

Embracing Complexity: China's Relationship with the International Order

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Abstract

China's relationship with the international order has been one of the key themes not only in the study of Chinese foreign policy but also more broadly in international relations. However, with the escalating tensions in US-China relations, and given how focused on China the US foreign policy has become, it is increasingly difficult to conduct this discussion in a scholarly fashion. Indeed, the US has officially designated China as a 'revisionist' power, and this characterization has been largely adopted in the Western mainstream media and punditry. This paper, however, points out that the scholarly debate is much less decisive. Thus, rather than producing another simplistic answer to whether China is a revisionist or status quo power, we take a sceptical perspective and argue that the question is too ambiguous and reality too complex to come up with a simple answer. Moreover, the question of China's position towards the international system as a whole should not be confused with the discussion of whether China's foreign policy is morally benign in its means or goals. We propose that this polemic article can contribute to our improved understanding of the issues. The paper conducts a critical review of the literature, complemented by the analysis of primary and secondary empirical material, to back up its position.

Keywords:

China, international order, Chinese foreign policy, US-China relations.

Introduction

Discussions about China's relationship with the international order have been around for decades, albeit evolving and taking various forms at a given time. Perhaps the most critical question has been whether China is a status quo or revisionist power, i.e., whether it aims to support and strengthen the current international order or, alternatively, whether its goal is to undermine and replace it with another one. China's increasing power and foreign policy assertiveness across many domains have given the debate not just the academic but also urgent political importance.

Perhaps the fact that the debate has been ongoing inconclusively since at least the 1990s¹ can be taken as the first indication that the answer is unclear. Perhaps also the question should take a different form and ask instead about the "extent" of China's support/opposition to the international order, thus changing the question from an either-or one to one of a continuous scale. Or we should probably start by clarifying the characteristics of the international order we are

¹ Aaron Friedberg, 'Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in a Multipolar Asia', *International Security* 18 (1993), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539204>; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security* 27, no. 4 (2003): 5–56; David Kang, *China Rising* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); John Ikenberry, 'The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?', *Foreign Affairs*, 2008, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west>; John Mearsheimer, 'The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia', *International Politics* 3 (2010).

talking about. Or there could perhaps be more different answers depending on what aspects of the international order are considered.

This paper takes a skeptical perspective on whether we can come up with a simple answer to the question. Indeed, that is already the point to take away. Today's international system is quite complicated, messy and non-static, and it is not entirely clear what constitutes pro-system and anti-system actors and actions. We argue that this complexity should be embraced not just by scholars, but also policymakers, journalists, businesses, and other stakeholders – rather than producing simplistic answers that would lead to distorted views and actions, bringing about more problems than solutions.

We also propose that the issue of China's positioning vis-a-vis the international order should be treated as a separate debate from that of whether China's foreign policy is morally benign or malevolent. In other words, China might challenge the interests of the US and generally act offensively, while it could be doing that, theoretically speaking, within the institutional boundaries of the current international order. China's long-term attempts to strengthen its position within the United Nations (UN) and its affiliated institutions can be quoted as examples here.² In turn, a benign action in principle might constitute a challenge to the current international order and its rules, norms, and institutions. Examples can constitute China's approach to development aid and financing which has often been done outside of the established institutions through newly created specialized organizations such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and New Development Bank (affiliated with the BRICS group).³ Even more obvious examples of such behaviour are the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China's other regional quasi-institutions – Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Cooperation, China-Arab States Cooperation, and the China-Central and Eastern Cooperation (previously known also as 16/17+1), Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries (so-called Macao Forum), China-Pacific Island Countries Forums.⁴ The existence of these regional mechanisms and the essentially universal umbrella framework in the form of the BRI – operating under somewhat different norms than previously established international organizations⁵ – create a network of institutions and cooperation frameworks which could potentially present a head-on challenge to the existing global governance system. For the time being, however, the challenge coming from these institutions should not be exaggerated as their viability remains questionable.⁶ Moreover, as argued by

² Courtney J. Fung and Shing-hon Lam, 'Staffing the United Nations: China's Motivations and Prospects', *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (2021): 1143–63.

³ Axel Dreher et al., *Banking on Beijing: The Aims and Impacts of China's Overseas Development Program* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108564496>.

⁴ Srikanth Kondapalli, *Regional Multilateralism with Chinese Characteristics, China and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Dian, Matteo & Silvia Menegazzi. (*New Regional Initiatives in China's Foreign Policy: The Incoming Pluralism of Global Governance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁵ Jakub Jakóbowski, "Chinese-led Regional Multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOCAC, and CCF," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No.113 (2018), pp. 659-73.; Injoo Sohn, "After Renaissance: China's Multilateral Offensive in the Developing World," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2012), pp. 77–101; Chris Alden and Ana Cristina Alves, "China's Regional Forum Diplomacy in the Developing World: Socialisation and the 'Sinosphere'," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 26, No.103 (2017), pp. 151-65; Garlick, Jeremy. *Advantage China: Agent of Change in an Era of Global Disruption: Jeremy Garlick: Bloomsbury Academic*. Bloomsbury, 2023.

⁶ Richard Q. Turcsanyi, 'China and the Frustrated Region: Central and Eastern Europe's Repeating Troubles with Great Powers:', *China Report* 56, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445519895626>; Chan, L. H. (2020). Can China remake regional order? Contestation with India over the Belt and Road Initiative. *Global Change, Peace & Security*, 32(2), 199–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2020.1772215>

Stephen,⁷ rather than being seen as a “last resort“ strategy or an “exit option“, parallel institution-building can often be a way to strengthen China’s role and legitimacy within the established institutions.

While the reserved position of this paper may seem too obvious to some, many others would likely disagree vehemently. Indeed, the debate – which has never been entirely scholarly anyway – seems more or less over when looking at the policy and pundit space: it has been the official US position since the publication of the 2017 National Security Strategy that China is, along with Russia and North Korea, a revisionist power.⁸ This official declaration has also greatly impacted the Western media discussions which have generally adopted these frames ever since without much empirical verification and critical review.⁹

This paper will proceed as follows. First, we will point out what we see as the key aspects – and problems – when trying to produce a single answer about China’s approach towards the international system through the prism of international scholarly debate. Second, we will focus on the Chinese perspectives on the issue by reviewing some empirical material from the rhetorics and practice of Chinese foreign policy. Finally, third, we will sum up the the presented discussion and the evidence and reiterate our argument in the conclusion. It is not our ambition to come up with any simple answers in this paper. Still, we believe that this polemic can contribute to our improved understanding of one of the key questions in contemporary international relations – one of the rise of China’s power, related changes in the distribution of power within the international system, and subsequent changes in its operation. At the end of the day, identifying flaws in a predominant answer is a worthwhile – alas, necessary – step in the right direction.

China and the International Order: International Scholarly Debate

One of the key problems in asserting exactly what challenges China presents to the international order is a lack of a common definition and an agreement about such an order’s general characterization. The most recent reiteration of the “revisionist China” narrative has, for instance, claimed that China undermines the “liberal rules-based international order”. But is the system really a liberal one with clearly established rules of the game? There are reasonable grounds to suggest that while some features of the current international order are liberal, others are not. Similarly, the rules of the order are less clear and less generally accepted than some may believe – and this applies even to, if not primarily to, the dominant actor of the order – the US.¹⁰

In fact, it is not even obvious that there is an international order to begin with, as pointed out by Breuer and Johnston¹¹. Their article is indeed a useful starting point for this paper as it traces the current ‘memes’ of China’s supposed revisionism to the “liberal rules-based international order”. First, the authors show how the meme was first introduced to the US official discourse in 2010 (coming from Australia via then-Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd who used it in a meeting with then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton). Second, they trace how the discourse evolved, including –

⁷ Stephen, M.D. (2020). China's new multilateral institutions: A framework and Research Agenda. *International Studies Review*, 23(4), 807–834. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa076>.

⁸ White House, National Security Strategy, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>

⁹ Breuer, A., & Johnston, A. I. (2019). Memes, narratives and the emergent US–China security dilemma. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1622083>

¹⁰ Alastair Iain Johnston; China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations. *International Security* 2019; 44 (2): 9–60. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360

¹¹ Breuer, A., & Johnston, A. I. (2019). Memes, narratives and the emergent US–China security dilemma. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1622083>

importantly – how it initially suggested that the US should *establish* the rules-based international order in the Asia-Pacific (i.e., raising it as an aspiration rather than a fact on the ground), only to claim later on that such an order had long existed and needs to be defended against China. Third, the authors also show how the meme and the narrative have become dominant in the US policy and mainstream media sphere, effectively silencing the debate about the nature of China’s relationship with the international order (and painting voices who would question it as naive at best).

This leads us to another related – and frequently very visible – key problem: the international order (sometimes referred to even more ambitiously as a “community”) is often equated to the interests of the currently dominant power, that is, the US. Johnston attempts to separate the two (i.e., the order and the dominant actor) and identifies as many as eight distinctive “issue-specific orders” in contemporary international system, which he argues operate differently, or can even be contradictory to each other.¹² As a result, aggregating them in a single order is, according to Johnston, practically impossible. Through this prism, China’s compliance differs between different orders, escaping easy characterization. For instance, China is a strong supporter of the ‘constitutive order’ based on the UN and state sovereignty, a medium supporter of the ‘international trade order’, and a very low supporter of the ‘political development order’, which includes concepts such as democracy and human rights.¹³ Moreover, Johnston points out that the US itself has at best rather mixed relationship with these orders as well, thus creating a situation in which both China and the US support some aspects of the international order and oppose others.

Various academic studies of the states’ behaviour within the United National General Assembly back up these assertions. Although China’s voting has been estimated to be somewhat less pro-order than the voting of the US, most countries in the world tend to vote (and also speak) in the UN General Assembly more similarly to China than to the US. Furthermore, China’s voting and rhetoric in the UN General Assembly has become somewhat more pro-order in recent years.¹⁴ These and other findings from China’s foreign policy behaviour in other domains and using different methodologies¹⁵ challenge the wide-spread perception of China becoming more revisionist in recent years. At the very least, they suggest that it is difficult to pinpoint clear evidence of the alleged revisionist position of China vis-à-vis the international order.

The issue of China’s relationship with the international system has always been tied to the perspective of the leading power in the international system, the US. Previously, there was a sense in Washington that China was too passive and should provide more for international governance – hence the calls for China to be a more “responsible” great power. Then US Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick, famously called upon China in 2005 to become a “responsible stakeholder” working with the US to “sustain the international system that has enabled its success”.¹⁶ Arguably,

¹² Alastair Iain Johnston; China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations. *International Security* 2019; 44 (2): 9–60. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360

¹³ Similar point is suggested by others, who also mention that China had previously accepted the open-trading system (thus economically liberal) but has always opposed the liberalism in the political sense, see Masuda, M. (2022). China and the Liberal International Order: Decreasing Affinity, Seeking Primacy. *Security & Strategy* 2(2), 19-37.

¹⁴ Turcsanyi, R. Q., Liškutin, K., & Mochtak, M. (2023). Diffusion of Influence? Detecting China’s Footprint in Foreign Policies of Other Countries. *Chinese Political Science Review*, 8(3), 461–486. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-022-00217-5>.

¹⁵ Alastair Iain Johnston; China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing's International Relations. *International Security* 2019; 44 (2): 9–60. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360

¹⁶ Zoellick, R. (2005). *Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?*. US State Department Archive 2001-2009. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

at the time, the problem with China was perceived to be that it was a free-rider – benefitting greatly from the international order (especially its open trading system and relative stability and security) but supposedly not providing its own contributions to the system-building and maintenance, thus remaining too passive.

In hindsight, the 1990s and the 2000s were indeed an era, when China was focusing especially on fuelling its economic growth and was trying to avoid escalation of tensions with the US and other countries which could hamper it. In reality, this was visible, for instance, in a comparatively more cautious approach towards the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea¹⁷ while the primary goals remained the integration with the global trade order¹⁸ and the establishment of functional trade partnerships with the neighbouring countries.¹⁹ The most significant milestone of China's integration into the existing world order was its accession to the WTO, in 2001. Indeed, China's foreign policy during these roughly two decades followed Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum of 'taoguang yanghui' (韬光养晦), often translated into English as 'keeping low profile' or 'hiding capabilities and biding time' (a verbatim translation would read 'hiding brightness, cherishing obscurity').²⁰

Ironically, the Western perception of the problem of 'free-riding' and passive China changed quite rapidly. Since around the late 2000s, and especially after the coming into power of Xi Jinping in 2012, China started to be seen as too 'assertive', meaning especially that it has become more willing to directly challenge the US interests.²¹ Indeed, the era of 'low profile diplomacy' was coming to an end as the Chinese leadership gained confidence that China was becoming powerful enough to insist on its own national interests, even if that meant a more explicit challenge to the US.²²

There is no consensus among scholars what is the end goal of China's strategy (or whether China even has the strategy). Some seem to suggest that China wants to establish itself as the global hegemonic power and replace the current US-led international order with a future China-led (or centric) order. Some of the popular and influential books of this genre have included Martin Jacques²³ "*When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*"

¹⁷ Chubb, A. (2021). PRC assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring continuity and change, 1970–2015. *International Security*, 45. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00400.

¹⁸ Doshi, R. (2021). *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ Vogel, E. F. (2019). *China and Japan: Facing History*. Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press; Kurlantzick, J. (2007). *Charm offensive: How China's soft power is transforming the world*. Yale University Press.

²⁰ Chen, D., & Wang, J. (2011). Lying Low No More?: China's New Thinking on the Tao Guang Yang Hui Strategy. *China: An International Journal*, 9(2), 195–216. 10.1353/chn.2011.0013; Shirk, S. L. (2022). *Overreach: How China Derailed Its Peaceful Rise*. Oxford University Press.

²¹ Chubb, A. (2021). PRC assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring continuity and change, 1970–2015. *International Security*, 45. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00400; Johnston, A. I. (2013). How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness? *International Security*, 37(4), 7-48.

https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00115; Jerdén, B. (2014). The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7(1), 47-88.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pot019>; Turcsanyi, R. Q. (2018). *Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67648-7>; Liao, N.-C. (2016). The sources of China's assertiveness: The system, domestic politics or leadership preferences? *International Affairs*, 92(4), 817–833. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12655>.

²² Yan, X. (2014). From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7(2), 153–184. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pou027>.

²³ Jacques, M. (2012). *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order: Second Edition*. Penguin Books.

and Michael Pillsbury's²⁴ *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. The titles are already quite telling – and have likely helped the marketing success with their provocative theses.

Rush Doshi²⁵ offers a more nuanced (and well-researched) take with his *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Doshi draws on extensive research of the internal Chinese-language Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sources and sees Beijing's level of ambition as steadily increasing in time with a few critical junctions on the path. First, he shows how, starting from the early 1990s, the CCP leaders recognized that the world was in a unipolar stage – i.e., dominated by the hegemonic US – but they also patiently expected the future trend to lead towards a multipolarity. Second, the global financial crisis of 2008 made Chinese leaders believe that the trend toward the multipolar world order was accelerating, and they shifted their previous 'low profile diplomacy' to a more pro-active 'striving for achievements,' particularly in China's immediate neighbourhood. Finally, third, the election of Donald Trump as the US president, the United Kingdom's Brexit, and the West's suboptimal handling of the COVID pandemic shifted China's strategy to a new phase in which China would not shy away from challenging the US and the international order globally. In effect, Doshi's argument is one about how the Chinese foreign policy strategy is primarily shaped by the changing perceptions of China's own power and its relative position to that of the US.

While Doshi vehemently argues that China does have a long-term strategy, he is not entirely clear about what the end goal of such a strategy is. On the one hand, he offers statements such as that China seeks both regional and global paths towards hegemony, promotes its own vision of the international order, and wants to shape the 21st century just like the US shaped the 20th century – comments, which do not seem to recognize any obvious limitations in China's ambitions. On the other hand, in other places, he does leave the option open that China may have limitations or at least settle for a position of equality (rather than superiority) with the US. At the end of the day, this is also visible in the book's title, which argues that China wants to 'displace' the American order (compared to Pillsbury who claims it wants to 'replace' it).

Such limits are well visible in the new publication by Mark Leonard, who writes, based on in-depth research of Chinese-language sources and personal interviews, that *“Chinese thinkers are not interested in preserving the status quo of the current international order, but neither do they want to establish China as a new hegemonic power.”* He goes on to show that the predominant perspective among Chinese scholars seems to be to brace for a chaotic international situation without a clear single order in which multiple power centres promote their alternative governance systems.²⁶ This also stands behind the long-term position of China on multipolarity, which in effect, is mostly about degrading the leading position of the US, and the US-led order. Taylor Fravel²⁷, in his analysis of China's Global Security Initiative (forming a trifecta of global initiatives with Global Civilization Initiative and Global Development Initiative, all unveiled between 2021-2023), similarly argues that China's vision is clear about what it opposes – the US and its alliance network – but very vague on actual proposition for a China-preferred global security order would look like.

²⁴ Pillsbury, M. (2016). *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. St. Martin's Griffin.

²⁵ Doshi, R. (2021). *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*. Oxford University Press.

²⁶ Bachulska, A., Leonard, M., & Oertel, J. (2024). *The Idea of China: Chinese Thinkers on Power, Progress, and People*. Berlin: ECFR.

²⁷ Fravel, M. T. (2024, May 30). China's Global Security Initiative at Two: A Journey, Not a Destination. *China Leadership Monitor*, 80.

To sum up, the international scholarly discussion is doubtful on the question whether China can be characterized simply as a revisionist power. Naturally, the fact that a rising power – China – is putting pressure on the distribution of power in the system – and especially the dominant power of the system – is obvious and has been discussed by a number of scholars and theoretical traditions, including transition theories,²⁸ theory of hegemonic stability,²⁹ or offensive realism³⁰ – although it should also not be taken for granted that the process would be conflictual.³¹ Moreover, even though China is best suited to try to adapt the current international order to accommodate its interests due to its larger comprehensive national power, it is not the only actor to have this ambition. Instead, other developing countries – emerging powers – such as India or Brazil, have been trying to have a more significant say in shaping the institutions and norms governing the international order, and China has often sought to link its efforts to a larger quest to make the international order more equitable which would benefit also other emerging powers.

In any case, if we accept the proposition that the current international order has some characteristics that are independent of the fact that it has been dominated by the US, then we end up being hard-pressed to build a persuasive argument that China is the singularly revisionist power in principle. What may distinguish China more than anything else among the other emerging powers could be the resources it can put to use to shape its preferred vision of the international order. The following section looks more closely at the Chinese perspectives to highlight its complex attitude towards the current international order.

China's perspectives and messaging about the international order

While international scholarly debates about China's relationship with the international order reveal no apparent consensus, China itself has been adamant that it is *not* a disruptive power but a supporter of the international order. Wang Yi, while still a vice minister of foreign affairs, described China's approach as: “*We are proposing a new order, but we are not abandoning or rejecting the existing order*” and that China would “*adjust and reform the unreasonable and unfair aspects of the international order to reflect the shared interests of the majority of states and people and promote the democratization of international relations*”.³²

Obviously, while the public political discussion in China is limited by the nature of its authoritarian political system, there is still some diversity of views within the permitted limits by the CCP, especially within the academic sphere. Masuda³³ in this sense identifies three Chinese schools when it comes to perceptions of international order. The first, ‘revolutionary’ school opposes the current liberal international order and suggests that China should build an order based on its socialist values. The second, ‘linkage’ school recognizes that China benefits from the current international order although it also asks for some reforms and evolution of the order to make it more fair. The third, ‘traditional’ school highlights China's specific experience and argues that China can offer the international community more options than just the Western-led order, relying on Chinese (pre-PRC) history and traditional values.

²⁸ Organski, A. F. K. (1968). *World Politics*. Knopf: New York; Chan, S. (2008). *China, the U.S., and the Power-Transition Theory: A Critique*. New York and London: Routledge.

²⁹ Gilpin, R. (1981). *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁰ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2010). The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3(4), 381-396.

³¹ Schweller, R. L., & Pu, X. (2011). After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline. *International Security*, 36(1), 41–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41289688>.

³² Cited in Masuda, M. (2022). China and the Liberal International Order: Decreasing Affinity, Seeking Primacy. *Security & Strategy* 2(2), 19-37.

³³ Masuda, M. (2022). China and the Liberal International Order: Decreasing Affinity, Seeking Primacy. *Security & Strategy* 2(2), 19-37.

Under Xi Jinping, Chinese foreign policy has increasingly stressed the role of China in upholding the international order, while its approach seems to have tapped into all the three schools of thought mentioned above. China has been presented as a “*builder of international peace, contributor to global development, defender of international order*”.³⁴ This has been tied to the notion of China being a “responsible major power”, a term which has seen a significant increase in use in official discourse already during the Great Financial Crisis, further rising after 2014.³⁵ China amplified its self-identification as a supporter of international order during the Trump Presidency after 2017, when the US ceased its participation in some international organizations and agreements, such as the Paris Climate Agreement, and assumed a largely sceptic view towards multilateral cooperation. For China, this has been a way to create contrast with the US policy, and seek to strengthen ties with other actors, primarily the European Union (EU), by highlighting the shared commitments to multilateralism.³⁶

The issue again lies in the competing definitions of what an international order is and what it is not. China has been trying to deflect the criticism that it presents a challenge to international order, by contesting its various concrete definitions as opportunistic and deliberately targeting China. This approach can be summarized by the words of China's Permanent Representative to the UN, Zhang Jun: “*We often hear the term ‘rules-based international order’. This is a vague statement that is not in the United Nations Charter, is not in the declarations adopted by leaders of various countries at the United Nations, and is not in the resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council. We have always wanted to ask, what kind of rules is the so-called “rules-based international order” based on, who made the rules, and what is the relationship between these rules and the international order?*”³⁷

In contrast, Chinese diplomacy has stressed its rather rudimentary definition of the international order, built around what can be called a “hard core”. As argued by Xi, “*the world only has one system, and that is the international system with the UN at its core. There is only one order, and that is the international order based on international law. There is only one set of rules, and that is those based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.*”³⁸ The question to which extent China does indeed uphold these fundamental values is, of course, contested, as rhetoric often clashes with the reality of Chinese foreign policy – China’s refusal to condemn Russia for its invasion of Ukraine is one of the most glaring examples. Nevertheless, China does not contest that these rules are universal in principle and is not openly seeking to change them.

At the same time, there is a lot of space for China to try to shape the “outer core” of the international order where China sees no universally agreed-upon principles. China’s ambitions in this regard have been rising, as seen in efforts to establish China-favoured norms and practices as globally accepted. Again, this effort is mostly reactive, as China has tried to dismantle the idea of universal political values, from democracy to human rights, legitimizing its authoritarian regime.

³⁴ Renmin Wang. (2016, June 1). 习近平：中国始终是世界和平的建设者、全球发展的贡献者、国际秩序的维护者 [Xi Jinping: China has always been a builder of world peace, a contributor to global development, and a defender of the international order]. <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0701/c405440-28516035.html>.

³⁵ Thomas, N. (2020, May 11). Great (Power) Expectations: Charting the Evolution of Chinese Foreign Policy. *Macro Polo*. <https://macropolo.org/china-great-power-foreign-policy-covid19/?tp=e>.

³⁶ State Council Information Office. (2018). *China's Policy Paper on the European Union*. https://english.mee.gov.cn/Resources/publications/Whitep/202101/t20210129_819308.shtml

³⁷ PRC Permanent Mission to the UN. (2023). 张军大使在安理会加强国际法治问题公开辩论会的发言 [Statement by Ambassador Zhang Jun at the Security Council Open Debate on Strengthening the International Rule of Law].

³⁸ Xi, J. (2022). 习近平：《习近平谈治国理政》第四卷 [Xi Jinping: The Governance of China Volume Four]. Foreign Language Press.

The “White Paper on the Global Community of Shared Future,” a concept that arguably encompasses China’s concept of a desired international order, claims: “*China advocates peace, development, equity, justice, democracy and freedom, the common values of humanity. With an open mind, China understands that different civilizations have different understandings of the nature of these values, and respects the efforts of people in different countries to explore their own development paths*”.³⁹

In China’s position towards the international order, domestic determinants still hold a key role. With the CCP being motivated first and foremost by a desire to retain its monopoly over political power, Chinese leaders have been wary of any negative external interference that could threaten its rule. The long-standing fear of “peaceful evolution”⁴⁰ directed by the West through the promotion of values contradictory to the CCP’s ideology, is a significant factor in China’s focus on sovereignty and noninterference on the international stage. It also leads to China’s efforts to change the definition of “outer core” and challenge any universality of concepts such as human rights and democracy. As argued by Weiss and Wallace⁴¹ the CCP mostly challenges those parts of the international order that “threaten its domestic survival and sovereignty.” This domestic focus and self-interestedness that it implies also in some ways limits China’s ability to present a full-fledged concept of an alternative international order that could gain wider acceptance among other actors on the international stage. At the same time, China often finds a common ground on the perceived importance of these principles with other authoritarian countries. China, along with its like-minded partners, has thus been engaged in efforts to “make the world safe for dictatorship/autocracy”, seeking to legitimize the coexistence of authoritarian and democratic regimes.⁴²

The fact that in its efforts to shape international order, China has often been working within the current institutional system, such as the UN, rather than going around it, again makes the question of whether China seeks to overturn the current international system a complicated one to answer. China’s significant success in influencing the UN institutions and affecting their agenda, such as gaining official support for its initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), attests to China’s ability to work within the established set of institutions.⁴³ In the end, by making use of already established multilateral institutions, China can imbue its activities with more legitimacy. Perhaps one of the most illustrative examples are China’s activities in the UN’s Human Rights Council, where through systematic long-term engagement, China has had significant success in promoting its state-centric ‘development-based approach to human rights’,⁴⁴ including through normative change and procedural institutional reshaping.⁴⁵

Conclusion

³⁹ State Council Information Office. (2023). *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*. <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1010/c127-916.html>.

⁴⁰ Ong, R. (2007). ‘Peaceful Evolution’, ‘Regime Change’ and China's Political Security. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 16(53). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560701562408>

⁴¹ Weiss, J. C., & Wallace, J. L. (2021). Domestic Politics, China’s Rise, and the Future of the Liberal International Order. *International Organization*, 75(2), 635–664. doi:10.1017/S002081832000048X.

⁴² Dukalskis, A. (2021). *Making the World Safe for Dictatorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Weiss, J. C. (2019). A world safe for autocracy: China's rise and the future of global politics. *Foreign Affairs*, 98, 92-102.

⁴³ Deng, Y. (2021). How China Builds the Credibility of the Belt and Road Initiative. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30(131), 734–750. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2021.1884958>

⁴⁴ Oud, M. (2024). Powers of persuasion? China's struggle for human rights discourse power at the UN. *Global Policy*, 15(2), 85–96. doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13361.

⁴⁵ Foot, R. (2024). Institutional Design and Rhetorical Spaces: China’s Human Rights Strategies in a Changing World Order. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 33(150), 1053–1066. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2023.2299958>.

At the end, it should come as no surprise that China wants to increase its international power and influence as much as possible – a common behaviour for any actor in an international system. At the same time, since one of the key characteristics of the current international order is the leadership of the US and the West,⁴⁶ it seems quite natural that China's power rise would sooner or later challenge this systemic feature – and that it would likely clash with the interests of the US and its allies who would most likely try to defend their positions.

The available evidence suggests that China has approached the quest to increase its overall power and influence with a combination of, on the one hand, maximization of its position *within* the current international order, while also, on the other hand, conducting some challenging steps, including building alternative institutions and promoting different conceptualization of “outer core” norms, such as human rights. This combination of what could be divided into a series of status quo and revisionist individual steps – all designed to help China in one way or another – may be a reason why it is all but impossible to label China entirely as *either* the status quo *or* revisionist power. This overall judgment remains accurate although throughout time China has clearly been moving more of its efforts toward being a challenger and builder of the alternative institutions.⁴⁷ This is especially true since Xi Jinping assumed his power in 2012, but the trend had been visible already before him and has essentially continued under his rule.

At the same time, the problem of conceptualization does not imply that China's ambitions in shaping the international system, however we define it, are inherently limited or benign. Nor does it tell us much about Chinese intentions on matters such as territorial disputes, where China has been moving towards more offensively promoting its claims with the use of (the threat of) military power, threatening regional stability. But this is a different discussion from that about the relationship with the international order itself.

Concerning the main characteristics of the international order, perhaps an area where the US and China are closest to the agreement, is the feature of the US being the number one country in the international system today. Subsequently, it seems that the primary strategic goals of both sides are in perfect opposition – as the US seems to believe that it has to remain in the driving seat of the order, and China is all but against such a proposition. Unless the two find some common ground – which seems highly unlikely at the moment – we will be witnessing an all-across-the-board competition for the future characteristic of the international order.

China is likely to continue to put pressure on the current international order both from the inside by increasing its position and calling for reforms of existing institutions, as well as from the outside by trying to introduce alternative norms and practices. China's deepening relations with Russia, despite its highly destabilizing behaviour (such as the invasion of Ukraine), shows that undermining the US primacy increasingly takes precedence in China's foreign policy calculations against other considerations, including its preference for international stability and even respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. The US and its allies will probably push back, although their exact strategy is perhaps less consistent and clear than China's. At the same time, the struggle for a new form of international order will not be limited to the two sides, as other emerging powers

⁴⁶ Allan, B. B., Vucetic, S., & Hopf, T. (2018). The Distribution of Identity and the Future of International Order: China's Hegemonic Prospects. *International Organization*, 72(4), 839–869. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26569499>

⁴⁷ Rolland, N. (2020). *China's Vision for a New World Order*. The National Bureau of Asian Research. NBR special report #83. https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr83_chinasvision_jan2020.pdf; Sutter, R. (2020). China's Multifaceted Challenges to International Governance. *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, 27(2), 97-112.

seek to increase their say in world politics, while not fully aligning with either of the opposing camps. The international system may, in line with Ikenberry⁴⁸, develop into that of three worlds – the Global West (led by the US), the Global East (Russia and China), and the Global South, functioning as more or less loose coalitions seeking to shape the international order to their advantage. In any case, attempts to control international discourse on the issue will likely complement this power struggle.



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⁴⁸ Ikenberry, GJ. (2024) Three Worlds: the West, East and South and the competition to shape global order. *International Affairs*, 100(1), 121–138. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia284>