

China in the World Order: A Critical Examination

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Abstract

In 1967, A.F.K. Organski in his book 'World Politics', first propounded the power transition theory and predicted the rise of China, and subsequently, the decline of the West. The power transition theory is based on two important assumptions- the world is hierarchically ordered with the dominant power responsible for creating and sustaining the order; and different countries have different rates of internal development, therefore, rising and falling relative to one another. A vital element in this theory is that of dissatisfaction – the theory postulates that 'dissatisfied' rising powers will inevitably contest the world order. This analysis formulates two important questions based on this variable of dissatisfaction- is China a dissatisfied power? If yes, what change does it seek in the order? And, does it desire an order that is multipolar in nature? In order to answer these questions, China's views of and engagement with the order is critically analyzed with a focus on international institutions of the world order.

Keywords

China, Power Transition Theory, A.F.K. Organski, World Order, United Nations.

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The steady rise of China in the world order has been one of the seminal events of the 21st century. China's extraordinary economic growth coupled with its military strength and active diplomacy has transformed the nation into a rising global power. This has not only resulted in a shift in the global distribution of power but also brought about alterations that have had significant ramifications for the world order. The world order as we know it today was established after the end of the Second World War with the United States (U.S.) at its helm- it is made up of a complex configuration of rules, international institutions, formal and informal alliances and norms undergirded by normative values and principles which are inherently 'liberal' in nature such as democracy, freedom of speech, expression and information, human rights and rule of law.

Organski explained the dynamics of the potential power transition war between China as a rising challenger and the United States as a declining hegemon in the international system.

More importantly, China has had to navigate its rise in this world order- an order which was shaped and institutionalized without its participation. This raises several important questions with regard to how a rising global power such as China views, participates and

interacts with the order. To put this into perspective, this analysis will be adopting the theoretical framework of the power transition theory as propounded by A.F.K Organski and focus on two important questions: First, is China a dissatisfied global power? If yes, what change does it seek in the order? Second, does it desire an order that is multipolar in nature? It is essential to note that these two questions are not mutually exclusive and neither are they exhaustive in studying China within this conceptual framework. In order to answer the above-mentioned questions, the analysis will examine in some detail China's approach to and engagement with the order. In conclusion, the analysis will also assess whether the power transition theory remains a useful framework for studying China in contemporary times.

Power Transition Theory

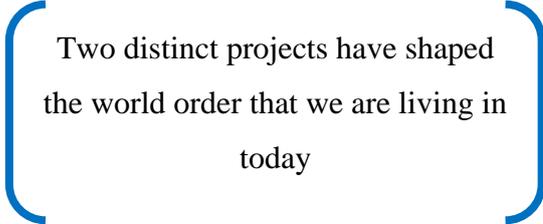
A.F.K Organski, in his book, *World Politics*, first formulated the power transition theory and predicted the potential rise of China and its impact on the international security order.¹ About 60 years ago, long before China embarked on its remarkable developmental path, Organski explained the dynamics of the potential power transition war between China as a rising challenger and the United States (U.S.) as a declining hegemon in the international system.² According to him, China's rise would be "spectacular" and "the power of China ought to eventually become greater" and "the Western

powers will find that the most serious threat to their supremacy comes from China”.³

Organski’s theory rests on two critical observations. First, the world order is hierarchically ordered with a dominant power (the hegemon) at the top that is responsible for creating and sustaining the order. There might be occasions when a rising power or challenger overtakes the hegemon- this is a period of crossover or power transition. Such transitions might be either peaceful (as in the case of the US overtaking Britain) or result in wars, for example, when a dissatisfied power, Germany, rose in power vis-à-vis the hegemon, Britain.⁴ The main variable in this theory for the prospect of war is that of dissatisfaction with the current order. Second, it posits that a country derives its power from internal development. Since development occurs at different rates⁵ for different countries, nations will rise and fall relative to one another.⁶

A vital aspect of the power transition theory is that of system stability. Power transition theory like hegemonic stability theory is based on the postulate that the stability of the international system rests upon hegemonic dominance which is achieved through power preponderance.⁷ The variable of satisfaction remains the most important element of the power transition theory. The core belief of the power transition theory is that rising powers are often dissatisfied with the world order- an order which according to power transition theory- has

been established by the dominant power. This dissatisfaction mainly arises from the fact that the order benefits the creator along with its allies, while rising powers are being disadvantaged or at least perceive themselves so.⁸ Thus, dissatisfied rising powers become challengers to the world order striving⁹ to reform the order, or at its extreme, even build a new one. Since the hegemon does not want to give up its position in the order voluntarily, it results in a great power war. However, peaceful power transitions are also possible- in this case, the rising power is satisfied with the existing status-quo.



Two distinct projects have shaped
the world order that we are living in
today

Understanding the World Order

The world order is the “product of centuries of struggle and innovation”.¹⁰ It can be defined as a stable structured pattern of relationships among states that involves some combination of parts, including emerging and established norms, rulemaking institutions¹¹, international organizations and formal and informal alliances, among others. The characteristic feature of an order is its stable and structured nature. An order is different from an international system - in the sense that a system encompasses all types of cultural, economic, political, social, ecological and other forms of interactions between and among states. An order consists of a certain

degree of institutionalization- established through ordering mechanisms¹² (such as alliances, norms, institutions) which play a role in governing the behaviors and relationships among actors in the order.

The liberal aspect of the world order, also known as liberal internationalism, has competed with the more orthodox Westphalian elements of the order.

Two distinct projects have shaped the world order that we are living in today. One is the establishment of the modern state system which dates back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This treaty established the core principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-intervention and the dynamics of great power conduct. These principles form the bedrock of the modern world order. The second project was the construction of the liberal world order heralded by the US. The devastations caused by the Second World War led to a liberal fervor- the newly formed nation-states whether liberal or authoritarian - seemed to largely agree that the world order should be shaped in a way which provided adequate space for consensus building and conflict resolution. American architects who were at the forefront of shaping the order in the postwar period, thus, advanced ambitious ideas about political and economic cooperation which were embodied in the United

Nations and Bretton Woods institutions. Due to postwar weakness in Europe, notwithstanding growing strains with the Soviet Union and the start of the Cold War, the United States of America was able, by virtue of its overall military and economic prowess, to take charge of the world order, adopting new commitments and functional roles in both security and economics.¹³

The American led-liberal order has placed heavy emphasis on normative values like democracy, human rights, freedom of speech and expression, equality and justice. This liberal aspect of the world order, also known as liberal internationalism, has competed with the more orthodox Westphalian elements of the order. Even though the order has overlapping and complex competing attributes, the two historic blueprints have created a world order which is now highly developed, institutionalized and expansive.

China in the World Order

As predicted in the power transition theory and by notable theorists and historians such as Paul Kennedy and Robert Gilpin, great powers rise and contest the terms of the international order. China is no different. It is following in the footsteps of rising great powers of the past.¹⁴ As captured very succinctly by the former US Deputy Secretary of State, James B. Steinberg- “A decade ago, the Chinese profoundly resisted the idea that it had any responsibility for the

global system. They hid behind their status as a developing country claiming that problems were not of their making. China now sees itself as a global player engaged in the issues of the day.”¹⁵

China was previously a norm-taker, meaning that it abided by the rules and norms adopted by the West, particularly the US.

A distinct feature of China’s rise in this order is that even more so than previous great powers, China’s rise is taking place in an order that is highly institutionalized. As Marc Lanteigne argues, China is not only “growing up”¹⁶ in this complex milieu of international organizations but is also making “active use”¹⁷ of these institutions to advance its “global power status”¹⁸ in the international order.

After the restoration of what China considered to be its ‘legitimate’ seat at the U.N. (displacing the Republic of China), it gradually abandoned its cold and adversarial stance, increasingly integrating into most institutions of the world order. In this phase, the Chinese became curious observers- learning the rules of the game. According to some scholars, China was a norm-taker during this period, meaning that it abided by the rules and norms adopted by the West, particularly the US. However, since the beginning of this century, China has adopted a pro-active role in international institutions. In

fact, ever since former US Deputy Secretary of State, Robert Zoellick urged China to become a “responsible stakeholder” in 2005, the US has encouraged China to take on greater responsibility to provide public goods instead of merely “free riding”.¹⁹ China is not only a part of all the major postwar institutions such as the United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organisation (WTO), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), security regimes such as Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and other bilateral agreements on greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, it has also been at the forefront of other regimes which link the nation with regions beyond the Asia-Pacific, such as, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and Strategic and Economic Dialogue (SE&D).

It is also an observer in many regional organizations such as Organization of American States (OAS), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Arctic Council and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). However, it is interesting to note that China along with the U.S. resists certain other institutions and treaties such as- the International Court of Justice (ICJ), International Criminal Court (ICC), Ottawa Landmines treaty, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Convention of Cluster Munitions. China also resists certain emerging “norms of intervention” such as the Proliferation Security Initiative, however, it has gradually come around to support the

Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, provided certain conditions are met.

Under the presidency of Xi Jinping, China has begun to advocate for and create new institutions

China's growing confidence in engaging with the institutional order is a direct and causal result of its increasing power in the world. China has spearheaded the initiative in creating new institutions because: a) it has felt that established institutions lack necessary reform; b) these organizations do not or might not advance Chinese interests in a way that is commensurate with its rising power and capabilities; and c) these institutions might impinge on China's concept of established norms such as sovereignty. An early example of this effort was the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which was established in 2001. Under the presidency of Xi Jinping, China has begun to advocate for and create new institutions, such as, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), New Development Bank (NDB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that places its geopolitical and geo-economic interests at the forefront.

The fundamental context for China's current and prospective stance on the international order is set by its national interests²⁰ or as defined by the Chinese- its 'core interests'. For any country, the value of the international order

lies in the way such an order can facilitate the pursuit of its national interests.²¹ The 'core interests' of China as officially defined in the 2011 Peaceful Development White Paper are- protecting its "sovereignty and territorial integrity" and achieving "national reunification"; preserving national security and its "political system established by the Constitution"; and maintaining "overall social stability and the basic safeguards for ensuring sustainable economic and social development."²² Subsequently, in July 2015, China passed its National Security Law, article 2 of which states, "national security refers to the relative absence of international or domestic threats to the state's power to govern, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity, the welfare of the people, sustainable economic and social development, and other major national interests, and the ability to ensure a continued state of security."²³ This significantly expanded the definition of national security to include almost everything under the sun, thereby also expanding its core interests.

China strongly endorses the orthodox elements of the Westphalian sovereign states system, particularly that of, sovereignty. China is increasingly becoming aggressive while addressing its sovereignty concerns in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea. In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 2015, President Xi Jinping opined that not only is "sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries inviolable"

but it also means that “all countries’ right to independently choose social systems and development paths should be upheld”.²⁴

Chinese leaders today also acknowledge that participation in the world order, specifically in international institutions, also enhance their nation’s power and “confer prestige, status and international and domestic legitimacy”

In order to fulfill its ‘core interests’, a crucial objective of the authoritarian Communist Party of China (CPC) which governs the nation is to maintain its control and legitimacy over the state and its citizens. Since the 1970s, the CPC has prioritized economic growth and competent governance as the source of its legitimacy. This successful shift toward performance-based legitimacy has strengthened the party’s grip on power, despite its nominal adherence to an antiquated Marxist ideology and Leninist politics.²⁵ China’s participation in the different aspects of the world order is actually based on a strategic calculation of supporting those values, norms and agendas which ensure that the CPC continues to thrive and maintain its power and authority. For example, China’s support of the international economic order is more forthcoming than the global political order which favors upholding liberal values such as democracy, human rights and freedom

of speech and expression; and, also makes it a benchmark for judging states on moral grounds. China is also deeply skeptical of the U.S. led military alliance system. Thus, China supports some aspects of the order while contesting others.

According to some Chinese scholars, a rising power such as China must not only increase its material capabilities but grow “socially” within the existing international society.²⁶

Guo Shuyong, an international relations expert at the Shanghai Jiao Tong University states that, “legitimacy plays an indispensably important role in the structuring and socializing of international political behavior....”²⁷ In order to rise in a socially acceptable and non-threatening manner, China has focused on creating narratives such as ‘community with a shared future of mankind’ or a ‘community of common destiny’ while also increasingly focusing on making multilateralism a core component of its foreign policy. China’s approach to multilateralism has matured considerably²⁸, despite much emphasis on bilateral foreign policy in Chinese diplomacy.²⁹ Apart from supporting international institutions, Beijing has championed the cause of regional multilateralism by taking the initiative in creating several forums and summits such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) + 3 forum; East Asia Summit; Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS)

summit; Chiang Mai Initiative and Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism.

Chinese leaders today also acknowledge that participation in the world order, specifically in international institutions, also enhance their nation's power and "confer prestige, status and international and domestic legitimacy".³⁰

Beijing has concentrated its efforts in trying to make its BRI synonymous with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

As is evident from the above analysis, China vociferously supports distinct parts of the world order while contesting others- it is an ardent supporter of the Westphalian system while it strongly contests the elements of 'liberal internationalism' and the U.S. led system of military alliances. China feels that its existence is threatened by these aspects of the order, and hence, it zealously guards itself against liberal norms and alliances which it perceives as dangerous. China surprisingly favors those institutions, such as the UN, that reflect more independent, value-neutral expressions³¹ of the world order. Therefore, this analysis would be incomplete without considering the nature of China's growth in an international institution which has been present since the birth of China and which has been given due importance by the Chinese, that is, the UN.

China in the UN

China became a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) in 1971 after the General Assembly voted to expel the Republic of China (ROC). China's participation in the U.N. is similar to that of its participation in the world order at large - it went from being an underconfident outsider at the organization's periphery to a self-assertive and confident insider - playing a major role in the organization. Currently, four out of the fifteen UN specialized agencies are headed by Chinese nationals – the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDP), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Since 2007, the position of under-secretary-general for the U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has been held by Chinese career diplomats, giving the Chinese government opportunities to reshape the UN's development programs in accordance to its interests.³² Beijing has concentrated its efforts in trying to make its BRI synonymous with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At the 2018 U.N. DESA High Level Symposium on the Belt and Road Initiative and 2030 Agenda, Liu Zhenmin, formerly China's Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs and the current U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, spoke of the synchronicity between the Belt and Road Initiative and the 2030 Agenda, arguing that "both of them serve

the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter” and “aim to promote win-win cooperation, shared development and prosperity, peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness and mutual understanding and trust.”³³ Following DESA’s lead, the U.N. as a whole vocally supported the Belt and Road.

While China has been consistently advocating for a reform of the UN it has blocked efforts by Japan and India for a permanent seat in the UNSC.

China is the second largest monetary contributor to the U.N. with its contribution rising to twelve per cent of the U.N regular budget. Not only that, it is also the second largest financial contributor to the U.N. Peacekeeping budget, now roughly \$6 billion a year, covering 15 per cent of costs.³⁴ China is also the largest troop contributor to the U.N. peacekeeping operations among the permanent members. Although, out of all the UN members, it is the 10th largest contributor of peacekeepers as of February 2019. In January 2018, China had 2,634 staff participating in UNPKOs in South Sudan, Lebanon, Mali, Darfur, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Western Sahara, Cyprus and Afghanistan.³⁵ In order to ramp up its commitment to the international order, President Xi Jinping pledged in 2015 to – establish a \$1 billion peace and development fund, earmarked \$100 million

for military assistance to the African Union (AU) and promised to contribute a standby peacekeeping force of 8,000 troops. There are also unconfirmed reports that Beijing was anxious to have a Chinese official take over the Department of Peacekeeping Operations at the U.N., however China has not made an official request as of this writing.³⁶ According to Courtney Fung, China’s involvement is based on a desire to be perceived both as a great power and as an ally to developing countries.³⁷

With regard to utilizing its veto power as a permanent member of the U.N.S.C, China has used its veto power only 14 times. As a point of comparison, the U.S. has vetoed 80 resolutions since November 1971 (when China joined the U.N.) – accounting for nearly two-thirds of all U.N.S.C vetoes during this period.³⁸ Since 1997, China cast 13 out of its 14 vetoes³⁹ reflecting an increase in its activity within the UNSC. It is important to note that China’s use of veto aligns with its geostrategic interests- for example, China’s vetoed against peacekeeping missions in Guatemala (1997) and Macedonia (1999), since both nations maintained official relations with Taiwan; its veto of a U.S. sponsored resolution criticizing Burma’s human rights record; veto of sanctions against Zimbabwe and South Sudan; and, it also vetoed a US-drafted resolution to address the crisis in Venezuela, among others. However, it has also played a positive role in enforcing sanctions against North Korea for its nuclear programme and was also vital in convincing the Sudanese

government to assent to a UN / AU hybrid peacekeeping force. Interestingly, many resolutions have been watered down in order to accommodate Chinese concerns. In addition, while China has been consistently advocating for a reform of the UN (in particular, to give a greater voice to developing nations in the UNSC), it has blocked efforts by Japan and India for a permanent seat in the UNSC.

Under the leadership of Xi, China has sought to assert its place as a global power in the world order – sometimes unilaterally and aggressively.

As noted in the previous section, China vociferously guards itself against liberal values and the one which strikes most is its erroneous record in dealing with the promotion of human rights. Despite being a member of the U.N. Human Rights Council, China has faced severe criticism from the West over its treatment of Uyghur minorities. Beijing, however, stated that this is an attempt to politicize human rights and question its territorial integrity.⁴⁰ China has worked consistently and often aggressively to silence criticism of its human rights record before the UN bodies and has taken actions aimed at weakening some of the central mechanisms available in those institutions to advance rights.⁴¹

Lastly, the quality of the Chinese delegation at the UN today draws praise from many quarters,

with observers heralding the contrast between the rigid and closed diplomats of previous decades to the funny, fluent, worldly, incisive and open representatives of recent years, completely at ease in the international game.⁴²

Conclusion

This analysis strived to carry out a thorough examination of China's engagement with the world order by utilizing the framework of the power transition theory and asking two vital questions: a.) is China a dissatisfied power? If yes, what change does it seek in the order? and b.) Does it desire a transformation of the order into one that is multipolar in nature?

After examining China's views of the order and its interactions with the order, the logical conclusion is that China is not an entirely dissatisfied power- on the one hand, it strongly believes in and guards the conservative concepts laid by the Westphalian system which have been perceived as crucial to the existence of the Chinese state; and on the other hand, China is irked by the standards led down by the West, particularly the US, believing that different nations have different social and political systems which should be respected instead of blindly adopting foreign or even alien standards of normative values, such as those of human rights, democracy and rule of law. It also strongly opposes the US system of alliances which it views as threatening not only to its power and prestige but also its existence. This

fear draws from the nation’s colonial past and its suffering at the hands of imperial powers. In lockstep with China’s growth in power, China believes in seeking its rightful place in the order- an order in which it has the necessary power and legitimacy to write and rewrite certain rules and norms according to the Chinese way. In his speech to the 19th Party Congress, Chairman Xi Jinping laid out his vision for a “new era...that sees China moving closer to the center stage and making greater contributions to mankind.”⁴³ Under the leadership of Xi, China has sought to assert its place as a global power in the world order – sometimes unilaterally and aggressively.

China’s repeated focus on the value of multilateralism indicates that China wants a shift in the world order.

The fulfillment of the ‘Chinese Dream’ by achieving ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ also depends on a stable and peaceful international environment. Thus, China’s deepening integration into the international order to realize the ‘Chinese Dream’ also means that it is this very order that has provided China with the space to transform itself into a global power. Thus, the Chinese state is deeply embedded in this order and does not seek to overturn it; rather, it seeks a “negotiated order”.⁴⁴As noted in the sections above, multilateralism has become a cornerstone of

Chinese foreign policy. Xi Jinping has time and again reiterated China’s commitment to upholding the values enshrined in the UN charter and highlighted China’s practice of multilateralism. In his speech to the UN commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Restoration of the Lawful Seat of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations, he once again focused on reiterating China’s commitment to the UN and its sincere practice of multilateralism. China’s repeated focus on the value of multilateralism in speeches by various Chinese leaders and its practice of the same in its foreign policy indicates that China wants a shift in the world order from that of American dominance and hegemony to one which is multipolar in nature. Therefore, the distinction China draws is between a “multipolar” order – i.e., one in which non-Western countries have a more equally weighted say in setting norms and making decisions within international institutions – and the current order, which China regards as a largely “unilateral” one that privileges the US and its allies.⁴⁵

Coming to the relevance of the power transition theory, G. John Ikenberry in his article, *The Rise of China and the Future of the West*, enumerates certain factors such as – the nature of the rising states’ regime, the degree of its dissatisfaction with the old order and the character of the international order itself – which determines how a power transition unfolds.⁴⁶ The coalition based character of this order is an important

feature- essentially, there are two coalitions- one, a conglomeration of democratic nations espousing liberal values; and second, a coalition of states which believe in more authoritarian norms. Keeping these factors in mind, it seems that a great war between China and the US is not likely to occur in the near future, since, China has now heavily invested in this order. However, going forth, there will be clashes on who sets the terms of the existing order.

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ICS ANALYSIS *Back Issues*

Issue No/ Month	Title	Author
No. 144 November	Exploration of Xi Jinping’s Concept of Common Prosperity	Shyam Saran
No.143 November	Legalism sugar-coated with Confucianism – from Qin and Han dynasty – Has this tradition continued in CCP way of ruling?	Animesh Jain
No.142 November	Women in China: “Baby Makers” and “Bed Warmers”?	Hemant Adlakha
No. 141 November	China’s ‘Leading Small Groups’: Instruments of Governance and Control	Kishan S Rana
No.140 October	Examining China’s Position on Myanmar in the United Nations Security Council	Chandam Thareima
No. 139 October	China’s Vaccine Diplomacy: Soft Power, Hegemony and its Geopolitics	Swapneel Thakur
No.138 October	China Working 24x7 to Establish China-Pakistan-The Taliban “Troika” in Afghanistan to Make India “Inconsequential”	Hemant Adlakha
No.137 September	China’s Recent Tech Regulatory Measures	SharmilaKantha
No.136 September	Decoding the Myanmar Crisis: Domestic Factors Behind Coup, External Players Help Sustain it	Jelvin Jose
No.135 August	Beijing Thinks India is the ‘Weakling’ in Quad	Hemant Adlakha

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