

Rethinking the Liberal International Order in Asia under the Impact of the Ukraine War

By Gilbert Rozman

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 posed the greatest shock to the international order established in Europe after WWII. It also reverberated powerfully in Asia. In the following four articles, we explore its impact in thinking about the Indo-Pacific region from the perspective of the United States, U.S. allies Japan and South Korea, and U.S. adversaries, China and Russia. Prior to the war how did these countries assess the order in the Indo-Pacific? What changed by 2023? The comparisons in this introduction put the five separate cases into a broader context.

Although big changes from the Russian onslaught occurred in Russia and the U.S., thinking in the other three countries actually registered more fundamental transformation. For Russia the liberal international order was demonized earlier and assumed to be on its last legs. Its decision to undertake a “special military operation” meant that it was acting on this worldview. For the United States, especially in the Biden administration, the overall threat to the U.S.-led order had been perceived earlier, and it remained to find answers to Russia's flagrant activation of this threat, not to rethink the defense of the order under way. In China, a more fundamental change occurred, backing Russia's war logic and misinformation at odds with its longstanding support for sovereignty and territorial integrity. If Xi Jinping had earlier begun a transition with his more aggressive “wolf warrior” thinking, a leap was still required to endorse Russia to such an extent. For Japan, there was also a transitional stage, driven by what is called the “Abe Doctrine,” which gave stronger backing to the liberal international order. Yet, the contrast with the new “Kishida Doctrine” was huge, made greater by the lingering legacy of the “Yoshida Doctrine” far removed from responsible leadership in the face of a crisis to the order. Finally, the case of South Korea is particularly stark because Moon Jae-in's ambivalence about this order endured into the

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opening weeks of the Ukraine war before Yoon Suk-yeol emerged as a champion of it, albeit with some limitations that left Seoul trailing Washington and Tokyo as a full-fledged backer of the order.

Comparing the four countries other than China, we find that their behavior in 2022 had a lot to do with their preexisting views of China. Confident that China had its back and would welcome an assault on the liberal international order, Russia was emboldened to go to war. Cognizant of the danger of the PRC resorting to coercion toward Taiwan and increasingly critical of China's behavior, the United States was quick to link the invasion of Ukraine to the threat to Taiwan. A little less focused on countering China, at least economically, Japan swung far closer to the U.S. stance. Least prepared to confront China, South Korea proved less inclined to take strong action against Russia, but yielded ground over time. China insisted that Taiwan is totally separate from Ukraine, since it has no sovereignty although China was prepared to disregard Ukraine's, but the other states all saw parallels, Japan taking the lead in insisting that one leads directly to the other.

Russia has been itching to proclaim the old international order dead and to identify a starting date for a new order. It has a particular way of defining the old order, demonizing U.S. leadership and intentions. In turn, Russia places high hopes on China, as the critical force of transformation. In the picture too are U.S. allies, irrevocably tethered to the U.S. yoke, and the Global South, anxious for the emergence of a new order. Given Russia's categorical rejection of Europe, its obsession for constructing the new order is Asia, referred to as Eurasia but also as the Asia-Pacific region. Moscow has even identified the building blocks of the new order—the great powers at the core, the emerging institutions led by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and principles of the order. Problematic, however, are its assumptions about the speed and degree of U.S. collapse, the readiness of China to abandon the old order and agree with Russia, and the state of thinking in the Global South. In the first year after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, assumptions had to be seriously reconsidered, notably about U.S. weakness and Chinese readiness to proceed.

WWII stands as the dividing line between a past of fascism, imperialism, territorial power grabs, and internecine warfare, and an international order governed by respect for sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, and economic integration that builds trust and tolerance. Although there was awareness that the international community did not include a small number of countries led by the Soviet Union, it was assumed that basic understandings greatly reduced the chance of any war spreading beyond a local area, leading to a direct conflict between the two superpowers.

U.S. normalization with Beijing in the 1970s, agreement to end the Cold War with Moscow by the beginning of the 1990s, and globalization of market economies by the 2000s gave confidence to Washington that the international order was improving. While debate persisted about how far democratization and human rights would be spread, the case for geopolitical stability appeared incontrovertible. Outliers North Korea and Iran were being pressed by broad multilateral forces. The U.S. was slow to awaken to the strengthening threats to the post-Cold War order it prized. Its allies, Japan and South Korea, were slower yet, particularly in recognizing Putin's aims.

Critical to the responses in 2022 were reconstructed memories of the existing international order. Chinese memories hark back to four distinct eras. First, there is the era of the "middle kingdom," when Sinocentrism reigned supreme, demanding a hierarchical, deferential order centered only on China. This worldview has revived. Second, Chinese recall a "humiliating" era of reduced sovereignty with no prospect of steering developments even in neighboring states. Recoiling from that fate is another driving force. Third, Chinese remember the "victories" of both 1945 and 1953 over Japan and South Korea as markers of a new era, when resistance succeeded, even as it left a foundation for Cold War great power and regional policy. Finally, the mainstream view the post-Cold War era as a time of advancement toward a desired goal, but handicapped by barriers that needed to be removed. The Ukraine war served to reenforce these four historical memories.

Russian narratives of Tsarist history, besieged from the west, Soviet history and WWII valiant in overcoming danger from the west and forging a sphere of control at risk from the west, and post-Cold War history rife with Western efforts to weaken Russia further, demonize the international order. They lay the groundwork for going to war to upend that order, In the first year of the war Russia doubled down on its critique of the preexisting order with claims it is now being replaced.

Below, I summarize four views of the impact of the war on shifting thinking about the liberal international order: Jacques deLisle on U.S. rethinking; Hosoya Yuichi on Japanese new thinking; Hannah Kim on a survey pertinent to South Korean rethinking; and Katie Stallard's joint article with me on Russian and Chinese new thinking on this order and their bilateral relationship. The full articles by these authors follow—each emphasizing the regional order in the Indo-Pacific.

Jacques deLisle, “Rethinking a Liberal International Order for Asia? The United States and the Impact of the Ukraine War”

The U.S. response to Russia’s invasion affirmed a liberal international order in ways that extend to Asia, and demonstrated its potential for effectiveness in an era of mounting challenges, primarily from China and Russia. At the same time, the Western-centered efforts to address the conflict at Eurasia’s western edge brought significant shifts in the content, or at least the focus, of the liberal international order—specifically toward an emphasis on sovereignty and coordination among like-minded states against threats and rivals—that extend to Asia. Any new-found optimism concerning a liberal international order for Asia must be tempered. The failure of deterrence reflected in Russia’s invasion and early lessons from the response to the war point to an increasingly tough road ahead for a liberal international order in Asia.

The coordinated response to Russia’s war in Ukraine that was led by the U.S. along with NATO and EU states has been celebrated as a signal success of (mostly) liberal-democratic states collaborating against an authoritarian aggressor acting against core rules of the international order—and rightly so. These developments had a range of positive implications for a liberal international order in Asia. They supported the idea that a similarly effective response might be mounted in response to analogous events in Asia, i.e., the prospect that China would attack or otherwise severely coerce Taiwan. The prospect has spawned a cottage industry of analysis addressing the “lessons” of the Russia-Ukraine war for a China-Taiwan scenario.

Beijing, like Moscow, has increasingly stridently challenged—including in an eve-of-Ukraine-War joint statement—principles of a liberal international order, and has been identified in key U.S. foreign policy statements as a principal threat to that order. It has repeatedly rejected the notion that the targeted entity is a separate state with its own sovereignty. China, like Russia, is governed by an increasingly personalistic and illiberal authoritarian regime. And Taiwan, like Ukraine, is a new democracy, emphasized in seeking support from other democratic states.

The collective international response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and to China’s position concerning Russia’s actions, extended to Asia, which bodes well for a liberal international order in Asia in at least two ways. First, Asian states joined in the North Atlantic-centered response to Putin’s war. Second, Europe’s wariness toward China increased and the gap between the views of

China's international behavior and agenda in Washington and in many EU states (and the EU itself) narrowed considerably. Beijing's increasing pressure and coercion toward Taiwan fostered new solidarity between Europe and the U.S. on key Asia regional security issues. Unprecedented statements from the G7 and NATO framed peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as a security issue for Europe, as well as the United States.

The war in Ukraine brought a renewed emphasis on one of the longest-standing norms of the liberal international order (and, indeed, one that predates liberalism in the international order): state sovereignty. A liberal international order embraces much—including liberal human rights, liberal-democratic governance, and economic liberalism—that is at odds with international relations realist-style conceptions of sovereign states. The renewed focus on the rule against the U.S. of force to change the status quo (of state borders, or of incumbent—and democratic—regimes) triggered by the war in Ukraine resonates with—and arguably amplifies—U.S. and allied statements concerning China and Taiwan. They also echo in China's other sovereignty-related tensions with liberal-democratic entities in the region.

The war in Ukraine has also sharpened the already-emerging focus on states' domestic liberal-democratic orders as a key pillar of the liberal international order and a dividing line between that order's supporters and its adversaries. The point is perhaps most succinctly captured by a favorite phrase of the Biden administration: the "like-minded states" that Washington seeks to rally to counter threats, or perceived threats, from China in Asia.

Russia was on the other side of the liberal-democratic/authoritarian divide. Russia's invasion and brutal actions are attributed to its autocratic system. The point was reinforced by the pattern that the shakiest members of the U.S.-European alignment against Russia were among its least liberal-democratic members, including Hungary and Turkey. Cooperation in Russia-targeting sanctions by significant Asian states (in terms of value of potential contribution to the collective effort) broadly tracked the extent to which they are liberal democracies. Japan and Korea were among the strongest collaborators and among the most democratic states in the region. India, where democracy is under stress during the Modi era, cooperated in imposing sanctions, but undercut the sanctions' effectiveness by making large purchases of oil from Russia, and made relatively muted or hedged criticisms of Russia's actions. The Asian region's rogue autocratic states (from the perspective of the U.S. and other supporters of a liberal international order)—Iran and North Korea—became Moscow's key sources of second-best substitutes for the weapons it could no longer produce, thanks in large part to trade and technology sanctions.

The Ukraine war has reinvigorated state sovereignty and related principles and has reinforced the centrality of states' internal liberal-democratic orders (or lack thereof) as focal points of the liberal international order. It has done so in ways that speak to some of the most contentious issues in Asia, especially ones involving China and increasingly adversarial U.S.-China relations.

Other implications of the war are less sanguine. Putin disregarded international rules and norms against aggressive warfare and the U.S.e of force to conquer or seize territory from a sovereign state, and his atrocity-committing troops flouted international human rights and humanitarian law. The alliance of predominantly liberal-democratic regional states failed to deter Russia. The UN Security Council was unable to condemn, or endorse action against, a veto-wielding permanent member. There is no "Asian NATO." The political and geopolitical underpinnings for such arrangements are lacking in the region. Unlike the vast majority of EU states, many Asian states, including several of the democracies in ASEAN and even some U.S. treaty allies in the region, seek to avoid "taking sides" (or doing so openly) in conflicts between Washington and Beijing, especially on Taiwan issues.

The liberal international order is vulnerable (in Asia and beyond) to challenges from China because it is to a significant degree an order based in international institutions. Many of those institutions are near-universal organizations in which each state has one vote. Others are Asian regional institutions that have similar arrangements or that decide matters by consensus. In both contexts, the gains that China has made with the Global South—and has sought, with some success, to preserve or reinforce through Ukraine war-related diplomacy—give it growing clout in those institutions, making them less liberal and less effective as means of constraining or influencing China. Moreover, China has been creating new, China-centered organizations giving Beijing new options to compete with and challenge—from the outside—the preexisting, largely liberal, rules-based international order. They do so in a period when the Ukraine war has made clearer—and perhaps deepened—Beijing's discontent with that order, openly acknowledging that Russia fights not simply against Ukraine but for a new international order.

Hosoya Yuichi, "Japan's Defense of the Liberal International Order: The "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy" from Abe to Kishida"

In the Indo-Pacific region, as the liberal international order has increasingly come under threat, Japan, over the decade 2012-22, tried at least three strategies on behalf of this endangered order: 1) U.S.-centered but autonomous in targeting Russia as if its pursuit of China could be deterred; 2) U.S.-centered

but more flexible in appealing to China as if its economic interests, including in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), could prevail over its increasingly aggressive (wolf warrior) geopolitics: and 3) U.S.-centered with full strategic support for the existing order, marked by an about-face on its military posture and response to Russia.

If prior to 2022 Japan seemed wary about full-fledged commitment to the U.S.-led order, as seen in its response to Russia's 2014 aggression in Ukraine and to China's BRI plans for regionalism, its simultaneous fulsome backing for regionalism exclusive of China and, at times, vanguard role ahead of the United States speaks to a different conclusion. The approach of Abe Shinzo had some contradictory features, but it paved the way to the 2022 breakthrough of Kishida Fumio. Tracing the transition, Hosoya clarifies what are called the "Abe Doctrine" and the "Kishida Doctrine," which (viewed separately or together) brought to an end the postwar "Yoshida Doctrine."

Japan's response to the 2022 Ukraine war played a leading role in expanding the focus from Europe to Asia. Whereas the "Abe Doctrine" separated the two expanses, even to the point of divorcing Russia in Asia from Russia in Europe, the "Kishida Doctrine" united these arenas into a common challenge for the liberal international community. Further, it broadened Japan's geopolitical role in Asia, while agreeing with the U.S. that economic security is becoming the centerpiece in the deepening competition. Critical to this shift was the strikingly different response in Japan to Russia's aggression in 2014 and 2022. To explain this contrast Hosoya traces the evolution of thinking about the international order over seven decades from Yoshida Shigeru to Abe. Then, he analyzes factors that arose between 2014 and 2022 affecting Japanese thinking before focusing on shifts in 2022-23 linked to thinking about the international order.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine tested Japan's commitment to the international order unlike anything that had proceeded. Four challenges stood out. First, would it react to Russia in lock-step with the U.S. and its European allies? Second, would it recognize parallels with China's behavior over Taiwan and transform its military posture accordingly? Third, would Japan join in forging a multilateral framework with NATO for resisting both Russia and China? And fourth, given the nature of the China challenge and the thrust of the economic sanctions decoupling from Russia, would Japan prioritize economic security even at the cost of pain for some companies? If, in all these respects, Japan was following the U.S. lead, the question remained how would the "Kishida Doctrine" be unique in the way Japan backed the liberal international order at a critical turning point.

In responding to Russia, despite some wavering on energy projects in Sakhalin, Japan stood firmly with the West, where some European states also delayed over energy. On Taiwan, Japan played a leading role in drawing parallels and convincing other states that the crisis in Europe and China's support for Russian logic required a response extending to the Indo-Pacific. Kishida's decision to boost defense spending to 2% of GDP and acquire offensive capabilities was a gamechanger. On NATO, Japan in June 2022 joined its meeting for the first time and as a member of the G7 Japan led in linking the trans-Atlantic to the trans-Pacific. Finally, after the October 7 U.S. announcement of export controls limiting China's access to advanced semi-conductor inputs, Japan took quite similar measures.

Hannah June Kim, "Threats to the Liberal International Order: Attitudes towards Democracy among the Youth in South Korea"

Recent studies examining the liberal international order, despite their differences, have one thing in common: they all acknowledge that the liberal international order is facing more challenges than ever before. The threat of populism, the rise of new nationalism, declining multilateralism, the rise in protectionism, and intensified competition among major powers play critical roles in attempts to undermine the liberal international order. The rise of authoritarian countries has been at the forefront of this challenge. China continues to contest the existing order and attempts to take advantage of the current system to increase its influence. Russia's sudden and aggressive invasion of Ukraine was not only a direct attempt to challenge Ukraine's independence and deny Ukrainian statehood, but also to attack the democratic-ness of the liberal international order.

Hannah Kim examines how people perceive the liberal international order and whether these perceptions have changed since the start of the Ukraine War, observing perceptions of the order through support for autocracy and examining the case of South Korea in the post-Cold War era. She describes Korea's recent troubles with democracy and growing apathy towards liberalism and how this has increased during the post-Cold War era, contending that support for authoritarianism increased right after the start of the Ukraine War, particularly among the youth, due to both external and internal factors including declining satisfaction with the existing liberal order, disappointment with their own institutions, and anxieties about their own future. She also explains how these attitudes may have changed throughout the course of the year.

Democratic stability and support began to decline in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. According to the 3rd wave (1995-98) of the World Values Survey, 83.7% of the Korean respondents stated that it is fairly good or very good to

have a democratic political system. Five waves from 1996 to 2018 of the survey show that there has been a general decline of favorability of democracy, decreasing proportions of respondents believe that it is very or fairly good to have a democratic political system. Declining support for democracy is not strikingly unusual to Korea. Many consolidated democracies have recently followed the trend towards democratic decay, with support for democracy declining through withdrawal from democratic institutions and rising support for authoritarian alternatives. Yet Korea's democratic decay is unique because the country has been struggling with democracy both internationally and domestically.

While "the international community is seized by a deep sense of urgency, the mood in Seoul [was] one of apathy, bordering on nonchalance." Indeed, even though China continues to be the closest credible threat to Korea, the latter country continues to remain lukewarm towards China and its threats. Part of this may be because Russia's invasion of Ukraine does not feel urgent or tangible, yet attitudes towards authoritarianism and China remain somewhat ambivalent as well. Views of China have sunk "to their lowest since diplomatic normalization between the two countries." However, these sentiments seem separate from Russia's attacks and seem to stem from feelings of cultural imperialism rather than fears of authoritarian influence and changes in the international order.

Two surveys, one conducted before the start of the Ukraine War in January 2022 and one afterwards in May 2022 suggest that support for strongman leadership had increased among all age groups, but particularly among the young. While support for democracy declined, anti-Chinese sentiment simultaneously increased, with little difference between conservatives and progressives. Thus, perceptions of the liberal international order during the Ukraine War are difficult to define through attitudes towards these countries. Having a conservative party in power suggests that the administration will keep Russia at a distance and work to protect the liberal international order by leading by example, agenda setting, and mediating.

The fundamental reason as to why preferences for the liberal international order are decreasing in Korea stems from grievances among Korean citizens. There is increasingly less support for democracy among South Koreans, and particularly, among the youth. The idealization of democracy and the liberal order began to decline through harsh realities among the youth for several reasons. For one, the youth are frustrated with political and corporate elitism. Many young Koreans have been discouraged with the recent administrations and their alleged abuse of power, leading to increasing grievances towards politicians and growing

distrust of the government, regardless of party. In addition, young Koreans are frustrated with income inequality and the lack of employment opportunities and feel as though the government is not doing much to resolve these issues. And while views towards Putin may have changed throughout the past year through the struggle and challenges visible during the war, initial impressions of Putin's strongman leadership may not have been as negative relative to other countries, where people were much quicker to condemn Russia's attacks, since younger citizens may have initially seen some merit to strongman leadership. This study leaves open the possibility that this may have changed in the latter part of 2022 where many young Koreans saw the disadvantages of strongman leadership. According to a recent study, confidence in Putin has declined in Korea, with 69 percent indicating no confidence. This may in part be because Putin is facing numerous challenges in the Ukraine War, and through this, his strongman leadership capabilities are also being questioned. Seeing Putin struggle may further decrease support for this type of autocratic leadership over time. It is possible that, since the time of the second survey, favorability for this type of leadership may have changed among the youth and, in a roundabout way, Putin's failures may help democratic progress in Korea.

Katie Stallard and Gilbert Rozman, "Sino-Russian Relations Amid the War in Ukraine: Their Reassessment of the International Order"

The authors divide views on the international order into three dimensions: 1) the role of great powers with emphasis on Sino-Russian-U.S. relations; 2) the shape of the Indo-Pacific region, including U.S., Chinese, and Russian plans; and 3) the state of the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship. On great powers agreement was highest, on regionalism it was complicated, and despite prior talk of a possible alliance, on bilateralism, contrary to claims, it was troubled. By 2019, consensus on what to do about the Grand Strategic Triangle strengthened, divisions over regionalism came more to the surface, and troubles in the bilateral relationship surfaced in more obvious ways.

Confident that China had turned more sharply against the United States, Russia still faced two challenges in this all-important triangle: 1) would China treat it as a full-fledged partner? and 2) would China agree to an accelerated timetable for aggressive action? The Chinese eschewed the triangular framework that soothes Russia's ego, generally taking a bilateral Sino-U.S. approach. They also were wary of concluding that a cold war had begun, instead accusing the U.S. of a cold war mentality. Yet, blaming Washington for containing both China and Russia, even more so in 2022, they ascribed to triangular thinking conducive to strong Sino-Russian ties.

Unlike the Grand Strategic Triangle, where growing consensus against the United States establishes a firm foundation for challenging the existing order, Indo-Pacific regional ties have exposed serious divisions about what a new order should be. If consensus has easily been reached in opposition to U.S. designs for regional reorganization, such as the FOIP, it has been much more difficult to agree on India's importance in the new framework, on ASEAN's centrality and pursuit of balanced great power relations, on the role of freedom of navigation and the name of the Northern Sea Route, and on the functions of the SCO. That the "heartland" of Asia forms the core of an emerging order is a shared aspiration obscuring the persistent struggle—even cat-and-mouse game—to guarantee one's own plans take precedence. Regional consensus fell far short of the overall, great power consensus.

Both Russia and China have concentrated for a decade on reconstructing the architecture of Asia in line with their respective visions of transforming the international order. Xi Jinping settled on the BRI as the framework for a Sinocentric, hub and spokes, design, running west, south, and north. Vladimir Putin proposed a Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP), putting Russia at the fulcrum of a continental configuration but acknowledging two-headed leadership with China of the critical organizations to steer regionalism. They pledged to support each other's initiatives and claimed that the SCO could serve as the umbrella organization for coordinating the emerging regional architecture. Insisting that their joint endeavors were the crux of a new world order, Putin and Xi claimed to be building it in close harmony.

While the Sino-Russian bond appears strong on the surface and booming in overall trade, it is hollow on matters critical to forging a new international order together. Four signs of hollowness are particularly revealing. First, there is no shared vision of a future order except for platitudes and insistence on the UN Security Council as the decisive voice. This is a formula for Beijing. Second, history looms in the background with the potential to spark a clash should nationalist forces on either side so desire. Third, personal exchanges and non-formulaic linkages are minimal. The COVID-19 limitations on movement only obscured the failure to develop networks of meaningful integration. Finally, civilizational arguments reinforce separation, not commonalities apart from objections to the values championed in the West. Russians have not found Chinese civilizational claims appealing nor vis-versa.

China's response to the conflict has demonstrated both the clear limits of the Sino-Russian partnership, and the resilience of the relationship. There is no evidence that China has provided direct military support to Russia since the start of the conflict, and there is no prospect that Chinese troops will be sent to fight on Russia's side. Neither Moscow nor Beijing has any interest in cementing a formal alliance with the other. While the relationship is viewed by both countries as mutually beneficial, geopolitically necessary, and a crucial component of their shared contest with the U.S., this does not mean that either side is likely to sacrifice their own interests on the altar of the other's foreign policy ambitions. Beijing's response to the conflict across all these dimensions has been characterized by self-interest and the imperative to pursue existing grievances, such as the U.S.-led liberal international order and the expansion of Western security pacts, to the perceived detriment of China's own security and its claim to Taiwan.

The Ukraine War has showcased the Sino-Russian consensus on the Grand Strategic Triangle as the crux of the international order, overwhelming different thinking on the regional order and bilateral relations. The Sino-Russian alignment is stable and underpinned by complementary (although not identical) values, security concerns, and economic priorities of the top leaders, but both sides will continue to pursue their own separate interests. Differences over the regional order came to the surface as Kazakhstan resisted Putin's view of the post-Soviet sphere and found support in China for its defense of sovereignty. Meanwhile, tensions over bilateral relations are hidden by tighter censorship. The overall mood of agreement is not weakening for now, but it faces serious challenges ahead.