Critical Issues Confronting China:

What’s Communist about the Communist Party of China?

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What is communism? What is socialism? What is socialism with Chinese characteristics? How we define these concepts is important as they shape how we describe what China is today and where China is going, which in turn will influence what we think U.S. China policy should be. Jude Blanchette, the Freeman Chair in China Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., explored the extent of ideological and institutional legacies of socialism and Marxism within the present-day Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and provoked more questions than answers. His explanations belied any simplification of China in Cold War terms.

Blanchette admitted that in some ways, China is very communist in its rhetoric, its appearance, and its behavior. In his speech in April 2018 for the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx’s birth and the 170th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto, President Xi Jinping touted Marxism to all the Politburo members, insisting that the basic principles embodied in Marx’s Das Kapital are still valid in understanding today’s world and that the principles of Marxism and its dialectical historical materialism continue to be applicable to China. This line of thinking is consistent with the first article of China’s constitution and the first two articles of the CCP’s party charter, which proclaim that China’s highest ideal is to realize communism and that party members should dedicate their lives to this ideal and serve the people. Xi considers these as sources of strength for they help foster party solidarity and country unity. He emphasizes core socialist values and urges party members not to forget the original aspirations of the CCP. Through a forceful anti-corruption campaign to punish rent-seeking officials and through installing party cells into all enterprises of any significant size as well as enforcing membership party dues, Xi has revived Leninist institutions instead of letting them atrophy.

In reality, most social services in China, such as, healthcare and education, are controlled by the state, although there are pockets of private enterprises. State-owned enterprises dominate the commanding heights of major industries, such as, banking, energy supplies, and telecommunications. Furthermore, the state technically owns all the land. More importantly, over the last two decades or so, industrial policies initiated by the Chinese state planning apparatus have become more numerous and salient. The power of the state in mobilizing people and resources is demonstrated again in China’s current battle against coronavirus, a “people’s war” in the government’s parlance, in which the state celebrates people’s sacrifice and martyrdom and imposes order in a manner reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).
Blanchette is keenly aware of possible consequences of framing China completely in Marxist terms. It would entrench the view in the U.S. which casts the U.S.-China relation in an ideological competition and in a zero-sum game in Cold War terms: capitalism versus socialism, or freedom versus authoritarianism. In this mindset, the role of China’s state is perceived so pervasive that it leaves no distinction between the state and the civil society. Blanchette named a few recent events driven by this kind of thinking. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated that we “treat China as it is, not what we want to be.” The U.S. State Department has designated China’s five official media outlets, namely the Xinhua News Agency, CGTN, China Radio, the China Daily, and the People’s Daily, as operatives of the CCP, which will be treated as foreign government functionaries, subject to similar rules as diplomats stationed in the U.S. In parallel, China expelled three journalists from the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) after the WSJ’s publication of an article entitled “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia.”

Yet Blanchette depicted a much more complex China than a simple black-and-white picture. Chairman Mao in 1964 rebuked revisionist Soviet Union and underlined that real communism will be a scenario where the state withers away; classes are eliminated; and equality among all people is realized. However, China has moved so far in the opposite direction that its economic inequality level has matched that of the U.S.; its state power has been strengthened in almost every way; and its class divisions have become ubiquitously visible.

In fact, some Chinese intellectuals have voiced their anger at the terrible work conditions of many working-class people who severely lack any legal protection. The other side of the same coin is China’s vibrant private sector. As of 2018, the private sector accounted for 60 percent of the GDP, 70 percent of innovation, 80 percent of urban employment, and 90 percent of new jobs. These facts show that China has strayed from its Marxist and communist roots. Some university students chose in recent years to risk their lives and align themselves with workers, demanding improvement in work conditions and protection of workers’ rights. Some neo-Maoists have become very vocal about their fight against capitalism and called the CCP to stay true to its stated ideals.

Marxism and communism, while providing an anchor to the CCP, also pose a threat to the CCP. Xi’s line has to be flexible enough to deal with 21st century challenges. Blanchette deems this obvious contradiction a perpetual tension that the CCP has to manage, as the top party leaders tend to be dialectical thinkers. For example, the concept of “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is enough to straddle both sides. To further complicate this picture, China’s communism is different from orthodox communism and from its revolutionary origin, where it adopted the strategy of besieging the cities from rural areas, contrary to the Soviet model.

Recognizing the uncertainty and confusion created by China’s hybrid political model, Blanchette reminded his audience of America’s own fluidity and evolution. From approximately 1991 to 2016, Americans had a pretty good idea about what conservatism meant in the American political spectrum, but after 2017 it is no longer the case. Similarly, China is not a square pack that can fit in a square hole. China is not the Maoist China as it was in the Cold War; it is not a capitalist
market economy either despite its considerable private sector. Blanchette thought that China’s hybrid nature would continue to pose a challenge for the U.S. to grapple with.