

The Implication of the Rise of China to the US-Led Liberal International Order: The Case of One Belt and One Road Initiatives

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Abstract

The rise of the “Middle Kingdom”, China, has been a source of intense academic debate amongst the Western scholars. On the one hand, the pessimists epitomized the “rise of China” as a threat to the US-led liberal international order. They provided a one-sided and biased analysis. On the other hand, the “rise of China” is portrayed as that of a peaceful rising power which is neither a threat nor a changer of the existing international order. Apart from these opposing perspectives, the US-led liberal international order has been facing an internal crisis within the liberal states. This shows that history *has never been going* as the liberal prophets predicated. The manifesto of “liberalism is the only governing ideology of post-Cold War period” is now falsified by the rise of populism and nationalism in the countries who drafted the manifesto of “end of history”. Alongside this, the inherently unjust system of the US-led liberal international order has also been facing increasing challenge from the emerging powers of the rest, notably China. This paper thus examines the implication of the rise of China to the US-led liberal international order by taking the “One Belt and One Road Initiative” (BRI) as a case. I argue that through the BRI, China envisioned a new equitable international order that can replace the prevailing exploitative order being established by the “Western powers” during colonialism. On the one hand, BRI foreshadows that China is a dissatisfied actor of the existing order and it is a revisionist power. On the other

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hand, BRI itself is a liberal project. Thus, BRI is not at odds with liberalism. It is functioning under the liberal order, but envisioned a new international order. Thus, it can be argued that BRI seems to be a liberal project challenging the US-led unipolar world order intended toward a more inclusive and transformative world order.

Keywords

China; One Belt and One Road Initiative; US; liberalism; international order.

1. Introduction

The end of Cold War has dramatically shifted the prevailed bounded order into liberal international order under the United States' hegemonic leadership. This was celebrated by liberal scholars as the triumph of liberalism. Fukuyama (1989, p. 1) epitomized the disintegration of Soviet Union as "the end of history", i.e. "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government". In a similar way, Ohmae (1995) contended that the period is "the end of the nation States and the rise of regional economies". Thus, liberalism is professed to be an eternal governing ideology and a system of "the final destiny of mankind" (Fukuyama, 1989, 1992).

Nevertheless, history has not moved as predicated. The post-Cold War *manifesto of liberalism* as the only eternal prevailing system, a truly universally applicable one and a universal grammar of all the ideologies is now falsified by the rise of populism and nationalism in the countries who drafted the manifesto of "end of history". Continental Europe which was seen as the symbol of liberalism's triumph is now a shrinking region foreshadowing the failure of liberalism (Mearsheimer, 2018, 2019). The coming to power of Donald Trump was also another challenge for the liberal institutions in liberal states. Alongside this, the US-led liberal international order is also being increasingly questioned by the emerging powers of the rest.

The more apparent challenge to the US-led liberal international order is, however, the rise of China. It is one of the most prominent developments with far-reaching implications to the prevailing international order. However, there are divergent contending views regarding the implication of the rise of China to the US-led liberal international order ranging from those who epitomize China as an aggressive revisionist power to the optimistic view that regards China as a status-quo-preserving rising power. The

intention of this paper is, therefore, to examine the implication of the rise of China to the US-led liberal international order by taking the “One Belt and One Road Initiative” (BRI) as a case.

Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative research approach. Secondary data gathered from books, journal articles, Chinese policies, statistical data, reports and official speeches have been used considerably. Accordingly, the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 conceptualizes the key concepts. Section 3 explores the contending debates on the implication of the rise of China from different theoretical perspectives. Section 3 also analyzes the crisis of the US-led liberal international order. Finally, in Sec. 4, the paper analyzes the implication of BRI to the US-led liberal international order.

2. Conceptualizing the Liberal International Order

In the post-WWII, US emerged as the leading superpower in creating liberal institutions, (re)building and maintaining a liberal international order. The liberal international order, however, has to wait until the collapse of USSR to be flourished as the only international order regulating inter-state relations. In 1989, the Cold War bipolarity that had constrained the liberal international order had demised. This has marked a dramatic shift.

In his first breakthrough article, *The End of History*, Fukuyama (1989, p. 1) contended that the year 1989 is not just the end of Cold War but “the end of history”, i.e. “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. Fukuyama (1992) further argued that the triumph of liberal democracy over other governing ideologies and systems will make liberalism to be the final destiny of mankind. Thus, the end of Cold War was celebrated as liberalism’s triumph and marked a shift from Cold War ideological-polarized bipolarity to a unipolar world under US hegemony and a liberal international order.

Now it is postulated that the post-Cold War period has a liberal international order under US hegemonic leadership. However, the concept “liberal international order” is a loosely defined concept. Let us start with the concept of order first.

The anarchical nature of international politics does not signify a total absence of an order and orderer. This is because the international system is not totally chaotic. Instead, there is a governing body of norms, rules and

institutions (Trachtenberg, 2006). Mazarr *et al.* (2016, p. 7) defined order as “the body of rules, norms, and institutions that govern relations among the key players in the international environment”. Likewise, Mearsheimer (2018) defined order as a group of international institutions that serve as the governing mechanisms of the interactions among the member states.

At the international level, order is the prevailing system of rules created in the interest of the major powers but supposed to be weapons of the weak states of the system albeit subject to change if it moves against the vital interest of the major power. Order can be manifested in institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Bank (WB), the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), bilateral and multilateral regional security and economic institutions and liberal political norms (Mazarr *et al.*, 2016; Mearsheimer, 2018). The set of principles, rules and norms that are emerged from these alliances and organizations are the “ordering mechanisms” to maintain a stable order (Mazarr *et al.*, 2016).

In this context, international order can be understood as an established, organized or institutionalized structure or pattern through “ordering mechanisms” that serves as a governing mechanism of inter-state relations (Mazarr *et al.*, 2016). It may be built upon a particular set of principles, values and norms intended to achieve a specific purpose. For instance, the different established international orders from the Concert of Europe (1814–1914) to the League of Nations (1919–1945) as well as the United Nations (1945) have their own purposes and ordering mechanisms.

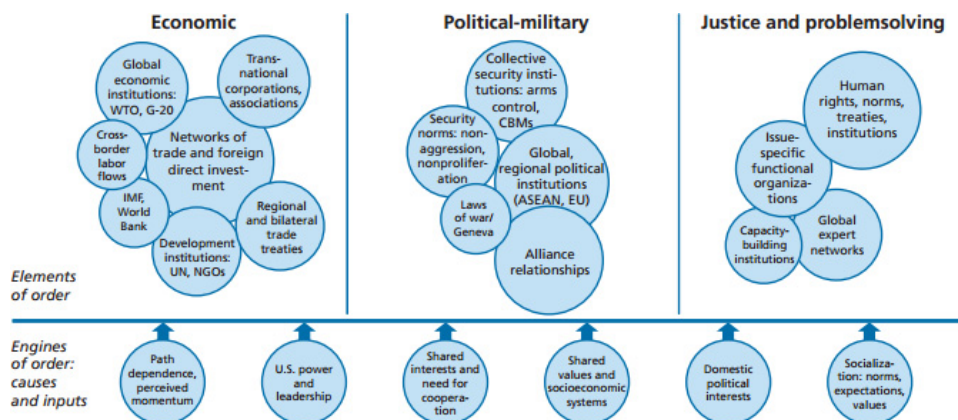
The liberal international order, which is the focus of this study, was established following WWII under the hegemonic leadership of the US (Cottle, Keys and Costigan, 2019). It is a rule-based system (Mazarr *et al.*, 2016) with the centrality of worldviews and the values of US and Western powers such as liberal democracy, human rights, collective security, multilateralism and free trade. Liberal institutions, for instance, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization, the United Nations, European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other trade arrangements, are created and maintained by the US and Western powers in accordance with the founding principles of the liberal international order. These principles, values and institutions are ordering mechanisms. The US has been using these ordering mechanisms to further its interest.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned liberal institutions have a role of indoctrinating and thereby convincing illiberal actors about the

inevitability, appropriateness, justice and natural order of the prevailing order. As Cox (1993, p. 62) has noted, normative instruments and institutions are the mechanisms through which hegemony is expressed. Even in the first place, institutions might be a hegemonic creation and thus they represent norms that hasten and legitimate the expansion of hegemonic order (Cox, 1993, p. 62). Thus, the existing liberal institutions and norms are the mirror and byproducts of the hegemonic power, the US. As a mirror, they reflect the color of the hegemonic power and as a creation of hegemony, they act as the priest of the hegemon with the function of indoctrination. Without question, a hegemonic fabricated institution may serve as a baptizer and indoctrinator of hegemony.

The post-Cold War US-led liberal international order also has three major pillars. The first is liberal institutionalism, and the task of US is strengthening and creating a web of liberal institutions with international membership. It is one mechanism through which the liberal order is maintained. However, institutionalism is by other means a neo-territorial expansion. This can be evidenced from the EU and NATO's eastward expansion so as to encroach perceived threats to the liberal order, notably Russia. The second pillar is complex web of interdependence. This is the task of integrating countries into an open world economy. The third one is spreading liberal democracy. Furthermore, these three pillars are maintained and promoted through a combination of economic, and politico-military ordering mechanism which are clearly shown in Fig. 1 (Mazarr *et al.*, 2016, p. 14). The figure shows key elements and engines of the liberal international order through which international orders is maintained and sustained.

Though all the three pillars of liberal international order are controversial, the third pillar is more polemical. Democracy along with human rights as the core value of US and liberal international order has been an enigmatic polemical problem. US tended to view itself as an eternal "defender of human rights" and promoter of liberal democracy. It appeared to be the savior of victims of human rights violations in Global South having a mission to civilize "others" by universalizing Eurocentric norms. By using "human rights and democracy" as a mask, the US has pursued a policy of regime change and become "deeply hostile to alternative (and often non-Western) civilizational orders that reject its dogmas" (Stokes, 2018, p. 133). However, the result was miserably bad. In some countries like



Source: Mazarr et al. (2016, p. 14).

Fig. 1. Elements and Engines of the Liberal International Order

Libya, neither democracy nor human rights have been realized. The current economic battle of the US and resurgent Russia in Syria is another classical example. On the basis of this account, it can be argued that in one way the US is a hegemonic stabilizer, whereas it is also a destabilizing hegemonic leader of the liberal international order.

In general, the US-led liberal international order is based on rule-based free-trade system, collective security, multilateral cooperation and the spread of democracy. With this, the last decade of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century were seen as “golden years” of the US in creating and maintaining a liberal international order successfully with a big promise (Mearsheimer, 2018). The first major manifestation of the success is the integration of “big powers” such as China and Russia into the key institutions of the international system such as the IMF, WB and WTO. Second, the European integration is taken as a classical example of the possibility of economic and political integration. The European integration under the auspices of EU has achieved a positive record and hence supposed to have a bright future. Third, NATO’s expansion to the Eastern Europe is seen as a success story of liberal international order. Finally, a new wave of democratization is proclaimed.

Nevertheless, history never moved as the US wanted. The “big promise” of liberalism has begun to fail. The US strategy of integrating the illiberal states into the liberal international order is not successful. The US policy of regime change in the Middle-East region is indicative of a bad state of affairs. Neither its “war on terror” nor its regime-change policy has brought

considerable effect. Continental Europe which was proclaimed in the 1990s to be the most hopeful in showing the fruits of liberalism, is now foreshadower of the decline of the liberal order. EU, the most successful liberal institution, has faced severe chronic problems as a result of Eurozone crisis and rejection of the treaty for continental constitution. Adding insult to injury, the decision of Britain to exit EU, the rise of populist parties and anti-liberal views are making the fate of liberal international order more problematic. Thus, the hoped-for continent for liberal international order has been paradoxically an example of failure of liberalism.

Moreover, the new wave of democratization has not sustained for long. The number of liberal democracies has been declining dramatically. The regime-change policy of the US has a deteriorated effect on the targeted illiberal states. Its regime-change policies in Libya and Syria are a double failure. In both states, civil war erupted and they became a safe haven for terrorists. Instead of building liberal democracy, the US regime-change policy has created illiberalism. Besides its self-proclaimed savior of others image, its regime-change policies in Libya and Syria led to grave violation of human rights, human migration and state failures.

Finally, the worst thing for liberal international order came from its creator, the US. The coming to power of Donald Trump was a challenge for liberal institutions such as the NATO, NAFTA and WTO. Alongside this, liberal institutions are increasingly questioned by the emerging powers of the South. The newly emerging powers are also competing to restructure the international institutions in their favor or to institute a balanced system. Moreover, due to hegemonic destabilization role under the cover of democracy and human rights, there is a growing contestation of US hegemonic status quo and the liberal international order. However, an apparent challenge to the prevailing system is the rise of China. In view of that, the following subsection explores major contending views on the implication of rise of China to the liberal international order.

2.1. Contending perspectives on the implication of the rise of China

The rise of China is one of the mainly debated issues of contemporary international relations scholarship. Realism including its variants such as offensive realism, balance of power theory and power transition theory held pessimistic views on the implication of the rise of China to the international order. They contend that in its very nature a rising power is a

revisionist power with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the existing international order (Feng and He, 2017). According to the power transition theory, since the general trend of the rise of great power is often violent revisionism, the rise of China will therefore be a violent one in challenging the existing US hegemony (Yang, 2013). According to this theory, a rising power will “initiate wars against the leading defender during a power transition, as evidenced by the rise of Germany and Japan in the late 19th century and the early 20th century” (Yang, 2013, p. 37). Nevertheless, power transition is not always violent; the 19th-century hegemonic power Great Britain was replaced by the new hegemonic power, the United States, peacefully.

On the other hand, balance of power theory asserts that rising power will challenge the existing hegemony by inviting counterbalance measures which led to great power competition and rivalry. The rising great power can disrupt the existing balance of power “which will then be restored through internal balancing (arms buildups) and/or external balancing (alliances). Until the balance is restored, these counterbalancing efforts, often either excessive (over balancing/chain-gang) or insufficient (under balancing/buck-passing), are likely to cause wars” (Yang, 2013, p. 43).

According to Mearsheimer (2018, 2019), as a rising great power, China will do what the United States did at the end of 20th century: pursue regional hegemony in its own hemisphere, Asia. He argued that the rise of China will shift the balance of power which will put an end to unipolarity (Mearsheimer, 2019). According to this narrative, the revisionist behavior of China will be at odds with US hegemony. This will lead to bounded order. Mearsheimer (2019, p. 50) asserted the following:

“There are likely to be Chinese-led and U.S.-led bounded orders that will help prosecute the security competition that is almost certain to arise between China and its allies, on the one hand, and the United States and its allies, on the other. That rivalry will have both economic and military dimensions.”

In general, the realist contends that the rise of China will lead to an intense and overarching competition. Since the alpha and omega of any state is national interest, China’s unprecedented growing power will lead it to pursue its interest more assertively and proactively which will in turn

force the US to maintain the liberal order and balance against it. In the process, there will be great power, rivalry even to the extent of hegemonic war (Glaser, 2011).

In contrast, liberalists are optimistic about the rise of China and its implication to the liberal order. They assert that “China will be a status quo power because China has benefited significantly from the current international order, which it should sustain rather than overturn” (Feng and He, 2017, p. 25). This sanguine view contends that because of the inherent merits of the current order, given the facts that the complex web of economic interdependence can make war costly for China and US, and China is already deeply integration within the international system, China is more likely to preserve than overthrow the prevailed system (Feng and He, 2017). Rather, it will “continue to actively seek to integrate into an expanded and reorganized liberal international order” (Wu, 2018, p. 995). Based on this, they contend that “because the current international order is defined by economic and political openness, it can accommodate China’s rise peacefully” (Glaser, 2011, p. 81). It is assumed that the US and other liberal states will welcome China to join the prevailing liberal order and let China to prosper within the system. On the part of China, they contend that it is likely to act according to the existing system rather than to launch a costly struggle to replace the liberal order and establish its own preferred international order.

Differently, the prospect-institutional balancing model asserts that “the high level of economic interdependence among states in the context of deepening globalization encourages states to choose multilateral institutions...to pursue security and interests...” (Feng and He, 2017, p. 29). Based on this, it is argued that China is more likely to use an inclusive rather than exclusive institutional balancing as a means to challenge the United States particularly in the economic and trade arena.

Apart from this, within the Chinese academia there are various contending views regarding what approach China should follow toward the US-led liberal international order. In the first place, it is suggested that China should play a leading role in changing the prevailing order, while others maintain that China should actively engage in low politics than high politics and should preserve the existing order and a yet another variant asserts that it should follow an incremental and peaceful approach of reforming and changing the order in its favor (Wu, 2018).

In general, there are contending views ranging from the realist revisionist view to the liberalism view of China as a preserving actor as it is beneficiary of the existing order; some others contend that China will use institutional balancing mechanisms. Whichever the case, China is challenging the US-led liberal international order in different ways. This paper argues that the rise of China could not be explained by a single theoretical approach. Rather, since China is a neo-mercantilist state in domestic politics, it is increasingly becoming pro-capitalist in its regional and international involvements. On the one hand, China is aspiring to be benign than malign hegemonic power; on the other hand, China is pursuing to end unipolar world and its official policy is toward a multipolar world order. From this, I argue that China is both a self-preservationist and a reformist rising great power. It is a self-preservationist because dismantling the existing order in its totality is not the most preferred interest of China. It is a reformist because the existing order is US creation and serves the interest of the US. It is not accommodative. Any action or policy contrary to the US worldviews and policy is tantamount to violation of the existing order. Because of this, China pursues a policy of revisionism in order to transcend the existing order from exclusionary into inclusionary, and from unipolar to multipolar. In line of this, the following subsection explores the what, who and when of the US-led liberal international order from various points of views.

2.2. Crisis of US-led liberal international order: Manifestations and challenges

The US-led liberal international order is in a crisis. The crisis is being interpreted differently. Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" is questioned retrospectively. According to the international relation scholars, the crisis is a proof for the "fall of the liberal international order" (Mearsheimer, 2018), and "the end of neoliberalism and the rebirth of history" (Stiglitz, 2019). In a similar way, Stokes (2018, p. 133) contends that:

"If the dominant cultural paradigm of the early post-Cold War period was the end of history as a triumphant liberal internationalism flattened global geopolitical space, Trump's victory represents the end of this interregnum: a rearticulation of the primacy of the nation-state, a fracture in

the postwar liberal internationalist consensus and a hardening of geopolitical revisionism.”

Whatever the catchwords scholars are using, the US-led liberal international order is facing apparent crisis as a result of different factors: resurgence of nationalism and Rise of the Rest (China, Russia and India).

2.2.1. Resurgence of nationalism and populism in the West

The doctrines of antithetical and/or complementary “isms” such as nationalism, fascism, Nazism, populism and liberalism are born, grew and spread into the Southern frontiers from the West. Although the exact date of the birth of nationalism remains debatable, it is as old as the nation-state itself, as a movement and guiding ideology traced back to the 18th and 19th centuries in Western Europe and America (Smith, 1998). Nationalism was a major organizing and mobilizing force behind modern European state formation.

By making nation as its center and end, nationalism has become a dividing and re-dividing force of lands and peoples along identity lines, reached its apogee level in the two world wars and caused the holocaust. After WWII, in Europe nationalism had begun to decline and gave way to other ideologies and organizing forces: liberalism and globalization. With this, the end of nationalism and its associated “isms” has been predicated many times. Hobsbawm (1990), the author of *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, proclaimed that his subject matter is “a dying breed”. Fukuyama (1992) also argued that the collapse of communism will constitute the end of other organizing ideologies such as communism, fascism, monarchy and so on, and since then liberalism will prevail as a universal governing ideology forever. Similarly, Ohmae (1995) also contended that the period is “the end of the nation States and the rise of regional economies”.

Nevertheless, history never goes as predicated. Nationalism and populism are now rising globally. “Liberalism triumph” is thus a false prediction. One will not be surprised if the potent weapon of destruction comes from illiberal states but from its birthplace, America and Western Europe. As noted by Mearsheimer (2018), the liberalism international order itself has “the seed of its own destruction”.

One of the “self-destruction seeds” for liberalism is the resurgence of nationalism and populism in US and Western Europe, mistakenly referred to as the creator and savior of liberal values such as democracy, human rights and free trade. Two major events that challenged the political chemistry of the liberal order are the Brexit (British Exit) vote in which the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union by 51.9% and the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States.

On June 23, 2016, the United Kingdom voted in the Brexit referendum to leave the European Union. And 51.9% of the voters voted to leave the European Union while 48.1% voted to remain (Statista, 2016). Surprisingly, the referendum registered the highest voter turnover in the history of United Kingdom accounting for 72% since the 1992 general election (Statista, 2016). Brexit is a major manifestation of Euroscepticism. Thus, Brexit can be seen as a move against the foundational base of the liberal order as the same country did the same thing in ending up the geopolitical order of the Concert of Europe. Brexit shows the climax stage of the crisis of liberal order. Walt (2016) viewed it as the “collapse of the liberal international order”. Similarly, O’Brien (2016b) stated that “Brexit, in other words, is the end of the end of history”. Differently, Voeten (2016) argued that the Brexit referendum reinforces the liberal assumption about the difficulty if not impossibility of withdrawal from liberal order in the realm of “complex web of interdependence”. He argued that Britain will be the proponent of liberal values even though it will be outside of EU. He concludes that Brexit and the rise of populism never show the fall of liberal order rather they may undermine the core foundations of liberal international institutions.

Adding insult to injury, the most destabilizing force to the bedrock of liberal international order has been the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States. In an article published in *The Washington Post*, O’Brien (2016a) symbolized the election of Donald Trump as “the end of the end of history”. His administration is against the very foundational base of liberal international institutions. Ikenberry (2018, p. 8) contends that:

“For the first time since the 1930s, the United States has elected a president who is actively hostile to liberal internationalism. Trade, alliances, international law, multilateralism, environment, torture and human rights—on all these issues, President Trump has made statements that, if acted

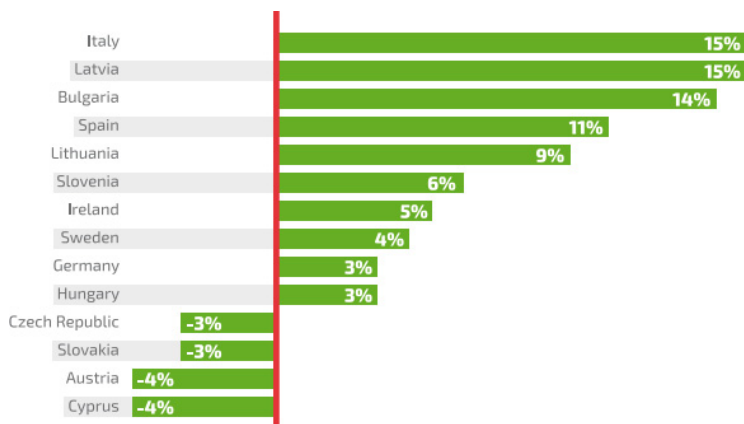
upon, would effectively bring to an end America's role as leader of the liberal world order."

NATO, one of the major pillars of US hegemony and the liberal international order, is the first liberal security institution under perceived crisis due to Donald Trump. He is the first-ever US President in contesting collective security principles as he "underlined the conditionality of the American commitment to NATO" (Carati, 2019). Next to NATO, WTO is part of the crisis due to the dramatic shift of US policy toward bilateral negotiation and agreement which is in contrast to the WTO's spirit (Carati, 2019). The revision of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is also another case to show. In his election campaign in 2016, Trump viewed NAFTA as the responsible trade arrangement for trade deficit and the decline of the US manufacturing sector and as a result intended to terminate it. To make the US distant from NAFTA, NAFTA is revised and named USMCA (United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement) (Carati, 2019).

In addition, some of his moves against this foundation include the imposition of customs tariffs on steel and aluminum, withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement, intervention in Syria by invoking the "Responsibility to Protect" and the announcement of the withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Agreement on medium-range missiles (Colombo, 2019). The US has also withdrawn from the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2017, without it "the influence and future of the TPP will be full of uncertainties" (Feng and He, 2017, p. 47).

Apart from the above-mentioned two major factors, the rise of populist parties in Europe with unpredicted popular public support is also a new headache of the liberal order. In Europe, there is a tremendous change in voters' support for right-wing and populist parties. The Populism Tracker of The Progressive Post shows that in 2018 populist parties gained more support in six EU countries that held parliamentary elections: Italy, Hungary, Slovenia, Sweden, Latvia and Luxembourg (Boros *et al.*, 2018). The Populism Tracker database revealed that voters' support for populist party had increased from 29.5% in 2017 to 30.3% in 2018 (Boros *et al.*, 2018). Figure 2 also shows countries that have witnessed an increased support for populist parties in 2018 (Boros *et al.*, 2018).

Similarly, the voting for populist and nationalist parties in the European Parliamentary elections of 2018 has increased considerably (Clark, 2019).



Source: Populism Tracker (Boros et al., 2018).

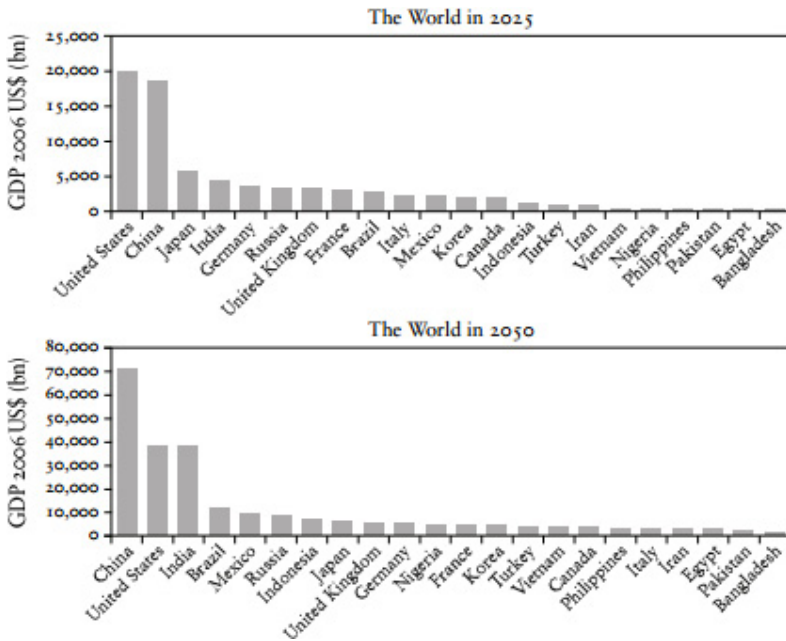
Fig. 2. Countries with Significant Changes in Support for Populist Parties in 2018

Statistically, the populist and nationalist parties have gained a majority of the vote-share in Hungary, Italy and Poland, where populist parties have also found the most success in national elections (Clark, 2019).

The 2008 financial crisis, the question of migration and refugee crisis and the euro crisis in general are not only the major causes for the rise of populism but also eroded the confidence of Europeans in European integration under the auspices of EU. In general, Eurosceptic populists are emerging as a challenger of the liberal order.

2.2.2. The rise of the rest

The “Rise of the Rest” is an exogenous challenge of the liberal international order. The “Rise of the Rest” generally refers to BRICS, a term coined in 2001 in a report by Jim O’Neill, Goldman Sachs Economic Research Group, to highlight the emerging four big powers from the South namely Brazil, Russia, India and China (O’Neill, 2001). BRICS is seen as an apparent challenger of the status quo. However, Nuruzzaman (2019) argued that BRICS is not a threat to the US-led post-Cold War order due to the internal divisions among the four big powers that constitute BRICS along the ideological and political lines, and also lack of an agreed collective world order vision acceptable to the international community. However, political and ideological heterogeneities and lack of convergent foreign policy goals and preferences would not undermine the role of BRICS in ending US hegemony. Although they are divided states along ideological lines, they



Source: Jacques (2009, p. 3).

Fig. 3. Projected Sizes of National Economies in 2025 and 2050

have a common goal, ending US hegemony. Russia and China are clear revisionist powers. India has also a motive to restructure the global governance system. In addition to their motive of restructuring the system, they have also the capability to do so. As shown in the above Fig. 3, the three countries namely China, India and Russia will have the largest economy in 2050 (Jacques, 2009, p. 3). National economy projection also shows that China will be the leading economy in 2050 followed by the U.S. (Jacques, 2009, p. 3). For this common goal, they may cooperate. The end result may be determined by other factors concerned.

Thus, BRICS can gradually erode and cause an emblematic shift in the international governance. However, no one is sure about the likely scenario. Rather, there are academically important questions to be considered: How and under what circumstances the rise of BRICS marks a decisive shift in the global balance of power and the end of US hegemony? Do BRICS foreshadow the end of unipolar system and an emergent new multipolar order? Are they satisfied actors acting within the US-led order and working toward maintaining it? What kind of power transition will happen, a violent transition or a peaceful one? Despite these questions, it is fair to argue

that there is manifestation of a gradual shift from a unipolar world order to a multipolar world order.

2.2.3. *The rise of the Middle Kingdom: A game changer*

If there is something unprecedented but a significant story in the 21st century of international relations, undoubtedly it will be the rise of the “Middle Kingdom”, China. Its economic growth has been miraculous (Babones, 2011). Nevertheless, no one is certain about the end result of the story and its implication. Will China replace US and become a new hegemonic power? Will the rise of China endanger the US-led liberal international order? Will the tension between China and US lead to another protracted war or Cold War? What will be the fate of current international governance in the context of rising China? These are polemical issues among the academia. More importantly, currently China introduced its new connectivity project namely the One Belt and One Road Initiative which is seen as a game changer.

2.3. *One Belt and One Road Initiative: History, principles, scope and implications*

For millennia, China has used the name *Zhongguo*, also spelled as *zhong-guohuo*, to refer itself as the “Middle Kingdom”, “Middle Country” or “Central Kingdom” (Jacques, 2009). According to their mythology, they consider themselves as a civilized nation that occupied the middle of the Earth surrounded by uncivilized barbarians. Thus, they have a Middle Kingdom mentality. The term Middle Kingdom has a geographical and a political meaning and implication. Initially, it referred to the geographically core state among the multiple divided states prior to the unification of China. After a unified China, the term Middle Kingdom refers to the country itself. In the 20th and 21st centuries, the term is used to refer to the centrality of China and its significance in the world, as a form of pride, collective consciousness of making China a real Middle Kingdom. On the lines of this, China has now introduced a historical initiative to connect the people all over the world based on the principle of win-win, mutual development. From this perspective, I argue that China’s One Belt and One Road Initiative is part of its age-old ambitious plan of making China the center of the world and thus, the Initiative is part of China’s inclusive-cum-exclusive institutional strategy of challenging the US-led liberal order.

BRI was introduced by the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, in his state visit to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013. In his presidential address at the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Xi Jinping said, "I proposed the building of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which I call the Belt and Road Initiative" (Xinhuanet, 2017). With this, he underlined BRI as a new road based on the memory of the past to build the present and a bright future for peace, prosperity, openness, innovation, connectivity, win-win situation, civilization and the benefit of contributing to the global development (Xinhuanet, 2017). In 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China jointly issued the first edition of the official BRI plan known as the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (hereafter, BRI Vision and Action). This BRI Vision and Action makes clear that BRI has two components, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. In other words, BRI is functioning with these two programs.

The "Belt" refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt, which focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe, linking China and the Indian Ocean with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia. It consists of a network of overland routes and railways, oil and natural gas pipelines and power grids.

The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on connecting China via Central Asia, Russia and Central Europe to Western Europe (Brona, 2018; Nordin and Weissmann, 2018). It connects three major routes namely the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean (Sarker *et al.*, 2018). It includes a network of land-based routes, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines and power grids. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, based on waterway roads, plans to connect Asia, Africa, Middle East and Europe and for this, it will start in China moving through South China Sea, Indian Ocean and Suez Canal to Europe (Brona, 2018; Sarker *et al.*, 2018). It has a network of ports and coastal infrastructure projects.

The primary objective of BRI is to connect Asia, Europe and Africa which dates back to 2000 years when China's Imperial Envoy Zhang Qian initiated the old Silk Road. In his presidential address in 2013, President Xi Jinping declared to establish and revitalize the old Silk Road by connecting

Asia, Europe and Africa via the twin infrastructure development namely railways and roads. In the light of this, the Vision of BRI is bringing peace, prosperity, cooperation, openness, inclusiveness and mutual benefit among the countries along the Belt and Road based on the principles of win-win instead of win-lose, peaceful coexistence, sovereign equality and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit and peace (National Development and Reform Commission *et al.*, 2015). In this case, the principles of mutual complementarity and mutual benefit are seen as the guiding principles of BRI. From this, it can be argued that BRI has three inseparable key issues: regionalism in East Asia and Central Asia, inter-regional cooperation and coordination and the creation of “common destiny” based on liberal values and principles.

The major contents for cooperation priorities are policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bond (National Development and Reform Commission *et al.*, 2015). It focuses on eight fields such as infrastructure connectivity, economic and trade cooperation, industrial investment, energy resources, financial cooperation, cultural and people-to-people exchange, ecological and environmental cooperation and maritime cooperation. For this, there are six economic corridors to be constructed namely the New Eurasian Land Bridge, China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor, China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor, China–IndoChina Peninsula Economic Corridor, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor.

More importantly, BRI is a systematic project to be built jointly “through consultation to meet the interests of all, and efforts should be made to integrate the development strategies of the countries along the Belt and Road” (National Development and Reform Commission *et al.*, 2015, p. 2). The cooperation mechanisms are the existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ASEAN Plus China (10 + 1), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Asia–Europe Meeting (ASEM), Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), China–Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Dialogue, Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Economic Cooperation and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation; the international forums, exhibitions and platforms are Boao Forum for Asia,

China–ASEAN Expo, China–Eurasia Expo, Euro–Asia Economic Forum, China International Fair for Investment and Trade, China–South Asia Expo, China–Arab States Expo, Western China International Fair, China–Russia Expo and Qianhai Cooperation Forum (*National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015*).

3. The Implication of BRI to the US-Led International Liberal Order

3.1. A historical mission of making the myth a reality

From the historical point of view, BRI should not be understood as a new noble project but as part of the history and myth of China. As discussed above, in ancient times the name “Middle Kingdom” was used to refer to present-day China. There is also a mythological belief that associates China with the discourse of centrality and civilization. After millennia, now China is in a way of making the story a reality via BRI. Thus, BRI is a project to revitalize the Middle Kingdom mentality.

BRI has connected three periods: past, present and future. In introducing his proposal for addressing the present problems and building a bright future, President Xi Jinping gave an emphasis to history of his ancestors in making the old Silk Road a symbol of peace and civilization. His speech can be read as follows:

“Over 2,000 years ago, our ancestors, trekking across vast steppes and deserts, opened the transcontinental passage connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, known today as the Silk Road. Our ancestors, navigating rough seas, created sea routes linking the East with the West, namely, the maritime Silk Road. These ancient silk routes opened windows of friendly engagement among nations, adding a splendid chapter to the history of human progress. . . the ancient silk routes embody the spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit. The Silk Road spirit has become a great heritage of human civilization.” (*Xinhuanet, 2017*)

President Xi showed his appreciation for the success of the ancient Silk Road. But he argued that in reality the world is facing chronic problems

largely associated with huge disparity between rich and the poor, a lack of inclusive and balanced system, instability and terrorism for which he came up with a new solution under the One Belt and One Road Initiative, multilayered multilateralism (Xinhuanet, 2017). In his speech, the President has used “we” in referring to present-day China and the global community in building the future based on win–win principle and “our” in referring to Chinese ancestors who were behind the old Silk Road. Thus, BRI comes as China’s initiative to revitalize the old Silk Road under the centrality of China.

At the normative level, BRI is seen as a holistic project for the benefit of all. It calls for multipolar world order. Against this backdrop, however, there are hegemonic narratives and discourses behind the BRI. One can question why China preferred to use “One” rather than a straightforward “Belt and Road Initiative”. Zakharov (2017) best described the Initiative as a strategy of “One Belt, One Road, One Hegemon”. He further argued that BRI will increase Chinese global market share, challenge the US’s role in East Asia, Middle East and Central Europe, strengthen non-Western institutions and thus, it will strengthen Chinese hegemony. In addition to this, China refrains from using the term strategy; instead, it uses the terms “Initiative” and “strategic vision”. Second, under the BRI priority is given for Asian region. From this, the critics argued that China want to be hegemonic power by making Asia as its base as the US did at the end of 19th century (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 409). The Western hemisphere is the US’s hegemonic base. Likewise, the Asian hemisphere may serve as the new hegemonic power’s, China, foundational base.

From this, it can be argued that BRI is a project of making the myth of Middle Kingdom a reality. Though it envisioned a multipolar world, its intended goal is to be a hegemonic power using Asia as its sphere of influence. For this, it will continually pursue two contradictory policies: internally a neo-mercantilist policy and externally a pro-liberal policy. BRI falls under the liberal policy. Its major guiding principles are drawn from the UN and China’s foreign policy guiding principles. Its objectives are connecting the world, strengthening open markets, having a balanced trade regime and so on. Nevertheless, China may use US created liberal institutions as need but may rely on its own created institutions.

3.2. BRI: Changing veiled consent into apparent contest of US-led liberal international order

The US-led international liberal order is not a balanced win–win playing field. There is asymmetry in terms of market power, political power and bargaining power. The rules of the game are drafted by the US in its favor. For this, there is a contest from global south with strong demand for restructuring it. Nevertheless, the contestation remains more of verbal and thus, there is an obscured consent to the prevailing order to be explained by several reasons. It is BRI that became an actual challenger of the US-led liberal international order.

BRI is a game changer at least in changing the existing obscured consent into apparent contest, the voice of restructuring the international governance system into actual change. China and other rising powers of the South are actual contesters of the US-led international liberal order. In this case, BRI shows Chinese dissatisfaction of the prevailing system and its own solution. In his speech in 2017, President Xi Jinping stressed the need for peace and development in the increasing multipolar, globalized, digitalized and diversified world, on the one hand, and the challenges the world encounters such as development gaps, lack of inclusiveness and balanced system, terrorism and instability (Xinhuanet, 2017). For this, the President introduced BRI not as China's strategy but as just a new initiative for multilayered multilateralism such as multitier capital market, multidimensional infrastructure network, multitier Belt and Road financial cooperation network and multilateral trading regime. Similarly, the 2015 BRI strategic vision declared that "the initiative to jointly build the Belt and Road, embracing the trend towards a multipolar world, economic globalization, cultural diversity and greater IT application, is designed to uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy in the spirit of open regional cooperation" (National Development and Reform Commission *et al.*, 2015, pp. 2–3).

Thus, at the normative level BRI envisioned a new world order which is multipolar on the basis of win–win principle instead of the win–lose US-led liberal order. However, critics argued that it will not lead to multipolar world but to great power rivalry and competition. Whatever the case, the likely scenario is that BRI may end the US hegemonic order. However, BRI itself is not at odds with liberalism. Its basic pillars and principles are largely devoted to the liberal order than other guiding ideologies. Thus, it will function under the liberal order but will challenge the playing field

created by the US. In general, BRI foreshadows the end of US hegemony and a beginning of a new world order.

3.3. BRI as offensive institutional balancing mechanism

Neither realism nor liberalism alone could explain the implication of the rise of China in the context of BRI to the liberal order. BRI is based on the liberal values and principles. Against this backdrop, BRI is an indirect threat to the liberal order. Thus, what explains it is the institutional balancing theory. In countering the US-led liberal international order, China has used both inclusive and exclusive institutional balancing mechanisms. Inclusive institutional balancing mechanism is a tactic of constraining the behavior and action of the target state by inviting into an institution (He, 2008; Feng and He, 2017). While exclusive institutional balancing mechanism is aimed at excluding the target state from an institution to the extent of using the institutional platform to counter and affect the behavior of the target state (He, 2008; Feng and He, 2017). Since 2000, China has used both tactics. China has used inclusive institutional balancing tactic against the US by involving actively in US-created liberal institutions and others such as the ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the East Asia Summit (EAS) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Feng and He, 2017). It has also created exclusively non-US institutions to counter US in Asia so as to consolidate the Chinese foundational base. Some of the institutions are the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Community of Common Destiny and the BRI.

In this case, BRI is an exclusive institutional balancing tactic of reforming the US-led liberal order. First, BRI can be seen as a strategy against the TPP which was created in 2016. The US had used TPP as an exclusive mechanism to exclude China from the agreement. Chinese think tanks viewed TPP as an economic NATO and an existential economic threat for China (Yang, 2016). In this regard, China has introduced BRI as a strategy of institutional exclusion and countering mechanism. China introduced BRI by critiquing the US's gradual tendency of protectionism. China shows its willingness and commitment to a win-win, open and transparent free trade, to address the problems facing the global and regional economies, through BRI which interconnects the world and benefits all countries involved. China also criticized the "pursuit of protectionism"; President Xi

Jinping regarded it as “locking oneself in a dark room. While wind and rain may be kept outside, that dark room will also block light and air. No one will emerge as a winner in a trade war” (CGTN, 2017). Thus, BRI has two purposes. One is challenging the US-led liberal order which is exclusionary and win-lose. Second, its BRI is a new mechanism toward a new order based on liberal values in the quest for “common destiny”.

Second, geographically, BRI starts from Asia to Europe, Africa, Latin America and the South Pacific. Thus, the initiative is geographically exclusive. It also has a number of partner countries but not the US. BRI is also not dependent on the traditional US-led liberal international order financial institutions. It depends on Chinese-created alternative financial institutions such as the AIIB. Thus, China intends to pull US out of the game and therefrom will consolidate its partnership with the emerging powers in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Central Europe.

3.4. BRI foreshadower of China's self-preservationist and reformist policy

BRI implicitly shows that China is a revisionist power and at the same time self-preservationist. From the realist perspective, it can be argued that China is an aspiring hegemony to overthrow the existing order. However, BRI is not antithesis of the liberal values and principles. As stated in several policy frameworks and strategic papers, the basic principles of BRI are peace, cooperation, openness, inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit (National Development and Reform Commission *et al.*, 2015). It also gives due emphasis to policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructures, unimpeded trade, financial integration and closer people-to-people ties (National Development and Reform Commission *et al.*, 2015). The project is launched as a joint project by joint contribution for shared benefits. It has also incorporated basic concepts and pillars of liberal institutions such as the UN guiding principles (Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2019). Thus, China is eroding US's hegemony under the mask of liberal project. At the international politics, China emerged as a pro-liberal and self-preservationist power. However, China is a neo-mercantilist state at its domestic politics. On the other hand, across different policies, BRI envisioned a new multipolar world under liberal values. Therefore, BRI is a double face strategy of China in challenging the US-led liberal order. On the one hand, BRI is China's grand strategy in

transforming the existing unipolar world order into multipolar world order. On the other hand, it is a transition mechanism of the US-made liberal international order into an inclusive transformative new order.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I attempted to examine the implication of the rise of China to the US-led liberal international order by taking BRI as a case. The study shows that China is challenging the prevailing order via multilayered strategies. BRI is an exemplary showcase of Chinese dual strategy. On the one hand, BRI foreshadows that China is a dissatisfied actor of the existing order and it is a revisionist power. By launching BRI, China announced its preferred international order which is multipolar. On the other hand, BRI itself is a liberal project. All of the guiding principles and explicit intentions behind the BRI have emanated from the liberalism ideology. Thus, BRI is not at odds with liberalism. It is functioning under the liberal order but envisioned a new international order. Thus, it can be argued that BRI is a liberal project challenging the US-led unipolar world order intended toward a more inclusive and transformative world order.

The paper also identifies the following implications. First, BRI is not something new but a project that revived the Chinese myth of “Middle Kingdom”. Thus, it is a project having a historic mission of making China at the center of the international system. BRI embodies the vision, mission and intended goals of China’s intended world order. Second, BRI has changed the veiled consent into apparent contest of the US-led liberal international order. Third, BRI is an offensive institutional balancing mechanism. Instead of using the US-created liberal institutions, China has emerged as a great power with its own instructions. Thus, BRI is one institutional balancing mechanism against the US-dominated liberal institutions. Finally, BRI foreshadows that China is a revisionist power and at the same time a self-preservationist rising power. Thus, China is eroding the US hegemony under the mask of liberal project. Therefore, BRI is a double face strategy of China in challenging the US-led liberal order.

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