

Rethinking a Liberal International Order for Asia? The United States and the Impact of the Ukraine War

By Jacques deLisle

The first year of the war in Ukraine taught mixed lessons about a liberal international order for Asia from a U.S. perspective (which, under the current administration, favors the term “rules-based international order”). In one fundamental respect, the war has shown less a need to rethink than an instance of reaffirmation: the response to Russia’s invasion showed the vitality of a U.S.-supported 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. In other ways, the conflict has led to a limited, if not always explicit, rethinking of that order’s elements: the Western-led efforts to address the conflict at Eurasia’s western edge brought shifts in the relative emphasis on elements of the liberal international order, and U.S. conceptions of it—specifically toward principles of state sovereignty and coordination among like-minded states. This phenomenon, too, extends to Asia. Looking ahead, more serious rethinking may be needed, in part because of the implications for Asia of developments related to the war in Ukraine.

Any new-found optimism concerning such an order’s prospects in Asia must be tempered in light of the weaknesses of the established order exposed by the Ukraine war and the looming challenges ahead. The failure of deterrence reflected in Russia’s invasion, and early lessons from the response to it, point to an increasingly tough road ahead for a liberal international order in a notably—and increasingly—difficult environment in Asia. Across several dimensions of the Ukraine war’s meaning for a U.S.-backed liberal international order’s prospects in Asia, China-Taiwan scenarios—the most obvious and prominent analogies to the Russia-Ukraine conflict—loom especially large.

“Liberal international order” is an imprecise and contested term, as is the now-U.S.-favored “rules-based international order.”¹ The version of international order espoused by Washington is not thoroughly or highly demandingly liberal

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(in its economics or politics), nor is it fully rules-based (given tolerance for resort to ad hoc and unilateral measures). As the war in Ukraine and frictions between the U.S. and China in Asia underscore, its international reach is limited and, in some respects, threatened. Still, the term is far from meaningless or disconnected from the largely status quo international order that has been central to U.S. and broader efforts to respond to the war in Ukraine and that the U.S. and its partners and allies support for Asia. And that order is indeed liberal and rules-based in the limited and specific senses addressed in the remaining sections of this article.

Reaffirming, Not Rethinking: Collective Action by Liberal States against an Order-Challenging Authoritarian Aggressor

The coordinated response to Russia's war in Ukraine, led by the U.S. along with NATO and EU states, has been celebrated as a signal success of (mostly) liberal-democratic states acting collectively and collaboratively against an authoritarian aggressor that has violated core rules of a liberal international order (including prohibitions of aggressive warfare and war crimes)—and rightly so. The U.S. and European allies and partners imposed punishing trade and financial sanctions on Russia and enlisted significant if varying support from economically important states outside the region. They incurred considerable costs in arming and aiding Ukraine and in suffering the effects of inflation due to rising energy prices and loss of access to Russian energy exports. They bore worrisome risks, including prospects that the war would escalate, by expanding geographically or crossing the nuclear threshold.²

The means were expressly multilateral and in significant part institution-based (and, thus, rules-based), with NATO and the EU taking leading roles and a series of lopsided votes for invasion-condemning UN General Assembly resolutions offering a broader international institutional imprimatur. Despite some strains, the coordinated efforts across the Global North to pressure Russia and undermine its warfighting capacity and to support Ukraine largely held a year into the war, underscored by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's high-profile visit to Washington in December 2022 and U.S. President Joe Biden's surprise trip to Kyiv on the invasion's first anniversary in February 2023.³

These developments have several positive implications for a liberal international order in Asia. Most simply, they are a “proof of concept” that a similarly effective collective international response might be mounted to address analogous events in Asia. By far the most evident parallel is the possibility that China would attack (or otherwise severely coerce) Taiwan. The prospect has, understandably, spawned a cottage industry of commentary and analysis—both public and within policymaking circles—addressing the “lessons” of the Russia-Ukraine war for a China-Taiwan scenario.⁴

Especially when viewed from the perspective of the prospects for a liberal international order in Asia, the similarities between the two cases are striking. Beijing, like Moscow, has increasingly challenged—including in an eve-of-Ukraine-war joint China-Russia statement—the US-favored liberal international order,⁵ and has been identified in key U.S. foreign policy statements as a principal threat to the existing international order.⁶ China, like Russia, has pointedly and repeatedly rejected the notion that the target or potential target—Taiwan or Ukraine—is a separate state with its own sovereignty⁷ and has asserted a right, and the will, to use force, if need be, to recover what it characterizes as (temporarily) lost sovereign territory.⁸ China, like Russia, is governed by an increasingly personalistic and illiberal authoritarian regime.⁹ And Taiwan, like Ukraine, is a (relatively) new liberal democracy, the leaders of which have emphasized liberal-democratic attributes in seeking support from the U.S. and other states.¹⁰ While Russia appeared to have a decisive military advantage when it began its invasion of Ukraine, China has clear superiority in the military balance across the Taiwan Strait. Taiwan, like Ukraine, ultimately must depend on the promise of help from the United States and other powers for its security and, in the event of attack, survival.

There are, of course, important disanalogies (some of them addressed in later sections of this article). But many of these differences are primarily relevant to the contentious and, for now, not-definitively-answerable question of whether the international response to a China-Taiwan conflict would be as impressive and effective as the (still-unfolding) reaction to the Russia-Ukraine War. Such contrasts are less germane to whether the underlying events—including an invasion or attack by China—in the cross-Strait (or other regional) context would pose kindred challenges to a liberal international order in an adjacent region. The implications of the Ukraine war for a liberal international order in Asia also extend beyond the complex and contestable analogies between the conflict in Ukraine (so far) and a potential attack by China on Taiwan.

The collective international reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and to China's position concerning Russia's war, extends to Asia and links Asian and European security. These features bode well for a U.S.-favored liberal international order in Asia. First, Asian states joined in the North Atlantic-centered response to Putin's war. They did so to varying degrees. Asian states did not join the U.S. and several European states in providing arms and military-related assistance to Ukraine. But some—including Japan and Korea—did provide humanitarian or other non-lethal assistance. Because of their large markets, wealth of outbound investment capital, or prowess in key technology sectors, some Asian states were vital, even indispensable, cooperators if the sanctions regime targeting Russia were to be effective.¹¹

Second, the Ukraine war contributed to greater wariness in Europe toward China and considerable narrowing of the gap in the views of China's international behavior and agenda held by Washington and in many EU states (and the EU itself). A signal event on this front was the China-EU summit held just weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. Beijing's apparent expectations that its interlocutors would be focused on the bilateral economic relationship, and that it would find a receptive audience for its calls for Europe to adopt an independent foreign policy detached from Washington's, proved to be badly misplaced. In the context of European alarm about Russia's invasion and Europe's support for Ukraine, China's alignment with Russia concerning the war (and more broadly) and its tone-deaf focus on economic ties played badly in Europe. Statements by top European Union leaders reflected the new—or newly prominent—divergence between China and Europe and the concomitant convergence between Europe and the U.S. (concerning China).¹²

A year into the war, China's substantial and evidently growing support for Russia reinforced these trends. China's growing trade and exports of militarily useful technology goods to Russia threatened the efficacy of multilateral sanctions and efforts to weaken Russia's fighting capacity.¹³ Visits to Moscow by senior Chinese foreign policy official Wang Yi, to Beijing by Putin ally Belorussian President Lukashenko, and—potentially—by Chinese leader Xi Jinping to Moscow telegraphed a sustained and seemingly deepening alignment.¹⁴ At the Munich security conference and in other contexts, Washington raised an alarm that Beijing was seriously considering providing lethal aid to Russia.¹⁵

These Ukraine war-related developments reinforced an already-emerging reorientation in Europe concerning China. Several years into China's Xi-era Belt and Road Initiative, skepticism already had grown in Europe about the net economic benefits of deeper engagement with China and Beijing's penchant to use economic leverage to political ends—often illiberal ones. Such concerns, along with rising bilateral tensions over China's human rights record, had helped stall the once much-touted EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.¹⁶ China's economic retaliation against Lithuania for Vilnius's limited upgrading of relations with Taiwan prompted a wave of EU support for Lithuania and criticism of China—including the EU filing a WTO case against China.¹⁷

Beijing's increasing pressure toward Taiwan encouraged a new solidarity between Europe and the U.S. on China-related Asian regional security issues. Issued against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, unprecedented statements from the G7 and NATO leadership framed peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait as a security issue for Europe, as well as the United States.¹⁸ The Ukraine crisis thus reinforced already-tightening linkages among Europe's asserted

security interests across two key regions. Amid growing concerns about China, European powers already had been increasing their security presence in the Indo-Pacific, in alignment and cooperation with liberal-democratic states in the region, including the United States, Australia, and Japan. The establishment of AUKUS was the most formal and structured example.

Third, the Ukraine war contributed to a sharpened U.S. commitment to Taiwan's security, which was in turn linked to U.S. visions of a liberal, rules-based order in Asia. Biden's most pointed and impactful statement of the U.S.'s clearer and more robust commitment to use force to defend Taiwan from unprovoked Chinese military action tellingly came in response to a reporter's question—posed in Japan during Biden's Asia trip—concerning differences in U.S. policy on direct military involvement, which Washington had foregone in Ukraine but which Biden pledged to undertake in a Taiwan scenario.¹⁹ That statement, and others concerning U.S. support for Taiwan, drew connections to support for a rules-based international order.²⁰

Some Rethinking: The Ukraine War and a Shift in Emphasis within the Liberal International Order

The Ukraine war helped push to the fore two long-standing components of the liberal international order favored by the United States. Both of these elements matter much for Asia and regional security scenarios, including—not least—Taiwan contingencies.

First, the war in Ukraine renewed emphasis on one of the longest-standing principles of the status quo international order (indeed, one that predates liberalism in the international order, but that has remained foundational in the contemporary era): state sovereignty. The liberal, rules-based order, as seen from Washington, embraces many norms—including liberal human rights, democratic governance, and economic liberalism—that are at odds with international relations realist-style conceptions of sovereign states as “black boxes” or “billiard balls,” nearly impervious to external demands and obligations (aside from those grounded in state consent).

Yet, the liberal international order remains—especially in its legal dimensions—a system based on sovereign states. An attack by one state that seeks to conquer another state (or annex portions of it) aligns vindication of the established order especially closely with defense of the principle of state sovereignty and the related prohibition of the use of force against the political independence or territorial integrity of another state.²¹ This linkage is all the tighter when the

aggressor state denies that its target is a sovereign state, or claims that its own population and the citizens of the targeted entity are “one people.” The latter assertion implicates the state-sovereignty-related and very-long-standing principle of the self-determination of peoples—which can entail rights of distinct groups that extend to a right to their own state under circumstances of severe oppression and a lack of meaningful political participation in a larger state.²² Russia’s positions on Ukraine tick all these boxes.²³

The most recent precedent for Russia’s war on Ukraine was Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, which led to the “coalition of the willing”—mostly liberal-democratic states—waging the first Gulf War, with the quintessential existing-order-supporting authorization of a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the use of military force to expel Iraq’s forces.²⁴ The post-Cold War entwinement of a liberal, rules-based international order with state sovereignty has deep roots. At the birth of the postwar version of the liberal, rules-based international order, the United Nations-centered regime gave pride of place to state sovereignty, and also embraced human rights, especially liberal ones and including the self-determination of peoples.²⁵ The wave of postwar decolonization brought additional emphasis on principles of state sovereignty (including for newly independent states that were sometimes ill-equipped to exercise or defend it). The principal still-earlier attempt at a liberal international order—manifested in the Wilsonian agenda at the end of the First World War—had also woven together ideals of liberalism and democracy, and separate sovereign states for distinct nationalities.

The Ukraine-induced renewal of attention to this dimension of the traditional liberal international order resonates for Asia, perhaps most strongly in the region’s currently most likely flashpoint—the Taiwan Strait. Paralleling Moscow’s assertions about Ukraine, Beijing rejects Taiwan’s claims to sovereign status, argues that use of force to “prevent secession” would not violate international legal proscriptions on the use of force internationally (or against another state), and insists that the people in Taiwan are Chinese (and thus part of a larger Chinese people, with no right to separate self-determination).²⁶ In a backhanded acknowledgement of the weakness of Russia’s claims to Ukraine, and in implicit recognition that international acceptance of the idea that Ukraine and Taiwan are analogous would be bad for China’s claims to Taiwan, official Chinese sources have insisted that the two cases are “different in nature” (in that the Ukraine case is “complicated” and involves “two countries”) and that U.S. or other foreign intervention in cross-Strait issues constitutes a violation of China’s sovereignty and interference in its internal affairs.²⁷

The Ukraine war-driven renewal of emphasis on the rule against the use of force to change the status quo (of state borders, or of incumbent—and democratic—regimes) resonates with—and arguably amplifies—recent U.S. and allied statements concerning China and Taiwan. The U.S. and major Asian and European powers have made newly pointed statements countering what they frame as China’s growing multifaceted coercion of Taiwan.²⁸ Biden’s repeated expressions of a commitment to use force to defend Taiwan have been accompanied by statements that resonate with self-determination and statehood: Biden’s declarations that changes to Taiwan’s status—the sovereignty-centered question of independence or unification—are for the people of Taiwan to decide, and the State Department’s brief deletion of venerable website language that the U.S. acknowledges Beijing’s view that Taiwan is part of China and that the U.S. does not support Taiwan independence.²⁹

These aspects of the Ukraine war’s implications for Asia—particularly for China-related regional security issues—extend beyond the Taiwan case. They echo across China’s other sovereignty-related tensions with liberal-democratic entities in the region. Principal examples include: the PRC’s territorial disputes in the South China Sea (with Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, as well as non-democracies Vietnam and Brunei), the East China Sea (with Japan), and the Yellow Sea (with Korea); the controversy over the erosion of autonomous governance, liberal rights, and progress toward democracy promised for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region; and the recently (in 2020) reignited and ongoing border conflict with India.

Second, the war in Ukraine has sharpened the 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”³⁰ that Washington seeks to rally to counter threats, or perceived threats, including threats from China in Asia.

This, too, is a well-entrenched element in thinking about a liberal international order. It is reflected in “second image” and “liberal” theories of international relations (which hold that a state’s domestic politics, including its system-type explains its international behavior).³¹ Such notions reached an apogee in the post-Cold War era and amid the “third wave” of global democratization in the late 1980s and 1990s.³² Here, too, the origins lie much earlier, in the failed post-WWI effort to prevent war while promoting principles of liberal democracy within states, and, earlier still, to Kantian notions of the internal liberal-democratic foundations of international peace that later inspired the “democratic peace” theory of the post-Cold War years, as well as the obverse thesis of greater risk of conflict with illiberal, non-democratic states.³³

The international response to the Ukraine war foregrounded this dimension of a liberal international order. Ukraine, of course, is a new democracy that has presented its liberal bona fides as a compelling reason for the U.S. and Europe to provide assistance. Zelensky regularly frames Ukraine's fight against Russia as an international fight for democracy everywhere.³⁴ Governments in the U.S. and Europe explain their support for Ukraine in similar terms. Conversely, Ukraine and its backers consistently emphasize that Russia is on the other side of the liberal-democratic/authoritarian divide, and attribute Russia's invasion and brutal actions to its autocratic system.³⁵ The point is underscored by the fact that the shakiest members of the U.S.-European alignment against Russia are also among its least liberal-democratic members, including Hungary and Turkey.³⁶

Tellingly, in terms of implications for the character and trajectory of a liberal international order in Asia, cooperation in Russia-targeting sanctions by major Asian states (in terms of value of potential contribution to the collective effort) has broadly tracked the extent to which they are liberal democracies. Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand are among the stronger adherents and the most democratic states in the region.³⁷ India, where democracy is under stress during the Modi era, has cooperated in imposing sanctions, but undercut the sanctions' effectiveness by making large purchases of oil from Russia, and has offered relatively muted or hedged criticisms of Russia's actions.³⁸

China did not squarely defect from the sanctions regime, but it has upped its purchases of Russian energy, expanded exports of items that Moscow needed, and continued to express agreement with Putin's claims that the West was at fault for the war.³⁹ Beijing did issue a warning (implicitly but clearly to Putin) against breaking the taboo on using nuclear weapons, but China's proffered 12-point framework for peace in early 2023 drew criticism for being thin on details and tainted by Beijing's more broadly Moscow-supporting stance.⁴⁰ The Asian region's rogue autocratic states (in the view 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.⁴¹ And, a year into the war, Washington warned that China might soon provide lethal aid to Russia.⁴²

On this ideational front, the pattern from the response to the Ukraine war aligns with broader developments in the international order for Asia, including cross-Strait relations. Drawing on elements from its predecessors' policies, the Biden administration has stressed the "democratic values" theme in its approach to Asia.⁴³ The major U.S. security policy statements concerning Asia depict China as a major threat to the liberal rules-based international order and as attempting to export its model of authoritarian politics.⁴⁴

In many contexts, including perhaps most elaborately at its “Summit for Democracy” (which, notably, included Taiwan alongside uncontested states), the Biden administration has emphasized shared liberal-democratic values and governance as the glue that binds a coalition of like-minded states to support a liberal, rules-based order in Asia and to push back against corrosive actions by China in Asia as well as by Russia in Eurasia.⁴⁵ Biden’s joint statements with the leaders of treaty allies Japan and South Korea have underscored shared values, and contrasts with authoritarian China, while pledging to resist China’s pressure and coercion, including (but not limited to) efforts targeting Taiwan.⁴⁶ Recently established security arrangements in the region, including the Quad and AUKUS, bring together liberal democracies, and shared political system traits are touted as bases for cooperation to address challenges posed by a China that is increasingly powerful abroad and authoritarian at home.⁴⁷ Following a long-running strategy that parallels recent efforts by Ukraine, Taiwan, too, has continued to assert its strong record on democracy and liberal rights as reasons the U.S. and other democratic states in the region and beyond should back Taipei against Beijing’s effort to marginalize Taiwan internationally and press toward political accommodation on the PRC’s terms.⁴⁸

In sum, the Ukraine war has reinvigorated state sovereignty and related principles and reinforced the centrality of states’ internal liberal-democratic orders (or lack thereof), as core elements 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.

More Rethinking Ahead? The Ukraine War’s Implications for the Future of a Liberal International Order in Asia

While lessons from the Ukraine war (or, at least, its first year) have been heartening for supporters of a liberal international order for Asia (even as the war has affected the relative importance of some of that order’s core principles), other implications of the war are less hopeful. Much of the impetus to the U.S. agenda of (re) invigorating a liberal international order in Asia is the belief that it will help achieve the goal of deterring China. But Russia’s launching of the war was, after all, a failure of deterrence in a largely liberal international order. Putin disregarded international rules and norms against aggressive warfare and the use 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 and indeed, on Putin’s account, was part of the West’s provocation of the invasion by expanding NATO to Russia’s borders and then moving to bring Ukraine into the fold. The failure of the U.S. and Europe (or the wider international community and its institutions) to

deter, or react more strongly to, Russia's 2014 takeover of Crimea and its involvement in a prolonged insurgency in eastern Ukraine may have made the 2022 invasion more likely. The centerpiece institution of the postwar international legal-security order—the UN Security Council—has been predictably unable to condemn, or authorize action against, a veto-wielding permanent member.

Viewed through the lens of the Ukraine war, deterring analogous moves (or lesser ones)—principally by China—looks to be a difficult and growing challenge in Asia. The problem partly reflects hard power-related factors that are only indirectly related to the content and efficacy of regional norms and institutions. Large-scale economic sanctions against China would be far more painful for the U.S. and its indispensable partners than measures targeting Russia have been and would do less to weaken China's military capacity. The imbalance in capabilities between China and Taiwan (and, to a lesser degree, other regional parties to a possible conflict with China) is much greater than between Russia and Ukraine (where the gap has been much less than expected when the invasion began). Defending, supporting, and supplying the small island of Taiwan against a formidable Chinese assault are far more daunting tasks than in Ukraine—and all the more so, given the strain the Ukraine war has placed on Western stockpiles.

Concerns about China's future intentions are in the mix as well. At least for now, Xi's China is a much less reckless actor than Putin's Russia. China does not appear to be on the verge of invading or militarily attacking Taiwan and does not seem eager to risk the international opprobrium, economic costs, and prospect of direct conflict with the United States and allies that would accompany such a move.⁴⁹ But that relatively happy situation is not sure to endure, and other concerns loom. As with Russia's view of U.S./West-Ukraine relations in the period preceding the 2022, China's view of the relationship between Taiwan and the U.S. (and its allies) has become increasingly fraught. This issue took its most dramatic recent turn following U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's August 2022 visit to Taiwan and the PRC's subsequent large-scale military drills.⁵⁰ Despite talk at the 2022 G20 summit and elsewhere of efforts to put a floor under the deteriorating bilateral relationship, the multiyear downward spiral in U.S.-China interactions—including especially concerning Taiwan—seems to show few signs of near-term reversal a year into the Ukraine war, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken cancelling a visit to Beijing amid the political fallout of a Chinese spy balloon's passing over the United States, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy planning a Taiwan visit, and a Republican-led House Committee beginning work to address perceived China threats.⁵¹ China's relations with other neighbors—and, of particular relevance here, concerning Japan's linkage of Taiwan's security with its own—have been on a generally, if less dramatically, negative trajectory.

U.S. efforts to support and sustain a liberal international order in Asia likely will face mounting—and Russia/Ukraine-resonant—challenges by China from within the order's framework. China has formidable capacity to replicate, and exceed, Russia in exploiting the vulnerabilities and limits of the norms and rules of a liberal international order (which has been weakened by the U.S. and others' inconsistent adherence to those norms and rules). That is the message of Beijing's Moscow-like framing (noted earlier) of Taiwan—and some Ukraine—issues, including international legal and normative ones: Beijing's skeletal peace plan's opening with a purported insistence on the sanctity of state sovereignty; China's assertion that military action to unify Taiwan would be an internal use of force, not transgressing relevant legal rules and systemic norms that limit permissible international behavior;⁵² China's assertion that the U.S.—operating through concerted and coordinated efforts with aligned states, sometimes deceptively veiled as defensive treaty arrangements—is the aggressive actor, threatening China (and Russia) and international peace and stability.⁵³

China, like Russia, wields a veto in the UN Security Council. In the many one-state one-vote organizations—many of them built with U.S. support—that populate a vast international institutional landscape, Beijing can use the clout and leverage that it has accumulated with the Global South—and which has grown (and likely grown more than Russia's) amid the Ukraine crisis—to achieve its aims or stymie Washington's. There is little to no potential for the U.S. to counter with an Asian NATO or an ASEAN-plus EU in Asia—a robust institutional structure for coordination and collective action among “like-minded” states to counter the region's most likely authoritarian challenger to the status quo. The political and geopolitical underpinnings for such arrangement are lacking in region where many relevant states still seek to avoid “taking sides” (or, at least, doing so openly) in a contest and potential conflict between rival great powers.⁵⁴ Taiwan, like Ukraine, is a (mere) friend of the United States and its partners, not a security treaty ally. It thus does not benefit from the legally binding and politically salient commitments of the mutual defense treaties that the U.S. has with many of the states aligned with a liberal international order, including the NATO states, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines.

More “external” perils also confront a liberal international order for Asia. The partly Ukraine-driven renewed emphasis on domestic system type or “like-mindedness” in the liberal international order has coincided with a stronger repudiation of liberal democracy and related ideals by China and Russia (and a closer ideological alignment between Moscow and Beijing). China—like Russia—has been sharpening its rejection of U.S.-favored liberal

principles for illegitimately claiming universality, serving as tools in U.S. or Western efforts to change and undermine China (and Russia), and being unsuitable for China (or Russia) and its distinctive features.⁵⁵ China also has been taking a lead in creating new, thus far not seriously status quo-challenging, organizations that may provide future institutional foundations for promoting its vision of a non-liberal international order, particularly in Asia. Examples include the SCO, the AIIB, the RCEP, and the looser arrangements of the BRI.

At the same time, the U.S. has, in some important respects, retrenched its aims and efforts in support of a liberal international order in the region. The newly Cold War-evoking divide between the U.S. and China limits the liberal international order's prospective reach to China and some other parts of the region (even though it may strengthen that order's grip among liberal-democratic states). The Ukraine war and its fallout have further confirmed the death (at least for now) of the international relations "constructivist" dream—reflected in the U.S. policy of "constructive engagement"—that bringing China into the institutions of the largely liberal and rules-based international order would make Beijing a reliable supporter of that order (and perhaps even promote various forms of domestic liberalization).⁵⁶ Washington has made the challenges for a liberal international order in the region still more daunting through Trump-era moves—with roots in longer-term trends and only partly or not-wholly-convincingly reversed by the Biden administration—that shook key, largely liberal institutions (such as the WTO, and the TPP) and previously ironclad support for venerable security commitments.

Not all of these issues are new, but they are newly daunting in the context of a U.S.-China relationship that is more nearly between peers, and that is also more adversarial, and more ideologically tinged—and has become more so in the shadow of Russia's war in Ukraine and American, Chinese, and other international responses to it.

Endnotes

- ¹ See, e.g., Hans Kundani, “What is the Liberal International Order?” German Marshall Fund of the United States, May 3, 2017, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/what-liberal-international-order>; Ben Scott, “But What Does ‘Rules-Based Order Mean?’” Lowy Institute, Nov. 2, 2020, <https://www.loyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-does-rules-based-order-mean>; G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?” *International Affairs* vol. 94, no. 1 (2018): 7-23.
- ² Congressional Research Service, *The Economic Impact of Russia Sanctions*, Dec. 13, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12092>; Michael Mazar, Patrick Porter, Kori Schake and Polina Sinovets, “Can Russia’s War in Ukraine End Without Nuclear Weapons?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Nov. 3, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/11/03/can-russia-s-war-in-ukraine-end-without-nuclear-weapons-pub-88321>.
- ³ See, e.g., Olena Lennon, “Zelensky’s Visit to Washington Marked a Strategic Inflection Point,” Kennan Institute, Jan. 17, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/long-read-zelenskys-visit-washington-marked-strategic-inflection-point>; “Statement from President Joe Biden on Travel to Kyiv, Ukraine,” The White House, Feb. 20, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/02/20/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-travel-to-kyiv-ukraine/>.
- ⁴ See, e.g., Jacques deLisle, “China’s Russia/Ukraine Problem and Why It’s Bad for Almost Everyone Else Too,” *Orbis* vol. 66, no. 3 (2022): 402-423; Franz-Stefan Gady, “6 Wrong Lessons for Taiwan from the War in Ukraine,” *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 2, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/02/lessons-ukraine-russia-war-taiwan-china-military-weapons-strategy-tactics/>; Bonnie S. Glaser and Jude Blanchette, “Ukraine War Should Counsel Chinese Caution on Taiwan,” *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 8, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-war-chinese-caution-taiwan-russia-china-putin-xi-jinping-invasion-sovereignty-11646769700>; Ryan Hass, “Learning the Right Lessons from Ukraine for Taiwan,” Brookings Institution, Feb. 22, 2022; <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/22/learning-the-right-lessons-from-ukraine-for-taiwan/>; Jeffrey W. Hornung, “Ukraine’s Lessons for Taiwan,” *War on the Rocks*, Mar. 17, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/ukraines-lessons-for-taiwan/>;
- ⁵ *Russia-China Joint Statement on International Relations*, Feb. 4, 2022, <https://china.usc.edu/russia-china-joint-statement-international-relations-february-4-2022>. The statement is framed in terms that are superficially and ostensibly supportive of the existing international order, but the pluralist and relativist position on democracy and human rights, the condemnation of NATO expansion and other liberal-democratic-state-centered security arrangements (such as AUKUS), and the criticism of “interference” in domestic affairs on pro-democratic and pro-human rights pretexts signal rejection of, and a response to, the liberal, rules-based international order championed by the United States.
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