

COMMENTARY / WORLD

Are they Asian values or just Chinese dreams?

Beijing is pushing for cohesiveness in a region with a very diverse range of views



The opening ceremony of the first China-ASEAN Maritime Exercise in Zhanjiang, Guangdong province, China, in October 2018 | REUTERS

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On July 3, Wang Yi, China's top diplomat and a member of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo, made a provocative comment about "Asian values" at the 2023 International Forum for Trilateral Cooperation in Qingdao, in East China's Shandong province.

He said that "China, Japan and South Korea, as well as other Asian countries, should practice open regionalism, promote inclusive Asian values, cultivate strategic autonomy, safeguard regional unity and stability, resist the Cold War mentality and avoid coercion by hegemony."

Among many problems associated with minister Wang's comments is that Asian values are much like the concept of the so-called Global South, Asians and the Global South are politically, economically and diplomatically heterogeneous with few common threads.

The concept of Asian values has a long history. During Japan's imperial period, it advocated for the Great Eastern Co-Prosperty Sphere, a grouping of Asian countries under Japanese tutelage that stressed nationalist "ideals of the East" as a common cohesive force to bring the region together and push back against Western colonialism.

As we know, this period did not end well with Japanese imperialism leading to the annexation of the Korean Peninsula, the Second Sino-Japanese War and Japanese aggression throughout the region. Aside from the tragic death and destruction that has been documented extensively, the consequences of Japanese expansionism remain with us today, with unsettled historical and territorial issues, as well as unresolved emotional issues such as the "comfort women" issue, referring to women who suffered under Japan's military brothel system before and during World War II, and the Nanking Massacre. These are all serious wedge issues, particularly with South Korea and China.

In the post-World War II period. "ideals of the East" morphed into "Asian values," an umbrella term to describe how East Asian states such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore and political entities such as Hong Kong and Taiwan grew rapidly.

It has been an umbrella tool used by nondemocratic politicians in the Indo-Pacific, such as Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad and the Singapore's late Lee Kuan Yew, to stress their belief or wishful thinking that South and Northeast Asian countries prioritize collectivism as a tool to unify people for their economic and social good. These leaders and others justify the repression of political opponents and the violation of human rights based on the argument that human rights are not part of Asian values.

Asian values have also been associated with a preference for social harmony, a collective concern for the well-being of the community, loyalty and respect toward authority and a preference for collectivism and communitarianism.

Today's China, as Wang's comments reflect, would like to use the idea of Asian values to drive a wedge between most of China's neighbors, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Southeast Asia and the West, including the U.S.

Wang and his comrades, including Chinese leader Xi Jinping, seem to not understand that the relations between many countries in the region and the U.S. is because they share many of the same values, aspirations and institutions. For example, Japan, South

Korea, Taiwan, India, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines and even Myanmar before the 2020 military coup hold regular elections to elect their local and national leaders. Asian citizens, when given the opportunity, want their leaders to be accountable through regular elections.

Rule of law is another value that many countries and political entities in the region share with the U.S. and the West to different degrees. Citizens want their political leaders to be subject to legal constraints, term limits and high levels of transparency. Leaders for life, nebulous leadership transitions (or not in the case of China) and political parties that are above the rule of law are not an Asian value that seems to have garnered traction in the region.

Part of making leaders accountable is having freedom of the press. Here, in Asia, however we define it, it seems to have a mixed record. Reporters Without Borders in 2023 has found that Asia's one-party regimes and dictatorships quash freedom of the press and the journalism that would make their leadership more accountable to their citizens. North Korea ranked 180th, China 179th, Vietnam 178th and Myanmar 173rd, respectively in 2023. India fared not much better despite its claim that it is the world's largest democracy, being ranked at 161. And the Philippines, despite journalist Maria Ressa being awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 2021, ranks 132nd.

The Northeast Asian states and political entities fared better with Taiwan at 35, South Korea at 47th and Japan at 68 — but not by much.

Asia's eroding freedom of press is related to an overall global erosion of press freedoms. This is partly due to the increasingly partisan divide we are seeing in countries around the world. It is also related to what Kyoko Kuwahara, research fellow at The Japan Institute of International Affairs, describes as "disinformation campaigns" by malicious actors such as China and Russia to "distort public opinion, create social or political instability or influence government policy-decision processes by spreading disinformation, and they can even have a serious impact on national security."

In her research paper, "Strengthening international cooperation against disinformation: The case of a Taiwan Strait contingency," published by the MacDonald Laurier Institute in Canada, Kuwahara argued that freedom of the press is being challenged by "information warfare, including disinformation campaigns, which are often used to destabilize a targeted country by focusing on existing divisions or certain divisive narratives in the society and amplifying them, which can significantly impact a government's policy-making process."

Strengthening journalistic standards in democratic Asian states and political entities, teaching critical thinking in schools, political parties and helping leaders understand and create the space for a vibrant media would be an Asian value that many citizens in the region would support. Still, I am pretty sure China's Wang is not advocating this kind of Asian value.

Diversity seems to be another Asian value that many states and polities share in the region. This is in contrast with China's recent clamp down on effeminate men on television and in media and the shutting down of dozens of WeChat accounts that cover

LGBTQ topics. To illustrate, Taiwan has legalized same-sex marriage and citizens in Japan, South Korea and Singapore seem to be way ahead of where their political representatives are in terms of diversity and inclusion policies.

There does seem to be a convergence of values between Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, India and some Southeast Asian states as it pertains to the rule of law, regular elections, relative freedom of the press (more needs to be done) and diversity. The inconvenient truth is these values are aligned with the U.S. and the so-called West and not so much with China's current government model and deepening trajectory of authoritarian rule.

Wang's rallying cry for Asian countries to reflect China's dreams are not exactly in line with the rest of Asia's values.

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