

CHINA AND THE CHALLENGE TO GLOBAL ORDER

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Executive summary

For two decades, China sought to profit from key arrangements of the global political and economic order. Now, in several (though not all) domains, China seeks to subvert these long-standing arrangements and prevent the emergence of new ones, in order to broaden its scope for action. It has also started to propose new arrangements under Chinese diplomatic leadership, starting to seek a role as an ordering power. In response, the United States and its Western allies must adapt their strategies. That does not mean refusing to cooperate with China in areas of common interest (for example, nonproliferation); but in most domains, the United States must not just look to the leading democracies but also to a wider constellation of states willing to act in defense of the core purposes of the order.

Introduction

A rising power may shape its own ambition, but not just as it pleases; it does not choose the world into which it will rise.¹ The balance of power in its region,

the overall international balance, and simple geography are inescapable factors that shape a country's choices as it grows. Other factors include the structure of the global economy, access to natural resources, and the sources of international finance.

Much recent discourse on the challenge of China's mounting power has been focused on the military and technological balance and on the growing tensions between China's burgeoning military capability and America's forward presence in Asia. And to be sure, China's rapid buildup of its navy and supporting technologies reveal the country's preoccupation with increasing its freedom of maneuver in the Taiwan Strait and the wider reaches of the Western Pacific and beyond.²

But China is asserting itself in a world heavily shaped by extensive globalization (which enabled China's economic rise) and a global political order underpinned by a treaty-based system. Contemporary globalization is characterized by massive trade and investment flows between the major economies of all regions, with China playing the role of the intermediate manufacturing node for the global economy (much of which is regulated by a set of well-articulated institutions) while remaining heavily dependent

on imported resources and global financial flows. Encompassing this economic order but extending beyond it, the global political order is characterized by patterns of behavior or arrangements between leading states, codified in treaties and often observed by institutions. Just as China is actively engaged in an arms race in the Western Pacific, it is also engaged in a race for position and influence in the global order.³

There are myriad policy domains that have corresponding established treaties, institutions, and agreed rules that aim to “guide” state behavior — a more accurate term than “govern.” Many are of modest consequence to overall international prosperity and stability. But a handful are far more consequential—for example the treaties that stipulate sovereign equality and freedom of navigation.

As China has grown from a weak state to a strong one, it is starting to exploit the stronger powers’ ability to pick and choose when and where to comply with core treaty provisions, as well as to shape the next generation of consequential treaties.

These treaties and institutions shape, to some degree, the policies and expectations of leading players on the world stage. The leading states in the international system are not compelled by the treaties and institutionalized arrangements of the existing order, but rather choose to follow them (to some degree) for the reciprocal benefits they can provide — until they chose not to. Smaller or weaker states have fewer options. As China has grown from a weak state to a strong one, it is starting to exploit

the stronger powers’ ability to pick and choose when and where to comply with core treaty provisions, as well as to shape the next generation of consequential treaties — in technology and climate, for example.

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For as long as China has been an aspiring or rising power, the global order has been shaped and dominated by the liberal powers. From the mid-1990s until midway through the administration of former President Donald Trump, the United States and its Western allies engaged in what might best be described as a half-hearted effort to bring China more deeply into the fold of the established political and economic order and the institutions of global governance. This involved bringing China into the World Trade Organization (WTO), creating a “+5” mechanism on the margins of the G-7, and later creating the G-20 — partially out of a sense that doing so would moderate and influence the rising power’s ambitions.⁴ Whether a more full-throated effort, including incorporating changes to the security order in Asia and allowing for greater Chinese voice in the international financial institutions, would have had that effect is debatable. But that ship has sailed. In fact, China’s behavior and its role within those existing institutions it has inhabited suggests the opposite; a more expansive opening to China would have led to a deeper erosion of the global order’s established arrangements.

China’s overarching strategy for the past decade and more has been to lessen the hold of the liberal powers on the institutions and arrangements of the global order (as well as to shift the balance of military power). For that broad goal, China has considerable international support, certainly in the Global South but also among other rising powers, even those who view China’s growing military power as a threat. But in some domains, it now seems that China may be seeking to overturn, or at least subvert, key pillars of the order itself.

TERMINOLOGICAL QUESTIONS AND SCOPE

Assessing China's strategies to influence the global order is made more difficult by the fact that this is a domain of terminological and conceptual imprecision. Scholars disagree about what constitutes the global or liberal order, and policymakers often invoke the concept of order loosely. The recent adoption of the term "rules-based order" adds more confusion than precision. And then there is the question of whether "global governance," another hotly debated concept, is central or ancillary to this order.

Putting aside these terminological debates, this paper examines China's strategies in a set of policy domains that extend beyond military power but stop well shy of the large penumbra of global governance. It takes as a given (but an important given) that China is building its military capabilities to improve its position in the balance of power in Asia and perhaps beyond. But while China seeks to accumulate military and military-technological power, it must also interact with other states in a globalized world.

This paper focuses on four domains of interaction, cardinal pillars of the current global order:

- *Sovereign equality and territorial integrity* – The principles that lie at the core of the post-World War II treaty order.
- *Freedom of navigation* – The foundation for the free flow of trade and energy, the bedrock of the global economy.
- *Arms limitation* – The agreements between powers that limit their acquisition or deployment of conventional or strategic weapons and that limit which states can possess certain classes of weapons.
- *Liberal values and basic human rights* – Civil and political rights; and democracy, the political system that best advances those rights.

It also touches on *rules-based trade and finance* – the flow of trade goods and finance according to negotiated rules, cornerstone of a liberal economy. This is essential, of course; but is covered in greater detail in another report in this series.⁵

The paper also touches on domains of order that will surely be consequential to the global order in coming decades, whereas no core ordering arrangements yet exists but are under negotiation—key examples include climate change (where institutions and treaties are advancing) and technology (where they are barely nascent). There is just enough evidence to date across these evolving areas to make an initial comment about China's apparent strategy.

Finally, the paper briefly comments on China's attitude towards *organization building*, regional and global, through which its position in global order may be advanced – and the West's stymied.

While this list of domains is not comprehensive and some scholars may object to the inclusion or exclusion of other areas, each domain selected is consequential to international prosperity or stability and has a major ordering treaty or institution that shapes behavior. Collectively they provide a core set of issues against which to assess China's strategies.

A final conceptual point: China does not exist alone in the world, nor does the United States, and bilateral exchanges between them do not define the net sources of influence in world politics. Other states' policies can have a significant impact on military and political affairs and on the global economy especially. At the very least, China must consider the strategies and interests of other major aspirant or status quo powers – particularly Japan, Russia, India, Germany (and the European Union), Saudi Arabia, and perhaps Iran – as well as pay some attention to the dynamics of influence in the Global South.

Particularly important to China are Russia and India. These two significant powers (or potential powers) in the international system are also seeking to change the terms of the global order or their position

within it, albeit by very different means. With both countries, China has complex, multifaceted relations that straddle the worlds of contestation and collaboration. China's strategies cannot be fully understood or responded to without reference to global order strategies of these two countries.

China's approaches and strategies

THE SIX PS

Across the aforementioned domains, China has used multiple strategies, which have evolved over time. As part of these strategies, it has employed the following approaches, or the "six Ps":

- *Profiting* – Taking advantage of the global order to grow or otherwise advance national aims. This broadly characterizes China's approach to engagement with international trade and financial institutions through the 1990s and 2000s.
- *Penetrating* – Reaching into an organization or regime to shape its policy in order to gain advantages for China. This characterizes China's approach to engagement with the United Nations (U.N.) over the past decade.
- *Piggybacking* – Building on rising powers' challenging actions and dissatisfaction with some parts of the global order (particularly those of Russia but also India, Brazil, and others).
- *Perverting* – Using the formal structure of a policy regime to advance Chinese interests but in a manner deeply injurious to the informal purposes. Arguably, this characterizes China's approach (or the consequence of its policy) to participation in the WTO of late, but perhaps best characterizes China's behavior around freedom of navigation.
- *Preventing* – Using its newfound global economic clout and its top-tier capacities to prevent the emergence of limiting rules or arrangements in new domains. Here, ironically, it often finds itself accompanied by the United States, which has often been slow or reluctant to accept international regulation in new issue areas.
- *Proposing* – In some domains, trying to play the role of rule-proposer or institutional innovator; the functions of an ordering power.

China is using some of these approaches simply to curtail the influence of the liberal powers on world affairs – a strategy that appeals to other emerging powers, even those who view China's rise with suspicion or fear. Other approaches may be designed to overturn core pillars of the global order itself or to pervert them so much that they collapse; in these cases, China is often piggybacking and providing diplomatic top-cover to the behaviors of other powers, particularly Russia, for its own gain.

THE CORE AND EVOLVING DOMAINS

The following discussion illustrates how China is using these approaches in its strategies to shift the balance of power in the core and evolving domains of the global order.

Sovereignty. We are watching an ongoing evolution in Chinese attitudes toward the issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity. For many years, China was among the conservative powers on this, defending sovereignty and territorial integrity at the U.N. against myriad forms of intrusion – often doing so in solidarity with smaller states in the Global South. China professed strong support for the U.N.-based multilateral system and repeatedly emphasized the principles of territorial integrity and sovereign inviolability as being central to international stability – cardinal elements of its own Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence doctrine.⁶

Indeed, in the post-Cold War period, it has been the Western powers that have been revisionist on this topic, seeking and ultimately gaining expansive interpretations of the right to intervene in sovereign affairs and to weaken the sovereignty shield. Some of these interpretations have been codified in the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine (a codification the United States initially opposed and then later embraced).⁷

Even during its conservative phase, China was often more flexible in practice than in rhetoric.

But even during its conservative phase, China was often more flexible in practice than in rhetoric. At the dawn of the post-Cold War era, China abstained from voting on U.N. Security Council Resolution 688, which stipulates that internal conflicts could constitute a “threat to international peace and security” (triggering the enforcement provisions of the U.N. Charter). Then, starting in the 1990s, China’s attitudes began to evolve substantially. In the post-Cold War period, China voted in favor of more than 70 council resolutions supporting U.N. actions that penetrated the sovereignty shield.⁸ Some of these resolutions gave intervening powers the right to use force against national governments on an “exceptional” basis. (There is no international norm for how many exceptions remake a rule.) China also voted in favor of the 2015 World Summit Outcome Document that established the R2P doctrine, abstained on rather than vetoed the doctrine’s much debated application to the US-led operations in Libya, and voted in favor of the doctrine’s subsequent and much forgotten application to the situation in Côte d’Ivoire, a resolution enforced by France’s Armée de l’Air and ground troops.⁹

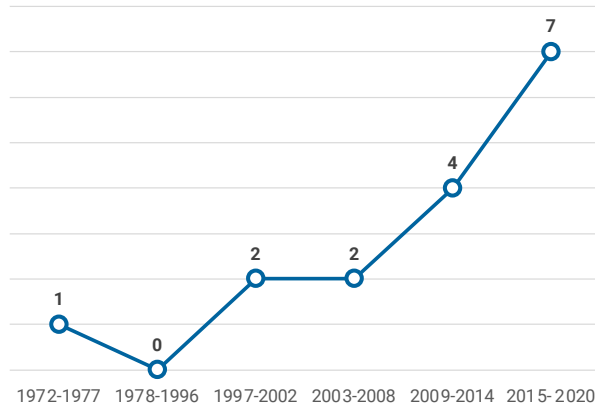
China’s attitudes on intrusions not authorized by the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) have also evolved. To be sure, it has opposed U.S. interventions, notably in Iraq, but notably also Russian interventions, particularly in Georgia in 2008 (seemingly helping to limit the scope of Russia’s ambitions). However, it was more ambiguous on Russia’s invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014. And, this year, when Russia again invaded Ukraine, this ambiguity turned into public statements of support for Russia’s position and active diplomacy at the U.N. to shield Russia from Western-supported votes aimed at isolating the country. Given that both invasions of Ukraine constitute a flagrant violation of Article II of the U.N. Charter — the article that protects territorial integrity and is the keystone of the entire international political order — China’s statements and actions are effectively undermining this central pillar of order.¹⁰

In parallel, China’s penetration approach in the U.N. has become more effective. The country’s stance is now far more assertive; for example, through vetoes at the UNSC, China has been piggybacking on Russia’s work to curtail the scope and parameters of peacekeeping operations in Africa and influencing senior appointments for mediation, as well as generally pushing back on Western initiatives. Although vetoes are an imprecise measure of influence, as there are many ways for UNSC permanent members to mold issues long before vote, they do nonetheless provide a clear measure of the uptick in China’s willingness to use its weight to shape international order in this crucial issue space.

FIGURE 1

An uptick in China's willingness to use its weight to shape international order

China's vetoes at the UNSC in five-year increments



Source: U.N. Security Council

Freedom of navigation. The evolution of China's ambitions is best illustrated in the realm of freedom of navigation. This domain includes commercial shipping, where China's role is most advanced, and of naval power, where its capacity is growing fastest. It is within this domain that China is most assertively challenging and seeking to undermine or overturn the core terms of the global order—even while profiting hugely from the existing regime.¹¹

Amid the drama and tension surrounding the Taiwan Strait, it is often forgotten that China's aggressive claims to territorial waters in that Strait and the adjacent South and East China Seas were made through international law mechanisms. In 2009, China submitted its claims in the dying weeks of a decade-long period for states to file with what's known as the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf;¹² the commission is a subsidiary mechanism of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which is the central treaty supporting freedom of navigation.¹³ The claims were, and remain, outrageous — a perversion of the meaning of "territorial waters," staked to threadbare historical claims and the existence of minor human features (for example, bird watching stations and weather beacons) on a variety of land features and atolls that

barely protrude above the waters' surface. Taken as a whole, China's claims constituted a massive resource and territorial grab.

The invalidity of most of their claims was confirmed by an international tribunal, in a case brought against China by the Philippines, with informal support from the United States.¹⁴ But any hope that China might temper its behavior according to UNCLOS rules was quickly shredded by China's dismissal of the tribunal's ruling and its ensuing noncompliance.¹⁵ China has not walked away from UNCLOS, but its behavior perverts the treaty's core intent.¹⁶

Beyond the Western Pacific, China's behavior is different. It has been actively participating in joint efforts to protect trade against piracy, working in coalitions authorized by the U.N. Security Council (in the Indian Ocean) and by multinational agreements (in the Malacca Strait). China's massive stakes in the protection of ocean-based trade are evident, as the country is by far the world's largest hub of container and bulk shipping. Its participation in the Indian Ocean counterpiracy operations, however, have also served as a training ground for People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) sorties to the "far seas" and as the core rationale for China's first overseas naval base (in Djibouti).

The boundary between China's global trade protection goals and its own power projection aspirations are hard to discern and vary by sea, but the visible patterns of behavior in the Western Pacific are disconcerting.

Arms limitation. Of the core domains of global order, arms limitation is perhaps the least well-articulated, because it is closest to the simple balance of military power. It is in this domain that major players most aggressively resist "rules" or regulations. However, even so, both bilateral and multilateral treaties seeking to limit the acquisition and use of conventional and nuclear weapons do exist and have at times guided leading states' behavior to a certain degree.

China's strategy toward arms control is what one would expect of a rising and militarizing power. Beijing resists being brought into any treaty negotiations that would limit its growing conventional or nuclear military capabilities. This is particularly true when it comes to bilateral or trilateral nuclear arms talks with the United States and Russia.¹⁷ Because China's nuclear stockpile is still well below that of the other two countries, it has strong incentives to avoid being brought into arms control negotiations and seems happy to piggyback on Russia in its current strategy of undermining existing treaties. The Obama administration was unsuccessful in its attempt to pull China into trilateral arms limitation talks with Russia. The Trump administration took a similar stance, but more through rhetoric; in practice, it focused on narrowing the scope for Russian cheating within existing arms limitations regimes or for walking away from them altogether. So far, the Biden administration has signaled that it would prefer bilateral rather than trilateral arms limitations talks with Beijing — doubtless reflecting the state of U.S.-Russia relations — but so far to little avail.¹⁸

China's approach to multilateral regimes that limit nuclear weapons proliferation is more constructive — as befits an existing nuclear power whose possession of nuclear weapons is recognized and legitimized within those regimes. China shares with the other nuclear powers a strong interest in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons in general and as such has been a backer of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime. However, as is the case with the other nuclear powers, China's general interest in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons is influenced by its specific interests in key cases (like Russia's interests in India and the United States' interests in Israel.) Beijing has supported efforts of the P5+1 (the five permanent UNSC members, plus Germany) to negotiate limits on Iran's nuclear weapons capability, but its support of those efforts and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action does not translate into wider efforts to contain Iran's ambitions.¹⁹ Similarly, while China has actively participated in various efforts to negotiate a nuclear weapons deal with North Korea, its nonproliferation concerns are

heavily shaped by its interest in limiting the scope and scale of U.S. military and diplomatic influence on the Korean Peninsula. Still, to date, there has been no example of China allowing its specific geopolitical interests to undermine its overall support for nuclear nonproliferation regimes; in this area, China's strategy contributes to, rather than detracts from, the stability of the global order.

Human rights and liberal values. In this domain, China's strategy is most at odds with that of the liberal powers. There are four central issues. The first is China's oppression of its Uyghur population. China and its defenders point to broad statements by Western leaders in the wake of 9/11 that purportedly justify Beijing's crackdown on Muslim dissidents, as well as to the West's own human rights abuses within the framework of the global war on terror and the war in Iraq. But no Western power's action since the end of World War II comes anywhere close to the scale or scope of the systematic oppression that China practices in the autonomous region of Xinjiang.

The second issue is China's robust suppression of political dissent at home, by both subtle and fierce means. The suppression is becoming increasingly sophisticated and sweeping, partly with the help of advanced technology. And, notably, this technology is being exported to other authoritarian regimes (though they may lack the administrative capacity to implement China's strategy to good effect).

The third issue is China's increasing attempts to penetrate U.N. human rights mechanisms, both to push back on the liberal powers and to defend itself against criticism. This is one area where U.N. leadership has episodically stood up to China. For example, in summer 2022, the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights released its much-delayed report on the High Commissioner's visit to China. The report included a frank and detailed assessment of China's actions in Xinjiang, and in response, China suspended cooperation with the High Commissioner.²⁰ (Regrettably, here, China can point to precedent in the United States' petulant practice of episodically withdrawing from the Human Rights Council over that body's treatment of Israel.)

The fourth is China's consistent opposition to the notion that liberal democracy is the backbone of the global order.²¹ Unlike human rights, which are codified in several U.N. treaties with near-global membership, the normative character of democracy as an ordering principle of international law remains contested. Moreover, some founding articles of key international bodies explicitly prohibit the bodies from expressing preference for one political system over another (for example, the articles of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development). However, as a political system that more frequently and more fully guarantees political and civil rights (as defined by the core instrument of modern international human rights law, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights), democracy certainly is a foundational principle for rights-based governance. In any event, democracies have been the leading powers within the international system for decades and have sought to protect that role and each other. They have also sought to advance democratic governance, albeit episodically and inconsistently. Historically, China has had limited power or influence to push back on this type of governance or to bolster nondemocratic regimes. Recently, though, in regions where China has become the largest economic partner, it has begun using its influence for political effect. What's more, China's illiberal take on human rights issues is popular in many states — from Thailand to Hungary to Saudi Arabia. These countries may welcome China's pushback on liberal norms, irrespective of the economic relationship.

Trade and finance. Although trade and finance are covered in detail in this series, it warrants saying briefly that, for some decades, China pursued a simple strategy of profiting from the existence of rules-based trade and cooperatively managed finance (through the G-20). However, since the 2008 global financial crisis, it seems to have shifted at least in part to a penetrating approach — using its economic weight and presence inside key international bodies to shape their policies in a favorable direction and limit any criticism or constraint of its own behavior. Meanwhile, the sheer scale of China's cheating, intellectual property theft, and state subsidies has of late outstripped the enforcement mechanisms of the WTO, causing the United States to lose

faith in the viability of the mechanism itself. Though China may thus be using a perverting approach, it is also again piggybacking on other powers' challenges, notably that of India, which has been a major obstacle to conclusion of a new trade round within the WTO during the last two bouts of negotiation (with Brazil as frequent fellow-traveler). Beijing has also been using a proposing approach, creating new regional and international financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Emerging domains

Then there are also several emerging domains of policy where publics and governments have expressed strong interest in treaties or other systems of regulated and limited behavior, which have yet to be fully realized. A few of these are in issues areas characterized as global public goods. Chinese strategy across these fields has a common theme: insulating itself from intrusion of external bodies into its internal affairs and defending itself from any serious limitations on its internal or external behavior in these realms. In this, it follows a pattern like that of the United States at various points, though as yet not balanced by the positive contribution that the United States has made in the provision of scientific, economic or military provision of global goods.²²

This preventive strategy of "limit intrusion" has especially characterized Chinese behavior in the one domain of global public goods where international arrangements are more fully developed: global public health. Throughout the period of its post-Cold War rise, China has been a recalcitrant actor here, as it was through the COVID-19 pandemic.²³

China's posture in global climate change negotiations has been similarly defensive, though in this area, it has had the option of piggybacking on other rising and regional powers' defensive strategies (particularly those of Brazil, India, and South Africa). China's position has been forced to evolve, as its skyrocketing carbon emissions have increasingly drawn international attention and ire. China was

a champion of the notion that “developing states” should have differentiated responsibilities from developed ones, but China’s rapid economic growth over the last decade eroded the protection that categorization provided. Beijing is far from alone, however, in resisting any form of international agreement that would impose external limits on its energy usage or carbon emissions; rather, like the United States, it instead agreed to U.N.-brokered compromises around nationally determined and voluntarily implemented limits.

China has been present and assertive since the start of negotiations on sub-sea mining (through the International Maritime Organization) and on putative rules and protocols to govern the use of cyber tools and artificial intelligence (through the U.N. and the International Telecommunications Union). In both areas, China has also been using a preventive approach, seeking to block the development of any rules or regimes that limit its ability to wield its top-tier capacities.

Organization building. China has also been building regional political mechanisms to advance its interests. For example, it has created an informal 16+1 cooperative mechanism to influence regional economic and investment policy in Europe (including in the EU). China’s most advanced mechanism, though, is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Although it is small (eight full members) and focuses on China’s Central Asian partners, its membership includes Russia and India, as well as Iran (as an observer). Some of its members have engaged in security coordination on counterterrorism and countering extremism, and others have floated ideas of using the mechanism to develop alternatives to the U.S. dollar as the core global reserve currency. None of those ideas have come to fruition yet, but intense negotiations (on trade, for example) continue.

China has also taken positions on three international governing bodies that reveal elements of its overall strategy. In the UNSC, China has worked with other states to block the addition of veto members and new permanent members, effectively preventing Japan and India from gaining equal status within the council. In the G-20, Beijing saw the potential for

taking a seat at the head of the table, alongside the United States. It explored the possibility of establishing a secretariat and a formal tripartite chairs arrangement to institutionalize the mechanism. But this idea came up against Western attitudes about summit mechanisms and the souring of U.S.-China relations and thus was not seriously explored.

And then there’s the BRICS. In the BRICS group of leading emerging economies, China wields a good deal more influence than it does in either the UNSC or the G-20. It has used the group’s summits to urge careful but steady consolidation and expansion of its membership and reach. China backed the inclusion of South Africa into the original BRICs summit. It also spearheaded the establishment of the BRICS Contingency Reserve Arrangement, a financing mechanism, and the New Development Bank, the first major institutional feature of the grouping.²⁴ Beijing cleverly accepted that the first head of the bank would be from India, helping to consolidate India’s support. China has also used BRICS summits to help insulate Russia from Western efforts to isolate it, including after the 2014 Crimea invasion and annexation. And most recently, it has encouraged other states to apply to the group — notably Argentina, Iran, and (reportedly) Saudi Arabia — in an effort to bolster the BRICS+ as an international body parallel to the G-7.

To Western powers’ eyes, the BRICS is an odd grouping. Of any two large powers, India and China perhaps have the tensest military and political relationship, illustrated by the state of affairs along the Himalayan frontier and in the Andaman Sea. Yet both countries continue to engage and foster further development within the BRICS framework. This in no way hints that India will reverse course in its strategic orientation — it remains wholly at odds with China’s growing militarization and ambition. New Delhi seeks to counter China’s ambition in part by simultaneously engaging with the Quad, the 2+2 Dialogue with the U.S., the I2U2 mechanism (which links the United States, the United Arab Emirates, India, and Israel) and similar mechanisms. The bottom line is that New Delhi and Beijing seem perfectly able to separate their strategic antagonism with each other from their shared desire to rewrite

the terms of the international economic, financial, and emerging-climate order; they both desire a globalization that better suit developing/emerging powers. U.S. officials have repeatedly demonstrated an inability to grapple with this seemingly counter-intuitive partnering in their own thinking or strategy on China. The “democracy vs authoritarian” and “free world vs authoritarian” frameworks that have characterized recent U.S. thinking fail to capture the intense desire of emerging democratic nations for deep change in the global economic order — a change most likely to be realized by China.

Notably, in spring 2022, China announced and began to promote another idea — this time for a “Global Security Initiative,” or a set of principles for security relations between states that China believes would uphold international stability. But Beijing’s diplomatic backing of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has cast the initiative in a rather dim light. It is too early to tell whether or when or how Beijing will elaborate on its idea, or whether it will attempt to build a structure for the initiative.²⁵

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In sum, as China’s power has grown, its overall strategy has increasingly shifted from profiting from existing arrangements of the global order, then penetrating them to advance its interests, to perverting

their core purposes or proposing new regimes or institutions for its own benefit. Some of Beijing’s efforts are legitimate and preferable to militarized contest. But, in numerous domains, China’s strategies are deeply antithetical to Western interests or to the continuation of a stable order.

U.S. STRATEGIES FOR AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

The treaties, institutions, and arrangements of the global order are not a panacea to compel states, especially powerful ones, to act other than in their interests. They are instruments that states use to limit risk in their relations with other states. They provide guardrails and guidelines, not guarantees. But guardrails are nevertheless crucial, because when they are being eroded — as they are now, at an alarming rate — risks go up. And these are major risks that include a failure to effectively address future systemic financial crises, pandemics, and seriously disruptive climate change; a costly and unmanaged retooling of global trade; and a clash at sea that could rapidly escalate to full-blown great power war.

So, how should the United States and its allies respond to this erosion? In the domain of *freedom of navigation*, the United States has recently begun moving in the right direction. It has initiated new sub-alliance mechanisms to increase coordination among partner navies, to limit China’s growing naval clout in Asia. The Quad and AUKUS will play a central role — though in the case of AUKUS, diplomatic intentions so far outstrip capabilities. The United States could do more, however, to encourage a wider set of allies to take on greater naval responsibilities in the protection of key trade routes (on which all major global economies rely). This would be more effective than seeking marginal contributions to security in Asia, and would free up some U.S. capabilities for deterrence.²⁶

It may also be time to revisit Senate ratification of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, given that U.S. strategy now relies more heavily on the concept of a rules-based order at sea and Chinese capabili-

ties already limit U.S. actions outside of the convention. The United States would profit diplomatically from ratifying the convention.

In the domain of *sovereignty* (protected under Article II of the U.N. Charter), the United States recently shifted to the right path. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has tested the international system's willingness and ability to defend this cardinal pillar of the global order. America's core military strategy – supplying substantial weapons and intelligence support to bolster Ukraine's defense efforts – appears to be achieving a degree of success, albeit at a high cost.

The results of America's diplomatic strategy, however, have been more mixed so far. The United States has generated significant Western support for its effort to isolate Russia, but only limited support among rising democratic powers and the Global South writ large. For example, Washington has failed to secure solid backing from Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates. U.S. diplomacy is being harmed by narratives that frame the tensions as a "new Cold War" or a battle of "democracy versus authoritarianism." And the United States has not paid enough attention to the changing demands of rising democratic powers and the Global South in the areas of global public goods and development (especially climate finance, public health, and food security). Washington needs to substantially retool its strategy for interacting with a more capable and more independent Global South; otherwise, the West will continue to lose ground to China and Russia in terms of strengthening bilateral ties and increasing influence in multilateral bodies. The United States could best respond by upping G-7 cooperation around the (badly named, modestly implemented) Build Back Better World Initiative.

Regarding R2P, given that for the foreseeable future Washington is likely to eschew unilateral interventions under this provision, there would be little cost to the United States in reinforcing the role of the UNSC. For example, Brazil's proposal that countries undertaking R2P operations should report to the council seems harmless; even NATO reported to the UNSC on its operations in Bosnia, given that those were authorized by the U.N. body. The United States'

resistance to Brazil's proposal seems shortsighted and should be revisited. Positive movement here would limit the ability of China and Russia to claim that Western policy on R2P issues undermine the core provisions of the U.N. Charter and the council and would buttress U.S. international diplomacy. The UNSC may prove to be blocked on such issues for some time to come, but absent a desire to act unilaterally, this changes little. Nothing in this would prevent the United States from undertaking unilateral actions *in extremis*.

In the domain of *liberal values and human rights*, there is virtually no common ground. Only a deep change in China's internal behavior or the West's wholesale abandonment of core values would allow for any real accommodation in this domain. The former is unlikely; the latter is undesirable.

In the domain of *arms limitation*: realistically, China is not going to agree to any treaties or agreements that limit its strategic weapons development until its stockpile is much closer to that of Russia and the United States. Efforts to pull China into either bilateral or trilateral arms limitation talks will likely fail. Washington should instead concentrate its diplomatic fire on resuscitating, rejuvenating, and building out mechanisms for crisis management and similar guardrails in both U.S.-China military-to-military issues, and perhaps also in wider North Asian security mechanisms. Even these objectives will be hard to achieve, given China's recalcitrance and posture, but the efforts are more likely to reap (modest) rewards than broader arms limitation exercises. At the same time, the United States should remain willing to work with China on multilateral arms limitation mechanisms, especially around nuclear nonproliferation. Given the current state of bilateral relations, extensive communication and negotiation around such issues may be challenging, but Washington could quietly encourage a friendly middle power to convene regular track 1.5 or track 1 dialogues among the nuclear and nuclear-adjacent powers.

In the domain of *global public goods*, the United States, China, and all the other major players mentioned in this paper are being affected by

global or transnational challenges — and they all need to participate in the search for solutions. Throughout the early post-Cold War era, instruments and frameworks for tackling global challenges were established under conditions of relative great power comity, when it was relatively easier to gain consensus, collaboration, and cooperation. Such instruments and frameworks may no longer be possible in the current environment, yet the need for collective action remains. The answer lies in reviving Cold War era habits, when despite literally posing an existential threat to one another, the United States and the Soviet Union managed to set aside their distrust just enough to collaborate on tackling issues like smallpox vaccination and the polio epidemic. “Distrust but collaborate” may not be a very tantalizing mantra, but it’s the most likely path toward reaching solutions on infectious diseases, financial instability, and climate change.²⁷

In the domain of *organization building*: To many observers’ surprise, President Joe Biden used the 2022 high-level session of the U.N. General Assembly to announce U.S. support for reform of the UNSC. Although Washington has previously adopted a guardedly positive stance on such reforms (in 2005), it did so quietly and has never lent its full diplomatic support to a reform process. It should do so, forcing China and Russia to make a very uncomfortable choice: welcome Japan and India as permanent members, or very publicly veto their hopes.

Conclusion

The Soviet Union posed an existential threat to the United States but a more modest challenge to the global economy or institutions of the international system. Conversely, for now, China poses at most a modest security threat to the United States but a major challenge to the global economic and political order.

While ramping up its capacity for deterrence, the West should collectively defend its core interests in the global order. For many years, the West sought to offer China a more expansive space in global order

arrangements. It hoped to tie China’s interests to the continuation of the existing order. But evidence from the last decade suggests that this effort (albeit a half-hearted one) has run its course. Now, the United States and its partners must fully examine their capacities within these arrangements and determine together what can be defended.

Importantly, this defense, or wider coalition of action, must encompass the major rising democratic powers. That includes India. That will not always be easy. On human rights, the West and India have significant policy differences, and on trade, finance, investment and climate, India’s interests are closer to China’s than the West’s. But India is gradually recognizing that core parts of the global order are essential to its interests and should be defended — and this should create enough overlap of interests to create ground for negotiations.

Collaborative efforts to defend the order can be made within or outside the established frameworks, or both.

Collaborative efforts to defend the order can be made within or outside the established frameworks, or both. Doing so *within* existing frameworks retains the possibility of collaboration with China under the right circumstances or in specific domains — like non-proliferation. More important, it will make it easier to achieve a wider coalition of countries that are willing to play constructive roles in defense of the established order.

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- 12** See “Limits in the Seas No. 150 People’s Republic of China: Maritime Claims in the South China Sea,” Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs, Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs in the U.S. Department of State, January 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2022/01/13/state-department-report-on-chinese-claims-in-the-south-china-sea>.
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