

The Rise of an Illiberal China in a Liberal World Order – Takeaways from event at Hudson Institute Wednesday 19 June at 9:15 am – 11:00 am

The panelists discussed China's increasingly illiberal propensities and how they are challenging the liberal Western values of human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and market economic structures.

Key take-aways:

- Tarun Chhabra, Brookings: Liberalism's inherent features of transparency and citizen-elected democracies undermine its viability against authoritarian models
- Philippe Le Corre, Harvard: China speaks to European narratives of historic greatness such as Greece's ancient civilization and Portugal's historic empire that are ignored by the EU
- Patrick Cronin, Hudson Institute: North and Southeast Asia are less inclined to opposing China and its illiberalism because many regional countries are not fully committed to liberal values
- Evan Feigenbaum, Carnegie: China comes out of a region where history and nationalism shapes foreign policy thinking more than communist party structures

Summary:

Tarun Chhabra discussed the vulnerability of liberal democracy and the role of technology and authoritarian economic structures in undermining liberal democracy. He argued that China is not imposing Han cultural hegemony and pointed out that the rise of illiberalism is taking place in Western democracies such as the United States as well. China has helped make the world safe for authoritarian regimes. There is not a grand strategy behind it, but that does not change the significant consequences of China's expanding role in the world. Democracy is the exception in a world where authoritarianism is the default regime. Inherent features in liberalism reduces its ability to survive at a time when authoritarianism can use technological developments and economic state support to undermine the openness of liberal societies as well as the barriers to monopolies and state sponsored capitalism of market economies.

Philippe Le Corre discussed China's engagement in Europe, which has been characterized by a mix of offering opportunity and approaching the region strategically. Chinese policies have undermined European unity and revived old authoritarian alliances, for example between Eastern European countries and states in the former Soviet Union. The EU's response has been to name China a systemic rival based on the experience that China undermines European liberal political and economic values, but we have yet to see if the EU can push back at Chinese influence. China has built power bases in European countries by means of economic investments and strategic political thinking. It is playing a long strategic game that plays into normative elements of Europe's history that have been neglected by the EU. For example, China plugs into Greece's civilizational history and Portugal's imperial past.

Patrick Cronin discussed Southeast and East Asia's response to China's illiberalism, pointing out that Hong Kong's future ability to preserve its democracy and human rights is a litmus test of the resilience and long-term strength of China's authoritarianism. In Hong Kong, the streets have won a tactical victory, but Taiwan demonstrates how the Chinese Communist Party succeeds in subverting liberal democracy, utilizing its openness and transparency. Northeast and Southeast Asian countries do not care about China's illiberalism. However, they are interested in a rules-based order because this will benefit the weaker powers at a time of growing Chinese influence. They are worried about China's

power, but they do not wish to confront China themselves and are instead expecting the United States to do that job. The Southeast Asian countries are too small to stand up to China, but a big democracy like Japan is also reluctant to talk about China's illiberalism. The problem is the United States has trouble finding assistance in confronting China. At the same time, China provides much needed public goods and investments in East and Southeast Asia. We sometimes overlook opportunities for partnering up with countries because we conflate populist tendencies with authoritarianism. Our attitude towards the Philippines is a good example. Indonesia is also a promising partner we overlook, although it is a democracy with a very independent China policy and considerable influence in Asia.

Evan Feigenbaum discussed China's emergence in the liberal order, pointing out that China is a revisionist but not a revolutionary power. China accepts the forms of liberal order such as the institutions, but not the norms of liberal order. China is born into an Asian region where historical memory and nationalism rather than ideology drives international relations and foreign policy. For example, Chinese ideas on territorial unity and sovereignty come from this experience and not from communism. As a result, these characteristics would remain part of Chinese policies even if the Chinese Communist Party no longer ruled China. Foreign policy traditionalism is more important than communism in China's international relations. Some of the Chinese policies that we criticize are features of numerous liberal societies. For example, state-owned enterprises are wide-spread in liberal democracies. The problem with the Chinese ones is that they are run by the Chinese Communist Party. When looking at Asia it becomes clear that liberal institutions are not as entrenched as we think, and it is quite difficult for liberal powers to get a foothold that consolidates liberal principles. However, China does not provide an alternative model. Instead, China provides economic and social incentives that result in arrangements that sidestep liberal norms.