

The Limits of the China Model

Report from conference proceedings
on authoritarian capitalism

Glasshouse Forum

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Glasshouse Forum's Executive Summary

Azar Gat claims that China may be able to combine authoritarian rule and economic development, and that a model of this kind can exert a considerable power of attraction also outside China.

In order to acquire a contrasting picture, Glasshouse Forum turned to China expert Johan Lagerkvist, who attracted attention for his study *China and the Internet: Unlocking and Containing the Public Sphere* (2006). A guiding principle for the leadership of the communist party is fear of political instability, says Lagerkvist. China is a country of extreme contrasts. It is the world's fourth largest economy and at the same time a very poor country, probably the most unequal country in Asia. Despite the democratic deficit, the regime possesses considerable popular legitimacy. An important reason for this is that it allows social protest as long as this keeps within certain boundaries. A Chinese process of democratisation will presumably build on a combination of pressure from below, from the grassroots movements, and from reformist leaders within the party, both a bottom-up and top-down affair.

In the longer term the major threat to the legitimacy of the regime is that it lacks a clear vision of the future. The Chinese leaders like to see China's soft power being strengthened in the international arena, but they know that it is too early to call China a superpower. They do not wish to launch a specifically Chinese model, but stress that everyone has to chart their own course and follow their own way forward based on their own prerequisites.

We will not see a new ideological Cold War between China and the West, says Lagerkvist, nor will there be a return of the authoritarian capitalist great powers. Economic modernisation leads to pluralism and equal opportunities for more people and China will not prove to be an exception to this. But the process is delayed for various reasons longer than that which seems desirable from the perspective of the West.