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While hailing expanded China–Russia cooperation as a ‘strategic choice’ that was here to stay, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi described Moscow as an indispensable partner in ‘creating a new paradigm of major power relations that is completely different from the old Cold War era’.¹ Such remarks make it imperative to recognise the constructed self-images of partners and adversaries in the global arena in order to understand what the most profound strategic challenge of our era may be: China’s self-fashioning as a ‘civilisation-state’ to challenge the liberal-international order.² It intends not merely to wage a power struggle within the current system, but rather to cast doubt on the system’s core values and norms with an eye to fragmenting global standards and elevating alternative governance and development paradigms.

What is a civilisation-state?

A civilisation-state defines its identity and political legitimacy not just through its current geopolitical boundaries or ethnic composition, but more crucially through the long-standing cultural and historical heritage it embodies. Unlike a nation-state – which is customarily based on a shared language, culture or ethnicity within defined borders – a civilisation-state embodies a deep-rooted historical identity and cultural legacy that influences its governance, its diplomacy and its people’s perception of themselves.³

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China's self-portrayal as a civilisation-state is not unique. Leaders in Hungary, Iran, Russia and Turkiye also endeavour to assert civilisational identities, drawing on narratives of historical greatness to reclaim or reimagine their pasts. They present themselves as guardians of distinct cultural, religious and historical narratives, aspiring to extend their influence beyond national borders. In 1948, historian John King Fairbank presciently remarked that, inspired by China, 'a new cultural nationalism ... may in the future outdo the merely political nationalisms in Europe'.⁴ Chinese nationalism, unlike the European variety, 'is coterminous with the entire culture, not merely with the state'.⁵

Civilisation-states advocate ideological autonomy, challenging international norms and institutions from their respective vantage points. They criticise the liberal-international order for its Western bias, arguing that it serves the interests of a limited number of nations at the expense of broader inclusivity. Their critiques extend to international bodies, which they perceive as instruments of Western hegemony. A core element of their arguments is non-interference, especially in matters concerning human rights or democratic governance, which China and Russia contend are pretexts for infringements on their sovereignty aimed at destabilising their regimes.

Internal contradictions

Civilisation-states' pursuit of civilisational or cultural imperatives can lead to international conduct that contravenes their avowed principle of respecting state sovereignty. This contradiction arises from the inherent tension between upholding the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states – a core aspect of respecting sovereignty – and the inclination to support, intervene or exert influence in matters affecting civilisational identities that can involve ethnic, cultural, religious or historical ties beyond recognised borders.

This is evident in China's approach to regions with which it shares historical or cultural bonds, and in its handling of its own diverse ethnic and cultural regions. Examples include extrajudicial actions, espionage, surveillance and legal jurisdiction over citizens abroad, especially in cases deemed relevant to China's national security or political interests. In particular, the

notion that individuals are still under Chinese authority regardless of their citizenship or location conflicts with basic precepts of liberalism.

Russian conduct has similar contradictions, manifest in its interactions with former Soviet states and its conduct in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. While Russia champions respect for state sovereignty in international forums, it has also prioritised coercively advancing Russian cultural and historical influences in Ukraine and aggressively supporting Russian-speaking populations in neighbouring countries.

By leveraging their rich historical and cultural legacies, civilisation-states have assumed a distinctive role in the global order, promoting ideological autonomy that often directly opposes, or outright rejects, liberal-democratic norms. They advocate strong central authority to counterbalance Western liberalism and perceived moral relativism, tainting the liberal order's advocacy of universal rights and laws. Civilisation-states favour ethnic, cultural or religious identities over inclusive definitions of citizenship, contesting the global consensus on human rights and governance.

Economically, these states dispute the equity and sustainability of free-market capitalism, championing models that permit greater state intervention or alternative economic systems, purportedly better suited to their national circumstances and more capable of tackling inequality and developmental hurdles. In another contradiction, this belies the fact that in these societies, state-led economic models reward loyalty and cautious approaches to economic reforms, which can lead to economic decisions in which political stability and the interests of the ruling elites trump optimal allocations of resources and market-driven efficiency.

Civilisation-states' opposition to the Western-led world order is evident. Under President Xi Jinping's leadership, China has vigorously promoted a narrative of national rejuvenation known as the 'Chinese Dream', aiming to restore China's status as a pre-eminent civilisation. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian leader Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei have similarly invoked their nations' historical and cultural legacies to assert a civilisational stance to justify their domestic and foreign policies. Yet such states do not present a unified front or share a common strategy. While their adherence to visions peculiar to their

respective histories links them as opponents of the Western order, it also limits their capacity for strategic unity.

Elusive middle ground

The rise of civilisation-states with ambitions that directly confront the liberal-international order still calls for a strategic reassessment by those dedicated to upholding democracy, human rights and the rule of law. They are compelled to devise comprehensive strategies that not only protect but also promote the order's foundational tenets. Obviously, this entails strengthening the structures of global governance that underpin international law, human rights and democratic norms, as well as bolstering the resilience of liberal democracies through education, cultural diplomacy and the reinforcement of international alliances. Such efforts, however, might not be sufficient to tackle the complex moral dilemmas that civilisation-states pose.

The West must navigate between two approaches, each appropriate in certain circumstances. The first is to be reactive and accept that it cannot change civilisation-states and must learn to cooperate with them despite necessary concessions on human rights. The second is to be proactive and emphasise the commitment to liberal democratic values and to push those interests even when it undermines cooperation with authoritarian states.

When the West chooses, however, to affirm the universality of liberal principles and nurture a global order that honours the dignity and rights of every individual, regardless of ethnic, cultural or religious identity, it must be prepared for countermeasures from civilisation-states. They may draw sympathy and even tacit cooperation from some elements within the liberal order: moral clarity and geopolitics often do not sit well together and inevitably produce difficult trade-offs. And other states, civilisational and otherwise, are likely to join China in rejecting the West's pursuit of a universal moral consensus on humanity's future. This discord underscores the difficulty the West faces in harmonising its normative frameworks with those of other cultures while also declining to recognise the latter's legitimacy and addressing the perceived injustices they have imposed.

The quest for a middle ground, whereby the moral precepts of different societies are accorded equal respect, remains fraught. It affects the West's relations not only with China but also with Russia, the Turkic populations of Asia, and the indigenous populations of Africa.

Finding mutual accommodation

Mutual understanding between China and the West regarding their respective pathways would require narrowing the divergence between their respective modes of causal reasoning. No existing framework reconciles the two. Each side holds an internally consistent viewpoint that is often incomprehensible to the other, resulting in explanations that the opposing side finds biased or flawed and dismisses as propaganda. Accordingly, peaceful coexistence requires that China and the West each understand what is non-negotiable for the other and refrain from insisting that it compromise on it.

Western liberal democracies stress individual freedom, the rule of law, democratic governance and human rights. Significantly curtailing them would amount to relinquishing their identity. China's ruling Communist Party, on the other hand, defines its legitimacy in terms of economic growth, social stability and, increasingly, national rejuvenation and resilience. Its legitimacy is also tied to its governance model: it considers its sovereignty, its territorial integrity and the Communist Party's centrality off limits.

While both sides can broadly agree on the necessity of peace, stability and prosperity for both their own societies and the global community, thus far the West has been unable to convince China's leadership that transitioning towards a more democratic form of governance would leave China's cultural identity or way of life acceptably intact. It would have to demonstrate that democratic values are not inherently at odds with Chinese culture or Confucian heritage – that is, that transparent and accountable democracy offers a framework within which China's traditional values and social norms can continue to thrive.

Assessing whether the values and social norms that are part of Confucian heritage can complement or at least coexist with the principles of constitutional democracy requires a nuanced understanding of both Confucianism and liberal Western democracy. Adherence to the core principles of community, personal

austerity, collective effort, filial piety and social harmony has not prevented Japan, South Korea and Taiwan from adopting a version of constitutional democracy. Confucian values could conceivably enrich democratic societies by fostering a deeper sense of community responsibility and ethical leadership. Conversely, democratic principles could introduce mechanisms of accountability and inclusivity to Confucian societies that ensured that respect for authority did not overshadow the need for justice and individual rights. From this perspective, blending traditional Confucian values with democratic principles in a mutually beneficial relationship seems at least plausible.

Notes

- ¹ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 'Wang Yi: China and Russia Have Forged a New Paradigm of Major-country Relations that Differs Entirely from the Obsolete Cold War Approach', 7 March 2024, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202403/t20240308_11256414.htm/.
- European affairs, has popularised it. See Bruno Maçães, 'The Attack of The Civilization State', *Noema*, 15 June 2020, <https://www.noemamag.com/the-attack-of-the-civilization-state/>.
- ² The term 'civilization state', as applied to China, was introduced by Lucian Pye. See Lucian W. Pye, 'China: Erratic State, Frustrated Society', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 4, Fall 1990, pp. 56–74. Bruno Maçães, a former Portuguese secretary of state for
- ³ Former empires' dreams of imperial restoration and those of civilisation-states may overlap, but they are not the same. An empire may be composed of several civilisations. The British Empire was not civilisational, although the Russian Empire tried to be.
- ⁴ John King Fairbank, *The United States and China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), p. 89.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 408.