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RESHAPING ORDER: CHINA'S GROWING GLOBAL INFLUENCE AND THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONALISM

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Abstract
This study examines how China's rise is reshaping the Liberal International Order (LIO) through the combined influence of its domestic governance, normative outlook, and material power. Moving beyond isolated analyses of China's economic or institutional engagement, this investigation examines how these dimensions interact to challenge the coherence and resilience of the liberal order. Using an interpretivist approach, the research analyses China's authoritarian political model, its emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference, and global initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and actions in the South China Sea. The findings indicate that China pursues a strategy of selective engagement, participating in liberal institutions while advancing alternative norms grounded in regime security and development. Rather than dismantling the LIO, this dual strategy reflects an effort to reform global governance on more pluralistic and sovereignty-centred terms. The study contributes to debates on hegemonic transition and norm contestation, suggesting that the liberal order is evolving through contested engagement in a multipolar world.

Keywords
China's Global Influence; Liberal International Order; Authoritarian Governance; Belt and Road Initiative; Sovereignty; Global Governance

1. Background of the Study

Since the end of World War II, the LIO has served as the foundation of global governance, promoting cooperation, economic openness, and political stability. It is founded on democratic principles such as multilateralism, the rule of law, and free markets, implemented through institutions like the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Ikenberry 2010). These institutions were designed to create a rules-based international framework in which all countries, regardless of their power or size, adhere to shared norms. However, in recent years, the LIO has faced growing challenges, particularly from emerging powers like China, which question the system's Western-centric orientation and embedded structural inequalities (Kim & Kim, 2023).

With over 18% of global GDP, China has become a central force in international affairs, leveraging economic, institutional, and military power. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has directed over $1 trillion into infrastructure projects across more than 150 countries, expanding geopolitical reach (Dunford & Liu, 2024). Its $225 billion defence budget supports

growing capabilities in cyber, maritime, and space domains (Aglietta & Macaire, 2023). As the second-largest contributor to the UN and a leading force behind the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), China uses these platforms to reshape global norms and challenge liberal institutions (Dong, 2025; Beeson & Xu, 2019).

Since the late 1970s, China has combined centralised political control with selective market reforms to become the world's second-largest economy (Mearsheimer, 2019). Its governance system, characterised by one-party rule, restricted civil society, and strategic planning, contrasts with the liberal democratic values underlying the LIO. Rather than conforming, China increasingly questions liberal norms in global institutions (Weiss & Wallace, 2021). Grounded in state sovereignty, non-interference, and regime preservation, this approach directly opposes the liberal order's emphasis on universal human rights, humanitarian intervention, and transparent governance (Xinbo, 2018).

China's global engagement promotes mutual development and South-South cooperation, advanced through institutions such as the AIIB, the BRI, UN peacekeeping missions, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) (Hameiri & Jones, 2018). While these efforts project an image of inclusive multilateralism, critics argue they primarily serve strategic objectives, advancing national interests, resisting liberal accountability, and shifting norms to legitimise authoritarian governance (De Graaff et al., 2020; Foot, 2024).

BRI investments enhance connectivity but also create dependency risks, challenge liberal trade norms, and expose recipient states to unsustainable debt burdens (Kim & Kim, 2023). Militarily, actions in the South China Sea undermine legal norms under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and signal strategic rebalancing in the Indo-Pacific (Mearsheimer, 2019). China's involvement in security coalitions like the SCO and partnerships with non-liberal powers, such as Russia, further strain the coherence of the liberal international order (Xinbo, 2018).

While research has examined China's economic rise and participation in global institutions (Beeson & Xu, 2019; Zeng, 2019; Wu, 2018), these aspects are often studied in isolation. Less attention is given to how China's domestic governance, normative outlook, and material power interact to reshape the LIO. As Johnston (2019) observes, China simultaneously complies with and challenges liberal norms, making its international behaviour difficult to classify within existing theoretical frameworks.

Addressing this gap, this study investigates how China's domestic political system, normative worldview, and strategic power projection collectively influence the coherence and long-term sustainability of the LIO. It seeks to accomplish three objectives: first, to analyse how China's internal political structure interacts with liberal international institutions; second, to evaluate the impact of China's normative principles on global liberal norms; and third, to assess the degree to which its material power projection influences the resilience of the liberal order.

Rather than focusing on isolated events or bilateral relations, the study examines China's systemic impact on international order, with emphasis on developments since the early 2000s, particularly after its accession to the WTO in 2001 and the launch of the BRI in 2013. Key examples include China's engagement with institutions such as the UN, WTO, AIIB, and SCO. These cases are selected for their relevance in illustrating how China's actions challenge liberal norms and institutional governance.

2. Methodology

This study employs an interpretivist epistemology to explore how China's domestic political system, normative worldview, and strategic power projection collectively challenge and reshape the Liberal International Order (LIO). Instead of aiming to establish causal relationships, the research seeks to understand how China's global actions are shaped by historically rooted meanings, institutional discourses, and ideological commitments. The interpretivist approach provides a detailed examination of competing narratives, discursive strategies, and normative conflicts within evolving global governance systems.

Data for this research were gathered from various secondary sources. These include peer-reviewed academic literature on international relations and Chinese foreign policy, official documents and white papers published by Chinese government agencies such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Council, as well as public speeches and communiqués by top Chinese leaders, especially President Xi Jinping. Additional sources consist of reports from international organizations like the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), along with think tank publications and expert commentaries from institutions like Freedom House, Carnegie Endowment, and CEPII. These materials were selected for their relevance to key themes of the study, including domestic governance, international norms, and material power projection, and for their ability to reflect current perspectives on China's global strategy. The data collection primarily focused on publications from 2001 onward, aligning with China's entry into the WTO and its increasing integration into the global order.

The analytical process used thematic analysis in three steps. First, open coding identified recurring motifs and discursive elements in the selected documents, such as sovereignty, non-interference, regime legitimacy, infrastructure diplomacy, and norm pluralism. The dataset included 38 policy reports and 42 scholarly articles, chosen for their relevance to China's global engagement and alignment with liberal norms. Two coders (the first and second authors) independently reviewed and coded the documents, improving analytical rigor through intercoder comparison and peer feedback. Second, axial coding grouped these initial codes into three main dimensions shaping the study: (1) domestic political characteristics, (2) normative frameworks, and (3) material power projection. The validity of the axial categories was tested through iterative peer discussion and cross-examination of coding results, ensuring consistency and thematic coherence. Third, the themes were analyzed based on four core pillars of the LIO: democratic governance, economic openness, multilateralism, and the rule of law. This mapping provided a structured way to understand how China's actions align with or challenge liberal institutional norms.

Complementing the thematic analysis, the study also conducted critical discourse analysis (CDA) on institutional texts like charters, resolutions, and declarations from the UN, AIIB, SCO, and WTO. The aim was to understand how China communicates its principles and how institutional language reveals deeper ideological views. Special focus was given to rhetorical devices such as "community of shared future for mankind" and "win-win cooperation," which serve as tools of norm entrepreneurship. Insights from CDA were used to cross-check thematic findings, confirming core themes like sovereignty and norm pluralism, while also exposing contradictions between formal rhetoric and institutional practices. This interaction deepened the interpretive scope of the study by capturing both discursive intent and behavioural differences.

The study explores four main institutional arenas of the United Nations, World Trade Organization, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as examples of China's varied engagement with international norms. These cases were selected for their strategic significance in global rule-setting, normative influence, and regional governance. By emphasizing systemic developments rather than bilateral foreign policy events, the research aims to demonstrate China's broader structural role in global governance.

Although this study does not involve primary data collection or fieldwork, it maintains analytical rigor by triangulating diverse data sources, applying systematic thematic coding, and using theoretically informed interpretive frameworks. This approach allows a thorough exploration of China's global engagement without sacrificing scholarly reproducibility or coherence. It also enhances the study's ability to distinguish between China's rhetorical adaptation to liberal norms and its substantive efforts to reshape global governance through normative and institutional innovation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the broader theoretical debate on international order, utilizing insights from hegemonic stability theory, liberal institutionalism, and constructivist international relations theory to examine China's contested role in the LIO. From the perspective of hegemonic stability theory (HST), the global order is most effectively maintained when supported by a dominant power that provides systemic public goods and enforces institutional rules (Mearsheimer, 2019). The post-1945 liberal order, anchored by U.S. leadership, relied on this logic, combining military dominance with ideological hegemony. However, China's increasing global influence introduces a systemic contradiction: a rising power with growing capabilities but a domestic political model and normative outlook that differ markedly from liberal principles. HST predicts that such shifts lead to institutional contestation, order renegotiation, or even systemic collapse.

Liberal institutionalism, in contrast, argues that international institutions are resilient independently of hegemonic power, promoting cooperation through norm diffusion, rule-based governance, and lower transaction costs. However, China's selective involvement with these institutions challenges this idea. While Beijing actively participates in organizations such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization, it also aims to reshape multilateralism to prioritize sovereignty and national interests, as demonstrated by the creation of parallel institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Stephen & Skidmore, 2019). As Johnston (2019) points out, China neither fully rejects nor completely adheres to liberal norms but employs a strategy of strategic duality, following institutional procedures when beneficial while questioning the underlying principles.

To understand this norm-based contestation, the study uses constructivist IR theory, which stresses how norms, identity, and discursive practices influence state actions and international systems. Constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas in global politics, arguing that states pursue not only material interests but also act based on historically rooted self-conceptions and social legitimacy. Liu and Yang (2023) describe China's global behavior as pragmatic revisionism, a stance that neither fully opposes nor blindly accepts the liberal order but aims to reshape it according to China's political culture, development goals, and civilizational identity. Similarly, Schneider (2014) points out that traditional Chinese political thought, centered on hierarchical governance, moral authority, and relational order, provides an epistemic alternative to the universalist ideas of liberal internationalism.

By integrating these theoretical traditions, the study regards China's growing global influence as both a tangible shift in global power and a normative challenge to the foundational principles of the LIO. Instead of viewing the liberal order as a static system, the research considers it a contested institutional space in which actors such as China promote different visions of global governance, legitimacy, and authority. Consequently, the study investigates whether China's emergence signifies a movement towards systemic pluralism, institutional transformation, or the gradual decline of the liberal order as the predominant global paradigm.

4. China and the LIO in Practice

While the theoretical frameworks outlined above offer different perspectives on China's complex relationship with the Liberal International Order (LIO), a comparative institutional analysis provides empirical insights into how these tensions play out in practice.To this end, Tables 1 and 2 compare China's actions in four major global institutions, including the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and how they align with the four key norms that support the Liberal International Order—rule of law, transparency, multilateralism, and free market principles.

Table 1 examines China's actions relative to four widely recognised liberal principles: rule of law, transparency, multilateralism, and free market openness.

Table 1: China's Behaviour in Key Institutions Across LIO Norms

Institution	Rule of Law	Transparency	Multilateralism	Free Market
UN	China adheres selectively to international legal norms, often invoking sovereignty to avoid human rights-based interventions (Carty & Gu, 2021).	China strategically uses rhetorical framing (e.g., "community of shared future") but often lacks procedural transparency (Carty & Gu, 2021).	Actively engaged in peacekeeping, UNGA voting, and agency leadership; emphasises sovereignty-based cooperation (Frick, 2025).	Minimal relevance for trade liberalisation; role in economic governance via development framing is limited.
WTO	Mixed compliance. Challenges persist in IPR enforcement, subsidies, and dispute resolution, reflecting divergence from Western legal norms (Du & Kong, 2020).	China's SOE operations and subsidy policies lack transparency, leading to global disputes (Du & Kong, 2020).	Supports multilateral trade frameworks but resists reforms that strengthen liberal governance (Frick, 2025).	Selective liberalisation: opens markets to gain WTO access, yet protects key sectors (e.g., tech, finance) (Harpaz, 2016).
AIIB	Nominal commitment to	Promotes transparency but	Highly multilateral in membership, yet	Supports global infrastructure

	international legal norms; lacks strong judicial enforcement mechanisms (Y. Zhao, 2018).	with soft standards; decisions often lack public scrutiny (L. Zhao, 2023).	dominated structurally by China (e.g., voting shares, board influence) (Carty & Gu, 2021).	investments but prioritises Chinese contractors and strategic interests (Harpaz, 2016).
SCO	No binding legal framework; consensus-based decision-making limits legal commitments (Xinbo, 2018).	Institutional opacity is widespread; declarations tend to be vague and seldom formalised (Bhalla, 2025).	Emphasises multipolarity and state sovereignty; fosters cooperation among authoritarian regimes (JIEG Gov, 2024).	Not focused on trade liberalisation; economic initiatives are politically driven (Xinbo, 2018).

To complement this, Table 2 re-categorises China's institutional conduct using a normative lens aligned with LIO foundations: democratic governance, economic openness, multilateralism, and rule of law.

Table 2: China's Institutional Behaviour Across LIO Norms

Institution	Democratic Governance	Economic Openness	Multilateralism	Rule of Law
UN	Challenges rights-based norms	Limited role	Strong participation	Selective adherence
WTO	N/A	Selective liberalisation	Formal support	Mixed compliance
AIIB	N/A	Prioritises national interest	Dominant membership	Soft rule-of-law
SCO	Supports authoritarian models	Politically driven trade	Emphasises sovereignty	Lacks legal framework

These tables reveal consistent patterns of strategic norm differentiation rather than outright rejection of the liberal order. China often follows multilateral institutions procedurally while adjusting their norms to emphasize state sovereignty, development priorities, and non-liberal governance. This behavior demonstrates both institutional dualism, involving simultaneous participation and contestation, and normative asymmetry, where liberal norms are selectively reinterpreted to serve national interests.

5. Dimensions of China's Challenge to the LIO

5.1 Domestic Political Characteristics

A centralised, authoritarian political system led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) sharply contrasts with the core principles of the LIO, which emphasise democratic accountability, judicial independence, and the independence of civil society. Within this system, political power is held at the top, lacking competitive elections or meaningful institutional checks on executive authority (Li, 2016; Pils, 2022). This domestic setup not only influences China's internal governance but also guides its external policies, as it

advocates for a statist and sovereignty-focused view of global order that challenges liberal institutional norms (Jones, 2020).

The consolidation of power under Xi Jinping has intensified authoritarian rule. The 2018 constitutional amendment removing presidential term limits abolished collective leadership norms and entrenched personalistic control (Weiss & Wallace, 2021). Xi's centralisation has been accompanied by increased ideological control, suppression of intra-party dissent, and an emphasis on "absolute party leadership" over all state organs (Fu, 2019). These developments are incompatible with liberal norms, which are premised on transparency, accountability, and rule-based constraints.

Civil society has been systematically constrained through legal and extra-legal mechanisms. The 2017 Foreign NGO Law placed all international non-governmental organisations under the Ministry of Public Security supervision, resulting in a sharp reduction in external civil society engagement (Han, 2018). Domestic NGOs, particularly those with advocacy mandates, face surveillance, funding restrictions, and harassment (Zhu & Jun, 2022). As Teets (2014) notes, civil society in China operates within a "consultative authoritarian" framework, where permitted activities align with state objectives. Freedom House (2023) underscores this reality by assigning China a score of 9/100 for civil liberties and ranking it as the world's most repressive cyberspace, characterized by pervasive censorship, mass data surveillance, and digital policing.

The judiciary remains institutionally subordinate to the CCP. Local party committees appoint judges, and courts are expected to prioritise political discipline over legal neutrality (Cabestan, 2005; Ahl, 2019). Despite procedural reforms, legal institutions are not designed to check power but to enforce compliance with party directives (Li, 2016). The World Justice Project (2022) ranks China 95th out of 140 countries on rule of law metrics, citing weak judicial independence, poor enforcement of civil justice, and limited accountability mechanisms. As Minzner (2011) argues, the Chinese legal system exemplifies "rule by law," where legal tools are used to consolidate authoritarian rule rather than uphold constitutionalism.

Instead of progressing towards liberal convergence through its participation in multilateral forums, China exemplifies what Johnston (2019) calls "dual engagement," engaging with global institutions while aiming to reshape their normative foundations. This approach reflects China's authoritarian model: modifying global structures to reinforce domestic legitimacy rather than liberalising in response to systemic pressures. The domestic political system thus not only opposes liberal international norms but also promotes an alternative governance model centred on control, hierarchy, and regime security.

5.2 Normative Principles and Global Engagement

China's approach to global engagement is guided by normative principles that differ significantly from those of the LIO, particularly in its emphasis on state sovereignty, non-interference, and development-oriented diplomacy. These principles reflect a longstanding ideological commitment to maintaining national autonomy and opposing normative universality in international affairs (deLisle, 2024). Rooted in China's historical experiences with foreign intervention and colonialism, the emphasis on non-interference underpins Beijing's foreign policy discourse, particularly in multilateral diplomacy and development partnerships (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2017; Mendes & Wang, 2023).

This normative stance is particularly evident in China's role within international institutions. At the United Nations, China frequently invokes sovereignty-based principles to influence

Security Council debates and development frameworks, often opposing humanitarian interventionism and rights-based conditionality (Chan, 2017). Its voting patterns at the UN Human Rights Council and Security Council show consistent opposition to sanctions or interventions not explicitly authorised by sovereign consent (deLisle, 2024). Similarly, within the WTO, China has supported a vision of multilateralism centred on economic non-discrimination but resists governance reforms that might introduce greater transparency or legal accountability (Steenhagen, 2025).

The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), launched in 2016 under Chinese leadership, exemplifies Beijing's effort to institutionalise an alternative form of multilateralism that mirrors liberal frameworks in structure but diverges in ethos. While the AIIB officially upholds transparency and sustainability standards, its operational model remains rooted in sovereignty and host-country ownership, avoiding political or governance-based conditionality (Harpaz, 2016; Zhao, 2018). This appeals to many countries in the Global South disillusioned with the Western-led Bretton Woods institutions, allowing China to position itself as a development partner that honours national priorities.

Through its involvement in the BRI, China further promotes these normative commitments. Infrastructure diplomacy under BRI emphasises mutual development, non-interference, and bilateral partnerships rather than rights-based mechanisms (Mendes & Wang, 2023). Although Chinese officials describe this as a "win-win" approach to global governance, critics contend that it undermines liberal norms by institutionalising development pathways that lack transparency or democratic accountability (Yuan, 2025). For instance, China's bilateral debt agreements often include confidentiality clauses and bypass IMF coordination, reinforcing non-transparent financial governance (Zhao, 2018).

China's normative assertiveness also manifests in what scholars call "norm entrepreneurship," promoting new ideas within existing institutions without explicitly dismantling them. This is evident in its promotion of the "community of shared future for mankind," a rhetorical device increasingly included in UN resolutions with Chinese support (Dong, 2025). Although seemingly inclusive, such discursive shifts aim to redefine the normative framework of international cooperation away from liberal universality and towards relational sovereignty.

5.3 Material Power and Strategic Projection

China's expanding global influence is supported by a strategic convergence of economic diplomacy, military updates, and technological power, all of which challenge the structural balance and principles of the LIO. These tangible capabilities not only extend Beijing's reach but also help establish an alternative model of global engagement that emphasises sovereignty, economic diplomacy, and digital independence.

A central pillar of China's external projection is the BRI, launched in 2013 as a transcontinental infrastructure and connectivity strategy. With over 150 participating countries and estimated investments exceeding $1 trillion, the BRI serves as a tool for economic diplomacy and geopolitical alignment (Dunford & Liu, 2024). Although presented as a mutually beneficial initiative, empirical studies indicate that the BRI fosters asymmetric dependencies through non-transparent loan agreements, often involving state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and collateralised infrastructure assets (Sehrawat, 2024). According to Hameiri and Jones (2024), China's financial arrangements tend to operate outside the norms of multilateral debt restructuring, creating governance gaps in recipient states and enabling strategic leverage.

Accusations of "debt-trap diplomacy," where recipient states allegedly cede strategic assets in exchange for unsustainable loans, remain controversial yet persistent. While not universally applicable, evidence from cases such as Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port and Pakistan's Gwadar project highlights the risks of economic entanglement (Parenti, 2023; Lyons, 2021). China's use of SOEs as instruments of foreign policy further blurs the line between commercial and strategic activity, fostering a model of state-capitalist expansionism that undermines liberal trade norms based on market autonomy and competitive neutrality (Aglietta & Macaire, 2023).

In the military sphere, China has undertaken extensive modernisation, with defence spending reaching about $225 billion in 2023, the second-highest worldwide, enabling capabilities in cyberwarfare, space, and naval projection (Aglietta & Macaire, 2023). Its assertive actions in the South China Sea (SCS), including island-building, military installations, and broad maritime claims, directly challenge international maritime norms such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Lyons, 2021). These moves, combined with China's veto-centric diplomacy in multilateral security bodies, demonstrate a recalibration of international norms towards power-driven regionalism.

China's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) exemplifies its security alignment strategy beyond Western-led frameworks. The SCO functions as a platform for regional anti-terrorism cooperation and military exercises but also mirrors a normative convergence among authoritarian states based on regime security, non-interference, and surveillance-based counter-terrorism (Sehrawat, 2024). Unlike NATO, which is institutionalised through collective security norms, the SCO operates on flexible consensus, allowing China to influence without committing to liberal transparency.

Technological influence, anchored in initiatives like the Digital Silk Road (DSR), constitutes a third pillar of China's strategic outreach. By exporting digital infrastructure, surveillance tools, and AI standards, China promotes an alternative model of digital governance based on cyber-sovereignty and state control of information exchange (Kokas, 2023). This is evident in the expansion of Chinese-built 5G networks, smart city solutions, and partnerships with authoritarian regimes for surveillance systems. Jelinek (2023) describes this as a "digital sovereignty trap," where technological dependence reflects the geopolitical patterns of traditional infrastructure aid but within the informational sphere.

China's projection of material power thus not only shifts the balance of global influence but also redefines the operational logic of the international order, blending strategic ambiguity with structural transformation.

6. Implications for the Liberal International Order

China's growing global influence presents a complex and multi-dimensional challenge to the LIO, but its implications should not be seen solely as erosion or replacement. Instead, China's integration into global governance, marked by ideological differences, institutional engagement, and norm innovation, has prompted a process of adaptation and diversification within the LIO. This changing dynamic indicates not the end of the liberal order, but its transformation through contestation and negotiated coexistence.

The liberal order has demonstrated significant institutional resilience despite China's normative and strategic assertiveness. As Weiss and Wallace (2021) argue, although China diverges from liberal democratic norms domestically, its ongoing participation in global institutions like the UN, WTO, and AIIB shows not rejection but selective engagement. This duality, simultaneous compliance and contestation, has required institutional adjustment but

has not dismantled fundamental mechanisms of global governance. Instead of leaving or weakening the system, China has chosen to stay integrated within it, creating opportunities for norm adaptation and procedural evolution.

From a systemic perspective, this interaction has generated what Fung (2020) describes as "rhetorical adaptation," where China rhetorically aligns with liberal principles such as multilateralism and development cooperation while resisting normative universality in practice. This approach has not negated liberal institutionalism but has compelled it to recognise alternative governance logics, particularly sovereignty-based pluralism and development-first conditionality. The resulting pluralisation of norms has expanded the ideational space of the global order without erasing its foundational liberal core.

Critically, Johnston (2019) argues that China's behaviour complicates clear distinctions between status quo and revisionist powers. China's role in maintaining specific institutional regimes, including global trade and climate change governance, demonstrates areas of strategic alignment with liberal norms. Simultaneously, its promotion of alternative discourses such as "community of shared future" and "mutually beneficial cooperation" indicates a reformist stance aimed at reshaping, rather than dismantling, the international order.

Empirical assessments further support this perspective. Zhang (2022) highlights that China's involvement in multilateral institutions displays a pattern of gradual norm diffusion and procedural adaptation rather than hegemonic substitution. Meanwhile, Maull (2019) asserts that the flexibility and decentralisation inherent in the liberal order have allowed it to accommodate external contestation while maintaining core commitments to rules-based interaction. Therefore, rather than disintegrating under the strain of ideological divergence, the LIO appears to be evolving into a more pluralist, post-hegemonic framework.

Theoretical implications of China's growing global influence also extend to debates on the transition of the global order. Rather than a Thucydidean contest leading to systemic collapse, the emerging dynamic points toward "multiplexity," a condition where multiple value systems and institutional practices coexist within a shared but contested international framework (Yuan, 2025). This coexistence does not eliminate normative friction but makes it manageable through institutional dialogue, reciprocal engagement, and adaptive reforms.

In this context, the liberal order's ability to endure relies less on normative uniformity than on its capacity for practical adaptation. China's growing global influence, therefore, should be seen not only as a source of disruption but also as a catalyst for institutional innovation, norm recalibration, and global inclusivity. Acknowledging the varied legitimacy of non-Western models, without abandoning liberal commitments to transparency, accountability, and rule-based interaction, provides a pathway for future coexistence.

7. Conclusion

The focus of this work is to examine how China's domestic political traits, normative worldview, and material strength impact on the LIO. With evidences found in this study, it is clear that domestically, China's authoritarian governance, centralised party control, and constrained civil society represent a significant departure from the democratic values underpinning the LIO. However, rather than isolating China, this internal model has been projected outward to legitimise alternative governance frameworks, particularly among states sceptical of liberal conditionality. In the normative sphere, China's focus on sovereignty, non-interference, and development diplomacy constitutes an ideational counter current to liberal universalism. Through organisations such as the UN, AIIB, and SCO, Beijing

promotes an alternative vision of multilateralism that emphasises state autonomy over rights-based intervention.

Materially, China's economic diplomacy, military expansion, and digital influence have increased its leverage, particularly in the Global South. The Belt and Road Initiative, the Digital Silk Road, and military assertiveness in key regions, such as the South China Sea, demonstrate Beijing's intention to shape the global order according to its strategic and political preferences. However, instead of completely rejecting the liberal international order, these actions reflect a selective strategy; embracing parts of the system that serve its interests while pushing back against elements that undermine its political goals.

Theoretically, this work adds to the literature on hegemonic transition and norm contestation by challenging binary frameworks that suggest either systemic replacement or maintaining the status quo. Instead, China's growing global influence demonstrates a form of "dual engagement," where it follows institutional rules while advocating competing normative logics. This aligns with emerging ideas about multiplexity and pluralisation of order, which view global governance as a layered and contested space rather than a single, hegemonic structure.

For policymakers and scholars alike, this analysis highlights the importance of moving beyond zero-sum frameworks. Instead of seeing China's growing global influence as inherently revisionist, a more productive approach involves engaging with its institutional behaviours, norm promotion strategies, and developmental diplomacy within inclusive frameworks that support liberal principles while embracing pluralistic values. In this way, the future of the LIO may not depend on its universalisation, but on its ability to adapt structurally and normatively to an international environment characterised by value diversity and institutional hybridity.

Future research should examine comparative cases of normative contestation, the changing role of middle powers in mediating between different models of international order, and the institutional mechanisms that support normative coexistence without undermining the core principles of liberal governance. As global governance transitions toward a post-unipolar structure, it will be important to understand how liberal values can coexist with alternative orders that neither yield to illiberalism nor rigidly oppose pluralism in order to maintain a cooperative, rule-based international system.

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