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Mirroring Hegemony: China's discursive contestation of the 'Liberal International Order'

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Mirroring Hegemony:

China's discursive contestation of the
'Liberal International Order'

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September 2024

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Mirroring Hegemony

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Abstract

Contemporary analyses of the crisis of the 'liberal international order', and the threat posed to it by China, are deficient. These accounts are based on a particular understanding of the international, and an assumption that China's contestation of existing power relations is necessarily 'disordering'. At the same time, the combination of compliance and contestation in China's international practices is interpreted as 'paradoxical'. This thesis argues that there is no paradox: China complies with the fundamental rules and institutions of international order, and its contestation is reserved for the power relations which structure Western-led liberal hegemony. The concept of the 'liberal international order', with its assumption that liberal hegemony and international order are coterminous, is, this thesis argues, an ideological construct, discursively fusing two different concepts with productive effects: it implies that liberal domination is essential to international order, and that opposition to this domination is necessarily *il*liberal, and self-evidently *dis*ordering. Furthermore, in granting authorial agency for the production of international order to Western actors, the role of the global South in co-producing international order, and the centrality of the South to the liberal hegemonic project, is effaced. This thesis uses this apparent 'paradox' in China's practices as a lens to *dis*articulate the concept of the 'liberal international order', and to reveal, as through a mirror, certain features of liberal hegemony which are missing from accounts of the 'liberal international order'. This highlights the role of discursive power within hegemony, as well as the central role of the global South within both the liberal hegemonic project, and the Chinese counterhegemonic project. The thesis further observes that, while China represents itself as an

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entirely different type of international actor from the West, its counterhegemonic discourses and practices take the form of 'mirroring' those discourses and logics which are fundamental to liberal hegemony: this raises important questions about how we can understand China's counterhegemonic project.

1. Introduction: China and the crisis of 'Liberal International Order'

1.1 The 'China paradox'

Over the decades from the end of the Cold War, there has been growing attention by international relations (IR) scholars to the concept of the 'liberal international order' (LIO). This literature outlines the parameters and nature of the 'LIO', while also analysing sources of threat to it. Over the last decade in particular, this literature indicates that the 'liberal international order' is in 'crisis', with some degree of consensus as to the sources of this crisis: growing populism and rule-breaking from within the 'core' of the 'LIO', and 'revisionism' from rising powers who are 'outside' the order. While Russia's war with Ukraine and Israel's war with Gaza are seen as potentially destabilising, it is the growing economic, military and cultural power of China which is generally deemed to pose the greatest long-term threat to the 'liberal international order'. This literature does not, however, provide any consistent analysis of the exact nature of the threat that China poses, and in particular, what it is that is threatened: indeed, many observers comment that China's combination of compliance and contestation in its international practices represents a 'paradox', leading to uncertainty as to what this means for the 'liberal international order'. This thesis argues that this uncertainty about the nature of the 'China threat' is at least in part due to the fact that the concept of the 'liberal international order' is fundamentally flawed. Despite its use across a range of IR literatures as well as policy discourse, there is little consensus about what, exactly, is being represented through this concept.

References to it differ along a number of axes: for example, they make different temporal and agential assumptions – when and with whose authorship this order was formed, and how it has evolved. They also, crucially, make different *spatial* assumptions about the ‘membership’ and ‘reach’ of this order: who is ‘inside’, and who, importantly, is excluded – and what it means, therefore, to be ‘outside’ of ‘order’.

It is in this context that China’s engagement with the ‘liberal international order’ has been represented as a ‘paradox’. Rather than adopting a consistent stance towards it – either compliance through ‘socialisation’ (the fast-dwindling liberal dream of the World Trade Organization (WTO) accession era), or revisionism (along the model being set by its ally Russia) – China appears to be broadly supportive of many of its aspects, while contesting other elements of it. Analysts note, for example, that China is apparently committed to multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the WTO, while it opposes the focus of the human rights agenda on individual civil liberties, and any humanitarian intervention implications of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ norm (Goh, 2019; Mitter, 2022; Risse, 2024). This has led to a range of responses in the literature, with different prognostications of the ‘illiberal hegemony’ (Lim and Ikenberry, 2023) that China’s rise could potentially bring about.

This thesis proposes instead to use this tension in China’s foreign policy as a lens through which to interrogate representations of the ‘liberal international order’, leading to a *disarticulation* of the concept. This lens reveals, as through a mirror, elements of liberal hegemony which are effaced from accounts of the ‘liberal international order’: in particular, the centrality of the global South to liberal hegemony, and also the

essential role of discursive and ideological power within hegemony.

1.2 The argument in brief

While this thesis makes no claims for a completely smooth consistency within China's foreign policy formation, it argues that the apparent 'contradiction' in China's policies towards the 'liberal international order' noted by scholars and commentators, is not a contradiction at all. Rather than reflecting some ambiguity or indecision within its policies, China's combination of active compliance and outright contestation is in fact consistent with its counterhegemonic project. This thesis argues that a close examination of China's engagement in the international illuminates the concept of the 'liberal international order', revealing some deep fault lines in the way in which it has been conceptualised, whether in Liberal and English School literatures, or those which are more critical. This thesis thus proposes to examine the concept of the 'liberal international order' through the lens of China's contestation, producing a clearer conceptualisation of what it is with which China is compliant, and what it is that China is challenging, bringing discourse power and the global South as crucial underpinnings of hegemony into focus.

Using this lens of observing China's compliance and contestation leads, in the first instance, to the rejection of the concept of 'liberal international order', on the ground that it is, in fact, an ideology-serving fusion, or articulation (Hall, 2018, p. 235), of two distinct concepts, and that it is, moreover, analytically obfuscating. China's apparently paradoxical approach reveals that there is a sharp difference between

‘international order’¹, and the (Western²-led) ‘liberal ordering project’³, which this thesis understands in Gramscian hegemonic terms. A close examination reveals that China is at least as compliant as the United States is towards *international order*, while its contestation is largely reserved for Western-led liberal hegemony. Furthermore, it argues that the discursive articulation of ‘international order’ with the liberal ordering project is, itself, a *hegemonic* move: it works to present as common sense the idea that Western (discursively constructed as ‘liberal’) leadership within the international system is fundamental to international order itself. This, in turn, discursively frames a challenge to Western leadership as necessarily ‘*illiberal*’, and, furthermore, ‘*disordering*’. An

¹ International order is understood as existing when actors share common understandings of rules and practices which govern their interactions, through stable patterns of relations and practices. International order is emergent from the social interactions of actors, rather than something that is deliberately designed, created, and owned by a single dominant actor or group of actors: it is more than simple institutional design. While it is, naturally, subject to international hierarchies and power relations, it is not dependent on any given configuration of power for its continued existence.

² This thesis recognises the ambiguity of the term ‘West’, agreeing with Gideon Rachman that it is ‘defined more by ideas than actual geography’ (Rachman, 2022), without a fixed or unchanging ‘membership’. It is used throughout the thesis to designate liberal-democratic states – including as a core, the US, much of Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Japan – but also non-state organisations representing the same interests and ideas, such as the OECD, Amnesty International, the IMF and World Bank. It also recognises that the ‘West’ is crucially underpinned by US material power, while not necessarily being strictly aligned with US foreign policy objectives. At times this thesis refers to the ‘global North’, when juxtaposed with the ‘global South’: this term is treated as equivalent to the category of the ‘West’.

³ Unlike ‘international order’, which is emergent and not authored, an international ‘ordering project’ is a hegemonic formation produced by, and in the service of, particular international interest groups, using their power to determine the *terms of the international* in various material and ideational ways, as explored by this thesis. It is both the product of, and productive of, international hierarchies. The ‘liberal ordering project’, as used here, is synonymous with ‘liberal hegemony’, or more particularly, ‘Western-led liberal hegemony’, as used throughout the thesis. How this project relates to ‘liberalism’ as an ideology or body of ideas is explored in later chapters.

additional, highly productive implication of the articulated concept of the 'liberal international order'⁴, is that the international order was designed and built by Western (liberal) powers; this works to efface the historical and ongoing role of less powerful actors, including those from the global South, in the formation of international order. *Disarticulating* the concepts of 'liberal hegemony' from 'international order' means that one can recognise that what might be a 'crisis' for Western-led liberalism and its international authority, is not, *necessarily*, a crisis of 'international order'

This thesis then goes on to use the lens of China's contestation to reveal further aspects of the Western ordering project, which are obscured or neglected by most conceptualisations of the 'liberal international order'. Firstly, China is targeting the language of the international, through practices explicitly designed to increase its own 'discourse power': this project highlights the role of discourse and ideology in Western-led liberal hegemony, in line with Gramscian ideas. Particular discourses are used to establish a 'standard of civilisation' within international society, through which actors can be deemed to have earned 'membership' through compliance, and which brings stigmatisation and sanctions of different sorts to players who do not comply, and thus remain, in essential ways, 'outside' of the order. China's counterhegemonic project, therefore, is an ideological / discursive contestation over this 'commonsensical' representation of the international as a bounded society led by 'liberal' actors, in which it is cast as 'outside' of the order, and thus a 'threat' to order.

⁴ Given that this thesis rejects the concept of the 'liberal international order', any reference to it should be understood to be referring to particular discourse(s), which the thesis seeks to expose.

Secondly, China's emphasis on 'relationality' as a conceptual and ethical basis for (Chinese-led) international order, and the attention it pays to instrumental relationship building across the global South, illuminates the complex webs of relations between stronger and weaker actors through which Western hegemony has been built and reproduced over time. The North-South relational webs which constitute liberal hegemony are notably obscured in socially 'thick' accounts of the 'liberal international order', which emphasise the core Western *membership* of this order. Gramsci's conception of hegemony draws attention to the need for those in a position of power to produce consent among weaker actors: power is, thus, *necessarily relational*, if it is to be hegemonic.

Thirdly, the ways in which China is using Development⁵ practices across the global South to increase its own international power and influence, and establish new hierarchies, bring to the foreground the enduring role of the global South in the (re)production of Western hegemony. Development practices have been essential in binding the South to the wider Western political and economic project, where, in line with Gramscian thought, more powerful states are seen to be making important concessions to subaltern actors, thus legitimising this inherently hierarchical relationship. Each of these three elements is examined in a different chapter; these chapters each take particular Chinese counter-hegemonic projects and practices, and show how they cast a different light on the Western ordering project, allowing for an understanding of it which stands in contrast to dominant conceptualisations of the 'liberal international order'.

⁵ 'Development' as an international practice is written in this way to distinguish it from 'development' as a concept.

This thesis further observes the particular nature of China's counterhegemonic project, which allows for this reflection on the nature of Western hegemony: whilst China explicitly seeks to contest (and indeed replace) Western-led liberal hegemony, representing itself as an essentially different international actor, its counterhegemonic project does not take the form of *rejection* and *revision* as usually understood. In fact, China's contestation takes the form of *mirroring*: in seeking to displace liberal hegemony, it both replicates Western ordering practices and logics, and articulates its 'difference' *through* liberal discourse and practices. China's contention is that the shared international goal of justice, peace and prosperity, embedded within the UN Charter, is being impeded by the 'uncivilised' practices arising from US exceptionalism; and its promise to the global South is that, through its leadership, the dream can be more safely realised. China is thus not *rewriting* the script about the ideational terms of the international, but rather, claiming a more faithful adherence to the text, in effect *writing over* the liberal script. In a direct mirroring of liberal discourse, China is articulating itself as the (subaltern) actor on the 'inside', protecting the rest against the (Western) barbarian 'outside'. This raises the question of whether 'liberal hegemony' could endure, whether or not it is 'Western-led'.

1.3 On the logic of questions

This thesis does not work with conventional scholarly questions of 'why' or 'how possible': instead, it is located in a different logic of questioning, of how a (hegemonic) project is represented, and with what effects. 'Why' questions, with a focus on causal analysis, identify independent and dependent

variables, and the interactions between them, to explain how some event or state of the world comes about. 'How possible' questions explain the conditions of possibility which allow a certain state of the world to emerge; with a focus on the constitution of subjects, or modes of reasoning, for example, these questions are of a more constitutive nature.

In contrast, this thesis situates itself within the IR tradition of subjecting dominant accounts or representations of the world to critical analysis. It is less concerned with explaining the reasons for those representations being adopted, or how they have been constituted over time, than with examining the work that these representations do, how they have been naturalised and thus accepted as commonsense, and their effects. Scholars working in this tradition expose how hegemonic accounts of the world, far from being neutral descriptions, are ideological constructs that mobilise meaning, discursively, in the service of particular identities and interests.

This thesis, therefore, applies this logic of questioning to both the liberal hegemonic project and China's counterhegemonic project; asking how, as ideological representations, these projects work discursively, and with what effects.

1.4 The analytical framework

This thesis is an analysis of the discursive strategies deployed by actors in their contestation of a hegemonic order, and in particular the discursive or ideological elements of that order. The analytical framework reflects the substance of the topic and the kind of questions being asked, discussing Gramscian hegemony, the concept of mirroring, and the methodological approach of the thesis.

1.4.1 On Gramscian hegemony

This thesis has adopted a Gramscian⁶ framework to make sense, both of the (historical) development of Western-led liberal hegemony, and of the (contemporary) moment of its contestation by China. Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony, as a formation produced through a combination of consent and coercion, relies on a sensibility to the fundamental relationship between those in a position of dominance, and those in a subaltern position within the hegemonic formation. This sensibility then allows for a stronger recognition of the claims and agency of the global South in the production of international order and hegemony than that allowed by alternative critical approaches, which have sometimes tended to locate agency and the production of the 'liberal international order' preponderantly with the 'West'.

Furthermore, Gramsci's emphasis on the role of ideology and culture allows for a richer understanding of the nature and emergence of hegemony than accounts, whether Realist or classical Marxist, which attribute dominance simply to material factors. Gramsci gave due recognition to the role of material factors in producing hegemony, but recognised that coercive power alone was insufficient to produce hegemonic rule. Without subaltern consent, there is no hegemony; and this consent requires, in addition to material concessions on the part of the ruling power, the (ideological) production of a 'common sense' legitimacy of rule. Moreover, Gramsci, while acknowledging ideology as an 'instrument of domination',

⁶ The thesis has drawn both on Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, as well as the extensive post-Gramscian literature, including Stuart Hall, Robert Cox, John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge, amongst others.

rejected the simplistic notion of it as the perpetration of a 'willed and knowing deception' by the strong over the weak (Gramsci, 1999, p. 196). Using a Gramscian approach thus entails taking 'liberalism' seriously – not necessarily in terms of its own idealistic self-representation within the concept of the 'liberal international order', and going beyond noting the ('illiberal') contradictions and paradoxes within liberal internationalism as a foreign policy (Hutchings, 2013; Jahn, 2013; Porter, 2020). This thesis does not set out to present an essentialised 'definition' of liberalism – indeed, it is highly aware of its mutability over time and space. However, it broadly associates liberalism with a concern with the rights of the individual, representative government, and the defence of private property; in addition to this, it represents liberalism as the 'constitutive ideology' of self-defining Western states (Jahn, 2013; Bell, 2014). Liberal *ideology*, furthermore, plays an essential ordering role in the production of Western-led hegemony, working as an informal 'standard of civilisation': it is more than just the foreign policy of a single dominant state, and it is not simply a 'euphemism' to disguise the workings of power politics (Porter, 2020). On the contrary, it provides the common-sense terrain within which certain forms or actions and ways of being are defined and naturalised, and transgressions stigmatised.

Finally, the Gramscian approach allows for an understanding of *change*: whilst this thesis accepts the postcolonial account of how the contemporary world has been structured by its colonial past in important ways, it argues that this account cannot explain China's changing self-identity and hegemonic ambitions: China cannot (simply) be understood as a subaltern, postcolonial actor, *resisting* liberal power. While China

continues to embrace its status as a 'developing state', its international discourse clearly articulates its ambitions to lead within the international: its determination to change global power relations are not about 'throwing off the yoke', but about establishing its own international authority. Gramsci's writings were fundamentally concerned with change and contestation, and with strategizing how counterhegemonic contestation should be organised. Using a Gramscian lens, therefore, helps to make sense of China's focus on 'remoulding' international discourse, its concern with a 'relational' approach to the global South, and its emphasis on its ('leading') status as a Development actor providing 'global public goods' across the global South: in Gramscian terms, China is fighting a 'war of position'.

Gramsci's analysis also allows for the possibility of *failure* of both hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects (Gramsci, 2011c, p. 124): first of all, his work recognises the potential for enduring material and coercive power, without the ideological legitimacy which produces hegemony. There is no doubt that, with economic and military power far outstripping that of any other state (including China), as well as the continued dominance of the dollar in global markets, the US remains the strongest state in material terms, thus maintaining the dominance of the West; however, its international *legitimacy* has been at risk for a number of years, suggesting that *Western hegemony* is weakening. On the other hand, the fact that China's counterhegemonic project has taken the form of 'mirroring', replicating liberal practices and discourses, might indicate the enduring strength of liberal hegemony. This further raises the possibility that China's project will fail, and become subsumed within liberal hegemony, its ideas and practices

becoming part of liberal orthodoxy through the process Gramsci termed '*trasformismo*' (Gramsci, 1999, p. 250). Liberalism, after all, is not a fixed, unchanging body of ideas, but evolutionary and shapeshifting over time (Flockhart, 2013; Jahn, 2013; Bell, 2014). This process is distinct from the idea of 'socialisation' as proposed within IR scholarship, whereby it is the 'rising power' which is expected to change and evolve to fit in with a given ideational system.

A Gramscian sensibility might, thus, emphasise the capacity of hegemonic projects to endure, in part through this process of *trasformismo*, whereby counterhegemonic ideas are absorbed within the hegemonic system, allowing it to persist. China's counterhegemonic ideas, articulated through a mirroring of liberal language and practices, could, therefore, simply become part of a 'transformed', yet still hegemonic, liberal orthodoxy.

1.4.2 On mirroring

This thesis uses the concept of mirroring in two senses: as a methodological device, and also as an empirical observation – for example, of how China produces an annual report detailing human rights abuses in the United States. Drawing as it does on key liberal norms and values, this thesis reads this behaviour as part of China's discursive contestation of liberal hegemony, within the hegemonic structure of liberal values.

Firstly, the thesis uses China's counterhegemonic contestation methodologically, as a lens, which reveals, as if in a mirror, features of the Western-led liberal hegemony which are obscured by the conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order'. Each chapter therefore uses China's counterhegemonic practices and discourses to provide an insight into a different aspect of the liberal hegemonic project. This usage of

‘mirroring’ has precedents in scholarship which seeks to destabilise hegemonic, Eurocentric accounts of world politics: for example, Sandra Halperin uses an account of the contemporary ‘Third World’ to reflect an alternative narrative of European history and the expansion of capitalism, from standard representations which are premised on the idea of an essential difference between Europe and the Third World (Halperin, 1997). Likewise, Miguel Angel Centeno and Fernando López-Alvez propose the use of Latin American experiences to inform social theoretical concepts to allow for better, more universal, grand theorising (Centeno and López-Alves, 2001). Simultaneously, such approaches also raise important political questions about knowledge production and its role in the reproduction of international hierarchies.

The second use of mirroring in this thesis is an empirical observation: while China articulates its antipathy for ‘Western liberalism’, and in particular for its universalising civilisational discourse and hierarchical practices, this thesis observes that in important ways, China is replicating liberal hegemonic practices and logics, and in its ‘Discourse Power’ project, it is in fact mirroring liberal universalism. In so far as any attention has been paid to this engagement by China, either within academia or the policy world, it has generally been interpreted as an attempt at (at least partial) *compliance* with international norms and practices (Kent, 2002; Xiaoyu, 2012; Johnston, 2014). However, it is clear from China’s discourse that the intention is, in fact, *agonistic*, which leads to a question about the role of mirroring in counterhegemonic contestation.

This thesis proposes three possible (not necessarily mutually exclusive) interpretations for this agonistic mirroring. The first is to read this mirroring as a deliberate choice, in line with

anticolonial and postcolonial literature on 'mimicry'. An early example of this is Hamdam Khodja's anticolonial treatise, *The Mirror*, published in Paris in 1833, in which he attempted to reason with the French state, using Enlightenment arguments, to withdraw from Algeria (Khodja, 2003). In some respects similar to the contemporary Chinese reports on human rights in the US, Khodja held up a mirror to France's violent colonisation of Algeria, and pointed to its inconsistency with the Enlightenment principles France claimed to promote. Homi Bhabha more recently developed the idea of subaltern mimicry as anticolonial resistance, which he argued was designed to undermine colonial authority through hybrid contamination, and this has been picked up and developed by later postcolonial and critical scholars (Ling, 2002; Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007; Bhabha, 2012). This literature is further drawn on to explain Russia's international behaviour, which subverts liberal authority through a hybridity of 'substantive mimicry' combined with (often violent) deviant behaviour, with the suggestion that Russia embodies the 'trickster' (Morozov, 2015; Owen, Heathershaw and Savin, 2018; Kurowska and Reshetnikov, 2021; Eller, 2023). However, to read China's mirroring as 'subaltern resistance' risks overlooking a fundamental fact about China's foreign policy: it does not simply want to *disrupt* the authority of Western-led liberal hegemony, but to *replace* it. Chinese discourses indicate that its counterhegemonic project envisages a world in which China is the leader, thus guaranteeing 'order' within the international system - and it is articulating this ambition through the discourses and practices of the hegemonic system that it seeks to replace. An alternative interpretation of mirroring as a deliberate, albeit contingent, counterhegemonic strategy, is suggested by historical examples of hegemonic transition, whereby new regimes draw on the

value systems of replaced regimes to emphasise stability, continuity, and legitimacy. Examples of this include the Ptolemaic Greeks and (pre-Christian) Romans, who absorbed the gods and religious practices of conquered peoples into their religious pantheons.

While this thesis observes that some instances of Chinese 'mirroring' are clearly part of a deliberate and knowing strategy, there are other instances where it appears to be more inadvertent. China discursively represents itself as entirely and categorically different from the West, which it seeks to 'other' through these discourses; however, at the same time, this thesis observes, it is in fact replicating many of the logics, practices, and discourses that have been fundamental to the production of liberal hegemony. This suggests a different understanding of mirroring within counterhegemonic struggle. This final possibility for interpreting China's mirroring is suggested by a Gramscian understanding of hegemony: that China is in some way structurally bound to operate discursively, even when dissenting, within parameters set by liberal hegemony, in a way that reflects the enduring strength of this hegemony. This suggests that any predictions of success for China's counterhegemonic project might be untimely - and further raises the question of whether *liberal* hegemony could endure, whether or not it remains 'Western-led'.

1.4.3 On discourse analysis as a methodology

Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony highlights the role of ideology in reproducing relations of domination and subordination. The concept of 'discourse' does not feature in his analysis; however, while recognising the important differences between ideology and discourse, this thesis draws on the (Gramsci-inspired) works of Stuart Hall, Trevor Purvis and Alan

Hunt which show how they can be understood together, with discursive practices producing ideological effects (Purvis and Hunt, 1993; Hall, 2018).

It is important to note at the outset the ways in which discussion of discursive power – what Gramsci terms ideology, culture, or commonsense – has changed over time. In the work of neo- or post-Gramscian scholars such as Hall, analysis of the relations between meaning and power – the core problematic of ideology as understood by Gramsci – has shifted from ideology as a relatively coherent set of ideas or beliefs, to discourse as a structure of meaning in use and the analysis of representational practices. Both strands can be found in Gramsci's work, and many of those who have applied him to the analysis of IR, such as Robert Cox or William Robinson, continue to adopt the former conception. In contrast, other scholars, such as Jutta Weldes, adopt a more structural understanding of meaning and its relationship with power, closer to Barnett and Duvall's account of discursive power, and it is this latter conception which is adopted here. On this view, analysis of hegemony is focused on how dominant or hegemonic accounts of the world are produced and their effects. There is less emphasis on tracing these representations to a particular actor or set of interests, although such analysis is not precluded. The aim is rather to show what such representations do – such as the taken-for-granted claims that a 'liberal international order' exists, with boundaries that somehow exclude actors like China. Questions of hegemony and the role of discursive practices in relation to it, are thus redefined in a structural rather than an agentic, or subject-centred way.

An attention to ideology and discourse, through discourse analysis, is therefore essential for understanding hegemonic

and counterhegemonic projects. Discourse analysis highlights different representations of the (international) social world, in which power relations, as well as binary categories such as 'developed' and 'underdeveloped', 'North' and 'South', as well as the 'inside' and 'outside' of international society, are naturalised, becoming common sense (Doty, 1996; Weldes, 1996; Milliken, 1999). It also draws attention to the articulation of 'liberal' with 'international order' (Hall, 2018, p. 235), and the productive role this plays in reproducing hegemonic social relations.

Discourse analysis thus draws attention to how meaning relates to power and its effects. It also, importantly, highlights contestation over meaning, which, in turn, leads back to Gramscian ideas about counterhegemonic projects: Purvis and Hunt, following Laclau and Mouffe, emphasise that discursive formations are never 'closed' and complete, but open and subject to contention and destabilisation (Purvis and Hunt, 1993; Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). This contestation in the form of alternative discursive projects exposes, and thus disrupts, 'common' sense, with *disarticulating* effects, and, where successful, *rearticulation* (Purvis and Hunt, 1993; Weldes, 1996). Paying attention, therefore, to China's counterhegemonic project, with its competing discursive formations, is highly revealing of the ways in which liberal hegemony has been produced through discourses and practices, and its power relations thus discursively naturalised. This thesis uses China's counterhegemonic project, therefore, as a discursive 'lens' to illuminate certain features of Western-led liberal hegemony, such as the role of liberal norms as 'standards of civilisation', and the centrality of the global South,

which are overlooked in dominant articulations of the ‘liberal international order’.

1.4.4 On primary source selection

While this thesis employs an interpretivist approach, and the claims that it makes are not concerned with revealing material ‘truths’ or testable causal hypotheses, in seeking to make an argument about the importance of representations within hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects, it retains a concern with transparency in its selection and use of primary source material (Moravcsik, 2014; Knotter, 2022). Research was, therefore, structured in a framework that selected ‘authoritative’⁷ statements of an official position, relating to understandings of the liberal / international order: for example, international order itself, ideas relating to its ‘liberal’ character such as human rights and democracy, and the global South / Development. A lesser emphasis was placed on economic and security issues, as these are not central themes for this enquiry. This framework also took *time* into account, recognising the role of both geopolitical and domestic political change, in the development of official positions on these matters. In addition to governmental-level discourse, the thesis also pays attention to both academic and media representations of these themes, in recognition of the co-productive relationship of scholarly, media, and policy-related thinking. However, while important discursive insights can be gained from these sources, they do not have the same ‘authority’ as official

⁷ By ‘authoritative’ is meant a statement issuing from an official source, or which can reasonably be understood to have an official stamp of approval from the relevant political leadership.

statements, and thus any inferences from such sources are treated with more caution.

The thesis begins with an exploration of the concept of the 'liberal international order', to make sense of how it has achieved its 'common-sensical' status within Western policy and scholarly discourses. *Self*-understandings of the 'liberal international order' are examined to expose the historical contingency of its claimed features, and the ways in which they have been combined to produce a naturalised sense of the 'liberal international order' as a 'society' of Western, 'liberal' states; while the rest of the world is represented as 'outside' of this society, and therefore either irrelevant to the production of order, or else potential sites of 'disorder'. As well as the scholarly literature expounding the conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order', therefore, this thesis draws on primary sources such as key US and UK government documents (including National Security Strategies), as well as speeches by prominent policy makers, to explore these 'self-understandings'. Sources were selected based on reference to international order, and in particular, representations of China in relation to order. The way in which these representations have changed over time as a result of shifting geopolitical conditions is highlighted.

In addition to analysing 'liberal' discursive formations which have been instrumental in the production and reproduction of Western-led liberal hegemony, this thesis also focuses on discourses from the Chinese state, both as they critique hegemonic liberal discourse, and as they set out the Chinese 'alternative'. As this thesis examines in Chapter Four, 'Discourse Power' forms an important part of China's grand strategy; the study therefore focuses on the ways in which China seeks to

deploy its discursive power to produce representations of 'China', as well as public discourses of the international: it is trying to change the 'common sense' of international discourse.

While this thesis occasionally examines Chinese-language sources which have been translated into English from Mandarin by other analysts, such as a speech by President Xi Jinping to a 2013 Communist Party of China (CPC) meeting, for the most part it deals with official Chinese discourse which is published in English by the government. There is a critical lack of transparency with translated sources: first of all, because of a potential lack of availability of *official* (Mandarin) transcripts of such speeches, and secondly, because of the potential loss, or even distortion, of meaning within any translation. Furthermore, this thesis takes the view that when official Chinese government sources are published in the English language, they have a particular discursive intent to communicate in the international public arena, and shape public perception, which is highly relevant for the purposes of this study. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to give an insight into the nuances of the process by which a particular statement came to be chosen, or the alternative positions which were considered and rejected. However, the fact that a statement was officially published, as the authoritative position of the Chinese government, makes this statement a legitimate object of enquiry, focused as this thesis is on the representations made by China as a counterhegemonic actor.

The main focus of this thesis is on China's foreign policy since the presidency of Xi Jinping, which began in 2013, although in places a more historical focus has been taken,

particularly in Chapters Five and Six, with changes and continuities highlighted. It has drawn on speeches by key policy makers, and in particular by Xi Jinping, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, to international fora such as the United Nations, the Belt and Road Forum, or the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), as well as communiqués and action plans from such meetings. It also draws on key documents, such as White Papers and policy papers, produced in English and published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) or the State Council Information Office (SCIO), the key arms of the Chinese government for these outputs in English (Bandurski, 2021). The speeches and documents used were selected on the basis of reference to the key areas of focus of this thesis, largely relating to understandings of the ‘liberal international order’: for example, international order, human rights, democracy, Development (and in particular, relations with Africa), civilisation, and ‘discourse power’ itself. The MFA and the SCIO are the primary voices for these topics. As the thesis has not focused on specific security issues, except in passing in Chapter Five, it has not drawn extensively on other potential sources such as the Ministry of National Defense or the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). It has also not engaged with such debates as can be expected within any government between foreign policy and defence departments on such security issues.

The processes and hierarchies of China’s foreign policy establishment (operating at both a governmental and Party level) are known to be labyrinthine, and in the past, this multiplicity of actors has led to a lack of clarity of messaging (Jones and Hameiri, 2021). However, Xi Jinping has taken a higher degree of formal power within both Party and

government structures, particularly with regard to foreign policy issues, than was held by either of his two predecessors. This has led to the greatest personification of foreign policy since 1989, with the implication that the primary sources published by Chinese government departments drawn on by this thesis, can be reasonably understood as consistent with 'Xi Jinping Thought', and thus, aligned with China's current foreign policy and the ways in which Xi intends China to represent itself internationally (Jakobson and Manuel, 2016; Taylor and Garlick, 2025).

While much of the Chinese discourse analysed in this thesis emanates in a deliberate, centralised way from the Chinese government, in the form of official pronouncements, reports, speeches and White Papers, the Discourse Power project is also diffused, and so other sources, such as (state owned) media reports, think tank papers, and the output of the Chinese School of IR are also included. While these non-governmental sources do not have the authority that the output from the MFA, for example, possesses, there are important reasons for considering them as providing at least some insight into official positions on the external projection of China.

Under Hu Jintao's presidency (2003-2013), when 'international discourse power' / soft power began to be spoken of within China, there was a considerable investment in the international reach of China's state-run media companies, with a view to promoting a positive view of China internationally. However, the sense of discursive stigmatisation, or 'victimhood', at the hands of the West, articulated as the 'third affliction', had increased by the time Xi assumed power (Lyhne-Gold, 2024). This led in 2013 to the release by the Party General Office of the so-called 'Seven Don't Speaks', banning discussion of certain issues such as

constitutional democracy, 'universal'/Western values, freedom of the press, and civil society (*Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation*, 2013). Later the same year, Xi gave an important speech at a conference on propaganda and ideology, in which he placed significant emphasis on the 'Discourse Power' project, calling for an increase in 'vigilance' regarding compliance within both state and non-state sources to CPC orthodoxy in representations of China, particularly externally ('Xi Jinping's 19 August speech revealed? (Translation)', 2013; Bandurski, 2018). Since 2013, therefore, there has been a significant reduction in the scope for a plurality of views in the representation of China, either from official bodies, or from those in the 'private' space.

The implication of this is that academia, and in particular the emerging 'Chinese School' of IR, becomes an important source for understanding (at least indirectly) Chinese thinking about its international position – certainly more so than the output of the US IR establishment, despite its historically close relationship to government (Hoffmann, 1977). This Chinese School was first founded in 2000, its intention being to counter perceived Eurocentric accounts of the international (Lu *et al.*, 2024). It is clear that, in representing China as a particular kind of actor within its counterhegemonic project, the Chinese School of IR can at least in part (and particularly since 2013) be interpreted as playing a role within China's broader Discourse Power project. The increased 'vigilance' on orthodoxy by the CPC also means that think tanks within China provide a reflection of official positions in their representations of China's foreign policy. The work of scholars published in non-academic media in China has therefore also been (cautiously) drawn on, where

it might allow an insight into official discourse on any of the key topics of this thesis, as set out earlier.

1.4.5 On the use of empirical cases

A key argument of this thesis is that, while it is (productively) effaced from most mainstream representations of the 'liberal international order', the global South plays a fundamental role in the production and contestation of international order. This claim is made in reference to the emphasis China has placed on Developmental relations with the South, through 'South-South cooperation', in its counterhegemonic project: it is notable that China continues to identify itself as part of the 'global South', and, furthermore, as a 'developing' state. The thesis argues that China's explicit emphasis on the 'South' highlights the historical and contemporary importance of the South to liberal hegemony. This thesis fully recognises the lack of homogeneity within the category of the 'global South': there are vast and important variations in terms of economic, cultural and (geo)political factors, and it is not possible to do justice to these within this study. Therefore, while reference is made to the 'global South', broadly understood, the particular focus of this thesis in illustrating this argument is Africa: China's relationship with Africa is explored side by side with an analysis of historical and contemporary Western relations with Africa.

'Africa' is not, however, used in this thesis as a classical 'case study', where cases are chosen to 'stand for' a more universal claim with generalisability (Gerring, 2009; Allarakia, 2022). The importance of 'Africa' is not in the way that it is representative of the West's or China's relations with the South more generally, but in the *particularity* of Africa both for the West and for China, and also, for its *lacking* the particularity which the US's 'neighbourhood' of Latin America, or China's

'neighbourhood' of Asia possess. China's engagement with 'Africa' is an integral part of its global public representation of itself.

Furthermore, the focus on Africa in this thesis does not intend to represent the African continent as a homogenous unit. While it might have been an option to have selected individual states within this continent to serve as case studies for understanding the West's and China's relations with Africa, the decision was taken to follow China's lead in the way it refers discursively to 'Africa' within its foreign policy, particularly through its activities with FOCAC, as explored in detail in Chapter Five. Western states have a long history of a particular set of relations within Africa. Likewise, the PRC, from its inception, began a pattern of relations with newly independent African states; which in the contemporary era continue to be the sites of considerable diplomatic, cultural and material investment through initiatives such as FOCAC, the BRI, and more recently, the Global Development Initiative. Africa is more than just the recipient of assistance for China: its 54 states represent an important grouping within the UN, and since the formation of the PRC, China has recognised the importance of this group for its international standing. Using Africa as a deep example therefore allows this thesis to explore and compare (counter) hegemonic relations with the South, without having to account for local and regional hegemonies or spheres of influence.

1.5 The 'liberal international order' refigured

The ubiquity of the concept of the 'liberal international order' within policy discourse and international relations literature is a

relatively recent phenomenon. Interest in the concept of 'liberal international order', both at an academic and policy-making level, has ebbed and flowed in the decades since 1945, and it is notable that the periods of greatest focus coincide with times of insecurity or uncertainty for liberal hegemony. For example, in the late 1960s, at the time of the collapse of the Bretton Woods system, the end of the Vietnam War, and the rise of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) symbolising the global South's resistance to Northern hegemony, a number of academic and policy-focused works emerged, articulating the 'liberal order' with defined boundaries and a clear sense of purpose, albeit understood in purely economic terms (Hayek, 1966; Barran, Johnson and Cromer, 1969; Krasner, 1977). In the 1990s, with the 'unipolar' moment and the sense of uncertainty brought by the sudden geopolitical changes, the concept of liberal / international order was revived, with new normative underpinnings and a focus on the central role of the United States (Nye, 1992; Latham, 1994, 1997; Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999). Following the events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, together with the debacle in Libya, academic and policy-facing interest in the concept of 'liberal international order' expanded significantly, led, in particular, by the writing of John Ikenberry (Ikenberry, 2006, 2009, 2011b, 2013, 2018, 2020). With the ongoing geopolitical disruption following these wars, a series of economic crises, and the international disunity manifested over the Russia-Ukraine war and Israel's war in Gaza, the West's hegemonic status is more uncertain now, arguably, than at any time since the Vietnam War. This burgeoning literature increasingly focused, therefore, on the 'crisis' of the 'liberal order', debating the endogenous and exogenous sources of threat to the order. The sense of 'crisis' within the 'liberal order' thus appears endemic to it,

reappearing as it does at different points in its history - whilst always being treated as a particular moment, with an amnesiac disregard for previous 'crises'. This essential sense of vulnerability may in large part be due to the many deep contradictions within liberal internationalism (Jahn, 2013), but is also a fundamental aspect of a hegemonic system. Duncan Bell notes, for example, that the British Empire, even at its zenith in the late nineteenth century, was also beset by a sense of permanent crisis, reflected in the imperial discourse of the time (Bell, 2019, p. 171). An attempt to understand its 'crisis' is thus very much at the heart of most analysis of 'liberal international order'.

Ikenberry's conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order' is distinctly spatially bounded: it is 'anchored in a coalition of leading liberal democracies' (Ikenberry, 2020), which he has, most recently, described as the 'global west' (Ikenberry, 2024) – a geographically expansive, and yet exclusive, concept. There is thus a strong sense of the borders of the order, both geographically and normatively. These borders, together with the fundamental architecture of the system, while far from static across time and context, provide an illusion of solidity to this conception of the 'liberal international order'. The concept of the 'liberal international order' draws a line, therefore, between the liberal and the non-liberal world. It also, however, works to draw a line between the North and the South: by crediting the production of 'international order' to the 'liberal' world, the role of Southern actors in the historical and ongoing production of international order is effaced (Tourinho, 2021). The implication of this is a correlation with narratives of 'civilisation' being the property of the 'West', to be disseminated through the periphery through both colonial

practices and post-independence 'Modernization'. This representation of 'liberal international order' which not only excludes the non-liberal, but also occludes Southern agency, is, this thesis argues, itself a productive element of the Western ordering project, reinforcing the hierarchical line drawing that is fundamental to liberal internationalism.

A key observation that emerges from studying China's counterhegemonic discourse is that, contrary to how it presents itself, the 'LIO' is not co-extensive or synonymous with the international order. This perspective is reinforced when, as Chapter 3 argues, it is demonstrated that key elements of the 'liberal order' – on its own understanding – are not the product of a liberal international community centred on the North Atlantic, but rather emerge out of long-standing relations between global North and South. Against dominant accounts of the 'liberal international order' which stress its boundedness, what China's discourse makes clear is that international order is wider and more encompassing than the Liberal account recognises. Drawing on the rich literature on international order, this thesis understands international order as existing when actors share common understandings of rules and practices which govern their interactions, through stable patterns of relations and practices. International order is emergent from the social interactions of actors, rather than something that is deliberately designed, created, and owned by a single dominant actor or group of actors: it is more than simply institutional design. While it is, naturally, subject to international hierarchies and power relations, it is not dependent on any given configuration of power for its continued existence.

This thesis argues that the concept of 'liberal international order' is doing a lot of ideological work. The yoking of the concept of 'international order' with 'liberalism' is not neutral and arbitrary: this articulation implies the necessity of liberal (Western) domination of the international system in order to prevent the risk of *disorder*, presumably at the hands of *il*liberal actors who sit outside this order. The fact that this term has become so ubiquitous, including within the critical literature, shows that this combined concept has become self-evident and natural, becoming part of the commonsense of IR discourse. This, according to Gramsci, is exactly how hegemony works, representing the particular as universal, and through repetition gaining acceptance, even for dissenting actors.

Dominant accounts of the 'liberal international order' call to mind Jacques Lacan's description of the 'mirror stage', whereby a physically uncoordinated, weak being (an infant, in his work) sees in a mirror its reflection, projecting coherence; and this moment of *méconnaissance* (misrecognition) is fortifying, producing a sense of identity which is, in important ways, at odds with reality. This *Gestalt* (or sense of settled 'wholeness') has 'formative effects' in creating a 'mirage [of] the maturation of [the subject's] power', as a complete being (Lacan, 2004, p. 3). Invoking the 'liberal international order' thus serves an essential ordering purpose, particularly at moments of geopolitical uncertainty: articulating 'liberal order' as a coherent, normatively salient entity provides a stabilising function for both scholarly and policy discourse.

Méconnaissance plays a further role when it comes to (mis)understanding the nature of the 'crisis': Slavoj Žižek expands on Lacan's work on its productive power, in which 'the Truth arises from misrecognition': the 'effect ... precedes its

cause ..., ... precisely “bringing about the past”. This is illustrated by Žižek through the Oedipus myth: Oedipus’s ‘misrecognition’ of the prophecy that he would murder his father and marry his mother leads him to take evasive actions that ultimately bring about the truth of the prediction (Žižek, 1989, pp. 56–58). The conflation (in IR literature and Western policy discourse) of the crisis of liberal *hegemony* as a ‘crisis’ of the ‘liberal *international order*’ risks producing a similar incoherence in Western policy responses which, themselves, risk deepening the damage to liberal authority, while also potentially posing a threat to international order.

Academic and policy-oriented articulations of the ‘liberal international / rules-based order’, should therefore be understood ideologically, in the ways that they provide a reassuring and fortifying illusion of coherence, whilst producing and reinforcing spatial and temporal hierarchies in the international. The concept of the ‘liberal international order’, through this repeated articulation, becomes part of the ‘common sense’ of the hegemonic international social order.

Most analyses of hegemony and hegemonic orders adopt a state-centric approach, emphasising the preponderant power of the United States. This thesis works with a more diffused notion of hegemony which it terms ‘Western-led liberal hegemony’; while this is crucially underpinned by the material power of the US, it is more than simply a direct product of US foreign policy. Multiple actors, both state and non-state, are involved in this project, including the European Union (EU), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and NGOs such as Amnesty International. Liberal hegemony is manifested in two important realms of the international: the promotion and maintenance of globalised

capitalism, and the promotion of liberal values as the essential 'standard of civilisation' in international relations. The apotheosis of this Western-led liberal hegemony was, therefore, the Washington Consensus, whereby neoliberal economic reforms and 'liberal' political and cultural practices were imposed across the global South in return for development assistance. The Gramscian perspective is fundamental to understanding the nature of this hegemony, how it is produced and maintained, and also how it is contested.

For Gramsci, a hegemonic order, as opposed to rule by coercion, is one that is accepted by both strong and weak actors as legitimate, and this legitimacy ultimately derives from a shared goal, or 'collective will' (Gramsci, 2011c, pp. 246–249). In the current hegemonic global order, arguably, this shared goal, or vision of the 'good life' is that which is embedded within the UN Charter: essentially, international justice, peace and prosperity (*United Nations Charter*, 1945; Flockhart, 2023). The mechanisms of hegemony must all relate back to this, and be accepted as promoting international justice and fairness, in order to be recognised as legitimate (Reich and Lebow, 2014, p. 17; Lebow, 2018; Lebow and Zhang, 2022). Robert Cox argues that world hegemony is based on a matrix of power, ideology, and institutions; and 'expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behaviour for states.' Furthermore, it is hierarchical, and it is fundamentally grounded in social relations. Institutions reflect and reinforce this hierarchy, as well as performing the ideological role of defining and imposing policy guidelines and social and economic orientation, in line with hegemonic interests (Cox, 1981, 1983).

Agnew and Corbridge, expanding on Cox and Gramsci, underline that 'perhaps the most important feature of this perspective lies in its emphasis on the routinized and incorporated nature of the practices and ideological representations that give an order its "normality" and "commonsensical" acceptability to the actors involved in it' (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995, p. 17). As Cox puts it, international organisations, as well as 'legitimat[ing] the norms of the world order', also 'co-opt the elites from peripheral countries and ... absorb counter-hegemonic ideas.' The ideological basis for hegemonic order is not, therefore, stable and static; nor, necessarily, is it entirely coherent. Ernesto Laclau argues that this lack of smoothness is 'intrinsic to the hegemonic operation', because '[a] power which is total is no power at all': 'the interaction between antagonistic wills' is fundamental to the hegemonic relation. Agnew and Corbridge further capture this in their description of geopolitical orders as being 'always partial and precarious, achieved through social practice rather than imposed through a transhistorical logic' (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995, p. 18). Hegemony is 'never complete and often resisted, it represents the binding together of people, objects, and institutions around cultural norms and standards that emanate over time and space from seats of power ... occupied by authoritative actors' (Agnew, 2005, p. 2). The social practices of Western-led liberal hegemony, which importantly include the complex relations woven between global North and South through norm-laden practices including Development, therefore continually reproduce this hegemonic formation and give it the illusion of coherence and normative salience.

The term 'global South' has become increasingly common since 1989 to designate the 'other' of the liberal hegemonic project

(previously represented by the 'East'), and since then it has displaced the designation of the 'Third World': the region of the world that requires the 'support' of the 'developed' world. It is, therefore, 'a symbolic designation with political implications' (Grovogui, 2011). Critical scholars have interrogated this concept, uncovering its social, cultural, and political loadings, and the hegemonic discursive power behind its use. Levander and Mignolo, for example, stress the role of conceptualising space in this way in 'systems of knowledge' and 'ways of knowing', arguing that 'the global south is only understood in relation to the global north, both entangled in long lasting historical relations of Western imperial expansion (Levander and Mignolo, 2011). Another way of understanding the global South is as a 'movement' based on contestation of hegemonic / colonial power, as expressed by Siba Grovogui: it is '... a multifaceted movement that underscores the need for a postcolonial international community of interest ... in an international order free of the institutional legacies of colonialism' (Grovogui, 2011). The global South, therefore, is less a precise spatial designation, than an ideological product (and contestation) of historical and contemporary (hegemonic) power, applied to an imprecise geography.

Because the ordering practices which produce liberal hegemony have the quality of 'common sense' and 'normality', it is difficult to recognise them for what they are, in their performative role. This thesis proposes, therefore, to 'reverse the perspective', and to identify them through China's counterhegemonic project. It focuses on certain emphases in China's foreign policy to illuminate the contours of liberal hegemony: the first of these is its focus on 'discourse power' and attempts to 'remould' liberal norms such as human rights and democracy; secondly, the

prominence given in its policies and discourse to the concept of 'relationality'; and thirdly, its work in Development in the global South. Through its policies, practices and articulations, China explicitly sets out both its essential difference from the West, and its own claims to 'universality' through new cultural norms and standards, underpinned by its own growing material power. It is on this basis that this thesis recognises China as making a (counter)hegemonic challenge: it is not simply resisting or attempting to disrupt Western-led liberal hegemony, but aiming to supplant it.

1.6 Chapter outline

Chapter Two examines the scholarly literature which is responsible for the discursive representation of the 'liberal international order' (LIO) as the production and property of the United States and its allies. It begins by analysing the concept of 'international order' itself, and the way in which it has been represented in different literatures, in order to make sense of how 'liberalism' has been articulated into it. The concept of the 'LIO' is then traced through different international relations (IR) literatures – mainstream, critical, and global – showing both the ideological nature of this concept, as well as its obfuscating effects, within both mainstream and non-mainstream / non-Western international relations texts. This obfuscation is especially highlighted in discussions of the 'paradox' of China's compliance and contestation towards the 'LIO', which are examined next, before considering explanations of China's rise within power transition theory and more recent literature on 'status'. Finally, the chapter turns to the concept of 'hegemony': first discussing, and then rejecting, non-Gramscian

conceptualisations of hegemony, before setting out the Gramscian understanding of hegemony which is favoured by this thesis. The chapter argues that paying close attention to China's compliance and contestation plays an important role in *disarticulating* the conceptualisation of 'liberal international order', revealing how the articulation has been naturalised within mainstream, critical, and 'global' IR literatures, with productive, ideological effects.

Chapter Three continues the argument that 'international order' is not coterminous with 'liberal hegemony', as is implied in the concept of 'liberal international order'. International order, this thesis argues, is emergent from the interactions of actors in the international, and, while inevitably subject to hierarchical power relations, is not simply the creation of the hegemonic power. This chapter shows firstly that the current international order has been influenced and shaped across the decades by the claims and contestations of subaltern actors, as demonstrated by a number of scholars of the global South. This belies the representation of the 'liberal international order' as the production and property exclusively of the United States and its allies. Furthermore, the chapter applies genealogical analysis to argue that the key features of the current international order, such as multilateralism, sovereignty / sovereign equality, and the institution of the UN, are not distinctively 'liberal', in any meaningful sense. The chapter then makes a close appraisal of China's practices and discourse regarding these key norms and institutions of international order, revealing that it is largely compliant. Where it expresses opposition (or indeed ambivalence), usually relates to its contestation of hegemonic power, rather than the international order itself. China's clear concern is to promote an international

order which allows it space to increase its own power and influence, as part of its counter-hegemonic project: this means contesting some of the power structures that derive from, and continue to foster, US-led hegemony. Using China's 'paradoxical' compliance / contestation as a lens, therefore, is an important means of *disarticulating* the concept of the 'liberal international order', revealing that 'international order' is not coterminous with the Western-led liberal hegemonic project. This project, and the features that are revealed through China's counterhegemonic project, are the subject of the following three chapters.

Chapter Four argues that, while China's focus on 'US hegemony' seems to reflect a state-centred understanding of hegemony in line with Realist and Liberal accounts, it clearly also recognises that ideology and discourse play an essential role in the international, in line with a more diffused, Gramscian understanding of hegemony. This is reflected in the great prominence it gives to what it calls its 'Discourse Power' project, as part of its strategy to build its own international stature under the presidency of Xi Jinping. This project has two main threads: one is to work through media and other communications networks across the world, but particularly through the global South, to present not only a positive view of itself, but also to promulgate its own perspectives on international affairs. In this respect, it is directly mirroring Western media operations from the Cold War onwards. The other thread is arguably more interesting, in that it is deeply revealing of a key element of liberal hegemony which is ignored, and yet, this thesis argues, is obliquely manifested in accounts of the 'liberal international order'. China's Discourse Power project concerns itself with 'remoulding' (or, in the terms of this

thesis, rearticulating) key international normative concepts, such as human rights, democracy, development, security, and international order itself, inserting new meanings into them. This project goes beyond China's earlier strategy of helping it to avoid the stigma of failing to conform: with China's more assertive international strategy under Xi, the intention appears to be to establish China as a *leader* within this normative framework. This draws attention to the role of discourse within hegemonic formations, where *particular* values are represented as *universal*, producing 'standards of civilisation' which allow compliant actors to be accepted as legitimate, and through which non-compliant actors can be stigmatised and disciplined. China openly deplores the 'false universality' of Western-led liberal hegemony (*US Hegemony and Its Perils*, 2023); however, contrary to the general perception in the West, it is not repudiating 'liberal' values such as human rights and democracy. On the contrary, it is embracing them through its Discourse Power project, internalising their continued salience for international legitimacy, while seeking to 'remould' their international understandings, effectively reproducing them in a 'mirror image'. At the same time, it is actively representing itself, particularly across the global South, as an authoritative leader on these values, hosting regular conferences and publishing papers on both human rights and democracy. This undermines the assumption increasingly prevalent in policy circles that China presents a direct threat to liberal norms and values (*National Security Strategy*, 2017; *Integrated Review Refresh: Responding to a more contested and volatile world*, 2023; Mitter, 2022; Singh, 2022).

Chapter Five sets out to interrogate conceptions of the 'liberal international order' based upon English School ideas of

international society, where the 'social' is restricted to the 'core members' of the West. These accounts marginalise the global webs of relations between North and South, or strong and weak actors, which constitute the international. Paying attention to China, however, brings these hegemonic relations into focus. For example, within the emerging Chinese School of IR, there is a concerted project to articulate a distinctively (and, arguably, essentialising) *Chinese* approach to the ontologies and epistemologies of international relations. This has led, inter alia, to the development of the concept of 'relationality' as central to Chinese ways of theorising the international, drawing on the concept of *Guanxi* (Chan, 2009; Qin, 2018; Kavalski, 2021). In turn, this has been reflected in Chinese foreign practices, particularly within the global South, where emphasis is placed on the personal and relational, across multiple dimensions (Benabdallah, 2020b). This focus on relationality within Chinese IR as well as the practices of the Chinese state highlights the centrality of the relations between weaker and stronger actors to *liberal* hegemony: something that is rarely discussed in accounts of the 'liberal international order', but which is fundamental within a Gramscian conceptualisation of hegemony.⁸

The Gramscian conception of hegemony emphasises the role of consent in making power hegemonic: it is not enough to rule through coercion or institutional power. This leads to a distinctly relational ontology of hegemony: international hierarchies are produced and maintained, and, importantly, accepted as *legitimate*, through complex webs of relationships between

⁸ Gramsci's work was, of course, limited to a study of relations within Italy – but his analysis of *domestic* North/South relations, between the 'developed' and 'underdeveloped', within his conceptualisation of hegemony, is illuminating for an understanding of global hegemony.

stronger and weaker actors in the international. Accounts of ordering which emphasise the provision of 'global public goods' as the function of the hegemon (Cooley and Nexon, 2020), without recognising the presence of violence and exploitation within the capitalist system, produce a sanitised account of these relations which do not capture the full picture of how liberal hegemony has been (re)produced. Likewise, accounts which focus only on the imposition of order through violence, suggesting that weaker actors are somehow ideologically 'duped' into consent, give insufficient credit to the flexing of Southern agency through the decision whether or not to accept the legitimacy of hegemony. The multifaceted relations between stronger and weaker actors are crucial to this acceptance. This conceptualisation differs from an English School-influenced account of the 'liberal international order' as a bounded 'society' of like-minded states: understanding Western-led liberal hegemony as constitutively produced out of North/South relations, producing economic, commercial, military, social, educational, and cultural entanglements, highlights that it is, and has always been, a *global* formation.

The crisis of the liberal ordering project can therefore be understood, at least in part, as a question of the West's hegemonic legitimacy, stemming in large part from a crisis in the *relations* between the global North and the global South. While Southern actors were prepared to tolerate periodic rule breaking by the US and its allies, as long as it was still accepted that their global leadership fundamentally led to the common goal of justice, peace and prosperity, this exceptionalism is viewed more negatively when the US in fact appears to be the greatest impediment to reaching this goal. In overlooking the constitutive importance of the global South, and in particular

the necessity of Southern recognition of *legitimacy*, space has opened up for China to build its own relational power, and in doing so is challenging the long-standing international hierarchies in representing itself as a more reliable guardian of global peace and prosperity.

Prominent among China's so-called 'South-South' relational practices, has been those of international aid and Development, and the role of these in producing hegemonic formations is the focus of Chapter Six. Long before it could make any claims to its own 'developed' status, from its earliest years the People's Republic of China (PRC) engaged in Development practices as a way of forming relational bonds based on solidarity with other states in the global South. Under Xi Jinping, however, this practice has taken on a new intensity, with China's economic involvement in the 'development' of weaker actors becoming more and more extensive⁹. With many of these projects coming under the articulation of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), the spatial, relational webs of China's Development programme become highly visible. China has further sought to underline its status as a leading Development actor through the launch of its 'Global Development Initiative'.

China's focus on the importance of Development, both to the formation of (hierarchical) relational networks across the global South, and to the essential status it confers on the donor within international organisations such as the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions, draws attention to the fact that the practice

⁹ While there is some discrepancy between the OECD definition of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and China's aid projects (Bräutigam, 2011a), this thesis takes a broad view of China's aid and Development programme, regardless of the proportion of concessionary loans, and the degree of involvement of government / private sector investment interests.

of Development has, since its emergence, been a key mechanism for Western hegemonic order building. Once again, this is consistent with Gramsci's argument that a hegemonic power must be seen to be making concessions to subaltern actors, in order to produce a sense of legitimate authority (Gramsci, 1999, p. 211). Development and aid have always played this fundamental role within post-1945 liberal hegemony.

However, Gramsci further argued that a '*democratic*' hegemony would seek to develop the subaltern actor in such a way as to allow a '[molecular] transition', whereby the recipient could become 'identical' with the donor (Gramsci, 2011c, p. 345). This thesis argues that this is not, in fact, how Development practices have been intended to work either under Western hegemony, or in their early genesis in colonial practices. Rather, Development practices work to secure the functional and developmental differentiation of the different actors within the capitalist system, yoking the recipient as a 'hinterland' to the metropolitan economy. This thesis further observes that, despite the claimed spatial and temporal alignment captured through the concepts of 'South-South Cooperation' and China's maintenance of its own status as a 'developing state', China's Development practices reflect the same capitalist logic, maintaining the functional and developmental differentiation between donor and recipient. This throws into doubt the question of whether the rise of China and the return of geopolitical competition represents an emancipatory moment for the global South (Gray and Gills, 2016). It further highlights the role of capitalism within liberal hegemony, which, in turn, opens the question of whether China genuinely represents hegemonic change.

Mirroring Hegemony

The thesis concludes with a discussion of its findings and its implications, and some directions for further research.

2. Hegemony in a Chinese mirror: from 'liberal international order' to liberal ordering

2.1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, the concept of the 'liberal international order' has become increasingly prominent in accounts of contemporary world politics, especially in discussion of its 'crisis' – including the rise of China and the implications of that. This is true amongst both political actors, and international relations scholars. Within the international relations literature, reference to the 'liberal international order' is widespread, whether from a Liberal, English School, or Constructivist orientation, in which its fabric and workings (as well as its current 'crisis') are analysed; or from Realist or postcolonial perspectives, in which it is treated more often as an object of critique. Whilst there is a distinct lack of coherence between these different conceptualisations, what they have in common is an assumption that the 'liberal international order' is the deliberate production of the US and its allies (collectively known variously as 'the West', 'the liberal world' or 'the global North'). There is a second, and in some ways more problematic assumption shared across these different approaches: that 'liberal international order' is merely a description of the state of the world: a messy, but nevertheless discernible assemblage of ideas, institutions, and practices.

There is, however, a growing literature that challenges these assumptions, both from the global South, and also within Northern IR scholarship. This literature draws on a shared uncertainty as to the nature, origins, and spatial extent of

'liberal order' to destabilise its settled understanding as a recognisable entity, authored exclusively by liberal states, with borders delineating those who are 'inside' from those who lie 'outside' this order. Scholars have also raised questions about the assumed identity between the 'liberal international order', and 'international order' itself: Michael Barnett, for example, regards the 'LIO' as a 'myth', and Daniel Nexon and Alexander Cooley draw a distinction between the international order, and a hegemonic US liberal project. Global South scholars have long observed this distinction, and it is very much reflected in China's engagement with the liberal project. This chapter builds on this literature to argue that a key element of liberal hegemony is embedded within this very concept of the 'liberal international order': representing the conflation of 'liberal' with 'international order' as natural and common-sensical, with the implication that *liberal* leadership in the international is essential to the maintenance of international *order*. This chapter sets out to substantiate this argument through analysis of the representational practices behind the conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order' within IR literatures.

The concept of the 'liberal international order' (LIO) is generally predicated on a contrast with its 'other', which appears in the literature as both the *opposite* of liberal – i.e., *illiberal*; and entailing the *opposite* of order – *disorder*. The yoking together, or articulation, of 'liberal' with 'order' (and in particular, 'international order') is presented as self-evident and natural, and is rarely interrogated. This literature then, further, takes for granted that the rising power of 'illiberal' states necessarily means a threat to international *order*. While Russia's threat to the LIO has been the subject of much writing around its Ukraine invasions, the rise of China, both through its growing material

power, and also its prominence as an international actor, has provoked increasing anxiety both in Liberal and Realist literatures and within policy making circles. Through the representation of China as the 'other' of the liberal world, and as essentially *external*, or even *antithetical* to international order, a particular self-understanding of the LIO emerges and is reproduced.

In seeking to detach the understanding of international order from conceptualisations of the 'liberal international order', this thesis is not proposing an abstract or apolitical idea of international order: it recognises that international order is essentially contested by a multiplicity of actors, while at the same time, it is fundamentally hierarchical. This contestation does not, however, equate to 'disorder': it is through contestation that the practices and institutions of international order are formed. Furthermore, resisting a conceptualisation based on a (bounded) 'society of states' does not mean a denial of the fundamental social character of international order. Consisting as it does of the relations between states, international order necessarily reflects power asymmetries in the international. The purpose of making this distinction is to help to make sense of China's 'contestation' of the 'liberal international order': what becomes clear when this contestation is examined is that China is not contesting, or threatening, international order itself. That there is a project of contestation is not in doubt: but it is the *liberal ordering project* that is being contested and threatened. This underlines that liberal hegemony, and international order, are not the same thing. China's contestation project not only makes this distinction clear, but it also draws attention to the nature of liberal hegemony, as well as its historical and contemporary

sources. This chapter argues that dominant Liberal accounts of international ordering are based on an elision of different (though necessarily related) phenomena: international *order*, and liberal *ordering*, or hegemony, which this thesis defines in discursive terms, drawing on Gramscian theory.

This chapter is organised in the following way: first, it examines the concept of international order which underpins the representation of the 'LIO'; secondly, it looks at how the 'LIO' is framed within the relevant IR literature, showing the disagreements and relative instability of the concept and how it is increasingly being seen, by some scholars, as a *project*. Finally, there is a discussion of hegemony and the centrality of discursive power to how it is defined: first discussing, and then rejecting, mainstream conceptualisations of hegemony, before setting out the Gramscian understanding of hegemony which is favoured by this thesis.

2.2 International order: some preliminaries

The concept of the 'liberal international order' which has come to dominate contemporary discussions of world politics and its possible futures, is predicated on a particular understanding of 'international order'. This section provides a short overview of IR debates about order, as a necessary first step towards analysis of the 'liberal international order' as a hegemonic ordering project. The concept of international order has no settled understanding, with the effect that articulations by different scholars can often be incommensurate. Scholars invoking the concept of the *liberal* international order, however, whether from a mainstream or critical perspective, tend to

share a certain idea of international order which emphasises the role of particular actors in producing and steering it. An alternative approach is to treat order as something that is emergent, focusing less on the 'sources', than on the *effects* of order, before tracing back to the origins, which could be agents, institutions, or structures. Such an analysis views rules as more constitutive than regulative, with no assumption of intentionality or control (Guzzini, 2013). This non-agential, emergent nature of order is the conceptualisation of international order favoured by this thesis, discussed in more detail later in this section.

Contemporary Liberal accounts of international order, however, place a strong emphasis on the agency of dominant liberal states in creating and maintaining international order: this is the key claim of John Ikenberry in his 2011 book, *Liberal Leviathan* (Ikenberry, 2011a), for example. Kyle Lascurettes also follows this tradition, in his argument that the sources of order can be located in the 'order preferences of the most powerful actors in world politics' (Lascurettes, 2020, p. 7). Earlier proponents of 'hegemonic stability theory' also clearly fall into this category, viewing order as something that is 'vertically' imposed: Robert Gilpin, for example, argued that from the nineteenth century international orders were 'liberal' in nature due to the fact that their major states (or hegemons) have been liberal. These hegemons set, managed and enforced the rules for the rest of the international order, which was bound together by shared economic, political and security interests, and was further based on a common ideological commitment to liberal values (Gilpin, 1976; Guzzini, 2013). Mainstream accounts of the LIO tend, therefore, to be agent-led, predicated on the assumption

that 'great power' agency is responsible for the 'creation' of international order.

A second assumption common to many conceptualisations of international order is some notion of a shared social purpose or common set of values (cf. Ruggie's related but distinct concept of embedded liberalism, and its 'social purpose' (Ruggie, 1982)). Reflecting on what apparently entirely divergent accounts of international order have in common, Janice Bially Mattern observes that international order is, primarily, seen as a 'normative good'. While different theoretical traditions give different reasons for the desirability of order, Bially Mattern suggests that these all equate to the fact that order 'engenders regularity and predictability ... it embodies stable, shared understandings among states about what they can expect from one another' (Mattern, 2005, p. 29). Order is, therefore, a fundamentally *social* concept. As this chapter will now show, the *social* character of order as a value is often linked in the analysis, whether intentionally or not, to *society*. It is in the largely unacknowledged slippage from 'social' to 'society' which also features in many conceptualisations of international order, however, that this thesis argues that the fundamental misrecognition inherent in the concept of 'liberal international order' lies.

This slippage can be seen in the theorisation of international order by Hedley Bull, which has been enormously influential on later IR theorists, both within and beyond the English School. Bull offers an *apparently* minimalist conception of international order: 'a pattern of activity that sustains the elementary or primary goal of the society of states' (Bull, 1994, p. 8); which, in turn, is defined as 'a group of states ... that ... conceive themselves to be bound by a set of common rules in their

relations with one another, and share in the workings of common institutions' (Bull, 1994, p. 13). These 'basic rules of coexistence include 'a mutual respect for sovereignty, the rule that agreements should be kept, and rules limiting resort to violence'; and the common institutions are 'the forms and procedures of international law, the system of diplomatic representation, acceptance of the special position of great powers, and universal international organisations such as ... the United Nations' (Bull, 1994, p. 42). Bull's conception of international order contains both structural and agent-led elements (Latham, 1997, p. 35). It is not static, as in the contrast between 'war' and 'peace', but processual and ongoing through the 'pattern of activity'; however, there remains a somewhat static and problematic concept at the heart of his definition, in the idea of an 'elementary or primary goal' of international society. Bull argues that the primary goal is the preservation of the state system; beneath this, are the maintenance of sovereignty of states; peace; limitation of violence; the keeping of promises; and the right to private property (Bull, 1994, pp. 16–19). Agency is therefore implied in this account, shaping the order according to the 'goal' of 'international society'.

While Bull claims that by the twentieth century international society had become global, the 'culture' on which it was founded was that of 'modernity', which he articulates as the 'culture of the dominant Western powers' (Bull, 1994, p. 39). This suggests that the 'primary goal' is at least derived from 'Western' culture. Bull further recognises that, at times of war or ideological conflict, it is usual to articulate opponents as being outside the 'framework of any common society' (Bull, 1994, p. 42). It is the linking of international *order* to international *society*, which is elsewhere invested with a far

more socially 'thick' meaning, which lays the ground for the later coupling by Liberal IR scholars of Western liberal states (as a 'thicker' conceptualisation of international society) with international order. International society is, despite Bull's earlier claims, a bordered concept, and it is through this move that non-liberal states (China, Russian, Iran etc) are explicitly excluded from conceptions of the 'liberal international order', while the global South is conspicuous by its invisibility.

Bull's other contribution to the theorising of international order is his articulation of 'primary' and 'secondary' institutions: primary institutions being, for Bull, the balance of power, war, diplomacy, international law, and great power management; and secondary institutions the range of international regimes and organisations explicitly designed to promote these. This framework remains the basis for most English School theorising on conceptions of international order. For example, Dunne, Flockhart and Koivisto set out their own list of primary institutions, which include sovereignty, international law, diplomacy, global markets, and global constitutionalism; while their 'secondary institutions' include international organisations, INGOs, and global policy networks (Dunne, Flockhart and Koivisto, 2013). Practice theorists have also been influenced by Bull's conceptions of 'institutions', articulating them as international *practices* which produce social order (Little, 2011; Adler, 2013; Koivisto, 2013). Buzan defines primary institutions as 'durable and recognized patterns of shared practices rooted in values held commonly by the members of interstate societies, and embodying a mix of norms, rules and principles' (Buzan, 2004). This definition is apparently consistent with Bially Mattern's account of international order; however, Buzan's conception is far more socially 'thick', based

as it is on values shared by *members* of interstate societies: a society with members necessarily also predicates *non-members*. English School theorists of international order are therefore clearly implicated in the slippage from ‘social’ to ‘society’, producing a bounded conception of international order, which is fundamental to Liberal conceptions of the ‘liberal international order’.

While fundamentally *social*, the concept of international order understood through an ontology of practices or ‘institutions’ does not *necessarily* entail a bounded *society*, with an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’: the entire international system operates on this basis, interacting according to mutually understood (and negotiated) processes and rules, and through mutually accepted channels. This difference is acknowledged in Lascurettes’ conceptualisation of order as ‘equilibrium perpetuation constituted by the presence of a set of *observed rules* among the units of a system’ (emphasis in original); these rules then falling into two categories: those governing ‘behaviour’, and those of ‘membership’ (Lascurettes, 2020, p. 20). While Lascurettes argues, for the sake of his thesis, that orders are ‘built to exclude’, and the rules of membership are an important element of his conceptualisation, he acknowledges that international orders across history have existed without them (Lascurettes, 2020, p. 24). There is, naturally, the possibility of more limited, defined international societies which act together in an orderly way according to shared interests, coexisting within the broader international order, potentially alongside or even overlapping with other such societies. What this thesis resists, however, is the notion that one such necessarily particular society – the West, for example – could represent ‘international order’ in itself. The fact that this

representation, in the concept of the 'liberal international order', has become a ubiquitous and virtually uncontested term both in the academic and policy spheres (where more recently it has become known by cognate terms such as the 'rules-based order', particularly in the context of China's perceived challenge (Breuer and Johnston, 2019)), is itself the product of liberal *hegemony*, which this thesis argues is conceptually distinct from, though deeply co-implicated with, international order. In Lascurette's analysis, therefore, there is a trace of the Eurocentrism that has long shaped IR scholarship: his conception of order overlooks the relationship between the 'inside' and the 'outside' which is *internal* to a colonial or imperial order.

The distinction given by Bull between 'primary' and 'secondary' institutions is an important one. For many theorists, order is constituted by primary institutions, and not, necessarily, by secondary, formal institutions. The institution of the UN, therefore, does not equate to international order in itself; however, the underlying principle of multilateralism and sovereign equality of states could be considered a primary institution. While Lascurette appears to adhere to this with his conceptualisation of order based on 'rules', his later account of the 'birthing' of the 'LIO' focuses on institutional design: he describes the foundation of the 'global order' through the establishment of the UN, and further associates the 'Western order', founded later when the implications of the Cold War became apparent, with the establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions and NATO. While there are clear problems of coherence in this account, it is important in that it reveals (if only tacitly) the distinction between international *order*, and 'Western' *institutions*.

Also pushing against notions of order as referring to a bounded and settled set of rules and practices, Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon present a conception of international order as an 'ecology', made up of 'architecture' (rules, norms, and values), and 'infrastructure' (practices, relationships, flows, routine interactions), mediated by international institutions: this builds on Bull's primary and secondary institutions in a useful way. The authors acknowledge that the 'ecology' is not static, but that the architecture and infrastructure shape and influence each other over time. They seek to avoid reifying the international order, arguing instead for a plurality of orders across issue areas and specific relationships; they also propose replacing the concept with that of international *ordering* (Cooley and Nexon, 2020). These are two very different propositions, however, and in proposing them, the authors have moved away from their earlier, parsimonious definition of 'relatively stable patterns of relations and practices in world politics'. The concept of 'ordering' introduces a dynamic element into their definition and also implicates agency. In addition, and more directly relevant to the analysis here, it also opens up questions about how that agency and ordering related to the 'ecology' more generally.

Nexon and Cooley's initial conceptualisation is, however, broadly consistent with the account of international order presented by Agnew and Corbridge (1995). These authors also give a processual account of order based on an 'organized system of governance: definition of actors, rules of operation, principles of interaction, and widely shared assumptions about trade, force and diplomacy'. Formal international organisations and "regimes" covering the behaviour of governments in specific issue areas', as well as 'intersubjective assumptions and

behavioural orientations', are all constitutive of order, in this conceptualisation. They depart from Ikenberry, Lascurettes and other mainstream IR scholars in rejecting the idea of a 'central directing agency' deliberately creating an international order; they argue instead that it arises through social practice, from the 'spontaneous actions of states and other actors', often producing unexpected results. International order is, therefore, never a settled thing, but responds to changing 'technological and economic circumstances' which alter the nature of interaction between states, as well as the practices and ideas on which orders are founded (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995). This is the understanding of order which is accepted by this thesis: international order exists when actors share common understandings of rules and practices which govern their interactions, through stable patterns of relations and practices. International order is emergent, emanating from the social interactions of actors, rather than something that is deliberately designed, created, and owned by a single (dominant) actor. It is fundamentally *relational*, produced through the complex, multiscalar, and, importantly, *hierarchical* relations between actors in the international, binding global North and global South together (Barkawi and Laffey, 1999; Sabaratnam and Laffey, 2023). It is not static – the relations and their hierarchies have deep historical roots, but order is produced and reproduced through contemporary practices; and it is not based on an international *society*, understood in its 'thick' sense: the relations that produce order can be contentious, even coercive, between actors that do not necessarily share common goals.

Any understanding of international order necessarily assumes or generates a conception of its negation: international *disorder* - evident for example in the threat of disorder which is invoked

in warnings about the 'revisionism' of rising powers. However, as Aaron McKeil has argued, this concept is relatively under-theorised in the mainstream IR literature (McKeil, 2021). Where conceptions of international order are understood in agent-led terms, any challenge to this agency might be interpreted as 'disorder'. In more processual accounts, for example in Bull or Bially Mattern's accounts, disorder could mean a disruption to the regularity and predictability (or patterns) of behaviour. Another reading of Bull might suggest it could be understood in static terms as a breakdown of the states system, if that is the agreed 'primary goal' of the society of states. Bull makes it clear that war itself does not negate the existence of international order. Deudney and Ikenberry's account of the establishment of the 'LIO' (or 'Western order', as they called it in 1999), describe it as 'explicitly conceived as a solution to the problems that led to the depression and world war'; disorder, therefore, could either take the form of economic crisis and major war, or simply a disruption to those institutions and processes which are understood as preventing them (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999). For Realists such as Rodrik and Walt, the key aims of their conception of a new international order reflect their view of the (contemporary) sources of disorder, which include climate change and pandemics; the risk of major war; economic protectionism; and mass migration. These might equate to Aron's conception of the 'minimum conditions for co-existence': disorder emerges from their absence (Aron, 1966; Rodrik and Walt, 2022). Other accounts of international order acknowledge that horizontal consensus, and even cooperation, between states are not essential features of international order: there is, therefore, a view that order is always contested, and that this contestation does not equate to 'disorder'.

Some ambiguity lingers therefore in the mainstream literature on the concept of international disorder; this is significant for the later analysis of how the concept of disorder is invoked when China is articulated as a threat to the '*liberal* international order'. Comparing the threat that China is understood to pose to the 'LIO', to the articulations of international disorder embedded within different conceptions of order, will be revealing about what it is in fact that China is challenging: this is explored below.

How international order is understood in the literature, therefore, is fundamental to the productive implications of representations of the 'liberal international order' as a bounded entity, comprising (or at least centred on) a limited (Western / liberal) 'society' of states. Furthermore, the understanding of *disorder* which is integral to notions of 'international order' itself has productive effects, when 'illiberal' states represented as 'outside' of the 'LIO' are understood to threaten order itself. The next section moves on to an examination of how 'liberal international order' has emerged in IR literature and policy discourse, and how it has been represented by scholars of different traditions.

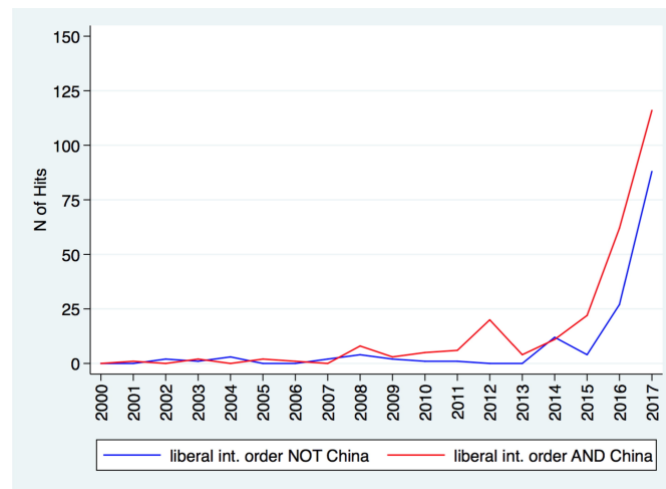
2.3 '*Liberal* international order' as an object

The concept of the 'liberal international order', as argued above, is predicated on a particular understanding of 'international order': as this section will show, many theorists argue that it was intentionally created, and subsequently maintained, by the US as the world's pre-eminent state; that it was, and arguably is still, associated with a particular 'international society' – the

‘West’; and that it is a normative good with a social purpose based on ‘liberal’ progressive values. Most accounts of the ‘LIO’, though they differ between authors, and across time, adhere to these essential features. However, more attention tends to be paid to the first of these features, particularly in writing on the ‘crisis’ of the ‘LIO’: either due to concern about the US’s ongoing commitment to maintaining the order (particularly during the Trump years), or because the rise of China is understood as threatening the US’s leadership of the order. This reflects the preoccupation with the liberal hegemonic ordering project, rather than with international order per se; but because it is hegemonic, it discursively presents itself as providing *universal* international goods as the basis of its legitimacy. This section traces the emergence of the ‘liberal international order’ as an increasingly prominent way of describing the contemporary international system, highlighting the geopolitical context in which this has taken place.

While the concept of the ‘liberal international order’ is not new (as the next section discusses), it is only in recent years that it has become a commonplace term within political and scholarly discourse. As Breuer and Johnston (Breuer and Johnston, 2019) demonstrate (see Figure 1), it is only in the mid-2010s that commentators began to make regular reference to something called a ‘liberal international order’.

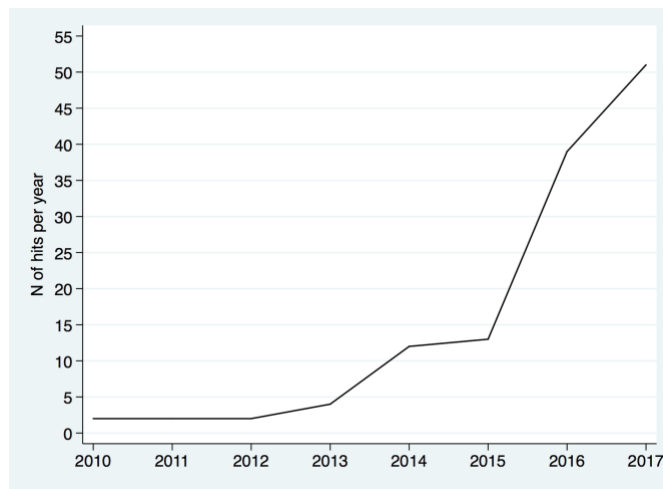
Figure 1: Yearly N of articles (US sources) that refer to ‘liberal international order’



Source: Factiva (Breuer and Johnston, 2019)

As this chapter argues, the prevalence of the term coincides with a growing (Northern) anxiety about both internal and external threats to liberal dominance of the international. One of these perceived threats is the rise of China, as suggested by the close association shown in Figure 2 between the concept of a ‘rules-based international order’ (treated as a near synonym for ‘liberal international order’) and the rise of China. Breuer and Johnston have tracked the emergence and use of the term ‘rules-based order’ in US media, and found that it is almost entirely used in connection with articulating China as a threat or challenge to this order, indeed even more so than the cognate term, ‘liberal international order’. They argue that describing the order as ‘rules-based’ is a rhetorical device designed to create a narrative stigmatising China as a revisionist power.

Figure 2. Yearly N of articles (US sources that refer to ‘China’ and ‘rules-based order’ within ten words of each other



Source: Factiva (Breuer and Johnston, 2019)

Despite its recent emergence as a form of commonsense about international order, references to a ‘liberal international order’ are not, however, entirely new. At different points in the past eight decades, different elements have been emphasised, often apparently shaped by the contemporary geopolitical context. During the Cold War, for instance, references to the ‘liberal international order’ most often referred to the capitalist economic system (or ‘regime’) designed and built by the US after 1945. This system was not confined to the North Atlantic region, nor only to liberal states, but also incorporated ‘developing’ states in its reach – as in the ‘liberal international economic order of freedom of trade and capital movements’ (Barran, Johnson and Cromer, 1969; Krasner, 1977). The key architecture of this order was the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the European Common Market and the European Free Trade Association. In so far as this was a normative order, it was limited to the promotion of the principle of free trade, seen as producing universal benefits both for ‘developed’ and

‘developing’ economies. While ‘liberal’ economic principles continue to be invoked within many understandings of the LIO, however, the near-universal expansion of capitalism since the 1990s, as well as the persistence of US protectionism, has resulted in some ambiguity about whether capitalism can be understood to be a necessarily ‘liberal’ system, understood either ideologically or spatially.

From the end of the Cold War, a different understanding of the nature, role, and spatial boundaries of the ‘LIO’ began to emerge within IR scholarship, but also in Western policy circles. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and China’s post-1978 reform and opening meant that increasingly liberal institutions such as elections, human rights, and capitalist markets were extended to new spaces. Forms of humanitarian intervention and liberal norms were promoted by international institutions and leading liberal states. At the same time, older themes of US leadership persisted, as encapsulated within the official US view of itself as the ‘indispensable nation’ (Albright, 1998). In 2002, George W. Bush declared in his National Security Strategy,

‘Our Nation’s cause has always been larger than our Nation’s defense. We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace – a peace that favors liberty. We will defend the peace against the threats from terrorists and tyrants. We will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers. And we will extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent ... The United States possess unprecedented – and unequalled – strength and influence in the world. Sustained by faith in the principles of liberty, and the value of a free society, this position comes with unparalleled responsibilities, obligations, and opportunity. The great strength of this nation must be used to promote a balance of power that favors freedom’ (*The National Security Strategy*, 2002).

While Donald Trump (during his first presidency) was considered a threat to the LIO within the broader academic community, his National Security Strategy of 2017 announced that,

‘[t]he whole world is lifted by America’s renewal and the reemergence of American leadership. After one year, the world knows that America is prosperous, America is secure, and America is strong. We will bring about the better future we seek for our people and the world, by confronting the challenges and dangers posed by those who seek to destabilize the world and threaten America’s people and interests’ (*National Security Strategy*, 2017).

Benjamin Netanyahu appealed to exactly this representation in his speech to the US Congress in July 2024: in the ‘clash between barbarism and civilization’, America is ‘the guardian of Western civilization and the world’s greatest power’, whereas ‘Israel fights on the frontline of civilization’, ‘protecting’ Americans (Netanyahu, 2024). Liberal accounts of the ‘LIO’ emerge, therefore, against this background, where America’s global leadership position, treated as a solemn obligation, is taken for granted; furthermore, American interests are fundamentally bound up with the ‘LIO’ itself.

This sense of the US’s weighty responsibility for maintaining international order, as well as the sense of a globally dominant liberal society of states, is reflected particularly in post-Cold War conceptualisations of the ‘LIO’. In 1999, the key features of the ‘liberal international order’ for Deudney and Ikenberry was the security co-binding represented by NATO; the ‘penetrated hegemony’ of the US, more ‘consensual and cooperative’ than ‘coercive’; economic openness and capitalism; and the common ‘civic identity’ of the West. What is notable about this description of the ‘LIO’, written in the 1990s, is its emphasis on

its 'Western' character. The authors are explicitly describing something that is bounded, and to a great extent confined to activities relating to this 'society' of states: it does not yet have the universalistic character of the same authors' later descriptions (which are explored below). The separation of 'Western' international society, from a more universal 'international order', is here maintained; however, it is conceptualised as radiating outwards increasingly from the 1990s. Ikenberry later describes 'Liberal Internationalism 2.0' as a 'Western-oriented security and economy system', which is a '[h]ierarchical order, with American hegemonic provisioning of public goods', based on rules and institutions which are enforced through 'reciprocity and bargaining' (Ikenberry, 2009). By the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, it was increasingly taken for granted that this order was global. In *Liberal Leviathan*, Ikenberry states that with the end of the Cold War, 'the inside order became the outside order – that is, its logic was extended to the larger global system' (Ikenberry, 2011a, p. 161). Most recently, however, in the context of alleged illiberal threats to the 'liberal international order', not least from China, Ikenberry has indicated a renewed emphasis on the spatial boundaries of the 'LIO' with his conception of the 'global West' (Ikenberry, 2024).

With Ikenberry's (2009) description of 'Liberal Internationalism 3.0', there is a clear fusion of the concept of international order with that of the liberal ordering project, with the earlier partiality acknowledged in previous writing smoothed out. Ikenberry here specifies '[o]pen markets, international institutions, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, collective problem solving, shared sovereignty, the rule of law' as features of the 'LIO' over time.

This list includes elements which accord with the understanding this thesis holds of the contemporary international order, such as international institutions, collective problem solving, sovereignty and the rule of law. However, cooperative security, democratic community, progressive change, and, arguably, open markets, are all *particular to the liberal ordering project*, and are entirely contingent to international order. Articulating them all together in this way serves the self-representation of the 'LIO', giving the concept its commonsensical status. Ikenberry describes this order as at once 'universal [in] scope', and bounded: it offers 'expanding membership in core governing institutions to rising non-Western states'; with a 'post-hegemonic hierarchy in which various groupings of leading states occupy governing institutions' (Ikenberry, 2009).

Furthermore, Deudney and Ikenberry's 2018 account of the emergence of the post 1945 international order, 'created' by 'Western' liberal democracies joining together to serve their joint interests, clearly presents the international society of liberal democratic states as synonymous with, or at least wholly responsible for, the 'institutions and incentives of the (global) international order'. There is no space in this narrative for the agency of non-liberal and subaltern actors in shaping international order. Only later do the authors acknowledge the role of the Soviet Union in building 'Westphalian' (as opposed to liberal) international institutions, such as arms control agreements and the World Health Organisation; and the fact that 'such autocracies as China, Iran, and Russia' are signatories to the Paris climate agreement and other accords to govern the commons (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2018). This somewhat belies Ikenberry's earlier claim that 'democracies are – in contrast to autocratic and authoritarian states – particularly able and

willing to operate within an open, rule-based international system and to cooperate for mutual gain' (Ikenberry, 2009). These 'Westphalian' institutions are treated, however, as 'a lasting foundation on which distinctively liberal and democratic institutions can be erected in the future': the non-liberal aspect of international order is treated, therefore, as historically contingent and temporary, with a clear acknowledgement of the liberal ordering project and the ambitions of its 'Anglo-American core' (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2018).

Other Liberal understandings of the 'liberal international order' also make claims which yoke liberal international society and its ordering project, to a concept of international order; Kupchan and Vinjamuri, for example, argue that the 'Atlantic democracies' are a 'vital anchor of international order', one that is 'infused with liberal values and institutions'. The US has traditionally had the role as a 'catalyst for both formal multilateral institutions and coalitions of the willing'; however, under Trump, there was a retreat from this role, creating a political vacuum which was filled by 'illiberal powers' (Kupchan and Vinjamuri, 2021). In this account, the 'liberal international order' is at once global and universal, and bounded and particular.

Rae and Reus-Smit note the internal contradictions within Ikenberry's conception of the 'liberal international order' (which Ikenberry himself had drawn attention to): for example, they juxtapose the commitments to state sovereignty and universal human rights; and the 'need for great power leadership while sustaining a democratic community of states.' Ikenberry's explanation (as given by the authors) for this tension is that 'external' forces such as the need to maintain a balance of power, and the 'will and command of a dominant power'

have caused 'more realist ... logics' to 'eclipse' the 'vision' of a 'liberal international order', based on 'interstate openness, reciprocity, and rule-governed interaction', producing a hybrid 'LIO' since 1945. In this account, the elements which relate to the conception of 'international order' (sovereignty, and the 'democratic community of states'), are claimed by Ikenberry as the 'liberal vision', whilst the hegemonic elements appear to be disavowed as 'realism'. Rae and Reus-Smit argue, in contrast, that these contradictions are *inherent* to liberalism, which cannot be treated as a 'singular, coherent whole' (Rae and Reus-Smit, 2013). This thesis does not dispute this analysis of liberalism; however, it argues that the incoherence within the concept of 'liberal international order' is not simply that every aspect of it, including the problematic ones, are evidence of 'multiple liberalisms at work'. Instead, it argues that the *concept* of 'liberal international order' is *itself* evidence of liberal (hegemony) at work, and that the apparent contradictions arise from the attempt to fuse the concept of international order with liberal hegemony, discursively constructing international order itself as a liberal product. This conceptualisation is productive of international hierarchies, through the claim that international order is a liberal creation, denying the role of weaker states in the production of international order and articulating non-liberal states as being outside of international order. This argument is explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Ikenberry's conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order' has evolved since his earlier writings (particularly since the Trump presidency) and at times, if not consistently, reflects the essential argument of this thesis: that 'international order itself is complex – multi-layered, multi-faceted, and is not simply a political formation imposed by the leading state ... By separating

“American hegemony” from “the existing international order”, we see a more complex set of relationships. The United States does not embody the international order, it has a relationship with it, as do rising states.’ (Ikenberry, 2019). Where this thesis departs from Ikenberry (on this reading), however, is in the understanding of ‘hegemony’, and the nature of this ‘relationship’; it is worth noting that in his co-authored article with Daniel Nexon, published the same year, the concepts are re-coupled in the term they introduce, ‘hegemonic order’.

There is, therefore, growing awareness among IR scholars that the relationship between ‘liberal order’ and international order is not static, and increasingly they open up space for considering them separately. For instance, the account of international order presented by Nexon and Alexander Cooley reflects a clear distinction between international order, and ‘American hegemonic ordering’, recognising the influence each has on the other, and in particular the ways in which international order is, as a result of US hegemony, ‘liberal’. These break down into three dimensions, each of which have featured to a greater or lesser extent, in different combinations, in the post-1945 international order. The first is ‘political liberal governance’, which forms part of what they term the ‘architecture’ of international order: this ‘establishes the responsibility for governments to protect some minimal set of individual rights for their citizens’, with a particular bias towards liberal-democratic governance. These ideals are ‘baked into’ the different treaties, charters, and declarations of the UN, with an intensification after the end of the Cold War. The second dimension is economic liberalism: the commitment to open markets, which evolved from ‘embedded liberalism’ to neoliberalism from the 1970s; this was rooted in the Bretton

Woods institutions from the 1940s, and later in the OECD, the EU, and the WTO. The third dimension they term 'liberal intergovernmentalism': the commitment to multilateralism in treaties, international organisations, and institutions, based on principles of juridical sovereign equality even where clear hierarchies of power exist (Cooley and Nexon, 2020). This thesis accepts that the first two dimensions are (arguably) identifiably 'liberal'; however, it would argue that the third dimension is fundamental to contemporary international order, and the authors do not justify their claim that it is specifically *liberal*. In this way, despite their separation of 'international order' from 'American hegemony', they reveal that they still view the international order as inherently 'liberal'. They do not recognise that the normalisation of the idea that aspects of international order are essentially liberal is in fact liberal hegemony in action. The unspoken implication of this position is that liberal leadership is essential to this order; and further, that were a 'non-liberal' state to become dominant, it would mean an end to this international order. This book does make an important contribution to the literature on 'liberal international order,' in that it pays attention to the role of weaker international actors within American hegemony, and by extension the global South, in its argument that this hegemony is being 'exit[ed] from below'. This account characterises the US and its allies as having had a 'patronage monopoly' since the end of the Cold War, providing global public goods such as Development and security assistance; with new rising powers within the system, this monopoly has been threatened, with many 'peripheral' states choosing to receive these goods without liberal conditionalities from actors such as China, thus 'hollowing out aspects of liberal architecture that underpinned the patronage monopoly of the West' (Cooley and Nexon, 2020, p. 136). This thesis

emphatically endorses the argument about the importance of the South within the liberal ordering project, and the impact on the South of having alternatives to liberal conditionalities in Development assistance is the subject of a later chapter. However, in characterising the historical relationship between North and South as one based on 'patronage' and the delivery of 'global public goods', and viewing the main problem for this relationship being the recent presence of alternative 'patrons', fails to acknowledge how the South might look back on the long cycles of violence and exploitation, as well as a punitive sanctions regime (whereby over 60% of all low-income countries are currently under some form of financial penalty from the US (Stein and Cocco, 2024)), which have accompanied this 'patronage'.

To this point, the discussion has focused on Northern IR scholarship, and in particular Liberal variants of it. From the perspective of the global South, however, the 'liberal international order' – and its relationship to international order conceived more broadly – looks very different. In July 2023, *International Affairs* published a special issue titled 'Asian conceptions of international order: what Asia wants', with articles on perceptions of international order from ten different Asian states. While the term 'liberal international order' is used uncritically in all these articles, explicitly aligned by the editors with Ikenberry's conceptualisation, the majority of the authors set out an understanding of 'international order' which is essentially the same as held by this thesis; and each then distinguishes this from the 'liberal' elements: the discursive production of 'standards of civilisation' through the universalisation of 'liberal' values such as liberal democracy, which increasingly most of these states view with suspicion. The

implication is that within these Asian states (as represented by their authors), a clear line is perceived between international order, and the liberal hegemonic project, with the latter neither seen as coterminous with international order, nor as necessary for the preservation of order. The Ikenberry-derived conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order', as the post-1945 creation of the US, thus sits uncomfortably with this analysis, leading to a slight compromise of coherence within the issue (Bajpai and Lakshmana, 2023).

Similarly, a *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* special issue in 2022 on 'The liberal international order and the global south: a view from Latin America', also takes for granted the concept of the 'LIO', albeit somewhat less uncritically. Once again, however, the focus of these articles shows a clear conceptual divide between 'international order' and the US's hegemonic project in the region. The argument made, which this thesis fully endorses, is that Latin American states, both historically and in the contemporary world, have made significant contributions to the production of the rules, laws, and practices that constitute 'international order', belying the claim that the 'LIO' is the 'creation' of the US.¹⁰ This 'international order' is then distinguished from the US hegemonic project, with which this part of the world is intensely familiar, in all its liberal hypocrisy. In these papers, it is argued that Latin American states have been highly instrumental in developing the elements of international order which promote international justice and fairness in the face of this hegemonic project. On this analysis, the concept of the 'liberal international order', in its conflation of international order with the liberal

¹⁰ This is an argument which is expanded upon in the next chapter on the nature of international order.

hegemonic project, obscures the extent to which they are not only distinct, but often antithetical to one another (Rodriguez and Thornton, 2022). Scholarship such as this strongly supports the argument made here, and points towards analysis of the 'liberal international order' as less a description of the world than as an ideological construction internal to a hegemonic project.

Some Northern IR scholars' engagement with the concept of the 'liberal international order' also points (if sometimes only by implication) to the hegemonic relationship between international order and the liberal ordering project. For instance, writing from the perspective of global historical sociology, George Lawson and Ayşe Zarakol place the same emphasis as Liberal scholars on the agency of liberal states in producing and maintaining international order, but also claim that 'liberalism functions as the *general operating system for contemporary world politics: its central ideology, its everyday practices, its code*. In this way, the LIO is embedded in the deep substrate of international relations, most obviously within forms of international administrations, from the UN system to practices of international law' (emphasis added) (Zarakol and Lawson, 2023). This conceptualisation makes an important point about how liberal ideology and practices – or liberal discourse - intersects in a hegemonic manner with international order (what the authors term the 'deep substrate of international relations'), structuring international hierarchies. Similarly, Michael Barnett's argument that the LIO 'never existed' except as a 'myth' designed to help the 'West maintain a solidarity and sense of purpose' is predicated on the concept of 'liberal international order' which is the product of 'liberal' actors: his main contention is that the 'liberal international

order was never all that liberal'. His analysis, however, is broadly supported by this thesis: that the stability of the post-war order, and current systems of global governance, are not, and never were, dependent on 'liberal' ideologies or the bounded 'Western clubs' for their functioning, despite their being subject, to different degrees over time, to liberal hegemony (Barnett, 2019).

Other scholars emphasise the dynamic and processual nature of international order, stressing to varying degrees the extent to which it is not synonymous with 'liberal international order' and the role of liberal ideology. At the same time, elements of the liberal hegemonic project itself – the centrality of US leadership, the notion of a bounded liberal society of states, and a degree of ambiguity about the space for Southern agency – remain. For example, Alexander Anievas and Richard Saull, writing from a Marxist sensibility, emphasise the geographical boundaries of the 'postwar liberal international order', representing it as a US-led society of states ('the West') in which domestic and international order-making overlapped in an anti-communist agenda, in part influenced by the agency of a 'post-fascist' far-right movement. In this conceptualisation, the LIO had a 'distinct social logic and moral purpose (the defense of liberal capitalism from radical-left subversion)'; borrowing from Gramsci, the authors describe it as a 'historical bloc' of broad social forces which mobilised to defend and stabilise the 'domestic-international liberal-capitalist order' (Anievas and Saull, 2020). In her chapter 'Cultural Chauvinism and the Liberal International Order', LHM Ling defines the 'liberal international order' as an 'inter-state system of capitalist world politics based on an ideology of individualism, competition, private property, and limits on state power. Its main proponents are governments

that uphold such an ideology and their affiliated private and public agencies like “the Wall Street-Treasury-IMF Complex”’. This structural, spatially undefined conceptualisation thus combines capitalism with core liberal ideologies, and its actors are simply (undesigned) states that propound these ideas – a conceptualisation that would struggle to explain China’s role. However, she also accords agential (not to mention spatial) properties to the ‘LIO’ in her writing, while apparently eliding it with the concept of ‘US hegemony’. It thus becomes unclear what the concept of ‘liberal international order’ actually adds to her analysis, ambiguously as it is treated within her text. Given that this chapter is specifically about the (hegemonic) attitude of ‘Western’ capital to the emergent capitalist system in Asia, the precise definition that she gives does not fit the narrative of her argument, which is distinctly spatial, and not about capitalism as such, but about hierarchical, culturally hegemonic practices by a particular group of actors (Ling, 2002). Mark Laffey and Sutha Nadarajah likewise emphasise the boundedness of ‘liberal order’, constituted by its ‘core’ (‘the West’) and its ‘periphery’ in a hybrid social formation of ‘liberal and non-liberal worlds’, but see this as global from the start: ‘liberal order’ is not generated internally within Europe, but rather in its engagement with its ‘outside’ through colonial and imperial relations. This shifts the emphasis from a static conceptualisation of ‘liberal order’ as an entity, located in a particular ‘international society’ at its core, to one that focuses on ‘ordering’ as a process: it is a ‘globe-spanning transformative project of liberal governmentality’ – what this thesis characterises as the liberal hegemonic project (Laffey and Nadarajah, 2012). The account of the ‘liberal international order’ and its crisis given more recently by Meera Sabaratnam and Mark Laffey develops this perspective further, rightly

pointing to a number of important ‘misrecognitions’ in the LIO’s ‘representation of itself’, yet overlooks what this thesis argues is the most fundamental misrecognition: the equation of the liberal hegemonic project with international order, or the ‘international system’, together with its institutions, practices, and norms (Sabaratnam and Laffey, 2023).

While the intentions of these critical/postcolonialist scholars in using this term are (rightly) to point to the problematic aspects of liberal hegemony, the characterisation of elements which are simply ‘international order’ as being fundamentally ‘liberal’, and the (deliberate) product of US / liberal hegemony, arguably leaves little space for locating the agency of (non-liberal) subaltern and dissenting actors in the relations that produce international order (as discussed in the next chapter). Furthermore, the concept of ‘liberal international order’ risks introducing an element of incoherence to critical arguments, often appearing as a signifier within the text but adding little analytical value. Finally, these conceptualisations, with their hyperfocus on the (problematic) agency of the West, also fail to make sense of the particular nature of China’s contestation. This thesis argues that these uses of the concept of the ‘LIO’ are themselves at risk of being subject to the universalising tendencies of liberal hegemony, producing the common-sensical view that ‘international order’ and the liberal ordering project are coterminous: this ‘misrecognition’ is a key focus of this thesis.

This section has identified a growing discomfort within the IR literature about the conceptualisation of the ‘liberal international order’, and in particular an uncertainty about the relations between ‘liberal international order’ and ‘international order’ itself. This is particularly evident in IR

literature from the global South – which had never made this equation – but also in Northern IR. Furthermore, there is a growing trend to view ‘liberal international order’ less as a fixed entity, and constitutive of international order, and more as an ideological project of US hegemony. There is evidence of an increased interest in the ideational and relational dynamics of international order, and in particular the idea of legitimacy.

In the remainder of this chapter, the argument will move on to showing how China’s rise has resulted in uncertainty as to how to interpret China’s (‘paradoxical’) engagement with the ‘liberal international order’; this uncertainty, this thesis argues, is best resolved through the disarticulation of ‘liberal ordering’ and ‘international order’. The next section will examine the work of some global North (and indeed, some Chinese) IR scholars in producing this disarticulation. The chapter will then go on to locate this discussion in relation to debates within IR about the nature of hegemony.

2.4 The ‘liberal international order’ and the ‘China threat’: uncertain representations

It is against this conceptual and theoretical background that increasing concerns in the 2010s and 2020s about the rise of China should be located. Concern about China exposes the fault lines in the representation of the ‘LIO’ as a necessary fusion, or articulation, of liberal international society as a bounded entity, with the global practices, rules, and institutions of international order. It becomes clear that different conceptualisations of the nature of international order, and the liberal ordering project, are required to make sense of the rise of China and its project to change global power relations.

Optimism in the early post-Cold War years about the 'integration' of China into international society was based on the liberal view that 'trade and exchange have a modernizing and civilizing effect on states, undercutting illiberal tendencies and strengthening the fabric of international community' (Ikenberry, 2009). In *Liberal Leviathan*, Ikenberry reflects the complacency of the time about China's place in the LIO, which he describes as ...

'... unusually integrative. It is an order that is easy to join and hard to overturn. Countries such as China and Russia are not fully embedded in the liberal international order, but they nonetheless profit from its existence. These states may not soon or ever fully transform into liberal states, but the expansive and integrative logic of liberal international order creates incentives for them to do so – and it forecloses opportunities to create alternative global orders' (Ikenberry, 2011a, p. 9).

'The fact that China has taken steps to join [the liberal international order] is evidence of the way in which the logic and character of liberal order reinforces a one-pole system' (Ikenberry, 2011a, p. 124).

At this point, Ikenberry was not yet envisaging China's rise as bringing about the breakdown of 'liberal international order', which he posited could come either in the form of the collapse of open markets, or a fragmentation of multilateralism producing competing geopolitical blocs. He acknowledges that neither scenario need actually 'entail a complete collapse of order – it simply means there is an end to its open, rule-based, multilateral character', as the 'American hegemonic order' is replaced by an international system with different centres of power (Ikenberry, 2009). Ikenberry's optimism is reflected in Barack Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy, which announces:

‘We are working to build deeper and more effective partnerships with other key centers of influence—including China, India, and Russia, as well as increasingly influential nations such as Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia—so that we can cooperate on issues of bilateral and global concern, with the recognition that power, in an interconnected world, is no longer a zero sum game’ (*National Security Strategy*, 2010).

However, by 2017, the optimism that been felt following China’s accession to the WTO in December 2001, that it would be ‘socialised’ through involvement in international organisations, no longer held amongst either policy makers or mainstream academic IR (on ‘socialisation’, see Alastair Johnston, 2008, *Social States*). In Donald Trump’s National Security Strategy of 2017, amongst the threats that the US is described as facing are: ‘[r]evisionist powers, such as China and Russia, that use technology, propaganda, and coercion to shape a world antithetical to our interests and values’ (*National Security Strategy*, 2017). Likewise, the following year, the US National Defense Strategy claimed, ‘China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors’ (US Department of Defense, 2018). In this moment of anxiety for the ‘LIO’ following the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s presidency, Deudney and Ikenberry argued that ‘China and Russia have dashed all hopes that they would quickly transition to democracy and *support the liberal world order*. To the contrary, they have strengthened their authoritarian systems at home and flouted norms abroad’ (emphasis added). Here, the ‘liberal order’ is conceptualised as ‘the overarching framework for global politics’, which stems from ‘the liberal vision of

nation-states cooperating to achieve security and prosperity'. There is an ambiguity in the *global / universal* claim for this order, based on economic, security and environmental interdependence; and the *externalising* of China and Russia, in particular, due to their 'illiberalism', despite their implication in at least economic and environmental interdependence. Furthermore, the facts of the 'recent rise of illiberal forces and the apparent recession of the liberal international order' are juxtaposed with the reality that 'states still mostly interact through well-worn institutions and in the spirit of self-interested, pragmatic accommodation' as a paradox to be explained. This ambiguity / paradox stems from the yoking of liberal international *society*, with international *order*. In so far as Deudney and Ikenberry acknowledge this articulation, it is through reference to democratic peace theory: 'a world with more liberal democratic capitalist states will be more peaceful, prosperous, and respectful of human rights. It is not inevitable that history will end with the triumph of liberalism, but it is inevitable that a decent world order will be liberal'. In the same article, however, the authors acknowledge the entirely contingent relationship between the international order and liberalism, recognising that 'many of [its] key participants ... are anything but liberal or democratic', and that 'contrary to the conventional wisdom, many of its institutions are not uniquely liberal in character, ... designed merely to solve the problems of sovereign states, whether they be democratic or authoritarian.' (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2018).

The following year, Ikenberry and Nexon suggest that China, by then (on some measures at least) the world's largest economy, had become 'more assertive in its efforts to shape regional and global international relations', suggesting that the BRI and the

establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) could be understood as 'parts of a broader attempt to reorder international relations along Beijing's preferred lines' (Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019). What these authors do not consider, is that the principle of multilateralism is fundamental to the current international order; and that in forming new multilateral institutions, China is in fact *conforming* to international order, and simply *mirroring* the liberal world's limited-member organisations. Meanwhile, Evelyn Goh makes a similar observation about the implications of China's apparently contradictory behaviour (apparently 'pro-order' yet 'anti-hegemonic') for the 'US-hegemonic order', commenting on China's 'multifaceted contestation of the US hegemonic order' with a 'shifting balance between complicity and resistance' (Goh, 2019). Likewise, Rana Mitter draws attention to apparent inconsistencies in China's attitude to international order: it is supportive of certain aspects, such as multilateral institutions which support the global economy and the norm of sovereignty, while opposed to the concentration on individual civil liberties within the human rights agenda, or the norm of R2P. He argues that China has a 'project to redefine world order while preserving many of its aspects ... Beijing is content with much of the order and structure that exists. The major change it seeks is that the norms which inform that order should be ones more amenable to the economic goals, security concerns, and political culture that Beijing prefer' (Mitter, 2022). This insight - significantly produced by a renowned China scholar rather than an IR one - is fundamental to the argument of this thesis: that China's contestation reveals the essential duality of international order, and US/liberal hegemony. While China is undoubtedly contesting the liberal hegemonic project, it is *not* seeking to overturn or disrupt international order.

Furthermore, Jessica Chen Weiss and Jeremy Wallace argue that 'China's rise has fused economic and security concerns about the consequences of letting an illiberal state prosper within [the LIO]. China's persistent illiberalism and growing military and economic power have helped call into question the adequacy of existing institutions, from the World Health Organization to the World Trade Organization', while recognising that 'Beijing continues to support the principles enshrined in the UN Charter ... while circumscribing the liberal emphasis on individual political freedoms and movement toward more intrusive international institutions.' Despite their claim that 'China's authoritarian character is at odds with key aspects of the system, particularly the emphasis on ... rules-based multilateralism', the authors find that it 'remains a staunch defender of the Westphalian order on which [the LIO] was built. Indeed, at times, the Chinese government has appeared *more invested in preserving existing arrangements than the United States has*' (Weiss and Wallace, 2021), emphasis added. The authors draw on Moravcsik to argue that the answer to this apparent inconsistency lies in the nature of China's domestic politics and preferences; others simply accuse China of 'free-riding' on the 'liberal order' while 'exploit[ing] ... international trading rules', and 'lack[ing] the capacity and vision to fundamentally alter the basis of the liberal order' (Mukherjee, 2019). Meanwhile, in policy making and policy-facing discourse, it has become normalised to speak of China as 'continu[ing] to *challenge the foundations of the rules-based order*' (Congressman J. Randy Forbes, interviewed in Kazianis, 2012), emphasis added; 'upending the rules-based order' (Economy, 2021); 'flouting post-war international standards' with 'attacks on the rules-based international order, democracy and freedom' (Singh, 2022); or the 'epoch-defining and systemic

challenge posed by China under the Chinese Communist Party' ('Integrated Review Refresh', 2023).

The need to make sense of China's 'paradoxical' engagement with the 'liberal international order', has led some IR scholars to recognise the importance of drawing a distinction between international order and 'liberal international order'. One possible approach is proposed by Johnston, when he engages with the official US approach of labelling China 'a "revisionist" state trying to undermine and replace international order', to interrogate what is meant by 'order', and how 'compliance' (and, presumably, *non-compliance*) can be measured. This leads him to the same conclusion as this thesis, that the generally accepted assumption that 'order and the interests of the hegemon or dominant state are mutually constitutive', is not supported by the evidence of China's international behaviour, because its contestation is targeted at only certain aspects of what is commonly bracketed within the concept of 'liberal international order'. Johnston makes the argument that there is an important difference between China's conflicts of interest with the US, and the idea of China being in conflict with 'international order'. His proposal is to 'deconstruct' the concept of international order, into eight 'simultaneously existing orders in different issue areas', which differ on the extent to which they are 'dominated by liberal institutions and rules'. He begins with the 'constitutive order' – the norms and institutions of the international, such as sovereignty and territoriality, the UN system, and diplomatic practices; and he argues that China is broadly supportive of this element of 'order', which is not, in any meaningful way, 'liberal'. This account of an 'emergent', as opposed to a hegemonically authored order, broadly aligns with the understanding of

international order favoured by this thesis. However, Johnston goes on to set out the other 'orders', which in his account appear to be concatenated, without any theoretical logic underpinning the different conceptualisations. These include a 'military order', relating to coercion and the norms and laws governing it; a 'political development order', setting out standard on human rights and democracy, for example – what this thesis characterises as the hegemonic discourse setting the contemporary standard of civilisation; and the 'international trade order' and 'international financial/monetary order', which together this thesis recognises as the fundamental norms and institutions which regulate and enable global capitalism (no longer an identifiably 'Western' element of the international). He also posits separate orders relating to social development, the environment, and information. This thesis does not disagree with Johnston's fundamental argument that China's behaviour cannot be coherently understood within the concept of 'liberal international order', and that it is essential to disarticulate this concept in order to make sense of China's mix of compliance and contestation; indeed, his argument is an important inspiration for this thesis. Where it disagrees, however, is in the conceptualisation of different, concatenated orders on (essentially) single issue areas, some (parts) of which correspond to an idea of international order, without identifying the role that (liberal) hegemony plays in rendering other parts apparently belonging to *order*, rather than to a (liberal) ordering *project*.

Amitav Acharya's conceptualisation of a 'multiplex' world order is another potential reconceptualization; however, it is notable that he begins with the concept of 'liberal international order' from the Liberal IR literature, based on free trade, multilateral

institutions, the growth of democracy, and liberal values, 'created and dominated by the United States and centred around Western interests, value, and institutions.' His analysis is predicated on the idea that while all of these together constitute 'liberal order', they are in decline, and a new type of world order is emerging. He rejects the idea of this being a 'multipolar' order: the multiplicity and heterogeneity of significant international actors, breadth and depth of economic interdependence, and the complexity of challenges faced by states in the contemporary world differentiate this order from historical examples of multipolar systems. Instead, he proposes a 'multiplex' order based on 'crosscutting globalisms' – essentially, a capitalist world with greater participation by 'non-liberal' actors in global governance, in particular through the creation of new (regional) multilateral institutions such as the BRICS, AIIB, etc (Acharya, 2017). This, therefore, is not in fact a reconceptualization: the concept of the 'liberal international order' remains intact at its heart, and the change he envisions is not, by his own admission, in fact a change, as he recognises that weaker actors played a significant part in producing many of the rules and norms that make up international order, such as ideas around human rights, the right to development, and the Laws of the Sea (as discussed in more detail in the next chapter). Moreover, international order and the liberal ordering project remain conceptually yoked in Acharya's work.

Leaving aside the details of precisely how Johnston and Acharya resolve the questions posed by China's 'paradoxical' engagement with the 'liberal international order', what is significant here is the ways in which IR scholars are being forced to grapple with the practical and intellectual tensions generated by the assumption that 'liberal order' and 'international order'

are synonymous. While some scholars, such as Acharya, have sought to complicate how these two relate, others, such as Johnston, disarticulate the two, and it is in this space that this thesis locates itself. All sides accept that what is at stake is hegemony – whether Western or US – and China’s challenge to it. The issue then becomes how to conceive of that hegemony, and its relationship to international order: certain scholars have increasingly focused on the ideational components of hegemony, such as recent work on power transition theory – which in turn opens up an engagement with Gramsci; and it is to this topic that this chapter now turns.

The recent increase in China’s international power has led to a revival of interest in power transition theory. As originally developed by Gilpin, and Organski and Kugler, power transition theory draws on interpretations of Thucydides to hypothesise on the course of a rising power’s ambition to overturn the existing international order, and the consequent likelihood (or even inevitability) of systemic war (Gilpin, 1981; Organski and Kugler, 1981). These accounts tend to focus on the economic and military aspects of hegemonic claims, paying less attention to the ideational, social and political forces which underlie hegemonic change, despite these playing a significant role in Thucydides’s work (and as recognised by the classical Realist tradition) (Lebow and Valentino, 2009; Lim, 2015; Allison, 2017; Kirshner, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2021).

Recent literature on ‘rising powers’, by contrast, tends to draw on a more social understanding of international hierarchies, paying attention in particular to the importance of ‘prestige’ and the recognition of ‘status’, as properties which are not simply proportionate to material (economic and military) strengths. Notions of prestige, status, and legitimacy, insofar as they all

depend conceptually on some notion of intersubjective meaning, point to the issues of representation and discursive power that are the focus of this dissertation. A notable weakness of this scholarship, however, is the taken for granted assumption that China is in fact a 'revisionist' state with respect to international order.

Michelle Murray, for example, examines how in different circumstances the struggle for recognition by a rising power may or may not come to be socially constructed as 'revisionist', and the implications of this stigmatisation and containment by the dominant power(s) for subsequent outcomes; the author takes for granted that the rising power is, indeed, revisionist, and so it is in fact a question more of whether its rise is recognised as 'legitimate' or not (Murray, 2018). Steven Ward postulates two axes of contestation by rising powers, distributive and normative, arguing that a rising power tends *either* to demand a greater distribution of the goods deriving from higher status, *or* a change to the normative underpinning of the international order. Only when a rising power expresses dissatisfaction on *both* axes is it characterised as 'radically revisionist'; however, he further argues that this position tends to arise from a refusal by existing powers to accommodate the status concerns of the rising power, leading to domestic pressure for 'spoiling' behaviour which aims at delegitimising and overthrowing existing rules, norms and institutions (Ward, 2017). Conversely, Stacie Goddard looks beyond actor intentions in determining the scale of revisionism associated with a given rising power, with an explanation based on the actor's network position within existing international institutions (Goddard, 2018a, 2019). Her argument that a rising power's ability to signal its intentions within the terms of

dominant discourse determines whether it is recognised as having legitimate status in the international, is an interesting one, and potentially speaks to China's 'discursive mirroring' which is observed in Chapter 4 of this thesis. However, an important difference between Goddard's argument and this thesis is that the act of 'recognising' is limited to the existing hegemon: she is seeking to explain differences in behaviour historically between different incumbent hegemon towards rising powers. This is a peculiar limitation of analysis, given that questions of legitimacy are social, depending on the views of an audience; Goddard's narrow conception of legitimacy stems from her decision to limit analysis to the 'great powers' themselves. Furthermore, it is important to note that, notwithstanding China's discursive mirroring, its *legitimacy* is *denied* by Western actors: China's project to be recognised as legitimate is, thus, focused on the global South. This accords with the Gramscian perspective, which emphasises that 'legitimacy' must be recognised not just by leaders, but also, crucially, by subaltern actors (Goddard, 2018b).

This emphasis on questions of meaning is also evident in Barry Buzan's analysis of China's rise and its implications. Buzan applies his analysis specifically to the case of China, and its discourse of 'peaceful rise'. Working with categories suggested by the Chinese IR scholar Qin Yaqing, he proposes the concept of 'reformist revisionist', on the basis that 'China accepts on an ideational basis the pluralist, coexistence institutions. It accepts at least instrumentally the market, resists the more politically liberal institutions, and wants to increase its status/rank. In line with its resistance to democracy, China is uncomfortable with the predominantly Western world society/global civil society, with which it does not deal well ... and which ... is a key driver of

the normative deepening of international society (democracy, human rights, environment)' (Buzan, 2010). Rohan Mukerjee also tackles the 'puzzle' of China's approach to the 'LIO', in which it appears to support some elements, while challenging others in three different ways: rule-breaking, delegitimization, and institutional proliferation. Applying Institutional Status Theory, he argues, provides this 'elusive' answer: assuming that China's ultimate goal is status and recognition, its behaviour towards the 'LIO' depends on the degrees to which its institutions are 'open' (where the World Bank, IMF, and UNHRC are low, and the WTO and UNSC are high), and to which they are 'procedurally fair' (where the UNHRC, and Climate Change and Maritime Law institutions are low, and the IMF, WTO, UNSC, and G20 are high). While this work produces some interesting arguments, its division of the 'LIO' into these broad classifications is somewhat crude, and in classifying the human rights institutions of the UN as both closed and procedurally unfair to China, it reinforces the Western view of China as being antithetical to human rights (broadly understood) and 'outside' of these institutions. This thesis makes a very different argument, as set out in Chapters 3 and 4. Mukherjee's analysis therefore maintains the incoherent conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order' at the centre of its argument, which produces a somewhat analytically confused, not to say misleading, picture of the nature of China's contestation (Mukherjee, 2022). This thesis argues that considering China's behaviour to be 'inconsistent', or in any way complacent about liberal ordering, is due to the fundamental misrecognition embedded in the concept of the 'liberal international order'.

All these accounts hinge on a particular conception of revisionist behaviour, which does not match the observation

this thesis will go on to make of China's counterhegemonic project. It is clear that China wants a fairer distribution of the goods accruing from great power status (as demonstrated in its dispute with the IMF, for example (Pickford, 2023)), and has a concern with its international prestige; its discourses also make very clear that it seeks to delegitimise and undermine the authority of the existing dominant powers. However, China is not seeking to overthrow existing rules, norms and institutions, but is explicit in its support for them: its contention is that it is a *more faithful guardian* of the values of the international than existing leading powers, which threaten these values (*A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*, 2023; *US Hegemony and Its Perils*, 2023). This distinction is recognised by Chan, Feng, He and Hu, who reject the status quo / revisionist binary, as well as the elision of 'international order' with 'existing power relations' and hegemonic interests. These authors share with this thesis the view that international order is continually in flux and contested by all international actors; it is *not*, therefore, the property of the hegemon, designated as the 'status quo' actor defending order against the 'disorder' presented by a (necessarily revisionist) rising power (Chan *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, Qin forcefully rejects Buzan's analysis, mainly on the basis of the English School category of 'international society' as something that is 'essentially static and socio-culturally confined'. Qin argues against the 'taxonomical thinking' which produces a sense of international society as 'Western-led', with others, including China, necessarily at least beginning *outside* of it, obliged to conform with (all) its (Western-defined) primary institutions in order to be recognised as 'belonging'. Qin instead proposes an account of international society as 'an open process of complex social relations in motion' – a conception which accords more closely

with this thesis's conceptualisation of international order (Qin, 2010). While Chan et al reject the utility of the concept of 'revisionism' for understanding China's rise, this thesis goes further, in making the observation that, far from being simply 'revisionist', China's counterhegemonic project has taken the form of *mirroring* the practices and discourses which are integral to (Western-led) liberal hegemony. This mirroring is not recognised by, and therefore remains unexplained within the theoretical and historical IR literature (either Western or Chinese) on rising powers and revisionism.

This thesis therefore turns to neo-Gramscian ideas of hegemony to provide a more coherent understanding of the difference between international order and the liberal ordering project; and, furthermore, to make better sense of what it is that China is contesting, and its use of mirroring to do so. A Gramscian perspective helps to illuminate the essentially hierarchical nature of the international, and to understand the ways in which hegemony operates relationally and discursively to structure North-South relations. The Gramscian conceptualisation of hegemony is different in important ways from the 'hegemony' that features in Realist and other mainstream accounts of international relations, which are outlined in the following section. While these accounts capture some of the elements which produce liberal hegemony, understood in a Gramscian sense, they cannot account for liberalism's discursive and relational power.

2.5 'Liberal order' as project: hegemony and fields

As this chapter has shown, IR scholars increasingly reject the equation of 'liberal international order' with international order itself. Attention has shifted instead to analysis of accounts of the 'liberal international order' as discursive elements within a wider liberal hegemonic ordering project. While power remains central to this analysis of China and its alleged challenge to the 'liberal international order', contemporary discussions of hegemony and its contestation place their emphasis on *discursive* power and its various forms (Barnett and Duvall, 2005). As a theorist of the cultural and ideological aspects of hegemony, Gramsci provides a sophisticated set of tools with which to analyse China's engagement with the 'liberal international order'.

The concept of 'hegemony' appears in different forms across IR scholarship, mainstream and critical, imbued with a variety of understandings. In the 1970s, the term was taken up by IPE scholars to reflect on the prospect of US decline (after the collapse of Bretton Woods and defeat in Vietnam). Robert Gilpin, Charles Kindleberger, Stephen Krasner, and others articulated different versions of 'hegemonic stability theory' (HST), as the necessity of there being a dominant state or hegemon to maintain the global political and economic order through the provision of international public goods. This characterised the US as the architect, guarantor, and defender of the post-1945 international order, altruistically delivering public goods through the convertibility of the dollar and the Bretton Woods institutions. 'Hegemony' here simply implies a preponderance of (economic and military) power allowing a state to dominate the system; if necessary, using its coercive capacity to enforce the 'rules of the game', while assuming the burden of (re)producing international order. 'International

order', in these accounts, is associated with a (liberal) economic system based on open markets, and underpinned by formal institutions. Without the hegemon, it was assumed that the anarchic system would be likely to collapse into ('mercantilist') disorder, with zero-sum economic rivalry and, potentially, great power war; the model for this scenario, as for many Cold War theories of international order, was the experience of the interwar years. The 'disorder' in the international system in the 1970s was, therefore, identified by these scholars as the direct result of the decline of US hegemony, thus conceptually yoking international order to the US (liberal) ordering project (Gilpin, 1975, 1976; Krasner, 1976; Kindleberger, 1986; Webb and Krasner, 1989).

Although originally rooted in the malaise detected in international order by Northern IR scholars in the 1970s, the linkage between this conception of 'hegemony' and international order introduced by HST has had a persistent appeal for mainstream IR scholars: Robert Keohane rearticulated it through his focus on the resilience of rules and institutions (characterised as 'regimes') as hegemony declined; and Ikenberry's early work is notably influenced by HST in the way he couples (American) hegemony with international order (Keohane, 1983, 1984; Ikenberry, 1989, 2001, 2011a, p. 2). Ikenberry and Nexon have also recently picked up on 'hegemony' as a useful concept for understanding international order. Much like the earlier HST theorists, they define hegemony as being based on 'superior economic and military capabilities', whereby a 'predominant power' can 'create' international order; for which, in turn, they draw on Ikenberry's earlier definition – that it is 'manifest in the settled rules and arrangements between states that define and guide their

interactions'. Hegemons establish order through a mix of complicity (from supportive states), bargaining, and coercion, but, the authors concede, are themselves 'structured' by the international order (Ikenberry, 2011a; Ikenberry and Nexon, 2019). Cooley and Nexon emphasise the 'provision of some combination of economic, security, and cultural goods' as the key element of hegemonic ordering, as well as the role of persuasion, socialisation, and soft power (Cooley and Nexon, 2020, p. 42). In their use of the term 'hegemonic order', or 'American hegemonic system' (in the case of Cooley and Nexon), the authors thus introduce a degree of ambiguity and complexity to the relationship between international order and hegemony; however, the term reifies the idea of a single entity as guarantor of order through this combination. Such duality as they concede, exists between the 'hegemon', understood in simple, Realist terms as the strongest state, and the 'order' or 'ecosystem' which it built. This allows them to account for the attitude of Donald Trump to the 'liberal international order', but is unable to provide a satisfying answer to the particular ways in which China's contestation is being undertaken, as this thesis highlights in later chapters. For this, a different conceptualisation of 'hegemony' is needed.

Ian Clark, writing from an English School perspective, rejects the understanding of hegemony based simply on 'primacy', defining it instead as 'an institutionalized practice of special rights and responsibilities conferred on a state with the resources to lead'. This understanding rests entirely on legitimacy and recognition within international society. With this high bar set, Clark argues that the US is not currently hegemonic within international society, and, moreover, that such hegemony is currently unattainable, whether held singly, collectively, or coalitionally

(Clark, 2009). While he makes a persuasive argument about the lack of legitimacy and recognition, this conceptualisation, with its focus on a single dominant state, does not allow for the ways in which hegemony operates discursively, irrespective of whether there is a single hegemonic state: hegemony resides precisely in the taken-for-granted notion that the current system *is* hegemonic, for example in how the current international order is common-sensically presented (and accepted even by critical and Southern scholars) as being 'liberal'. Clark's emphasis on legitimacy and consent, furthermore, has a somewhat apolitical orientation. The liberal individualistic conceptualisation of 'consent' used here, based (presumably) on pre-existing preferences, not only sets the bar high for hegemony to apply, but it also overlooks the complexity of consent within a hegemonic system, in which ideology and the production of common sense in fact produce these 'pre-existing' preferences (Morton, 2003). This is discussed in more detail shortly.

The fundamental assumptions on which hegemonic stability theory was based, were disputed at the time by critical scholars (Strange, 1987; Grunberg, 1990). Susan Strange's argument hinged on a rearticulation of the understanding of hegemony: she argues that if US hegemony were conceptualised through its *structural* (rather than simply economic or military) power, it becomes clear that its dominance within the international system had not diminished. She set out four interdependent aspects of structural power: the ability to exercise control over other actors' security from violence; the ability to control the system of production of goods and services; control over the structure of finance and credit; and influence over knowledge of different kinds, including control over the acquisition,

communication and storage of knowledge and information. Writing just before the end of the Cold War, Strange argued that the US continued to hold preponderant strength in each of these aspects, concluding that not only had its hegemony not diminished, but that it was likely to continue into the future. With this argument, Strange detaches the fact of US hegemony from the existence, or lack, of international order (which, like the HST scholars, she associates with an open and stable world economy): notwithstanding the enduring US hegemony, international order was still somewhat impaired, in large part due to the US's own 'inconsistent, fickle, and unpredictable' behaviour (Strange, 1987). Strange's argument has been backed up by more recent scholarship from Carla Norloff and William Wohlforth, who demonstrated that the decline of the Bretton Woods system actually coincided with an increase in US monetary power, contradicting the narrative of 'decline' on which HST had been based (Norloff and Wohlforth, 2019).

In contrast to materialist and structuralist conceptions, which typically ignore discursive power or treat it as a secondary, derivative element, Nexon and Neumann have recently produced an alternative interpretation of hegemony drawing on Bourdieu and field theory, which aims to encompass both material and discursive elements. Such a theory, they claim, reconciles Realist and neo-Gramscian conceptualisations. This approach focuses on different types of 'capital' to explain the nature of hegemony and its relationship to international order: '[h]egemons use their superior position in ... military and economic fields — the meta-capital that their outsized capabilities provide them with — to create, shape, and shove other fields — each of which involve patterns of super- and subordination derived from the possession of field-relevant

capital. That is, they shape international order'. However, rather than agreeing with the Realist view that international order is the product of hegemonic design, the authors argue that 'hegemons emerge in pre-existing fields and often lack sufficient meta-capital to restructure them completely ... meta-capital allows us to see them as both shaped by, and shapers of, international order'. On this view, therefore, international order is not the same thing as the hegemonic project; however, a hegemon naturally has a strong influence on international order. In part, it is able to do this through the possession of 'symbolic capital', which arises when 'certain species and subspecies of capital — whether cultural, economic, social, military, or whatever — become infused with specifically ideological meaning that renders them particularly valuable'; and also 'meta-capital', which they explain as the 'capacity to set the rate of exchange among kinds of capital — within and across fields — and, more broadly, to structure fields themselves' (Nexon and Neumann, 2018). This account is built upon in a subsequent chapter by Cooley and Nexon, where they present an ideal-typical model that represents hegemons as providers of public goods, such as security, economic stability, as well as 'symbolic goods', defined as valuable through the hegemon's 'meta-capital'. Contestation to hegemonic power (and/or the existing order, which Cooley and Nexon, like this thesis, distinguish) can thus take place (either deliberately or inadvertently) through 'goods substitution' by other actors, which can result in the 'hollowing out' of the hegemonic order (Nexon and Cooley, 2021).

This Bourdieu-inspired account illuminates a different dimension of hegemony than that offered by Realists, allowing, through the concept of 'cultural capital', for the role of ideology

and ideas in hegemony. However, extrapolated as it is from Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'fields', it presents a flat and apolitical view of how hegemony works: rather than the somewhat transactional conception of 'goods' provision or 'substitution', based on 'rates of exchange' between 'capital' in different 'fields', hegemony needs to be understood as an inherently political, hierarchical concept, entailing an ever-present possibility of coercion (military, economic, or *stigmatising*) to achieve its universalising intent. Moreover, the ideal-typical approach allows the authors to exclude the particular nature of contemporary international politics, and the role of imperialism, violence, and capitalist extraction in producing the current hegemonic system from their analysis, despite the fact that for subaltern actors, this history plays a significant role in their decisions from whom to accept 'public goods' when offered a choice – leaving aside the larger issue of whether forms of imperialism, violence and capital extraction are plausibly conceived of as 'public goods'. Furthermore, the ideal-typical approach belies the fact that this is a description of *American* hegemony, albeit sanitised through the acknowledgement and then dismissal as irrelevant, of the US's often violent, *disordering*, 'illiberal' foreign policy (Cooley and Nexon, 2020, p. 20).

Another account which explicitly rejects the concept of the 'liberal international order', in favour of a focus on the 'rough work' of hegemonic ordering (by the US) through power politics, is offered by Patrick Porter. While arguing that all hegemonies across history 'articulate [their] order in elevated rhetorical terms that soften the realities of power', Porter decries the (relatively recent, in his account) adoption of the 'euphemism' represented by the concept of the 'LIO'. In

particular, he blames this 'mythology' for the legitimization of liberal internationalism as a (misguided, imperial) foreign policy. His argument, therefore, has two targets – the euphemistic narrative of 'who we are' as liberal actors, with its embedded contradictions, and a particular foreign policy – liberal internationalism. This duality is not, however, always clear in his argument, with 'liberal internationalism' and the concept of the 'liberal international order' being treated as fundamentally the same thing. Furthermore, their important role within the 'rough work' of hegemonic ordering is, as a result, not taken seriously. Like classical Marxists (if only in this respect), Porter treats ideology, and by implication discursive power, as epiphenomenal (Porter, 2020).

To a great extent, therefore, this debate hinges on different understandings of the concept of 'hegemony', with Strange adopting a more sophisticated, structural account, rather than simply basing it on a measure of (relative) material strength. A structural approach to hegemony brings into view the ways in which international hierarchies are produced, beyond the simple ranking of 'great powers.' The field-theoretical account also brings in more complexity, but arguably strays too far from the Realist conception of 'dominance', as well as the structuralist focus on asymmetries of power, with a conceptualisation seemingly stripped of politics. All of these accounts share an assumption about the 'hegemon', embodied by a particular state (the US), while disputing whether or not, therefore, the US actually qualified as 'hegemonic' at any given time. A more compelling account of hegemony, and the one adopted by this thesis, however, is one first articulated by Gramsci, and more recently adopted and adapted by the neo-Gramscian school of IR.

2.6 Gramscian hegemony

Gramsci's original conception of hegemony addresses a number of the shortcomings evident in existing IR scholarship, in particular the relative marginalisation of questions of meaning. Furthermore, while Gramsci's Marxist orientation led him to focus on the relations between dominant social forces (or class) and hegemonic representations, he did not reduce the social production of meaning and its distribution to the agency of a single actor, however materially dominant. On the contrary, Gramsci paid attention to how dominant representations were both reproduced and contested across the different sites and spaces of civil society, such as churches, schools, and the media. Translating Gramsci's conception of hegemony to the international system, allows for an analysis of hegemony which is not predicated on a single, dominant state, but recognises hegemony as something that is more diffused, and less actor-centred and intentional than the accounts in the mainstream literature. This thesis thus refers to 'Western-led liberal hegemony', rather than 'US hegemony', in line with this. The preponderant material power of the United States crucially underpins this hegemony; however, the nature of liberal hegemony is not simply or exclusively authored by the US, and, moreover, continues to persist even when the US is (arguably) no longer 'hegemonic', or when it is governed by self-identifying opponents of liberalism. By extension, nor can it be transformed by a single actor, such as China, but must instead be negotiated as a terrain traversed by multiple states, both in the North and the South.

Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony fully recognises the importance of material supremacy; it also acknowledges the role of coercion in disciplining dissenting actors. However, what distinguishes Gramscian hegemony from Realist accounts, is the attention he pays to the necessity of subaltern *consent*: it is this which separates a hegemonic system from authoritarian rule (Gramsci, 1999, pp. 306–7). Furthermore, he explores the role of ideology – understood here as the production of representations that become commonsensical – for producing consent: he argues for 'the cultural fact, of cultural activity, of a cultural front as necessary alongside the merely economic and political ones' (Gramsci, 1999, p. 194). Unlike Patrick Porter, therefore, Gramsci argues that ideologies – again, understood as discursive practices that produce accounts of the world – are not simply an 'illusion' or 'euphemisms' deliberately designed to 'deceive' subaltern groups through false consciousness, but are 'real historical facts', representing important 'instruments of domination' together with 'material forces' (Gramsci, 1999, p. 196, 2011c, p. 172). Cox was the first modern IR / IPE theorist to introduce the Gramscian conceptualisation of hegemony to theorisations of international order. He actively sought to distance this understanding of hegemony from that embedded in HST, which is coterminous with 'domination'. For Cox, hegemony is a 'structure of meanings underpinned by a structure of power', in which social practices, or the 'ways of doing and thinking', are explained and legitimised by ideology emanating from the 'dominant social strata of the dominant state or states.' Cox's conceptualisation of international ordering, while understood at the state level, thus puts into the foreground the power of civil society acting globally, linking dominant social classes in a 'complex of international social relationships.' For Cox, hegemony must be 'universal in

conception'; however, there is a greater 'intensity' and 'consistence' at the core, while hegemony is 'more laden with contradictions at the periphery'. It is 'expressed in universal norms, institutions and mechanisms which lay down general rules of behaviour for states ... - rules which support the dominant mode of production'. This conception of hegemony is not (simply) based on coercion or exploitation, but is secured in a way which most other actors could consider 'compatible with their interests', across social, economic, and political spheres. However, how these 'interests' are understood differs from both Realist and Liberal accounts, because hegemony involves 'a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole society': the interests and preferences of actors therefore do not pre-exist the hegemonic system (Cox, 1981, 1983, 1992). That is, hegemonic representations and the discursive practices that enable them come to define not only the shared common sense about how the world works, but also how social subjects come to see themselves and their place within that world, thus shaping their interests (for an IR application, see (Weldes, 1996)). William Robinson expands on this with his argument that 'Gramscian hegemony involves the internalization on the part of subordinate classes of the moral and cultural values, the codes of practical conduct, and the worldview of the dominant classes or groups – in sum, the internalization of the *social logic* of the system of domination itself. This *logic* is imbedded in ideology, which acts as a cohesive force in social unification' (Robinson, 1996, p. 21). Furthermore, contrary to the field-theoretic account of hegemony, Gramsci argued that the basic unit of analysis was not the aggregation of discrete events or 'moments', nor individual agents acting in the 'political market-

place', but the '*ensemble* of social relations configured by social structures' (Gill, 1993, p. 24).

Cox further argues that (certain) international organisations are a 'mechanism' of hegemony, serving hegemonic ends in a number of ways: they 'embody the rules' and 'ideologically legitimate the norms' of the international order, which are in turn subject to hegemonic power. They also 'co-opt the elites from peripheral countries' and 'absorb counter-hegemonic ideas' through the process Gramsci articulated as *trasformismo*. He focuses in particular on the Bretton Woods institutions, which 'facilitate the expansion of the dominant economic and social forces.' In Cox's account, then, international institutions are not coterminous with either world order or hegemony, but work, in different ways, under the influence of, and in the service of hegemony. Because they act as the vehicles for normalising, transmitting, and enforcing global rules and norms, and because these rules and norms are ideologically determined, institutions can be the agents for hegemonic power. Furthermore, certain institutions contribute materially to hegemonic power, through their governance of world monetary and trade relations. He argues that institutions are an important 'anchor of hegemonic strategy' as they legitimise power relations, thus ensuring that these are not coercive and dominant, but are hegemonic through consent. Institutions allow the strong to express leadership in terms of 'universal or general interests', rather than particular, through the apparent granting of concessions. He argues that material capabilities, ideas, and institutions are all essential elements (or 'forces') within the hegemonic structure, with reciprocal relationships. Because hegemony is never complete, but always partial and precarious, it is possible, for example, for the weak, working

together within institutions, to influence ideas. However, this does not necessarily undermine the hegemonic power, as the process of *trasformismo* allows the absorption of potentially counterhegemonic ideas, making them 'consistent with hegemonic doctrine' (Cox, 1981, 1983).

Robinson also draws on Gramsci to explain US interventionist foreign policy during the Cold War, looking at how the US discursively constructed the concept of 'stability' within international order to justify its military and economic interventions across the global South. Robinson demonstrates that, rather than locating the interest in 'stability' at the national or international level, it is to be found in the interests of particular social groups or classes across national boundaries (working through civil society), in certain economic, social, and political arrangements. He argues further that in certain circumstances, it is in the interest of these dominant social groups to *destabilise* other societies – though this is justified on the grounds of stabilising international order. Therefore, while consent is fundamental to hegemony, this does not mean that there is no role for coercion: Gramsci made clear that both play a role in the 'social relations of domination' (Robinson, 1996, p. 22; Gramsci, 1999, p. 261).

Hegemony intersects with international order, therefore, through the role of the dominant ideology or discursive practices in setting the terms of reference with which actors interact in the international, including the 'definitions of key political, economic, and philosophical concepts.' Robinson focuses on the concept of 'democracy', where one particular definition ('polyarchic') has become hegemonic (Robinson, 1996, p. 30). As Bieler and Morton put it, 'social forces may use ideas as "weapons" in order to legitimize particular policies'

(Bieler and Morton, 2001). These core concepts are significant in the role they play in determining 'membership' of 'international society', based on compliance with hegemonically determined norms; failure to comply can result in coercion, such as stigmatisation, economic sanctions, or even military intervention. The dominant ideology or discursive practices also define international social practices which govern relations between stronger and weaker actors, such as Development; this practice is fundamental to Gramsci's idea of the 'economic-corporate sacrifices' which the leading group must make to secure consent (Gramsci, 1999, p. 211). Later chapters will examine this and other hegemonic concepts in more detail, and the role they play in China's counterhegemonic project.

Robinson makes a further observation from Gramsci which sheds important light on the concept of the 'liberal international order' in mainstream Anglophone IR. Gramsci develops the concept of 'organic intellectuals', who stand in a particular relationship with politically dominant classes, in which they have the role of 'developing a relatively coherent worldview ... in the function of domination'. In a claim about the Trilateral Commission, which could apply equally to the John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter Princeton Project of 2006, Robinson argues that 'organic intellectuals provide the theoretical understanding of historical processes and of structure necessary for dominant groups to engage in the social practice of domination, and the construction of hegemony as a fit between power, ideas, and institutions' (Robinson, 1996, p. 42). Thus, US academia, working closely with policymakers through research funding and conferences, was intimately involved in creating an intellectual rationalisation for US interventionist policies such as 'modernization' and democracy promotion

(Robinson, 1996, pp. 44–45). Inderjeet Parmar has developed this idea, showing extensively the role of elite / international knowledge experts, and in particular US foundations (such as Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford), in promoting liberal hegemony (Parmar, 2002, 2019). As this thesis will show in Chapters 4 and 5, there is a very similar relationship between the Chinese state and the ‘Chinese School of IR’. This thesis further argues that the concept of the ‘liberal international order’ in Anglophone academia, which is treated as coterminous with the ‘rules-based order’ often invoked in liberal policy circles, provides exactly the ‘coherence’ that Gramsci suggests, in the service of the hegemonic project. Again, as argued in Chapters 4 to 6, similar patterns are evident in China’s counterhegemonic project, particularly towards the global South.

2.7 Conclusion

This thesis proposes to apply a neo-Gramscian approach to understanding the liberal ordering project. Using China’s counterhegemonic project as a lens produces a perspective which highlights elements which are effaced from other (both mainstream and critical) accounts of the so-called ‘liberal international order’. This chapter has argued that China’s contestation reveals that this term is an articulation of two separate ideas: ‘international order’ and ‘liberal hegemony’. In fact, as the next chapter will show, China’s international practices are broadly consistent with international order, whilst its contestation is directed at liberal hegemony. Yoking these two ideas together in the concept of ‘liberal international order’ is part of the ideology of liberal hegemony, understood in Gramscian terms, producing as common sense the idea that

liberal leadership is *necessary* for the maintenance of international *order*, and simultaneously effacing the role of non-liberal actors in the (ongoing) production of international order. This is examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Making this conceptual separation is not only essential for analytical coherence, this thesis argues, but also allows for a clearer understanding of the nature and causes of the current 'crisis': accounts which conceptually yoke 'international order' with 'liberal hegemony' are apt to consider contestation by China as a 'revisionist' project which is destabilising to the (liberal) international order, rather than recognising China's contestation as being targeted largely at liberal hegemony. This reading then potentially justifies policies to 'contain' China, articulated as a necessary move to maintain stability in international order; such policies run the risk of themselves destabilising international order. There is, therefore, a political as well as an analytical significance to this conceptual clarification.

The next chapter looks in more detail at the concept of 'international order', showing firstly that the current international order has been influenced and shaped across the decades by the claims and contestations of subaltern actors; and secondly, that the key features of the current international order, such as multilateralism, sovereignty / sovereign equality, and the institution of the UN, are not distinctively 'liberal', in any meaningful sense. It then makes a close appraisal of China's practices and discourse regarding these key norms and institutions of international order, revealing that it is largely compliant. Using China's 'paradoxical' compliance / contestation as a lens, therefore, is an important means of *disarticulating* the concept of the 'liberal international order',

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revealing that 'international order' is not coterminous with the Western-led liberal hegemonic project.

3. China on the Inside: ('Liberal') International Order and the Global South

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter showed how the concept of the 'liberal international order' has become naturalised and rendered 'common sense' as a description of the international, with ideological effects; and used the apparent 'paradox' in China's pattern of compliance and contestation to 'disarticulate' the concept and reveal the hegemonic project that underlies it. It argued that the international order is not identical with the liberal hegemonic project; and, furthermore, that characterising them as coterminous reinforces liberal hegemony by firstly making the liberal project appear fundamental to *order* (and thus, the avoidance of *disorder*), and secondly, effacing the role of 'non-liberal' actors in the production and reproduction of international order. The effect of this is to reinforce the hierarchies on which Western-led liberal hegemony is built, by discursively granting the 'liberal' world authorial authority, while the rest of the world, lacking authorial agency, are produced as passive recipients at best, or potential wreckers of order at worst.

This chapter further examines this 'contradiction' in China's behaviour: despite being characterised as a 'revisionist' rising power, and represented as 'external' to the order, with the ambition of supplanting liberal hegemony, China is notably *compliant* with many aspects of the 'liberal international order'. It examines the post-war international order, and in particular

its (commonsensically defining) institutions of multilateralism, international law, and sovereign equality, and considers the role of non-liberal, and particularly subaltern states in co-producing this order. China's own discourse about international order, and the ways in which it is compliant with it, are then set out, to make the argument that there is an 'international order' which, while subject to liberal hegemony, does not depend on this hegemony for its continuation, contrary to claims within Western policy discourse and Liberal IR literature.

International order is, arguably, under threat from multiple sources: the recent Covid pandemic and the global South debt crisis which has resulted, the Ukraine/Russia conflict, war(s) in the Middle East, the prospect of (another) unsettled US presidential election potentially returning Donald Trump to power, the rise of the far right in European elections, as well as the perennial potential of a global economic shock, all present the risk of destabilisation. This thesis argues, however, that China's growing power, and its increasing assertiveness within international institutions, need not be automatically counted as one of the potential risks to *international order*: as even English School theorists have recently acknowledged, contestation does not undermine international order, but can in fact be generative of it (Flockhart and Paikin, 2023). In both its international discourse, and in its practices, China is in fact broadly supportive of the key institutions of international order, articulating itself as a leader in the pursuit of justice, fairness and stability in the international. Its contestation is instead reserved for Western-led liberal *hegemony*. Representing China as being *outside* of international order, on account of its being *illiberal*, and therefore necessarily a threat to it, is an ideological move.

3.2 The (co-)production of international order

As the previous chapter argued, international order exists when actors share common understandings of rules and practices which govern their interactions, through stable patterns of relations and practices. International order is emergent from the social interactions of actors, rather than something that is deliberately designed, created, and owned by a single (dominant) actor. This does not efface the hierarchical nature of the international system: unequal power relations both produce, and are produced by, this emergent international order. The current international order began in the post-1945 period, adapting with major structural changes such as decolonisation and the collapse of the USSR. While 'international order' is about more than simply institutions, multilateralism, like respect for sovereignty / sovereign equality, is a key norm of the current international order, and so institutions such as the UN are important manifestations of, and channels for, international order, helping to produce the stable patterns of relations and practices.

This section takes the key elements which are outlined as fundamental to the 'liberal international order' by much of the scholarship which uses this term, and considers their historical genealogy to assess the extent to which they can either be understood as quintessentially 'liberal', or exclusively 'authored' by Western / liberal states.

3.2.1 Multilateralism as 'liberal'

For many Liberal international relations scholars, the institutionalisation of multilateralism was a key part of the

establishment of the post-1945 'liberal international order', ushering in a new way for states to cooperate with one another. The establishment of international organisations after 1945 was more than simply a political or administrative move: *normative* liberal ideas about international society were embedded in them (Latham, 1997, p. 43; Mazower, 2013). Robert Keohane expressed most clearly the association between multinational institutions and theoretical liberalism – or 'regulatory liberalism' as he terms it. Claiming that the concept of multilateral institutions was 'presaged' by Kant's vision of a 'federalism' of states, he argues that international organisations, based on established rules, norms and practices, are essential to international peace (Keohane, 2002, pp. 49–51). Furthermore, multinational institutions are seen as fundamental to the *liberal* order: Ikenberry, writing on his conception of this order, referred to the 'hallmarks of liberal internationalism – openness and rule-based relations enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations and norms such as multilateralism' (Ikenberry, 2011b). For Emanuel Adler, international organisation and multilateralism (as well as democracy, human rights and the rule of law) are key elements of liberal internationalism, 'deeply rooted in the idea of progress, promot[ing] institutionalized self-restraint and peaceful change' (Adler, 2013). Marianne Kneuer hypothesises that the growing 'democratic deficit' is a threat to the principle of multilateralism, using Orban's attitude to the EU and Trump's attitude to multilateralism generally as evidence (Kneuer, 2022). This presupposes, however, that liberal democratic states embrace multilateralism, a supposition that overlooks the US's historical and contemporary record with multilateral compliance, as discussed later.

Nevertheless, this assumption about the fundamental co-implication of multilateralism with liberalism, and therefore the constitutive role of multilateralism within the 'LIO', is the context for George Bush Senior's declaration of a 'new world order' in 1991, in which the 'United Nations, freed from Cold War stalemate, is posed to fulfil the historic vision of its founders': the UN was understood to be a liberal institution *by design* (Bush, 1991). In fact, Bush's utopian idea about the foundational vision of the UN was to a great extent unwarranted. The US officials who began to design it during the early 1940s took as their model the League of Nations, whose failure had ended in the conflicts of the 1930s and 40s. While Wilson's liberal internationalist credentials are often cited as part of the 'liberal order's' foundational narrative, it is unclear whether his 'liberalism' bears much family resemblance to contemporary liberal understandings. The League of Nations was a deeply hierarchical, exclusionary organisation, which took as its model, far more than any utopian concerns with international democracy and equal rights, the governance of the British Empire, with its civilising mission based on a moral universalism. (Hewitt, 2013, p. 32; Mazower, 2013, p. 12). Therefore, the identification of multilateral institutions, and the UN in particular, as being self-evidently liberal, based on current understandings, is problematic. The UN came into existence in a world in which the existence of empires was still taken for granted; and while membership of the UN General Assembly played an emancipatory role for many postcolonial states, this was not built into its design. For the US civil servants who were tasked with devising a new international organisation to manage the peace, the key concern was to maintain the wartime alliance between the US and the USSR through a permanent organisation; the Security Council veto system was

designed with this goal in mind, to preserve the sovereign rights of the post-war great powers (Mazower, 2013, p. 14). In fact, the determination to preserve states' sovereignty greatly outweighed any concern for the protection of minorities through international law in the design of the UN, and it was not, therefore, seen as an instrument for the defence of human rights in the way liberal discourse now indicates (Mazower, 2013, p. 22). This highlights the shapeshifting character of liberalism over time: it is not an unchanging set of norms.

Despite the claim that liberal scholars make for multilateralism as a liberal norm (and thus, the 'creation' of the West), the roots of Wilson's liberal internationalism, seen as the origin point of the norm of multilateralism embedded within international institutions, can, in fact, be found in Latin America. Greg Grandin and Marcos Tourinho both show how multilateral practices, underpinned by international law and the mutual recognition of sovereignty, emerged from post-independence Latin American states in the nineteenth century; and that the League of Nations was in large part modelled on the Pan American conferences which had been held since 1826, including America from 1889 (Grandin, 2012; Tourinho, 2021).

Another non-liberal pre-1945 example of multilateralism suggested by Tourinho came, by definition, at a non-state level, when in 1927 the leaders of thirty-seven colonial resistance movements (including Sukarno (Indonesia), Nehru (India), Messali (Algeria), and Haya de la Torre (Peru)) met in Brussels to 'exchange strategies and debate the problems of the imperial order'. This community was itself a product of colonialism, meeting through shared protest, prison and exile experiences, and used conferences such as Brussels to discuss resistance strategies, as well as raise public recognition of their struggles.

Its purpose was, in fact, to resist liberal (colonial) practices; this suggests that insofar as multilateralism has its genesis in liberalism, the reality is somewhat at odds with the benign origin myth of liberalism (Silvestri, 2000; Mazower, 2013; Tourinho, 2021). This element of multilateral collaboration was, however, further enabled through the different forums of the UN: O'Malley and Thakur argue that the networked identity of the global South movement, linking the recently decolonised parts of Africa and Asia with actors from Latin America, was fostered as they articulated their different claims and contestations of unequal global structures (O'Malley and Thakur, 2022).

Moreover, as further evidence that the liberal claim on multilateralism is suspect, there is the fact that the US and its allies have frequently, under the current international order, been the ones to undermine the norm of multilateralism. Cox quotes Sir Shridath Ramphal, then Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, who wrote in 1988, in a volume entitled *The UN Under Attack*,

'[T]he paradox—and the tragedy—of recent times is that even as the need for better management of relations between nations and for a multilateral approach to global problems has become more manifest, support for internationalism has weakened—eroded by some of the strongest nations whose position behoves them to be at its vanguard and who have in the past acknowledged that obligation of leadership. This is most true, of course, of the United States, whose recent behaviour has served actually to weaken the structures of multilateralism, including the United Nations itself.' (Cox, 1992)

Stewart Patrick also shows how, in the post-Cold War period, the US has refused to act multilaterally over a range of areas,

including the use of force and peacekeeping, arms control, use of sanctions, funding the UN, the International Criminal Court (ICC), human rights, and the global environment (Patrick, 2002).

The claim, therefore, that multilateralism is a product of liberalism, and that it would be at risk in an international order not dominated by the US, is hard to substantiate. Not only did non-liberal and global South actors play an important role in the emergence of this international norm, but also, arguably, the US is the greatest threat to the functioning of multilateralism in the current international order. Furthermore, what those who make this claim fail to account for is the complexity of liberalism: far from being a timeless, unchanging political philosophy, liberalism changes over time, and is beset by internal contradictions and tensions (Hutchings, 2013; Rae and Reus-Smit, 2013; Bell, 2014). Liberalism has, furthermore, also changed in important ways in the face of *external* contestation, for example in response to the decolonisation movement: this is important to bear in mind when considering China's engagement with liberal norms, as discussed in the next chapter. Liberalism's lack of perfect coherence over time and space is further explored in the following sections.

3.2.2 Sovereignty/sovereign equality and international law as 'liberal'

Ikenberry also identifies sovereign territoriality as a fundamental element of the '*liberal* international order', a norm which was developed in the West (in the 'Westphalian' tradition), and diffused out to the rest of the world over time. Westphalian sovereignty is so fundamental to 'liberal international order', that Ikenberry claims that the erosion of the sovereignty norm during the early years of the twenty first century amounted to an erosion of the *liberal* nature of the

international order, bringing about an *illiberal* hegemony (Ikenberry, 2011a). The liberal nature of sovereignty is also emphasised by Robert Latham, who finds its genesis in the discussions of the principle of non-intervention in the work of Kant, Mill, Cobden and Manzini. He further argues '[t]hat the Westphalian state system predates the rise of liberal modernity and order makes the state and its sovereignty no less an element of liberal order than the market' (Latham, 1997, p. 153). Beate Jahn, writing from a critical position, likewise shows how Locke articulated state sovereignty through his thinking around private property (Jahn, 2013, pp. 56–7).

Ikenberry also makes the claim that the LIO is defined by the underpinning of international law: 'Treaties and legal doctrines as well as the wider array of international rules and institutions emerged inside the West and the global system over the centuries as tools by which states could signal restraint, commitment, and mutual recognition'. He goes on to claim that the 'restraints and protections' of international law function best between democracies (by which he means 'liberal democracies') (Ikenberry, 2011a, p. 285). The claim of liberalism to the concept of (positive) international law appears to be mainly based on its purported foundations being laid by European scholars such as Grotius (1583-1645) and Vattel (1714-67), who set out to codify the terms of international trade, violence, and peace-making between (civilised) states on the basis of liberal values such as property rights (Bull, 1994; Buzan and Lawson, 2015). There is an extent, therefore, to which international law is identifiably liberal, given that, unlike natural law, it built hierarchies and exclusions on the basis of European ideas of civilisation into international interactions with non-European peoples. However, it is unlikely that it was

this aspect of liberalism that Ikenberry had in mind in his claim that the same factor of unbalanced power (in the so-called 'unipolar moment') that had eroded 'Westphalian' sovereignty norms, had also undermined the norms of international law, resulting in a less 'liberal' global order – largely through the actions of the US. Ikenberry's benign, progressive ideal of liberalism does not acknowledge its historical roots in imperial, hierarchical practices, where sovereignty was mutually recognised in the international according to a 'standard of civilisation', much as it was during the 'unipolar moment' that he decries.

Again, many critical and global South scholars have shown that these norms are not the exclusive creation or property of the 'liberal' world, which were introduced into the 'non-liberal' world through codification in the UN Charter 1945. Jordan Branch, for example, has contested the 'Westphalia' myth for the norm of sovereignty, showing how it actually entered international practice via colonial practices in the Americas, at a time when aristocratic sovereign hierarchy remained the norm in Europe (Branch, 2012). Tourinho and Grandin demonstrate how Latin American states in the nineteenth century articulated the norm of sovereign equality between them, drawing on international law to codify norms around intervention (Grandin, 2012; Tourinho, 2021).

In the post-Cold War international order, the norm of sovereignty was to an extent disavowed by the US and its liberal allies, in favour of cosmopolitan humanitarianism; and it is China who, to the dismay of liberal states, appeals to the norm of sovereignty as fundamental to international order. While these explicit articulations are of relatively recent standing, however, the US has always been ambivalent about the

principle of non-intervention; though before the rise of China, the US took pains at least to justify interventions through the language of sovereignty (or to conceal them through covert action) (Weber, 1995). The US has likewise resisted being constrained by international law, on grounds of sovereignty: it has not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; most international human rights treaties are not enforceable in its courts; and it does not recognise the International Criminal Court (ICC), which was designed in large part through the agency of weak and middle states (including, as Siba Grovogui shows, Trinidad and Tobago), deliberately to avoid the political influence of great powers by remaining independent of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and its veto potential (Goldsmith, 2003; Grovogui, 2011; Jahn, 2013). The US's attitude to sovereignty is, therefore, ambiguous: it defends its own in the face of multilateral obligations, while remaining ambivalent about the sovereignty of weaker states.

The Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907 are often cited as essential moments for the production of international law by liberal states; however, attendance was not restricted to the European 'society of states': the 1907 conference hosted a delegation from Latin America, who were influential in bringing about agreement on its Second Convention, applying arbitration to contractual disputes over payment of debt between two countries, rather than the historical norm of resorting to military force. This new international norm had emerged from the experiences of Latin America dealing with debt owed to European states, which had resulted in the Drago doctrine of 1902, in which the US acted to prevent such military interventions by European powers (albeit amending it with the Roosevelt Corollary, allowing the US to intervene in Latin

America where the interests of US businesses required) (Tryon, 1910; Grandin, 2012; Tourinho, 2021). Grandin further argues that, rather than a neo-colonial imposition upon subaltern states lacking agency, the Monroe Doctrine was embraced and frequently invoked by Latin American leaders in their own international dealings, who called for it to be given the status of international law, despite staunch US resistance to this. Furthermore, it was through later Latin American resistance to the Roosevelt corollary of the Monroe Doctrine that the US was, in 1933, forced to accept the principle of national sovereignty, in renouncing its right to intervene in Latin America (Grandin, 2012; Tourinho, 2021). This rule of non-intervention, codified at the 1933 Pan-American Convention in Montevideo, became fundamental to the later creation of the United Nations, with the simple, yet at the time revolutionary, statement: 'No state has the right to intervene in the internal or external affairs of another' (Tourinho, 2021).

Tourinho further shows how small states and subaltern / anticolonial actors influenced the development of universal laws of war: the laws that had emerged, beginning with the Hague Conferences, and further developed after the First World War, applied a strict 'standard of civilisation' in being applicable only to wars between 'civilised' states, and not to the 'small wars' against (non-white) colonial subjects. He cites the examples of Berber tribes during the Rif War against Spain and France in the 1920s applying to the Red Cross for humanitarian support; and the FLN committing itself to laws of armed conflict explicitly rejected by the French during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62): both these actions brought international attention to the hypocrisy of existing legal conventions on war adopted by European powers. The 1977

Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions were also strongly influenced by anticolonial movements, in the changes made to the definition of combatant and civilian to include those seeking self-determination, making anticolonial conflicts a form of just war, and helping to create the universal *jus in bello* with stronger protections for civilians (Tourinho, 2021).

Emergent international law, as well as the norm of sovereignty, were not, therefore, simply the product of the great powers of the 'liberal' world: weaker actors, including those from the global South, were also able, through their own agency, to influence particular norms and areas of law. Furthermore, the US's ambivalence towards the sovereignty norm, and international law generally, indicates that neither of these is necessarily 'liberal', nor a product of hegemonic power.

3.2.3 The UN as a 'liberal' institution

The US's well-documented role as the key architect of the UN system after the Second World War is often taken to suggest that the institution as it emerged from the 1950s and 1960s was in its entirety the 'creation' of the US, and, therefore, a necessarily 'liberal' institution. The historical evidence suggests, however, that the US was far less interested in the General Assembly (GA), with its potential for becoming a global South-dominated institution based on sovereign equality of states, particularly with the ending of European colonialism, than it was in the Security Council, which the US designed as a forum for managing great power relations which it intended to dominate (Ikenberry, 2011a). Furthermore, the creation of UN bodies such as the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), established in 1964 by the GA, gave Southern actors an important voice advocating for greater justice in global trade and development matters, bringing Latin

American development economics expertise into alignment with the interests of newly independent states in Africa and Asia (Krepp, 2022).

The assumption that the US acted as an agent for decolonisation through the UN Charter is also open to question, the reality being somewhat more complex than this: in fact, the US recognised the importance of empires for the continued economic stability of its European allies, and at least tacitly supported their attempts to reassert control over colonial possessions in Southeast Asia, particularly as the Cold War emerged. However, the GA quickly became a key forum for anticolonialism, in its role as adjudicator on intra-imperial dissensions, and, increasingly, as a global forum for contesting power relations (Mazower, 2013, pp. 150–153; O'Malley and Thakur, 2022). Mazower describes 'the emergence in the General Assembly of an entirely new conception of world order – one premised on the breakup of empire rather than its continuation, on politics rather than law'. This was not in the least what the US 'architects' of the UN had intended. As the Cold War paralysed the Security Council, the power of the GA, and the range of its business, increased. It advocated for decolonisation, and with new postcolonial states joining its ranks, Europe's voice was further diluted (Mazower, 2013, pp. 185–6). While it had little *de facto* power in world politics, as a forum for debating global issues, it had a real impact on the emergence of new norms of international order, and its delegitimization of colonialism had an almost revolutionary effect on the structure of global politics. O'Malley and Thakur emphasise that the historical influence of the global South on the developing norms of international order can not only be sought through *successful* projects, claims, and contestations.

The unequal structural power embedded within the UN meant that weaker actors faced multiple hurdles and, occasionally, concerted opposition to their demands for justice; however, even projects which ended in failure left a mark on emergent ideas about international order (O'Malley and Thakur, 2022).

Although the Third World Movement, as it came to be known from the 1950s, is understood to have fragmented somewhat due to its internal contradictions and confrontations, and to have collapsed altogether after the oil shock of the 1970s and the rise of neoliberalism, the global South's continuing mark on international order should not be overlooked. While the New International Economic Order's (NIEO) demand for global distributive justice in 1974 was defeated by US hegemonic counter-practices (Parmar, 2019), the global South, through the GA, played a fundamental role in producing international human rights law, and related norms. In 1965, the GA approved the International Convention on All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the following year, the twin International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), were finalised, largely due to a coalition of postcolonial states, led by Egerton Richardson, the foreign minister of Jamaica. In the ICESCR, the primary right is that of the collective self-determination of peoples: although this concept is generally associated with Wilson, and with the later Atlantic Charter, it is only in the ICESCR that it is truly universal, with the colour line expunged. Furthermore, within this Covenant, self-determination is understood not simply politically, but, crucially, *economically*, based on sovereignty over natural resources. This Covenant also codified the right to strike for the first time in international law, as well as the right to an 'adequate standard of living' (Moyn, 2019, pp. 110–111).

A more recent example of global South states shaping emerging international norms is set out by Matthias Dembinski, who shows how the African Union (AU) incorporated the idea of the responsibility to intervene in a member state in the event of a crisis, into its Constitutive Act in July 2000, a year before the norm of 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) was first proposed by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). The AU's decision on intervention was prompted by the events in Rwanda, and had been promoted by South Africa and Nigeria in particular, on the basis of existing ideas of pan-Africanism and solidarity. Although some observers interpreted this as a sign of the AU reflecting 'core liberal governance norms', the reaction of African countries in condemning the NATO military action to remove Colonel Qaddafi from power in Libya, revealed that the AU had not simply been channelling liberal norms, however they were interpreted and actioned, but had been acting as norm entrepreneurs who disapproved of liberal interpretations of it. Furthermore, with the global South's opposition to R2P hardened after the events in Libya, Western draft resolutions in the UNSC on intervention in Syria were defeated, and interpretations of the norm of R2P have since reverted to being closer to that originally envisaged by the AU (Dembinski, 2017). The General Assembly has also in recent years been a crucial forum for states of the global South to express how their views on contemporary conflicts and crises such as the Israel-Gaza conflict, do not align with those of the US and its Western allies (O'Dell, 2023).

All of these examples show that, *liberal hegemony* notwithstanding, *international order* is not simply the creation and ongoing project of hegemonic power, but is something that

emerges through practices and interactions of actors in the international, often constraining the actions even of the most powerful state. Moreover, through the processes of decolonisation, and the use of informal and formal forums (and in particular the GA after 1945), global South actors have made a significant contribution to emerging norms of international order. This reality is, however, effaced in the use of the term 'liberal international order' by policy makers, as well as mainstream and even critical scholars; using this term to describe international order reinforces the line drawing and occlusions of liberal hegemony. As the previous chapter argued, the duality of 'international order' and the 'liberal ordering project' have always been clear to global South observers, both scholars and political actors, and observing China's discourses and practices relating to international order further underlines this.

3.3 China and international order

The binary of considering China either a 'status quo' or 'revisionist' rising power has become a scholarly trope. This thesis argues that these two positions are not necessarily a binary, and, furthermore, that there is no 'paradox' in China's approach to international order. While Ikenberry and others frequently characterise China as having the ambition to set up its own 'alternative' (illiberal) international order (Murphy, 2022; Lim and Ikenberry, 2023), the reality is that China is a firm supporter of maintaining the existing international order. That does not mean that it does not, on occasion, contest its norms; however, it does not do so any more than any other state, and perhaps less than the US does. Contesting the norms of the

international is one process through which international order is produced, and need not amount to 'revisionism'. As this thesis argues, international order is not a static 'creation' of the dominant power, but an iterative pattern, produced relationally through international practices. This is, in fact, the dominant conceptualisation of international order within the different branches of the Chinese School of IR (Xiong, Peterson and Braumoeller, 2024). This helps to explain why China's counterhegemonic project, reflecting its ambition to lead within the international, clearly articulates its commitment to the existing international order. For example, in March 2024 China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that China would promote a 'new type of international relations' whereby it will:

'uphold fairness and justice ... China will practice true multilateralism, and promote greater democracy in international relations. China will be more unequivocal on issues of principle concerning the legitimate rights and interests of developing countries and the future of humanity, and will shoulder greater moral responsibility and press ahead in the right direction of history. China will promote win-win cooperation ... China will stay on the right path of seeking solidarity and cooperation, offer more solutions with Chinese wisdom to regional hotspots and global issues, and provide more public goods in the interest of world peace and development. China's new development will bring about new opportunities in the world.' (*Wang Yi Envisions China's Diplomacy in 2024*, 2024)

There is nothing in this language which suggests that China's foreign policy is 'revisionist', emphasising as it does all the norms of international order which are highlighted by Western

scholars of the 'liberal international order': however, it is clearly counterhegemonic, in the way that it is setting China up as a leader, delivering 'public goods'.

3.3.1 China and multilateralism

There is significant evidence to show that China, far from repudiating the norm of multilateralism (despite its not being a 'liberal' state), and wanting to undermine existing multilateral organisations, is in fact deeply committed to this principle. So committed is China to multilateralism, that it is investing in improving its profile within existing institutions, as well as forming new multilateral organisations. Furthermore, Xi Jinping has made China's commitment to multilateralism explicit in his discourse. Speaking at the UN General Assembly in September 2021, he announced

'[W]e must improve global governance and practice true multilateralism. In the world, there is only one international system, i.e. the international system with the United Nations at its core. There is only one international order, i.e. the international order underpinned by international law. And there is only one set of rules, i.e. the basic norms governing international relations underpinned by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter' (Xi, 2021a).

Furthermore, in their 2022 'Joint Statement', Russia and China made a commitment to:

'... support and defend the multilateral trade system based on the central role of the World Trade Organization (WTO), take an active part in the WTO reform, opposing unilateral approaches and protectionism. [They] are ready to strengthen dialogue between partners and coordinate positions on trade and economic issues of common concern, contribute to ensuring the sustainable and stable operation of global and regional value chains, promote a more open, inclusive, transparent, non-discriminatory system of international trade and

economic rules' (*Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, 2022*).

In its official discourse, therefore, China is a strong adherent of the principle of multilateralism; however, its commitment to multilateralism in practice is variable, depending on the nature of the issue, and its perception of its interests. Various scholars argue that the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), show China's willingness to take the initiative with setting up new multilateral institutions to remedy gaps in the existing institutional architecture. Both the AIIB and the SCO mirror 'liberal' institutions in their issue areas and governance, but are tailored to China's particular (regional) concerns: the availability of finance for its global infrastructure-building programme, with lending risks mitigated; and the problems China faced from political and economic instability in its neighbouring states. Setting up these new institutions reflects, therefore, both China's willingness to take responsibility, working with other states, for these issues, and its desire for the prestige of providing these 'public goods'. However, rather than setting up an 'alternative' institutional framework, Matthew Stephen emphasises that China's institutions are 'nested' within, or overlapping, the existing financial institutional framework. Furthermore, Kastner, Pearson and Rector argue that on certain areas China is less inclined to lead, being prepared to 'free ride': for example, on global nuclear non-proliferation, and to some extent global trade, China has often been satisfied with offering passive support while remaining on the sidelines of negotiations. China also remains committed to maintaining and even strengthening the role of the IMF in the global economy; however, it has an

ongoing campaign to reform the quotas and voting shares to reflect changes in global economic rankings, reducing the influence accordingly of the North Atlantic states. In multinational trade negotiations, meanwhile, China, no less than the US, demonstrates a concern for self-interest, and has made an effort to shape WTO rules and norms from within (Stephen and Skidmore, 2019; Hopewell, 2020; Kastner, Pearson and Rector, 2020; Merling and Kring, 2023; Lee *et al.*, 2024; Stephen, 2024; *Outcome Document of the Third South Summit*, 2024). However, while China appears to remain committed to the WTO, friction with the US has to some extent paralysed its operations, leading to China's increasingly establishing free trade agreements on a bilateral or regional basis, mainly with global South / BRI partners (Kynge and Fray, 2024). This underlines the ambiguous position that global capitalism occupies within liberal hegemony: while capitalism used to differentiate the 'Western' bloc from the communist 'Eastern' bloc, China's rise has come through its embrace of capitalism, and (arguably) it currently shows more commitment to the 'liberal' principle of free trade than the US. This was highlighted at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2017, when Xi expressed his deep commitment to globalisation and free trade, while Donald Trump refused to attend (Graaff, Brink and Parmar, 2020).

The evidence suggests, therefore, that China is committed to the 'multilateral' norm of international order in principle, and also to most of the international institutions that formed part of the post-1945 architecture of global political and economic governance in practice. Its own institutional architecture is not designed to replace these, but to work alongside in ways that allow China to work on its own terms within certain domains,

while delivering importance prestige to China for delivering (regional) 'public goods' (Freeman, 2021). Such contestation as China makes to existing multilateral institutions relates mainly to a desire to improve its standing within these organisations, rather than seeking to undermine them: it shows that China recognises how hegemony works through these institutions – this is discussed in more detail in later chapters.

3.3.2 China and sovereignty/sovereign equality

The PRC's subaltern position in the post-war period, and its late readmission to the community of states from 1971, means that it is a staunch defender of the principle of sovereign equality for other states, and this is consistent with its 'South-South' discourse. Furthermore, China is dedicated to protecting its own sovereignty from what it considers the interference of outside states in its internal affairs, and for maintaining the sovereignty of its borders, including Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Tibet. In this respect, it is not significantly diverging from the example set by the US: it is on the basis of the principle of its own domestic sovereignty that the US has not ratified several international treaties and conventions, particularly on human rights. Even China, with its sensitivity to international criticism of its human rights records, has ratified these treaties. Despite this, China's attitude to sovereignty is often contrasted with that of the US (Tang, 2018; Mitter, 2022).

Regarding the sovereignty of other states, China's record is more mixed. It is a staunch defender of the right to non-intervention, and frequently invokes the UN Charter in respect of this norm. In its practices in the global South, China frequently distinguishes its own record on non-intervention with that of the West, drawing attention both to the history of military intervention, and that of normative Development

political and economic conditionalities. China is not, however, entirely against the principle of humanitarian intervention, giving muted support to the relatively new norm of R2P; however, it resists understanding R2P simply as a mandate for military intervention (under the 'third pillar' of R2P), placing greater emphasis on the state's own responsibility to protect its citizens (the 'first pillar'), and the responsibility of neighbouring states to assist the state in doing so (the 'second pillar'). In this respect, China's behaviour is very much in line with the majority of the GA, and with the spirit of this norm as it has developed since 2005 (Foot and Walter, 2011).

However, with the expansion of China's international economic involvement, particularly across the global South, its interest in the political stability of these states has come to mirror that of the US. Protecting its commercial interests as well as its own nationals in conflict-affected countries has become a growing concern for China: Daniel Large and Congyan Cai describe how China intervened in Sudan (using economic coercion) to encourage the acceptance of a UN-AU peacekeeping mission for Darfur in 2007 (Large, 2008; Cai, 2013); and Chapter 5 outlines how China is becoming increasingly involved in policing within African countries hosting Chinese nationals.

It is clear, therefore, that China is committed to the principle of sovereign equality embedded within the UN Charter, and that while its championing of 'Westphalian' sovereignty can put it at odds with Western cosmopolitanism, it is arguably no less open to ceding its own sovereignty than the US. Furthermore, international norms around cosmopolitan intervention have undergone a shift since the failed Libyan operation, bringing them more into line with those championed by China and the global South. Meanwhile, China's inclination to intervene in the

domestic affairs of global South states when its own economic or human interests are at stake is growing, reflecting the longstanding practices of Western states. It would be difficult, therefore, to characterise China as a revisionist state over its attitude to global sovereignty norms.

3.3.3 China and the UN

As part of its discursive adherence to the principle of multilateralism, China has made its commitment to the UN a priority for its foreign policy, indicating that it recognises that the UN is a key institution of international order. The Chinese government has in recent years been making a significant effort to increase its profile within the UN and its agencies, in terms of acquiring senior positions, increasing staff numbers at all levels, and, perhaps most significantly, inserting Chinese norms and phrases into the UN's working language. Again, this is reflected in official Chinese discourse: at the February 2022 'Joint Statement' between Russia and China, they:

'... underline[d] that Russia and China, as world powers and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, intend to firmly adhere to moral principles and accept their responsibility, strongly advocate the international system with the central coordinating role of the United Nations in international affairs, defend the world order based on international law, including the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, advance multipolarity and promote the democratization of international relations, together create an even more prospering, stable, and just world ...[They] intend to strongly uphold ... the existing power-war world order, defend the authority of the United Nations and justice in international relations' (*Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, 2022*).

The PRC's engagement with the UN was initially limited: once its exclusion was lifted in 1971, when it assumed the Chinese state's seat at the UN and within the Security Council, its main commitment, at least at first, was to set out to repudiate any commitments made by the Taiwanese government to the UN, including the UN Charter itself. In recent years, however, and particularly under Xi's rule, there has been a marked change in its engagement, which has been intensified in various ways. Chinese discourse increasingly effaces the exclusion of (the People's Republic of) China from the foundation of the UN in 1948, with proclamations underlining a 'settled and static interpretation of the Charter' which China seeks to preserve and defend against those states which China portrays as being disruptive to international order. This rejection of the evolution of the UN since 1948 could also, however, be interpreted as mistrust of the geopolitical power relations embedded in the multilateral system, which have produced new international norms, for example on security and conditional sovereignty (Foot, 2021b). It is an indication of its recognition of the importance of the UN to international order and its hierarchies that China is focusing its resources on increasing its power within it, allowing it to lead the 'reform and development of the global governance system' (Xi, 2021b).

As well as a significant increase in its use of the veto within the Security Council, China has started to use the UN to further its own political agenda through particular policy spheres: beginning with Development, but increasingly moving also into peace and security, traditionally the preserve of the US and its liberal allies (Fung and Lam, 2021a). Its first significant move to increase its profile within the UN was through its leadership of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) since

2007. Once dominated by the US, UK and France, it is now recognised as a Chinese domain, with a high concentration of Chinese staff at all levels, and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) agenda is increasingly aligned with the BRI (Okano-Heijmans *et al.*, 2018; Lee and Sullivan, 2019; Fung and Lam, 2021a). It has also secured the election of Chinese individuals to head several UN agencies over recent years, including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). This is significantly more than any other state, in part due to the US and its allies tending in the past to deprecate the importance of these agencies. The US considered their failure to secure the election of their favoured candidate at the FAO in 2019 as a diplomatic humiliation: Qu Dongyu, the Chinese candidate, won the election with 108 out of 191 votes, despite the US State Department making ‘beating China’ a key priority, lobbying other FAO members to place their votes elsewhere (Chadwick, 2019; Lynch and Gramer, 2019). US concern about China’s growing influence in UN agencies, both under the Trump and Biden administrations, has led to its withdrawal of both funding and participation from certain agencies (Lam and Fung, 2021). It has also become far more assiduous in blocking Chinese (or Chinese-supported) candidates in elections (Schaefer, 2020; *Financial Times*, 2020). As a result, perhaps, of more coordinated Western action to prevent Chinese nationals from being elected to run UN agencies, it is notable that, as of 2024, only one, the FAO, is headed by a Chinese national (Lam and Fung, 2024).

It has been suggested that this focus on the ‘second-tier’ or ‘orphan’ agencies which deal with Development policy has

limited China's role to 'low politics', and that it was only able to secure such prominent roles due to deliberate neglect of this sphere by the Western powers (Okano-Heijmans *et al.*, 2018; Lee and Sullivan, 2019; Fung and Lam, 2021a). This view underlines how the West has tended to overlook the importance of the issues of the global South to international ordering, as highlighted by this thesis. Its influence within the Development policy spheres of the UN, both through personnel and funding contributions, has meant that the UN's development agenda, first through the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and more recently the SDGs, has become deeply implicated with China's BRI: the UN Development Programme has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chinese government on implementing the BRI. Furthermore, through its leadership of DESA, China advises the Secretary General on Development issues (Okano-Heijmans *et al.*, 2018; Fung and Lam, 2021a; Haug and Waisbich, 2024). Its past leadership of the ITU was flexed to influence internet governance and internationalise its own digital standards, as well as to further its 'Digital Silk Road' agenda; and as the largest donor to UNESCO since the US left the organisation in 2019, it has ensured that projects increasingly partner with Chinese institutions promoting BRI connectivity, as well as providing vocational training within BRI partner states (Okano-Heijmans *et al.*, 2018; Lee and Sullivan, 2019). China's growing influence within the UN has also led to China's preferred language around global issues being increasingly adopted in official UN texts and in speeches by senior leaders, as will be examined in detail in Chapter 4 (Foot, 2020). As Fung and Lam observe, this 'enable[s] China to establish Chinese interests as multilateral interests' (Fung and Lam, 2021a). Official UN status for the BRI has the effect of

legitimising China's flagship ordering project, further cementing support for China across the global South (Foot, 2020; Haug and Waisbich, 2024).

The G77 + China group, representing the global South, now has a membership of 134 states, representing 70% of UN membership. This UNGA voting bloc tends to be highly favourable towards China. The relations that China has built within the global South are also evident within the Security Council itself. China can usually depend on the three rotating Africa seats among the non-permanent members to support it; together with Russia's backing, just one further vote is required to block the adoption of any draft resolution antithetical to China without requiring recourse to its veto (Feltman, 2020).

Building on its growing strength in the 'low politics' areas of the UN's work, China clearly has its sights on expanding its influence within the 'high politics' domains of peace and security, traditionally dominated by the US and its liberal allies. China has in recent years become one of the largest contributors to the UN's peacekeeping activities in personnel terms (by far the largest amongst permanent SC members), and its second largest budget contributor. It has become a major contributor to the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), establishing the UN Peace and Development Fund in 2015, through which it finances projects and activities relating to the maintenance of international peace and security, while also linking these to the BRI – thus introducing its preferred approach to peace and security issues through economic development, repudiating the supposed divide between 'low' and 'high' politics (Feltman, 2020; Foot, 2021b). However, China has yet to secure any senior posts within peace and security, due both to its lack of experienced candidates; and an

increasing pushback against Chinese candidates by liberal states, who are suspicious about the degree of independence of Chinese nationals within the UN from the Communist Party of China (CPC or CCP) (Foot, 2021b; Fung and Lam, 2021a).

In addition to this focus on securing senior posts within particular UN departments and agencies, China has been working actively to increase its staffing across all seniority levels and all policies areas within the UN. It is important to note that it is starting from a low base: in 2020, other than the Chinese heads of UN agencies, there were just three Chinese senior leaders at the UN (assistant secretary-generals or above), compared to 26 US nationals of similar rank (Feltman, 2020). Of its fellow permanent members of the Security Council, only Russia has fewer executive level posts (Fung and Lam, 2021a). Furthermore, data released in 2022 indicates that there were 1,471 Chinese nationals at all ranks employed within the UN, compared to 2,573 UK nationals, and 5,567 US nationals (UN Secretariat, 2022). China's share of staffing across the UN has risen from 1.05% to 1.25% between 2011 and 2022, despite the fact that in fact, the total number of PRC nationals employed at the UN has almost doubled during this period (Lam and Fung, 2024). To remedy this deficit, China has established a UN Association of China to provide training for international civil servants from former high-level Chinese UN officials. Universities in China also increasingly offer degrees in international organisations or international public policy, teaching technical and foreign language skills. It sponsors staffing positions in the UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, and sends vast numbers of Chinese interns to the UN, sending more than any other state since 2014 (Fung and Lam, 2021a; Lam and Fung, 2024).

It is clear, therefore, both from its official statements and its practices, that China views the UN, and multilateralism in general, as a key part of the international order. The investments that China makes in terms of both financial and human resources within the UN is a good indicator of its priorities within the international, including the basis for its own international ordering project. With the US having withdrawn from many UN agencies, China is becoming one of the most visible actors within the UN. Furthermore, it is clear that through its dominance of the UN's Development work, as well as emerging areas such as internet governance through the ITU, China is actively shaping the discourse and norms of the international order.

In all these ways, therefore, representing China as 'outside' of international order, or as a threat to it, is hard to defend. Instead, as this thesis argues, China is better understood as at once *inside* liberal order, while *mirroring* liberal hegemony: it represents itself as the most trustworthy guardian of the norms and principles underpinning international order, and the West, particularly the US, as the greatest threat to order. This claim and counterclaim of 'rogue' behaviour towards international order is examined in the next section.

3.4 Rule breaking and exceptionalism

The previous chapter set out some of the claims made about China's threat to international order in both policy and scholarly discourse. This chapter has shown how China is, in fact, fundamentally compliant with the key principles which Ikenberry and others have described as essential pillars of the

‘liberal international order’ – often far more so than the US itself. Despite this, it remains true that China is not universally compliant with international rules and norms: however, in this respect, China could (again) be argued to be closely mirroring the rule-breaking behaviour of the US. This thesis argues that rule breaking can be understood within a hegemonic frame: to have the exceptional status of being *allowed* to break the rules of international order is a key mark of hegemonic prestige (Hurd, 2007). As China frequently points out, the US has a long habit of rule-breaking: as a hegemonic leader, it has not always abided by the rules that it imposes on hierarchically weaker states, for example regarding the laws of war, or economic principles (Lebow, 2023, p. 274). However, because within the discourse of the ‘liberal international order’ the US is cast as the ‘order-maker’, providing ‘security and other “system services”’ to other states, its rule-breaking is sanctioned for the sake of the ‘greater’ international good (Ikenberry, 2011a, pp. 6, 225). The literature on international norms recognises the role of international social hierarchies on exerting pressure on states to conform, suggesting that for a higher-ranking state, the costs of not conforming are lower, and the US’s exceptionalism can be understood within this framework (Towns and Rumelili, 2017). Increasingly, however, as the US’s international authority has been shaken, this rule breaking no longer appears to be of benefit to anyone except for the US itself, and so China’s criticisms echo a widely felt sentiment (Lebow, 2023, p. 273). China, however, appears increasingly disposed to grant itself the same exceptional leave to ignore the rules of international order. Examples of this include its actions within the South China Sea, as well as its recently published map which effectively redraw its land and maritime borders within the territory of its neighbours (Cronin and Manning, 2020; Narins

and Agnew, 2020; Raymond and Welch, 2022; *Reuters*, 2023). China's motivations in this rule-breaking are not to overturn these rules, nor to destabilise international order generally: this action cannot therefore be described as 'revisionist' behaviour; quite simply, it is disregarding international conventions because it is in its interests to do so, and it is calculating that any costs will be outweighed by the benefits. Arguably, this is an example of China mirroring the US's hegemonic behaviour and practices, where it has likewise acted in its own interests without being constrained by international rules and norms, often through aggressive use of what is known as 'lawfare', a practice also increasingly used by China (Chakravarty, 2022; Mitter, 2022).

This might, in part, explain why, despite China's growing reputation as a trade and development partner across South East Asia, a recent survey by ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore suggested that China is generally not trusted to 'do "the right thing" in contributing to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance' (Olander, 2024; *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, 2024). Whether China will ever have the international stature to be given the same licence as the US has had in the past to break international rules is, at this point, unknowable; in the meantime, it is perhaps relying excessively on its economic and military power to curtail opposition to its actions in its neighbourhood – which, as Gramsci argues, is insufficient for hegemonic domination. Any claim to hegemonic exceptionalism must be rooted in some justification based on the common principles of justice and fairness. This argument, drawing on Gramscian ideas of a legitimacy which is discursively produced and contested, contrasts with Realist claims that only material power matters.

3.5 Conclusion

This thesis argues that China's counterhegemonic project makes visible aspects of international order and Western-led liberal hegemony which are overlooked by most accounts. This chapter in particular argues that international order is not coterminous with Western-led liberal hegemony, as is implied in the concept of 'liberal international order'. International order emerges from the interactions of actors in the international, and, while inevitably subject to hierarchical power relations, is not simply the creation of the hegemonic power. The current international order has not only been influenced and shaped across the decades by the claims and contestations of subaltern actors; but also, is not distinctively 'liberal'. A close appraisal of China's interactions and discourse regarding the key norms and institutions of international order reveals that it is largely compliant, and not, as represented in Western policy discourse, in some way 'outside' the international order. Where it expresses opposition (or indeed ambivalence), usually relates to its contestation of hegemonic power, rather than the international order itself. China's clear concern is to promote an international order which allows it space to increase its own power and influence, as part of its counter-hegemonic project: this means contesting some of the power structures that derive from, and continue to foster, Western-led hegemony. Just like the US, however, as China's international power grows, it has shown an inclination to grant itself exceptional powers to ignore or even break the rules of international order. While such rule breaking is cast in Western policy circles as an attempt to subvert or undermine international order, with China and Russia

broadly equated as 'revisionist' states, this thesis reads it as a mirroring of the US's own behaviour as the global hegemon: it forms a part of China's (counter)hegemonic project. Using China's 'paradoxical' compliance / contestation as a lens, therefore, is an important means of *disarticulating* the concept of the 'liberal international order', revealing that 'international order' is not coterminous with the Western-led liberal hegemonic project. This project, and the features that are revealed through China's counterhegemonic project (but which are overlooked by most accounts of the 'LIO'), are the subject of the following chapters.

The next chapter moves on to an examination of China's close engagement with the 'liberal' discourses which constitute the contemporary 'standard of civilisation', showing that, far from repudiating these discourses, China has internalised them. It then goes on to show how China's 'Discourse Power' programme is playing a key role in its counterhegemonic project.

4. Re-writing liberalism: China's discursive strategies and counter-hegemony

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapters have used the apparent 'paradox' in China's mix of compliance and contestation as an invitation to *disarticulate* the conception of the 'liberal international order', arguing that the articulation of 'international order' and 'liberal ordering project' is a hegemonic move with ideological effects, representing Western-led hegemony as being fundamental to *order* itself. This chapter develops further the overall argument about the role of ideology and discourse within hegemony: it analyses the 'Discourse Power' element of China's counterhegemonic project to draw attention to how particular liberal discourses work to structure international hierarchies, in dividing states into those which are compliant (thus, for example, represented as the 'Free World'), and those 'illiberal' states stigmatised for non-compliance. China's engagement with these liberal discourses is not, as generally understood by Western analysts, to reject them outright; instead, it engages closely with them to *rearticulate* them: essentially, it is 'rewriting' liberalism.

A neo-Gramscian conceptualisation of hegemony illuminates how the Western-led liberal ordering project is reproduced through practices, institutions, and discourses which are articulated as universal and, through their repetition, acquire a 'common-sensical' acceptability throughout the order, including for dissenting actors. The performance of these practices, and

compliance with these discourses, amount to a 'standard of civilisation' within the hegemonic liberal ordering project, and play a role in structural international hierarchies: failing to comply can risk putting a state beyond a line which demarcates legitimacy, and all the rights of sovereign statehood which come with that (Reus-Smit and Zarakol, 2023). The liberal ordering project, therefore, as well as being formed of material hierarchies, with the economic and relational webs and entanglements which are examined the next chapter, is fundamentally based on a discursive hegemony, through which 'epistemological enforcers' (Ó Tuathail, 1998, p. 20) (re)produce the world, normatively, through a set of 'liberal' values, institutions, and practices. Lower ranking states seek status by observing these standards, and achieving recognition as 'good states' (Wohlforth *et al.*, 2018). These standards illuminate the geopolitical/ideological imagination of the 'core' members of the liberal project, called on to defend them from those who would seek to undermine it through attacks on its essential liberal values - although, as Jahn puts it, these 'non-liberal others' are themselves discursively produced and constituted by 'liberal power politics and its justification' (Jahn, 2021). The dynamics of hegemony can therefore only be understood by paying attention to the discourses that underpin it – and it is for this reason that China's Discourse Power programme plays such a central role in its counterhegemonic project.

China is clearly keenly aware of how it is represented in Western discourse: the binaries of 'freedom' versus 'autocracy' maintain a strong hold in both policy-facing and (certain) scholarly discussions of the rise of China. In policy making discourse, as Chapter 2 discussed, it has become normalised to speak of China as 'continu[ing] to challenge the foundations of the rules-

based order' (Kazianis, 2012); 'upending the rules-based order' (Economy, 2021); 'flouting post-war international standards' with 'attacks on the rules-based international order, democracy and freedom' (Singh, 2022); or the 'epoch-defining and systemic challenge posed by China under the Chinese Communist Party' ('Integrated Review Refresh', 2023)¹¹. The United States' National Security Strategy of 2017 claims that amongst the threats that the US is facing are: '[r]evisionist powers, such as China ..., that use technology, propaganda, and coercion to shape a world antithetical to our interests and values' (*National Security Strategy*, 2017). Furthermore, in President Biden's 2022 State of the Union address, he argued, "In the battle between democracy and autocracy, democracies are rising to the moment, and the world is clearly choosing the side of peace and security" (Biden, 2022). This is reflected in some scholarship: Deudney and Ikenberry argue that 'China and Russia have dashed all hopes that they would quickly transition to democracy and support the liberal world order. To the contrary, they have strengthened their authoritarian systems at home and flouted norms abroad' (Deudney and Ikenberry, 2018). This highlights, therefore, that a counterhegemonic struggle must necessarily take place at the level of ideology, and indeed, through its 'Discourse Power' project, launched in 2011, China manifestly recognises the importance of this (*The Central Committee's decision on several major issues concerning*

¹¹ As shown in Chapter 2, Breuer and Johnstone have tracked the emergence and use of the term 'rules-based order' in US media, and found that it is almost entirely used in connection with articulating China as a threat or challenge to this order, more so than the cognate term, 'liberal international order'. They argue that describing the order as 'rules-based' is a rhetorical device designed to create a narrative stigmatising China as a revisionist power (Breuer and Johnston, 2019). The concept of the 'rules-based' order is, however, predicated on that of the 'LIO' – comprising liberal states, international institutions, international law, etc.

deepening cultural system reform, 2011; Wang, 2015; Zhao, 2016). However, as this chapter argues, far from repudiating core 'liberal' values of human rights and democracy, China's contestation of liberal (ideological) hegemony takes the form of (deliberate) *mirroring*: representing itself as a norm leader, and the US as the main transgressor of these values.

Within the contemporary Western-led liberal hegemony, the fundamental standards of civilisation include being seen to be democratic, and to respect human rights. These are not immutable standards, and each is subject to a greater or lesser degree of historical contingency - despite the fact that through their articulation as being universal, they are also represented as being 'timeless'. As in the early (imperial) era of the global order, non-liberal elites, even those dissenting to liberal hegemony, have tended to seek the status of conforming to the liberal 'standards of civilisation' (or at least sought to avoid the stigma of being 'illiberal' / 'uncivilised') (Reus-Smit and Zarakol, 2023; Zarakol and Lawson, 2023). This is consistent with Gramsci's analysis of the role of ideology, legitimacy, and consent within hegemonic projects.

4.1.1 China's 'Discourse Power' project

The previous chapter showed how China conforms closely to the rules and practices of the contemporary *international order*; its contestation, therefore, is for something other than this order – Western-led liberal hegemony. This is made clear in official Chinese discourse: for example, in 2023 the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) released a report on 'US Hegemony and its Perils', in which it argues that the US 'has long been attempting to mold other countries and the world order with its own values and political system in the name of promoting democracy and human rights', while taking 'a

selective approach to international law and rules, utilizing or discarding them as it sees fit, and has sought to impose rules that serve its own interests in the name of upholding a “rules-based international order”’. This report details the political, military, economic, technological, and cultural hegemony of the US, before concluding: ‘While a just cause wins its champion wide support, an unjust one condemns its pursuer to be an outcast ... The United States has been overriding truth with its power and trampling justice to serve self-interest’ (*US Hegemony and Its Perils*, 2023).

China is evidently alert, then, to the role of hegemonic discourse in international ordering, having been repeatedly stigmatised by liberal states for its perceived transgressions, leading to its being characterised as antithetical to liberal norms, and, consequently, ‘outside’ of ‘international society’ in important ways. It is presented as acting as a threat to the ‘rules-based international order’ in a way designed to ‘make the world safe for autocracy’ (Lee and Sullivan, 2019; Foot, 2021a); this has been accompanied by a return to invocations of the ‘free world’ (Truss, 2021). In response to this, since 2011, and intensifying under Xi’s presidency, significant official effort has been put into a ‘Discourse Power’ (*huaya quan*) project, designed to push back against this stigmatisation. This project was originally launched to ‘innovate the methods and means of external propaganda, enhance international discourse power, properly respond to external concerns, enhance the international community's understanding and recognition of our country's basic national conditions, values, development path, domestic and foreign policies, and show our country's civilized, democratic, open and progressive image’ (*The Central Committee’s decision on several major issues concerning*

deepening cultural system reform, 2011). Its focus has always, therefore, been on an international projection of Chinese values; however, it is notable that ‘civilized’, ‘democratic’, ‘open’ and ‘progressive’ *all echo the language of liberalism*.

While this project can be contextualised within China’s longstanding defensive project, there is an ambiguity within the translation of ‘*huaya quan*’, indicating the movement from defensiveness and the ‘right to speak’, to the ‘power’ to ‘speak with authority’ (Wang, 2015; Zhao, 2016; Jones, 2021). Although only incorporated into official discourse from 2011 as a concerted project, the concept of ‘*huaya quan*’ has long appeared in Chinese IR discourse, particularly from 2005 when, as Wang Hung-jen shows, there was an explosion in its use in urging China to be more assertive on the world stage, albeit initially in close association with Nye’s concept of ‘soft power’ and discourse (from 2003) of China’s ‘peaceful rise’, and coinciding with the launch of Confucius Institutes in 2004 (Wang, 2015). More recently, and particularly under Xi Jinping, the concern with ‘soft power’ has largely disappeared from official and academic discourse, with a new focus on the relationship between discourse and (hegemonic) power, rather than the ‘right to be heard’.

Despite this increased assertiveness, a close examination of the Discourse Power project does not confirm the West’s image of China as a wrecker of liberal international norms. While openly hostile to liberalism in its discourse, China’s behaviour within the international system is not consistent with the accusation that it seeks to replace liberal norms and practices with its own. China’s engagement with the quintessentially liberal norms around human rights and democracy is highly significant. Contrary to general assumptions, it does not reject the

discourse of human rights and democracy, despite both having been used to delegitimise China internationally, but works closely with them in a way designed to present itself as a 'norm leader', and the US as the main threat to these 'universal' values, in line with what Rebecca Adler-Nissen characterises as 'counter-stigmatization' (Adler-Nissen, 2014). The fact that China has embraced the discourse of human rights and democracy indicates the persistent hegemony of this 'liberal' discourse, suggesting that they do indeed represent a 'civilisational standard' in contemporary international society (Zhang and Buzan, 2020). China's Discourse Power strategy reveals the relationship between liberalism and its supposedly core norms to be historically and ideationally contingent, yet deeply implicated in the hegemonic liberal ordering project.

This chapter will look at the genealogy of democracy and human rights within liberalism, and how they have come to have the status of modern 'standards of civilisation' within Western-led liberal hegemony. It then examines how China engages with each of these concepts, and how it seeks to 'remould' them while retaining them as essential international norms. The wider Discourse Power project is then examined, showing the central role of discourse and ideology within a counterhegemonic endeavour.

4.2 The discursive terrain: Liberalism as the standard of civilisation

This thesis follows Gearóid Ó Tuathail in viewing hegemonic geopolitical discourses as 'epistemological enforcers', or 'standards of civilisation', which define the self and its 'others',

and thus produce international hierarchies (Ó Tuathail, 1998, p. 20). Paying attention to the historical emergence of liberal internationalism helps to illuminate how such standards of civilisation are articulated and become salient; and also, how they are subject to change in line with structural alterations in international society. The concept of civilisation became widespread in Europe from the revolutions of the late eighteenth century, and was frequently invoked by writers articulating liberal thought in the nineteenth century, particularly in relation to ideas either justifying or opposing colonialism (Mehta, 1999; Guizot, 2013; Muthu, 2014; Bell, 2019). The key move made by many nineteenth century liberal thinkers was to conceptualise 'civilisation' in *universal* terms, based on the concept of 'progress', which in turn was fundamental to the liberal vision. John Stuart Mill wrote most extensively about civilisation, but his ideas were drawn from, and echoed by, other writers of the period such as his father James Mill, James Fitzjames Stephen, and Herbert Samuel. James Mill, for example, articulated the 'stages' of civilisation, which, in ignoring the particularities of history and place, created a universalising, hierarchical measure, the 'scale of nations' (Mehta, 1999, p. 88). The essential nineteenth century concept of 'progress' was understood in linear temporal terms: territories and peoples were either 'mature', 'advanced' and civilised, or 'backwards' and 'childlike', in a state of barbarity or savagery, and in need of 'tutelage' from a colonial power (Mehta, 1999; Muthu, 2014; Bell, 2019). The 'universal' vision of civilisation required a state to demonstrate a commitment to the rule of law, the upholding of contracts, the development of representative institutions, civil and political liberties, and the fostering of a capitalist political economy through the defence of property rights (Bell, 2019, p. 52). Duncan Bell sets out how

this language 'invokes a standard of assessment and a regime of difference ... drawing ... normatively significant boundaries' between the 'civilised' and the 'uncivilised' (Bell, 2019, p. 96). The significance of this line drawing related to the status of a people or territory within international society: where key elements of civilisation could be demonstrated, in particular the possession of 'appropriate political qualities', the people or territory would be recognised as having the right to self-government, and therefore sovereignty. Not possessing the elements of civilisation meant that a state risked being deemed to require 'tutelage' through colonisation. As a recognised member of international society, however, a state could take part in international commerce, be bound by (or even contribute to the emergence of) international law, and engage in diplomatic exchanges with other sovereign states; most significantly, a state earned its right to sovereignty (and therefore non-interference) through being recognised as 'civilised'. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this standard was internalised by territories all over the world, as states – including those more or less outside the European colonial system such as Japan, China, and the Ottoman Empire - rushed to embrace 'modernity'.

Liberal hegemony thus emerged, representing the particular as universal, and normalising this standard of civilisation as fundamental to recognition within international society. While 'civilisation' is no longer explicitly invoked in contemporary international life, the concept still haunts North-South international relations, immanent within emergent concepts such as Modernization theory in the 1960s and 1970s, structural adjustment programmes, the Washington Consensus and aid conditionalities more generally, the Responsibility to Protect,

peacebuilding and democratisation programmes, the work of the International Criminal Court, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as well as 'Development' itself (Gilman, 2003; Smith, 2003; Barkawi and Laffey, 2006; Jahn, 2007; Williams, 2012). It is notable that it is China which has reintroduced the concept of 'civilisation' to international discourse, through its 'Global Civilization Initiative', as discussed later in this chapter.

4.2.1 Democracy

This thesis argues that two norms in particular, which are intimately related to liberal thought, represent the fundamental standards of civilisation in contemporary international politics: democracy, and human rights. Democracy as an articulated standard of civilisation / acceptability within international society is of longer standing – however, its precise definition has moved and changed over time. Hobson and Kurki trace the first identification of democracy (or at least, republicanism) with liberalism to the writings of Paine and Kant (Hobson and Kurki, 2013). Early associations of liberalism with representative governance did not amount to 'democracy' as it is currently understood; however, it was considered a key factor that distinguished liberals from aristocratic Whigs (not to mention Tories) in British politics, and reflected the demands of the emergent middle classes to be included in political life. Any political representation during this period, however, was restricted to male property owners - a small proportion of the population. It was not until the 1930s that democracy became a central, totemic characteristic of liberalism, with the struggles in Europe between 'liberal' and 'authoritarian' states. It was during this time that the concept of 'liberal democracy' became widely used, and represented as the 'constitutive ideology' of the West (Bell, 2019, p. 82), particularly after 1945. Salient as

this association was during the violent conflict against fascist regimes up to 1945, it became fundamental to Western discourse during the Cold War. It is notable, of course, that the importance of democracy at this time was more *ideological* than it was *material*, in the US's Cold War order-building practices: there are multiple instances of the US either overtly or covertly undermining or even overthrowing democratically elected regimes when it was in its own geopolitical interests, for example in Iran in 1953 and Chile in 1973 (Robinson, 1996; Jahn, 2013, p. 81). As Anievas and Saull argue, 'US hegemony was founded upon the active and persistent *limiting* of acceptable democratic options – that is, the curtailing of left-wing parties and exclusion of more radical democratic possibilities', effectively enforcing 'bounded pluralism' by delegitimising certain political actors and ideologies (Anievas and Saull, 2020).

From the late stages of the Cold War, however, there was a genuine global drive towards ('liberal') democratisation, not simply starting in the newly independent states which had once formed the Soviet Union and its satellite states, but some years before this within long standing Western allies such as Portugal (1976), South Korea (1987) and, more recently, Taiwan (1996). This was most clearly expressed in Ronald Reagan's 1982 speech in London, in which he announced his 'campaign for democracy' as a central element of American foreign policy. Since then, with democracy becoming increasingly part of the hegemonic 'common sense' of the international, there has been an explosion in the number of intergovernmental organisations and NGOs dedicated to promoting democracy, and in 2005 the UN announced democracy to be one of its 'universal and indivisible core values and principles' – despite there having been no mention of it in the original UN Charter (Hobson and

Kurki, 2013). Democracy, therefore, had crossed the line from being a particular political arrangement of self-identifying liberal states, to being a universal norm within the post-Cold War international order (Robinson, 1996; Abrahamsen, 1997).

Promoting democracy went some way beyond being a simple normative agenda from the 1990s onwards. With the Kantian-inspired 'democratic peace thesis' being increasingly taken up in policy circles, non-democratic countries began to be articulated, not just as domestically unjust political systems, but also as a threat to world peace and thus international order. This provided the justification for a number of interventions: as well as the extreme cases of the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, there were multiple peacebuilding interventions to introduce democratic systems across the global South in this period. There was also an intensified focus on democratisation within Development interventions, through conditionalities placed on aid (Williams, 2012, p. 117; Hewitt, 2013; Jahn, 2013, pp. 75–88). While this drive for 'good governance' began with the US policy establishment and was spearheaded by the World Bank, other Western states overcame their reluctance to comply in the 1980s, and by the 1990s routinely began to 'embrace the new development language of governance, rights, and democracy' (Williams, 2012, pp. 131–135). These 'good governance' standards which were imposed on the global South were used to draw lines between states worthy of their membership of global society, and those which were deemed to be 'failing' or 'rogue' – and thus in need of being 'helped, educated, re-educated, healed, locked up, or thrown out' (Guzzini, 2013). As Stefano Guzzini further argues, this is about 'reaffirming the identity of the normal', albeit in a continuously renegotiated fashion. Being judged to be 'undemocratic' in

liberal terms, therefore, led to the risk of a state's sovereignty essentially being forfeited, and it consequently became an important condition for membership of international society to have at least the veneer of representative democracy. Thus, as well as the increased number of states holding elections, there was also an observable trend from the 1990s for states to invite in international election monitors, whether or not the process was intended to be free and honest (Kelley, 2008; Hyde, 2011).

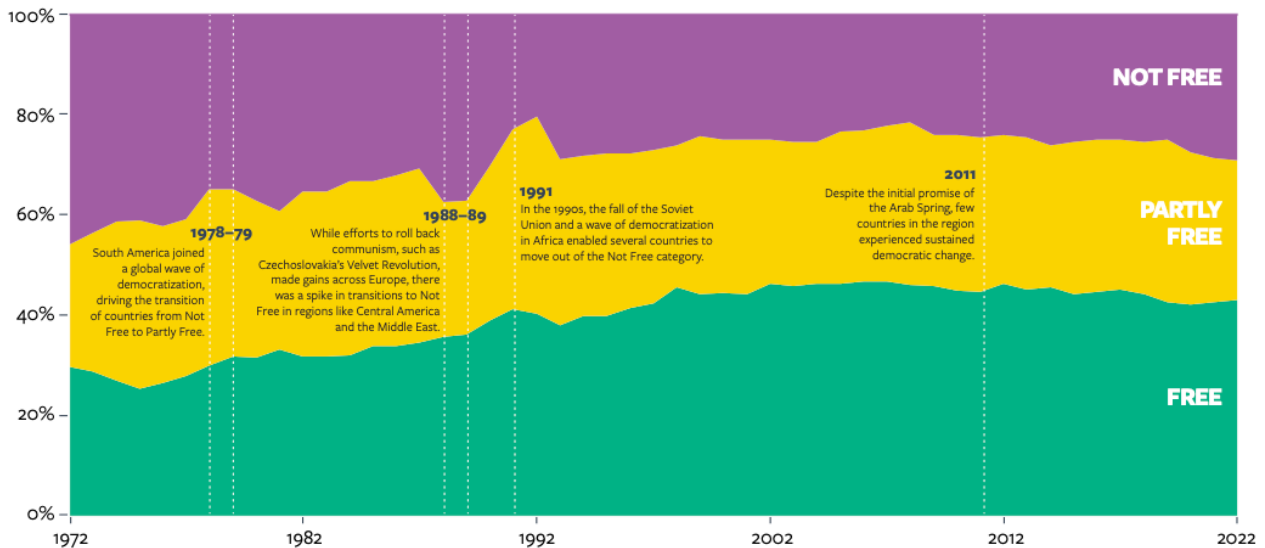
Democracy promotion remains an important element of US foreign policy: in an echo of Reagan's agenda, the 'Princeton Project on National Security', led by Slaughter and Ikenberry, published its strategy in 2006 which included a call to establish a Concert of Democracies – a new international organisation with the aim of 'forging a world of liberty under law' (Ish-Shalom, 2016). More recently, under President Joe Biden, the US has hosted 'Summit[s] for Democracy' – in December 2021 and March 2023; with the third summit, under the aegis of the US State Department, held in Seoul, South Korea in March 2024. The first, held virtually, was attended by the heads of state of over 100 countries, as well as civil society and private sector representatives. Many attendees were from the global South, as well as Taiwan; South Africa and Pakistan were among the few that declined the invitation, while Russia and China were not invited. The summits' stated purpose is to set out an 'affirmative agenda for democratic renewal and to tackle the greatest threats faced by democracies today through collective action' (State Department, 2021)

There is clearly a renewed sense of urgency around this agenda, given both the modest results of the post-Cold War democracy promotion agenda, in terms of the numbers of states genuinely introducing 'liberal' democracy; and also in view of the

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increased numbers of cases of ‘democratic backsliding’ (Freedom House, 2023). This is made clear in this graph from Freedom House’s 2023 Annual Report, which shows an increase in the number of states defined as ‘not free’:

Figure 3. The ebb and flow of democratization



Source: (Freedom House, 2023)

As the Freedom House data indicates, there has always been a degree of hegemonic interpretation as to what counts as democratic, and what does not: in its grading system ('Free', 'Partly Free' and 'Not Free'), there is no acknowledgement of the essential contestedness of the concept of democracy (Ish-Shalom, 2016). This hegemonic interpretation also influences to what extent being 'undemocratic' places a state beyond the pale for international society. Therefore, while North Korea, Syria, or Iran, for example, have always been portrayed as internationally unacceptable in large part due to their undemocratic systems, Saudi Arabia has long been courted as an important ally, due to its oil wealth and geopolitical

importance (Jahn, 2013, p. 81). Within those countries that do hold elections, there is a further assertion of liberal hegemony in the degree of oversight of these elections, and judgements regarding how 'fair' the processes are. Despite increasing signs of democratic dysfunction in countries such as the US, these judgements rarely fall on Western states (Kelley, 2008). The stakes of election monitoring are high: a poor report, as well as risking domestic unrest, can result in sanctions such as the withholding of international aid or exclusion from international organisations (Hyde, 2011).

It is clear, therefore, that democracy has become an essential standard of civilisation within the hegemonic liberal ordering project: defined in a particular way (described by Robinson as 'polyarchy' (Robinson, 1996)), yet articulated as a universal norm and applied to produce international hierarchies. Democracy promotion remains a central tenet of US foreign policy (and to a greater or lesser extent, those of its allies), and states deemed to fall short against this standard, as defined by leading liberal states, risk being subject to sanctions within international society. The hegemonic universality of this norm (albeit narrowly defined) is reflected in the way that even states which have no intention of allowing a democratic transition of power make a show of holding elections, inviting international observers to adjudicate on the process.

4.2.2 Human rights

While democracy has a fairly longstanding association with the liberal ordering project, particularly since the struggles against fascism in the early twentieth century, human rights, despite their representation as a timeless, essential part of liberalism, have much more recently been added to the key standards of civilisation within international liberal hegemony.

Contemporary discourse in the West identifies human rights as a quintessentially liberal and, furthermore, timeless concern of Western international order. Respect for human rights internationally became a key plank of the post-Cold War international order, and, through the emerging norm of humanitarian intervention, a central justification for political and military action. The reality was that, despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 being an important moment in the creation of the UN and the forging of the post-war international order, the concept of 'human rights' *within the international sphere* was of recent creation, without strong roots in liberal thought, and, furthermore, was rarely mentioned in subsequent (liberal) international discourse until the 1970s (Foot, 2010; Jahn, 2013; Moyn, 2017). The Atlantic Charter of 1941 between Roosevelt and Churchill, establishing the basis for a post-war peace, emphasised 'Four Freedoms': freedom from fear and want, and freedom of speech and religion; in the same year, Roosevelt had coined the term 'human rights', based on these same freedoms. These were presented as the 'essential qualities of a democratic and peaceful world'; however, despite their invocation of liberal ideas of the individual, as well as the concept of 'natural rights', this declaration cannot be read as a normative blueprint for a 'liberal world order' so much as a rallying cry for the war effort, just as the Truman Doctrine's binary between freedom and oppression was the ideological standard of the early Cold War (Foot, 2010; Moyn, 2017, pp. 88–89).

The UDHR lived up neither to Roosevelt's wartime proclamations, nor to historical liberal principles: as Moyn argues, 'neither a genuine limitation of prerogative, as in the Anglo-American tradition, nor a statement of first principles, as

in the French, the Universal Declaration emerged as an afterthought to the fundamentals of world government it did nothing to affect' (Moyn, 2017, p. 93). Perhaps because of this detachment from such pre-existing liberal ideas around rights as there were, it was decades before (international) human rights became part of the popular (Western) political imagination, or even commonplace in geopolitical discourse. They were the concern largely of the UN – and in fact, only a peripheral one, mobilised most prominently by the global South in anticolonial discourse of the right to self-determination in the decades immediately following the Second World War, in which they were loaded with understandings very different from contemporary usage (Foot, 2010, p. 454; Blackburn, 2011; Getachew, 2019). A clear indication that the UN's vision of human rights was to a significant extent separate from, or even antithetical to, core US norms, was the fact that it announced in 1953 that it would not ratify the human rights Covenants, due to domestic opposition (Foot, 2010). It was left to European states to promote their own human rights agenda, motivated by the desire to 'burnish their anti-communist credentials' (Foot, 2010, p. 455). The subsequent Covenants detailing the particular rights to be protected in the international were divided into two parts, reflecting the geopolitical divides and great power politics of the Cold War: one on Civil and Political rights (ICCPR), reflecting the priorities and norms of the liberal world, and the other on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (ICESCR), supported by the Soviet Union and its allies. Originally presented to the UNGA for debate in 1954, six years after the UDHR, they were not adopted until 1966, and did not come into force until 1976.

An important change to the 'liberal' articulation of human rights in the international took place in the US from the 1970s. In large part due to the Vietnam War, as well as increased domestic and international scrutiny of the role of the CIA in antidemocratic coups and subsequent humanitarian abuses in Latin America, and reflecting internal conflict within the US establishment, there was a 'strategic reorientation' to the support of human rights movements in civil society and academia. A human rights bureau was established within the State Department, which produced annual 'Country Reports on Human Rights Practices', on which international loans were to be made conditional – presaging the conditionalities attached to Development aid of the post-Cold War period (Dezalay and Garth, 2002, p. 67; Foot, 2010, p. 457). In the mid-1970s, Jimmy Carter put international human rights at the centre of his electoral platform, which, although not followed through in office, brought the concept for the first time to the forefront of the popular Western geopolitical imagination. What was clear was that, while this change was prompted by discomfort over the US's own international record, its focus was on other states, designed as a new basis for legitimising international hierarchy. Although its origins for the US at least were in Latin America, increasingly its focus was the Soviet Union and the growing interest in dissidents – proving to be a highly effective means of delegitimising (and ultimately destabilising) the West's key opponent. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch came into existence during this period, bringing a new mode of advocacy for this changed articulation of human rights, based around the rights of the individual (Moyn, 2017).

By the time the Cold War came to an end, human rights as a liberal geopolitical concern had been naturalised within

international discourse, the relatively recent genesis of this concern being effaced through what was effectively a re-writing of history by Western scholars and activists (Moyn, 2017, p. 88). Importantly, this new embrace of human rights was based on an emphasis on political and civil rights, and was therefore strongly linked to the post-Cold War agenda of democratisation and sponsorship of civil society across the global South. Over the first decades of the twenty first century, with the emerging norm of the Responsibility to Protect, these human rights are notably articulated as being *universal and indivisible*, in ways that bring them into conflict with other established norms of the international such as sovereignty. What consensus there was in the international during the 1990s over liberal interpretations of human rights has become more fractured under the strain of this conflict.

Thus, while human rights and democracy promotion are clearly deeply implicated with the discourse of the 'liberal international order', their association with liberalism is arguably not an essential one. Each has a historically contingent relationship both to liberalism, and to the liberal ordering project. Furthermore, these concepts are not settled: over time, understandings around human rights and democracy have been invested with different meanings. Despite this, democracy and human rights have become essential standards of civilisation within the liberal hegemony, invested with the illusion of universality and timelessness. It is therefore on this terrain that China's counterhegemonic project has been articulated, in recognition of their centrality to the *liberal* hegemonic project.

4.3 China's discursive strategies

China is evidently alert to the role of hegemonic discourse in international order, having been repeatedly stigmatised by liberal states for its perceived transgressions, leading to its being represented as antithetical to liberal norms, and, consequently, 'outside' of 'international society' in important ways. In particular, it is frequently represented as acting as a threat to the 'rules-based international order' in a way designed to 'make the world safe for autocracy' (Lee and Sullivan, 2019; Foot, 2021a); In response to this, over recent years, and intensifying under Xi's presidency, significant effort has been put into a 'Discourse Power' (*huaya quan*) project, designed to push back against this stigmatisation (Zhao, 2016; Jones, 2021).

A close examination of this project belies China's Western representation as being fundamentally antithetical to liberal norms, and thus a threat to the 'liberal international order'. China is, explicitly, hostile towards 'liberal universalism' in its discourse. However, this has not led it to an outright rejection of discourses of democracy or human rights, despite these having been used to delegitimise China internationally, particularly since Tiananmen Square in 1989. The reality is that China has embraced the discourses of human rights and democracy, highlighting the persistent hegemony of this 'liberal' discourse, and suggesting that they do indeed represent a 'civilisational standard' in the contemporary international order (Zhang and Buzan, 2020). China's Discourse Power strategy reveals the relationship between liberalism and its supposedly core norms to be historically and ideationally contingent, yet deeply implicated in the hegemonic liberal ordering project.

4.3.1 Rearticulating democracy

China's reaction to Biden's Summit for Democracy in December 2021 was a clear indication of its recognition that democracy remains an important 'standard of civilisation' within the international order, even at a time of apparent liberal decline. Rather than repudiating democracy and seeking to promote its alternative authoritarian system of governance, China hastily convened its own international democracy forum, held a week before Biden's, and published a white paper titled "China: Democracy that Works" (Ohlberg, 2021; State Council Information Office, 2021). In addition to this, it also published a critical report on democracy in the US (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, 2021). This report emphasised that the US's 'dysfunctional democracy' entails 'rule of the minority elite', with 'entrenched racism', a 'widening wealth gap', and 'freedom of speech in name only'. It also rehearsed the 'disastrous consequences of US export of its brand of democracy'; this makes the important move of relativising democracy as defined by liberal states, and reducing it to a 'brand'.

The fact that a significant number of global South states, including many of its BRI partners, were amongst the participants in Biden's democracy summit, meant that China was unable to dismiss the event as irrelevant Western posturing. However, its apparent embrace of democracy through its 2021 White Paper was not simply a reaction to feeling outflanked by this summit: for some time, China has been crafting its own explicit articulation of 'whole process democracy', including in its engagements within the global South. Legitimising its governance model is a key element of China's discourse power, which allows it to be judged, not by Western criteria, but on terms it shapes itself through

‘discursive remoulding’ – as Wang Yi put it, ‘Let us promote the true spirit of democracy, strip pseudo-democracy of its various types of charade, and make the international relations more democratic so as to inject momentum to human progress’ (Ohlberg, 2021; Yang, 2022). This rearticulation of democracy is, therefore, an essential element of China’s global (re)ordering project.

The project to define democracy in its own terms is of several years’ standing: in 2017, China Global Television Network, controlled by the CCP, produced “What is democracy in China?”, a video about the National People’s Congress that portrayed it as more genuinely democratic through its consultative format than Western liberal democracy (Ohlberg, 2021). While this project is partly domestic facing, as part of its ‘Discourse Power’ operation this rearticulation of democracy is projected internationally, particularly within the global South. For instance, China has a long-standing practice of inviting media representatives from Africa to observe its ‘Two Sessions’ (the annual event where both the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference convene at the same time), after which they are encouraged to write complimentary articles on Chinese democratic processes (Onunaiju, 2022; van Staden, 2022). In April 2022, China convened a further democracy event with 22 French-speaking African countries, in which members of China’s National People’s Assembly and 90 African representatives participated online. This meeting focused on the idea, already emerging in African scholarship, that ‘Western’ democracy is ineffective in Africa, and that democracy should take whatever form is suitable for the country in which it is practiced, an idea articulated as ‘intrinsic’ or ‘cultural’ democracy (Adejumo-

Ayibiowu, 2019; Byamungu, 2022; *Ding Zhongli Attends the Opening Ceremony of the Online Seminar between the National People's Congress and the Parliaments of French-speaking African Countries*, 2022).

Furthermore, in the February 2022 'Joint Statement' between Russia and China, the first section is devoted to setting out their

'... understanding that democracy is a universal human value, rather than a privilege of a limited number of States, and that its promotion and protection is a common responsibility of the entire world community ... There is no one-size-fits-all template to guide countries in establishing democracy. A nation can choose such forms and methods of implementing democracy that would best suits its particular state, based on its social and political system, its historical background, traditions, and unique cultural characteristics. It is only up to the people of the country to decide whether their state is a democratic one ... Russia and China as world powers with rich cultural and historical heritage have long-standing traditions of democracy, which rely on thousand-years of experience of development ... [Russia and China] believe that the advocacy of democracy and human rights must not be used to put pressure on other countries. They oppose the abuse of democratic values and interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states under the pretext of protecting democracy and human rights ... They stand ready to work together with all the interested partners to promote genuine democracy'(Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development, 2022).

This intervention from Russia and China, perhaps best interpreted as addressing the global South rather than the 'liberal' world, shows very clearly that they are not rejecting democracy, but rather rejecting a narrow understanding of democracy applied universally. They furthermore reject the use

of democracy (and human rights) to 'put pressure' on non-compliant countries. While condemning the idea of a 'one-size-fits-all' model of democracy, they highlight the democratic history of both countries, and commit themselves to promoting 'genuine' democracy – albeit undefined here. China's discursive project to rearticulate democracy thus aims fundamentally to disturb the universalism and singularity of Western liberal understandings of its key normative concepts. China is not simply seeking to 'make the world unsafe for democracy', or to promote its own authoritarian model, as many commentators insist. China has embraced democracy as a key element of legitimacy in international society. It is, however, seeking to undermine its settled, liberal meaning, both by highlighting the destructive, illiberal consequences of democracy promotion through liberal internationalism, and through investing the concept of democracy with new meanings. As a further move in its ordering project, China is attempting to establish itself as a global promoter of the 'true spirit of democracy'.

4.3.2 Rearticulating human rights

Some scholars note the apparent contradiction between China as an early signatory to the UN's human rights treaties (and, somewhat later, its covenants), concerned with its image as a defender of international rules; and its reputation as a human rights abuser, from the stigmatisation after Tiananmen Square in 1989 to the condemnation of its actions in Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet. As China has increased its material strength in the international, there has been a marked change from its initially defensive strategy in the 1990s, when liberal power was at its height, bringing the 'discourse and practice of human rights to the centre stage of international politics' (Zhang and Buzan, 2020). China's concern has moved from deflecting

criticism, to actively seeking to rearticulate understandings around human rights in a way that represents China as the key champion of this norm (Kobayashi, 2016; Foot, 2020).

China published its first White Paper on human rights in 1991; since then, they have been produced regularly, particularly at times when China feels itself a focus of Western criticism for its record (Kobayashi, 2016). These documents reassert China's commitment to the principles of human rights through the UDHR; however, they seek, increasingly assertively, to establish a hierarchy of rights in opposition to the 'liberal' priority placed on individual civil and political rights, by promoting the primacy of economic, social, and cultural rights. This division is already embedded into the two Covenants, and reflected in part the different Cold War concerns of the global North/West and global South/East (Foot, 2010). In recognition of this, in 1992 Chinese diplomats at the UN established the 'Like-Minded Group' of global South states to form a voting bloc, which helped to protect China from being singled out for condemnation. This group also worked to influence the agenda at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, ensuring that their concern to include economic rights on an equal basis was reflected in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (Kobayashi, 2016; Zhang and Buzan, 2020). In 2008, the Beijing Forum of Human Rights, now an annual event, was established, as part of China's strategy of proactively seizing the human rights agenda. The 2022 event was attended by 'about 200 senior officials, researchers and diplomats from nearly 70 countries and international organizations such as the United Nations'; reporting on the event indicated that it was used to create a platform for international leaders to praise China's human rights record, as

well as promoting China's own discourse around human rights (*Beijing Forum on Human Rights - China Human Rights*, 2022).

A second element of China's defensive strategy in the 1990s, which has persisted into the present, took the form of attack: in 1998, it published its first critical report into the human rights record of the US, now an annual event. These reports focus in particular on historical injustices such as slavery and treatment of minorities, as well as more recent abuses such as police brutality and the US carceral regime; more recently, however, China has begun expressing concern for all black people (or 'Africans and people of African descent') across Western societies (Global Times, 2021; Olander, 2021a, 2021b). This attacking tactic, of holding a mirror up to the US and its practices, has become a key part of China's discourse on human rights, and this discourse is particularly directed at the global South. This is clearly demonstrated in the following statement made by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in August 2022, to Geneva-based diplomatic envoys from Asia and Africa:

'Some Western countries have relished acting as human-rights "judges", who hold a "flashlight" to check on others but never on themselves, and point accusing fingers at human rights situations in developing countries but turn a blind eye to the terrible human rights records of themselves and their allies. Such double standards and acts of selective blindness must be rejected and resisted by all' (Wang, 2022b).

At the same time as it has been actively seeking to rearticulate understandings around human rights in the international, China has been making concerted efforts to present itself as a state deeply concerned with human rights at the domestic level. The Chinese Constitution was amended in 2004 to bind the state to 'respect[] and safeguard[] human rights'; and the constitution

of the CCP was changed to write human rights into it at the 17th Party Congress in 2007. It was further announced in 2017 that legislative changes had been made to protect the civil and political rights of its people, and that criminal law revisions had abolished the death penalty for nine crimes (Yuan, Yi and Zhufu, 2017; Zhang and Buzan, 2020). Rather than seeking to evade commentary on its human rights, therefore, China has determinedly attempted to seize the agenda, but on its own terms.

Much of China's contestation has been in line with the fundamental Cold War division between 'individual' versus 'collective' rights. However, China has also innovated in the explicit linking of human rights to economic development, as well as its emphasis on promoting 'common', as opposed to universal values (Yuan, Yi and Zhufu, 2017). It has articulated Asian (or Confucian) values as 'prioriti[sing] economic and social rights over civil and political rights, the community over the individual, and social order and stability over democracy and individual freedom' (Nathan and Scobell, 2009), or 'human-heartedness' rather than the rights of the individual (Yuan, Yi and Zhufu, 2017). This change in emphasis, or *rearticulation*, reflects a general change in China's approach in recent years: it has stopped presenting itself as conforming to international norms, instead emphasising China's uniqueness and its own development and governance model, while criticising the liberal political and economic model and the record of the West in promoting its own values on the (false) basis of their universalism (Foot, 2020, p. 217).

Introducing its own language and ideas into official UN pronouncements on human rights has been a recent focus for China. In the 2017 session of the UN Human Rights Council

(HRC), Beijing drafted two human rights resolutions articulating its own conceptions of human rights, stressing 'the contribution of development to the enjoyment of all human rights', reflecting its sense of greater confidence within the international. However, the liberal language around human rights as 'universal' and 'indivisible' remains 'sticky', and the final resolution retained these ideas, softening China's original resolution. When China sponsored this resolution again in 2019, the EU negotiated to change the wording, removing the insistence on development having 'foundational significance'; and in another resolution in 2018, Western states, led by the US, insisted on removing China's language of 'win-win cooperation in the field of human rights' in favour of 'mutually beneficial cooperation' (Foot, 2020). China was also attempting to include the phrase 'a people-centred approach to human rights' into HRC documents, with limited success; and more recently, this has been dropped in favour of an emphasis on 'fulfillment, happiness and security' (United Nations, 2020; Wang, 2021a, 2022a; *What China Says*, 2022; Oud, 2024). Thus, while China is having a degree of success in introducing its language and conceptualisation of human rights within the UN, liberal concepts remain enduring (Foot, 2024b, 2024a).

This process of investing concepts with new understandings is described by Yuan, Yi and Zhufu as 'norm remolding', which 'refers to the way the original norms, in the course of their diffusion, are endowed through practice with new content, by new actors, in a way that *enriches and perfects* them' (Yuan, Yi and Zhufu, 2017) (emphasis added). This is happening not in an incidental way, but as a concerted process, and the Chinese scholarship around the 'remoulding' of human rights norms reflects its importance to the Chinese state, given the known

relationship between Chinese academia and the state (as discussed later in this chapter). Yuan et al recognise the existence of 'Western discourse hegemony' in international society, particularly 'the international norms of freedom, human rights, democracy, etc', and argue that 'remoulding' requires recognising them as not universal, but tools in Western strategic and economic interests; and 'criticizing the rationality, political nature and even hypocrisy of established normative discourse' (Yuan, Yi and Zhufu, 2017).

The importance of the 'Discourse Power' project on human rights is reflected in its prominent focus in the Russia and China 'Joint Statement' of February 2022, with the declaration that Russia and China ...

'... note that the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights set noble goals in the area of universal human rights, set forth fundamental principles, which all the States must comply with and observe in deeds. At the same time, as every nation has its own unique national features, history, culture, social system and level of social and economic development, universal nature of human rights should be seen through the prism of the real situation in every particular country, and human rights should be protected in accordance with the specific situation in each country and the needs of its population. Promotion and protection of human rights is a shared responsibility of the international community. The states should equally prioritize all categories of human rights and promote them in a systematic manner. The international human rights cooperation should be carried out as a dialogue between the equals involving all countries. All States must have equal access to the right to development ... [Russia and China] believe that peace, development, and cooperation lie at the core of the modern international system' (*Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*, 2022).

This statement shows that, unlike with democracy, China is prepared to recognise the concept of 'universal' human rights, with 'one-size-fits-all', as they put it elsewhere, imposed through the UN Charter. However, the language of this declaration clearly seeks to find a way to relativise human rights to a given country's 'history', 'culture' and 'social system', etc. This statement also seeks to introduce China's key language around the 'right to development', and the linkage of peace with development.

As well as this 'rhetorical adaptation', China has become actively involved in the global governance aspects of the international human rights agenda, particularly, as Foot observes, after 2011, reflecting its concerns over the 'Arab Spring' (Foot, 2020, p. 205). It was influential in the design of the Human Rights Council (HRC), limiting its powers and activities, stipulating the geographical redistribution of seats, and opposing the introducing of membership criteria based on human rights records (Foot, 2020). Through its network of support within the UN, it has ensured its continued membership of the HRC since its inception, except for the one year compulsory absences (Okano-Heijmans *et al.*, 2018). Within the HRC, it has employed a variety of tactics to promote its own agenda. For example, in recognition of the role of NGOs in promoting a 'liberal' agenda through their representation of civil society, Beijing has actively blocked many from gaining consultative status within the UN, particularly those that have been critical of China. It has also carried out 'astro-turfing': flooding the UN with state-sponsored NGOs ('GONGOs') to dilute any critical voices (Lee and Sullivan, 2019). While most HRC resolutions are accepted by consensus, China's body of support within the global South

ensures that it tends to hold the balance of power when voting or support in other forms is required, for example on the Universal Periodic Reviews (UPRs) (Foot, 2020; Zhang and Buzan, 2020). This means that in the regular votes condemning either China or the liberal world's human rights records, China can rely on a constituency of support; and this support is reciprocal, as its tactics over the UPRs of its allies demonstrate. In a 2021 vote, for example, on the 'Negative impact of the legacies of colonialism on the enjoyment of human rights', proposed by China, Sri Lanka and Venezuela, the motion was carried with 27 votes from global South states, against 20 abstentions from mainly European states plus key allies such as Japan and Republic of Korea. In a Chinese-sponsored motion the same year on 'From rhetoric to reality: a global call for concrete action against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance', the vote was carried with 32 votes for, 10 against (entirely from European states), with Japan and South Korea abstaining (*48th session of the Human Rights Council: Resolutions, decisions and President's statements* / OHCHR, 2021). In 2023, Azerbaijan sponsored a vote on 'The negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights', as part of China's campaign to delegitimise the West's use of economic sanctions. This vote was passed by 33 votes from the global South, including China, with the US plus 12 European states voting against it (*52nd regular session of the Human Rights Council: Resolutions, decisions and President's statements*, 2023).

China is also able to influence the UN's human rights agenda through its status as a permanent member of the Security Council. Contesting as it does the norm of humanitarian intervention, China has used its veto to prevent discussion of

human rights abuses in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe and Syria (Foot, 2020). Furthermore, in May 2022 China used its veto on a vote to extend sanctions on North Korea, on the basis of the human rights impact of sanctions (Dag Hammarskjöld Library, UN, 2022). China is thus using its privileged position within the UN to resist hegemonic liberal interpretations and policing of human rights, favouring a development-based approach to rights, and prioritising the production of social order, particularly in the case of its allies.

One area of the UN's human rights activities which is less subject to China's direct influence is the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). China's frustration at this is evident in its regular calls to 'increase transparency of OHCHR's internal management and improve the uneven geographical representation of OHCHR staff in particular high level officials' (Chen, 2020). In 2022 China bowed to pressure to allow an official visit by Michelle Bachelet, the outgoing High Commissioner, to inspect conditions in Xinjiang; however, China distanced itself from the process, with a spokesman stating in July 2022: 'The so-called assessment of Xinjiang is a show choreographed and staged by the US and a few other Western countries ... We call on the Office of the High Commissioner to respect the serious concern of the Chinese people and everyone speaking for justice in the world, stand on the right side of history and reject publishing an assessment on Xinjiang based on false information and false accusations' (Zhao, 2022). The report, when it came, was damning, accusing China of 'serious human rights violations', which 'may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity' (UN News, 2022). However, at the HRC meeting that followed the report, a motion to discuss it was narrowly rejected, by 19 votes

to 17, with 11 abstentions: in a result that was considered a victory for China, a number of Muslim countries voted against holding a debate, including Indonesia, Pakistan, Qatar, and the UAE (Amnesty International, 2022).

China's efforts to deflect criticism of its human rights record through leveraging its relational networks within and beyond the UN is proving, therefore, to have some degree of success. It is clearly not satisfied, however, with the ongoing process of regular condemnation by Western states countered by regular statements of support by its allies. China recognises that while human rights are understood in liberal terms, prioritising civil and political rights, it is always going to be vulnerable to criticism on its actions in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. The discursive rearticulation of human rights is therefore fundamental for China to establish its legitimacy – and right to lead - in the international. This project is clearly a priority for China, with considerable scholarly, political, diplomatic, and discursive effort being invested in it. 'Liberal' understandings around human rights remain dominant, however; though over time, gradual integration of Chinese concepts within the human rights discourse of the UN could potentially erode this hierarchy of rights in China's favour.

4.4 Extending the Discourse Power project – the Chinese School of IR

China's discursive contestation of liberal hegemony extends beyond the official Discourse Power programme, narrowly defined. In recognition of the important role of knowledge production in discourse power, there has been a clear effort to

use academic research, particularly on international relations, to represent the world in ways other than the hegemonic Western representation. It is in this context that the Chinese School of IR can be understood as part of China's Discourse Power programme. This Chinese School was first founded in 2000 by a group of scholars including Qin Yaqing (whose work is considered in some detail in the next chapter), its intention being to counter perceived Eurocentric accounts of international order, as well as concepts such as the balance of power, drawing instead on East Asian history such as the hierarchical tributary system in historical East Asia, and concepts such as '*Tianxia*' or 'all under heaven' (Zhao, 2009; Dreyer, 2015; Wang, 2017; Mayer, 2018; Acharya, 2019; Kang, 2020; Mirza and Khan, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2024; Xiong, Peterson and Braumoeller, 2024). However, as pointed out by many scholars, the 'School' was conceived of before the scholarship existed to populate it, and so its foundation can be interpreted as a politically-inspired element of China's Discourse Power project, particularly given the close government associations of many of the scholars involved ¹² (Foot, 2020, p. 229; Breslin, 2021, p. 13; Lu *et al.*, 2024; Xiong, Peterson and Braumoeller, 2024). Furthermore, concepts such as China's 'peaceful rise' or a 'harmonious world' move smoothly between IR theorising and official government discourse (Zheng, 2005; Yu, 2007; *Harmonious World: China's Ancient Philosophy for New International Order*, 2007; Qin, 2010; Acharya, 2019).

¹² Qin Yaqing, for example, is known to be an advisor to the Chinese government, as a member of both the Foreign Policy and Public Diplomacy Advisory Committees within the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) (Qin Yaqing, 2024). This mirrors the role of various American IR scholars such as Colin Kahl, Stephen Krasner, Henry Kissinger, Joseph Nye, Jeff Legro, John Ikenberry, Anne-Marie Slaughter, and Daniel Nexon, inter alia, within different US government departments at different times.

Moreover, the conceptualisations of international order within the different theories of the Chinese School in the main do not challenge those from 'Western' theorists, at least on ontological terms: in large part, the different Chinese School theorists accept either 'anarchy' or the 'LIO' as characterising the existing international order. The challenge from Chinese School theories of international order is almost entirely on *normative* grounds: they present different conceptualisations of how international order *should be*. While there are important differences between Yan Xuetong's Tsinghua Approach of 'Moral Realism', Qin's Relational approach, the Shanghai School's Symbiosis Theory, and Zhao Tingyang's theory of *Tianxia*, all suggest a view of an idealised international order led by a more 'moral' international leader bringing international stability and justice; and because each essentialises the ontologies and epistemologies, and/or the unique historical experience of China, it is at least tacitly understood that this moral leadership could only come from China itself. Furthermore, they all accept hierarchy as the basis for international order (Xiong, Peterson and Braumoeller, 2024).

Beate Jahn and Justin Rosenberg both draw a parallel with Stanley Hoffman's critique of postwar IR as 'an American social science': there is, Hoffman argued, a two-way street between political agents and IR scholars, whereby governments solicit knowledge about IR, while IR scholars are influenced by contemporary political issues, providing explanations and rationalisations for them (key examples being Liberal ideas such as complex interdependence, democratic peace, or soft power), while also seeking to influence the political process (Hoffmann, 1977; Lu *et al.*, 2024). It is clear, therefore, that the Chinese School of IR can at least in part be interpreted as playing a role

within China's Discourse Power project, representing China as a particular kind of actor within its counterhegemonic project.

4.5 Extending the Discourse Power project – international governance initiatives

China's discursive project within the UN is not limited to the human rights domain: it is actively working to insert its language prioritising economic development and state stability as being fundamental to human rights, and seeking to undermine embedded liberal hierarchies generally within global discourse. Within the area of peace and security, for example, China is concerned to reorient understandings of the root causes of conflict as lying within economic development, emphasising sustainable economic growth and development, poverty reduction, education, and healthcare as the 'foundation of peace'; this is in opposition to the US view that 'democracy is the most powerful way to prevent all forms of conflict' (Thomas-Greenfield, 2021; Wang, 2021b). Foot notes how China has been deploying 'scholarly and official arguments in support of its articulated beliefs with the aim of situating these perspectives within a larger, mostly UN-centred, policy literature' (Foot, 2020, p. 229). By sponsoring debates at the UN on its approach to peace and security, China is ensuring that its voice on this is heard, and its ideas are being gradually incorporated within mainstream views – thus 'translating its domestic governance philosophies into international consensus' (Foot, 2020, p. 269). The UN is thus a key forum for China's discursive contestation of liberal hegemony at the global level.

Key phrases associated with Xi Jinping have also become commonplace within UN discourse, such as 'win-win cooperation' and 'community with a shared future for mankind' (Jones, 2021). Having these phrases adopted in authoritative global governance contexts gives legitimacy to China's claim to be offering 'Chinese wisdom' to help solve the problems facing mankind (Foot, 2021b). Preventing these phrases, however apparently anodyne, from being adopted in UN discourse is a concerted strategy of the US and its allies, who clearly recognise the importance of 'owning' the language of the international to the reproduction of hegemony (Foot, 2024b).

Over recent years, China has launched a series of 'Global Initiatives', on Development (GDI), Security (GSI), and, most recently 'Civilisation' (GCI). Each of these was launched with some fanfare, but little specific detail, leading to much speculation about what, exactly, China intended to achieve through them. This thesis argues, however, that they should all be understood less as concrete programmes in specific fields of foreign policy, but as part of China's Discourse Power project. They are designed to allow China to 'write the script' for these policy areas, while establishing its credentials for providing global public goods in Development and security – recognised by Cooley and Nexon to be key to global hegemony (Cooley and Nexon, 2020). In the June 2023 Forum on Global Human Rights Governance held in Beijing, Xi Jinping sent a letter to participants in which he explicitly links each of these three Initiatives with human rights, highlighting the close relationship between these initiatives and China's Discourse Power project:

'At a time of severe challenges facing the global human rights governance, China stands for safeguarding human rights with security, respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all

countries, calling on all countries to follow the path of peaceful development, and putting into action the Global Security Initiative.

China advocates for promoting human rights with development, putting into action the Global Development Initiative, and ensuring fair entitlement to human rights by people of all countries through modernization paths with their own characteristics.

China stands for advancing human rights with cooperation in the spirit of mutual respect and equality, putting into action the Global Civilization Initiative, and deepening exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations' (SCIO, 2023).

These initiatives thus play a central role in China's Discourse Power project, particularly seeking to appeal to the project's key audience, the global South. The ways in which each initiative seeks to rearticulate liberal hegemonic norms in order to appeal to the concerns of Southern actors, are examined in the following sections.

4.5.1 Global Development Initiative

In 2021, with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) apparently falling from favour, and with its eye on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the 2030 Agenda, China launched the Global Development Initiative (GDI). Little detail was announced about what the GDI proposed specifically, though it was linked by Xi to China's greater commitment to helping developing countries meet their environmental commitments, in the face of criticism of the environmental cost of the BRI's large infrastructure projects. Those projects earmarked as 'GDI projects' within the UN development system are not, in fact, new, so much as a list of mostly triangular projects that may well have pre-existed the initiative. Most observers in the West have consequently largely been dismissive of it, treating it as another example of empty posturing (Yu, 2022). However, this thesis argues that the GDI is

an important part of China's counterhegemonic project. In part, it is a relational project: it has set up a Group of Friends of the GDI within the UN (with 72 members by September 2023), producing somewhat platitudinous meeting outputs which have Chinese discourse embedded within them. This is part of China's strategy to build its international position through the relationships its Development work in the global South produce, as discussed in the following chapters.

However, it is the discursive element of the GDI which, this thesis argues, is the most significant aspect of it. Under the OECD-DAC definitions of aid, China falls short both by its lack of transparency, and by the very small amounts of overseas development aid (ODA) it actually delivers. China wants to be a dominant actor in Development, and it can only represent itself as such (without actually increasing its aid commitment) by incrementally changing international understandings around what counts as Development (and thereby undermining OECD definitions). The GDI is a deliberate strategy to do exactly this, within multilateral institutions: it embraces language around climate security and sustainability, allowing China to 'own' these 'Western' priorities, in a way that appeals to the many climate-vulnerable states of the global South, while also bringing in its own language around Development. This includes positioning Development as fundamental to human rights and peace / security, in a mirror image of liberal understandings (which reverse the logic). The GDI is, therefore, very clearly an element of the Discourse Power project.

4.5.2 Global Security Initiative

Although launched in April 2022, the GSI 'Concept Paper' was not released by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) until February 2023, leaving observers vague about what

‘initiatives’ were, in fact, proposed. The paper itself, however, made few concrete policy suggestions, with the focus very much on the ‘concept’ of security, investing it with new understandings in line with Chinese thought and policies. Once again, this draws attention to the importance of the language of the international to the hegemonic / counterhegemonic project.

The Concept Paper begins by articulating the ‘moment’ of crisis of the international, using language that echoes the terms in which the interwar and post-war world were invoked in the early years of the post-1945 US hegemony. The document is suffused with language from ‘Xi Jinping Thought’, such as ‘win-win cooperation’ and ‘community of shared security for mankind’, the linking of Development with peace (requiring a ‘holistic’ approach), and the primacy of sovereign equality and non-interference. What is notable, however, that these ideas and concepts are not presented as new or particular to China, but are weaved into the document as ‘historical trends’ (and thus projected backwards in time), and the ‘common pursuit of all countries’, thus *universalising China’s particular* ideology, exactly in line with Gramsci’s conception of hegemony. The document makes frequent references to the ‘responsibilities’ of great powers, making clear that China is the state which is taking this responsibility, and highlighting practices such as ‘[a]busing unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction [which] does not solve a problem, but only creates more difficulties and complications.’ As with human rights and democracy, China is here creating a reverse mirror reflection of past criticism that it is not acting like a ‘responsible great power’, by emphasising that *it* is the responsible power, and that it is the *US* (albeit not named in this document) that is acting ‘irresponsibly’ through

its security policies, including its use of unilateral sanctions. On emerging / non-traditional security fields, such as data security and AI, China is seeking to position itself as a leader / innovator with new initiatives for global governance and proposals for Beijing-led forums; whereas in other fields, such as biosecurity, space, global health, food and energy security, transnational organised crime, and climate change it commits itself to existing global governance norms and institutions. This reflects both its commitment to complying with the existing international order and the norm of working multilaterally, and its hegemonic aspirations.

A close reading of the GSI Concept Paper thus illuminates how China is framing its counterhegemonic project, with the aim of establishing itself as a hegemonic power. It is attempting to frame its own language and ideas as part of the 'common sense' of the international, while positioning itself as a 'responsible great power', working to deliver international public goods. The US is explicitly erased from the narrative, referred to only as one of the states whose international actions create further instability and insecurity. This paper articulates the current crisis – a moment of singular uncertainty, insecurity, and challenge – and presents China as the natural solution.

Since the launch of the GSI, peacebuilding initiatives by China, such as the detente between Saudi Arabia and Iran brokered by China in March 2023, and the Beijing Declaration on Ending Division and Strengthening Palestinian National Unity, signed by 14 Palestinian factions in late July 2024, have been articulated through the GSI, greatly enhancing China's reputation in the security domain, particularly in the eyes of the global South.

4.5.3 Global Civilisation Initiative

Described by the President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Gao Xiang, as ‘another important scientific solution provided by China in the new era to address common challenges facing humanity’, the GCI was launched in March 2023 as perhaps the most blatantly counterhegemonic move by China so far (in Gramscian terms). Gao’s paper (published under the auspices of the CCP), detailing the ‘motivations and intent’ of the GCI, argues that ‘[i]n every historical period, as long as a civilization has focused on exchange, mutual learning, and inclusion, they have been able to achieve the “beauty of each and shared beauty” of civilizations; on the contrary, advocating civilizational barriers, conflicts, and superiority, engaging in a win-lose and winner-takes-all approach, even if they rely on force to gain the upper hand for a time, such civilizations will ultimately disappear in the long river of history.’ Like the GSI, the GCI concept is positioned as a response to a particular ‘moment’ of crisis: in this case, the ‘grave harm caused by hegemonic, domineering, and bullying behaviors such as relying on strength, seizing by force, and zero-sum games, [which] has led to increasing deficits in peace, development, security, and governance, presenting human society with unprecedented challenges. The Global Civilization Initiative is committed to overcoming the common challenges that hinder the modernization of human society, reflecting the practical concerns of protecting human civilization’s achievements.’

This paper thus sets out to dislodge ‘Western’ claims to civilisation, through an emphasis on China’s (long) history of civilisation, and the implication that Western civilisation, as far back as Plato, was influenced by Chinese ideas: China has ‘made an indelible contribution to the progress of human civilization’.

The paper asserts that '[o]ver thousands of years of development, human civilization has gradually crystallised the common values of all humanity, including peace, development, fairness, justice, democracy, and freedom, which have become the distinctive characteristics of advanced civilizations. Peace and development are the common cause of humanity, fairness and justice are the common ideals, and democracy and freedom are the common pursuits.' This claim detaches all these values from liberalism, therefore, and makes them the 'common values of all humanity', developed over a far longer timeline (and a far broader geography) than the usual liberal Enlightenment claims. It is a clearly counterhegemonic claim, but, in this mirroring move, it raises the question of whether subsuming these values actually *dislodges* or *reinforces* liberal hegemony.

Furthermore, the GCI is articulated as fitting within the existing international order and global norms: '[a]s a new international public good, the Global Civilizational Initiative has become an important part of the global governance system, promoting the development of the global governance system in a more just and reasonable direction and guiding the modernization of human society to enter a new stage from chaos to governance and from governance to prosperity'. This articulation lends legitimacy to the GCI, giving it 'common-sensical' validity, while also making (hegemonic) claims to the provision of international public goods. Furthermore, notwithstanding its celebration of 'exchange, mutual learning, and inclusion', the embrace of diversity, and its condemnation of civilisational hierarchies, the GCI is clearly positioned to articulate the superiority of China's civilisation. It claims, '[t]hrough continuous exploration and practice, China has created a new form of human civilization with Chinese characteristics ... The

Global Initiative on Civilization is a major theoretical innovation of China's modernization process, fully embodying the global significance of China's modernization with Chinese characteristics.' Chinese modernization is articulated in contrast to 'capitalist modernization' with its 'various drawbacks', which has led to 'many developing countries falling into a development trap by blindly following the Western model'. China clearly intends its own system to be a universal model: 'The new form of human civilization created by the CCP has strong vitality and lasting influence, demonstrating the incomparable superiority of the socialist system. The new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics is profoundly influencing the world pattern and the development of human society with additional brilliant development achievements From an international perspective, it requires promoting the establishment of a more just and reasonable international new order and creating a new world of lasting peace and universal prosperity'. Despite claiming that '[t]his new order aims to end hegemonism and power politics', Gao claims that China will 'be a steadfast guardian of international fairness and justice, as well as a contributor and building of the global governance system', and that the GCI 'provides a Chinese answer to the question of human social modernization, offering a guiding ideology and action plan for the development and progress of human civilization.'

This 'Xivilization' project, as it has become known in Chinese society (Global Times, 2023), can very clearly, therefore, be read as being counterhegemonic, and demonstrates the fundamental role of ideology and discourse in the production, reproduction, and contestation of hegemony. As with Western-led liberal hegemony, China is instrumentalising history to

legitimise ideas; and it is also making the hegemonic move of representing the particular as timeless, universal and 'common-sensical', while 'othering' contrary ideas and movements which present a threat.

4.6 Conclusion

China's Discourse Power project thus shines a light on the constitutive role of discourse in hegemonic ordering projects, in line with Gramsci's analysis. As its material strength and authority in the international has grown, China has been making a concerted effort to rearticulate understandings of the fundamental liberal norms and practices which underpin liberal hegemony. Significantly, its intention is not just to evade the stigma of non-compliance, but to present itself as a norm leader. Although working through these 'liberal' norms, rearticulating them in a 'mirror image', is part of a deliberate strategy of using mirroring within counterhegemony, this mirroring may in fact indicate the continued salience of liberal discourses for international legitimacy – and despite China's efforts, these norms remain deeply invested with liberal ideas. The strategy of mirroring hegemonic discourse as a *counterhegemonic* move raises important questions about how a hegemonic project can be contested. To some extent the mirroring is a deliberate (and, within the global South at least, fairly successful) tactic to expose the hypocrisy of the US in particular. However, in the apparent internalisation of the key civilisational standards of liberal hegemony, it is unclear that China's Discourse Power project will produce the effect that China is seeking: there is a possibility that liberalism itself will evolve and shape-shift (as it has so often in the past), and thus

remain hegemonic. This question is returned to in the final chapter.

The next chapter moves on to another element of China's counterhegemonic project, in which its mirroring is not a deliberate strategy, but inadvertent: in using the concept of 'relationality', and emphasising the importance of 'relations' with global South actors, its intention is to represent itself as an entirely different type of international (leading) actor. This thesis observes, however, that China's discourse of 'relationality' in fact draws attention to the relational nature of Western-led liberal hegemony, placing the global South at the centre of this analysis of hegemonic order-building, and indicating that China is replicating many of the West's hierarchical logics and practices. The following two chapters therefore move on from the purely discursive element of China's counterhegemonic project, to take a critical look at China's counterhegemonic *practices* in the global South, and considers their representations and their effects.

5. Counterhegemony, relationality and the global South: China's ordering practices, their representation and effects

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined how discourse and ideology play a central role in the production of hegemony, with China's Discourse Power project showing a clear recognition that liberal ideologies are the discursive terrain on which its counterhegemonic project is being fought. This chapter moves on to examine China's discourse of 'relationality': unlike its rearticulation of human rights and democracy, this discourse is designed to represent China as an entirely different kind of international actor, in which the West is essentially 'othered'. The discourse of relationality, however, as it is articulated in scholarship and enacted through practices with the global South, in fact draws attention to the centrality of the South to the Western-led liberal hegemonic project, which has always been constituted by complex webs of relations between North and South. A close examination of China's relational discourse and practices across the South, furthermore, indicates that in important ways, China is, despite its discourse of 'difference', in fact replicates the logics of North-South hegemonic relations. In this way, therefore, this thesis observes that China's relational approach in the global South is not necessarily emancipatory for the South: like leading liberal states, China uses 'relations' instrumentally in the pursuit of its own (counter)hegemonic agenda.

The Chinese focus on 'relationality' is evident increasingly both in scholarship, and in its policy discourse. The academic work of the Chinese IR scholar Qin Yaqing on relationality is perhaps the most well-known, with his (2019) book, *A Relational Theory of IR*. Qin here sets out to articulate 'relationality' as a distinctively Chinese ontology, arguing for its superiority over 'Western' positivist approaches to IR (critical approaches are not acknowledged). The argument makes an ontological case for relationality, based on elements of traditional Chinese thought, before going on to expound the role it plays in Chinese foreign policy. Relationality is indeed becoming increasingly prominent in China's policy-related discourse, particularly regarding the global South, where it is articulated as 'South-South Cooperation'. In both policy and academic spheres, the Chinese relational *ontology*, and the state's relational *practices*, are presented as something original and quintessentially 'Chinese'.

There is justice in Qin's argument that there is an important difference between his relational ontology, and the conceptualisations of the 'liberal international order' examined in Chapter Two. As that chapter argued, the concept of the 'LIO' in the Liberal academic and policy literature draws on English School ideas of 'international society', with a focus on the relationships between *liberal* states. These conceptualisations, however, exclude, in both material and discursive ways, the relationships which are in fact more fundamental to liberal hegemony: those between the global *North / West* and the global *South*. The multiple, interwoven relationships between North and South have, this thesis argues, created the fabric of the post-1945 Western-led liberal hegemony, which is formed of more intimate bonds than the essentially transactional

connections between allies posited in the theory of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1973).

Furthermore, a relational ontology has long been essential to critical Anglophone IR scholarship, which in turn results in a relational lens, to highlight the global webs and connections that produce international hierarchies and hegemony. Relational ontologies have become increasingly widespread in anglophone international relations analysis, including some more mainstream, positivist approaches such as social network analysis, constructivist and practice approaches to IR (Jackson and Nexon, 1999, 2019). Critical approaches to IR have, however, had a longstanding mission to 'think relationally'. Postcolonialism and global historical sociology, for example, expose how through both historical and contemporary practices across the global South, webs of connections are produced between states on a hierarchical basis. Encompassing economic, financial, commercial, cultural, military, and political relationships, the liberal ordering project has always involved networks of entanglement between the global North and global South. Postcolonial international relations scholars such as Barkawi and Laffey, for example, call for a focus on the 'dynamic nature of the relations' between the core and periphery of the 'liberal order' (Barkawi and Laffey, 1999). Only by 'acknowledging the mutual constitution of Europe and the non-European world and their joint role in making history' can one make sense of current and historical international relations; this requires 'relational thinking': 'putting the weak and the strong in a common analytic frame' (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006). Rampton and Nadarajah, likewise, argue for 'making visible ... intimate relations of co-constitution' between the 'liberal' and 'non-liberal' worlds. The liberal and the non-liberal should not

be treated as a dichotomy: they are mutually implicated, the universal and the particular permeated and interwoven; the non-liberal is submerged within, and immanent to the liberal (Rampton and Nadarajah, 2017). Agathangelou and Ling take the approach of 'relational materialism', introducing the term 'worldism' – how multiple worlds are related through intimacy and entwinement, whereby the self and the other are implicated through complicity (Agathangelou and Ling, 2009).

This thesis shares this commitment to focus on a relational ontology which necessarily comprises both strong and weak actors. Understanding the liberal hegemonic order as constitutively produced out of North/South relations, producing economic, financial, commercial, social, and cultural entanglements, highlights that it is, and has always been, a *global* order – with its 'dangerous outside' and 'unstable borderlands' located deep inside it (Saull, 2005). Hegemony, because hierarchical, is necessarily *relational*: it is produced through, and exists within, the relationships between actors in the international. Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony emphasises the relational bond between the strong and the weak within society as being based on 'force and consent, coercion and persuasion, ... [and] order and discipline' (Gramsci, 2011c, p. 74). Following Gramsci, therefore, this thesis understands relations both as part of the ontology of hegemony, but also as an instrumental hegemonic ordering technique of leading actors.

As a project, liberal hegemony is never complete, but is constantly in production through these relational practices; and it is, furthermore, through these practices in the global South that liberal hegemony is increasingly being contested. The crisis of the liberal ordering project stems in large part from a crisis in

the *relations* between the global North and the global South. In overlooking the constitutive importance of the global South to the order, space has opened up for China to build its own relational power, and in doing so is challenging the long-standing hierarchies of the international.

This chapter will examine the range of relational practices which have produced the hierarchical entanglements between North and South over time, which are constitutive of Western-led liberal hegemony. It will then examine Qin's arguments about relationality in detail, both as an ontology and as a set of claims about China's foreign policy, before applying this lens to an examination of China's relational practices in Africa.¹³ It will argue that, in important ways, China's relational practices, no less than those of the West, are hierarchical and instrumental: it is, therefore, in important ways mirroring the logics which have produced Western-led liberal hegemony.

5.2 North-South relational practices

From a relational ontology that acknowledges the co-constitution of the hegemonic liberal 'core' and its 'periphery', emerges a methodology of observing the specific relational practices behind this entwinement, producing hegemony and hierarchical order. This approach differs from 'complex

¹³ The particular focus on Africa in this thesis neither suggests that Africa 'represents' the global South, nor does it set out to homogenise the African continent. However, as this section goes on to show, China has longstanding relations with countries across Africa, and, through the BRI and FOCAC (the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation), it invests considerable social and economic capital in this region. It therefore offers a window onto the ways in which China pursues a 'relational' foreign policy. A focus on Africa, furthermore, excludes the particular politics of its relationships in its own neighbourhood of Southeast Asia, and of those with the US's 'neighbourhood' of Latin America and the Caribbean.

interdependence' as expounded by Keohane and Nye in the 1970s, which focused on the webs of (economic and trade) connections at multiple levels between actors from different states: firstly, their emphasis was on relations *within* the West, and secondly, their theory explicitly ruled out military force, as being made an essentially redundant instrument of policy through this economic interdependence. As will be made clear, however, military force has historically played an important role in the formation of North-South relations: this is not the type of relationality envisaged by Keohane and Nye (Keohane and Nye, 1973). Network and practice theorists have also, more recently, paid close attention to the role of international diplomacy and multilateral institutions in producing international society, likewise maintaining an emphasis on interactions within the West (see, for example, Sending et al., 2015).

Focusing on relational practices which bring the global North and South together, however, helps to make sense of the historical and contemporary production of *global* liberal hegemony. Many of these relational practices are targeted at the elite level within the global South: this is in line with Gramsci's claim that '[t]he spirit of cleavage ... must aim to extend itself from the protagonist class to the classes that are its potential allies: all of this requires complex ideological work' (Gramsci, 2011b, p. 53). However, this falls short of what Gramsci describes as a 'life of connectedness' which produces a 'historical bloc': 'Only if the relationship between ... the leaders and the led, between the rulers and the ruled is based on an organic attachment in which impassioned sentiment becomes understanding and hence knowledge (not mechanically but in a living manner), only then is the relationship one of representation, and only then does one get an exchange of

individual elements between the rulers and the ruled, the leaders and the led' (Gramsci, 2011b, pp. 173–4). The elite-level relationships between global North and global South are based, not on an 'organic attachment', but on a hierarchical *separation*; certainly producing and drawing on 'knowledge' about the subaltern, but this is a knowledge which reinforces the power relationship, rather than producing empathetic understanding.

The following section outlines just a few of the ways in which North-South practices have been explicitly relational, and how, in these relations, the hierarchies of the liberal hegemonic order has been produced.

5.2.1 Security relations

Understandings of North-South military relations range from the benign ('military diplomacy') to the openly violent; all, however, have played a part historically in producing intimate connections and mutual understanding during the years of liberal hegemony. Krieger, Souma and Nexon focus on US military and defence diplomacy, which 'stresses the creation and nurturing of partnerships at the institutional and individual levels', drawing attention to the 'soft power of US military prestige' based on asymmetrical power relations (whether with Northern or Southern allies). Practices they include as military diplomacy include training foreign fighters in US military schools, other professional military education, international military exercises, and negotiations over US arms sales, in addition to formal 'diplomatic' activities by military staff embedded within foreign diplomatic missions (Krieger, Souma and Nexon, 2015). This analysis might be broadened to include the training of international military leaders at Sandhurst, in the UK.

A practice which explicitly manifests hierarchical North-South hegemonic relations is military basing. It is estimated that in 2021, the US controlled around 750-800 overseas military bases in 80 countries around the world, outside the core territory of the US. While many of these are NATO bases within Europe (particularly Germany, Italy and the UK), plus others in Japan and South Korea, the majority are spread across the global South (Vine, 2021). The bilateral contracts behind basing agreements generally involve host states conceding sovereignty to the US, allowing the presence of American troops in exchange for agreed benefits such as security guarantees; however, other bases (such as Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, or the Panama Canal Zone) have been formed historically after military occupation relating to imperial expansion. These bilateral agreements with Southern host states were renegotiated over time, with host governments exercising agency to demand more favourable terms of occupation. During the Cold War, the benefits that the US tended to provide in return for basing could include aid for host country militaries, which often led to supporting authoritarian leaders deemed anti-Communist allies. Democratisation in host states after the Cold War led in several cases to the delegitimization of US bases, with basing contracts terminated in a number of states, including the Philippines in 1991. The contradictions between the post-Cold War democracy promotion agenda, with the perceived need to secure Central Asian bases after 9/11, ended with both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan terminating their basing agreements with the US after uneasy relationships with their authoritarian rulers. This dynamic was repeated in the 2011 Arab uprisings, where the US relationships with authoritarian rulers such as Hosni Mubarak led to suspicion and hostility amongst Egyptian protestors; and the US need for naval basing rights complicated

its response to the Bahrain government's violence against political opponents (Cooley and Nexon, 2013; Krieger, Souma and Nexon, 2015).

The UK, on a far smaller scale, also maintains a network of overseas bases, the full extent of which is not in the public domain. As well as being an important part of the ongoing colonial relationship with its 'overseas territories' in the Atlantic and the Caribbean, Britain perpetuates this aspect of its historical colonial relationship with certain African states, and in particular, in its extensive military basing and training network in Kenya (Miller, 2020). France, likewise, maintains military bases in its overseas territories in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean and the Pacific, while it has had longstanding basing arrangements across its former colonial possessions in West Africa (*Forces prépositionnées* / *Ministère des Armées*, 2022). These, however, are under review: after being forced out of Niger, Mali and Burkino Faso, the French government is now planning to reduce significantly the staffing on its remaining bases in the region (Vincent, 2024). France's forced retreat in the Sahel region is widely interpreted as a crisis of Western hegemonic power, particularly given the increased presence of the Russian Wagner Group in its place (Latorre, 2022; Fiennes and McDonald, 2023; Giustozzi, 2024). Even in this state-to-state account, the social, relational aspect of military basing is very clear. Cynthia Enloe's account, however, emphasises the relationality of basing on an entirely different level: in her description of the co-incidence of brothels and military bases, she highlights how gender, and in particular militarised masculinity, plays its part in inscribing the (relational) hierarchies of this aspect of North-South encounters (Enloe, 1993). While bases are represented as a benign and naturalised

element of the ordering project, they are, as Enloe argues, key sites for manifesting power relations, and thus become a focus of contention.

Tarak Barkawi makes the case for understanding war as an essentially social phenomenon, producing cultural frameworks, and reinforcing hierarchies; he also disputes the discursive distinction between 'peace' and 'war', and the association of diplomacy with peace and, as such, the antithesis of war, highlighting how the 'proxy wars' in the global South during the Cold War were important sites of North-South relationship building. He shows how post-independence global South states' armed forces tended to be dependent to a greater or lesser extent on great power patronage, becoming 'direct instruments of superpower foreign policy'. While this was self-evidently true of the armies of Eastern European states, it was also an important element of US Cold War relationality. The US established a school for training Latin and Central American officers, with a view to turning their military forces into 'imperfect instruments of US policy', quashing rebellions and preventing the rise of leftist political forces. Likewise, the army of South Vietnam was the product of US power, using US uniform and equipment despite the disparities of size. The US strategy was to use 'indigenous' forces to police its global order (much as European states had used colonial armies to fight their earlier wars), and military training by the US took place on an enormous scale globally between 1955 and 1981 (Barkawi, 2006, 2015). It was, of course, not only national armies that the US was training and funding: under the 'Reagan Doctrine', the US provided covert assistance to anti-communist groups within the Soviet sphere of influence, such as the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, the Contra 'rebels' in Nicaragua, and UNITA in

Angola (Williams, 2012, p. 95). This fundamentally *relational* approach thus became an essential element of US hegemonic order building during the Cold War.

Since the Cold War, there has been a continuation of military relations between the US (and to a lesser extent its allies) and the global South, for example through the US's 'War on Drugs', in which it deployed troops within a number of South American states to take on a role more traditionally associated with domestic policing. In a more conventional deployment of international military force, US troops occupied Haiti in 1994 and again in 2004, and intervened in Somalia, Zaire, Sudan and Nigeria, in addition to the Middle Eastern wars and other operations identified with the 'War on Terror' (Go, 2011, pp. 176–177; Barkawi, 2015). The 'intimacy' of these encounters fed back into the US's self-imagination, effacing the (shameful) cultural legacies of Vietnam and Chile with a (recovered) persona of 'moral leader' through a 'humanitarian moral grammar of war' (Weber, 2006).

Just as war has historically brought North and South together in an intimate relationship, so, too has 'peace': Kirsch and Flint agree with Barkawi, however, that this distinction is built on a false dichotomy, with 'reconstruction' premised on 'an ideology of progressive military occupation' while in fact representing a 'continuity of violent power relations', reshaping places and spaces and inscribing identities on the basis of asymmetrical power (Kirsch and Flint, 2016). In the post-Cold War years, 'peacebuilding' emerged as an essential international ordering practice linking (the developed, rational, peaceful) North and (the underdeveloped, chaotic, dangerous) South (Al-Qaq, 2009). Mark Duffield describes this as 'contingent sovereignty', which 'constitutes a zone or frontier that is shaped by the

interactions between national and international actors and institutions', producing a 'human security state in which the core economic and welfare functions of population are now designed and managed by international actors and agencies.' In this way, the 'international community' becomes an integral part of the state, with Development funding delivered through the national budget, and shadow committees monitoring performance. As Duffield describes it, peacebuilding brings 'development' and 'underdevelopment' together in an intimate relationship, but at the same time, they are 'distinguished biopolitically ... as connected but separate assemblages of institutions, techniques and interventions by which life is supported and distinguished internationally ... [D]evelopment embodies the biopolitical division and separation of the human species into developed and under-developed species-life' (Duffield, 2007). Peacebuilding (re)produces particular identities through the asymmetrical relationship when 'expert' interveners arrive in 'conflict zones' to help 'local partners', backed by vast resources and accountable to international institutions and donors; this divides the world in a binary way between the liberal, with 'problem-solving agency and interventionist capacities', and the non- or a-liberal, which is the *external* source of instability – what Sabaratnam terms 'the structural relations of colonial difference' (Campbell, Chandler and Sabaratnam, 2011; Autesserre, 2014; Sabaratnam, 2017). Peacebuilding is, therefore, an intensely relational practice; however, in reinforcing these divisions and hierarchies, it (re)produces the hegemonic order.

5.2.2 Developmental relations

As the international practice of Development became widespread after 1949, both the distribution of aid, and the

ways in which Development was practiced, reflected relational factors. Some of these were based on the history of colonial relations, while others were relationships forged through Cold War geopolitics; paying attention to the distribution of aid (as set out in the next chapter) makes clear that donor states have always used aid instrumentally to produce and maintain hierarchical relationships, as part of the liberal ordering project. The role of debt as an instrument of international ordering is receiving increased scholarly attention, in part due to the prominent part it plays in China's relations with the global South. However, debt has long been an important element of North-South relations: Meera Sabaratnam and Mark Laffey have developed the framework of 'complex indebtedness' to describe the 'formations of indebtedness – which are hierarchical and asymmetric – as a key basis for relations between polities' (Sabaratnam and Laffey, 2023). British colonial relations were structured through debt – there was little beneficence in early colonial 'development'; and the following chapter will argue that the colonial roots of contemporary Development are much misconstrued. However, one clear link between colonial practices and post-1945 Development existed, and to some extent has been perpetuated, at the personal, *relational* level. Uma Kothari, through interviews with former British Colonial Office employees who went on to work in the nascent international Development field, builds a narrative of *embodied* continuity: these individuals tended to understand their work as a continuum from preparing the colonial territories for independence as colonial administrators, to working to 'Develop' the 'Third World'. Employed either as consultants, or directly for multilateral agencies or NGOs, these individuals brought a collective culture which emerged from the colonial

experience, and which informed the culture, discourse, and ideas of the international Development world. Unlike their Development contemporaries who had not had this colonial experience, these individuals had been trained to immerse in local language and culture, to become 'deeply familiar, yet superior within, [their] geographic environment'. This emphasises an important relational element within early post-war Development, albeit soon effaced by the rise of 'technical' professionalism within the field, when 'local' knowledge and the ability to build this type of relationship was no longer valued (Kothari, 2019, pp. 55–64).

Some European donor states did, however, maintain an explicitly relational approach to Development in their former colonies, even after the aspiration of 'Eurafrica' faltered (Hansen and Jonsson, 2017). France, in particular, used its aid programme to remain close, particularly with its former colonies in Africa. Over 90 per cent of its substantial aid budget went to these states, where it provided between 80 and 90 percent of the aid they received, underpinned by a highly personalised relationship between political elites. In this way, France ensured that both its political and economic influence over these states remained significant, securing its access to strategic resources, maintaining monopolistic positions for French companies, retaining the Franc Zone, with ongoing military cooperation (Williams, 2012, pp. 55–56). This highly personal approach to Development continued, despite criticism from the 1990s when the approach appeared to be at odds with the norm of promoting 'good governance' through aid; and particularly with France's support for the Hutu-dominated government in Rwanda before the Tutsi genocide. The perception, both inside France and externally, that French aid

was being used to maintain the rule of African dictators while enriching French elites, forced administrative reform, as well as changes to French aid policies in line with liberal norms. To this day, however, France continues to prioritise its personalised relationships over norms such as democracy promotion (Williams, 2012, pp. 131–132).

The US's approach to Development was also explicitly relational, though in a different way: the Mutual Security Acts of the 1950s, which linked aid to military assistance, made clear that this was targeted at '*friendly countries* to strengthen mutual security and individual and collective defences of the free world' (US Government, 1951, quoted in Williams, 2012, p. 49, emphasis added). The major beneficiaries of US aid during the Cold War reflect this emphasis on 'friendship': Israel and Egypt, Turkey, the Philippines, and Nicaragua (as well as many other Latin American and Caribbean states). This 'friendship', however, is some way removed from the type of international friendship analysed by Felix Berenskoetter, which can be characterised as an intimacy between 'interdependent "equals"': the asymmetries of power predicate this 'friendship' from its first inception (Berenskoetter, 2007). During the Cold War, the fundamental goal of US Development and aid was to help to build stable, 'friendly', pro-Western regimes through a range of strategies; Ethan Kapstein, for example, argues that the US worked to change social formations within 'developing' states to reduce the risk of class conflict, using economic measures such as land reforms to influence the relations between elites and peasants, and thus between that state and the US (Kapstein, 2017).

In its relations with certain states, including the Philippines and Chile, however, the US to some extent mirrored France's highly

personalised, post-colonial approach in which hierarchy was inscribed. Between the US and the Philippines there was a deeply enmeshed relationship, which encompassed trade, investments, military basing, cultural connections, lending, and aid; however, there was a high degree of elite level collaboration, whereby the US relationship was used to defend patrimonial political and economic interests (Cullather, 1994; Robinson, 1996, pp. 117–124; Sylvan and Majeski, 2009). As with France, however, it was the prioritisation of the elite-level relationship over cosmopolitan concerns for rights and democracy that ultimately undermined this partnership in the post-Cold War world – though with the return of the Marcos dynasty to the Philippines, and a mutual suspicion of China, a new relationship has emerged with the announcement in May 2023 of the ‘Bilateral Defense Guidelines’ (US Department of Defense, 2023). In Chile, the US had longstanding economic interests, which evolved from the 1950s into a combination of economic and military aid to further its political interests in the country; this included funding media outlets, and intellectual and political elites; as well as full-scale electoral interference in the 1960s to attempt to prevent a leftist government from taking power, which would have fundamentally threatened the relationship. Official and covert funding continued throughout the 1960s to assist individuals, political parties, and civil society groups to challenge the rise of the left; and from the 1970 election of Allende, the US engaged in well-documented destabilisation operations which resulted in a military takeover by a violent authoritarian regime under Pinochet. These events were at least facilitated by the US’s intimate relationship with Chile’s social and economic elites (Robinson, 1996, pp. 153–166). As a sign that these asymmetrical relationships were nevertheless *mutually* constitutive, it was in the wake of this

(and similar) interventions that the US policy establishment, led by liberal foundations, began to prioritise rights promotion in US foreign policy, to put the country 'on the side of the angels' (Dezalay and Garth, 2002).

5.2.3 Educational, cultural and social relations

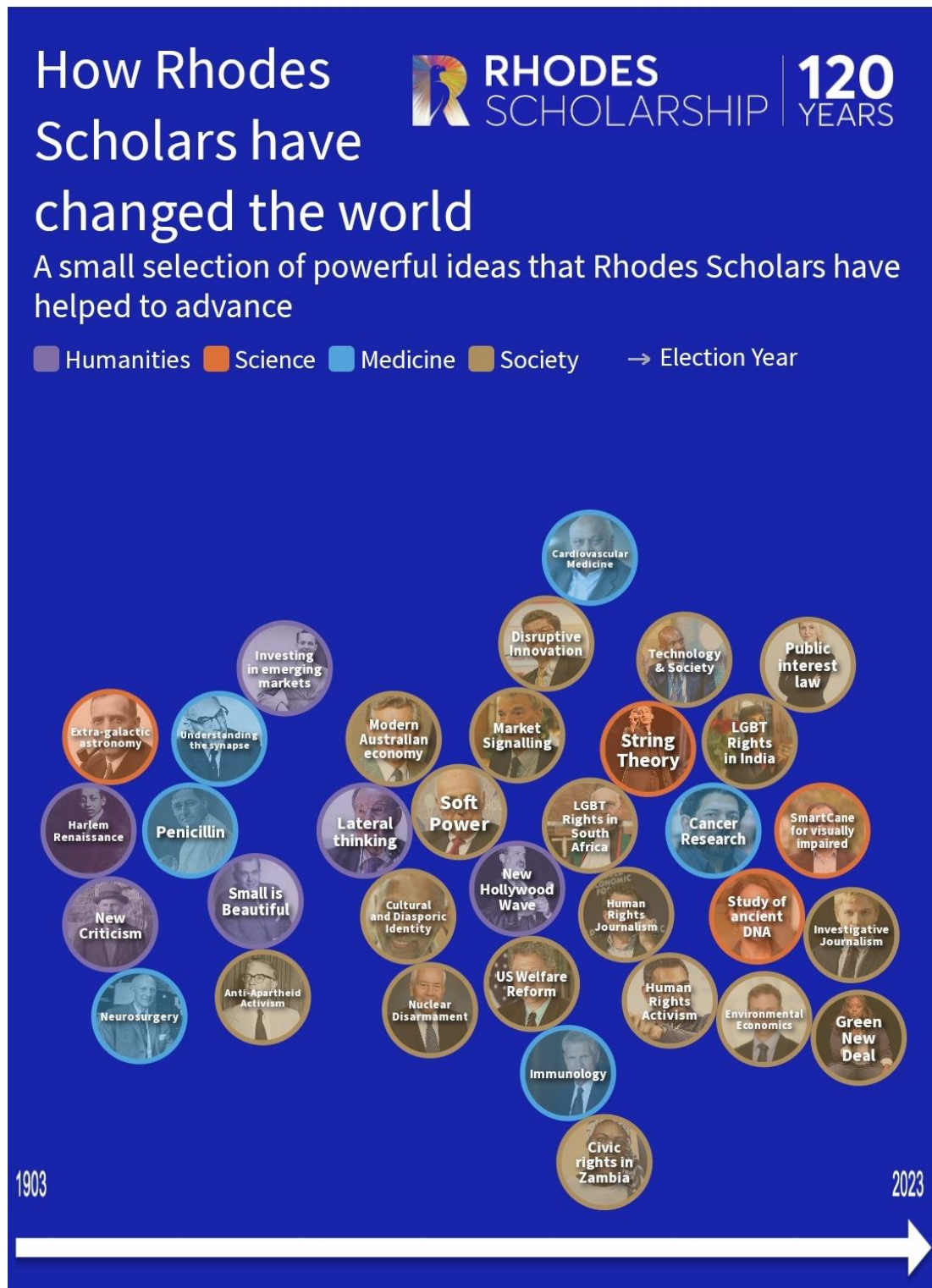
A key element of hegemonic order building has been educational links between North and South, producing what Inderjeet Parmar describes as 'elite knowledge networks', whereby Southern elites are 'incorporat[ed] into the dominant model of order, fostering deep inequalities within emerging states' (Parmar, 2019). Two of the most prestigious educational scholarships, allowing global South students to study at elite universities in the UK and US respectively, were founded at key moments for the hegemony of each power: the Rhodes Scholarship in 1903, and the Fulbright Scholarship in 1946. These have been joined by other programmes linked to elite Northern educational institutions, including the Chevening Scholarship, set up by the British Foreign Office in 1983. These educational links cannot be underestimated: a significant proportion of postcolonial leaders in the global South were educated in the North, producing important North-South relational networks at the elite level. As Secretary of State Colin Powell stated in 2001, 'I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here' (Powell, 2001).

Parmar describes how elite knowledge networks are based on flows of people, money, and ideas, producing 'experts' with 'useful knowledge that constructs ideology, institutions, and policy'. He draws attention to how this worked with Chile's 'Chicago Boys' (Barder, 2013) and Indonesia's 'Beautiful Berkeley Boys', educated in the US in modernization theory

before transforming their respective economies with neoliberal ideas. Chinese economics students were likewise granted scholarships (including from the Ford Foundation) from the 1950s, for doctoral training at US universities; and the Ford Foundation also helped to establish economics programmes within elite Chinese universities (Parmar, 2019). All of this laid the path for China's subsequent embrace of capitalism; and the trend continues: around 60% of the 801,000 Chinese students studying abroad in 2016 went to the US, the UK or Australia, representing significant proportions of each country's foreign student numbers (CSIS, 2017). The relational networks between core and periphery based on education and the transmission of ideas is, therefore, fundamental to the hegemonic project, and this is reflected in the scale of investment in North-South educational and ideas programmes over decades.

The role of elite university scholarships in promoting hegemonic liberal ideas is well exemplified in the following graphic, from the Rhodes Scholarship website. This claims that Rhodes Scholars have 'changed the world' in various ways, including through research on human rights activism, civil rights in Gambia, LGBT rights in India and South Africa, investing in emerging markets, as well as the concept of 'soft power' (Joseph Nye was himself a Rhodes Scholar in the late 1950s).

Figure 4. How Rhodes Scholars have changed the world



Source: (Changing the World for 120 Years - Rhodes Trust, 2023)

In addition to the transmission of hegemonic ideas at the elite level through educational programmes, media and culture have long been used to promote 'Western' values and cultural property to a mass audience across the global South, adapting with technological developments. This transmission is inherently hierarchical, with the 'broadcasting' of ideas establishing epistemic power relations through an assumption of authority to speak. The dissemination of culture is an essential element of liberal hegemony – articulated by Joseph Nye as 'soft power', and by critics of the US as 'cultural imperialism', with acknowledged similarity to the Gramscian notion of hegemony (Zahran and Ramos, 2010).

Lene Hansen examines the role of communication as a 'driver of international society', and quotes Benedict Andersen on the role of mass media in producing the 'imagined community' (Hansen, 2017). Applying a Gramscian lens to this reveals that mass media can be used internationally to 'drive' hegemony, and that the 'imagined community' is the idea of the smoothly universalised ideology. However, the universality is necessarily illusory, and the same media technologies can also be used to resist and contest this hegemony. As an example of the use of media to 'drive hegemony', Robinson explains the importance of 'international communications' to the Reagan administration's 'democracy promotion' programme: the National Security Decision Directive 130 in March 1983 declared them 'an integral part of US national security policy and strategy'. This brought an expansion of international broadcasting, particularly within the global South, and research on 'foreign public opinion' (Robinson, 1996, pp. 98–99). Media penetration under this programme tended to target 'youth', identified as a risk to the US project; and also the business

sector, to entrench free-market values and the ideology of neo-liberalism (Robinson, 1996, p. 103). Beyond this particular programme, both Anglophone and Francophone media have long played an important part throughout liberal hegemony in creating a sense of the relationship between global North and South, while reinforcing hegemonic liberal ideas.

While treated here as separate categories, these different practices and strategies have worked together in overlapping and co-implicated ways over decades to produce complex webs of relational connections between North and South, and it is through these that the post-1945 liberal hegemony was, in large part, built. Paying attention to these relational connections is in line with the Gramscian idea that hegemony relies on consent as well as coercion. Coercion, of course, played an important role, as did economic power, but it was the intimacies produced through military basing and training, peacebuilding, Development, education, the co-opting of elites, and international media and cultural exchanges at the mass level, which delivered the consent on which liberal hegemony depends. These relations between North and South reproduce hegemony by bringing the 'internalization of the *social logic* of the system of domination' (Robinson, 1996, p. 21). The conceptualisations of the 'liberal international order' which focus on the 'international society' of the 'West' are based, therefore, on a fundamental, and *productive*, misrecognition of the necessarily *global* nature of the ordering project. The effacement of the global South in these conceptualisations further inscribes the liberal boundaries between the 'civilised world' and its 'other', reproducing the hierarchies and asymmetries on which liberal hegemony is built.

5.3 Relationality in Chinese IR Theory

The 'relational turn' in international relations that has recently emerged, particularly through the influence of Chinese IR, is not, this thesis argues, an entirely new approach (Chan, 2009; Benabdallah, 2020b; Kavalski, 2021; Kurki, 2021; Trowsell *et al.*, 2021). Chinese scholars espousing relational IR, such as Zhao Tingyang (drawing on the concept of *Tianxia*, or 'all under heaven') and Qin Yaqing (drawing on *zhongyong* dialectics, or yin and yang), however, do not fully acknowledge the contribution of postcolonial international relations theory to ideas of relationality in IR. Instead, they contrast their lens with those of mainstream positivist (or as Qin frames it, 'Western') approaches to IR, suggesting that the Chinese approach to relationality brings an entirely different perspective (Zhao, 2009; Qin, 2018). This section examines the discourse of relationality expounded by Chinese international relations scholars. It then takes the instrumental approach to relations set out by Qin Yaqing as a framework for interrogating Chinese Development policies in Africa, and the ways in which they are used instrumentally to achieve particular goals in line with core Chinese objectives: with its distinctively normative tone, Chinese relational IR scholarship can be read as the discursive partner to China's relational foreign policy practices. This chapter argues that the emergent 'relational IR' from Chinese scholars, and in particular the associated claims to singularity, play an important role in the discursive project to contest liberal hegemony.

In tandem with the Chinese government's discursive project to allay concerns about China's rise by portraying China as a non-threatening great power (Nordin and Smith, 2018), there has been a focus by Chinese IR scholars on relational IR, drawing heavily on Confucian ideas. Qin Yaqing is perhaps the most prominent of these scholars, with his *Relational Theory of World Politics* (Qin, 2018). This sets out to distinguish Chinese approaches to IR from 'Western' scholarship, which he characterises as being based on rational individualism. He argues that the concepts and frameworks deployed by Western IR essentially fail to apply to China, based as they are on this individualist ontology, which is fundamentally different from Chinese relationalist ontology. In arguing thus for a parochial rather than universal application of ontology and concepts, it is unclear whether Qin's 'relational theory of world politics' can be applied to explain the international relations of the world, and in particular the 'West'. This culturally essentialist approach appears instead to serve a different purpose: to set out a normative prescription for how international relations *should* be, in practice, based on Chinese relational values. In contrasting Hegelian dialectics, based on the centrality of conflict, with *zhongyong* dialectics, based on the harmonious co-implication of yin and yang, Qin appears to be making a normative claim about Western versus Chinese ways of *thinking* and, therefore, *acting* (Qin, 2018, p. 152). Furthermore, in his discussion of 'relationship management', Qin contrasts Western intolerance of diversity and production of order through insistence on homogeneity, with Chinese respect for difference and management of complex social relationships 'for a more stable political and social order' (Qin, 2018, pp. 227–236). Given the culturally essentialist and normative tone of this analysis, the 'respect for difference' in fact equates to an *insistence* on

difference, with hierarchy strongly implied through this strong self-other dichotomy. It is clear that, far from presenting itself as a neutral theoretical lens for understanding world politics, this work represents a discursive legitimization of Chinese foreign policy.

It is in this light, therefore, that Qin's description of 'relational power' can be read: this offers a clear insight into how China uses relations with other states instrumentally as part of its ordering project. Qin characterises relational power as something not possessed by actors, but residing in relations among agents through complex interdependence: 'through an alliance arrangement, the agent's power resources are available to its allies; or, through a special relationship, an agent may have privileged access to the decision-making power of an international institution.' Its 'usability is through relationship rather than ownership' (Qin, 2018, p. 243). Of Barnett and Duvall's taxonomy of power, Qin sees relational power mapping most closely to their 'institutional power', whose power 'is accessible by some privileged agents', based on a 'special relationship between the agent and the institution' (Qin, 2018, p. 248). In this conception, 'human relations *per se* constitute a valuable power base, performing similar functions as military forces, economic wealth, or effective leadership'. This relational power is sharable, and it increases by use (Qin, 2018, p. 259). Qin makes clear that a state within a relational network maintains its individual interests, which are 'embedded in relations and can be gained more through a skilful management of relations' – 'manag[ing] relations for its benefit' (Qin, 2018, pp. 226–7).

Qin's analysis glosses over the importance of *relative* (relational) power, and the role of dominance and hierarchy

within the relational network he describes; his account of sharable relational power is thus benign and apolitical. How certain agents come to acquire the 'privilege' to access the decision-making power of international institutions is unclear; and different actors' ability to use relations instrumentally to further their own interests, depending on this relative power, is not articulated (Guzzini, 2023). In this sense, Qin's work inadvertently echoes mainstream anglophone IR theory, in particular Liberal scholars such as John Ikenberry, where US power is represented in the same benign terms, thus effacing both the origins of this power and the (often violent) means through which it is maintained.

5.4 Relationality in Chinese foreign policy

5.4.1 Overview

This analysis bears a strong relation to Chinese foreign policy in practice: this section proposes to use Qin's arguments about instrumental relationality, and relational power in particular, as a framework for analysing Chinese Development policy in Africa, and the ways in which relations built through Development practices are used, via multilateral institutions, to further China's foreign policy agenda and augment its power in the international.

Analysing China's policies in Africa in the light of scholarly articulations of relationality and *guanxi* ('connections') is not an original approach: Stephen Chan has written on this (Chan, 2009), and Lina Benabdallah's book *Shaping the Future of Power* gives an in-depth account of China-Africa relations through Qin's concept of relational power (Benabdallah, 2020b). She

argues that China's relational, people-centred approach is categorically different from the policies of other major powers, and that the relational power generated through its practices in Africa helps China by legitimating its development model and governance practices through norm diffusion, as well as opening up economic opportunities (Benabdallah, 2020b, p. 3). Where this thesis departs from Benabdallah's analysis is in the degree of faith it places in China's discourse of South-South Cooperation and win-win policies. She argues that postcolonial analysis, with its focus on 'othering' and domination, does not apply to China's strategy in Africa, where 'power seems to circulate and operate successfully precisely because there is no hierarchical othering. China portrays itself as another developing country, as African states' equal, and this ... makes power relations less visible/confrontational and therefore more successful' (Benabdallah, 2020b, p. 16). As the next chapter argues, however, beneath China's discourse of equality and developmental symmetry, there are clear hierarchies of temporality and power, and it is only by paying attention to these unspoken hierarchies that China's ordering project comes into view. Joshua Eisenman uses a similar approach of applying Qin's relationality as a framework to analyse Chinese policy in Africa; however, he is more attentive to the hierarchies in this relationship which are built into 'Sinocentrism' – the 'belief that notions of Chinese cultural and political superiority ought to be "universal"' – which is articulated explicitly by Qin and Zhao (Zhao, 2015; Qin, 2018). In particular, Eisenman draws attention to the requirement that the African elites within this relationship support China's "'core national interests'" – "state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification, China's political system established by the Constitution and overall social stability, and the basic safeguards

for ensuring sustainable economic and social development” (Eisenman, 2022 - quoting China State Council Information Office, 2011). Paying attention to the *instrumental* use of China’s relational power, and the ways in which it is projected in the international, particularly within international institutions, means moving beyond China’s own narrative of itself as a benign great (Southern, developing) power, and focusing on what this means for international ordering.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, and particularly around the time of the 2008 Olympics, Chinese politicians and academics frequently invoked the concept of ‘soft power’ as a key strategic concern for China. However more recently, and particularly under Xi Jinping, ‘soft power’ is rarely mentioned, replaced by the concept of ‘relational power’, in which China invests significant resources, seeing it as fundamental to its strategy of contesting Western-led liberal hegemony. The role of relations in Chinese strategy is explicit, for example in a 2017 speech by Xi at the UN in Geneva, in which he claimed that China was the ‘first country to make partnership-building a principle guiding state-to-state relations. It has formed partnerships of various forms with over 90 countries and regional organizations, and will build a circle of friends across the world’ (Xi, 2017b). These partnerships were to be based on a broad agreement on underlying principles, rather than being blocs of ‘like-minded states’ (Breslin, 2021, p. 109). In the Joint Communique from the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2019, there is the statement: ‘Considering connectivity as a means of bringing countries, peoples and societies closer together, we believe the Belt and Road cooperation promotes exchanges, mutual learning and dialogue among different peoples, cultures and civilizations’

(Joint Communiqué of the Leaders' Roundtable of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation - Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 2019).

This thesis does not dispute the great emphasis placed on personal and group relations in China's historical and contemporary dealings with Africa: '*guanxi*' and 'relationality' are clearly more than just a discourse. This is perhaps best exemplified in the tradition that the Chinese Foreign Minister's first trip of every year is to an African country, at a time when senior Western officials' visits had become increasingly rare. Xi Jinping has himself made four visits to Africa between 2013 and 2018, visiting a number of countries on each trip. A recent statement on China / Africa relations contains the assertion, 'Nothing is more important than a true friend. China has always considered solidarity and cooperation with African countries to be an essential element of its foreign policy. This will never change, not even when China grows stronger and enjoys a higher international status' (State Council Information Office, PRC, 2021). Relationality *is* a discourse, however: it is one of the ways in which China consistently articulates its difference from the 'West'.

Chinese discourse with the global South emphasises its long history of peaceful relations: for example, it 'instrumentalises nostalgia' for the distant past by reviving the narrative of the fifteenth century admiral Zheng He, whose visits to cities in Malaysia, Indonesia and Kenya are commemorated with statues, memorials, and temples. Woven into the discourse around the 'New Silk Road' / Belt and Road Initiative, China thus emphasises the peaceful and respectful nature of its historical encounters, in contrast to the violent colonisation of the European states (Benabdallah, 2021). It also emphasises more

recent history, and its Developmental relations with Africa during the Cold War (Chan, 1985). During the 1950s and 1960s, at a time when China was not internationally recognised as a legitimate state, it joined the Third World Movement, viewing it as an important relational network; though Suzuki Shogo argues that this was not because China inherently valued the friendship of its fellow members, but because it required this relational capital in its struggle to gain recognition from more powerful actors (Suzuki, 2017). That notwithstanding, China regularly invokes this history of friendship, making direct comparisons with Europe's history of violence and colonisation. History is further invoked in relation to the BRI, which was originally known by the historically evocative term 'New Silk Road': in Xi's speech in 2017 at the Belt and Road Forum, he draws on this history as part of China's claim to contribute positively to international *relations*, and therefore *progress*: 'Over 2,000 years ago, our ancestors, trekking across vast steppes and deserts, opened the transcontinental passage connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, known today as the Silk Road. Our ancestors, navigating rough seas, created sea routes linking the East with the West, namely, the maritime Silk Road. These ancient silk routes opened windows of friendly engagement among nations, adding a splendid chapter to the history of human progress.' (Xi, 2017a)

As the following analysis shows, China's relational strategy in Africa to a great extent mirrors the ways in which the liberal hegemonic project was underpinned by North-South relations; however, there are some important differences, in part reflecting China's particular history, and also the fact that its project is *counterhegemonic*. While its discourse emphasises relationality, partnerships, and 'win-win cooperation', hierarchy

is embedded in these relationships, with a clear line drawn between China and its global South 'partners'. This hierarchical approach is clearly revealed in its diplomatic classification system, which ranks different levels of diplomatic relationship: the power to decide the status of any given relationship lies entirely with China. (See Appendix One for the most recently available breakdown of these diplomatic classifications). Upgrades to diplomatic relationship rankings are lobbied for assiduously by Southern leaders, and when achieved are announced with fanfare (*CGTN*, 2024; *Al Jazeera*, 2024). These hierarchies are also manifested in more nuanced ways, such as with positioning for official handshakes. (See Appendix Two).

5.4.2 Developmental relations

The BRI epitomises China's focus on 'relationality' in its international dealings. This is made clear by the same speech by Xi: 'The pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative requires a peaceful and stable environment. We should foster a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation; and we should forge partnerships of dialogue with no confrontation and of friendship rather than alliance.' (Xi, 2017a). The particular geopolitical imagination embedded within the BRI is aimed at promoting the Chinese vision of 'community of shared destiny for mankind', together with 'win-win cooperation' in a 'harmonious world'. However, in common with China's other policies across the global South, China's unique and superior status is inscribed in the BRI, replicating liberal hierarchical practices and discourses. By drawing on the 'Silk Road' history, China is emphasising its authorial role and ownership of the project, as well as the particular concepts for international relations embedded within it (McConnell and Woon, 2023).

China is, therefore, using its Development policies to promote its own hegemonic discourse. However, this is not the 'autocratic ideology' that alarmist accounts in the North focus on: China is promoting 'Xi Jinping thought', rather than seeking to export its own political system and governance model. Rhetoric in the US and parts of Europe focuses on the argument that China's Development finance is being used to undermine democracy in Africa, for example through supporting authoritarian leaders (*The Economist*, 2022). Recent analysis, however, indicates that there is little evidence for this, though there are some differences in the supply of debt-based financing where there is less democratic oversight of a country's economy (Dreher *et al.*, 2022, p. 147). What this analysis does highlight, however, is the way in which Chinese investment within democratic countries tends to favour the territorial power base of incumbent leaders in Africa, suggesting that African leaders use Chinese aid for 'clientelistic purposes' (Dreher *et al.*, 2022, p. 182). Earlier research found that in cases of changes of domestic leadership in states in the global South, concessionary finance from China tended to increase, apparently to mitigate uncertainty about a country's foreign policy under a new regime (DiLorenzo and Cheng, 2019). A relational approach to Development financing, even under the discourse of non-intervention in domestic politics, does, therefore, potentially produce relations of personal indebtedness to China, which can be used instrumentally in the international arena.

5.4.3 Summit diplomacy

In line with China's commitment to working multilaterally, as well as an important demonstration of its convening power, China has made 'summit diplomacy' central to its relationship

strategy with the global South. It now has several different regional forums, though each takes a somewhat different form. The first to be founded was FOCAC (Forum of China-Africa Cooperation) in 2000: it is held at ministerial level every three years, alternately in China and Africa, with sub-forums promoting trade deals, technology transfers, educational scholarships and training, media cooperation, etc. The CASC (China Arab States Cooperation Forum) was founded in 2004, with ministerial meetings held every two years, and the first China-Arab summit (at head of state level) was held in December 2022 in Saudi Arabia. Finally, the China-CELAC Forum (with the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) was formed in 2014, with regular ministerial meetings and periodic sub-forums. China uses these events to promote its own international norms and concepts, such as 'major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'; or a 'community with a shared future for mankind'.

The FOCAC events bring together political leaders, businesses, investors, educators, and health actors across a series of meetings, designed to form deep connections between individuals as well as producing state-to-state financial commitments. These include, in the November 2021¹⁴ meeting, a commitment for China to receive \$300 billion in African imports over 2022-24, and \$300bn in annual trade by 2035 (compared to the EU's total of \$100 billion in African imports). Furthermore, there was a target for \$10 billion in new FDI by 2024, and \$60 billion in additional FDI by 2035 (Lynch, Ryder and Jing, 2021). With the AU joining FOCAC from 2018, international security cooperation has become an increasingly important

¹⁴ The 2024 FOCAC ministerial-level summit is being held in September 2024, in Beijing

aspect of the process. As Jones and Hameiri point out, China is not a unitary actor, particularly in its engagement with Africa: individual businesses, investors, provinces and regional governments make their own investment commitments, and many of these are formulated and negotiated through person-to-person connection at events like FOCAC (Jones and Hameiri, 2021). Despite the fragmented nature of the relationships formed, the Chinese government creates a unified narrative of 'China-Africa' relations arising from FOCAC meetings.

5.4.4 Educational, media and cultural relations

Having been a recipient of 'Western' educational and cultural programmes for decades, China is highly sensitive to their importance to hegemonic projects, and has been making significant investments (albeit interrupted by the pandemic) in its own cultural and educational programmes. Before the pandemic, China had made it a priority to increase the numbers of international students within Chinese universities, as an essential element of its relational strategy. In 2016 (a peak year), there were over 440,000 foreign students in China, up 35% from 2012, and putting China in third place globally behind the US and UK. The majority of these were from neighbouring states such as South Korea, Thailand, and Russia.

FOCAC has historically emphasised the provision of university scholarships and professional training opportunities within China for various sectors, including health, media, peacekeeping and policing, and agriculture. In the five years prior to the pandemic, the number of African doctoral researchers within Chinese universities doubled to 8,000, many on institutional or government scholarships; while in 2018, a total of 80,000 African students were studying in China (Mills and Robinson, 2022). This brought China close to France as the

leading destination for African students, significantly ahead of the US and UK, which each host about 40,000 African students annually (CSIS, 2017). At FOCAC 2018, China pledged 50,000 government scholarships and 50,000 training opportunities for workshops and seminars. In 2021, perhaps due to Covid travel restrictions to China, no similar numerical commitments were made, though China committed itself to maintain its training engagements within Africa. Confucius Institutes, which launched in 2004, are central to this strategy, promoting teaching Mandarin Chinese to Africans through 62 institutes across the continent. Mandarin is also now on the national curriculum of several African countries; and at the same time, China has committed to promoting the teaching of African languages within China. It was announced in April 2023 that the Defence Forces School of Education and Languages in Kenya would start to teach the Chinese language to Kenyan military officers, via the Nairobi Confucius Institute.

Furthermore, FOCAC promotes cooperation between Chinese and African universities and think tanks through seminars, joint research projects, and exchanges ('Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024)', 2021). China has funded university building in poorer African countries such as Eritrea and Malawi; and it financially supports centres for studying China-Africa relations in universities across the continent, including Nairobi, Abuja, Johannesburg and Tanzania (*Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, 2022). Some of the largest projects have been with a key Chinese ally, Ethiopia: in June 2021, the African Leadership Excellence Academy, largely funded by the Chinese government, was opened in Addis Ababa; and in October 2022, a China-funded science museum was also inaugurated there.

This activity could be seen as contributing to the education of the next generation of African political leaders, encouraging them to have strongly positive views of China through the deep personal ties formed through education. It is worth noting, however, that the blueprint for this relational work through education was set by the US and its European allies: China is not innovating in any of this.

In addition to its university- and think tank-based educational strategy, China also uses human resource development, or 'capacity building', as part of its relational project across the global South. In 2016, 'Luban Workshops', for example, were established through the initiative of the city of Tianjin, focused on vocational training, particularly in technology skills. They spread initially through Asian countries, but were introduced to Africa in 2018. There are now 25 Luban branches outside China, including 12 in Africa (and one in the UK). In the 2021 FOCAC, the Luban Workshops were co-opted by the central government, and promoted as a means by which Africans could be enabled to work for Chinese technology companies in Africa (King, 2021). In line with the view that China is not a unitary actor, capacity building in Africa can also be seen at a non-state level: for example, in 2021 Huawei, a Chinese technology company, announced an ICT 'talent ecosystem' within Ethiopia to 'help students and professionals gain an internationally recognized certification and develop better career paths in the telecom and IT sector', with plans to train 800 professionals in the first year, and 4,000 over three years (*Xinhua*, 2021). As China's economy grows, it will no longer have access to a homegrown pool of cheap labour – the resource on which it has so far depended. It has been suggested that China will increasingly outsource low value manufacturing to Africa, and

that this strategy is what is underlying 'capacity building' efforts there, reflecting Africa's position as the 'hinterland' to China's economy, as discussed in the next chapter.

In response to an anxiety that China lags behind the UK and US in terms of 'discourse power' across the global South, where debates are still shaped disproportionately by Western media such as CNN and the BBC, China has identified this as an essential focus in its counterhegemonic project. The Chinese Ministry of Finance budgeted over US\$7bn in 2009 to support this strategy of presenting a positive image for China internationally, a project which has accelerated since Xi assumed office in 2012. In 2013, Xi made a speech at the 'National Ideology Work Conference' stressing the need to 'tell China's story well, disseminate China's voice well, and strengthen China's discourse power internationally' (Zheng, 2022). Chinese embassies all over the world play a key role in this strategy, coordinating a multi-pronged approach to 'telling China's story well': organising media events (such as conferences, training programmes and trips to China for local journalists); placing articles authored by Chinese leaders and diplomats in local newspapers; and providing interviews and media briefings to local media with the Chinese ambassador.

Cooperation on press and media within Africa is emphasised in each FOAC declaration, including exchanges, China-based training, and 'co-production', designed to 'promote mutual understanding and enhance the bond between the people' ('Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024)', 2021). The Chinese Ministry of Finance budgeted over US\$7bn in 2009 to support this strategy of presenting a positive image for China internationally, and Africa has been a key target for this (Thibaut, 2022). As well as setting up Chinese media

organisations within Africa, and aiding governments to expand access to internet and mobile phones to disseminate news from Xinhua, China has deployed other tactics such as the use of 'borrowed mouths' – local journalists who publish pieces which are sympathetic to China and relay its messages (Thibaut, 2022; *Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, 2022). Broadcasting has been an important area of investment for Chinese media companies: China's State Council Information Office (SCIO) estimated in 2022 that they provide 13 million African users with programming through over six hundred channels, in eleven languages (Thibaut, 2022). Again, this is an example of China not innovating, but mirroring liberal hegemony-building practices.

As a strategy, however, all of this has been demonstratively successful, with public opinion surveys like Afrobarometer and Pew Research Center showing clearly positive views of China in Africa and the global South generally (Thibaut, 2022). A 2022 report by the Centre for the Future of Democracy, drawing from a wide range of global opinion polls, showed that in the developing world in general, more people hold a favourable view of China (62%) than they do of the United States (61%). In Sub-Saharan Africa, both China and the US show high and largely stable support, around 75%. The proportion in favour of China in BRI partner states rises to almost 75%, though its support is significantly lower than it was only 10 years ago in 'developed' states (from 47% to 23%). This is reflected in opinion by regime type: over the past 10 years, China's popularity rating amongst individuals living in representative democracies has dropped sharply, while it is more popular amongst those living in authoritative regimes (Foa *et al.*, 2022). This has been emphasised by recent geopolitical events: Arab

Barometer in 2024 recorded a sharp disparity between support in the Middle East for the US (which has declined, particularly since the Israel-Gaza war), and that for China, whose work to stabilise the region with the normalisation of Saudi-Iran relations is reflected in a recent surge in popularity (Arab Barometer, 2024).

China's 'relational' foreign policy emphasises 'cultural and people-to-people exchanges', many of which tend to be announced at its multilateral forums, including through the BRI. For example, at FOCAC, these cover a number of areas such as tourism, cultural exchanges, press and media, academia and think tanks, and sub-national people-to-people exchanges. The China-CELAC declaration of 2021 also highlights people-to-people exchanges, through cooperation at a local level, including a new network of China-LAC sister provinces and cities, a local government Forum for Cooperation, and a China-LAC People's Friendship Forum. The CASCf likewise includes cultural exchanges such as arts festivals, and 'Civilisation Dialogue Seminars', designed to promote 'equality, solidarity and communication between different cultures with a major aim to accomplish peaceful coexistence'.

5.4.5 Political relations

The work of the CCP within African countries, which in many ways runs parallel to these other activities, is a distinctly Chinese contribution to the portfolio of international relational practices; however, while the modality of ideology transmission is different, it is still mirroring liberal hegemonic practices. The emphasis in these activities is on *friendship* – echoing Truman's targeting of 'friendly nations' in 1949.

The overseas Chinese population living in Africa has been growing significantly, and the CCP actively harnesses them in the effort to project a positive image of China there, as part of its 'united front work'. Ohlberg observes that this united front work 'appears to be particularly extensive and developed in countries that are classified as full or flawed democracies (such as Botswana, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Mauritius, and South Africa)' – where the CCP's access to individual rulers is necessarily less sustained. Through united front organisations based in Africa, training is offered to help them to be effective ambassadors of 'Sino-African friendship' by presenting China positively (*Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, 2022). This is the same infrastructure that is used to reach out to local political elites, another fundamental aspect of China's relational policy in Africa. China's 'Second Africa Policy Paper' of 2015 emphasised 'enhancing political mutual trust' as key to the 'Development of China-Africa Cooperation'; this is to be achieved through 'frequent mutual visits and dialogue between Chinese and African leaders', 'experience sharing in governance', and inter-governmental institutions. A further key element of this is 'promoting exchanges in various sectors including those between legislative bodies, consultative bodies, political parties, the military and local governments.' Furthermore,

'The Communist Party of China [CCP] stands ready to expand and deepen diverse forms of exchanges and cooperation with friendly political parties and organizations in African countries based on the principles of independence, equality, mutual respect and non-interference in each other's internal affairs. It is committed to exploring a new platform for collective communication and dialogue with the aim of enhancing mutual understanding and friendship and deepening exchanges of governance experience.'

This will also enable them to better understand and recognize each other's governance systems and philosophies, learn from each other, improve governance capacities together and contribute to the development of state-to-state relations.' ('China's second Africa policy paper', 2015).

The 'friendship' expressed in this statement appears, on face value at least, to accord far more closely with Berenskoetter's analysis of international friendship, based on mutual respect and mutual learning, than the US's Cold War language of 'friendly nations' in which influence moved only in one direction (Berenskoetter, 2007).

This party-level cooperation has been further emphasised in successive FOCAC declarations, and is clearly an important part of China's relational strategy within Africa. The CCP has long been active within Africa, building relationships with both ruling and opposition parties across the continent, and has relations with 110 political parties from 51 out of 54 African countries ('Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024)', 2021). The CCP International Liaison Department (CCP-ILD) arranges for local party officials to visit China on 'study tours' and for training sessions, and between 2000 and 2022, the CCP carried out 881 exchanges with African ruling and opposition parties (Nantulya, 2024). The ultimate objective of this activity is to garner support for China's approach to international order and governance norms, rather than promoting a one-party system or other aspects of China's domestic political model (Benabdallah, 2020a; *Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, 2022). To further this end, the CCP opened in February 2022 a new Political Party School, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere Leadership School, outside Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, co-funded with the ruling parties of six African countries (Tanzania, South Africa, Mozambique, Angola,

Namibia and Zimbabwe) (Klomegah, 2022). This school is explicitly designed to train the next generation of political leaders in these states, with strong relations with China, and a favourable view of China's (global) governance model guaranteed. In addition to this, there are also 'friendship organizations', targeted at local elites generally – as well as politicians, they include business elites, journalists, and academics. Coordinated by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) based in Beijing, the work is strictly party-controlled, while manifesting as the activities of civil society (*Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, 2022).

5.4.6 Military relations

China is unlikely ever to match the US for overseas military bases; however, it has developed a strategic military footprint on the East coast of Africa, with a view to transforming the PLA Navy to a 'blue water' navy capable of projecting global power. Described as 'anti-piracy' missions, China's operations in the Gulfs of Aden and Guinea have been interpreted as an opportunity to train Chinese forces and test new technologies away from the more sensitive Pacific region. China also opened its first overseas naval base in Djibouti in 2017. As it has made significant investments in ports across Africa, particularly in states to which it grants its highest diplomatic ranking, it is quite possible that more naval bases will be added in the future; frequent alarmist claims are made by US military representatives in Africa that China is poised to open a new military base in Equatorial Guinea, on Africa's Atlantic Coast (claims which so far appear to be unfounded) (Murphy, 2023). Furthermore, an intelligence leak in May 2023 revealed the building of a Chinese military facility in the UAE, with plans for

five overseas bases and ten logistical support sites by 2030. A spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington DC responded to this report, saying 'As a principle, China conducts normal law enforcement and security cooperation with other countries on the basis of equality and mutual benefit ... The US runs more than 800 overseas military bases, which has caused concern by many countries around the world. It is in no position to criticize other countries' (van Staden, 2023).

While China's military expansion has so far been limited, therefore, it has been responding opportunistically to the reduction in the US's military basing over recent years. The Azores, for example, was a vast US mid-Atlantic base during the Cold War, with 3,000 personnel; the scaling back of the base to 200 personnel has had a significant effect on the local economy, leading Portugal to accept overtures from China. It is understood that they have built a business centre on the Lajes airbase, and expanded the nearby port facilities, using the Azores as a trans-shipment point for Chinese goods bound for European markets (while denying any intent to make this a military base) (Alden and Fiala, 2022). There is significant concern in the US about the expansion of Chinese influence in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region, which is interpreted as potentially introducing military relations through the back door (or 'gray zone activities'), via the commercial relations it is developing across the region. A recent statement by General Laura J. Richardson, the Commander of US Southern Command, before the Congress House Armed Services Committee, claimed that:

'[t]he PRC is investing in critical infrastructure, including deep-water ports, cyber, and space facilities which can have a potential dual use for malign commercial and military activities. In any

potential global conflict, the PRC could leverage strategic regional ports to restrict U.S. naval and commercial ship access. This is a strategic risk that we can't accept or ignore. These activities are heavily subsidized through PRC state-owned enterprises (SOE), allowing them to underbid on infrastructure projects, quickly displacing local and international competitors. SOEs are developing deep-water ports in seventeen countries, particularly around strategic maritime chokepoints in this region. In Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, PRC SOEs abused commercial agreements by conducting military functions at host-country ports. What's to keep them from doing the same right here in this hemisphere? In Panama, PRC-sponsored companies are engaged in, or bidding on, several projects related to the Panama Canal - a global strategic chokepoint. These projects include port operations on both ends of the canal, water management, and a logistics park. Meanwhile, in Argentina, a PRC SOE is attempting to secure the rights to build dual-use maritime installations near the southern port city of Ushuaia, which would support sustainment and power-projection while providing proximity to the Strait of Magellan, Drake Passage, and Antarctica. This would be a potential game-changer for the PRC, dramatically improving its access to Antarctica. The PRC also sees this region as key to expanding its space domain awareness and improving its military space capabilities. There are at least 11 PRC-linked space facilities across five countries in this region, more than any other geographic combatant command's AOR, that provide Beijing with space tracking and surveillance capabilities. This includes a joint spacemonitoring facility in Chile and a deep space station in Argentina that is managed by an agency subordinate to the People's Liberation Army (PLA).' (Richardson, 2023)

The US clearly recognises, therefore, the importance of relations to building global military power, and, furthermore, the potential for China to use its 'relational power' in this way, building on the global links it has made through the BRI. In addition to the potential for using its relationships to develop a physical footprint, China conducts frequent military / naval

exercises with its allies around the world. As well as the highly publicised joint exercise with Russia and South Africa in 2023, it has recently conducted joint exercises with Cambodia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Pakistan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Iran (Ministry of National Defense, 2023). In 2019, the ground forces of the Chinese and Tanzanian armies conducted a 25-day joint training exercise in Tanzania, under the codename 'sincere partners' (Ministry of National Defense, 2020).

Another way in which China is building military relations is through its increasingly prominent role in UN Peacekeeping: as well as being a significant financial contributor, it is among the world's largest contributors of peacekeeping personnel to UN missions across the global South. In February 2021, for example, China's 2,464 UN peacekeepers were deployed in eight UN missions, including South Sudan (with over 1,000 personnel), Mali, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Darfur, and Lebanon. In this way, China is taking the opportunity of working alongside other global South military forces and representing itself as a reliable, responsible partner (Foot, 2020; Coleman and Job, 2021). This identity projection is also reflected back into China via cultural products, just as Weber observed with the US (Weber, 2006): African conflicts are the background to a growing number of Chinese movie franchises in which Chinese forces carry out heroic acts (Olander, 2022a).

Furthermore, as a reflection of the US's expansion into international policing through its 'War on Drugs' and other programmes, China has likewise begun conducting joint operations with international partners to tackle corruption and the 'spread of terrorism ideologies' among Chinese and Taiwanese nationals living overseas. It is also promoting Chinese

policing norms through training of significant numbers of African police and law enforcement personnel both in China, and through the growing number of Chinese-constructed police training schools across Africa. These policing norms are based on the security model of 'stability maintenance' (*weiwen*), in which human rights, civil liberties, and public accountability are secondary to regime security. The agreements it has struck with up to 40 African states for 'overseas Chinese protection', in which African security actors are expected to prioritise the protection of Chinese nationals over African citizens, reflect the hierarchical, line-drawing practices of liberal hegemony (Nantulya, 2023).

5.4.7 Multinational institution relations

China is clearly concerned with instrumentalising the relations it so assiduously builds across the global South within the multinational institutions of the international order. As this thesis argues, China is committed to expanding its role within the key institutions of the international order, while countering hegemonic liberal power within them. This policy has traditionally been focused on garnering support for key votes within the UNGA on issues of concern to China. As Africa's 54 states represent a significant proportion of UNGA votes, it is no surprise that China should court their support there (Large, 2021). More recently, however, another element has emerged in China's relational power strategy within the UN. As Chapter 3 discussed, historically, Chinese nationals have been significantly under-represented within the staffing of the UN and its agencies, at all levels of seniority. Over the past few years, China has been making a concerted effort to remedy this, both at lower levels and, more importantly, at the director level (Fung and Lam, 2021b). Given the process by which high-level posts

are elected within UN agencies, strong support and a network of relations are essential to secure these posts – and over recent years, China's relational policy across the global South has clearly delivered this important dividend. The campaign for the election of Qu Dongyu to be director general of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2019 brought much international scrutiny: there were allegations that they awarded debt relief to Cameroon in return for their withdrawing their own candidate; and that they threatened to block agricultural exports from Brazil and Uruguay unless their support was guaranteed (Fortuna, 2019). The official Chinese response to Qu's election shows very clearly how China viewed this success as deriving from its relational foreign policy in Africa. Speaking at a FOCAC meeting, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said of his fellow African foreign ministers:

‘They were so happy and excited as if a member of their family had been elected. China understands that its success is attributable to the support of other countries, and in particular, the most staunch support from Africa. I wish to take this opportunity to express my most sincere thanks to all of you and to all our African brothers and sisters. From now on, there will be one more good friend of Africa in the UN agencies’ (*Wang Yi: Thank African Countries for Supporting the Chinese Candidate's Election as Director-General of the World Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 2019*).

This statement, given as it was at FOCAC, shows the connection that China makes between its Development activities, and the ‘family’ relations that emerge from them, and its strategy to increase its profile and power within the UN. Furthermore, Chinese lobbying has been successful in securing the election of director generals from China-friendly states in the global South to other UN agencies (including IFAD, whose previous leader

was from Togo, and the World Health Organization (WHO), whose leader is from Ethiopia).

Fung and Lam have examined the growing influence of China within the UN, both through its budgetary contributions and through senior personnel (from China as well as allied states) making statements and implementing policies sympathetic to China's strategy. In particular, they have traced how states with a strong voting alignment with China in the UNGA are more likely to secure leadership positions in the UN, presumably with Chinese support (Lam and Fung, 2021). This points very clearly to China's relational strategy: states in the global South stand to benefit both materially and through the international prestige of holding influential UN agency positions, through their support for China.

China's relational strategy has an additional clear political objective, which relates to its fundamental geopolitical concern for gaining support in international fora for its 'core interests': Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. At the local level, this can be part of the work of the 'Friendship Associations': for example, the group in Liberia encouraged voters 'to elect individuals who will support and uphold the One-China Policy'; and 22 friendship organisations signed a letter in 2021 addressed to the World Health Organization praising China's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and condemning US calls for origin tracing (*Political Front Lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa*, 2022). In the summer of 2022, in the wake of US Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, a number of political leaders and political parties across the global South, including many African states, condemned the US for this visit and confirmed their commitment to the One China Policy, in the interests of global stability (Jones, 2022).

5.5 Conclusion

Returning to Qin's account of relational power, this analysis shows that China is indeed 'skilfully managing' its relational network through its Development activities in Africa to further its own, pre-existing interests. While this relational power can be demonstrated to be sharable, given China's support for candidates from friendly states in UN agency elections, it is clearly not distributed equally. Again, in line with Qin's account, certain actors within the relational network do have 'privileged access' to institutional power. China is clearly this privileged agent – as reflected by the number of senior positions within UN agencies it has held over recent years, far more than those held by members of its relational network. While Qin argues that relational power is not the possession of any one agent, but emerges through the interactions between actors, China entered this relationship already *possessing* power, which placed it in a particular position within the relational network. Thus, while 'relational power' clearly is a concern, and perhaps a reality, for China in its dealings with the global South, as a concept it is not enough to explain China's strategy for international ordering. Importantly, Qin's analysis glosses over the hierarchical nature of relationality, whilst simultaneously insisting on the superiority of Chinese thought and actions. China's counterhegemonic project is fundamentally about building all these types of power, and, far from being a shared, mutual resource, it is inherently hierarchical. The emphasis placed on 'relationality', both in Chinese IR scholarship and Chinese foreign policy practices in its counterhegemonic

project, thus helps to bring into relief the relational nature of liberal hegemonic ordering. The webs of relations between North and South produced through military, peacebuilding, policy, trade, as well as Development practices have long formed the fabric of liberal hegemony. Chinese discourse emphasises the particularity of its relational ontology and foreign policy, explicitly seeking to distance itself from Western practices; however, it is in fact mirroring many of the constitutive practices of liberal hegemony. Furthermore, contrary to its relational discourse of South-South Cooperation, Chinese 'relational power' is necessarily asymmetrical and hierarchical, predicated on the essential difference between China and the global South – once again, mirroring liberal line-drawing.

The next chapter deals in more detail with one particular aspect of relations with the global South, international Development and aid, and its role in producing hierarchical relations within a hegemonic formation. Again, while China represents itself discursively as an entirely different kind of international actor in this field, differentiating itself from the West in important ways, a close examination reveals that it is, in fact, replicating many of the hierarchical logics which are fundamental to Development as a hegemonic practice.

6. Development and the Global South as Hinterland: Contesting or reproducing liberal hegemony?

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted tensions between how China's counterhegemonic project is represented – as relational, in contrast to the liberal hegemonic project – and the ways in which that project has been carried forward. In particular, it identified significant parallels between that project and liberal ordering, especially with respect to the global South. These practices, as numerous critics of liberal ordering have pointed out, are productive of hierarchical relations. This chapter develops this theme – of the reproduction of hierarchy not dissimilar to that of liberal hegemony – through a focused analysis of Development in China's counterhegemonic project. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, Development is integral both to the liberal ordering project and to China's discursive contestation of it through its Global Development Initiative. This chapter focuses on the structural effects of aid and Development, highlighting the temporal production of the global South as 'hinterland' within an economic system. This has always been true for the West, and is increasingly evident within the emergent Chinese-centred international order; this chapter therefore argues that China's focus on the global South as it attempts to build its (counter) hegemonic capacity is a direct mirror of historical liberal order building. This, in turn, further reinforces the fundamental role that the global South has always played within liberal hegemonic ordering, further

undermining the account of the 'liberal order' which emphasises its historically 'Western' membership.

Over recent years, the spaces and practices of Development have attracted new actors, as 'rising powers' have increasingly included Development in their own foreign policy repertoires (Kragelund, 2019; Paczyńska, 2019). This 'South-South cooperation' was initially regarded with complacency by the global North, as a manifestation of the extension of the 'liberal order'. More recently, however, China's success in relationship building through Development and aid, and in particular its Belt and Road Initiative, has been interpreted as a *contestation* of the 'liberal order'. As China has increased its Developmental activities over the last twenty years, it has amplified the discourse of 'South-South cooperation': as a postcolonial, developing country itself, this discourse stresses, China's Development practices bear no relation to the hierarchical, paternalistic approach of the West. China is clearly alert to the potential relational power that accrues from Development practices, and by simultaneously representing itself as a 'developing' state and a major donor of international aid, through 'South-South Cooperation', China is disrupting the fundamental imagined geography of liberal hegemony. In providing aid and Development without the liberal political and economic conditionalities still imposed by the IMF and OECD donors, in line with its policy of non-interference, China has become an attractive Development partner across the global South, offering its 'Beijing Consensus' as a direct contrast to the Washington Consensus (Zhao, 2016). Its domestic developmental philosophy, articulated under Hu Jintao from 2003 as the 'Scientific Outlook on Development', prioritising

‘human wellbeing’ in the development of economic society, was offered as a model for other developing countries (*Keywords in Party History - The Scientific Outlook on Development*, 2021). This has subsequently been superseded under Xi Jinping by the ‘New Concept for Development’, which places its emphasis on ‘high-quality, efficient, fair and sustainable development’: this change in approach has been influential in recent changes to the Belt and Road Initiative, as discussed later (*The New Concept for Development*, 2022). Furthermore, China’s respect for sovereignty and commitment to working with the state, rather than through civil society, means that it has built a coalition of governmental support within the South that enables it to strengthen its position within the key multilateral institutions of the international order (Gray and Gills, 2016; Xue, 2020; Regilme and Hodzi, 2021).

With a focus more on bilateral loans rather than traditional aid, China has become the lender of choice for many African states, with data indicating that China is by far the largest bilateral donor in Africa since 2015, with 13% of total debt (the US is second at 4%) (Carreras and Griffith-Jones, 2021; Dreher *et al.*, 2022). China is also mindful of its own food security, and has become the second largest global market for African food exports (Buckley, 2013; Bräutigam, 2015). China’s Development approach draws heavily on the lessons of historical Development (of which it was, itself, a recipient), and its priority is the current state of the Chinese economy and industry. This is explicit in its statements advocating ‘mutual support’ and ‘win-win cooperation’ (*China and Africa in the New Era : A Partnership of Equals*, 2021). Beyond Development, Africa plays an important role in the Chinese economy as a producer of raw materials (such as lithium, copper, and wood), which China

extracts and transports to its own territory for processing (Dreher *et al.*, 2022). This brings echoes of colonial policies in Africa.

This thesis argues that an observation of China's counterhegemonic project reveals that the global South has always been an essential element of the liberal ordering project, and that the practice of Development has, since its emergence, been a key mechanism for this area of hegemonic order building. Gramsci's conceptualisation of hegemony emphasises the constitutive relationship between the strong and the weak. While it is accepted that hegemonic dominance depends on a greater share of material power, the Gramscian perspective stresses that material coercion is insufficient to maintain hegemony: subaltern consent is fundamental (Gramsci, 1999, p. 212). This consent is secured through the granting of concessions by hegemonic leaders to the subaltern classes, which in turn contributes to the discursive 'common sense' legitimisation of the existing order. Gramscian analysis, thus, points to the fundamental role of the dialectical coalition between the weak and the strong in producing hegemony. This then shines a light on the role of Development and aid practices, linking the temporally and spatially distinguished 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' parts of the world: these practices can be read in Gramscian terms as an essential element of the 'economic-corporate sacrifices' made by the leading group to subalterns to secure the recognition of hegemonic legitimacy (Gramsci, 1999, p. 211). This is in line with Jorg Kustermans's analysis of the role of 'gift-giving' in the production of hierarchical relationships in the Ancient Near-East and Early Modern East Asia, in which he shows how this ritualised practice

was used to consolidate the international authority of the dominant polity by making it 'palatable' (Kustermans, 2019).

Gramsci's writings also draw attention to the role of developmental alterity in hierarchical relations, highlighting the 'constitutive heterotemporality' of hegemonic orders, for example in the temporal fracturing between the urban centre and rural periphery (or 'North' and 'South') (Gramsci, 2011a, pp. 130–136, 143–144, 228). Peter Thomas argues that Gramsci's urban/rural dynamic can be mapped onto the international system, showing that 'it is the tempo and efficacy of the international [hegemonic] system that seeks to impose a unity on the disparity of different national historical experiences, as they are progressively drawn within the homogenising and synchronising dynamics of the world market' (Thomas, 2017, p. 196). In his reflections on the possibility of change, Gramsci posits that a 'democratic' hegemony is one where economic and political practices enable the '[molecular] transition from the groups that are led to the leading group' (Gramsci, 2011c, p. 345). This would imply that the practices of Development might be designed to bring the 'underdeveloped', or temporally 'backward' spaces of the world (viewed as 'negligible and inert within the movement of history'), to a co-temporal level with those that are more temporally advanced, or 'developed' (Gramsci, 2011a, p. 228, 2011b, p. 174). A close analysis of the practices of Development as they emerged historically, and of how they relate to the concept of 'development', reveals, however, that this has never been the case. Under liberal hegemony, Development practices were designed to fix 'underdeveloped' spaces always behind, both in the temporal and spatial imagination, as the 'hinterland', producing a necessarily hierarchical international order, based on a

‘temporal disjunction’ which produces an ‘always uneven and asymmetrical’ relationship (Thomas, 2017, p. 188). Rather than being encouraged to replicate the modernity of the donor state, the hinterland is functionally differentiated, secured within the international order through economic entanglement.

Many observers comment that China’s role as a Development actor is emancipatory for the global South, in providing more choice of potential aid donors (Gray and Gills, 2016). However, this thesis argues that, while the existence of choice is liberating for recipient states, China’s Development project, though articulated as essentially different from that from the global North, in fact replicates both its practices, and its hierarchies. This highlights the role that the global South has historically, and in the contemporary system, played in the production of hegemony: there is no ‘global North’ without the ‘global South’, and the emergence of liberal hegemony crucially depended on the expansion of global capitalism (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015).

To understand this, a reappraisal of the concept of Development is required, going beyond its representation in the policy sphere as an altruistic delivery of public goods; and also rejecting accounts which see contemporary Development simply as an extension of the colonial ‘civilising mission’. Tracing the emergence of Development as a practice reveals its role in the construction of liberal hegemony from the early years of the twentieth century. Furthermore, a close examination of China’s Development practices and discourses, with a particular focus on its activities in Africa, reveals how closely China is mirroring historical liberal hegemonic practices, using Development to create a distinctive set of hierarchical relationships which this thesis characterises as the ‘hinterland’. The following section

traces the emergence of Development as an international practice, showing that, far from being designed to help 'underdeveloped' territories up the 'ladder of progress', it has always been undertaken with the donor economy in mind, and is, therefore, a tool of global capitalism.

6.2 The global South in the production of liberal hegemony

6.2.1 Civilisation, progress, development and 'Development'

While histories of Development traditionally locate its genesis in President Truman's plan for post-war reconstruction, many critical scholars have argued that Development's true roots lie in European colonialism; and further that this practice arises from Enlightenment conceptions of linear progress (Esteva, 2009; Williams, 2014). In this account, exploration and colonialism brought Europeans face to face with their 'Other', producing binary identities of 'civilised' and 'barbarian', in which the Other is interpreted as representing Europe's past or 'infancy'. This linear, universalised conception of civilisation or progress, it is argued, evolved into the practice of Development within Europe's colonies, which was then taken up and reinterpreted by a hegemonic United States after World War Two. Geographical and cultural differences, therefore, are understood hierarchically in temporal terms, and the concept of 'underdevelopment', and consequent practice of Development, are viewed as the imposition of a teleological understanding of Western modernity on distant places (Sachs, 2010; Williams and Young, 2013; Fabian, 2014; Helgesson, 2014; Jordheim, 2014; Rist, 2019).

It is assumed in these accounts that 'Development' as an international practice is conceptually identical to 'development' as a self-understanding, located within the same web of meaning derived from Enlightenment ideas of progress and civilisation. It is further assumed, therefore, that the temporal, unilinear implications of the latter understanding are embedded in the practice of Development – that it involves helping another, less developed territory along the pre-defined path to a state of 'development'. A close reading of the historical emergence of ideas of developmental alterity, and, separately, the international *practice* of Development, suggests, however, that these assumptions are problematic. While colonial thought and liberal theory, emerging in a co-constitutive way over the course of the nineteenth century, were both influenced by ideas of civilisation, interpreting difference across space in terms of time, leading to a linear, teleological conception of progress, this was a contested view – and did not necessarily equate to a concept of 'singular' progress. Debates between liberal thinkers revealed that these views were never unanimously held, and by the late nineteenth century, at least in part in response to events within the empire, different conceptions of alterity prevailed. The idea of the 'ladder' of progress, in which non-European territories were conceived as representing Europe's past – and in turn, Europe representing their future – was superseded by a more culturally essentialised conception of other societies, with multiple paths (Seeley, JR, 1891; Cromer, 1913; Levin, 2004; Mantena, 2010; Bury, 2011; Marwah, 2011; Bell, 2019).

When 'Development' emerged as a (colonial) practice in the early twentieth century, therefore, it was not motivated by the 'civilising mission' (although this remained part of the

legitimizing discourse of colonialism); nor was it about helping colonies up the 'ladder of progress'. The primary motivation for early Development projects – which included expanding agricultural production, research into plant and tropical diseases, and infrastructure investment – was the current state and future potential of the metropolitan economy. The colonies were seen as sources of raw materials – food and minerals – which were taken to the metropole for processing; developing infrastructure was designed firstly to facilitate this process, and secondly it was presented as a boost to home industries supplying the equipment; furthermore, the colonies were also captive markets for manufactured goods from the metropole. Helping the colonial territory up the ladder of development, emulating developed European economies through the fostering of manufacturing industries, did not feature in the discourse (Chamberlain, 1897; Garvin, 1934; Isaacman and Isaacman, 1983; Constantine, 1984; Van Beusekom, 2002; Huillery, 2014; Ukelina, 2017). In so far as this was about 'synchronising the unsynchronous', it had to do with securing co-temporality through deepening economic entanglements, fixing colonial territories in their position of 'hinterland', outside of time – or at least, legible only within the temporality of the metropole. There is, therefore, a conceptual hiatus between 'development' in its sense of linear progress, and the practice of 'Development', which, with its auxiliary concept of 'underdevelopment', fixes the hinterland forever behind. This conception of 'Development' is less ambiguously suggested by the term used by France in its own emerging imperial investment schemes: '*mise en valeur*'. What was more influential for French Development practices was functionalist anthropology, whereby 'each society's institutions were integrated and mutually reinforcing, like the organs and cells in

a living body'. While colonial officials on the ground might have maintained social evolutionist justifications for their presence in imperial territories (Van Beusekom, 2002), as far as the metropolis was concerned, the empire was a coeval organ of the imperial body, providing an essential but peripheral function, rather than learning to catch up with the industrial development of the metropolis.

There is some truth, therefore, in the critical insight that geopolitical line drawing, or imagined geographies, with the world hierarchically divided into zones of civilisation and savagery, developed and underdeveloped, underpinned the colonial world order (Escobar, 2012; Duffield, 2013; Rist, 2019). However, contrary to the claims of much critical scholarship, this self/other interpretation was not the driving impetus in the entirely contingent emergence of the practice of Development. The entrenchment of the economic bonds between metropole and periphery, despite this, further solidified the sense of a single order, with universal intent. The periphery has always been internal to the West's understanding of itself, even as it has, in the same move, been dismissed as subordinate and passive.

6.2.2 Modernization and post-war US hegemony

When the US inaugurated its global hegemony with the introduction of Development as an international practice from 1949, it had already had almost a century of its own experience in implementing racializing, functionally differentiating 'development' practices, as these had played an integral role in its project of expansion through settler colonialism in its West, the project to incorporate the South and formerly enslaved populations, as well as its own imperial experience in the Philippines (Adalet, 2024). However, the US was also strongly

influenced by European colonisers' geographical imagination, and their attempts to extract the maximum value from their colonies, in its *international* ordering project after the Second World War. This project thus drew on the long experience of Britain, France, and the other European colonial powers, their repertoires of colonial practices, as well as their institutional architecture. Projects such as the 1945 Nigeria Development Plan or the *Office du Niger* Irrigation Scheme in French Soudan (Mali) were held up as models for future agricultural expansion, despite having produced only moderate success at best (Van Beusekom, 2002; Ukelina, 2017). The United States' efforts to integrate what was by then called the 'underdeveloped' world into the global economy, competing with the Soviet Union with rival versions of 'modernity', arguably had more to do with self-identity, the ongoing production of liberal hegemony and the temporality of the Cold War, than with making these 'backward' territories genuinely on parity with the 'developed world' (Agnew, 1996; Macekura and Manela, 2018).

While this chapter has argued that colonial Development policies did not have their origins in Enlightenment ideas of linear progress, it is clear that 'Modernization Theory', inaugurated by the US in its post-1949 programme, was based on a linear idea of modernity, taking the US and its development as its model. Its object was the 'transition from a position of "backwardness" or "primitive" society, to a "modern" society' (Williams, 2012, p. 40). This was conceived of as a linear progression through certain stages, encompassing social, economic, and political elements to allow 'latecomers' or 'traditional' societies to mimic the 'modernity' of North America and Western Europe. However, Modernization was arguably as much about guiding the US towards the society that

it should be, as it was a blueprint for postcolonial states and a manifesto for a US-led international order (Gilman, 2003, p. 6). Crucially, in echoes of the French functionalist anthropology and its conception of *mise en valeur*, Truman's 1949 inaugural address articulating the US's new Development programme (beyond Europe and Latin America), announced that '[a]ll countries, including our own, will greatly benefit from a constructive program for the better use of the world's human and natural resources. Experience shows that our commerce with other countries expands as they progress industrially and economically' (Truman, 1949). The vision was of a single system, with the US at its centre, each part with its role to play in the US geoeconomic and geopolitical project. The rest of Truman's address concerned itself with an emphasis on the liberal values of freedom, self-determination, and democracy; the importance of the United Nations and its related agencies; promoting recovery of the global economy through reducing the barriers to world trade; and to the establishment of NATO and other bilateral security agreements to counter the Soviet threat. Development, therefore, was clearly located as an essential element of the US plan for liberal hegemonic ordering in this period, playing a role in the normative, economic, political and security aspects of this order (Williams, 2012, p. 13). As the US Secretary of State of that time, Dean Acheson, put it,

'... the Point Four operation is part of a total program, and is dependent upon the success of our total efforts to create an environment favorable to peace and progress. And like the other aspects of our foreign policy, the Point Four Program has as its ultimate aim the safeguarding of the human values we prize. For it is only by the increase of freedom and well-being among our neighbors that we can continue to enjoy freedom and well-being at home' (Acheson, 1952).

It is in this context that the entirely contingent international practice of providing *external* help to another, less developed state gradually became an unquestioned, hegemonic norm of international relations. While it was inaugurated in the post war period by the US, European states, keen to maintain their influence on their remaining and former colonies, implemented similar programmes. The Soviet Union quickly recognised this as a key frontier of geopolitical competition (as well as an ideological and economic opportunity), introducing their own Development offer from the mid-1950s, albeit on a smaller and less institutionalised scale than the US. Gradually, as states such as Japan became more 'developed', it became a mark of their status that they should also participate in this international practice. The 'expertise' assumed by more developed states, with a privileged access to knowledge about how to manage the path to modernity, far from promoting international equality, created further hierarchical distance between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' states.

Each different stage of liberal Development has been articulated within the hegemonic liberal discourse of the time. Thus Truman emphasised in 1949 that US international aid was being offered to 'peace-loving peoples', which quickly evolved, in the context of the emerging Cold War, to the 'free peoples' of the world (Smith, 2003). The era of the Washington Consensus reflected the unquestioned triumph of the liberal economic and political model, with neoliberal policies being imposed (albeit unequally) across the global North and South. These discourses represent an acknowledgement that the global South and global North are bound together in a single endeavour, with

Development and aid contributing to the relational bind between them.

In the decades after the end of the Second World War, when the Cold War was at its height, the emphasis for aid donors, whether from the West, the Soviet Union or China, was on funding large industrial and infrastructure projects which were presented as being essential for promoting economic development. These included projects such as the Askombo Dam hydroelectric project in Ghana in 1961 (funded by the World Bank, the US, and the UK); the Aswan Dam in Egypt (financed by the USSR); and the Tanzania-Zambia railway (funded and built by China). The emerging field of 'development economics' held as one of its assumptions that industrialisation was essential to development, taking the modern industrial economy and its focus on increasing manufacturing output as its template (Williams, 2012, p. 35). However, these projects had as much to do with geopolitics as they did any considered theory of development: competition between rival ordering projects allowed global South leaders to present a 'shopping list' of Developmental projects. This meant that 'success' either for the donor or the receiver was not necessarily measured in development outcomes, but rather in geopolitical point scoring for the donor, and (often) short-term domestic political goals for the latter.

The geopolitical grounding for Development was made clear by the US, very shortly after the relatively utopian, altruistic sentiments of Point Four were expressed in 1949: in 1951 the first Mutual Security Act was passed, which subsumed aspects of Development and aid within a broader logic of military aid and security partnerships. Truman justified this in these terms:

‘Although the Mutual Security Program requires us to spend large amounts for troops and weapons, it is a program for peace. Its ultimate success will come when the troops and weapons are no longer needed, and the monies now required for defense can be used to raise the living standards of our own and other nations who are truly devoted to peace’ (Truman, 1952).

From the late 1960s, the US aid community increasingly recognised that the large-scale industrialisation programmes were not actually benefitting the poorest sections of society within recipient states, and a new, ‘pro-poor’ agenda increasingly took over. This involved a focus on agriculture, health, and education. By this time, the aid community had become professionalised and institutionalised, and was no longer primarily motivated by Cold War logics. The distribution of aid did, however, reflect US foreign policy priorities of the time, with Israel and Egypt becoming the two largest recipients of aid by 1976 (at the time of the attempt to forge a peace settlement between them); Turkey, the Philippines, and Nicaragua were also major beneficiaries. As Ronald Reagan made clear in 1985, the US aid programme was ‘manifestly in [its] own national interest’ (Williams, 2012, pp. 51–52). This is perhaps reflected in the point that, by the same year, less than 20% of total global bilateral aid (of which the US remained the largest donor by far), went to the world’s poorest states (Williams, 2012, p. 62).

6.2.3 Poverty and dis-order

From Truman’s Point Four of 1949 onwards, the US approach to Development pivoted on the understanding of the concept of ‘poverty’ and its conflation with ‘threat’ to the liberal ordering project. Furthermore, ‘poverty’ had a definite location: the global South. During the Cold War, poverty in the global South was articulated as bringing a risk of Communism: Truman had

described poverty as ‘a handicap and a threat both to [underdeveloped areas] and to more prosperous areas’, and the Development agenda was explicitly aimed at countering Soviet influence (Truman, 1949). More recently, the problem-solving approach to the global South was extended, with aid and Development being articulated within the discourse of the ‘Wars’ on Drugs / Terror: poverty and instability are represented as a global security risk, bringing a logic of emergency to combatting them (Duffield, 2007; *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review*, 2015). The threat from communism was thus replaced by the threat posed by ‘failed’ states and ‘rogue’ states, bringing the risk of drugs, political violence, refugees and infectious disease (Williams, 2012, p. 99). This focus on poverty and the threats that it poses ultimately has the effect of further ‘othering’ the global South, by representing it as a *risk* to the liberal project, as if external to it, rather than being an integral part.

6.2.4 Neoliberal Development

With the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, and the end of the Cold War ushering in a period of unipolarity from the early 1990s, what scope there had been for Southern sovereignty and agency became circumscribed, as liberal Development programmes became more interventionist in the domestic political and economic arrangements of recipient states. From the early 1980s, the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes introduced policy frameworks designed to stimulate growth through policy reforms such as trade liberalisation, reduction of the state’s role in the economy, and private sector incentives. As a key site of neoliberal experimentation, however, the global South remained *central* to the liberal ordering project. From the late 1980s, the focus on

'good governance' led to further interventionist conditionalities being imposed on recipient states through democracy and human rights promotion, and the 'empowerment' of civil society. Furthermore, the 1990s saw the rise of liberal 'peacebuilding' in the global South, further intensifying the relations that produced liberal hegemony. Even as the Washington Consensus receded, political and economic conditionalities with both multilateral and bilateral Aid packages have remained a feature of the liberal Development model. Western Development agencies thus became gradually more and more intrusive in economic and political life from the 1980s: this leads to a sense that the developing world is once more under the strict tutelage of the developed core, imposing a model of development necessitated by the logics of global capital.

The logic here is to treat the global South as a problem which could only be solved through liberalism; and despite this intensification of relations, increasingly the global South has been rendered peripheral in conceptions of 'liberal international order' emanating from both policy makers and academia. This discursive marginalisation has taken place precisely at a time when, through globalisation, the global South's place in the global economy has been made explicit, with important changes to Development discourse which no longer makes a teleological promise of 'development', but rather focuses simply on mitigating neoliberalism's impact on the poorest of the global South, whilst continuing to extract value for the North.

It therefore becomes increasingly clear that the South has never been understood on its own terms (or within its own

development temporality), but entirely within the temporality of liberal hegemony. As Uma Kothari observes, 'dichotomies of ... the "modern" and the "traditional" and the "West" and the "rest" are embedded within development discourse, and this reassertion of colonial classifications of difference is often invoked to justify development interventions. The representation of peoples in and of the "Third World" as "backward", "traditional" and incapable of self-government further embeds global distinctions developed during the colonial period' (Kothari, 2019, p. 49). This line drawing, in which the global South is understood as being categorically different from the liberal core, is reproduced in the self-understandings of liberal hegemony which entirely efface the fundamental role the periphery/'other' has always played, both materially for the metropolitan economy, and also ontologically, in defining the 'self'.

Temporal hierarchy is deeply embedded within development discourse; however, the *practices* of Development have not in fact erased this lack of synchronicity – the productive language of 'underdevelopment' has helped to fix the hinterland in time and space, producing, in Gramsci's terms, an 'undemocratic' hegemony. This, therefore, bears no relation to the colonial 'civilising mission': it is the spatial expansion, or 'spatial fix' of capitalism (Harvey, 1981; Helgesson, 2014). Recipients of Development are not only embedded in particular locations, but Development discourse 'abstracts, excludes and separates them from the global', spatially and temporally, leaving them 'incarcerated' in time. 'Through a discourse of tradition, backwardness, and underdevelopment, they become confined and consigned to the past. These social imaginings of the past that are mapped into contemporary spatialities show how the

past is not simply another time but also another place' (Kothari, 2011).

The following section explores the role of Development for post-revolutionary China, demonstrating that while it began as a relational practice to improve China's global status, Development began to play the same economic role for China as it always had for Western actors. This is made clear by the governance of Development agencies and practices within China: it is, first and foremost, a commercial endeavour. The chapter argues that the relations produced by Development practices are inherently hierarchical, fixing the recipient as a temporally and functionally differentiated element of a wider economic project. Despite China's discourse of South-South cooperation and emphasis on its postcolonial equivalence with the rest of the global South, a close examination reveals that these hierarchies structure its own Development programme.

6.3 China and Development in the global South

To be an aid donor, offering global public goods, became a *sine qua non* for any state hoping for 'great power' status after 1947, and China's aid programme began soon after the formation of the PRC. However, it is only from around 2005-6 that China actually became a net donor of aid – before this, it had been a net recipient, at least since the 1980s (Dreher *et al.*, 2022). Being a donor of aid was not just a signifier of status for China, therefore, but was in fact seen as a route for China to achieve this status. Development delivered this benefit to China through the relationships it was able to build across the global South, which in turn produced deeper political objectives for China:

recognition at the UN and within the international community more generally, and a stronger hand in its underlying conflict with Taiwan. While China's approach to Development has changed over time, it remains true that a key motivation for China's involvement in Development is the relationships that it builds – and China very much takes the long view with this. Since the formation of the PRC, sharing its own Development experience has been closely equated with the project to seek endorsement of its governance model, and its very legitimacy as a state. While China's dealings in the global South have recently been characterised (falsely (Bräutigam, 2020)) as 'debt traps', and in a superficial way as (malign) influence, it is nonetheless true that China takes an instrumental approach to aid, using it to cultivate and reinforce political alliances, just as Western actors have always done.

Like European states and the US, China has also been motivated by the needs of its domestic economy in pursuing its Development policy within the global South, particularly since the Xi era: creating opportunities for increasingly profit-seeking Chinese enterprises, finding new markets for its overproduction of industrial inputs, off-shoring mature industries, and finding an outlet for its excess foreign currency reserves have all contributed to the direction that China's Development strategy has taken. The original elements of the BRI, consisting of land-based transport links across Eurasia from China's West, combine economic motives (trade routes) with (domestic and international) political rationales. This region, which includes Xinjiang, has traditionally been amongst the poorest parts of China, and least connected (materially and politically) to the centre. Creating these trade routes not only potentially raises prosperity in the region, but also binds it closer to central

political and economic state control – quite apart from the benefit to China's neighbouring states, and others along the route(s), in developmental terms.

From the time of the 2008 global financial crisis, and particularly since the rise of Xi Jinping, China has seized every opportunity to project its influence as an alternative to Western capitalism, articulated by China as being implicated in the crisis. While Western states reduced their foreign aid budgets in the wake of the crisis, China's overseas spending increased. The fundamental character of the BRI, however, is not its geographical extent, or the amounts of money committed to it, but the discursive project to narrate diverse and unconnected projects, which had been initiated over a long period of time, and overseen by multiple different actors with different motivations and little central direction, into a single, coherent, and *new* grand strategy.

There is an important difficulty in quantifying China's aid programme, due to a lack of published data. As discussed below, this is due both to China's secrecy over its programme, and to the administrative complexity of its Development organisations. AidData have created as comprehensive a dataset as possible of China's international aid- and debt-financed projects, and this analysis draws heavily on that, particularly through the work of Dreher et al (2022), as well as the extensive work by Deborah Bräutigam.

6.3.1 Early Cold War Development strategy

During the Cold War, China was concerned with having the status of an aid donor, despite being, at the same time, a major recipient of aid: it was the first *developing* country to establish an aid programme (Bräutigam, 2009). From the 1950s, China

sought to develop relationships with anticolonial movements and newly independent states, initially particularly those with ideological affinity to China, through financial assistance. This intensified from 1960 when it split from the Soviet Union – China saw aid as the key to creating a bloc to counter ‘hegemonic’ US and Soviet influence. At its peak, between 1965 and 1973, when its average per capita income was around US\$200 (in constant 2010 US dollars), the Chinese government spent about US\$12bn (reaching almost 7% of the total government budget) on foreign assistance activities (which included military support and training to revolutionary groups) (Dreher *et al.*, 2022). By far the majority of states receiving aid from China in 1973 were in Africa (29), but China also had aid commitments to countries in Asia (7), the Middle East (6), and Latin America (3) (Bräutigam, 2009).

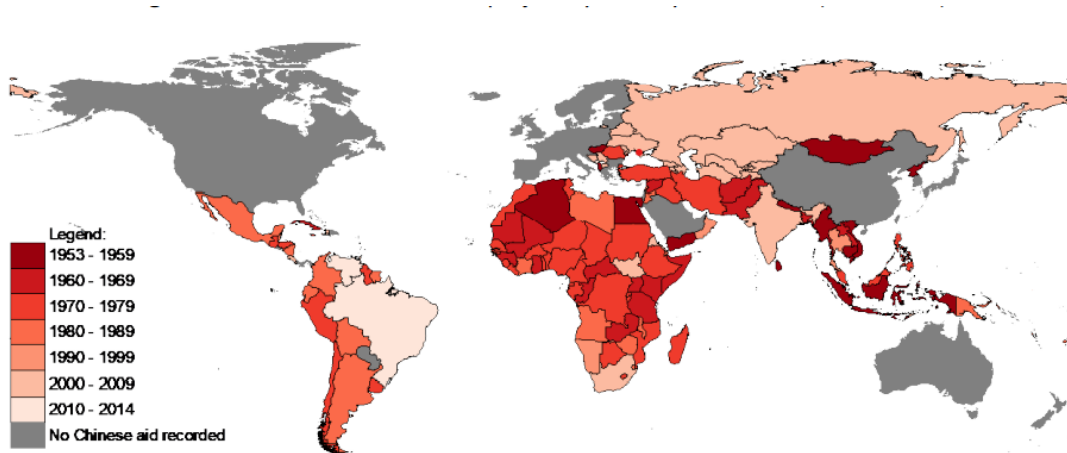
An important motivation for PRC aid at this time, in addition to its broader geopolitical concerns, was its focus on achieving representation at the UN, supplanting the seat held by Taiwan; any state in the global South which switched diplomatic recognition to the PRC was rewarded with spending on prestige public buildings. At the 1971 UN vote on the PRC’s accession, China’s support from multiple African states was critical to its success.

During this period, Chinese aid was given in the form of grants and interest-free loans. Seeing its own Development experience as a model for newly independent states, China offered a combination of technical training and low profile industrial and agricultural projects offered on a ‘turn-key’ basis with the use of Chinese expertise, designed to meet both urgent and longer-term needs for these economies. Perhaps due to its commitment to non-intervention, the fact that it presented

itself as a model for development did not translate, however, into proposing Maoist-style programmes – many of which were to prove catastrophic for the Chinese population. This did not stop some admirers of China, such as Tanzanian President Nyerere, from attempting to emulate Chinese collective farming, with disastrous results for agricultural production (Bräutigam, 2009).

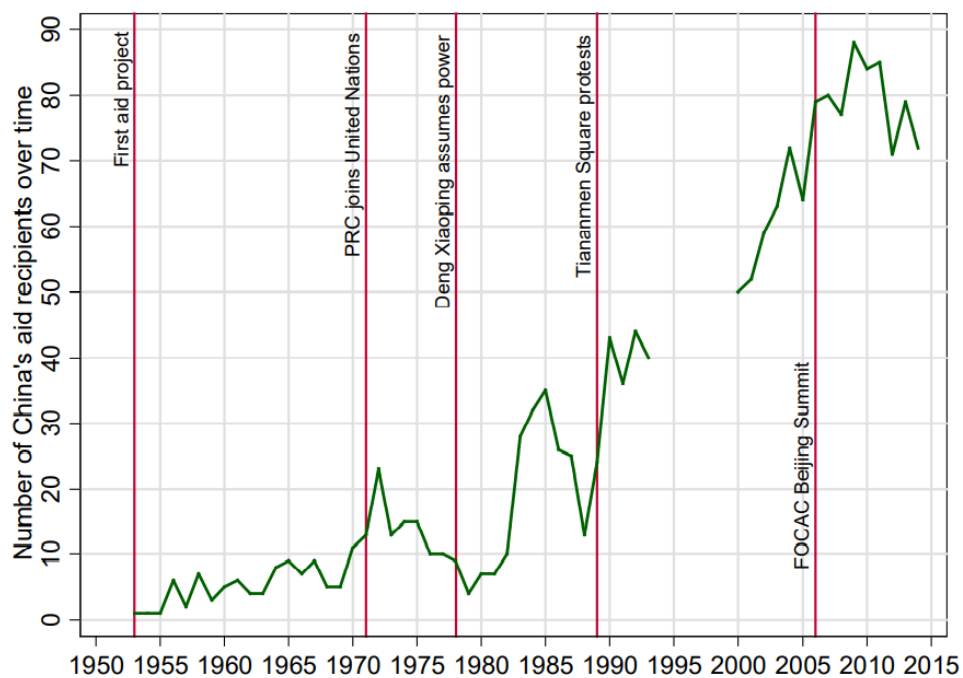
As the West began to rethink its aid interventions, moving away from industrialisation and infrastructure building towards pro-poor programmes working through civil society, China intensified its focus on high profile infrastructure projects. These included the TAZARA railway linking Zambia with the port at Dar es Salaam in Tanzania – a project which, despite its problems, did have a real impact on rural development along the course of the line. Another example is the Karakorum Highway, linking Islamabad in Pakistan to Kashgar in Xinjiang built in the 1960s-70s. This project increased trade flows for both states (and has now been upgraded as part of the flagship BRI CPEC project). Altogether, however, China was not a major donor at this time, with its total aid spend amounting to about the same as that of Denmark (Dreher *et al.*, 2022).

Figure 5. Year of first Chinese aid project by country



Source: (Fuchs and Rudyak, 2019)

Figure 6. Number of Chinese aid recipients over time



Source: (Fuchs and Rudyak, 2019)

These graphics show that, while parts of Africa and the Asia-Pacific region began receiving aid from China well before its accession to the UN, the expansion both in territorial terms, and in terms of the number of recipients, has been far more recent. By 2014, indeed, almost every part of the global South, as well as Russia, have received aid from China.

6.3.2 Late Cold War to Post- Cold War: 'Going Out'

Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership from 1978, international aid (particularly within Africa) remained an important part of Chinese foreign policy, but it was reduced to far more modest levels, to allow China to focus on its domestic economy and internal development, and under Jiang Zemin, on the opening up of its 'socialist market economy'. The rationale for maintaining an aid programme remained the twin impetus of building political support abroad, and promoting Chinese commercial activity overseas. On China's negotiating to join the WTO in the 1990s, however, there were growing calls for it to take on the role of a 'responsible great power' (President Bill Clinton, quoted in Nye, 1997) by providing more global public goods, and it began once more to increase its involvement in international aid. China began around this time to increase its contributions to humanitarian projects, and became increasingly involved in international peacekeeping operations – in which it is now one of the world's largest contributors.

From the late 1980s, China had revived its interest in high-profile building projects, which came to be known as its 'stadium diplomacy': as well as soccer stadiums, China constructed presidential palaces and parliamentary buildings in a bid to build political alliances across the global South. However, from 1995 an aid reform programme was introduced

which increasingly demanded 'value for money', with 'market-oriented' principles underlying its aid decisions.

This coincided with Beijing adopting its 'Going Out' strategy: as part of this, China's state-owned policy banks, Eximbank and China Development Bank, which had been formed in 1994, had the task of helping to find overseas markets for Chinese firms. Faced with a dual problem of domestic overproduction of industrial inputs such as aluminium, glass, steel, cement, timber, etc; and an oversupply of foreign exchange reserves accrued through trade surpluses, Beijing enlisted its policy banks to intensify their support for international industrial and infrastructure projects, with the participation of Chinese firms in the contracts, and with the sourcing of project materials from China a key condition of contracts. Chinese construction firms were already well established across Africa: in Dar es Salaam alone, there were eight resident Chinese engineering companies which had been working across contracts, including those funded by other donors, throughout the 1990s. There were 42,393 Chinese engineers and skilled labourers working in Africa by 2000 (Bräutigam, 2009). The change, therefore, was to some extent just an intensification of pre-existing practices - but the involvement of China's policy banks with their remit to develop overseas markets with the use of concessional aid loans brought a fundamental shift. From this point, Beijing was not so much a benefactor, as a banker. While Renminbi-denominated grants and zero-interest loans for international Development projects remained at a constant level, their overall share of China's Development finance portfolio dramatically reduced, dwarfed by US\$-denominated loans and export credits, priced at market rates. Just 23% of China's Development-related

spending between 2000 and 2014 met the OECD definition of ODA, with the rest classified as OOF (Dreher *et al.*, 2022).

The key to China's new approach during these years was the explicit link it made between aid, trade, and investment opportunities – in all of this, China was guided by the Asian 'developmental state' model, with central and regional government organisations coordinating programmes. The imperatives of the domestic Chinese economy were at all times fundamental to these international initiatives – as manifested by the fact that it was the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) that set the direction in 1995, to combine aid, mutual cooperation and trade under the 'Great Economic and Trade Strategy'.

China's new 'aid' programme consisted of three initiatives: joint-venture investments in manufacturing and agriculture; assembly factories, such as for vehicles, creating markets for Chinese machinery and parts; and exploration and investment in mineral and forest resources, to supplement China's own, increasingly insufficient, natural resources.

After the setting of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with their focus on social development, funding for agriculture, manufacturing and infrastructure dropped massively: this led to an opening for Chinese Development projects. Just one month after the UN Millennium Summit, China launched the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which, now held every three years, habitually showcases pledges from China on economic cooperation with Africa, including debt relief, scholarships, and training programmes, as well as project funding. Part of the rationale for the launch of FOCAC was to overcome some dismay from China's traditional aid recipients in Africa at the

ending of China's aid based on zero-interest loans on flexible terms; it was also designed to encourage China's somewhat reluctant private sector businesses to seek opportunities in Africa. This multilateral initiative followed a dramatic increase in bilateral activity, with senior Chinese leaders making a number of visits to African countries from 1995 onwards – a practice which continued until the beginning of Covid. Other forums across the global South were also formed along similar lines in the following years, designed to promote China's aid and economic cooperation as a 'win-win' prospect.

Another indication that China's aid programme at this time was clearly focused on the domestic Chinese economy is the China-Africa Development Fund (CADF) launched by the China Development Bank in 2007. This was a \$5bn equity fund for Chinese firms to draw on, to encourage them to relocate manufacturing operations to Africa, particularly in so called 'sunset industries' like textiles and leather manufacturing, but also including agriculture, electricity, transportation, telecoms, infrastructure, and resource exploration. Designed to hedge some of the risk for Chinese firms entering this new market, the CADF worked on longer time horizons than typical for equity funds; unlike most Western equity funds operating in Africa at that time it offered equity investment (the CADF was possibly modelled on the British Commonwealth Development Corporation). Furthermore, from 2006 China began to develop special economic zones across the global South, (loosely) modelled on those in China. Built and operated by Chinese enterprises on a profit-making basis, they were designed for the relocation of mature industries from China, as well as export-processing and other services.

6.3.3 Belt and Road / Contemporary Aid

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) thus emerged from this opportunistic and piecemeal genesis. Well before the programme was articulated (under Xi from 2014) as the BRI, there had been a vast increase in China's international Development spending through major construction projects. As stressed before, China's role in them increasingly was less as a donor than as a banker, with foreign currency-denominated lending at or near market rates.

China Eximbank offers three different types of loans: government concessional loans (GCLs), denominated in Renminbi and offered to government borrowers at below-market interest rates, with twenty-year maturities and five-year grace periods; preferential buyer's credit (PBC), denominated in US dollars but also at below-market rates; and a non-preferential buyer's credit loan (BCL), with shorter maturities and grace periods, and tethered to a floating market interest rate.

Something that characterises China's approach to Development, both historically and in more recent years, has been its attitude to risk. China has been prepared to fund and undertake risky projects (both in terms of financial risk, as well as the risk to human life) that DAC donors would not touch. Both TAZARA and the Karakoram Pass demonstrate this – both were constructed in extremely challenging environments, with several construction workers dying. In recent years China has been refocusing the BRI, attempting to prioritise responsibility and environmental credentials, though evidence from the global South indicates that BRI investment maintains its reputation for poor environmental and governance standards (Custer, Horigoshi and Marshall, 2024, p. 9). Furthermore,

recent research suggests that Chinese FDI, particularly in resource-intensive manufacturing industries, has resulted in increased carbon emissions in Africa, in contrast to the emissions associated with similar manufacturing investments from OECD countries, indicating that Chinese investment remains associated with lower environmental, social and governance standards (Tang, Owusu and Ndubuisi, 2024). This might also explain a change in focus for the BRI, with a move away from large new infrastructure projects, towards advanced technology sectors (van Staden, 2024b). China has invested over \$1.1bn in renewable energy projects in Africa over the last decade, and its companies are increasingly being appointed as main contractors for new renewable energy projects in sub-Saharan Africa (Musasike *et al.*, 2024).

China treats its foreign aid programme as a state secret, which means that it is impossible to determine the scope of its aid projects, or the geographical distribution of its programmes. It ranks as ‘very poor’ on the 2022 Aid Transparency Index, along with Türkiye and the UAE (2022 *Index Archive*, 2022). This is at least as true for its international investment activities – there is no ‘map’ of the Belt and Road, and individual contracts are shrouded in secrecy (see the recent political furore around the Kenyan SGR contract). China presents this as a point of principle: at the 2011 High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, it refused to join the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI), stating that the ‘principle of transparency should apply to north-south cooperation, but ... it should not be seen as a standard for south-south cooperation’ (Dreher *et al.*, 2022, p. 64). Dreher *et al* indicate, however, that the reasons for this secrecy might also be more mundane: the lack of democratic accountability demanding accurate public expenditure

accounts; the risk of public discontent from the Chinese population at the scale of China's Development programme, given its own low per-capita income levels; and the very fact that until the creation of CIDCA in 2018, there was no central agency overseeing China's Development strategy, which is carried out by a range of state and non-state bodies and enterprises – and no master database keeping track of contributions (Dreher *et al.*, 2022).

6.3.4 Institutional framework

The institutional governance of aid within China's government from the 1950s demonstrates the intimate connection between aid and foreign policy, and, later, between aid and commercial opportunities for China. The various changes in identity reflects this: from the Commission of Foreign Economic Relations (which jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made aid decisions in the 1960s), to the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade in the 1980s, then the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation in the 1990s, before becoming the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) from the early 2000s. Each of these entities housed the central office for the implementation of foreign aid, before, in 2018, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) was formed. However, the process has never been entirely centralised: this bureaucratic formation was mirrored at provincial and municipal levels, with local cooperation bureaux increasingly transforming into profit-making corporations fulfilling Development construction projects.

Meanwhile, non-government entities also play a crucial role: Eximbank and CDB, China's policy banks, as well as state-owned commercial banks such as Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, and China CITIC Bank, provide loans

on a concessional or non-concessional basis for large-scale project. SOEs, including ZTE, CATIC, China North Industries Group and Poly Technologies, provide assistance to foreign governments to purchase their products through supplier credits.

Some degree of centralisation is imposed, however, through the oversight and budgetary role of the State Council, which has particular control over high value aid projects. The Ministry of Finance is responsible for allocating donations to multilateral aid organisations; and also manages cancellation of foreign aid debt. MOFCOM provides grants and interest-free loans for smaller projects; and is also involved in the provision of training (in management, economics, agriculture, health, justice, education, media, etc); while the Ministry for Education oversees the provision of university scholarships for students from developing countries, as well as the network of Confucius Institutes. The Ministry of Health oversees the deployment of medical teams from China, while other ministries (such as Agriculture, or Science and Technology) oversee programmes related to their areas of governance. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) likewise remains closely involved with aid at all levels, with a particular concern for the political goals behind Development assistance – which can potentially be at odds with MOFCOM's commercial imperatives (Bräutigam, 2009; Yu and Ridout, 2021).

To add to the confusion, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) is responsible for coordinating the BRI, with executive responsibility shared by MOFCOM, Ministry of Finance, and the MFA. The NDRC's focus is mainly on domestic economic policy, but increasingly is involved in all aspects of China's foreign policy, including climate diplomacy and trade

and investment treaty negotiations. Once again, other ministries with relevant focus, such as the Ministry of Transport, are also involved in particular BRI projects (Yu and Ridout, 2021). This administrative confusion underlines the point that the BRI is not a grand strategy, but a discursive concept narrating a collection of disparate commercial endeavours into a coherent policy.

6.3.5 Bilateral – aid, investment, and debt

Dreher et al have analysed the differences in China's Development projects between those financed with aid (grants and low / interest-free loans), and those financed with debt, and found that each type is used in the service of different objectives. Aid-based projects are employed to secure foreign policy favours from the recipient government, particularly within the UN; whereas debt-based projects are often linked to securing access to natural resources or commodities from the borrowing state, or simply to maximise investment returns. Furthermore, Beijing's aid allocation is very much in line with OECD-DAC countries, awarding the most aid to those countries with higher levels of need.

To some extent, China's Development model was adapted from its own experience with Japan, which delivered aid projects in China up to the 1990s based on a government 'request-based' system of project identification and approval. Like China's practice with the BRI, many of Japan's concessional loans and export credits to China were predicated on commodity extraction, in particular oil. China used Japanese loans to build railways and ports via which Chinese oil and coal were exported to Japan; and then on building major utilities and other infrastructure, as well as fertiliser plants (Bräutigam, 2009).

A more recent Initiative in Chinese lending for Development projects is the use of special purpose vehicles (SPVs), set up to design, finance and implement income-generating projects. Increasingly, Chinese funds are lent directly to these SPVs, rather than being channelled through governments. This has the downstream benefit to China that the repayments for the loan are due from the SPV, making any repayment guarantee from the host government unnecessary (Dreher *et al.*, 2022). China is also known to make use of escrow accounts in the terms it sets with commercial loans, ensuring that revenues from the project are siphoned off into an account which pays China, bypassing the demands of any other creditors (Acker and Bräutigam, 2021).

6.3.6 New Multilateral Development Banks (MDBs)

While continuing to work within the Bretton Woods institutions, China has also built alternative international financial institutions (IFIs): the New Development Bank (NDB - linked to BRICS), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Each has US\$100bn operating capital. Through these institutions, China has been attempting to contest some of the Western norms around aid and lending, such as the measurement of debt sustainability in borrower countries, the eligibility criteria for concessional financing, the design and implementation of social and environmental safeguards, transparency, as well as the categorisation and combination of Development and trade finance.

6.3.7 Emerging philosophy of Development

Despite its growing economic strength and geopolitical status, China's identity as belonging to the global South remains fundamental. Sharing a history of subjugation by foreign powers, China heralds this solidarity through 'South-South

Cooperation'. Linked to this idea, is China's emphasis on 'win-win' aid partnerships: it makes no attempt to hide the fact that China expects its own economy to prosper in a mutually beneficial aid relationship. Whereas in the past, China relied on the bilateral relationships formed to improve its international standing, under Xi, 'telling China's story well' has become a preoccupation, and it is the light of this that the articulation of the BRI, and, more recently, the Global Development Initiative (GDI) can be understood, as international articulations of its domestic Development philosophies, as set out earlier in this chapter.

While in material terms, China's Development activities are not too far removed from those promoted by Western states over different periods, there are some fundamental differences in approach. As foreign aid is viewed as indivisible from Chinese foreign policy, it is subject to the same key principles, and in particular, the principle of 'non-interference in internal affairs.' It does not, therefore, impose any conditionalities on aid, and makes no value-based demands (beyond an adherence to the One China principle, obviously). This also entails a suspicion of civil society: China's aid relationships are exclusively with political elites at the government level. A fundamental difference in China's philosophy of Development from that of 'traditional' donors is its linking of Development to human rights, as discussed in Chapter 4: there has been considerable resistance by Western actors to China's attempts to inscribe Development as a universal human right.¹⁵

¹⁵ See Appendix Three for China's 'Eight Principles of Foreign Economic and Technological Assistance'.

6.4 Emancipation, or a new hinterland?

An important result of growing geopolitical competition which has been noticed by many analysts is the revival of 'Active Non-Alignment', seen particularly in UN votes on the Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Gaza conflicts (Heine, 2024). Reduced dependence on OECD donors and their aid conditionalities has opened up space for global South actors to resist hegemonically imposed ideas and norms, and to make their own claims and contentions through international forums. At the developmental level, the existence of choice of Development partners is strongly welcomed by global South actors (Custer, Horigoshi and Marshall, 2024). However, important as all of this is, it is essential not to overstate the degree to which China itself presents an *emancipatory* proposition for the South generally.

China's approach to Development, whether with grants or loans, is not prescriptive, and is not predicated on values external to the recipient country. This means that the recipient state is free to pursue its own Development plan, financed in a demand-driven way by China. Whereas DAC donors are constrained to act through particular channels, China feels no such restriction, negotiating directly with political elites on this funding. Dreher et al set this out clearly in a case study on Tanzania's Five Year Development Plan of 2011, which the DAC donors, working through the Joint Aid Strategy for Tanzania (JAST), based on social sector investments, had rejected. The Tanzanian government turned instead to China, who provided US\$2.9bn (in commercial, concessional, and semi-concessional loans) between 2011 and 2014 for a range of projects, such as a natural gas pipeline, fibre optic cable, expansion of the Dar es Salaam seaport, and an upgrade to the TAZARA railway.

Following the initiation of this programme, private sector investment increased sharply, and the average annual economic growth rate was 7%.

China also works to different timelines, partly because it is not constrained by the requirement to select contractors through a competitive bidding process – borrowers are encouraged to work with pre-selected Chinese contractors. The benefit to political elites is that they are able to deliver demonstrable progress to their population quickly, often within an election cycle. Obviously, the combination of lack of openness and use of elite channels brings the risk of corruption and inflated project costs, as the recent public outrage over secret Chinese contracts in Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya have demonstrated. The increasing use of SPVs for loan payments will, to some extent, reduce the risk of political corruption with Chinese loan funding. The historical lack of rigorous due diligence, essential for delivering projects at speed, has arguably been responsible for a number of the current problems across the global South, where countries have found themselves encumbered by debts for infrastructure projects which look unlikely to produce sufficient revenue within a realistic timeframe. It is likely that Chinese lenders will in future require far more stringent due diligence before agreeing to any large loans, and over recent years many agreements to fund projects have been quietly withdrawn.

While China is increasingly the Development partner of choice for African states, its approach to Development and the projects it is undertaking do not suggest that *new* ideas about Development are being introduced. In fact, its Development strategy bears a strong resemblance to that of European colonisers in the early twentieth century. While there are some

cash grants (such as would be recognised by the OECD-DAC definition of aid), Chinese Development projects are largely funded by loans, and focus on agricultural Development, infrastructure projects equipped and staffed from China, and extraction of raw materials for the benefit of Chinese industry. Africa, meanwhile, is being cultivated as a market for manufactured Chinese goods – with a trade balance strongly in China’s favour. Some low-level manufacturing is encouraged within new ‘Special Economic Zones’ (SEZ) – equipped from China. None of this suggests that China has set out to help African countries up the ‘ladder of progress’ to develop as potential future competitors to China – rather, it suggests that China is fostering Africa as a new hinterland, fixed in its position as an adjunct to the Chinese economy. Just as for the West, China’s Development activities are based on functional differentiation: recipient states are not being encouraged to replicate China’s economic development, but to play a different role within China’s (global) economy (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2024). Once again, this reflects an important theoretical tradition within the Chinese School of IR: *Gongsheng* (or symbiosis) theory, most closely associated with Ren Xiao. This theory is predicated on a conceptualisation of an ideal international order based (hierarchically, albeit harmoniously) on functional differentiation between different states (Ren, 2024).

A key difference between China’s approach and that of the West is its own, relatively recent, experience of being a ‘developing’ country – a status it still in fact claims for itself. In presenting its offer to Africa as ‘South-South cooperation’, China claims to have eschewed the temporally hierarchical, paternalistic approach of Western Development (Kragelund, 2019). Frequent references are made to China’s affinity with Africa, recognising

in its own underdeveloped rural areas (Bräutigam, 2011b; Buckley, 2013; Benabdallah, 2021). However, South-South cooperation might make a case for *spatial* parity, but it does not necessarily absolve China of viewing Africa through a *temporal* hierarchy, with the hierarchical binary of underdeveloped/developed; and its analogy with its own rural areas, as well as with its own development experience, draws attention to this.

Temporal concepts suffuse discussions of China's rapid industrial and urban development, particularly related to the 'urgency' that is necessitated by the 'lateness' of China's development. A dichotomy is set up between what it means to be 'modern' (*xiandai*) vs 'lagging behind' (*luohou*). The creation of special economic zones (SEZs) and their surrounding metropolitan areas along China's coast resulted in a wholesale destruction of old structures and street patterns, reflecting the way in which the 'past is ... treated only as a precursor to the future, something ultimately to be overcome' (Zhang, 2006). The concept of 'Shenzhen speed' was coined to express the rapid construction rates there, with the SEZ doubling in size every two years (Yang, 2017). This mode of development led to new temporal rather than territorial techniques of governance, based on 'futurity' – this is encapsulated in Xi's concept of the 'Chinese Dream' (Shin, Zhao and Koh, 2020). However, this process of development is restricted to the coastal, outward-facing areas of China; the rural central and Western regions of the country suffer under the discursive stigmatism of 'lagging behind' and 'backwardness' (Cartier, 2012). Despite being one of the largest donors to the UN's International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), China has maintained an IFAD office on its own territory to maintain its status as 'developing

state'. IFAD's work forms part of China's project to extend its social order over its marginal and problematic Western areas, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, where rural poverty is most prevalent, making the link between development and domestic order-making within China clear, and mirroring the US's history of (internal) frontier development.

The strict hierarchy of urban over rural is underpinned by structural features of Chinese politics and society: every Chinese citizen is registered in the *hukou* system as either an urban or rural citizen, which not only denotes where they live, but where they are *allowed* to live – and the social benefits to which they are entitled, based on this status. The *hukou* system is designed to control internal migration and protect cities from an influx of rural migrants. However, China's rapid economic rise has been fuelled by the low-cost labour of rural migrants working illegally in urban industries, leading to a sub-class of workers living in cities on minimal social benefits. There is, therefore, a clear and productive hierarchy between urban and 'modern', and rural and 'backwards', in China's culture and politics – it is a stratification which produces different class trajectories, perpetuating socio-economic inequality (Chuang, 2015). Discourse around development in China, therefore, exhibits a strong sense of the concept of 'modernity', as well as the 'ladder of progress', and the policies separating urban from rural areas certainly amount to a 'denial of coevalness' (Fabian, 2014).

The temporal divide between urban and rural China is further made explicit through the concept of 'rural nostalgia' which is deliberately fostered by the state via the annual Spring Festival and the 2013 'New Type Urbanization Plan'. Designed to counter both the 'urban disease', suffered by exhausted city

workers, and the 'rural problem' of underdevelopment and poverty, the aim of this plan was to 'foster integrative urban-rural development' through the promotion of 'nostalgic tourism' (*xiangchou luyou*) to rural villages. However, the reality was that it further deepened the social divide by stigmatising the villagers as 'primitive', whilst producing a problematic clashing of temporalities through the commodification of rural underdevelopment for the benefit of the urban classes (Qian, 2017). China, therefore, has its own 'hinterlands' – in particular, the contested remote areas on China's Western borders. The claim, therefore, that China feels an affinity with Africa's rural underdevelopment suggests more about temporal hierarchies than the discourse clearly intends.

However, its Developmental discourse is very different from that of the West, and one of the key differences is in the way temporality features in its articulation of its relations with Africa. In contrast to the presentist bias of the West, whose official narrative of Development abjures its colonial roots, and further overlooks the decades of failed Development projects since 1949, China deliberately invokes its past encounters with Africa, for example the 'peaceful and respectful' encounter with Zheng He in the fifteenth century (as mentioned in the last chapter). This 'distinguished lineage of principled relations' further includes China's history of Development cooperation in Africa from the 1960s, in an attempt to present a sense of continuity between past encounters and current policies – despite these relations having been in reality 'multifaceted and varied', including political and military interference in the 1960s. History is thus mobilised to legitimate policy in the present, and to establish China's identity as a 'uniquely moral international actor' (Strauss, 2009). Furthermore, the future plays a

significant role in China's Development vision for Africa: it is secured through the thousands of educational scholarships China offers to African students every year (at a time when the US has been significantly reducing theirs). As well as this attention to future generations, China clearly invests in its relationships with current African leaders through diplomatic ties, high profile events such as FOCAC, and official visits, marking a strong contrast with Western states, with their focus on governance and conditionalities.

Julia Strauss notes, however, how China's Development rhetoric has changed as China has become wealthier and more deeply entangled with Africa: the narrative of 'similarity and shared historical struggle' has been gradually replaced by 'different notions of complementarity, international division of labour between China and Africa, and the positive effects of globalization for both' (Strauss, 2009). This 'international division of labour' is key to understanding how China's approach to Development in Africa crucially aligns with that of the West: China is not helping Africa up the 'ladder of progress', setting it up as a potential future rival, but is positioning and fixing Africa as its hinterland, a symbiotic but secondary element of China's counterhegemonic project.

6.5 Conclusion

It is clear, therefore, that both for the West and for China, whatever views of civilisation, unilinear progress or modernity are articulated in the discourse of development, the actual *practice* of Development is based on a different temporal, spatial and functional conception of alterity. The

‘underdeveloped’ are not on the same path to modernity, but are functionally differentiated, yoked instrumentally, and fixed as the permanent hinterland to the ‘developed’ economy. The practice of Development, which has been so fundamental to the production of liberal hegemony, has become a key site for contestation by China. China is mobilising this practice, which emerged historically from liberal ideas and capitalist colonial relationships, to differentiate itself from the West; and is thus building its own set of hierarchically organised, economic, political, and social entanglements. For global South actors, then, while geopolitical competition has reopened possibilities for the articulation of their claims and contestation, the fundamental hierarchical structures of global capitalism have not changed.

7. Conclusion: Mirroring Hegemony

7.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter will firstly summarise and discuss the findings of the thesis. It will then consider any limitations, omissions, and elisions that may have constrained the argument in particular ways, and discuss how the study might have been strengthened. Finally, this chapter will consider directions for further research, suggested by some of the unanswered questions of this study on discursive contestations of hegemony.

7.2 Summary of thesis findings

Accounts of the international which rely upon the concept of the 'liberal international order' risk a number of fundamental *méconnaissances*: the ideological articulation of 'international order' with 'liberal ordering' represents the international in a particular manner, with productive effects. Firstly, in associating Western dominance of the international with *liberalism*, any dissent to this dominance is represented as necessarily *illiberal*, and thus stigmatized within the hegemonic normative framework. Secondly, in articulating this Western / liberal dominance with international *order*, dissent is stigmatized as *disordering*. Thirdly, representing the 'liberal international order' as the production and property of Western / liberal states effaces the role of other actors, particularly those from the South, in the reproduction of international order, as well as the role of the South in liberal *ordering*, understood as a hegemonic project. Finally, in representing the international as the 'liberal

international order', scholars and analysts are unable to make sense of the particular nature of China's mix of compliance and contestation, interpreting it as 'paradoxical', and, necessarily, *disordering*.

This thesis has used this tension in China's foreign policy as a lens, to *disarticulate* the conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order'. This lens has been used to clarify the nature of international order, and the degree to which it can meaningfully be identified as 'liberal' either in its historical genesis or ongoing reproduction. Furthermore, a historical enquiry into the emergence of international order reveals that dissent and contestation are in fact *productive* of international order: contestation does not, necessarily, bring disorder.

In addition to this, the lens of China's counterhegemonic project has been used as a mirror to reveal elements of Western-led liberal hegemony which are overlooked and effaced in accounts of the 'liberal international order'. Firstly, the role of ideology and discourse in both hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects is indicated by the prominence of China's 'Discourse Power' initiative, whereby China concerted works to *rearticulate* the language and norms of the international. In particular, Chapter Four examined how China interacts with core liberal international norms such as human rights and democracy, which, this thesis argues, work as a contemporary 'standard of civilisation': despite being represented within Western discourse as being antithetical to these values, China in fact engages closely with them, representing itself as being a *norm leader* - with the US, in particular, represented as the main transgressor. It is thus using the hegemonic liberal standards of civilisation in a direct 'mirror image'. This chapter goes on to examine other elements of China's Discourse Power project,

examining how it is seeking to *rearticulate* different international discourses and practices, including around Development, security, civilisation, and international order itself. This highlights, in line with a Gramscian understanding, how important ideology and discourse are to both hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects.

Secondly, the emphasis that is placed on the discourse of relations and relationality in both China's international practices in the global South, and in the work of one of China's most prestigious IR scholars, Qin Yaqing, underlines that the Western hegemonic project has *always been constituted* by webs of (intrinsically hierarchical) relations between North and South. These North-South relations are overlooked both by English School-derived accounts of an 'international society' of like-minded states, and by Liberal accounts of 'complex interdependence' with their sterile, transactional nature. Instead, these are long-standing intimacies which work across a number of dimensions, comprising economic, financial, commercial, military, social, and cultural entanglements between strong and weak. Paying attention to China's emphasis on relationality, therefore, belies the conceptualisation of the 'liberal international order' as at least originating as a *bordered* society of likeminded states: Western-led liberal hegemony has always, from its genesis, been a *global* project. This accords with a Gramscian conception of hegemony, which emphasises the importance of relations between strong and weak actors for the production and maintenance of hegemony through consent.

Thirdly, the thesis has used the intensification of China's Development programme through the Belt and Road Initiative under Xi Jinping, to reflect on the importance of aid and Development practices across the global South in producing

Western-led liberal hegemony. The thesis considers how these practices produce a particular type of hierarchical formation, conceptualised as a 'Hinterland', where the recipient is fixed permanently 'behind' in temporal terms, forever functionally and temporally differentiated, and yet yoked to the metropolitan economy. Again, this is consistent with Gramsci's analysis of the role of capitalist social relations within hegemony. In its relations with the global South, China can be seen to be replicating the logics and practices which have been fundamental to the production of Western-led liberal hegemony.

'Mirroring' is thus used as a methodological device in this thesis, whereby China's counterhegemonic contestation serves as a lens to disarticulate the concept of 'liberal international order', and reveal the ways in which Western-led liberal hegemony has been reproduced. In particular, it highlights the role of discourse and ideology in hegemonic formations and counterhegemonic endeavours; and also, importantly, centres the global South within an understanding of global hegemony. The thesis has used a Gramscian theoretical framework to understand hegemony, and to make sense of the role of these different elements in hegemonic and counterhegemonic projects.

The other sense of 'mirroring' in this thesis is as an empirical observation: while China, in its counterhegemonic project, represents itself as a different type of international actor, castigating the US and its allies for their 'hypocritical' and 'bullying' international practices, and condemning 'liberal universalism', a close observation of its practices and discourses reveals a different story. In fact, this thesis argues, in each of the elements of global hegemonic projects highlighted in the previous chapters, China appears, in important ways, to be

replicating, in ‘mirror image’, liberal practices and logics, and ‘speaking through’ liberal discourse.

This thesis, therefore, suggests that representations of the rise of China as being *necessarily* ‘disordering’ are not legitimate: it is largely compliant with the rules and norms of international order, and even within its counterhegemonic project, its target is Western domination rather than the liberal norms which underpin liberal hegemony. However, the logic of the articulation of the ‘liberal international order’ is to represent (‘external’) contestation as being both ‘illiberal’ and ‘disordering’: this leads to a fundamental, and potentially dangerous, *méconnaissance*, as this representation could be used to legitimise Western policy responses which themselves could be deeply disordering. The ambition of this thesis has been to provide greater clarity for understanding the world that we live in, and the forces, practices and representations that worked to make the world this way – and in particular, to *disarticulate* the obfuscating concept of the ‘liberal international order’. However, the uncertainty over how to interpret China’s contestation through ‘mirroring’, replicating liberal logics, practices and discourses, leaves the question of how a counterhegemonic project which uses mirroring in this way should be interpreted, unanswered. This final section of this chapter considers a number of different explanations of this ‘mirroring’ within a counterhegemonic project, which form the basis of a proposal for further research.

7.3 How this study might have been strengthened

This study of China’s counterhegemonic project has deliberately left open the timeframe under consideration.

While it is clear that much of the analysis focuses on events and discourses that have been initiated, or at least intensified, under Xi Jinping's premiership, it has avoided making any claim that China's international ambitions were transformed from 2013: in fact, it has drawn attention to continuities in its policies, particularly within the global South. This diffidence in attributing the counterhegemonic project, with its particular discourses and practices, to a particular leader, stems at least in part from the fact that this thesis never set out to be 'about' China, by an expert on China. The focus was always on the nature of hegemony, and the possibility of hegemonic change. The particular pattern of behaviour observed within China's recent international practices and discourses offered an analytically interesting case of counterhegemony, and so China became central to this study, without actually becoming the *subject* of it. A greater expertise on China might, however, have brought more richness to its conclusions.

Not unrelated to this is the fact that, while this thesis sought to orient the global South as central to hegemonic formations, and to recognise Southern agency, there was little space for the South to speak for itself. How China's practices and discourses are 'received' within the South are referred to only fairly briefly, in Chapter 5. A wider analysis, for example of UN General Assembly voting patterns, might give a deeper insight (without wanting to suggest that global South states make such voting decisions entirely due to hegemonic / counterhegemonic pressure).

Finally, while capitalism lurks within this analysis, there is no direct examination of it. Capitalism is treated as an element of the liberal hegemonic project, and the mirroring of

capitalist logics within the global South is how China is observed to be replicating the ‘hinterland’. However, the thesis has gone no further than suggesting obliquely that a social forces analysis (as opposed to a focus on states as agents of hegemony / counterhegemony) might produce a very different interpretation of the prospects for real change with China’s rise. Furthermore, capitalism, like liberalism itself, is not a fixed and unchanging system, and the world has already clearly transitioned from the highpoint of neoliberal globalisation, with an increase in protectionism and forms of state capitalism. Tracing these changes and relating them to the overall argument would bring greater complexity to this area of the analysis.

The following section outlines a proposal for extending the study in a different way, through a particular focus on the concept of mirroring within counterhegemonic endeavours.

7.4 Proposal for future research

7.4.1 Introduction: mirroring in China’s counterhegemonic contestation

China is unambiguously antithetical to Western-led liberal hegemony in its discourse, which emphasises its own credentials as an alternative global leader, that can be more relied upon than the US to deliver the common goal of international justice, peace and prosperity (*A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions*, 2023; *US Hegemony and Its Perils*, 2023). This discourse stresses its difference from the US and its allies, whom it castigates for rule breaking, bullying, and different forms of exceptionalism.

However, while it has in the past tended to express its identity as temporally and spatially aligned with the global South (for example through its claimed status as a developing state, and the discourse of South-South Cooperation), increasingly since Xi Jinping's coming to power, China has been asserting its own 'exceptional' status, establishing clear hierarchies between itself and other actors. This hierarchy can be manifested in apparently trivial details, such as Xi's insistence on placement for formal handshakes (see Appendix Two), but is also apparent in more significant arenas such as the redrawing of its national and maritime borders in official maps (Olander, 2022b; *Al Jazeera*, 2023; *Reuters*, 2023). Its hierarchical approach is followed through in its Development practices which, on close examination, clearly replicate the logics and practices of 'liberal' Development. Just like the West, China is not attempting to put in place Gramsci's conceptualisation of a 'democratic hegemony', whereby less developed regions are helped to reach a position of equivalence with the more developed benefactor. On the contrary, China's engagements with the global South, and Africa in particular, fix the region in its position as a hinterland to the Chinese economy, forever functionally and developmentally differentiated. While it is clear that China does, indeed, place a high value on relationships in the international, particularly with the global South, it once again reflects the West's instrumental logic with these relationships: having secured consent and legitimacy through its Development practices, China 'cashes in' its relational bonds through international institutions such as the UN. Securing the support of the global South in General Assembly votes, in elections to run UN agencies, and within the UN Human Rights Council, is a key dividend for China in its 'relational' diplomatic approach. It is clear, therefore, that despite its claimed identity

as a different type of global power, and its discursive alignment with the global South, as China becomes a stronger international actor, it is replicating the practices and logics of the West in its dealings with the global South.

Moreover, while China is interpreted in Western policy (and certain academic) circles as presenting a direct threat to 'liberal' values, seeking to reject and overturn international human rights and democratic norms to 'make the world unsafe for democracy' (Foot, 2021a), close attention to its 'Discourse Power' project suggests a different interpretation. Rather than repudiating human rights and democracy as international standards, China in fact engages very closely with both these values, inscribing human rights within its own constitution, and producing regular white papers and conferences on both rights and democracy with the clear aim of presenting itself as not just *conforming*, but as *leading* in these fields (Foot, 2020; State Council Information Office, 2021; Byamungu, 2022; Onunaiju, 2022). Furthermore, it produces regular reports on human rights abuses and democratic failures in the West, particularly the US (Olander, 2021a). In positioning itself as more closely compliant with human rights and democracy than the most powerful liberal state, it is not only establishing the legitimacy of its own authority to lead: it is, significantly, doing this *within and through* the key standards of liberal hegemony.

What is clear, therefore, is that, despite China's articulation of itself as essentially different from the US and other 'liberal' states, it not only replicates Western logics of hegemony in the global South, but also seeks to establish its superiority within the discursive framework of liberal hegemony. It is this hegemonic mirroring that this proposal seeks to explain. There is a range of different interpretations of such mirroring

behaviour within a counterhegemonic; however, there remains the possibility that China's mirroring actually demonstrates the persistence of a liberal hegemony grounded on (hierarchical) capitalist relations and 'liberal' standards of civilisation.

7.4.2 Interpretations of mirroring

The literature on rising powers takes for granted that 'status seeking' is the best explanation for China's international practices, interrogating the extent to which this motivation will drive China to attempt to undermine the existing order. However, this literature assumes that 'compliance' with international norms represents a broad acceptance of the existing order, provided it is allowed a greater share of 'great power privileges', based on recognition of its growing status (Ward, 2017; Murray, 2018). This literature does not, therefore, offer any particular insights into how mirroring could be used within the *contestation* of power. The anticolonial and postcolonial literature offers a different reading of mirroring: an early example of this is Hamdam Khodja's anticolonial treatise, *The Mirror*, published in Paris in 1833, in which he attempted to reason with the French state, using Enlightenment arguments, to withdraw from Algeria (Khodja, 2003; Pitts, 2009). This is in line with Agnew and Corbridge's observation that the dominant political discourse within an international order is actively adopted even by opponents: 'hegemonic representations do not go unchallenged but even challenges ... must conform to the "terms of debate" laid down by the dominant discourse in order to be intelligible or easily read' (Agnew and Corbridge, 1995, p. 49). However, as both Jennifer Pitts and Karl Agerup note, Khodja expresses a keen affinity and esteem for these values, and his appeal is to the French to live up to them. This is at odds with China's case, where the 'discourse remoulding' programme

is less a call for the US and its allies to reform their behaviour and live up to their own values, than a manifesto, targeted particularly at the global South, for China's authoritative leadership on these values, while simultaneously repudiating 'liberal universalism'.

7.4.3 Mimesis, trickstery, imperial repertoires

Homi Bhabha more recently developed the idea of subaltern mimicry as anticolonial resistance, which he argued was designed to undermine colonial authority through hybrid contamination. (Bhabha, 2001). Bhabha's account thus places more emphasis on the agonistic motivation of mirroring: here, colonial hybridity arises through a mimicry which produces something that is 'almost the same, *but not quite*' – the 'difference of the same'. Drawing on Lacan, Bhabha identifies the role of mirroring in producing a critique of the original through rupture: 'the *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority' (emphases in original) (Bhabha, 2012). Judith Butler, commenting on Bhabha's work on mimesis of dominant language, argues that '[m]imesis can effect a displacement of the first term or, indeed, reveal that the term is nothing other than a series of displacements that diminish any claim to primary and authentic meaning'; it is not so much that the translation that is implied in mimicry introduces contamination, but that the translation/mimesis exposes the incoherence or incompleteness of the original, undermining its universalistic claims (Butler, 2000).

Postcolonial IR scholars have developed Bhabha's concept of mimicry in their analysis of relations of dominance. Hobson and Seabrooke, for example, discuss the role of 'mimetic challenge' and 'hybridised mimicry' as forms of subaltern defiance and

resistance. 'Hybridised mimicry' is drawn directly from Bhabha's work, whereas 'mimetic challenge' is a tactic of 'everyday actors', through which they 'adopt the discourse and/or characteristics of the dominant to cloak their resistance-challenges to the legitimacy of the dominant, ... appeal[ing] to the normative discourse of the dominant in order to push through their own subversive agenda' (Hobson and Seabrooke, 2007, p. 17). In a similar move, L.H.M Ling distinguishes 'formal mimicry', which she characterises as superficial emulation, treated generally with indulgence and amusement, from 'substantive mimicry', which, through deeper engagement, allows hybridised practices and identities to emerge. The latter presents a greater threat to the hegemon as it opens the possibility of competition, and is therefore, in Ling's argument, usually met with a disciplining reaction (Ling, 2002, p. 117).

Catherine Owen et al pick up on the concepts of 'mimetic challenge' and 'substantive mimicry' to explain Russia's international behaviour. As Viatcheslav Morozov observes, Russia articulates its contestation of Western hegemony through liberal discourse, in particular drawing on the language around rights and democracy to justify and legitimise its own international practices (Morozov, 2015). Owen et al argue that Russia's substantive mimicry of liberal discourse 'produces hybridisations that expose the weakness of the Western liberal project and its perceived moral authority in the international system', citing in particular the use of the concept of 'responsibility to protect' to justify its (pre-2022) wars in Georgia and Ukraine. In attaching new meanings to 'liberal' concepts and practices, the authors argue, Russia's substantive mimicry is producing hybridised values which ultimately delegitimise the existing order (Owen, Heathershaw and Savin,

2018). The observation of Russia's 'substantive' or 'hybridised' mimicry plays into the idea of Russia as a 'trickster', blending conformist and deviant behaviour in its international practices in a way that indirectly subverts normative frameworks through its combination of 'stigma acceptance, rejection and counter-stigmatisation' (Kurowska and Reshetnikov, 2021). The trickster is a necessarily liminal international figure, yet, as Eller observes, it does not lack power: its mythical origins are 'demi-gods' who corrupt the 'divine' order of the world through profanity and irreverence (Rumelili, 2012; Mälksoo, 2018; Eller, 2023). It combines playfulness and satire with violence, suggesting 'an equivalence between emancipatory transgressions and authoritarian force' (Kurowska and Reshetnikov, 2021). Russia uses a variety of channels in its campaign to subvert Western-led hegemony: as well as overt military operations (Syria, Crimea, Ukraine) and covert violence (via the Wagner Group, or assassination attempts on foreign soil), its media company RT works to unite anti-liberal, 'paleoconservative' and populist forces across the West, frequently using 'mimetic parody' to undermine Western values (Morozov, 2015; Stent, 2020; Kurowska and Reshetnikov, 2021; McFaul, 2021). In these endeavours (which, of course, follow a Western blueprint for historical political interference), Russia is notably significantly less circumspect than China. Furthermore, it is clearly pursuing its own agenda, without attempting to frame itself discursively as a global leader, with an alternative vision for international relations, in the way that China does (Ghiasi, Zhang and Ferchen, 2023). It is clear, therefore, that the label of 'subversive/disruptive revisionist' applies far more accurately to Russia, than it does to China.

An explanation based on subaltern mirroring thus offers the potential of a more nuanced account than the assumption that China's 'compliance' reflects its 'socialisation' into international society (Kent, 2002; Xiaoyu, 2012; Johnston, 2014). The various postcolonial accounts of subaltern mimicry share the aim of recovering subaltern subjectivity and agency in accounts of the international, and provide valuable insights to this end. However, the concept of subaltern mimicry, while it might have been applied to China's early project to engage with rights and democracy discourse during its stigmatised period after Tiananmen Square, somehow fails to capture China's contemporary, explicitly counterhegemonic project. Mimicry is not the same as mirroring: China is *not* a subaltern subject resisting the colonial imposition through the only agency it can achieve. Furthermore, it is not (simply) using liberal discourse to justify its own policies, nor are its ambitions limited to 'disruption' through hybridity or 'trickstery': there is nothing playful about China's project. While it does, explicitly, reject the 'false universalism' of liberal hegemony, its mirroring is not the means by which it makes this point. On the contrary, China's mirroring indicates its ambition to produce its own hegemonic universalism: it is *projecting its own authority claims*, in a direct reflection of liberal hegemony.

An alternative reading of mirroring which will recognise China's claims to authority and leadership, is, therefore, required, and so a deeper historical enquiry is proposed to understand how mirroring has historically been deployed in successful counterhegemonic projects. For example, historians such as Burbank and Cooper have observed the ways in which different imperial projects emulated one another through mimesis, showing how in the ninth century, the early Russian empire

combined elements of Turkic, Byzantine and Mongol statecraft, and well as adopting the religion of the Byzantine Empire, to consolidate imperial power (Burbank and Cooper, 2010, pp. 186–188). Jeremy Adelman argues that, in the early modern era, various forms of encounters allowed influences to be transmitted through ‘emulation and borrowing’, producing ‘commensurability between regimes and facilitat[ing] coexistence and conflict’ between European imperial endeavours, as well as with and between empires in China, Delhi and Istanbul (Adelman, 2015). This synchronic mirroring of ‘imperial repertoires’, however, perhaps rather indicates the early emergence of a ‘global society’ or international order based on shared rules and norms: it is not the same as China’s distinctly agonistic, counterhegemonic project. As this thesis has argued, China’s concern is not simply with being accepted by established powers, but with delegitimising these powers within the terms they themselves have (hegemonically) established.

However, as Burbank and Cooper point out, these ‘repertoires of rule’ across empires were variable, often adapted to different local political and cultural systems, ‘work[ing] with and reshap[ing] the structures of authority they found’ (Burbank and Cooper, 2010, p. 325), and this points towards a more useful historical analogy for illuminating the nature of China’s contemporary use of mirroring as part of a programme of deliberate (international) political change. The authors observe that the Roman empire, although universalising and homogenous in political and cultural forms, deliberately emulated and built upon the achievements of earlier Greek, Persian, and Egyptian empires. Despite defeating and replacing the Greek empire across the Mediterranean, Romans

considered Greek to be the language of learning and creativity; and the Roman concept of '*humanitas*', their essential 'standard of civilisation', drew on the 'universal values' embodied by Athens (Burbank and Cooper, 2010, p. 37) – even as Latin supplanted Greek as the language of imperial power (Lafferty, 2003). Furthermore, the Romans actively borrowed the culture, achievements and practices of the regimes which it subsumed within its imperial control, 'taking other people's gods into the imperial pantheon' (at least until the adoption of Christianity) (Burbank and Cooper, 2010, p. 12). In this respect, they emulated the imperial repertoire of their predecessors, the Greeks: Joseph Manning argues that the Hellenistic period in Egypt was characterised by hybridity, with the Ptolemies maintaining the traditions of (the defeated) Egyptian monarchy for political and economic control of the state, and, most importantly, adopting pharaonic imagery and religious iconography and practices as central to their projection of power and legitimacy (Manning, 2012).

These examples of claiming legitimate political authority through *diachronic* mirroring of the political, cultural, and ideological forms of the hegemonic regime which has been replaced, offer a potential reading of China's decision to pursue counterhegemony through the mirroring of 'liberal' discourses, and the practices which are fundamental to the (ongoing) production of liberal hegemony. Because the change that China is seeking is not in the behaviour of liberal rulers (as for Khodja), nor is it a means to (self) emancipation from liberal rule, as suggested by the postcolonial conceptualisation of mimicry, but a replacement of Western-led hegemony itself by a new (Chinese-led) universalising logic, historical examples of hegemonic change offer fertile interpretations of the way in

which China is pursuing this goal. Since it is a *contingent* tactic, however, there remains the question of why China is pursuing counterhegemonic change in this way, and whether the project is likely to produce the results China hopes for.

7.4.4 Hegemonic ‘transformism’ and liberal shapeshifting

This use of history brings the risk of pre-judging the outcome of China’s counterhegemonic project. As a matter of necessity, history provides few relics, texts, or monuments to failed counterhegemonic projects. There is, however, a possibility that, through its mirroring of hegemonic liberal practices and discourse, China is in fact *reproducing* and *reinforcing* liberal hegemony. Terry Eagleton’s interpretation of Lacan’s mirror stage describes how the mirror reflects back a more ‘consoling coherent image’ than the ‘diffuse[d]’, ‘decentre[d]’ true state of the subject, leaving it ‘armed with this imaginary self’, strengthened and purposeful (Eagleton, 1997). This ‘mirage’ of *Gestalt* (or sense of ‘wholeness’ and coherence), provided by China’s reflection might, through this misrecognition, have a fortifying effect on liberal hegemony, contrary to China’s counterhegemonic intentions.

Furthermore, liberal hegemony has always been contingent, incomplete, and contradictory, due, in part, to what Beate Jahn describes as liberalism’s ‘fragmentary dynamics’ (Jahn, 2013, p. 11). It is a project, a work in progress, extending over time and space, polythetic, and above all, adaptable, absorbing new ideas through its relational encounters (Flockhart, 2013). This shapeshifting character of liberalism, in which it absorbs new tenets (including those of subaltern actors resisting liberal hegemony), and sheds old ones, could be articulated through Gramsci’s concept of *trasformismo*, whereby opponents of the

hegemonic system eventually become co-opted into it. As Cox explains, '[h]egemony is like a pillow: it absorbs blows and sooner or later the would-be assailant will find it comfortable to rest upon'. Through *trasformismo*, potentially counterhegemonic ideas are absorbed, making them 'consistent with hegemonic doctrine'. Cox, therefore, takes the view that, while counterhegemonic projects might bring an alteration to the hegemonic ideology through its absorption of contrary ideas, hegemonies are robust and adaptable, meaning that effecting complete hegemonic change is not an easy challenge (Cox, 1983; Gramsci, 1999, p. 250). This certainly fits with the history of Western-led liberal hegemony, which has altered ideologically in important ways over the decades, whilst essentially maintaining its fundamental hierarchies.

China is explicit that the hegemony which it is countering is 'US hegemony' (*US Hegemony and Its Perils*, 2023), and while it tilts against 'liberal universalism', this is not based on a particular account of what 'liberalism' is, beyond the ideological and normative representations of the US and its allies. While this understanding of liberalism has adherents likewise with the (Western) theoretical literature, many scholars would argue that liberalism is, in fact, a determinate (if not fixed), objectively recognisable ideology (Bell, 2014). Beate Jahn's 'immanent critique' of liberalism tends toward this approach, drawing on canonical texts of western liberalism to identify the origins of its contradictions (Jahn, 2013). Analysis of the rise of China which warn against the risk of its 'hollowing out' liberal ideas tends to draw on this understanding of liberalism (Ralph, 2017; Edel and Shullman, 2021). Meanwhile, although Trine Flockhart stops short of the full logic of the claim that liberalism can indeed only be recognised as the ideological output of self-identifying

'liberal' states, her approach is distinctly actor centred. This account considers liberalism as a 'tradition', constructing 'presents of the past' to make sense of 'change, contradictions, and inconsistencies' within the tradition of 'liberal ordering', which is manifested in 'how it is practised and how it is imagined' differently, at different times (Flockhart, 2013). This, crucially if not explicitly, presupposes a *particular* group (specifically, Western actors) carrying out these practices, and doing the 'imagining'. Kimberley Hutchings, likewise, argues that unless actors 'self-identify' as a 'liberal subject', 'a range of liberal practices and beliefs ... become unworkable and unintelligible': liberal subjectivity, produced by the line-drawing between 'liberal' and 'illiberal', is, therefore, fundamental to understanding these practices and beliefs as 'liberal'. Despite this apparent difference of approach, each of these authors is writing about the practices of 'liberal internationalism', such as humanitarian intervention, liberal peacebuilding, and democracy promotion, it is clear that liberalism is associated with the practices and legitimising discourses of Western *states*.

However, as Jahn acknowledges, liberalism is a 'defining feature' not just of powerful 'liberal' states, but also of international organisations, private companies and NGOs, meaning that 'liberal norms – from human rights through to free trade – provide a general reference point for international politics', and also that the 'world economy is largely structured in accordance with liberal principles' (Jahn, 2013, p. 5). This underlying, structural dominance of liberal norms policing stability within international relations, together with global capitalism, is *hegemonic*, setting the terms of the international for *all* actors, in a way that is not simply intended and directed by self-identifying 'liberal' states. This suggests that this liberal

hegemony *could persist*, whether or not one or more of these Western / liberal states remained the dominant international actor in material terms. Hegemony is always in the interests of particular actors, but it is not clear that these actors are necessarily *states* as such. Furthermore, the elites that benefit from a stable international order fostering global capitalism are not exclusively located within the West. The implication of this could be that China's counterhegemonic project is, in fact, nothing of the sort: perhaps the greatest impact of its project to disrupt the basis of the US's international authority will be that liberal hegemony simply 'transforms' through this challenge, in a form of *reverse reflection*, thus remaining fundamentally resilient.

Appendix One: China's diplomatic partnerships

Not all partnerships are created equal

Hierarchy of China's diplomatic partnerships, in order of closeness



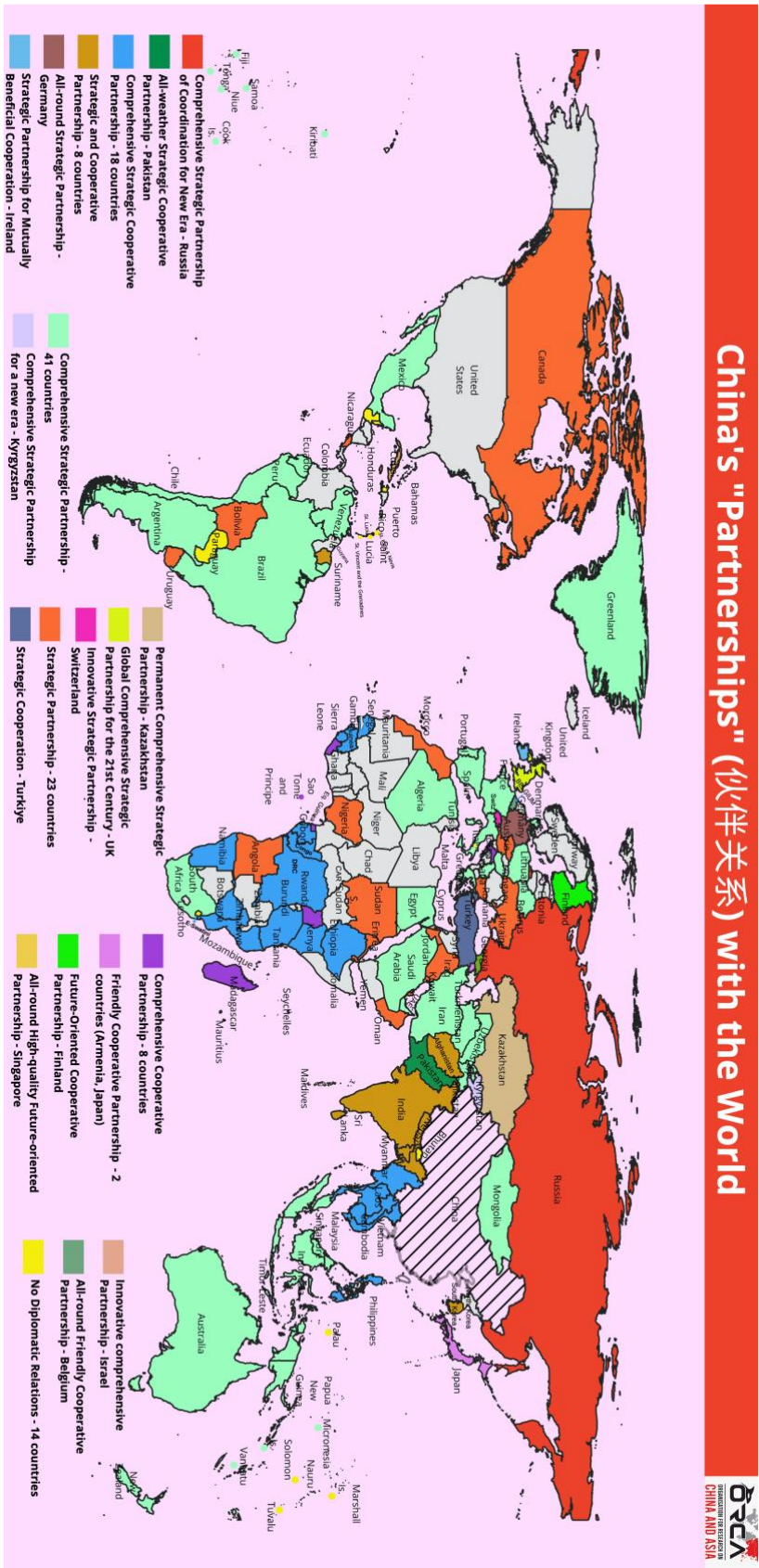
TYPE OF PARTNERSHIP	DESCRIPTION	COUNTRIES
1. Strategic Partnership of Coordination 战略协作伙伴关系		
Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era (新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系)	China's highest level of foreign partnership; cooperation on all issues, including international affairs, military and technological development.	Russia
2. Strategic Cooperative Partnership 战略合作伙伴关系		
2.1 All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership (全天候战略合作伙伴关系)	Wide-ranging coordination and cooperation - both political and economic - with strategically important countries. Pakistan tops the list, ranked as an "all-weather" partner.	Pakistan
2.2 Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (全面战略合作伙伴关系)		11 countries, all in Southeast Asia and Africa
2.3 Strategic Cooperative Partnership (战略合作伙伴关系)		Six countries, mostly in South Asia (including India)
3. Strategic Partnership 战略伙伴关系		
3.1 All-round Strategic Partnership (全方位战略伙伴关系)	Strategic partners are countries China considers strategically important for political, economic or geopolitical reasons. They warrant a higher level of engagement from Beijing, though relations are not without friction.	Germany
3.2 Permanent Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (永久全面战略伙伴关系)		Kazakhstan
3.3 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (全面战略伙伴关系)		40 countries, including eight EU member states and the UK
3.4 Friendly Strategic Partnership (友好战略伙伴关系)		Austria
3.5 Strategic Partnership (战略伙伴关系)		16 countries, including Canada and the Czech Republic
3.6 Innovative Strategic Partnership (创新战略伙伴关系)		Switzerland
4. Cooperative Partnership 合作伙伴关系		
4.1 All-round Cooperative Partnership (全方位合作伙伴关系)	Cooperative partnerships focus mainly on economic cooperation. Even if relations are friendly, cooperation is limited to specific issue areas.	Singapore
4.2 Comprehensive Friendly Cooperative Partnership (全面友好合作伙伴关系)		Romania, Maldives
4.3 Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership (全面合作伙伴关系)		Six countries, including South Korea and the Netherlands
4.4 Friendly Cooperative Partnership (友好合作伙伴关系)		Japan
4.5 New-Type Cooperative Partnership (新型合作伙伴关系)		Finland
5. Partnership 伙伴关系		
Innovative Comprehensive Partnership (创新全面伙伴关系)	Other partnerships tend to signify that, though relations may not be close, there is a wish to improve them.	Israel

Note: as China's only treaty ally, North Korea is not included in this partnership framework.

Sources: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, MERICS

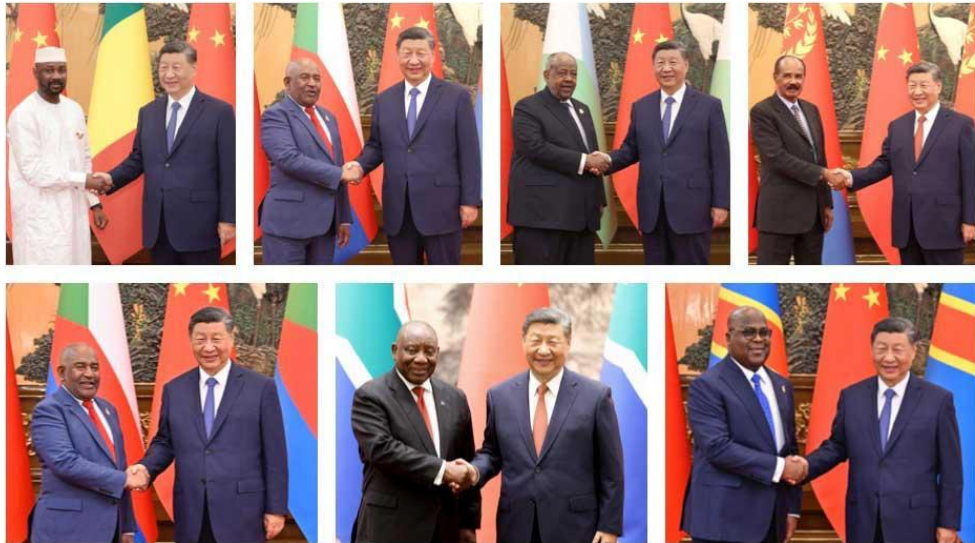
© MERICS

(MERICS China Security and Risk Tracker / Merics, 2021)



(Bhole, 2023)

Appendix Two: Handshakes and Hierarchies



Source: (van Staden, 2024c)

While the discourse ahead of the September 2024 FOCAC gathering emphasised China's spatial and temporal alignment with Africa, as a member of the global South and a 'developing' country itself, the hierarchies built into these relationships are obliquely reflected in these images taken as Africa leaders arrived for the summit (van Staden, 2024a). Almost always, when photographed shaking the hand of a global South leader (or indeed, with any world leader), Xi Jinping stands on the right of the image, in the 'dominant' position, forcing the other party to assume a more awkward, 'supplicant' position (Whigham, 2022).

Appendix Three: China's foreign aid principles

China's Eight Principles of Foreign Economic and Technological Assistance (*China's Foreign Aid White Paper*, 2011)

January 1964

1. The Chinese government always bases itself on the principle of equality and mutual benefit in providing aid to other countries. It never regards such aid as a kind of unilateral alms but as something mutual.
2. In providing aid to other countries, the Chinese government strictly respects the sovereignty of recipient countries, and never attaches any conditions or asks for any privileges.
3. China provides economic aid in the form of interest-free or low-interest loans, and extends the time limit for the repayment when necessary so as to lighten the burden on recipient countries as far as possible.
4. In providing aid to other countries, the purpose of the Chinese government is not to make recipient countries dependent on China but to help them embark step by step on the road of self-reliance and independent economic development.
5. The Chinese government does its best to help recipient countries complete projects which require less investment but yield quicker results, so that the latter may increase their income and accumulate capital.
6. The Chinese government provides the best-quality equipment and materials manufactured by China at international market prices. If the equipment and materials

Mirroring Hegemony

provided by the Chinese government are not up to the agreed specifications and quality, the Chinese government undertakes to replace them or refund the payment.

7. In giving any particular technical assistance, the Chinese government will see to it that the personnel of the recipient country fully master the technology.

8. The experts dispatched by China to help in construction in recipient countries will have the same standard of living as the experts of the recipient country. The Chinese experts are not allowed to make any special demands or enjoy any special amenities.

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