



## THE RBIO AS A STABILIZING FUNCTION IN A BIPOLAR WORLD

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### JCSP 49

#### Exercise Solo Flight

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## **ENTANGLING THE DRAGON: THE RBIO AS A STABILIZING FUNCTION IN A BIPOLAR WORLD**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Rules Based International Order (RBIO) is “a shared commitment by all countries to conduct their activities in accordance with agreed rules that evolve over time.”<sup>1</sup> Its stated goals are to provide stability, peace, security, and the system of states.<sup>2</sup> However, the RBIO is a power struggle. Martel points out that due to the diverse histories and cultures of the states involved, the RBIO is subject to “competing claims of legitimate authority in determining what the rules are, how they should be upheld, and who the upholders and the violators are.”<sup>3</sup> For many years, the People’s Republic of China was content to let others hold this authority, but now it is starting to make waves. This rising China that regularly skirts, bends, or outright ignores the rules, has brought the very existence of the RBIO into question. Less often acknowledged is the reluctance of the US to fully commit to the RBIO. This paper will examine how Power Transition Theory predicts that the rise of a new major power places the world’s equilibrium at risk, how the RBIO can help stabilize it, but how both major powers have regularly undermined the RBIO. Finally, it concludes that there are three possible outcomes: a major war, a new Cold War, or a recommitment to the RBIO. Moreover, that war is extremely unlikely, we are currently on a path to a new Cold War, but that a recommitment to the RBIO is the best option for humanity.

### **POWER TRANSITION THEORY AND THE RBIO**

Since the fall of the USSR, the world has existed in relative peace. Civil wars, wars of secession, and border conflicts, notwithstanding, there have not been open hostilities between major world powers for over thirty years. A world primarily controlled by a powerful hegemon resulted in peace. This fact lends credence to Organski’s Power Transition Theory.<sup>4</sup> Organski argued that one state holding a preponderance of power would result in peace. Considered revolutionary, if not downright heretical, when he published in 1958, it is now more widely accepted than the Balance of Powers Theory it upended.<sup>5</sup> The corollary, however, postulates that war is the likely outcome when an aspiring power achieves parity or near parity and seeks to unseat a declining hegemon.

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<sup>1</sup> Stéphanie Martel, "Unpacking the 'Crisis' of the 'Rules-Based International Order': Competing Hero Narratives and Indo-Pacific Alternatives," working paper, Defence and Security Foresight Group, University of Waterloo, July 2020, [https://uwaterloo.ca/defence-security-foresight-group/sites/ca.defence-security-foresight-group/files/uploads/files/dsfg\\_workingpaper\\_martel\\_rbio.pdf](https://uwaterloo.ca/defence-security-foresight-group/sites/ca.defence-security-foresight-group/files/uploads/files/dsfg_workingpaper_martel_rbio.pdf), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Youcheer Kim, "Is China Spoiling the Rules-Based Liberal International Order? Examining China's Rising Institutional Power in a Multiplex World through Competing Theories," *Issues and Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs* 56, no. 1 (2020): 11.

<sup>3</sup> Martel, "Unpacking the 'Crisis' of the 'Rules-Based International Order,'" 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald L. Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program," *International Interactions* 34, no. 4 (2008): 316.

<sup>5</sup> Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program," 314.

Because China threatens to unseat the US as the dominant economic power within a few decades, there is growing concern that Organski's theory may prove correct. As China's economy has grown, their military has followed, increasing the chance that China will be emboldened to make offensive military strikes to seize additional power. In acknowledgment of these trends, in 2017, the US National Security Strategy shifted focus away from terrorism and on to great power competition.<sup>6</sup> With the release of the Canadian Indo-Pacific strategy in 2023, Canada, has joined the US in taking a more confrontational approach to China.<sup>7</sup>

Gilpin, quoted by Holland, allows that China may not resort to conventional war, but he specifically predicts that "competition and chaos" will result as "China trie[s] to reorganize the international system to their own advantage."<sup>8</sup> Essentially, he foresees it as a threat to the RBIO. This has become a buzz phrase for many western politicians in the past few years, but the concept of the RBIO is not new and neither are threats to it. A rising China simply presents a new challenger after a generation of American dominance. In light of this challenge, there is conflict between how to best support the RBIO – the carrot or the stick.

For years, the West took a supportive, carrot, approach to China.<sup>9</sup> Theoretically, such an approach would encourage China to play by the rules. Their rapid economic growth facilitated by increasing international trade being the reward for participating in the RBIO. However, the anticipated democratization, or at least liberalization, of China has not occurred over the fifty years that followed Pierre Trudeau's establishment of relations with China. In fact, particularly since the election of President Xi Jinping in 2013, they have shown a tendency to try to set their own rules, particularly in south east Asia, where they enjoy regional dominance. China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, human rights abuses, and controversial trade practices are evidence that the carrot has not had the intended effect.<sup>10</sup> These growing concerns surrounding China's behaviour have resulted in more Western nations shifting to a firmer approach: a stick. Indeed, the threat posed by China is a rare unifying factor between members of the Republican and Democratic parties in an increasingly divided US. As Holland argues, "China's global assertiveness brought together the major constituencies of the United States in ways reminiscent of the cohesion on foreign policy that emerged during the Cold War with the Soviet Union."<sup>11</sup> This argument is prescient of where the world is headed if we continue down the current path.

The RBIO provides peace and security through the articulated rules, agreed to by all and enforced through defined mechanisms. Organski's theory proposes that it also

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (2021): 2.

<sup>7</sup> Canada, *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, (Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, 2022), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Holland, "Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 27, no. 2 (2021): 232.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Holland, "Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 27, no. 2 (2021): 229.

<sup>10</sup> Holland, "Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategy," 229.

<sup>11</sup> Holland, "Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategy," 230.

enhances security through a secondary mechanism. While allowing that all state's are trying to maximize their power, Organski reasons that the dominant power "realizes that force is the most expensive tool in its toolkit and therefore normally utilizes it with restraint." Therefore, they limit their power accumulation to avoid these costs.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the dominant power formulates international systems that encourage cooperation. This will require it to cede and redistribute some of its power to encourage participation, but it will pay off in the form of more satisfied neighbours. International institutions provide arenas for discussion, mediation between states, forums for negotiation, or agreement of standards. However, when major powers do not adhere to the rules they help create, it calls the legitimacy of the system into question.

## CHINA UNDERMINING THE RBIO

China is undoubtedly the larger offender of contravening international rules. Bennett asserts that "China wants to benefit from the developments of the West... [but] does not want to accept all the international rules and laws which it did not play a part in formulating."<sup>13</sup> To assess this claim and determine if China poses a threat to the RBIO, it is useful to first consider the Chinese perspective and to look at their actions on the international stage.

Baylis looks at Chinese history and contends that the humiliation of the Chinese people, by western capitalists after the Opium Wars in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and again by Japanese invasions that forced the Chinese to resign portions of their territory, resulted in a long-standing desire to reaffirm their sovereignty and power. In short, they "desired the restoration of Chinese pre-eminence in world politics."<sup>14</sup> Chinese actions today suggest that either this cultural grievance persists or as, Glaser hypothesizes, they are motivated by greed.<sup>15</sup> Regardless, they continue to pursue greater global influence and have taken a long-term view of achieving this status.

Under Deng's chairmanship, China appeared to be deviating from the goal of global influence. They adopted the parallel strategies of *taoguang yanghui* and *gezhi zhengyi gongtong kaifa*, which together saw them keeping a low profile, avoiding disputes, and focusing all their energies on development.<sup>16</sup> Those policies successfully allowed China to rise economically. This non-threatening approach encouraged other nations to manage them with a "carrot" mentality, further enabling Chinese progress. Meanwhile, they used their growing wealth to develop a significantly improved military. Their defence spending increased by 620 percent between 1996 and 2015, including

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<sup>12</sup> Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program," 320.

<sup>13</sup> Yann Bennet, "China's Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities: Post-COVID Challenges for China and the International Rules-Based Order," in *COVID-19 and Foreign Aid*, ed. Viktor Jakupec, Max Kelly, and Michael de Percy (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 268.

<sup>14</sup> John Baylis, "Chinese Defence Policy," in *Contemporary Strategy: Theories and Policies*, ed. John Baylis, Ken Booth, John Garnett, and Phil Williams, (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 243.

<sup>15</sup> Charles L. Glaser, "Realism," in *Contemporary Security Studies*, ed. Allan Collins, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022),

<sup>16</sup> Wenjuan Nie, "Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Dilemma: One Belt, One Road or the South China Sea?" *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 3 (2016): 426.

significant investments in nuclear weapons to ensure a second strike capability.<sup>17</sup> Whether intentionally (in line with some grand design), naturally (via some innate tipping point based on their amassed power), or coincidentally (with the election of Xi), China has now shifted to the strategy of *fenfa youwei*, striving for achievement.<sup>18</sup> Xi's new approach has seen more aggressive actions against their neighbours and attempts to reshape the RBIO in China's favour. Three of the most notable deviations from the RBIO are China's actions in the South China Sea, their attempts to manipulate other states using their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and their underhanded practices in the global market.

In the South China Sea, creative use of gray zone tactics has allowed China to amass territory that would normally require a conventional war to acquire. Unprecedented use of "salami-tactics," have resulted in unchecked gains, and now China's neighbours, as well as those interested in maintaining the RBIO, are concerned that it is too late to turn back the clock. Their gradual maneuvers have slowly stretched their territorial claims, in ways not permitted in international law, without escalating the conflict and drawing in the West.

They have proven adept at timing their more assertive moves during periods of distraction: claiming Vietnamese territory while that country was diplomatically isolated and seizing Mischief Reef shortly after the US closed their bases in the Philippines. They have also used their economic and diplomatic power to their advantage. They supported US sanctions on North Korea in exchange for US tacit acquiescence on their activities in the area.<sup>19</sup> More recently, they negotiated the "Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" with ASEAN nations. On the surface, this would appear to be China participating actively in the RBIO, but the agreement requires nations to engage in bilateral discussions on matters related to the South China Sea. Because China is the dominant power in the region, they use this clause to ensure they always have the upper hand in negotiations.<sup>20</sup>

China has explicitly rejected the authority of the current RBIO by in their reaction to a ruling by the UNCLOS Permanent Court of Arbitration. In 2013, the Philippines raised a complaint stating Chinese reclamation projects in the Spratley Islands were in violation of their territorial waters. In 2016, the Court ruled, unequivocally, in the Philippines favour. China, despite being a signatory of UNCLOS, rejected the ruling on weak pretences, continued their reclamation projects, and increased their militarization of

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<sup>17</sup> Eric Heginbotham, Michael Nixon, Forrest E. Morgan, Jacob L. Heim, Jeff Hagen, Sheng Tao Li, Jeffrey Engstrom, Martin C. Libicki, Paul DeLuca, David A. Shlapak, et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015) [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR392.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR392.html) 1, 285.

<sup>18</sup> Wenjuan, "Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Dilemma," 423.

<sup>19</sup> James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Deterring China in the 'Gray Zone': Lessons of the South China Sea for U.S. Alliances," *Orbis: Foreign Policy Research Institute* 61, no. 3 (2017): 327-328.

<sup>20</sup> Marthen Napang et al., "Contesting Views of the Philippines and China Over the Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea," *Journal of East Asia and International Law* 12, no. 1 (2019) 188.

the islands they had built out of the sea. In sum, China's actions in the South China Sea are likely some of its most flagrant contraventions of international norms and laws.

On the soft power side, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will see China invest trillions in roads, oil and gas pipelines, ports, and railways, ranging from South East Asia, to India, to east Africa, and even Europe. Xi's goal is to create "a global community of shared future" to address the 'deficit of peace, development, and governance.'<sup>21</sup> China's investment in the BRI dwarfs their official development aid. In fact, they have provided more than double the amount of development funding as the US. But unlike traditional aid, Chinese funding comes with strings attached, in the form of high interest loans.<sup>22</sup> The result is nations, at risk of bankruptcy, selling assets and access back to China to relieve some of the debt.

Bennett looks that Xi's rhetoric on the BRI and notes that from their perspective the BRI is simply part of China's foreign policy, and "China intends to follow a different international development strategy than that of other nations."<sup>23</sup> The BRI is seen by some as an attempt by China to legitimize its influence by improving its image and increasing its soft power. It is seen by others as taking advantage of weaker nations to exert influence, extract wealth, and challenge US hegemony.<sup>24</sup> Still others would argue that BRI loans are not that different from International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans. Austerity measures tied to IMF loans have hampered the social programs that could help many developing nations out of poverty and desperate attempts to pay back the loans have pushed countries to privatize their national industries, usually through sale to Western buyers. The IMF may be indicative of how the West has used the current RBIO to their advantage, and the BRI shows China's attempts to replicate those tactics to gain more international influence.

China should be motivated to maintain good standing in the realm of international trade. Yet even here, China continues to flout rules. Since China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the US has brought 27 claims against them, and won all of them.<sup>25</sup> China contravenes open-market principles by providing state-sponsored advantages, such as land, subsidies, and loans, to state-owned and domestic corporations. They have also been found to violate copyright and intellectual property laws. They frequently use their economic clout to intimidate and coerce other countries, enacting import and export restrictions, state-led boycotts, and travel bans on countries that they perceive to have undermined them economically or even politically.<sup>26</sup> Even more concerning to the RBIO, some trading partners are imitating China's policies in an attempt to even the playing field.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, because China is now the WTO's

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<sup>21</sup> Bennet, "China's Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities," 272.

<sup>22</sup> Bennet, "China's Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities," 272.

<sup>23</sup> Bennet, "China's Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities," 267.

<sup>24</sup> Bennet, "China's Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities," 267.

<sup>25</sup> United States Trade Representative, *2021 USTR Report to Congress on China's WTO Compliance*, February 2022,

<https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/Press/Reports/2021USTR%20ReportCongressChinaWTO.pdf>, 11.

<sup>26</sup> United States Trade Representative, *China's WTO Compliance*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> United States Trade Representative, *China's WTO Compliance*, 21.

largest trader, any severe repercussions for them will resonate world-wide, meaning they rarely see significant consequences of their actions.

By considering China's policies, culture, and actions, it is clear that China is looking to exert more influence in the international sphere. Moreover, their use of salami-tactics to claim territory in the South China Sea, their extortive BRI initiative, and their dishonest trade tactics are indicative that they do not intend to respect the current status quo and are working to reshape the RBIO to their advantage.

## **USA UNDERMINING THE RBIO**

As China grows richer and more powerful, it is unsurprising that it would expect to change some of the rules. Great powers wield disproportionate influence, even in international organizations. Kim points out,

Although international institutions are the result of cooperation among states, their benefits are conferred asymmetrically, as a state with high institutional power becomes privileged while a state without it reluctantly accepts some features and products of institutions.<sup>28</sup>

This concept plays out in the power held by the Permanent members of the UN security council, and the fact that three of them, the US, China, and Russia, consistently ignore the laws they helped enact. Interestingly, two of the countries are considered pariahs, while the third is considered the leader of the free world. While the international community is often quick to throw stones in China's direction, it behoves the West to inspect their own behaviour to avoid calls of hypocrisy from those who are disadvantaged by the current system.

The US frequently chooses not to ratify the international laws and uses their power to influence international institutions to favour their national interests. Failure to constrain itself to the rules calls into question the US's legitimacy as a leader and the legitimacy of the entire RBIO. Boer argues that, from the point of view of many countries, the RBIO is a set of arbitrary rules decided by a limited number of countries instead of order based on international laws.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the US assertiveness against China's rise on the international stage has put pressure on many countries to pick a side. As Holland argues, "Washington's posture toward Beijing has put traditional U.S. allies in a difficult position. They must choose whether to join the effort to counter China's ambitions, support those ambitions or take some intermediate stance."<sup>30</sup>

For example, the US Indo-Pacific Strategy championed upholding the RBIO, including, ironically, UNCLOS, despite the fact that the US has still not signed it, 40 years later. China continues to point to this as a demonstration of the US's hypocrisy and use it as fodder to claim the US has no authority to enforce the Arbitration Court's ruling

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<sup>28</sup> Kim, "Examining China's Rising Institutional Power," 2.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Boer, "The Ideology of a Rogue State: A 'Rules-Based International Order,'" *Guardian*, October 10, 2022, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Holland, "Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategy," 228.



on the Spratley Islands.<sup>31</sup> Specifically, China targets the US “freedom of navigation” operations, wherein US warships sail near the Chinese artificial islands. The US claims these are in accordance with international law, but China counters that, without committing to UNCLOS, the US argument is without merit.<sup>32</sup> Noting that the US did not even endorse the court’s verdict until 2020, they too seem to have a strategy of ambiguity in play.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps more egregiously, US-led sanctions are frequently meted out without the approval of any international body, and they often target Communist countries, such as Cuba, North Korea, and the USSR. Their close allies, consisting of most of the world’s advanced economies, usually follow suit. Leaving non-Western countries to conclude that these sanctions are “unilateral, illegal, and tools of imperialist hegemony.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, wars in Iraq (2003) and the former Yugoslavia were launched without UN endorsement, demonstrating that the US, and their allies, are powerful enough to ignore the RBIO when it is in their national interests.

Finally, the US withdrawal from the Rome Statute and the implementation of the American Service Members’ Protection Act (ASPA) fundamentally undermined the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ASPA, colloquially referred to as “the Hague Invasion Act,” “authorizes the president to ‘use all means necessary and appropriate to bring about the release’ of a US or allied person detained or imprisoned by the ICC.”<sup>35</sup> Essentially, it threatened the ICC with non-specified consequences if it attempted to prosecute American citizens. The US also engaged in bilateral agreements with approximately 100 countries, agreeing not to extradite each other’s citizens to the ICC. Known as Article 98 agreements, most countries were coerced into signing them on penalty of losing significant aid from the US. While subsequent amendments have softened the ASPA, the ICC, already criticized for “hunting Africans” and the slow pace of justice,<sup>36</sup> has had the wind stolen from its sails without the participation of the world’s largest democracy.

Another pernicious issue with having the global super-power being a democracy is the inability to commit to long term solutions. Unfortunately, democracies struggle with deep horizons.<sup>37</sup> With regular election cycles, politicians are incentivized to take bold decisions and enact policies quickly. The Trump administration provided a particularly extreme example of this phenomenon by making highly-visible foreign policy changes: pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, renegotiating NAFTA,

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory B. Poling, "A Course to Steer: 2016–2021," in *On Dangerous Ground: America's Century in the South China Sea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022) 253.

<sup>32</sup> Boer, “The Ideology of a Rogue State,” 10.

<sup>33</sup> Poling, "A Course to Steer: 2016–2021," 239.

<sup>34</sup> Boer, “The Ideology of a Rogue State,” 10.

<sup>35</sup> Helen Clapp and Kathryn Sikkink, “From ‘Invade the Hague’ to ‘Support the ICC’: America’s shifting stance on the International Criminal Court,” *Kathryn Sikkink* (Blog), Harvard University, April 27, 2022, [https://tinyurl.com/3xyus4jt\\_](https://tinyurl.com/3xyus4jt_)

<sup>36</sup> Matt Killingsworth, “20 years on, the International Criminal Court is Doing More Good than its Critics Claim,” *The Conversation*, July 11, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/20-years-on-the-international-criminal-court-is-doing-more-good-than-its-critics-claim-186382>.

<sup>37</sup> Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program," 328-329.

leaving the Paris Agreement, withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Agreement, and attempting to withdraw from the World Health Organization (in the middle of a world-wide pandemic) just to name a few.<sup>38</sup> While President Biden has reversed some of these decisions, they remain indicative of the “America first” mindset enabled by being a powerful hegemon, and the inability of other nations to rely on consistency in the institutions and rules supported by their power and financing.

While American offences against the RBIO are less egregious than China’s, the success of the RBIO depends on world-wide participation. When the dominant power refuses to acquiesce to agreements, takes unilateral actions against other nations, and changes course on a dime, the RBIO is undermined.

## **POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE**

With the reality that neither of the major world powers is participating fairly or fully in the RBIO, the question arises as to how this will affect international security, how to preserve peace, and what impact it will have on the RBIO. Organski’s Power Transition theory would suggest that the probability of war will be increased because there is no longer a preponderance of power. However, Organski’s theory was derived from a study of historical precedence, it did not account for nuclear weapons capable of ending humanity as we know it. This step-change in military capability may limit the predictive capacity of the theory. Interestingly, Tammen, an Organski disciple, argues that “mutual assured destruction [MAD] disappeared conceptually and in practice” following the end of the Cold War, proposing that it was a concept invented by proponents of the Balance of Power Theory to explain why a bipolar world is stable.<sup>39</sup> Arguably, MAD could be used to reinforce the Power Transition Theory, in order to explain how the relatively balanced powers of the US and USSR did not erupt into World War III. Similarly, MAD may be one of two factors that may mitigate China’s ambitions. The other is the RBIO.

Tammen warns that “threats, embargoes, or sanctions” will not be able to control a rising challenger.<sup>40</sup> These punitive tactics require a power differential between the punisher and the offender. As the EU discovered when they attempted to sanction Chinese officials for Human Rights violations after agreeing to the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI); China countered with sanctions against EU officials for interfering in China’s internal affairs and put a hold on CAI progress.<sup>41</sup> Instead, “the dominant power can attempt to wrap a web of international obligations, relationships, and common understandings around the emerging challenger.”<sup>42</sup> This has been the goal of the RBIO.

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<sup>38</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, “Trump’s Foreign Policy Moments,” accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/trumps-foreign-policy-moments>.

<sup>39</sup> Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program," 323.

<sup>40</sup> Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program," 321

<sup>41</sup> Bennet, "China’s Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities," 273

<sup>42</sup> Tammen, "The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program," 321.

Despite both major powers regularly scorning the rules, power theory suggests that, as the world returns to a bipolar power struggle, both nations will seek to broaden and strengthen their international alliances and partnerships. After decades of unipolar dominance, this will mean the US will need to resist putting their national interests ahead of all other considerations.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, China will need to build partnerships using tactics other than coercion. By this mechanism, the RBIO could be strengthened as both countries accept more controls being imposed on them by international organizations to avoid frustrating their allies.

Kim looks at several competing theories and posits that the rise of China could have one of three consequences: because “China has deeply integrated into an unshakable rules-based international order,” they may learn to function within it, likely transitioning to a more capitalistic and liberal governance; or they will leave foundational institutions in place, while proactively manipulating less established institutions in their favour; or China will delegitimize the current order and replace it.<sup>44</sup>

The belief that China will acquiesce to the RBIO in its current form is likely optimistic. With a standard of living for the average individual far lower than their Western counterparts, this is an unattractive option for them. Moreover, they may leverage that dissatisfaction, at home and abroad with other non-western countries, to try to gain support to upset the RBIO.<sup>45</sup> Further, as their global power has grown, their policies and practices are not showing greater compliance with the RBIO, quite the opposite. Their actions in the South China Sea and in the global economy have demonstrated their willingness to leverage their power to their advantage.

Reflecting on the other two options, power transition does not necessitate war, but simply the destabilization of the current order.<sup>46</sup> China may accomplish this using the other tools of national power: diplomacy, information, and economics. This is a far more likely outcome because of the reality of MAD. China also advocates for their “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, namely, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.”<sup>47</sup> These principles suggest that they will seek power non-militarily. Their expansion of influence through non-military means can be seen through their use of soft power and economic coercion, and even their use of gray zone tactics to avoid escalation in the South China Sea. However, without a major war, China is unlikely able to destabilize the entire RBIO. Thus, they will likely pursue salami-tactics in all arenas to influence the rules to their advantage.

## HOPE FOR THE RBIO

Determining what parts of the RBIO may survive and what parts may collapse is an important question to guide where countries should invest their efforts. It makes

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<sup>43</sup> Holland, “Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategy,” 233.

<sup>44</sup> Kim, “Examining China’s Rising Institutional Power,” 3.

<sup>45</sup> Tammen, “The Organski Legacy: A Fifty-Year Research Program,” 326.

<sup>46</sup> Kim, “Examining China’s Rising Institutional Power,” 5.

<sup>47</sup> Bennet, “China’s Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities,” 268.

intuitive sense that the path-dependency model will play a significant role in influencing these decisions. Institutions with entrenched histories and co-dependencies with other institutions will be too costly to change. More flexible areas will be targeted for change to slowly move the needle towards China's dominance.

Kim's research looks at China's voting pattern in the UN for clues as to where they are looking to make changes. While overall, Chinese votes are trending towards closer alignment with Western nations, there is an even more pronounced shift in its harmonizing with Russia.<sup>48</sup> This would suggest that the RBIO has become ingrained in some areas, resulting in votes where all the major powers agree. In these areas, China is willing to align itself with the current order. Conversely, the closer association with Russia suggests divergence from the RBIO on other topics. The issues where China is frequently divergent are "neutrality, non-intervention in domestic affairs, and affinity with developing countries."<sup>49</sup> These topics align with the both the rhetoric and actions emanating from China. It will be these topics where the West will need to evaluate how willing they are to compromise or what costs they are willing to accept to sustain their values.

The risk of a confrontation on one of these issues is rising. China has declared their sovereignty over the South China Sea, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang as core national interests on which they will "stand firm, be clear, have the courage to fight and never surrender."<sup>50</sup> Aggressive actions, such as the militarization of the Spratley islands, threatening interactions with Taiwan, a slide towards totalitarianism, and human rights abuses against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang suggest that China's peaceful rise may be becoming more belligerent. Bennett also cautions that as China's growth slows, they may, like a cornered animal, begin to take additional risks to try to cement their power. Quoting Beckley and Brands, he notes "when a nation like China wants to reorder the world and sees that its time and ability to do so are waning, it will make a 'low-probability lunge for success rather than suffering a humiliating descent.'"<sup>51</sup> This mindset may account for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a concerning omen to global security if China, or even the US, were pushed to such extremes.

Kim counters that "China's stance on territorial arrangements in the South China Sea tends to exhibit continuity and prudence rather than provocation and assertiveness."<sup>52</sup> While this view gives China the benefit of the doubt and advocates for a restrained response, building islands on rocks barely above the waterline, militarizing them, and refusing to abide by the decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration are clearly provocative actions. Still, these gray zone tactics do show temperance by China and may signify sufficient self-control to avoid following in Russia's path.

The BRI also appears to be a peaceful attempt to destabilize the RBIO in its current construct. With spending estimated at \$1 trillion to date, and a total eventual

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<sup>48</sup> Kim, "Examining China's Rising Institutional Power," 15.

<sup>49</sup> Kim, "Examining China's Rising Institutional Power," 15.

<sup>50</sup> Wenjuan, "Xi Jinping's Foreign Policy Dilemma," 428.

<sup>51</sup> Bennet, "China's Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities," 270.

<sup>52</sup> Kim, "Examining China's Rising Institutional Power," 20.

investment of as much as \$8 trillion, the BRI dwarfs the capital funds of the World Bank (\$263 billion) or Japanese-dominated Asian Development Bank (ADB) (\$147 billion).<sup>53</sup> These projects have the potential to have a major influence in the world, allowing China to rewrite the rules, particularly in the developing nations they target. However, unlike the ostensibly altruistic goals of similar organizations, like the IMF, China's interests have primacy in Chinese policy. They are not interested in replacing the US as the leader on the world stage, they are only interested in advancing their own aims. This openly competitive world order will result in further exploitation of weaker countries and a back slide in progress on human security.

Ultimately, China may soon find itself at a turning point. Less than seven years after its 2013 launch, the BRI was already losing favour with many of the African and Asian countries involved. Lack of transparency, a growing recognition of the shortage of economic benefits for the host states, and predatory lending tactics have soured public opinion of the BRI in much of the world; and governments are cancelling or pausing projects in many countries.<sup>54</sup> Whether the credit goes to growing literacy rates, more access to information, or more ethical leaders, China is learning that unilateral bully tactics are no longer an effective tool to increase their power. Domestic issues like slowing economic growth, population decline, increasing tariffs and trade sanctions, and a growing middle class dissatisfied with their government will also limit China's ability to buy influence. These setbacks will force them to either take a bold move to cement their dominance, potentially revert to more inward-looking strategies reminiscent of Deng's era, or learn to play by the rules.

## **OPTIONS FOR THE WEST**

Ultimately, the continued success of the RBIO at providing a secure and peaceful world is in the best interest of humanity. As the world again approaches a bipolar status, avoiding the conflict predicted by the Power Transition theory is preferable. Two strategies may permit this peace: appeasement or a united front.

The first option is to cede significant power to the China to appease them. China has long advocated for unquestioned sovereign rights and shows contempt for many of the rules in the international sphere as well, such as UNCLOS and the WTO. Consequently, this option will see a weakening of the RBIO but will avoid war. State-centric attitudes like "America First" will take hold world-wide, and the two great powers will enter a second Cold-War-like *détente*. Secondary impacts will disproportionately impact the Global South. Progress on human security issues and human rights will likely backslide as the ICC, international aid, and global cooperation are delegitimized and deprioritized in a renewed arms race. Countries will seek to secure their domestic supply lines, decreasing international trade. Similarly, the WTO will lose credibility as more countries seek to even the playing field by duplicating China's dubious trade tactics. Additionally, powerful countries will manipulate, coerce, and exploit weaker states in an

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<sup>53</sup> James McBride, Noah Berman, and Andrew Chatzky, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, updated February 2, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>54</sup> Bennet, "China's Inward- and Outward-Facing Identities," 274.

effort to amass resources and power. In many respects, this is the path we are currently on, but it is ultimately a race to the bottom.

The second option requires fostering and maintaining a united front in favour of the RBIO. In essence, giving the preponderance of power to those that partake fully and fairly in the RBIO. Despite US economic and military strength, they no longer hold sufficient power across the DIME tools to effectively control China independently. Meanwhile, China has been seeking out new markets to increase their political and economic might while decreasing their dependency on the US. China is far from alone in its rejection of interference and is finding many states willing to side with them. Reeling from their colonial pasts, proxy wars between the US and Soviet Union, international organizations (like the IMF) that seem to favour Western interests, and exploitation by foreign-owned multi-nationals, much of the Global South favours non-interference, making China an attractive alternative. This is exemplified by several African, Asian, and South American countries voting against NATO intervention in both Libya and the former Yugoslavia.<sup>55</sup> After decades of US dominance and their single-minded pursuit of their own national interests, many countries are eager to welcome a replacement. A united front will require the US and other Western nations to recommit to the RBIO, signing on to UNCLOS and the Rome Statute and ceasing unilateral actions such as sanctions and military interventions not approved by the UN. Moreover, they will need to reassess international institutions and regulations with a view towards equity, increased human security, and reigning in western-based multinationals that have exploited the global South for decades or more. This option will be hard to execute as it will likely be contested by the most powerful people, governments, and corporations in the world, but it will foster loyalty from states that are currently on the fence. Furthermore, in terms of influencing China to become a reliable member of the RBIO, this is likely the most sustainable option, and could therefore have positive economic outcomes as China submits to WTO and other international standards.

There is some evidence that this path may still be an option. The Biden administration's returned to the Paris Agreement and WHO show their recommitment to global institutions. Similarly, the War in Ukraine has seen the US move towards a more collaborative approach to international law. They have softened their stance on the ICC, supporting investigations of war crimes committed by Russian forces and their proxies. Clapp and Sikkink point out the about-face, noting that Russia's violation of international law has resulted in a rare bipartisan reversal of policy,

The lead author of S.Res.546, Lindsey Graham, a staunch Republican, is well aware that support of the Ukraine investigation would contradict US opposition to the ICC's assertions of jurisdiction over personnel of non-States Parties such as the United States and Russia.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Rita Abrahamsen and Adam Sandor, "The Global South and International Security" in *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, ed. Alexandra Gheciu and William C. Wohlforth, (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2018), 385.

<sup>56</sup> Clapp and Sikkink, "America's shifting stance on the International Criminal Court."

It is possible that any missteps by China could equally trigger more moves towards the RBIO. However, proactive action now could prevent Taiwan from becoming the next Ukraine.

## **CONCLUSION**

Keeping China satisfied in the international order will be a tricky balancing act. It will require consistency and long-term strategy. Unfortunately, the US has regularly undermined the RBIO and frequently enacts foreign policy flip-flops that impact the world order. With Power Transition Theory predicting a period of instability as we return to a bipolar world, the US and their allies need to make proactive changes now to avoid the worst-case scenario. While open hostilities are unlikely given China's second-strike nuclear capability and the reality of MAD, a renewed Cold War dynamic is the current path of least resistance. However, that path will, again, leave the weakest states in vulnerable positions to be exploited, and will turn back the clock on advances in human security. A renewed commitment to all aspects of the RBIO and honest applications of equity principles to help raise the global south will align a larger portion of the world with the current world order. Without disaffected states to support their cause, China will have insufficient power to implement their desired changes through political, economic, or military coercion, leaving them no choice but to participate in the RBIO. Hope yet remains that the entanglements created by the Rules Based International Order, will sustain global peace.

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