

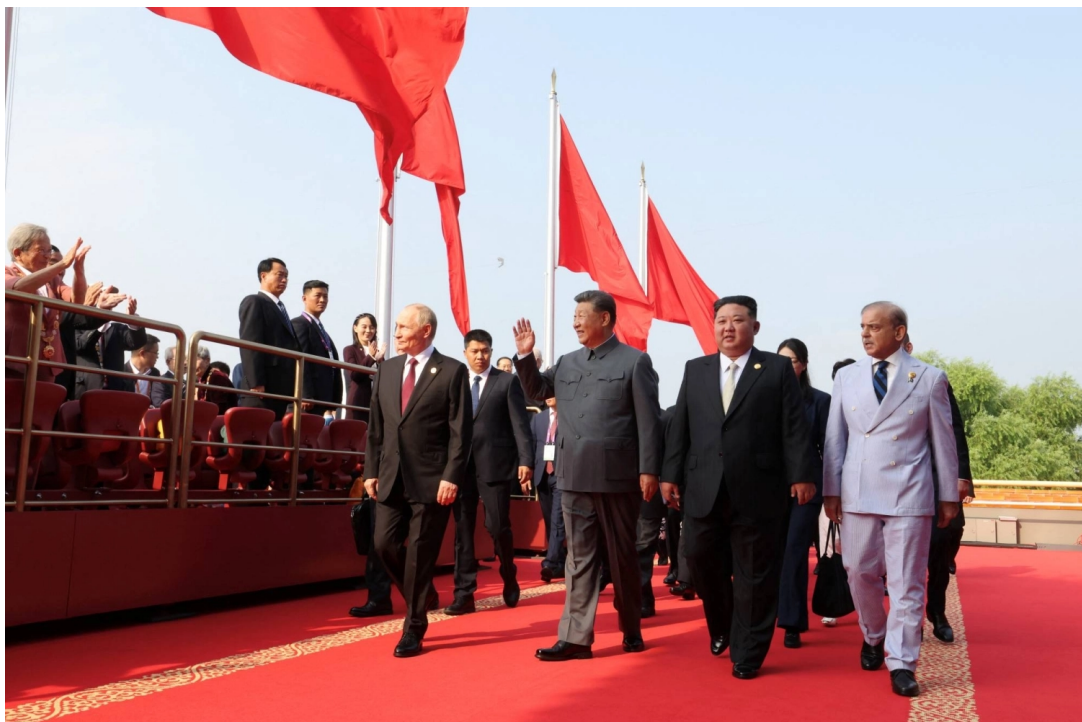
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COMMENTARY / WORLD

What the 'Chinamaxxing' crowd doesn't get

The illusion of control and why authoritarian resistance is inevitable



Chinese leader Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and others attend a military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II in Beijing on Sept. 3. | CNSPHOTO / VIA REUTERS

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Authoritarian regimes often project strength. But history suggests the opposite: Systems built on fear and political loyalty ultimately undermine the truth, trust and innovation that sustain lasting power.



To the casual observer scrolling through modern social media, the authoritarian bloc, often colloquially grouped as the CRINKS (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and their autocratic sympathizers), projects an aura of formidable efficiency. Unburdened by the messy, protracted debates of democratic legislatures, these regimes boast of hypersonic missiles, sprawling megacities and unified populaces.

To be fair, history and the contemporary record show that command economies can brute-force impressive results in highly targeted sectors. From the early Soviet triumphs in the space race to Beijing's current dominance in electric vehicle manufacturing and critical mineral processing, authoritarian systems can rapidly mobilize capital and labor toward top-down state priorities.

But this centralized mobilization is a double-edged sword. While it excels at scaling existing technologies, it fundamentally strangles the organic, decentralized innovation required for sustained, broad-based economic leadership. Beneath the veneer of absolute control lies a terminal rot. The concentration of power inherently concentrates corruption, breeding a systemic detachment from reality that makes internal resistance not merely possible but inevitable.

To understand the fragility of these regimes, one must first examine how authoritarianism destroys the very mechanisms of truth. In a state-directed system, rewards are tied to bureaucratic approval rather than market performance or objective success. This creates a fixed, zero-sum game in which rational actors respond with theater.

A recent analytical deep dive, aptly titled "From Sandpaper Chips to Exploding Rockets: The Inevitable Failure of Authoritarian Tech," perfectly encapsulates this dynamic. In 2003, Beijing proudly unveiled the Hanxin-1 chip, hailing it as a monumental breakthrough in domestic semiconductor manufacturing. It was



later exposed as a standard Motorola processor with its original logo literally sanded off.

This was not an isolated grift but the predictable outcome of a Nash equilibrium in authoritarian systems that favors illusion over genuine research and development. When survival and success depend on pleasing the party boss rather than the consumer, honest innovators are weeded out. We saw this historically with the catastrophic explosions of the Soviet N1 rockets and we see it today in the hollow lock-in of state-mandated technology that eventually collapses under fiscal reality. Organizations anchored to politics rather than objective reality inevitably prioritize appearances over truth.

This institutional decay inevitably bleeds into the social fabric, completely eroding trust. In his seminal work "Twilight," historian Hal Brands documents the internal contradictions that doomed the Soviet system. The paranoia of the state became so all-encompassing, and internal reporting so thoroughly falsified to appease superiors, that the KGB actually resorted to spying on the United States and the West just to figure out what was happening within its own borders. The Soviet leadership had built a surveillance apparatus so vast that it blinded itself to its own domestic decay.

Something similar is playing out in contemporary Russia, as depicted in the poignant documentary "Mr. Nobody Against Putin." The film follows an ordinary Russian teacher and village documentary producer navigating the Orwellian landscape of Putin's state following the illegal invasion of Ukraine. Surrounded by neighbors who do not know whom to trust and bombarded by state lies designed to manufacture consent for a disastrous war, the protagonist represents the quiet, inevitable grassroots resistance that authoritarianism breeds. When a state demands that its citizens live in a perpetual lie, it inadvertently creates dissidents



out of ordinary people who simply wish to acknowledge the truth. The concentration of power in Putin's hands has concentrated corruption to such a degree that the social contract is fundamentally broken.

Despite these glaring historical and contemporary failures, a bizarre phenomenon has taken root in Western digital spaces: "Chinamaxxing." This growing social media trend features influencers and commentators idealizing Chinese state efficiency under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party, or CCP, often juxtaposing heavily edited videos of pristine high-speed rail lines against the very real infrastructure and political dysfunction of the United States. Proponents of Chinamaxxing point to the chaotic domestic politics of the United States as proof that the democratic experiment is failing.

What this propaganda conveniently omits is the broader Indo-Pacific reality, specifically Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, Singapore. These nations have managed to develop rapidly, achieving technological supremacy and high standards of living without resorting to massive human rights abuses, the crushing of civil society, mass surveillance or the patriotic reeducation campaigns that are a feature, not an anomaly, of the CRINKS. These Indo-Pacific democracies prove that the rule of law, democratic institutions and an open society are the true prerequisites for sustained development and global credibility.

There are profound lessons here for the geopolitical architecture of the Indo-Pacific. For middle powers such as Japan, the contrast reaffirms that relationships based on mutual respect, transparency and the rule of law are far more durable than alliances forged through authoritarian coercion. Tokyo's commitment to a Free and Open Indo-Pacific is not merely a diplomatic slogan; it is a strategic necessity built on the understanding that open systems outlast closed ones.



But the United States, as the traditional anchor of this regional security architecture, has much to learn from the twilight of these autocratic systems. As American domestic politics wrestle with the temptation of more centralized executive power, a sentiment that gained significant traction under U.S. President Donald Trump and continues to echo in populist circles, Washington must heed the warnings of history. The allure of the “strongman” who can cut through bureaucratic red tape is a dangerous mirage.

From the perspective of Washington’s allies in Tokyo, Seoul and Taipei, American reliability is inextricably linked to its democratic resilience. If the United States continues down a trajectory that degrades its democratic institutions, attacks the free press and demands personal loyalty over objective competence, it risks mirroring the very institutional weaknesses it seeks to combat. An America that flirts with authoritarian impulses becomes an unpredictable, and therefore unreliable, partner in the Indo-Pacific.

If the past is any prologue, a nation that abandons its commitment to truth and institutional checks and balances may soon experience the same features described in Hal Brands’ “Twilight.” We risk creating a society in which our best minds must hide their work from political commissars, ordinary citizens are forced to navigate a labyrinth of state-sponsored lies and where our technological edge is reduced to the equivalent of sandpapered chips.

Authoritarian states project strength, but they are inherently brittle. They are inflexible, prone to catastrophic corruption and fundamentally at war with human nature. Internal resistance within the CRINKS is inevitable because the human desire for truth, trust and genuine progress cannot be permanently suppressed by a police state. The ultimate lesson for the free world is not to emulate the false efficiency of our adversaries but to



fiercely protect the open, messy and resilient democratic institutions that have always been our greatest strategic advantage.

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KEYWORDS

CRINKS([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/CRINKS](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/crinks)), CHINA ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/CHINA](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/china)), RUSSIA ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/RUSSIA](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/russia)), IRAN ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/IRAN](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/iran)), NORTH KOREA ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/NORTH-KOREA](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/north-korea)), SOVIET UNION([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/SOVIET-UNION](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/soviet-union)), KGB([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/KGB](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/kgb)), U.S. ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/US](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/us)), WEST ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/WEST](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/west)), VLADIMIR PUTIN ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/VLADIMIR-PUTIN](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/vladimir-putin)), UKRAINE([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/UKRAINE](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/ukraine)), CCP ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/CCP](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/ccp)), INDO-PACIFIC ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/INDO-PACIFIC](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/indo-pacific)), SOUTH KOREA([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/SOUTH-KOREA](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/south-korea)), TAIWAN([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/TAIWAN](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/taiwan)), FREE AND OPEN INDO-PACIFIC ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/FREE-AND-OPEN-INDO-PACIFIC](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/free-and-open-indo-pacific)), DONALD TRUMP ([HTTPS://WWW.JAPANTIMES.CO.JP/TAG/DONALD-TRUMP](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/donald-trump))

