

# The Liberal International Order and the Rise of China

## This week's readings:

- Allison (2018), *The Truth About the Liberal Order*
  - Lissner & Rapp-Hooper (2018), *The Liberal Order Is More Than a Myth*
  - Monteiro (2014), *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Intro)
  - Fravel & Glaser (2022), *How Much Risk Should the U.S. Run in the South China Sea?*
  - Friedberg & Boustany (2020), *Partial Disengagement*
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## Big questions:

1. What, precisely, is the “liberal international order” (LIO) and how did it relate to U.S. unipolarity?
2. Does China seek to reform, hedge within, or overturn the LIO?
3. Which U.S. strategies—dominance, disengagement, or defensive accommodation—best manage Sino-U.S. rivalry while sustaining order?

## What do we mean by “Liberal International Order”?

Ikenberry's shorthand: “the governing arrangements among a group of states, including rules, norms, and institutions.” Core pillars:

- Open markets & free trade (GATT/WTO, IMF regimes)
- Security cooperation under U.S. leadership (alliances, forward deployment)
- Multilateral institutions (UN system, Bretton-Woods twins)
- Democratic solidarity & human-rights norms

## Critiques:

- Allison retorts that what really kept the peace was raw U.S. military-economic preponderance: the order was “neither liberal, international, nor orderly.”
  - Long Peace owed more to bipolar power than to liberal institutions.
  - U.S. engagement driven by Soviet threat, not altruistic liberalism.
  - Biggest dangers today = U.S. domestic dysfunction + China's rise, **not** Trump alone.
- Lissner & Rapp-Hooper accept the critique of myth-making, yet argue the order still provided coordination goods and constraints that many states value.
  - Order always messy but still matters: rules and institutions shape state incentives and provide public goods.
  - Allies & even China value pieces of it; hence worth adapting, not abandoning.
  - Need simultaneous domestic renewal and external leadership.
- Mearsheimer & other realists: LIO sowed seeds of backlash—exporting democracy, enlarging NATO, and deep economic openness empowered challengers.

## Crisis of success?

Ikenberry: expansion after 1991 produced a more diverse membership, diluting consensus and creating renegotiation pressures (e.g., WTO gridlock, UNSC paralysis).

# The unipolar moment

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been the unipole—that is, the one dominant and inarguable major power in the world.

## Is unipolarity stable?

- Waltz: unipolarity unstable—others will balance or the unipole will overextend.
- Wohlforth 1999: enduring unipolarity—no state can soon match U.S. capabilities.
- Monteiro 2014 refines: durability depends on strategy.
  - High costs of confronting U.S. + nukes  $\Rightarrow$  low incentive for peer challenge.
  - If the unipole **accommodates** rising states' economic growth and avoids constraining them militarily (Defensive Accommodation), balancing is less likely.
  - Strategies:
    - **Offensive dominance**  $\rightarrow$  temptation for preventive war; invites balancing.
    - **Defensive dominance**  $\rightarrow$  frequent wars vs. recalcitrant minor powers (Iraq, Kosovo).
    - **Disengagement**  $\rightarrow$  wars among minors (regional instability).

## Is unipolarity desirable?

### Advantages

- Wide latitude of action: can initiate coalitions, set rules, veto hostile orders
- “Geography of security”: wars, if any, occur in distant theaters, not on the unipole's soil.
- Material gains: reserve-currency privileges, first access to emerging tech & markets, ability to tax the system via sanctions/standards.

### Drawbacks

- Overstretch trap: Pressure to be world police, supply public goods fuels domestic backlash. (Waltz)
- Moral hazard: Allies free-ride, drag the US into disputes (Monteiro “defensive dominance” wars).
- Stimulates counter-balancing; a pre-eminent U.S. must spend to stay ahead of challengers.
- Domestic opportunity costs: high defense spending crowds out investment in infrastructure, social welfare, and debt sustainability.

## Diagnosing the Present “Crisis”

Three stressors emerge from the readings and slides:

- **Power Diffusion:** China's GDP (PPP) overtakes the U.S.; other middle powers diversify ties.
- **Order Expansion:** Enlargement to non-Western members diluted consensus (Ikenberry's “crisis of success”).
- **Domestic Malaise:** Democratic dysfunction erodes U.S. capacity to underwrite the order (Allison; Lissner & Rapp-Hooper).

China leverages these fissures—e.g., Belt and Road, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—to sequester influence while avoiding formal rule-breaking. Yet its maritime coercion (South China Sea) collides with LIO norms on freedom of navigation.

## Competing Explanations for 70 Years of Relative Peace

Author	Primary Cause	Policy Implication	China storyline
Allison	U.S. hard power + nuclear deterrence	Maintain capability; focus at home	China tests but does not fear LIO, only power
Lissner/R-H	Institutions + shared gains	Reform order, not abandon	China partially socialised
Monteiro	Costs of war × unipole's strategy	Defensive accommodation	If U.S. contains growth, PRC arms
Friedberg/Boustany	Economic interdependence ≠ benign	Selective decoupling (“partial disengagement”)	Limit tech diffusion, avoid escalation

Table 1: What stopped Great-Power War? Competing logics

### China's Revisionism: How Deep?

- Security motives dominate in Fravel & Glaser's account: maritime buffer, A2/AD, SSBN bastion, Taiwan leverage. Resource motivations (“oil under every atoll”) are secondary; status and nationalist identity matter where sovereignty symbols loom.
- In economic statecraft, Friedberg & Boustany detail a *mercantilist-Leninist* model: subsidies, tech transfer, and BRI lending to entrench interdependence on Chinese terms.

These practices bend—rather than shatter—LIO rules, blurring whether Beijing is a reformer or a revolutionary.

### Strategic Choices for Washington

Monteiro's typology clarifies the menu:

- **Offensive Dominance:** Widen military reach, contain China's growth.
- **Defensive Accommodation** (Monteiro's optimum): defend allies, uphold rules. Accepts some Chinese influence; relies on deterrence, alliances, and LIO reform.
- **Disengagement / Partial Decoupling** (Friedberg & Boustany): scale back security roles, restrict sensitive trade, share burden with like-minded democracies. Reduces exposure but invites regional arms races.

Fravel & Glaser advocate **leaning less competitive** in the South China Sea—continued FONOPs and sanctions, but no commitment to fight for every reef.

tl;dr

1. LIO, unipolarity, and nuclear deterrence interacted: rules could flourish because US was top dog and existential war is/was costly.
2. China's rise is testing *all three* pillars—material, normative, and strategic—but its behavior is mixed: coercive at sea, institutionalist in trade, cautious on escalation.
3. U.S. strategy is a balancing act: too much dominance hastens balancing; too little invites vacuum. Defensive accommodation + targeted economic de-risking offers a middle path, yet still presumes sustained alliances and credible deterrence.
4. Order adaptation is inevitable: expect narrower coalitions of democracies, more issue-specific institutions, and a messier, but not necessarily catastrophic, post-unipolar landscape.