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WHICH INTERNATIONAL ORDER IS CHINA PUTTING FORWARD?

The rise of China has become one of the central issues in contemporary debates about international order. As China's economic, technological, and political influence has expanded, scholars and policymakers have increasingly questioned whether Beijing seeks to preserve, reform, or replace the existing 'rules of the game'. The answer remains contested. While some observers portray China as a revisionist power determined to challenge the liberal international order, others emphasize the extent to which China has benefited from and remains integrated into the structures of globalization and global governance.

The debate has become more important as the world entered a period of growing uncertainty. The relative decline of Western dominance, the diffusion of power toward non-Western actors, and increasing dissatisfaction with existing institutions have reopened fundamental questions about the nature and future of international order. In this changing environment, China's vision of world politics deserves particular attention because it offers one of the most coherent alternatives to the liberal assumptions that have shaped international relations for much of the past three decades.

Yet understanding China's position is not straightforward. Beijing simultaneously supports many existing international institutions while criticizing aspects of the order they represent. China presents itself as a defender of globalization and multilateralism, while advocating principles such as sovereignty, non-interference, and civilizational diversity that often challenge liberal universalism. This apparent contradiction raises important questions about the nature of China's international ambitions and the kind of order it seeks to promote.

Accordingly, this article addresses three interconnected questions. First, how should international order be conceptualized in the context of contemporary power shifts and growing normative contestation? Second, what are the principal characteristics of China's understanding of international order and how do they differ from dominant Western approaches? Third, does China's behaviour constitute a challenge to international order itself, or primarily to its liberal and Western foundations? To answer these questions, the article draws on theories of international order, power transition, and hierarchy, while also engaging with Chinese intellectual traditions and contemporary debates about China's role in global governance.

Key words: international order, liberal international order, revisionism, globalization, Tianxia, hierarchy, multipolarity, global governance.

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Formulation of the problem in general form, its relation to scientific or practical problems. The transformation of international order has become one of the central issues in contemporary international relations. The relative decline of Western predominance, the diffusion of power toward non-Western actors, and the growing contestation of established international institutions have generated renewed debates regarding the principles upon which global order is based. Among these developments, the rise of China occupies a particularly important place because it raises fundamental questions about the future distribution of power, the legitimacy of existing international institutions, and the evolution of the normative foundations of world politics.

China's expanding economic, technological, and political influence has stimulated extensive discussion concerning its long-term intentions and strategic priorities. Competing interpretations demonstrate that no consensus has yet emerged regarding the character of China's international ambitions or the nature of the order it seeks to promote.

The growing uncertainty surrounding China's role reflects broader conceptual problems in the study of international order itself. International order is not limited to formal institutions or the distribution of material capabilities but also incorporates rules, norms, legitimacy, and competing understandings of appropriate international conduct. Consequently, assessing China's role requires distinguishing between challenges directed against international order as such and those aimed specifically at its liberal and Western interpretation. Failure to make this distinction often leads to overly simplified assessments of China's foreign policy and strategic objectives.

These issues possess not only theoretical but also considerable practical significance. Understanding China's conception of international order is essential for assessing the future evolution of global governance and the dynamics of contemporary great-power competition. As international politics becomes increasingly multipolar, the ability to distinguish between systemic continuity and normative transformation acquires growing importance for both scholarly analysis and practical policymaking. This makes a comprehensive examination of China's understanding of international order both timely and necessary.

Analysis of previous studies. The growing influence of China has generated extensive scholarly debate regarding its implications for international order. Existing studies can broadly be divided into three major approaches.

The first group of scholars views China as a fundamentally revisionist power that seeks to challenge and ultimately replace the existing international order. Realist authors such as J. Mearsheimer (2014) argue that the rise of China is likely to generate intense geopolitical competition with the United States and lead to a restructuring of the international system. Similar concerns are reflected in the works of G. Allison (2017), who emphasizes the risks associated with power transitions, and R. Doshi (2021), who interprets Chinese grand strategy as a long-term effort to displace American predominance and establish a new regional and global order.

A second group of studies emphasizes China's integration into existing institutions and its dependence on globalization. Scholars such as G. Ikenberry (2011) argue that the liberal international order possesses a high degree of adaptability and has successfully incorporated rising powers, including China. A. Johnston (2008) similarly demonstrates that Chinese participation in international institutions has often been

characterized by adaptation and accommodation rather than outright opposition to existing rules and norms.

A third strand of literature focuses on indigenous Chinese understandings of international order. Authors such as Y. Qin (2018) and T. Zhao (2021) argue that Chinese political thought offers alternative conceptions of international relations based on relationality, harmony, hierarchy, and civilizational diversity. These approaches challenge the universality of Western theoretical assumptions and suggest the possibility of alternative normative foundations for international order.

Selection of previously unresolved parts of the problem to which the article is devoted. Despite substantial scholarly attention to China's rise, important questions remain unresolved. Existing research often presents a dichotomy between revisionism and status quo behaviour, while paying less attention to the possibility that China may seek neither the preservation nor the destruction of the existing order. Instead, Beijing may be attempting to reshape the normative and institutional foundations of international order while preserving many of the structures of globalization from which it benefits. This article contributes to the debate by examining China's approach as a form of selective revisionism aimed at redefining influence, hierarchy, and legitimacy within the contemporary international system.

Another unresolved issue concerns the conceptual distinction between the international order as a whole and its liberal variant. Much of the current debate implicitly equates challenges to the liberal international order with opposition to international order itself. As a result, insufficient attention has been devoted to identifying which elements of the existing order China seeks to preserve, which it attempts to reform, and which it openly contests. This conceptual ambiguity complicates the assessment of China's long-term strategic objectives and often leads to contradictory conclusions in the academic literature.

Furthermore, previous research has tended to examine China's behavior primarily through the prism of material power or institutional participation, while paying comparatively less attention to the normative principles that underpin Beijing's understanding of international order. The relationship between China's support for state sovereignty, multilateral institutions, economic globalization, and demands for greater representation of developing countries has not always been analyzed as a coherent vision of international order. Consequently, the internal logic of China's approach remains only partially explained.

The present article seeks to address these gaps by examining China's conception of international order as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than as a simple choice between revisionism and status quo orientation. It argues that China's approach is best understood as one of selective revisionism, combining support for many fundamental institutions and principles of the existing order with efforts to revise those normative and institutional arrangements that Beijing regards as reflecting disproportionate Western dominance. In doing so, the article contributes to a more differentiated understanding of China's role in the ongoing transformation of the contemporary international order.

Formulation of the goals of the article, presentation of the main research material with full substantiation of scientific results. One of the most widespread current assumptions is that China represents a fundamentally revisionist power seeking to dismantle the existing international system and replace it with

an alternative Sino-centric order (Mearsheimer, 2014; Allison, 2017; Doshi, 2021). Yet such interpretations often miss both the structure of the current international order and the logic of Chinese foreign policy.

We argue that a better way to understand Chinese foreign policy and grand strategy is by perceiving China not as a revolutionary actor attempting to abolish the international order as such, but by seeing it as a selectively revisionist power seeking to redistribute influence, modify norms, and reshape institutional hierarchies within the system.

To proceed with this hypothesis it is important to define 'international order' more strictly. In its broadest sense, international order refers to the set of rules, institutions, norms, and distributions of power that structure interactions among states and other international actors. Order does not imply harmony or the absence of conflict. Rather, it refers to the existence of relatively stable expectations regarding acceptable behaviour, legitimate authority, and the management of disputes.

Different theoretical traditions conceptualize international order in different ways. For realists, order is primarily a product of power distribution. Stability emerges when major powers accept, enforce, or are constrained by a particular balance of power. From this perspective, changes in the distribution of capabilities inevitably produce pressures for changes in international order itself (Gilpin, 1981). Institutionalists, by contrast, emphasize institutions, rules, and interdependence which tend to result from rational calculations. International order is sustained not only by power but also by formal organizations, legal frameworks, and mutually beneficial cooperation that reduce uncertainty and facilitate collective action (Keohane, 1984). The English School views international order as a social institution grounded in shared norms and practices. States form an international society because they recognize common interests and accept certain rules governing their coexistence (Bull, 1977). These different perspectives suggest that international orders possess several interconnected dimensions. They are simultaneously material, institutional, and normative. Material power determines which actors possess the capacity to influence outcomes. Institutions provide mechanisms through which cooperation and governance occur. Norms define what forms of behaviour are considered legitimate and desirable. Durable international orders typically combine all three elements. They are not maintained solely through coercion, nor solely through consent, but through a combination of power, institutions, and legitimacy.

The contemporary debate about international order is largely shaped by the legacy of the post-Cold War period. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many observers described the emerging system as a liberal international order characterized by American predominance, expanding economic globalization, dense institutional cooperation, and the growing influence of liberal norms such as democracy, human rights, and rule-based governance (Ikenberry, 2011). Yet this order was never universally accepted. Critics argued that what was often presented as a universal order reflected, at least in part, the preferences and interests of the Western powers that dominated its institutions and normative foundations (Acharya, 2014).

The rise of China has brought these debates to the forefront of contemporary international politics. If order is viewed primarily as a set of institutions facilitating globalization, China appears deeply integrated into and dependent upon the existing system. If, however, order is understood as a particular distribution of influence and

normative authority, then China's growing dissatisfaction with Western dominance suggests a more revisionist position. Understanding China's vision of international order therefore requires distinguishing between the broader structures of global order and the specifically liberal and Western interpretation that has dominated during recent couple decades.

One of the paradoxes of the post-Cold War 'rules-based order' is that the institutions created and promoted by the West facilitated the rise of China as a global power. Economic globalization, open trade regimes, relatively stable maritime security, access to global markets, technological interdependence, and participation in international institutions created highly favourable environment for Chinese economic modernization. As John Ikenberry argues, liberal international order possesses an unusually integrative character because it allows rising powers to benefit from participation without immediately overturning the system itself (Ikenberry, 2011). China's rise therefore occurred not outside globalization, but through deep incorporation into its structures.

At the same time, China's integration into the global system gradually produced dissatisfaction with the normative and geopolitical asymmetries embedded within it. From Beijing's perspective, the post-Cold War order reflected not universal principles, but rather the institutionalization of Western, and especially American, dominance after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chinese critiques therefore focus less on globalization itself than on the ideological and political architecture surrounding it. Beijing consistently opposes what it perceives as liberal universalism, democracy promotion, humanitarian interventionism, sanctions regimes, and the gradual erosion of classical sovereignty norms (Qin, 2018). This position reflects not only strategic calculations, but also deeper historical and political experiences. Chinese political thinking remains profoundly influenced by memories of foreign intervention during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result, sovereignty occupies a uniquely central place within Chinese foreign policy doctrine. Beijing systemically promotes principles of territorial integrity, non-interference, and regime autonomy as foundational norms of international order. In this regard, China's vision appears significantly more Westphalian than the liberal internationalism promoted by the United States after the Cold War.

The contrast between these two visions of order is substantial. The liberal international order that emerged after 1991 incorporated ideas of conditional sovereignty, humanitarian intervention, democratic enlargement, and normative universalism. Liberal internationalism assumed that political systems could gradually converge around common democratic norms and institutions. China rejects this assumption. Beijing consistently argues that civilizations, historical experiences, and political systems differ fundamentally and that no single developmental or ideological model should be universally imposed. In this sense, China promotes coexistence without ideological convergence. As Zhao Tingyang argues through his reinterpretation of the concept of Tianxia, political order should be based not on universal ideological homogenization, but on hierarchical coexistence and relational stability (Zhao, 2021).

At the same time, China remains deeply dependent on global trade, technological integration, financial stability, and open economic connectivity. It continues to participate actively in existing international institutions while simultaneously constructing parallel mechanisms of influence. Organizations and frameworks

such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization illustrate this dual strategy. Rather than abandoning existing institutions, China increasingly seeks to reshape institutional balances from within while reducing Western dominance over global governance structures.

This process reflects what may be described as selective institutional revisionism. China does not seek immediate revolutionary replacement of the world order comparable to the ideological revisionism of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Instead, Beijing attempts gradual redistribution of influence while preserving many core structures of globalization that continue to benefit Chinese economic development. China's policies within international institutions often reflect adaptation and selective accommodation rather than outright rejection of existing rules (Johnston, 2008). However, China simultaneously attempts to reinterpret norms and institutional practices in ways more compatible with its own political model and strategic interests.

Chinese rhetoric consistently emphasizes multipolarity, sovereign equality, and opposition to hegemony. At the same time, China increasingly occupies a structurally central position within global production chains, infrastructure systems, digital technologies, logistics corridors, and trade networks. Through initiatives such as One Belt One Road, Beijing establishes forms of interdependence that generate political influence without direct territorial control. In this sense, economic connectivity becomes an instrument of geopolitical centrality.

This dynamic can also be linked to older Chinese traditions of organizing political space. Historically, imperial China operated through hierarchical and relational forms of order associated with the concept of Tianxia, 'all under heaven.' Unlike the Westphalian model based on formally equal sovereign units existing in an anarchic environment, Tianxia implied a politically and culturally centralized order organized around asymmetrical relationships between the imperial centre and peripheral actors. Influence depended less on formal sovereignty and more on recognition, hierarchy, and civilizational centrality. Contemporary China obviously does not seek restoration of the historical tributary system in literal form. Nevertheless, some contemporary Chinese approaches to international order appear compatible with modified Tianxia logic: hierarchy without formal empire, influence through dependence rather than direct coercion, and centrality achieved through economic and infrastructural integration.

Some scholars caution against interpreting Tianxia as a direct blueprint for contemporary Chinese foreign policy. The historical tributary system was highly complex and often operated alongside conventional power politics, military competition, and pragmatic diplomacy (Kang, 2012). Moreover, modern Chinese policymakers rarely advocate the restoration of imperial institutions in any literal sense. Instead, references to Tianxia are primarily found among Chinese intellectuals seeking indigenous conceptual alternatives to Western international relations theory (Bell, 2010). For this reason, Tianxia is perhaps best understood not as a policy programme but as a normative vocabulary through which alternative conceptions of international order can be articulated.

The concept also highlights a fundamental distinction between competing visions of order. In the Westphalian tradition, order emerges from the coexistence of formally equal sovereign units operating under conditions of anarchy. In the Tianxia tradition, order is associated less with formal equality than with the existence of a recognized centre capable of generating stability, coordination, and legitimacy.

Political relationships are therefore understood not primarily through sovereignty and territorial boundaries but through patterns of hierarchy, reciprocity, and relational obligation (Zhao, 2021). This distinction resonates with a growing body of international relations scholarship that challenges the traditional assumption that international politics is purely anarchic. States frequently enter relationships characterized by unequal authority, asymmetric influence, and varying degrees of dependence without formally abandoning sovereignty. Contemporary Chinese approaches to international order appear compatible with such forms of informal hierarchy.

Beijing consistently presents itself as an opponent of hegemonism and power politics. Chinese foreign policy discourse regularly criticizes unilateral domination, bloc confrontation, and external coercion while promoting concepts such as 'win-win cooperation,' 'mutual benefit,' 'common development,' and the construction of a community of common destiny for mankind. Chinese leaders also repeatedly emphasize support for multipolarity and sovereign equality. China positions itself not as a future hegemon, but as a defender of a more balanced and inclusive international system.

But the logic of global economy works in such a way that China's growing role in the global economy increasingly produces relations characterized by structural asymmetry and dependence. This creates one of the central tensions in understanding China's approach to international order: Beijing rejects formal hegemony while simultaneously constructing networks of influence that place China in an increasingly central and privileged position within the international system. This process is especially visible in the economic sphere. China has become deeply embedded in global production chains, infrastructure development, logistics, finance, and digital technologies. China is gradually constructing transnational networks centred around Chinese capital, industrial capacity, transportation corridors, digital infrastructure, and technological standards. As a result, many states become increasingly dependent on access to Chinese markets, financing, supply chains, and technological ecosystems. These forms of dependence do not necessarily imply direct political control, yet they generate asymmetrical relationships that can be converted into geopolitical influence – thus shaping core elements of an alternative vision of the world order.

This model differs significantly from traditional territorial empire or classical military hegemony. China avoids direct political domination, ideological occupation, or large-scale military intervention abroad. Instead, influence is exercised indirectly through connectivity, interdependence, and infrastructural centrality (Rolland, 2017). Economic integration becomes inseparable from strategic influence. An especially important dimension of this process concerns technology and digital infrastructure. Chinese companies increasingly occupy central positions in sectors such as telecommunications, surveillance technologies, digital payments, e-commerce, artificial intelligence, and green technologies. These technological ecosystems create long-term forms of dependency because infrastructure standards, software environments, and data systems tend to lock states into durable patterns of interaction. Geopolitical influence no longer depends solely on military alliances or territorial control. Control over infrastructure, logistics, standards, and networks becomes equally important.

Beijing does not openly frame these policies in hierarchical terms. Instead, Chinese discourse emphasizes equality, partnership, non-interference, and mutual benefit. China does not appear to seek global domination through direct territorial empire or universal ideological conversion.

China's suggested international order may differ fundamentally from both liberal universalism and classical balance of power politics. It is a system in which multiple states formally retain sovereignty, yet operate within hierarchically structured networks centred on Chinese economic and technological power. Such a model combines globalization with asymmetry, interdependence with hierarchy, and formal multipolarity with unequal influence.

China's approach to international order may represent an attempt to reconcile globalization with hierarchy in a post-Western context. Beijing does not seek direct imperial domination comparable to earlier historical empires, nor does it fully embrace liberal notions of horizontal equality between states. Instead, China appears to be constructing a more relational and asymmetrical form of international order in which influence emerges through centrality within global networks rather than through formal political control. In this sense, China's emerging model may be understood as hierarchy without open hegemony.

Beijing's vision of international order appears less revolutionary than conservative in systemic terms. China does not seek the destruction of globalization, capitalism, or international institutions. Rather, it seeks a transformation of the normative and geopolitical foundations of the existing order: a shift from liberal universalism toward pluralistic sovereignty, from unipolarity toward managed multipolarity, and from Western centrality toward a more hierarchically distributed system of influence. China therefore acts not as a destroyer of international order itself, but as a power attempting to redefine the principles, balances, and hierarchies upon which that order rests.

Research findings and prospects for further research in this area. The findings of this study suggest that China's approach to international order cannot be adequately explained within the conventional dichotomy of status quo versus revisionist power. Rather than seeking either to preserve or to overturn the existing international order in its entirety, China pursues a strategy of selective revisionism. Beijing generally supports the institutional foundations of the current international system–including the United Nations, multilateral cooperation, and economic globalization–while simultaneously advocating reforms of those normative and institutional arrangements that it considers to reflect excessive Western dominance. This differentiated approach provides a more accurate framework for understanding China's foreign policy behavior and its role in the ongoing transformation of international order.

The analysis also demonstrates that China's vision of international order is based on a distinct combination of continuity and change. On the one hand, Chinese policymakers emphasize sovereignty, non-interference, and the central role of the United Nations as fundamental principles of interstate relations. On the other hand, Beijing promotes a redistribution of influence within international institutions, greater representation of developing countries, and the development of alternative mechanisms of global governance. Consequently, China's strategy is directed less toward replacing the existing order than toward reshaping its normative and institutional balance in accordance with the realities of an increasingly multipolar world.

These conclusions contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between rising powers and international order. They suggest that transformations of contemporary international order should not be interpreted solely through the prism of systemic confrontation between established and emerging powers but also through

gradual processes of institutional adaptation, normative contestation, and selective reform. Such an approach makes it possible to move beyond simplified categorizations of China's international behavior and to better explain the coexistence of continuity and change in contemporary global governance.

Further research may focus on several related directions. First, comparative studies could examine whether China's pattern of selective revisionism differs from that of other rising powers, particularly India and Brazil. Second, future research could investigate how China's conception of international order is reflected in specific policy areas, including security governance, international economic institutions, technological competition, and global development initiatives. Finally, longitudinal analyses would help assess how China's understanding of international order evolves in response to changes in the international distribution of power and the broader transformation of the global political system.

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ЯКИЙ МІЖНАРОДНИЙ ПОРЯДОК ПРОПОНУЄ КИТАЙ?

Резюме
Піднесення Китаю стало одним із центральних питань сучасних дискусій про міжнародний порядок. Із розширенням економічного, технологічного та політичного впливу Китаю науковці й політики дедалі частіше ставлять питання про те, чи прагне Пекін зберегти, реформувати чи замінити існуючі «правила гри». Однозначної відповіді на це питання немає. Одні дослідники розглядають Китай як ревізіоністську державу, що прагне кинути виклик ліберальному міжнародному порядку, тоді як інші наголошують на тому, наскільки значною мірою Китай виграв від глобалізації та залишається інтегрованим у її структури й механізми глобального врядування.
Ця дискусія набула особливої актуальності в умовах зростаючої міжнародної невизначеності. Відносне послаблення домінування Заходу, дифузія влади на користь незахідних акторів та зростаюче невдоволення чинними міжнародними інститутами знову поставили на порядок денний фундаментальні питання про природу й майбутнє міжнародного порядку. У цих умовах китайське бачення світової політики заслуговує на особливу увагу, оскільки пропонує одну з найбільш цілісних альтернатив ліберальним уявленням, які визначали розвиток міжнародних відносин протягом більшої частини останніх трьох десятиліть.
Водночас зрозуміти позицію Китаю непросто. Пекін одночасно підтримує багато існуючих міжнародних інститутів і критикує окремі аспекти порядку, який вони уособлюють. Китай позиціонує себе як захисника глобалізації та багатостороннього співробітництва, водночас відстоюючи принципи суверенітету, невтручання та цивілізаційного різноманіття, які нерідко вступають у суперечність із ліберальним універсалізмом. Ця, на перший погляд, суперечність порушує важливі питання щодо характеру міжнародних амбіцій Китаю та того, який саме міжнародний порядок він прагне сформувати.
Відповідно, стаття зосереджується на трьох взаємопов'язаних питаннях. По-перше, як слід концептуалізувати міжнародний порядок в умовах сучасних змін у розподілі сили та зростаючої нормативної конкуренції? По-друге, якими є основні характеристики китайського розуміння міжнародного порядку та чим вони відрізняються від домінуючих західних підходів? По-третє, чи становить поведінка Китаю виклик міжнародному порядку як такому, чи насамперед його ліберальним і західним засадам? Для відповіді на ці питання стаття спирається на теорії міжнародного порядку, переходу влади та ієрархії, а також залучає китайські інтелектуальні традиції й сучасні дискусії щодо ролі Китаю у глобальному врядуванні.
Ключові слова: міжнародний порядок, ліберальний міжнародний порядок, ревізіонізм, глобалізація, Тянься, ієрархія, мультиполярність, глобальне управління.

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