

China: The Long and Winding Multipolar Road

The West's 'rules-based order' invokes rulers' authority; Russia-China say it's time to return to law-based order

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We do live in extraordinary times.

On the day of the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), President Xi Jinping, in Tiananmen square, amid all the pomp and circumstance, delivered a stark geopolitical message:

The Chinese people will never allow foreign forces to intimidate, oppress or subjugate them. Anyone who tries to do this will find themselves on a collision course with a large steel wall forged by more than 1.4 billion Chinese.

I have offered a [concise version](#) of the modern Chinese miracle - which has nothing to do with divine intervention, but "searching truth from facts" (copyright Deng Xiaoping), inspired by a solid cultural and historical tradition.

The "large steel wall" evoked by Xi now permeates a dynamic "moderately prosperous society" - a goal achieved by the CCP on the eve of the centennial. Lifting over 800 million people out of poverty is a historical first - in every aspect.

As in all things China, the past informs the future. This is all about *xiaokang* - which may be loosely translated as "moderately prosperous society".

The concept first appeared no less than 2,500 years ago, in the classic *Shijing* ("The Book of Poetry"). The Little Helmsman Deng, with his historical eagle eye, revived it in 1979, right at the start of the "opening up" economic reforms.

Now compare the breakthrough celebrated in Tiananmen - which will be interpreted all across the Global South as evidence of the success of a Chinese model for economic development - with footage being circulated of the Taliban riding captured T-55 tanks across impoverished villages in northern Afghanistan.

History Repeating: this is something I saw with my own eyes over twenty years ago.

The Taliban now control nearly the same amount of Afghan territory they did immediately before 9/11. They control the border with Tajikistan and are closing in on the border with Uzbekistan.

Exactly twenty years ago I was deep into yet another epic journey across Karachi, Peshawar, the Pakistan tribal areas, Tajikistan and finally the Panjshir valley, where I interviewed Commander Masoud - who told me the Taliban at the time were controlling 85% of Afghanistan.

Three weeks later Masoud was assassinated by an al-Qaeda-linked commando disguised as “journalists” - two days before 9/11. The empire - at the height of the unipolar moment - went into [Forever Wars](#) on overdrive, while China - and Russia - went deep into consolidating their emergence, geopolitically and geoeconomically.

We are now living the consequences of these opposed strategies.

That strategic partnership

President Putin has just spent three hours and fifty minutes answering non pre-screened questions, live, from Russian citizens during his annual [‘Direct Line’ session](#). The notion that Western “leaders” of the Biden, BoJo, Merkel and Macron kind would be able to handle something even remotely similar, non-scripted, is laughable.

The key takeaway: Putin stressed US elites understand that the world is changing but still want to preserve their dominant position. He illustrated it with the recent [British caper in Crimea](#) straight out of a Monty Python fail, a “complex provocation” that was in fact Anglo-American: a NATO aircraft had previously conducted a reconnaissance flight. Putin: “It was obvious that the destroyer entered [Crimean waters] pursuing military goals.”

Earlier this week Putin and Xi held a videoconference. One of the key items was quite significant: the [extension](#) of the China-Russia Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, originally signed 20 years ago.

A key provision: “When a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that...it is confronted with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats.”

This treaty is at the heart of what is now officially described - by Moscow and Beijing - as a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era”. Such a broad definition is warranted because this is a complex multi-level partnership, not an “alliance”, designed as a counterbalance and viable alternative to hegemony and unilateralism.

A graphic example is provided by the progressive interpolation of two trade/development strategies, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasia Economic Union (EAEU), which Putin and Xi again discussed, in connection with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was founded only three months before 9/11.

It’s no wonder that one of the highlights in Beijing this week were trade talks between the Chinese and [four Central Asia “stans”](#) - all of them SCO members.

“Law” and “rule”

The defining multipolarity road map has been sketched in an [essay](#) by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that deserves careful examination.

Lavrov surveys the results of the recent G7, NATO and US-EU summits prior to Putin-Biden in Geneva:

These meetings were carefully prepared in a way that leaves no doubt that the West wanted to send a clear message: it stands united like never before and will do what it believes to be right in international affairs, while forcing others, primarily Russia and China, to follow its lead. The documents adopted at the Cornwall and Brussels summits cemented the rules-based world order concept as a counterweight to the universal principles of international law with the UN Charter as its primary source. In doing so, the West deliberately shies away from spelling out the rules it purports to follow, just as it refrains from explaining why they are needed.

As he dismisses how Russia and China have been labeled as “authoritarian powers” (or “illiberal”, according to the favorite New York-Paris-London mantra), Lavrov smashes Western hypocrisy:

While proclaiming the ‘right’ to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries for the sake of promoting democracy as it understands it, the West instantly loses all interest when we raise the prospect of making international relations more democratic, including renouncing arrogant behavior and committing to abide by the universally recognized tenets of international law instead of ‘rules’.

That provides Lavrov with an opening for a linguistic analysis of “law” and “rule”:

In Russian, the words “law” and “rule” share a single root. To us, a rule that is genuine and just is inseparable from the law. This is not the case for Western languages. For instance, in English, the words “law” and “rule” do not share any resemblance. See the difference? “Rule” is not so much about the law, in the sense of generally accepted laws, as it is about the decisions taken by the one who rules or governs. It is also worth noting that “rule” shares a single root with “ruler,” with the latter’s meanings including the commonplace device for measuring and drawing straight lines. It can be inferred that through its concept of “rules” the West seeks to align everyone around its vision or apply the same yardstick to everybody, so that everyone falls into a single file.

In a nutshell: the road to multipolarity will not follow “ultimatums”. The G20, where the BRICS are represented, is a “natural platform” for “mutually accepted agreements”. Russia for its part is driving a Greater Eurasia Partnership. And a “polycentric world order” implies the necessary reform of the UN Security Council, “strengthening it with Asian, African and Latin American countries”.

Will the Unilateral Masters ply this road? Over their dead bodies: after all, Russia and China are “existential threats”. Hence our collective angst, spectators under the volcano.

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