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China’s emerging liberal partnership order and Russian and US responses

Evidence from the Belt and Road Initiative in Eurasia

Peter Braga and Stephen G. F. Hall

Why should we expect the Chinese to act any differently than the US did?

John J. Mearsheimer

My good men! How long must our great Russia bow and cringe before China?! Just as we bowed before foul America during the Time of Troubles, so now we crawl hunchbacked before the Celestial Kingdom.

Vladimir Sorokin, Day of the Oprichnik

Reforming and perfecting the existing international system does not mean starting over. It means pushing it to develop in a more just and rational direction.

Chinese President Xi Jinping

Introduction

There is unease among neighbouring and Western states about what a rising China – its gaining political and economic strength – will mean for the world. There is fear among these states, expressed by international relations theorist John J. Mearsheimer quoted above,¹ that a rising China will become the same sort of domineering world power as the United States. This concern is starkly illustrated in Vladimir Sorokin’s fictional dystopia, Day of the Oprichnik.² In the novel, Russia is not so much a nation, but a transit and resource extraction space for goods flowing westward from China.
The current international system is often described as a liberal hegemonic order, sponsored and protected by the United States. A liberal order is open and loosely rules based. The ideal is for international relations to reflect such liberal traits as openness, multilateralism, human rights, democracy, market economics, economic and security cooperation, respect for state sovereignty, and so on. This order is also hegemonic, or unipolar rather than multipolar, because it is maintained by a single, dominant state – the United States. This state sets clear rules and a hierarchical order according to its own vision for the world.

Nonetheless, pressure is growing for a reordering of this system. Ambitious international collective action projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – a Chinese-led infrastructure mega-project, which aims to coordinate maritime shipping lanes (the road) with overland transit infrastructure (the belt) from Asia to Europe – appear to be shifting the axis of global agenda setting from Washington to Beijing. There is intense debate among academics and public intellectuals on the fate of the liberal hegemonic order.

But what alternative to this international order does China seek to build? And what can be said about the reactions of major powers, such as the United States and Russia, to a changing international system? This chapter argues that tentative answers to these questions can be found in Russia’s and the United States’ reactions to China’s growing presence in Eurasia. Eurasia is the combination of the two continents of Europe and Asia, including (but not limited to) Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

The answer to the first question briefly summarises academic debates on China’s rise. It supports the view, contrary to hawkish interpretations of China’s gain in influence, that China seeks to build an international order that closely resembles the current system, but with a greater emphasis on multipolarity, sovereignty, and non-interference in domestic affairs. Scholar Wu Xinbo has called this a liberal partnership international order.

China’s system of diplomatic partnerships with Eurasian countries participating in the BRI serves as evidence for this hypothesis.

The answer to the second question argues that Russia seeks to maintain its status as a great power within a reordered international system. Its Greater Eurasia Project is a clear indication of this opportunistic strategy. Additionally, the United States’ response to Chinese pressures upon the liberal hegemonic order has become increasingly incoherent. In the late 1990s and 2000s, its strategy fluctuated between engagement and containment. In recent years, it has leaned closer towards containment.
But the Trump administration has thrown this response into disarray. This chaos is reflected in the United States’ lack of a BRI policy and in its patchy support for partners in Eurasia.

Debating China’s rise

There is lively scholarly debate on China’s rise and its impact for the contemporary international order. To begin with, the international order itself is a concept fundamental to both (neo)realist and (neo)institutionalist theory. Both camps see states as unitary actors, believe there is no overarching authority to enforce rules between them, and conclude states are forced to structure an international order among themselves. Therefore, debates on the international order occur often within or between these two camps of theory.

For realist scholars, China’s rise tends to be associated with the looming threat of war. Issues of power transition and polarity are their main concerns. Some analysts fear that the transition from a US-led, unipolar international system to a multipolar or bipolar one, or to a possible future where China is the sole hegemon, will not be peaceful. They are concerned the United States might attempt to balance against China’s increasing strength, which will result in a military conflict; they worry about a Thucydides trap between China and the United States. Other realists argue that the structural conditions for a Thucydides trap are not present, so conflict is unlikely.

Institutionalist scholars focus on the principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures of the international system. They are concerned for the international order’s ‘liberal traits’ of democracy, human rights, free markets, and economic and security cooperation. In general, institutionalist views on China’s rise can be divided into three groups. The first group argues that China will continue to integrate into an expanded and somewhat rearranged liberal order. China’s growing interconnectedness to the current system means its own interests will increasingly align with those of the other members of the existing liberal order. The next group argues that China’s continued rise resembles a negotiation. While China will aim to preserve the aspects of the system that made it rich, it will also seek to adapt parts of the current liberal order to better suit its needs. However, the liberal order will also adapt to China. The stakeholders of the current system will seek to protect their interests, while at the same time including China, which is also an important member. The third group takes a gloomier view. While China will not
seek to overthrow the existing order, it will push for major changes to rules and norms, which are at the heart of contemporary liberal order.\textsuperscript{18} This will not end global cooperation between states but the features of multilateral governance – such as conditions for democracy and human rights – may simply be different or absent.\textsuperscript{19}

Chinese academia tends to be concerned with how best to suit domestic development needs to the current international order.\textsuperscript{20} One group of academics argues that China should directly engage in altering the liberal order to suit these needs. A second group advocates returning to a low profile in world affairs, much like during the Deng Xiaoping era.\textsuperscript{21} The third ‘mainstream view’ is where China makes efforts to continue its peaceful ‘harmonious rise’, but also works towards incremental changes.\textsuperscript{22}

The alternative: A liberal partnership order

This chapter argues that China seeks to maintain some elements of the liberal order, while changing others to better suit its needs. The third epigraph that opens this chapter, quoting Chinese president Xi Jinping, expresses this argument.

The alternative system China aims to build is a liberal partnership order. Wu Xinbo outlines its features.\textsuperscript{23} China wishes to preserve liberal economic elements and dilute the hegemonic requirements of the current US-led order. It wants a ‘relatively more equal political order and a cooperative security order’.\textsuperscript{24} Or, in other words, it wants a multipolar system without a sole dominant power. The ideal is for issues of global collective security to be decided among the order’s leading members – via an institution such as the United Nations.\textsuperscript{25} This order also accommodates greater ‘political diversity’\textsuperscript{26} and means that all political regime types are equal – democratic or non-democratic. Issues of human rights and regime type are a nation’s internal, sovereign affairs. Any interventions or conditions on such issues count as interference in a nation’s sovereignty. Political diversity and non-interference are exemplified in the regional security organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),\textsuperscript{27} which requires ‘mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States and inviolability of State borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs . . . [and] equality of all member States’.\textsuperscript{28} Adherence to human rights or democracy are not requirements for participation – unlike NATO, for example, which was founded upon principles of democracy.\textsuperscript{29} Thus the ‘partnership’ element
of this order emphasises international cooperation based on shared economic and security goals.

Wu argues that Chinese partnership diplomacy is evidence of China’s efforts to gradually implement an alternative order in the international system. Partnership diplomacy is a system of symbolic partnerships, which the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) assigns to countries to signal the level of bilateral relations they have with China. Since the early 1990s, China gradually developed this approach to diplomacy according to the same principles of the liberal partnership order – open markets, free investment flows, respect for sovereignty, and non-interference in domestic affairs. Scholars argue that partnership diplomacy is an effort to shape an international order more in accordance with China’s own long-term interests. Partnership diplomacy began when Chinese policymakers sought a way to develop relations with foreign countries without the binding conditions of formal alliances. It is an approach to relations that seeks to maximise opportunities and reduce risks. Now, practically every country China interacts with has an official MFA partnership.

It is just now that a proto-liberal partnership order has emerged. Partnership diplomacy was developed over more than two decades in tandem with China’s rise. Although there have been years of booming, high-level economic growth, only recently has China dramatically increased its international profile, with projects such as the BRI. To be clear, since the early 2000s China has actively encouraged its state-owned enterprises to increase investments overseas. By contrast, the BRI is a collective action project, which requires multiple foreign partners for success. Rather than individual enterprises pursuing profits abroad, the BRI requires many participants to coordinate with China towards a common goal.

The BRI and Eurasia as a proto-liberal partnership order

The beginnings of China’s liberal partnership order can be monitored in Eurasia. This is mainly because the BRI has created conditions for China to become the guiding force for an initiative that shares aspects of liberal internationalism – such as openness, multilateralism and market economics. Although the analogy is supported neither by Chinese academics nor by China, the BRI has been described as ‘China’s Marshall Plan’. The 1947 Marshall Plan is considered one of the foundations of the current liberal hegemonic order, because it brought multiple nations together to work collectively with the United States to rebuild a more prosperous
Europe. The BRI holds comparable potential for the countries of Eurasia. The region is the location of the BRI’s Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). Announced in 2013, the SREB is China’s effort to interlink Central Asia, Russia and Europe across the landmass of Eurasia – reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road. Most of the post-Soviet countries that span the vast distances of the SREB have low- or lower-middle income economies. For countries in the region, participation in the SREB represents a potential future of greater trade, connections with the wider world, modernisation and development. For China, relations in Eurasia are essential for the success of the SREB, the BRI’s flagship project.

Another reason China’s emerging alternative order can be observed in Eurasia is because China actively practises partnership diplomacy in the region. All post-Soviet Eurasian countries have MFA partnerships. There are various levels of MFA partnerships; each level implies different expectations and significance to a bilateral relationship. Those with BRI-related projects officially supported by China have been assigned high-level partnerships. Those without BRI projects officially supported by China have lower-level partnerships. The higher-level partnerships have ‘strategic’ in their title. Strategic partners are “closer friends” than other countries, and among the strategic partners, there is also an implicit hierarchical structure. Bilateral interactions with the higher-level strategic partnerships ‘include rather detailed agendas for bilateral collaboration and provide for the establishment of specific communication channels to facilitate regular exchanges between the heads of state and high-level representatives of different government units’. This is not to say non-strategic partnerships are not valued by China. Strategic partners are seen to impact China’s security, while non-strategic partners are less likely to do so. For example, since the announcement of the BRI, Chinese military leaders have met with BRI participants on average almost twice a year. BRI non-participants met with military leaders on average once in four years, if at all. This suggests the BRI is an additional security concern for China, and thus merits additional efforts on security with BRI participants.

Partnership diplomacy coupled with the BRI makes Eurasian diplomatic relations adhere to the principles of China’s liberal partnership order – openness, market economics, and economic and security cooperation. To begin with, despite the hierarchical nature of the MFA’s different levels of partnerships, the Chinese concept of partnership implies a relationship of collaboration, joint undertakings and shared risks. This equates openness and equality within a liberal partnership order. The BRI projects – whether transit or energy infrastructure – are meant to increase
connectivity, which means an increasing ‘trade’, ‘financial’, ‘infrastructure’, and ‘people-to-people’ interaction between all partners involved. This adheres to the market economy and economic cooperation within the order. So far, there is no formal security architecture for the BRI. This suggests existing multilateral security forums, such as the UN and SCO, are enough – at least at this early stage. For example, China has supported multilateral efforts within the United Nations to resolve the crisis in Ukraine. Multilateral organisations fit the liberal partnership order’s preference for collective approaches to security. Any political interaction consists of ‘exchanges between parliaments, political parties and non-governmental organisations of different countries’. That is, political interaction refers to increased encounters, but does not touch on human rights or political systems, such as liberal democracy.

Crucially, issues of human rights and political systems are private matters, rather than matters of principle. Two recent examples – one between Kazakhstan and China, and the other involving political developments in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine – demonstrate how China handles these types of issues with its partners. In late May 2018, after months of reported disappearances, the Kazakh government confronted Chinese authorities about rumours of Kazakh citizens being detained against their will in anti-Muslim, ‘re-education’ camps in neighbouring Xinjiang province. Kazakhstan’s Foreign Ministry said the two sides discussed the ‘protection of the rights and interests of the citizens of the two countries, and also the mutual trips of residents of Kazakhstan and China’. China responded that any detentions resulted from ethnic Kazakhs that had tried to revoke their Chinese citizenship without the proper documentation. The key takeaway is that China is dealing with Kazakhstan via diplomatic channels to carefully and quietly resolve the issue. Above all, the issue is China’s sovereignty – that China can conduct whatever policy it sees fit within its western territory of Xinjiang. Therefore, the problem is being solved quietly via diplomatic exchange, rather than adherence to a set of agreements on human rights.

The second example shows differences of political regime are unimportant to China. Instead, stability is what matters. When a regime change took place in Ukraine against an increasingly authoritarian regime, China did not degrade its strategic partnership with Ukraine. In addition, Ukraine lost its main investment project with China, because it was located in Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014, so China chose to scrap the project. All the same, China did not downgrade its strategic partnership with Ukraine. The two sides continue to search for areas of cooperation, including within the BRI. Another example relates to regime
Violent protests took place in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010. However, China did not alter its relations with Kyrgyzstan. Instead, China waited for stability to return, and continued to develop its relations. Kyrgyzstan received its first strategic partnership in 2013 and its higher-level comprehensive strategic partnership in June 2018. The principles of openness in economic matters and trade, equality among partners, sovereignty, and non-interference are what China seeks to uphold.

The BRI and China’s partnership diplomacy in Eurasia, therefore, can be viewed as a proto-liberal partnership order. The BRI is a collective action project that exemplifies aspects of liberal internationalism, such as openness, multilateralism and market economics. In the region, China practises partnership diplomacy, which seeks to enhance cooperative relations among partners, instead of making binding agreements among allies. Together, partnership diplomacy and the BRI combine as a basic form of China’s liberal partnership order. Importantly, aspects of the US-led liberal hegemonic order that China dislikes – principles of human rights and democracy – are not requirements to participate in China’s alternative order.

Reactions to a changing international order

How are Russia and the United States responding to China’s rise and a potential alternative international order? The following two sections, ‘Russia’s reaction: Desire and risk’ and ‘The United States’ reaction: Liberal hegemonic disorder’, argue that the two countries’ foreign policies in Eurasia can be analysed to show contemporary reactions to and potential future trajectories of the shifting international order.

Russia’s reaction: Desire and risk

Russia desires to take advantage of changes to the international order as China rises. To balance against the United States and Western Europe (the West), and to maintain its identity as a great power, Russia is seeking to become an essential element of a new, multipolar order. In doing so, Russia runs the risk of becoming a less important member of an alternative order. While there is a broad range of scholarship characterising Russia-China relations, there is general agreement that Russia’s marginalised position within the current world order is driving it to deepen its cooperation with China. An example of Russia’s strategy to keep itself an
important member of the international order is its attempt to make itself a political arbiter of trade in Eurasia as the BRI grows. Only time will tell if this risky strategy will bring the desired results.

The study of Russia-China relations can be divided into four schools. The mainstream, limitationist school stresses the differences and problematic tensions between Russia and China. The alarmist school warns that China and Russia are natural allies against the West, and foresees the smooth development of a Sino-Russian security alliance. Adherents of the identity literature school compare national identity and domestic society to understand how this affects Sino-Russian foreign policy. They tend to argue there is a growing convergence in Russia and China’s foreign policy preferences. The normalcy school argues that while Russia-China relations have fault lines, relations are founded on shared interests and are largely pragmatic. Despite their differing views, these schools agree that Russia and China both seek a multipolar world. After various high-profile scandals (such as the Magnitsky affair, the Olympic doping programme), outcry against the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, and the implementation of Western sanctions, Russia feels increasingly ostracised. Russia has grown closer to China in a relationship of ‘asymmetric interdependence’. This is where China sees Russia as a supplier of military technology and resources, and junior partner. Russia needs China as an alternative market and lender, because of strained relations with the West.

An alternate international order challenges Russia to remain a relevant world power. At the same time, it presents an opportunity for Russia to rise from its apparent ostracisation in the current liberal hegemonic order. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the new Russian state under Putin has looked to replicate the pre-eminence of the Soviet period. As early as his 1999 millennium message, Putin advocated that during his tenure he would place Russia among the great world powers. Putin’s regime fears becoming what former US presidential advisor and diplomat Zbigniew Brzezinski called a ‘black hole’, outshone by Europe (the EU and its allies) in the west and China in the east. For Russia, the rise of China is perceived as both a threat and an opportunity. Russia risks becoming China’s junior partner for the long term. But at the same time, China could become the eastern balancer to Russia’s over-reliance on Europe.

Thus, Russia has been developing a Eurasia strategy to remain relevant. The Kremlin has sought an independent policy in Eurasia, which supports China, but keeps the region under Russian influence. The first step has been to harmonise Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) trade regulations with the BRI. Inaugurated on 1 January 2015, the EAEU is Russia’s...
union building project for the post-Soviet space. The goal of the EAEU is to lead to ‘a Russia-led political–economic bloc that would become a political–economic pole in the multipolar international order’, a Eurasian Union. The EAEU has five members: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia. It is Russia’s tactic to remain a leader among Eurasian states. But harmonising the EAEU with the BRI is an attempt to dilute Chinese influence, because Russia is more widely included in the details of trade as the initiative develops. The Kremlin’s China policy is a fine balance, summed up as ‘never against each other, but not always with each other’.

In a further step to make the best of the BRI and China’s growing presence in Eurasia, in 2016 the EAEU launched the Greater Eurasia Project. It is essentially a framework of treaties to develop Eurasia into a common economic and security space. The Kremlin perceives that with the integration of the EAEU and the BRI, Russia gains some control over the process and can act as a bridge to help the project reach across and into the EU. This gives Russia influence both with China and Europe.

In this way, Russia seeks to become an indispensable player – a vital middleman as Bobo Lo argues – for China. This is the essence of the Greater Eurasia Project: to create a regulatory treaty framework to lock Russia into a ‘comprehensive trade and economic partnership in Eurasia with the participation of the European Union states and China’. It is intended to complement the BRI – a superstructure above the SREB to help facilitate the initiative. This strategy serves two purposes. First, to reduce pressure from the West for the short term. Second, to aid the construction of a new world order in Eurasia. Combining the EAEU and the Greater Eurasia Project, Russia becomes a necessary partner for China and one of the permanent arbiters of Eurasian politics and trade. In such a scenario, Eurasian regimes get to participate in BRI trade, because Russia, the EU, and China say so. Taking advantage of China’s pre-eminent economic strength, Russia maintains its status as a great power in world politics.

Chinese officials are offering their cautious support for the Greater Eurasia Project. They think the project is a short-term improvisation, rather than a long-term plan. Chinese scholars are negative about the project. They argue that the Greater Eurasian Project has vague motives and unclear boundaries. Chinese officials currently refer to the Greater Eurasia Project as the ‘Eurasian Economic Partnership Agreement’ instead of the ‘Eurasian Comprehensive Partnership’ used previously. The word choice emphasises China’s preference for economic interaction. This suggests they are anxious to distance themselves from anything that may be
binding for project members in the future. Some Chinese experts believe the Greater Eurasian project ‘is a short-term strategic shift rather than a long-term grand strategy . . . [They] foresee Russia abandoning the Greater Eurasian [project] following the rapprochement with the West’. 74

Overall, it remains to be seen how the Sino-Russian partnership will pan out. China is after all the dominant partner, so it is possible Russia will become a junior partner without all the benefits Russian policymakers hope for. It is likely the partnership is one of mutual convenience, with both offering each other support in certain areas, but remaining independent in others.

The United States’ reaction: Liberal hegemonic disorder

The United States has responded to a potentially changing liberal hegemonic order with a mix of grudging acceptance, combined with attempts to keep China in established international structures, thereby restricting China’s ability to manoeuvre. It is important to note that the current Trump administration views China’s rise and the BRI as threats to the existing order, carrying an alternative order with them. In a speech at the Rhode Island Naval War College in June 2018, Secretary of Defense James Mattis alerted listeners to ‘China harbouring long-term designs to rewrite the existing global order’. 75 He said of China’s strategy:

The Ming Dynasty appears to be their model, albeit in a more muscular manner, demanding other nations become tribute states, kowtowing to Beijing; espousing One Belt, One Road, when this diverse world has many belts and many roads; and attempting to replicate on the international stage their authoritarian domestic model, militarizing South China Sea features while using predatory economics of piling massive debt on others.

Regardless of Chinese efforts to downplay the potential changes it will bring to the current international order, the United States is on the lookout.

This section begins with a look at academic debate on how the United States should respond to pressures placed upon the liberal hegemonic order by China's rise. Next, there is a review of the actual policy path the United States has taken in response to these pressures. This section shows the United States’ response to China has been ineffective and is increasingly becoming disordered. The United States’ policy has fluctuated between engagement and containment, leaning closer to the latter
in recent years. The Trump administration has thrown this approach into disarray. This ineffectiveness and inconsistency are reflected in the United States’ policy in Eurasia. The United States has developed a response neither to China’s rise nor to the alternative system that comes with it.

In general, scholars have argued for two opposing strategies in response to Chinese pressures upon the contemporary international order. The first is hard-line containment. Realist scholars argue that the United States needs to use internal balancing (a military build-up near China) and external balancing (military alliances with China’s neighbours) to counter China. In the summer of 2018, US Secretary of Defense Mattis voiced his support for a strategy of internal and external balancing against China. The second strategy is a compromise approach. Institutionalists have suggested a policy of ‘wary interdependence’, also called ‘congagement’ (a combination of ‘containment’ and ‘engagement’). This is where the United States accepts China as a great-power partner for the twenty-first century. The strategy is to include and engage China as much as possible within existing international institutions (such as the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund [IMF]), so it gradually accepts the prevailing rules and norms of the contemporary order. At the same time, the United States works to contain any Chinese military build-up or aggression. On balance, it is hoped that advocates for the second strategy prevail.

In practice, the United States’ response has been an attempt at congagement. Over time, this seemed to produce few meaningful results. The latter Bush administration copied much of the Clinton administration’s congagement policies towards China. The Obama administration began by continuing this approach. The administration stressed engagement with China through mutual cooperation and increased communication, but this strategy was mired in mutual mistrust and deemed ineffective. Chinese authorities had not opened China’s economy to equal competition, and a Chinese military presence continued to develop in the South China Sea. The Obama administration shifted its strategy closer towards containment. The United States increased its naval presence in the South China Sea, transferring some of its most technologically advanced naval and air force systems to the Pacific theatre. Obama also inserted the United States into the Senkaku Islands dispute between Japan and China, siding with Japan. These actions are not indicative of the Obama administration taking steps to improve cooperation and transparency with China. In tandem, the Obama administration promoted the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with 11 states from East Asia, South and North
America, and Oceania. This was an attempt to bolster US dominance in Asia while forcing China to make economic reforms.Obama’s China policy began by promoting cooperation, but rapidly became a disjointed mixture ‘of highly mixed emotions and anxieties’, leading to increased disapproval ‘against China’, which resembles a policy of containment. The Obama administration’s shift from engagement towards containment highlights a transition (and the decay) in US-Chinese relations.

The deterioration in relations has continued under Trump. The Trump administration’s policy is incoherent – in part because it failed to hire enough China specialists at the State Department. More US naval vessels are now stationed in the South China Sea to uphold rights of naval passage. A growing trade war has further strained cooperation. Accusations of Chinese interference in the 2018 US elections have not helped either. Despite these recent developments, in 2017 Trump met with Xi Jinping to discuss cooperation. Counter-intuitively, one of Trump’s first actions as president was to renege on the TPP. Many viewed this action as a US own-goal and a win for China.

While the United States is not deeply involved in much of Eurasia, its approach to the region still reflects its ineffective and disordered response to China. The baseline of US foreign policy in Eurasia was established after the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991. At that time, the main issues for the United States were stability and supporting transitions to market democracies. The United States then shifted to a policy of militarisation in Eurasia under the Bush administration. Focus was lost on much of the region, as Afghanistan dominated foreign policy. The Obama administration was faced with a double problem – to reduce military commitments in Eurasia as the Iraq and Afghan wars wound down, but also to address concerns about China’s growing presence in the region. Policy under Trump has been erratic. It has failed to address the breadth of change in the region and has not allocated appropriate policy tools to protect US interests.

The clearest example of the failure to engage with or to counter China’s growing presence in Eurasia is the fruitless Modern Silk Road Strategy (MRS), which became the New Silk Road Vision. The MRS began in 2009 as an Obama-era plan to develop post-war Afghanistan. The strategy was for Afghanistan to engage in political and economic cooperation with all six of its bordering neighbours. It would promote the idea that Afghanistan was a major transit hub at the centre of Eurasia. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced a highly truncated version of the MRS, the New Silk Road Vision (NSR). The NSR is a collection of projects to build economic connectivity between the Central
Asian states, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. The aspirations outlined by Secretary Clinton have not been matched by action. But it is likely the MRS and NSR ideas sped up Beijing’s BRI plans and increased its roll-out to more states and continents. Without resources paralleling China, the United States’ NSR policy is unworkable. Thus, the NSR highlights the disjointed nature of US foreign policy in responding to the rise of China. Secretary Clinton made a statement that could not be backed up by tangible actions.

In addition, the removal of US troops from Afghanistan and the withdrawal from the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan have hampered the image of the United States as an important player in Central Asia. The reduction of financial support for Central Asian states by the State Department only enhanced this perception.

From around the time the SREB was announced in 2013, the United States’ Eurasia policies have lacked lucidity, commitment and reliability. ‘US policy has been more note-worthy for its contradictions and muddled strategic framework’. One such example of a muddled strategic framework by the United States occurred in August 2015, in which US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Dan Feldman stated that ‘We welcome China’s engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which we see not as competitive, but complementary to our own efforts’. Yet, earlier in 2015, the Obama administration was advising US allies and regional partners to not join China’s Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) – a China-led multilateral Asia-Pacific development institution with 57 member countries formed in 2016. The AIIB is, in fact, the product of Chinese frustration with a lack of votes within the US-led development institutions, the IMF and World Bank.

The Trump administration’s official response to the BRI ignores much of Eurasia. It was supposedly worked on for months before being unveiled by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The United States would only focus on the Indo-Pacific region – defined by Pompeo as stretching ‘from the United States west coast to the west coast of India’. Pompeo announced financing of US $113 million dollars for ‘new initiatives’. This minuscule sum pales in comparison to China’s US $40 billion Silk Road Fund. Another inconsistent jolt in policy is the Trump administration’s recent signal for a return to Central Asia. This comes after the Obama administration’s careful withdrawal. The decision occurred because of US perceptions that China and Russia were playing a new ‘Great Game’ and the United States had to react in some way. However, the United States is late to the game (some scholars say nearly a decade behind) and is now having to play catch-up.
The United States has not held a coherent policy about the rise of China since the late 2000s. The Obama and Trump administrations have been simultaneously conciliatory and oppressive. The begrudging acceptance of China’s rise by the United States has often been closer to one of intransigence. As China’s political and economic influence grow in Eurasia, so will its ability to implement its alternative, liberal partnership order.

The United States has ignored Eurasia for too long. The United States’ stalled NSR, coupled with its withdrawal from Afghanistan, has decreased US influence in the region. By contrast, China’s BRI is in full flow, treating Eurasia as a pivotal region. If the United States is to truly engage in Eurasia, it will face stiff competition, either having to convince local states to refute Chinese and/or Russian advances, or alternatively match Chinese investment. If the United States chooses to match Chinese investment, it will lead to an astronomical sum of capital being pumped into the region. Under the disjointed foreign policy of the Trump administration – across the globe, not just Eurasia – it is highly unlikely the United States will develop a stance on China’s liberal partnership order apart from scattered containment and criticisms.

**Conclusion**

The international order faces change. It is shifting from a unipolar system to one that, at the very least, will soon be bipolar. The contemporary order is evolving from a US-dominated system to an arrangement between the United States and China. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union led the Eastern bloc against the United States in a bipolar system. The development of the next order remains in its infancy. How it develops in the future depends on how both actors collaborate.

Some have advocated that China’s gaining political and economic strength is detrimental and will lead to conflict. Others have maintained that China’s preferences will evolve to support prevailing norms and it will become a stakeholder in the current order. Still others have argued that China is labouring for major changes to the core values and practices of the international system. This chapter has argued that China, for the most part, is not trying to establish a new international order. Rather, it seeks to maintain certain features of the current liberal order, while adapting others to better suit its needs. It continues to promote the liberal features of openness, multilateralism, market economics, and economic and security cooperation. It places greater emphasis on multipolarity,
sovereignty, and non-interference in domestic affairs. It works to demote the current liberal order’s hegemonic requirements for human rights and democracy. Chinese scholars have called this alternative system a liberal partnership international order.

This chapter has also argued that China’s rise has affected two other major powers – the United States and Russia. Each country reacted in different ways to this development. Russia views itself as a great power and wants the world to become multipolar, with itself as a distinct pole. Russia is motivated in part by the West’s (primarily the United States’) efforts to ostracise Russia within the existing international order. Russia has sought a partnership with China that both works to displace the United States and improve its own position. Yet it is unknown how far the Sino-Russian relationship will last into the future. It is unlikely that China views Russia as anything but a regional power whose alignment may change if it becomes dissatisfied with its limited status. Russia has accepted China’s rise. As pressure builds for an alternative order, Russia hopes to counter the United States’ dominance. Ideally, Russia would like to be treated as a major power with its privileges maintained in the post-Soviet region.

By contrast, the United States’ acceptance of China’s rise has at the very best been grudging. The Bush and Obama administrations instigated a policy of congagement, attempting to both engage and contain China. As congagement came to be seen as ineffective, there has been an increasing emphasis on containment. The Trump administration views China’s growing international presence as a threat. It sees China’s rise as a direct challenge to the existing order. Nevertheless, the United States has failed to develop a coherent response.

Eurasia is a geopolitical theatre where China’s alternative liberal partnership order, Russia’s manoeuvring, and the United States’ disordered policy are all visible. China uses partnership diplomacy in Eurasia to promote its brand of relations and to increase its connectivity to much of the globe. Russia views itself as the regional great power. While it has accepted Chinese economic pre-eminence, it is developing a strategy to be Eurasia’s political arbiter. Its Greater Eurasia Project is a clear indication of this opportunistic approach. In recent years, the United States’ policies in Eurasia have lacked clarity, commitment and reliability. Its erratic approach – ranging from support to subversion – has culminated in a lacklustre response to the BRI and estranged regional partners.

As China rises, it brings pressure for an alternative international order with it. How this order evolves remains to be seen. Russia seeks to remain a great power by making itself China’s vital partner. In the process, Russia hopes to dislocate the United States’ hegemonic position and
to establish a multipolar order. The United States has begrudged China’s rise, yet it has failed to develop an effective response. The United States is failing to embrace and adjust to change, and this increases the fragility of the liberal hegemonic order it leads. Granted, the relationship between the United States and China is filled with mutual mistrust. A reduction of containment may be perceived by US allies as growing weakness. At the same time, a refusal to engage more with China appears petty – China is rising, and the United States needs to find ways to protect its interests and accept the inevitable.

Notes
11. This is when one rising power threatens to displace an established power and a violent conflict ensues. The phrase was coined by Graham T. Allison, who was referencing the journals of Thucydides, an Athenian general.
27. Established in June 2001, the SCO is a Eurasian organisation whose official mandate is to coordinate regional efforts to fight terrorism, separatism and extremism. See Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ‘Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’ (Shanghai Cooperation Organization Secretariat, 15 June 2001), accessed 4 November 2018, eng.sco.org/load/193054/. As of 2018, SCO members include China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.
35. James D. Sidaway and Chih Yuan Woon, ‘Chinese Narratives on “One Belt, One Road” (一带一路) in Geopolitical and Imperial Contexts’, *The Professional Geographer* 69, no. 4 (2 October 2017): 591–603.
39 MFA of the PRC, ‘Guojia He Zuzhi’ [Countries and Regions].
40 Feng and Huang, ‘China’s Strategic Partnership Diplomacy’, 15.
46 Xi, ‘Full Text of President Xi’s Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum’.
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56 Hasan H. Karrar, The New Silk Road Diplomacy: China’s Central Asian Foreign Policy since the Cold War, Contemporary Chinese Studies (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009); Constantin


65 Trenin, ‘Russia’s Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy’.


69 Trenin, ‘Russia’s Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy’.

70 Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 149.


73 Li, ‘Da Ou Yu Huo’.


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Obama did this by mentioning how the Senkaku Islands were covered under Article 5 of the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan. Obama is the first president of the United States to mention the Senkaku Islands in such a way.

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