



# CHINA'S PERSPECTIVES On The International Order

How Should the EU Proceed?

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# Key Recommendations

- International order is a work in progress; the EU cannot cling to the past. For the first time in history, the world's societies are deeply engaging with one another, with an increasing level of confidence and on more equal standing. The EU will need to accept this global development.
- China's perspective, preferences, and calls for reform are not unreasonable and reflect the world's political, economic, civilizational, and cultural polarity and diversity. The EU should consider acting in a more reserved manner with regards to the liberal indoctrination of the international order.
- China as well as most others favour an international order based on rules and mostly abide by them. Thus, rather than strictly focusing on rules, the EU should give way to more egalitarian principles and be more receptive to other civilization's perspectives on the international order.
- The EU should support the reform of a fraying international order and welcome internationalist reforms in key institutions while a legitimate and functioning international order imposes constraints on the power dynamics between China and the US and their conflict — which is one of the biggest risks to global stability in this century.
- The EU should develop a vision for a reformed international order, seeking common ground and constructive ways to move forward, particularly regarding cooperative security.

International order is a recent phenomenon in human history. It therefore finds itself in early internationalist stages and is a continuous work in progress. Because international relations are not static, the international order cannot be static either. The world's civilizations and societies are finally interacting on a standing that is somewhat more equal. Led by China, the international order's values, principles, rules, and norms are increasingly scrutinized through non-Western civilizational, (geo)political, and intellectual viewpoints. Indeed, the world has become less acquiescing, and reformists are aplenty. The EU needs to acknowledge this and start acting accordingly. Some, such as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, are already aware of this to some degree: "Those who are nostalgic for the dream of a European world power [...] are stuck in the past".<sup>1</sup>

But in contrast to the way mainstream media increasingly portrays it in the West, this is not necessarily bad news, "the end of the world", or the beginning of an authoritarian world.<sup>2</sup> There is no need to view the international order through such simplistic binary lenses. Rather, this invitation for change is a very useful and timely wake-up call and a unique opportunity to access and gain wisdom, knowledge, values, and perspectives from the four corners of the world. To truly learn from one another and to fuse humanity's knowledge and wisdom could lead to enlightenment at a global level. For one, these reformists that are often constructive — with China being the most active, competent, and resourceful — are not launching a frontal attack on the international order and they are not making demands for an alternative order. They recognize the many merits of the one ruling today. Rather, they are seeking recognition from Europe (and the US) with regards to their culture and socio-political systems, as well as a new balance of inclusivity and input in high-level decision-making processes. Some, like China, also seek more cooperative interpretations of security rather than collective ones. Indeed, the current global security frameworks and principles frequently demonstrate their inadequacy, as can be seen in the escalating tensions and armed conflicts. We need to come together, engage in conversations, and reassess the concept and implementation of security, its order, and framework. Moreover, it is undeniable that the collective wisdom, knowledge, values, and reflections of all member states combined

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1 "Germany's Scholz calls for reformed EU in a 'multipolar' world", Deutsche Welle, 9 May 2023, [dw.com/en/germanys-scholz-calls-for-reformed-eu-in-multipolar-world/a-65558112](https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-scholz-calls-for-reformed-eu-in-multipolar-world/a-65558112) (last accessed 25 April 2024).

2 As Yan Xuetong argues, some change to the system does not imply an overhaul of the system, see Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019, pp. 155–172.

outweigh that of a single cohort, such as the West. It is impossible for the EU to deny this.

China's perspective on the international order revolves around three prevailing discontents: first, the West's politically liberal labelling and indoctrination; second, the West's hegemony that is spearheaded by the US; and third, US-led collective security alliances and institutions. The first discontent has two underpinnings: the international order should not be labelled liberal as only a minority of member states are liberal democracies, and the international order is not genuinely liberal. China argues that the West does not acknowledge and respect the world's civilizational and cultural plurality and, therefore, does not respect diversity in socio-political models, values, and traditions. Thus, China asks: is the order genuinely liberal and democratic? The second discontent states that the current order possesses the hegemonic mentality of the US, lacking fairness and genuine openness, and has clear geographic boundaries. China sees the international order as being mostly economically catered to the West, with the US acting as the gatekeeper. The third discontent is that, according to China, US-led collective security alliances and institutions go against the spirit and letter of cooperative security dictated by the UN Charter. Orders have traditionally been instruments against rivals and threats, and the US-led liberal international order still maintains binary and schismatic characteristics from the Cold War. Similarly, China dismisses the "rules-based international order" of the US and its allies as an approach that seeks to impose chimeric rules that serve their interests.

China's calls for reform and its proposed initiatives are not irrational and reflect the world's civilizational, cultural, socio-political, and economic polarity and diversity. How can the EU, a beacon of liberalism and progressivism, not arrive at the same observation or have done so already? Importantly, China's vision for the international order is no less rules-based than that of the US, something which Harvard's top international relations intellectual Stephen Walt concludes.<sup>3</sup> While China predominantly tends to be reformist in its approach to the US-dominated regional maritime security order, this is less pronounced at the international level. To illustrate Walt's point, we could look at China's support of UNSC resolutions. Between 2000 and 2018, China backed 182 out of 190 UNSC resolutions that imposed sanc-

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<sup>3</sup> Walt, Stephen M., "China Wants a 'Rules-Based International Order,' Too," *Foreign Policy*, 31 March 2021, [foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/](https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/31/china-wants-a-rules-based-international-order-too/) (last accessed 25 April 2024).

tions on nations deemed to be in violation of international rules or norms.<sup>4</sup> Fareed Zakaria, a globally respected voice of reason, astutely observes that: “The old order — in which small European countries act as global heavyweights while behemoths such as China and India are excluded from the first ranks of global institutions — cannot be sustained.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, multipolarity requires reform of the international order. Otherwise, it risks losing relevance and influence, and that would pose a real risk to the international order.

With these global shifts and arguments in mind, it is evident that it is preferable to address such plurality and suggestions for reform through peacefully negotiated institutional, principal, and normative change than through conflict.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the longer the EU waits, the more it risks being seen as resistant to change by parties that do not belong to the West. The non-West is not complaining because they like to, but because they have genuine and long-standing concerns. Manifestations of the liberal international order are under genuine duress of legitimacy. This is both due to failure to effectively deal with longstanding challenges, such as persistent poverty in the Global South, and emerging ones, such as climate change, as well as its unrealistically conceived liberal indoctrination and certain inherent theoretical and historical shortcomings.

How should the EU in particular proceed? Within the EU, it is necessary reach a consensus on what the international order is, what it is made of, and what it should be. To give just one example: in the collective West, references to the international order range from the “international order” to the “liberal international order” and many shades in between. More recently, one sees variants of the “rules-based international order”, which originates in the 1990s but is especially popular in the US today. China, too, has a host of references for the international order. It refers to international order as the “post-war international order”, the “international order”, “world order”, “existing international order”, “the international order

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4 Zakaria, Fareed, “The New China Scare: Why America Shouldn’t Panic About Its Latest Challenger,” *Foreign Affairs*, [foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare) (last accessed 25 April 2024).

5 Ibid.

6 A new type of power transition characterized by institutional balancing rather than traditional military methods might be more peaceful than widely predicted. See Huiyun Feng and Kai He, “China’s Institutional Challenges to the International Order,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 23–49. See also Steve Chan, Huiyun Feng, Kai He, and Weixing Hu, *Contesting Revisionism: China, the United States, and the Transformation of International Order*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

underpinned by international law," or "the international system." It will be hard to come to terms if there is no agreement on such conceptual and terminological fundamentals. Many EU member states, particularly the larger players such as Germany and France that tend to adopt a broader perspective, can start this process domestically before taking it to the EU level. Building on consensus within the EU, it will eventually need to develop its collective vision for the international order and necessary improvements — rather than merely reiterating and centralizing a rules-based order. Most states usually abide by existing rules. The issue is rather that some new rules need to be crafted, other rules leave room for interpretation, and still other existing rules do not serve all parties and their corresponding decision-making and rule-making processes are not egalitarian. There is enough classical and contemporary wisdom and sophistication in European civilization to promote such egalitarianism. Arguably, no continent in the world enjoys the socio-economic egalitarianism that Europe has in the past. If the EU can develop this at home, it should not have difficulty promoting and co-developing this at the level of international order.

The European vision will need proposals to advance the international order's legitimacy, sustain what works, and provide suggestions for reform for what does not. It must be clear by now that the Westphalian principles of sovereignty, equal standing, and non-interference that are enshrined in the UN Charter are considered untouchable by virtually all countries in the Global South. The EU should respect that. They do not want to make the EU and its member states in their image, and the EU should not try to make them in its image. Keeping in mind that the current liberal international order was created in a balance of power that was favourable to Europe after World War Two, listening with an open mind to different civilizations and cultures, actors large and small, particularly in the Global South, is absolutely imperative in a multipolar world. Equally imperative is that the EU and its member states follow up with concrete actions with regards to reforming the international order and making compromises. Just listening will not do. We have moved past that chapter in the book of international order.

As international order, which is still in its early stages, continues to evolve, it will likely become a fusion of values and principles from several civilizations: Western, Chinese, Hindu, African, Islamic, Latin, and Orthodox, among others, and those of other and subcultures. This will enrich the international order and recuperate its validity. Given its role as the original curator and, in absolute terms, still a highly influential actor, Western civilization will continue to exert significant influence on the international order. But this requires Europe

to become involved more enthusiastically. On a final note, it is absolutely critical that this progression of the international order does not become a clash of civilizations. It should rather proceed through dialogue, understanding, compromise, cooperation, and fusion. Let us write the next chapter of the book of international order together.

*This executive summary is based on a [Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung policy report](#). The aims of that report are to garner understanding for China's perspective and preferences with an open mind. The objectives of the author and this report are not to explicitly endorse or criticize these perspectives, preferences, and propositions for reform, but merely to identify and understand them.*