

Blame It on China?

Liberal Order in Crisis and Belt and Road Initiative Effect

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Abstract

This study investigates whether China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has produced observable structural effects on the Liberal International Order (LIO). While much of the existing scholarship frames the BRI as either a revisionist challenge or a cooperative supplement, few works apply empirical evidence to test these claims. Drawing on United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voting data from 1980 to 2024, the analysis employs Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) to examine ideological distances between states and China, distinguishing BRI participants from non-participants. The findings show that the BRI triggered a short-term convergence in 2013, with countries moving closer to Beijing's positions. However, this effect quickly dissipated: over time, non-participants drifted further away, while participants—though consistently closer to China—did not exhibit significant additional convergence. These results suggest that the BRI has not generated durable or systemic “re-ordering” effects, but rather functions as a form of selective and regional influence, reinforcing ties with already aligned states and cultivating political support among certain developing countries. Theoretically, the study contributes to debates on the decline and resilience of LIO by demonstrating that China's challenge lies less in outright replacement than in incremental penetration and parallel institutional building. Methodologically, it supplements narrative accounts with causal inference using quantitative evidence, offering a baseline for future regional and qualitative analyses.

Keywords: Liberal International Order, China, Belt and Road Initiative, International Relation, International Order

1. Introduction

Is China rewriting the international order? In its 2022 National Security Strategy, the U.S. government identified China as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective.” (The White House 2022, 23). Correspondingly, in the past decade, academic debates surrounding LIO have unfolded in three major directions: (1) Decline/Severe Challenge Thesis — emphasizing the shift in structural power and the erosion of institutional legitimacy, arguing that the LIO is under unprecedented pressure (Alcaro 2018; Bukovansky 2017; Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021; Mearsheimer 2019); (2) Resilience Thesis — contending that deeply embedded institutions and adaptive mechanisms can still sustain the core of the order, portraying China as an “insider participant” rather than a revisionist disruptor (Ikenberry 2010, 2018, 2024; Nye 2017); (3) Myth/Non-Existence Thesis — questioning whether the postwar system ever truly possessed globally universal liberal characteristics, instead arguing that it was essentially a Western-centric arrangement (Allison 2018; Johnston 2019a). Notably, Nye (2017) introduces the notion of “soft power attrition,” suggesting that what has weakened is the image of the United States rather than the liberal order itself; Stokes (2018), on the other hand, focuses on how Trump-era unilateralism eroded allies’ trust and the consistency of rules, highlighting a path of “self-inflicted harm.” The systemic theoretical divergence in the field—between structural power transitions versus normative legitimacy erosion, and between institutional continuity versus hegemonic succession—has not been rigorously tested, but such scholarly disagreement underscores that LIO has once again become a central debate in the study of international relations.

In 2008, the U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) published *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, predicting that the rise of China and other emerging powers would usher in a multipolar global order. The report anticipated that more nations might opt for China’s development model over the political and economic frameworks of Western liberal democracies. It also warned that America’s global dominance would gradually erode, forcing Washington to confront difficult choices on key international issues (National Intelligence Council 2008). Thirteen years later, *Global Trends 2040: A More Contested World* went a step further, identifying China explicitly as the principal challenger to the international order. It stated:

“In A World Adrift, the international system is directionless, chaotic, and volatile as international rules and institutions are largely ignored by major powers like China, regional players, and nonstate actors. OECD countries are plagued by slower economic growth, widening societal divisions, and political paralysis. China is taking advantage of the West’s troubles to expand its international influence, especially in Asia, but Beijing lacks the will and military might to take on global leadership, leaving many global challenges, such as climate change and instability in developing countries, largely unaddressed. ...Rival powers will jockey to shape global norms, rules, and institutions, while regional powers and nonstate actors may exert more influence and lead on issues left unattended by the major powers. These highly varied interactions are likely to produce a more conflict-prone and volatile geopolitical environment, undermine global multilateralism, and broaden the mismatch between transnational challenges and institutional arrangements to tackle them. (National Intelligence Council 2021)”

The National Intelligence Council has observed that the international order is fracturing, with the world now split into several economic and security blocs—of varying size and strength—centered on the United States, the European Union, China, and Russia. This fragmentation is manifest in disrupted global supply chains, impeded international trade, and intensified efforts to court developing countries (National Intelligence Council 2021). Today, Washington faces simultaneous strains from the war in Ukraine, the Israel–Palestine conflict, and rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait, each placing heavy demands on its finite strategic resources. This has fueled fierce policy debates over how to “prioritize main theaters.” Some strategists contend that the Indo-Pacific should be treated as the overriding priority, advocating a “responsibility-shifting” approach to European security to avoid strategic overextension (Campbell & Rapp-Hooper, 2022). Others caution that excessive retrenchment in Europe could erode allied trust and embolden coalitions of revisionist powers (Kroenig, 2023). The Biden administration’s 2022 *National Defense Strategy* identifies China as “the most comprehensive and serious long-term challenge,” yet simultaneously emphasizes that “Russia presents an acute threat” requiring the preservation of cross-regional deterrence (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022, pp. 4–6). This dual emphasis highlights the difficulty of sustaining a two-theater strategy under resource constraints. In short, how Washington balances the Indo-Pacific and European theaters has become a pivotal test of its ability to preserve leadership in LIO—a test made harder by

the structural erosion of its global governance capacity.

The U.S. government's own reports suggest that Washington now views China as its principal long-term rival, with competition unfolding across multiple fronts—economic, cultural, and military. At the heart of this rivalry is LIO, a set of rules and institutions that the United States claims to have built and led for decades, now facing a severe challenge from Beijing and teetering on the brink of fragmentation. Yet, quantitative assessments of the international order remain scarce in the scholarly literature. This paper addresses that gap by seeking to apply empirical evidence and causally robust research tools to map the structure of the international order and trace its transformations—an unresolved academic debate to which this study aims to make a primary contribution.

Since launching the “Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” in 2013—collectively known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—China has made increasingly clear its ambition not only to expand its influence in global affairs but also to shape an alternative international order. Wen Yang, a senior fellow at the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China, argues that the BRI represents a strategic effort to supplant the U.S.-led liberal international order with a China-led “developmentalist world order” (Wen 2016a). Existing scholarship on the BRI tends to concentrate on its effects on the domestic politics and foreign policies of partner states, often focusing on elite-level interactions. This study seeks to address that gap by assessing whether, and to what extent, China's order-building efforts have borne fruit.

LIO faces threats not only from the rise of emerging powers like China but also from profound shifts within its chief architect and guarantor—the United States. Donald Trump's first term, beginning in 2016, marked a sharp departure from the foreign policy principles that had guided Washington for seven decades after World War II. His “America First” agenda embraced an overtly unilateral and transactional approach, pulling the U.S. out of major international agreements—including the Paris Climate Accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Iran nuclear deal—terminating negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the European Union, and withdrawing from multilateral institutions such as UNESCO, the World Health Organization, and the UN Human Rights Council. These moves signaled a clear disdain for the foundations of multilateralism. Trump's second term, far from reversing course, deepened this challenge: in his first hundred days, he shuttered the U.S. Agency for International Development, threatened steep tariffs on allied nations, and withdrew from additional international agreements. Such actions suggest that the most consequential

threat to LIO may come not only—or even primarily—from China, but from its own leading architect, dismantling it from within (Vinjamuri, van Rij, et al. 2025). By incorporating the Trump administration’s impact into its analysis, this paper seeks to engage a central scholarly debate over the order’s durability and to provide empirical evidence to inform that discussion.

This study is guided by two central questions. First, can we develop empirical indicators capable of capturing the structure of the international order and, in turn, assess the extent to which LIO is in decline? Second, if such a decline is occurring, should China be considered the primary driver of this global shift, or are the underlying causes rooted in the United States’ own internal challenges? Addressing these questions would help remedy a persistent gap in the literature, where analyses of LIO often proceed without robust empirical evidence. It would also speak directly to ongoing academic debates and the disconnect between theory and policy, while improving our ability to forecast the future stability of the international order.

2. The Liberal International Order and Its Challenges

Within international relations theory, “order” is typically defined as a framework of norms and institutions that regulates state-to-state interactions. Realist scholar John J. Mearsheimer conceptualizes the international order as a system comprised of international institutions that facilitate the governance of relations among member states (Mearsheimer 2019). This order serves not only to establish behavioral rules but also to enhance the predictability and stability of international affairs.

Historically, the foundations of today’s international order can be traced to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which enshrined the principles of state sovereignty and equality, forming the basis of the modern international system—known as the Westphalian sovereignty system. This system evolved over the centuries, most notably in the aftermath of the two World Wars, when Britain and the United States, under the banner of a “liberal ascendancy,” played a leading role in shaping LIO we recognize today. This order rests on core principles including open markets, international institutions, cooperative security, a community of democracies, progressive change, collective problem-solving, shared sovereignty, and the rule of law (Ikenberry 2011a).

Yet LIO is far from static. Shifts in the global distribution of power, the rise of new great powers, and the growing influence of non-state actors have placed it under unprecedented strain (Ikenberry 2018, 7; Mearsheimer 2019, 8). These pressures have led scholars to revisit fundamental questions about the order’s definition, operating logic, and long-term viability. One defining feature of the liberal order is its reliance on “co-binding” security arrangements, whereby liberal states establish mutually constraining international institutions to mitigate the uncertainties of an anarchic system (Keohane 2004). This approach does not deny the reality of anarchy but actively seeks to manage and overcome it. Democracies are particularly well suited to this task, as their domestic institutions more easily create checks on state power.

A second hallmark is U.S. hegemony, characterized less by unilateral coercion than by cooperation and reciprocity (Ikenberry 2018, 8). The openness of the American political system and its dense web of transnational linkages allow other states to articulate their interests in U.S. policy processes, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of American leadership. Even states with constrained sovereignty—such as Japan, Germany, and Taiwan—occupy pivotal roles within this system. Granted sovereignty after World War II, these states, by strong domestic

consensus, chose to exercise strategic self-restraint, forgoing the development of full-scale military forces and nuclear arsenals (Adler and Barnett 1998, 462; Ruggie 1982, 405). This restraint reflects a shared recognition of the catastrophic legacy of authoritarianism and imperialism.

Finally, LIO rests on an economic foundation of high openness—economic liberalism. Within the Western order, such openness has been sustained not only by the stability afforded by U.S. hegemony but also by the substantial absolute gains generated by capitalism. These gains incentivize states to adopt measures that mitigate the effects of anarchy, allowing them to focus on reaping economic benefits. The complexity and rapid pace of change in modern industrial capitalism make it difficult for states to calculate relative gains with precision, which in turn encourages them to preserve an open economic system (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999).

LIO comprises three interrelated dimensions—political liberalism, economic liberalism, and liberalism in international relations. While these dimensions often appear mutually reinforcing, they also harbor inherent tensions. Under conditions of “hyper-globalization,” for instance, economic liberalism can erode democratic freedoms, thereby undermining the foundations of political liberalism. Nor is the liberal order a monolithic or static system. Since the end of the Cold War, it has undergone significant transformation, particularly with the rise of mechanisms such as the Responsibility to Protect and the International Criminal Court, which have constrained the autonomy of sovereign states. This evolution has deepened perceptual divides between Western and non-Western countries and brought into sharper relief the contradictions between liberalism and order itself. Globalization strategies promoted by the United States and Europe have placed economic liberalism at the heart of the contemporary order. Yet heavy reliance on a rules-based international economic system has narrowed states’ policy space and spurred growing introspection within the West about the merits and consequences of globalization (Kundnani 2017).

Most scholars concur that the twentieth century was marked by U.S. unipolar hegemony and Washington’s repeated attempts to construct an international order. While the form and meaning of these orders varied over time, their underlying purpose remained constant: to serve the core strategic interests of the American hegemon (Ikenberry 2018a; Men Honghua 2006). Since the 1940s, LIO has provided the framework for contemporary interstate relations, particularly among capitalist, democratic, and industrialized nations. The international organizations that arose in tandem with the LIO were designed explicitly to sustain and advance that order.

The early twenty-first century saw the rise of non-Western powers and a shift of wealth and influence from the global North toward the Southeast, leading many observers to conclude that the U.S.-led order was in decline. At the time, however, Ikenberry maintained that LIO was not under serious threat. While America's dominance had diminished, emerging powers showed little interest in overturning the order's foundational principles. Instead, they sought to leverage it to strengthen their own authority and advance their interests. In Ikenberry's view, these states had no desire to see the liberal order dismantled (Ikenberry 2011). Mearsheimer (2019), by contrast, emphasizes the structural distinctions between the U.S.-led orders before and after the Cold War. During the Cold War, Washington presided over the Western Bloc, a system that was neither liberal nor truly international but rather a "bounded order." Its primary purpose was to engage in a high-stakes security rivalry with another bounded order—the Soviet-led Communist Bloc. In both blocs, realist principles, not liberal ideals, defined the core of the system.

Mearsheimer contends that the United States should abandon its long-standing "liberal crusade" to export democracy around the globe—a project that, paradoxically, lay at the heart of Washington's vision for LIO. The central contradiction, he argues, is that efforts to promote liberal democracy inevitably clash with nationalism, given the deep incompatibility between liberalism's universalist values and the core interests of sovereign states. In practice, the liberal order's pursuits—whether in the democratic transformation of the Middle East or in Europe's enlargement and integration—have frequently become bogged down in institutional and cultural conflict. At the same time, hyper-globalization and economic liberalization have deepened social inequality, undermining the order's legitimacy within the United States and across the West, and further eroding its stability and long-term viability (Mearsheimer 2019).

Many analysts argue that the decline of LIO is, at its core, a self-inflicted American problem. A pivotal moment came in March 2003, when Washington invaded Iraq. President George W. Bush chose to override the decisions and objections of the United Nations and the broader international community, attacking a fragile and unstable regime later shown to pose no real threat to U.S. security. The war not only tarnished America's global reputation but, more profoundly, represented a betrayal of the very normative consensus underpinning LIO—an order the United States itself had helped to build. That betrayal yielded no strategic dividends: far from eliminating international terrorism, the conflict coincided with its resurgence and expansion over the next two decades. This outcome left enduring doubts among other nations about America's capacity and moral authority to lead the liberal order, and, in the process,

transformed the United States into an imperial power (Ikenberry 2011a; Jackson 2023).

Amitav Acharya (2018) argues that LIO's vulnerabilities stem not only from the rise of external challengers such as China, but also from deep-seated structural flaws and U.S. policy failures. At its core, he maintains, the liberal order is a limited and selective system—dominated by Western powers—that has excluded major non-Western states like China and India and, in some cases, generated adverse effects in non-member countries. Acharya sees the current order evolving toward what he terms a “multiplex world,” characterized by more diffuse power, multi-layered governance, and an expanded role for regional institutions and non-state actors. In his view, the future will be defined not by the dominance of a single great power, but by a more pluralistic and decentralized “multiplex cinema” model, in which states, regional organizations, and non-state actors engage in both cooperation and competition to shape global order.

Some analysts contend that Donald Trump's election and subsequent policies accelerated the unraveling of LIO. By backing the breakup of the European Union and pursuing economic nationalism, Trump deprived the international institutions underpinning the order of meaningful U.S. engagement—the participation of its unipolar leader. These actions reintroduced nationalist conceptions of international order into the core of foreign policy discourse, while sapping the vitality of the liberal order (Stokes 2018). Examples of Trump's defiance of the liberal order include withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), challenging the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), using overtly unilateral and coercive tactics to pressure fellow NATO members, and pulling out of key UN-affiliated international organizations. Such withdrawals cast serious doubt on America's commitment to LIO and prompted even long-standing members of the liberal camp to begin their own retreat from it. Through his “America First” agenda, Trump revealed—much to the surprise of political observers—that America's diminished leadership was not the result of an inability to meet the challenge of rising powers, but of resentment that the very order it had built was being leveraged by others to gain advantage. This sense of grievance, Bukovansky (2017) argues, drove Washington to willingly forfeit its global leadership role.

Another clear marker of LIO's decline is the broad retreat of European states from the democratic camp. This trend encompasses Brexit, the rise of “new authoritarianism” in Hungary, Poland, and even Turkey, as well as a surge of anti-globalization populism sweeping through many long-established democracies (Ikenberry 2018a). Lake, Martin, and Risse (2021) share this assessment, noting that numerous members of the liberal order now grapple with

internal pressures from populism, nationalism, and anti-globalization movements. In recent years, these domestic challenges have been compounded by global threats such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, while externally, the order faces assertive authoritarian rivals determined to erode its foundations.

China has also emerged as a principal challenger to LIO, actively seeking to reshape it from within. While drawing significant benefits from the LIO—a process critics liken to “siphoning”—Beijing’s governance model stands in direct contrast to the order’s core principles. At the same time, it bolsters the Westphalian state-sovereignty framework and selectively supports free-market rules that serve its interests. This combination risks eroding the LIO’s traditional adaptability, raising the possibility of its eventual unraveling.

Beijing’s approach is less about outright rejection of the LIO than about strategic “selective participation” and “institutional reengineering.” China plays an active role in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization to consolidate its global standing, while promoting alternative norms on issues like human rights and democratic governance that diverge from Western liberal values (Mukherjee 2022). Through such engagement, China has been able to shape the voting behavior of other member states, increasing their alignment with its positions—gradually shifting the LIO’s normative underpinnings from within (Pauselli, Urdínez, and Merke 2023).

According to a Chatham House report, China advocates a “Westphalian-style order” centered on sovereignty, insists that global influence should be commensurate with national capacity, and actively seeks to dilute U.S.-led liberal ideals—directly challenging the LIO’s foundational values. This strategy of embedding itself in existing institutions while advancing alternative norms risks deepening internal value divisions and destabilizing institutional operations, thereby undermining the LIO’s capacity to adapt and increasing the likelihood of its gradual disintegration (Vinjamuri, Aydın Düzgit, et al. 2025).

Not all international relations scholars share the view that LIO is in terminal decline. In *The Future of the Liberal World Order*, Ikenberry (2011b) argues that the order has not withered alongside America’s relative loss of power; rather, it has shown greater resilience and adaptability as emerging powers have become more deeply integrated into it. While the redistribution of power has led some states to question the U.S.-led system, countries such as China, India, and Brazil have not sought to dismantle it. Instead, they have leveraged its rules and institutions to advance their own development.

These rising powers also seek greater influence and leadership positions within international organizations, aiming to secure higher status and legitimacy from inside the existing framework. For Ikenberry, the order's defining features—openness and rule-based cooperation—continue to drive global governance. Deepening economic and security interdependence, coupled with transnational challenges such as climate change, terrorism, and pandemics, is compelling states to engage more actively in multilateral cooperation. This, in turn, creates opportunities for the liberal order not only to persist but also to renew itself. Ikenberry sees many of today's challenges—including the rise of new powers and the inequality fueled by globalization—as byproducts of the order's own success. His prescription is not abandonment but reform: updating and expanding the liberal order to incorporate emerging states into a more inclusive and representative system of multilateral governance.

Johnston (2019) fundamentally challenges the prevailing logic underpinning much of the debate on international order. In his view, the global order has never been a singular, integrated system; rather, it is a multidimensional framework composed of organically evolving arrangements in different domains. From this perspective—whether one adopts the unified-system approach or Johnston's own framework—China has not, in fact, mounted a challenge to the existing order. Ikenberry (2011) makes a related point, noting that although the liberal order was originally established under U.S. and Western leadership and imbued with liberal principles, it has over time evolved into a distinct international system no longer exclusively defined by its American or Western origins. Within this system, democracy and the rule of law continue to hold central importance. According to Johnston, much of the scholarship portraying China as a challenger to the liberal order suffers from two key flaws: first, a lack of historical grounding, which leads to exaggerated perceptions of the assertiveness of China's recent diplomacy; and second, the failure to recognize that a truly “U.S.-led international order” has never existed in practice.

Johnston (2019a) proposes replacing the traditional view of a U.S.-dominated, unitary international order with a “multi-order” analytical framework. In this conception, distinct domains of global governance are assessed separately: some orders exhibit internal value-based conflicts, while others are prone to tensions with parallel orders. He disaggregates the international order into a set of sub-orders, including the Constitutive Order, Military Order, Political Development Order, Social Development Order, International Trade Order, International Financial/Monetary Order, International Environmental Order, and International Information Order. Johnston argues that this breakdown offers a more precise means of

evaluating the order's composition, the extent of internal divergence, and the level of challenge posed by rising powers. While this typology is not immune to criticism, it offers a valuable alternative to the notion of a "single order" sustained by a single dimension of power. This paper engages directly with Johnston's approach. The specific components of his framework, along with the internal and external challenges facing each, are summarized in Table 1.

Acharya (2018) challenges the very premise that a "U.S.-led liberal international order" has ever truly existed. Since its purported creation, he argues, the order has governed or coordinated only a narrow grouping—the U.S.-UK-West Europe-Australasia configuration—while most countries, for most of the time, have operated outside its reach. The liberal order's global reputation, in his view, rests on an inflated narrative of its scope and influence. Historically, the order never encompassed the Soviet bloc, China, India, or the majority of the so-called Third World during the Cold War. Its primary relevance lay in the internal coordination of Western states and in limited regional cooperation. Accordingly, Acharya suggests, the liberal order should be seen as a regional, not global, arrangement. He further contends that the order has never been a pure system of "public goods" provision. Rather, it often reflects the interests and power politics of its leading states. The United States and its allies have leveraged it to advance their own agendas—sometimes at the expense of other countries' sovereignty and development priorities. Economic globalization, for instance, has frequently deepened inequality and fueled social tensions in developing nations, rather than delivering the broad-based prosperity it promises.

In sum, there is broad agreement that LIO is confronting the most formidable challenges since its inception. Yet on core questions—its precise character, whether it has been led by the United States, who bears primary responsibility for its decline, and whether these developments herald its eventual demise—scholarly consensus remains elusive. This study aims to address these debates through empirical inquiry, evaluating whether the order has experienced a substantive downturn and, if so, identifying the principal actors driving this transformation in the international system.

Table 1. Components of the International Order and Their Internal/External Challenges

Sub-Order Name	Domain	Key Norms	Main Institutions	Level of Internal Conflict	Level of Chinese Support
Constitutive Order	Principal participants in the order and their identities	Sovereignty, territorial integrity	United Nations (UN), intergovernmental organizations	Low	High
Military Order	Participants' military capabilities	Non-aggression principle, specific weapons limitations	UN Charter, arms control treaties, UN peacekeeping operations	Medium	Medium
Political Development Order	How states aggregate domestic interests	Liberalization, democratization, human rights, Responsibility to Protect	UN human rights conventions, International Criminal Court (ICC)	Medium	Low
Social Development Order	How states organize the welfare of groups and individuals	Right to development, anti-discrimination, rights to personal development	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; UN conventions on women, children, persons with disabilities	Medium–Low	Medium–Low
International Trade Order	How states manage cross-border flows of goods and services	Free trade	World Trade Organization (WTO), G20, regional trade agreements	Low	Medium

Sub-Order Name	Domain	Key Norms	Main Institutions	Level of Internal Conflict	Level of Chinese Support
International Financial Order	How states regulate cross-border capital flows	Liberalization, transparency, accountability	International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, national development banks, stock exchanges	Low	Medium
International Environmental Order	How states manage transboundary pollution	Precautionary principle, developed/developing country differentiation	Montreal Protocol, Kyoto Protocol, Paris Agreement	Medium–High (after Trump’s election)	Medium–High
International Information Order	How states manage cross-border flows of information	State and multi-stakeholder governance, commercial espionage, sovereignty vs. freedom, privacy rights	International Telecommunication Union (ITU), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)	High	Strong support for UN-centered governance

Source: Compiled by the author based on Johnston (2019a)

3. From “Keeping a Low Profile” to “Striving for Achievement”: China’s Diplomatic Transformation and Four Global Initiatives

China today stands as the world’s largest and most capable non-democratic power—and the state most willing and able to reshape the existing international order. For many observers, this is no longer a matter of debate. Since 2000, China’s rapid economic expansion has propelled it to the position of the world’s second-largest economy. As a rising great power, it is frequently characterized as a revisionist state, intent on challenging the norms and institutions crafted by the United States and other Western democracies. Since 2013, the Xi Jinping era has seen the announcement of four flagship global initiatives: BRI, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative. Respectively, these address the economic, social development, traditional security, and cultural dimensions of the international order. Collectively, they mark the strategic platform for China’s more assertive engagement in shaping global governance.

On April 21, 2022, at the Boao Forum for Asia, Xi Jinping delivered a keynote address titled “Rising to Challenges and Building a Bright Future Through Cooperation (攜手迎接挑戰，合作開創未來).” On February 21 of the following year, he formally launched the Global Security Initiative (GSI), outlining six core commitments: a common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security vision; respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, along with sovereign equality and non-interference as fundamental principles of international law; adherence to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter; recognition of all states’ legitimate security concerns; peaceful settlement of disputes through dialogue and consultation; and the integrated safeguarding of both traditional and non-traditional security domains (Xinhua, 2023).

Read in full, the GSI positions China’s security vision firmly within the existing institutional framework, emphasizing multilateralism and reaffirming the Westphalian principle of state sovereignty. Substantively, it does not seek to overturn the foundations of the current international order. Rather, it critiques the United States and its Western allies for addressing global conflicts through unilateral and protectionist means, and calls for “a new security pathway based on dialogue rather than confrontation, partnership rather than alliance, and win–win outcomes rather than zero-sum competition.” Beneath this rhetoric, however, the initiative represents Beijing’s bid to advance a “Chinese solution” for shaping the architecture

of global order.

In the wake of Xi Jinping's speech, then-Foreign Minister Wang Yi (王毅) published an essay entitled "Implementing the Global Security Initiative and Safeguarding World Peace and Tranquility." He described the GSI as "rooted in the independent foreign policy of peace practiced by New China, and derived from the uniquely Chinese tradition and wisdom of diplomacy." As a "responsible major power," Wang asserted, China has consistently upheld the banner of peace, development, cooperation, and mutual benefit, contributing actively to global peace and security and "setting an example for great powers." His repeated invocations of the "Chinese experience" and the "Asian spirit" framed the initiative as part of building a "community with a shared future for mankind"—a vision aimed at shaping a global security architecture conducive to Chinese interests (Wang Yi, 2022).

When introducing the Concept Paper on the Global Security Initiative, Foreign Minister Qin Gang emphasized that "China's development depends on a secure international environment. Likewise, without China's security, there can be no global security." The event's official title—"The Global Security Initiative: China's Solution to Overcoming the Security Dilemma"—made explicit the initiative's positioning as a distinctly "Chinese version" of the security pillar of the international order (People's Daily, 2023). Taken together, these statements underscore that the GSI marks a shift in China's foreign policy toward openly challenging U.S. long-arm jurisdiction and unilateral sanctions, while also advancing a strategic narrative aligned with Xi Jinping's "East rising, West declining" thesis—both in tone and in scope (Chen Weihua, 2023).

These initiatives illustrate China's growing ambition to shape international rule-making—an evolution that parallels its ascent as a major emerging power. As Jiang Chaoyi (2021) notes, Beijing is seeking to move from being a passive rule-taker to an active rule-maker, especially in pivotal domains such as global economic governance and the provision of international public goods. This shift is driven in part by China's dissatisfaction with the Western-dominated rule system, which it views as skewed and inequitable in the allocation of influence and resources. China's strategy to address this imbalance is multi-pronged. It works within multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization to advocate for more inclusive and equitable frameworks. Simultaneously, it uses policy platforms like BRI to embed its development models and normative preferences into emerging global rules, positioning itself as a provider of alternative governance solutions. Beijing also underscores the importance of enabling developing countries to participate equally in rule-

making, using coalition-building to bolster both its leadership role and the perceived legitimacy of its initiatives in the global regulatory arena. Since its launch in 2013, BRI has secured cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and over 30 international organizations, encompassing roughly three-quarters of the world's population and more than half of global GDP. By 2023, cumulative BRI-related investment and financing had surpassed USD 1 trillion, comprising approximately USD 630 billion in construction contracts and USD 420 billion in equity investments—underscoring infrastructure as the dominant channel for capital deployment. World Bank analysis of 68 key transport corridors suggests that, when paired with trade facilitation measures and debt management reforms, participating countries could see a 4.1% increase in trade volumes and a 1.1–2.2% reduction in global trade costs (Baniya, Rocha, and Ruta 2020). These metrics underscore the BRI's substantial scale in both financial commitments and trade potential, offering a data-driven foundation for evaluating its implications for the liberal international economic order.

The scale of capital flows and the reach of BRI's transcontinental investment networks have been matched by a surge in scholarly interest. Bibliometric analysis indicates that from 2013 to 2024, more than 3,000 peer-reviewed journal articles referencing the “Belt and Road” have been published across at least 24 disciplines—including international relations, development economics, environmental governance, and social anthropology—at an average annual growth rate of 28% (Firdous, Lai, and Akhter 2025). The thematic focus of this literature has evolved over time, shifting from early work on infrastructure benefits and financing models toward more recent concerns with debt sustainability, environmental spillovers, and regulatory competition. This cross-disciplinary and dynamic body of research underscores the BRI's substantial and far-reaching impact on global affairs.

China regards the BRI as its most ambitious international economic undertaking to date. According to Huang Yiping—former member of the People's Bank of China's Monetary Policy Committee and now a professor at Peking University's National School of Development—the BRI seeks to spur economic growth across Asia, Europe, and Africa while reshaping the framework of international economic cooperation. It is structured around five priority pillars: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchange. Among these, infrastructure is the linchpin, with emphasis on large-scale cross-border railways, oil and gas pipelines, and telecommunications and power grids. This approach not only supplements the existing global economic architecture but also embodies China's strategy of fostering regional cooperation through infrastructure-driven

development.

Chinese policymakers are also aware that the BRI faces significant challenges. According to Huang Yiping, these include the lack of a unified coordination mechanism, potential clashes in political values among participating states, and concerns over the financial sustainability of cross-border projects. Large-scale infrastructure ventures, in particular, face formidable operational hurdles, as they must navigate divergent cultural contexts, legal frameworks, and policy environments—factors that complicate efforts to achieve commercially viable outcomes.

Critics have also viewed the BRI as a means for China to offload excess industrial capacity. Left unaddressed, such perceptions risk eroding the trust and political goodwill of partner countries. Yet Huang argues that, if managed effectively, the BRI could help transform economically underdeveloped regions into new engines of global growth, while offering fresh policy thinking for international cooperation—such as more adaptable, context-sensitive policy design and partnership models grounded in reciprocity. Although the BRI may not entirely reshape the global economy, its value as a complementary force for emerging markets and global governance deserves recognition and support (Huang 2016).

Wen Yang contends that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is far more than an economic policy or a slate of infrastructure projects; it is an ambitious bid to shape an alternative global order to the Western-centric liberal international framework. At its core, the BRI promotes diversity, connectivity, and coordinated growth, grounded in the vision of a more inclusive international system—one in which developing countries can engage as active participants rather than passive rule-takers under Western norms. Operationally, the BRI prioritizes infrastructure development, leveraging cross-border transportation, energy, and telecommunications projects to drive economic integration along its corridors. Yet the initiative faces significant headwinds, from Western skepticism to governance and execution challenges within some partner states. Wen argues that the BRI's deeper significance lies in its potential to advance a distinct model of globalization—rooted in development priorities and cross-cultural dialogue—that could emerge as a key driver in reshaping the contemporary international order (Wen 2016b).

Confronting claims that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a modern-day Marshall Plan, Chinese policymakers have been keen to underscore the distinctions. According to Jin Ling, Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of European Studies, China Institute of International Studies, the BRI's essence lies in shared development, grounded in principles of equality,

mutual benefit, and pragmatic cooperation—not in ideological confrontation or security-driven grand strategy. Whereas the Marshall Plan was conceived in the Cold War to contain the Soviet Union and cement U.S. primacy, the BRI is framed as an inclusive platform for fostering regional interconnectivity, particularly through cooperation in infrastructure, trade, and cultural exchange, free from the logic of geopolitical rivalry.

Still, Jin notes some operational parallels. Much like the Marshall Plan boosted European recovery and integration through economic aid, the BRI leverages massive infrastructure investment to build economic capacity among participating states, potentially catalyzing regional integration. The key difference, she argues, is that the BRI refrains from imposing conditions, respects partner sovereignty and development models, and avoids forging exclusive geopolitical blocs. Yet, the initiative's challenges are arguably steeper than those faced by the Marshall Plan: navigating a diverse set of partner countries, managing a more complex geopolitical landscape, and dispelling suspicions about China's ascent. Realizing the BRI's long-term vision, Jin concludes, will require not only the delivery of infrastructure but also deeper policy alignment, coupled with pragmatic and flexible engagement to overcome resistance and misperceptions.

As the foregoing discussion shows, since Xi Jinping assumed leadership, China's foreign policy has shifted markedly—from the earlier, more passive stance of “keeping a low profile” (韜光養晦) to an increasingly proactive “striving for achievement” (奮發有為) approach aimed at institutional construction. The launch of four global initiatives represents more than an expansion of policy tools or diplomatic rhetoric; it signals China's assessment of the current international order and its ambition to reshape it. Notably, through practical undertakings such as the Global Security Initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has sought to recast the architecture of international norms around its own narrative framework, while redistributing legitimacy and leadership within multilateral institutions. Against this backdrop, the following sections will assess whether these initiatives are driven by a deliberate intent to restructure the global order, and whether, in practice, BRI generates structural impacts substantial enough to challenge the existing international framework.

4. The Belt and Road Initiative as a Potential Driver of International Order Change

Since its launch in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has provoked vigorous scholarly debate over its implications for LIO. One prominent view holds that the BRI embodies a strategic agenda to revise the existing order and to promote the "China model" abroad. Proponents of this perspective argue that, through infrastructure investments and the creation of new regional institutions, Beijing is building a "parallel order" designed to establish a China-led rule-making framework outside the Western-dominated system. Some observers further point to the BRI's synergy with China's "16+1" cooperation with Central and Eastern European states, which they see as fostering a political-economic structure parallel to the Western-led order. From this vantage point, the BRI is taken as evidence of China's intention to reshape global governance—leveraging trade and investment networks alongside homegrown institutional mechanisms to disseminate Chinese values and norms worldwide, thereby challenging the rule-making authority historically exercised by the United States and its allies (Rühlig 2018).

Table 1. China’s Four Major “Global Initiatives” and Their Stated Objectives

Initiative Name	Year Announced	Challenge to Liberalism	Challenge to International Order
Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road	2013	Regional political economy	Rules governing global infrastructure and investment governance
Global Development Initiative: Accelerating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to promote stronger, greener, and healthier global development	2021	Economic liberalism	Global development assistance and governance mechanisms
Global Security Initiative	2022	Liberalism in the international order	Rules of collective security and alliance systems
Global Civilization Initiative	2023	Political liberalism	Norms on universal values and human rights governance

Source: Compiled by the author.

The scale of capital flows and the reach of BRI’s transcontinental investment networks have been matched by a surge in scholarly interest. Bibliometric analysis indicates that from 2013 to 2024, more than 3,000 peer-reviewed journal articles referencing the “Belt and Road” have been published across at least 24 disciplines—including international relations, development economics, environmental governance, and social anthropology—at an average annual growth rate of 28% (Firdous, Lai, and Akhter 2025). The thematic focus of this literature has evolved over time, shifting from early work on infrastructure benefits and financing models toward more recent concerns with debt sustainability, environmental spillovers, and regulatory competition. This cross-disciplinary and dynamic body of research underscores the BRI’s substantial and far-reaching impact on global affairs.

The combined design of BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has produced a dual dynamic—one that appears to strengthen the Liberal International Order while simultaneously undermining it. Ostensibly, China advances multilateral cooperation under the slogan of “joint construction and shared benefits” (共建共享). The AIIB, for instance, has brought in numerous European and American allies as founding members and has publicly

pledged to work with existing institutions, projecting the image of a “responsible major power” with credible global governance capabilities (Zhou Ziqin 2020). Beneath this cooperative veneer, however, both the AIIB and the BRI harbor an agenda of institutional realignment. The AIIB’s China-centered governance framework inserts Beijing into the domain of international financial governance, offering “new public goods” as an alternative to the Bretton Woods system and laying the institutional and material groundwork for a potential future departure from US- and Europe-led structures (Zhang Yugui 2015). Through extensive infrastructure investment and financing in developing economies, China embeds itself deeply in the political and economic fabric of partner states, fostering interdependent regional networks and gradually diluting the discursive and institutional dominance of traditional Western powers (Qiu Yihong 2016). In essence, the BRI and AIIB equip China with strategic leverage to build an autonomous and potentially decoupled global infrastructure and financial sphere, while preserving the outward appearance of cooperation with the existing international order.

Beyond its economic dimensions, BRI serves multiple diplomatic purposes for China: projecting itself as a global “role model,” creating channels for international outreach and strategic messaging, offering economic support to allies and prospective partners, exerting influence over overseas Chinese communities, and cultivating relationships with foreign governments and publics (Mandelbaum and Weiffen 2023, 367–370). A number of Chinese scholars echo this interpretation—or at least adopt a revisionist posture toward the international order. Wang Qianhui and Peng Yue (2024), for instance, argue that the modern international order has long been under Western dominance, rendering it neither fair nor inclusive for China and other developing states. The existing system, they contend, constrains developing countries from advancing their preferred visions of global order through current institutional channels. In light of these limitations, Beijing has advanced the BRI as an alternative platform for enacting a different model of international order. From this vantage point, LIO—or, in China’s framing, a liberal “hegemonic” order—emerges as a primary target of revision through the BRI.

In contrast, a second line of scholarship adopts a more cautious stance, portraying BRI as primarily economically motivated rather than as a calculated bid to upend the existing order. From this perspective, China’s engagement with global governance reflects selective reformism rather than outright revisionism. Empirical studies show that Beijing does not consistently contest the Western liberal order; in many policy arenas, it remains a net beneficiary of existing rules and seeks to expand its influence from within rather than construct a rival system (Machado 2022). Some policy analyses further argue that the BRI’s disruptive

effects on global norms are largely inadvertent—more a byproduct of fragmented domestic governance than the result of a coherent, centrally directed effort to create a new order. In its original conception, the BRI was framed as a program to enhance regional connectivity through infrastructure investment, with its political dimensions kept largely implicit.

According to Chinese scholar Wang Zhaohui (2021), China neither possesses the intent nor the capability to challenge or overturn the liberal, rules-based order, given that it remains among that system's foremost beneficiaries. Chinese officials likewise underscore that the initiative is not meant to “start from scratch.” Former diplomat Fu Ying has characterized the BRI as a constructive supplement to the existing international system—designed to nudge it toward a fairer and more inclusive architecture rather than supplant it—aimed chiefly at deepening the economic and trade networks embedded within the current order. Nonetheless, she notes, the United States has “misread” the initiative as a geopolitical threat (Fu 2020).

In short, scholarly opinion on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is sharply divided. The “challenge” camp sees the BRI as carrying an agenda for institutional overhaul, portraying it as China's vehicle for building an alternative rule-making order that could, over time, erode the core values of the liberal international order. By contrast, the “supplement” camp views the initiative chiefly as a means of closing global development gaps, aiming for coexistence and shared prosperity within the existing system. From this perspective, any impact on international norms is largely incidental rather than intentional. The discussion now turns to regional case studies to assess how the BRI has shaped different parts of the world.

Southeast Asia: Authoritarian Embrace and Democratic Caution

Southeast Asian responses to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reveal a pronounced divide. Several authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes have embraced the initiative with enthusiasm. Thailand, for instance, emerged as an active supporter following its 2014 military coup. While Western governments responded with sanctions and diplomatic distancing, Beijing adhered to its non-interference principle and pressed ahead with cooperation, effectively offering the junta an implicit form of political endorsement. For Thailand, the influx of Chinese infrastructure investment has not only spurred economic activity but also bolstered the ruling elite's political legitimacy. As a result, Thailand's political and business classes have generally welcomed China's economic role as a boon for national development. Cambodia stands out as the region's most pro-China case: Chinese financing has transformed infrastructure, most notably through the Phnom Penh–Sihanoukville Expressway, which has improved connectivity and upgraded rural facilities. Cambodia was also among the first to adopt China's mobile payment platforms for cross-border transactions, enabling visitors to use WeChat Pay and Alipay directly and thereby deepening bilateral economic integration. These economic gains have translated into greater political alignment with Beijing; for example, in ASEAN deliberations over the South China Sea, Cambodia has repeatedly taken positions favorable to China (Busbarat et al. 2023).

In contrast, democratic states have tended to approach the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with greater caution and balance. Malaysia offers a telling example: upon taking office in 2018, Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad suspended multibillion-dollar infrastructure deals signed by his predecessor with China, invoking concerns over sovereignty and fiscal sustainability. He later succeeded in renegotiating projects such as the East Coast Rail Link on terms more favorable to Kuala Lumpur (Berger 2018). The Philippines has shown even sharper policy swings tied to leadership changes. Under President Benigno S. Aquino III, Manila formally joined the BRI but, owing to deep mistrust of Beijing, advanced virtually no major projects. In contrast, President Rodrigo Duterte adopted an overtly pro-China orientation—accepting Chinese loans for irrigation systems and dam construction, enabling Alibaba to partner with local firms on electronic payment systems, and granting Chinese telecom operators access to the domestic market. Duterte, in turn, used these investments as a political resource to strengthen his network of allies (Sianipar 2023).

By 2022, President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr. had dramatically reversed the

Philippines' course, scrapping several previously negotiated BRI railway projects and refraining from announcing any new major undertakings. This underscores how, in democratic systems, China policy can shift significantly with changes in leadership, and BRI participation often hinges on the political priorities of the government in power (Rabena 2022). Broadly speaking, Southeast Asia's authoritarian regimes—such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos—have tended to embrace the BRI wholeheartedly, seeking economic gains and political consolidation. Democratic regimes—such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia—have instead sought to balance openness to Chinese investment with the protection of national interests, subjecting projects to scrutiny over quality, debt sustainability, and sovereignty concerns, and making adjustments where necessary.

Africa: Infrastructure Gains and Political Alignment

Across much of Africa, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is widely regarded as a vehicle for development. Chronic underinvestment in infrastructure has long constrained the continent, and Beijing's BRI commitments—spanning roads, railways, ports, and related facilities—have filled a gap left by traditional Western aid. While some early Chinese loan projects in Africa did contribute to debt pressures, Beijing in recent years has recalibrated its approach, moving away from an exclusive reliance on loans toward greater use of grants and interest-free funding, thereby easing the burden on partner states. This more flexible model has enabled countries to secure urgently needed infrastructure without falling into debt traps. The economic dividends have been substantial: factory and road construction under the BRI has created jobs for Africa's rapidly expanding labor force, advanced prospects for industrialization, and is widely viewed as a catalyst for boosting the region's long-term growth potential (Cohen 2024).

Yet the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Africa is as much about political alignment as it is about economic development. As Chinese investment has expanded, many African governments have forged increasingly close political relationships with Beijing. On the global stage, economic ties have often translated into diplomatic support for China's positions (Durif, Monnier, and Meglio 2024). At the United Nations, for instance, African states frequently side with Beijing in human rights votes—on issues such as the treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang, which are prioritized by Western governments, African delegations have often opposed or abstained, effectively blocking UN action. Analysts note that Beijing has deliberately used economic cooperation to secure such backing: by deepening trade and aid relationships under the BRI, China has cultivated a reliable bloc of African partners that routinely support its stances in arenas like the UN General Assembly, extending the reach of its geopolitical

influence.

In October 2022, the United States and its allies brought before the 51st regular session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) a draft resolution (A/HRC/51/L.6) addressing the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Just weeks earlier, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) had released its Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China, which concluded that Beijing's counterterrorism and anti-extremism policies had led to grave human rights violations in the region—most notably mass arbitrary detention—and imposed disproportionate, targeted restrictions on the Uyghur Muslim minority. The report, unusually sharp in tone for the OHCHR, was widely interpreted as a strong rebuke. Yet, in a move that surprised international human rights observers, China and a coalition of allied states blocked the resolution. Notably, many African governments with substantial economic ties to Beijing voted against or abstained, ensuring the measure's defeat (Voice of America 2022).

Beyond the UN arena, the BRI has shaped domestic policy preferences and governance patterns across Africa. Because Chinese financing generally comes without governance or human rights conditions, some African leaders have favored Beijing's assistance over Western aid, reducing their reliance on traditional donors. Critics caution that this could erode the democratic governance and liberal norms promoted by the West for decades (Venkataraman and Vignesh 2022). Others, however, argue that the political effects of Chinese lending vary significantly across countries and are not uniformly negative; in some cases, such financing has opened up alternative pathways for development (David and S 2024). Overall, the BRI enjoys broad acceptance in Africa as a catalyst for economic growth, while also tightening China–Africa political bonds. This alignment increasingly manifests in African support for Beijing's positions on issues of international order, both to preserve mutually beneficial relations and—potentially—to serve as an entry point for China's broader ambitions to reshape global governance.

China has also deepened its cultural, economic, and political ties with Africa by promoting a “harmonious world (和諧世界觀)” vision and deploying “soft power (軟實力)” diplomacy, while framing its engagement under the banner of “South–South cooperation” to position African states as reliable allies in the international arena. These efforts have been underpinned by extensive trade, investment, and aid flows—most prominently through the BRI. While some critics have labeled China's approach a form of “neo-colonialism,” its diplomatic outreach in Africa has, overall, delivered substantial gains (Zhang Yajun 2008; Liu Zhenden and Hung

Ming-te 2015). Outside Asia and Africa, Beijing's foreign policy takes on distinct forms in other regions. Scholars observe that through economic instruments, foreign direct investment (FDI), and the BRI, China has steadily expanded its footprint in Latin America. Yet the trajectory of China–Latin America relations has evolved into a triangular dynamic, shaped by the reactive involvement of the United States (He Qiying 2022; Xu Yanran 2019; Guo Jie 2019).

Recent scholarship has begun to offer preliminary but illuminating empirical evidence on whether BRI is intended to reshape the architecture of the international order. Viewed as a key window into China's global strategic ambitions, the BRI's evolution and operational practices reflect a dual logic of institutional export and geopolitical penetration. From its launch, the initiative has spanned two principal economic routes and six economic corridors, supported by institutional mechanisms such as the Silk Road Fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to embed China-led economic rules and financial networks. Between 2013 and 2022, cumulative investment surpassed US\$900 billion, making the BRI a central vehicle for projecting Beijing's external influence (Xue Jianwu 2023). Even so, in most partner states, the BRI has not substantially shifted their foreign policy alignment toward either China or the United States, nor has it triggered systemic democratic backsliding. In a subset of heavily indebted countries, however, the initiative has strengthened China's structural leverage over domestic policy choices, thereby creating tangible geopolitical influence (Xue Jianwu 2022).

The trajectory of BRI has also been shaped by the political regime type of partner states and the extent of their economic dependence on China. In countries with more entrenched democratic institutions—such as Malaysia and Pakistan—BRI projects often become embroiled in electoral politics, serving as focal points for opposition allegations of government–business collusion. By contrast, in non-democratic or highly China-dependent states—such as Laos—implementation tends to proceed more smoothly and with minimal controversy. This pattern suggests that Beijing does not export a fixed governance model wholesale, but instead adapts and negotiates its approach to fit local political contexts (Xue Jianwu 2019).

At the institutional level, the network of agreements and cooperative frameworks developed under the BRI has yet to mount a wholesale challenge to U.S.-led liberal norms. Nonetheless, in sectors such as transportation, finance, and infrastructure, it has already fostered a distinctly Chinese “parallel order” (Xue Jianwu 2020). Rather than supplanting the existing system outright, this order seeks—through incremental institutional practices and dense cooperation networks—to cultivate an alternative normative sphere with China at its

center.

In sum, BRI embodies a strategic vision of incremental institutional restructuring. Far from being a straightforward exercise in economic expansion, it seeks to recalibrate development logics and cooperation frameworks in ways that create space for “institutional coexistence” within the current international order—thereby eroding the normative legitimacy of Western dominance. This strategic reconfiguration is a tangible expression of the broader trend toward “competitive multipolarity” in global politics. Were the BRI—into which China has poured significant resources over the past two decades—found to have no meaningful role in altering the structure of the international order, it would suggest that Beijing is not a systemic challenger. Yet the evidence reviewed here points to the initiative’s clear potential to reshape the competitive landscape of global governance and, in certain domains, to partially contest U.S. leadership. This study therefore examines shifts in the international order to assess the extent and nature of that impact.

4. Research Questions and Design

As outlined in the preceding discussion, the Liberal International Order (LIO) faces mounting pressures from both within and without. Chief among these is the ascent of China as an emerging great power and its vigorous promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) alongside other global projects—developments that have sparked intense scholarly debate. Some analysts argue that China is not an outright revisionist state, contending that its challenges to the current order are selective rather than systemic (Johnston 2019a). Others, however, maintain that since Xi Jinping assumed leadership, Beijing’s foreign policy has shifted from a posture of “keeping a low profile” (韜光養晦) to one of “striving for achievement” (奮發有為), aiming to reshape the global order through its international initiatives. In light of this divergence, there remains no clear scholarly consensus on China’s actual intent and capacity to contest the existing order.

More concretely, this study addresses two main research questions using empirical data analysis. First, do the voting records of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) reveal measurable indicators that capture the defining features of the existing international order? Put differently, can patterns in UNGA voting behavior be used to trace the existence and evolution of the so-called U.S.-led liberal international order? Second, since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013—alongside China’s other global initiatives, including the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative—have these efforts left a discernible imprint on UNGA voting patterns, drawing states’ positions closer to Beijing’s and farther from those aligned with the U.S.-led liberal order?

To probe these issues more closely, the study poses three sub-questions:

1. Have UNGA voting patterns over the past two decades revealed substantial shifts in the global balance of power? If so, do these shifts substantiate claims that China’s rise is challenging U.S. hegemony, or are they better understood as routine adjustments within the existing order?
2. Is there evidence that states have moved ideologically closer to China in their UNGA voting behavior? If such a trend exists, does it closely coincide with the rollout of BRI?
3. Do BRI participants exhibit different shifts in UNGA voting patterns compared to non-participants? More specifically, have participating states shown a more pronounced tilt toward

Beijing, indicating the initiative's political efficacy and influence?

By addressing these questions, the study aims not only to engage theoretical debates on the content of the liberal international order and shifts in China's diplomatic strategy, but also to generate empirical evidence capable of supporting causal inference regarding the scale and durability of the BRI's structural effects on global order.

The quantitative component of this study employs Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) to assess the potential causal impact of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the structure of the international order. ITSA is well-suited for time-series data, enabling a comparison of pre- and post-intervention trends to determine whether a given event—in this case, the BRI—produced statistically significant and immediate effects, and whether such effects persisted over time. For the empirical analysis, I compile United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voting records from 1980 to 2024 and apply the Ideal Point Estimates methodology developed by Bailey et al. (2017) to locate each country's annual ideological position based on its UNGA voting behavior.

This allows me to track shifts in their relative distance from China. The dataset encompasses all UN member states, distinguishing between BRI participants and non-participants to identify variation in the degree of influence. The research design proceeds in two steps. First, a single-group ITSA model tests whether the BRI has had a global effect in shifting countries' UNGA voting behavior closer to China. Second, a multiple-group ITSA model compares trajectories between participating and non-participating states. The model is specified as follows:

Single-group ITSA:
$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times T + \beta_2 \times BRI + \beta_3 \times P + \varepsilon$$

Two-group ITSA:
$$\begin{aligned} Y = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times T + \beta_2 \times BRI + \beta_3 \times P + \beta_4 \times BRI_{joined} \\ & + \beta_5 \times BRI_{joined} \times T + \beta_6 \times BRI_{joined} \times BRI \\ & + \beta_7 \times BRI_{joined} \times P + \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

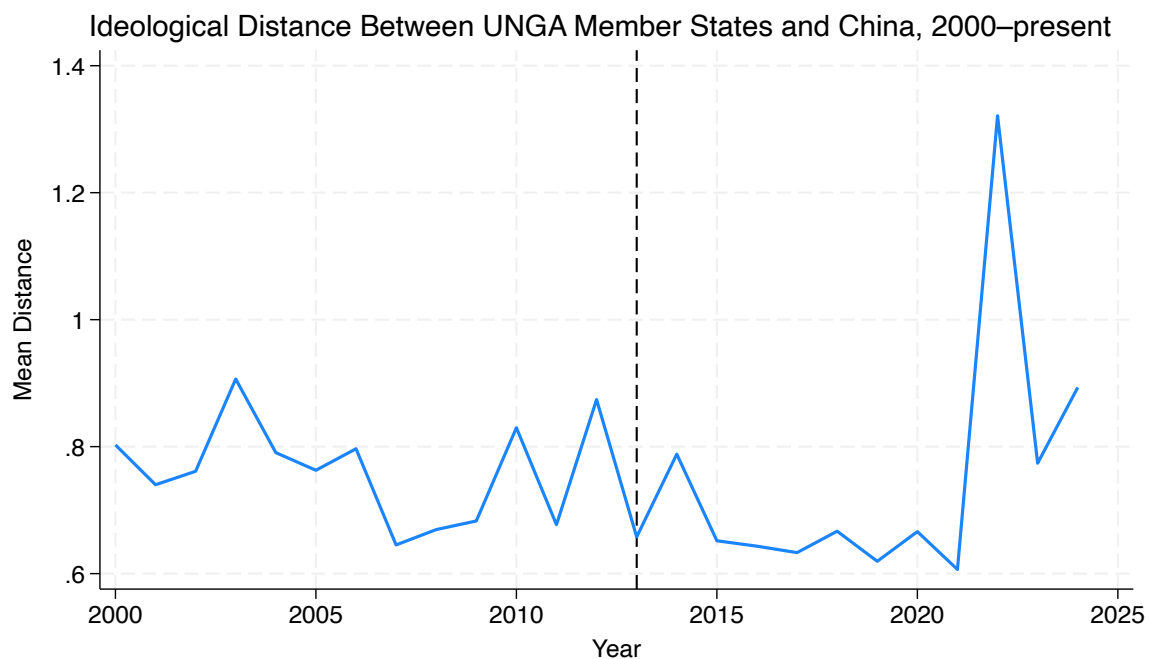
In this specification, Y represents the ideological distance between a given state and China; T captures the underlying time trend; BRI marks the intervention point—the year the Belt and Road Initiative was introduced; P reflects the time trend following the intervention; and

BRI_{joined} is a binary indicator for whether a country is a participant in the initiative.

5. Preliminary Results

This chapter reports the initial quantitative results from the Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA), which examines the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) impact on the international order—focusing in particular on shifts in countries' ideological distance from China in United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voting. In this framework, lower ideal point scores indicate greater alignment with Beijing, while higher scores signal closer alignment with Washington. A first-cut look at the global average distance from the 1980s through 2022 reveals no obvious trend toward ideological convergence with China (Figure 1). Taken over the long term, the mean change in countries' distance from China before and after the BRI is minimal, suggesting that descriptive averages alone may mask structural shifts occurring at specific points in time.

Figure 1. Ideological Distance Between UNGA Member States and China, 2000–present



Findings from the single-group Interrupted Time Series Analysis (ITSA) show that, prior to China's official launch of the BRI in 2013, countries maintained an average ideological distance of about 0.79 from China in UNGA voting—evidence of a clear initial gap. From 2000 to 2012, this distance declined slightly each year, but the change was not statistically significant, indicating no systematic convergence before the initiative. After 2013, however, the pattern shifted. In the year of its launch, the distance dropped by roughly 0.13, pointing to a short-term convergence effect. Yet the subsequent trend turned upward, with countries moving away from China at an average pace of about 0.03 per year. Figure 2 illustrates this shift: the pre-2013 trend was largely flat or slightly downward, but after 2013 the trajectory reversed toward increasing divergence. Overall, the single-group ITSA suggests that while the BRI initially fostered closer alignment with China's positions, it was followed by a sustained drift in the opposite direction—implying that the initiative's long-term political consequences may not have fully matched China's intended strategic objectives.

Figure 2. Single-Group ITSA Design

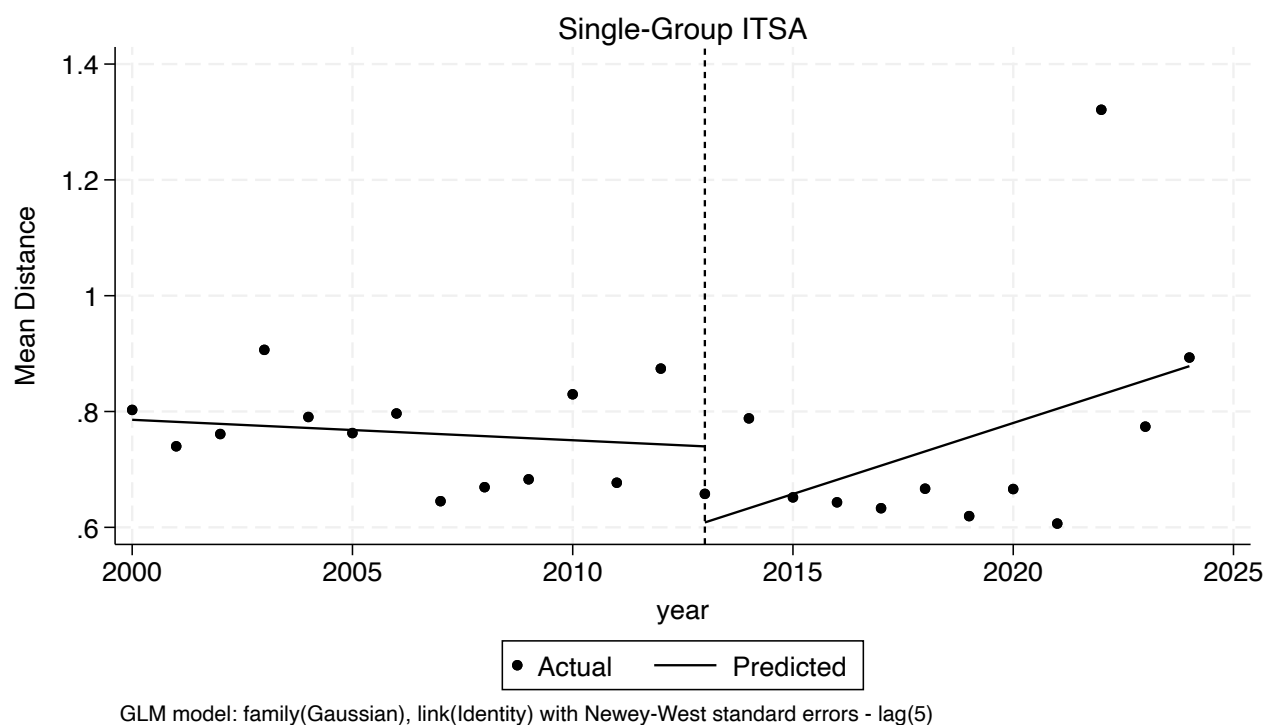


Table 2. Single-Group ITSA Regression

Parameter	Coefficient	Std err.	P-value
Baseline Trend β_1	-0.004	0.005	0.438
Step – change at 201 β_2	-0.131	0.055	0.017*
Trend change after 2013 β_3	.0281	0.012	0.023*
Intercept β_0	0.786	0.025	< 0.001***

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The two-group ITSA shows how participation in the BRI relates to voting alignment with China in the UN General Assembly. Among non-participants, the baseline average distance from China stood at 1.31, with no significant downward trend between 2000 and 2012. Following the launch of the BRI in 2013, their distance dropped by roughly 0.25, suggesting a momentary convergence, but this was quickly reversed as the long-term trend shifted upward, signaling a gradual divergence. By contrast, participant countries were already significantly closer to China before 2013, as reflected in their lower baseline distance. However, neither the immediate post-2013 difference nor the trend difference between participants and non-participants reached statistical significance. In other words, the BRI did not produce a measurable change in the relative trajectories of the two groups. Figure 3 illustrates this clearly: participants remained closer to China throughout, while non-participants briefly converged before drifting further apart. Taken together, the two-group ITSA suggests that while BRI countries consistently maintained closer alignment with China, the initiative itself does not provide evidence of a structural shift in the broader configuration of international politics.

Conclusion

Figure 3. Two-Group ITSA Design

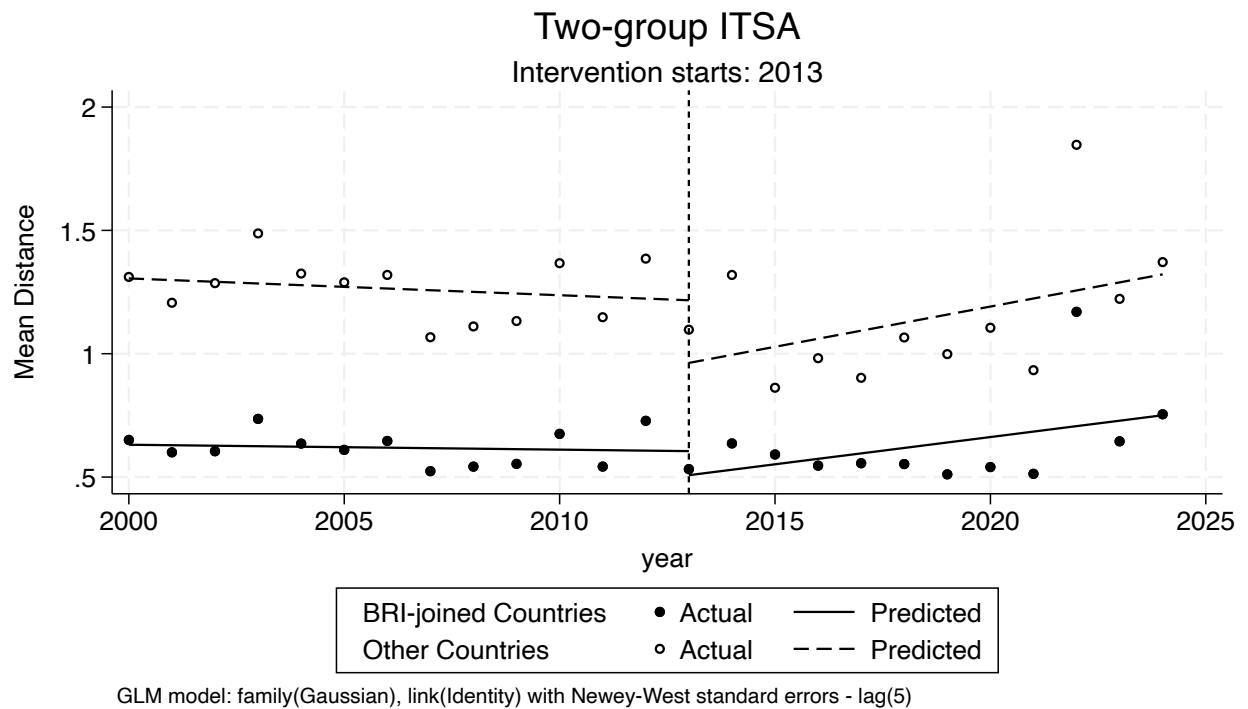


Table 3. Two-Group ITSA Regression

Parameter	Coefficient	Std err.	P-value
non – BRI Countries Baseline Trend β_1	-0.007	0.007	0.310
non – BRI Countries Step – change after 2013 β_2	-0.254	0.096	0.008**
non – BRI Countries Trend change after 2013 β_3	0.039	0.019	0.042*
Baseline level diff (BRI – non – BRI) β_4	-0.674	0.045	< 0.001***
Baseline trend diff (BRI – non – BRI, pre – 2013) β_5	0.005	0.008	0.536
Step – change diff after 2013 (BRI – non – BRI) β_6	0.156	0.106	0.140
Trend change diff after 2013 (BRI – non – BRI) β_7	-0.015	0.022	0.486
non – BRI Countries Intercept β_0	1.305	0.040	< 0.001***

Source: Compiled by the Authors.

6. Conclusion

This study employs Interrupted Time Series Analysis to examine whether the Belt and Road Initiative has produced observable structural impacts on the Liberal International Order. The empirical results show that while the BRI did trigger short-term convergence in UN General Assembly voting in the year of its launch in 2013, the subsequent trend moved in the opposite direction: non-participant countries gradually drifted away from China, whereas participant countries, although consistently maintaining lower levels of distance, did not exhibit significant additional convergence. In other words, the BRI did not generate lasting or systematic “re-ordering” effects in quantitative terms, but rather functioned more as a form of selective and regional influence, manifested in the policy continuation of already friendly states and in the political support of certain developing countries. This finding departs from the assumption of a comprehensive institutional replacement in the “China challenge” thesis and instead resonates with arguments that emphasize order resilience.

Theoretically, the results of this study provide empirical feedback to three major scholarly debates concerning the LIO. On the one hand, they weaken the strong version of the “decline thesis,” which treats the BRI as a disruptive instrument of order subversion. On the other hand, they show that order resilience is not absolute, but is maintained through differentiated trajectories among participants. Furthermore, this study reveals that China’s challenge to the international order lies more in “selective penetration” and “parallel institutional building” rather than direct replacement of existing rules. This implies that the future of the global order will not simply follow a binary opposition but is more likely to present forms of “plural coexistence” or “competitive multipolarity.”

Methodologically, this study supplements existing discussions that are primarily narrative and theoretical by conducting quantitative analysis of UNGA voting data, thereby providing a baseline for subsequent comparative regional cases and qualitative research. Future research should more carefully integrate regional-level political conditions and domestic institutional factors to examine how the BRI affects international norms and the trajectory of order through different mechanisms. Overall, this study demonstrates that although China’s Belt and Road Initiative has become an inescapable force in global governance, its challenge to the LIO remains gradual, limited, and fraught with contradictions.

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