



# The geopolitics of democracy: The US against Russia and China

European View  
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[journals.sagepub.com/home/euv](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euv)**Vasilis Kollaros**

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**Abstract**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, American democracy set an example for the rest of the world, having proved its resilience to the authoritarian regime of the USSR during the Cold War. However, in recent years, China, which has adopted a different model of governance, a mixture of political authoritarianism and economic capitalism, has directly challenged the quality and credibility of American democracy. The more Beijing grows economically, the more it challenges Western institutions and the international order. It believes that there are alternative paths to prosperity.

Russia, a classically authoritarian regime, agrees with China, with which it has developed close political and economic relations. The inherent problems of American democracy, especially under the Trump administration, have been used by Beijing and Moscow to support their arguments. The Russo-Ukraine war, aside from other interpretations, can be characterised as a dispute between democratic and authoritarian regimes.

**Keywords**

US, China, Russia, Democracy, Authoritarian regime, Capitalism, Geopolitics

**Introduction**

Aside from the economic, commercial, technological and defence competition between the US (and the West in general) and China, one of the areas of ‘conflict’ concerns the differences between the two ‘worlds’, meaning the institutional and socio-political models of governance followed by each country.

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The democratically liberal–capitalist paradigm of the US is diametrically opposed in nature and content to the authoritarian–capitalist system of China. However, as China gains a larger share of the global balance of power and openly challenges US hegemony and the US model of governance, the debate about which of the two systems leads to more economic and social prosperity, thus ensuring that this system spreads and prevails globally, becomes more intense.

The aim of this article is to highlight the diversity of the governance models of the US, China and Russia and how this determines alliances at the international level. China and Russia, in the coming years, will come closer together, especially in trade and economic terms, thus strengthening the political ties between them. Challenging American hegemony is the ultimate, common goal of both.

The following sections first analyse the historical context of the development of American democracy from the collapse of the USSR to the victory of Joe Biden in the last American elections. The article then focuses on the Chinese model of governance, as well as the attempts to challenge Western democracy by China and Russia. Finally, the current Russo-Ukrainian war is analysed in light of the confrontation between democratic and authoritarian regimes.

## **American democracy in crisis**

Among other consequences, the collapse of the Soviet Union confirmed that the quality of US democracy was the pillar supporting its economic development and the foundation of its global dominance. In other words, the governance model of the US was an example for the rest of the world, having proven its resilience during the Cold War period. According to some researchers, the reason for the dominance of the US over the authoritarian and autocratic USSR lay in the democratic quality and superiority of the US political system (Taussig and Jones 2019). This is why, between the end of the Cold War and the installation of the Trump administration, the US, in a missionary role, undertook the idealistic task of expanding and consolidating democracy on a global level (Arvanitopoulos 2003, 110).

In the era after the Cold War, liberal globalisation conquered the world, advancing US interests (Roumeliotis 2002, 76), while international relations theorists tried to interpret the structural changes in the international system and the evolution of the world since the Cold War. This was evident in the work of Francis Fukuyama (1992) in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, and of Samuel Huntington (1996) in his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

The golden age of US hegemony and the global reach of US democracy was abruptly interrupted by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. These resulted in a policy shift from the Bush Jr. administration and led to decisions being made that would alter the content of US democratic politics. More state intervention and the curtailment of the civil rights of US citizens, in the name of security, led to a huge increase in state control, the militarisation of the security/police forces and less democracy.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the ideology of spreading democracy in the world continued to be a key component of US foreign policy, used to justify the US interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Similarly, it became a key parameter of the ‘Arab Spring’ (2010), which aimed to achieve the democratisation of the Middle East and North Africa (Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria). However, the Spring ended in an ‘Arab Winter’, as new, more authoritarian and extremist, Islamic regimes and fragile states emerged out of the chaos caused by outside interventions (Hila 2020, 156).

Under the Trump administration, the US abandoned its role as the democratic crusader in the world. Domestically, meanwhile, it trod a dangerous path in terms of democracy as the country’s political life became besieged by intolerant, nationalistic and xenophobic slogans (Arvanitopoulos 2022, 95). The violent attack on Congress on 6 January 2021 by supporters of former President Trump shook the foundations of US democracy.

The election of Joe Biden to the presidency has brought to an end the trauma of the Trump administration, but the wounds to the body and the international image of the democratic US remain. Furthermore, Biden’s election marked a shift in the choices and direction of US foreign policy in favour of multilateralism in terms of the way the US treats its allies.

## **China’s political–economic model of governance**

From very early on, Westerners sought to integrate China into international organisations (the WTO, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank), but Beijing did not participate in the way they thought it would. China promoted its own regional and international cooperation with Asian, African, Latin-American and European countries, while seeking to change the terms and rules of the international organisations and international law to better protect its interests.

Westerners are puzzled by the fact that China has been able to develop without following the path of liberal capitalism, but rather by giving the latter a highly authoritarian form, which fits perfectly with the nature of its political system. In other words, this politically authoritarian regime has implemented an authoritarian version of capitalism and managed to grow continuously, raising questions and fears in the West (Ang 2018).

Deng Xiaoping, who assumed the leadership of China in December 1978, gave a new form and direction to the country’s economic system, leaving aside centralised economic statism and moving to conditional capitalism. By opening up China to the world and giving individuals the opportunity to do business, his reform effort led to the rapid growth of the Chinese economy. The economic model applied involved making high levels of domestic savings, financing industrialisation and promoting exports, combined with a gradual, but state-controlled, liberalisation and privatisation of important sectors of the Chinese economy.

Deng, however, rejected Western-style democracy, as it conflicted with Communist ideology. The foundations were laid, therefore, for a peculiar state entity, which, while remaining authoritarian at the political level, adopted capitalism at the economic level, thus creating a hybrid regime.

In contrast to the US model of spreading democracy around the world, China favours establishing economic ties of interdependence that primarily serve its own interests. In this context, Beijing is constantly strengthening its geopolitical and geo-economic interconnectivity with countries in its region and beyond, especially in the context of the 'One Belt One Road' initiative. This strategy will link China by land and sea with Europe, Central Asia and South Asia, and will ensure its control of the transportation of goods and raw materials to and from China (Roumeliotis 2019, 49). This 'new Silk Road' will allow China to significantly increase its economic and political influence in the Asia–Oceania region.

### **China challenges Western (US) democracy**

Increasingly in recent years, China, enjoying the full support of Russia, has questioned the quality of Western institutions. China considers the Western liberal vision for the international order to be lacking in legitimacy, especially in its own geographical region, that is, South-East Asia.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017, the Chinese president stated that China's model offers a new option for countries and nations that want to accelerate their development, maintain their independence and ignore external pressure for democratisation (Xi 2017). This message was particularly attractive to those leaders who hope to achieve economic success without meeting the democratic demands of their own people. Chinese officials usually talk about the 'right' of nations to choose their political systems, whether democratic or authoritarian—and the arrogance of countries, such as the US, which believe that democracy is the preferred option (Hila 2020, 170)

When confronting the US, China argues in favour of the superiority and effectiveness of its own political system, contrasting this with the failures and deadlocks of US foreign policy. The cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, where democratic institutions were forcefully imposed without being the will of the people, are sufficient examples for Beijing.

Professor Stephen Walt argues that the lessons in morality and democratisation that Western powers have tried to give through their military interventions have not been accepted by the rest of the world. The perception of Americans, that hostility towards the US has nothing to do with its policy but is the result of a rejection of American values, is therefore not accurate. In addition, Professor Stephen Walt argues that non-Westerners, who have different values, are not necessarily less moral (Krastev 2020, 24; Walt 2018, 175).

China believes that the path to social prosperity does not necessarily have to be the same as the one taken by Westerners. According to researchers Torrey Taussig and Bruce Jones (2018), China's economic power demonstrates that nations do not need to democratise to reap the benefits of the global economy. However, the growth of the Chinese economy has not been accompanied by a corresponding growth in the perception of human rights, the welfare state and the rule of law. It is a development only for the few, those who maintain close relations with the Chinese Communist Party.

## **The ideological 'conflict' between the US and China in light of the Russo-Ukraine war**

China and Russia have many reasons to work with each other, the main one being to decrease US hegemonic power, which is a major and common concern for both. At an institutional level, the Chinese and Russian political and social systems also share a common basis: authoritarianism, albeit that this operates differently within each state. In China, authoritarianism is a safety net for the bureaucracy, which controls every political, social and economic aspect of life and is intertwined with the Communist Party. In Russia a small economic oligarchy derives its power from a personal political leadership with authoritarian characteristics.

Between the beginning of February 2022, which saw the signing of the Sino-Russian alliance, a strategic cooperation 'without limits', as it was meaningfully described by both sides, and the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, the German press (Papadimitriou 2022) was already speaking of an 'axis of authoritarianism'. The war has not only not weakened the relationship between the two states but rather has furthered their common goal to challenge and diminish American power on a global level, starting with Russia's forward presence in Eastern Europe and China's in South-East Asia.

A few days after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian war, in his speech to the US Congress on 1 March 2022, US President Biden declared that the Ukraine War was a battle between democratic and authoritarian regimes (Biden 2022a). In addition, on 21 March 2022, he made a momentous statement at the Business Roundtable in Washington, DC. Specifically, Biden said, 'And now is a time when things are changing. There is going to be a new world order out there, and we have to lead it. And we have to unite the rest of the free [democratic] world to do it' (Biden 2022b). There is no doubt that his mention of a 'new world order' points to the new fragmentation of the world into zones of influence between democratic countries and those with authoritarian regimes.

In this light, the Russian invasion has been interpreted as an affirmation of the aggression of authoritarian regimes and their attempt to export their authoritarianism in international relations. At the same time, Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukrainian territory shattered any illusions that existed in the West about China's role and attitude towards the war, which Beijing insists on describing as a 'crisis', while tracing its causes to NATO's 'aggression'.

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has revealed the limited possibilities for the West in its competition with authoritarian regimes. For example, Western economic sanctions against Russia have forced the country into a greater embrace and closer economic cooperation with China. On the other hand, the Russo-China relationship is characterised by an imbalance. But the approximation of these two powers has enormous significance for global security and the global balance of power, because China, the world's rising economic power, which will surpass the US economy by 2030, is ruled by an authoritarian regime. Historically, the hegemon of the international system has sought, among other things, to export and impose its own political system.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the ideological rivalry between the US and China predates the global events of recent years. However, it is now clear that the changes and upheaval in international relations and the global economy caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian War have accelerated the existing fragmentation of the international system into zones and spheres of influence of the major economies. They have also sharpened the ideological and political antagonism between liberal states and capitalist–authoritarian regimes.

The leading power for states in the authoritarian bloc is China. Westerners fear that China's economic rise will signal, *inter alia*, the spread of its authoritarian rule and the overthrow of democracy worldwide. However, Beijing so far shows no signs of wanting to impose the Chinese model on the world, apart from establishing a number of cultural and linguistic centres abroad. China is more interested in establishing economic relations with third countries, usually through imbalanced and unequal economic agreements that secure its supply of raw materials and energy, and in the global technological dominance of its digital giants (e.g. Baidu, Huawei, Alibaba, Tencent and Xiaomi).

China's growing economic power and geopolitical influence constitute the basis from which to challenge the global US hegemony, starting in South-East Asia and the Indo-Pacific. This fact has led the US leadership to ideologise this 'conflict', as it did in the past vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, by speaking about liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes.

The 'battle' between democracy and authoritarianism, or in other words between the US and China/Russia, will monopolise the interest of international relations researchers in the coming years. It will also become more intense as China continues to grow economically, challenges the US hegemony and acquires more leverage in international affairs (Arvanitopoulos 2023, 50). Beijing's ally in its effort to deconstruct, and defend itself against, the West will be Moscow, which also refuses to accept Western standards of governance. However, American democracy already counts a victory in this 'war', that of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Whether the US will be able to triumph again,

this time facing two allied rivals, depends on the quality of US democracy, and an understanding and correction of the distortions of US foreign policy over the last 20 years.

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