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Chinese Ways

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Summary:

To the Editor:

In "The Rise of China and the Future of the West" (January/February 2008), G. John Ikenberry offers a compelling series of arguments for why China will not attempt to overturn the liberal order. But he is wrong to assume that the absence of confrontation implies gradual integration. It does not. China is pursuing a different strategy: forging a route around the West by constructing an alternative international system in the developing world. The norms of China's parallel political order are alien to those Ikenberry wishes to see preserved.

There is a lot of wishful thinking but much less evidence to suggest that China is adopting the political norms that Americans believe define the liberal order. Beijing's foreign policies in the developing world, for example, reject the core liberal notion that the international community has the right and the responsibility to protect the individual. China places sovereign state rights above and beyond obligations to individuals or international organizations. In China's world, states deal with one another only in regard to their economic and security objectives. Human rights, domestic governance rules, and other components of the Western liberal order are off the table. What the Chinese offer as their version of an international system is very different from the one the West has come to accept.

Ikenberry suggests that China's deep participation in the international system depends on, and is evidence of, China's willingness to play by the United States' rules. This analysis misses the degree to which the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party have, both domestically and internationally, effectively disaggregated economic and political liberalism. They have successfully orchestrated an economic ascendance that allows China to connect to the international economic order on its own terms. China's sheer economic might, in turn, has rendered the country far less susceptible to the political leverage the West has wielded over its economic partners in the past. Whose rules are really going to be in play when state-owned and state-directed Chinese investment funds bail out U.S.-based privately owned banks?

The weakness of Ikenberry's analysis ultimately lies in the too simple way he asks the starting question: "Will China overthrow the existing order or become a part of it?" Beijing has other choices, and the Chinese are just as smart and energetic as the Americans are. The false dichotomy that Americans see (that China will either challenge or join the Western order) dangerously obscures the degree to which China can and is constructing a world without the West, a world that is surprisingly autonomous from the liberal international order. The dominant academic paradigm -- that rising powers will either challenge or assimilate to the existing order -- will need to be changed to explain the rise of China and its consequences for world politics.

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