



Problems in Viewing China's Rise as a Threat to the Liberal International Order

Charles L. Glaser

For over a decade, U.S. policymakers and scholars have cast China's rise as a threat to the liberal international order (LIO). The LIO has been credited with achieving the Cold War peace, U.S. victory in the Cold War, and the absence of balancing against U.S. hegemonic power following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Consequently, a threat to the LIO could have dire implications for the U.S. security. Careful examination, however, shows that framing U.S. security in terms of the LIO creates more confusion than insight and risks misguiding U.S. foreign policy.

What is the Liberal International Order (LIO)?

An international order is widely understood by scholars as the institutions and rules that guide the states that belong to the order. Among the LIO's key institutions are NATO and the U.S.-Japan alliance, the open international trading system—including the World Trade Organization—and the United Nations. Since the end of the Cold War, LIO terminology has at times been used to cover a broader set of components, including the norm to promote and defend democracy, obligations to adopt plans to reduce climate change, the nuclear nonproliferation regime, and the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The many different uses of LIO terminology are a significant source of confusion, however deeper problems lie elsewhere.

The LIO Concept

LIO theorists argue that five mechanisms—causal logics—explain how the LIO produces international outcomes.

1. *Democracy*. Key features of democratic states—including common interests, and expectations that disagreements will be resolved via compromise and reciprocity—enhance their abilities to maintain alliances, pursue trade, abide by international rules, and avoid war with other democracies.
2. *Hierarchy*. Hierarchy reflects the legitimate political authority that exists between the most powerful state—the United States—and the weaker states in the LIO. Weaker states consider the extensive influence of the United States in shaping the order to be legitimate because the United States has relied on bargaining, not coercive uses of its superior power. Legitimacy in turn increases the United States ability to pursue its preferred policies and to preserve the LIO.

3. *Institutional binding.* A powerful state can impose restraints on itself by joining international institutions. This institutional binding can reassure weaker states that the dominant state will neither abandon nor forcibly coerce them. This checking of the United States has increased its allies' willingness to reach agreements that increase their dependence on and vulnerability to the United States.
4. *Economic interdependence.* A core tenet of liberalism is that economic interdependence reduces the probability of war. States give priority to increasing their prosperity and trade can play a central role in achieving this end. States understand that war would disrupt the benefits of interdependence and therefore avoid it.
5. *Political convergence.* Authoritarian states that become engaged with the global international economy, and as a result become more prosperous, will liberalize domestically, and move toward democracy. Given the peace-creating benefits of democracy, political convergence leads to a promising future.

Inward Focus of the LIO Concept

The most striking problem with claims that the LIO has been responsible for significantly reducing international conflict and competition is that the LIO concept is primarily inward looking—its logics apply to states that belong to the LIO, but not other states. The United States' adversaries and potential security competitors have not been members. Thus, the LIO concept has little to say about peace and cooperation between the United States and its adversaries.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and its allies were entirely excluded from the LIO: they were not democracies; the West's key Cold War security institutions were designed to balance against the Soviet Union, not to include it, which renders institutional binding irrelevant; and the Soviet Union did not belong to the international trading system, which eliminates any potential impact of economic interdependence. In addition, the global balance of power was bipolar and therefore did not support hierarchical relations.

The post-Cold War era is less clear-cut, but suffers many of the same limitations. China is not a democracy and is not a member of U.S. security alliances in Asia; indeed, it is now the target of these alliances. China has been, however, increasingly integrated into the international economy; the economic interdependence and political convergence arguments therefore do apply. But the predicted results have not occurred: international trade has been accompanied by growing tensions between the United States and China, and China's dramatic economic success has not been accompanied by a shift toward democracy and liberalization more generally.

The LIO's Weak Theoretical Foundations

Although the LIO concept's inward focus leaves the LIO with little ability to directly affect U.S. relations with adversaries, the LIO might enhance its members' ability to cooperate and coordinate with each other. If so, the LIO could then increase U.S. security indirectly by increasing member states' wealth and the effectiveness of the LIO's institutions. However, due to theoretical weaknesses in three of the mechanisms that constitute the LIO concept—institutional binding, hierarchy, and political convergence—the LIO does not provide the United States with significant indirect security benefits.

Although international institutions can facilitate cooperation in a variety of ways, a powerful state cannot effectively bind itself. For example, institutionalists claims are correct that a powerful state that violates its institutional commitments will damage its reputation as a reliable partner. However, in high-stakes situations these reputational costs will usually be dwarfed by the

benefits the powerful state would receive by acting. Thus, its institutional partners should not be significantly reassured by peacetime commitments that might be tested in a severe crisis.

Although hierarchy might have the potential to provide a dominant power with enhanced influence, there is little evidence of legitimacy in the key Western institutions. For example, the United States' outside influence in shaping NATO is well explained by U.S. power advantages alone. In addition, the United States has used coercive threats when necessary—for example, to prevent Germany from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Finally, increased engagement with the global international economy has not generated a shift toward democracy in either China or Russia. Research in comparative politics explains that this should not be surprising. Although there is a strong correlation between states that are more economically developed and states that are democracies, the emergence of a liberal democracy is far from automatic, depending instead on a variety of additional conditions. In line with this finding, many China experts believed that integrating China into the world economy would not lead to democracy within a relevant time frame.

Abandon the LIO Lens

To improve analysis of U.S. foreign policy, scholars and policy analysts should discontinue use of the term “LIO.” First, for reasons discussed above, the LIO concept provides little analytic leverage—it is inward looking and certain of its key arguments are theoretically weak. Second, the LIO discourse is a source of significant confusion—as noted above, scholars and commentators do not have an agreed understanding about what the LIO includes.

Third, framing analysis of U.S. policy in terms of the LIO builds in a significant status quo bias. Much of the discussion of the LIO starts from the premise that it is desirable and needs to be preserved. During periods of significant change in the distribution of power, however, the United States should be reconsidering whether to preserve its international commitments and exploring how best to achieve its fundamental interests in the decades ahead.

Adopt a Grand-strategic Lens.

To generate greater clarity about the international challenges facing the United States and its options for confronting them, analysts should employ a grand-strategic lens. Doing so would improve the analysis of issues raised by the LIO discourse by placing them in the wider context of U.S. options for dealing with current geopolitical challenges: it would improve analysis of U.S. interests and threats to those interests; it would require fuller engagement with the theories that are relevant to the formulation of U.S. international policy; and it would identify the full spectrum of broad options for achieving U.S. security and prosperity. In contrast, the LIO lens starts and ends with a single option—preservation of the LIO.

Associated Reading

Glaser, Charles L. 2019. [A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept is Misguided](#). *International Security*. 43(4): 51-87.

Biography

 **Charles L. Glaser** is a Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, and Director of the Institute for Security and Conflict Studies at George Washington University. He is the author of [Crude Strategy: Rethinking the U.S. Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil](#); [Rational](#)

[Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation](#); and [Analyzing Strategic Nuclear Policy](#).

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