

China: Democracy and Development

Speech for the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) “Democracy” Forum

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This is my presentation prepared for the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) “Democracy” Forum, that too place from 21-23 March in Beijing.

There is no sustainable development without what we call “democracy”- or without people’s, beneficiaries’ active participation. This applies to large political systems intending evolving, seeking the betterment of their populations – as well as for “smaller-scale” development projects, seeking to eradicate poverty and improve the wellbeing of the people.

What is “Democracy”?

Ancient Greece is considered the birthplace of *Democracy*.

The word ‘democracy’ has its origins in the Greek language, combining two words ‘*demos*’ meaning people and ‘*kratos*’ meaning power or rule.

Today, we would call it “People’s Rule”.

Democracy was first applied in the City of Athens.

Historically, democracy was born some 2,500 years ago.

The *inventor* of “democracy” was the Athenian leader Cleisthenes. In the year 507 B.C., he introduced a system of political reforms that he called *demokratia*, or “rule by the people”. It was the first known democracy in the world.

However, it was never a rule by the people. It was a rule of a select group of educated men.

Women were not part of this “select group”

Yet, on the positive side, Ancient Greece has given us the notion of a more egalitarian governance, namely through the participation of the people. Not perfect, but a beginning that has ‘rubbed-off’ on our western society, at least notionally, but to be improved.

Today’s so-called western democracies are governed by one or two chamber parliaments. Representatives are often heavily influenced by lobby- or interest groups, way beyond the purpose for which they were supposedly “elected”.

Is China going to be a shining light for “real democracy” where people’s opinions, views and active participation are sought?

This is what happened on Friday 10 March 2023, when China’s President Xi Jinping was reelected for a third term, a first in modern Chinese history:

Xi Jinping was re-elected as the President of China on Friday, securing an unprecedented third five-year term in power. Last year, President Xi was also re-confirmed in the key position of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader.

His candidacy was endorsed by a unanimous vote from the National People’s Congress (NPC), China’s legislature and supreme authority. Apart from being kept as the nation’s president, Xi was also retained as chairman of the Central Military Commission, which is in charge of the overall administration of the country’s armed forces.

Is the NPC representing the 1.4 billion Chinese?

The NPC – China’s Parliament – consists of about 3,000 delegates, making it the largest parliamentary body in the world. Delegates to the NPC are elected for five-year terms via a multi-tiered representative electoral system.

This process speaks for one of few systems of “direct democracies” in the world. It is hardly ever recognized as such by the Occident.

Speaking in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, President Xi Jinping, his hand on the Constitution, took an oath, vowing to “*build a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious and great modern socialist country.*”

This noble objective is clearly based on democratic principles.

At the outset and for a foreign observer, it is clear, President Xi is a popular leader. His achievements speak for themselves. One of the most brilliant concepts by Xi is the 2013 inaugurated Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), based on the ancient Silk Road of some 2,100 years ago.

Recently, President Xi – supported by his cabinet – brokered a new diplomatic overture, reestablishing diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It was a democratic method as all three parties agreed on a process.

Hopefully a fourth party, Yemen, may become a key beneficiary of these newly established relations between two hitherto foes. And that, if the atrocious war waged by the Saudis and

fueled, mainly by the US and UK against one of the world's most impoverished nations, Yemen, will stop and bring about lasting peace – as well as fast and sustainable physical reconstruction of destroyed infrastructure and social healing, societal reconstruction of Yemeni values, of balance and harmony.

Yemen could become a case study for sustainable development for China's modern Silk Road, or BRI. It could become a blueprint for applied democracy in reconstruction and socioeconomic development with the people and for the people.

The Ancient Silk Road was a trade route connecting China with people and societies, dispersed as well as in towns, over hills and mountains and flat grasslands.



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The Silk Road began in north-central China in Xi'an (in modern Shaanxi province). A caravan track stretched west along the Great Wall of China, across the Pamirs, through Afghanistan and into the Levant and Anatolia. Its length was more than 6,400 km.

Eventually the one track became many. Then, like today, the old and new Silk Road alias the BRI embraces several routes (see map; origin OrexCA).



These ancient trading routes may have been among the first depicting “applied democracy”; trade as a democratic tool for development. It touched people, consulted and cooperated with people’s participation, in view of improving their well-being through trade.

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Democracy projects the idea that citizens of a country should take an active role in their own development. Government is there to manage and execute people’s choices.

Democracy also supports the idea that people can replace their government through peaceful transfers of power, for example, by elections or referenda, rather than violent uprising or revolution. Democracy supports the concept of “evolution” rather than “revolution”. Therefore, a key feature of democracy and development is the voice of the people.

Decision-making, be it political, economic, or for developmental projects for industry, infrastructure, research, enhancement of culture – the involvement and consultation of people in whatever form is most suitable, is crucial for the decision-making process and for making projects sustainable.

Example

If I may, I would like to share a little example of my own experience in development economics while with the World Bank. My work being in water resources, as well as drinking water supply and sanitation, I was working, among many places, also in West Africa.

On a mission to Burkina Faso, just north of the Ivory Coast, we were visiting villages evaluating their need for water supply systems as they had no access to drinking water. They had to get their water from small creeks, dirty wells, and other sources, often far away and not clean for drinking, causing many intestinal diseases, preventing kids from going to

school, and also, gradually lowering their immune defenses.

As we were visiting different villages, we came across a series of brand new pumps to be operated by foot. They were unused. We wondered why and asked around. Until somebody told us – hesitantly – that these pumps were foot pumps and they considered water so precious not to be treated with their feet.

They wanted hand pumps.

This was quite a lesson in people's participation. Whoever financed and built these foot pumps did for sure not consult with the people. So, the investment was wasted and to some extent also the trust by the people.

People's participation is extremely important in all aspects of development, including and especially in the development of a population's well-being.

In addition to the Belt and Road outreach to countries and people for economic cooperation, aiming at development for the betterment of life and societal well-being, China has a myriad of technical, advisory services and diplomacy to offer. All aiming at enhancing harmony, cooperation, and peace in the world.

One of such a recent case was China's 12-point Peace Proposal in the war between Ukraine and Russia. It was a cleverly thought-out plan, considering history of the two countries, appeasing the current hostilities, transiting through a ceasefire on to the negotiation table; mediated by Chinese diplomacy.

The west, US-NATO mainly, rejected the initiative under the pretext it was not neutral, referring to the close relations between China and Russia.

Nevertheless, President Xi Jinping plans to travel to Moscow to meet with Vladimir Putin, possibly before the end of March. These plans may be advanced, as China has been offering to broker peace in Ukraine. Despite western skepticism, Beijing doesn't give up its approach and search for a diplomatic solution. This is an effort for democracy, for regional peace and cooperation.

China is adamant in promoting peace not only in her Asian neighborhood, but around the globe. And one of the instruments is, indeed, the Belt and Road. But never coercion, always participation by free will.

Shortly after launching BRI, in early 2014, President Xi went to visit Madame Merkel, the then-German Chancellor, to invite her, her country, to be part of what Xi called the connection between Vladivostok and Hamburg. Angela Merkel, under the spell of Washington, showed the Chinese President the cold shoulder.

President Xi left Germany, leaving the door – the invitation – open to join any time. In the meantime, last year – 2022 – Chancellor Scholz and a German delegation of business people went to visit Beijing, returning with some US\$ 1.8 billion equivalent in contracts for Germany and the wider EU.

It is the power of "open door", of non-aggression, of democracy.

The long-term goal of both Presidents, Xi and Putin, is to reestablish democratically a

natural Eurasian market, connecting a contiguous landmass of some 55 million km², covering more than a third of the earth's total land area, containing well over 5 billion people, about 70% of the world population.

It will eventually happen, democratically, peacefully and to the benefit of all the people living on this space and in the world.

Democracy is not just voting; it is taking into account the concerns and preoccupations of the people. Reaching the objective may, at times, be slow, but when the plan materializes, it is sustainable and durable.

This is China's approach to Democracy.

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