Global Reordering and China's Rise: Adoption, Adaption and Reform

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Abstract
While much of the debate over the implications of China's rise tends to dichotomise around either status quo or revisionist predictions, the reality seems to lie somewhere in between. In broad terms, China has embraced multilateral forms of cooperation and governance. This does not mean, however, that it is satisfied with the distribution of power in many international institutions, or some of the norms and principles that underpin them. This has resulted in a reformist position, with China increasingly willing to offer its own supplementary alternatives. China's rise has also provided an important economic alternative to dealing with the West, and considerably undermined the ability of others to establish their preferences and world views. China's lack of commitment to democracy and the external promotion of human rights remains a key reason why some analysts remain unconvinced about the long term ambitions of an illiberal actor in a global liberal order.

Keywords: China, global governance, norms, China model, rising powers, liberalism

It is now a quarter of a century since William Overholt predicted that an emerging China would become a threat to the existing order, and Denny Roy identified a "hegemon on the horizon" that would likely undermine regional stability and security.[1] In the intervening years, the concept of a China challenge to the way the world is organised and governed has become an oft repeated and important meme in the debates over the nature of the global order. To be sure, what an alternative non-liberal Chinese world order might look like (rather than China simply having more power within the existing global order) is difficult to pin down, and is often left undefined; the focus is typically on the challenge itself, rather than its consequences.[2] Nevertheless, Martin Jacques is not alone in thinking that it is not a case of *if*, but *when* China will rule the world and reshape it to reflect its own values and interests.[3]

There are very good reasons for expecting China to challenge the liberal order – in fact, in some areas and in some respects, it already has. After all, China's interests did not inform the creation of the existing institutions of global economic governance, where voting rights in some ways still reflect the geopolitical realities of 1944 rather than the distribution of global power today.[4] China's leaders have openly and repeatedly expressed their dissatisfaction, actively sought to bring about change in these institutions, and shown that they have both the desire and the capacity to introduce new institutions where such change is slow in coming or does not go far enough (or both). Not only have the supposed universal nature of some liberal norms and their consequent policy prescriptions been challenged, but new Chinese norms are being proposed as the basis for governance discussions and regulation in some issue areas. And while economic neoliberalism may have done much to discredit itself and its own efficacy and legitimacy, the continued growth of the Chinese economy has reinvigorated proponents of the developmental benefits of following strong state forms of capitalism.

[1] Overholt, *The Rise of China*, and Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon".
[2] Christensen, *The China Challenge*, 56.
[3] Jacques, *When China Rules the World*.
[4] China, in the form of the Republic of China was an original charter member of the United Nations, and participated in the Bretton Woods conference. Communist Party members were part of the process, including the future first governor of the People's Bank of China after 1949. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the interests and goals of the Chinese Communist Party were not exactly central to the forms of governance that emerged in the post-WWII era. For details, see Jin, *The Chinese Delegation*.

So for those that assume that power transitions are inherently destabilising and dangerous,[5] or who focus on the specific ambitions of a non-Western country led by an illiberal Communist Party,[6] there is at least some evidence to justify their predictions and/or suspicions. And yet while China clearly does not meet the democracy and human rights component of Riccardo Alcaro's definition of 'the liberal order' outlined in the Introduction to this collection, in the other dimensions we have seen significant movement towards the liberal status quo. China has moved from fearing Asian regionalism to embracing and promoting it,[7] become an active participant in many multilateral institutions, and recognised the need for international collaboration to deal with non-traditional security challenges. Dealing with the environment has become an urgent policy goal and, not least because of a reversal of policy in the United States, some have even identified China as the future "global climate leader".[8] Moreover as China has been a – perhaps ***the*** - main national beneficiary of the globalisation of production and the liberal economic order in the post-Cold War era, it is difficult to see why it would want to change it radically. Indeed, at Davos in 2017, Xi Jinping argued that it was China that was the defender of the "global free trade and investment" in the face of a protectionist turn elsewhere.[9]

How do we reconcile these conflicting views of what China has done to date and, more important, what it wants to do in the future? Is the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) a first sign of a new sinocentric economic order, or rather a reflection of China's commitment to multilateralism and the provision of Chinese global public goods – albeit with some minor revisions to existing rules?[10] Or is it a result of Washington's reluctance to accommodate Chinese interests even though Beijing has gone a long way to integrate itself into existing Western-dominated governance forms?[11]

[5] For example, Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise", and Allison, *Destined for War*.
[6] For an overview of the emergence of such responses to China's rise and an assessment of them, see Broomfield, "Perceptions of Danger".
[7] Breslin, "Understanding China's Regional Rise".
[8] Hilton, "China Emerges as Global Climate Leader".
[9] Xi, "President Xi's Speech to Davos".
[10] Renard, *The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank*.
[11] Etzioni, "The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank".

The suggestion here is that the China challenge to the liberal order is likely to be partial and selective, rather than holistic and systemic. Emboldened by a perception of a significant rise in Chinese power, but moderated by an understanding that the US is likely to remain the dominant global power for some time to come, there has been a push in Beijing to bring about changes that best suit Chinese objectives and interests. This entails being rather supportive of the status quo in some issue areas, while being quite forceful in pushing Chinese ideas and initiatives in other policy domains. In addition to specific attempts to reform (or not, as the case may be) the existing order, the nature of China's economic rise has also provided an important challenge to the dominance of neoliberal ideas and practices. By becoming an important economic partner for other developing economies, China creates a space for elites in the developing world to make choices, diminishing their dependence on traditional economic partners, and thus undermining the ability of more established global actors to impose their liberal ideational and policy preferences. The result might not be a Chinese-led world order, but one in which there is a significant, specific and deliberate China challenge to the status quo in policy domains, and significant consequences of China's rise that might undermine the force of liberal arguments and preferences in other issue areas.

Studying China's future(s)

Students of all countries have an eye to how events might unfold and how the country is going to evolve; it is probably fair to say that few countries have been the subject of as much futurology and prediction as China. This stems from a fundamental uncertainty over China's commitment to the existing international order. China might not be widely considered to be communist in any meaningful way anymore, but it is equally widely perceived to be "different"; "an illiberal, non-Western state in a western-centric, liberal order".[12]

Not surprisingly there are considerable differences in opinion, ranging from Jacques' prediction of a sinocentric world, on the one hand,[13] to Minxin Pei's and Gordon Chang's predictions of economic and political crises and collapse, on the other.[14]

[12] Muller, "China an Illiberal, Non-Western State".
[13] Jacques, *When China Rules the World*.
[14] Pei, *China's Trapped Transition*, and Chang, *The Coming Collapse of China*.

Space precludes an in-depth analysis of the various predictions and how likely they are to come true here. But it is worth briefly noting three collective consequences of these studies that provide an important context to thinking about China and the (future) liberal order.

First, while not all predictions take China's continued rise for granted, there does seem to be an implicit assumption in some that things will continue to go well for China. This seems to be particularly the case when there is a theoretical inclination to separate the study of domestic dynamics out from the study of international relations. Whilst there is no prediction of an imminent crash in this article, it acknowledges that an inward turn to deal with, for example, domestic financial problems, could slow and/or alter the nature of China's rise. Long-term lower growth with less of an emphasis on investment and infrastructure would also reduce the importance of the Chinese market for some exporters (and in some cases, already has). And, as we saw in 2017, increased regulations to prevent capital flight can have a very quick impact on overseas Chinese mergers and acquisitions,[15] and also perceptions of China's long-term goals and ambitions. At the very least, it is worth reminding ourselves that the inevitability of Japan's rise to dominance that was still being identified as recently as the start of the 1990s ultimately proved not to be inevitable at all.

Second, the idea that pre-existing understandings and theoretical preferences tend to shape the way that events are understood and interpreted is well established across the social sciences. This helps explain why different people had very different understandings of the question about the significance of the AIIB. In the case of China's rise, an added dimension is the way that past and current behaviour is often discounted as a guide to future actions and objectives. As Pan Chengxin argues, any good paradigm has effectively to deal with anomalies that might suggest an alternative explanation or prediction of the future.[16] So what China did when it was relatively weak, so the argument goes, will not be the same as what it will do when it has even more power in the future.[17]

[15] See Huang and Tang, "Why China is Curbing Outbound Direct Investment".
[16] Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power*, 26.
[17] Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong".

Third, and perhaps most significant here, in his extensive analysis of different studies of China's futures, Roger Irvine identified a "strong tendency to polarise" around extreme and opposing potential outcomes.[18] Of course, there are also more nuanced positions. But the temptation to simplify potential outcomes down to two competing alternatives remains, and can still be seen and heard in debates over China's future(s). We have already noted one such cleavage in the assumptions of China's continued rise to global power (and even dominance) versus the conviction that China (or Communist Party leadership at least) will collapse. Another dichotomisation is the theoretically driven (neo)realist prediction of an "unpeaceful rise"[19] and liberal expectations of an integrated and socialised risen China as a stakeholder in the existing global order.

The idea that China is, can, or wants to be either a wholly status quo or a wholly revisionist power seems somewhat problematic. There are parts of the liberal order that do not sit at all comfortably with Chinese preferences; for example, norms relating to sovereignty and intervention. There are other areas where the desire is to push for change in existing institutions and practices and to assume more power *within* existing frameworks. The nature of global economic governance could be a good example here. We might argue that the overall goal is to revise the way the liberal order works, but to different extents and in different ways in different policy domains. But as the word *revise* suggests a revisionist agenda, and the word *revisionist* seems to have lost its original meaning and become equated with fundamental and revolutionary change (when it comes to debating China), then the idea of a selective reformist agenda is perhaps more appropriate.

Actors and objectives

It is not surprising that there tends to be a focus on China's top leaders when it comes to assessing Chinese objectives and goals; they really are very powerful individuals. That said, it is a mistake to think of China as having one single view and voice. In China's more isolationist days, international interactions were very much dominated by the business of diplomacy, overseen and undertaken by a small number of senior

[18] Irvine, *Forecasting China's Future*, 1.
[19] Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise".

leaders. As China engaged the capitalist global economy and became involved with a range of functional transnational multilateral regulation and governance mechanisms, the number of Chinese international actors increased significantly; actors who operate with differing degrees of autonomy to pursue their own specific goals and objectives.

As a result, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has lost considerable power within the central decision-making hierarchy, with a range of economic ministries and specialist agencies (for example, the Ministry of Environmental Protection) playing increasingly important roles.[20] At the higher levels of the authoritarian state bureaucracy, there can be considerable disagreement over specific policy areas. The conflict between the Ministry of Commerce and the People's Bank of China over currency reform and renminbi internationalisation seems a particularly pertinent example here given their significance to the global liberal economic order.[21] The commercial objectives of major enterprises are important too,[22] and many local governments pursue their own agendas, particularly when it comes to facilitating and regulating cross border flows.[23] As a result, in 2012, the International Crisis Group described an almost anarchic situation in the South China Seas with a range of different Chinese actors pursuing different policy objectives, making the task of identifying "what China wants" rather difficult.[24]

There are also a range of opinions on the nature of the liberal order, and what China can (in terms of capacities) and should (in terms of ambitions) do to change it. In the 1990s, the idea that China should "say no" and turn its back on the West gained considerable popular support,[25] and this highly critical and rejectionist position is still extremely easy to find on various Chinese internet platforms today. The *Global Times* newspaper also tends to take a more nationalist position on many issues than other official media outlets, and was openly criticised by Chinese diplomat Wu Jianmin for

[20] Lai and Kang, "Domestic Bureaucratic Politics".
[21] Freeman and Yuan, *China's Exchange Rate Politics.*
[22] Zhao, "The myth of China's overseas energy investment"
[23] Li and Lee, "Local Liberalism".
[24] Though there have been attempts to consolidate the number of actors and coordinate activities since then. International Crisis Group, *Stirring up the South China Sea, I.*
[25] Des Forges and Xu, "China as a Non-Hegemonic Superpower?"

potentially harming relations with Japan in 2016.[26] This diversity allows outside observers to go "opinion shopping" to find the Chinese view that reinforces pre-existing understandings of what China is and what it wants.

Xu Jin argues that the mainstream position within Chinese academia is somewhat less assertive and more cautious (about the real extent of Chinese global power) than the position that Xi Jinping is projecting. But Xu also notes the key role of the paramount leader in establishing the "theme of the time" that creates the overarching framework within which these debates can take place; for example, the nature of the global order, Chinese interests and objectives, and the fundamental principles that should inform Chinese thinking and action.[27] So notwithstanding the diversity noted above, it seems reasonable to focus here on how what we might call 'official China' articulates its views of the liberal order, and how China can and should act within it.

China's as global power

When it comes to considerations of the fundamental nature of the liberal order, Chinese positions have been relatively consistent. Where things have changed – and changed quite considerably in recent years – is when it comes to thinking about the relative power of China and other actors within this order, and what China might be able to do to bring about change. Facing widespread opprobrium and the possibility of international isolation in the post-Tiananmen period, China's international strategy came to be dominated for the best part of two decades by the *taoguang yanghui* concept associated with Deng Xiaoping. Directly translating as "hide brightness and foster obscurity" it was part of a wider exhortation to effectively "keep a low profile" while China was still relatively weak and the dominant (liberal) global powers unprepared to accommodate its interests. In the 1990s, the same basic understanding was manifest in the *China threat thesis* – the idea that those hostile to China would look for any evidence to show that China was mounting a challenge to the Western-led order. Thus, even as China's relative global power increased, the logic of maintaining a low profile remained firm.[28]

[26] Wu was widely considered to be China's most influential foreign policy 'dove', and his death in a car crash prompted a (not always very respectful) debate over the nature of the world order and China's place within it, spanning the full range of Chinese perceptions and positions. Hornby, "Wu Jianmin".
[27] Xu, "Debates in IR"
[28] Chen and Wang, "Lying Low No More?".

Perceived changes in the nature of the global order in the new millennium, and China's position within it, began to generate a rethink. The US-led intervention in the Middle East was seen as exacerbating dissatisfaction with US hegemony in the rest of the liberal world, starting a gradual shift away from unipolarity, and creating a "period of strategic opportunity" [*zhanlue jiyuqi*] for China.[29] Nevertheless, acutely aware that how others viewed China could do a lot to either help or hinder China's rise, it was deemed prudent to accompany attempts to exploit this period of opportunity with a concerted, orchestrated and oft repeated articulation of the peaceful nature and consequences of China's rise. The length of this period of opportunity was subsequently extended as other changes presaged important global power shifts that also played into China's hands. Chief among these was the global financial crisis – a crisis that was perceived in China to be of a form specific to deregulated Western neoliberal capitalism (albeit one with global consequences) that fundamentally undermined the legitimacy and authority of the Western liberal way.[30]

While Chinese policymakers and analysts might disagree over many things, they seem to agree that at some point in and around the global financial crisis, a significant power shift occurred. The US might be destined to remain the world's predominant actor for some time to come, but China has emerged as the most important of the rising powers, and "second amongst global equals" behind the US.[31] While Michael Yahuda noted a new emphasis on "striving for achievements" [*fenfa youwei*] from 2009,[32] Yan Xuetong argues that the 18th Party Congress and Xi Jinping's ascension to the apex of the Chinese power structure in 2012 marked a new era in China's global proactivity.[33] Quite simply, Xi was prepared to express openly what many people had been thinking for some time. Not only had China's self-confidence increased,[34] but its "comprehensive national power" had also risen to the extent that

[29] Feng, "Rethinking China's Grand Strategy".
[30] Xu, "Rethinking China's Period of Strategic Opportunity".
[31] Zhang, "China and Liberal Hierarchies".
[32] Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness".
[33] Yan, "From Keeping a Low Profile".
[34] Referred to in China as the "Three Self-confidences" [*sange zixin*]; Path or Road self-confidence [*lu zixin*], theory self-confidence [*lilun zixin*] and system self-confidence [*zhidu zixin*]. See Yuan, "China's Grand Strategy in the New Era" ["Xin shiqi zhongguo de da zhanlüe"].

Chinese people and government no longer thought of China as a developing country, but instead as developed, a great power and maybe even a superpower.[35]

To be sure, the commitment to rising peacefully in a way that doesn't fundamentally undermine the current order remains. China's leaders have also been explicit in arguing that China has "neither the ability nor the intent to challenge the United States".[36] Even so, it is hard to argue against the suggestion that since this change in perceptions (and leadership), there has been an increasing Chinese preparedness to articulate and defend its 'core interests' [*hexin liyi]*, to push for change in some liberal governance institutions, and to challenge the supposed universal nature and applicability of many liberal norms.

Power and influence in multilateral institutions

The starting point for any assessment of China's views of the liberal order is a long-standing dissatisfaction with the distribution of power within the major institutions of global governance, particularly (but not only) of global economic governance. This generates two of the now relatively often repeated goals of Chinese diplomacy: "improving global economic governance, and promoting the democratization of international relations".[37] We should note here that democratisation in this Chinese context does not mean the participation of civil society groups and non-state actors in global governance as proposed by some cosmopolitan thinkers. Rather, it is a statist agenda, and refers to increasing the participation and power of those states that have been sidelined and/or underrepresented in international institutions, and reforming voting structures to reflect the new realities of the global distribution of power. In this respect, China's preferences can perhaps ironically be interpreted as more liberal than the uneven and unequal forms of representation that characterise many governance structures today.

Notwithstanding the considerable reform that has taken place in China to ensure membership and active participation in a whole range of governance institutions (including those that originated in Bretton Woods), there is a clear preference for the

[35] Yang, "Strategic Adjustment" ["Zhan zai xin qidian"].
[36] Chen, "Relax".
[37] This example is taken from Lan, "Chinese President Proposes".

structure of some over others. The G20, for example, is seen in China as providing a platform for a new form of multilateralism – one that it can influence and one that is certainly more representative than the G7/8 (of which China is not a member). It is notable that China used its power as host of the 2016 Summit to invite more representatives from developing states than ever before. This "host diplomacy" was an articulation of the idea of China striving for globally inclusive multilateralism (where the interests of the developing world are heard and promoted) in contrast to the Western liberal states' commitment to maintaining their privileges in existing unrepresentative institutions; most notably the G7, but also the IMF and the World Bank.[38]

However, it is the United Nations that is considered to be "the most universal and representative intergovernmental organization in the world"[39] and has become what Rosemary Foot calls "China's venue of choice".[40] China's leaders have used the UN as a key venue to articulate China's preferred global order, and a preferred image of what type of great power China will be in that order. But this commitment to the UN is not just rhetorical. In recent years, China has become a major funder of UN activities through direct contributions (third behind the US and Japan) and via the China-UN Peace and Development Fund. It has also provided more peacekeeping troops than any of the other permanent members of the Security Council (SC).[41]

China is formally committed to supporting reform of the SC that brings about greater representation of developing countries, smaller states, and to provide a more even geographical spread of membership (particularly to include African membership).[42] Where this leaves the membership ambitions of larger or already developed Asian states like India and Japan (that do not always share Chinese ambitions) is another question, and it is fair to say that from India, for example, China looks more like a "principle opposition" to democratising UN reform than a proponent of it.[43] And it is

[38] Kirton, *China's G20 Leadership*
[39] In the words of China's Permanent Representative, Liu Jieyi, on the official China pages of the UN website. http://www.china-un.org/eng/dbtxx/ambliu/
[40] Foot, "Doing Some Things".
[41] Breslin and Ren, "China and Global Governance".
[42] Xue, *China as Permanent Member*.
[43] Bagchi, "China emerges as principal opposition".

also fair to say that China has been able to use the current unrepresentative nature of the SC to support its interests over the years.

Nevertheless, China has used its veto power less than any other of the SC permanent members.[44] But when it has been used, China, along with Russia, has been identified as a key obstacle to the emergence of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as a ***functioning*** principle underpinning the global (liberal) order. In truth, the Chinese position on intervention is not quite so absolute as it is sometimes depicted. But it is also true that China really has acted to block or moderate UN sanctions against countries like North Korea and Syria, and to try to prevent military and other forms of intervention that breach territorial integrity and sovereignty.[45]

So within this Chinese commitment to multilateralism, we see a key difference between China and the liberal West over what multilateralism should be for**.** Even though there is a broad agreement that one goal should be to bring about peace, there is a rather fundamental disagreement on the limits that the principle of sovereignty should place on how that peace could and should be brought about. This is compounded by a suspicion that intervention is sometimes (at the very least) about securing other material and geopolitical aims and objectives of major Western powers.

Universalism and global (liberal) norms

This suspicion is also compounded by a belief that what is often proposed as universal norms are in fact the norms of a few. These norms – and also many of the theories of politics and international relations that are used to study them – are the result of the histories, experiences and cultures of a globally small number of now developed and relatively wealthy Western liberal societies. Whereas this might once have resulted in a Chinese rejection of these liberal norms as simply not applicable to China and other

[44] Though this does not tell the full story of China's influence, as the threat of a veto can lead to proposals either not being formally tabled, or modified and 'diluted' to get Chinese approval. There are also times when China does not have to use the veto because a Russian veto is enough to block the proposal. See Wuthnow, *Chinese Diplomacy*.

[45] This understanding is formalised in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence first designed to find a solution to tensions in Sino-Indian relations. They are mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence.

non-Western developing states, the emphasis now is on moderating or redefining them in light of China's experiences.

For example, Sarah Teitt shows how China's acceptance of a form of R2P (having initially rejected and condemned it) results from a significant redefinition of what R2P means (or should mean); one that rejects the use of force, and has to have not only both full UN agreement and supervision and also "local" support.[46] Similarly, we have seen a redefinition of what constitutes 'human security' (in and for China) built on the specifics of the Chinese case. Chinese analysts note that when human security first came on the international agenda, there was considerable disagreement between countries like Canada and Norway that wanted to emphasise the importance of freedom from fear, and Japanese preferences for the dominance of freedom from need and crime.[47] Given that understandings of human security differ between even developed liberal countries, then clearly (so the argument goes) there will be even greater differences between developed and developing countries, and each country should develop their own national definitions . In the Chinese case, this not only results in the primacy of ensuring socioeconomic security rather than political freedoms, but also places the state front and centre in defining what China's human security challenges actually are, prioritising the most important of them, and developing strategies to effectively combat them.[48]

This process of the 'nationalisation' of norms has a defensive component. It helps explain Chinese differences from the dominant Western political tradition and why China *will not* become like Western liberal states. These newly 'sinified' norms should also provide the basis for judging and assessing China, rather than against inappropriate Western benchmarks of what constitutes a good and effective human rights regime, democracy, legal system and so on. This explains why the suffix "with Chinese characteristics" – which is in fact a prefix in Chinese [you zhongguo tese de) - has become so ubiquitous and added to, amongst others, concepts and terms such as legal system, democracy, human rights, justice, military modernisation, democracy,

[46] Teitt, "The Responsibility to Protect".
[47] Hu, "Human Security Concept" ["Ren de Anquan Gainian"] .
[48] For details, see Breslin, "Debating Human Security".

and free market. The *China Daily* has even identified a unique and specific "sexual revolution with Chinese characteristics".[49]

Four important conclusions follow from this way of thinking. First, no matter how far China might move towards liberal principles on the international arena, this is not accompanied by any move towards liberalism at home. The "political system established by the constitution" has been established as one of China's "core interests";[50] an area of "bottom line thinking" [*dixian siwei*], that China is simply not prepared to compromise on or negotiate with others.[51] Under Xi Jinping, the room for debating alternatives to the current system has been considerably reduced, with even the relatively limited calls (in liberal terms) of Chinese constitutionalists to create a "law-based political order and institutionalization of fundamental relationships between the Party, the state and citizens" being silenced.[52] In short, the commitment to democracy outlined as a key component of the liberal order in the introduction to this special issue is lacking in China, with no signs that this will change any time soon.

Second, using the same term to refer to very different ideas can lead to considerable confusion about shared goals and ambitions. China can say that it believes in human rights and human security, but if what China means by these terms differs considerably from other definitions, then the Chinese search for it might go in very different directions to what others want and do.

Third, if norms need to be nationally defined, this implies that sovereignty is the fundamental basis and starting point for locating norms (and arguably that it is the state that is responsible for interpreting them). In the State Council's White Paper on Building Political Democracy in China, this argument is more than implied, and sovereignty and independence emerges as the most basic and fundamental of all rights.[53] So if other (liberal) states try to impose their specific view of what they argue are universal norms, they are abrogating a more fundamental norm in the form of the

[49] http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-05/14/content_16498056.htm
[50] State Council, *White Paper: China's Peaceful Development*.
[51] Yang, "Strategic Adjustment". The other core interests defined by the White Paper are "state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, …. social stability, and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development". State Council, *White Paper: China's Peaceful Development*.
[52] Creemers, "China's Constitutionalism Debate", 91.
[53] State Council, *White Paper: Building of Political Democracy*.

sovereign right of others to develop their own nationalised definitions, priorities, and policies.

Fourth, the logical conclusion of this way of thinking is that if China should develop its own distinctive (national) understanding, then so should everybody else. If this were followed through, then it would not lead to the replacement of Western norms (disguised as universal ones) with Chinese ones and the creation of a sino-centric normative world. Rather, it would lead to a form of normative and/or ideational anarchy and the rejection of universalism *per se*. What this might mean for China's abilities to externalise its preferences and interests is not wholly clear. But what is clear is that it would make it much harder for others to impose their preferences and interests as well – including Western proponents of a global liberal order. As Pan Wei put it in discussing China's challenge to dominant (neo)liberal economic norms:

> The Chinese System does not boast itself as an alternative to the Western System. However, it weakens the argument for the exclusive legitimacy of the Western System.[54]

From norm reviser to norm maker?

While the claim not to be presenting a clear Chinese alternative might have been valid in the past, this position has now changed. There is now an official exhortation for China to increase its "institutional voice" [*zhiduxing huayuquan*] and promote China's "norms, protocols and definitions" as the basis for international interactions.[55] Chief among what Chinese diplomat Fu Ying calls "an array of newly developed diplomatic policies and guidelines put forward by China" is the idea of a "community of common destiny" [*minyun gongtong ti*] first enunciated by Xi in 2012.[56] At first sight, the emphasis on "cooperative security, common development, and political inclusiveness" does not sound particularly radical. Indeed, the promotion of the concept seems more about establishing a set of non-threatening and thus widely acceptable general goals and ambitions than articulating a clearly defined new set of

[54] Pan, "Western System".
[55] Kelly, "The CCP's Acceptance of Market Principles", 49.
[56] Fu, "China's Vision for the World". Fu uses the alternative translation of a 'Community of Shared Future' which is also in wide usage.

(alternative) Chinese norms and principles. In this respect, its main utility is in establishing the idea that Xi and China are ready for a form of responsible global leadership, which might be seen as an updated version of "China's peaceful rise".

However, as Andrea Worden shows, it can have more specific uses as well. China has long been trying to establish its understanding and definitions as the basis for discussion at the UN Human Rights Council – if not for all, then at least for states that have some sort of shared suspicion of Western political and individualist preferences. In 2017, Worden argued, that this process increased in intensity, with Chinese officials using the promotion of the "community of common destiny" as a way of trying to elevate the importance of developmental rights over political and civil (individual) rights (and also of the primacy of sovereignty over human rights concerns). This included issuing a statement on behalf of 140 countries on poverty reduction and human rights, and managing to insert the concept of "building a community of shared future" into two Council resolutions.[57]

Sonja Sceats, who has investigated the promotion of Chinese alternative definitions of human rights, identifies attempts to establish a preferred Chinese understanding of "internet sovereignty" as a basis for emerging cyber security agreements as another area of Chinese proactivity. This is built on the understanding that maintaining social order and stability and state security is more important than guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression.[58] More tentatively, we might suggest that through the AIIB and the cumulative impact of its various overseas investment projects and financing/loan initiatives, China might be slowly emerging as a (if not the) leader in international development; not just through the provision of finance, but also in promoting a specific conception of what development is, or should be, that is stripped of "good governance" democratising and liberalising elements. Finally, although still very much a minority endeavour, some Chinese intellectuals are also promoting the idea that a Chinese conception of how to build a harmonious world order (derived from China's past) might provide the basis for solving some of the more serious and apparently intractable conflicts between states in the future.[59]

[57] Worden, "China Pushes Human Rights".
[58] Sceats, "China's Cyber Diplomacy".
[59] For a review of debates over IR theory in China, see Noesselt, "Revisiting the Debate".

The "China model" and the (neo)liberal economic order

It is in the economic realm, however, that a China challenge to global liberalism is most commonly identified. In some respects, this seems quite ironic, as the sources of this challenge are often initiatives that on the face of it seem to represent China's further integration into the existing order – perhaps even an embrace of liberal principles. For example, China has become an enthusiastic member and proponent of regional forms of governance to deal with transnational issues; one of the core components of the global liberal system defined by Alcaro. Yet this first acceptance and subsequent promotion of multilateral cooperation and the extension of trade and aid relationships in Asia have been taken by some not as a move towards the status quo but instead as part of a Chinese strategy to replace the US as the dominant power (or even to eject it from the region).[60]

Similarly, as we have already noted, China's decision to take some form of multilateral leadership in the shape of the AIIB has been described as the first sign of a new Chinese challenge to the existing financial and broader economic order.[61] Yet, even if it does utilise some different criteria than existing financial institutions, the AIIB is still overwhelmingly a system-conforming institution that adds to and complements existing funders, rather than a revolutionary one that replaces them; and indeed it has actively sought to co-finance projects with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. As the US has not joined this China-led project (unlike most other major Western economies), this has created a situation in which the AIIB is a challenge to the "US-led international structure" and at the same time "firmly situated within the existing international financial order".[62] Whilst this might sound contradictory, it is in fact an excellent example of the lack of clarity about what it is that China is actually thought to be challenging; the liberal order *per se*, or US leadership ***within*** that global order? If, as it seems, it is the latter, then we might see the AIIB as an example of China not so much challenging the West as beating the West by "playing by the rules that Westerners themselves have formulated".[63]

[60] Windybank, "The China Syndrome".
[61] Koike, "The AIIB"
[62] Wan, *The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank*, 58.
[63] Hu, "A Competitive Edge", 27.

The creation of new institutions is just one of the challenges that China has been said to present to the existing liberal economic order. Another is the extent to which China's 'model' of strong state capitalism might lure others away from more liberal paths and programmes; particularly given the perceived failure of neoliberal models and forms during and after the global financial crisis. Identifying what exactly the China model of development is, and why it has been successful, is a far from easy task. But even John Williamson, who is often identified as the architect of the free market "Washington Consensus", has reflected on how the Chinese experience has revalidated the efficacy of the strong state and interventionist form of capitalism as a model for other developing countries to follow, vis-à-vis the neoliberal alternative that he previously championed.[64] Even if other developing countries might not simply be able to copy all that China has done themselves, China's successes in generating economic growth stands as an example of what can be done if you follow your own path rather than follow neoliberal economic prescriptions.

We might also add to this list the idea that China is free riding on liberal global economy as US President Barack Obama stated in 2014.[65] This in part refers to the way that the Chinese state supports Chinese economic actors' overseas activities while not allowing the same access to the Chinese economy that others grant to China. As a result, the nature of the liberal order is in some ways diluted by the toleration of a major illiberal (in economic terms here) actor within it. Hence the reluctance in the US and parts of Europe to grant China the full market economy status in the WTO that China's leaders assumed it would be given in December 2016,

[64] Williamson, "The Impact of the Financial Crisis".
[65] See Feng, "Obama's Free Rider Comments".

15 years after entry. It also refers to China's condemnation of US security activity overseas, even when China gains economically from this action, as Obama claimed had been the case in Iraq.

Chinese financial power

The final addition to this list of challenges is the consequences of the spread of Chinese financial and other economic flows. While this might sound like repeating concerns about the development of the AIIB (and the BRICS New Development Bank), here the focus is a much broader one, and relates to the totality of Chinese loans, investment projects and other financial interactions funded by the Chinese state, or undertaken by Chinese commercial actors.[66] We can further break this area of concern into three (interrelated) areas.

The first is the way that this reinforces the position of illiberal Chinese state enterprises as key actors in the global economy, and potentially also reinforces the attraction of less than neoliberal forms of capitalism. The second is the potential for a reorientation of current economic geographies and a re-centring towards China, based on Chinese investment and trade priorities. The argument is that this might not just have economic consequences (for example, in terms of the distribution of key resources), but because of increased reliance on China, make other countries less likely to challenge China on other issue areas as well (for example, on Chinese territorial claims). The way in which the Rodrigo Duterte publically announced the Philippines' realignment away from the US and towards China in October 2016 seems to provide a very pertinent example of such a process.[67] Whether similar changes will come about as China moves to implement its One Belt, One Road initiative remains to be seen.

[66] Often with support from the state in the form of financial backing, diplomatic initiatives to secure a political foundation for economic interactions, and so on.

[67] "Duterte: Philippines is Separating from US and Realigning with China", *The Guardian*, 20 October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/20/china-philippines-resume-dialogue-south-china-sea-dispute.

Third, we noted above the ideational alternative that China presents for other developing countries. More important, it provides a hard material economic alternative as well. For countries like North Korea and Zimbabwe, this might take the form of an alternative to isolation. For others, it means an alternative to either the existing international financial organisations, or the existing major Western economies. It is not quite the case that international economic contacts with China, including development projects, come with no political or economic conditions attached. Not recognising Taiwan remains a very significant condition and, increasingly, Chinese funders seem to want at least some sort of guarantee that their money simply will not just disappear. Nevertheless, what China is not (the West) and what it does not do (in terms of imposing conditionalities) can make it an attractive economic partner for some – particularly in a post global crisis economy that is not exactly awash with investment capital from the traditional heartlands of the global liberal economy. One consequence is that attempts to punish or undermine 'rogue states' and to try to lever others into adopting liberalising and/or democratising agendas becomes considerably more difficult.

The global and the regional

The example of the consequences of Chinese investment shows that any challenge might emerge from the bottom up, rather than (just) from changes to governance forms and norms at the global level (from the top down). And it is important to note that China's leaders have deliberately developed a differential set of strategies for dealing with different types of international actors in different parts of the world.

Most often, a distinction is made between big powers as the key [*guanjian*], the periphery (the neighborhood) as the priority [*shouyao*], and developing countries as the foundation [*jichu*].[68] As Yuan Peng points out, one of the strategic problems that China faces is that the US is a major actor in both of the first two categories – it is both the most important big power and also a key actor in China's neighborhood.[69] And while China might not have the power or the desire to challenge the US or the liberal order at the global level, the same is not true in China's backyard. Power and

[68] And sometimes also "multilateralism as the stage [wutai], and public diplomacy as the complement [buchong]".
[69] Yuan, "Reflections on the Great Epoch" ["Guanyu da shidai yu da zhanlüe"], 14.

politics in southeast Asia are dealt with in detail in this special issue by Richard Stubbs, but it is still worth noting here China's commitment to defending its 'core interests' in the South China Sea, the above noted plan to establish strategic economic interactions along the Belt and Road, and China's promotion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership plan in direct opposition to the Trans Pacific Partnership at one time favoured by the US.

China has 'bottom up' influence in other regions as well. Yu Zhengliang distinguishes between different international environments (and therefore the need for different strategies), in four mega zones; to China's north, south, east and west.[70] One of the crucial determinants of what China can (and already is) doing in each is the extent of Western (and in particular American) influence and commitment. In the North, this suggests the importance of forging a deeper alliance with Russia to pursue common interests. In the East (very broadly defined), the decline of US power in Latin America has created an opportunity for China to increase its economic influence, while New Zealand and Australia are somewhat caught between Chinese (economic) and US (security) initiatives. In the West:

> China's strategic expansion of the West is the establishment of strategic fulcrums in the East African continent (Kenya, Tanzania and Mozambique) and the Seychelles, connecting the Indian Ocean and the whole of Africa, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. At present [2012], the United States and Europe are in crisis, weakening their influence on Africa, and China-Africa cooperation is outstanding and the foundation is solid. China is in a very favourable strategic opportunity in Africa.[71]

Conclusions

Yu's analysis of China's opportunities in Africa reminds us that power transitions are not just about the choices, actions and preferences of those that are rising; what happens in and to the existing (or declining) predominant powers is important too. The consequences of regime change in Iraq and Libya have not exactly enhanced

[70] Yu, "Reflections on China's Grand Strategy" ["Guanyu zhongguo da zhanlüe de sikao"] .
[71] *Ibid*., 100.

arguments for liberal interventionism, the global financial crisis has undermined the logic of (neo)liberal prescription for economic progress,[72] and new security challenges have highlighted tensions between the provision and guarantee of personal freedoms, on the one hand, and protecting and defending (both individuals or states), on the other. And after the election of President Donald Trump, there seems to be a vacancy for a new global leader in at least some issue areas (like the environment).

As a result, we might expect there to be relatively fertile ground for the promotion of an alternative set of norms and policy initiatives that challenge existing dominant paradigms; and to some extent that has been the case. This is especially true for those looking for an economic alternative (or perhaps more often, supplement) to dealing with Europe, North America, and the existing international financial institutions. It is also true for those who want to be left to organise their own political systems as they see fit, free from outside influence and interference.

In some areas, China is prepared to provide that alternative and leadership. Having emerged from the era of keeping a low profile, Chinese actors have made it clear that they want a greater voice in the international order, and also greater respect for what China has done. Under Xi Jinping, the country has gained greater self-confidence in itself, and a greater preparedness to articulate Chinese preferences and concepts as the basis for some governance discussions and forms. As Xi put it at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, the country was entering a new era that would see it "moving closer to the centre of global politics" with China now prepared and able to make "greater contributions to mankind".[73] While the specifics of what a community of common destiny might actually entail are not always clear, it is increasingly being touted in China as the foundation of a new Chinese "agenda setting" strategy that opposes "injustice, inequality, hegemonism, power politics and neo-interventionism".[74]

[72] Here, it is important to make a distinction between neoliberalism as one specific form of capitalism (that China's rise has indeed challenged), and capitalism in general (which, it can be argued, China's rise actually reinforces by legitimising its strong state incarnation).
[73] Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory".
[74] Neo-interventionism refers to the arguments that are put forward to justify intervention rather than just the act of intervention itself. Hua, "China takes strides" ["Zhongguo Dabu Zouxiang"].

The rejection of democracy and liberal political structures as relevant to China is an example of this internal self-confidence; and no matter what China has done so far, the nature of the domestic political order remains the key reason why some will simply never be convinced about what it will do in the future. China's conviction that respecting sovereignty is more important than R2P (as defined and understood in the liberal world) and that development is a more important human right than political and civil individual rights are both examples of a Chinese normative contribution to global politics; and both also point to key cleavages between a rising China and the supporters of a more liberal order that is unlikely to shrink in the future.

In other policy domains, the China challenge has been much less clear, with instead China seeking to "play a responsible role (fostered by multilateralism) on the world stage"; partly because being a more status quo actor supports Chinese interests in some areas, and also partly as a means of "gaining legitimacy and appearing trustworthy" as a putative global leader.[75] What this suggests is a rather patchy set of different types of Chinese relationships with the global liberal order in different policy areas depending on the extent of Chinese satisfaction with the status quo, the identification of a clear Chinese policy (or normative) alternative, and the likelihood of Chinese preferences gaining "followership" from others.

This patchiness is in itself a reflection of the partial and ongoing nature of the power transition from unipolarity to something else, and uncertainty over what that something else might be. We have yet to see the sort of "ordering moment" that Kupchan reminds us are typically established through "postwar settlements"[76] – and hopefully will not have one. Nor hopefully will we see the sort of victory by one side (and set of beliefs) over the other that marked the end of the Cold War and the bipolar global order.

What this suggests is an immediate future at least where China is an important – but far from the only – actor in the formation of fluid issue-specific sets of alliances and coalitions. Where China might ally with European powers to establish new parallel

[75] Caffarena, "Diversity Management", 9 and 10.
[76] Kupchan, *Nobody's World*, 182.

and largely system-conforming financial institutions like the AIIB, but at the same time be on the opposite side of the debate with a different set of allies when it comes to establishing basic conceptions of human rights. Or where China and India might come together to express a common dissatisfaction with the distribution of power in global institutions, but hold very different positions when it comes to the composition of security relations and alliances in Asia; or even for that matter when it comes to the question of whether institutional reform should see India gain a seat as a permanent member of the UN SC. The still rather common polarisation of thinking of China as being either a status quo power or a revisionist one misses the point; it misses the point about what China's leaders want and their (differential) ability to get it. And it also misses the point about the nature of the post-unipolar global order itself.

Notes on Contributor

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