

CHINA'S GROWING INFLUENCE IN THE WORLD

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Introduction

As China's growing global role and increasingly hardline policies at home and abroad gain attention, the United States and other Western governments are also taking notice of China's expanding influence in developing countries. The implications of China's growing investments linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), its ambitious global infrastructure and connectivity program, are increasingly debated. So, too, are the nature of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) efforts to popularize its authoritarian model and undermine developing democracies around the world, whether intentionally or indirectly. In November, Vice President Pence noted that the administration, through its Indo-Pacific strategy, intends to bolster the rule of law and human rights in regional countries facing growing influence from China.

Such attention is welcome, and it has spurred numerous analyses on the drivers of China's growing influence efforts, with most focused on external factors in Beijing's calculus. China seeks influence due to many geostrategic considerations, such as the protection of sea lanes critical for the transport of energy and the establishment of military facilities to protect China's growing global interests. However, much of the foundation for China's growing influence in developing countries is found inside China, where the CCP faces a mounting set of challenges to its rule that dominate its attention. As Washington considers how best to address China's push for influence across the developing world, it is critical to have a clear understanding of the domestic imperatives at play. Studies addressing internal drivers of China's growing influence abroad have centered on the implications of President Xi Jinping's consolidation of power since late 2012. Indeed, as others note in this series, it is tempting to ascribe the aggressive turn in Chinese foreign policy entirely to Xi, who has brought China closer to one-man rule than it has been in decades. Xi has centralized power

across all policy domains, including foreign affairs. Xi has used this power at the apex of foreign policymaking to accelerate China's push for influence in the developing world.

Xi's centralization of power, however, has been more an accelerant than the main driver of China's more assertive influence efforts. It is, rather, the Party's obsession with preserving its rule—a theme which both predated and facilitated Xi's elevation to power in 2012—that more fundamentally drives China's growing influence in developing countries. Mounting threats to CCP control have occupied Chinese leaders since early this century as they have come to terms with the unraveling of the core factors that characterized China's reform era—relative political stability, ideological openness, and rapid economic growth. As Carl Minzner puts it, the leadership is consumed by the need to strengthen “the levees they rely on to keep the waters of a turbulent society in check.”

Protecting the Party

While the Party's primary focus remains on domestic issues such as corruption deemed central to its legitimacy, Chinese leaders have sharpened their focus on those aspects of developing country relationships deemed likely to bolster the Party's fortunes amid this turbulence. Two significant areas in which the CCP has stepped up influence efforts to benefit Party control are the economic and information domains.

First, Beijing wants to mitigate mounting economic challenges and slowing growth in China through overseas investment and the creation of markets abroad for Chinese goods and materials. The Party's legitimacy depends on the health of China's economy. Access to resources needed to feed China's growing economy has long driven its engagement with the developing world, but China's economy is now struggling. Chinese leaders are therefore looking to further boost overseas investment and trade, which have been growing for years but have been partially rebranded under the BRI. As part of its broader economic development strategy, Beijing is using BRI to export massive quantities of steel and aluminum, find new markets for Chinese products, and help keep indebted state-owned enterprises (SOEs) afloat. BRI projects, many of which are implemented through provincial governments eager to capitalize, facilitate the expansion of Chinese companies' international footprint. These efforts are viewed as critical to propping up growth and employment as China endures an uncertain transition from a manufacturing focus to services and consumption, including potential reforms likely to result in layoffs.

As the Party has driven Chinese society toward more state-sponsored ideological conformity to create a lasting basis for authoritarian Party rule, it also desires greater ideological control abroad. Despite increased efforts to limit “infiltration” of outside values and ideas, Chinese have growing access to Western news, content, and culture. The CCP judges that, as China continues to “open up” to reap the benefits of playing a more central role in the global economy, it will need to “sanitize” the external information environment to ensure that such opening does not invite ideological challenges to Party control. Among developing countries, China is most concerned about its “periphery,” where it fears ideological contagion from democratization and “color revolution” might cross into China. Deng Xiaoping, commenting on allowing dangerous foreign influences to circulate in China as it opened to the world, once remarked, “If you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in.” The CCP is now looking to kill as many flies as possible inside developing countries as it deepens engagement with them.

Lastly, the CCP shapes information in developing countries as part of an effort to legitimize the Party and China’s authoritarian system on the global stage. China’s promised rise and rejuvenation as a great power, a key pillar of the Party’s legitimacy, requires expanding its normative power abroad. Chinese leaders recognize that to achieve legitimacy as a responsible great power without democratizing—a prospect not welcomed by the developed West—they must first popularize China’s model in the developing world. These efforts also support China’s economic goals. Gaining widespread support for its model has become more important as China depends more on a favorable climate for Chinese investments. The CCP conducts large-scale trainings of foreign officials about its development methods and provides increasingly sophisticated technology to authoritarian governments. China frequently reprints in domestic official media the “positive China stories” told in foreign media, using reflections of China’s rejuvenation and responsible global role to stoke patriotic sentiment to CCP benefit. Chinese leaders recognize that to achieve legitimacy as a responsible great power without democratizing—a prospect not welcomed by the developed West—they must first popularize China’s model in the developing world.

The CCP has a large and growing set of tools it uses to advance its narrative in developing countries and to quiet critics, including pervasive but overt official propaganda and media outlets, covert efforts to cultivate thought leaders, and more aggressive use of the Party’s United Front Work Department (UFW) to squelch anti-China narratives by “enemy forces”

abroad perceived to threaten Party control at home. As at home, enhanced Party control over all aspects of its foreign engagement has accelerated under Xi, propelling influence efforts in developing countries. Greater CCP coordination of propaganda and information manipulation efforts abroad, combined with the granting of increased power and bureaucratic sway to the UFWD, have streamlined overlapping functions, enhancing their effectiveness. Party committees have been strengthened within both SOEs and private Chinese firms operating abroad, and Party discipline inspectors are now embedded in every government organ.

Bigger than XI

China's push for greater influence in the developing world, therefore, is a product not only of geopolitical opportunism or aggressive policies under a more powerful Xi, but also of a more fundamental external manifestation of China's more hardline authoritarianism at home, deemed necessary for the Party's continued survival. Much like its approach to industrial policies deemed essential to China's economic future, China's tactics in the developing world are inherent to the Party's methods to achieve China's "rejuvenation" and ensure regime control. In other words, the problem is more dire than if it was solely a result of one man's pursuit of unbridled power. The CCP is unlikely to be deterred from pursuing economic advantages and manipulation of information through strong criticism or appeals to universal values.

China's tactics in the developing world are inherent to the Party's methods to achieve China's "rejuvenation" and ensure regime control. Furthermore, there is a good chance that Chinese leaders will become even more focused on preserving Party rule in the face of mounting challenges at home, even as China grows more powerful abroad. China's approach to developing countries in this scenario will increasingly reflect the short-term demands of Party control rather than considerations of China's long-term interests in a country. This would result in China seeking quick returns on investments abroad and more heavy-handed propaganda and "sharp power" efforts to shape the narrative to protect China's interests. Chinese leaders facing growing domestic problems would be more vigilant against the "infiltration" of foreign ideology and more reliant on populist nationalism to survive, enhancing the value of information manipulation abroad.

If U.S.-China ties continue to decline, Beijing will likely compensate for damage to China's economy and look to convince the public in China that it is taking a strong role globally in the face of U.S. pressure. Chinese fears of a protracted economic struggle will propel greater

focus on gaining lopsided benefits from investment in developing countries. China will increasingly cast itself as the upholder of globalization and global growth, in contrast to the Trump administration, but may also take a directly anti-U.S. approach to its information-shaping efforts as the bilateral relationship declines. The CCP is likely to redouble advocacy for China's authoritarian development path. Longer term, Chinese leaders may respond to a bifurcating global economy and technological landscape by more proactively institutionalizing developing countries' economic relationships with China, ensuring that if they must choose, they pick Beijing.

Focus on the Targets

China's building of influence throughout the developing world has significant implications for U.S. interests, undermining the foundation of democracies and their relationships with the West. The challenge is only likely to grow given the probable array of tools potential authoritarians will have at their fingertips, often courtesy of China. Although China is not yet able to reshape the global economic order in its own image, the country's growing economic leverage and role in setting the rules and norms are set to grow, especially if Western countries continue to withdraw.

The Party's approach will not change unless it sees fewer benefits from its aggressive approach in developing countries. Chinese officials and companies take a harder line in countries where governance, transparency, and the rule of law are lacking. The United States and its partners therefore must invest resources in changing the context in the countries China targets for influence, building the resilience of their institutions and giving countries alternatives to Chinese investment. The United States should invest to bolster the capacity of civil society and independent media in developing countries, enabling them to closely monitor and evaluate Chinese project implementation practices and promoting the rule of law and transparency. Congress should heed the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission's recent suggestion to provide additional assistance for countries that are vulnerable to Chinese influence, which could help promote digital connectivity, infrastructure, and energy access. The West should also raise awareness of China's influence efforts in think tanks, universities, NGOs, and media in many developing countries where impartial expertise on China and the nature of the CCP is lacking. Wherever possible, the United States should work with partners such as the EU, Japan, India, and Australia to offer infrastructure alternatives to developing countries.

The CCP's approach to influence in the developing world is driven by deep-seated and intensifying concern about regime survival. From the outset of Xi's tenure, he declared an intent to forcefully restore Party control, prevent a Soviet-style collapse, and prepare for the next phase of "reform and opening up" and China's rise to great power status. These enduring imperatives will ensure an aggressive Chinese approach to securing leverage over developing countries even after Xi has stepped down. To prevent the resulting spread of authoritarianism and defend its interests, the United States will need to recommit to the hard work of defending democracy around the world.

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