**A Dangerous Scenario for the 21st Century: from “The Halifax International Security Forum”.**

**Introduction**

In late November 2020, the Halifax International Security Forum (HFX), published what they term as a “handbook about China for democracies”[[1]](#footnote-1). It is claimed to be “perhaps the first comprehensive compendium of vital information about the very serious and urgent test that now confronts the world’s democracies\*, or more simply, “Beijing is not our friend”.

Were this to be some minor conspiracy group, the skewed vision of world, and of China’s position in it, might not matter. In fact, the collection of 250 discussants/interviewees involved represent a serious, and otherwise reputable, grouping of senior politicians, academics, thinktank members, diplomats, and security professionals, from a variety of countries around the world.

That attention should be paid to China, its unique political and economic development, and its growing role in global affairs is not disputed. The concerning issue in the HFX document is the lack of any pretence of objective, non-judgemental analysis of the complexity of the issues involved, and of the naïve, underlying assumption that the mixture of liberal individualism, Western democratic governance models, and free market capitalism is unchallengeable, and hence requires no analytical or philosophical defence.

China can defend its actions, policies, and geopolitical and geo-economic approach. My concern in this article is to indicate the simplistic nature of the HFX ‘analysis’. Essentially, as selected extracts indicate HFX tends to condemn itself. To help it along, I will select the key assertions set out in the six chapters of the handbook. Often the assertions are so outlandish as not to require comment. A longer analysis paper is available from Michael Lloyd at GPI.

**Key Arguments: HFX Chapter 1**

The proposition adduced here is that one of China’s main aims is “to make the world safe for authoritarianism”. This is followed by an unauthenticated historical claim that: “China, led by Xi Jinping, is emerging as the most powerful authoritarian state in history”. This familiar assertion rests on a confusion between democracy and governance that is ill-understood in Western political discourse. All nation-states require governance systems. All are mixtures of authoritarian elements and democratic elements. The issue for any governing elite is the balance between the two. In China - but not only in China, but also in a variety of nominally ‘democratic’ countries – the balance is tilted, to an extent, towards authoritarianism. However, it is incorrect to claim as does the HFX document that “Democratic China is a mirage”.

There may be practical objections to the single party democracy in China, though the CCP is not the only governance organisation in China, but it does not, of itself, prevent the Chinese governance system from having a democratic dimension.

The CCP, as the core of the Chinese governing elite (Leninist it may be), does seek to secure the on-going support of the Chinese people, and legitimacy as the governing elite, in various ways, similar to those adopted in the West, such as continuous focus groups and public opinion polling. Elections do take place at provincial, regional, and city levels, though CCP candidates tend to be strongly represented.

There is much more that may be said about governance, authority, and democracy, both in China and in the West, but suffice to argue that the HFX handbook cannot be regarded as a repository of collective wisdom on the topic.

**Key Arguments: HFX Chapter 2**

The main proposition advanced here is that “the PRC is intent on undermining democracy abroad”. The problem for the authors of the handbook is that there is scant evidence for this assertion. For instance, the quote Xi Jinping as stating that “China will continue to play its part as a major and responsible country, take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system, and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance”. Bizarrely this unequivocal statement is interpreted negatively: it is simply proof of the duplicity of Xi Jinping and China.

Indeed, this view is bolstered by a further assertion that, “the regime in Beijing is and will for the foreseeable future remain authoritarian, neither respecting nor deferring to the values of democratic nations, *nor the global norms and institutions infused with those values*”.

No empirical evidence is provided that China has, any more than the US, not respected global institutions. Leaving aside the important point that the world currently has only *international* organisations, not global ones, both China and the US are equal ‘sinners’ in this respect.

The handbook then states that the PRC “increasingly has the economic power to assert its own authoritarian value system, not just in China, or even Asia, but across the world”. It may be argued that China has the *capability* to do so, though, unlike the US, China nowhere demonstrates evidence that it wishes to exert such power that it may have, rather is its external modus operandi is demonstrably that of “partnership”.

Another ‘argument’ deployed in the handbook is the assertion that “While no reasonable person would welcome a new cold war, if anyone has launched one, it is China”. Given the publication of the White House Strategic Approach to the PRC, published on May 20, 2020, with its ideological messaging, it would appear that it is the US rather than China that has launched a new ‘cold war.

The difference in these two positions is best understood in relation to the military capability of China, which is regarded, even by the Pentagon, as *defensive* in nature. There is no empirical evidence, beyond its acknowledged internal borders, that China is seeking to oppose, let alone overthrow any countries’ governments.

Oddly, given the handbook has already handed pariah status to China, is the *correct* assertion that “Many of the greatest challenges that the people of this planet face in the twentieth century will require global solutions. Without China, they will be difficult or impossible to achieve”. Accusing China of its “unilateral assault on the world’s democracies”, of which there appears to be little, if any, empirical evidence, is hardly conducive to working with China to deal with the problems of climate change.

However, of course, there is a further caveat relating to the situation where “China has also sought to capture established international institutions, making them either ineffective at their missions or better at protecting Beijing’s interests”. This charge, of course, covers the WHO where China’s influence is viewed as an example of China’s “creation of structures that could lead to a parallel system of global governance designed to shape the international order in China’s image, or at least in its strategic interests”. Of course, democratic nations, such as the US, do not themselves seek to pursue the same approach? Again, the assumption is “democracies” are blameless in seeking to influence international organisations. The US also tends to avoid joining any international organisation which might threaten its own interests.

The handbook’s then sets out a startling assertion that “No other major trading country’s government, not even Japan’s at the height of its power in the 1980s, has intimidated and threatened foreign governments or businesses” *as China has*. The inclusion of Japan here shows an ignorance of recent economic history. HFX ignores the blatant bullying of Japan by the US over its alleged ‘statist’ development of its ICT industry in the 1980s. US actions resulted in Japan being forced to accept, in 1989, the so-called Plaza Accords, and the subsequent substantial appreciation of the Yen.

Further ‘evidence’ is adduced in relation to the operation of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in respect of “debt diplomacy”, characterised in the case of Sri Lanka as “Chinese economic bullying” in relation to the Hambantota Port Development. The distortion of what happened portrayed in the handbook is used to further the misrepresentation of the role of China in the complicated saga, in which the project was initiated by Sri Lanka, and though initially the port made substantial losses, it is now, thanks to China’s intervention, a thriving port, with no increase in the debt costs.

**Key Arguments: HFX Chapter 3**

The next chapter of the HFX handbook is concerned to attempt to demonstrate how the nature of China’s successful drive to becoming the world’s largest economy, fostering its global ambitions, has been built on a mixture of corporate bullying, the counterfeiting of goods, patent infringements, intellectual property theft, and low wage cost competition via its exports, especially during 2019/2020. On the last point, China’s dependence on foreign trade in exports and imports combined, as a percentage of GDP, has declined consistently from 67% in 2006 to 32% in 2019. Exports represent around 17%. China is hence becoming, like the US, less reliant of foreign trade.

A further misleading charge is that China is a “global center of slavery”. The handbook claims that the Global Index on Slavery (GIS) estimated that in 2016 there were 3.8 million living in conditions of modern slavery in China. Assuming this figure is accurate this is plainly reprehensible. However, it should be noted that, according to the GIS, the most appropriate *comparable measure*, is the numbers per 1000 of the population, on this ranking China has a similar ranking as the countries of Western Europe. Ignoring this contextual ranking, the handbook goes on to insist that “because the government profits from slavery and forced labour; it fuels the growing economy that undergirds political stability”. Given the sheer size of the Chinese population at 1.4 billion this comment is absurd.

**Key Arguments: HFX Chapter 4**

The next chapter accuses China of “Tech Authoritarianism”, or more specifically “the CCP under Xi being committed to technological authoritarianism at home and abroad”. This accusation is supported via various examples.

The first charge relates to the launching, in 2015, of the Digital Silk Road Initiative. It is argued, correctly, that “it has both foreign and domestic policy objectives.” It is claimed that the external objective is “to become dominant in global institutions on governance of the internet and the setting of technological standards. Central to this strategy is promotion of China’s core principle of “cyber-sovereignty” in U.N. bodies and elsewhere, which, in a nutshell, *apparently,* comes down to establishing an international norm, so that authoritarian states have the ability to censor the internet? As one of its interviews, Clayton Cheney, explains “While China’s Digital Silk Road has the potential to enhance digital connectivity in developing economies, it simultaneously has the capacity to spread authoritarianism, curtail democracy, and curb fundamental human rights”.

This dystopian view ignores the fact that China is actively involved in the *international* telecommunications industry, technical standards committee. It will, as with other countries involved attempt to influence the complex standards-setting process, though China cannot dictate the outcomes. This narrow view also ignores a centuries-old concern of China, dating back at least to the original silk road, to achieve maximum *connectivity* across land, given its geographical position. It is the search to establish connectivity, not to establish a ‘new world order’, that drives this initiative.

A quotation from China’s own cybersecurity strategy is quoted. “No attempt to use the internet to undermine or overturn China’s national regime or sabotage sovereignty will be tolerated”. Similar statements could be extracted from cybersecurity strategies in the US, the UK, and other countries. After a catalogue of erroneous statements concerning the decision reversal of the UK government, under extreme pressure from the US government, to include Huawei in its 5G network (see Lloyd, GPI, 2020), the handbook concludes that “Chinese tech companies must either be excluded completely or regarded as guilty until they can prove themselves innocent. It is a sad state of affairs. But, once again, it is one that Xi Jinping’s China has brought upon itself”. Not sure what happened to Western democracies concept of justice here?

**Key Arguments: HFX Chapter 5**

Under this heading the handbook purports to analyse China’s geostrategic ambitions. The discussion concentrates on the area of the South China Seas. This focus is interesting in itself as having earlier accused China of wanting to establish a global order and vastly extended reach, and to have initiated a cold war, it geostrategic ambitions appear to be confined to the waters surrounding it and the Indo-Pacific Arena. The US and Europe appear to be safe from any such ambitions on the part of China! Though to be fair the handbook does mention China’s Arctic policy. Interestingly, in criticising this policy, it is noted that China is 900 miles away from the Arctic Circle: coincidentally, exactly the same distance that the US Pacific fleet is from the US territory of Hawaii!

In discussing China’s policy, it is suggested that “There is a vast contested strategic space all the way from the Western Pacific, the South and East China Seas, through to the Indian Ocean and the east coast of Africa. India, and the Indian Ocean in particular, are at the pivot of the multidimensional—strategic, economic, diplomatic—challenge that China poses in this contested space”. It is reasonable to enquire what business the US has in this ‘contested space’, that is, as pointed out above 900 miles distant from its own domestic territory. The opposite geographical situation is the case for China!

The handbook first goes through the litany of asserted threats to democracy posed by China in its own region and territories: Taiwan, Hong Kong (no mention of (Macao), “Japan’s Senkaku Islands, the increasingly militarized disputed islands in the South China Sea like Fiery Cross Reef, and the Himalayan wilderness on the Sino Indian border—Beijing’s cold war against democracy is always at risk of going hot”.

The handbook stretches imagination by quoting the June 2020 speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg assessed the nature of the China challenge in the following terms: “It’s not about NATO moving into the South China Sea but about the fact that China is coming closer to us. We see them in the Arctic, we see them in Africa, we see them investing heavily in infrastructure in our own countries and, of course, we see them also in cyberspace.” The Arctic space one might accept is a concern of NATO, but Africa? However, as the handbook notes “America’s existing military power remains an obstacle to Beijing’s dreams of uncontested supremacy in Asia, and around the world”. China might wish, eventually, to achieve military dominance around its territory in Asia in order to secure its own territorial sovereignty, but to suggest that it “dreams of uncontested supremacy around the world” is an unsustainable, and dangerous, flight of fancy.

Finally, in coverage of the handbook’s desire to paint China as the Soviet Union with greater firepower and range, the handbook quotes a clearly speculative examination by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) which looked at the potential to conduct operations across the spectrum of war and determined that China is an “expeditionary power,” akin to France, the United Kingdom, and Russia in days past. Again, there is no evidence that any modernisation or enhancement of China’s forces is anything other than *defensive* in intent.

**Key HFX Arguments 6**

The final chapter, entitled “Stronger Together” moves to designing a set of international security, foreign policy, and trade alliances. The handbook disavows the idea of a ‘Global NATO’ in favour of the enhancement of what is term, by the US, though not by its partners, as the ‘Quad’. The Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) is a loose grouping involving the US, Japan, Australia, and India. It fell apart a year after its formation in 2007, though was revived in 2017. Additionally, it is suggested that Britain, France, and Germany should form a ‘Group of Three’, motivated to form a common security and foreign policy front against China, though concentrating on the monitoring of Russia, the Middle-East, and Africa!

Pursuing this idea of ‘coalitions of the willing. Across the globe, HFX, concedes that “In Latin America, the United States also needs to be mindful of past injustices”. After a passing reference to the remaining necessity of “seeing Juan Guaido assume his rightful place as Venezuela’s president”, it proposes to hand over the role of organising any Americas coalition to Canada, aided it hopes by Mexico!

On this topic HFX suggests, impracticably, that “the United States–Mexico- Canada Agreement and the European Union’s single market are natural building blocks for the eventual creation of a global, democratic free-trade club. The overall aim is that “The effective deployment of U.S. power, wealth and technological prowess in conjunction with its vast array of global allies, will ensure that China’s ambitions can be kept in check”.

“The United States remains the democratic world’s natural leader. Multiplied by its allies, it can lead an unbeatable combination that can last all the way through the twenty-first century”.

“Beijing has pushed the world’s democracies to the brink of a confrontation that the world’s democracies and their peoples did not want. If China chooses not to reassess and not to reconfigure, then calmly, yet decisively, democracies can and will come together to meet the challenge of this century’s Greatest Game”. *No comment is needed on these two last paragraphs.*

**Concluding Comments**

The final rhetorical flourishes of the document quoted above appear to be indicative of a dangerous ‘group think’ gripping political and intellectual elites in the United States, and in other allied countries. The ‘call to arms’ is an amalgam of Star Wars and The Manchurian Candidate. Rather what should be sought is peaceful co-existence and collaboration between China and the West; this outcome should be seen as a stable equilibrium and maintained as such.

No-one can doubt the serious purpose behind the conceptualisation and promulgation of this document; nor the intensity and sincerity of belief of those associated with the views expressed in the document. However, it would be well that opinion formers and national politicians considering espousing the approach contained in the handbook should first carefully review its superficial underlying arguments. Specifically, Western leaders - and those initially inclined to support the threadbare underpinning political philosophical argumentation of the document – should, before endorsing the handbook, take a step back. There is an urgent need for critical analysis of the theory and the practice underlying the justification of the conventional Western liberal democracy, prior to accepting its advertisement as the constitutional panacea for all countries, at all times. If not done, then hubris will surely follow.

**Michael Lloyd**

1. https://halifaxtheforum.org/china-handbook/en/hfx-china-handbook [↑](#footnote-ref-1)