

THE ROLE OF DEMOCRACY DISCOURSE IN THE EMERGING “NEW COLD WAR”

In the first three decades after China initiated reform and opening-up policies in 1978, its relations with the United States (U.S.) improved steadily. However, in the post-2007/2008 global financial crisis period, both countries' attitudes toward each other began to change. Particularly since the Trump administration, as the U.S. started to define China as its main competitor; their bilateral relations deteriorated further. As a result, scholars, diplomats, and politicians worldwide began to talk about the emergence of a new Cold War between China and the U.S., encompassing economic, ideological, military, and political aspects. The ideological aspect of this emerging “new Cold War” revolves around the discourse of democracy.

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With the end of the Cold War, the international system transformed into unipolarity and the United States (U.S.) emerged as the unrivaled superpower. Several authors, Francis Fukuyama being in the first place, viewed the victory of capitalism against socialism as the “end of history”¹ and claimed that liberal democracy emerged as the unrivaled political system. Since the mid-1990s, however, another group of authors argued that this assertion was not true and that China, a rising power, would challenge the U.S.-centered system.² Although this view was supported by the U.S. foreign policy and security elite, the U.S. capital’s strong relations with China led U.S. administrations throughout the 1990s and 2000s to view China as a partner rather than a rival. As a result, the Clinton and Bush administrations looked for opportunities to engage China in the U.S.-led international system.³ However, things started to change after the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. While the crisis wounded the belief in western capitalism’s capacity to create wealth, the Chinese model seemed to be working successfully in the post-crisis period. As a result, China’s confidence in its system increased, and it started to follow assertive economic and foreign policies.⁴ The U.S. responded to this change in China’s behavior by first increasing its presence in the Asia Pacific and strengthening its ties with its allies and partners under the Obama administration,⁵ then by launching an aggressive economic and foreign policy, including the start of a trade war during the Trump administration⁶ and finally by combining previous two administrations’ efforts and initiating a policy of countering China’s rise in economic, ideological, military and political fields under the Biden administration. As a result of these moves, scholars, diplomats, and politicians worldwide began to talk about the emergence of a new Cold War between the U.S. and China.

Biden Administration’s China Policy and the Idea of a New Cold War

Under Joe Biden’s leadership, to counter China and Russia, the U.S. began attempts to form an “alliance of democracies”. Before being elected President of the United States, Biden stated in a Foreign Affairs article in January 2020 that the United States should demonstrate to the world that it is ready to govern the international order as a fearless defender of democratic values, freedom of the press, the right to vote,

¹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National History*, No. 16 (Summer 1989): p. 3-18.

² Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (Summer 1993): p. 22-49; Richard Bernstein and Rosa H. Monroe, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Knopf, 1997).

³ Ho-fung Hung, *Clash of Empires* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022): p. 11-24.

⁴ Nien-chung Chang Liao, “Winds of Change: Assessing China’s Assertive Turn in Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. 53 No. 6 (2018): p. 880-895.

⁵ Kenneth G. Lieberthal, “The American Pivot to Asia,” *Brookings*, 21 December 2011. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-pivot-to-asia/>

⁶ Sanja Arežina, “U.S.-China Relations Under the Trump Administration,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2019): p. 289-315.

and liberal democratic values.⁷ In his election speech on 7 November 2020, Biden said, “America is a beacon for the globe”.⁸ He also stated that if the international leadership, which was abandoned during the Donald Trump era, is not assumed by the U.S. again, it will either be taken over by a rival power like China or chaos will prevail in the world.⁹

“Behind Biden’s words lies the idea that a new Cold War has begun between the U.S. and China.”

Under Biden’s presidency, the U.S. intends to regain and maintain its leadership in the international system, especially against China. Before he was inaugurated as the U.S. President, Biden told, “The best Chinese strategy... is one which gets every one of our - or at least what used to be our - allies on the same page”.¹⁰ He believes the U.S. should establish a united front against China with its partners and allies and stand up to China’s “harmful” acts. Because if the U.S. is joined by its allies and partners, the arrangements to be made on many matters ranging from the environment to trade and from technology to transparency will preserve liberal democratic interests and values - in other words, the interests of the U.S. - rather than China’s interests.¹¹

Behind Biden’s words lies the idea that a new Cold War has begun between the U.S. and China. Even though both Biden¹² himself and Secretary of State Antony Blinken¹³ stated that the U.S. does not seek a new Cold War, the “new Cold War” has become a frequently used concept in the U.S.-based mainstream International

⁷ Joe Biden, “Why America Must Lead Again”, *Foreign Affairs*, 23 January 2020. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>

⁸ Alex War, “Joe Biden in Victory Speech: Let This Grim Era of Demonization in America Begin to End,” *Vox*, 7 November 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/11/7/21554701/joe-biden-acceptance-speech-2020-election>

⁹ Biden, 2020.

¹⁰ Thomas Friedman, “Biden Made Sure ‘Trump Is Not Going to Be President for Four More Years,’” *The New York Times*, 2 December 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/02/opinion/biden-interview-mcconnell-china-iran.html>

¹¹ Biden, 2020.

¹² “President Biden: ‘We are not seeking a new Cold War or a world divided’”, *BBC*, 21 September 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-58644091>

¹³ Antony J. Blinken, “The Administration’s Approach to the People’s Republic of China”, U.S. Department of State, 26 May 2022. <https://www.state.gov/the-administrations-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>

Relations literature.¹⁴ According to Robert Kaplan, who claims that a new Cold War has already started between the U.S. and China, there are definite and fundamental differences between these two powers, and these differences cannot be eliminated completely. For him, like the old one, the new Cold War has military, economic and ideological pillars, and in all three areas, as its number one opponent, China challenges the U.S.'s right to leadership.¹⁵

Kaplan claims that in the military realm, China wants to fend the U.S. Navy off from the Western Pacific. To Chinese rulers, the Western Pacific is as important to their country as the Caribbean is to the U.S.. On the other hand, U.S. administrations have always viewed the U.S. as a Pacific power. This is as true today as it was during Japan's - forced - opening in 1853.¹⁶ Elliott Abrams states that, in order to meet China's military challenge, the U.S. needs to increase its military spending and produce more conventional military hardware as well as nuclear weapons.¹⁷ According to Kaplan, China challenges the supremacy of the U.S. in the economic field as well and there is bipartisan support to meet this challenge. By agreeing that China "steals intellectual property, acquires sensitive technology through company buyouts, fuses governmental and private sectors so that their enterprises have an unfair edge... and so on," Democrats and Republicans, for instance, find themselves on the same side in the ongoing trade war.¹⁸ Based on a similar position, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission's 2022 Annual Report to Congress suggests the U.S. government abandon the previously attempted but failed approach of trying to engage China in the international economic system and instead develop a new strategy to build resilience against the distorting effects of state capitalist practices of China.¹⁹

Another area where this rivalry takes place is ideology. Contrary to the post-World War II era, during which the world was divided into capitalist and socialist blocs, today it is hard to talk about a sharp ideological divide taking place between two

¹⁴ I.e. Odd Arne Westad, "Has a New Cold War Really Begun?," *Foreign Affairs*, 27 March 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-27/has-new-cold-war-really-begun>; Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (November/December 2021). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-10-19/new-cold-war>; Michael T. Klare, "Welcome to the New Cold War," *The Nation*, 14 January 2022. <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/china-cold-war/>; Ian Bremmer, "The New Cold War Could Soon Heat Up," *Foreign Affairs*, 5 May 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-05-05/new-cold-war-could-soon-heat>

¹⁵ Robert D. Kaplan, "A New Cold War Has Begun," *Foreign Policy*, 7 January 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun/>

¹⁶ Kaplan, 7 January 2019.

¹⁷ Elliott Abrams, "The New Cold War," *National Review*, 3 March 2022. <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2022/03/21/the-new-cold-war/#slide-1>

¹⁸ Kaplan, 7 January 2019.

¹⁹ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "2022 Report to Congress," November 2022. <https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2022-annual-report-congress>

distinct groups of countries. Even though China is still governed by a communist party, since the 1980s, the same party initiated reforms to transform the country’s socialist economic structure into a capitalist structure.²⁰ In other words, today’s China is no longer a socialist country but represents a variety in the spectrum of capitalism. For this reason, the supporters of the new Cold War, both scholars and politicians, are trying to establish the discourse of an ideological struggle taking place between China and the U.S. based on a dichotomy between democracy and authoritarianism instead of an antagonism between capitalism and socialism. This way, the U.S. is described as the leader of the democratic world against “Chinese authoritarianism” as it did lead the “free world” against “Soviet dictatorship” during the Cold War. Kaplan claims that the ideological divide between China and the U.S. is immense as the divide between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.²¹ In short, the ideological aspect of the emerging “new Cold War” between the U.S. and China revolves around the discourse of democracy.

“According to Chinese leaders, the U.S. democracy is both unique to that country and far from perfect. It is therefore unacceptable for the U.S. to impose its model on other countries through wars or other means.”

The U.S.’s Summit for Democracy

The U.S. leadership also supports the idea that there is an essential philosophical gap between the two countries and aims to benefit from this difference. In this context, as promised by Biden in his Foreign Affairs article,²² the U.S. held the first Summit for Democracy, which is planned to be held twice,²³ on 10 December 2021. The agenda of the summit, which was held online due to the Covid-19 outbreak, was announced as “democratic renewal and to tackle the greatest threats faced by democracies today through collective action”.²⁴ With this agenda, the summit gathered around three

²⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): p. 120-151; Martin Hart-Landsberg, Paul Burkett, *China and Socialism: Market Reforms and Class Struggle* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2005).

²¹ Kaplan, 7 January 2019.

²² Biden, 2020.

²³ The Biden administration is planning to hold the second summit, Summit for Democracy 2023, on 29-30 March 2023. This time the U.S. will co-host the summit with the governments of Costa Rica, the Netherlands, Republic of Korea, and Republic of Zambia. “Summit for Democracy 2023,” U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy-2023/>

²⁴ “Summit for Democracy,” U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy/>

themes: (i) strengthening democracy and defending against authoritarianism, (ii) addressing fighting corruption and (iii) promoting respect for human rights. During the summit, more than 275 participants - members of governments, civil society and the private sector - made more than 750 commitments to meet the three key themes of the summit.²⁵

While government officials, civil society representatives, business people and journalists from 110 countries, where multi-party elections are held, were invited to the summit that aims to defend and strengthen democracies, China and Russia, which the Biden administration defines as “Autocrats... working overtime to undermine democracy and export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad”,²⁶ were not invited.²⁷ For this reason, many evaluated the summit’s aim as bringing the “democracies” of the world together against the authoritarian governing models of China and Russia, which the U.S. also defines as its competitors.

China and Russia expressed their dissatisfaction with the summit in an article titled “Respecting People’s Democratic Rights”, which was authored jointly by then-the ambassador of China to the U.S. Qin Gang and the ambassador of Russia to the U.S. Anatoly Antonov. According to the ambassadors, by holding such a summit, the U.S. grants itself the power to define the concept of democracy and decide which countries are considered democratic and which are not. Ambassadors claimed that such a move, which reflects the Cold War logic of the U.S., has the potential to create a split in the world and result in an ideological confrontation. For these reasons, China and Russia firmly opposed this move and positioned themselves on the side of the multilateral international order in the face of the U.S.’s exclusionary politics²⁸

While the U.S. was aiming for a democratic alliance against China and Russia, it faced severe criticism because of the invited countries to the summit.²⁹ For example, the leaders of countries with questionable democratic qualities such as the Philippines, Nigeria and Pakistan³⁰ were invited. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and then

²⁵ “Summit for Democracy 2021,” U.S. Department of State. <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy-2021/>
“Summit for Democracy Summary of Proceedings,” The White House, 23 December 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/23/summit-for-democracy-summary-of-proceedings/>

²⁶ The White House, “National Security Strategy,” 12 October 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>, p. 3.

²⁷ “The Summit for Democracy,” U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/summit-for-democracy/>

²⁸ Anatoly Antonov and Qin Gang, “Russian and Chinese Ambassadors: Respecting People’s Democratic Rights,” *The National Interest*, 26 November 2021. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russian-and-chinese-ambassadors-respecting-people%E2%80%99s-democratic-rights-197165>

²⁹ Debasish Roy Chowdhury, “Joe Biden’s Democracy Summit Is the Height of Hypocrisy,” *Time*, 10 December 2021. <https://time.com/6127359/biden-summit-for-democracy/>

³⁰ Pakistan refused to attend the summit, stating that in the past the world had suffered too much from the Cold War. Aamir Latif, “Pakistan Declines US Democracy Summit Invitation,” *AA*, 8 December 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-declines-us-democracy-summit-invitation/2442311>

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who are criticized for undermining democracy in their respective countries,³¹ can also be added to this list. Moreover, while 30 percent of the 110 invited countries are considered semi-free by the U.S.-based Freedom House, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Iraq are not even regarded as free.³² In a nutshell, many people thought the Summit for Democracy 2021 was a significant contradiction since it included non-democratic participants.

China’s Response: The Chinese Democracy

The Biden administration’s view of China as the U.S.’s biggest competitor is a result of the country’s development success over the past 40 years. Since reforming its socialist economic structure in December 1978, China has transformed itself into a state-capitalist economy. In due course, the country lifted nearly 800 million of its population out of poverty.³³ However, unlike the expectations of many Western scholars and staff of the previous U.S. administrations, this economic transformation did not lead to a political transition to democracy. In short, the Chinese case represents a challenge to modernization theory. It turns out to be a disappointment to the ones who were expecting a democratic transition in the country.³⁴

Although China is not governed by democracy in the western sense, the concept of democracy is being taken seriously and debated by Chinese rulers and intellectuals. Indeed, China has a long history of discussing democracy. Primarily since the 1990s, these discussions have been held by Chinese intellectuals with different political perspectives such as liberalism, critical socialism and Confucianism.³⁵

Like Chinese intellectuals, the Communist Party of China (CPC) is also aware of the importance of the concept of democracy. All congress reports since the 17th Party Congress³⁶ in 2007 involve a section on “socialist democracy” and what the country should do to develop institutions to advance it. According to the CPC, democracy,

³¹ Ashutosh Varshney, “How India’s Ruling Party Erodes Democracy?”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (October 2022): p. 104-118; “Brazil: Bolsonaro Threatens Democratic Rule,” *Human Rights Watch*, 15 September 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/15/brazil-bolsonaro-threatens-democratic-rule>

³² “Global Freedom Status,” Freedom House, 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2022>

³³ The World Bank, “Lifting 800 Million People Out of Poverty – New Report Looks at Lessons from China’s Experience,” 1 April 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/04/01/lifting-800-million-people-out-of-poverty-new-report-looks-at-lessons-from-china-s-experience>

³⁴ Cao Fangjun, “Modernization Theory and China’s Road to Modernization,” *Chinese Studies in History*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (2009), 7-16; Dan Blumenthal, “Why Isn’t China Democratizing? Because It’s Not Really Capitalist,” American Enterprise Institute, 26 April 2011. <https://www.aei.org/articles/why-isnt-china-democratizing-because-its-not-really-capitalist/>; John J. Chin, “The Longest March: Why China’s Democratization is *Not* Imminent,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 23, No. 1, (2018): p. 63-82.

³⁵ Emre Demir, “1990’lardan Günümüze Çin’de Meşruiyet ve Demokrasi Tartışmaları”, *Mülkiye Dergisi*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2021): p. 848-877.

³⁶ “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects, Full text of Hu Jintao’s report at 17th Party Congress,” USC US-China Institute, 15 October 2007. <https://china.usc.edu/hu-jintao-17th-party-congress-report-2007>

which is “a manifestation of the political advancement”³⁷ and “a common value of humanity”³⁸ cannot be understood only as it is defined by the West, especially by the U.S. In other words, democracy has more than one definition and is no one’s monopoly. Democracy, a concrete phenomenon that is constantly evolving, is shaped and differentiated according to the history, culture and traditions of countries. Therefore, while the U.S.-specific democracy model governs the U.S., China is governed by a democracy model specific to China.

Moreover, the CPC claims, unlike the U.S. model, the Chinese democracy model works well for the Chinese people. According to Chinese leaders, the U.S. democracy is both unique to that country and far from perfect. It is therefore unacceptable for the U.S. to impose its model on other countries through wars or other means. If no country imposes its governing model on other countries, the world will become a place where diversity is respected, and different societies live in harmony.³⁹

To explain its democracy model, on 4 December 2021, shortly before the U.S.’s Summit for Democracy, the Chinese state published a white paper entitled “China: Democracy That Works”. According to this report, although there are no direct elections in China, the demands of the people are reflected in the decision-making processes through a process of constant consultation of rulers with the Chinese people.⁴⁰ Wang Shaoguang, one of China’s leading intellectuals, explains this process with the Mao era concept of mass line. According to Wang, the criterion for Chinese-style democracy is the system’s capacity to meet the objective needs of the people and to incorporate people’s opinions into decision-making processes. Only in this way can a system of government be called a substantive democracy. This is why, he claims, representational democracy is superior to western representative democracy based on competitive elections.⁴¹ The report also puts forward that China is governed by “whole-process people’s democracy [which] integrates process-oriented democracy with results-oriented democracy, procedural democracy with substantive democracy, direct democracy with indirect democracy, and people’s democracy with the will of the state. It is a model of socialist democracy that covers all aspects of the democratic process

³⁷ “The State of Democracy in the United States,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 5 December 2021. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202112/t20211205_10462535.html

³⁸ “Full Text: China: Democracy That Works,” *China Daily*, 4 December 2021. <https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202112/04/WS61ab0795a310cdd39bc7957e.html>

³⁹ “The State of Democracy in the United States,” 5 December 2021; “Full Text: China: Democracy That Works,” 4 December 2021.

⁴⁰ “Full Text: China: Democracy That Works,” 4 December 2021.

⁴¹ Wang Shaoguang, “Representative and Representational Democracy,” *Reading the China Dream*, <https://www.readingthechinadream.com/wang-shaoguang-representative-and-representational-democracy.html>

and all sectors of society.”⁴² In short, for the Chinese government, whole-process people’s democracy is “a true democracy that works”.⁴³

According to the Chinese state, the way to assess whether a country’s political system is democratic or not is to observe whether the change of leadership in that country takes place in an orderly and lawful manner. Democratic governance furthermore includes multidimensional processes such as the relationship of citizens with the state and society, the management of economic and cultural activities in accordance with the law, the ability of the people to easily convey their demands to the state, the effective participation of all social segments in the country’s politics, the rational execution of national decision-making processes, and the participation of highly skilled people in all fields to the country’s governance system. Moreover, for a country to be considered democratic, for the CPC, the actual owner of the country should be the people themselves, not the oligarchs who control an overwhelming part of the economy.⁴⁴ It is clear that many points in China’s definition of democracy directly target the “weaknesses” of or “problems” in the U.S. democracy. In other words, China positions its own democracy model in opposition to the U.S. model.

It should be noted that in its efforts to propagate its own version of democracy, China’s primary target audience is the Chinese people. Therefore, the primary purpose of the CPC’s “Chinese democracy” discourse is not to spread its model to other countries but to legitimize/strengthen the “whole-process people’s democracy” in the eyes of the Chinese people. On the other hand, the discourse of Chinese democracy also has the goal of countering the ideological challenge of the U.S.’s new Cold War rhetoric.

Concluding Remarks

With Biden in the White House, the idea of democracy has been elevated to a strategic level in the competition between the United States and China. The struggle to define the concept of democracy was also experienced during the Cold War years. The Nazi rule in Germany in the 1930s and the years of chaos that followed resulted in the establishment of a “democracy front” against the “fascist bloc”. The democratic bloc won the Second World War; however, its members defined the concept of democracy differently. While the U.S. and the UK defined democracy in the liberal bourgeois sense, the Soviet Union considered it in terms of people’s democracy. These two competing conceptualizations were adopted by the countries of capitalist and socialist blocs, respectively. Today’s struggle for defining democracy between the U.S. and China, although taking place in a very different context, again carries

⁴² “Full Text: China: Democracy That Works,” 4 December 2021.

⁴³ “Full Text: China: Democracy That Works,” 4 December 2021.

⁴⁴ “Full Text: China: Democracy That Works,” 4 December 2021.

the potential of creating a dangerous ideological divide among states. Let's hope the new Cold War rhetoric will not turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy and create a world divided along ideological lines.