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## COVID-19 and International Order: A Case Study of China's Role\*

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### Abstract

Following World War II, the United States constructed a liberal international order that grew noticeably more influential after the Cold War. Today, this order is in crisis, in a way that certain International Relations theorists mention the emergence of a post-liberal international order. In this relation COVID-19, as the most severe global public health crisis, has created an unexpected and serious problem in the International order. Taking into account this new international order, this research focuses on the following questions: What kinds of order are possible and whether COVID-19 Can be considered as an opportunity that helps China to build international order as a hegemon? In answer to these questions, this paper uses a conceptual model to predict the future international order according to the factor of Covid-19 and the role of China in this order. According to the existing models and with respect to the most important challenges for China to achieve a hegemonic position, we will conclude that the future order of the international system will remain as security-based international order, with two actors (China and Us) and two different ideologies.

**Keywords:** China, COVID-19, Disorder, International Order, US

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## 1. Introduction

For many years, the world has been ruled by a western liberal order, which was created after the Second World War by the United States and its partners. The characteristics of this order consist of the free market and economic openness, multilateral institutions and security cooperation. In this regard, the United States as a hegemon became the ‘first citizen’ of this order and stabilized the world economy, fostered cooperation and promoted free world values. The United States, meanwhile, had a number of important partners, such as Western European states, who tied their security and economic fortunes to this extended liberal order. This order spread outwards after the end of the Cold War (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 7) to the point that Western elites define it as a positive force for promoting peace and prosperity around the world (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. 8).

Mearsheimer (2018, p. 9) believes that the “US-led order during the Cold War was a *bounded order* that was limited to the West and was built on a realist foundation, so it was neither international nor liberal”. On the other hand, the post-Cold War order, is international and liberal, and performs an essential role in controlling the world’s economy, in contrast with the pre-Cold War order that was not interested in economic issues.

Today, ‘this liberal international order is in crisis and the arrival of the post-liberal international order is the talk of town’ (Glaser, 2019, p. 52). According to Gilpin (1981) ‘the liberal hegemonic order carries the seeds of its own destruction’. In this regard populists and patriots are criticizing some of the concepts of liberal order including free trade, open borders, and free press (Mustando, 2019, p. 53).

In general, the signs of a crisis in the international order are: wars between states, power asymmetries, economic crises, diverging preferences among member states, domestic member state politics and low institutionalization. However, in the current situation, the COVID-19 is the most important sign of the crisis in the international order. COVID-19, as the 'most severe global public health crisis, has created an unexpected and serious test of the state capacities of countries with varying political regimes and levels of socioeconomic development' (Fukuyama, 2020).

In this regard, the role of main powers, especially the United States and China as leaders of the system in crisis management and creation of order is of significant importance. As a result, the key questions discussed in this paper in respect to COVID-19 are: what kinds of order are possible after the breakdown of the previous order, and whether COVID-19 can be considered as an opportunity that helps China to build international order as a hegemon? To answer these questions, we will first examine the concept of international order with emphasis on the concept of liberal international order; we will then examine different perspectives on changing the international order. In the third part, we will present the proposed models concerning international order and finally we will examine China's limitations and opportunities in establishing the order and future leadership of the international system.

This paper is based on the use of the proposed conceptual model to predict the future international order according to the factor of COVID-19 and the role of China in this order. One of the important variables in this analysis is attention to the COVID-19 factor as an independent influential variable. In this paper data collection will be performed through the study of existing theoretical literature about International order.

## 2. Definitions and Concepts

In this section, we will describe the three concepts of ‘international order’, ‘international disorder’ and ‘liberal international order’.

### 2. 1. International Order

Mearsheimer (2018, p. 10) believes that order is a cluster of international institutions that manage the interactions among the states. In such view, institutions are the main and the most crucial elements in international order; states therefore agree to follow them because they believe that obeying their rules is to their interest. He distinguishes *international order* and *bounded order*. International order includes all existing great powers in the world. Ideally, this order would be more inclusive when it contains all of the states in the system. In contrast, ‘bounded orders are comprised of a set of institutions that have limited membership. They do not include all of the great powers and they are usually regional in scope’ (Mearsheimer, 2018, pp. 7-8).

As a result, international orders are the patterns of behavior, rules and norms that provide international relations with a degree of predictability and stability. ‘Order is both a state of affairs and a quality or condition’. In this way, when expected patterns of behavior, rules and norms change, or after major wars, a change in order may happen (McKeil, 2021, p. 203). On the other hand, Chan (2018, p. 614) on the definition of international order, distinguishes ‘power structure’ and international order. In his words, power structure shows the distribution of power in the international system; changes in major states’ relative capabilities therefore automatically threaten this order. This order reflects shared normative principles about the legitimacy of ruling elites, the

sanctity of borders and treaties, the limitation of force using, and respect for another state's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

## 2. 2. International Disorder

Scholars refer to examples such as war, revolution and economic turmoil as a signs of disorder, such as Bull's notion of 'international disorder; defined as patterns of activity that disrupt or deny the purposive goals of an international order. Bull (2002: 8) also distinguishes between international order and world order, the former referring to order among states and the latter describing order among states and humankind in general. International order is more 'rigorously' conceived as a state of 'predictability or regularity' among states, which suggests that disorder is a state of unpredictability or irregularity. According to this definition, COVID-19 can be considered as a kind of world disorder.

McKeil (2021, p. 199) discusses various concepts related to international disorder's concept, which include: *international instability*, which refers to the vulnerability of the international environment to violent changes as revolutionary discontent. *International uncertainty or unpredictability* is a situation in which the real status of diplomatic relations is unclear among statespersons, when fear and distrust exist. *International criminality* reflects disregard for international law; *international political discord or controversy*, refers to the emergence of heated controversy and disagreement over international issues, particularly ideological disagreement over fundamental international principles; *international dysfunction* concerns functionally ineffective international rules, norms and authorities; and finally, *international conflict and violence* refers to opposing interests, explicit hostilities, an arms race, and finally war.

### 2. 3. Liberal International Order

The types of international orders are: *liberal internationalism*, *political realism*, *authoritarian*, *nationalism*, *Social Darwinism*, *revolutionary socialism* and *post-colonialism* (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 8). In contrast, Griffiths (2017, p. 130) distinguishes four types of international order as *mechanical anarchy*, *organic hierarchy*, *mechanical hierarchy* and *organic anarchy*.

Mechanical anarchy indicates “an un centralized system with no division of labor, where each unit is a replication of the others” (Griffiths, 2017, p. 139). In this order, communication between members is rather weak, although they are not completely disconnected from each other. The converse of a mechanical anarchy is an organic hierarchy, “an ideal-type characterized by complete political centralization and full functional differentiation” (Griffiths, 2017, p. 140). Hierarchy, in the International Relations literature, means government or central authority.

According to Griffiths (2017, p. 146), “a mechanical hierarchy is a politically centralized system that doesn’t have any division of labour”. The best example for this type of order is large politically centralized states or empires that are segmentally differentiated. The last order is Organic anarchy. This ideal-type order is a ‘politically un centralized society that is completely functionally differentiated’ (Griffiths, 2017, p. 149). According to Griffiths, the degree of political centralization can be seen on a continuum ranging from full anarchy to complete hierarchy. Griffiths proposes two different scenarios for international change: ‘a classical way when political centralization, followed by functional differentiation, produces organic hierarchy order; and a modern way, when functional differentiation in anarchic space convert to organic anarchy order’ (2017, p. 150).

The current international order is the American-led liberal international order. The characteristics of this order consist of the existence of a dominant state in the system as a liberal democracy with great impact on the key institutions that comprise the order, the existence of a number of other liberal democracies in the system, and the existence of an open world free economy. The main goal of these liberal democracies, especially the hegemon, is to spread democracy throughout the world and create effective international institutions (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. 10). According to Ikenberry (2010, p. 510), 'liberal international order is a distinctive type of order, organize in around open markets, multilateral institutions, cooperative security, alliance partnership, democratic solidarity and United States hegemonic leadership'.

### **3. Literature Review: Different Perspectives on Changing the International Order**

In this section, we will examine the different theoretical perspectives on the change in the liberal international order. In this regard, Ikenberry (2010) makes a distinction between the crisis of authority within the liberal international order (crisis of America's position in the global system), and the crisis of its underlying principles and organizational logic, in which liberalism and liberal international order are at risk. To answer the question that 'Is the American-led 'liberal era' ending, or is it transforming into a new type of liberal order?', Ikenberry argues that the American liberal hegemonic order is indeed in crisis. However, he refers to it as a crisis of authority within the liberal international order and not a crisis concerning its underlying principles and organizing logic. As a result, power and authority will shift in the global system, but

rival orders will not emerge even if new leaders do (Ikenberry, 2010, p. 518).

In contrast to Ikenberry, Robert Kagan (2008, p. 14) sees a rise in the influence of authoritarian states that are against to Western order. For example, Russia and China, as the autocratic revivals and unlike the old authoritarian states of the last century, have adopted global capitalism, and have manifested significant progress and development, as they are able to trade and invest in world markets. Yet, at the same time, they are anti-liberal and hostile to the Western democracy. In this relation, certain scholars argue that non-Western great powers, such as Russia and China, are trying to design a new world order and invest in new governance fashions in support of ideational and institutional pluralism in world affairs (Acharya, 2018).

In the new, post-crisis environment, G-20 has replaced G-7 as the main platform of decision-making on key global governance issues. The growing importance of G-20 meant that new actors, especially key emerging powers, have become more assertive in the global arena (Onis & Kutlay, 2020, p. 127). In fact, the non-Western powers pursue a 'dual-track strategy' in creating pluralistic international order (Hurrell, 2018, p. 89). In this relation Ikenberry (2010, p. 519) speaks about the rise of new *poles* that entails the emergence of great powers that make the characteristics of a *hub*. They have "their own security alliances, commercial partners, political networks and so forth". In such an image, the most important question to answer concerns China: Is China emerging as a geopolitical 'pole'?

Certain scholars believe that despite the crisis in the liberal international order, many international institutions of this order are in a survival mode (Debre, 2021, p. 315). In contrast, other scholars



consider the crisis in the international order from the perspective of a crisis in the functioning of intergovernmental institutions. For example, Realists consume IOs as means for states to pursue their interests (Walt, 1987). Once relations between states become less cooperative, IOs will suffer. Liberal institutionalists focus instead on whether IOs solve problems effectively? These researches contend that democracies are more interested in building more lasting institutions, so changes in the type of domestic political regimes affect IOs (Debre, 2021, p. 316).

One of the most important views on change in the international order is Gilpin's theory of hegemonic rise and fall (1981). Gilpin defines hegemon as the most powerful state in the international system that uses its power to shape the economic and institutional regimes according to its advantages. Hegemons expand until the marginal cost of doing so exceeds the marginal benefits. Hegemonic transitions are dangerous times, as aspiring and declining hegemons tend to fight great wars. Gilpin's hegemons are therefore liberal, but the essence of their hegemony is coercion (Owen, 2019, p. 56).

All hegemonies are the same. The US-led Western order does not differ from the international hierarchical order. Gilpin explains that the law of uneven growth causes the cycles of rise and decline among the great powers and the way in which economic and military strength, among them, serves as the currency of international politics. Over time, the gap between actual power and status widens, causing system disequilibrium in the form of persistent international crises. As a result, after hegemonic wars peace and order are most plentiful.

Barry Posen (2018), argues that the U.S. grand strategy has

changed from *liberal* to *illiberal hegemony*: a strategy whereby the United States retains its superior economic and military capability and role as security actor for most regions, but it refuses the export of democracy and exit from many multilateral trade agreements (Posen, 2018).

In contrast to this view, Onis and Kutlay (2020, p. 127) characterize the emergent postliberal international order as a *new age of hybridity*, which signifies that no overriding set of paradigms dominate global governance. Instead, “we have a complex web of competing norms, which creates new opportunities as well as major elements of instability, uncertainty, and anxiety”. In the age of hybridity, China and the other non-Western great powers play an increasingly counter-hegemonic role in shaping new order. Hence, the age of hybridity is open to cooperation on key economic issues, but contains significant conflicts in the technological, political, and security domains. Onis argues that the main issue in the age of hybridity is democracy paradox. On the one hand, postliberal era shows the democratization of globalization by allowing participation of non-Western states in the global governance. In contrast, the emerging pluralist trend at the global arena is not accompanied by ‘globalization of democracy’ at the state level (Onis & Kutlay, 2020, p. 127).

#### **4. Conceptual Framework: Proposed Models for the Future of International Order**

The proposed models of this paper for predicting the nature of international order with respect to COVID-19 and China's position in this order, are divided into *security-based order* and *democracy-based order*. In the first model, the aim of order is to produce

security in the international system and in the second model the aim of order is to maintain and produce democracy in the international system.

#### **4. 1. Security-based International Order**

In a security-based order, the main question to answer is: Which state in the international system is capable of maintaining and creating international stability and security? This order can be divided into four categories: *unipolarity security-based order*, *multipolarity security-based order with different ideologies*, *security-based order consisting of concerts of democracies* and *security-based order consisting of institutions*, which will be explained in the following section.

##### **4. 1. 1. Unipolarity Security-based International Order**

In this order, the question is whether the United States will remain the current hegemon of the system, or will China play a hegemonic role by ousting the United States? In the unipolarity world, the international order cannot be realist, because in this order there is only one great power, and thus, there cannot be security competition among great powers, which is the essential principle of any realist world order. Hence the form of order in a unipolarity order, depending on the political ideology of the sole pole, would be either agnostic or ideological (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. 9).

This article assumes that if the United States is the hegemon of the international system, we will see an ideological order with a liberal hegemony, while if China is the hegemon, we will have an agnostic order with an illiberal hegemony, since China does not

have a universalistic ideology. If the great power has a universalistic ideology, it has a great desire and tendency to export its core values and its political system to other countries, which leads to an ideological world order. In this order, the hegemon will be positioned to pursue this mission, because it does not have to compete with rival great powers. Liberalism and Communism are examples of a universalistic ideology that cause states to attempt to transform the world (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. 10). In contrast, in agnostic international order, the unipole does not have a universalistic ideology, and thus is not committed to impose its own political values and governing system to other countries. As a result, the fundamental issue of the dominant power is the states that challenge its authority and economic interests (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. 11).

Therefore, if American hegemony continues, the liberal order will prevail. This international order is built on the idea that the international society is, as Woodrow Wilson argued, 'corrigible'. Reform is possible. Power politics can be tamed and states can build stable relations around the pursuit of mutual gains. On the other hand, this order is expected to move states in a progressive direction, defined in terms of liberal democracy. The order provides institutions, relationships, and rights and protections that allow states to grow and advance at home (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 10). In this order, the subordinate states are partners, but not equal partners. They follow the American order, because it is better and more acceptable than other alternative orders. On the other hand, their support of American hegemony pays them increasing returns (Owen, 2019, p. 56).

Several issues are important in a unipolar security- based order. The first issue is military superiority and the capability to

determine who will be the hegemon and world leader? In other words, the preponderance of the U.S. or China's power, is necessary to supply global public goods, for example military and economic stability or the military intervention of the hegemon when it is necessary to preserve a stable international order, since in this view, world security is a more reachable aim and is close to global preferences. In other words, in this order, other states demand the hegemon to provide security for all, instead of democratize the world (Etzioni, 2007).

The second issue is self-control. In this order, China and America, by exercising self-restraint and especially by binding themselves within international institutions, can convince others to follow their orders. In this bargain, subordinate states gain reassurance that they will not be dominated, and that the hegemonic power will be exercised predictably and responsibly (Ikenberry, 2001a, pp. 52–64).

The role of hegemonic values and ideological ideas in creating the legitimacy and continuity of leadership is another important issue in this order. For Ikenberry (2001b), “hegemony is less about function and more about order”; as such, order is deeply affected by the character and values of the hegemonic state. In this regard, he emphasizes the distinctive American features of the postwar order, one of them is Liberalism in the sense that the core member of the club requires a democratic political system and free economy. In his book *After Victory*, Ikenberry explains the way in which the distinctive features of American liberalism shape the order and facilitate the interstate cooperation: “America's democracy is open, transparent, and decentralized; these features enable other states to participate in the US hegemonic project and gain a voice in the management of the system” (Ikenberry, 2001a, p. 203).

The last important issue regarding this order is the way in which China, as a hegemon, replaces this order, by peaceful change or by hegemonic war? Will the power transitions between them be dangerous? Will the declining power have incentives to start a preventive war with the challenger (Copeland, 2000), or the rising power will start a war to transform the international system in its favor and interests? (Gilpin, 1981, p. 94).

#### **4. 1. 2. Multipolarity Security- based International Order with Different Ideologies**

The international order will be realist in the bipolar or multipolar system. In this order, various poles, each with insignificant rights, behave as dictated by the realist and engage in security competition with each other; under these circumstances, it will not be possible to establish a liberal international order (Mearsheimer, 2018, p. 4). In this order, security considerations are preferred to ideological considerations and we are witnessing a bounded order to the number of poles. For example, the *American order* alongside the *Chinese order* and Military alliances will be at the core of those two bounded orders. Of course, it is very unlikely that the United States and China will go to war with each other, because they are economically interdependent, and both have nuclear capability that acts as a deterrent (Schreer, 2015, p. 15).

#### **4. 1. 3. Security-based International Order Consisting of Concerts of Democracies**

In this order, while security is the main center of international order, the focus is on the security of individuals instead of national security. Indeed, for liberal realism, the nation-state and the

international state system are tools for realizing democratic values. As a result, nation-state's foreign policy and international norms, laws, and institutions have to be guided by its contribution to the security of the individuals (Morgan, 2008, p.1325). In this order, sovereign states—led by liberal democracies—cooperate for mutual gain and global public goods are guaranteed not only by the United States, but also by a concert of Western democracies and their allies such as India, Japan, and others. In this order, therefore, “a group of democratic states” will collectively provide the various functional services previously provided by the United States. They provide security, uphold open markets, and so forth (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 19).

#### **4. 1. 4. Security-based International Order Consisting of Institutions**

This order is emphasized by liberal institutionalists and cosmopolitanists, the goal of which is to establish global justice. This view is contrary to the previous two views, which assume a world of sovereign states, and tends to see states as an obstacle to the security of individuals. In this view, international institutions, regardless of any sensitivities related to the sovereignty of governments, have taken the lead in the world and must be able to provide all aspects of security in order to achieve global justice. In this relation, advocates of the global justice approach tend to see security as a broader perspective than realists. They are thus interested in nutritional security, environmental security, and health security. On the other hand, for liberal institutionalists, the support for this international order derives from the power of international norms, laws, and institutions. For them, these norms, laws, and institutions together create a functioning international society,

while military intervention is justified only when international law and the United Nations recognize it as legitimate (Morgan, 2008, p. 1326).

#### **4. 2. Democracy-based International Order**

In this order, actors such as China who are illiberal democracies are eliminated. In this order the key questions asked are: Is this a US-led unipolar order? Or is it a multi-actor order led by the Democrats Concert? (Liberal realism)? Or is it an order led by international institutions (institutionalists and globalists)?

In the next sections, with respect to COVID-19, we will examine China's limitations and opportunities in establishing order and future leadership of the international system.

#### **5. China's Opportunities and Challenges to Hegemony**

China's rise to power in recent years has been significant and remarkable in both the economic and military spheres. China as a world's largest economy and as a country with military capabilities could be a significant challenge for the United States (Rasooli Saniabadi, 2019, p. 204). In addition, China handled the global financial crisis in a more efficient way than the West, and through peaceful rise narrative, sought to exert much more influence, at first regionally in Asia, via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (Zeng, 2017, p. 624). In such way, the Chinese model of authoritarian capitalism, also known as "state capitalism" has been referred to as an alternative to democratic capitalism for global governance (Onis & Kutlay, 2020, p.132). In recent years, with the announcement of the "America



First” strategy by President Trump, more space has been provided for China, because this strategy has weakened the role of American leadership in the liberal international order by loosening its explicit commitment to the liberal foreign policy principles (Walt, 2018, p. 9).

From an economic point of view, China's increasing material capacity will make it possible to seek territorial expansion to challenge the United States for regional hegemony in Asia. China “will most certainly translate its economic power into military and make a run at dominating Northeast Asia” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 4). In this regard, estimating China's economic growth by 2029 indicates that it will overtake the United States in GDP. China's dominance is therefore entirely predictable within the next few years (Subramanian, 2011).

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, China's position in the international system was placed in a dilemma. On the one hand, the COVID-19 outbreak damaged China's international image in 2019, and by extension, its cultivation of friendships, and on the other hand, the world witnessed China's dominance as the world's largest producer of medical supplies such as testing swabs, protective masks, surgical gowns, and hand sanitizers. The fact that China has the capacity, even under lockdown, to keep producing the needed medical supplies to successfully combat COVID-19 signifies that it is well placed to play the role of a humanitarian power by offering access to these supplies (Smith, 2020, p. 238).

The questions that are raised in this respect are therefore the following: How are the US and China's international efforts on COVID-19 affecting their respective soft powers? How does the world's public perception of the US and China's COVID-19 efforts

affect their competitive advantage over global leadership? In answer to these questions Ameyaw-Brobbe (2021, p. 261) has argued that “COVID-19 could serve as a critical juncture to change the U.S. global leadership position due to its failures at home and abroad. In contrast, China can use it to build its image and maximize its edge in international order building by forging meaningful friendships through humanitarian assistance”.

China as the most successful player in the international arena in the fight against disease claims to have set “a new standard for the global efforts against the epidemic” (Hernandez, 2020). China has been able to make significant humanitarian efforts using “mask diplomacy”; Many European and African countries were on the list of Chinese assistance (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2021, p. 262). China not only rescued others via humanitarian assistance, it also organized institutions in order to inform other governments through videoconferencing. China can therefore take advantage of its role in pandemic assistance to maximize its leadership in international order-building efforts. In contrast, until President Biden was elected, the Trump-led U.S. rejected the ideology of globalism and maintained its own vision of patriotism (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2021, p. 263).

However, despite these opportunities and advantages for China, especially with regard to the COVID-19 factor, the main argument of this article with respect to research findings (checking the most important challenges for China to achieve a hegemonic position in the international system) is that the future of international order will remain as security-based international order, with two actors and two different ideologies. However, institutions will also play an active role in this order (The hybrid of bipolar security-based international order with different ideologies and security-based

international orders consisting of institutions). The most important challenges for China are:

### **5. 1. The Western Liberal Order Nature**

Ikenberry argues that the U.S.-Chinese power transition can be significantly different from those of the past, because China faces an international order that is fundamentally different from those confronted by the past-rising states. China faces a Western-centered system that is open, integrated, and rule-based, with wide and deep political foundations (Ikenberry, 2010, p. 511). As a result, it is hard to overturn the Western order, but easy to join. America's partners trusted it due to the transparency of the US government and society. Transparency helps partners to anticipate US policy changes. In addition, the United States is open to its international partners' influence; they know that they can have influences on the formulation, interpretation and implementation of rules (Ikenberry, 2001a, pp. 203–205). Furthermore, an optional buffet will be provided upon ordering. China does not have to accept everything. It can select certain rules or schemes, and not select other. (Ikenberry, 2018). As a result, Ikenberry's order is flexible and multi-layered, has 'integrative tendencies,' and offers opportunities for shared leadership. In his view, power does not determine order, but order socializes power. As a result, liberal orders are self-reinforcing and become robust over time.

### **5. 2. China's Inability to Cultivate Meaningful Friendships**

One of China's major challenges in international order building is an inability to cultivate meaningful friendships with other

countries, especially great powers (Smith, 2020). Friendship is one of the most important essential elements in international order building. A look at history shows that Friendship has played a very important role in the rise and fall of various orders. To this end, in recent years, China has made numerous efforts in creating ‘cultural diplomacy’ to cultivate more meaningful friendships. In this regard, China has resorted to initiatives such as proliferating Confucius Institutes (CI) and Confucius Classrooms abroad, as well as attracting international students to study in China (Hartig, 2015). In addition, China tried to use the COVID-10 pandemic situation as a means to cultivating deeper friendships through mutual collaboration with various countries. Yet, despite China's efforts, the United States, maintains important friendships with major partners, especially strong partners. Therefore, lasting friendships in the US-led international order, especially transatlantic friendships between this country and Western countries, are of significant importance for maintaining mutual common strategic interests and deep normative and cultural understandings (Smith, 2020, p. 236). For example, alongside the European countries, the United States also maintains close friendships, with Canada, Australia, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the Republic of Korea (Hafeznia, 2017, pp. 1-12)

### **5. 3. The Socialization of China as a Rising Power**

The theoretical literature of realists and liberals on hegemonic order reveals that they assume that the hegemon must be held committed to preserving the existing international order. As a result, from their perspective, the ruling power has status-quo motivation and the rising power has a revisionist motivation, since the hegemon is a satisfied state and derives the most benefit from

the existing order. Conversely, a rising state challenges this order and seeks to alter the existing norms and rules of the international action. This view, however, neglects the effects of rising power's socialization in engaging with other states in the international system (Chan, 2018, p. 613). In this regard, we can assume that the rising power has a status-quo orientation, while the declining hegemon has a revisionist one. Perhaps a weakened hegemony is less committed to the existing international order and is increasingly motivated to resist existing rules. As a result, China can become a more status-quo state if it gains more relative power, and US can become a revisionist state if it suffers a relative decline (Chan, 2018, p. 614). Therefore, along with the possibility of China's socialization and its benefit from the existing order as a satisfied state, the international order is not the same as the existing interstate distribution of power, which means that the changes in the interstate power distribution do not necessarily imply changes in the international order (Welch, 2018, p. 17).

#### **5. 4. China's Willingness to Participate in International Forums**

Keohane and Martin (1995, p. 43) believe a state's decision to join international organizations, and comply with international agreements and treaties, is an important sign of a willingness to engage in the "focal points" of international cooperation, and reflects that it state has a revisionist or status-quo orientation; the UN state voting records point in this direction. Does it indicate that if the state works with other global communities, the accession or absence from an international organization is a useful indicator of a country's status quo or revisionist tendencies? (Chan, 2004, p. 210). In this regard, it should be noted that on most of the issues raised at

the United Nations, especially on matters of arms control, international peacekeeping, maritime cooperation, environmental protection, and climate change, China has taken positive positions as a strong supporter of international initiatives.

### **5. 5. Insufficient Soft Power of China as a Hegemon**

Soft power is one of the most important requirements for building and maintaining the international order. Nye (2008, p. 94) believes that “soft power refers to a country’s ability to exploit others and their nationals without resorting to economic or military means”. Soft power demonstrates the ability of others to achieve results by attraction, not by coercion or payment; it relates to “winning hearts and minds, not twisting arms” (Nye, 2008, p. 96). Important indicators of soft power are country’s cultural values and legitimate policies and humanitarian actions. Building and maintaining an international order will also require more powers, such as Western European countries, to set the global agenda to embrace the norms and roles of that order. A survey about global perceptions of China across 34 countries in December 5, 2019 indicated a negative view among 41% of the participants (Silver, 2019). In this regard, another survey conducted in March 2019 revealed that all ten European countries had low confidence towards Chinese leaders (about 62%) (Devlin & Huang, 2019, p. 4). These results indicate that among European countries, which constitute the more prominent regions involved in setting the international agenda, are not fully confident in China’s ability to build an international order (Ameyaw-Brobbeey, 2021, p. 264). A January 10, 2020 survey about global preference for either the United States or China revealed that more people around the world prefer the United States (in 21 countries) to China (in just seven countries) (Silver &

Devlin, 2020, p. 6). These results indicate that China's COVID-19 aid was not sufficient in constructing a positive global public perception of this country. One of the key factors behind this misunderstanding is the "conspiracy story" disseminated by the United States, claiming that China's irresponsibility created the conditions for the virus to spread around the world. The US influence in international media and public debate around the world helps the US put the blame on China, therefore weakening its international image. In fact, the United States has traditionally been more likely to affect other countries than China (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2021, p. 265).

### **5. 6. Lack of Friendly Relations with Great Powers**

As stated, China attempted to create and cultivate friendships with other countries across the world through various means especially international COVID-19 aid. In this context, China used the concept of "all-weather friends" to show close ties with other countries in the context of mutual political ties and financial support. The main target of this idea was 14 countries, all of which (except Brazil) are developing, poor and relatively vulnerable countries, which are not important players in the international system. This indicates that China is attracting the hearts of developing countries. However, in order to attempt international leadership, China's Vision needs to be accepted by a more prominent and powerful country, especially from Europe (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2021, p. 267).

In fact, friendships of this nature are top-down with no role for the general public. This is while public opinion is very important in creating friendly feelings towards other countries. The purpose of

Chinese top-down diplomacy is admiration of leaders, but not their respective publics. As a result, China does not succeed to attract the hearts and minds of general publics. In this relation, Kissinger (2014, p. 13) believes that “any system of world order, to be sustainable, must be accepted as just—not only by leaders, but also by citizens”.

### **5. 7. Lack of Friendly Relations with Europe**

China’s international COVID-19 aid did not seem to be sufficient to attract European publics, since controversial issues between China and these countries seem to be more prevailing. For example, human rights are a core principle that underpin European society. This European ideal has created a negative image toward China as a responsible actor. As a result, considering Russia as part of Europe, Russia is the only Chinese friend in the region (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2021, p. 268). This indicates that the influence of economics on soft power is minimal. In contrast, European countries have significantly friendly relations with the United States. Apart from European security interdependence with the United States, Europe shares significant similarities such as cultural roots, values, and beliefs with the US, which bind them to a greater extent, compared to China (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2021, p. 269).

## **6. Conclusion**

For many years the world has been dominated by a western liberal order, and the United States, by providing hegemonic leadership, has become the ‘first citizen’ of this order. The most important features of this order were alliances, free world economy, cooperation, interdependence and championing ‘free world’ values.



It is noteworthy that any order, including the liberal international order, has always been associated with crisis. However in the current situation, the COVID-19 as the most severe global public health crisis is the most important sign of the disorder in the international system.

COVID-19 can be seen as a 'potential epochal moment' for international politics, because of the profound and rapid impact that it has had on the entire world system. Epochal moments in international politics are critical junctures or important turning points that disrupt the status quo, and bring new realities. They are important for order in international politics, because they cause the dynamics of static international orders through sudden changes (Smith, 2020, p. 237).

Certainly, there is no theoretical consensus among international relations scholars on what the post-COVID-19 world will be like. However, it is certain is that the Coronavirus pandemic strengthens nationalism, and weakens globalism and free market economy. The Coronavirus pandemic has re-established the importance of states as main players in the international order, the importance of borders and the growing importance of human security. As mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic, as one of the most important factors in creating disorder in the international system, can bring significant changes in the international order.

In this regard, the role of main powers, especially the United States and China as leaders of the system in crisis management and creation of order is very important. The key question raised in this paper in respect to COVID-19 was thus the following: What kinds of order are possible and whether COVID-19 can be considered as an opportunity that helps China to build international order as a hegemon?

In answer to these questions, this paper predicted the nature of international order with respect to COVID-19 and China's position in this order, and discussed the proposed models through its conceptual framework. These models are divided into *security-based order* and *democracy-based order*. In the first model, the aim of order was to produce security in the international system and in the second model the aim of order was to maintain and produce democracy in the international system. In a security-based order, the main question raised was: Which state in the international system is capable of maintaining and creating international stability and security? This order can be divided into four categories: *uni-polarity security-based order*, *multi-polarity security-based order with different ideologies*, *security-based order consisting of concerts of democracies* and *security-based order consisting of institutions*.

In this paper by checking the most important challenges for China to achieve a hegemonic position in the international system, we confirm that the future order of the international system will remain a security-based international order, but with two actors and two different ideologies. However, institutions will also play an active role in this order (The hybrid of bipolar security-based international order with different ideologies and security-based international order consisting of institutions).

We conclude that with respect to COVID-19 and in the current context of international order, China has tried to increase its influence to reshape the rules and institutions of the international system in order to fulfill its interests and become a world hegemon. In this situation, although China has succeeded to gain some admiration for its COVID-19 efforts, it has not yet succeeded in creating a unipolar order under its own leadership. In other words,

COVID-19 measures were not be enough for China to completely win over the United States and become a hegemon. Complexities in diplomacy and contemporary international relations indicate that international order building requires skills and capabilities beyond material strength, and needs long-lasting friendship and soft power.

This article predicts that future international order will see the dominance of two main actors. In this order, the US and China will create two bounded orders as *American order* alongside the *Chinese order* and Military alliances will be at the core of those two bounded orders. They also will engage in security competition with each other. As a result, 'security considerations' take precedence over 'ideological considerations'.

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