

Critical Dialogue

Playing Our Game: Why China's Rise Doesn't Threaten the West. By Edward S. Steinfeld. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 280p. \$27.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592713001515

— Charles A. Kupchan, *Georgetown University*
and *Council on Foreign Relations*

Whether emerging powers embrace or instead challenge the current international order will be an important determinant of international stability in the years ahead. The material primacy of the traditional Western democracies will wane as emerging powers like China, India, and Brazil continue their ascent; that much we know. What remains unclear is how this change in the distribution of global power will affect the rules and institutions that are the infrastructure of international order.

China will wield considerable influence over this question. Its aggregate GDP is expected to surpass that of the United States in the second half of the next decade, and its geopolitical ambition will rise in step. Moreover, China's reliance on state capitalism and its illiberal brand of one-party rule contrast sharply with the West's principled commitment to free markets and liberal democracy. China's ascent thus has the potential to challenge not only the pecking order associated with Pax Americana but also its normative foundations.

As the title of Edward Steinfeld's book makes clear, *Playing Our Game* represents an emphatic vote of confidence in China's readiness to embrace the Western way. Steinfeld argues that Beijing's relentless determination to promote prosperity by attaching itself to a globalized economy is all the while transforming China and mandating its embrace of Western norms of governance. He claims that "the country has in essence linked its domestic transformation process—its destiny—to a global system that we designed and that we dominate. In the process, China has increasingly absorbed—and even embraced as its own—values, practices, and aspirations that have in their origins our own" (p. 231).

This book shines as a study of China's political economy, detailing how integration into global markets has transformed virtually all aspects of Chinese industry, including corporate governance, research and product development, and manufacturing. But Steinfeld makes an unsubstantiated leap of faith when arguing that these economic changes

are compelling the Chinese to play our game on political issues as well. To be sure, China's attachment to the global marketplace is having political repercussions. But what is emerging is a unique brand of state capitalism predicated on political values and institutions that bear very little resemblance to the West's. China may be prospering, but it is doing so by playing its own game, not by copying the West's developmental path.

Steinfeld's core chapters on the remaking of Chinese industry are a fascinating read. By relying heavily on foreign companies to guide the transformation of its economy, China ended up importing from the West both business practices and manufacturing systems. The country's industrial infrastructure was molded to fit into a global architecture of commerce, bringing to China innovations such as modular production and digitization. Competing in the global marketplace also required changes to the country's laws, business regulations, and labor markets.

Playing Our Game is at its best in its fine-grained account of the manufacturing of specific products, such as laptops and motorcycles. The book's informed and meticulous analysis of different sectors reveals just how profoundly globalization has penetrated China's economy. When it comes to matters of industrial production, Steinfeld provides ample evidence to support his claim that "China today is growing not by writing its own rules but instead by internalizing the rules of the advanced industrial West" (p. 18).

Even on purely economic matters, however, Steinfeld does go a bit too far in insisting on China's thorough Westernization. Despite the explosion in private businesses, China's state sector still produces some 40% of the country's GDP. Many of the managers of state-owned enterprises are appointed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and are party members. Moreover, the state has deeply penetrated the private sector through party-led business associations, the flow of party cadres into private business, and the recruitment of entrepreneurs into the CCP. The symbiotic relationship between the CCP and China's business community stands in stark contrast to the relationship between the state and the market in the West. In this respect, China is distinctly *not* playing our game.

The author also overstates the degree to which China's management of its currency has converged toward Western standards. He argues that China controls the exchange

rate of the renminbi (RMB) through the same kind of open-market transactions that the United States uses to affect the money supply and control inflation rates. But controlling inflation by managing the money supply is a far cry from setting a fixed, export-friendly exchange rate for the RMB that is programmatically defended by China's central bank. As years of international complaint about China's undervalued currency make clear, Western governments hardly believe that China is playing by a common set of global rules.

Steinfeld's argument becomes even more problematic when he strays from analysis of China's economy to matters of politics. He contends that China's drive for prosperity and modernity is transforming not only its economy but also what constitutes political legitimacy: "China today, after nearly a century of upheaval, is recapturing its identity and sense of self-worth not by lashing out but instead by attaching itself to an existing global order, our order. . . . It is not just opening itself up to us as investors or economic actors. Rather, it is absorbing our notions of governance and taking them as its own" (pp. 229–30). According to the author, China's leaders have concluded that "[f]or China to be modern—and by extension, for its government to be legitimate—society would have to be governed in a certain way that sounded a lot more like contemporary Western democracy than traditional Chinese socialism" (p. 39).

On these issues, Steinfeld argues primarily by assertion, providing none of the careful empirical narrative that backstops his economic analysis. Indeed, the empirical evidence points to a conclusion quite the opposite of his. The CCP thus far shows no signs whatsoever of readying the country for a transition to democracy. On matters of civil and political rights, Chinese behavior diverges widely from Western standards. Beijing's suppression of dissent, abuse of political prisoners, censorship of the press and Internet, and persistent hacking of Western newspapers belie Steinfeld's confidence that China is gravitating toward Western standards of political conduct. He may ultimately be right that China will go the way of South Korea and Taiwan, with "self-obsolencing authoritarianism" eventually giving way to liberal democracy. But at least for now, that transition is far from beckoning.

Steinfeld is correct that after more than a century of humiliation, China is bent on "recapturing its identity and sense of self-worth" (p. 229). But as it does so, it will self-consciously draw on its own history, culture, and unique developmental path. Steinfeld is simply mistaken that China "has chosen to develop by tying itself to us and trying to become like us" (p. 231). China wants to be on a par with the West, but it does not want to be the West.

China is happy to play our game inasmuch as it benefits handsomely from integration into the global economy. But as it takes its place amid the top ranks, the country is fashioning its own brand of modernity, not replicating the West's. And when it has the power to do

so, Beijing will seek to recast the international system in ways that advantage its interests and suit its ideological preferences—just as all great powers before it have done.

Accordingly, Steinfeld is overly sanguine about the geopolitical implications of China's rise. He concludes that China's "time as an existential adversary has drawn to a close." China "is a partner," he continues, "an entity that shares with us an increasingly common set of values, practices, and outlooks. Most transparently, it shares with us an interest in sustaining the global system it has joined" (pp. 232–33).

Time will tell. But at least for now, China's military establishment is fast expanding and its territorial disputes with neighbors are heating up. Meanwhile, the United States is pivoting to East Asia, beefing up its military presence in the region, and refurbishing its network of alliances. Geopolitical quiescence hardly looms on the horizon. Fasten your seat belt.

Response to Charles A. Kupchan's review of *Playing Our Game: Why China's Rise Doesn't Threaten the West*

doi:10.1017/S1537592713001679

— Edward S. Steinfeld

While Charles Kupchan and I share common aspirations for a more flexible and inclusive global order, we clearly differ in our understanding of contemporary China. This difference is about far more than facts. Rather, it reflects a fundamental disagreement about the nature and identification of sociopolitical change itself.

When Kupchan describes what "China" is or is not doing, he is referring to the Communist party-state, and discussing it not only as if it were a purposive, unitary whole but also as if it represented the totality of "China." Hence, in his effort to refute my argument, he asserts that the state, or the CCP, or "China" censors the media, persecutes dissenters, expands the military, and antagonizes neighbors. While accurate, those claims represent neither the totality of Chinese behavior nor the full scope of China's sociopolitical change process. Instead, they pertain to the typical behaviors of authoritarian regimes across time, including, as I point out in my book, the governments that ruled South Korea and Taiwan even at the final stages of their nations' respective democratization processes. Authoritarian abuses are not to be overlooked or condoned. But nor does their existence confirm, ipso facto, the absence (or presence) of progressive change.

When many of us talk about the "West," including Professor Kupchan in his book, and including myself, frankly, we find it natural to think about change in terms of interactions among societal interests, individual activists, ideologies, religious values, and political institutions. My book argues that, because of the manner by which Chinese society has engaged the global economy, time has

led to an understanding of change in China in comparable terms. The party-state is unquestionably still a major force in Chinese society. But we now witness even within that state an extraordinary pluralization of voices, interests, and loyalties: managers of state-owned enterprises who work hand in hand with global capital, overseas-trained academics who run state universities, independently wealthy entrepreneurs who finance educational experiments in the countryside or publicly complain about environmental degradation, and so on. Even ordinary citizens have become increasingly emboldened to articulate their wants and needs, sometimes in the form of vitriolic nationalism, but sometimes, too, in the form of public “gotcha” revelations about governmental hypocrisy in the face of widely promulgated official standards for accountability. None of these behaviors were evident—or even imaginable—10, 20, or 30 years ago.

As a result, when discussing where China is heading, foreign and Chinese observers alike find it increasingly difficult to define what (or who) we mean when we refer to “China.” Are we talking about the state, and if so, which one—central or local? Are we talking about official policy, and if so, policy as formally pronounced, or policy as actually practiced on the ground? And who exactly are the relevant actors now? More than just matters of academic debate, these are issues that are being contested on a daily basis in Chinese society. An expanding array of actors—both within the state and beyond—is scrambling to fill in the blanks and clarify these newly opened chasms of ambiguity. That they are indicates dramatic, and at least in my view, progressive systemic change.

No One’s World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn. By Charles A. Kupchan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 272p. \$27.95.
doi:10.1017/S1537592713001527

— Edward S. Steinfeld, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

In this provocative new book, Charles Kupchan issues a clarion call to the advanced industrial nations of the West. The global order they have built over two centuries—a system based on liberal democracy at home and free trade abroad—is meeting its demise, he warns. New nations have arisen that neither share the West’s historical traditions nor aspire to its contemporary values. The advanced industrial West, Kupchan argues, cannot logically expect nations like China, India, Brazil, and Russia to voluntarily comply with an existing order that is alien to their experiences and unaccommodating to their interests. Nor can the West realistically strong-arm such nations. The fulcrum of relative power has shifted too far to make coercion possible. But the West, he asserts, must not stand idly by. Historically, power transitions—save for a few rare exceptions—have tended to engender violent conflict. This time will be no different, says the author, unless

the West moves aggressively to foster a new and far more inclusive global order.

Upon what principles should this order be based? First, in Kupchan’s view, the system must be grounded in a new approach to governmental legitimacy, one focused not on taxonomical categorizations of regime type, but instead on observed measures of governmental performance. Second, the new order must emphasize respect for sovereignty, presumably privileging noninterference over concerns previously used to justify intervention (i.e., defense of human rights, promotion of democracy, or support for self-determination). Third, the new order must emphasize inclusion for “the rest” in multilateral organizations. Fourth, the system must tolerate national efforts to tame globalization, whether through financial regulation, currency management, labor standards, or a variety of other market interventions. Fifth, the system, in acknowledging its limited capacities in an increasingly complex world, must embrace regionalization and decentralization. And sixth, the new order must forestall great-power conflict between the existing hegemon, the United States, and its sole likely challenger in the future, China.

For the West to play a role in any of this, Kupchan warns, it must first get its own act together, an immense challenge given how far afield it has strayed. The United States suffers political paralysis at home and overextension abroad. Special interests distort the electoral process and undermine policy, thus leading to huge disparities in wealth, privilege, and access across American society. And overseas, the United States, bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan, has abdicated its global responsibilities and failed adequately to manage the rise of the rest. And throughout all, the United States has become more unilateral in its actions, undercutting the multilateralism that had once resided at the core of the West’s global order.

The European Union, meanwhile, has performed no better. Harmonization has yielded to fragmentation, as the member nations have split on everything from America’s war on terror to the handling of the Greek financial crisis.

For Europeans and Americans alike, Kupchan’s message is straightforward. Get your political house in order. Empower the state to engage in domestic renewal. Encourage pragmatic populism. Pursue responsible fiscal policy. And on the foreign policy front, focus on that which truly counts: the building of a new system that can peacefully accommodate the rising rest.

Kupchan’s ideas are wonderfully thought provoking, and his policy prescriptions eminently sensible. As a reviewer, however, I find myself in the awkward position of agreeing wholeheartedly with those prescriptions, but disagreeing strongly with the train of logic by which the author arrived at them. Kupchan’s analysis, in my view, misconstrues the nature of both the West and “the rest,” and in so doing, overstates the breadth of the chasm dividing them.

While he arrives at appropriate calls for greater collaboration and multilateralism, his assumptions, if truly believed, could just as easily support a far more confrontational—and, in my view, far more parlous—approach.

The underlying problem is that Kupchan's argument is premised on a highly stylized historical account, one that is not so much wrong as woefully incomplete. In his telling, Western society emerged from conditions of fragmented state authority, religious ferment, an assertive and highly urbanized bourgeoisie, and dense social networks. What resulted over time were deeply institutionalized preferences for open scientific inquiry, commercial entrepreneurship, political democracy, and cultural tolerance. Those features, in turn, interacted in Promethean fashion to produce unprecedented dynamism for state and society alike. The West's Athens grew to shine over the East's Sparta, the tottering empires of yore—the Ottomans, the Romanovs, the Qing—with their inflexible hierarchies, their overweening bureaucracies, their dogmatic ideologies, and their slavishly loyal landed elites.

In Kupchan's view, however, new circumstances have arisen—whether related to “globalization,” new technology, or something else—that now prevent Western institutions from translating so clearly into dominant state power. Instead, it is the old imperial civilizations that now enjoy the edge, catching up with—and in some cases surpassing—their liberal peers. Thus, it falls upon us, the denizens of the West, to respond by shifting our own institutions and finding ways globally to accommodate theirs.

I certainly agree that the nations of the West must continue evolving and innovating if they are to survive. However, my reading of history is somewhat different from Kupchan's. Pluralism, civil society, and vibrant democracy are certainly part of the Western experience. But so too are totalitarianism, Nazism, industrialized mass murder, and mechanized modern warfare. In America's case, moving hand-in-hand with entrepreneurship, robust property rights, and democracy have been robust histories of slavery, disenfranchisement of women and minorities, suppression of organized labor, and corrupt government. The point is neither to denigrate the West nor to deny its potential as a model for late developers. Rather, it is simply to emphasize that the concept of “the West” encompasses a vast array of values and practices—some admirable, some abhorrent, and many intermingled, often uncomfortably, at key moments in time.

Kupchan is absolutely right to emphasize the existence of multiple versions of modernity in the contemporary world. Those multiple versions, however, are as well represented within the Western tradition as beyond it. As a case in point, China over the past century and a half has careered through repeated efforts to assimilate practices and ideologies that at any given time were understood to be the essence of Western modernity and power. There

was Marxism, and Leninism, and fascism, and state planning, and industrial capitalism, and yes, even democracy. The absorption process was often brutally disruptive and violent. And the institutional vestiges—including authoritarianism and nationalism—are still evident today. We can have a serious debate about whether these vestiges are more reflective of the Western models they were intended to mimic or the indigenous traditions that such models were supposed to replace. But it is analytically unjustifiable to assert that the mere existence of these societal features—all of which have counterparts in modern Western history—signifies ipso facto some kind of Manichean clash of civilizational values between East and West. To do so would reflect a lack of awareness not just of “the rest” but also of ourselves—who we are, how we behave, and where we have come from.

In a more straightforward policy sense, the differences between the West and “rest” might not be as vast as Kupchan suggests. The United States, and to a lesser extent the nations of Western Europe, view themselves—understandably and justifiably—as exemplars of free trade, open markets, and minimal state regulatory intervention. Much of the rest, however—equally understandably, and equally justifiably—sees in the West nations with monumental barriers against imported agricultural products, vast defense budgets supporting indigenous high-tech industries, expansive governmental structures for funding “big science” and applied industrial research and development, and highly sophisticated central banks capable of managing critical prices in the domestic economy. One could be forgiven for interpreting the state-building efforts of at least some of the rest as aspirational attempts to duplicate Western practices rather than supplant them.

Indeed, it is conceivable that at least some members of the rest, though seemingly out of step with the West at any given moment of time, are actually on a Western-style developmental path. Take the cases of Taiwan and South Korea, entities that during their authoritarian phases in the latter half of the twentieth century borrowed extensively from the *illiberal* aspects of the Western tradition, but are flourishing multiparty democracies today. Neither place during the 1970s and 1980s could have reasonably been considered democratic. But with the benefit of hindsight, we can now look back on those periods as part of a longer democratization process.

And that brings us to the challenge of interpreting contemporary China, the one country Kupchan rightly, and with all appropriate caution, identifies as a potential great-power competitor to the United States. As an authoritarian, one-party regime, China could not be more different from the advanced industrial democracies of the West. Yet, in profound ways during the reform era, China has latched onto critical elements of the Western liberal tradition. The nation has thrown itself open to trade, outsourced the education of its elites to the West, reintegrated

many of those elites into key positions in the domestic establishment, and increasingly promoted Western notions of citizen-focused, accountable governance. The results on the ground have been mixed. Extraordinary growth has been coupled with rampant corruption, gross abuses of power, and terrible environmental degradation. In some corners of Chinese society today, one can easily encounter self-satisfied celebration of the nation's newfound economic power, as well as jingoistic demands for more assertive application of foreign policy muscle. But one can hear plenty of other voices as well, even from within the state, openly ruing the flaws of the Chinese system—its clumsy excesses of governmental hierarchy, its relative paucity of social capital and trust, and its glaring lack of the legal protections believed to foster the accountable government and vibrant entrepreneurship associated with the West. China is a society in a self-described state of becoming. The very legitimacy of the system itself, one might argue, depends on a society-wide understanding that tomorrow *must* look different from today. And in the context of that imperative for change, the key point of reference—in essence, the key aspirational target for the future—is not some sort of idealized version of Chinese values, but rather that which is observed in the advanced industrial West today.

China today has no “ism” of its own. Neither state nor society has articulated any unique set of indigenous values or institutions that citizens can embrace. Nobody is celebrating—or even really talking—about institutional alternatives to the West. The imperative is to catch up and, by implication, to converge. But the questions are how quickly and toward exactly which elements of the West's decidedly complex, and sometimes contradictory, liberal traditions.

I believe that if the global system were to evolve in the direction advocated by Kupchan, such questions would more likely be resolved peacefully. Perhaps because I view China as developing along a trajectory generally compatible with the Western tradition (which itself constitutes an evolving set of norms and values), I believe that Kupchan's system is actually well within our reach. Attaining it, at least with respect to China, would require the West not to accommodate a revisionist ideology or alternative vision of modernity but, instead, to negotiate the far more circumscribed claims of a fairly standard aspirant to advanced industrial status. China, in my view, is more eager to join the club than to burn down the clubhouse. Like any nation, particularly one with unresolved claims in a historically fraught region, it will at times threaten unilateral action. Other nations can, and should, stand up in resistance. My fear, however, is that those sharing Kupchan's assumptions about the rising rest's alien qualities will mistake fairly standard interstate friction for an existential threat to the global order. In so doing, they risk leading us into an escalatory spiral necessitated

by neither the structure of the system nor the aspirations of its newest rising members.

**Response to Edward S. Steinfeld's review of
*No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the
Coming Global Turn***

doi:10.1017/S1537592713001680

— Charles A. Kupchan

I am grateful to Edward Steinfeld for his thoughtful review of *No One's World*. I focus my response to his critique on three issues: the rise of the West, the implications of China's ascent, and the challenge of preserving a rules-based international system.

Steinfeld charges that my take on the rise of the West airbrushes the darker side of the story and is “highly stylized” and “woefully incomplete.” But I hardly overlook the intolerance and bloodshed that accompanied the birth of capitalism and democracy, and my reliance on synthesis and broad cross-regional comparison was in the service of demonstrating that the West followed a historically contingent developmental path, based on unique cultural, socioeconomic, and political conditions. Today's emerging powers are similarly forging their own developmental models, leading to a world of multiple modernities, not, as Steinfeld sees it, global convergence along Western lines.

For instance, it is of great consequence for international politics that the Islamic world has not experienced a transformation similar to that of the Protestant Reformation. Mosque and state remain intertwined in the Middle East, meaning that the region is embracing a very different kind of participatory politics than the secular variant that emerged in many parts of the post-Reformation West. Divergent political norms hardly preordain a collision between Western Christendom and the Muslim Middle East, but they do foretell different approaches to domestic and international governance. It is of similarly fundamental importance that China's rising middle class has become a stakeholder in the one-party state—a stark contrast with the clash between bourgeoisie and monarchy that cleared the way for the onset of liberal democracy in Europe. A compact between the Chinese Communist Party and the country's economic elite gives state capitalism considerable staying power.

I examine these non-Western developmental paths not to denigrate them but to make the case that the world is headed toward growing ideological and normative diversity, as well as a multipolar distribution of power. I do not foresee, as Steinfeld suggests, a “Manichean clash of civilizational values.” Rather, the redistribution of global power will be the main driver of geopolitical rivalry, and divergent norms will make it more difficult to tame the competitive dynamics awakened by structural change.

On China, Steinfeld and I share considerable common ground. We agree that China must confront mounting

economic and political challenges and that, particularly when it comes to commerce, it is borrowing from the Western model to do so. However, we part company on the political front. He believes that China takes the West as its “key aspirational target” in pursuing reform. I agree that the Chinese government is searching for greater legitimacy and accountability—but in a Confucian and communitarian political milieu, not in a liberal and republican one. Steinfeld maintains that China sees no institutional alternatives to those of the West. Instead, I see plenty of evidence—the Shanghai Cooperation Council, the BRICS grouping, China’s support for a regional trade group that excludes the United States—that Beijing is actively seeking to circumvent institutions dominated by the West.

Finally, while Steinfeld and I agree on the need for a more inclusive global order, he suggests that I overstate the differences in interests and values between the West and the rising rest. He sees China as a “fairly standard

aspirant”—a country that will soon look like a big Taiwan or South Korea. In contrast, I see China’s rise as potentially setting the stage for significant Sino-American rivalry over interests and norms. By exaggerating the “alien qualities” of emerging powers, Steinfeld claims, I mistake “fairly standard interstate friction for an existential threat to the global order.” I fear that he makes the opposite mistake. By raising expectations that China will “play our game,” he mistakes the perils associated with a hegemonic transition for nothing more than business as usual within the Western order.

Western leaders need to head into this period of transition with eyes wide open. If so, there is a good chance of arriving at the compromise and consensus needed to craft a new and more diverse rules-based order. In contrast, to assume that China and other emerging powers are about to dock their ships of state in the Western harbor is both illusory and dangerous.