

# CHINA, GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER: A NEO-GRAMSCIAN ANALYSIS

*Maheera Munir and Faiza Abid\**

## **Abstract**

*China's ascendant position in International Relations has sparked a debate over the future of the US-led liberal international order. As China's military, economic, ideological, and institutional influence continues to expand, apprehensions about its challenges to the existing global order and the evolution of China's role in international governance have intensified. This research is qualitative and consults both primary and secondary recourses. From the neo-Gramscian school of thought perspective, this research explores the core relationship between China and the global order, delving deep into the historical context. Unlike traditional international relations theories, this research presents a historical and relational interpretation to present an alternative perspective on China's rise. Elucidating this dynamic historical progression, this paper posits that China's relationship with the world order has evolved significantly, moving from animosity and refutation in the post-independence period to compliance with Western ideals and institutions, integration into the international system and, more recently, to the pursuit of independent institution-building, global governance, and promotion of alternative world order. This paper concludes that while China has adopted a predominant role in shaping the rules of the international system, it is far from being a disruptive reformist. Thus, despite its global outreach, China does not seek to build a power centre that counters explicitly the Western liberal order but signals a gradual transition towards a multipolar order.*

**Keywords:** China, Global Governance, Neo-Gramscian Theory, Hegemony, Liberal International Order, Ideas, Institutions.

## **Introduction**

**W**hat Napoleon Bonaparte predicted of China's rise and its shaking global influence now appears to be turning into a geopolitical reality. The rise of China as a global power has sparked a debate about the implications of increasing Chinese influence on the existing world order. Realists argue that China's counterhegemonic rise will likely threaten the status quo, facilitate power transition, and cause instability within the current world order.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, liberals view China's rise as a propelling force behind increased global economic interdependence, which reduces

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\*Maheera Munir is Researcher at Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS), Lahore. She holds an MPhil in International Relations from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore. Faiza Abid is an independent IR scholar. She holds an MPhil in International Relations from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore. The author(s) can be accessed at [maheeramunir8@gmail.com](mailto:maheeramunir8@gmail.com).

the likelihood of conflict. Similarly, constructivists maintain that the global norms and rules are strong enough to restrain China and can shape China into a responsible provider of global public goods.<sup>2</sup>

The rise of China in the international power hierarchy is mainly the result of a series of progress that China underwent post-1949. Mao Zedong's attempts at ending the semi-colonial status of China to achieve political stability followed by Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, but a low-profile, self-reliance policy prepared China to shape its relations with the external world under a self-determined approach. As China's economic progress attracted foreign direct investment, China surpassed the Japanese GDP and became the second-largest economic power in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

With the rise in emerging economies, Beijing harnessed a historic opportunity to participate in the global order. The major attraction for developing countries remains that the Chinese governance model has lifted 800 million people out of poverty and transformed China into an industrial powerhouse.<sup>4</sup> Although China remains a communist state, it has carefully adopted a mixed economic system combining free-market and socialist principles. This resulted in China's unprecedented economic growth and consequent military modernisation. In turn, it paved the way for increased Chinese influence and assertiveness in the South China Sea, the Indo-Pacific region and across the globe. China's transforming role is exhibited in a sequence of actions such as leading the global governance mechanisms, enhancing patterns of global economic governance, creating a broad framework for international collaboration, assuming the role of a responsible power, constructing accessible trade areas, etc.

The existing literature only partly analyses the interaction between China and the existing liberal international order. Therefore, this research utilises the neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony to explain the historical and relational interpretation of China's current engagement with the global order. Neo-Gramscian theory allows a detailed analysis of Chinese 'ideas' under its approach to a new world order and Chinese 'institutions' such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), New Development Bank (NDB), etc. to determine how China's rise has reshaped the global governance structure and how it threatens the liberal international order.

This paper argues that the perception of China as a threat to the liberal international order stems from its expanding strategic influence, increasing role in international institutions, and vision of a renewed world order. In reality, however, China is so deeply integrated into the current global order that it only seeks to leverage its influence to not act as a disruptive, revisionist vindicator but to facilitate a transition from US hegemony towards multipolarity with China as one of the principal power centres. To investigate this research problem, this paper first explores the assumptions of the neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony and determines the nexus between global governance, hegemony, and world order. Secondly, it provides historical background on China's rise and increasing role in international

management. Thirdly, it delves into the threats that China's rise poses to the liberal international order through its ideas of a renewed world order, BRI, and increasing institutional power. Next, it implores if China's new world order can replace the existing liberal international order. Lastly, it concludes that China's material and ideational/normative capabilities allow it to pursue independent institution-building on the grounds of opposing unilateralism. Still, they have not given China the power to replace the existing world order.

## **Neo-Gramscian Theory of Hegemony**

The Neo-Gramscian theory studies International Relations through a critical lens and is rooted in the political theory of Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). In the 1980s, Robert Cox advanced Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony, world order, and historical change. Neo-Gramscian theory evaluates how the particular combination of societal forces, state, and predominant set of ideas determine and uphold the existing world order.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, neo-Gramscian theory transcends the impasse between realist and liberalist approaches by contextualising their theoretical underpinnings and uncovering the interlocking relation between agency and structure. According to the Gramscian school of thought, realism views the structure of the international system based on power distribution in terms of material resources. However, such an approach dismisses the role of social forces and assigns insignificant value to the normative element of world order.

Cox applies the concept of Gramscian hegemony to global politics by emphasising the issue of consent. He asserted that dominant international states have historically shaped the global order to suit their objectives. However, it has not been possible solely due to their coercive capabilities but because dominant power has successfully generated a broad consensus for that order. Moreover, intellectual and moral leadership is central to Gramscian theory, which means that consent and acceptance of ideologies and institutions compatible with the existing structure maintain a dominant structure. Therefore, hegemony refers to a comprehensive configuration of state and non-state actors following a unified, mutually agreed set of values and norms. According to Cox, it is not only the material capabilities but also the ideas and institutions engaged in a reciprocal interaction in this structure. Thus, material and conceptual forces are not opposite but mutually constitutive.<sup>6</sup>

Material capabilities refer to quantifiable resources of a state, such as territorial size, population, GDP, industrial units, military resources, etc., which hold both destructive and productive potential. Ideas are of two kinds: intersubjective and collective. While intersubjective ideas highlight how social relations work in a particular historical setting, collective ideas represent contrasting views regarding the validity of contemporary power dynamics and the meanings of abstract concepts like freedom, justice, etc.<sup>7</sup> According to Cox, institutions are tools for maintaining and preserving the existing order. Thus, in addition to highlighting the prevailing or

evolving power structures, institutions also foster collective ideas which conform to these power relations.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the neo-Gramscian theory takes social forces, as opposed to the state, as the central ontological unit. It considers the formation and historical evolution of states in retrospect. State formation happens when the elite class prioritises broader societal concerns over narrow material gains and binds the diverse aspirations of social forces.<sup>9</sup> An alliance of social forces, i.e., historical bloc, is linked with hegemonic social class and can transfer into global realms as it adopts the new form of social relations of production.

### **The Nexus Between Global Governance, Hegemony, and World Order**

The concept of ‘global governance’ was prominent in the post-Cold War period under economic interdependence and globalisation, which gradually translated into Western domination over international governance under the unipolar structure and liberal order. Global governance promotes the idea that the state is no longer a unitary actor in the international system; intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations, transnational companies, and civil society all play an influential role in addressing global issues and challenges. Thus, the concept of global governance largely reconstructed the traditional framework of analysis (individual level-state international level) to include two new analytical units, i.e., a broader level of the international system, often referred to as the global order and a smaller level of societal influences and social forces.<sup>10</sup>

According to Thomas G. Weiss, global governance combines formal and informal elements, such as ideas, rules, norms, policies and institutions, to establish a universally accepted order.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Chan and Lee argue that global governance considers how global issues are managed to ensure stability and order in this anarchic international system with no central governing body.<sup>12</sup> Margaret Karns and Karen Mingst suggest that global governance is made up of several “cooperative problem-solving arrangements and activities” such as IGOs, NGOs, semi-formal state groupings like G7, G20, BRICS, etc., international rules and regulations or ‘soft’ law, international regimes, ad hoc arrangements, conferences, and public-private partnerships like the UN Development Fund (UNDP), etc.<sup>13</sup> These definitions and indicators suggest that ‘ideas’ and ‘institutions’ are two common elements in global governance and the neo-Gramscian conception of hegemony. Therefore, a conceptual relationship can be established between the two via international organisations.

According to Cox, international institutions maintain a hegemonic role, which is evident from the following features:

- Institutions are the embodiment of rules and norms that assist the outward expansion of a hegemon’s world order

- Institutions themselves are a consequence of world order with a predominant state
- Institutions validate the norms of the world order on the ideological basis
- They homogenise the elites of peripheral states
- They cushion counter-hegemonic ambitions<sup>14</sup>

Cox illustrates that international organisation is not merely a manifestation of material entities; instead, it comprises norms, rules, and ideas concerning the problems and challenges of global governance. In this way, the effectiveness of international organisations as instruments of hegemony depends on the rise and fall of global governance and the evolving dynamics of global order. To become a historical bloc, a state must uphold an international order conceived as universally acceptable.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Rise of China and its Increasing Role in International Governance**

After its independence in 1949, China remained hostile towards the external world and rejected the structure of global governance dominated by the West. China struggled to transform from an agricultural to an industrial economy and remained a middle power between the US and the USSR.<sup>16</sup> Under the *libido (leaning to one side) strategy of Mao Zedong, Beijing recognised the USA as a significant threat because it undermined the country's statehood and legitimacy and fostered stronger relations with its ideological partner, the USSR.*<sup>17</sup> Mao argued that China should lead a global communist revolution and supported several socialist revolutions in third-world countries such as Myanmar and Vietnam.<sup>18</sup>

Due to China's ideological rivalry with the West, it had limited participation in global institutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. China feared these international organisations were merely the West's economic and political tool to promote a new form of imperialism that directly threatened Beijing's non-interventionist and independent foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, regarding global governance, the post-independence period was an era of mutual hostility and rejection. China acted as a revisionist state, challenging the international governance system. As Sino-Soviet relations further deteriorated towards the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, China recognised the USSR as the greater of two evils. In 1971, China was able to ease relations with the West through ping-pong diplomacy, which also paved the way for official diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing.<sup>20</sup> China became a UN member in 1971 and established a loose and limited form of cooperation.<sup>21</sup>

Chinese engagement with the international community expanded under Deng Xiaoping as his idea of 'Reform and Opening up' was a massive catalyst for easing Chinese external relations.<sup>22</sup> The 1978 economic reforms underpinned internal economic development and modernisation. They improved the country's international perception and "Tao Guang Yang Hui", which meant the country should practice self-

restraint and 'lie low'.<sup>23</sup> Gradually, China became more accepting towards the norms and ideas of the Western liberal order. After 1978, China's institutional participation further deepened as it expanded its involvement in the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001. As Beijing became more integrated into the global governance structure and reaped benefits, its role transformed into a "system vindicator".<sup>24</sup>

China has adopted a more proactive stance in the international governance structure in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial turmoil. It allowed China to assume a leadership position in the Asia-Pacific through the economic assistance of regional states to avert the negative implications of the crisis. The financial crisis radically redistributed global power, providing ample opportunities for China to expand its regional influence and considerably enhance its material capabilities. Consequently, China made significant economic strides, replacing the USA as the largest global manufacturer and overtaking Japan to emerge as the second-largest global economy in terms of GDP in 2010 and becoming the most prominent trading country in 2013.<sup>25</sup>

Highlighting its ideological forefront, Xi Jinping proposed his idea for global governance in 2012 based on principles such as extensive consultations, mutual contributions, and collective benefits.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, 'extensive consultations' means that each state participating in global governance should brainstorm and discuss ideas together; 'joint contribution' indicates that all states must play their respective parts to construct global governance in a manner that promotes collective advantages and enhances overall potential; and 'shared benefits' implies that the benefits generated by the consequences of global governance should be equitably distributed amongst the participants. To promote this idea, the Chinese government proposed and launched innovative projects catering to differing global governance issues, e.g., BRI, the New Asian Security Concept, and the 'Community of Common Destiny' concept.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding institutions, even though Beijing's position in the prevailing international institutions has become comparatively strong, it still lacks credible decision-making power in the face of US influence. Therefore, China is moving away from the conventional international organisations of the Western liberal order and struggling to attain more structural power by creating new China-led global institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), New Development Bank (NDB), etc.<sup>28</sup> The AIIB can potentially enhance Beijing's sway and credibility through different means. First, China could attain leverage via the threat of exit, i.e., presenting an alternative to the established Bretton Wood multilateral financing and lending system.<sup>29</sup> Second, it allows China to expand its network of global partnerships, strengthen country-led pathways for development, and propagate its principle of non-interference.<sup>30</sup> In turn, this would lead to the growth of a supportive worldwide alliance and possibly erode the political authority of the US. In the same manner, the NDB is based on a country system that not only upholds state sovereignty but also restricts the imposition of Western standards by promoting the involvement

of local institutions in development projects.<sup>31</sup> This translates into a feeling of ownership over a state's development trajectories.

Furthermore, China has allied with emergent economies, particularly BRICS, to devise an alternative model of global governance that is constructive and unified instead of unipolar. China has adopted a predominant role, serving as a primary investor, importer of FDI, and a key trading partner.<sup>32</sup> In practical terms, BRICS is viewed as a coalition of influential powers with a shared financial reserve of US\$4 trillion, which has made significant strides in formulating a multilateral economic policy, forming alternative trade and financial pathways, fostering market integration, and reducing costs.<sup>33</sup> According to the estimates, with their planned expansion, BRICS nations could collectively account for more than 50% of the global GBD, reaffirming their importance within the international order.<sup>34</sup>

On the one hand, Chinese leaders and scholars maintain that China-led international institutions complement the prevailing global governance framework. Conversely, Western states disagree, claiming that this represents China's attempt to redirect the world from a Western-led global governance structure. Thus, China has adopted a counterhegemonic strategy in the contemporary era, and its participation in the international governance structure is reflected in its attempts to reshape the system.

## **Threats to Liberal International Order**

By the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, Western powers continued to view China's strengthening position in the international system as an effort to integrate itself into the liberal international order along with Chinese acceptance of existing structures, mechanisms, norms, and values. As evident as it is, China's amalgamation into the global political economy has allowed Beijing to reap several financial and trade benefits. This eliminates the need to revise or transform the order that has allowed China to sustain itself as a global political power and a thriving economic player. Moreover, after nearly seventy years of the prevalence of the Western liberal order and thirty years of US unipolarity, it is difficult to think that the current order could give in to something radically different. Nevertheless, elites within Beijing are engaged in a robust discussion regarding constructing an alternative world order. Under Xi Jinping's tenure as the leader, Beijing has openly declared dissatisfaction with the prevailing global order.<sup>35</sup> While China maintained a relatively defensive stance in the past, it is now carrying out forward-leaning and assertive attempts to transform the existing state of affairs.

With an evolved role in global governance, greater material capabilities, and the introduction of the BRI, China's rise threatens the liberal framework of the international order in multiple ways.

## Chinese Conception of a Renewed World Order

Although China has not explicitly laid out the vision for an alternative world order, close attention to Chinese debates and discussions reveals that Beijing draws inspiration from its strategic culture, rooted in historical expectations and traditional thoughts. Collectively, China's vision depicts a longing for a limited dominance that loosely extends over significant areas of the Global South, with the underlying aim to free the region from the hegemonic ambitions of the West, embedded in liberal ideals.<sup>36</sup> The crucial characteristics of China's vision for world order are as follows:

- **Tianxia – A Confucian Doctrine:** China derives its inspiration for a new world order from *Tianxia*, a Confucian doctrine based on the ideas of a unitary world; 'worldliness' instead of internationalism; the world as a unit of analysis instead of nation-states; and presence of a global institution that discards anarchic nature of the international system.<sup>37</sup> The current vision of China regarding the new world order considers some, and not all, principles of the Tianxian ideology. China's vision of shaping the world rests on the motivation to establish a vital place within the international system that allows China to promote rules that value its interests (unchallenged power, economic development, and global outreach) and curb rules and norms that undermine its interests (rules-based order, international law, and democracy).
- **Economic Interdependence but Political Independence:** China, under its vision for a new international order, promotes the concept of 'economic interconnectedness alongside political sovereignty'. The idea asserts that each state should be free to choose its system of government, authoritarian or democratic, based on its historical dynamics, culture, and socio-political conditions.<sup>38</sup> No state should force the other state, politically or militarily, to convert into democratic or non-democratic. Instead of universal coexistence and interdependence, China's vision for a new world order focuses on political coexistence and economic interdependence, threatening the democratic norms and ideas of the liberal international order. This idea is further emphasised in China's recent Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI), which calls for respect for other countries' values, histories, and cultures and to refrain from imposing one's values on others.<sup>39</sup>
- **Partial Order:** China does not envision the complete collapse of the present international order; instead, the goal seems to be constructing a partial system sculpted out of the prevailing system. The defining characteristics of this subsystem would be 'hierarchy' and 'asymmetry.' Beijing envisions forging interdependencies instead of stringent control and complete absorption of states within its



sphere of influence. China would be at the top as the predominant state, and weaker states would operate around its orbit.<sup>40</sup>

- **Common Security:** Under its Global Security Initiative (GSI) proposed in 2022, China promotes the notion of ‘common security’, challenging the collective security principle of the existing world order. China asserts that collective security is limited to the security of states that are part of a particular security alliance, such as NATO. On the other hand, common security represents a common strategy and security of all the states that would allow equal participation in security mechanisms and promotion of the common good.<sup>41</sup>

In summation, China envisions a partial, loose, and malleable hegemony. Partiality indicates the prevalence of a sphere of influence rather than the aspiration to dominate the entire world. Loose means that China aims to exert direct, absolute control of the territories of foreign states and governments. Malleable implies that Beijing’s hegemonic ambitions are not defined under strict geographic or cultural lines; the only precondition is regard for China’s predominant position.<sup>42</sup> However, it is imperative to note that such an order would not originate alongside geographical boundaries or ideological fault lines but along the degree of difference offered to Beijing by countries under its influence.

## The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The BRI, a potent combination of Chinese ideas and institutions, formulates the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy in the current era. The project is closely interlinked with Beijing’s vision to create a comity of nations with shared goals and aspirations. It corresponds to the vision that Beijing is central to the new economic and political order and exercises influence over states. Under BRI, Beijing’s influence extends from the East Asian Region to Eurasia, its adjacent water bodies, and the developing world. China insists the BRI will allow states to escape the shackles of the US-dominated political and economic order. According to China, the goals of BRI include regional development, increasing China’s industrial power, and resolving the problems of overabundant industrial capacity.<sup>43</sup>

However, the West maintains that the BRI is not merely a tool to assist China with its national economic agenda. Instead, the aim is to expand the Chinese foothold worldwide by setting up financial institutions, building ports, highways and pipelines, financing infrastructure projects, enlarging diplomatic networks, and promoting cultural exchange.<sup>44</sup> The Western powers view the BRI as Beijing’s overarching strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century with counter-hegemonic goals and objectives. The US, in particular, describes the BRI as the Chinese Communist Party’s mechanism to further its revisionist agenda and strengthen its influence over the developing world through debt-trap diplomacy.<sup>45</sup> This has led to a widespread perception that the BRI is akin to China’s interpretation of the Marshall Plan, which allowed the US to acquire more significant influence over the European continent, global institutions, and the world.<sup>46</sup>

On the contrary, China asserts that BRI is not developed on hegemonic features but is an effort to ensure peace and stability by strengthening bilateral relationships and establishing multilateral frameworks not exploited and controlled by Western powers.<sup>47</sup> It was to promote the idea of cutting reliance on Western institutions, so China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to fund projects within BRI partner countries. The AIIB aims to provide financial assistance to BRI states at low interest rates over a long period in exchange for access to resources and transportation nodes.<sup>48</sup> The Western countries view the AIIB as China's primary tool of exploitation and the weapon of debt-trap diplomacy. The typical Western perception is that the AIIB allows China to exercise rights of ownership over natural resources and ports of a partner country if it fails to meet loan conditionalities.<sup>49</sup> This broadly threatens the sovereignty of independent states and the principles of the rules-based international order.

The BRI is primarily viewed as a Chinese tool to expand infrastructure foothold and strategic influence. This is evident from the case of Sri Lanka, which received a US\$1.3 billion loan from AIIB to develop the Hambantota Port. However, as Sri Lanka failed to repay loans, negotiations led to a 99-year lease, facilitating Chinese strategic expansionism in the Indo-Pacific power theatre.<sup>50</sup> In addition to this, the BRI aims to internationalise the Chinese currency, the Renminbi. For this very purpose, China has established the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), supported by the People's Bank of China, which remains outside the control of Western-led international financial institutions.<sup>51</sup> Thus, BRI and its institutions and mechanisms threaten the liberal international order.

### **China's Increasing Institutional Power**

In addition to BRI, China is formulating an international network of collaboration built on the principles of communication, non-aggression, and non-alliance. Xi Jinping first proposed this idea in 2014; he stated that Beijing must make more friends while adhering to the non-alignment principle.<sup>52</sup> Beijing's diplomatic partnership does not seek to tie states into a rigid alliance system, whether military or economic. Instead, it yearns for an all-round collaboration in economic, political, diplomatic, and security realms. China regards its partnerships as crucial for realising its vision of a comity of nations with a shared destiny, so it partners with authoritarian and liberal democratic states. The latter plays a significant role in legitimising the agenda that sabotages the basic foundation of the international normative order. For example, democratic states, which are in the majority in the UNHRC, can defend the UDHR. However, Beijing's 'right to development' concept appeals to authoritarian states and democracies alike.

Furthermore, According to Xi Jinping, inequitable and inadequate structures within the international governance system need to be reformed. China must develop fresh mechanisms and regulations to foster economic and regional collaboration.<sup>53</sup> To enhance its institutional power, China is:

- Reforming and transforming the prevailing global mechanism to enhance the discourse power of the developing world, represented by Beijing, within the institutions. The fundamental goal is to break the monopoly of first-world countries. An example is the enlargement of Beijing's share of votes in the IMF and World Bank.<sup>54</sup>
- Creating new global institutions and entities so Beijing can exert its influence from the beginning.

For this very purpose, China has established institutions like the AIIB, Silk Road Fund, New Development Bank, 16+1 platform, and the China–Latin America Forum. China is also working to include its critical concepts in UN resolutions; for instance, since 2017, the phrase 'community of shared future for mankind' has been included in the UN resolutions.<sup>55</sup> Simultaneously, Beijing is working to position BRI in the UNHRC, UN Agenda 2030, and sustainable development goals as an endorsement of the state's endowment to international governance.<sup>56</sup>

In 2021, China introduced the Global Development Initiative (GDI) at the 76<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly, which calls for a people-centred approach to shared and sustainable development to accelerate socio-economic recovery post-COVID-19 pandemic and speed up the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda.<sup>57</sup> Under the GDI, China has established the Group of Friends of the GDI at the UN, a library of global development projects, a US\$ 4 billion fund, and a Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund. The GDI has successfully undertaken more than 200 small and mid-sized development projects since its inception and enjoys the support of more than 100 countries and international organisations.<sup>58</sup> Another such initiative which enhances China's influence in global governance is the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) proposed in March 2023, which advocates for the respect for diversity of civilisations while upholding the shared values of humanity for the promotion of the principles of equality, inclusivity, mutual growth, and coexistence.<sup>59</sup> This initiative enjoys tremendous support and appreciation from the Arab League, African states, and Asian nations who have been at the discriminatory end of the liberal international order. Together, the GSI, GDI, and GCI initiatives are perceived as significant global public goods that China is offering the world in line with its independent, non-interference, and win-win development foreign policy.

Furthermore, China has adopted leadership in reinforcing a gradual yet technologically driven approach towards international climate governance. Forging alliances with countries of the global South as a part of climate politics has increased Beijing's discursive prowess and diplomatic standing.<sup>60</sup> For example, the emphasis on decarbonisation has become a central focus in Beijing's attempts to formulate external coalitions. China places a high priority on integrating the countries of the global South in Chinese-led clean-tech provision and supply chains as opposed to collaborative technological ventures.<sup>61</sup> Thus, China is effectively leveraging soft power to underscore

the significance of adaptation in multilateral negotiations over climate change initiatives.

### **Can China's New World Order Replace Liberal International Order?**

A neo-Gramscian analysis of China's historical growth and its changing role in global governance depicts that Beijing's evolution has been a dynamic process rather than static growth that aligns with the norms and values of Western liberal international order. A detailed interpretation of Chinese institutions and their promotion of new ideas and norms reflects China's will to challenge the existing global governance system, counter unilateralism, and assume the driving seat of the global governance mechanisms. Due to its material capabilities, ideas, and established mechanisms and institutions, China can follow its independent strategic choices. In the contemporary period of increasing Chinese influence, China is unwilling to abide by the principles of international law and the rules of the liberal international order that do not conform to Chinese interests.

Following the period of isolation (1949-1978), China's integration into the neoliberal system through its open-door strategy paved the way for China to turn its aspiration of national rejuvenation into a tangible reality. However, the very anarchic structure and flaws of the Western liberal order (in terms of democratic backsliding, military interventions and rigid notions of collective security) have compelled China to assume the position of a counterhegemonic actor. Through a neo-Gramscian lens, China's counterhegemonic course strategy uses material capabilities to influence ideas and build institutions to replace Western-led global governance structures with an alternative world order. Beijing has formulated various new ideas and norms (such as political independence, mutual non-interference, extensive consultation, collective contribution, mutual benefits, common security, etc.) to transform the global governance architecture.

However, while China holds the potential and capabilities to reshape the system and bend the game's rules, critical analysis highlights that it is still in the early phases. For now, even with its global outreach, China does not seek to build a power centre that counters explicitly the Western liberal order and promotes a new world order based on China's vision. On various platforms, China has asserted that 'Beijing will never seek hegemony' and is unwilling to act as a so-called 'world police'.<sup>62</sup> This depicts that China does not aspire to overtake the role of the US on the global stage. Further, since China prioritises a 'peaceful rise,' China does not surpass the US in terms of regional and international allies, military bases, influence within the UN and its affiliate bodies, global financial sector, etc.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, China is not the only emerging power. Other growing economies like Brazil, India, and South Africa, as well as revisionist powers like Russia, seek to build power centres that serve their interests. Each of these emerging powers has its respective ideologies that can be translated into rules and norms for the international

community. However, all these powers, along with China, are so integrated into the Western liberal order that any attempt to eliminate the current governing arrangement and structure would bring more chaos than benefits. So, while it cannot be eliminated, it can be replaced with a system more conducive to the rise of China and other emerging powers discontent with the Western-led liberal international order.

The Chinese vision for an alternative global order is gradually taking shape, revealing strategic ambitions to position China as a dominant state within the international system. This vision is embodied through omnidirectional diplomacy, where Beijing actively seeks to forge alliances with various countries, particularly under the framework of BRI. Moreover, China's diplomatic efforts and initiatives indicate a strategic objective for China to lead the Global South, thereby minimising Western influence and diminishing the dominance of liberal democratic values.

However, while China has increased opportunities to alter the prevailing norms, rules, and institutions, it is unlikely to replace the Western-led global order. Chinese vision of the international order resembles a celestial system, where Beijing, the central and most powerful entity, influences other states without asserting direct control. Geographical or ideological factors do not constrain this influence; instead, it is determined by the deference shown by Beijing. Moreover, as a significant beneficiary of the current global order, China's initiatives represent an assumption of responsibility as much as a declaration of privilege. Thus, a more probable evolution in the coming decades is China utilising its prestige and position of authority, commensurate with its rising power status, to reform the existing order to reflect its increasing power and interests better rather than undermining the prevailing system.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between China and the world order has evolved for six decades. From the post-independence period until 1971, China's relationship with the Western-led international governance structure was characterised by mutual animosity and refutation. From 1971 onwards, China complied with Western ideals and institutions, which led to its integration into the international system. However, after 2008, the rapid rise of China on the global forefront, coupled with an increase in its material and ideational/normative capabilities, has led to the policy of independent institution building. Chinese perception of alternative world order and the emergence of China-led development mechanisms like BRI and financial institutions such as the AIIB and NDB run counter to Western interests and represent a stark rejection of the liberal hegemonic order. Moreover, China's increasing role in global governance through the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilisation Initiative and their conforming agencies and platforms render China a responsible provider of global public goods. These developments have led to widespread concerns over the fear of China's emergence as an actor with counter-hegemonic aspirations, which could have severe ramifications for the Western liberal

order. However, it is too early to assert that China has turned into a disruptive or revisionist vindicator of the current world order; it is only reasonable to conclude that China is transforming the world order into one that rejects unilateralism and Western domination of global governance and stands on the tenets of multilateralism entailing multiple power centres, common security, and win-win development.

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