



CHINA'S EIGHT ARGUMENTS AGAINST WESTERN 'HUBRIS' AND WHY THEY FAIL

BY DENNY ROY

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The poor performance of Western Europe and the United States during the pandemic has revived Western declinism. A recent example is an [essay](#) by Zhou Bo of the Center of China-American Defense Relations, Academy of Military Science of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. Zhou's assertions are important, but also mainly wrong, and therefore call for a critique. Below I will summarize Zhou's arguments before refuting them.

- 1) The West is "falling apart," and in a "nadir of its self-confidence," based on the observation that Europe does not have a coordinated response to the pandemic.

Europe is a collection of sovereign governments with very limited merged sovereignty. Each still has its own policies in most areas, including pandemic response. Similarly, China and its Northeast Asian neighbors Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Mongolia, and Taiwan each had separate national policy responses to the pandemic. That does not indicate that any of the states in Northeast Asia is suffering a crisis of confidence in its own political system.

- 2) China successfully implemented emergency counter-measures now "being emulated around the world."

The Chinese government did relatively quickly take the drastic measures that are relatively easy for an authoritarian state with untrammled police powers. But the West will not seek to "emulate" other aspects of China's performance that Zhou does not mention:

the Chinese government [treated](#) initial reports of the disease as criminal rumor-mongering, [suppressed](#) information about the outbreak in the crucial early days, [hoarded](#) supplies of medical equipment purchased by importers abroad while China had shortages, [demanded](#) that other countries lift their restrictions against Chinese travelers while itself [excluding](#) and [scapegoating](#) foreigners, attempted to [re-write](#) the story of China's role in the pandemic, and [concealed](#) the actual numbers of China's sick and dead.

- 3) The pandemic suggests the United States will lose its declared strategic competition with China and Russia because the United States needs medical equipment from China and, aside from the pandemic, relies on China for drugs.

The US need for imported medical equipment is temporary and rectifiable; it will not limit US ability to strategically compete with China. The pandemic is, however, accelerating the trend of American diversification away from China for vital supplies, even if China is the cheapest producer. Chinese commentators such as Zhou who crow about this US over-dependence on China are unintentionally doing Americans a favor.

- 4) "China and Europe will inevitably get closer" because "a divided Europe will naturally look east" and because Europe, like China, wants "multilateralism" in "global trade," climate change, and "the role of international institutions" while the United States is opposed.

First, it does not logically follow that less commitment to European integration among individual Western European countries causes them to "naturally" move to China. Zhou would have to make the case that individual European countries want to trade more or align themselves more tightly with China but have been prevented by their membership in the EU or by now-absent US leadership. But Zhou doesn't go there.

Secondly, it is over-simplistic and misleading for Zhou to say that China and Europe see eye-to-eye on "multilateralism" in a way that leaves America out. In keeping with decades of previous US policy, Washington continues to support NATO, advocates for human rights and democracy worldwide, and is the EU's top trading partner.

Beijing, on the other hand, routinely violates or disavows international law when it clashes with Chinese self-interests, often sides with outlaw states, and opposes attempts by international organizations to champion liberal principles. China's idea of multilateral trade is other countries being open to Chinese imports and technology extraction while China maintains protectionism and predatory policies against Western direct investment in China. European political leaders have been much like Trump administration officials in their recent [criticism](#) of China over various issues.

It's questionable that the desire of European states for a relationship with China extends beyond wanting their share of the possible economic benefits.

- 5) Americans want the EU to view China as an enemy, but will fail because "the creation of the EU is meant, in part, to avoid great power competition."

This seems to be a reference to US attempts to [discourage](#) security partners from contracting Chinese corporation Huawei to build their advanced data network infrastructure. The EU was founded on what began as Western Europe's common interest not in "avoiding great power competition," but rather protecting themselves by banding together against a threatening great power. China is a long way from being their new Soviet Union, but is getting some negative attention, which is why some European governments have reservations about using Huawei systems.

- 6) As the US economically decouples from China, Europe will gain "a greater flow of goods, capital, personnel and technology from China."

Are Chinese exports to Europe currently limited by China choosing to sell to the US rather than Europe? In any case, the US interest in decoupling is driven by American concerns about economic dependence on China. Western Europeans [share those concerns](#), which means they may not want everything China offers.

- 7) The pandemic "can become a turning point for the country to provide more public goods to the world," as shown by China providing medical supplies to many virus-hit countries.

Selling previously hoarded medical supplies is not providing public goods. Zhou is correct that China has

the capacity to be a global "Good Samaritan" by quickly producing a large amount of certain items for which there might be a desperate foreign demand during a humanitarian crisis. China fulfilling such a role would be welcome. This, however, is a relatively low level of providing public goods. A higher level is something like intervening in a failed state to deliver food and other aid while under hostile fire, as the US and other countries did in Somalia in 1993-94. Beijing avoids operations such as this because they are difficult and controversial, but meaningful international leadership is inherently difficult and controversial.

- 8) What matters is not whether states are democratic or authoritarian, but the government's performance. China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore proved during the pandemic that a "strong and decisive" state is necessary and that the Western model of limited government cannot cope with crises.

By admitting that multiparty democracies like Japan and South Korea handled the pandemic well, Zhou fatally undercuts his implied argument that the lack of civil and political liberties in China is justified by superior government performance. Politically, Japan and South Korea are more similar to Western Europe than to China. Furthermore, Zhou neglects to mention the two countries most praised for their pandemic responses: New Zealand, a transplanted Western European country; and Taiwan, another liberal democracy. By ignoring Taiwan, Zhou silently reminds us that the China Model overly empowers a regime to prioritize its own survival, leading to unconstrained ruthlessness and vindictiveness even at the expense of its own and international society.

Europeans want to profit from China, but will not see the China Model as politically or culturally inspirational or attractive as long as China is ruled by a regime with objectives and policies so deeply at odds with Western Europe's liberal traditions.

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