

The Sovereignist Zeitgeist Binding Budapest, Beijing, and America First

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About the Author



Dr. Eric Hendriks, a Dutch sociologist, researches China's integration into the global order, keenly interested in the ideological tensions involved. He is working on a book about contemporary Chinese world conceptions and how these seek to challenge liberal, Western-centric views of world order. Hendriks has studied at Utrecht, Berkeley, Göttingen, and the University of Chicago, earned his Ph.D. from the University of Mannheim, and worked at the University of Bonn and Peking University. Hendriks lived in Beijing for six years, researching the educational linkages between China and the United States. He is also a public intellectual and published over seventy essays for Dutch, German, and English-language media. His writings have appeared in the NRC, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Quillette, Quadrant, and Times Higher Education.

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Abstract

How can Budapest maintain such close relationships with both Beijing and Washington? Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán Viktor and US President Donald Trump are friends, while Hungary seems also to have the best China ties of all EU member states. Some observers rationalise that Orbán and Trump get along so well because they are both national conservatives, whereas Hungary-China ties must be all about economics. Yet, that is false. Shared ideas about the changing world order are important in the relationship between Budapest and Beijing—and they can play that role also because some of the most fundamental ideas about the political world common to national conservatives in Hungary and the US are espoused by China's political and academic elites, too. Despite and through their antagonism, Xi's China and Trump's America awaken a world of multipolarity and neo-Romantic national particularisms, the order of which grounds in sovereignty. Hence, instead of being caught in a balancing act, Hungarian foreign policy stands firmly in the middle of an emerging sovereigntist Zeitgeist. It is avant-garde, not adrift.



Afang Palace. (Chester Beatty Library, Dublin).

Introduction

A Zeitgeist is like water to fish: you swim in it. Hence, an emerging Zeitgeist is hard to detect. Never are you entirely outside of it. Never does it stand in front of you. Instead, it nests in your priorities, assumptions, and the way you perceive. Yes, the great conflicts of our times: those can be all too noticeable in their surface manifestations. But the deeper accords behind the conflicts, the secret alignments that set the conceptual stage upon which the disagreements play out? Those remain obscure. Thesis and antithesis, violently clashing, make themselves heard, though they can still be misunderstood; the true challenge, though, is to spot the silent synthesis sneaking into the shared background assumptions of the rivals. It is what ushers in the New Era.

We have all noticed the rivalry between Beijing and Washington. Fiercely ‘America first,’ the Trumpists out-hawk everyone in their China rhetoric. Intuitively, then, you would surmise that the ‘America first’ worldview nowhere substantially overlaps with Xi Jinping thought, China’s state doctrine. But there is such overlap.

Underneath the polemics, power struggles, and vilification—which, regrettably, is mutual and far from harmless—is a shared rejection of the liberal consensus that captivated the West and Westernised elites since the early 1990s; a rejection of its self-centric liberal universalism and claim to the future of humanity, of its anti-nationalism, its dogmatically individualistic image of man and society. Despite and through their antagonism, Xi’s China and Trump’s America awaken a world of multipolarity and neo-Romantic national particularisms, the order of which grounds in sovereignty.

This also sheds new light on Hungary, which maintains good relations with both Trump and Xi’s government. Instead of being caught in a contradictory balancing act, with antagonistic forces pulling the country in different directions, as in the typical depiction of the country’s foreign policy, Hungary stands firmly in the middle of the emerging sovereignist Zeitgeist. Hungarian foreign policy is avant-garde, not

adrift. So, what constitutes our times’ emerging Zeitgeist? Here are three fundamental ideas about the political world that you could uncontroversially bring up in national conservative circles in Budapest and the United States, including among America first Trumpists, and among academics and politicians in China.

1) We have hit an axial moment in history as the liberal era ends and a sovereignist-multipolar world order is dawning, one in which the USA is a great country, not the world’s policeman, nor the upholder of liberal universalism.

2) The central units of international politics are sovereign nation-states, while the greatest units of culture are civilisations, neither of which can be overwritten with an abstract, universalistic political model.

3) Peace relies on sovereignty, respect for political and cultural borders, and the absence of ideological bloc formation—and not on the maintenance, whether through moralism and diplomatic pressure or exogenous regime changes, of something like a ‘liberal world order.’

I base my comparative observations on the analysis of 1) the latest two ‘Tusványos’ addresses by Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán Viktor; 2) the book *Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity* by Political Director Orbán Balázs (no family relation); and 3) ten speeches on the ‘community with a shared future for mankind’ (人类命运共同体), i.e., the idealisation of a world of peaceful and productive co-existence, by high-ranking Chinese, CPPCC-affiliated scholars and administrators at the China Economic and Social Forum 2024, which I attended in Shanghai on the seventh of November.¹ I have the original Mandarin language transcripts of the speeches.

Orbán Viktor’s Tusványos addresses are highly intellectual, lecture-style orations laying out Hungary’s grand vision. The last two Tusványos addresses had a geopolitical focus and

¹ Orbán Viktor, “Lecture of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 33rd Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp” (Tusnádfurdó: 17 Jul. 2024), anonymous translation from Hungarian, <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/lecture-of-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-33rd-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>, cited on 13 Dec. 2024.

“Full speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 32nd Bálványos Summer Free University” (Tusnádfurdó: 22 Jul. 2023), anonymous translation from Hungarian, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2023/07/25/full-speech-by-primeminister-viktor-orban-at-the-32nd-balvanyos-summer-free-university-on-22-july-2023/>, cited on 13 Dec. 2024.

Orbán Balázs, *Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity* (Budapest: MCC Press 2024).

China Economic and Social Forum 2024 (2024年经济社会论坛) by the China Economic and Social Council, which belongs to the Shanghai Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, 7 Nov. 2024, Shanghai.

reflected on Hungary's and Europe's positioning vis-à-vis the Chinese-American rivalry. Orbán Balázs' statements, including *Hussar Cut*, are also authoritative and indicative of the Hungarian government's geopolitical thinking, because, as the Prime Minister explained in his last annual Tűsványos address, "the Hungarian government has a political director whose job is actually to put together this grand strategy." The CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) is an advisory body for the CPC (Chinese Communist Party) and an ideas forum that interfaces between the CPC,

journalists, intellectuals, and non-party elites. It is where the Party explains, tests, and discusses ideas to, on, and with China's non-Party elites and foreign intellectuals and politicians, in the process refining those ideas, receiving feedback, and building networks. Hence, the CPPCC offers the ideal window into China's official (or soon-to-be official) political thought. The CPPCC forum I attended focused on China's new, Xi-ist vision of a world with a 'shared destiny' (人类命运共同体), the meaning of which approximates the English phrase 'unity in diversity.'

Hungary Between Trump and Xi

Placing Hungary firmly in the middle of the emerging sovereignist Zeitgeist corrects the widespread image of Hungarian foreign policy as a boat adrift or a juggler who could drop his balls at any moment. Many intuit that, more so than with other states, Hungary's foreign policy is a precarious balancing act. For example, *The Diplomat* recently ran an article titled "Between Trump and China: Will Hungary's Orbán Manage a Balancing Act?"² Admittedly, this is a tempting or even unavoidable image—if you

overlook the emerging synthesis underneath the American-Chinese rivalry. Without awareness of the silent interpretative agreements underneath the rivalry, observers will perceive only conflict and contradiction and be forced to conclude that there is nothing third states can do vis-à-vis the US and China except choose a side or balance. And balancing is a complex affair, possibly pragmatic but intellectually inconsistent or even opportunistic.

Hungary would have to be a master juggler. Consider that of all European leaders, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán Viktor has the best personal relations with US President Donald Trump. Trump and Orbán have referred to each other as "friends" and have continued meeting while Trump was out of office (2021–2024), with Orbán even publicly endorsing Trump in the run-up to the 2024 presidential election. At the same time, Hungary's government is arguably the EU member state with the best China ties.

To illustrate, PM Orbán was the only EU member state leader to attend the third Belt and Road Summit in Beijing in 2023. When General Secretary Xi Jinping of the PRC visited the EU realm in the spring of 2024, he only went to France and Hungary (with France being a much larger country in terms of population and national economy). In July 2024, in his Tűsvényos speech, PM Orbán explained that though he looked forward to another Trump presidency (Trump had not been re-elected yet), "[W]e [Hungarians] have received an offer from China. We have received the maximum offer possible, and we will not get a better one. ... The Chinese say that ... we should participate in each other's

modernisation." PM Orbán makes a caveat, expressing his realism about risks and the power asymmetry. "Of course, when lions offer an invitation to a mouse, one must always be alert, because after all reality and relative sizes do matter." Still, his message is clear: the Chinese have made an overwhelmingly attractive offer to Hungary, which the US or anyone else seems unable to match. Yet, how can Hungary be both pro-Chinese and pro-American, maintaining warm relations with Xi's party-state and the Trump administration? Mr Sebestyén Hompot, the author of the above-cited *Diplomat* article and several other sceptical reports on Hungarian-Chinese relations, is puzzled, for "There seems to be a clear contradiction between being pro-Beijing and pro-Trump at the same time."³ Taken in by the image of China and Trump's America as absolute ideological antipodes, Hompot goes as far as to claim that "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán might find that Trump's 'America first' strategy is the exact opposite of how he sees the ideal future global order."⁴

To make the supposed conundrum of Hungary's supposed 'split' position somewhat comprehensible, many observers, Hompot included, rationalise that Orbán and Trump get along so well because they are both national conservatives in political persuasion, whereas Hungary-China ties are supposed to be purely about economics. In that case, the ideas and the political allegiance would all be on the side of Orbán's friendship with Trump, whereas Hungarian-Chinese relations would strictly revolve around economics, i.e., trade, investments, and battery and EV factories. Following this logic, Hompot reasons that "Budapest has high expectations for the continuation of large-scale Chinese investments, especially in the electric mobility sector."⁵

Indeed, on the face of it, the economics-only reading of Hungary's China outreach seems to fit the foreign policy concepts used by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Political Director Balázs Orbán. These are the concepts of "connectivity" and "economic neutrality": in principle, you want to connect in win-win constellations with as many players as possible (connectivity), and therefore, you refrain from ideologising trade unnecessarily (economic neutrality

² Sebestyén Hompot, "Between Trump and China: Will Hungary's Orbán Manage a Balancing Act?," *The Diplomat*, 4 Dec. 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/between-trump-and-china-will-hungarys-orban-manage-a-balancing-act/>, retrieved on 12 Dec. 2024.

³ Hompot, "Between Trump and China."

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ On connectivity, see Orbán Balázs, *Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity* (Budapest: MCC Press 2024), 161–233. On economic neutrality, see Orbán Viktor, "Goal of economic neutrality is to protect living standards of families," article on the home page of the prime minister, 4 Oct., <https://miniszerelnok.hu/en/goal-of-economic-neutrality-is-to-protect-living-standards-of-families/>, retrieved 12 Dec. 2024.

over bloc thinking).⁶ Thus, neither the ideological proximity to Trump's America nor the fact that the Chinese have a very different political system needs to come at the expense of trade with China. Moreover, China is inevitable in the economic domain; the industrial giant and *Exportweltmeister* is the largest trading partner of the US and the EU. Ideas versus economics: it seems to make sense.

But is it that simple? No, all that is a surface-level rationalisation. 'Ideas' (with Trump's America) versus 'economics' (with China) sets up a false dichotomy because the Hungarian and Chinese governments, in fact, share crucial ideas about the emerging world order. Shared ideas stand in the centre of the relationship between Budapest and Beijing—and can play that role because, as I will show, some of the most fundamental conceptions about the political world common to national conservatives in Hungary and the US are espoused by China's political and academic elites, too. Let me sketch out this Hungarian-Chinese-American triangle, drawing first the Hungarian-Chinese connection and then its lines to 'America first.'

The Hungarian-Chinese Connection

Hungary's connectivity with China is not merely economic but also political interpretative and intellectual. To start Hungary's Fidesz government has consistently opposed what China's political officialdom rejects as "Cold War mentality" (冷战思维), "para-politicisation" (泛政治化) of trade, and "bloc confrontation" (阵营对抗).⁷ In 2024, in his Tusványos speech, PM Orbán proclaimed: "We will not join in the formation of a technological bloc opposing the East, and we will not join in the formation of a trade bloc opposing the East. We are gathering friends and partners, not economic or ideological enemies."⁸

In November 2024, Dr Orbán Balázs presented the Chinese translation of his connectivity manifesto *Hussar Cut* at the Chinese Academy of Science. He stated in English in the accompanying announcement tweet: "We must resist dangerous bloc formation logic with courage, ingenuity, and

boldness", which is music to China's ears since it fears (or feared, under Biden) the US, the EU, and America's East Asian partners forming an anti-Chinese bloc.⁹

In this context, Hungary also opposes the EU's newly imposed electric vehicle tariffs on China, despite being an EU member state.¹⁰ Of course, this opposition is part of an economic or economic-strategic vision; Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs has called the EU concept of 'derisking,' which aims to secure key Western economic and technological sectors by cutting them off from Chinese value chains, "a brutal suicide" economically.¹¹ However, that economic vision is embedded in a more comprehensive worldview, which, on crucial points, belongs to an emerging sovereignist Zeitgeist, the rough contours of which I will try to sketch in this report.

Hungary's intellectual connectivity with China involves sharing interpretative possibilities, which can take the form of individuals informally stumbling upon new ideas and traditions of thought, but also grounds in institutionally facilitated explorations and exchanges. Institutionally, a central node is the Eurasia Centre, a think tank connected to Hungary's John von Neumann University, which has devoted much attention to facilitating intellectual exchanges with China, explaining Chinese political world conceptions to Hungarians and hosting Chinese scholars in Budapest. Its founder, Dr Horváth Levente, published the book *A kínai geopolitikai gondolkodás*, translated as *Chinese Geopolitical Thinking* (incidentally, though, much of published Chinese 'geopolitical' thought is 'anti-geopolitical,' but that goes beyond the scope of this report).¹²

The intellectual connectivity is not narrowly political; it has range and covers philosophical congruences in macro conceptualisations. On the macroscopic extreme stands Dr Matolcsy György, a former governor of the Hungarian central bank and former economics minister, who theorises in his book publications an "edge of time" in which world-historical cycles restart and in which Hungary will need to learn from "Asia," too.¹³ Matolcsy's vision is congruent with

⁷ E.g., "Beijing Declaration on Jointly Building an All-Weather China-Africa Community with a Shared Future for the New Era" (关于共筑新时代全天候中非命运共同体的北京宣言), declaration published on 6 Sept. 2024 at the 2024 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), https://fao.sz.gov.cn/xxgk/zyxw/content/post_1227537.html, retrieved 18 Dec. 2024.

⁸ "Lecture of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 33rd Bálványos Summer Free University" (2024).

⁹ Balázs Orbán, tweet on X (28 Nov. 2024), https://x.com/BalazsOrban_HU/status/1862085057353015384, retrieved 17 Dec. 2024.

¹⁰ "Orban Warns of 'Economic Cold War' With EU Tariffs on China," Bloomberg 3 Oct. 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-10-04/orban-warns-of-economic-cold-war-with-eutariffs-on-china-evs>, retrieved 18 Dec. 2024.

¹¹ "'Suicide' for economy: Hungarian foreign minister takes aim at EU's China 'de-risking' strategy," South China Morning Post 27 Jun. 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3225624/hungarian-foreign-minister-decries-de-risking-strategy-towards-china-warns-brutal-suicide>, retrieved 19 Dec. 2024.

¹² Horváth Levente, *A kínai geopolitikai gondolkodás* (Budapest: Pallas Athene Konyvadó 2022).

¹³ Matolcsy György, *On the Edge of Times The Rerun of the 1940s and the 1970s* (Budapest: Pallas Athene Konyvkiadó, 2022). Ibid., *Hungarian Vision and Strategy 2030/40* (Budapest: Pallas Athene Konyvkiadó, 2024)

the account of world affairs provided by the CPC doctrines of the “new era” (新时代) and “great changes unseen in a century” (百年未有的大变局), doctrines I will touch upon below.

You can put Orbán Balázs’ anti-bloc connectivity or Matolcsy György’s notion of a great temporal transition next to thousands or tens of thousands of similar assessments by Chinese politicians, officials, and intellectuals.¹⁴ So, let me pair them with two statements made at the CPPCC conference I attended in November 2024.

Matolcsy’s theory that forty and seventy-year cycles intersect in the 2020s, creating the perfect storm for political and economic-financial transformation, goes well with this imagery invoked by Dr Huang Runqiu 黄润秋, Minister of Ecology and Environment and member of the Standing Committee of the CPPCC: “At present, the world’s unprecedented changes are accelerating.” The sentence could also be translated as, “Presently, the world’s great change unseen in a century—is accelerating.”¹⁵

Orbán Balázs’s anti-bloc connectivity matches well with the following statement by Yuan Bingzhong 袁炳忠, Vice President of Xinhua News Agency and Executive Director of the China Economic and Social Council: “The media [in China and elsewhere] should clearly oppose individual countries’ use of unilateralism and protectionism—such as ‘small yard and high fence,’ ‘decoupling,’ and ‘de-risking,’ which undermine international cooperation—and focus instead on strengthening connectivity, mutual benefit, and reciprocity among all countries.”¹⁶

First, “Small yard and high fence” is Biden’s slogan for cutting China off from strategically sensitive sectors. “De-risking” is the strategic containment concept that the Biden administration and the European Commission use against China; it is a concept that the Hungarian government explicitly rejects.¹⁷ Here, Mr Yuan’s call for anti-bloc, pro-connectivity media messaging reflects the entirely different practical political concerns from which the Chinese and the

Hungarians arrived at the ideal of connectivity: the Chinese fear anti-Chinese Western bloc formation and an intensification of the US-Chinese trade war.

The Hungarians, by contrast, embrace connectivity because they do not want to be absorbed into an ideological, expansionist bloc, which would cause the country to be dominated by its bloc leader, whether that bloc leader is the European Commission in an overly centralised EU, President Biden in an expansionistic, offensively orientated NATO, or the diffuse liberal ideology of an aggressively evangelical, ‘regime changing’ liberal West. Yet, despite their different practical political concerns, the Hungarians and the Chinese nonetheless arrive at similar calls for anti-bloc connectivity.

Conceptual Proximities

In turn, these calls for anti-bloc connectivity reflect conceptual proximities between Hungarian national-conservative and Xi-ist interpretations of world political affairs. Mind, I do not posit a hypothesis of Chinese influence. As is typical with conceptual proximities in the realm of ideas, it is not immediately clear if assigning any straightforward causalities of influence is possible. The ultimate origin of a person holding an idea tends to be somewhat or entirely mysterious.

However, the conceptual proximities are noteworthy in their own right. Most striking is the conceptual proximity between the Xi-ist eschatology of the “new era” ushering in “great changes unseen in a century” and Orbán Viktor’s idea of a “global system change” (világrendszer váltás). These macro conceptions of world affairs share the following four fundamental assumptions.

- 1) Both conceptions perceive liberal Western-centrism in world affairs giving way to a multipolar and multi-civilisational constellation.
- 2) China’s rise most forcefully drives that shift. PM Orbán speaks of a shift toward “Asia and China” in both his 2023

¹⁴ Consider that in Xi-ist nomenclature, such assessments would fall either directly under the general header of “new era,” the tail of the party-state’s official ideology “socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era,” or under the more specific header of “great changes unseen in a century,” a macro concept launched in 2018 for understanding world affairs, which, at the beginning of 2023, had been mentioned in around 40,000 articles listed in the China Integrated Knowledge Resources System. Alicja Bachulska, Mark Leonard, and Janka Oertel, *The Idea of China: Chinese Thinkers on Power, Progress, and People* (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) 2024) 20. To say that these topics are central concerns of Chinese politics and intellectual life would be an understatement.

¹⁵ Huang Runqiu 黄润秋, “携手推进生态友好的现代化” (Joining hands to promote eco-friendly modernisation), talk to the CPPCC’s Economic and Social Forum 2024. The quote: 当前, 世界百年未有之大变局加速演进。

¹⁶ Yuan Bingzhong 袁炳忠, “共绘百花齐放的世界现代化新图景” (Reimagining world modernisation as a hundred flowers blossoming together), talk to the CPPCC’s Economic and Social Forum 2024. The quote: 媒体应当旗帜鲜明地反对个别国家用“小院高墙”“脱钩断链”“去风险”等单边主义、保护主义行为破坏国际合作, 聚焦各国加强互联互通、互利互惠的积极举措和成果, 为建设世界现代化树立正确的舆论导向。

¹⁷ “‘Suicide’ for economy,” South China Morning Post 27 Jun. 2023.

and 2024 Tusk addresses, while General Secretary Xi Jinping argues that China's rise is "the main contributor" to the 'profound change unseen in a century' that is transforming the world.¹⁸

3) For everyone's sake and its own benefit, the United States must abandon its exceptionalist claim to liberal-universalist 'world ideals' and any unipolar supremacy. (Though PM Orbán also raises the possibility that Trump could somehow pull off a last-minute rescue of American world supremacy: "Donald Trump's attempt [to revive American greatness] is probably the last chance for the US to retain its world supremacy.")¹⁹

4) On the threshold of the new era, the greatest diplomatic challenge is to manage the tensions between an arisen China, which deserves a place under the sun (to use the loaded phrase by German Foreign Secretary Bernhard von Bülow), and the United States, which has to rediscover itself as a great country with a great culture, i.e., as a particularity, and hence disavow claims to representing liberal universality. Ideally, 'America first' would be that self-recognising American sense of cultural particularity.

There is proximity even in the phraseology. PM Orbán proclaims in his 2024 Tusk address that, "We are in a change; coming is a change unseen for five hundred years" (Egy olyan változásban vagyunk, egy olyan változás jön, amire 500 éve nem volt példa). The connection of "a change unseen" to "five hundred years" is reminiscent of Xi's "great change unseen in a hundred years" (百年未有的大变局).

Conceptually, the two notions are even closer because the "hundred years" in General Secretary Xi's phrase is a figure of speech emphasising how significant the change is; the actual conceptual referent of General Secretary Xi's phrase is the ending of a change theorised as having lasted roughly five hundred years. Ending is the Western-centric global

modernity that emerged five centuries ago with the Spanish conquests in the Americas and the capitalist world market dominated by Holland and England. PM Orbán works with a similar timeline. For him, too, the great change is the ending of global Western-centrism—i.e., the ending of a world order in which era-defining changes are inner-Western transitions—and the rise of a world in which Asia brings global transformation.

In the past, change was Western: the Habsburgs rose and then fell; Spain was up, and it became the centre of power; it fell, and the English rose; the First World War finished off the monarchies; The British were replaced by the Americans as world leaders; then the Russo-American Cold War was won by the Americans. But all these developments remained within our Western logic. This is not the case now, however, and this is what we must face up to; because the Western world is not challenged from within the Western world, and so the logic of change has been disrupted. What I am talking about, and what we are facing, is actually a global system change. And this is a process that is coming from Asia.

Again, that there is conceptual proximity does not prove causal ideational influence, let alone one that is easily identifiable. We cannot conclude that just because some of the underlying conceptualisations match those propagated by Beijing, the Hungarian Prime Minister and his associates must have drunk the Beijing Kool-Aid. Still, the mere fact that there is conceptual proximity and that this proximity is recognised by Hungarians who have been exploring Chinese political thought—might already count for a form of Hungarian-Chinese intellectual connectivity. Or perhaps we could say it belongs to the connectivity mindset to relish such proximities and make the most out of them diplomatically. Finally, and most significantly, the notion of a changing world in which Western and liberal supremacies are waning is the necessary background understanding from which the connectivity approach emerges as a strategic option.

¹⁸ Steve Tsang and Oliva Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (New York: Oxford University Press 2024) 181.

¹⁹ "Lecture of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 33rd Bálványos Summer Free University" (2024)

Hungarian Forint and Chinese Yuan Renminbi currency. (Shutterstock).



Hungary's Connectivity Approach

Let me dig deeper into Hungary's connectivity approach as a mode of thought. What is connectivity for the Hungarians? The maximising and diversifying of Hungary's multifaceted forms of exposure, including intellectual exposure, from a mindset of profound openness. In his *Hussar Cut*, Political Director Orbán Balázs defines the concept as a capability to think and act, in that order. "Connectivity is primarily a capability. ... It is the capacity to think in a certain way and to act on that basis. Thus, politically speaking, it is the ability to manage the mutual dependencies we inevitably accrue, while increasing their number in order to maximise the relative benefits."²⁰

As a mode of thought, connectivity is anti-bloc, breaking free from containment in imperial imaginings and rigid ideologies, which are the stuff of bloc thinking. Bloc thinking is fallacious, narrowing, and dangerous because, either cynically or naively, it treats the political world as if it neatly divides into good guys and bad guys. But that is far from the reality. Political goodwill and justified ideals are not exclusively contained in one particular empire or ideology.

They are not the property of liberal elites in Western capitals. Nor can it be justified to overwrite the political and interpretative traditions of different cultures and civilisations with some standardised political model, be this model liberal or Leninist. Hence, anti-bloc connectivity thinking is more noble and conducive to peace than its opposite, bloc thinking. Yet, though virtuous, anti-bloc thinking is not only or primarily about virtue; there is a strategic dimension, too. More than for many other states, it is strategically vital for Hungary to stay out of ideological blocs because a small country like Hungary would end up dominated by the bloc's leader. Alliances and dependencies are acceptable, but blocs are too rigid and all-encompassing.

Due to a bloc's rigidity and comprehensiveness, membership in a bloc comes at the expense of sovereignty, especially for the weaker members. A small nation in Central Europe, surrounded by mighty empires for centuries, Hungary prizes its sovereignty and thus tries to avoid jeopardising it, avoiding absorption into large, ideologically demanding, internally homogenising and externally expansionist blocs,

be they an over-centralised EU, an offensively operating NATO, or an ideologically aggressive liberal West.

Do not confuse the connectivity approach of 'increasing the number of mutual dependencies' with traditional balancing. Balancing is about not leaning too far in any direction; it moderates all and any exposure. In contrast, Hungarian connectivity is about leaning-in in all directions. Hungarian connectivity does not gently stick a foot into the water, careful not to go too deep; no, it jumps into every pool it can find. In this way, Hungary has become the EU member state with the closest China ties, the closest Trump ties, the closest ties to Erdogan's Turkey, and the least bad Russia relations. All in. In all directions. Against bloc absorption. For sovereignty. And peace.

So, there are ethical or idealistic as well as strategic rationales for Hungary to be antibloc, but why do the big boys, the would-be bloc leaders, allow Hungary to get away with it? The short answer is that they don't. Hungary's explicated sovereignism has for years caused tensions with the European Commission, which wields pressure campaigns against Hungary under the guise of 'rule of law' interventions, and with a diffuse post-national liberalism influential in Western journalistic, cultural and academic institutions, which slanders Hungary as 'undemocratic' and 'un-European' in countless hostile publications. Influenced by the Commission and those liberal publications, the Biden administration was also hostile toward the small Central European state.

Yet, what helps Hungary render its anti-bloc connectivity stance tenable, is that Xi's China and Trump's America are together building a sovereignist, culturally particularistic world in which there is little room for self-universalising, expansionist ideological blocs, be they liberal-Western or Leninist. The world's two greatest powers further such sovereignist particularism partly due to the power dynamics they unleash on the world stage. Most markedly, the industrial weight of the PRC, a non-liberal state, is a game-changer, its very existence ridiculing liberal-imperial world imaginings that strive to universalise Western liberalism. Yet, Xi's China and Trump's America are also anti-bloc in mindset, albeit for partly different reasons.

²⁰ Orbán Balázs, *Hussar Cut* 183.

‘America First’ and ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’

Despite Chinese-American rivalries, ‘America first’ and the Xi-ist take on ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ overlap on significant ideas about our contemporary world and usher in a sovereignist Zeitgeist. This Zeitgeist might come just in time to support the embattled Hungarians, who were getting perhaps a bit too avant-garde in recent years, storming deeply into the emerging era while the power centres of Western Europe were and are still frozen into the old liberal order. America first and Xi-ism lay the foundation of this emerging era by opposing the formation of international blocs centred on ideology and refraining from exporting a standardising political model.

Specifically, America first and Xi-ism break away from the quasi-universalism of “Western globalist doctrine,” in the words of Dávid Bencsik of Hungary’s Demokrata media group.²¹ Danube Institute fellow and American foreign policy expert Doug Stokes calls this the “hyper-globalist model,” which “promised prosperity through free trade, open borders, and interconnected economies. It envisioned a world where national sovereignty would increasingly be supplanted by supranational authorities, from the European Union to the WTO, creating an integrated liberal order that could manage global challenges collectively.” In its place comes a “sovereign internationalism.”²²

Of course, the Sino-American co-construction of this Zeitgeist derives from heterogeneous motives, the Chinese and American contributions rooted in radically different political concerns and different historical experiences and interpretative and communicative traditions in political culture and public life. Crucially, the anti-bloc impulse of the Trumpists does not flow out of any sense of connectivity. America first is not a connectivity doctrine! On the contrary, it rejects connectivity, believing the US must reduce its connections to the outside world to bring all production, all jobs, home. PM Orbán cites Trump saying, “America First, everything here, everything will come home!”²³

The rhetorical style of the Trumpists, too, could not be more divergent from Chinese political communication. Certainly, you will not hear President Trump, or PM Orbán for that matter, speak in the high-flown phrases of which the Chinese have many. Here is how lofty and non-Trumpian speeches by Chinese politicians sound. “Internally, Chinese civilisation cultivates self-discipline and self-restraint; externally, it emphasises propriety and righteousness. The concepts of the world as a commonwealth, self-restraint in the public interest, and calculating personal gain with the world’s gain in mind are of considerable value in restraining the nation-state’s selfishness and embracing the global community’s public-spiritedness.”²⁴

How different is America first. And yet it, too, rejects bloc confrontation. Instead of through a vision of global community or connectivity, America first arrives at its antibloc position through its disownment of liberal ideology and its novel sense of American exceptionalism. America first disowns American aspirations to liberal world leadership, which it associates with moralistic liberal internationalism, overfinancialisation and the shipping of jobs overseas, and the United States’ failed and expensive ‘liberatory’ interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

Meanwhile, its new exceptionalism intuits that America is too great to need the EU or EU member states in any standoff with China. Behind all this, finally, lies a reconceptualisation of the political self—a particularising reconceptualisation. America retreats from its universalistic claim and becomes a particular country. A great country, yes, but a country, alongside other countries. A country that must safeguard its national interests and cannot afford to be the world’s policeman or conduct humanitarian interventions in faraway world regions. Doug Stokes describes “a quasi-spiritual reckoning” with an emerging “moral order.” It is worth citing the passage in full.

²¹ Hompot, “Between Trump and China.”

²² Doug Stokes, “Donald Trump and the Age of Sovereign Internationalism,” *The Critic* 18 Nov. 2024, <https://thecritic.co.uk/donald-trump-and-the-age-of-sovereign-internationalism/>, retrieved 20 Dec. 2024. Incidentally, I derived, without much creativity, the term sovereignist Zeitgeist from Stokes’ “sovereignist internationalism.”

²³ “Lecture of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 33rd Bálványos Summer Free University” (2024).

²⁴ Ma Jiantang “马建堂, 在文明互鉴中推动构建人类命运共同体” (Promoting the building of a community of human destiny through inter-civilisational understanding), talk at the China Economic and Social Forum 2024. The quote: 中华文明注重个体和群体责任的统一, 对内修身律己, 对外注重礼义。这种天下为公、克己奉公、计利当计天下利的观念, 对于克制民族国家之私、奉全球命运之公, 颇有参考价值

For all his flaws and dysfunctions, Trump has served as a catalyst—forcing the old establishment to confront its contradictions. His presidency underscores the emergence of a new paradigm where sovereignty, national interest, and the desire to be free from technocratic control increasingly take precedence. Crucially, this shift should not be viewed merely through the simplistic lens of left vs. right; rather, it is best understood as a more fundamental moment—a quasi-spiritual reckoning for the West, grappling with the kind of moral order that will define its future.²⁵

Over the last half-century, the CPC, which sets China's intellectual mainstream, has completed a parallel—though much riper—particularisation of its political self-image. Of course, the CPC has always been against Western liberalism and its universalist pretensions. That is nothing new. Yet, with its foundational regime doctrine of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, the People's Republic of China had its own universalist pretension to tame and tone down. It particularised via the notion of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” (中国特色社会主义), which started as a slogan yet became the official state doctrine and umbrella concept under General Secretary Xi. When then-General Secretary Deng Xiaoping coined the first variant of the term in 1978, it had the mere purpose of legitimising flexibility in economic policy. Yet, the term's conceptual referent began to shift, increasingly emphasising the ‘Chinese characteristics,’ which were, in turn, increasingly culturally interpreted. The ‘Chinese characteristics’ morphed from being the existing economic circumstances of China at the time, which needed

to be taken into consideration for pragmatic reasons, to the unique, historically-grown, and substantive cultural essence of Chinese civilisation.²⁶

General Secretary Xi Jinping's addition “for the new era,” which expands it to “socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era,” does not renege on the concept's cultural particularism, but rather implies that China, in its new era, has become so important internationally that it shares in the responsibility to maintain a particularistic world order in which nations and cultures coexist peacefully. I know that the past twenty years saw the emergence of ‘tianxia’ universalisms in Chinese academia and intellectual life, and I have published on this subject.²⁷ Yet that is not the universalism of a political model to be exported over cultural boundaries; to the contrary, tianxia philosophies celebrate the ‘universal condition’ of cultural and national plurality. Both these tianxia philosophies and the official doctrine of Xi Jinping thought proceed from the image of a multicivilisational, culturally patterned world in which unique nation-states, peoples, and cultures have their particular characteristics and should be respectful of differences while cherishing commonalities. In a typical statement, Ma Jiantang asserts that, “We should respect the differences among civilisations and insist on the commonality of civilisational values. All civilisations, in their long development history, are different and have unique characteristics. However, with thousands of branches and thousands of leaves, the roots are connected, and the differences do not conceal the similarities.”²⁸

²⁵ Doug Stokes, “Donald Trump and the Age of Sovereign Internationalism.”

²⁶ Jiang Shigong “强世功，哲学与历史——从党的十九大报告解读‘习近平时代’ (Philosophy and History) 开放时代 (2018). Also see: Kaiser Y. Kuo, “The Return of Culturalism in Chinese Political Thought,” Sinica 7 Mar. 2024, <https://www.sinicapodcast.com/p/the-return-of-culturalism-in-chinese>, retrieved 12 Dec. 2024.

²⁷ “The Polemics of China's Counter Cosmopolitanisms” (2022) Telos 201: Liberal Empire and Civilizational States, 13–37.

²⁸ Ma Jiantang, Ibid. The quote: 我们要尊重不同文明的差异性，坚持文明价值的共通性。各种文明在其悠久的历史发展历史中异彩纷呈、各有千秋。但千枝万叶，根系相连，异不掩同。



Donald Trump and Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago, Palm Beach. (Courtesy Donald J. Trump Presidential Library).

Conclusion: Glimpses of the Emerging Zeitgeist

We can now glimpse the contours of the emerging sovereignist Zeitgeist, revisiting the three ideas listed at the start of this report. These were three fundamental ideas about the political world that you could uncontroversially assert whether mingling with national conservatives in Budapest or Washington or CPC-aligned intellectuals in Beijing or Shanghai. The first fundamental idea is that we have hit an **axial moment** in history. The Western, liberalism-centric world order is on the verge of collapse. A sovereignist-multipolar world order is dawning. In the new order, the USA is a great country, not the world's policeman, nor the upholder of liberal universalism. In a typical 'America first' expression, this means that 'America is going to stop paying for everything and everyone.' And that it will 'not fight other people's wars.' The new era, then, is when the US will again become great as a country. A similar but more theorised sense of transition imbues Orbán Viktor's notion of a "global system change" (világrendszer váltás), which his last Tüsványos address referenced 13 times in its various Hungarian grammatical inflexions. The Xi-ist eschatology, finally, is the most elaborate, revolving around concepts such as the new era, the shared future for all mankind, and the great change unseen in a hundred years. I analysed this eschatology in a videoed lecture at the Danube Institute, which is available on YouTube under the title "How Does China See the Future?"²⁹

Second, a new political ontology dawns. Political ontology concerns the question of what kind of stuff the political realm is made up of. We are moving away from a liberal ontology that emphasises free-floating individuals and placeless, 'culturally neutral' institutions, preferably decentralised, supranational or international ones—which, especially according to Europe's more markedly post-national variants of liberalism, should operate most directly under international law. A liberal ontology, that is, that deemphasises cultural substance, borders, place, and sovereignty. Yet, these categories now make a comeback in the emerging sovereignist ontology. In the sovereignist political ontology, the central units of international politics are sovereign nation-states, which culturally cluster into larger cultural zones and civilisations. The heterogeneous particularisms of this landscape of nations, peoples, cultures,

and civilisations prevent a universalistic regime model, be it Leninist or liberal, from becoming the global norm and universally followed regime type, which would render national sovereignty defunct or of secondary importance. Still, attempts at universalising a single regime model and ideology have undermined national sovereignty regionally, e.g., in the Soviet sphere under the Soviet Union and currently in the EU.

In the US, the sovereignist political ontology is present in the Trumpian reimagining of the nation, especially in President Trump's famous dictum that "Without borders, we don't have a country." PM Orbán Viktor neatly summarises the culturally substantive, sovereignist conception of the nation when he explains that "the nation state is not a legal abstraction, not a legal construct: the nation state is rooted in a particular culture. It has a shared set of values; it has anthropological and historical depth." On a larger scale, there are the civilisations; these have a similar anthropological and historical depth, though each comprises different nations, nation-states and national and regional cultures.³⁰ This completes the culturalist Romantic image of a multi-civilizational world that is propagated, too, by General Secretary Xi Jinping, who launched in this context his "global civilisations initiative" (全球文明倡议). I have written various essays on the surprising commonalities between conservative political ontologies and contemporary Chinese culturalism and multi-civilisationalism. One of my essays on this topic appeared in the Hungarian Conservative under the title "The Curious Case of China's Conservative Streak."³¹

Finally, the dawning Zeitgeist comes with novel assumptions about world order. In sovereignist thought, peace relies on sovereignty, which entails respect for political and cultural borders and the absence of ideological bloc formation. Peace does not rest on the maintenance, whether through moralism and influence or force, of something like a 'liberal world order.'

That is quite the inversion, given what came before. Liberal old-order thought could be so anti-sovereignist, especially in Germany and EU federalist circles, that it would even

²⁹ "How Does China See the Future," videoed lecture, uploaded on 8 Mar. 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lfqU0g2_G3k, retrieved 12 Dec. 2024.

³⁰ "Lecture of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 33rd Bálványos Summer Free University" (2024).

³¹ Hungarian Conservative Vol. 3 No. 3. 88–99.

depict national sovereignty as an inherent threat to peace. For example, writing in the nineties, liberal philosopher Jürgen Habermas branded as “problematic ... the alleged right to national selfdetermination.”³² Those were different times.

Assumptions have been sliding. What appears intuitive is on the move. In the emerging *Zeitgeist*, mutual respect for sovereignty is fundamental to peaceful coexistence. Great powers refrain from forcing their political systems on each other and never agitate for regime change in states in distant world regions, in both cases out of regard for political and cultural boundaries. That same regard for legitimate boundaries incidentally makes them seek control over mass migration to their home territories. Finally, great powers

should not pit geopolitical blocs against each other in ideological standoffs. Instead, they accept the lasting coexistence of distinct nations, cultures, and civilisations.

Such acceptance may seem straightforward, but in the practice of power politics, it is a demanding request, for, as PM Orbán observes, it requires that China and the US “accept that there are two suns in the sky.”³³ Well, there we go. Whether the great powers will keep the peace in the coming decades is to be seen. But if they do, it will be because they will have understood that, as the Chinese saying has it, “The five colours of the world complement each other; the eight tones of the world play together, bringing peace and harmony.”³⁴

³² Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen: Studien zu politische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1997) 8.

³³ “Full speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 32nd Bálványos Summer Free University” (2023).

³⁴ Ma Jiantang, *Ibid.* The quote: 五色交辉，相得益彰；八音合奏，终和且平。



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