

Is the world big enough for middle powers?

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November 8 2022

Note: This article appeared in *The National Interest* on November 8 2022.

It was only several weeks ago that President Joe Biden reaffirmed his administration's high hopes for the United Nations (UN). Standing before the seventy-seventh session of the UN's special assembly on September 21, Biden [said](#), 'The United States will always promote human rights and the values enshrined in the U.N. Charter,' adding that 'this institution, guided by the U.N. Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is at its core an act of dauntless hope.'

Two weeks later, Chinese state media was triumphantly touting Beijing's success in [derailing](#) a US-backed motion for the UN Council on Human Rights to discuss allegations of human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. It came after [sixty-six mainly developing nations](#), including China, broke from Washington's position by calling for a peaceful [settlement](#) of the war in Ukraine—which would likely reward Russian aggression by urging partial acquiescence to Moscow's demands.

Both Biden's Washington and Xi Jinping's Beijing ostensibly agree that the UN and its affiliated organisations should continue to play a key role in global affairs. But fundamental differences between their understanding of what this role should be—especially in relation to the thorny issue of human rights—are eroding these institutions' capacity to facilitate cooperation and settle territorial and distributional conflicts. On both sides of these differences, states are bypassing these institutions and turning instead to like-minded partners. Economic cooperation is [booming](#) between China and Russia, throwing a lifeline to Russia while much of the world continues to condemn its flagrant violation of Ukraine's sovereignty. In a speech at the UN last year, Biden [emphasised](#) that the United States is 'not seeking a new Cold War or a world divided into rigid blocs.' But reflecting a less optimistic view of these bodies' potency—or perhaps to hedge against their subversion—Washington appears to be building multifaceted alliances aimed at containing China and Russia and expanding their purview so that they may operate parallel to a broadening spectrum of UN institutions and the liberal international market system.

Recognition of this reality is starting to rise from world leaders' subconscious and is now puncturing the surface of political discourse. China's ambassador to Australia, Xiao Qian, recently [proclaimed](#) that China aims to help sustain the rules-based order. Yet while Xi's speech marking the opening of the 20th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party [praised](#) China's growing 'international influence, appeal and power to shape [the world],' its main emphasis was on mitigating growing dangers to China's national security. While touting his commitment to finding 'common ground' with other nations, Biden's speech to the UN made no secret of where America stood in 'the contest between democracy and autocracy.' And though the Biden administration's recently released National Security Strategy outwardly spoke of protecting the 'rules-based order,' it [betrayed](#), according to international relations professor Van Jackson, an anti-globalist tone inspired by a new 'national security Keynesianism' intended to 'wield the economy as a weapon in rivalry with China

and, to a lesser extent Russia.’ Neither leader dared to acknowledge that their homages to the ‘rules-based order’ poorly mask their devolution to an auxiliary geopolitical ballast, as competition and balance of power gradually re-assume their mantle as the primary shapers of international engagement. And no other leader dared to extrapolate on what this means: that the liberal world order as we have known it, which has helped sustain an unfettered period of global capitalism-driven prosperity, is nearing a close.

China and the United Nations

It is popular to blame rising geopolitical tensions on hawkish political actors. But it is equally necessary to explore the culpability of liberal commentators. The political discourse around liberalism in international relations has long been blighted by those who confuse its ideals for our reality. And the marriage of the two neoliberalisms—related to international relations and economics, respectively—has overexpanded consensus and suffocated interrogations into these institutions’ contradictions. However, the conflation of liberalisms has inspired few attempts to confront a fundamental conundrum: how can the liberal world order accommodate the leadership of an economically dominant state actor that is fundamentally and increasingly illiberal?

China’s answer to this conundrum has been to produce an alternative vision of the liberal order built around concepts such as ‘common prosperity,’ ‘win-win’ cooperation, and a ‘community of common destiny.’ These visions ostensibly paid homage to the UN charter and sought to build broader consensus among the ‘Global South’ by reflecting the priorities of developing nations who, relative to wealthy liberal democracies, occupy a different plane on the Maslovian hierarchy of national needs. Yet these ideas are also being leveraged to try to quarantine domestic governance issues—particularly in relation to human rights—from the scrutiny of global bodies. If the intention behind this is, in part, to allay the concerns of Western powers that Chinese leadership would not have an adverse impact on the former’s progressive vision of the liberal international order, it has clearly not worked.

A key institutional foundation of the current liberal international order is the UN’s ‘Three Pillars’: human rights, peace and security, and development. China’s vision largely supports the latter two, but its rhetoric and actions toward human rights have been hostile. This partially stems from Beijing’s [accusations](#) that the prerogative to defend ‘universal’ human rights allows powerful states to violate the sovereignty of other states—setting back the latter two pillars of peace and development—through the use of humanitarian interventionism as a guise to pursue hegemonic interests.

China’s alternative vision, skillfully set out in Oxford professor Rosemary Foot’s excellent book *China, the UN and Human Protections*, counters an interventionist approach to human rights concerns by promoting Westphalian notions of sovereignty, expressed in the UN [charter’s](#) prohibition against the institution ‘interven[ing] in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.’ This vision not only emphasises peace as a product of universal respect for sovereignty but also sees the modern state—unmolested by external interference and free to deal autonomously with domestic insubordination—as the most potent vehicle for realising the economic and ‘developmental rights’ of its citizens in a manner that respects each ‘people’s’ prerogative for collective self-determination.

This Chinese view has obvious problems. It could have enormous ramifications for Taiwan and the entire South China Sea—both of which Beijing claims falls under the purview of its ‘[core interests](#)’ and ‘[domestic jurisdiction](#),’ but which have considerable [geostrategic significance](#) for America and its Pacific allies. Yet an arguably more fundamental problem is that prospective hegemon’s interactions with their own citizens inevitably become everyone’s business and do so for reasons that extend beyond their capacity to project soft power. American hegemony may, depending on who you ask, have ushered in a modern equivalent of Pax Romana or—in the Chomskyan, Chinese-backed view—has been the cause of numerous conflicts. But when nations become powerful enough to project power and can no longer be effectively constrained by external forces, the extent to which their elites are constrained by their own constitution and constituencies factors heavily on how their global leadership is vetted. This is an important issue because the liberalised multilateral trading system has a geopolitically-blind approach to the distribution of systemic power—the capacity to disrupt systems such as supply chains and markets.

Free market principles emphasise market complementarities and promote heightened economic interdependence. But in doing so, they expand the ecology of nations' political economies transnationally and amplify the uneven distribution of systemic power and its ramifications for national security. In times of heightened strategic competition, this can place authoritarian nations' need for control and their low threshold for insecurity in conflict with their respect for other nations' autonomy. This reality is part of what is keeping democratic middle powers tethered to the United States, even while Washington's own record of compliance with international institutions leaves much to be desired. China's increasingly low threshold for security threat tolerance and the lack of a counter ballast in the form of domestic safeguards—manifest not only through [mass surveillance](#) but also through heavy-handed forms of pre-emptive security intervention that have extended to China's 'autonomous' regions of [Hong Kong](#) and [Xinjiang](#)—is accentuating fears that Beijing's aversion to ceding systemic power could combine with the prevailing logic of its security epistemology to motivate the regime to export its authoritarianism.

It is arguably fears of this ilk that have magnetised the concerns of democratic nations' political elites in relation to their own status and agency in a 'Chinese-led' world order, and citizens' concerns about what this will mean for their personal lives and freedoms—a view perhaps supported by a pronounced [downward](#) spiral in assessments of China's respect for personal freedoms in public sentiment surveys across liberal democracies. Yet such fears have already been expressed in less explicit forms in the European Union, where it is claimed that [strategies](#) such as elite capture targeting fragile states threaten to shift these nations' allegiances and degrade their autonomy, and in [Australia](#), where it is feared that elite capture and the securitisation of bilateral relations with China is becoming a disruptive influence in the [Solomon Islands](#). Elite capture strategies would be bolstered by articulations of the inviolability of national sovereignty when the latter entails, as Beijing advances, the elevation of the rights of the prevailing government (i.e., elites subject to capture) above that of individual citizens.

These issues provide the broader context underlying concerns over China's alleged attempts to reshape the UN and other global bodies. China's influence in the UN arguably peaked in 2020, when its citizens held leadership posts in four of the fifteen UN specialised agencies, as well as the position of under-secretary-general for the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). While Beijing's new-found influence [cast a shadow](#) over the World Health Organization during the Covid-19 pandemic and helped [bring DESA](#) on board to assimilate China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into the UN Sustainable Development Goals, a bigger concern has been its attempts to [restrict the participation](#) of human rights NGOs in events and [impede](#) the UNCHR from fulfilling its mandate. In June of the following year, UNCHR high commissioner Michelle Bachelet was left to [lament](#) 'the most wide-reaching and severe cascade of human rights setbacks in our lifetimes,' criticising, among other problems, the 'chilling impact' of the introduction of Hong Kong's national security law. She waited till just before midnight on August 31, merely [minutes before the expiration](#) of her four-year term, to release her long-awaited report on alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Middle democracies: Between a rock and a hard place

This backdrop brings us back to where we are today. Biden has reasserted America's commitment to the UN and the 'rules-based order,' winding back the 'America first' rhetoric of his predecessor, former President Donald Trump. But if anything, he has gone far further than Trump in leveraging values-based alliances, as well as American military, economic and structural power, to create parallel institutions that not only hedge against the subversion of these global bodies but also undermine their primacy as instruments for managing disputes between world powers. It is patently clear that the core guiding tenet of these new institutions is containing America's primary geostrategic rivals, China and Russia.

For instance, in response to Russia's stumbling invasion of Ukraine, US-led countermeasures largely bypassed the UN, and military assistance aside, brought to bear the full weight of Western (and Western-allied) systemic power in areas such as [trade](#), [finance](#), and [technology supply chains](#). Some of that disruptive power is now being directed towards China, especially in relation to access to cutting-edge [technology](#). On the American side, the demonstrated potency of these measures in the wake of the Russian invasion is arguably proving to be a drawcard to democratic allies, which may in turn have been a factor inspiring NATO to [shift its attention](#) to China and the Pacific, in alignment with the increasingly popular '[one theatre](#)' (or combined theatre) thesis. These precedents also threaten to further weaken the liberal international order by drawing other less

democratic or authoritarian governments, fearful of being targets of similar measures, into a resilience strategy that brings them closer into Beijing's orbit, potentially strengthening the latter's own counter-ballasts against Western systemic power.

It should be noted that this multifaceted mobilisation of alliances arguably extends in scope beyond anything the United States did in the latter part of the Cold War. During that period, US analysts also [decried](#) the strategic subversion of the UN by the Soviet Union, which similarly had some success in rallying the Global South. Yet the efforts of the Soviet Union to accumulate structural power through global bodies were hampered by its relative economic weakness. With China's near-peer status vis-à-vis the United States extending to economic and technical strength, and its prospects of greater success in translating this into structural power, old alliances, as well as new ones such as the Quad, are branching out from platforms narrowly preoccupied with defence and security cooperation, extending to the dimensions of [economics](#), [infrastructure](#), [trade](#), regulation, supply chain security, and [technology cooperation](#). While pledging to sustain the 'rules-based order,' they are essentially reconstructing it.

In the Pacific, the domain of China's more immediate push for regional hegemony, this situation is shrinking the middle ground for liberal democratic middle powers that have long enjoyed close security relations with Washington yet have retained strong economic ties with China. And there are inchoative signs that they are leaning towards entering a US-led security and economic bloc. Australia, having for some years been the most vocal middle power critic of China's hegemonic ambitions and a victim of punitive trade measures from China, has enthusiastically signed up to this broader-spectrum Quad and other programs aimed at re-engaging Washington in what it openly acknowledges to be a [strategic competition](#) for regional influence. Australia has also attempted to [diversify its trade](#) and increase [security](#) over critical knowledge, infrastructure, and innovation drivers. And, echoing the tenets of a 2021 government [report](#), Australia is facing [calls](#) to enhance its technological sovereignty by developing an indigenous semiconductor manufacturing capacity, which Australia-China Relations Institute researcher Marina Zhang [cautions](#) could mean a step towards 'technology decoupling.'

But this is also happening in democratic regional powers that have traditionally managed their relationship with China with far more success. The election of Japanese prime minister Fumio Kishida, known previously for a ['dovish'](#) foreign policy outlook, was expected to help Japan improve its relationship with China. Instead, Kishida has enthusiastically [touted the Quad](#), tightened security cooperation with Washington and [Australia](#), supported the [Chip 4 Alliance](#) (aimed at blocking China from semiconductor/high-performance chip supply chains), and passed an economic security law [described](#) by the Nomura Research Institute as 'mainly devised to counter China.' Kishida later gave the post of minister of state for economic security to Sanae Takaichi, a strong critic of Chinese intellectual property theft who [holds](#) hawkish views on defence and diplomacy and [sees](#) overreliance on Chinese trade as a ['grave'](#) risk to Japan's economic security. More recently, Japan's ambassador to Australia, Yamagami Shingo, advocated that Australia block China from joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), [arguing](#) that 'economic coercion has become a signature modus operandi' of Beijing's foreign policy.

Finally, even South Korea—long one of the US allies most friendly towards China—has seen its new conservative president, Yoon Suk-yeol, promise to 'work together with like-minded nations that respect freedom,' a vow that has been [described](#) as a pledge to build 'a value-based alliance with Washington.' Despite South Korea being tethered to China geographically and economically and Seoul's view of Beijing as an essential player in curtailing North Korean aggression, Yoon has [agreed](#) to preliminary negotiations on the Chip 4 Alliance and reinvigorated trilateral [defence cooperation](#) with Washington and Tokyo.

It increasingly seems that there is no easy path to safer pastures amid diminishing prospects for a middle way that combines a strong trade relationship with China and a strong American security license. Xi's Putinesque rise towards lifelong, centralised leadership, his growing emphasis on power projection and national security, a litany of alleged Chinese human rights abuses, and other factors, such as China's 'economic coercion,' are making acquiescence to China's regional ascendancy a less tolerable proposition. And it is increasingly apparent that these middle countries must play an active role for there to be any hope of shoring up America's waning regional hegemony.

As the scope of this alliance expands to account for the ongoing economic, technical, and diplomatic dimensions of China's rise, and in doing so reduces the functionality of broader multilateral platforms, these nations will face a challenging paradox: forming a strategic bloc for the defence of their values might come at a cost to their agency. It will no doubt also eventually come at the expense of some of their interests. The reality is that locking themselves into the American-led alliance will not only expose these middle powers to grave consequences should America's containment strategies fail but will also open them to unilaterally determined forms of obligation creep. Harsh American measures, such as [recent restrictions](#) that could mean China-based tech workers will have to choose between their jobs and their American citizenship, could well come with demands for mirror or aligned regulations among partner nations with whom America's technology and security interests are integrated. Certain lucrative commodities with geostrategic importance, such as Australia's burgeoning lithium [trade](#) with China, could well be subject to economically costly controls.

Finally, this direction will also mean that security is predicated upon nations' success in making ongoing and inevitably costly investments in retaining the balance of power. Investing in reducing the primacy of the international bodies in which middle powers engage multilaterally with China, in addition to pursuing resilience strategies that reduce trade independence with Beijing, will remove the role of key buffers that mitigate the risks of diplomatic spats escalating into tensions or outright conflict. Actively blocking China's structural, economic, and systemic avenues to assuming global hegemony, which Beijing sees as legitimate domains of great power competition and preferable to war, could increase China's appetite for military conflict at the very time that a looming demographic crisis hastens Beijing's strategic tempo.

Crises and opportunities?

All this underlies that in this race to keep the world from a point of no return, a rapid change in tack is needed. The role of liberalised global markets in bringing unprecedented prosperity—and the need for nations to work together to address global crises such as climate change—continues to offer compelling arguments for the retention of the [liberal international order](#). But it is evident that this is no longer enough to convince many states—and, most importantly, the world's largest superpowers—to put aside their differences. There can be no coming together when pressing points of contention are in fundamental ways politically existential, especially when contentions are magnified by high levels of global integration or the effect of global free trade in amplifying and unevenly distributing systemic power.

Hope for stepping back from the precipice best rests on bringing difficult questions of values and political culture, and their compatibility with the liberal order, back to the table. If middle power democracies are to play a role, it may not be realistic to expect them to coax superpowers to enter into 'managed strategic competition,' as [advanced](#) by former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Rather, it may best be realised by leveraging the unfolding crises of global liberalism to make China amenable to hearing the conditions that would make liberal democratic nations' accommodation of Beijing's global leadership a tolerable proposition. If a half way is to be found as a result of these negotiations, it has to be different than where it is now. This could happen if China can be convinced that the true triumph of politics is not the fantasy of 'win-win,' but the necessity that no one gets what they want.

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