



Journal of Climate and Community Development

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-7855](#) P-ISSN: [3006-7847](#)

Beyond Revisionism and the Status Quo: China's Strategy of Selective Reformism in the Liberal International Order

Muhammad Shahzaib¹ Dr. Abdul Basit Khan² Dr. Mian Muhammad Azhar³

¹ MPhil Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

² Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

³ Associate Professor/Chairman, Department of Political Science, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Mian Muhammad Azhar, **Correspondence through:** muhammad.azhar@gcuf.edu.pk

Vol. 5, Issue 2, 2026

Article Information

Received:

2026-06-21

Revised:

2026-08-08

Accepted:

2026-08-25

ABSTRACT

China's growing influence has fueled the discussion on the future of the Liberal International Order (LIO) while at the same time raising doubts about China's interaction with the current order. This article concentrates on the central puzzle: How to measure China's cooperation with and reform of the Liberal International Order while at the same time measuring its resistance? It is conceptual and qualitative in nature and applies the realist and liberal institutionalist perspectives to analyse China's behavior, followed by a discussion on the China's engagement in each of the dimensions of the LIO. The analysis shows that both of these viewpoints alone offer a plausible account of China's behavior abroad. Instead, China's actions indicate a policy of selective reformism that involves staying attuned to the institutions that advance its national interests, while attempting to reform the institutions in a gradual way that is not seen as compromising sovereignty and regime security. It is suggested that selective reformism is a more complete prism for analyzing China's current international actions and can aid in discussions of the development of the Liberal International Order in a multipolar world order.

Keywords: *External Behavior, China's Rise, Liberal International Order, Selective Reformism, Global Governance, International Order.*

Citation: APA

Shahzaib, M., Khan, A, B & Azhar, M, M (2026). *Beyond revisionism and the status quo: China's strategy of selective reformism in the liberal international order*, *Journal of Climate and Community Development*, 5(2), 270-279.



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1. Introduction

With the growth of China, one of the most important questions in the international politics of today is what the future of the Liberal International Order (LIO) will be? Since China's economic, diplomatic, and strategic weight has grown, the question of whether the international order is ready to incorporate the power of a major non-Western state or whether China is aiming to reform the institutions and norms that have been central to global governance since the second half of World War II has become more prominent in academic discussions (Doshi, 2021).

While there is a shared understanding of the importance of China's rise, there is limited understanding about the character of China's interactions with the LIO. Notwithstanding, China is also deeply connected to the international economy and is actively involved in key international institutions, while also advocating for institutional improvements and questioning liberal principles on sovereignty and regime security (McGregor, 2024). To date, the research on these changes has been largely framed in terms of a binary logic, whereby China is either a revisionist power that aims to challenge the U.S.-dominated order or a status quo power that seeks to maintain it. Both views highlight the different aspects of China's action, but they offer only partial explanations for its seemingly contradictory practices of cooperation with, reform of and opposition to various elements of the Liberal International Order.

In view of the debate mentioned above, the following research question is addressed in this article: How to study China's cooperation, reform and resistance towards the Liberal International Order simultaneously? It suggests that the idea of selective reformism, in which Beijing supports institutions which still uphold its national interests and attempts to gain "gradual" reforms of institutional arrangements and normative values that are "inconsistent" with the evolving balance of power in the world, best explains external Chinese behavior. China's engagement is not necessarily revisionist or status quoist, but rather an institutional co-operation, a selective reform and a normative opposition in various issue areas. The article begins by summarising the relevant literature and pinpoints the significant debates and

research gap underpinning this research. It then builds a theoretical structure by formulating conflicting expectations based on realism and liberal institutionalism. The chapter then builds on this foundation to explore the development of the Chinese practice of engaging a Liberal International Order before assessing the Chinese approach to a number of issue areas to illustrate the rationale for selective reformism. The subsequent discussion evaluates the explanatory power of the competing theoretical perspectives and makes the case for the possible explanatory benefits of a selective reformism analysis of China's international behaviour. Finally, the report presents the main results, the theoretical contribution of the article, limitations of the study, and ideas for future research.

2. Literature Review

The ascendancy of China has led to a wide scholarly discussion about its implications for the Liberal International Order (LIO). Many of the existing literature sees China as a revisionist power which aims to change the status quo within the existing distribution of power in the Liberal International Order (LIO). In the light of realism theory, Mearsheimer (2018) contends that the LIO inadvertently helped China's rise, thus engendering a competitor to the American hegemony in the future. In his opinion, the rise of powers is not normally happy with the present and eventually aims to gain more influence in their region and around the world. In this way, China's growing economic and military strength will almost certainly result in attempts to influence the international institutions and rules to the Chinese interests. However, Doshi (2021) found that China's emergence is a result of a long-term grand strategy aimed at challenging the supremacy of the United States. He says that Beijing was "compliant" with the United States at first, then tried to neutralise American influence and eventually turned to other ways of establishing institutions and expanding into the world. Similarly, Chinese authorities have also often referred to the current order as a "so-called rules-based order", reflecting their discontent with an international order that they believe is skewed in favor of the U.S. and its allies. These studies as a whole depict China as a force that wants to make significant modifications to the existing international order.

On the other hand, liberal scholars argue that China has prospered within the existing international system and therefore has interest to preserve many of its core features. Ikenberry (2018) affirms that the LIO is not just a representation of American power but a well-organized order comprised of rules, treaties, organizations and norms that work to the benefit of the states within the order. Due to the nature of China's economic transition, Beijing is closely connected with the current world order, which has happened mostly through engagement with the rest of the world and its institutions. Similarly, Chan and Hu (n.d.) contend that China's WTO membership in 2001 had led to a faster economic development and global economic integration. This perspective gives a better account of China than as a revolutionary challenger; rather, it shows China as an important ally in the current system. While doubts have been cast on many elements of the liberal order, as de Graaff et al. (2020) point out, Beijing is still pro-globalization and pro-multilateral economic cooperation.

The empirical literature has outlined that China does not wholeheartedly accept the Liberal International Order (LIO) but does not reject it either, instead it tries to reform the LIO from within. Beijing has "fought back" against aspects they consider to be threatening Beijing's sovereignty and "regime security" while maintaining other "important pillars of the existing order", including free trade and investment, writes Weiss and Wallace (2021). Likewise, Atlı and Akar (2020) see the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as not a replacement of the existing institutions, but rather a complement to them. He is correct in this, because its systems of governance and operations are similar to those of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Furthermore, McGregor (2024) believes that China has reaped significant advantages from the post-war international system, and that it wants to modify this system to fit its own needs and the increasing influence of its power. In the same way, Holm (2025) notes that China, like several other emerging powers, does not seek to overturn the entire order; rather, it advocates reforms that would provide greater representation to developing states in global governance. Weiss and Wallace (2021) argue that China generally

supports international arrangements related to trade, investment, and economic development because these contribute to governing system legitimacy and national prosperity. However, Beijing becomes significantly more resistant when international norms collide with issues of sovereignty, territorial integrity, or domestic political system. that China does not seek to export an alternative ideology but constantly opposes the international propagation of democracy, human rights interventionism, and liberal political norms when they conflict with the principles of sovereignty and non-interference. McGregor (2024) notes that Beijing seeks modifications to aspects of the existing order relating to Taiwan, human rights, and the South China Sea while continuing to support many of its economic dimensions. De Graaff et al. (2020) thus describe China's engagement with the LIO as a 'dual process of adaptation, resistance and transformation'.

There is an existing literature that is split between realism and liberalism with regard to the nature of a rivalry system. The existing literature is polarized between those who anticipate a rivalry system and those who anticipate an institutional accommodation. The realist scholars, like Mearsheimer (2018) and Doshi (2021), focus on China's long-term rivalry to America's leadership, while liberal scholars like Ikenberry (2018) highlight the international institutions' durability and China's consistent presence in them. More recent research, however, has sought to break down this divide by focusing on the Chinese attempts to reform institutions, develop new institutions, and resist liberal norms in selected areas (Atlı & Akar, 2020; Papa & Han, 2025; Weiss & Wallace, 2021). However, less focus has been given to address the multiple dimensions of China's involvement, transformation and marginalization in the Liberal International Order in various policy fields. In the literature, China is often portrayed as either a power out of touch or a revisionist power. This article closes this gap by suggesting that the Chinese government adopts selective reformism, whereby it upholds and strengthens the existing institutional frameworks in line with its own interests, adopts reforms when representation is not sufficient, and challenges or bypasses liberal norms when they are at odds with its interests in terms of sovereignty, political

system and national development.

3. Theoretical Framework

As demonstrated in the previous section, there has been a long-standing – and on-going – debate on the implications of the rise of China for the Liberal International Order (LIO). Realists see the rise of China as a sign of China's power and influence on the international scene as an indication that it has emerged as a challenger to the current international order, whereas liberal institutionalists would have argued that China's extensive involvement into global institutions and markets generates incentives for China to continue cooperating with the dominant international order. The contradictory interpretations offer a valuable, yet limited understanding of the contemporary international behaviours of the Chinese. Therefore, realism and the liberal institutionalism are used in a complementary way in this study, generating opposing theoretical predictions on how China will interact with the Liberal International Order. The study compares these expectations with the actual Chinese actions in various issue areas, and proposes the concept of selective reformism as an even more distinct framework to understand the simultaneous processes of cooperation, institutional change, and strategic resistance in the case of China.

3.1 Emerging Powers from a Realist Perspective

One of the main theories of international relations concerning the behaviour of states in an anarchic world is realism. It claims that the lack of a central authority forces states to put survival, security and power-seeking on top of their priorities. States have no choice but to build their own security and protect their national interest, so they are constantly striving to strengthen their own capacity. As a result, power shifts often result in strategic competition, especially between existing and emerging great powers (Waltz, 1979). In a realist view, international institutions have only limited autonomy to intervene as they tend to mirror the balance of power, not to limit powerful states' strategic interests. On these assumptions realists claim that great powers are indeed interested in pursuing a policy of maximizing their relative power since they are afraid of the other states intent in the future. Rising powers will therefore not be content with a world order dominated by a rival power and will instead seek

to gain more influence in the region and, if feasible, to change the international landscape in their favor. In other words, rising powers will be reluctant to accept an international order dominated by a rival power and will strive to make the international environment more secure and more favorable for themselves in their region. (Mearsheimer 2001) The more capabilities shift, the more competition between the dominant hegemony and its challenger is likely to occur.

In the context of China's rise, realism would argue that the growth of Beijing's economic and military power has given it the material means to challenge elements of an international order which has been dominated by the U.S. The rapid engagement by China in international institutions is thus not so much a sign of its normative commitment to the rules of the liberal order as it is a pragmatic approach to the pursuit of long-term national goals. This is also supported by Doshi (2021), who believes China's presence in international institutions has been more instrumental than substantive, allowing them to build up economic, technological, and diplomatic powers prior to achieving more influence over the rules and institutions of global governance.

Realism offers three general predictions for China's behavior towards the Liberal International Order. First, as China's relative power rises, Beijing should become more less satisfied with institutional arrangements that are the hallmark of American dominance. Second, China should seek to expand its influence by promoting institutional reforms or creating alternative arrangements that better reflect its strategic priorities. Third, strategic competition with the United States should deepen as both powers struggle to impose their own set of ideas for global governance. These expectations would help the subsequent analysis of China's conduct.

3.2 The Assessment of Liberal Institutionalism about China

On the other hand, liberal institutionalism argues that international cooperation is both possible and workable despite the absence of a dominant power in the international system. Rather than viewing international politics as an unending struggle for relative power gain, liberal institutionalists posit that states frequently recognize the mutual benefits of cooperation and therefore establish international institutions to reduce uncertainty,

facilitate information sharing, and promote stable patterns of interaction (Keohane, 1984). States continually work towards their national interests, but institutions help them to create collective results that can't be obtained by unilateralism. International institutions therefore are seen not simply as a vector of the current distribution of power but as autonomous entities that can move the states in their direction through rules, norms and expectations that seek to foster cooperation. When viewed from this perspective, deep state integration leads to economic, political and diplomatic gains for the states that benefit them, gains that will not be the springboard for the elimination of the existing international order. Even powers which are rising in influence are likely to become more influential through their participation in institutions, and their negotiation of reforms rather than by a radical reshaping of the international system. Liberal institutionalism argues that China has been extraordinarily successful in its economic development from this perspective, and that this has been linked closely with Beijing's integration into the global markets and multilateral institutions. The economic development and international influence of China has been enhanced by international organizations. The fact that China is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO), is active in the United Nations (UN) and takes part in the economic governance of the world shows how international institutions have helped its economic development and global influence. The post-1945 Liberal International Order is defined by a "rich web of rules and institutions," which benefit the United States, but also other member states, in the long-term, as Ikenberry (2011) argues. In this respect, China has strong interests in maintaining the current institutional framework to make changes within existing frameworks.

Liberal institutionalism also anticipates three large possibilities on how China will interact with the Liberal International Order. China's first step towards international engagement should be to pursue its current membership of the international institutions which are the sources of power for both its economy and politics. Second, where institutional reforms are considered necessary, Beijing is expected to pursue change primarily through multilateral negotiation rather than challenging the institutions directly under LIO.

Third, endured economic interdependence and institutional cooperation should encourage continued cooperation with other major powers given the continued competition between the both powers for strategic gains.

3.3 Evaluating Realist and Liberal standpoints about China's Rise

The discussion above makes it clear that realism and liberal institutionalism provide contrasting perspectives for understanding the behaviour of rising powers within the international system. While both theories seek to explain how states respond to changing distributions of power, they differ fundamentally in their expectations regarding the role of international institutions, the motivations of rising powers, and the prospects for international cooperation. resultantly, they generate competing expectations concerning China's engagement with the Liberal International Order. According to realism, international institutions are primarily instruments through which dominant powers pursue their long-term strategic goals. As power shifts in favor of emerging states, rising powers feel uncomfortable with the existing order as it is designed in a way by the established powers that reinforce their supremacy. Applied to China, realism therefore predicts that Beijing will gradually challenge the power arrangements of the Liberal International Order by expanding its strategic influence, promoting alternative institutional arrangements, and competing with the United States for regional and global leadership. Liberal institutionalism, therefore, holds that international institutions create incentives for cooperation by generating mutual economic gains, reducing uncertainty, and facilitating smooth engagement among states. Rather than encouraging confrontation, deep institutional integration increases the costs of disrupting the existing order. similarly, liberal institutionalism expects that China's widespread engagement in global markets and multilateral institutions will reinforce its commitment to the core ideals of the Liberal International Order while pursuing gradual reform in the LIO mechanisms instead of challenging the order.

Nevertheless, both perspectives explain important aspects of China's international behavior, neither independently provides a comprehensive account of Beijing's present link to the Liberal International Order China's strategic rivalries with

the U.S., its desire for more influence in the world and its efforts to build alternative institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank are correctly attributed to realism. It, however, does not address why China continues to be a part of institutions like the World Trade Organization, or why it continues to be involved in more general structures of global economic governance. Rather, the liberal institutionalists have been quite successful in accounting for China's deep economic involvement and the fact that China has remained a player in the multilateral institutions, but have less success in dealing with Beijing's willingness to challenge international norms and institutional processes that it sees as unequal's with itself and its interests. China's behavior is not a thoroughgoing revisionism as predicted by realism, and is not the consistent "business as usual" as predicted by liberal institutionalism. Rather, Beijing demonstrates an institutional cooperative, an ambiguous reformist and a strategic resistance in various issue areas. That means that no one single theory is enough to explain the nature of China's interactions with the Liberal International Order. Instead, a more systematic analytical approach is needed to account for the different attitude of the Chinese government towards the different institutions that it supports, is trying to reform, and does not want to accept. The next section elaborates on the idea of selective reformism in order to give it such a framework.

3.4 Understanding the Concept of Selective Reformism

This article studies China's relationship with the Liberal International Order from the perspective of competition between the two theoretical frameworks of realism and liberal institutionalism, and brings the concept of "selective reformism" into the field. Selective reformism does not see China as a revolutionary revisionist intent on changing the current international order, nor as a status quo power dedicated to staving off change, but instead considers that in different areas of institutions and policies the way China behaves depends on its changing strategic, economic and political interests. The concept thus sees China's interaction with the Liberal International Order as a multifaceted one, consisting of institutional

cooperation, institutional reform and strategic resistance all in one foreign policy approach.

Selective reformism has two facets to it, first Selective cooperation. China actively joins into international institutions and upholds the existing rules where they promote economic development bolster international legitimacy and benefit national development. By continuing to be a member of the World Trade Organization and playing a more active part in the United Nations system and in the various international development and climate change processes, Beijing has gained much from the current international order. These are not only strategic, but also indicative of a sense of mutual benefits in participating in existing institutions for the purpose of advancing China's national interests, and their participation in these institutions also has a positive impact on how Chinese influence is enhanced on the international arena. The second dimension is to be selective with respect to reform. Instead of undermining the Liberal International Order, China is making more and more proposals for changes to certain aspects of global governance which are under-represented in China's view. This has been seen in Beijing's advocacy of institutional reforms in existing institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the creation of additional ones like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB) and the increasing influence of BRICS in global economic governance. They are not necessarily aimed at challenging the current international order: they are designed to shift the balance of influence, broaden the base of developing countries' representation, and complement the current system of governance where China feels the international structure is lacking. There is selective resistance in the third dimension. Resistance is strongest in the areas of sovereignty, territorial integrity, regime security, and strategic autonomy – where international norms, institutional practices, and/or external pressure is seen as a threat to these core national interests. Beijing's approach to Taiwan, the South China Sea and a few human rights issues reveals that the "rule of law" is a conditional rather than unconditional concept for it. There, China's interests are what they deem as sovereign interests

and national security instead of external normative expectations – where China can follow liberal norms.

From the three dimensions, it is seen that China's interaction with the Liberal International Order is neither "all-good" nor "all-bad. Rather, China's actions stem from a pragmatic and situationally-sensitive approach that involves both cooperation and reform alongside resistance, depending on the domestic and external political and economic context and national priorities at the time. Selective reformism can thus be used as a more complete framework of analysis than realism or liberal institutionalism. It maps out the blending of Chinese approaches in international practice and takes into account that the strategies are distinct in various policy fields. The next analysis utilizes this to analyse Chinese behaviour in the key economic, institutional and security aspects of the Liberal International order. The aim is to assess Beijing's behavior as a bid for change of the current system, versus the goal of modifying the system by selective and strategic reform.

4. China's Rise and the Evolution of the Liberal International Order

China's relationship with the Liberal International Order (LIO) has evolved alongside its outstanding economic growth since the adoption of the reform and opening-up policy in 1978. Since this period, it refrained from challenging the liberal order. Beijing embraced the institutions and rules that govern the global economy to achieve national development. Integration into international markets, accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, and active participation in multilateral institutions enabled China to achieve sustained economic growth. In this regard, the stable international environment played its role for China to become a global economic power (Ikenberry, 2008; McGregor, 2024). This period demonstrated that China's rise took place largely within the institutional arrangement of the LIO. China kept its engagement pragmatic while dealing with LIO institutional arrangement for economic growth rather than conflicting on ideology. With the increase in economic and political influence, China's relationship with the LIO gradually evolved from institutional integration to demands for institutional reform. The global financial crisis of 2008 strengthened Beijing's notion that the

governance structures of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank no longer reflected the changing distribution of global power. During this time, China's growing diplomatic influence increased its confidence in advocating a larger role for emerging economies (Brown, 2023). With the confidence to gain diplomatic support from developing countries, China established complimentary institutions and launched many initiatives including Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), BRICS and the New Development Bank (NDB). China adopted the pragmatic strategy by not challenging the existing international order directly, but launched alternative initiatives that provided the opportunities to the countries of global south to assert themselves more powerfully (Atlı & Akar, 2020; Papa & Han, 2025).

At the same time, China's growing power intensified strategic competition with the United States. Particularly economic, technological, and security domains are the most important ones in this respect. American initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS reflected growing concerns over China's increasing regional and global influence, while Beijing viewed these initiatives as efforts to maintain U.S. hegemony within the existing order (Doshi, 2021). Despite the ongoing rivalry between both the great powers, China continued to participate actively in major international institutions and remained deeply integrated into the global economy. Through this, China signalled that it wasn't so much a rejection of the Liberal International Order as a gradual adjustment to the new geopolitical realities. The rise of China can best be seen as a shift from institutional participation to institutional reform, which paves the way for selective reformism as outlined in the next section.

5. China's Strategy of Selective Reformism

It is not only the classic revisionist-power-stablequo dichotomy that demonstrates that China is beginning to play a role in the Liberal International Order. Beijing has not set out to change the status quo, but has been only selectively promoting institutions that can promote economic growth, and encouraging changes to those that don't reflect Chinese interests and run contrary to the country's

priorities. It is best illustrated in the economic arena. China is a strong supporter of the World Trade Organization and the interdependence of the world's economy. It also supports institutional innovations via the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB) and other BRICS programs (Atli & Akar, 2020). As a rule, these institutions do not replace the already existing multi-lateral financial institutions, but are complementary to them. They are part of the process of increasing the representation of emerging economies without altering the general framework of global economic institutions (Papa & Han, 2025). China's solutions are thus a bid to change the institutional structure of the international economy, but not the overall shape in which it is continuing to prosper.

China's "sovereignty, territorial integrity and regime protection" policy seems to grow more assertive. Beijing has consistently defied international norms and outside pressures which it deems to be "inconsistent" with the principle of state sovereignty and "non-interference" on Taiwan, the South China Sea, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and human rights issues, among others (Weiss & Wallace, 2021). When China uses the term "so called" it is doing so with the idea of human rights, in an attempt to make it a stance that is not universal, but selective. In the midst of the international institutions in which it fits, China has contested the "liberal norm" theories which, in its perspective, grant the right to external actors to intervene in the nation's affairs (McGregor, 2024). This is because China's objections are targeted not so much against the institution of the Liberal International Order, but against the normative elements which detract from China's national interests. Thus, China's involvement involves institutional involvement and partial resistance to the norm system, not rejection of the entire system. China's conduct is a consistent pattern, across issue areas. Beijing cooperates when there are existing institutions that help spur economic growth and international stability. It is calling for reform in governance frameworks that exclude the emerging powers and against rules or norms that compromise sovereignty and regime security (Holm, 2025). The differentiated approach is a sign that China is not blind to the Liberal International Order, or that it is not a revolutionary

opponent of it. Rather, it aims to reconfigure separate aspects of the current status quo, but to maintain the ones that remain in the national interest. The analysis thus far makes it clear that it is more useful to account for China's current foreign policies than to use the conventional dichotomy between revisionist and status quo powers in order to explain the Chinese case. Selective reformism is a concept best used to understand the "simultaneous pursuit of institutional cooperation, reform and normative resistance" that China has been undertaking in the Liberal International Order.

6. Discussion

From the debate above, it is evident that both theories of realism and liberal institutionalism alone are able to explain why China is engaged with the Liberal International Order (LIO). Both theories offer valuable insights into key facets of Beijing's actions, but the empirical evidence points to a more nuanced dynamic of interaction, including institutional cooperation, calls for reform and opposition to specific liberal norms. The result shows that one could not explain China's strategy simply using the traditional framework of revisionist and status quo powers. It is easier to describe via a more complex conceptual framework than with Rather It.

Realist theory is right that there are a number of dimensions of China's external behavior that it predicts. Beijing has attempted to exert more influence over international institutions, to dispute some of the rules of the U.S.-led international order, and to step up strategic competition with the U.S. in various fields as its military and economic power has been growing (Doshi, 2021). Similarly, liberal institutionalism accurately explains China's continued participation in multilateral organizations, its deep integration into the global economy, and its recognition of the mutual benefits generated by international cooperation (Ikenberry, 2008; Foot & Walter, 2011). However, neither perspective fully captures the coexistence of these seemingly contradictory patterns. Realism struggles to explain why China continues to support and benefit from many core institutions of the existing order, whereas liberal institutionalism underestimates Beijing's willingness to contest institutional arrangements and liberal norms (McGregor, 2024; Weiss & Wallace, 2021).

The evidence presented in this study suggests that China's behaviour is more profoundly explained through the concept of selective reformism. Rather than seeking either to preserve or overthrow the Liberal International Order, China differentiates among its institutional and normative components according to their compatibility with long-term national interests. Beijing generally supports institutions that facilitate economic growth, trade, and global stability, advocates reforms that increase the representation and influence of non-western states, and resists rules or norms supposed to threaten sovereignty, territorial integrity, or regime security. This differentiated strategy explains why China simultaneously defends the World Trade Organization, promotes institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank, and challenges selected interpretations of liberal political norms. One can therefore define selective reformism as a process in which a new power keeps some aspects of the old international order that are conducive to its national interests and at the same time works to change institutions, the governance system and normative frameworks in small, incremental steps.

This argument has implications that go beyond China's foreign policy. These results indicate that the problems of the present day do not necessarily indicate the end of the Liberal International Order, but rather its more or less gradual transformation in the process of global power shifts. Emerging powers will gain economic and political clout and consequently pressure for institutional reform will grow – but not necessarily that there will be a complete rejection of the current order. China's experience thus demonstrates that rising powers can be stakeholders and reformers or both at the same time, adding to the development rather than the erosions of international institutions.

Knowledge of this dynamic not only enriches theoretical debates in International Relations, but will enable a more balanced approach to the interpretation of the future direction of the Liberal International Order in a multipolar world.

7. Conclusion

The result of this study is that China's interaction with the Liberal International Order is best described as an approach of selective reformism: China's simultaneous cooperation, reform and selective resistance are dependent on the strategic importance of the elements of the existing order. China's behaviour does not fall into the familiar label of either revisionism or status quo power but is a pragmatic and differentiated approach which seeks to influence specific institutional or normative arrangements while maintaining those that are still able to serve China's national interest.

The results of this research form part of the debate regarding the future of the Liberal International Order, indicating that in the modern world institutional change is more likely to be accomplished in incremental fashion than in a revolution. In an increasingly multipolar international system, the rising powers can interact with the existing international institutions through the concept of selective reformism. Being a theory-based study, this article has only sought to formulate a conceptual explanation of China's approach to the Liberal International Order and not to test the proposed framework in a number of specific cases. In the future, other comparative analyses of the explanatory power of selective reformism, such as those that could be conducted with other emerging powers like India or Brazil, or those that could be made across issue areas and regional settings, could be explored. Such a research would enable the evaluation of whether selective reformism is a general trend of the behaviour of rising powers or a more peculiar trait of China's foreign policy today.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

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