

The Shape of Things to Come in China. A New Stage in Economic and Social Development

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It's Lianghui (“Two Sessions”) time – the annual ritual of the Beijing leadership. The stars of the show are the top political advisory body, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference; and the traditional delivery of a work report by the Prime Minister to the top legislature, the National People’s Congress (NPC).

The review of the draft outline of China’s 14th Five-Year Plan will proceed all the way to March 15. But in the current juncture, this is not only about 2025 (remember [Made in China 2025](#), which remains in effect). The planning goes long-range towards targets in the [Vision 2035](#) project (achieving “basic socialist modernization”) and even beyond to 2049, the 100th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China.

Premier Li Keqiang, delivering the government work report for 2021, stressed that the target for GDP growth is “above 6%” (the IMF had previously projected 8.1%). That includes the creation of at least 11 million new urban jobs.

On foreign policy, Li could not draw a sharper contrast with the Hegemon: “China will pursue an independent foreign policy of peace” and will “promote the building of a new type of international relations”.

That’s code for Beijing eventually working with Washington on specific dossiers, but most of all focusing on strengthening trade/investment/finance relations with the EU, ASEAN, Japan and the Global South.

The outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for the Chinese economy [had already been designed](#) last October, at the CCP plenum. The NPC will now approve it. The key focus is the “dual circulation” policy, whose best definition, translated from Mandarin, is “double development dynamics”.

That means a concerted drive to consolidate and expand the domestic market while continuing to push foreign trade/investment – as in the myriad Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. Conceptually, this amounts to a quite sophisticated, very Daoist, yin and yang balancing.

In early 2021, President Xi Jinping, while extolling Chinese “conviction and resilience, as well

as our determination and confidence”, was keen to stress the nation faces “unprecedented challenges and opportunities”. He told the Politburo “favorable social conditions” must be created by all means available all the way to 2025, 2035 and 2049.

Which brings us to this new stage of Chinese development.

The key target to watch is “common prosperity” (or, better yet, “shared prosperity”), to be implemented alongside technological innovations, respect for the environment, and fully addressing the “rural question”.

Xi has been adamant: there’s too much inequality in China – regional, urban-rural, income disparities.

It’s as if in a cool reading of the dialectical drive of historical materialism in China, we would arrive at the following model. Thesis: imperial dynasties. Antithesis: Mao Zedong. Synthesis: Deng Xiaoping, followed by a few derivations (especially Jiang Zemin) all the way to the real synthesis: Xi.

On the Chinese “threat”

Li stressed China’s success in containing Covid-19 domestically; the nation spent at least \$62 billion on it. This should be read as a subtle message, addressed especially to the Global South, about the efficacy of China’s governance system to design and execute not only complex development plans but also cope with serious emergencies.

What’s ultimately at stake in this competition between wobbly Western (neo)liberal democracies and “socialism with Chinese characteristics” (copyright Deng Xiaoping) is the capacity to manage and improve people’s lives. Chinese scholars are very proud of their national development plan ethos, defined as SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound).

A very good example is how China, in less than two decades, managed to extricate 800 million people out of poverty: an absolute first in History.

All of the above is rarely evoked as Atlanticist circles drown in virtually 24/7 China demonization hysteria. Wang Huiyao, the director of the Beijing-based Center for China and Globalization, at least had the merit to [bring into the discussion](#) Sinologist Kerry Brown of King’s College, London.

Drawing from comparisons between Leibniz – close to Jesuit scholars, interested in Confucianism – and Montesquieu – who only saw a despotic, autocratic, imperial system – Brown re-examines 250 years of entrenched Western positions on China and remarks how is “more difficult than ever” to engage in a reasonable debate.

He identifies three major problems.

1. Throughout modern history, there’s no Western appreciation of China as a strong and powerful nation, and its restored historical importance. Western mindsets are not ready to deal with it.
2. The modern West never really thought of China as a global power; at best as a land power. China was never seen as a naval power, or capable of exercising

power way beyond its borders.

3. Propelled by the iron certainty over its values – enter the very much debased concept of “true democracy” – the Atlanticist West has no idea what to make of Chinese values. Ultimately the West is not interested in understanding China. Confirmation bias reigns; the result is China as a “threat to the West”.

Brown points to the key predicament afflicting any scholar or analyst trying to explain China: how to convey China’s extremely complex worldview, how to capture the China story in a few words. Soundbites do not apply.

Examples: explaining how a whopping 1.3 billion people in China have some sort of health security, and how 1 billion enjoy some kind of social security. Or explaining the intricate details of China’s ethnic policies.

Premier Li, delivering his report, vowed to “forge a strong sense of community among the Chinese people and encourage all of China’s ethnic groups to work in concert for common prosperity and development”. He did not specifically mention Xinjiang or Tibet. It’s an uphill task to explain the trials and tribulations of integrating ethnic minorities into a national project amid non-stop hysteria on Xinjiang, Taiwan, South China Sea and Hong Kong.

Come and join the party

Whatever the Atlanticist West’s whims, what matters for the Chinese masses is how the new Five-Year Plan will deliver, practically, what Xi has previously described as “high-quality” economic reform.

Things look good for powerhouses Shanghai and Guangdong – they were already aiming at 6% growth. Hubei – where Covid-19 cases first appeared – is actually targeting 10%.

Based on frenetic social media activity, public opinion confidence in the Beijing leadership remains solid, considering a series of factors. China won the “health war” against Covid-19 in record time; economic growth is back; absolute poverty has been eradicated, according to the original timetable; the civilization-state is firmly established as a “moderately prosperous society” 100 years after the founding of the Communist Party.

Since the start of the millennium, China’s GDP grew no less than 11-fold. Over the past 10 years, GDP more than doubled, from \$6 trillion to \$15 trillion. No less than 99 million rural people, 832 counties and 128,000 rural villages were the last ones to be extricated from absolute poverty.

This complex hybrid economy is now even engaged in setting up an elaborate, “sweet” trap for Western firms. Sanctions? Don’t be fools; come here and enjoy doing business in a market of at least 700 million consumers.

As I’ve noted last year, the systemic process in play is like a sophisticated mix of internationalist Marxism with Confucianism (privileging harmony, abhorring conflict): the framework for “community with a shared future for mankind”. One country – actually a civilization-state, focused on its renewed historical mission as re-emerging superpower. Two sessions. And so many targets – and all of them achievable.

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