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'Barbarizing' China in American Trade War Discourse  
--The Assault on Huawei<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract

How is the legitimization of the American trade war with China discursively managed and conferred in recent American political discourse? This paper critically examines this under-explored question in the current literature. Taking cues from critical international theory and its insight on discourse and foreign policy, I start by historicising the discursive practices, which I call 'barbarising China', in the construction of civilisation vs barbarism as a hierarchical opposition. Mapping authoritarian China onto this historically contingent liberal civilisational edifice, I argue, has prepared the ground for American political action in the trade war. Through a critical analysis of how China has been constructed as a 'barbarian' economic aggressor in recent American political discourse, I further argue that the 'political reality' and 'knowledge' this discursive practice produces serves not only the political imperative of legitimising American trade war policy choices, but also a particular need of the 'civilised' hegemon to legitimise its power and practices beyond the trade war. Through a close examination of a coordinated assault on Huawei, I illustrate how 'barbarising' China has been discursively done as an integral part of the trade war and assert that 'barbarising' China has become indispensable in American strategy to sustain its precarious hegemony.

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The escalating US-China trade war has been a subject of intense scholarly and policy interest since it was launched by the Trump administration in early 2018. The rapidly expanding literature on the subject has been preoccupied with assessing economic consequences of the trade war – for example, whether it would lead to the great decoupling of Chinese and American economies – and with evaluating its geostrategic implications for intensified global rivalry between the hegemon and its putative challenger. Intense debates also tackle a number of issues behind and beyond the trade war centring on two big questions: Is the trade war a prelude to a new Cold War between the United States and China? And does the trade war constitute an integral part of an ongoing race between these two strategic rivals for global technological supremacy? (Holland and Sam 2019; Johnson and Gramer 2020; Kaplan 2019; Li 2019; National Security Committee on Artificial Intelligence 2019; Pethokoukis 2020; Schneider-Petsinger et al 2019).

What is strikingly missing in the current literature is how the legitimization of the trade war is discursively managed and conferred in America's changing China policies. This paper addresses critically this under-explored question. For this purpose, I choose to conduct a critical examination in particular of how China has been discursively constructed as a post-modern-day 'barbarian' in political and normative terms as well as in its economic practices, which I call 'barbarizing' China. This analytical choice to give ontological priority to discourse is purposeful not just because of the potential explanatory power of discourse analysis. Equally importantly, it is informed by three key theoretical assumptions of critical international theory loosely connected to post-structuralism as summarized by Lene Hansen (2016, 95-110). First, power is discursive, i.e. discourse reproduces power and domination. Second, discourse creates political 'reality' as knowledge. A discourse, in the words of Roty (cited in Hansen 2016, 96), 'delineates the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular "reality" can be known and acted upon.' Third, foreign policy is a discursive practice, as foreign policies are dependent on particular representations of self (who undertakes these policies) and others (upon whom these policies are acted). It is through discourses that foreign policy actors seek to make their policy choices appear legitimate, necessary and appropriate. Analytically, this chosen focus on discourses necessitates an interpretivist methodology.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section historicizes the discursive practices, which I call 'barbarizing China', in the construction of civilization vs. barbarism as hierarchical opposition with an analytical focus on liberal discourses after the Cold War ranging from the 'end of history' to democracy and human rights as new standard of 'civilization'. Mapping authoritarian China onto this historically contingent liberal civilizational edifice, it is argued, has prepared the ground for and galvanized American political action in the trade war. The second section considers first the unstable representation of China as the Other of the liberal and democratic core in these discursive practices before turning to examine how rising China has been constructed as a new barbarian, an economic aggressor, in American trade war discourse. It argues that constructing China as an economic aggressor addresses the political imperative of legitimizing American policies in the trade war. It illustrates how different discourses of civilization vs. barbarism converge and overlay to represent China, a peer competitor of the United States in strategic, economic and normative terms, as a new barbarian along the confrontational boundaries of civilization vs. barbarism. Within this context, the third section looks at how the hegemon strikes back at the barbarian. It discusses in analytical detail what I see as a coordinated and the-whole-of-government assault on Huawei, a highly controversial and politicized corporate case, to demonstrate how 'barbarizing' China has been discursively done as an integral part of the trade war. Concluding remarks offer brief comments on how 'barbarizing' China is indispensable in creating a new China scare for the purpose of managing discursively the legitimation of the trade war and assert that 'barbarizing' China has become instrumentally and philosophically essential for the hegemon to sustain its precarious political, cultural, economic and military dominance in the twenty-first century global order.

### **Liberal Discourses of Civilization vs. Barbarism as a Hierarchical Opposition**

The genesis of civilization vs. barbarism as a constructed hierarchical opposition can be traced back to the antithesis between Greek and barbarian in Greek antiquity. In this tradition, the barbarian is the product of a civilizational discourse and functions as the inferior part in a hierarchical opposition that helps sustain the superiority of the civilized self. The barbarian, the opposite of civilization *par excellence* that

'threatens the frontiers of the civilized world and simultaneously sustained the self-definition of the latter' (Boletsi 2013: 67) is, however, a modern European construction originated in the Enlightenment, when civilization is increasingly understood as European civilization and identified with secular Europe itself. Equating civilization *per se* with the particular civilization of Europe strips the non-European worlds of any semblance of civilization. The ensuing sustained colonial and imperial encounters between Europe and the non-European worlds and interactions between their respective cultural systems can only be interpreted meaningfully in terms of confrontations between civilization and barbarism/semi-barbarism/savages. In the 'civilizing' and rapacious gaze of European imperial powers, non-European parts of the world are increasingly 'stigmatized as being inferior, backward, barbaric, effeminate, childish, despotic, and in need of enlightenment (Zakarol 2011, 54).' The codification of the standard of 'civilisation' in international law of the nineteenth century embodies a classical 'civilizing mission,' i.e. to compel the non-European worlds to fulfil the standard of 'civilisation' defined by the Europeans in order for them to acquire membership of the expanding European international society (Bull and Watson 1984; Gong 1984).

The rhetoric of civilization vs. barbarism in the public discourses of world politics after the Second World War is unsurprisingly rather muted, as nationalism and national self-determination norms rise to delegitimize colonialism/imperialism and to define legitimate statehood and rightful membership in the making of the 'post-imperial' and post-colonial international society. The UN General Assembly passes resolutions and declarations to uphold that no country would be discriminated against on the basis of 'civilisation'. The globalization of international society between 1945 and 1989, Gerry Simpson (2004, 272) asserts, is 'marked by a rejection of standards of civilization, culture and democracy as a criterion for membership of the international community'. As John Hobson (2012, 322) sharply observes, however, 'the old explicit Eurocentric trope of "civilization versus barbarism" effectively became replaced by the subliminal Eurocentric tropes of "tradition versus modernity" and "core versus periphery".'

The resurrection of civilization vs. barbarism hierarchical opposition in contemporary liberal discourses can be traced back to Francis Fukuyama's claim of the 'end of history' in 1989, *annus mirabilis* for liberals. In Fukuyama's words,

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government (Fukuyama 1989, 4).

This most compelling expression of liberal hubris at the end of the Cold War celebrates not only the elimination of a threatening ideology to liberalism but also resurrects historically discredited Enlightenment expectations of a universal civilization. The illusive Enlightenment idea of a universal history finds thus a contemporary incarnation in claims of an inexorable historical march towards liberalism as the apex of human progress on which all history will eventually converge. This discursively prepares ground for and is constitutive of, to borrow from John Gray (2000, 12), 'a "hubristic" and dangerous project of deploying the power of the state to promote a universal civilization,' i.e. that of using the historically unparalleled political, economic, cultural, and military power of the United States to promote liberal universalism. In practice, that led to a period of liberal internationalist political action at 'ordering' the world at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which largely ended in failure, ranging from liberal interventionism justified by the so-called Blair doctrine, liberating wars for regime change such as the Iraqi war, to an articulation and advocate of 'a new, more cuddly version of imperialism (Misra 2001)' and 'empire light (Ignatieff 2003).'

Liberal hubris following 'an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism (Fukuyama 1989, 3)' that ended the Cold War turned out to be, however, a source of hegemonic anxiety about American power, as the loss of American ideological identity followed quickly the collapse of the Soviet Union as the ideological Other. The legitimacy of the hegemon simply 'vanishes like a disappearing phantom' when there are no barbarians any longer (McClintock 2009: 55). The claim of a clash of civilizations, first articulated by Huntington (1993), was aimed at addressing such

anxiety caused by the 'enemy deficit' in the wake of liberal triumph in the 1990s. 'No universalist political project,' John Gray (2000, 14) averred, 'can do without enemies.'

For Huntington, the great political and ideological divides of the Cold War were replaced by a clash of civilizations. Global politics in this new era, in his words, 'is shaped by cultural and civilizational tides (Huntington 1996: 309).' The prospect of a universal civilization is still in constant struggle with forces of barbarism, as he warns that 'On a worldwide basis Civilization seems in many respects to be yielding to barbarism, generating the image of an unprecedented phenomenon, a global Dark Ages, possibly descending on humanity (Huntington 1996: 321).' The end of the Cold War, in other words, does not mean the end of barbarians or barbarism.

Huntington is nevertheless unequivocal that only the values of the West can lead this fight against barbarism. As Wendy Brown (2008: 411) critically observes, for Huntington, 'What will hold barbarism at bay is precisely what re-centres the West as the defining essence of civilization and what legitimates its efforts at controlling the globe'.

As if to fulfil Huntington's self-fulfilling prophesy, the civilized world appears to be at war – after 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington – with the world of evil: a networked world of global terror often associated implicitly and explicitly with Islamic fundamentalism. The Huntingtonian civilizational discourse was officially taken up by the White House, when George W. Bush (2001a: 1113) proclaims on 15 September 2001, 'a group of barbarians have declared war on the American people' in a civilization's fight. The United States, Bush (2001b: 1198) claims, 'is presenting a clear choice to every nation: Stand with the civilized world, or stand with the terrorists.' Consequently, the rhetoric of this post-9/11 civilizational discourse divides the world through a number of hierarchical oppositional pairs: 'America, civilization, freedom, liberty, justice, humanity, compassion' on one side, and 'terrorists, barbarism, evil, hatred, cruelty, and cowardice' on the other side. This opposition between civilization and barbarism is most confidently articulated when President Bush (2002: 165) states that the U.S. has 'a historic opportunity to fight a war that will not only liberate people from the clutches of barbaric behaviour but a war that can leave the world more peaceful in

the years to come.’ Such civilizational rhetoric discursively legitimizes violence and the use of military force both for ‘pre-emptive strike’ in defending Western citizens and their values against barbarism, and for a new kind of ‘civilizing mission’ of imposing liberal values on other cultures for the benefit of what is good for them. It necessitates ‘assertive liberalism’ in engaging in the morally ‘virtuous’ war (Sutch 2011, Banta 2011).

Parallel to the Fukuyamian and Huntingtonian civilizational discourses are discourses of democracy and human rights as new standard of ‘civilization’ as both a product and an expression of the unmatched hubris of liberal triumphalism after the Cold War. This particular strand of liberal ideas is articulated by a group of liberal scholars and captured in their writing in at least three closely inter-related lines of thinking. The first line of thinking tries to re-impose identity boundaries based on state’s commitment to two core liberal values, democracy and human rights. This line of thinking is explicit about the possibility of dividing the world into liberal and non-liberal zones, ‘with a liberal zone of law constituted by liberal states practicing a higher degree of legal civilization, to which other states will be admitted only when they met the requisite standards (Kingsbury 1999: 90).’ This civilized core is ‘projected as ordered, unified, lawful; a place where human rights flourished, while the rest of the world was variously portrayed as lawless, anarchic, chaotic, backward and dangerous (Simpson 2004: 279).’ Such division of the world into a liberal zone of law, order and justice vis-à-vis a non-liberal zone of violence, injustice and chaos is seen not just as an emerging reality but also as a morally and normatively defensible proposition that discursively justifies and legitimates an extraordinary range of interventionist and intrusive or otherwise coercive activities in the non-liberal zone in promoting the advancement of the backward and the barbaric. ‘To resist the liberal order’, in the words of Andrew Hurrell (2006: 7), ‘is to risk being categorized together with rogue regimes and with the enemies of economic and political freedom’.

The second line of thinking falls within what Gerry Simpson (2004) calls ‘liberal anti-pluralism’, which seeks to reopen ‘the barbarian option’ in the conception and constitution of international society after the Cold War. As Anne-Marie Slaughter



(1995, 504) claims, 'The most distinctive aspect of Liberal international relations theory is that it permits, indeed, mandates, a distinction among different types of states, based on their domestic political structure and ideology'. The idea here is that states must be distinguished by their democratic credentials, for norms of liberal democracy are regarded as defining qualities of international order. For Slaughter, international law in a (hypothetical) world of liberal states must, by the same logic, distinguish 'the model of law among liberal States' from 'a corollary set of expectations concerning legal relations between liberal and non-liberal States (Slaughter 1995, 534, 515).' This idea is further reinforced in the 'democracy as civilization' discourse in which non-democracies are represented as the so-called '(post)modern-day barbarians (Hobson 2008),' the ontological Other for liberal democracies. This gives the existence of non-democratic states a perennial sociological feature of international society and a particular political meaning 'more for what they are than what they have done (Donnelly 2004, 147).' As liberal democracy is presented as '*the* legitimate form of domestic governance in international politics (Hobson 2008, 76 Italics in the original)' and 'the most advanced historical form of polity (Reus-Smit 2005, 76),' the 'Concert of Democracies' is naturally the vanguard of global international society. Such representation epitomises the contemporary version of the 'charmed circle' in international society, which occupies the core of a concentric circle surrounded by non-democracies and illiberal states with various shades of civilizational attributes, which are to be disciplined, democratized and/or civilized. As John Ikenberry (2018, 11) puts it, 'there is an expectation that a liberal international order will move states in a progressive direction, defined in terms of liberal democracy.'

The third line of thinking, consequently, attempts to create unequal sovereigns by proposing 'differential treatment where the boundaries of the liberal zone are crossed, conferring privileges based on membership in the liberal zone (Kingsbury 1999: 91).' It criticizes classical international law for 'its fastidious concern for state sovereignty and sovereign equality', and for 'failing to distinguish between the rights of decent states and indecent ones (Franck 2006, 89).' The claim of 'a greater moral reliability [of liberal democracies] than other states in international relations' is used to justify what Reus-Smit (2005, 72) calls 'the formal rehierarchisation of

international society', in which 'democratic states would gain special governance rights – particularly with regard to the legitimate use of force – and other states would have their categorical rights to self-determination and non-intervention qualified.' In Philip Bobbitt's constitutional theory, 'If a state is not democratic and does not protect human rights (like Iraq), then its "cloak of sovereignty" should no longer protect it from military intervention (Mann 2004, 632).' These calls and claims are responsible for creating the notion of differentiated sovereignties – conditional sovereignty, contingent sovereignty, and qualified sovereignty, for example – for so-called 'rogue states' or 'wayward states' outside the self-claimed core of global international society. Such conceptions of an existentially unequal sovereigns in international society have ominous and disturbing resonance to the concept of 'graduated sovereignties' invoked and exercised in legitimating the liberal shifts to empire imperialism in the name of *La Mission Civilisatrice* in the nineteenth century international history (Hobson 2014).

### **China's as a New Barbarian already inside the Gate**

The brief analysis above has teased out the historicity of civilization vs. barbarism as a constructed and constantly reproduced binaries and hierarchies. It should be also clear that the contemporary liberal discursive construction of the civilization vs. barbarism edifice after the Cold War, though historically highly contingent, has demonstrated the power that discursive practices have asserted in global politics. Most importantly in the context of our discussions here, it is one of 'the key [discursive] representations (Hansen 2016, 103)', that has structured, influenced, and conditioned the debates on the rise of China by representing rising China as a 'problem' to be resolved. 'Knowledge' produced by such representation enables political actors to ascribe a particular identity to China through mapping China onto the liberal edifice of civilization vs. barbarism. In this sense, this discursive practice has arguably prepared the ground for and galvanized American political action in the trade war with China.

Where exactly has China been consigned to in this civilization vs. barbarism edifice of hierarchical opposition constructed by contemporary liberal discourses, then? There is no question that China – a rising authoritarian, nationalistic, and dissatisfied

power with an illiberal regime – has played an indispensable role in the historical formation and political renewal of liberal ‘Greater West’, as it has been invoked frequently as the dichotomic Other to sustain the self-definition of the latter. In the Huntingtonian ‘paramount axis of world politics’ after the Cold War, i.e. the West vis-à-vis the rest (Huntington 1993, 48), China belongs decidedly to the (uncivilized) rest. The answer to the above question is not, however, as straightforward and obvious as it immediately suggests.

It is true that Huntington (1993, 45-48) claims that ‘conflict between civilizations will supplant ideological and other forms of conflict as the dominant global form of conflict’ and that ‘a central focus of conflict for the immediate future will be between the West and several Islamic-Confucian states.’ In his words, an evolving Confucian-Islamic connection ‘has emerged to challenge Western interests, values and power.’ It is true that after its brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators on the Tiananmen Square in 1989, China became a pariah state, a barbarian that grossly violated human rights norms. In the US debates about China in the 1990s, Alastair Johnston (2003: 5) observes, ‘the subtext is a fairly sharp othering of China that includes a civilizing discourse (China is not yet a civilized state).’ It is also true that in the liberal discourse of democracy as civilization, authoritarian China is represented more as a ‘post-modern-day barbarian’ than as a revisionist power, since ‘the democratic core of Western ideology delegitimizes China’s authoritarian government (Allan, Vucetic and Hopf 2018, 843).’ Beijing’s increasingly repressive domestic politics and its defiance of democracy and human rights norms as seen in its harsh repression of pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong and its mass detention of Uighurs in Xinjiang have only reinforced this delegitimation.

In this sense, ‘The return of history and the end of dreams’ (Kaplan 2008) triggered by the autocratic revival exemplified by the rise of China could well be recast more appropriately as ‘the return of barbarians and the beginning of liberal nightmare’. In a thinly veiled language of civilization vs. barbarism couched in terms of identity politics, Allan, Vucetic and Hopf (2018) invokes the question of identity to argue that China’s authoritarian identity poses a major ideational barrier to its eventual acceptance as a new global hegemon, because Western publics who adhere to a

democratic and liberal order are unlikely to consent to a leadership of an authoritarian China. They further claim that 'If the identities of rising states and the hegemonic ideology are inconsistent, rising states are unlikely to enter the order as full members (Allan, Vucetic and Hopf 2018, 864).' In this conception of a 'civilized' world of a concentric formation dominated by the hegemonic ideology of liberal West, China, as well as other non-Western rising states, are assigned to the periphery with only partial membership because of various shades of ideological inconsistency.

Such construction of China as a new barbarian outlined above is, however, at best unstable. In the new civilizational discourse after 9/11 formulated in George W. Bush's famous dictum of good vs. evil, China is clearly seen as standing on the side of the civilized world against the evil in the global war on terror. China also has complex, contradictory and often contentious relationship with the liberal world order because it has selectively and substantively adapted itself to 'an unusually dense, encompassing, and broadly endorsed system of rules and institutions' of liberal world order, which is 'unusually accessible, legitimate, and durable (Ikenberry 2008, 28-30).' China, in other words, has interacted in 'polymorphic ways ... with the liberal world order and its main institutions, rules and protagonists (Graff et al. 2019, 202).' It has embraced capitalist imperatives in its economic development and in transnationalizing the Chinese political economy. This success of China, 'a leading beneficiary of this liberal international order (Campbell and Ratner 2018, 67),' has helped to widen notably the appeal of 'a deterritorialized global capitalism made up of flows, fluxes, networked connections and transnational production networks (Hurrell and Sengupta 2012, 455-456).' The economic transformation of China, in other words, is constitutive of the globalized capitalist order at the same time when rising China, more authoritarian and repressive under Xi Jinping, is regarded as a heavy drag to the inexorable historical march towards a universal civilization, liberal universalism.

In the most recent discourse of American policy towards China, this glaring contradiction in the political and economic transformation of China is widely framed as the failure of American strategy/policy of engagement with China ever since the

Clinton Administration in the 1990s, if not Nixon's opening of China in 1972. America's China reckoning, Campbell and Ratner (2018, 61-62) claim, is that American policies are based on the false premise that 'U.S. power and hegemony could readily mould China to the United States' liking.' In reality, however, not only 'Diplomatic and commercial engagement have not brought political and economic openness,' but also 'the liberal order has failed to lure or bind China as powerfully as expected.' In the words of then Vice President Mike Pence (2018), 'Previous administrations made this [engagement policy] choice in the hope that freedom in China would expand in all of its forms—not just economically, but politically, with a newfound respect for classical liberal principles, private property, personal liberty, religious freedom – the entire family of human rights. But that hope has gone unfulfilled.' An emerging dominant narrative in American China policy posits that the American engagement strategy/ policy designed to liberalize and democratize the Chinese political system has largely failed (Johnston 2019). The United States, and more broadly the West, simply 'got China wrong', as a lead article in *Economist* puts it. 'It bet that China would head towards democracy and the market economy. The gamble has failed (Economist 2018).'

Such caricature of American engagement strategy/ policy as a new civilizing mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century contributes to legitimizing Trump's launch of a trade war against China in early 2018. It triggers a discursive construction of China as a new barbarian of a different nature in the American trade war discourse. More specifically, China is accused of not just practising 'unfair trade' but more disturbingly an economic aggression designed to weaken the United States in the 2017 US National Security Strategy (The White House 2017). The White House Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy (2018) claims that 'China's economic aggression threatens the technologies and intellectual property of the United States and the World,' and that 'Chinese actors are the most active and persistent perpetrators of economic espionage.' The IP Commission 2019 Review levels a broad range of accusations at China in claiming that

China engages in systematic economic espionage through a variety of means including cyber-espionage, evasion of export control laws, counterfeiting and

piracy, reverse engineering, forced tech transfers, investment and licensing restrictions, data localization requirements, discriminatory IP protections, collection of science and technology information by Chinese nationals at universities, labs, and companies, and investments in private companies and university R&D programs (The IP Commission 2019, 2).

This is echoed in one lead article in *The Economist* (2019), which simply alleges that ‘The country [China] is a prodigious hacker. It has purloined everything from the plans for the F-35, an advanced fighter jet, to a database of millions of American civil servants’ and that ‘it [China] has conducted a “vast” and “unrelenting” campaign targeting dozens of Western companies and government agencies’. Such Chinese economic aggression is said to be also part of a tech war China engages in in its rivalry for technological supremacy with the United States; particularly in an AI arms race and an arms race in quantum computing. The same goes for the ‘Made in China 2025’ program and ‘The Thousand Talents Plan’ launched by the Chinese government, which must be stopped (The White House 2018).

In these official and public narratives, therefore, China has been represented as a post-modern-day barbarian in its economic practice in at least four dimensions: 1. As a ‘trade cheat’ that engages in unfair trading practices, 2. As a thief that steals intellectual property rights, 3. As a hacker that loots commercial secrets through cyber espionage, and 4. As a villain that uses coercive means to force technological transfer. China’s economic growth, one White House document alleges, ‘has been achieved in significant part through aggressive acts, policies, and practices that fall outside of global norms and rules (The White House 2018, 1).’ These ‘very pernicious actions (Robert Lighthizer cited in Swanson and Bradsher 2019)’ can no longer be tolerated. China’s economic rise, in short, is no longer to be celebrated but feared. It must be delegitimized and slowed down, if it cannot be stopped altogether.

This emerging image of China as ‘a new barbarian’ is further projected by the US accusation of Beijing backtracking its commitments in US-China trade negotiations, reneging on its earlier promises in May 2019 (Swanson and Bradsher 2019); by the suggestion that China cannot be trusted to honor the trade agreement even if there is one; and by Joe Biden, the then Democratic Presidential candidate, explicitly calling

Xi Jinping 'a thug', 'a guy who doesn't have a democratic — with a small d — bone in his body' (Financial Times 2020). This representation of China as 'a new barbarian' facilitates the construction of China as an untrustworthy, irrational and dangerous Other rather than a legitimate strategic competitor for the United States. Such a representation is uncannily reminiscent of an Orientalist discourse in the nineteenth century when the Chinese are presented as 'idiotic', 'treacherous', 'insidious', 'devious', 'stubborn', and 'lacking moral standard', who steal and lie; and whose government is 'arrogant', 'jealous', 'irrational', and therefore 'dangerous' (Ringmar 2013).

To the extent that Mike Pompeo (2019b) is correct in claiming that President Donald Trump 'has changed the global conversation on China,' the new barbarian that the United States and the West has been fearfully waiting for has finally arrived. The new barbarian has arrived, however, not at the gate, but inside the gate of the liberal world order dominated by American power. Worse still, it is engagement with the West that 'has enabled China to grow richer, more quickly than would otherwise have been possible,' Aaron Friedberg (2018) claims. It is this unintended consequence of the American engagement policy that proves its ultimate failure. The liberal project to 'civilize' China has simply gone awry!

This construction, and representation, of China as a new barbarian may have fulfilled the need of the hegemonic and 'civilized' United States for a sense of peril to go on and for an external negative and barbaric Other through which it can measure, strengthen, and legitimize its power and practices. But it also spells a deeply-felt fear of the end of its unchallenged domination by the hegemon, as it now clings to a diminishing base of political, economic and technological power. Now that the barbarian can no longer be kept at bay, the hegemon is justified to fight barbarism with barbaric tactics and practices such as unilateral imposition of tariffs, the assault on global trade system, and aggressive decoupling of the world's two largest economies (Bown and Irvin 2021). The arrival of China as a new barbarian has thus produced a real trauma for the United States, which lies in the uncertainty of future challenge/threat this new barbarian may represent for the hegemon and for the liberal world order. Such traumatism, to borrow Jacques Derrida, 'is produced by

the *future*, by the *to come*, by the threat of the worst *to come*, rather than by an aggression that is “over and done with” (Borradori 2003, 97, emphasis in the original).

### **The Assault on Huawei**

Unsurprisingly, the hegemon is striking back at the barbarian. One of the most compelling examples of such strike-back is to make Huawei, the world leader in 5G technology, a flashpoint in the trade war. The assault on Huawei started with the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, Huawei’s chief financial officer and daughter of its founder, Ren Zhengfei, in Canada in December 2018. Meng was arrested at the request of the US government to extradite her to the United States for criminal trial. The Department of Justice’s criminal indictment charges Meng and Huawei with violating US sanctions on Iran and with ‘theft of trade secrets conspiracy, attempted theft of trade secrets, seven counts of wire fraud and one count of obstruction of justice (DoJ 2019).’ This is followed by an intensive global campaign by the Trump administration to claim and convince its allies and the world that using Huawei technologies poses a national security threat to the United States, and more broadly to other liberal democracies. It has since actively lobbied American allies to ‘link their arms’ to ban Huawei from their critical digital infrastructure construction. Speaking in London in May 2019, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (2019a) warned his hosts that using Huawei technology in British 5G networks could allow China not only to access valuable data but also ‘to divide Western alliances through bits and bytes, not bullets and bombs’ through the control the Internet of the future.

It is also in May 2019 that President Trump signed an executive order that blocks U.S. businesses from using equipment and services made by companies controlled by ‘adversary governments’, clearly aimed at China and Huawei. On the same day, the Department of Commerce placed Huawei and sixty-eight of its affiliates on its BIS (Bureau of Industry and Security) Entity List, to which U.S. companies may not sell components without government approval. Subsequently, Google announced that it would no longer provide the Android mobile operating system to Huawei smartphones. Four other major U.S. technology companies, namely, Broadcom, Intel, Qualcomm, and Xilinx, almost stopped supplying equipment to Huawei (Segal



2019). In February 2020, the Department of Justice took an unusual step to charge Huawei with conspiracy to violate the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO), a 1970 law designed to fight against organized crimes (DoJ 2020; Yu 2020). In August 2020, the Department of Commerce expanded its restrictions to limit Huawei's use of chips made using American software and equipment, because, in the words of Wilbur Ross, the Secretary of Commerce, 'Huawei and its affiliates have worked through third parties to harness US technology in a manner that undermines US national security and foreign policy interests (DoC 2020).'

What explains this brutal assault on Huawei as the prime target of the Trump administration in the trade war? As Jeffrey Sachs (2018) notes, many American and foreign corporations and financial institutions violated American sanctions against Iran, but none of the CEO or CFO of these sanction busting corporations and institutions were arrested. JP Morgan Chase, for example, 'paid \$88.3 million in fines in 2011 for violating US sanctions against Cuba, Iran, and Sudan. Yet Jamie Dimon wasn't grabbed off a plane and whisked into custody.' In terms of intellectual property disputes, Huawei claims to have a better record than Apple and Samsung. 'According to public records, from 2009 to 2019,' Huawei asserts (2020), 'Apple was involved in 596 intellectual property lawsuits and Samsung in 519,' whereas 'Huawei was involved in 209.' There are also claims that President Trump has made Huawei a bargaining chip in his trade war.

A more credible answer lies probably in the fact that Huawei has become telecommunication technological pacesetters and has, by most accounts, taken the lead in the race to develop 5G technology as a critical piece of future national infrastructure and the central digital eco-system of the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy. Huawei also plays an increasing role in creating global technical standard for 5G. If and when China rules the web, Adam Segal (2018, 10) claims, Beijing will 'secure the economic, diplomatic, national security, and intelligence benefits that once flowed to Washington' and will try 'remaking cyberspace in its own image.' Washington is therefore fearful that with the leadership in 5G technology and transformative connectivity they promise, Beijing will replace Washington as the world's premier

intelligence power and perhaps even deny Washington access to the networks that make global commerce and the projection of military power possible. Chinese intelligence agencies, following the example set by their American counterparts, may capitalize on the central role that Chinese technologies and companies play in global digital network infrastructure construction to gather crucial intelligence and to spy on its adversaries. 5G, in other words, is turning increasingly into a geopolitical battleground between the United States and China. This brutal war, therefore, as candidly admitted by Adam Segal (2019), is ‘a gambit in a larger battle over the future of the digital world,’ pure and simple.

How is this brutal assault on Huawei justified and legitimized in the American trade war discourse, then? Put it more specifically, how is the legitimation of this brutal assault on Huawei discursively managed? At a more general level, there is a purposive, one suspects also orchestrated, discursive construction of Huawei at best as an untrustworthy source of technologies, and at worst as the direct instrument in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party for intelligence and data gathering, potentially giving Beijing the capability to shut down key digital networks of the United States in the event of war. Huawei constitutes now a national security threat to the United States and the liberal democracies also because ‘China is seeking to export digital autocracy through its telecommunication giant, Huawei (Pelosi 2020).’ This discursive construction has more specifically four thrusts. In the first place, Huawei’s technologies are said to constitute a national security threat to the United States and others because Huawei may intentionally install ‘backdoors’ or other vulnerabilities in the equipment it manufactures and supplies. These ‘backdoors’ can be used by Huawei to gather data for spying purposes, whereas built-in vulnerabilities allow hackers to steal technologies and information. Mike Pence, according to *Economist* (2019), ‘publicly warned that Huawei’s gear could contain malicious code – the so-called “backdoors” designed to let Chinese spies snoop on communications, or even bring down networks altogether.’ Gordon Sondland, US Ambassador to EU, put it more bluntly and sensationally in February 2019 when he asserted that if

Someone from the Politburo in Beijing picks up the phone and says “I wanna listen in on the following conversation, I wanna run a certain car off the road that’s on the 5G network and kill the person that’s in it,” there’s nothing that company legally can do today in China to prevent the Chinese government from making that request successfully (quoted in Von Der Burchard 2019).

It is true that Article 7 of China’s National Intelligence Law, released in June 2017, does stipulate that

All organizations and citizens shall, in accordance with the law, support, cooperate with, and collaborate in national intelligence work, and guard the secrecy of national intelligence work they are aware of. The state will protect individuals and organizations that support, cooperate with, and collaborate in national intelligence work (Chinese Ministry of Justice, 2017).

Huawei has, however, categorically denied that it has ever received any request for the Chinese government for collecting data from its equipment and networks and repeatedly said that its products posed no greater cybersecurity risk than those of any other vendor. In an interview with CBS News in February 2019, Ren Zhengfei, the Founder of Huawei, was quoted saying that ‘For the past 30 years, we have never done that, and the next 30 years to come, we will never do that (CBS News, 2019).’

So far Washington has not, however, provided any convincing public evidence that Huawei has intentionally ‘rigging its hardware or spying on behalf of the Chinese government (Williams 2019).’ There are doubts that Washington has shared much evidence in private with its allies, either. A ‘dossier’ on Huawei presented by a delegation of senior US officials to their counterparts in the UK in January 2020 contains ‘no smoking gun’ incriminating Huawei (Corera 2020; See also Williams 2019). In the eight years of operation of the Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre established in 2010 in the UK and funded by Huawei, British inspectors say that they have never found a backdoor. Huawei pointed out, not without a degree of pride that ‘its equipment has survived repeated and intrusive checks by one of the most capable electronic-intelligence agencies in the West (Economist 2019).’ As John Suffolk, Huawei’s Global Cyber Security & Privacy Officer, ruefully noted in April 2019, ‘Snowden revealed all kind of things going on with American technology’, but ‘No

one has revealed anything that we do [is bad] (MacAskill 2019).’ As revealed by Snowden, it is the U.S. National Security Agency that had since 2007 been operating a covert program against Huawei, which involved breaking into Huawei’s internal networks, including headquarter networks and founder Ren Zhengfei’s communications (Sanger and Perlroth 2014).

Second, Huawei is alleged to have a close link with the Chinese military and China’s state security apparatus. Such linkage is often traced back to Ren Zhengfei, Huawei’s founder, who worked as a soldier and then an officer in the PLA Engineering Corps between 1974 and 1983 (Medeiros et al 2004). A report by the US House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in 2012 also claimed that it had ‘received internal Huawei documentation from former Huawei employees showing that Huawei provides special network services to an entity the employee believes to be an elite cyberwarfare unit within the PLA (Hille, McGregor and Taylor 2012).’ Huawei’s former Chairwoman, Sun Yafang, one report by the CIA-based Open Source Centre alleged, had worked for China’s Ministry of State Security Communications Department before joining the company (Gertz 2011). Huawei’s involvement in defence-related research and development, in dual-use technological developments such as the 863 program and in initiatives related to China’s national strategy of civil-military fusion are also frequently cited as evidence of Huawei’s close but opaque connections with the Chinese military. By the extension of the same logic, would Microsoft’s multibillion-dollar contract with the Pentagon to construct Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure (JEDI) cloud service prove that Microsoft has close link with the US military? On closer examination, all these claims are substantiated at best only by circumstantial evidence. Ren Zhengfei’s previous military experience involving the PLA is well known public knowledge. Huawei’s alleged connections with the Chinese military that the provided evidence suggests are at best tenuous.

Third, it is the alleged CCP ‘penetration’ of Huawei’s corporate governance structure. It is reported that as early as in 2007, there were more than 300 CCP Party branches in the Huawei corporate structure, with more than 12,000 CCP party members. Zhou Daiqi, Huawei’s current Party Secretary, serves also as Chief Ethics & Compliance Officer and Director of the Corporate Committee of Ethics and Compliance (Kania

2018). Such ‘penetration’, it is claimed, enhances the CCP’s potential ability to exploit Huawei’s reach with or without the company’s complicity or foreknowledge. This is especially true as the CCP under Xi Jinping openly seeks deeper ‘fusion’ between the party–state apparatus and business enterprises and has appreciably strengthened its attempts to exercise greater control and influence over China’s dynamic tech sector. This raises serious questions about the extent to which Huawei can operate as a corporate entity with real independence. As one Huawei executive explained at a hearing at the US Congress back in 2012, however, the Party committees and branches were established within Huawei as requested by the Company Law of the People’s Republic of China (U.S. Congress 2012, 22-23). It should be noted that Huawei is not unique in this CCP ‘penetration’. Almost every major privately-owned Chinese tech company—including Alibaba, Baidu, iFlytek, Tencent, and Xiaomi, among others—has party branches and/or committees embedded in their corporate governance structure. Accordingly, the risk, if any, lies not with Huawei *per se*, but with the authoritarian Party-state. Nevertheless, the opaque nature of Huawei’s governance structure, which boasts little transparency regarding the extent to which the CCP exercises influence over the company’s direction and decision-making, clearly does not help.

Fourth, Huawei is said to be at the behest of the Chinese government because it is ‘effectively state-owned’, even though Huawei is putatively privately owned and has a well-publicized employee ownership scheme. This is because its employee-ownership is held by a trade union committee, which, like all trade union committees in China, are required to be associated with a labour federation tied to the Communist Party. It is also because Huawei is said to have received and continue to receive policy support and subsidies from Beijing, in part to promote Huawei as a ‘national champion’ to exercise leadership in technological innovation in one of seven strategically important industries that the Chinese government has identified in its economic strategical development plan. Its ‘independence’ as a technological company is therefore questionable and questioned. It simply cannot be trusted to be free of Chinese state influence. ‘Huawei’s global expansion, in and of itself, therefore, can only serve as a vector for extending Beijing’s global influence’ (Kania 2018).

The case against Huawei has clearly been made 'clearer than truth', as Dean Acheson would have it (Zakaria 2020). Huawei is, however, only emblematic of the CCP as 'the central threat of our times', as is bluntly put by Pompeo (Quoted in Santora 2020), and of the Chinese state, which 'wants to be the dominant economic and military power of the world, spreading its authoritarian vision for society and its corrupt practices worldwide' (Pompeo as quoted in Taylor 2019). At the Munich Security Conference 2020, Nancy Pelosi warned European leaders that if they let Huawei construct 5G communication infrastructure, they will 'choose autocracy over democracy on the information highway,' and ceding the control of 5G communications to an anti-democratic government amounts to the 'most insidious form of aggression (Financial Times 2020).' That perhaps explains why Trump is reported to have been 'apoplectic' over the sovereign decision of the British government, its closest ally, to use Huawei in parts of the UK 5G networks (Payne and Manson 2020). The expansive intervention of the American President, Vice-president, Congressional leaders and the Secretary of State in the assault on a Chinese corporate conglomerate and in constructing Huawei as a threat to American national security is nothing short of extraordinary and exceptional. It must be no small a consolation for the Trump administration, when the British government engineered a sharp U-turn of its previous policies in July 2020 to decide to ban Huawei completely from the UK's 5G networks (Reuters 2020).

### **Concluding remarks**

The assault on Huawei sees the overlaying of two mutually reinforcing discursive practices, both of which serve the purpose of 'barbarizing' China, i.e. post-Cold War liberal discourses of civilization vs. barbarism as a hierarchical opposition, which serve to delegitimize authoritarian and despotic Chinese regime as the Other of the democratic core; and a recent trade war discourse representing rising China as a new barbarian that engages in economic aggression. To the extent the meme of a barbaric China in its economic (mal)practices has now been widely accepted as political 'reality' in popular discourses and 'factual knowledge' in daily report of print and social media alike, the caricature of rising China as a threat has a newly added dimension of barbarity for American foreign policies to act upon. An economically prosperous (yet barbaric) China now poses a serious threat to America because of its

economic aggression, which is said to have deprived the United States of continued economic prosperity and security even when both continue to benefit from an unprecedented and deeply entangled economic interdependence.

Framed in civilizational terms, strategic competition between the United States and China becomes a contest between civilization and barbarism. China is stigmatized as both outside civilization and opposed to civilization. There simply cannot be moral equivalence between the barbarian (rising China) and the civilized (hegemonic US) even if they both engage in, for example, electronic surveillance and cyber espionage in equal measure. Remember that it was Americans that put more than 20 spying devices in a Boeing 767 purchased by the Chinese government for use by President Jiang Zemin back in 2002 (BBC 2002)! It is NSA, as revealed by Snowden, that conducted covert operations against Huawei, not the other way around! The discursive language used to relegate China to the immoral and barbaric sphere of global economic practices valorizes the United States, while othering China, encoding the superiority of the former. It portrays the 21<sup>st</sup> century China as a new civilizing project for the US and the West.

In representing China, a peer competitor of the United States in strategic, economic and normative terms, as the civilization's Other along the confrontational boundaries of civilization vs. barbarism, the notion of civilisation itself becomes 'a claim to power as well as a justification for violence (Mazower 2006, 553).' These civilizational discourses function as a cloak of American domination to sanction illiberal policies against China. The Trump administration's unilateral trade war is therefore self-justifying, and the legitimation of its attempted decoupling of American and Chinese economies is in this way discursively conferred. China must be punished by whatever means the hegemon deems necessary and appropriate, as the Trump Administration's attempts to ban TikTok and WeChat in the United States further demonstrate (Gertz 2020). Geopolitical goals of the hegemon can therefore be legitimately pursued through a tech war such as the assault on Huawei. In short, a newly constructed distinction between the civilized and the barbaric becomes instrumentally and philosophically essential for the hegemon to retain its political, cultural, and military dominance in the twenty-first century global order.

In this reading, 'barbarizing' China has become indispensable in creating a new China scare (Zakaria 2020) produced by the fear of the worst *to come* as part of the American strategy to sustain its precarious hegemony.

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