

3

Chinese Vision of a Rules- based Order International Order with Chinese Characteristics

Dr. Benjamin Tze Ern Ho



In recent years, the idea of a “rules-based order” (RBO) has been in vogue among scholars and practitioners of international politics, particularly in the Asia-Pacific (or Indo-Pacific) region amid heightened geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China. At first glance, the need for “rules” to ensure international order is stating the obvious: *to have order, individuals and states need to operate with some rules.*

At the same time, however, what these rules might be (and ought to be) remains a vexing problem, particularly given the varying opinions and views among states regarding who gets to set the rules and, more fundamentally, whose interests the rules are meant to serve.

To be certain, countries in the West are far from monolithic; competition for global influence exists even among states who subscribe to the liberal tradition. However, the idea that rules remain necessary to ensure a degree of predictability and regularity in international affairs is generally accepted by Western powers. From this view, only with rules can international stability—even as an idealized outcome—be sustained and safeguarded amid shifting domestic-political dynamics.

The rise of China complicates the Western-centric understanding of RBO given that the idea of a rules-based order is not inherently self-evident within traditional Chinese political philosophy. Indeed, Beijing’s experience of encountering RBO (and multilateralism more generally) is a comparatively recent phenomenon; only after its reform and opening-up program in the 1980s was Beijing more amenable to considering its foreign policies in such terms—and even then, mostly with an eye to the

Taiwan issue. It was only after the 2008–09 global financial crisis, whereby Chinese leaders perceived a notable decline in the West and a reduction of Western (particularly American) influence in global multilateral institutions that Beijing started to court multilateral institutions with greater deliberation.

As the thinking in China goes, diminished American influence would create an opportunity to modify the rules governing the international system. In addition, Beijing's realpolitik vision of international politics leads it to conclude that most countries who aligned with the United States in the past did so not because of some higher ideational motivation (for instance, to preserve individual human rights, or believing that democracy was the best form of governance) but because their own national interests—often materially defined—were best served subscribing to the American-led international order. A Chinese-led order could therefore expect to command similar levels of support.

China perceives the present moment, marked by US domestic dysfunction and the especially the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as a golden opportunity to shape global norms and values in accordance with its own preferences. This does not mean entirely dismantling the

present international structure and replacing it with a Chinese one (Beijing is aware that many countries would not go along with it), but rather to continue to support a rules-based order (*jiyu guize de guojizhixu* 基于规则的国际秩序) that preserves “Chinese characteristics” and ultimately Chinese national interests.

To be clear, the safeguarding of national interests is hardly unique to China; most if not all countries prefer rules that favor themselves. What is problematic is that China's national interests are defined primarily with respect to the preservation of its one-party rule. In liberal democracies, of course, political parties vie to see who can best articulate the national interest. As observed by Qin Yaqing, who previously headed the China Foreign Affairs University, “the most basic feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.”¹ Seen this way, it comes as no surprise that many Chinese scholars equate the pursuit of a rules-based order as being synonymous with the pursuit of a liberal international order, which runs fundamentally at odds with the CCP's single-party rule. Indeed, the narrative the CCP frequently touts is that the pursuit of a liberal order by the United States is meant to

make other countries to become more “Western,” thus fundamentally threatening the CCP’s grip on power.

Not surprisingly, when Chinese leaders discuss regional order, they frequently talk about building “a more just, equitable, fair, democratic and representative international political and economic order” in the future tense, a vision that China aims to have an influential role in helping to implement.² Similarly, there is a deeply held belief among many Chinese scholars and policymakers that the United States—as a hegemonic power—does not practice what it preaches in terms of living up to the ideals of the RBO. For instance, China points to the United States as having violated (or opted out of) core aspects of international order—such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq or Washington’s nonratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—to argue that hegemons have the privilege of hypocrisy.³ Again, this suggests that China perceives the RBO as being conceived ultimately to preserve American international primacy while artificially constraining China’s own rise.

With this in mind, I contend that China’s approach to multilateralism is one which seeks not to acquiesce in *existing* ideas of RBO

(which posits certain universal ideals) but rather one which call into question the relevance of multilateralism as framed by Western thinking and worldview. China takes a more flexible approach to international law by portraying such rules as less morally (and legally) binding than how the West views them. In other words, Beijing seeks to *relativize* the application of international rules for reasons of self-interest. Unlike the US vision of multilateralism and RBO, which is that international rule-making can help to preserve international stability despite changing domestic-political circumstances, China’s goal for a revised RBO is far narrower, more limited, and conspicuously inverted: to ensure *domestic* stability amid a changing *international* environment. In sum, multilateralism and the RBO means different things to different state actors: *the United States and the West see multilateralism as a means of entrenching global leadership and promoting a liberal vision of world order, while China sees multilateralism as a diplomatic tool to preserve China’s national interests and legitimize its one-party rule.*

Moving forward, it will be more necessary than ever for countries to demonstrate that their support for RBO (if indeed they support

such an order) is more than just an outgrowth of their alignment with the United States or a product of anti-China politics. In other words, states will have to articulate how and why abiding by the tenets of a RBO is inherently good for them, or else what the characteristics of a better, more equitable RBO ought to be like. Should their dispositions depart from the preferences of Washington and Beijing, then perhaps it is time the international community come together to examine what is problematic and how best to remedy it. On the other hand, if there are core aspects of

RBO that speak to broader universal concerns, than China's framing of international order as inherently biased in favor of the West will be exposed as self-interested and, indeed, irresponsible. ■

Dr. Benjamin Tze Ern Ho

Dr. Ho is an assistant professor in the China Programme, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Notes

1 Yaqing Qin, Song Dexing, Zhang Yensheng, Zhang Xiaotong, Zhu Feng, and Lu Chuan Ying. "Zhuanjiabitan: Dabianjuzhong de zhongguo yu shijie" [Experts in conversation: China and the World in the Great Game], *Shanghai Institute of International Studies conference*, 2019, DOI: 10.13851/j.cnki.gjzw.202001001 (accessed at CNKI), see 5.

2 See Mira Rapp-Hooper, Michael Chase, Mataka Kamiya, Shin Kawashima, and Yuichi Hosoya. "Responding to China's Complicated Views on International Order." *Carnegie Endowment for International*

Peace, October 10, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>.

3 Rapp-Hooper et al., "Responding to China's Complicated Views on International Order."

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.