China and the liberal international order: a pragmatic and dynamic approach

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The world is currently undergoing some profound changes that are reshaping global politics. Among these changes, the sudden and devastating outbreak of COVID-19 stands out as the most significant shock to the international system in a century, paralysing humanity in an unprecedented manner. Geopolitical rivalries have escalated, with the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war posing a serious risk that major powers will be dragged into a prolonged conflict. Meanwhile, US-China strategic competition—the defining issue of the twenty-first century—has continued to intensify, with few signs of easing in the near future.[1] These mounting global crises have cast doubt on the functionality of the liberal international order (LIO), leaving many wondering about its future, with particular concern as to how emerging powers such as China will reshape it.[2] Understanding China's evolving attitudes towards the international order will be essential in answering these critical questions.

In recent years, a fierce debate has raged over the root causes of the crisis facing the LIO, both within the academic community and among policy-makers. While some scholars have focused on internal factors, highlighting the flaws of the dominant powers within the order and questioning the very foundations of the LIO,[3] others have looked outward and identified external challenges as the

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[1] In the latest US National Security Strategy, China is recognized as 'America's most consequential geopolitical challenge' and 'most consequential competitor'. See The White House, *National security strategy of the United States of America*, 2022, pp. 11–12, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf.

[2] The Russia–Ukraine war has already provoked anxieties over China's potential military actions towards Taiwan. See C. Todd Lopez, 'China may draw lessons from Russian failures in Ukraine', US Department of Defense, 8 Sept. 2022, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3153131/china-may-draw-lessons-from-russian-failures-in-ukraine/. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 25 May 2023.)

[3] Michael Barnett, 'International progress, international order, and the liberal international order', *The Chinese*

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primary threat to the order's survival.[4] Two special issues of *International Affairs*, one published in 2018 and the other in 2021, have vividly illustrated the ongoing debate and highlighted a growing concern over the future of the LIO.[5]

Over the past decade, the rise of China and the decline of US leadership have amplified anxieties in the West over the challenges China poses to the LIO.[6] Some western media, academia, and governments have gone so far as to label China a 'revisionist' state with ambitions to dismantle and replace the international order with its own set of values that are at odds with liberal principles, such as an 'authoritarian-capitalist international order (ACIO)'.[7] However, a growing number of scholars have challenged this pessimistic narrative, offering a more nuanced and complex view of China's relationship with the LIO. For example, renowned China expert Alastair Iain Johnston has pushed back against the emerging bipartisan consensus in Washington that 'engagement with China has failed', arguing instead that the severity of China's challenge to order is exaggerated, and China 'interacts differently with different orders, supportive of some, unsupportive of others, and partially supportive of still others'.[8]

Johnston's argument stands for a line of scholarly works that characterize China's interactions with the LIO as 'selective engagement' or 'selective reform'.[9] Similarly, other scholars suggest that the socialization of international norms is a 'two-way' process, whereby emerging powers like China internalize and reshape existing international norms simultaneously.[10] It is worth noting, however, that this type of selective engagement is not unique to emerging powers. In reality, all states, whether liberal or illiberal, engage with international norms and institutions in a selective manner. This includes the United States.[11] In this sense, revisionism is not unique to a rising power. As illustrated in some studies, the US

Journal of International Politics 14: 1, 2021, pp. 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaa019; G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241.

[4] Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, *Exit from hegemony: the unraveling of the American global order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); David C. Gompert, 'Four circles: comprehending the China challenge', *Survival* 64: 2, 2022, pp. 95–110, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2055826.

[5] 'Ordering the world: liberal internationalism in theory and practice', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, https://academic.oup.com/ia/issue/94/1; 'Deglobalization: the future of the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, https://academic.oup.com/ia/issue/97/5.

[6] Alastair Iain Johnston, 'China in a world of orders: rethinking compliance and challenge in Beijing's international relations', *International Security* 44: 2, 2019, pp. 9–60, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00360.

[7] John M. Owen, 'Two emerging international orders? China and the United States', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1415–31, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab111.

[8] Johnston, 'China in a world of orders', p. 12.

[9] Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy L. Wallace, 'Domestic politics, China's rise, and the future of the liberal international order', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 635–64, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002081832000048X; Heng Wang, 'Selective reshaping: China's paradigm shift in international economic governance', *Journal of International Economic Law* 23: 3, 2020, pp. 583–606, https://doi.org/10.1093/jiel/jgaa021.

[10] Xiaoyu Pu, 'Socialisation as a two-way process: emerging powers and the diffusion of international norms', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5: 4, 2012, pp. 341–67, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pos017; Zhu Liqun, 'China and international system: Two-way socialization under the logic of practice,' in Jinjun Zhao and Zhirui Chen, eds, *China and the international society: adaptation and self-consciousness* (Hackensack, NJ: World Century, 2014), pp. 19–53, https://doi.org/10.1142/9781938134517_0002.

[11] David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse, 'Challenges to the liberal order: reflections on *International Organization*', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 225–57, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636.

has espoused an increasingly revisionist outlook, particularly during the controversial Trump administration.[12]

Which ideas are relevant in light of recent developments in both Chinese foreign policy and world politics? How can we make sense of China's perceptions of the LIO? What part of the order does China support, and what change does it endeavour to bring? In this article, we answer these questions by reviewing the debates over China's relationship with the LIO and evaluating new dynamics in China's international practices within the LIO. At a time when the world faces the possibility of a third world war arising from the Russia–Ukraine conflict and many states are sceptical of China's commitment to maintaining a peaceful world order, a comprehensive and timely analysis of China's perspective on order is crucial. Despite the extensive research conducted on China's view of world affairs, the majority of notable works on this topic have been written by foreign scholars, while Chinese scholars have either focused solely on academic debates or attempted to interpret official foreign policy. In our article, we aim to provide an objective and balanced analysis of China's view of order by examining theoretical thought and policy practices from a Chinese perspective, drawing insights from both Chinese academic writings and government statements.

It is important to note that this article does not aim to construct a theoretical framework to explain how China's view of international order has been driven by different factors over time. Rather, its purpose is to establish a solid foundation for a nuanced understanding of China's current approach to the international order. Such an understanding is a prerequisite for any original research seeking to address this topic comprehensively. Specifically, we contend that a perceptual gap exists between China and the West with respect to their comprehension of the post-1945 international order. The disparity between China's pragmatic and functional view and the West's ideological emphasis of the order has led to western scepticism regarding China's intentions. In practice, China has maintained a pragmatic stance and has interacted dynamically with different subcomponents of the LIO. As a whole, China continues to exhibit a significant degree of support for the present order and has not yet displayed intent to establish a wholly new international order.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows. First, we review the debate on China's vision of international order among Chinese scholars. Second, we survey China's latest perceptions of the concept of the LIO based on both official and academic resources, with a particular focus on their differences from US and western perceptions. Third, we analyse China's evolutionary attitudes towards different subcomponents of the LIO. Fourth, we conduct a brief review of China's latest responses to the current challenges of the LIO under the background of intensified US-China strategic competition and proceed to a short discussion about their implications. Finally, we present our concluding remarks.

[12] Steve Chan, 'Challenging the liberal order: the US hegemon as a revisionist power', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1335–52, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab074; Kai He, Huiyun Feng, Steve Chan and Weixing Hu, 'Rethinking revisionism in world politics', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 14: 2, 2021, pp. 159–86, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poab004.

The debate around China's vision of international order

The question of China's vision of international order has been the subject of an ongoing debate, with western scholars divided in their beliefs regarding China's intentions.[13] Some argue that China has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of the current international order and thus has an interest in maintaining it.[14] Others believe that, given the improvements in its national strength and international status, China's role within the international order has changed, and its participation in and impact on international affairs are becoming more comprehensive and extensive. Accordingly, China's definition of the content and scope of its national interests and the means to safeguard them are also bound to change. Consequently, China has an increasing need to reform and even replace the LIO.[15]

Based on different attitudes that China might have towards the US-led international order, the existing Chinese literature can also be divided into two camps. The first camp believes that the current international order is generally beneficial to China, and that there is therefore no need for China to overthrow it. They maintain that the existing international order is the most institutionalized and internalized in human history, and that it has greatly alleviated disorder in the anarchical system.[16] They highlight the decrease in the number of casualties from international wars and the trends of multipolarity in international politics, economic globalization and the democratization of international relations.[17] Furthermore, they assert that the existing international order has provided economic opportunities for developing countries, including China. This camp of scholars refutes the West's perception that China is challenging the international order and argues that China wants to continue to integrate with the current order while promoting reforms to develop the international order in a more just and reasonable direction.[18]

This line of reasoning rests on two key assumptions. First, that the current US unipolar system will eventually give way to a US/China bipolar system or a

[13] Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a status quo power?' *International Security* 27: 4, 2003, pp. 5–56, https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803321951081; William A. Callahan, 'Chinese visions of world order: post-hegemonic or a new hegemony?' *International Studies Review* 10: 4, 2008, pp. 749–761, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00830.x.

[14] Avery Goldstein, 'China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping: reassurance, reform, and resistance', *International Security* 45: 1, 2020, pp. 164–201, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00383; David Shambaugh, 'The illusion of Chinese power', Brookings Institution, 26 June 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-illusion-of-chinese-power.

[15] Michael Pillsbury, *The hundred year marathon: China's secret strategy to replace America as the global superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2015). Also see Martin Jacques, *When China rules the world* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); Peter Harris, 'China in British politics: Western unexceptionalism in the shadow of China's rise', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10: 3, 2017, pp. 241–67 at p. 242, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pox009.

[16] Shiping Tang, 'China and the future international order(s)', *Ethics & International Affairs* 32: 1, 2018, pp. 31–43, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679418000084; Shiping Tang, 'Guoji zhixu bianqian yu zhongguo de xuanxiang' [The transformation of the international order and China's choices], *Zhongguo shehui kexue* [Social Sciences in China] no. 3, 2019, pp. 199–200.

[17] Xuetong Yan, 'Chinese values vs. liberalism: what ideology will shape the international normative order?' *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 11: 1, 2018, pp. 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poy001.

[18] Zhou Guiyin, Song Dexing, Liu Feng, Qi Lingling, Mao Weizhun, Zhang Xiaotong and He Yinghao, 'Zhongguo yu guoji zhixu bitan: guannian yu zhanlue' [China and international order: visions and strategies], *Guoji zhanwang* [Global Review], no. 1, 2021, pp. 22–7.

multipolar system dominated by major powers who value political stability, international norms and global economic integration.[19] Second, that while the US may be in decline, it will remain committed to protecting its core areas of hegemony, which China should avoid challenging directly.[20] Instead, China should increase its power and influence in less crucial areas while working with the US and other major powers to build a more accommodative order.[21] Ren Xiao advocates for a 'system of symbiosis' that would allow the Chinese to coexist with the western order through inclusive improvement, global partnership, mutual trust and global governance cooperation.[22] In addition, Qin Yaqing notes that a peaceful, prosperous and progressive international order could only be established if the reality of a plural world is recognized and different values from different states and nations are respected.[23] Wu Xinbo separates US hegemony from the LIO and notes that while China's rise may challenge US hegemony, it will not necessarily challenge the rules-based international order.[24]

In contrast to the first camp, the second camp of scholars takes a more critical stance towards the current US-led international order and calls for a bolder approach. They believe that the LIO's growing dysfunctionality is due to its lack of legitimacy and that China should offer an alternative framework to address global crises. The problem with the current LIO, according to this camp, is that it is based solely on western values, failing to take into account the diversity of civilizations and values in the world.[25] Moreover, the order's clear geographical boundaries and functional role as an instrument for hegemony make the United States the gatekeeper of the LIO, and deciding which countries may join the order becomes a tool for US foreign policy.[26] The order's interventionist tendencies have also led to disastrous consequences in targeted countries and have created regional political chaos.[27]

[19] For more discussions about the potential bipolarity, please see Richard Maher, 'Bipolarity and the future of U.S.-China relations', *Political Science Quarterly* 133: 3, 2018, pp. 497–525, https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12801; Øystein Tunsjø, *The return of bipolarity in world politics: China, the United States, and geostructural realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

[20] Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, 'After unipolarity: China's visions of international order in an era of U.S. decline', *International Security* 36: 1, 2011, pp. 41–72 at p. 63, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00044.

[21] Wang Yiwei, 'China's rise: an unlikely pillar of U.S. hegemony', *Harvard International Review* 29: 1, 2007, pp. 60–3; Yinghong Shi, 'Fengwuchang yi fangyanliang: zhongguo yingyou de waijiao zhexue he shiji dazhanlue' [To have a long vision: diplomatic philosophy on external affairs and secular grand strategy for China in the 21st century], *Journal of HIT (Social Science edition)* 3: 2, 2001, pp. 13–20.

[22] Xiao Ren, 'Grown from within: building a Chinese school of international relations', *The Pacific Review* 33: 3–4, 2020, pp. 386–412, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2020.1728573.

[23] Yaqing Qin, 'International society as a process: institutions, identities, and China's peaceful rise', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3: 2, 2010, pp. 129–53, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poq007.

[24] Xinbo Wu, 'China in search of a liberal partnership international order', *International Affairs* 94: 5, 2018, pp. 995–1018, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy141.

[25] Xuetong Yan, 'Political leadership and power redistribution', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9: 1, 2016, pp. 1–26, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pow002.

[26] Wang Honggang, 'Xiandai guoji zhixu de yanjin yu zhongguo de shidai zeren' [The evolution of modern international order and China's responsibility of the times', *Xiandai guoji guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations], no. 12, 2016, pp. 1-14.

[27] Cai Tuo and Zhang Bingbing, 'Cong guojia zhuyi zouxiang shijie zhuyi—ziyou zhuyi guoji zhixu de bianxi yu fansi' [From nationalism to cosmopolitanism—analysis and reflection on the liberal international order], *Tansuo yu zhengming* [Exploration and Free Views], no. 7, 2022, p. 40.

In response to the flawed US-led international order and China's growing strength and influence, the second camp of experts believes that China is now capable of offering an appealing blueprint for a new order. Drawing inspiration from the philosophy and history of traditional Chinese order, Zhao Tingyang proposes that the Chinese theory of *Tianxia* (all under Heaven), which is more holistic and inclusive than western ideas and culture, is the optimal philosophy for world governance and should be employed to reshape the world order.[28] Similarly, Zhang Weiwei maintains that China will rise as a 'civilized country' that will surpass the West not only in material wealth, but also in institutional arrangements and cultural concepts, advocating for *Wangdao* (humane authority) instead of *Badao* (hegemony).[29] Yan Xuetong proposes a middle course and argues that China should shape the international order 'by combining some Chinese traditional values with selected liberalist values, such as benevolence, righteousness and rites with equality, democracy and freedom, respectively'.[30]

The contrasting views expressed by Chinese scholars about the current US-led international order are complex and nuanced. On the one hand, China has profited enormously from the current order, which has provided it with unprecedented opportunities for development and integration into the global system.[31] As the most successful player under the current order, why would China want to undermine it? However, China's rise has also highlighted the difference between its political system and some of the values promoted by the United States and its allies, such as liberal democracy, free enterprise and individual political freedoms. This has resulted in tensions between China and the West. These tensions, together with the recent challenges arising from within the liberal world—mainly the rise of populism and the decline of US leadership—have encouraged China to propagate its own values of the international order.

The varying perspectives among Chinese intellectuals on how China should engage with the LIO have left observers puzzled. Many are wondering which path the Chinese government will ultimately choose when in pursuit of national rejuvenation—a more revolutionary approach, or a more moderate one. However, this confusion stems from a failure to recognize two key factors: the fundamental differences in how China and the West perceive the LIO, and the dynamic and multifaceted nature of China's responses to different subcomponents of the LIO. Understanding these nuanced differences is vital in making sense of both China's future paths and its current practices in the international arena. A comprehensive analysis of China's perceptions of the LIO is necessary to fully grasp its position.

[28] Zhao Tingyang, 'A political world philosophy in terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)', *Diogenes* 56: 1, 2009, pp. 5–18, https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192109102149.

[29] Zhang Weiwei, *The China wave: rise of a civilizational state* (Hackensack, NJ: World Century Publishing Corporation, 2012).

[30] Yan, 'Chinese values vs. liberalism'.

[31] Zhu Feng, 'Guoji zhixu yu zhongmei zhanlue jingzheng' [International order and Sino-US strategic competition], *Yatai anquan yu haiyang yanjiu* [Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs], no. 4, 2020, pp. 1–22.

Chinese perceptions of the LIO

The perception and narrative of the current international order differ significantly between China and the West. While the term 'liberal international order' is commonly used in western literature on International Relations, other terms—such as the 'Liberal Order', 'American International Order', 'Pax Americana' and 'Wilsonian World Order'—refer to the same order denoted by the LIO: the order that is established and maintained by the US,[32] with its norms and their corresponding institutions rooted in western liberal values.[33] The idea of establishing an international order that reflects US ideology and institutional design dates back to the end of the First World War, when US President Woodrow Wilson proposed the 'Fourteen Points'.[34] However, it was not until the end of the Second World War that the US had sufficient power and will to implement the design.[35] During the Cold War, the LIO was only dominant in the western hemisphere, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, it extended to the entire world and enjoyed its peak for nearly three decades thereafter.[36]

Chinese academia believes that the establishment and maintenance of the LIO require three conditions. First, the LIO is a product of the US pursuit and consolidation of its dominant position and is oriented to its own national interests and liberal values. Second, the US power advantage, coupled with its system of global alliances, constitutes the security basis of the LIO. Third, multilateral institutions that promote the liberal character of the US, such as multilateralism itself, free trade and market economy, provide the necessary institutional foundation for the LIO.[37] Simply put, hegemony is the end, strength is the foundation, and the institution is the means.

In the Chinese government's discourse, the concept of LIO is not used. Nor is the western liberal ideology recognized as the foundation of the current international order. Rather, the Chinese government frequently refers to the 'existing international order', 'the international order underpinned by international law', or sometimes 'the postwar international order'.[38] For instance, when meeting with

[32] With respect to the other names for the LIO, see Joseph S. Nye Jr, 'Will the liberal order survive? The history of an idea', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 1, 2017, pp. 10–16, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive; Walter Russell Mead, 'The end of the Wilsonian era: why liberal internationalism failed', *Foreign Affairs* 100: 1, 2021, pp. 123–37, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-12-08/end-wilsonian-era.

[33] Da Wei, 'China's choices in a changing international order', *China International Studies* vol. 2, 2021, pp. 24–38, https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/chintersd87&div=5&id=&page=; Liu Feng, 'Guoji liyi geju tiaozheng yu guoji zhixu zhuanxing' [Benefits distribution and international order: adjustment and transformation], *Waijiao pinglun* [Foreign Affairs Review], no. 5, 2015, pp. 54–5.

[34] Qin Yaqing, 'Shijie zhixu de biange: cong baquan dao baorongxing duobian zhuyi' [The change of world order: from hegemony to inclusive multilateralism], *Yatai anquan yu haiyang yanjiu* [Asia-Pacific Security and Maritime Affairs], no. 2, 2021, pp. 2–3.

[35] Nye, 'Will the liberal order survive?'.

[36] Robert O. Keohane, 'Twenty years of institutional liberalism', *International Relations* 26: 2, 2012, pp. 125–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117812438451.

[37] Wang Ziyuan, 'Ziyou guoji zhixu yu diwei chengren' [Liberal international order and status recognition], *Shijie zhengzhi yanjiu* [World Politics], no. 4, 2021, pp. 122–126; Xu Jin, 'Zhongmei zhanlue jingzheng yu weilai guoji zhixu de zhuanhuan' [The idea competition in international order and power transition], *Dangdai yatai* [Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies], no. 4, 2019, p. 8.

[38] We use these three terms interchangeably in the rest of the article. Note that the Chinese government more

the Chairwoman of the Federation Council of Russia Valentina Matviyenko in 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out that 'the two countries [should] … speak and act together to … safeguard the achievements of the Second World War as well as the postwar international order'.[39] When using these terms, the Chinese government is generally referring to a part of the LIO it supports: emphasizing the importance of international rules. Specifically, the international political and security order is the norm, based on the principles of the UN Charter and with the UN at its core.[40] The core of the international economic order is the international framework of multilateralism constituted by the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and so on.

In discussing the current international order, China has a clearly different focus from that held by the US and its allies. China holds a very pragmatic position by always putting emphasis on the objective foundations of the international order, which, from the Chinese perspective, is the rules-based multilateral international framework. This consists of the UN as the main body in the political and security domains, and the WTO, WB and other relevant multinational mechanisms in the economic domain. China is steadfast in its refusal to attach any ideological value to the international order, and, in particular, rejects the notion that the western liberal democratic values and the system of military alliances are an intrinsic part of the order.[41]

By highlighting the role of international rules in generating and maintaining the international order, China plays down the significance of power and ideology and deems itself a strong upholder of the UN-centred order.[42] Such a stance was reaffirmed in the report to the Twentieth National Congress of the Communist Party of China: 'China is firm in safeguarding the international system with the United Nations at its core, the international order underpinned by international law, and the basic norms governing international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.'[43]

In contrast, the US and its 'like-minded' allies regard liberal democratic values as the core element of the postwar international order.[44] Multilateral rules are seen as key means for the US to promote its liberal character including multilateralism,

often mentions 'the international system with the United Nations at its core, the international order underpinned by international law, and the basic norms governing international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter' together. For the latest example, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China', 25 Oct. 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202210/t20221025_10791908.html.

[39] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'President meets Russian Federation Council speaker', 24 Sept. 2014, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/top_news/2014/09/24/content_281474989006884.htm.

[40] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hong Lei's regular press conference on November 10, 2015', 10 Nov. 2015, http://np.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/201511/t20151110_1593785.htm.

[41] Fu Ying, 'China no threat to international order', *China–U.S. Focus Digest* 9, 2016, pp. 11–14, https://www.chinausfocus.com/magazine/v09.

[42] Da, 'China's choices in a changing international order', p. 25.

[43] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Full text of the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China'.

[44] Michael J. Mazarr, 'Preserving the postwar order', *Washington Quarterly* 40: 2, 2017, pp. 29–49.

free trade and reciprocity.[45] This ideological underpinning of the western conception of the LIO has led to concerns about the rise of politically illiberal powers like China and Russia, which are viewed as posing a significant threat to the order.

The difference between China and the United States in terms of both ideology and the perception of the postwar order has generated mutual suspicion and accusations in recent years. On the one hand, the US is sceptical of China's commitment to upholding the postwar order. There are increasing bipartisan claims in Washington and academic circles that refer to China as a revisionist state.[46] On the other hand, criticism has also been forthcoming from Chinese officials and scholars regarding the 'hypocrisy' of the LIO. From their perspective, the LIO presents itself as a global order accepted and respected by all countries while, in reality, it operates as an exclusive 'club', only allowing entry to countries with western ideologies and policies.[47] Chinese scholars have argued that the LIO is essentially an American order that always prioritizes national (US) interests and liberal values over international norms and rules. As US–China rivalry intensifies, the LIO has faded into a hegemonic order against, and excluding, China. During the Trump administration, the US has increasingly competed with China by using means that are contrary to the principles of the LIO, such as decoupling and sanctions.[48] Even scholars within the West have demonstrated that the US has always leveraged its trade policies to achieve and maintain its global dominance.[49]

To sum up, when referring to the postwar international order, China calls it the 'international order underpinned by international law' while the West labels it the LIO. These differing labels reveal distinct value preferences. China takes a pragmatic approach and recognizes the UN-centred rule-based multilateral international framework as the core foundation of the postwar order. The western narratives, however, incorporate a strong ideological element by considering liberal values an intrinsic part of the postwar order. This perception gap has led to enormous misunderstandings and mutual recriminations between China and the West concerning the root causes of the crises of the current international order. When assessing China's dissatisfaction with the LIO, it is important, therefore, to distinguish the (sub)components to which China refers. Specifically, whether China is criticizing the 'reality part' of the order (the UN-centred international laws and rules) or the 'value part' of the order (liberalism and democracy) makes a huge difference when it comes to interpreting China's actual stance.

[45] G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: the origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 182.

[46] Ely Ratner and Brad Carson, 'Jaw-jaw: how America got China wrong', *War on the Rocks*, 22 Jan. 2019, https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/jaw-jaw-how-america-got-china-wrong.

[47] Da, 'China's choices in a changing international order', p. 33.

[48] Xu Jin, 'Linian jingzheng, zhixu goujian, yu quanli zhuanyi' [The idea competition in international order and power transition].

[49] Kristen Hopewell, 'Strategic narratives in global trade politics: American hegemony, free trade, and the hidden hand of the state', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14: 1, 2021, pp. 51–86, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaa020.

The LIO's subcomponents and China's reactions

As many scholars have pointed out, China's approach to the LIO and foreign policy-making is not static and monolithic: rather, it is complex and dynamic.[50] Weiss and Wallace, for instance, use two domestic variables—centrality and heterogeneity—to explain China's diverse international behaviours and to demonstrate that China is more adaptable on many issues than some extreme views suggest.[51] Similarly, a nuanced examination reveals that China has engaged with different aspects of the LIO in different ways. Johnston's 2019 article, for example, identifies eight different orders that coexist in different issue areas within the LIO.[52] While such a fine-grained analysis can shed light on a country's overall degree of compliance with the international order, it may be too fragmented conceptually for people to construct a comprehension of a country's overall position towards the international order.

In understanding China's approach to the international order, we identify three key subcomponents of the LIO. The UN-centred international political/security order and the multilateralism-based international economic order are the two primary institutions that constitute the LIO, while other suborders are secondary. Meanwhile, as regional economic arrangements are especially important for China's development and peaceful rise at the current stage, the newly emerging regional economic order is another key subcomponent for the analysis. Regarding these three subcomponents, China's approaches could be respectively categorized as strongly supportive; supportive but with intentions to promote reforms in certain domains; and dynamically evolving.

The international political/security order

China has consistently highlighted the importance of the international political and security order, which is centred around the United Nations and based on the UN Charter and international law.[53] This order is considered the cornerstone of maintaining global peace and stability, a belief held by China since its admission to the UN in 1971. China believes that since the end of the Second World War, the UN-centred international political/security order has laid the foundation for maintaining peace and stability in the international community. The principle of sovereign equality and respect for the principle of equal rights and self-deter-

[50] Feng Zhang and Barry Buzan, 'The relevance of deep pluralism for China's foreign policy', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 15: 3, 2022, pp. 246–71, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poac014; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'The failures of the "failure of engagement" with China', *The Washington Quarterly* 42: 2, 2019, pp. 99–114, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1626688; Johnston, 'China in a world of orders'.

[51] Weiss and Wallace, 'Domestic politics'; Schweller and Pu also noted that what might best capture the Chinese vision of international order is a negotiated order that builds on a flexible and pragmatic approach to foreign policy. See Schweller and Pu, 'After unipolarity'.

[52] Johnston, 'China in a world of orders', pp. 25–56.

[53] See, for example Li Huiming, 'Renlei mingyun gongtongti yu guoji zhixu zhuanxing' [A community with a shared future for mankind and international order transition], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], no. 8, 2021, pp. 4–33; Dong He and Yuan Zhengqing, 'Zhongguo guoji zhixuguan: xingcheng yu neihe' [China's view of international order: formation and cores], *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu* [Teaching and Research], no. 7, 2016, pp. 45–51.

mination of peoples enshrined in the UN Charter are consistent with China's Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, first proposed as guiding principles for China's foreign relations in 1954.[54] In practice, China has made significant and increasing investments in upholding the order, contributing more troops to UN peacekeeping missions than any other permanent member of the Security Council and ranking second in terms of its funding of UN peacekeeping operations.[55]

China's support of the UN-centred international political/security order is driven by three primary factors. First, the international regimes and norms of this order align with China's aspiration to attain great power status. Given that the victorious powers, including China, founded the UN-based international system following the Second World War, China promotes the legitimacy and authority of the UN to achieve its agendas. Moreover, as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council with veto power, China enjoys a special status and potential advantages over other states. Second, the emphasis on state sovereignty, equality, and non-interference enshrined in the UN Charter confers China with the legitimacy and institutional power for 'defending the nation's sovereignty against foreign encroachment' and 'circumscribing the liberal emphasis on individual political freedoms'.[56] Third, the UN also provides China with a platform to showcase its commitment to multilateralism and address global issues such as climate change, terrorism and economic development, which are critical to its domestic stability and security. In short, preserving the UN-centred international political/security order aligns with China's objective of advancing 'a triadic model of [economic] development, strong state, and social stability'.[57]

The international economic order

China's attitudes are more dynamic towards the economic order. The post-Second World War multilateral mechanisms established by the LIO have provided a platform for developing countries to participate in international economic affairs. While initially dominated by western countries, these mechanisms have increasingly benefited China and other developing countries since the 1980s and 1990s. The international economic order is composed of three suborders: the multilateral trade order, the international financial order, and the international development assistance order. Since its reform and opening up, China has been a major upholder of the international economic order which has largely nurtured the country's unprecedented economic growth. However, thanks to its increased national strength, China is increasingly willing and able to push for reforms within these suborders, leading to a shift in its interactions with them.

[54] Liu Jianfei, 'Guoji geju yanjin yu guoji zhixu chongsu' [Evolution of international pattern and reshaping of international order], *Dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi* [Contemporary World and Socialism], no. 5, 2015, p. 118.

[55] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Position paper on China's cooperation with the United Nations', 22 Oct. 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wjzcs/202110/t20211022_9609380.html.

[56] Weiss and Wallace, 'Domestic politics', pp. 637–45.

[57] Rosemary Foot, *China, the UN, and human protection: beliefs, power, image* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

First of all, China is firmly supportive of the multilateral trade order. For the past two decades since its accession to the WTO, China has fulfilled its commitments and reaped enormous benefits for its development.[58] With growth in foreign direct investment of 157.7 per cent (in RMB terms) between 2001 and 2020, China has become the world's largest exporter, accounting for 14.7 per cent of world exports by the end of that period and reducing its average import duty rate from 15.3 per cent in 2001 to 7.4 per cent in 2021.[59] As of 2021, China had signed 19 free-trade deals with 26 countries and regions.[60] The Chinese government has repeatedly emphasized its determination to uphold the multilateral trading system, as demonstrated by its recent participation in the establishment of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, spearheaded by the Association for Southeast Asian Nations.[61]

Second, China is trying to increase its influence within the international financial order. Unlike in the WTO, whose members have an equal vote and equal ability to initiate the dispute resolution process, traditional voting power in international financial institutions is largely determined by the balance of power among states.[62] With the rise of China and other emerging states, the original distribution does not reflect changes in the international economic landscape. China has been actively seeking to enlarge its power, but it has done so within existing institutions with little evidence of overthrowing current regimes. In 2010, the reform programme of the IMF was passed, which raised China's vote share to third place. In 2016, the renminbi was added to the basket of currencies making up the IMF special drawing right.[63] China's creation of alternate institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund simply gives it additional means to gain the leverage that is needed to increase its power within existing institutions.[64]

China's efforts to internationalize its currency and reduce its dependence on the US dollar have raised concerns about its potential intentions to challenge the existing international financial order.[65] However, this perspective overestimates China's current capabilities; it also overlooks how deeply China is entrenched in global financial markets powered by the US dollar. China is more heavily invested than any other economy in US Treasury bonds and other dollar-denominated

[58] Doug Stokes and Martin Williamson, 'The United States, China and the WTO after coronavirus', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14: 1, 2021, pp. 23–49, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaa013.

[59] 'China fulfills commitments to WTO, upholds multilateral trading regime: Commerce Ministry', *Global Times*, 9 Dec. 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1241128.shtml.

[60] 'China fulfills commitments to WTO'.

[61] The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Address by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at the conference of the 70th anniversary of CCPIT and global trade and investment promotion summit', 18 May 2022, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx_662805/202205/t20220518_10688542.html.

[62] Liu, 'Benefits distribution and international order', p. 53.

[63] International Monetary Fund, 'IMF Survey: Chinese renminbi to be included in IMF's special drawing right basket', 1 Dec. 2015, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/sonew120115a.

[64] Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the international order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), pp. 37–8, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2423.

[65] Zongyuan Zoe Liu, 'China is quietly trying to dethrone the dollar', *Foreign Policy*, 21 Sept. 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/21/china-yuan-us-dollar-sco-currency.

assets, and thus would bear the brunt if a significant shift occurred in the global financial system. China's strategic objective is to elevate the renminbi to a regionally influential currency through local institutions and regional intergovernmental organizations, while reducing its dependence on the US dollar and minimizing both exchange risk and liquidity shortages.[66]

Third, China attempts to complement the international development assistance order by contributing a Chinese approach.[67] Traditionally, the responsibility of providing aid to underdeveloped countries has largely fallen on western countries or their domestic NGOs, which often come with strong political strings attached. Such aid often serves as an important channel for the West to promote democracy and human rights in recipient countries. With increasing economic power, China has increased its involvement in providing overseas development assistance. Unlike the western model, China's aid does not hinge on the political achievements of the recipients, such as the establishment of democracy or effective rule of law.[68] Promoting economic development, instead of political reform, is China's primary concern.[69] In that process, China has not exported a political ideology or directly challenged the established arrangements under the LIO: rather, it has provided an alternative option outside the existing financial institutions largely controlled by the US and other western developed countries.[70]

China's efforts to promote regional development are rooted in its comparative advantages in technical areas related to local development.[71] The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an important vehicle for China's promotion of its approach. Some scholars have claimed that the BRI prioritizes meeting China's own economic development needs with the primary goal of shifting excess industrial capacity and the secondary aim of promoting the development of China's border provinces.[72] Others believe that the BRI also has some political and security purpose.[73] The Chinese government and academia deny any strategic intention behind the BRI, but it is undeniable that the BRI serves both China's domestic development goals and its desire for global prestige. Indeed, the allure of the BRI and its main financier, the AIIB, is significantly boosted by the disinterest of

[66] 'China to work with Asian nations to grow use of local currencies in trade', Reuters, 16 Feb. 2022.

[67] Bowen Yu, 'Cognitive evolution and China's international development cooperation', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14: 4, 2021, pp. 481–505, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poab014.

[68] Johnston, 'China in a world of orders', p. 35.

[69] Axel Dreher, Andreas Fuchs, Brad Parks, Austin M. Strange and Michael J. Tierney, 'Apples and dragon fruits: the determinants of aid and other forms of state financing from China to Africa', *International Studies Quarterly* 62: 1, 2018, pp. 182–94, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx052.

[70] Li Wei and Luo Yifu, 'Cong guize dao zhixu—guoji zhidu jingzheng de luoji' [From rules to orders: the logic of international institutional competition], *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics], no. 4, 2019, pp. 28–57.

[71] Men Honghua, 'Zhongguo jueqi yu guoji zhixu biange' [The rise of China and the transformation of international order], *Guoji zhengzhi kexue* [Quarterly Journal of International Politics] no. 1, 2016, pp. 60–89.

[72] Peter Ferdinand, 'Westward ho—the China dream and "One Belt, One Road": Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping', *International Affairs* 92: 4, 2016, pp. 941–57, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12660; Mingjiang Li, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: geo-economics and Indo-Pacific security competition', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 169–87, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz240.

[73] Philippe Le Corre, *China's rise as a geo-economic influencer: four European case studies* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018); Markus Brunnermeier, Rush Doshi and Harold James, 'Beijing's Bismarckian ghosts: how great powers compete economically', *Washington Quarterly* 41: 3, 2018, pp. 161–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2018.1520571.

western private capital in bridging the infrastructure financing gap prevalent in many developing nations.[74]

The regional economic order

In the Asia-Pacific region, the United States has long sought to create an inclusive, high-standard, and rules-based economic order.[75] China's response to this order has been dynamic and evolving, starting from dismissive to accommodative. Its attitude towards the contested Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is a good example. Initially, China denounced the TPP as a central economic element in the broad US policy of 'pivoting' or 'rebalancing' to Asia which was aimed at containing China's regional hegemony.[76] Gradually, however, China's suspicion waned, and it stated that it 'will analyse the pros and cons as well as the possibility of joining the TPP, based on careful research and according to principles of equality and mutual benefit'.[77] The TPP later transformed into the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), after the US withdrew from the TPP under the Trump administration in 2017. Since then, China's attitude has become even more positive. In 2021, a statement from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce claimed that China 'is actively conducting a study on matters related to joining the [CPTPP] and is willing to strengthen technical exchanges with CPTPP members on relevant problems'.[78]

The evolution of the official Chinese position towards the TPP from one of hostility and suspicion to a more positive stance reveals China's pragmatic approach to regional order. Despite potential political and economic costs, China was convinced that joining the TPP would generate significant economic benefits.[79] The fact that China expressed a change in its initial attitude towards the TPP before the unilateral withdrawal of the US confirms that its decision-making is driven by cost–benefit analysis rather than a desire to compete with the US as a great power.

From the above analysis of China's different responses to the subcomponents of the LIO, it becomes evident that China's approach to the international order has been pragmatic, rather than being driven by ideology. This pragmatism is bound up inextricably with three intertwined dynamic variables: China's domestic political and economic agenda; its national strength; and its relationship with

[74] For the differential effects on the rules governing development finance the BRI and the AIIB might have, see Lars S. Skålnes, 'Layering and displacement in development finance: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14: 2, 2021, pp. 257–88, https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poab001.

[75] The White House, 'Fact sheet: advancing the Rebalance to Asia and the Pacific',16 Nov. 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/fact-sheet-advancing-rebalance-asia-and-pacific.

[76] Cary Huang, 'Beijing suspicious over U.S. regional trade bloc', *South China Morning Post*, 14 Nov. 2011, https://www.scmp.com/article/984758/beijing-suspicious-over-us-regional-trade-bloc.

[77] Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China, 'Interview with the spokesperson of the MOFCOM', 1 May 2013, http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/ae/ag/201305/20130500146218.shtml.

[78] 'China actively studying CPTPP membership: MOFCOM', *Global Times,* 4 Feb. 2021, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1214949.shtml.

[79] Evelyn S. Devadason, 'The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP): the Chinese perspective', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23: 87, 2014, pp. 462–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.843890.

the United States. The evolution of these three variables has largely determined China's evolving conception of the international order and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

Challenges to the LIO and China's responses

How, exactly, the changes in China's domestic political and economic agenda, national strength and relationship with the United States have set the course of its approach to the international order over the past few decades is another important topic worth a separate article. Due to limitations of space, we do not discuss it in detail here. However, before concluding this article, it is important to review China's latest responses to the current challenges to the LIO in the context of intensified US–China strategic competition, and to engage in a short discussion about their implications.

Besides the perceived threat posed by China, the COVID–19 pandemic,[80] the rise of populism[81] and the growing disorder in regional politics and security have also been identified by western scholars as key challenges to the LIO.[82] Although Chinese officials and academia reject the notion of 'the China challenge', they do agree with some western scholars that the LIO is in the process of transformation. From the Chinese perspective, the drawbacks of the LIO are becoming pronounced, in three areas in particular. First, the LIO is seen as under-representing the interests and demands of developing and emerging countries. Second, the LIO is perceived as unfair, as western-led economic globalization has contributed to a widening wealth gap between the rich and the poor within many nations. Third, the diversity and complexity of global and regional crises have revealed the dysfunctionality of the LIO, leading to calls for a more pluralistic model of governance.

With respect to its perceived drawbacks, China has been increasingly active in recent years in promoting its thoughts on the reform of the LIO. Politically, China has reaffirmed its unwavering support for the UN-centred international order.[83] Economically, China is pushing for greater representation and participation of emerging and developing countries in international affairs.[84] Socially and ecologically, China has put forward the concept of a balanced, coordinated, and

[80] Carla Norrlöf, 'Is COVID–19 a liberal democratic curse? Risks for liberal international order', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33: 5, 2020, pp. 799–813, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2020.1812529; Milan Babić, 'The COVID–19 pandemic and the crisis of the liberal international order: geopolitical fissures and pathways to change', *Global Perspectives* 2: 1, 2021, pp. 1–6 at p. 4, https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2021.24051.

[81] Michael J. Mazarr, 'The once and future order: what comes after hegemony?' *Foreign Affairs* 96: 1, 2017, p. 28, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-12-12/once-and-future-order; Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, 'The liberal order is rigged: fix it now or watch it wither', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 3, 2017, p. 37, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2017-04-17/liberal-order-rigged.

[82] John J. Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail: the rise and fall of the liberal international order', *International Security* 43: 4, 2019, pp. 7–50 at pp. 28–30, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342.

[83] 'Statement by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at the General Debate of the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly', *China Daily*, September 22, 2021, https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/22/WS614a82b1a310cdd39bc6a948.html.

[84] 'Xi focus: Xi pumps more BRICS power into global economic governance', *China Daily*, 24 June 2022, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202206/24/WS62b5c5b3a310fd2b29e6877c.html.

inclusive growth as well as launching the Global Development Initiative (GDI), which emphasizes taking real actions, focusing on development problems and following the concept of giving priority to development and a people-centred approach.[85]

In analysing China's recent responses to the LIO, two major changes stand out. First, China's proposals have become more 'macro' in character, evolving from regime-oriented to norm-oriented, with broader concepts such as the 'community of common destiny for mankind' and the offering, by way of the GDI, of Chinese solutions to global crises.[86] China has also continued to align with some countries at the UN to advocate the idea of developmentalist human rights as an alternative to western human rights norms.[87] Second, China's investment in international institution-building has increased: extending beyond the existing LIO architecture, it is seen by the West as a way to reshape global norms. Although the primary goals of China's recent moves are linked more directly to domestic political and economic agendas,[88] there is no way that they will be easily overlooked as US–China strategic competition intensifies. As China seeks to become a rule contributor or maker, the US, as the 'system maker and privilege taker' and the upholder of western liberal values,[89] sees any moves from politically illiberal China as ideologically unacceptable.[90]

Although China has no apparent intention to overturn the LIO, it does wish to see an international order that recognizes its great power status, provides a more equitable distribution of benefits, and allows resistance to some liberal norms that may jeopardize its core interest and harm its regime security. Moreover, China seeks a more balanced relationship with the United States, the dominant power in the LIO, to satisfy its aspirations for great power status. It will not be easy, however, for China to push the transformation of the international order in the desired direction. China's current overall capacity and vision of international order are insufficient to support a new international order, which requires an enormous power advantage and the support of most great powers, neither of which China currently possesses.[91] In addition, China faces internal and external challenges that limit its capacity to provide a large number of global public goods and to bear the costs of reforming and rewriting the international order. More importantly, China has yet to come up with universal values that can supplant American values.[92]

[85] 'Xi Focus: Xi proposes Global Development Initiative', *Xinhua*, 22 Sept. 2021, http://www.news.cn/english/2021-09/22/c_1310201216.htm.

[86] For the concept of a 'community of common destiny for mankind', see Fei Liena and Ban Wei, 'Spotlight: China underlines community of common destiny amid world uncertainties', *Xinhua*, 5 March 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-03/05/c_136104420.htm.

[87] Rosemary Foot, *China, the UN, and human protection*.

[88] Mingjiang Li, 'The Belt and Road Initiative', pp. 169–87; Avery Goldstein, 'China's grand strategy under Xi Jinping', pp. 164–201.

[89] Michael Mastanduno, 'System maker and privilege taker: U.S. power and the international political economy', *World Politics* 61: 1, 2009, pp. 121–54, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000057.

[90] Feng Liu, 'The recalibration of Chinese assertiveness: China's responses to the Indo-Pacific challenge', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 9–27 at p. 11, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz226.

[91] Tang, 'China and the future international order(s)', pp. 31–43.

[92] Suisheng Zhao, 'Moving beyond the US–China Cold War cliché', *East Asia Forum*, 14 Oct. 2021, https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/10/14/moving-beyond-the-us-china-cold-war-cliche/.

How competition between the United States and China over the values which undergird the international order will proceed depends—in the case of each country—on both domestic developments and external support. China has been more active in promoting its interests and may, at some point, present its own vision of international order, but such ambitions are subject to a variety of constraints, especially the rate of growth of its power, domestic political developments, and the number of its external followers and supporters. The US, for its part, will also face mounting challenges in sustaining the LIO if it cannot reverse its decline in global power, manage its internal political strains or reassure its allies and partners who are more sceptical of its international commitments.

Conclusion

In this article, we contend that China and the West hold different perceptions regarding the postwar international order, which has led to suspicion about China's intentions towards the existing order. China takes a pragmatic approach that emphasizes the UN-centred rule-based multilateral international framework as the core foundation of the postwar order, while downplaying the significance of power and ideology in international relations. The West, contrarily, regards liberal values as an integral part of the postwar order. In fact, China's interactions with the LIO have been dynamic and malleable based on different subcomponents of order. Although China's recent interactions with the LIO appear to be more ambitious, its internal and external constraints, insufficient capacity, and lack of universally appealing values are still preventing the birth of a Chinese version of international order.

The two recent *International Affairs* special issues on the international order highlighted a growing concern over the future of the LIO.[93] The major external factor driving this anxiety is the rise of China. China's illiberal political system, ambitious pursuit of national rejuvenation and deteriorating relations with the United States provide compelling reasons for pessimism. The West is concerned that China is likely to challenge the existing US-led international order, and China's regional neighbours worry that they would at some point face two vastly different orders between which they will have to choose. However, based on China's official statements, academic thoughts and policy practices, this article finds that China still largely supports the current order, except for concerns over global crises that have not been adequately tackled by the existing global governance.

China may have a vastly different vision of international order from that of the US, but it does not, at least for the moment, attempt to change the core elements of the order. Influenced by its experiences since the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century, China's cognition of the international order contains three sets of genes: pro-West and liberal, anti-West and revolutionary, and pro-globalization and growth-driven. The pro-globalization and growth-driven

[93] 'Ordering the world: liberal internationalism in theory and practice', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018; 'Deglobalization: the future of the liberal international order', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021.

gene perspective, which prioritizes pragmatism and 'crossing the river by feeling the stones', has been the dominant doctrine since China's reform and opening up, and is still enjoying the majority of support at the moment, despite growing pro-West and anti-West voices. If China sticks to the pragmatic line and remains focused on globalization without exporting ideologies, we can be cautiously optimistic that the world will avoid a new Cold War in the foreseeable future.

Although this article does not aim to construct a theoretical framework to explain how different factors have driven China's view of international order over time, it does intend to provide a solid basis for such endeavours. A precise comprehension of China's actual approach to the international order is the essential starting-point of any original research on this topic. In terms of future research, one avenue that could be explored is how the evolving relationship between China and the United States has influenced China's view of the international order over time, and how it may develop in the future. Further investigation into the role of domestic factors, particularly China's political and economic agenda, in shaping its approach to the international order could also offer valuable insights.