

## Order, Disorder, Reorder: Can the Liberal International Order Survive the Sino-American Competition?

### Düzen, Düzensizlik, Yeniden Düzen: Liberal Uluslararası Düzen Çin-Amerikan Rekabetini Atlatabilir mi?

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#### Abstract

The future of international politics today hinges on how the Sino-American rivalry unfolds. Views vary from expectations of peaceful evolution to hegemonic transition, but many fail to recognize the significant role the liberal international order (LIO) can play in shaping the course of events. Thanks to its structure and adaptability, the LIO is more than the mere environment surrounding this rivalry and may be the primary determinant of American and Chinese choices, steering relations toward cooperation. The success of the LIO during the post-WWII era is notably the product of the environment it has managed to create, characterized by mutual gains, as well as considerable costs in the event of a revisionist disruption. Moreover, the LIO has a structural character that enables it to exert influence on state behavior. This article, drawing on liberal internationalist theory, contends that the LIO demonstrates the substantial potential to emerge as the ultimate “victor” amidst the intensifying rivalry between the two major actors. By evaluating multiple arguments, the analysis concludes that a reformed version of the LIO, which accommodates both American and Chinese aspirations, includes a dual leadership mechanism in decision-making, and reflects the newly shaped power dynamics, offers a viable solution to the Sino-American competition.

**Keywords:** Sino-American Relations, Liberal International Order, Liberal Internationalism, Interdependence

#### Öz

Günümüzde uluslararası siyasetin geleceği, Çin-Amerikan rekabetinin nasıl şekilleneceğine bağlıdır. Bu rekabete ilişkin beklentiler, barışçıl evrimden hegemonik bir güç geçişi olasılığına kadar uzanmaktadır, ancak liberal uluslararası düzenin olayların seyrini şekillendirme olasılığının genelde göz ardı edildiği görülmektedir. Yapısı ve uyum yeteneğine bağlı olarak söz konusu düzen, bu rekabetin içinde cereyan ettiği ortamdan çok daha fazlasını ifade etmektedir. Amerikan ve Çin tercihlerinin önemli bir belirleyicisi olma ve ilişkileri iş birliğine doğru yöneltme kapasitesine sahiptir. Liberal uluslararası düzenin İkinci Dünya Savaşı sonrası dönemdeki başarısı, yaratmayı başardığı, karşılıklı kazanımların yanı sıra revizyonist dönüşümlerde yüksek maliyet yaratma gücüne sahip olmasıyla tanımlanan ortamın ürünüdür. Ayrıca bu düzen, devlet davranışı üzerinde etkili olmasını sağlayan yapısal bir karaktere de sahiptir. Liberal uluslararası teoriye dayanan bu makale, liberal uluslararası düzenin yoğunlaşan

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büyük güç rekabetinin sonuçta kazananı olma olasılığının yüksek olduğunu savunmaktadır. Çeşitli argümanlara dayanan bu analiz, tarafların beklentilerine uygun, karar almaya ilişkin ikili bir liderlik mekanizması içeren ve yeniden şekillenen güç dinamiklerini yansıtan bir biçimde dönüşecek liberal uluslararası düzenin Çin-Amerikan çatışmasının çözümünde merkezi önemde olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çin-Amerikan İlişkileri, Liberal Uluslararası Düzen, Liberal Uluslararasıılık, Karşılıklı Bağımlılık

## 1. Introduction

After more than two decades, the broad consensus is that how the Sino-American rivalry unfolds will determine the future of international politics in the twenty-first century. Yet, views vary significantly regarding the probable outcome of this rivalry. To some, the most recent two centuries in the last twenty are anomalous exceptions, and the world will witness the emergence of yet another “Chinese century” (Kissinger et al., 2011, p. 13). Accordingly, it is likely, if not inevitable, that the *Pax Sinica* will replace the *Pax Americana*, perhaps even as a result of a hegemonic war (Allison, 2017a; Kissinger, 2015, pp. 366–367; Layne, 2018, p. 90). Opposing this deterministic view, and without ignoring the remarkable rise of China over the last four decades, others claim that China will suffer from the lack of necessary economic, political, and human resources due to its domestic constraints (Fenby, 2014, p. 26). As for the possibility of a war, optimists point out the deterrence generated by the ever-deepening interdependence, the post-Cold War version of “mutually assured destruction,” as the central force to steer the US and China toward cooperative and constructive solutions rather than conflict (Ikenberry, 1998, pp. 77–78, 2008, p. 24; Zakaria, 2011, p. 140). One can hardly overstate the extent to which this mutual dependence shapes bilateral relations. Indeed, the made-up word, *Chinamerica*, illustrates its intensity (Ferguson, 2008; H. Jones, 2010).

Today, however, the rivalry between the two colossuses, considered “the most dangerous geopolitical relationship” of contemporary world politics (Allison, 2017b), spills over from the economic realm into every dimension of international affairs. A viable approach to Sino-American relations, therefore, requires a meticulous analysis of other salient aspects, focusing specifically on the international framework that shapes the actions of both actors. More than being the mere environment in which the US-Chinese competition takes place, the liberal international order (LIO), forged and led by the US throughout the post-WWII era, has agency. The LIO has long proved its resilience and persistence. Its self-corrective nature and adaptability to radical international changes (Ikenberry, 2009, 2020; Robert O. Keohane, 1984) are evidence of its capability to shape a stable and peaceful future for the US and China. There is reason to believe that the LIO can be the primary determinant of American and Chinese choices, propelling both giants toward cooperation. Moreover, rather than posing a vital challenge, the rise of China can catalyze the rejuvenation and strengthening of the existing order (Tierney, 2021). The LIO may be the ultimate victor in the intensifying great power rivalry.

Theoretically, this article draws on the liberal internationalist insights that provide analytical tools supporting this claim. The liberal internationalist vision can be traced back to the Kantian idea of a federation of republics, which inspired the Anglo-American understanding of politics (Johnson & Heiss, 2018, p. 124). This intellectual background evolved into a political project, notably Wilsonianism, in the early twentieth century. Subsequently, it followed an agenda centered around the zealous endeavors to maintain modern states' progress toward modernity (Ikenberry, 2020, pp. 6–12). Liberals placed special emphasis on multilateral institutions and collective action for shaping state behavior to ensure international peace and stability (Haas, Keohane, Levy, Keohane, & Gasser, 1993; Robert O. Keohane, 1984, 2018; Robert O. Keohane & Martin, 1995, p. 40). Multilateral institutions are envisaged as the platforms for interstate cooperation, leading states to act rationally and eschew conflict (Robert Owen Keohane & Nye, 1977). While mindful of the importance of state power, liberals firmly believe it is difficult to dismantle institutional arrangements once they emerge. Then, with the injection of liberal principles into these institutions, they act as restraints that impede selfish and ambitious international undertakings and encourage peaceful interactions (Ikenberry, 2001).

The LIO has been the operating system during the longest peace amidst major world powers since the Roman epoch (Mueller, 1996, p. 3). Its success is the product of the environment it has managed to create, characterized by mutual gains, as well as considerable costs in the event of a revisionist disruption. The LIO has a structural character that enables it to exert influence on state behavior (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). Thus, in response to the two-faceted contemporary challenge that emanates from the ascendancy of anti-liberal tendencies within the Western world and the escalating Sino-American tension, the LIO can find multiple instruments to ensure a political and institutional rearrangement that reflects the emerging realities. Additionally, this process can present an opportunity for the LIO to adapt its core tenets to the new equilibrium to be reached.

This study is based on five interlinked arguments: (1) that the LIO's long-proven flexibility and adaptability will facilitate the absorption of any transformation; (2) that the LIO offers a win-win solution, making outright military confrontation unreasonable for both powers concerned; (3) that China owes its rise to the LIO and is not likely to seek to upend the system; (4) that global leadership role comes with a heavy burden, one that Beijing seems to have neither the resources nor the willingness to shoulder; (5) that today, no single actor alone can respond to the modern transnational challenges and Washington has already yielded to this reality. This deference will eventually lead the US to a concessive attitude, accepting an increasing Chinese voice within the LIO provided that any radical alteration of the *status quo* is not on the table.

The remainder of this article proceeds in three sections. It begins with an overview of Sino-American relations since the end of the Cold War and an attempt to demonstrate the flaws of an understanding based solely on geopolitical considerations. The subsequent section focuses on the historical background of the LIO, along with its characteristics directly affecting the course of great power competition. The last section examines the above-mentioned arguments to reveal how the LIO can imbue the US-Chinese rivalry with cooperative and peaceful elements.

## 2. The Sino-American Competition: Toward a Hegemonic Transition?

Regardless of the view toward the course of China's rise in the twenty-first century, one can hardly overstate that the change in the global power equilibrium requires a reorganization of the country's relations with the US, the weakening hegemon. The two giants need to reach a renewed *modus vivendi* both in Asia-Pacific and globally. Put differently, the *Pax Americana* is facing an assault from the very same region that generated substantial challenges for more than a half-century. China, Korea, and Vietnam have been the sources of these attacks since the onset of the American century (Cox, 2008, p. 288).

The rift in bilateral relations began to emerge in 2005 (Cohen, 2019, p. 273), and the catalytic effect of the Great Recession (2008) shifted relations to overt competition. The financial crisis also led to a drastically transformed global distribution of power, reflecting the gradual multipolarization of the world order (Layne, 2009, p. 147). In retrospect, the post-Cold War Sino-American relations and China's adaptation to the newly-shaped international environment can be divided into three distinct periods up to 2008, as China "(1) [sought] to restore the damaged official relations with the USA– June 4, 1989 and June 1994; (2) tr[ie]d to sustain the relationship – June 1994–September 11, 2001; and (3) seize[d] new opportunities to expand and deepen the relationship – September 11, 2001–[2008])" (Qingguo, 2008, p. 45). From 2008 onwards, bilateral relations have undergone a fourth phase marked by Chinese incentives to seize as many opportunities as possible to challenge US supremacy at the international level.

After the brutal Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, the Clinton administration's policy toward China centered around "comprehensive engagement," seeking to develop a "constructive strategic partnership" (Nye, 2015, p. 56; Shambaugh, 2000, p. 98). With China's 2001 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), Washington's primary objective became to make the country a "responsible stakeholder" in the international order (Rice, 2005; Zoellick, 2005). This optimistic American strategy resulted, to some extent, from a pragmatic prioritization of the interests of business lobbies in the US Congress (Sutter, 2010, p. 98). In the meantime, commitment to Deng Xiaoping's prescient dictum inspired the Chinese attitude: "Observe calmly; secure our position; handle affairs prudently; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership" (Whiting, 1995, p. 301). The low profile assumed by China enhanced the optimism of the policy-makers in Washington and boosted their commitment to the comprehensive engagement strategy, which was hoped to ensure the liberalization of the domestic political landscape in China.

Starting in 2005, following another Taiwan crisis, one cannot help but observe growing Chinese self-confidence nurtured by the perception that American power was in decline. The Great Recession that shattered the economic foundations of the global US hegemony further strengthened this perception, leading to increased Chinese assertiveness at regional and global levels. Despite reassurances that China's essential objective is to maintain its rise peacefully (Bijian, 2005, pp. 18–24; Bingguo, 2011), China under Hu Jintao (2002-2012) and particularly

under Xi Jinping (since 2013) seems to have adopted an adversarial stance in the face of the US. Conscious of its international status, Beijing began to follow Xi Jinping's motto in foreign policy, "striving for achievement" (A. H. F. Li, 2017, p. 69), and has sought to become a norm-maker and an agenda-setter on a global scale (Lanteigne, 2019, p. 16). Illustrative of China's new understanding of international politics on a competitive basis are its calls for building "a new model of major country relations" ("Remarks by President Obama and President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China Before Bilateral Meeting," 2013) and President Xi's declaration that his nation "has gone from standing up to becoming rich and becoming strong" (Kuhn, 2017).

Certainly, international politics does not take place in a vacuum. Nor is the world order unipolar. The gradual change in China's strategy and its increased assertiveness triggered a shift in US response from engagement to opposition to Beijing's ambitions, and a new US approach centered on geopolitical considerations has emerged. After President Obama's ill-fated "pivot Asia" initiative (Goldberg, 2016), the Trump administration took an abrupt turn toward a strategic rivalry, culminating in trade wars. The escalating tension in bilateral relations was also crystallized in the National Security Strategy (NSS, 2017) and the National Defense Strategy (NDS, 2018), which depicted China as a "revisionist" actor. Washington unequivocally acknowledged the idea that the American strategy must be built upon the fact that "the reemergence of long-term strategic competition" would shape the global political arena (*National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 2017; *The 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 2018). Later in 2020, Mike Pompeo, then-Secretary of State, succinctly expressed the administration's competitive view regarding relations with China, bluntly criticizing the past US approach: "We must admit a hard truth that should guide us in the years and decades to come, that if we want to have a free 21st century, and not the Chinese century of which Xi Jinping dreams, the old paradigm of blind engagement with China simply won't get it done. We must not continue it and we must not return to it" (Pompeo, 2020). Similarly, this attitude echoed within the foreign policy establishment in Washington, DC, inspiring an anonymous – and significantly reductive – article published by the Atlantic Council, "The Longer Telegram," which emphasized the need to strengthen ties with allies to counter China's assertiveness and compel Beijing to return to its pre-2013 position ("The Longer Telegram," 2021).

The Obama and Trump administrations insisted on seeing Beijing through a competitive lens and prioritized, to a varying extent, militarized strategies that define Sino-American relations from a geopolitical perspective. This tendency has remained unchanged under the Biden administration so far. Like his predecessors, President Biden has not forged a strategy that rejuvenates opportunities for economic initiatives and cooperation. Instead, his administration has maintained the US commitment to self-defeating military solutions that risk embroiling China and the US into a suicidal confrontation (Jackson, 2022). This prevailing geopolitical and military focus strengthens the conviction of those who advocate a looming hegemonic transition (henceforth the hegemonic transition school, HTS), overlooking the LIO's substantial capacity to reconcile the interests of both actors.

The logic underlying this pessimistic view rests on the realist assumption that “the overriding goal of each state is to maximize its share of world power.” As functionally undifferentiated units that are greedy for power states constantly seek to establish “hegemony” (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 2, 29). In this zero-sum game played in an anarchic self-help environment, when a player feels powerful enough to challenge the established hegemon to replace it, this confrontation is most likely to result in a large-scale war, according to the HTS (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 94–95; Organski, 1958, pp. 196–201). In this era characterized by “the return of geopolitics” (Mead, 2014), the crucial question that seals the fate of the rest of the century is whether the Sino-American rivalry is heading toward a military conflict (Lemke & Tammen, 2003, p. 270). Putting excessive faith in the historical record, some claim that such a war is almost inevitable (Allison, 2017a).

Admittedly, one can hardly deny that the breakout of a war initiated either by the eager rising power (China) or the established dominant actor (US) is possible. The likelihood of this disastrous scenario, however, is highly debatable. Regardless of any assessment of its power, “China is the only great power that can potentially threaten the status of the United States” (Rudolf, 2020, p. 5). By any measure, it poses the most comprehensive and multi-faceted challenge faced by the US since the end of WWII. Unlike the past rising powers, the Soviet Union and Japan, Chinese military, economic, and technological capabilities combined make the Asian giant the gravest threat that the *Pax Americana* has ever confronted (Ikenberry, 2008, p. 26; Zhong & Mozur, 2018). Yet, this rivalry must not necessarily end in a catastrophic war. Indeed, it is curious that those who take Thucydides’ writings about a hegemonic transition war in Ancient Greece as the basis for their far-fetched pessimistic arguments turn a blind eye to his ironic conclusion, positing the belief in the inevitability of war as one of the main reasons for it (Thucydides, 1974, p. 38). The tendency to wield analogies, albeit tempting, risks overlooking the unique dynamics of the given case. As for the Sino-American competition, its most distinctive characteristic compared to great power rivalries of the past is the environment in which it takes place (Ikenberry & Lim, 2017, p. 16). A viable and realistic analysis must consider the particularities of the LIO and the ever-deepening interdependence between international actors. These factors, among others, make a Sino-American war not impossible but extremely unlikely. The key to a shift from competition to cooperation lies in making necessary adjustments within the LIO, not overturning it.

### **3. The LIO as the Venue of the Great Power Rivalry**

Defining the LIO is difficult because of its elusive character and fluid nature. Since it is a multi-faceted order with mutually reinforcing institutional and normative aspects, attempts to develop an all-encompassing definition hinge on varying standpoints. For the sake of analytical clarity, one can politically frame the LIO as a loosely rules-based system built upon the principles of openness, multilateralism, collective security, institutionalism, and cooperation (Ikenberry, 2010, p. 512, 2018, p. 11). Its normative aspect, on the other hand, bears a progressive social purpose in that it fosters the Western community, forging a civic identity (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999, pp. 192–195; Stephen & Skidmore, 2019, p. 64). Based on this two-dimensional definition,

the ideational foundations of the LIO, inspired by the liberal internationalist understanding of world order, predate the post-war American hegemony. Glimmerings of this vision first emerged through eighteenth-century liberal thinking, and liberal internationalism has since developed comprehensive ideas to promote universal liberal values through large-scale order-building. Later, in the early twentieth century, it took the shape of a political project – unsuccessfully – advanced by Woodrow Wilson.

In the aftermath of WWII, accumulated liberal internationalist ideas and experiences paved the way for the creation of a far-reaching LIO under American auspices (Ikenberry, 2018, 2020). Throughout the Cold War, the LIO served as a framework for a sort of security community. Organized around shared liberal principles and practices, it provided security for the Western states in both military and economic terms. “It was both a *Gesellschaft* – a ‘society’ defined by formal rules, institutions and governmental ties – and a *Gemeinschaft* – a ‘community’ defined by shared values, beliefs and expectations” (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 17). Although some consider it inherently flawed and conceptually misguided, even “bound to fail” (Glaser, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2019), the Cold War record of the LIO, in fact, reflects remarkable success. Yet, the word “success” here does not solely refer to the Western victory over international communism. As a sub-system within a wider bipolar order, the LIO’s adaptive capacity in the face of political and economic fluctuations seemed to evidence the accuracy of the liberal belief that world order can be reformed progressively. From economic recovery in the post-war period to ending the Franco-German antagonism in the middle of Europe and the integration of Japan and Germany, the LIO assumed daunting tasks through institutional mechanisms and rules while attracting many international actors (Ikenberry, 2010, p. 513).

Its successful past has affected the LIO in two opposing ways. First, increasing faith in the LIO as an operating system encouraged its members to strengthen its political and institutional structures. Through these mutually reinforcing structures, the LIO helped mitigate the impact of problems stemming from anarchy at the international level, ensured mutual gains that enhanced cooperation, and induced states to act independently of relative gain considerations. It became more than just the environment of international politics. Insofar as it extended its rules and norms to international actors and consensually affected state behavior, the LIO achieved a “structural character” able to survive changes in the global distribution of power (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999).

Secondly, the end of the Cold War terminated the function of the LIO as a sub-order within a wider bipolar order, leading not to its dissolution but to expansion. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Western order became global (Ikenberry, 2020, p. 11). This globalization of the LIO resulted in the integration of states with various ideological predilections and political agendas. The old bargains and structures gradually came into question, shattering the political foundations of the LIO. This transformation undermined the understanding of the Western liberal civic identity developed around the LIO such that the weakening social purpose accompanied the shattering political foundations of the world order (Ikenberry, 2018, pp. 9–10). Ironically, the LIO today is



the victim of its Cold War success, and one cannot deny that it faces a crisis. However, this is not a crisis of the system itself but a crisis of reorganization and rearrangement.

Worth noting is that the increasing number of stakeholders and the rise of non-liberal great powers are not the only sources of the challenges the LIO has encountered. Certain policies pursued by its long-standing proponents, including its locomotive, the US, have shattered the foundations of the rules-based liberal order (Lake, 2020, pp. 464-465). The ephemeral unipolarity in the 1990s prompted a reexamination of the ideational underpinnings of US foreign policy, which had long been guided by Western enlightenment values and an unwavering belief in their universal character (Kimmage, 2020). Casting doubts about the future of an internationalist foreign policy approach, this distancing with the West as a concept was later followed by growing unilateralist tendencies in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The prevailing neoconservative insights within the American policy-making circles, which culminated in the Iraq War in 2003 and resulted in decoupling with some traditional allies, eroded the credibility of the LIO and US commitment to it in the eyes of the world (Krauthammer, 2005; Lafeber, 2002, p. 549; “Villepin: War Is Acknowledgment of Failure,” 2003). Although the renewed emphasis on multilateralism in international affairs during the Obama era raised liberal hopes in Washington, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 dealt a severe blow to the global leadership role of the US. His transactionist approach, “America first” vision, and power-centered understanding of internationalist politics represent a significant break not only with the long-standing American foreign policy tradition but also with the liberal internationalist consensus that inspired US behavior in the post-war period (Donduran, 2020). According to Madeleine Albright, former Secretary of State, the US has “... not had a chief executive in the modern era whose statements and actions are so at odds with democratic ideals” (Albright, 2019, p. 5). The unabashed promotion of an anti-liberal political agenda by the Trump administration aimed at dismantling the LIO, thereby posing a grave threat to its credibility and survival (Powaski, 2019, p. 268). As a result, the future of the LIO has become subject to debate, as has the question of whether the US, as the established hegemon, can be considered a revisionist actor (Ikenberry, 2017). Going even further, some argued that in those years, China became less revisionist compared to the US, which assumed an anti-liberal stance that weakened the institutional, political, and ideological foundations of the LIO (Chan, 2021, pp. 1347–1348).

The challenges to the LIO from within are not solely limited to certain unorthodox US policies. Taking a broader perspective, the LIO has encountered multiple internal threats of a political and economic nature (Lake, Martin, & Risse, 2021). The rise of right-wing populism and nationalist tendencies in the Western world, combined with the growing influence of anti-globalization (or deglobalization) movements, are the driving forces of this internal challenge that attacks the pillars of the LIO (Paul, 2021). The liberal retrogression in the West has reached its apex with Brexit, illustrating the growing influence of these nationalist and populist currents. This self-damaging Western estrangement from the LIO, coupled with paradoxical US revisionism, came as a test of the resilience of the rules-based order.



Two important developments in recent years have mitigated the intensity of these internal challenges. On the one hand, the election of Joe Biden as US President in 2020 has put an end to the revisionist American policies, reaffirming the commitment to the global leadership role and the determination to “lead by the power of [American] example” (Biden Jr., 2020; “Read: President-Elect Joe Biden’s Remarks,” 2020). Some even stressed that “his presidency may be the establishment’s last best chance to demonstrate that liberal internationalism is a superior strategy to populist nationalism” (Wright, 2020). On the other hand, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to further consolidation within the Western world, underscoring the value of multilateral structures in providing security and a venue for collective action (Leonard, Krastev, & Leonard, 2023; Wunderlich, 2022). Although these signs of reinvigoration do not amount to the total elimination of the internal challenges the LIO has faced in the twenty-first century, nor the profound crisis of transition, one cannot help but observe that the waters in the West have relatively calmed in recent years.

Unsurprisingly, the apparent cracks in the Western world, coupled with the trend toward multipolarity, were seen as opportunities by the emerging great powers. The internal challenges to the LIO have certainly played a significant role in bolstering their revisionist claims and boosting their self-confidence. Therefore, the demise of unipolarity and the changing distribution of power simply impose a renewed organizational logic and foundations on the LIO to adapt. Although some argue that the actors fail to undertake substantive adaptive actions, calling into question the long-proven resilience of the system (Acharya, 2018; Flockhart, 2020; Jervis, Gavin, Rovner, & Labrosse, 2018), there is no reason to look elsewhere for the solution to this transitional crisis. Given its universal appeal, stemming from the emphasis on individual freedoms and dignity and intrinsic features, such as interdependence and security provision, which significantly raise the cost of overturning the system, the response to this crisis lies in comprehensive reforms rather than radical transformation (Deudney & Ikenberry, 2018). The simplistic assumption that competitive relations between an established hegemon and a rising power will inevitably lead to a war of hegemonic transition is not likely to hold. Indeed, the inherent attributes of the existing order seem capable of taming conflictual impulses and reinforcing institutional restraints through a comprehensive reassessment of the positions of major powers, including China and the US, in light of global power shifts.

#### **4. Toward a New *Modus Vivendi* within the LIO**

Two interrelated arguments support the likelihood of peaceful evolution for Sino-American relations within the LIO. The first involves its different characteristics, structural nature, and capacity to affect state behavior through its fundamental principles and institutional mechanisms. The second emphasizes the actors’ view of the ongoing crisis of transition and international politics as a whole and assumes that they will eschew a devastating military confrontation at best, resulting in a Pyrrhic victory, and embrace cooperation on new terms.

First, postwar history testifies to the flexible nature and adaptive capacity of the LIO in the face of profound global changes (Arg. 1). The crisis confronting the LIO today is not the most acute in history. Indeed, during its bumpy journey for more than two centuries, many substantial incidents challenged the liberal internationalist agenda (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 22). In retrospect, its development as a political project unfolded in three stages. The first version of liberal internationalism – Wilsonianism – failed to become a properly functioning international order, not only because it was deeply flawed but also because the world in the 1920s and 30s was not equipped for collective security. The conditions, thus, were not ripe. Nonetheless, the liberal internationalist political project was born out of its ashes, and a second version was forged, which marked the Cold War years. This new version moved beyond the first by designing a more complex world order with a more inclusive and benign vision. Through explicit security commitments and comprehensive multilateral institutions, the architects of this second version managed to build a more encompassing order centered on a flexible set of principles. Today, the second version reels under profound pressures of international political change. Yet, a post-hegemonic third version characterized by a reassessment of the roles and authority of major international actors seems to provide a viable response to this challenge (Ikenberry, 2009). As evidenced by the Cold War, the flexible character of the LIO provides incentives to actors to overcome dilemmas posed by the necessity of coexisting with others that stand for different political ideas and agendas (Ikenberry, 2020, p. 65). This flexibility allows the LIO to absorb various, mostly opposing, expectations and forge a common ground, as well as envision a post-hegemonic world order shaped by reconciled American and Chinese interests.

Second, the LIO, by creating gains and incentives for each actor, offers viable and sustainable solutions to relative gains problems, eliminating the zero-sum logic of international relations (Arg. 2). The rules, norms, and institutions dedicated to “economic openness” mitigate the problems of anarchy so that states see no need for preoccupation with relative gains at the expense of absolute ones (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999, pp. 189–191). As various aspects of international politics have become incrementally intertwined, low yields in one issue-area do not necessarily weaken prospects for higher yields in another for any actor. Similarly, the growing complexity of economics leads to the emergence of states with multi-sectoral economies, clouding the calculation of aggregate relative losses and gains (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999, p. 191). Thus, within the non-hierarchical structure of the LIO, there can be no absolute winners or losers.

International trade appears to be the area in which actors benefit most from economic openness. Contrary to claims that the anti-LIO attitude of the Trump administration undermined one of the core premises of the system (Sharma, 2020, p. 87), abundant evidence demonstrates that developing states owe much of their success to this structural feature of the LIO, despite undeniable power asymmetries. The functioning of the LIO, based on the mutually strengthening principles of multilateralism and interdependence, ensures not equal but fairly distributed gains for each actor within the system. Aside from mitigating the impact of power in trade bargains, the operational logic that takes the provision of mutual gains as the principal objective encourages states to embrace international cooperation rather than confrontation to ensure welfare at home.

In diminishing the impact of power in economic affairs, the LIO provided developing states with enhanced opportunities to increase their gains in a relatively secure environment.

Economic openness serves, therefore, as a source of security by making military confrontation highly costly and unproductive for the stakeholders of the system. Setting aside absolute gains in pursuit of relative ones is not a rational or beneficial choice for a state seeking to enhance its welfare and power. In this sense, economic interdependence generated by multilateral practices within the existing order spills over to the security realm, imposing institutional and structural constraints on parochial nationalistic impulses. Preventing the war between great powers has been, *inter alia*, the main goal of the LIO since its establishment (B. Jones, Wright, Shapiro, & Keane, 2014, p. 4). The absence of such a military confrontation throughout the post-war era – the longest period in modern history – illustrates its efficiency in ensuring a relatively secure international environment, especially for relations between major powers (Alcaro, 2018, p. 165; Ikenberry, 2010, p. 514). Doubtless, multiple historical and politico-military factors paved the way for this benign atmosphere, including nuclear deterrence, increasing numbers of democracies, and the declining significance of gains from conquest, etc. (Jervis, 2002). However, one can hardly assess the impact of all these factors independent of the operating system of the period under consideration.

Third, and directly linked to the second argument, opportunities and incentives provided by the LIO have enabled and facilitated China's rise (Arg. 3). Many consider China's accession to the WTO a landmark development that has shaped the country's behavior on a wide array of issues and considerably accelerated its growth (Blancher & Rumbaugh, 2004; Chow, 2003; X. Li, 2012; Lu, 2012). For instance, China's GDP has witnessed a remarkable rise since then, skyrocketing from \$1.21 trillion in 2000 to \$17.73 trillion by 2021 ("GDP (Current US\$) – China | Data," n.d.). Chinese net trade in goods and services followed a similar path during the same period, reaching \$462,81 billion from \$28.87 billion ("Net Trade in Goods and Services (BoP, Current US\$) – China | Data," n.d.). Likewise, the post-WTO period attested to striking growth in China's GDP per capita between 2000-2021, soaring from \$959.5 to \$12,556 with an average annual growth rate of 8.7% ("GDP per Capita (Current US\$) – China | Data," n.d.; "GDP per Capita Growth (Annual %) – China | Data," n.d.). Combined with massive efforts by major Western powers, especially the US, dedicated to China's integration into the system, these figures demonstrate the incentives and permissive environment provided by the LIO. That is not to say that the LIO alone should take all credit for China's impressive performance over the last four decades. On the contrary, China has invested enormous intellectual and material resources to write its success story, one unprecedented in modern history (Chow & Perkins, 2015; Jinglian & Shitao, 2015; Ray, 2002; Zakaria, 2011, p. 102). Yet, the answer to the question, "Could China have authored this development story had it not been for the LIO and the constructive efforts of the major powers" is most likely to be negative.

Fourth, contemporary debate over the replacement of the US-led rules-based order by a looming *Pax Sinica* overlooks the important fact that order-building on such a broad scope is a daunting

task that inflicts material and non-material costs on its architect (Ikenberry, 2001, 2011). Hence, the global leadership role comes with a heavy burden, one that Beijing lacks the necessary resources and willingness to shoulder (Arg. 4). Making binding multilateral arrangements, especially for a powerful state, results in so-called “sovereignty costs,” reducing the autonomy of action and policy (Abbott & Snidal, 2000, pp. 436–441). In addition, leading a rules-based order imposes substantial economic costs on the leader. On the one hand, the leader must be willing to settle for lesser gains compared to those possible if it were to act as the most powerful actor in the system under an anarchical world order. By limiting the role of power in bargains and trade-offs, a rules-based order diminishes the potential gains of powerful actors in exchange for a stable and cooperative international environment. On the other hand, funding global governance institutions and mechanisms requires generosity from the leading actor, since it assumes a larger share compared to others. In this context, the non-material costs of order-building seem to contradict the long-standing Chinese insistence on the sacred character of state sovereignty in the Westphalian image (S. S. Kim, 1994), whereas its domestic constraints – growth deceleration, the middle-income trap, demographic obstacles, and political challenges – substantially limit its capacity and willingness to lead the international community (Hass, 2021a, 2021b; Nye, 2015, pp. 47–48; World Bank, 2013). For instance, the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) under Chinese auspices reflects Beijing’s reluctance to conceive institution-building efforts as part of a counter-hegemonic initiative. As can be observed in its design and practices, the AIIB acts as an instrument providing China with the greater authority required by its growing global financial influence while respecting the existing norms and limits of the LIO (Ikenberry & Lim, 2017, p. 16).

It bears underscoring that Beijing’s attitude in response to recent developments has raised divergent interpretations regarding its stance, which may appear to contradict this argument. China’s backing of Moscow in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, its mediation efforts, and its determination to deepen bilateral ties have engendered a perception that China possesses a greater inclination to assume the global leadership role than previously believed (Gabuev, 2023; Jinping, 2023). Moreover, the increasingly competitive tone of its rhetoric and its unabashed criticism of the US on matters pertaining to human rights and democracy serve to reinforce this view (“The Report on Human Rights Violations in the United States in 2022,” 2023; “The State of Democracy in the United States: 2022,” 2023; “US Hegemony and Its Perils,” 2023). Nevertheless, it is imperative to note that these actions do not falsify the fundamental premise of this study, nor do they signify a radical transformation in China’s perspective on the LIO. On the contrary, China’s aspiration to expand its standing within the extant order without upending it constitutes the primary underlying factor that underpins its recent conduct. China seeks to capitalize on the confrontational milieu between Russia and the Western powers as a strategic tool to assert its ascendant position, rather than to instigate novel arrangements, regulations, or norms. The manifestation of its ostensible adherence to core liberal values and the fundamental structures and principles of the rules-based order elucidates the limits of Chinese revisionism. Furthermore, even at this juncture, Beijing’s aim is not to commandeer the helm of the global system but rather

to partake in the preeminent position occupied by the US and to accrue, within the LIO, privileges commensurate with its burgeoning power. Thus, these actions, indicative of China's heightened activism, if not assertiveness, aimed at expanding its leeway, should not be misconstrued as an indication of its willingness to bear the burdens entailed by assuming the global leadership role.

Finally, the transnational challenges emerging in the last decades have revealed that no international actor alone can cope with these modern threats (Arg. 5). Whether China or the US, without collective support behind it, none has sufficient power to lead the international community to overcome threats posed by climate change, terrorism, migration, human trafficking, etc. To cope with this new reality, a growing emphasis on multilateralism and collective action (Drezner, 2011; Feffer, 2021; Rose, 2015) has been sustained since the end of the Bush administration, except during the Trump era. In relinquishing the hegemonic position, the US will inevitably cede a greater voice to China within the LIO, which befits China's expanding capacity and improving its international status.

The most reliable guarantor of international peace and security in this world of unconventional threats is the LIO itself. Overturning the existing order to forge a new one is equivalent to jumping from the frying pan into the fire. A hegemonic Sino-American war is destined to result in devastation for both the winner and the loser. The solution to this crisis of transition lies in the LIO, not elsewhere (Ikenberry, 2009, 2010). The LIO has experience in overcoming such crises and the ability to do so again. The reformation of the system based on a joint leadership mechanism, a G2-like structure, and a shared decision-making authority can encourage the US and China to focus on the cooperative aspects of their relationship rather than adversarial ones. Assuming that Washington is willing to abdicate its *primus inter pares* status, and Beijing asks only for cooperation on a par with the US, a reorganization of the existing order that reflects changes in the global power distribution and that can respond to emerging modern threats is the key to propelling Sino-American relations toward cooperation.

## 5. Conclusion

We all forget even the existence of things that fulfill essential functions in our lives, taking them for granted. International politics is not immune to this inherent human trait. Throughout the post-war period, the LIO has been very successful in achieving its core objectives that the world has already forgotten its existence, taking the fruits of its success for granted and even putting its future into doubt despite the absence of a viable alternative.

As discussed so far, the operational logic of the LIO based on multilateral institutionalism, economic and security interdependence, and the principle of mutual gains has encouraged international actors to focus on cooperative relations rather than conflict or purely selfish initiatives. Moreover, the LIO's flexible and adaptable nature has enabled it to respond capably to profound political shifts that have emerged in different eras. In time, the liberal rules-based order developed a structural character. At the risk of exaggeration for the sake of analysis, one can say that the LIO is tantamount to a distinct international actor with the capacity to inspire state

behavior. Its might exceeds the mere sum of its members' powers. Certainly, there have always been – and will be – rogue states and free-riders, but they can never be effective enough to cast a shadow over the LIO's overall success.

The fact that the LIO has been reeling under substantial pressure imposed by the changing global power dynamics and the transformation of the Western political landscape, notably since the early 2000s, does not necessarily mean that it has lost its inherent capabilities. As such, the solution to intensifying Sino-American competition lies inside the existing institutions and structures of the LIO. A crisis of authority resulting from China's rise and America's weakening superiority characterizes contemporary international politics. In an increasingly interdependent world, upending the LIO serves neither side's interests. Indeed, China – unlike Russia – does not even pursue revisionist dreams as claimed by the proponents of the HTS, nor does it present an ideological or practical alternative to the LIO. Rather, China seeks to ensure greater political autonomy and voice within the international system (Ikenberry, 2014, pp. 88–89). In this sense, China does not “challenge” but “contest” the existing order (S. Kim & Kim, 2022). This contestation is based on the expectation that China's weight as a major actor would increase within the LIO, enabling Beijing to carve out a larger room for action. As such, instead of dismantling the LIO or imposing a new order on the international community, China sets out to ensure the transformation of the world order in a way that would provide itself with a status equal to that of the US. Therefore, the solution to the Sino-American competition resides in a reformed version of the LIO, one that accommodates both American and Chinese expectations and reflects newly shaped power dynamics. Establishing new informal groupings that affirm their equally privileged statuses and building new mechanisms for cooperation that emphasize mutual gains and encourage an accommodationist attitude can be the fundamental pillars of this reformation process.

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