devises “a socialist project.”¹¹⁶ Nye warns against dismissing China’s consolidation of ideology, noting that “although China is far from America’s equal in soft power, it would be foolish to ignore the gains it is making.”¹¹⁷

Since the late 2000s, when the fourth phase of the American liberal world revolution began alongside the ongoing third phase, a significant shift in the global landscape has become evident: the once-unstoppable momentum of diffusion of American liberal democracy has ground to a halt, challenged by the gradual diffusion of socialism with Chinese characteristics. As highlighted by the RAND Corporation, there is a sober recognition that “we may be reaching the natural limits of key elements of the liberal order—namely, the further liberalization of trade and the active promotion of democratic systems.”¹¹⁸ This suggests a looming threat to the American hegemonic order, with the momentum of dissemination of American liberal democracy experiencing a significant deceleration. Moreover, since the late 2010s, the USA has found itself embroiled not only in competitions concerning security, technology, and economics, but also in ideological contests with China. In other words, not only has the appeal of American liberal democracy waned, but America has also confronted the emergence of a potent new ideological competitor, socialism with Chinese characteristics. Under Xi’s leadership, China sheds its erstwhile reticence, launching bold initiatives to spread socialism with Chinese characteristics worldwide. These developments indicate that the trajectory of the American liberal world revolution is undergoing a profound shift.

Four Probable Scenarios for the Future of International Relations

The Lasswellian world revolution highlights the most significant points regarding the future trajectory of American liberal democracy and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Given the above analysis, it alerts us that the diffusion of the American liberal democracy is nearing its limits, hinting at the culmination of the American liberal world revolutionary cycle, while concurrently indicating that China is entering the second phase of its own world revolutionary cycle. This profound shift prompts us to question: as the American liberal world revolution loses momentum and the Chinese socialist world revolution undergoes concurrent development, what lies ahead for the future of international relations? In fact, predicting the outcome of such large-scale power competition, and transition, is an inherently challenging endeavor, especially since this type of transition, referred to as the “Lasswellian world revolution,” tends to unfold over centuries. Hence, as mentioned earlier, this article attempts to present probabilities instead of definitive predictions. Within Lasswell’s concept of “probability constructs,” we can imagine four probable scenarios that might play out in the near future.

The first probable scenario envisions a triumphant resurgence of American liberal democracy, reminiscent of its dominance during the 1990s, while also predicting the eventual collapse of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This suggests that the current halt of diffusion of American liberal democracy is just a brief deviation from its inherent strengths. Despite standing at a crossroads, American liberal democracy is resilient, historically demonstrating its “reasoned deliberation and the ability to make course corrections, when necessary.”¹¹⁹ With assets such as a dynamic free-market economy, a competitive edge in technology, substantial investment in research and development, military strength,

¹¹⁶ Boer, *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ Joseph Nye, “The Rise of China’s Soft Power,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 December 2005, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB113580867242333272>.

¹¹⁸ Mazarr et al., *Measuring the Health of the Liberal International Order*, p. xviii.

¹¹⁹ Brands, “Democracy vs Authoritarianism,” p. 96.

diplomatic resources, top educational institutions, and population growth,¹²⁰ America is well equipped for resurgence of American liberal democracy. Importantly, America is not companionless. Liberal democracy is not solely championed by the USA; its democratic allies and clients in East Asia and Europe also practice it. No matter how important China is economically to liberal democracies, these nations are less likely to sever their ideational ties with the USA and are more inclined to collaborate with the USA in revitalizing the American hegemonic order.

Conversely, this scenario takes a dim view of China's socialism with Chinese characteristics, akin to past failed ideologies like Nazi Germany's cultural nationalism, Pax Nipponica's pan-Asianism, and the Soviet Union's Marxism-Leninism. Dubbed "China doomer"¹²¹ or "Peak China,"¹²² it anticipates the collapse of China's social, economic, and political systems due to inherent flaws such as a lack of checks and balances, strict state control and excessive intervention in the market, limited freedoms, and a dearth of transparency. Beckley and Brands argue that "We live in an age of 'peak China,' not a forever rising China. Beijing ... wants to reorder the world, but its time to do so is already running out."¹²³ Given this context, while American liberal democracy retains significant global influence and the American liberal world revolution remains ongoing, the Chinese socialist world revolution fails to materialize.

The second scenario paints a picture of a power competition, wherein American liberal democracy is overshadowed by the burgeoning influence of socialism with Chinese characteristics. This scenario is meticulously anchored in the unparalleled decision-making prowess of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which seamlessly blends centralization with efficacy, alongside a remarkable consistency in policy formulation and a prowess for efficient execution. Political stability and societal harmony stand as pillars in this scenario, collaboratively weaving a tapestry that positions China on an unwavering path toward realizing its audacious dream of "national rejuvenation" and ushering in the era of the Chinese socialist world revolution. All of these monumental achievements are projected to reach their zenith as the PRC celebrates its centennial anniversary in 2049. Critically, this anticipated triumph stands as a robust counter-narrative to the pessimistic "China doomer" logic and the linear process model which posit that "China cannot keep moving forward to the per capita income, educational, and informational levels of a middle-income country without experiencing the pressures for democratic change that Korea and Taiwan did more than two decades ago."¹²⁴

This stands in stark contrast to the declining American liberal democracy, which held sway for the past century. Historical patterns suggest that, as noted earlier, the collapse of global powers is typically rooted in internal rather than external factors. This means that the demise of the American empire stems from the ultimate failure of American liberal democracy to address internal challenges, such as economic and racial inequalities, political polarization, and the erosion of liberal values. America's abrasive diplomacy, particularly evident during Trump, coupled with the recent symptoms of declining appeal and increased rejection to American liberal democracy, democratic backsliding around the world, the emergence of the BRICS bloc, and the ascendancy of socialism with Chinese characteristics, has weakened the global standing of American liberal democracy and exposed its vulnerabilities in the American hegemonic order. This precarious situation paves the way

¹²⁰ Chung-in Moon et al., "Cold War Discourse and Geopolitical Flashpoints in Post-Covid-19 Northeast Asia," *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2021), p. 20.

¹²¹ Gordon Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China* (New York: Random House, 2001).

¹²² Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

¹²⁴ Larry Diamond, "China and East Asian Democracy: The Coming Wave," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2012), p. 13.

for socialism with Chinese characteristics to gain prominence, signaling a potential shift from the American liberal international order to the Chinese socialist international order.

The third scenario presents a period of “peaceful coexistence,” where American liberal democracy and socialism with Chinese characteristics manage to coexist harmoniously, fostering a genuine partnership and a harmonious international order. In this scenario, China, having successfully advanced its national, or possibly even its socialist project, does not harbor any intention to challenge the universalist claims of American liberal democracy. China partially combines its “traditional values with selected liberalist values” such as “equality, democracy, and freedom”¹²⁵ and becomes an integral component of the core of the American hegemonic order. Meanwhile, the USA, open to sharing leadership with China, successfully reforms American liberal democracy, viewing socialism with Chinese characteristics not as an ideological rival, but as a companion. In this scenario, both nations prioritize their shared aspirations and common interests, such as combating climate change and fostering a sustainable future for humanity. The spirit of collaboration and mutual respect allows them to transcend traditional paradigms of ideological competition, working together for the greater good of global society and bringing about an “international order that is more peaceful than the one we live in today.”¹²⁶

The fourth scenario, termed the “interregnum,” extends beyond simply mapping the cyclical process of ideologies or the world revolution. This interregnum encapsulates a period of ideological flux; that is, a “time of troubles,” in which a relatively long night falls between the twilight of dominant ideology and the dawn of emerging ideology,¹²⁷ or a pivotal “transition between the last world revolution and the next.”¹²⁸ In this interregnum, the waning power’s ideology is losing its appeal yet retaining influence, while the rising power’s ideology is in its nascent stages, striving to gain significant ground. This implies that during the interregnum, we can anticipate a period of heightened strategic competition between America, entering the fourth phase of its American liberal world revolution, and China, embarking on the second phase of its Chinese socialist world revolution. In other words, America is struggling “to salvage and preserve all it can of its ideology’s primacy,”¹²⁹ while China “seeks to push outward to its expanding sphere of influence a set of ordering norms unique to its own cultural, socioeconomic, and political orientations.”¹³⁰ The result is intensified competition and increased “chaos and disorder in world politics,” especially evident in the USA–China dynamics or even potential “civilizational clashes.”¹³¹

The Interregnum: The Time of Troubles

The current geopolitical landscape is undergoing a formidable shift as the USA and China emerge as long-term competitors engaged in an intricate rivalry. The degree of volatility inherent in this competition remains uncertain, standing at the threshold of multiple potential outcomes yet to be determined. Meanwhile, this article posits that among the four contending scenarios discussed, the most probable is the interregnum. This scenario

¹²⁵ Yan Xuetong, “Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2018), p. 1.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹²⁷ Toynbee, *A Study of History*, p. 249.

¹²⁸ Ronald Brunner, “The World Revolution of Our Time: A Review and Update,” *Policy Science*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2007), p. 192.

¹²⁹ Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations*, p. 70.

¹³⁰ Charles Kupchan, “The Normative Foundations of Hegemony and the Coming Challenge to Pax Americana,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2014), p. 226.

¹³¹ Baohui Zhang, “When Civilisational Clashes Meet Power Shifts: Rethinking Global Disorder,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (2022), p. 360.

provides a nuanced understanding of the global terrain, capturing the intricate competition between the USA and China.

First, the currently available evidence does not support the prospect of a triumphant renaissance of American liberal democracy. The challenges facing American liberal democracy are deeply ingrained and systemic, posing a complex web of issues that resist simple solutions. A paramount barrier is the almost sacred veneration for American liberal democracy among Americans that clouds critical assessment and impedes necessary reforms. The entrenchment of power among a privileged elite, who monopolizes access to critical resources and information, further creates a fortress around the American liberal democracy, making reforms a Herculean task.¹³² Additionally, the global trend of authoritarian regression, coupled with a seismic shift in global power dynamics, also complicates the path to revitalizing the vigor of American liberal democracy.

Second, the prospect of socialism with Chinese characteristics to overwhelm the established American liberal democracy is also deemed improbable. Despite the impressive record of socialism with Chinese characteristics in poverty reduction, it deviates significantly from its socialist ideals of economic equality, egalitarian society, robust social safety nets, labor rights, and workplace democracy, exhibiting stark economic disparities, limited social welfare, and suppress of freedoms, with more pronounced deviations than seen in the American liberal democracy. Moreover, Xi's authoritarian leadership risks destabilizing the regime if significant mistakes are made by the CPC.¹³³ Pan and Xu's research indicates that there is a misalignment between urban middle and upper class—seeking liberal values like freedom of speech, assembly, and private property—and the government's stance on socialism with Chinese characteristics.¹³⁴ This misalignment is evident in protests amid discontent over the “zero-COVID” policy in 2022. Additionally, concerns of slowing economic momentum, particularly as China confronts the “middle-income trap,” pose vulnerabilities for socialism with Chinese characteristics. The once robust 8% growth rate is history, with widely reported issues like local government debts, real estate bubbles, youth unemployment, and *neijuan* (a process that traps the Chinese in a relentless cycle of intense competition and overwork), causing public unease and questioning the endurance of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Meanwhile, the fate of socialism with Chinese characteristics pivots on its ability to resonate globally. Despite China's ascendancy in the ideological sphere, skepticism about the sway of socialism with Chinese characteristics is growing globally: particularly, it is rising not only in Western countries but also in non-Western nations.¹³⁵ China's “wolf warrior” diplomacy and “sharp power” tactics sully its global image. Issues like human rights abuses in Xinjiang, repression in Hong Kong, and the Chinese government's intolerance for criticism hinder the global diffusion of socialism with Chinese characteristics.¹³⁶ Indeed, navigating the “Nye paradox,” balancing soft power with assertion of core interests, poses a significant challenge for China.¹³⁷ Ultimately, the internal and external complexities render socialism with Chinese characteristics surpassing American liberal democracy unlikely in the near future.

Third, the prospect of a “peaceful coexistence” period between the USA and China, while not entirely impossible, appears increasingly unlikely. The current rivalry between the two nations encompasses economic, trade, technology, space exploration, and security domains on the surface. However, fundamentally, the competition is ideological. They are vying for

¹³² Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay*, pp. 464–505.

¹³³ Tsang and Cheung, “Has Xi Jinping Made China's Political System More Resilient and Enduring?” p. 225.

¹³⁴ Pan Jennifer and Xu Yiqing, “China's Ideological Spectrum,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (2018), pp. 254–73.

¹³⁵ Joshua Kurlantzick, *China's Collapsing Global Image: How Beijing's Unpopularity Is Undermining Its Strategic, Economic, and Diplomatic Goals* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2022), p. 1.

¹³⁶ Westad, “Legacies of the Past,” p. 32.

¹³⁷ Chung, “Homework for Beijing,” pp. 117–8.

the role of shaping the global society's governing ideology, essentially determining who will lead the world. Therefore, despite shared challenges such as global financial stability, climate change, humanitarian disasters, global health, and nonproliferation, it is less likely that a common interest will emerge to create a binding force in their relationship. Additionally, the inevitability of competition stems not only from the notable divergence in ideologies but also from the fizzle of diffusion of American liberal democracy and the onset of diffusion of socialism with Chinese characteristics. These different trajectories exacerbate their competitive tendencies. Therefore, both the USA and China show little inclination to peacefully coexist and are reluctant to relinquish dominance to the other in this century.

As a result, the most probable scenario of the four contenders appears to be the interregnum, described as the "time of troubles," which occurs between the twilight of dominant ideology and the dawn of new one, ushering in a period of competition and uncertainty. America, in the throes of its fourth phase of the American liberal world revolution, grapples to maintain the relevance and appeal of American liberal democracy, while China, in the onset of the second phase of the Chinese socialist world revolution, expands its socialism with Chinese characteristics based on unique sociopolitical-economic philosophical ideas. This interregnum is marked by heightened strategic competition, as both powers fiercely defend their ideologies and push their respective values onto the global stage.

While the USA's ideational capabilities have diminished, America, driven by the persistent imperial temptation, adopts a more ideational-oriented approach uniting American "democratic values" with its "diplomatic leadership,"¹³⁸ thereby defining China as an ideological rival. As America perceives a growing threat from the socialism with Chinese characteristics, which demonstrates increasing capabilities to displace American liberal democracy, it responds by implementing more aggressive policies toward China to defend both American liberal democracy and American hegemonic order. China, on the other hand, remains committed to its socialism with Chinese characteristics and rejects American liberal democracy, calling for its people to brace for a "new Long March" and to "firm up their will to fight,"¹³⁹ by provoking Chinese nationalism. Therefore, competition between America and China is not likely to end. Moreover, the ideological competition between them, rooted in the structural dynamics of the Lasswellian world revolution, signifies a period of great peril and uncertainty.

In conclusion, as Huntington astutely points out, the "most significant political distinction among countries concerns not their form of government but their degree of government" or governance.¹⁴⁰ What truly matters is not the ethnocentric perspective that deems one ideology superior to another, but rather the ability of either the waning yet dominant American liberal democracy or the nascent yet fragile socialism with Chinese characteristics to provide indispensable attributes like community, effectiveness, and stability, alongside solutions or visions that align with evolving societal and global contexts. This underscores that amidst the interregnum, the ideology that can effectively address contemporary challenges like polarization, division, inequality, conflicts, and climate change while also establishing a framework for a new normative international order that promotes tolerance for ideological and political diversity will emerge as the genuine champion of the "world revolution of our time."

¹³⁸ Joe Biden, "Remarks by President Biden on America's Place in the World," *The White House*, 4 February 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/04/remarks-by-president-biden-on-americas-place-in-the-world/>.

¹³⁹ "Commentary: China Fights US Trade Bullying with 'Long March' Spirit," *Xinhua*, 24 May 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/24/c_138086295.htm.

¹⁴⁰ Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, p. 1.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Donald Puchala, Jerel Rosati, Stephen Nagy, Zhiqun Zhu, J. J. Suh, Sawa Omori, John Hsieh, Liping Shi, Masahiro Yamada, Josuke Amada, Jidon Chen, Zongfeng Zhao, Bohan Shi, and three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and unwavering support. Furthermore, I received invaluable support from the Department of Politics and International Studies at International Christian University, the Institute of Social Science at Chuo University, the Faculty of Global and Interdisciplinary Studies at Hosei University, and the Center for Northeast Asian Studies at Meiji University.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.