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China's Speed Dilemma: Efficiency vs Legitimacy

By Tang Meng Kit

SYNOPSIS

China's rapid rise has delivered breathtaking infrastructure, technological feats, and global influence. But this efficiency comes with high political, social, and environmental costs. This commentary examines the trade-offs between speed and legitimacy, asking whether China's model is sustainable or replicable in a more rights-conscious world.

COMMENTARY

China speed, which refers to the exceptionally rapid pace of China's economic development and infrastructure projects, encapsulates a development model defined by fast, large-scale progress driven by centralised authority and national ambition. This approach has enabled China to construct hospitals in days, complete mega-bridges in months, and build the world's largest high-speed rail network in just over a decade. However, the speed at which these are achieved raises important questions: Does China's speed represent a new paradigm of effective governance, or does its costs undermine its legitimacy and global appeal? This commentary examines the systemic drivers of China's development tempo, its milestones, the trade-offs involved, and lessons for the world, focusing on recent policy shifts toward sustainability.

Systemic Drivers of Speed

China's political system, led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), enables rapid execution through centralised control. Beijing's decisions face minimal institutional resistance, unlike in liberal democracies, where public consultation, judicial oversight, and elections slow progress. Provincial leaders are evaluated on metrics like GDP growth and infrastructure delivery, incentivising speed over deliberation. For example,

during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Wuhan built a 1,000-bed hospital in ten days, mobilising 7,000 workers and state resources.

Operationally, the state streamlines land acquisition, capital allocation, and labour mobilisation. Land requisitions often bypass lengthy legal processes, and environmental reviews are expedited. The 2008 stimulus package, injecting 4 trillion yuan (US\$586 billion), exemplified this, funding 1,500 infrastructure projects in two years. This contrasts with democratic systems like the US, where the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act took months of debate for US\$1.2 trillion over five years.

Showcasing China Speed: Achievements and Ambitions

China's high-speed rail network, spanning 45,000 kilometres by 2024, connects 90 per cent of cities with populations over one million, reducing travel time between Beijing and Shanghai from 12 to 4.5 hours. In space, the Chang'e-5 mission retrieved lunar samples in 2020, and the Zhurong Mars rover landed in 2021, marking China as a space power. The Tiangong space station, completed in 2022, hosts regular missions, rivalling NASA's International Space Station.

Digital infrastructure is equally transformative. By 2023, mobile payments via WeChat and Alipay accounted for 98 per cent of transactions in major cities, while AI-driven surveillance covers 626 million cameras nationwide. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has invested US\$1 trillion across 147 countries by 2025, building projects like Pakistan's Gwadar Port in 36 months, compared to decades for similar projects elsewhere.

The Costs Behind the Acceleration

China's rapid development, driven by authoritarian control, limits dissent and transparency. The Three Gorges Dam displaced 1.2 million people, and like Xiamen's chemical plant project, allowed little room for recourse and protests. Since 2012, 1.5 million officials have faced corruption charges, highlighting how centralised power enables speed but undermines accountability.

Economically, prioritising speed has caused inefficiencies. The 2008 stimulus of 4 trillion yuan (US\$586 billion) fueled growth but left 76 trillion yuan (US\$10.7 trillion) in local debt by 2023. Projects like Ordos City, with 100,000 vacant homes and 20 per cent of underused infrastructure, per a 2022 audit, show the risks of overinvestment.

Socially, urbanisation has displaced 60 million rural residents since 2000, creating urban slums. In 2024, 290 million migrant workers, 70 per cent in precarious jobs, lacked social security. Despite poverty dropping to 1.7 per cent by 2020, the urban-rural income gap widened to 2.5:1 by 2023, deepening inequality.

Environmentally, industrialisation has polluted 60 per cent of China's rivers and 25 per cent of its land. The BRI's coal plants in Indonesia and Pakistan have drawn criticism, with Greenpeace calling it "the riskiest environmental project". China's 2022 emissions of 10.2 billion metric tons led globally, though per capita emissions trail the US, balancing growth with environmental costs.

Global Impact and Perception

China's model reshapes global supply chains, producing 50 per cent of the world's solar panels and 30 per cent of semiconductors by 2024. The BRI's speed pressures on competitors; for example, Kenya's Chinese-built railway was completed in 18 months, versus decades for British-era lines. Soft power efforts, like 540 Confucius Institutes worldwide, promote China's narrative of modernity without democracy. However, Western scepticism persists due to its surveillance systems (e.g., Xinjiang's monitoring systems) and human rights concerns, with 60 per cent of Americans viewing China unfavourably in a 2024 Pew survey.

Can China Speed Be Replicated?

Democracies like Germany, which prioritise consensus over speed – its 20-year Stuttgart 21 rail project is an example – make China's model unfeasible. Even authoritarian regimes struggle to replicate China's coordination and scale. Singapore's efficient governance offers a partial parallel, but its small size limits scalability. As in Japan's Shinkansen network, elements like long-term planning can inspire, but forced relocations and environmental shortcuts are broadly unacceptable.

Recent Policy Shifts: High-Quality Development

Since 2021, China's 14th Five-Year Plan has prioritised "high-quality development", targeting a 13.5 per cent reduction in energy intensity and an 18 per cent drop in carbon emissions by 2025. The "Made in China 2025" initiative invests US\$300 billion in AI, robotics, and green tech, aiming for 70 per cent self-sufficiency in high-tech industries. In 2024, China added 200 gigawatts of renewable energy, surpassing coal in capacity. The BRI's "Green Silk Road" emphasises sustainable projects, like solar farms in Ethiopia, though coal investments persist in 20 per cent of projects.

These shifts address trade-offs. Environmental regulations have closed 150,000 polluting factories since 2016, and urban social welfare programmes, like hukou reforms, now cover 45 per cent of migrant workers. However, challenges remain: local governments face fiscal strain and geopolitical tensions, like Panama's 2025 BRI exit, highlighting resistance to China's influence. Demographic decline, with a population drop of 5.6 million in 2023, adds pressure.

The Future of Speed

China's transition to high-quality development requires balancing speed with sustainability. The leadership aims for a 4.6 per cent GDP growth in 2025, down from 8 per cent in the 2000s, prioritising innovation and equity. Global pushback, like US tariffs on Chinese EVs and environmental limits, tests this shift. The world watches whether China can sustain its gains without compromising its legitimacy.

Conclusion: What the World Can Learn

China speed showcases what a determined state can achieve, but its costs – political repression, economic debt, social inequality, and environmental damage – highlight the need for balance. Democracies can adopt China's strategic planning and

infrastructure focus, as seen in South Korea's rapid 5G rollout, but they must prioritise equity and oversight. Speed is vital in a century of climate urgency and global competition, but sustainable, inclusive progress is paramount.

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