

Challenging the liberal order: the US hegemon as a revisionist power

STEVE CHAN*

Sino-American relations have come under increasing strain. This tension was already evident before the COVID-19 pandemic, and indeed even before the trade dispute between the two countries starting in 2018.¹ Graham Allison has asked whether the United States and China can avoid ‘Thucydides’s trap’.² According to Thucydides, the rise of Athens and the consequent fear felt by Sparta made the Peloponnesian War all but inevitable. Predating Allison, other scholars have published similar views.³ A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler’s formulation has become widely known as the power-transition theory.⁴ It claims that the danger of a systemic war is greatest when a revisionist latecomer reaches power parity with or even overtakes an existing hegemon.

The theory stipulates that this danger is influenced by two variables: a power shift that closes the capability gap between a rising state and an established state; and a revisionist motivation or agenda on the part of the rising state. Each of these variables is a necessary condition for the occurrence of war. However, although much attention has been paid to analysing how a power transition can affect this occurrence, relatively little systematic work has been undertaken to determine whether a state is revisionist. Thus, much of the existing literature does not address the power-transition theory’s stipulation that the danger of a systemic war is dependent on the *joint* effect of these two variables. Instead, analysts working in this theoretical tradition have to date simply asserted that revisionism is a typical trait of rising states (except for the United States when it was an ascending power), whereas a dominant power is necessarily committed to defending the international order. This treatment is in my view problematic and motivates me to write this article.

* This article is part of the September 2021 special issue of *International Affairs* on ‘Deglobalization? The future of the liberal international order’, guest-edited by T. V. Paul and Markus Kornprobst. I thank Brian Job, Markus Kornprobst, Benny Miller, T. V. Paul and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback, although space limitations did not permit me to address fully all their comments.

¹ Xiangfeng Yang, ‘The great Chinese surprise: the rupture with the United States is real and is happening’, *International Affairs* 96: 2, 2020, pp. 419–38.

² Graham Allison, *Destined for war: can America and China escape Thucydides’s trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

³ A. F. K. Organski, *World politics* (New York: Knopf, 1958); Robert Gilpin, *War and change in world politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁴ A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The war ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

In its original form, power-transition theory further stipulates that its proposition about the elevated danger of a systemic war pertains only to the relationship between the two most powerful countries at the pinnacle of the international hierarchy. According to this theory, these two countries are motivated to fight over which one of them should decide the rules of the international order. This postulation in turn brings us back to the question of which country is a revisionist seeking to alter, even overturn, the existing order. In its original form, then, the theory does not, strictly speaking, address conflict among the less powerful countries. This point is pertinent, because the two world wars are typically characterized by proponents of this theory as a challenge mounted by Germany to displace Britain's global primacy and the order over which London presided. Yet significantly, Germany never overtook the United States, which had already become the world's most powerful country according to its economic size (power-transition theorists argue that a country's gross domestic product is the best indicator of its power) by the late 1800s. In other words, the depiction of an Anglo-German struggle for supremacy presented by power-transition theorists is only possible if the United States is excluded from their analysis.

Ironically, in the one and only instance since 1815 of power transition between the world's two leading powers, namely, when the United States replaced Britain as the world's dominant power, its outcome was peaceful, thus contradicting power-transition theory's expectation. To salvage the theory, its proponents have usually portrayed the United States as a status quo power. They thus exempt it from the common tendency for rising powers to be revisionist states. This treatment again brings us back to the question about what appropriate and valid indications can point to a country's revisionism. As already mentioned, analysts have hitherto tended to settle this question by definitional fiat or rhetorical assertion rather than empirical analysis. Certainly, Anglo-American relations were acrimonious at many points during the period when the United States was a rising power, but war was narrowly avoided on several occasions.⁵ Fast forward to today, a natural question would be which country appears to be dissatisfied with the liberal international order and is seeking to change it.

Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the international order

China and the United States had fought in Korea long before a possible power transition between them. Similarly, Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor even though its leaders had thought the United States to be eight or nine times stronger. Thus, an imminent or actual power transition is neither necessary nor sufficient for war to break out between major states.⁶ Indeed, if one considers power transitions

⁵ Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the balance of power in North America, 1815–1908* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Christopher Layne, 'Kant or cant: the myth of the democratic peace', *International Security* 19: 2, 1994, pp. 5–49.

⁶ Steve Chan, *Thucydides's trap? Historical interpretation, logic of inquiry, and the future of Sino-American relations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020); T. V. Paul, ed., *Accommodating rising powers: past, present, and future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

beyond just the two most powerful states (such as the Anglo-German dyad featured most prominently in power-transition narratives of the two world wars), it is clear that many such transitions have happened peacefully. In recent decades, China has overtaken Britain, Germany, Japan and Russia, and Japan has overtaken Britain, Germany and Russia, but war did not happen in the wake of these developments.⁷

Power-transition theorists argue that because international order was created by the dominant state, this country draws the largest share of benefits from it and thus has the greatest incentive to maintain it. 'By definition, the dominant power is satisfied ... [and therefore] is the defender of the status quo. After all, it creates and maintains the global or regional hierarchy from which it accrues substantial benefits'.⁸ Conversely, the distribution of benefits under the existing order is distorted against rising powers which did not have a voice in deciding this order. They are thus assumed to be dissatisfied and motivated to seek its demise. As these countries gain more power, their increased capabilities are supposed to make them a greater threat to the existing order.

Because this prevailing view argues that a ruling state cannot be dissatisfied with the existing international order, it assumes away by definition any possibility that this state can be revisionist. By equating the incumbent hegemon with the international order, it treats any bilateral conflict between a rising state and a ruling state as if it were a challenge mounted by the former against the international order and hence the entire international community. It also switches its logic in attributing revisionism to rising and ruling states. It sees the ruling state as committed to the international order because this country is supposed to have the largest stake in preserving that order. But it does not consider whether a ruling power in relative decline may come to have a smaller stake in, and thus less incentive to maintain, the existing order. This country may become more dissatisfied and be motivated to alter the international order to reverse its decline. At the same time, conventional discourse does not consider the possibility that a rising power, as it moves up in the interstate hierarchy, may acquire a larger stake in the existing order. Why should it overthrow the order that has enabled it to ascend? Even though a rising state now has a greater capability to challenge this order, it should have less incentive to do so. In contrast, a declining hegemon should still have the greatest capability to revise it.⁹

There is an affinity between the depiction of a hegemon as the defender of international order and the hegemonic stability theory.¹⁰ This theory argues that

⁷ Organski and Kugler's study included states that were not among the top two or three in the world's power ranking. They advocated using gross domestic product to measure national power. Japan has the world's third-largest economy and in 2019 its military spending was only slightly behind those of Germany, France and Britain.

⁸ Ronald L. Tammen, Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, Allan Stam III, Mark Abdollahian, Carole Alsharabati, Brian Efind and A. F. K. Organski, *Power transitions: strategies for the 21st century* (London: Chatham House, 2000), p. 9.

⁹ Power-transition theory does not consider domestic politics which, I argue below, has motivated the deglobalization process and the decline of the liberal international order. This theory also does not consider strategies, whether asymmetric or not.

¹⁰ See Charles P. Kindleberger, *The world in depression: 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), and 'International public goods without international government', *American Economic Review* 76: 1, 1986, pp. 1–13.

it takes a powerful country with both the necessary capability and the incentive to overcome the free-rider problem and to provide public goods for the world. The world will be a more peaceful and prosperous place when there is a preponderant power; and conversely, the provision of public goods will be endangered when the hegemon declines. Power-transition theorists acknowledge that a hegemon seeks private goods even though they also maintain that it provides public goods. They do not consider the prospect that, as it declines, this country may be less inclined to shoulder this burden. They assume that it will remain steadfast in its support of the international order even when suffering absolute or relative decline. They also overlook the point that international order can be supported by multilateral regimes such as the Concert of Europe. China has been asked to be a ‘responsible stakeholder’ and to increase its contribution to international public goods.¹¹ At the same time, there is pervasive unease and scepticism in the West about moves made by Beijing such as its not engaging in competitive currency devaluation during the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and its offer of medical supplies to countries in need of this assistance during the current pandemic, suspecting that these actions are just Beijing’s attempt to buy influence abroad.¹² As I argue below, rather than treating it in isolation, we need to compare a state’s conduct with its own past and that of its peers.

What international order?

Most scholars working in the power-transition tradition act as if the meaning of international order were self-evident and did not need to be defined or explained. They tend to confuse it with the existing interstate distribution of power, and lump both under the euphemism of ‘*the status quo*’. Their view rules out the possibility that established states may be motivated to change the existing distribution of power to further enhance their own power. It assumes that these countries would settle for and defend what they already have, and not demand more. Moreover, it suggests that when a state tries to improve its capabilities and thereby to alter the existing power distribution in its favour, it must *ipso facto* be motivated to challenge the international order (and hence be ‘revisionist’)—unless that state is the incumbent hegemon or one of its allies. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice expressed this view when she said: ‘China resents the role of the United States in the Asia–Pacific region. This means that China is not a “status-quo” power, but one that would like to alter Asia’s strategic balance in its own favor.’¹³ More recently, the Pentagon called China a revisionist power that

¹¹ Joseph S. Nye, *The Kindleberger trap* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, 2017), <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/kindleberger-trap>; Robert Zoellick, ‘Whither China: from membership to responsibility: remarks to the National Committee on US–China Relations’ (New York, 21 Sept. 2005), https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_noteso6_winter_spring.pdf. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 21 April 2021.)

¹² Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm offensive: how China’s soft power is transforming the world* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹³ Condoleezza Rice, ‘Promoting the national interest’, *Foreign Affairs* 79: 1, 2000, p. 56.

seeks to 'reorder the region to its advantage by leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce other nations'.¹⁴

A state can seek to improve its power without challenging the international order (as power-transition theorists argue in the case of the United States overtaking Britain). All states presumably would like to have more power rather than less.¹⁵ Indeed, even after securing its undisputed primacy after the USSR's demise, the United States continues to seek improvement in its international position. Its military expenditures in 2019 exceeded the *combined* total of the next eleven highest countries,¹⁶ and in some years after the Cold War's end amounted to nearly half of the total amount spent on defence by *all* other countries in the world.¹⁷ During its years of ascendancy, it engaged in the behaviour of which it is now accusing China, seeking to displace European influence from the western hemisphere.¹⁸ It enunciated a novel principle, the Monroe Doctrine, insisting that it and it alone had the right to intervene in the affairs of countries in this region. Despite such behaviour, the United States is considered a 'status-quo' country in the power-transition literature.

It is important to distinguish this expansionist behaviour, motivated by desire for more power, resources and territory, from a state's desire or intention to upend the existing international order. Obviously, former imperial and colonial powers engaged in expansion, but only some of them have been considered revisionist. Henry Kissinger calls attention to this distinction, describing world politics as 'a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraints where rules break down, preventing one political unit from subjugating all others'.¹⁹ International order thus refers to widely shared rules that govern relations among states. These consensual rules or norms form the foundation of *international society*, as distinct from the *inter-state system* based on power politics and dynamics. The English School further draws a distinction between the primary institutions of international order and its secondary institutions.²⁰ States' sovereignty and territorial integrity have been the primary institutions of international order since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and secondary institutions such as intergovernmental organizations and multilateral accords (e.g. the United Nations, the Law of the Sea, the Geneva Conventions) are built upon the principles embedded in the primary institutions.

¹⁴ US Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific strategy report* (Washington DC, 2019), <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>.

¹⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of Great Power politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

¹⁶ International Institute of Strategic Studies, *List of countries by military expenditures* (London, 2018), https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_military_expenditures#As_a_share_of_GDP.

¹⁷ For example, the US alone accounted for 49% of the world's total amount of military spending in 1995 and 46% in 2006. See <https://www.cfr.org/report/trends-us-military-spending> and www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0904504.html.

¹⁸ Bourne, *Britain and the balance of power*; Aaron L. Friedberg, *The weary titan: the experience of relative decline, 1895–1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Stephen R. Rock, *Appeasement in international politics* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Henry Kissinger, *World order* (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 9.

²⁰ Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society: a study of order in world politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1977); Barry Buzan, *From international to world society? English School theory and the social structure of globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Although conceptually distinct, international order and the interstate distribution of power are related empirically. New norms, rules and institutions are usually introduced after devastating wars, when the leader of the winning coalition commands an especially powerful position.²¹ This preponderant state plays a decisive role in the creation of the order, but power alone is not enough. Consent and cooperation by other states are also necessary for its sustenance. A hegemon may try to propagate a new norm such as ‘preventive war’, but when others decline to follow it suffers a legitimacy deficit, undermining its authority and power.

International order is always in flux, and becomes a contested matter when consensus erodes.²² Countries are engaged in a constant struggle to promote certain values that are more congenial to them, and to resist others that are anathema to them. They typically operate in a grey zone that signifies neither complete defiance nor complete compliance. It is facile to designate states in binary categories as either revisionist or status quo orientated. We should think instead in terms of a spectrum to account for variations in their policy preferences and conduct over time and across issues.²³ A state can, for example, insist on its own sovereignty when seeking to stop illegal immigration, while at the same time challenging other states’ sovereignty when justifying its right to intervene in their internal affairs.²⁴ Revisionism in its strict literal sense of trying to alter the existing rules or norms of the international order is of course not an exclusive property of rising powers. Established powers can promote novel doctrines: examples are the categories of crimes against peace and humanity after the Second World War, ‘responsibility to protect’ in situations of massive violations of human rights, ‘regime change’ to overthrow objectionable foreign governments and ‘preventive war’ in the name of self-defence. Non-rising powers can also act similarly: examples would be the developing countries’ campaign to create a ‘new international economic order’ and their demands to dismantle racist institutions. Seen in this light, revisionism should not be used as a pejorative code word to refer to policies of which an observer disapproves. Moreover, all states, including China and the United States, tend to be selective revisionists.

International order and systemic wars

Power-transition narratives interpret systemic wars as stemming from competition between the world’s two most powerful states to determine the nature of the international order. There are several problems with this view. First, it is a

²¹ G. John Ikenberry, *After victory: institutions, strategic restraint, and the rebuilding of order after major wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²² Barry Buzan, ‘China’s rise in English School perspective’, *International Journal of the Asia Pacific* 18: 3, 2018, pp. 449–76; Evelyn Goh, ‘Contesting hegemonic order: China in east Asia’, *Security Studies* 28: 3, 2019, pp. 614–44.

²³ Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, *China, the United States, and global order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Rosemary Foot, ‘Remembering the past to secure the present: Versailles legacies in a resurgent China’, *International Affairs* 95: 1, 2019, pp. 143–60.

²⁴ For conceptions of sovereignty that compete with the Westphalian version, see Roland Paris, ‘The right to dominate: how old ideas about sovereignty pose new challenges to world order’, *International Organization* 74: 3, 2020, pp. 453–89.

gross distortion to suggest that a powerful country can simply impose its vision of international order on others. This order, as noted above, requires not only leadership from the powerful but also consent from the less powerful. Rhetorical exaggerations may help to mobilize political support, but they do not give an accurate picture of how international order is formed and maintained. Even though a dominant state can take a leading role in promoting certain norms and enforcing certain rules, legitimacy is more important than coercion in getting others to accept them. Legitimacy refers to widely shared beliefs that the rules and norms are right and just.²⁵ They are based more on the logic of appropriateness than on the logic of consequences.²⁶

Second, prevailing narratives give priority to the role played by systemic wars in settling the nature of the international order. They therefore give short shrift to alternative ways, including peaceful institutional reform, of shaping international order.²⁷ Reform that adjusted the International Monetary Fund's voting quotas to reflect more accurately the increased importance of developing economies serves as an example of such peaceful reform. As another example, norms about the non-use of nuclear weapons have surely strengthened over time.²⁸ Similarly, until the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, an international consensus was emerging that military 'intervention without some effort to gain [UN Security Council] approval is now virtually obsolete, a remarkable feature of contemporary international relations that merits both theoretical and policy attention'.²⁹ The idea that countries have a responsibility to protect innocent people even if intervention to do so violates traditional notions of state sovereignty has gained international support, although it remains controversial.³⁰ Finally, colonialism and various forms of racial discrimination (such as apartheid) have become discredited in today's world. All these examples suggest that changes in international order can happen peacefully without a systemic war.

Third, it is not clear how history would have been different if some wars had turned out differently. It is relatively easy to imagine the very different form that international order might have taken if Nazi Germany had won the Second World War or if the USSR had prevailed in the Cold War. It is less clear how international order would have been changed if the Kaiser's Germany had won the First World War or imperial Japan had been successful in carving out an 'East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' in the Second. These countries might have been able to

²⁵ Ian Clark, *Legitimacy in international society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in international relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²⁶ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, 'The logic of appropriateness', in Robert E. Goodin, ed., *The Oxford handbook of political science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604456.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199604456-e-024>.

²⁷ Stacie E. Goddard, 'Embedded revisionism: networks, institutions, and challenges to world order', *International Organization* 72: 4, 2018, pp. 763–97.

²⁸ Nina Tannenwald, 'The nuclear taboo: the United States and the normative basis of nuclear non-use', *International Organization* 53: 3, 1999, pp. 433–68, and 'Stigmatizing the bomb: origins of the nuclear taboo', *International Security* 29: 4, 2005, pp. 5–49.

²⁹ Alexander Thompson, 'Coercion through IOs: the Security Council and the logic of information transmission', *International Organization* 61: 1, 2006, p. 2.

³⁰ Alex J. Bellamy, *Responsibility to protect* (New York: Polity, 2009).

establish mastery in Europe and Asia, respectively. But then the United States had already accomplished the same feat in the western hemisphere. Few have tried to show how the primary institutions of international order—at least as practised and accepted by the Great Powers of the day—would have been altered had the Kaiser's Germany and imperial Japan managed to attain regional hegemony. Such a development would have changed the existing interstate distribution of power, but not the then prevailing rules of the game or the international order. Ironically, since the Meiji Restoration imperial Japan had tried to adopt western institutions and practices in the hope that it would be accepted as a member of the 'civilized' world. Its policies of aggrandizement were no different from those already undertaken by the established powers.

Are belligerents motivated to fight over the nature of international order, or is the breakdown of international order likely to cause war? When major powers bind themselves to a restrictive vision of international order, the world is more peaceful. Charles Kegley and Gregory Raymond explain that 'restrictive orders contain international norms that establish demarcation lines, support the inviolability of neutral territory, and uphold the principle of nonintervention. The less support for these kinds of rules of the game, the more permissive the normative order.'³¹ A restrictive order also includes norms that limit states' use of force, recognize the legitimacy of ruling elites, respect the territorial integrity of other states, stress the sanctity of international agreements and acknowledge each Great Power's sphere of influence. When there is widespread consensus about and observance of these norms, international relations are more stable and peaceful. Conversely, in a permissive international order there tends to be more turmoil and conflict.

Western countries, led by the United States, have endorsed the doctrines of preventive war and regime change abroad (as in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Venezuela), which challenge important tenets of a restrictive international order. Although during the Cold War western states acknowledged, at least tacitly, a Soviet sphere of influence in eastern Europe, they have since then expanded the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to Russia's 'near abroad'. They have never recognized a Chinese sphere of influence, as shown by several protracted wars fought on China's doorstep (in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan) and the ring of US allies and military bases along its borders. Western countries also supported the secessionist movements that broke up the former Yugoslavia (but not Crimea's breakaway from Ukraine) and various 'colour revolutions' to overthrow incumbent governments. Recent events suggest that we have entered a period of a more permissive international order: not just a period of greater competition over the secondary institutions of international order, but also one involving more direct assaults on its primary institutions of state sovereignty and non-interference.

³¹ Charles Kegley and Gregory Raymond, *A multipolar peace? Great-power politics in the twenty-first century* (New York: St Martin's, 1994), p. 132; Lawrence Freedman, 'The rise and fall of Great Power wars', *International Affairs* 95: 1, 2019, pp. 101–18.

What about the liberal international order?

International order restrains the unbridled exercise of naked power by promoting shared expectations and common understanding among states, particularly with respect to their observance of primary institutions. Moreover, it provides a basis for establishing secondary institutions such as multilateral organizations and conventions that reduce states' coordination and transaction costs and diminish their incentive to defect. When states become members of multilateral organizations and signatories of international conventions, they agree to surrender some of their discretion in return for others likewise disciplining their behaviour. The post-1945 liberal order has been described as a constitutional pact organized by Washington; one that is 'open, integrated and rule-based'.³² Its core membership was composed of countries in the North Atlantic region that featured democracy and the free market. NATO and the Bretton Woods regime were the key secondary institutions for this order. But recent events have caused some to question whether this liberal order will endure, and whether the United States as the incumbent hegemon has become a revisionist power.³³

A liberal international order was originally envisaged by Immanuel Kant.³⁴ His 1795 treatise *Zum ewigen Frieden* pointed to three pillars supporting a peaceful community of nations. Translated loosely, these are republicanism, cosmopolitanism and pacific union. In contrast to monarchies, republics are supposed to restrain rulers' authority to involve their country in war. A country is more warlike when its rulers do not have to bear personal costs of fighting. Conversely, ordinary people know that they will have to pay the costs of war in blood and taxes. When they have a political voice in a republic, peace is likely to ensue in Kant's view. Cosmopolitanism refers to exchanges among people from different countries, for example through trade and travel; this has the salutary effect of promoting empathy and mutual understanding. Finally, pacific union describes the integration of like-minded entities to form what Karl Deutsch and his colleagues have dubbed 'security communities', within which the idea of settling differences by violence has become unthinkable.³⁵

Kant's ideas have inspired recent scholarship on democratic peace.³⁶ Bruce Russett and John Oneal have translated the ideas of republicanism, cosmopolitanism

³² See G. John Ikenberry, 'The rise of China and the future of the West: can the liberal system survive?', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 1, 2008, pp. 23–37, and *Liberal Leviathan: the origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

³³ G. John Ikenberry, 'The future of the liberal world order: internationalism after America', *Foreign Affairs* 90: 3, 2011, pp. 56–68, and 'The plot against American foreign policy: can the liberal order survive?', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 3, 2017, pp. 2–9; Jennifer Lind, 'Asia's other revisionist power: why US grand strategy unnerves China', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 2, 2017, pp. 74–82; Randall L. Schweller, 'Rising powers and revisionism in emerging world orders', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/valday/Rising-Powers-and-Revisionism-in-Emerging-International-Orders-17730>.

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual peace: a philosophical essay* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1795), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/50922/50922-h/50922-h.htm#tnote>.

³⁵ Karl W. Deutsch, Sidney A. Burrell, Robert A. Kann, Maurice Lee, Jr, Martin Lichtenman, Raymond E. Lindgren, Francis L. Loewenheim and Richard W. van Wagenen, *Political community and the North Atlantic area: international organization in the light of historical experience* (New York: Greenwood, 1957).

³⁶ Steve Chan, 'In search of democratic peace: problems and promise', *Mershon International Studies Review* 41: 1, 1997, pp. 59–91; Michael W. Doyle, 'Kant, liberal legacies, and foreign affairs', parts 1 and 2, *Philosophy*

tanism and pacific union to mean respectively the contemporary phenomena of democratic government, economic interdependence and states' joint membership in intergovernmental organizations.³⁷ They and other scholars have shown that these three variables tend to have a positive effect on one another, and that collectively they tend to reduce the incidence of militarized interstate disputes for those pairs of countries with these characteristics. This research engendered optimism when authoritarian regimes yielded to democratization after the Cold War, when former socialist countries turned to market economy and foreign trade, and when countries that were once estranged from the rest of world (e.g. China, Vietnam, Burma, Cambodia) rejoined international organizations. There was even a euphoric sense that democracy and capitalism had triumphed over all ideological rivals.³⁸

This optimism and confidence about the spread and consolidation of a liberal international order turn out to be not entirely warranted. Although the dyadic version of democratic peace (namely, the proposition that democracies do not fight each other) receives considerable empirical support, the monadic version (that is, that democracies in general are more peaceful) is questionable. The United States, Britain, France, India and Israel (all democracies) are among those countries with the highest incidence of involvement in wars and militarized interstate disputes.³⁹ As for pacific union, European integration has experienced setbacks, most notably Brexit.⁴⁰ This retrogression has also been manifested in the discontent and even animosity felt by many Europeans towards Brussels. Concomitantly, the process of democratization has suffered setbacks in countries such as Hungary and Poland. Populism, reflecting anti-immigrant and anti-globalization sentiment, has gained significant political inroads even in traditional liberal bastions such as Norway and Sweden. Religious and racial intolerance, xenophobia and economic protectionism have been empowered by sharpening social divisions and growing economic inequity. There is a rising tide of nationalism and even isolationism in western Europe and the United States, traditional champions of the liberal international order. Donald Trump carried out an unabashed campaign of 'America First', seemingly determined to abandon and reverse the tradition of multilateralism that had been the hallmark of US diplomacy since 1945.⁴¹ His successful bid for the US presidency showed strong and rising domestic opposition to the traditional tenets of liberal internationalism. As Joseph Nye notes,⁴² the more

and *Public Affairs* 12: 3, 1983, pp. 205–35, and 12: 4, 1983, pp. 323–53, and 'Three pillars of the liberal peace', *American Political Science Review* 99: 3, 2005, pp. 463–66.

³⁷ Bruce Russett and John Oneal, *Triangulating peace: democracy, interdependence and international organizations* (New York: Norton, 2001).

³⁸ Francis Fukuyama, 'The end of history?', *National Interest*, no. 16, 1989, pp. 3–18.

³⁹ The greatest danger for the occurrence of wars and militarized interstate disputes pertains to mixed dyads, that is, between democracies and non-democracies. Autocracies have also generally managed to maintain peaceful relations among themselves. See Mark Peceny, Caroline C. Beer and Shannon Sanchez-Terry, 'Dictatorial peace?', *American Political Science Review* 96: 1, 2002, pp. 15–26.

⁴⁰ Erik Jones and Anand Menon, 'Europe: between dream and reality', *International Affairs* 95: 1, 2019, pp. 161–80.

⁴¹ Daniel W. Drezner, 'Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency', *International Affairs* 96: 2, 2020, pp. 383–400.

⁴² Joseph Nye, Jr., 'The rise and fall of American hegemony from Wilson to Trump', *International Affairs* 95: 1, 2019, pp. 63–80.

likely threat to the liberal international order comes from populist politics at home rather than challenges from abroad.

The liberal international order has been buttressed by hard-nosed power politics, especially the overwhelming influence of the United States. This order was bounded rather than truly international. Its economic institutions excluded the communist countries.⁴³ The security dimension of this order was not very liberal, as US-led alliances included authoritarian right-wing governments. Nor did this order restrain the exercise of US power when Washington felt that important interests required it to act unilaterally and against existing norms.⁴⁴ Although the liberal international order has often been given credit for enhancing global stability and prosperity, such attribution has not usually considered competing explanations.⁴⁵ The push to ‘deglobalize’—or, in the case of the United States, to ‘economically decouple’ from China—has come from the West, not from China.

Washington’s unilateralism and revisionism

Washington’s international disengagement and its refusal to be tied down by international commitments is not an entirely new phenomenon introduced by Trump’s administration. The United States famously declined to join the League of Nations, despite strenuous lobbying by President Woodrow Wilson. It also rejected the International Trade Organization, having taken a leading role in its negotiation. More recently, the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, the Paris climate accord, the International Criminal Court and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) suffered the same fate after Washington had taken part in protracted negotiations on their creation. The US Senate declined to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1999 despite President Bill Clinton’s support for it. In 2002, President George W. Bush abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. As for Donald Trump, during his presidency the United States pulled out of the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action); the Trans-Pacific Partnership; the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty; the Global Compact on Migration; the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization; and the UN Human Rights Council. He criticized the North American Free Trade Agreement as the ‘worst trade deal in history’,⁴⁶ and threatened to withdraw from it unless he could negotiate more advantageous terms for the United States. He also withdrew the US from the Arms Trade Treaty, the Open Skies Treaty and the World Health Organization (WHO).

⁴³ G. John Ikenberry, ‘The end of liberal international order?’, *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23; John J. Mearsheimer, ‘Bound to fail: the rise and fall of the liberal international order’, *International Security* 43: 4, 2019, pp. 7–50; Nye, ‘The rise and fall of American hegemony’.

⁴⁴ Randall L. Schweller, ‘The problem of international order revisited: a review essay’, *International Security* 26: 1, 2001, pp. 161–86.

⁴⁵ Graham Allison, ‘The myth of liberal order: from historical accident to conventional wisdom’, *Foreign Affairs* 97: 4, 2018, pp. 124–33; Charles L. Glaser, ‘A flawed framework: why the liberal international concept is misguided’, *International Security* 43: 4, 2019, pp. 51–87.

⁴⁶ ‘Trump: NAFTA worst trade deal in history’, CNBC, 28 June 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/video/2016/06/28/trump-nafta-worst-trade-deal-in-history.html>.

Moreover, Washington boycotted the International Labour Organization, threatened to withdraw from the Universal Postal Union, and held up the World Trade Organization (WTO) by blocking the appointment of judges to its appellate body. It has been chronically delinquent and tardy in paying dues to the United Nations.

Other examples include Washington's refusal to join the convention to ban land mines and to ratify the International Convention on the Rights of the Child. Many such episodes predated Trump's administration, which was not the first one to show open distrust and even disdain for multilateral institutions and agreements. This administration merely demonstrated a more pronounced tendency to reject these secondary institutions of international order. Its behaviour indicated a retreat from—even an assault on—two of Kant's pillars of perpetual peace, namely cosmopolitanism and pacific union. Claims that the 2020 US presidential election was 'stolen' also endanger Kant's third pillar, democracy. After his supporters stormed the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, Trump was impeached (for a second time) for inciting insurrection. On many previous occasions, Washington has recoiled from committing itself to international institutions and accords, even though it has often urged others to do so. Writing before Trump became US president, Steven Ward argued that Germany and Japan were revisionist powers before the Second World War because they refused to participate in international conferences and agreements to limit armaments, boycotted or withdrew from international organizations (most notably the League of Nations) and undertook concerted armament programmes.⁴⁷

The various international accords and organizations mentioned above are not perfect. They can certainly be improved on. Nevertheless, they do represent large areas of international consensus and focal points of international cooperation. If one examines countries' voting records in the UN General Assembly and Security Council, one sees that Washington has become increasingly isolated. Compared to other major powers, it has found itself over time more often outvoted by other countries. During the period 1971–2015, 75.1 per cent of all the General Assembly's rollcall votes were 'yes' and only 4.7 per cent were 'no' (the remainder were accounted for by abstentions and non-participation). Only 21.9 per cent of US votes were 'yes' and 54.2 per cent were 'no', compared to China's corresponding figures of 78.8 per cent and 3.3 per cent.⁴⁸ Among the Security Council's other permanent members, 'yes' votes cast by the USSR/Russia, France and Britain constituted 72.5 per cent, 43.8 per cent and 42.3 per cent respectively of their ballots, whereas their 'no' votes were 9.7 per cent, 20.9 per cent and 25.8 per cent. China's voting position has been much closer to those of India and Brazil, which have had even higher percentages of 'yes' votes (83.6 per cent and 86.6 per cent respectively).

In recent years, the United States has also resorted more often to vetoes in the Security Council to block resolutions that it opposed but were favoured by a majority. Between October 1971 (when China joined the UN) and December 2019,

⁴⁷ Steven Ward, *Status and the challenge of rising powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁴⁸ Steve Chan, Weixing Hu and Kai He, 'Discerning states' revisionist and status-quo orientations: comparing China and the US', *European Journal of International Relations* 27: 2, 2019, pp. 613–40.

China cast 14 vetoes, France also 14, Britain 24, the USSR/Russia 37 and the United States 82. Again, these patterns did not start with the Trump or even the George W. Bush administration. Signs that the United States has found itself increasingly outside the norms of the international community as expressed by UN votes can be discerned even before the Clinton administration.⁴⁹ As these votes reflect the popular expectations and emerging aspirations of the world, Washington has become more out of step with the rest of the international community than has Beijing. Although China has also declined to join some international institutions, such as the International Criminal Court, it has not been known to withdraw from them. Significantly, the use of indicators such as accession to international treaties (especially arms control accords), membership in intergovernmental organizations and rollcall votes in the UN should not be controversial, as other scholars have used them previously to assess a country's revisionism.⁵⁰

Beijing professes to support Westphalian principles of state sovereignty, non-interference in other states' domestic affairs and their territorial integrity, principles that represent the primary institutions of international order. This does not mean that China has in practice always adhered to these principles, as shown in its contentious sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea.⁵¹ However, in recent decades it has been involved in fewer wars and militarized disputes than the United States. Significantly, its current policies reflect an enormous change from its rhetoric and conduct during the Maoist years, when it openly supported insurgencies seeking to overthrow 'bourgeois' governments, boycotted international organizations and pursued an inward-looking command economy emphasizing self-reliance. In contrast, US policies have evolved in the opposite direction. Washington played a leading role in creating the UN, and in this organization's early days was among its strongest supporters. It has, however, now turned into a sharp critic of this and other multilateral institutions. In contrast to its active and leading role in organizing international coordination to contain the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome epidemic of 2002–2004 and the financial crisis of 2008, it has been visibly absent from international efforts to combat COVID-19.

A shift from multilateralism to unilateralism came into sharper focus during Trump's administration. However, as noted above, there were earlier signs indicating that the United States was moving in this direction, most clearly in its invasion of Iraq without UN authorization and subsequently also in its attacks on Serbia, Libya and Syria.⁵² Washington has propagated new doctrines, such as preventive war and regime change abroad, that clearly challenge the primary

⁴⁹ Erik Voeten, 'Resisting the lonely superpower: responses of states in the United Nations to US dominance', *Journal of Politics* 66: 3, 2004, pp. 729–54, and 'Data and analyses of voting in the UN General Assembly', in Bob Reinalda, ed., *Routledge handbook of international organization* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 54–66.

⁵⁰ Chan et al., 'Discerning states' revisionist and status-quo orientations'; Alastair I. Johnston, 'Is China a status quo power?', *International Security* 7: 4, 2003, pp. 5–56, and 'China in a world of orders', *International Security* 44: 2, 2019, pp. 9–60; Ward, *Status and the challenge of rising powers*.

⁵¹ Douglas Guilfoyle, 'The rule of law and maritime security: understanding lawfare in the South China Sea', *International Affairs* 95: 5, 2019, pp. 999–1018.

⁵² Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: world politics in the twenty-first century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, *America unbound: the Bush revolution in foreign policy* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

institutions of international order and, as such, represent revisionist attempts to alter this order.⁵³ By going outside the UN and engaging in forum shopping (for example, carrying out attacks against Serbia and Libya under NATO auspices), its policies have also contributed to diminishing the legitimacy and effectiveness of this leading secondary institution of international order. When different kinds of empirical indicators from a range of sources and over time are considered, China is not obviously more revisionist than the United States—and indeed, compared to the Maoist years, it has become less so.⁵⁴

What about Chinese misconduct?

Various objections can be raised to the conclusion just stated. For example, one may argue that the United States has adhered to the norm of territorial integrity by withdrawing from countries that it had invaded, and that it has opposed secession movements, whereas China has not adhered to this norm, claiming a large portion of the South China Sea and pursuing territorial disputes with Japan and India. However, during its years of ascendancy the United States acquired vast amounts of territory by defeating Mexico and Spain (equivalent to all or parts of today's Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming, in addition to Guam, Puerto Rico and the Philippines), and no scholar to my knowledge has considered the United States to be revisionist on account of this conduct. Germany's historical territorial acquisitions appear puny by comparison. Whether the United States opposes secession depends on one's perspective. Was Saigon attempting to secede from Vietnam, and Taiwan from China? Washington surely enabled the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. It also supported Panama's secession from Colombia with the aim of building a canal there. China withdrew its troops from North Korea after the 1953 armistice, but US troops are still in South Korea.

China has the world's largest number of land borders with other countries. It has settled nearly all of them, usually on terms favourable to its smaller neighbours.⁵⁵ Its boundary disputes with India and Nepal are the sole exceptions. It does have maritime disputes with several countries, and it has rejected the Permanent Court of Arbitration's jurisdiction in its dispute with Manila in the South China Sea. Other signatories of UNCLOS have also invoked this provision to be exempted from dispute settlement by an international tribunal. But the United States has not even signed this convention. It has refused to accept the International Court of Justice's ruling that it had violated international law when it mined Nicaragua's ports, and it also challenged the freedom of navigation when 'quarantining' Cuba in 1962. Quoting Singapore's former ambassador to the United Nations,

⁵³ Ian Hurd, 'Breaking and making norms: American revisionism and crises of legitimacy', *International Politics* 44: 2–3, 2007, pp. 194–213.

⁵⁴ Chan et al., 'Discerning states' revisionist and status-quo orientations'; Johnston, 'Is China a status quo power?'

⁵⁵ M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong borders, secure nation: cooperation and conflict in China's territorial disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Kishore Mahbubani, that ‘China is the only great power today that has not fired a single bullet across its borders in 30 years [as of 2010]’, David Kang notes that ‘by contrast, even under the peaceful American presidency of Barack Obama, the United States dropped 26,000 bombs on seven countries in 2016’.⁵⁶

China has also been accused of undertaking predatory trade policies. Yet Daniel Drezner reports that ‘China’s compliance with adverse WTO rulings was better than that of either the United States or the European Union’, and concludes that ‘China, far from acting like a spoiler, acted primarily as a responsible stakeholder to reinforce the preexisting rules of the global economic game’.⁵⁷ By contrast, Broz and colleagues note that

the United States has made more frequent use of WTO exceptions to protect domestic industries from foreign competition than any other nation ... Foreign nations have initiated more complaints at the WTO against the US for violating trade-exception rules than against any other nation or region, including the European Union.⁵⁸

These remarks do not excuse Beijing’s malpractices, but do put them in a comparative light.

What about election meddling? Washington has alleged Russian interference in its 2016 presidential election, and Chinese and Iranian interference as well in its 2020 election. The United States has, however, meddled in other countries’ elections far more frequently and flagrantly, dating back at least to its efforts to prevent a communist victory in Italy’s 1948 election.⁵⁹ It was also complicit in military coups or engaged in outright invasions that overthrew foreign governments (e.g. in Chile, Grenada, Guatemala, Iran, South Vietnam and, unsuccessfully, Cuba). It has even physically seized another country’s leader (Panama’s Manuel Noriega) and assassinated a foreign official in a third country (Iran’s General Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad). By contrast, China has not been associated with such actions or the assassination of other countries’ nuclear scientists.⁶⁰ Again, there should be some consideration of frequency and magnitude in evaluating any country’s conduct or misconduct.

Washington has accused China of cyber espionage and has lobbied other countries to ban Huawei from their 5G infrastructure on the grounds that this Chinese telecommunications company may gain access to sensitive information and be required to turn it over to the Chinese government. The irony is not lost on Germany’s economics minister Peter Altmaier, who remarked that it was the

⁵⁶ David Kang, ‘Thought games about China’, *Journal of East Asian Studies* 20: 2, 2020, p. 140. Chinese and Vietnamese troops had clashed in the South China Sea in 1988.

⁵⁷ Daniel Drezner, ‘Perception, misperception, and sensitivity: Chinese economic power and preferences after the 2008 financial crisis’, in Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø, eds, *Strategic adjustment and the rise of China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), pp. 82, 91.

⁵⁸ J. Lawrence Broz, Zhiwen Zhang and Gaoyang Wang, ‘Explaining foreign support for China’s global economic leadership’, *International Organization* 74: 3, 2020, pp. 417–52.

⁵⁹ Dov Levin, *Meddling in the ballot box: the causes and effects of partisan electoral interventions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁶⁰ Farnaz Fassihi, David E. Sanger, Eric Schmitt and Ronen Bergman, ‘Iran’s top nuclear scientist killed in ambush, state media say’, *New York Times*, 27 Nov. 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/27/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-scientist-assassinated-mohsen-fakhrizadeh.html>.

United States that surreptitiously taped Angela Merkel's telephone conversations in 2015, and that 'the US also requires its companies to provide certain information needed to fight terrorism'.⁶¹ Edward Snowden disclosed mass surveillance undertaken by the National Security Agency with the cooperation of European governments and US telecommunications companies. Public media have reported the United States planting listening devices on a Boeing aircraft sold for use by China's president.⁶² Media reports have also pointed to the United States and Israel using a computer virus (Stuxnet) to damage Iran's nuclear programme. In short, 'hacking' and 'cyber warfare' are not being undertaken just by the Chinese.

China's mistreatment of its domestic political dissidents and ethnic minorities can also give rise to scepticism about its foreign policy. A country that mistreats its own citizens is unlikely to treat foreigners better. The irony here is that Sino-American relations were much more cordial and cooperative during the Nixon, Ford and Carter years when China had an even more authoritarian government than it does today. Although one should not condone any violation of human rights or political repression, a degree of introspection and a comparative perspective would again be welcome. Recent protests in Hong Kong occurred around the time of mass demonstrations in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and the United States ('Black Lives Matter'). In January 2021, there were also mass protests in the Netherlands (over curfews imposed in response to the pandemic), India (over government subsidies for farmers), the United States (over alleged election irregularities) and Russia (by supporters of Alexei Navalny). Which countries have had more casualties and arrests as a result of police action? Many Americans were horrified by the spectacle of Trump's supporters storming the Capitol and called them 'insurrectionists'; but many of them would also have seen scenes of rioters seizing and vandalizing Hong Kong's Legislative Council, and few would use the same label to describe those demanding Hong Kong's independence. These episodes point to people's asymmetric access to information, and their application of seemingly different standards of evaluation. One usually does not hear much reference to the plight of Palestinians or Native Americans in judging whether Israel or the United States is or was 'revisionist'.

Conclusion

After the Napoleonic Wars, major European states created the Concert of Europe to maintain peace and stability while also seeking to preserve their domestic order and incumbent regimes. By almost all accounts, the order fostered by this institution was successful in keeping peace in Europe. There were fewer militarized disputes and wars between 1816 and 1848 than between 1849 and 1870 after

⁶¹ Stuart Lau, 'German minister and US envoy clash over Huawei's possible participation in Germany's 5G network', *South China Morning Post*, 26 Nov. 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3039320/german-minister-and-us-envoy-clash-over-huaweis-possible>.

⁶² John Pomfret, 'China finds bugs on jet equipped in US', *Washington Post*, 19 Jan. 2002, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/01/19/china-finds-bugs-on-jet-equipped-in-us/65089140-2afe-42e0-a377-ec8d4e5034ef/>.

the Concert broke down. This system's demise resulted not from a wish by its autocratic members (Prussia, Russia and Austria-Hungary) to dismantle it, but rather from deliberate efforts by its liberal members to undermine it. Britain and France abandoned the Concert-based order to appease domestic public opinion. While the autocracies had wanted to preserve the political status quo and provide mutual assistance to defend their monarchies, the liberal members saw things differently. Charles Kupchan remarks: 'Britain had in effect become a revisionist power, seeking to extend its geopolitical influence and export its liberal ideology.'⁶³

One should be aware of a status quo bias that is often present in discourse on international order. This order need not necessarily serve the causes of liberty, justice, equality or human dignity. For example, the order envisaged at the Versailles peace conference ending the First World War did not recognize the principle of racial equality: Japan's demand for recognition of this principle was rebuffed by the western countries. President Wilson's enthusiasm for his Fourteen Points, promoting ideals such as public diplomacy, free trade and self-determination, was not shared by the other major powers. 'Self-determination' did not include people in Europe's colonies (or for that matter, the Philippines, which was a US colony).

Are the United States and China fundamentally different in their 'revisionism'? Allegedly, Washington just wants to retain its primacy within the existing order, whereas Beijing wants to replace it with an illiberal one. Intentions are difficult to determine, but actual conduct is easier to observe. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has engaged in an active programme of regime change, opening the markets of former socialist countries and extending the NATO alliance. It has not just tried to maintain its leadership in the (geographically and ideologically) bounded *western* liberal order that had existed during the Cold War, but has instead pursued a more ambitious goal of instituting a new *global* order reflecting its values and interests, as Mearsheimer argues.⁶⁴ It has been playing not defence but offence. Although some have impugned Beijing's professed commitment to globalization and Westphalian principles, most scholars have agreed that it has so far *acted* more as a responsible stakeholder than as a spoiler.

Dissatisfaction with globalization and the push to 'deglobalize' have come from the West and the United States rather than China, which in turn begs the question who is trying to alter or revise the 'system' or international order. Beijing's foreign policy clearly reflects the fact that it has been a huge beneficiary of globalization, and the West's discontent has something to do with the perception that it has not done nearly as well. There are three points to make here.

First, who are the West? Certainly, rich people and US and western multinational corporations have done very well in the era of globalization, even though many ordinary people have not.

Second, deglobalization may suggest a relative decline or a reduced rate of increase in cross-border trade and investment between some countries, and

⁶³ Charles Kupchan, *How enemies become friends: the sources of stable peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 24.

⁶⁴ Mearsheimer, 'Bound to fail'.

perhaps also in the West's willingness to admit refugees and migrants (and, if so, this phenomenon raises questions about its commitment to these and other liberal values in the first place). But it would seem a stretch to argue that there is or will be a concomitant reduction in the cross-border flow of information, infectious diseases or the effects of global warming. Moreover, even in the economic sphere it is not clear that, say, Brexit or the US policy to decouple economically from China will necessarily mean reduced linkages among other countries. Economic exchanges within or between some regions, such as continental Europe and east Asia (especially after the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership and the EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment in late 2020), may very well increase and accelerate. There is little sign that China wants to 'deglobalize' or disengage from the world. The Biden administration has already reversed some of Trump's policies, notably by rejoining the Paris climate accord and the WHO. It is important to recognize where the impetus for deglobalization (i.e. reducing the flow of people, technology and goods) is coming from, the presence of divergent trends, and the possibility for reversal.

Third, like its predecessors relying on export expansion as an engine of economic growth, China has been a party to a tacit grand bargain. This deal basically calls for export-surplus countries to recycle their gains to finance US fiscal and monetary extravagances (in addition to benefiting US consumers, who are enabled to stretch their household budgets by cheap imports). In return for their access to the US market, they agree to accept devalued dollars. In the case of Japan and South Korea, they also exchange their political subordination for US military protection. For China, this involves opening its economy to foreign companies for investment and production (which have been practically non-existent in Japan and South Korea), and purchasing large amounts of US debt instruments. This deal, then, has not been a one-way street such that China has had a free ride.

This tacit bargain (sometimes called globalization) is in danger of becoming obsolescent. US consumers' purchasing power has become more strained, and the US market and the dollar are not as alluring as they once were. China has become the most important trade partner for many east Asian countries, which are not as economically feeble and dependent as previously. Since the end of the Cold War, the premium for US military protection has declined whereas the cost of alienating an increasingly powerful China has risen. In east Asia, it is the unravelling of this implicit grand bargain, rather than deglobalization, that appears to be the main dynamic. This explains the role China plays in narratives seeking to emphasize the continued value and indispensability of US military protection. East Asian countries, however, are reluctant to choose between the United States and China. Instead of decoupling from either country or from each other, they will continue to engage all.