China and liberal hierarchies in global international society: power and negotiation for normative change

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China’s rise within a liberal global order shaped, sustained and dominated by the hegemonic power of the United States has triggered a considerable number of heated global debates—including in the pages of this journal1—about whether a rising China is a status quo or a revisionist power, and what future its rise heralds for the West. A wide range of positions have been staked out in these contested and continuing debates on a spectrum ranging from the realist conviction of a ‘gathering storm’—to appropriate a Churchillian metaphor—portending a coming clash of the two titans, through the liberal hope that a more expansive and institutionalized liberal international system can accommodate the rising Chinese power even with the passing of the unipolar moment, to the constructivist belief that socialization and integration have already made China more of a status quo power than a revisionist one.2

All analysts would probably agree that the rise of China will inevitably have consequences for the future shape and character of global order, but the various strands of analysis agree on little else. Is power competition between China and

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the United States principally for ‘primacy or world order’? Has China initiated a ‘foreign policy revolution’ with a ‘go-out strategy designed to remake global norms and institutions’? Are we witnessing a replay of historical patterns in ‘a succession of hegemonies’ and of ‘hegemonic struggles among political rivals’ that shape ‘the great turning points in world history’? Has China already become part of the liberal global establishment, having become powerful not by challenging the liberal institutions, but by selectively endorsing and embracing some of them? Why should the rising challenger seek to bandwagon with the hegemon as Beijing did in going out of its way ‘to accommodate where possible and to seek coincidences of interest with Washington’? If ‘China does not seem to have unappeasable revisionist ambitions’, in what sense does it remain a ‘dissatisfied responsible great power’? Is it true that China seeks not only to change the rules of the existing global order, but also to rule and/or order the world? These are among the questions that have been debated and interrogated in the existing scholarship.

These investigations and propositions grapple with the consequences of the rise of China for the systemic transformation of international relations and treat the rising Chinese power as a problem that needs to be managed to achieve peaceful change. Taking the rising Chinese power as a challenge/threat to the longevity of the liberal global order captures at best only part of the dynamics of the ongoing putative power transition. This is not only because ‘the orthodox rising-power-as-revisionist argument does not really help to explain the totality of China’s diplomacy’, but also because, perhaps more importantly, it fails to appreciate that the rise of China has in significant ways reinforced, rather than undermined, certain aspects of this very same liberal global order. Take for example Chinese experience and success in economic development to date. Arguably a triumph, in part, of the globalized capitalist order, it has notably widened the appeal of ‘a deterritorialized global capitalism made up of flows, fluxes, networked connections and transnational production networks’, albeit one ‘marked by inequality, instability and new patterns of stratification’. If this analysis is accepted, the assumption that China, governed by an authoritarian regime, poses a threat to the liberal global order mischaracterizes crudely a rising China’s global order preferences and overlooks the contentious politics entailed in China’s entanglement

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5 Clark, ‘China and the United States’.
7 Ikenberry, ‘The rise of China and the future of the West’.
with a myriad of liberal institutions in the existing global order. It treats both the theory and the practice of liberal global ordering as analytically unproblematic and largely static, thus hindering an appropriate understanding of the complexity and evolving nature of liberal global order, with its own inherent tensions and contradictions, and its own transformative dynamic with the advance and the retreat of ‘assertive liberalism’.

Two valuable insights provided in the existing literature are worth noting. One is that China is rising within an order not of its own making. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) was not ‘present at the creation’ of the key global economic institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Until very recently, it has always been a rule/norm taker rather than a rule/norm maker in the expanding institutional networks for global governance. Seen as either an outright opponent to American hegemony in the past, or as its resolute challenger at present, China—an authoritarian, nationalistic and dissatisfied state with an illiberal regime—has played an indispensable role in the historical formation and political renewal of what is called the liberal ‘Greater West’, but only as the Other. The second point is that we are living in ‘a world characterized by a specific form of concentration of power’, rather than just by the changing distribution of material power. This historically unusual pattern of concentration of power is not seen only in the unprecedented preponderance of American power in both material and ideational terms. It is also reflected in the arrival of China, a non-western power with a self-proclaimed developing country identity and an authoritarian regime, as the second among equals in the Great Power club, arguably with its own purpose and project.

The rising Chinese power matters, then, because of its nature and purpose. Building on this insight, this article investigates how China has been at once defending, contesting and negotiating with the liberal global order in a historically contingent social world with a view to shaping normative change in global international society. Drawing upon the English School theoretical perspective, I conceptualize the liberal global order, which is ‘hard to overturn and easy to join’, as constituted by a network of liberal institutional constructs in both mutual support and conflict, which are embedded in and constitutive of the social structure of global international society. In spite of the claim that liberalism is the ‘default setting’ of modern international society, global international society in the twenty-first century is still characterized by deeply incompatible world-views and conflicting values among member states as well as competing societal purposes as conceived and understood among society members. It is still marked by ‘a complex plurality of ideas, views and values’ and by ‘a plurality of political...
identities in search of recognition’. Following the English School scholars in the pluralist/solidarist debate over the changing normative structure of international society, I conceptualize international society as endemically contested normative space, and normative change as perpetual contention over the changing normative orientation of international society manifested along the pluralist–solidarist spectrum.

The rest of this article investigates the power dynamics and transformative logic of China’s rise in an appreciably different manner, in part to unsettle the conventional wisdom in the unresolved debate about whether China is a status quo or a revisionist power. It takes the view that ‘hierarchy in anarchy’ is historically common in the evolution of international society, and that there have always been ‘inherent power differentials’ in anarchical international society. The analytical focus below is accordingly on the politics of hierarchy: specifically, how rising Chinese power wrestles with liberal hierarchies of global international society with a new unfolding raison de système, which ‘aim[s] to promote shared values and purposes rather than simply underpin coexistence and help to keep conflict to a minimum’.

In particular, it argues that three hierarchical institutional constructs of liberal persuasion coexist, indeed cohabit, in global international society today. They are, namely, the legalized hegemony embodied in the liberal pluralism based on the United Nations Charter; the changing normative order of an emerging solidarist and anti-pluralist formation, with its deliberate creation of unequal sovereigns; and the liberal global governance order, which calls for leadership and responsible management on the part of Great Powers. Notwithstanding the inherent tensions and conflicts between these three constructs, they constitute an unusual and complex global context within which China has been negotiating for normative change to accommodate its peaceful rise. As a rising, illiberal Great Power, China is entangled with these liberal hierarchical institutional constructs in a multifaceted fashion involving complex dynamics. In investigating such entanglement, the article argues that three differentiated strategic approaches have been developed by China: namely, to defend liberal pluralism in the legalized hegemony; to contest liberal cosmopolitan anti-pluralism in the changing normative order; and to promote state-centric solidarism in constructing global governance. Such an overall strategy can be characterized as China working with and navigating through the liberal global order to achieve peaceful change and to sustain what I call a ‘resilient status quo’ as an integral part of China’s global order preferences. To the extent that the agency asserted by the rising Chinese power matters, more

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analytical attention needs be paid to understanding the consequences and implications of China’s rising power in terms of its effect in shaping normative change in the evolving global international society.

China and legalized hegemony

Legalized hegemony is defined by Gerry Simpson as

The existence within an international society of a powerful elite of states whose superior status is recognized by minor powers as a political fact giving rise to the existence of certain constitutional privileges, rights and duties and whose relations with each other are defined by adherence to a rough principle of sovereign equality.\(^{23}\)

As a liberal hierarchical construct, legalized hegemony in any international society has four distinctive characteristics. First, the dominance of this group of powers is legally based and/or constitutionally prescribed. Second, there is recognition of equality among the powers themselves, notwithstanding the actual differences in material and normative power among them. Third, this self-constituted directorate of Great Powers enjoys particular prerogatives and has a special interest in and responsibility for maintaining the existing international system through acting in concert. Fourth, legalized hegemony is not only imposed by the Great Powers from above and but also accepted socially by consent from below on the part of other powers within the existing system.\(^{24}\) Legalized hegemony becomes an integral part of the international legal order when it is formalized in international law, as in the case of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which bestows special privileges, rights and duties on five permanent member states (the P5). A functional Great Power directorate is often taken as evidence of the vibrant existence of international society, and as a marker of the operation of Great Power management as a primary institution of that society.

The origin of legalized hegemony as an institutionalized practice can be traced back to the Congress of Vienna in the classic European international society of the early nineteenth century, when the concept of ‘Great Powers’ was first formulated and when it was accepted that the special status of Great Powers endowed them with ‘special rights and obligations in international society’.\(^{25}\) This institutionalized practice was built into the design by liberal internationalists of the two main twentieth-century collective security systems, both the League of Nations and the United Nations. The constitution of legalized hegemony in the instance of the UNSC was fiercely contested at the founding conference in San Francisco. It was only through some tortuous negotiations both in San Francisco and at Dumbarton Oaks that an uneasy compromise was achieved between legalized hegemony in the constitution of the P5 and an egalitarian United Nations General Assembly.\(^{26}\)


UN system, which is integral to the post-1945 international order, is the culmination of the globalized Westphalian project in constructing a pluralist international society informed by classical liberalism. A set of rules, institutions and norms that had changed and deepened over the three centuries after Westphalia were inscribed in 1945 into the UN Charter, which enshrines the principles of liberal pluralism. This was the liberalism of tolerance and diversity. Riding on the crest of liberalism in its anti-colonial mode after 1945, nationalism and national self-determination norms rose to delegitimate colonialism/imperialism and to define legitimate statehood and the right to participation in the making of post-imperial and post-colonial international society. Newly independent and post-colonial states, irrespective of their internal make-up (whether liberal/democratic or not), were embraced by the UN. The proliferation of post-colonial states has led to the globalization of a system of juridically equal sovereign states. In the process, international society has become truly global, with a more pluralistic standard based primarily on international legal sovereignty and an emphasis on sovereign independence and equality.  

Liberal pluralism finds its most eloquent articulation in the UN Charter. States in international society are seen as occupying positions analogous to those of individuals in a domestic political order. Like individuals in a domestic society, states on the international stage should have legal equality before the law and should enjoy the same rights to liberty and self-determination. The state as individual writ large should be physically inviolable. In international relations, this set of core liberal ideas has been transmuted into the principles of legal sovereignty, sovereign equality, self-determination, non-intervention and so on, enshrined in international law. What Reus-Smit calls the ‘equalitarian regime’ in international society affords all sovereign states existential and legal equality. This liberal pluralism tolerates, perhaps even celebrates, the diversity of states produced by these norms and principles. It gives ontological priority to the state, which is defensible on the ground that the liberty of the state is essential to the liberty of individuals. Liberal pluralism informs and is in turn embedded in the primary institutions of global international society today, among them sovereignty, diplomacy, international law and Great Power management.

That the PRC is today part of the legalized hegemony epitomized in the P5 at the UNSC has come about more by default than by design. As is well known, it was at the insistence of Franklin Roosevelt, and much to the dismay of Winston Churchill, that the Republic of China was included as one of the four ‘policemen’ of the postwar plan to construct a new international order, a group which eventually morphed into the P5 at San Francisco in 1945. The communist victory in the Chinese civil war, unforeseen at San Francisco, complicated not only China’s historical position in legalized hegemony at the UN, but the operation of legal-

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29 Buzan, *An introduction to the English School of International Relations*.
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ized hegemony itself for over 20 years, as the PRC was excluded from the UN and therefore denied a place in the P5, its Great Power directorate, between 1949 and 1971.30

Like the other members of the P5, China now enjoys not only a socially recognized and accepted Great Power status but also special privileges and rights associated with legalized hegemony, and shares the authority and special responsibility it incurs accordingly. Legalized hegemony gives these five Great Powers a central ordering role, particularly in the collective security system of the UN. It is from this position at the top of the power hierarchy that China has mounted a vigorous defence of the Charter-based pluralist order as normatively sensible, morally defensible and politically viable, precisely at the moment when the Westphalian project as the central normative structure of international order is under relentless assault, when pluralist international society is seen as morally failing, and when the United States’ support of the UN has become increasingly erratic and contingent.31

In the first place, China defends a pluralist international order that gives the state ontological priority. The fundamental purpose of the UN Charter, in Beijing’s view, is to preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its member states. This interpretation does not seem to be in contravention of what has been stipulated by the UN Charter. Principles of sovereign equality, non-interference and self-determination have all been enshrined in the Charter, constituting the foundations of the international legal order. The UN Charter stipulates, for example, that ‘nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any State’.32 Self-determination is celebrated as ‘a significant contribution to contemporary international law’.33 Beijing insists that this restrictive interpretation of the moral purposes served by state-based pluralism should continue to prevail as the foundation for world peace, regardless of palpable changes in the normative structure of international society in the twenty-first century.

This defence is informed, in important part, by China’s own experience of nation-state building and its encounter with expanding European international society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For China, the sovereign state and the associated principle of the inviolability of state sovereignty remain the best available instrument and hope for the protection of its national security against foreign invasion and external threat in the anarchical society of states. In responding to a question about China’s increased military spending during a recent visit to Berlin, President Xi Jinping stated that: ‘As a nation-state, China must build up adequate self-defence capability to safeguard its security and sovereignty. This is to prevent the recurrence of the tragedy of China being

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31 For an elaboration of this argument, see Hurrell, On global order.
32 UN Charter, art. 2.7.
enslaved and colonized by imperial powers after the Opium War.’ 34 As a post-imperial polity itself, whose nation-state building remains unfinished business and is constantly under challenge, China has repeatedly stated that safeguarding state sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security is one of the top priorities of the country’s grand strategy of peaceful rise. 35

Second, China has embraced the UN as the only body that has the authority to legitimate collective action to meet challenges and threats to international peace and security. It has designated the UNSC as the only institution that has the authority to legitimate the use of coercive force, conditional upon the unanimity of the P5. On this view, no coalition of the willing has the licence either to authorize or to legitimate the use of force against a sovereign state, as in the cases of Kosovo and Iraq. The UN and in particular the legalized hegemony of the P5 should remain the foundation of the collective security system, which, in the words of a previous Chinese President, Hu Jintao, ‘plays an irreplaceable role in international cooperation to ensure global security. Such a role can only be strengthened and must not in any way be weakened.’ In the face of scepticism and criticism that the UNSC has become ill-suited to dealing with the key issues concerning global security, President Hu urged that: ‘As the special agency of the UN responsible for maintaining world peace and security, the Security Council must be given the authority to carry out its mandate.’ 36

To the extent that the UNSC has become ‘the ultimate bastion of Great Power politics’, 37 defending the legitimacy and authority of the UN Charter rules takes on particular significance in the face of assertions that the system based on the UN Charter has failed and must be swept aside. 38 The strong emphasis that China has placed on the UN Charter as the main constitutional constraint on the exercise of power, particularly of coercive power, is aimed in part at countering American unilateralism and constraining the unbridled exercise of US military power at a time of a ‘growing consensus among American policy makers and commentators that the prevailing legal and institutional architecture of international society is ill-suited to the prosecution of a revisionist foreign policy agenda, whether liberal or neo-conservative’. 39 Its priority is to prevent a dangerous slide ‘from a horizontal system of sovereign states that demonstrate mutual respect to a hierarchical world system where conduct is subject to oversight and punishment by an unspecified and unaccountable agent of the “international community”’. 40

It is well argued that ‘for China, the Security Council’s legitimating function

39 Reus-Smit, ‘Liberal hierarchy and the license to use force’, p. 76.
renders it a valuable means of taming American power and thus of advancing the prospects for multipolarity'.\(^4\) This argument, however, misses an important point: namely, that to defend the Security Council’s legitimating role in collective decision-making is to defend ‘the integrity of the international system of rules and procedures in which everyone has a stake’, and is an attempt to ensure that international relations continue to operate ‘within the ambit of the rule of law’ in the contest between the power of legitimacy and the legitimacy of power.\(^4\)

Third, a more normative line of defence of the Charter-based order is articulated in China’s consistent emphasis on the continued viability of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, first given formal expression in the 1950s, as the guiding principles and norms in conducting relations among states in the twenty-first century. These principles are broadly compatible with what constitutes the normative structure of a pluralist international society. Two of them—mutual respect of each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs—are a tacit refutation of the normative move towards a doctrine of ‘contingent sovereignty’ or ‘conditional sovereignty’, which was embraced by the United States particularly during the Bush administration in its ‘war on terror’. In this respect, China has emerged as one of the strongest defenders of a traditional and absolutist concept of sovereignty, entering into contestation on a broad range of issues wherein state sovereignty is implicated, most notably humanitarian intervention.

To the extent that China has defended sovereignty and non-intervention in practice, its voting behaviour at the UNSC on interventions from Kosovo to Afghanistan and from Iraq to Libya and Syria shows clearly that it inclines to defend the normative status quo and is conservative and sceptical about radical institutional changes in regard to humanitarian intervention. This normative defence has been reinforced by linking to the UN Charter the Chinese vision of a harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity first propagated by President Hu Jintao in 2005. This alternative vision articulates a sharply defined repudiation of another liberal hierarchy under construction in the twenty-first century international society, discussed in the following section.

**China among unequal sovereigns**

China’s defence of the institutional and normative status quo embodied in the order based on the UN Charter clearly shows the staying power of the pluralist orthodoxy. This defence should also be seen as an articulation of its contestation of and resistance to certain current normative changes that the new liberal internationalism has been trying to bring about in international society. For the new liberal internationalists, the core norms of the old egalitarian liberalism based on sovereign equality either ‘no longer capture the reality of the new transnational

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\(^{4}\) Foot, "Doing some things" in the Xi Jinping era’, p. 1089.


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order’, or ‘are morally bankrupt’, or ‘are in the process of radical modification’.43 This new liberal internationalism has come to the fore both at a particular historical juncture and within a specific power-political context. The apparent triumph of liberalism at the end of the Cold War, which found its tangible and powerful expression in the demise of communism in Eastern Europe, followed by the collapse of the former Soviet Union, is a historical moment in the long process of liberal ascendency, ‘propelling the West and the liberal capitalist system of economics and politics to world pre-eminence’.44 This new era of liberal ascendency is also marked by historically unprecedented shifts in the ideational and material balance of power, resulting in ‘a political system that … revolves around a single superpower’.45

This ‘more judgmental, substantive liberalism’ shows its anti-pluralism in several ways.46 First, since the end of the Cold War the new liberal internationalist thinking has in its own way reimposed identity boundaries based on states’ commitment to two core liberal values, democracy and human rights. Undergirded by the democratic peace theory, it is explicit about the possibility of dividing the world into liberal and non-liberal zones, ‘with a liberal zone of law constituted by liberal states practicing a higher degree of legal civilization, to which other states will be admitted only when they met the requisite standards’.47 This western core was ‘projected as ordered, unified, lawful(l); a place where human rights flourished, while the rest of the world was variously portrayed as lawless, anarchic, chaotic, backward and dangerous’.48 Such a division of the world into a liberal zone of law, order and justice and a non-liberal zone of violence, injustice and chaos is seen not just as an emerging reality, but as a morally defensible proposition that justifies and legitimates an extraordinary range of interventionist and intrusive or otherwise coercive activities in the non-liberal zone. ‘To resist the liberal order’, in the words of Andrew Hurrell, ‘is to risk being categorized together with rogue regimes and with the enemies of economic and political freedom’.49

Second, new liberal internationalists work to recreate categories of states in international society in contravention of classical liberalism as embodied in the UN Charter and to ‘establish new forms of international outlawry after the end of the Cold War’.50 As Anne-Marie Slaughter claims: ‘The most distinctive aspect of Liberal international relations theory is that it permits, indeed, mandates, a distinction among different types of states, based on their domestic political structure and ideology.’51 In such re-creation, liberal democracy becomes ‘the legiti-

43 Simpson, Great Powers and outlaw states, p. 283.
45 Hurrell, On global order, p. 7.
46 Simpson, Great Powers and outlaw states, p. 283. The following discussion draws in part upon Yongjin Zhang, ‘The standard of “civilization” redux’.
48 Simpson, Great Powers and outlaw states, p. 279.
49 Hurrell, Hegemony, liberalism and global order, p. 7.
mate form of domestic governance in international politics’, as it is ‘the most advanced historical form of polity’. Democracy in this fashion embodies a new competing idea of legitimate statehood in international society and is taken as the appropriate test for recognition as a full member. This division works to reinvent a ‘more restrictive international society’ in the existing global order wherein ‘rule rationality’ gives way to ‘value rationality’, a notable move away from a pluralist towards a solidarist conception of international society. This assertion of democratic states as ‘virtuous’ reopens the membership question, re-establishes the standard for defining an ontological outlaw, and reimposes the inside/outside boundary within global international society. The ‘charmed circle’ in the early years of the twenty-first century consists of a core of liberal democratic states, surrounded by outer and then peripheral circles of non-democracies and illiberal states to be disciplined and/or democratized.

In the discourse of ‘democracy as civilization’, the ‘Concert of Democracies’ (or the ‘League of Democracies’) becomes the vanguard of global international society. ‘Democracy as civilization’ as a discourse is, at the same time, implicated in the reintroduction of domination and exclusion in international society, as it reopens ‘the barbarian option’ in the conception and constitution of international society. In the mirror of democracy, non-democracies become what Chris Hobson calls ‘(post)modern-day barbarians’. This gives the existence of non-democratic states, a perennial sociological feature of international society, a particular political meaning. Non-democracies become the ontological Other for liberal democracies, and often a threatening one. ‘Liberals do not only distrust what they do,’ declares Michael Doyle; ‘we dislike what they are.’ The discourse of ‘democracy as civilization’ therefore contributes to the construction of ontological outlaws in international society. Those states are outlaws ‘more for what they are than what they have done’.

Third, this exclusivist conception of international society marked by value rationality is not only much more politicized, but also existentially unequal. Those who advocate reinventing the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in twenty-first-century global international society propose ‘differential treatment where the boundaries of the liberal zone are crossed, conferring privileges based on membership in the liberal zone’. They complain about the antiquated rules of international law for ‘failing to distinguish between the rights of decent states and indecent ones’. The claim

53 Reus-Smit, ‘Liberal hierarchy and the license to use force’, p. 76.
56 Hobson, ‘Democracy as civilization’, p. 94.
57 Quoted in Hobson, ‘Democracy as civilization’, p. 93.
58 Donnelly, ‘ Sovereign inequalities and hierarchy in anarchy’, p. 147.
60 Franck, ‘The power of legitimacy and the legitimacy of power’, p. 89.
of ‘a greater moral reliability [of liberal democracies] than other states’ reasserts moral inequalities between states. Because of their ‘comparative moral reliability’ and other distinctive qualities, ‘liberal democracies ought to have special rights in international society, both in international decision-making and with regard to domestic autonomy’. These advocates argue in turn for the formal reconstruction of a hierarchy of international society, ‘whereby democratic states would gain special governance rights—particularly with regard to the legitimate use of force—and other states would have their categorical rights of self-determination and non-intervention qualified’.

This proposed reconstruction of a liberal hierarchical international society based on the new standard of ‘civilization’ reintroduces the rightful membership question and attempts to reinvent the authority and rules to determine which states belong to either side of the inside–outside division. It is responsible for the creation of the notion of differentiated sovereignties—conditional sovereignty, contingent sovereignty and qualified sovereignty, for example—for those outside the self-proclaimed core of global international society. Such conceptions are eerily reminiscent of the ‘graduated sovereignties’ claimed and exercised in the liberal shift to imperialism in nineteenth-century international history.

Accordingly, the conception of international society marked by value rationality is potentially more militant, as it is often used to justify moves towards coercive solidarism. In the name of democracy, violence and war as well as regime change can be and indeed have often been justified as necessary evils in the course of either establishing or defending a ‘superior’ liberal political and legal order and punishing or disciplining ‘rogue states’, ‘pariahs’ and ‘outlaws’. Expanding the zone of liberal peace necessitates engaging in the morally ‘virtuous’ war.

To the extent that this new liberal and solidarist-oriented hierarchical construct of unequal sovereigns has been successfully established in global international society, notable normative changes have happened. There is now a rather unhappy coexistence of important features of the pluralist order that China defends and the new cosmopolitan and anti-pluralist conceptions of international society in which China is viewed as the undemocratic Other, decidedly outside, or at best on the margin of, this reinvented international society. China is undoubtedly ranked low in this liberal hierarchy, if not at the bottom. It is one of those states that need to be civilized, that is, democratized, and disciplined from time to time. Johnson observes that in the US debates about China in the 1990s, ‘the subtext is a fairly sharp othering of China that includes a civilizing discourse (China is not yet a civilized state)’.

These new liberals’ attempts to redefine legitimate statehood, rightful state conduct and rightful membership in a solidarist-oriented interna-
tional society have considerably complicated China’s search for legitimation of its rising power.

China has contested this division of international society into unequal sovereigns with great vigour. As noted above, China does not accept the assertion that the pluralist order as embodied in the Westphalian project is a moral failure. It has defended vigorously the legalized hegemony of the UNSC as an irreplaceable authority to legitimate and authorize the use of force in accordance with the norms and spirit of the UN Charter. This is an explicit refutation of the claim that the ‘Concert of Democracies’ in the form of the coalition of the willing has licence to use force as it deems necessary and enjoys special governance rights for global rule-making. It has maintained as a fundamental principle sovereign equality for all states, including so-called ‘rogue states’ or ‘wayward states’.

In negotiating for its acceptance of the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), China has insisted that any intervention on this ground should be authorized by the UN and should be subject to the sovereign consent.

Two particular challenges that China has mounted to this liberal hierarchical construct of unequal sovereigns are worth further consideration. One is a sophisticated strategy that China has developed in its human rights diplomacy in response to and for negotiation with the changing human rights discourse and normative regimes. On the one hand, China moved to sign two core components of the International Bill of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (signed in 1998, not yet ratified) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (signed in 1997, ratified in 2001). The acceptance of the universality of human rights is constitutionally expressed in the 2004 amendment to article 33 of the Chinese constitution, which asserts: ‘The State respects and preserves human rights.’ The Chinese government also began to issue a regular series of white papers to elaborate its human rights policies and to defend its human rights record. There is an appreciable move on the part of China from a ‘cultural particularist’ understanding of international human rights norms to a ‘negotiated universalist’ position.

These steps are in part instrumental moves in fending off international criticisms of China’s human rights policies and practices in the wake of the violent crackdown on demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. A number of efforts have also been made to frustrate any attempt to attach a social stigma to China as a human rights ‘pariah’ in international society. Between 1992 and 2001, one important thrust of China’s human rights diplomacy at the UN was to put together a winning coalition of states within the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) to thwart any attempt at passing a resolution by the UNCHR singling out the PRC for criticism of its human rights policies and practices. Chinese diplomats are said to have ‘mastered Commission procedures and … often used them successfully to deflect criticism’.

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To ward off criticisms of its record on political and civil rights, the Chinese government often emphasizes its notable achievements in improving the collective economic and social rights of Chinese citizens. Beginning in 1998, the Chinese government, through the Information Office of the State Council, has regularly issued a publication entitled *Human rights record of the United States* as a response to the United States’ practice of singling out China for criticism in its own annual ‘country reports on human rights practices’. During his visit to Washington in February 2012, the then Vice-President Xi Jinping made a point of saying at a luncheon hosted by Vice-President Biden that: ‘There is no best human rights guarantee. There is only better human rights guarantee.’ This was an apparent defence of China’s human rights record, but also a veiled criticism of that of the United States.

China was also closely involved in the negotiations for the establishment of the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), which came into being in 2006 to replace the UNCHR. Its objections, challenges and compromises in these negotiations constitute a contribution to the construction of the international human rights governance architecture. Chinese activism has also been noted in regular sessions of the UNHRC. ‘At the 2011 18th regular session of the Council, a few instances emerged of the more overt exercise of China’s influence, its willingness to take on a leadership role, and its move to try and influence positions at early stages of a human rights debate.’ Not surprisingly, perhaps, ‘China has welcomed the decision of the UN’s Human Rights Council to establish a universal periodic review process of each UN member state’s human rights record because this reduces the prospect of Beijing’s being “unfairly” (in its perception) singled out for scrutiny of its human rights record’. Most important in the present discussion is that through participating in ‘a universal social process’ that helps produce international human rights as a universally held norm, China’s ‘negotiated universalist’ standing has been further consolidated.

The other case of contestation worth considering is China’s articulation of the idea(l) of a harmonious world, first made on the world stage by President Hu Jintao in addressing the UN in September 2005. If ‘world politics is the arena for struggles amongst social and political ideals’, the articulation of the social idea(l) of a harmonious world is particularly meaningful as embodying China’s vigorous contestation and explicit refutation of liberal anti-pluralist attempts to construct an exclusivist international society. Striving for a harmonious world, Hu contended, requires ‘upholding the spirit of inclusiveness’ and ‘preserving the diversity of civilizations in the spirit of equality and openness’. This is justi-

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69 Foot and Inboden, ‘China’s influence on Asian states during the creation of the UN Human Rights Council’, p. 868.
70 Foot, ‘“Doing some things” in the Xi Jinping era’, p. 1092.
72 Unless noted otherwise, all quotes by Hu Jintao in the following discussion are from Hu’s speech, ‘Build towards a harmonious world of lasting peace and common prosperity’, New York, 15 Sept. 2005.
fied on the ground that ‘diversity of civilizations is a basic feature of humanity and an important driving force behind human progress. In the course of human history, all civilizations have, in their own way, made a positive contribution to the overall human progress’. As a rejection of ‘value rationality’ in reconstituting international society, Hu asserted that ‘we should do away with misgivings and estrangement existing between civilizations’. This is because it is civilizational differences that allow civilizations ‘to learn from one another and grow stronger together. Uniformity, if imposed on them, can only take away their vitality and cause them to become rigid and decline.’

In a clear refutation of the claim that the democratic state is ‘virtuous’, after rehearsing China’s usual line that ‘we should respect a country’s right to independently choose its own social system and path of development’, Hu went on to state that: ‘In this way, countries will go for mutual emulation instead of deliberate exclusion, for mutual learning of respective strong points instead of making fetish a particular model.’ As an explicit challenge to the ideas of ‘democracy as civilization’ and ‘a league of democracies’ as the vanguard of global international society, Hu contended that ‘the world’s civilizations may differ in age, but none is better or more superior than others. Differences in history, culture, social system and mode of development should not become barriers to exchanges between countries, let alone excuses for confrontation.’ In striving for a harmonious world where all civilizations coexist and accommodate each other, ‘inter-civilizational dialogue and exchanges should be enhanced and different cultures would flourish and complement one another only through competition and comparison’.

**China as the second among ‘great (ir)responsibles’**

China is rising in ‘the one world of globalizing capitalism, of global security dynamics, of global institutions and global governance’. This is a world of which the rise of China is a constitutive element. In other words, in its rise, China has been riding on a wave of accelerated social and economic globalization, which has fuelled demands for shifting patterns of governance and deeper institutionalization of global politics. This process of globalization has thus significantly affected the scope, complexity and ambition of global rule-making: how the world is governed has changed significantly, and global governance has become more and more demanding. While interstate governance is deepening and widening, there has emerged a ‘complex governance around and beyond states’ whereby global market players, social movements and civil society groups join states as both competitive and cooperative actors in forging complex transnational and trans-governmental networks that take global modes of regulation, and the construction, promotion and enforcement of norms, beyond traditional interstate governance. Rightful rules, which constitute the foundation for global governance,

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74 Hurrell, *On global order*, p. 60.
are always negotiated among and contested by multiple actors.\textsuperscript{75} There is, in this understanding, a profound nexus between international society and world society in the construction of effective global governance, which moves international society firmly towards a solidarist orientation.

David Lake’s conceptualization of global governance as ‘a set of authority relationships’ highlights, perhaps unwittingly, the centrality of Great Powers in constructing and practising global governance. Lake identifies ‘a concept of relational authority, which treats authority as a social contract in which a governor provides a political order of value to a community in exchange for compliance by the governed with the rules necessary to produce that order’.\textsuperscript{76} To the extent that ‘governor’ here refers to a state actor, such conceptualization is very close to a classical argument articulated by Hedley Bull concerning special privileges that Great Powers enjoy as ‘great (ir)responsible’ sitting at the top of power hierarchy and special responsibilities they are expected to fulfil in international society.\textsuperscript{77} For Bull, ‘Great Powers cannot expect to be conceded special rights if they do not perform special duties’.\textsuperscript{78} As ‘a socially constituted type of actor playing a particular (unequal) role in international society’,\textsuperscript{79} Great Powers are expected to make contributions to the achievement of common purpose and to international order and governance by imparting ‘a degree of central direction to the affairs of international society as a whole’.\textsuperscript{80} For Adam Watson, in such global institutions as the UNSC and G8, Great Powers have already exercised ‘a collective hegemonial authority which continues to grow’.\textsuperscript{81} Though sceptical about the viability of hegemonic ordering, Andrew Hurrell concedes that hierarchy might be an alternative model if the demand for global governance cannot be satisfied through the creation of multilateral institutions.\textsuperscript{82} Great Power management as a primary institution in international society endures in the age of globalization and global governance.

It is clear that global governance with embedded pathologies of power is a particular social order, which is inclusive rather than exclusive. It is a social order that cannot be managed or negotiated only among members of the Concert of Democracies as an exclusivist international society. As Miles Kahler argues, emerging powers have a growing influence on the mosaic of institutions and actors that construct and define global governance. Their preferences, capabilities and strategies in respect of global governance matter a great deal because they may be either ‘nascent supporters of existing global governance’ or ‘rising challengers promoting a disruptive agenda of change’.\textsuperscript{83} On some global governance issues,
they have achieved ‘veto-player’ status with power to block international agreement.  

China’s preferences, capabilities and strategies matter a great deal not only because of its status as the second among the ‘great irresponsibles’, a position that has significantly increased its bargaining power in the negotiations for constructing the institutional and normative architecture of global governance, but also because the world will ‘increasingly see itself as a stakeholder in China just as China has been encouraged to be a stakeholder in the international system’. That is perhaps what has prompted John Ikenberry to ask with a certain degree of anxiety whether the rise of China signals ‘the emergence of a rival non-Western way of organizing the international system or simply the arrival of new stakeholders seeking greater authority and leadership within the existing international order’.  

Chinese approaches and policies towards global governance have attracted a number of criticisms. Chinese diplomacy ‘has sometimes been described as challenging, disturbing or disrupting the various global governance arrangements’. China’s reservations about and opposition to different forms of conditionality are well known. These range from macroeconomic policy conditions, through micro-economic reform conditions imposed by the IMF on recipient states, to conditions designed to promote good governance, human rights and democracy endorsed by the OECD Development Assistance Committee. It is equally ambivalent about international policy coordination in dealing with ‘rogue states’. China’s position on humanitarian intervention, as discussed above, is at best conservative. Its abrasive diplomacy at the fractious Copenhagen conference on climate change in 2009 has often been cited as an example of China’s disruptive behaviour in attempts to reach consensus on one of the most pressing global governance issues.

There are also criticisms of China for shirking its global responsibility. For Fred Bergsten, ‘China continues to act like a small country with little impact on the global system at large and therefore little responsibility for it’. For others, ‘China is clearly determined to take its rightful place at the head table of world politics and enjoy its attendant prerogatives. But its government has not yet formulated a clear view of the country’s role as a global power and the commitments it entails’. Like other Asian regimes, Chinese leaders are ‘more concerned with their national power aspirations than with global governance’.

There are two potential lines of defence against such charges. Emerging powers,

84 Hurrell and Sengupta, ‘Emerging powers, North–South relations and global climate politics’, p. 480.
86 Ikenberry, ‘Is a “one world” order possible?’, p. 2.
87 Foot, ‘US–China interactions in global governance and international organizations’, p. 348.
90 Acharya, ‘Can Asia lead?’, p. 851.
including China, Kahler observes, are confronting their own domestic political and economic dilemmas, which are likely to ‘induce an aversion to risk’ in their approach to global governance issues.91 For one Chinese scholar, China simply ‘could not assume those responsibilities against its core national interests, its deep-rooted principles, and beyond its capacities’.92 These criticisms and lines of defence highlight an appreciable gap between China’s willingness to take up its global responsibilities and the international expectations of a rising China as the second among the ‘great (ir)responsible’.

In spite of numerous criticisms of Chinese approaches to global governance issues, there is clear evidence that China is increasingly committed to taking up its global responsibility and to providing global public goods. In a meeting with the UN Secretary-General in June 2013, President Xi Jinping explicitly accepted that China, as a permanent member of the UNSC, ‘has heavy responsibilities to assume’ and affirmed that China ‘has the capability to assume them’. He further specified a broad range of areas in which China would ‘step up its efforts’ to fulfil its global responsibilities, which included promoting the peaceful settlement of international disputes, supporting the UN’s Millennium Development Goals, working with other parties to tackle climate change, and making more contributions towards world peace and human development.93

There is no question, then, about China’s endorsement of and commitment to global governance in principle and as a liberal value. The question is: what are China’s preferences in the construction of an institutional and normative global governance architecture in terms of commitment to pluralism or solidarism? The answer to this question entails a brief empirical examination of China as a ‘great (ir)responsible’ in the three cases of global security, economic governance and environmental governance.

By virtue of its participation in legalized hegemony as a member of the P5, China has already been deeply involved in shaping global governance through multilateral diplomacy at the UN, ranging from preventive diplomacy, economic sanctions, conflict revolution, peacekeeping and peacemaking to humanitarian intervention and policing compliance of arms control regimes such as that to inhibit proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. However, it is Chinese participation in and contribution to UN peacekeeping that perhaps best illustrates China’s new willingness to take up its responsibility to provide global public goods in global security governance. China started to participate in UN peacekeeping operations as recently as 1988, after years of antagonism and antipathy.94 Since the turn of the century its participation has been significantly accelerated and expanded. China is very proud of the fact that it is the biggest troop contributor to UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs) of all the P5 states, with police, medical

91 Kahler, ‘Rising powers and global governance’, p. 712.
92 Chen Zhimin, as quoted in Breslin, ‘China and the global order’, p. 622.
forces, engineering troops and combat troops all serving.95 ‘As of December 2013, it was contributing 2,078 troops to 10 out of 15 UNPKOs, and between April 1990 and July 2010 it provided 15,600 personnel to 18 separate UN missions’, while ‘two of its generals have become PKO force commanders’. China has also significantly increased its financial contribution to UN peacekeeping, ‘doubling its contribution to the peacekeeping budget from just over 3 per cent in 2012 to 6.64 per cent in fiscal year 2013/14, making it the sixth largest contributor’.96

In terms of global economic governance, the speed, scope and scale of China’s growing economic power have created pressures for readjustment on the United States and other ‘great (ir)responsibles’ in the global economy—so much so that one Chinese scholar claims that any reform of global economic governance ‘would not be realistic without China’s participation’.97 It is true that, like other rising powers, the Chinese will ‘aim to place their imprint on reconstructed global institutions, and the stamp will differ markedly from a status quo supported by the incumbent powers’.98 That China is unhappy about the existing global economic governance architecture based on the so-called Bretton Woods system, and is a staunch advocate of its reform, has been widely noted.99 Together with other emerging powers, it has pushed for these reforms to address the mismatch between existing global economic governance arrangements and the changing economic reality, and to ‘re-establish trust between developing economies and the BWIs [Bretton Woods institutions]’.100 One particular thrust of these reforms seeks to increase the representation of emerging powers in global economic institutions, in order to give them a bigger say in global economic decision-making. Progress to this end was achieved in the ‘most fundamental governance overhaul in the [International Monetary] fund’s 65-year history’, approved by the IMF executive board in November 2010, which brought about ‘the biggest ever shift of influence in favour of emerging market and developing countries to recognize their growing role in the global economy’.101 The proposed overhaul of quotas, if implemented, would elevate China to number three in voting power at the IMF.102 This approach suggests that China prefers incremental and gradual change in global economic governance, aimed at strengthening rather than dismantling the existing institutions. This new distribution of global governance responsibilities to provide

96 Foot, ‘“Doing some things” in the Xi Jinping era’, p. 1092.
97 Xiao Ren, ‘A reform minded status quo power? China, the G20, and changes in the international monetary system’, Research Centre for Chinese Politics and Business, Indiana University, 2012, p. 27.
98 Kahler, ‘Rising powers and global governance’, p. 711.
100 Jorgensen and Strube, ‘China, the G20 and global economic governance’, p. 5.
102 If such reforms are aimed at undermining the dominance of the West in these institutions, the initiative has ostensibly failed, as the United States will still have virtual veto power even after the US Congress has approved the IMF board recommendation. In December 2015, the US Senate finally adopted long-awaited reforms of IMF governance structure with China’s voting rights increased from 3.8% to 6%: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-35141683;
China with greater representation does not just afford China prestige and status, but also satisfies its desire to demonstrate that it is a ‘great responsible’.

China’s promotion of the G20 as the main platform for enhancing global economic governance is compatible with its reformist goals. China has used the G20 to push for the reforms mentioned above, and finds it an appealing forum for several other reasons. First, China was ‘present at the creation’ of the G20, ‘the most significant institutional innovation in global economic governance since the creation of the WTO [World Trade Organization]’, and can therefore claim equal ‘historical ownership’ over the process of constructing this global institution. This is politically and symbolically important to China, which as noted above was historically absent from the construction of other global economic institutions. Second, the G20 incorporates China as having ‘equal say’ with the traditional G7 powers in global economic governance, a parity of voice which is seen as ‘a significant milestone in the transition away from the G7-dominated, post-war economic governance model’. Third, compared to the G8+5, the G20 provides a more even representation from both developed and emerging economies: China does not want to be seen as detached from other developing countries, even when it assumes an identity of a ‘great responsible’ sitting at the top table of global economic decision-making in ‘an ever more open and dynamic series of negotiations between North and South over the nature and agenda of global governance’. China’s role as a ‘great responsible’ will be further tested by its G20 presidency in 2016.

A more contentious instance is China’s approach to environmental protection and climate change. This is because its abrasive behaviour at the Copenhagen climate change summit remains a source of contention. Its reluctance to make a firm and binding commitment to secure reduction of its CO₂ emissions has aroused misgivings and concerns that the world’s number one carbon emitter will continue to act as a great irresponsible in environmental issues. In a broad sense, however, China could be said to have been ‘present at the creation’ of post-Rio 1992 global norms and institutions concerning the environment and climate change. It is a party to the Rio +20 Agreement, has signed the Kyoto Protocol, has endorsed the Bali Action Plan, and has been present at the negotiations for the Copenhagen Accord, Cancun Agreements and the Durban Conference. It has adopted the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and has been part of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). In so doing, it has participated fully in the creation of an increasingly complex set of international environmental institutions, the expansion of international environmental law, and the emergence of a distinctive practice of multilateral environmental diplomacy. Together with other developing countries, principally India and Brazil, it was responsible for the creation and crafting of the ‘common and differentiated responsibility’ norm at the UNFCCC.

Through this range of activities, China could be said to have come to accept what Robert Falkner calls ‘responsibility for the planet as one of several moral

103 Patrick and Thaler, ‘China, the United States and global governance’.
104 Jorgensen and Strube, ‘China, the G20 and global economic governance’, p. 10.
China and liberal hierarchies in global international society

claims on states’. The same trend can also be seen in domestic policy initiatives and changes in China. The Chinese government has, over the past decade or so, made conscious efforts to chart a clear path to transition away from heavily polluting coal to cleaner and sustainable energy sources such as wind and solar. It has at the same time introduced a broad range of domestic laws and policies to promote energy conservation and energy efficiency. The National Climate Change Programme released by the Chinese government in June 2007 set specific national-level targets to reduce the country’s energy intensity and raise the share of renewable energy in its primary energy supply mix. China has emerged as a global leader in and investment destination for green and renewable energy technologies. China is a world leader in wind power generation. It now boasts the largest installed capacity of wind power of any nation and is the largest global wind energy market. At the end of 2015, China overtook Germany in terms of installed solar PV capacity to become the world’s leading solar PV country. China is thus at once the world’s largest carbon emitter and its largest renewable energy market. In September 2015, just three months before the Paris climate conference that December, the Chinese government announced a new long-term (post-2020) commitment to reduce its carbon intensity by 60–65 per cent from 2005 levels by 2030. This builds on China’s 40–45 per cent carbon intensity reduction target for 2020 and its efforts to develop a national carbon cap and trade programme by 2017. It also adds to China’s commitment, made in the US–China joint announcement on climate change of November 2014, to peaking its carbon emissions by 2030 or earlier while increasing clean energy to 20 per cent of total energy consumption by 2030.

In contrast to its fierce contestation of liberal solidarism in creating an exclusive international society of unequal sovereigns, then, China’s approach to global governance issues as the second among the ‘great (ir)responsibles’ is ostensibly more accommodative of solidarist values, ranging from accepting its responsibilities in providing collective security and global economic governance as public goods to endorsing environmentalism. Like China’s endorsement and defence of the UNSC as the embodiment of legalized hegemony, it prefers ‘essentially hierarchical and exclusionary’ and ‘power-centred’ forums for global governance such as the G20 in negotiating for change. In so far as the construction of the global governance architecture is concerned, the central direction China wishes to impart to international society is state-centric solidarism.

111 For a deliberation on state-centric vs cosmopolitan solidarism, see Buzan, An introduction to the English School of International Relations, pp. 114–20.
Conclusion

In the messy world of power politics, the entanglement of China as a rising power with the three liberal hierarchical constructs in global international society is untidy. Such untidiness defies the simple assumptions that rising powers create power-political tensions that inevitably challenge the status quo of the international system and that a rising China poses an existential threat to the survival of the liberal global order. The rise of China has and will continue to have consequences for the transformative dynamics of the international system not just in power-political terms but also in terms of normative change, as it has redefined the global power hierarchy. As discussed above, China has negotiated with the liberal global order for normative change from the variety of positions in which it finds itself within the liberal institutional constructs of the hierarchy of power. It has vigorously defended the pluralist order informed by classical liberal pluralism and embodied in the UN Charter as continuing to be politically viable and morally acceptable. It has upheld the legitimate authorities of the legalized hegemony, as epitomized in the P5 of the UNSC, from its position at the top of this hierarchy. As a constructed Other, China has at the same time strenuously contested liberal solidarism in constructing an exclusive international society and mounted determined resistance to the construction of a liberal hierarchy of unequal sovereigns attempted by new liberal internationalists. As a second among ‘great (ir)responsibles’, China has opted for negotiating a consensual, state-centric solidarist position on global governance issues.

The tangled nature of its engagement with these three liberal hierarchical constructs demonstrates that China has a range of preferences for the normative change of international society on the pluralism–solidarism spectrum. Its defence of the legalized hegemony and its support for the UN more generally is not a vote for the pluralist order in its minimalist sense. While it rejects firmly any coercive form of liberal solidarism, it has partially endorsed some solidarist values in global governance and has promoted a state-centric approach to taking international society in this direction. The agency China exercises in this manner contributes to explaining the limited consensus among Great Powers as to the ‘central direction’ of the evolving global order, because ‘even when genuinely consensual, the promotion of solidarist values both depends on, and reinforces, the power and privileges of the dominant state or groups of states’.112 Given that ‘the aspirations of this normatively ambitious international society remain deeply contaminated by the preferences and interests of powerful states’,113 the preferences of China as the second among equals in the Great Power club matter greatly in understanding the contention between pluralism and solidarism in the changing raison de système of global international society.

112 Hurrell, On global order, p. 9.
113 Hurrell, On global order, p. 9.