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Key Developments in Global Affairs

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## CHAPTER 1

# China, Russia, and the Future of World Order

*Brian G. Carlson*

China and Russia pose illiberal challenges to world order, most visibly at present in Russia's aggression against Ukraine and in the threat that China poses to Taiwan. Shared views on world order, particularly the desire to reduce US power and to resist universal claims for democracy and human rights, are an important driver of the China-Russia partnership. Despite recent setbacks, the concept of a liberal international order remains valuable in addressing the challenges that China and Russia pose.



Russia's President Vladimir Putin holds talks with China's President Xi Jinping via a video link from Moscow, Russia, December 30, 2022. *Sputnik / Mikhail Kuravlev / Kremlin via REUTERS*



Manifestations of intensifying great-power rivalry, most notably Russia's war in Ukraine and China's increasingly menacing posture toward Taiwan, raise profound questions about the future of world order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine clearly violated the UN Charter, its attacks on civilian targets breached the laws of war, and its aggression and nuclear threats imperiled European and international security. Meanwhile, the increasing scope and tempo of China's military exercises, missile launches, and military aircraft flights in the waters and airspace surrounding Taiwan heightened concerns about a possible invasion in the coming years. In both Ukraine and Taiwan, the aspirations of people wishing to live in free and democratic societies are under threat.

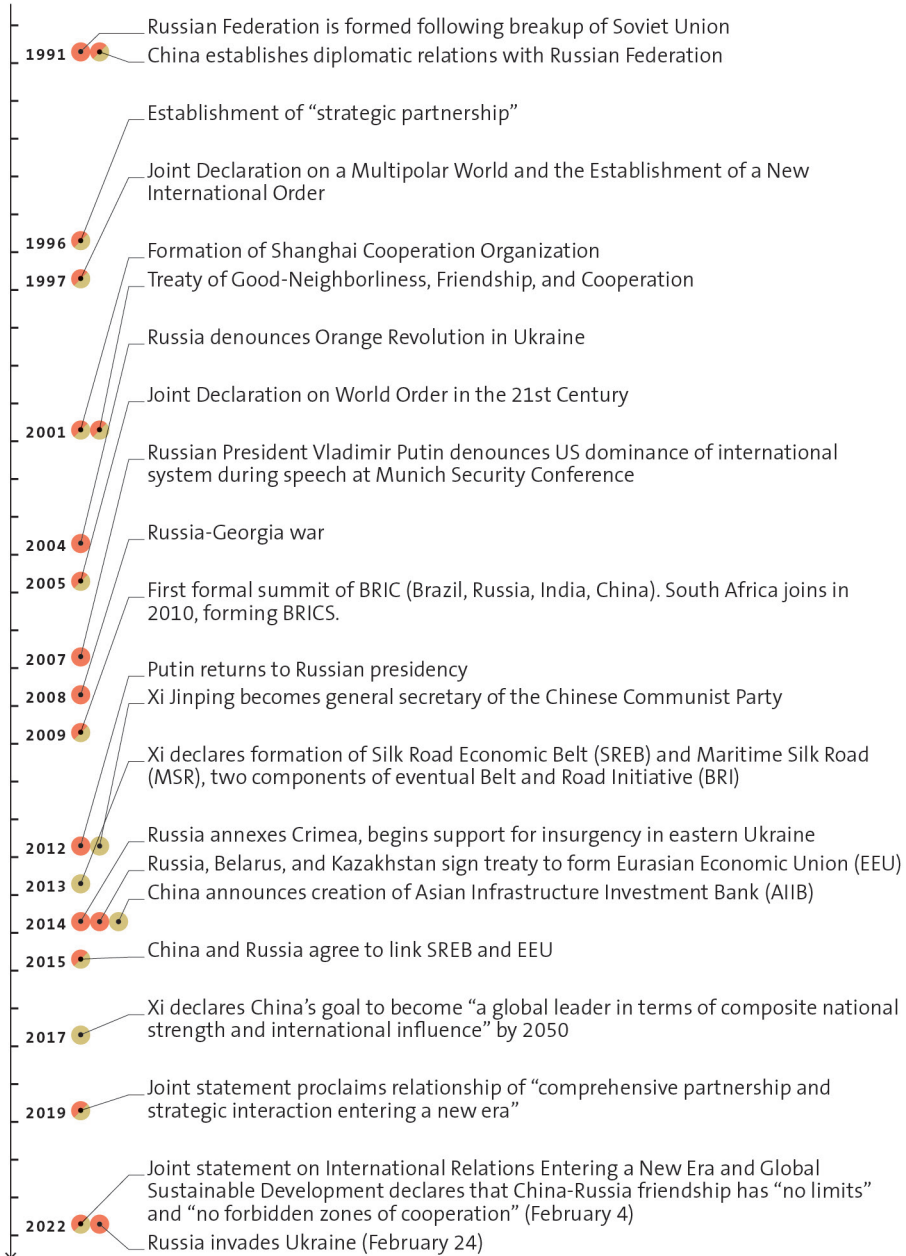
Beyond their separate actions, China and Russia continue to tout their partnership. The joint statement that Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin issued in February 2022, less than three weeks before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not only declared that the two countries enjoyed a friendship with "no limits," but also outlined many of their shared views on world order. In practice, limits to the relationship are apparent. Throughout Russia's war in Ukraine, China has maintained a stance of pro-Russian neutrality,

offering rhetorical support and a boost to Russia's finances through increased energy purchases while refraining, at least as of this writing, from providing Russia with weapons or helping it to evade sanctions. As Xi and Putin reaffirmed during a video conference in late December 2022, China and Russia remain committed to their partnership. In February 2023, the United States claimed that it had intelligence suggesting that China was considering whether to provide Russia with weapons. Despite China's relatively restrained support for Russia to date, Xi might regard the war in Ukraine as "the opening salvo in a broad East-versus-West confrontation for control of the international system."<sup>1</sup>

These events underscored growing concerns about illiberal challenges to world order. In the framing of US President Joe Biden's administration, the future of world order is the subject of an intensifying struggle between democracies and autocracies. The administration's National Security Strategy, which was released in October 2022, declares that the most pressing challenge to US foreign policy comes from "powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy." In this document's telling, both Russia and China challenge international peace and stability, including by "exporting



## Actions and Statements by China and Russia Pertaining to World Order



Sources: Author's compilations



an illiberal model of international order,” though the nature of their respective challenges differs in important respects. “Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has shown,” the document states. China, by contrast, “is 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Among liberal democracies, discussions of world order often focus on the concept of a liberal international order. This concept, like the closely related notion of a rules-based international order, remains contested in both conceptual and policy terms. In general, however, a liberal international order refers to an order in which the participating states interact on the basis of mutually agreed rules, cooperate in multilateral institutions to solve common problems, engage in open economic exchange, and value democracy and human rights. The notion of a liberal international order has suffered setbacks in recent years, largely as a result of developments within the liberal democracies themselves. These include domestic political tensions surrounding contentious issues such as immigration,

national identity, social values, and the economic dislocations resulting from free trade. The liberal democracies must address these issues if they are to rebuild the domestic consensus for a liberal international order.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter, however, focuses on the challenges that China and Russia pose to world order. The momentous events of the past year suggest that the struggle over world order is likely to intensify. The course of this struggle will affect the prospects for multilateralism in the years ahead. It therefore has important implications for the United Nations, including its Geneva-based institutions, and for Switzerland, which holds a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 2023–2024. The following sections examine the concept of a liberal international order and the challenges that it faces, the respective views of world order held by China and Russia, the two countries’ cooperation on issues of world order, and possible long-term sources of divergence in their views. The concluding section examines future scenarios for the world order and possible objectives for Western policymakers to pursue.

### **The Problem of World Order**

As Henry Kissinger writes, no truly global “world order” has ever existed. The contemporary international



system is based on Westphalian principles, so named for the Treaty of Westphalia, which was the product of negotiations in the German region of this name to end the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). Under this treaty, independent states enjoyed sovereignty over the territory under their control and refrained from interference in the domestic affairs of the other states. Westphalian principles eventually spread around the world, largely as a result of European imperialism, creating the modern system of sovereign states. As Kissinger writes, these principles now constitute “the sole generally recognized basis of what exists of a world order” even as they have no natural defender and “are being challenged on all sides.”<sup>4</sup>

After the end of World War II, the United States exercised leadership in creating the institutions that form the basis of today's world order. Following the adoption of the UN Charter in 1945, the United Nations began operations as an intergovernmental organization with worldwide membership aiming to uphold international security and international law. As permanent members of the UN Security Council, the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and China held veto power over the council's resolutions. Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists held China's seat on the

council until 1971, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) claimed it. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly established Russian Federation inherited the Soviet seat on the council. The UN embodies Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and non-aggression.

In addition to the UN system, the United States also led the creation of an order with more limited membership that was designed for Cold War security competition with the Soviet Union. This was a partial or bounded order, rather than a global order, with Western liberal democracies and other US allies as its core. In the security sphere, this order included the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and US alliances in Asia. In the economic realm, it consisted of the Bretton Woods institutions, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, as well as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the precursor to today's World Trade Organization (WTO). The organizing principles of this order thus included open trade, cooperative security, multilateralism, democratic solidarity, and US leadership.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet Union led its own competing order, consisting of institutions such as the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). Compared



to the US-led system, the Soviet bloc was weakly institutionalized and overwhelmingly characterized by top-down control from Moscow.

The end of the Cold War led to a widespread belief in the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism. The United States and its allies embarked upon efforts to spread these ideas worldwide, as well as to expand the international institutions that originally developed inside the US-led Cold War bloc. In the security realm, NATO expanded to include several new member-states in Central and Eastern Europe. In the economic arena, ambitions to expand the liberal international order were global in scope. These efforts largely focused on integrating China and post-Soviet Russia into this order. The United States pursued a policy of engagement with China that eventually led to its WTO membership in 2001. The G-7 group of advanced democratic capitalist countries welcomed Russia into its ranks, making it the G-8, and Russian membership in the WTO eventually followed in 2012.

These efforts failed to fulfill the expectation of the 1990s, however. Starting in that decade, relations between Russia and the West deteriorated over issues such as NATO expansion, Russia's wars in Chechnya, the failure of Russian democracy, and Russian

opposition to "color revolutions" on its doorstep. Meanwhile, engagement with China failed to promote domestic political change in that country, while China's increasingly assertive international behavior, starting after the 2008 financial crisis and gaining momentum after Xi came to power in 2012, belied hopes that China would eschew revisionist aims and support the international status quo. As these events unfolded, China and Russia steadily increased their own bilateral cooperation in diplomatic and security affairs. These developments led to concerns that China and Russia, through their authoritarian domestic regimes and assertive foreign policies, would threaten the preservation and strengthening of a liberal international order.

The idea of a liberal international order can refer either to an order that has liberal characteristics or to one based on cooperation among liberal democracies.<sup>6</sup> The liberal characteristics of an order reflect at least three important principles. The first, based on liberal institutionalism, is that the creation of a web of international institutions allows countries to solve problems cooperatively on the basis of multilateralism in an open, rules-based, and peaceful international order. The second, based on interdependence theory, is that steadily





expanding economic interdependence among nations not only promotes prosperity, but also serves as a force for peace. The third, based on democratic peace theory, is that democracies do not fight wars against each other. Therefore, efforts should be made to spread democracy around the world. Closely associated with this belief is the desire to promote human rights, at times through humanitarian interventions that run counter to Westphalian principles.

Efforts during the post-Cold War era to establish a liberal international order of global scope, based on the above principles, have largely failed.<sup>7</sup> Cooperation among liberal democracies, therefore, is now the most promising arena for the preservation and flourishing of a liberal international order. When efforts to expand the geographic scope of the liberal order stall, as appears to be the case at present, then the essential remaining objective is to ensure a favorable international environment for the survival of liberal democracy in the states where it already exists. In Woodrow Wilson's phrase, the goal is to build "a world safe for democracy."

In recent years, efforts to strengthen a liberal international order have encountered clear setbacks. In addition to the problems within liberal

democracies themselves, foreign military interventions that aimed at nation-building and democracy promotion ended in failure, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving US and European publics disillusioned with such enterprises. Efforts to build an expansive liberal international order also provoked opposition abroad, especially from illiberal states such as China and Russia. As the Biden administration's National Security Strategy noted, China and Russia challenge the world order in differing ways, as befits differences in their status and roles. In the words of a recent RAND study, China is "a peer, not a rogue," while Russia is "a rogue, not a peer."<sup>8</sup> Russia has mounted a great-power resurgence in recent years, allowing it to act as a disruptive force in the international system, but it has suffered damage from the war in Ukraine and faces uncertain long-term prospects. China, as an emerging superpower and competitor to the United States, has the potential to challenge the existing world order in fundamental ways.

### **China's Challenge to World Order**

Over the past few decades, China has gradually deepened its integration into the international system. Following the death of Mao Zedong and the beginning of "reform and opening" under Deng Xiaoping, China joined several international institutions.



These included arms control institutions, such as the Conference on Disarmament and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization, as well as regional organizations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum.<sup>9</sup> After the end of the Cold War, the United States encouraged China's further integration into the global economy and international institutions, a process that culminated in China's WTO accession. This US policy of engagement aimed to encourage both domestic reform in China and cooperative behavior in China's foreign policy. In 2005, Robert Zoellick, who was then US deputy secretary of state, encouraged China to become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system.<sup>10</sup>

At present, China's support for the existing international order varies by issue. For example, China strongly supports the UN system, offers moderate support for the international trade order as embodied in the WTO, and strongly opposes universal claims for democracy and human rights.<sup>11</sup> China supports Westphalian aspects of the international order, including state sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of states, which have been pillars of its foreign policy dating back to the Principles of Peaceful Coexistence of 1954. China's support for liberal elements of the order, however, is mixed at best. In addition

to its clear opposition to an international order based on liberal political values, China's support for a liberal economic order is subject to important constraints. As befits a country that has reaped immense gains from globalization, China generally supports an open world economy. However, China's own mercantilist practices, including the party-state's strong role in the economy and restrictions on foreign access to China's domestic markets, are in conflict with the principles of market economics and fair competition that underpin the world economic order.<sup>12</sup>

In recent years, the failure of the US engagement policy toward China has become increasingly clear.<sup>13</sup> Contrary to hopes that engagement would lead to domestic reform in China, Xi has further curtailed domestic political rights and strengthened the state's role in the economy. He has also pursued an increasingly assertive foreign policy, confounding hopes that China would become a responsible stakeholder in the international system. These trends have important implications for world order, raising concerns that China could seek to create a world that is "safe for autocracy."<sup>14</sup> Despite China's participation in the international system and adherence to many of its principles, Chinese leaders remain acutely aware that they had no part



in making the rules of this system. As Kissinger notes, they have long expected the international system to adapt in ways that grant them a greater say over rule-making, even to the extent of revising some of the existing rules. Sooner or later, Kissinger predicts, they are sure to act on this expectation.<sup>15</sup>

Such efforts already appear to be in their early stages and are visible in several dimensions. China has already created or participated in the formation of several new multilateral institutions of which the United States is not a member, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) grouping, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Silk Road Fund, the New Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). China has also become increasingly active in existing international institutions, aiming to reshape them from within. For example, China has sought to strengthen its influence in international economic institutions, as well as to revise human rights norms in ways that conform more closely to China's preferences.

China appears determined to establish its own sphere of influence in East Asia. In this vision, China would

regain the historical position that it held for centuries at the top of a regional hierarchy, with other Asian countries showing deference to China's leadership.<sup>16</sup> China would also break the US alliance network in Asia and limit US presence and influence in the region. China's ambitions may be far more expansive than this, however.<sup>17</sup> In his speech to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2017, Xi said that China had entered a "new era" in which it should "take center stage in the world." At the 20th Party Congress in October 2022, during which Xi secured a third term as general secretary, he declared that "the world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century, but time and situation are in our favor."

Along with the "China Dream" of the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," Xi has proposed the creation of a "community of common destiny for all mankind." This concept, which is closely linked with the BRI and with China's efforts to build influence in the Global South, remains opaque. However, it suggests that China might aim not only to build a sphere of influence in Asia, but also to create a Sinocentric world order in which China plays the leading role in shaping global rules and norms.<sup>18</sup> In this view, China's aim would not



be to rule the entire world, but to establish itself as the world's dominant power by assuming the leadership of a diverse grouping of states, consisting largely of non-democratic developing countries from the Global South, that it can attract into its orbit.<sup>19</sup> The deal that China brokered in March 2023 to restore diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which could greatly enhance China's stature in the Middle East, is consistent with this approach.<sup>20</sup>

Regime security, which requires preserving the CCP's hold on power against threats both domestic and foreign, lies at the heart of Xi's conception of world order. In 2013, consistent with longstanding CCP concerns, Xi issued Directive No. 9, which declared that liberal democracy was a foreign idea that threatened China's domestic security. The following year, Xi introduced the Overall National Security Outlook (ONSO), which established a broad framework for responding to both traditional and emerging security threats. As the implementation of the ONSO has made clear, the understanding of national security contained in this document focuses overwhelmingly on political security, namely the preservation of CCP rule.<sup>21</sup> In the years following its introduction, Xi applied this framework to domestic security as he cracked down

on internal dissent, established a network of detention centers in Xinjiang, and eroded Hong Kong's democratic freedoms. His announcement of the Global Security Initiative (GSI) in April 2022 signaled the application of this framework to foreign policy, including efforts to shape the world order to China's advantage.<sup>22</sup>

In its efforts to reshape the world order, China increasingly seeks to weaken the influence of liberal democracies in international institutions. Some of its actions suggest the further aim of subverting fundamental elements of the international system. These include China's maritime claims in the South China Sea and other bodies of water. China dismissed the July 2016 ruling by the International Court of Arbitration in The Hague that rejected its sweeping claims to control over the South China Sea, arguing that the court lacked jurisdiction in the matter. Recently, China has claimed the Taiwan Strait as its own territorial waters. Such claims pose potential threats to freedom of navigation.<sup>23</sup>

China also resists the application of international human rights norms, as embodied in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Republic of China participated in the negotiation of this document, which occurred prior to the communist



victory in the Chinese civil war, but the CCP was absent. China has resisted efforts by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) to condemn China's treatment of the Uyghurs and other ethnic-minority Muslims in Xinjiang. It has rallied support for its position in the UNHRC from many developing countries that have been the recipients of Chinese aid and investment, including several Muslim-majority countries. After UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet issued a report in the summer of 2022 that sharply criticized China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang, China suspended its cooperation with the High Commissioner's office. In the technology sphere, China's efforts to set global standards in areas such as 5G, Internet governance, Artificial Intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and the Internet of things could help to wire the world in ways that benefit its own authoritarian system.<sup>24</sup>

China's efforts to reshape the world order are in their formative stages. Xi and other Chinese leaders most likely have not reached firm conclusions about their ultimate vision. Their intention to erode the international system's emphasis on liberal political values, however, seems clear. A careful reading of Xi's writings and speeches to party cadres, moreover, reveals his sincere belief in Marxist ideology and

in socialism with Chinese characteristics. The US-China rivalry and the associated struggle over world order, therefore, are likely to feature an ideological struggle between democratic capitalism and socialism. Moreover, by some indications, Xi may view Westphalian principles as a foreign concept that should eventually be replaced. Such ideological factors could feature prominently in China's efforts to build a world order that is conducive to the flourishing of its one-party, authoritarian system.<sup>25</sup>

### **Russia's Challenge to World Order**

In the early years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States worked with Russian President Boris Yeltsin's administration in an effort to integrate Russia into the West. This effort lost momentum amid the failure of political and economic reforms in Russia and rising US-Russia tensions over NATO expansion and other issues. The appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as foreign minister in 1996 signaled the shift from a pro-Western to a Eurasianist foreign policy. Putin made renewed efforts to improve relations with the West early in his presidency, especially following the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Eventually, he grew disillusioned and angry with what he viewed as the West's refusal to respect Russia's interests as a great power. In



response, he sought to establish Russia as an independent great power in a multipolar world.

Putin viewed the post-Cold War international system as a unipolar order that left the United States largely free, at least for a time, to pursue unconstrained hegemony. The concept of a liberal international order was, in Putin's view, merely a means by which the United States pursued its hegemonic ambitions. Democracy promotion and human rights advocacy, including the doctrine of humanitarian intervention and support for democratic color revolutions, were simply part of efforts by the United States to bring more countries into its orbit and to dominate the world.<sup>26</sup> Putin expressed these views forcefully during his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, accusing the United States of engaging in "an almost uncontained hyper use of force—military force—in international relations" and having "overstepped its national borders in every way." In this speech, as on many other occasions, Putin argued that a unipolar order was unsustainable and that multipolarity was in the process of formation.<sup>27</sup>

Putin and other top Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, have argued repeatedly in favor of adherence to international law, based

strictly on the UN Charter and Security Council resolutions, and against conceptions of a liberal or rules-based international order. They frequently mention the cases of Iraq, Kosovo, and Libya as examples in which the United States and other Western democracies ignored international law. The NATO bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 and the US-led war in Iraq in 2003 both proceeded without Security Council approval. Russia declared that international recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008 had no basis in international law. After abstaining from a UN Security Council resolution to establish a no-fly zone in Libya, Russia accused Western countries of overstepping the resolution's mandate by supporting the successful effort to topple Muammar Gaddafi's government. Russian leaders cited such cases to justify their own aggression against Georgia and Ukraine. Despite its frequent expressions of support for UN principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, in practice Russia views true sovereignty as the prerogative of great powers. The sovereignty of less powerful countries that depend on great powers for their security, in the Russian view, is subject to constraints.<sup>28</sup>

As with China, Russia supports some aspects of the existing world order. Russia generally supports those



elements of the order that it perceives as beneficial to its interests and opposes those that threaten to undermine them. Russia strongly supports the UN system, which grants it a veto in the Security Council. Russia fiercely opposed NATO expansion, arguing that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), of which Russia is a member, would have been the proper multilateral format for addressing European security. In the field of arms control, Russia supports those elements that serve its interests, such as the nuclear nonproliferation regime and, until recently, the New START Treaty, but opposes other aspects that it perceives as disadvantageous, as in its withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, its violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, and its decision in February 2023 to suspend participation in New START. Like China, Russia opposes universal claims for democracy and human rights, including the doctrine of humanitarian intervention and color revolutions, and supports strong state control over the flow of information on the Internet.<sup>29</sup> Putin not only opposes efforts to expand liberal values around the world, but also claims that this effort has run its course. In 2019, he declared that “the liberal idea has become obsolete” because it had “outlived its purpose.”<sup>30</sup>

Disillusioned with the notions of world order that the United States and other Western liberal democracies advance, Russia has responded in several ways. In its relations with liberal democracies, it has aimed to disrupt their preferred conceptions of world order. One of the major motivations behind Russia’s war against Georgia in 2008, its annexation of Crimea in 2014, its support for insurgents in the Donbas starting that same year, and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was to halt further integration of post-Soviet countries into NATO, the EU, and other Western institutions. In an effort to establish itself as an independent great power, Russia also led processes of Eurasian integration. These included the formation and development of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), as well as efforts to bolster Russia’s security role in post-Soviet territories through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Finally, in an effort to increase its leverage in the international system, Russia also strengthened its partnership with China and other BRICS countries. Russian leaders recognized that the reorientation of their foreign policy to the south and east came with the risk of increased dependence on China, but they believed that the West’s unwillingness to respect their interests left them with no other choice.<sup>31</sup>



## China-Russia Cooperation on World Order

Throughout the post-Cold War era, as China and Russia have drawn steadily closer in their relations, shared views on a range of issues pertaining to world order have been a major driver of the relationship. This convergence of views has been apparent in the UN Security Council, where China and Russia have cooperated closely. On all 14 occasions since 2007 in which China has exercised its veto power in the Security Council, Russia has joined China in casting its own veto.

The similarity in the national identities of China and Russia, deriving largely from the legacy of communism in both countries and shared discomfort with a US-led order, has stimulated increased bilateral cooperation.<sup>32</sup> A shared opposition to liberal hegemony, or the promotion of universal claims for democracy and human rights backed by preponderant US power, played a particularly important role in the deepening of China-Russia cooperation. The leadership of both countries viewed liberal hegemony as a threat to their continued hold on power.<sup>33</sup> Concerns about regime security, therefore, gave both countries a powerful incentive to cooperate with the other. In the case of Russia, for example, the country's economic and social well-being arguably would

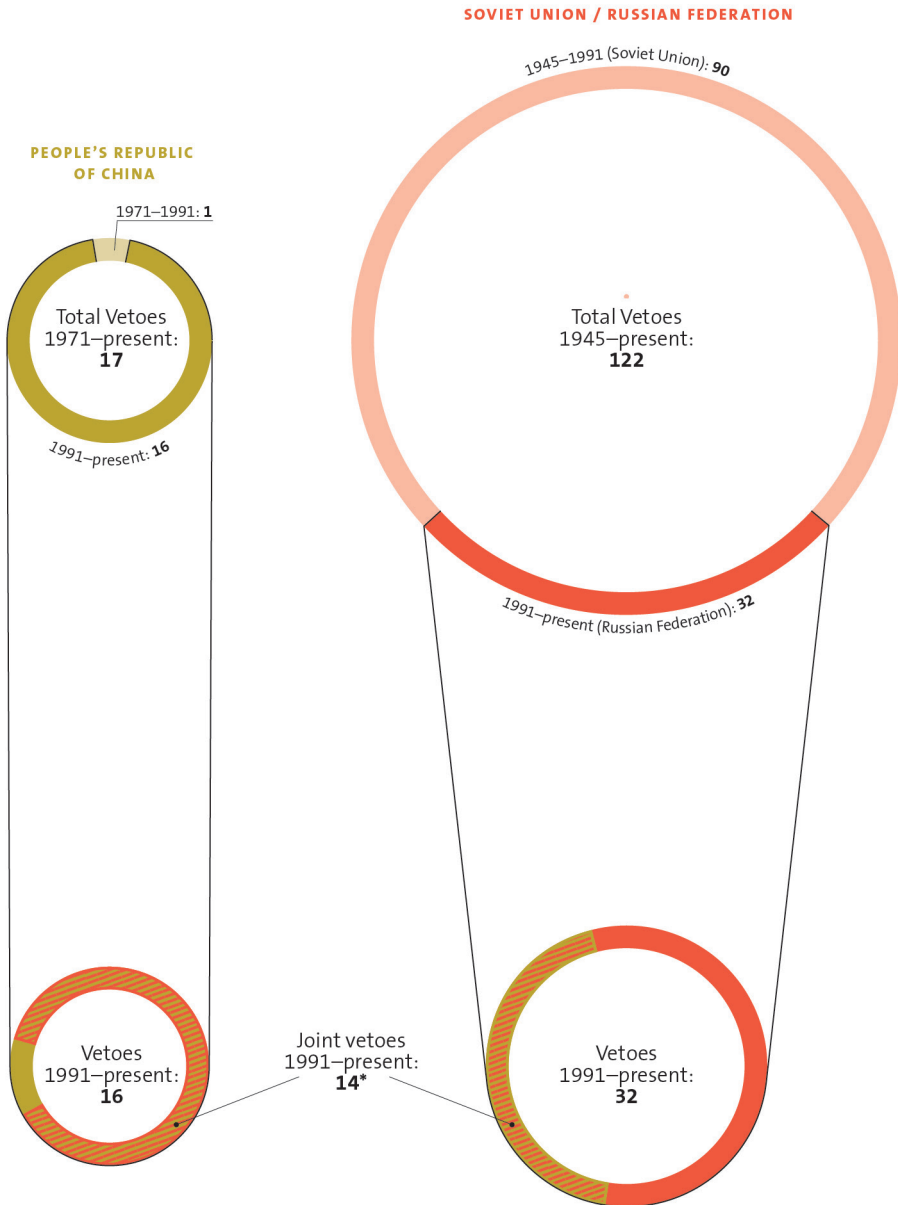
have been better served by the pursuit of integration with the West. Such a course might have threatened Putin's autocratic regime, however. The objective of staying in power counseled cooperation with China instead.<sup>34</sup>

In their joint statement of February 4, 2022, China and Russia laid out their own vision of world order. The joint statement reprised a litany of complaints about the US-led order that the two countries have made for more than a quarter-century, while also adding some new points. The two countries declared their support for an international law-based order with a central and coordinating role for the United Nations and the UN Security Council. They called for an international order based on multipolarity, respect for each state's right to choose its own development path, and the protection of human rights in accordance with the situation in each country. They declared their opposition to unilateralism, the resort to force, interference in other countries' sovereign affairs, the promotion of color revolutions, the use of democracy and human rights to pressure other countries, and the imposition of economic sanctions. They also expressed opposition to any further expansion of NATO and to closed bloc structures in the Asia-Pacific, noting their particular concern about





## UN Security Council Vetoes



\* These 14 instances of joint vetoes by China and Russia represent all of China's vetoes since 2007.

Sources: Dag Hammarskjöld Library, United Nations



the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Australia-US-UK (AUKUS) security partnership.<sup>35</sup>

China and Russia have called for the formation of a multipolar world regularly since first expressing this idea in a joint declaration in 1997. In contrast to the international system of the immediate post-Cold War period, which they characterized as a unipolar order that allowed the United States to practice “hegemonism,” a multipolar world would bring democracy to the international system in the sense of allowing a wide variety of states to have a say in the world order. In a multipolar world, China and Russia contend, the major powers could coexist peacefully on the basis of mutual respect for civilizational differences and each state’s right to choose its own political system and development path. In a particularly strained argument that appeared in the February 4 statement, China and Russia assert that each state should be able to decide for itself what constitutes a democratic form of domestic governance. China and Russia also aim to undermine the US dollar’s dominant role in the international economy.

This expression of common views on world order raises a number of problems, however. For all their talk of state sovereignty, China and Russia appear to believe that this prerogative

applies only to great powers such as themselves. Russia violated the sovereignty of Georgia by invading that country in 2008. It has violated Ukraine’s sovereignty since annexing Crimea in 2014 and initiating support for insurgents in the Donbas starting that same year. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was the most blatant example of its rejection of Ukrainian sovereignty. Initially, the invasion appeared to aim at regime change in Kyiv or possibly even the extinguishing of Ukrainian statehood. In September 2022, Putin declared the annexation of four Ukrainian provinces. Although Russian forces were not fully in control of any of them, it remained unclear, at the time of writing, how much of its territory Ukraine would be able to regain, either through fighting or negotiations. The Baltic countries and other NATO member states in Central and Eastern Europe perceive an ongoing security threat from Russia.

For its part, China’s apparent desire to stand at the top of a hierarchical order in East Asia could lead to the curtailment of other Asian states’ sovereignty. China’s behavior in its South China Sea disputes with neighboring countries exemplifies this tendency. A famous outburst at an ASEAN summit in 2010 by Yang Jiechi, who until recently served as China’s top foreign policy



official, was illustrative. In response to criticism of China's South China Sea policies by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Yang snapped at the assembled representatives of Southeast Asian countries: "China is a big country and you are small countries and that is a fact." As mentioned above, Xi may believe that the Westphalian system should eventually be replaced. In Asia, this could indicate his preference for China to stand at the head of a regional hierarchy, in a new order reminiscent of the historical Chinese conception of *tian xia* ("all under heaven").

Advocacy by China and Russia of international law and the central role of the UN also rings hollow in many cases. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a blatant violation of the UN Charter's prohibition on interstate aggression. Its conduct of the war, including atrocities committed by Russian soldiers and intentional assaults on civilian populations, violates the laws of war. Despite its professed commitment to the principles of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, China has abstained from resolutions in the UN Security Council and General Assembly to condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine and annexation of its territory. China has also at times ignored international law and breached treaty agreements, as in its rejection of the international court ruling against

its claims in the South China Sea and in its violation of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration governing Hong Kong's return to China in 1997.

China and Russia pose a special challenge to the cause of international human rights. The two countries have maintained a "tactical alliance" to shield themselves from criticism in the UN, including Geneva-based bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>36</sup> Following the revelation of atrocities by Russian soldiers in the Ukrainian city of Bucha, Russia was expelled from the UNHRC. China continues to engage actively in this body, where it seeks to shield itself from criticism of its human rights record, particularly in Xinjiang, where it has reportedly placed 1 million or more Uyghurs and other ethnic-minority Muslims in internment camps. China's aim is not to overturn the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but rather to change international human rights norms by achieving outcomes in the UN General Assembly and the UNHRC that support its positions. Russia, by contrast, invests much less energy in such efforts and appears to be much less concerned than China when it becomes the target of such votes.<sup>37</sup>

From the standpoint of liberal democracies, one danger is that China



and Russia could extend their efforts beyond defensive actions against the spread of liberal democracy and take more assertive action that could make the world unsafe for democracy. The future of liberal democracy in both Ukraine and Taiwan is under threat. China and Russia provide support to North Korea, Iran, and other autocratic countries that threaten the peace of their regions. Russia has interfered in liberal democracies for many years, and China could become more active in this area, possibly with Russia's support.

### **Potential China-Russia Divergence on World Order**

Despite the congruence between Chinese and Russian views of world order, as well as their growing cooperation on these issues, differences also exist between the two countries that could become increasingly apparent over time. The close relationship that the two countries enjoy at present is likely to last for at least as long as Putin and Xi remain in power, and perhaps for much longer. Over time, however, a divergence of views on such issues as multipolarity and spheres of influence could cause the relationship to fray.<sup>38</sup>

As mentioned above, China and Russia have consistently expressed a desire for multipolarity over the past quarter-century. Russia's desire for multipolarity seems genuine. Its main goal

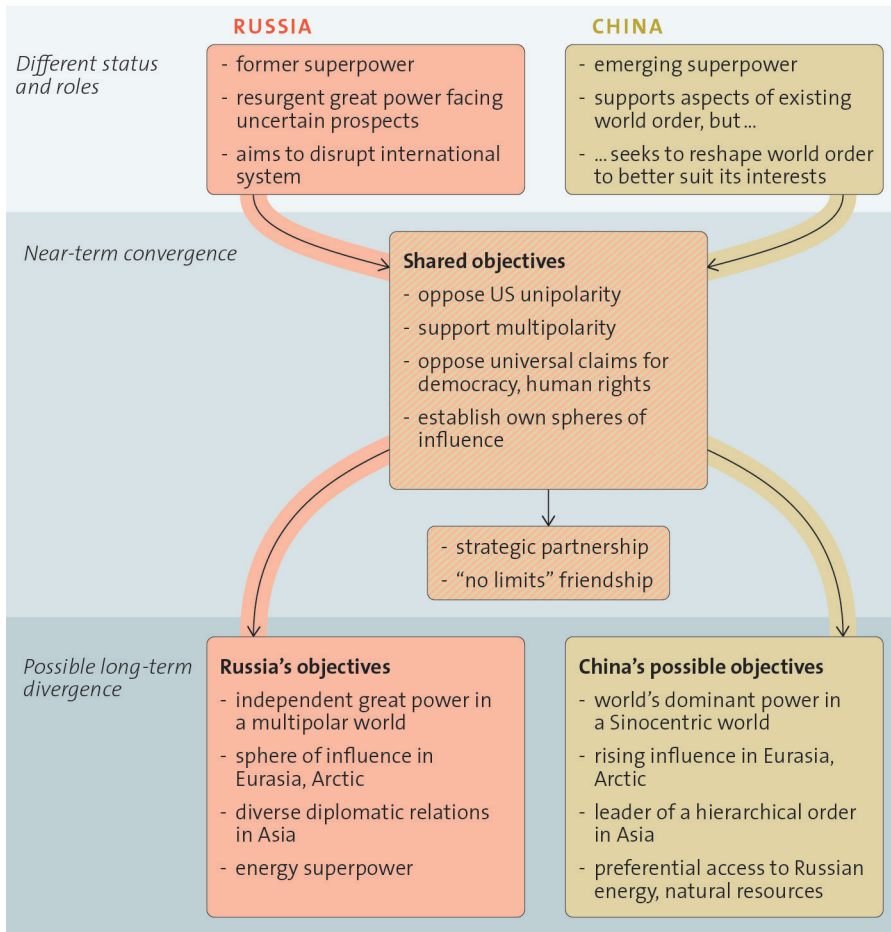
is to establish itself as an independent great power. As a former superpower with no realistic chance of regaining this status, Russia's only hope is to re-establish itself as a great power in a multipolar world. Russia joins China in opposing a US-led unipolar world. It also expressed discomfort with the idea, floated in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, of a G-2 world in which the United States and China, as the world's two dominant powers, would play a leading role in the management of world affairs. Russia cannot establish itself as a major power in either a US-led unipolar world or in a bipolar world defined by the US-China rivalry. It can only do so in a multipolar world.

Despite China's frequent expressions of support for multipolarity, it remains unclear whether this is really China's vision for the long term. At present, China supports the concept of multipolarity because the existence of other powerful countries that oppose the United States, especially Russia, helps to relieve some of the pressure on China. If the world were to transition rapidly into US-China bipolarity, with Russia either unwilling or unable to provide meaningful support to China, then China might find itself standing alone in the face of pressure from the United States and its network of allies and partners



## China-Russia Relations and World Order

Near-term convergence, possible long-term divergence



Sources: Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World* (Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy / Penguin Random House Australia, 2017); other writings by Lo; author's own assessments.

around the world. A bipolar world in which Russia plays only a minor role could eventually take shape, but China wants more time to build up its comprehensive national power

before this situation arises.<sup>39</sup> In the long run, China may aim for the creation of a Sinocentric world. Such an outcome would not be advantageous for Russia, which could then face an



overwhelming threat from its giant neighbor to the east. In such a situation, China would be in a position to make onerous demands on Russia or to encroach upon its interests.

For example, the growing power imbalance in China's favor could lead to a divergence on the issue of spheres of influence. The close relationship that China and Russia enjoy at present allows them to pursue spheres of influence in the regions closest to their main population centers. For Russia, this is in the post-Soviet regions. For China, this is in the maritime Asia-Pacific. Eventually, however, expanding Chinese spheres of influence could encroach upon Russia's interests. This could occur in such regions as Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic.

In Central Asia, Russia already appears to be losing influence. This trend has accelerated as a result of the war in Ukraine, which has weakened Russia, distracted it from Central Asian security affairs, aroused suspicions about its intentions among countries in the region, and caused Central Asian countries to lose respect for Russia's military prowess. This situation is especially worrying for Russia because its claim to a continuing major role in the region depends upon its ability to serve as the main security provider. As Russia's influence slips, China could

fill the vacuum. China's investments in the region through the BRI have already strengthened its regional influence. In September 2022, during a trip to Central Asia, Xi declared that China supported the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. To many observers, he appeared to be extending security guarantees to these countries, which seek to hedge against Russia's long-term intentions.<sup>40</sup>

In Northeast Asia, an expanding Chinese sphere of influence could threaten Russia's position in its own eastern regions, as well as in the Arctic. Over time, Siberia and the Russian Far East could become increasingly economically dependent on China, which might covet these regions' oil, gas, timber, and other natural resources, as well as their agricultural land. China's growing interest and presence in the Arctic could also threaten Russia's claims in this region.<sup>41</sup> As Russia becomes increasingly dependent on China in the wake of its disastrous war in Ukraine, China could gain the ability to pursue its interests assertively in these regions.

China's apparent desire to build a sphere of influence in Asia could also conflict with Russia's desire to maintain a diverse foreign policy in the region. China's growing power in Asia



could further reduce Russia's regional influence, which is already greatly diminished since Soviet times. China could be in a position to demand that Russia curtail its relations with countries such as India and Vietnam. Russia has longstanding ties to both, but China's own relations with these countries have grown increasingly tense. China might demand that Russia stop selling weapons to them or, in the event of a military conflict pitting China against one of them, refrain from providing any form of support to China's adversary. Russia and China also disagree on whether India should gain a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, with Russia in support but China firmly opposed.

Despite these potential sources of long-term divergence, China and Russia maintain a strong commitment to their partnership that is likely to last for the foreseeable future. Amid its isolation from the West, Russia is increasingly dependent on China's support. For its part, China continues to value its close relationship with Russia, which it views as a valuable partner in challenging the United States. Therefore, China has a strong interest in offering reassurance to Russia and in refraining from making high-handed demands that could jeopardize its support. If China were to abandon this policy of restraint and reassurance,

then Russia might eventually adjust its foreign policy in recognition of a threat from its increasingly powerful neighbor. For the foreseeable future, however, Western leaders should assume that the China-Russia partnership will remain close, with all of the attendant implications for world order.

### **The Future of World Order**

As a new world order takes shape following the "unipolar moment" of the early post-Cold War era, three broad possibilities present themselves. The new world order could be fragmented, diverse, or antagonistic.<sup>42</sup> In a fragmented world, no state would have the capability or the will to manage the international agenda. Such a situation could be better described as world disorder than world order. Some elements of fragmentation are visible in the contemporary world, but they would become much more prominent if the United States were to withdraw from the leadership that it has exercised since World War II. US leadership in the world, including the provision of global public goods, has played a crucial role in upholding order.<sup>43</sup> In the future, if the United States were no longer willing or able to exercise such leadership, then the resulting vacuum would invite other states, most likely China, to advance their own visions of world order.



A diverse world order would be similar to the multipolar world that China and Russia profess to support. Such an order would be based on Westphalian principles. The leading states would respect the diversity of civilizations and political systems and agree not to interfere in each other's internal affairs or to criticize other states' domestic political arrangements. If the United States were to agree to the formation of such a system, then it would accept the premise that China's rise threatens neither US interests nor the world order, as long as China abides by the rules of the order and pursues its desired reforms peacefully. Likewise, the West would have to make far-reaching efforts to accommodate Russia's desire for great-power status. China and Russia, for their part, would also endeavor to maintain an equal partnership despite the growing power imbalance in China's favor.

In practice, a diverse world order of the kind that China and Russia propose would be extremely difficult to implement. In such an order, the liberal democracies would most likely have to accept expansive Chinese and Russian spheres of influence.<sup>44</sup> Such an outcome would not only be antithetical to the notion of a liberal order, but would also pose security threats in both Asia and Europe. Liberal democracies cannot accommodate Russia's great-power aspirations if this means

the persistence of Russian imperialistic aims. Such concerns are even more acute in relation to China. Although Russia lacks the power to gain hegemony over Europe, China could eventually attain sufficient power to make a bid for regional hegemony in Asia. Such an effort would threaten the traditional US aim of preventing any other power from gaining hegemony over one of the world's major regions. Moreover, in a deeply interconnected world, different conceptions of order will interact continuously.<sup>45</sup> This is likely to promote tension between the competing views of order, rather than respectful coexistence in separate geographical spheres, as well as intense competition to set the dominant rules, norms, and standards of the world order.

As the US-China rivalry intensifies, security competition between the two countries could overwhelm all efforts to build a harmonious world order. Because states in the international system can never fully trust each other's intentions, they must pay careful attention to other states' military capabilities. As China's military capabilities expand, the United States will face strong incentives to strengthen its own military forces and to expand security cooperation with allies and partners. Such efforts are already underway. They include growing cooperation among the





members of the Quad (United States, Japan, India, Australia), the AUKUS security partnership, and increased US efforts to enlist NATO in the competition with China. The United States is modernizing its nuclear arsenal and making advances in missile defense and high-precision conventional weapons. China, for its part, has embarked upon a buildup of its own nuclear arsenal with the aim of maintaining the credibility of its nuclear deterrent. China could further increase military cooperation with Russia, including in the area of nuclear deterrence. As security competition intensifies, mutual distrust could grow, undermining any potential efforts to establish a diverse world order.

As the international political landscape comes to be defined by the US-China rivalry, the scope for democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention will shrink. This could reduce the salience of liberal hegemony as an irritant in relations between the United States and its allies and partners, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other. However, this tendency has its limits. The United States and other liberal democracies cannot, and should not, compromise on the principles of human rights as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the established body of human rights law. They must resist

efforts by China and Russia to weaken human rights protections. They may have limited scope to hold China and Russia to these standards, but they must neither refrain from telling the truth about the human rights abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere, nor condone efforts by China and Russia to dilute human rights standards in the interests of international harmony.<sup>46</sup>

Ultimately, an antagonistic world order might be the most likely outcome. In this case, an East-West confrontation would arise, pitting the United States and its allies and partners against China, with Russia as Beijing's most important partner. This situation would be similar in some ways to the US-Soviet Cold War, but also different in important respects. As during the original Cold War, each of the superpowers would lead a bounded order that is designed to facilitate security competition with the other.<sup>47</sup> Once again, the United States would lead a bounded order consisting of its allies and partners. This order would feature many liberal elements, including multilateral institutions, economic interdependence, and a membership consisting primarily, though not entirely, of liberal democracies. China would lead its own bounded order consisting of friendly countries including Russia and perhaps a wide array of countries from the Global South.



As during the Cold War, a “thin” international order would also exist to facilitate cooperation on problems that are common to humanity. During the period of US-Soviet confrontation, the two superpowers cooperated on arms control, global public health, and other issues. The US-China rivalry is far more complex than the US-Soviet rivalry was and would therefore require more sophisticated forms of cooperation in this thin international order. Unlike during the Cold War, when the competing blocs had only minimal economic exchange, China’s economy is tightly linked with those of the United States and its allies in both Asia and Europe. Although some efforts at economic decoupling are already apparent, especially in the technology sector, the level of economic interdependence is likely to remain high. Therefore, the regulation of economic relations would be an important task for this thin international order.<sup>48</sup> Overall, such an arrangement would need to address issues such as arms control, nuclear nonproliferation, terrorism, climate change, global public health, and financial stability. Intensifying great-power rivalry, however, is likely to make even such mutually beneficial cooperation, including in the UN system, exceedingly difficult to achieve.

The goal of a worldwide liberal international order is out of reach for the

foreseeable future, but the United States and other liberal democracies still have good reason to maintain their commitment to a liberal international order centered mostly on cooperation among themselves. Historically, leadership of a liberal order gave first Britain and later the United States a distinct advantage in the face of repeated challenges, enabling one or both of these countries to be on the winning side of every major war with international systemic consequences dating back more than 300 years.<sup>49</sup> The period since World War II, during which the United States has led a liberal order, has been characterized by sustained economic growth, the worldwide expansion of democracy, and the absence of great-power war. The United States and other liberal democracies have benefited enormously from this state of affairs.<sup>50</sup>

As during the Cold War, when the imperatives of security competition with the Soviet Union led the United States to cooperate with various dictatorships, security competition with China is likely to require cooperation with a variety of non-democracies, including Vietnam and other Asian countries. It will also require cooperation with India, a democracy that nevertheless remains reluctant to embrace Western conceptions of a liberal international order and has suffered



some democratic backsliding domestically, as Boas Lieberherr discusses in his chapter in this volume. India and a variety of other countries, both democratic and non-democratic, are likely to calibrate their cooperation with the United States and its allies in proportion to the security threat that they perceive from China, while remaining unenthusiastic about efforts to promote a liberal international order, as seen in their unwillingness to condemn Russia for its war in Ukraine or to join sanctions against it. For these reasons, among others, the Biden administration's conception of a struggle between democracies and autocracies is an inadequate framework for understanding the US-China rivalry.

Nevertheless, a liberal international order will be an invaluable asset in the coming security competition with China. The United States and other supporters of a liberal international order will have to maintain focus and discipline. They must curtail their ambitions in some respects, most likely foregoing humanitarian intervention and nation-building efforts for the foreseeable future.<sup>51</sup> In promoting liberal democracy, they should adhere to traditional ideas of liberty based on natural rights, rather than promoting particular views on contemporary social issues that remain fiercely contested within liberal democracies themselves.<sup>52</sup>

With such considerations in mind, the liberal democracies can strengthen their position considerably through cooperation among themselves. Together, liberal democracies are responsible for a clear majority of global GDP and military spending.<sup>53</sup> The support that the United States and its allies have mustered for Ukraine in its efforts to resist Russian aggression is a demonstration of the power of concerted action among the liberal democracies.<sup>54</sup> Liberal ideas offer the best hope for economic dynamism, which is essential both for improving people's lives within liberal democratic societies and for building the material power that is needed for security competition. New bargains will need to be struck on issues such as free trade and immigration in order to rebuild political support for such an order.

If this can be achieved, then a bounded liberal order will play one additional and crucial role in the competition with China. It will set an example that will appeal to people around the world. In order to prevail in the contest for the future of the world order, China and Russia would have to offer a model that is more appealing than what the liberal democracies can offer. Based on present indications, they appear to fall well short.<sup>55</sup> China is attempting to offer its own system, featuring authoritarian political rule and state capitalism, as a



model for the world. Whether or not this will prove to be an appealing model in the long run remains to be seen. The historical record, however, suggests that liberal democracies have distinct advantages over autocracies, both in pursuing great-power competition and in improving the lives of their own citizens. If the liberal democracies can adequately address the problems that have arisen in the past few years, both within their societies and within the broader liberal order, then they still have a good chance to showcase a model that is superior to anything than China and Russia can offer.

Charlotte Hirsbrunner, a summer 2022 intern in the Global Security Team of the Think Tank at CSS, provided research assistance for this chapter.

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