

China's Internalization of the Liberal International Order

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Abstract

Most literature on China and the liberal international order has described how China behaves towards the multiple elements of the order, but virtually no systematic efforts were undertaken to understand the rationale or motivation of that behaviour. Hence, such studies do not clarify whether compliance comes from an actual commitment to the order's ideas or if it is instrumental in order to acquire legitimacy and avoid social sanctions. To address this gap in literature, this article elaborates on the concept of internalization. I separate partial from full internalization: both require substantial compliance with norms, but in the former states halt compliance when interests are at stake. I identify Chinese interests to, then, assess if China internalized the three main institutions of the liberal international order: sovereignty, human rights and the market. I conclude that none of them was fully internalized yet, although there is partial internalization of sovereignty and the market. This means that China's compliance with the order's norms is higher than many assume, but that it is selective and subordinated to Chinese core interests.

Keywords: China, human rights, internalization, liberal international order, sovereignty

1. Introduction

The debate on China and the international order has been a hot topic in International Relations literature and in public debate. In Western media, China is frequently portrayed as 'assertive'. Both politicians and pundits are increasingly keen on the so-called 'China threat thesis', asserting China wants to overthrow the international order. The United States (US) Secretary of State Antony Blinken has repeatedly stated that China is a threat to the 'rules-based order' (Esplin-Odell, 2021). Much of the literature on the topic has followed a similar direction. Broadly speaking, it is possible to identify three positions, based on which I will situate this article.

The realist argument is a pessimistic one that believes China, being a rising power, will make war with the leading hegemon – the US – whose power is declining in relative terms, to replace the current order by its own order that grants China advantages and privileges (Allison, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2006, 2010). On the contrary, liberals argue for a more optimistic view that China will preserve the liberal international order. That order is allegedly integrative, providing shared authority and large economic gains (Ikenberry, 2018). Rising powers “may not want Western dominance of global institutions, but they want the West’s rules and organizational principles” (Ikenberry, 2018: 25) like an open world economy and a multilateral system of rules and institutions. Hence, China has strong incentives not to replace the order, but to maintain it and deepen its foundations, albeit with reforms regarding its hierarchy. Nonetheless, some liberals have grown increasingly dissatisfied with an alleged rising assertiveness and failure to adapt to liberal norms, which had led them to support a tougher stance on China.

Both arguments fail to capture the complexity of the relation between China and the liberal international order: this country supports some elements of the order, while challenging (or rejecting) others at the same time (Acharya, 2018b; Buzan, 2010; Esplin-Odell, 2021; Johnston, 2019).

Constructivists take a more nuanced approach to the issue. Analyzing international order, they tend to privilege its ideational elements and not merely the distribution of power or absolute gains, to assess if the “prevailing norms, culture, and ideas can socialize China’s behaviour to make it fit with the existing international order” (Feng and He, 2017: 27). From my point of view this approach has two advantages *vis-à-vis* the previous ones. First, it treats international order in a more holistic way, analyzing the ideas, norms and institutions that underlie it. This is not to say that power or material gains are not important, but that, ultimately, what renders an international order support is the attractiveness of its ideas (Acharya, 2018b). Second, it captures the complexity of this issue that I mentioned before. Constructivists tend to analyze Chinese perceptions and behaviour towards the multiple norms or ‘sub-orders’ of the overarching international order (Johnston, 2019).

However, I believe there has been a major shortcoming in this literature. There are very detailed and nuanced analysis about how China behaves towards the multiple elements of the order, but few systematic efforts to understand the rationale or motivation of this behaviour. This is somewhat curious, given the basic constructivist premise that an actor may conform to rules due to social pressure and fear of sanctions, hence not from a real belief in the righteousness of such rules (Johnston, 2001; Wendt, 1999). From such studies about China’s compliance with international norms, a question arises: does this compliance come from an actual commitment with international

rules, or is it merely instrumental to acquire legitimacy and avoid social sanctions? This question will occupy me in this article

I will undertake this task by resorting to the concept of ‘internalization’. This concept is widely used in other disciplines like social psychology, but not so much in IR, although there are some notable works on it. My theory-building efforts to define and measure internalization are to be seen as tentative and should be criticized and refined by others. Through this concept I will analyze China’s internalization of the liberal international order’s main institutions. My empirical data will come mostly from Xi Jinping’s term until early 2021, but sometimes I will have to observe past events and patterns, since internalization is a process that happens over time.

The article is structured as follows. In the first section, I will lay out my understanding of the liberal international order. In the second section, I will define internalization and explain how it can be operationalized. In the third section, I will discuss Chinese core interests, something key to assess internalization. In the three following sections, I will assess empirically if China internalized the order’s main institutions by the following order: sovereignty, human rights and market. In the last section, my argument will be restated and some concluding remarks will follow.

2. The Liberal International Order

Departing from a constructivist ontology, I concede a “frontal place to ideas, norms, and legitimacy in conceptualizing order” (Acharya, 2018a: 7). Like Acharya and many others, I believe the foundations of order are shared ideas and norms (Acharya, 2018a). I believe that Tang’s account of order considers this:

order is the degree of predictability (or regularity) of what is going on within a social system, presumably because agents’ behavior, social interactions, and social outcomes within the social system have come under some kind of regulation (Tang, 2016: 34).

However, the richness of Tang’s conceptualization comes from its four dimensions of operationalization: (i) the scope or coverage of an order; (ii) the relative distribution of power among the system’s units; (iii) the degree of institutionalization measured along coverage of issue areas and degree of intrusiveness; (iv) the degree of internalization by social actors (Tang, 2016). To characterize the liberal international order, I will operationalize these four dimensions.

Regarding scope, the international liberal order was of Western creation and scope between its inception in 1945 and the end of the Cold War (Ikenberry, 2011). After that, it expanded throughout the globe, reaching an

almost global scope. Although Reus-Smitt (2013) claims it's global, Acharya (2018b) is right when he points out that there are some regions like the Islamic World is excluded from the liberal international order.

Regarding the relative distribution of material power, it was always marked by Western preponderance, especially by the US's unparalleled concentration of material power (Tang, 2018b). This is still true, but it is changing. The distribution of material power is increasingly diffused as US and the West decline and non-western countries rise, especially (but not exclusively) in the economic realm (Acharya, 2018b; Acharya and Buzan, 2019; Zakaria, 2011). Western countries still hold disproportional advantages in the main international organizations of the international order, but this is increasingly contested by non-western countries (Acharya, 2018b; Stuenkel, 2016).

I now turn to the degree of institutionalization. My first task is to define an institution. An institution can be seen as "a relatively stable collection of practices and rules defining appropriate behavior for specific groups of actors in specific situations" (March and Olsen, 1998: 948). Out of this definition, I should highlight some characteristics. Institutions are durable elements of the international culture, but they are not permanent nor fixed – they "undergo a historical pattern of rise, evolution and decline" (Buzan, 2004: 181). They comprise several practices, rules and norms that can be transformed over time by agency.

Moreover, these elements postulate appropriate behaviour that coerces actors into conformity. In fact, institutions have an inherently controlling character. They constrain an actor's behaviour "by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible" (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 72). This is called primary social control, posited by the sole existence of the institution. Because sometimes socialization and internalization are poor, actors may not fully comply with institutionally codified conduct. When this is the case, institutions activate sanctions – secondary social control mechanisms – in order to enforce compliance (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). These can be material like direct coercion or, more often, social like ridicule and opprobrium (Johnston, 2001). Moreover, institutions hold not only causal or behavioural effects, but also constitutive effects: they are able to constitute actors' identities and interests (Buzan, 2004). For instance, a state that internalized human rights norms may identify as part of a democratic community of states and one of its interests will be to protect its citizens' human rights (Risse and Sikkink, 1999).

At this point, a clear line should be drawn between international organizations and international institutions. While the former refers to formal organizations or physical entities with explicit rules and purposes, material resources and capacity for action, the latter refers to durable patterns of rules,

norms and practices prescribing roles and appropriate behaviour to social actors, hence purely ideational in substance (Keohane, 1988; Young, 1986). In spite of this difference, in practice international institutions and international organizations are quite connected, since durable ideas about norms, rules and practices can give birth to organizations aiming to follow them. Buzan (2004) calls international organizations 'secondary institutions' for this reason – the World Trade Organization (WTO) is an example of a secondary institution that embodies intersubjective understandings comprised in a primary institution (the market).

The liberal international order has multiple institutions, so the coverage of areas is large. Though not always with the term institutions, there are many propositions in literature about the ideas that underpin the liberal international order, which sometimes conflate or overlap, albeit with different names. The following table sums up the stance of some of the most important contributions about this. However, it is important to note that Buzan is talking about international society and not the liberal international order – the institutions I display apply to both.

Table 1 Candidates for Institutions of the Liberal International Order by Author

	Buzan (2004, 2014)	Ikenberry (2011)	Reus-Smit (2013)
Sovereignty	Yes, related with territoriality, international law and nationalism	Yes, but demising	Yes
Market	Yes	Yes	Yes
Democracy	Emergent, but contested	Yes	Yes
Human rights	Emergent, but contested	Yes	Yes
Multilateralism	Yes, deriving from diplomacy	Yes	Yes
Environmental Stewardship	Yes	No	No

That the market (or free trade) is an institution of liberal international order is beyond dispute. In the post-Cold War world, a worldwide consensus has emerged around global market capitalism (Acharya and Buzan, 2019). Despite the human rights challenge, sovereignty is still the main organizing principle in International Relations. I disagree with Ikenberry's (2011) idea of a 'post-Westphalian world' – it is true that sovereignty has become more conditional, but that should not be interpreted as its demise, but as a change in its normative core (Barkin, 1998). Sovereignty remains a major institution of liberal international order and international society. Democracy, however, could be a good candidate in the past, but today it does not enjoy universal legitimacy nor coerciveness due to a myriad of factors such as the

proliferation of authoritarian regimes, the populist upheaval in democratic countries and the widespread rejection of democracy promotion. On the other hand, though Buzan (2014) says the same about human rights, the case is different, because while there are disputes about their meaning, they hold universal legitimacy and became heavily institutionalized after World War II (Donnelly and Whelan, 2017). Human rights are my third and last institution of liberal international order. Multilateralism is also one, but I will not assess it due to lack of space. Environmental stewardship is an emergent institution, but has not fully institutionalized yet.

Henceforth, I will take the liberal international order as constituted by these three institutions, therefore assessing whether China has internalized them. In the empirical sections, I will elaborate further on each one of them before analyzing China's internalization. I will now explain what I mean by internalization.

3. Internalization: a Research Path

The fourth operational dimension of Tang's (2016) definition of order is internalization. Besides stating it is "inherently tied to subjects' support for an order, or 'subjective legitimacy'" (Tang, 2016: 37), the author does not tell us much more, failing to elaborate the concept. Internalization is a key concept in my study. Most studies about China and the international order focus on compliance, which is only a measurement of behaviour. This is a limited and unsystematic approach because it simply accounts for the sequence of an actor's actions towards the order without understanding their motivation or rationale.

Pro-social behaviour can stem from a variety of reasons. On the one hand, the actor can pursue a conduct because it really believes it is the appropriate one, so he/she/they links its identity and interests with it. On the other hand, the actor can opt for the same conduct for instrumental reasons like maximizing material and social gains (e.g., status and sense of belonging) or dodging social sanctions (e.g., opprobrium and exclusion), without actually believing subjectively in the righteousness of that behaviour (Johnston, 2008). Studying behaviour without taking this into consideration tells us little about the motivation of the compliance (if that's the case) and whether it will persist in the future – one can imagine that with a different motivation comes a different commitment. Thus, my proposal is that we go beyond compliance to analyze China's internalization of liberal international order's institutions. This way, we get a deeper glance on Chinese perceptions of the order and a more accurate assessment of Chinese intentions and commitment towards it.

Norm internalization is still very undertheorized in International Relations, despite its centrality in other related disciplines like Sociology and Social

Psychology. Internalization can be defined as “taking over the values and attitudes of society as one’s own so that socially acceptable behaviour is motivated not by anticipation of external consequences but by intrinsic or internal factors” (Grusec and Goodnow, 1994: 4), more concretely the belief in the righteousness of that behaviour. In other words, “the objectivated social world is retrojected into consciousness” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 78): the norms become self-evident, real and inevitable in the actor’s subjectivity.

“A norm is said to be internalized when it is a part of the person, not regarded objectively or understood or felt as a rule, but simply as a part of himself, automatically expressed in behaviour” (David, 1949 cited in Campbell, 1964: 393). When the norms are internalized, they become ‘taken-for-granted’ and unquestioned; conformity is seen not only as the only option, but as the right option. The actor no longer thinks in consequential terms – they comply with the norm because they believe ‘it is the right thing to do’ or because it is consistent with its identity or social category (Johnston, 2001). When internalized, norms not only have behavioural or causal consequences, but they can also constitute actors’ identities and interests (Buzan, 2004; Risse and Sikkink, 1999; Wendt, 1999). For instance, the internalization of human rights norms by a state can make it feel part of a liberal-democratic community of states (Risse and Sikkink, 1999).

Although the definition is intuitive, it is very difficult to operationalize without further qualification. Norm internalization has been observed in different ways in the literature. Some claim internalization occurs when the actor experiences psychological pain when deviating the norm even if the material benefits of doing so are positive (Axelrod, 1986) while others believe it is signalled by compliance in the absence of observation or external pressure (Campbell, 1964). It is not possible to assess if state leaders feel psychological pain when they deviate norms and very difficult for states to act without being seen.

There is another possibility in the literature that relates internalization with compliance. Campbell (1964) and Checkel (2005) argued that we should expect low deviancy and substantive compliance when a norm is internalized. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) even claim that conformity with the norm is almost automatic. I will follow through with this line of thought, albeit with some qualifications.

The reader must be noting an apparent lack of coherence, since I criticized the measurement of compliance. To explain how my approach is different, I shall resort to Wendt’s (1999) typology of internalization degrees. In the first degree the actor “complies only because he is forced to, directly or by the threat of certain, immediate punishment that would force him” (Wendt, 1999: 268–269). This degree does not apply to my case because Chinese material power is too great for this actor to be forced to comply. In the second

degree, the actor complies because it is in its self-interest to do so. This means that compliance is purely instrumental, so “as soon as the costs of following the rules outweigh the benefits, actors should change their behaviour” (Wendt, 1999: 271). The third degree refers to when the actor believes the norm is legitimate, “which means appropriating as a subjectively held identity the role in which they have been positioned by the generalized Other” (Wendt, 1999: 272–273). Here, the norm really constructs the actor and the quality of the compliance is very high, as is his/her/their resistance to normative change.

Wendt highlights something of great importance for the operationalization of the concept: regardless of the compliance level of the actor, there is only complete internalization when they do not stop complying due to contradictory interests. To demonstrate that China completely internalized the order’s institutions, one must not only observe that China complies in a consistent way, but also that it does not stop doing so when the norms require actions or omissions that are contrary to subjective self-interests. This would meet the earlier expectation that complete norm internalization entails a constitutive effect on self-interest – the actor redefines its identities and interests in line with the norms (Risse and Sikkink, 1999).

This division is important because social pressure also prompts pro-social behaviour, but internalization makes it more durable and self-reinforcing (Johnston, 2008). This is hardly a novelty, and neither are my two types of internalization, which conflate to a great extent with Checkel’s (2005): the first driven by a logic of consequences, and the second driven by a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1998). My contribution lies, instead, in suggesting a way to operationalize this variable and to empirically assess what type of internalization occurred:

- *No internalization*: the actor does not exhibit significant compliance with the analyzed institution or norm(s);
- *Partial (or Type I) internalization*: the actor exhibits significant compliance with the analyzed institution or norm(s), but it stops doing so when compliance would undermine its interests;
- *Complete (or Type II) internalization*: the actor exhibits high-quality compliance with the analyzed institution or norm(s) and does not stop complying even in the presence of contradictory interests.

This requires an assessment of interests before analyzing compliance. After identifying Chinese interests, I will operationalize this variable in the three institutions of the liberal international order (LIO) to assess what type of internalization occurred. Methodologically, this takes the form of congruence testing (George and Bennett, 2005). The norms prescribed by each of the institutions are outlined in the beginning of the respective section; then, empirical instances where these norms ought to be applied is presented, followed by an

assessment of China's compliance with each. This is done following King, Keohane and Verba's (1994) advice of maximizing the observable implications of the theory, i.e., trying to present a comprehensive set of empirical evidence. In the end of the section, such compliance record is evaluated and contrasted with Chinese interests to infer the type of internalization.

This will highlight China's commitment to the LIO's institutions, i.e., if pro-social behaviour is contingent on its interests or if it is prompted by a genuine subjective identification with the LIO's norms. The former possibility (type I internalization) should not be seen as a rationalist hypothesis – it is entirely consistent with my constructivist ontology. First, it assumes substantial compliance, which is only possible by a desire to pursue pro-social behaviour most of the times. Second, it does not exogenously assign China's interests – these are endogenous, undetermined *a priori* and subject to inquiry. This means that they are not subsumed to exogenously attributed and abstract cost-benefit calculations; moreover, that would preclude any possibility of substantial compliance or socially oriented behaviour.

In the next section, I try to unravel China's interests.

4. China's Interests

Chinese foreign policy has been based on its so-called three 'core-interests': security, sovereignty and development (Muller, 2016). This is visible in many Chinese officials' statements and official documents, stressing how important they are and how China will not concede in achieving them, not dismissing the use of force if necessary. To reconstitute the meaning of such subjective interests, I will rely mostly on Chinese discourse, but also on secondary experts analyses to a lesser extent.

The meaning of security for China has an international and a domestic element. On the one hand, China wants to be able to resist and deter aggression, as well as counter existential threats, so it deems necessary that China "strengthens its defence and military to provide security" (China, 2019). Beijing stresses, nonetheless, that its defence strategy is defensive in nature: "Though a country may become strong, bellicosity will lead to its ruin. The Chinese nation has always loved peace" (China, 2019). China has always stressed that, no matter how strong it gets, it will never seek aggression, hegemony or expansion (Xi, 2017a). On the other hand, security is also identified with regime security, i.e., the maintenance of its political system of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule (Mazarr et al., 2018). After the end of the Cold War and western triumphalism *à la* Fukuyama, China has been under pressure for democratization due to its authoritarian regime, so preserving 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' – and, ultimately, CCP's strength and authority – is a priority for its leaders. Xi Jinping is very clear about this:

We have made sweeping efforts to strengthen Party leadership [...] the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Communist Party of China; the greatest strength of the system of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the leadership of the Communist Party of China; the Party is the highest force for political leadership (Xi, 2017a).

The interests of security and sovereignty are quite intertwined. However, China holds a definition of sovereignty considered traditional and rigid by most. Once again, Xi Jinping puts it very straightforward:

The principle of sovereignty not only means that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries are inviolable and their internal affairs are not subjected to interference. It also means that all countries' right to independently choose social systems and development paths should be upheld (Xi, 2015).

Sovereignty as a Chinese interest has two major implications. First, it is meant to “to fend off foreign interference in China’s domestic politics” (Tang, 2018a: 37). The pressure of democratic and human rights norms after the Cold War motivates this concern, as well as the traumatic historical experience of the ‘Century of Humiliation’. It makes reference to a century that followed the Opium Wars where China was exploited and dominated by foreign powers such as Britain, US, France and Japan – this narrative resonates a lot in Xi’s discourse and Chinese society (Gries, 2020). This is linked with the regime security interest, because the warranty of autonomy and absence of foreign intervention in domestic affairs serves to preserve China’s political system (Stokes, 2019).

Second, sovereignty “refers to the country’s ability to exercise authority over all geographic claims, including Taiwan. It also includes territory, which refers to the integrity of all land and maritime borders” (Mazarr et al., 2018: 14). In other words, it means territorial integrity and ‘national reunification’ along these four axes: (i) stick to the ‘one country, two systems’ solution to ensure that China exercises jurisdiction over Hong Kong and Macao; (ii) oppose Taiwanese independence; (iii) defeat separatist movements (e.g., Tibet); (iv) ensure that Diaoyu/Senkaku and South China Sea’s islands are part of the Chinese territory.

China must be and will be reunited. China has the firm resolve and the ability to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and will never allow the secession of any part of its territory (China, 2019).

The last core interest is development. At first glance, it has the obvious meaning of pursuing economic development, keeping high growth rates and improving people’s welfare. All these socio-economic goals are impersonated in the mantras of ‘building a moderately prosperous society’ and ‘national

rejuvenation'. This is perceived as essential to increase the country's composite strength. However, this interest has other less straightforward meanings. First, it represents the intention to preserve the unique Chinese economic model of state capitalism, which is "a combination of liberal market economy mechanisms and a central-planned guideline" (Xing and Shaw, 2013: 99) with a large role for government interference in economic matters. If any doubts exist, Xi is very direct:

We must uphold and improve China's basic socialist economic system and socialist distribution system. There must be no irresolution about working to consolidate and develop the public sector; and there must be no irresolution about working to encourage, support, and guide the development of the non-public sector. We must see that the market plays the decisive role in resource allocation, the government plays its role better (Xi, 2017a).

Second, development for China is closely related with international trade. In fact, after Deng Xiaoping's 'reform and opening up', China became the second largest economy in the world and Chinese leaders acknowledge that the integration into the global market was decisive for Chinese economic success:

China took a brave step to embrace the global market. [...] It has proved to be a right strategic choice. [...] China has become the world's second largest economy thanks to 38 years of reform and opening-up. A right path leads to a bright future (Xi, 2017b).

In his famous 2017 speech at the World Economic Forum, Xi Jinping posited China as an unconditional supporter of economic globalization, stressing the need to foster international trade even further and to halt protectionism (Xi, 2017b).

Third, this core interest also aims to maintain an external peaceful environment, which is seen as a critical condition for economic development. For many years, China has presented a narrative of 'peaceful development' to assure countries that are anxious about China's rise, stating repeatedly that it will not threaten other countries nor seek hegemony or expansion. Xi explains:

We cannot realize the Chinese dream without a peaceful international environment, a stable international order and the understanding, support and help from the rest of the world (Xi, 2015).

The analysis I conducted so far also reveals an interesting fact. While having interests that collide with the international order, China is constantly showing strong support for it:

China will continue to uphold the international order. [...] China was the first country to put its signature on the UN Charter. We will continue to uphold the international order and system underpinned by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter (Xi, 2015).

In spite of having interests contrary to culture, every social actor has strong incentives to engage in pro-social behaviour to acquire self-esteem, legitimacy and avoid social sanctions (Johnston, 2001, 2008). China, of course, is no exception. In fact, it often emphasizes its commitment with the order's institutions, despite having interests – and behaviours (explored in the next section) – that collide with them. In reality, evidence reveals a dual-track approach where China supports some elements of the order, but wants to change others (Breslin, 2018; Johnston, 2019; Morton, 2020).

These strong incentives to pursue pro-social behaviour and to overstate the country's commitment to the order's institutions justify the measurement of internalization because it has the potential to highlight the country's motivation (external or intrinsic), hence its real commitment to these norms and institutions.

I will now turn to my empirical section where I will test my two hypotheses in each one of the order's institutions.

5. China and the Institution of Sovereignty

Sovereignty has been a major institution of international society for centuries and one of the liberal international order since its creation in the aftermath of World War II. As I said before, the norms that constitute an institution change over time and sovereignty is no exception. The recognition of a sovereign state by international society was always dependent on some features or institutions the state should have that were believed to be the legitimate source of sovereignty (Barkin, 1998).

Before 1945, divided sovereignty reined: “core states had full sovereignty and periphery states did not” (Buzan, 2017: 233), because the institution of colonialism was also in place, allowing the exploitation and colonization of non-western societies (Acharya and Buzan, 2019). The decades following World War II saw the demise of colonialism and (formal) racism, so sovereignty became truly universal (Acharya and Buzan, 2019; Buzan, 2017). A norm of self-determination entered the institution of sovereignty, which permitted the decolonization of multiple territories and people previously under colonial rule. A major normative development occurred: territoriality became the main legitimate source of sovereignty (Barkin, 1998). This means that legitimate sovereignty was contingent to functional control over a defined territory and transfers of acquired territory could not happen without consent. Such normative change had the effect to reify borders and to impede foreign interference. Thus, the institution of sovereignty between 1945 and the early 1990s comprised the norms of self-determination, sovereign equality, territorial integrity, non-aggression and non-interference. The understanding of sovereignty in this period is often called

'absolute', 'rigid' or 'traditional' sovereignty, since it shielded states greatly from having their sovereignty eroded.

After the end of the Cold War, this institution was re-interpreted again, this time in a liberal fashion. In fact, "throughout the 1990s the norms of sovereignty have shifted from absolute state sovereignty, towards conditional state sovereignty" (Jones, 2018: 103). The institutionalization of human rights changed the meaning of sovereignty because "state's exercise of sovereignty is increasingly seen as conditional upon whether it treats its citizens humanely and justly" (Zhang and Buzan, 2019: 6). A new legitimate source of sovereignty emerged: a state in post-Cold War world is legitimated less by its control of a territory and more by its ability to protect human rights of its citizens (Barkin, 1998), especially civil and political rights. Sovereign equality is undermined as a new hierarchy of states is created based on their human rights record. In addition, a norm of humanitarian intervention arose, allowing military interventions in countries to halt severe human rights violations – the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (Donnelly, 2014).

However, one must not exaggerate this transformation of sovereignty. Conditional sovereignty is derived from Western-liberal values and is mostly advocated by Western states, while many Global South countries contest it (Barkin, 1998). They still hold on to the rigid conception of sovereignty eager to preserve their autonomy and shield themselves from foreign interference. The scope and application of R2P is also narrow and quite sovereigntist, requiring the approval of the UN Security Council (Donnelly, 2014). It is clear that the transformation of sovereignty is still limited and that absolute sovereignty is still meaningful.

This puts a challenge to my analysis because there seems to be two rival interpretations of this institution: the liberal and the traditional one. I will try to assess if China internalized any of them. I have explained how China stands for a traditional or rigid conception of sovereignty (Xi, 2015). This defence comes from China's traumatic experience of nation-state building, specially the encounters with Western international society in the 19th and 20th centuries – the so-called 'Century of Humiliation' – and aims to avoid foreign interference in domestic affairs and to preserve CCP's rule (Tang, 2018a; Zhang, 2016). For China, human rights are not unimportant, but their protection should not breach a country's sovereign rights – human rights are subordinate to sovereignty (Carrai, 2019). I will explore the human rights institutions in this next section, but for now I want to leave clear that China does not support the liberal interpretation of sovereignty. Notwithstanding, China constructively engages with it through a norm-shaping posture, seeking to mould the liberal stance into a more sovereigntist one, therefore conciliating liberal and traditional interpretations (Jones, 2018).

It might be puzzling, however, how China supported and supports R2P, since it leaves the door open for foreign military intervention in order to halt human rights violations. In fact, China was a full participant in the debate that generated R2P and supported it afterwards (Zhang and Buzan, 2019). This support has its singularities and it can be said that the Chinese position regarding R2P, though in general supportive, lies at the conservative end of the spectrum (Nathan, 2016).

On the one hand, “Beijing has always emphasized the first two pillars of the R2P mandate, i.e. the state’s responsibility to protect its own citizens and the responsibility of the international community to encourage and assist the state to fulfil that responsibility” (Zhang and Buzan, 2019: 15). On the other hand, China is very uneasy about the third pillar because it allows foreign military intervention. Beijing has often blocked or expressed reserves about sanctions and military intervention because it wants to guarantee that the application of R2P respects state sovereignty (Carrai, 2019). The major exception was the intervention in Libya (2011) that Beijing acquiesced to, but it hardened its position afterwards, since it perceived that NATO exceeded the UN mandate to seek regime change, which for China is unacceptable (Jones, 2018). Never after Libya did China authorize a military intervention. This was the opportunity to reject any future non-consensual military intervention under R2P and to delegitimize regime change (Zhang and Buzan, 2019). It is obvious that the Chinese stance towards R2P is highly permeated by rigid interpretations of sovereignty. Did China internalize such understandings?

The first signal of Chinese support for absolute sovereignty is its strong support for the UN system. This happens because the “fundamental purpose of the UN Charter, in Beijing’s view, is to preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its member states” (Zhang, 2016: 801). China sees the UN as the only legitimate body to address threats through the use of force, conditional upon the Security Council’s authorization where China holds a permanent seat and veto power (Zhang, 2016). The UN system, where China holds considerable influence and veto power, is seen as the best tool to prevent breaches on states’ sovereignty and to tame the arbitrary exercise of power by western states, especially the US, which usually perpetrate these violations. For China, UN enforces the pluralist international order it desires (Buzan, 2010; Zhang, 2016).

China has also been a major contributor to the UN’s peacekeeping operations. “In 2018 it ranked second place among the top ten contributors to the UN’s peacekeeping budget [...] By the end of 2018, China had contributed a total of 2,515 troops and military experts, and 151 police to UN peacekeeping missions (ranking tenth in the world)” (Morton, 2020: 167). This is an unequivocal signal of Chinese support for the UN and for traditional understandings of sovereignty, since it often voices two conditions

for the peacekeeping missions: UNSC endorsement and consent by the host country's government (Zhao, 2018).

The main evidence of Chinese compliance with the institution of sovereignty is, of course, its clean record regarding intervention and aggression, the two most striking ways of breaching one's sovereignty:

It has not gone to war since 1979. It has not used lethal military force abroad since 1988. Nor has it funded or supported proxies or armed insurgents anywhere in the world since the early 1980s. That record of non-intervention is unique among the world's great powers. All the other permanent members of the UN Security Council have used force many times in many places over the last few decades – a list led, of course, by the United States (Zakaria, 2020: 56).

The only exception would be the recent lethal skirmishes with India over disputed border territories (Lee and Clay, 2022). Rhetorically, China is often stressing how important it is to respect sovereign in the traditional sense, emphasizing the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that are frequently evoked and still guide Chinese foreign policy (Muller, 2016). “China has emerged as one of the strongest defenders of a traditional and absolutist concept of sovereignty, entering into contestation on a broad range of issues wherein state sovereignty is implicated, most notably humanitarian intervention” (Zhang, 2016: 803). Moreover, China often condemns Western powers for politicizing human rights as an excuse to interfere in other states' domestic affairs (Machado, 2021).

Thus far, it seems that Beijing has internalized the traditional institution of sovereignty because it has not only shown high quality compliance, but also has not disrespected institutionally prescribed behaviour when its interests were at stake. In fact, it looks like this institution constituted Chinese interests, namely the core interest of sovereignty, which is a proof the institution was internalized (Buzan, 2004; Risse and Sikkink, 1999). However, some cases show China's compliance with its so proclaimed traditional interpretation of sovereignty is flawed when it harms Chinese core interests.

The derivative institution of sovereignty is international law (Buzan, 2004), since it seeks to preserve state sovereignty through common agreed-upon rules and mechanisms to settle disputes. The Chinese approach to international law is sometimes disruptive and self-serving. The first evidence for this is Beijing's reluctance for third-party mediation of territorial disputes, preferring bilateral negotiations instead (Johnston, 2019). A striking example is the Philippines' request for arbitration in 2013 under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) due to competing disputes with China regarding some islands in the South China Sea. Beijing launched a campaign to discredit the arbitration panel and refused to participate in the proceedings,

in spite of having signed and ratified UNCLOS (Williams, 2020). Also, China has not accepted the compulsory jurisdiction of the ICJ yet (Muller, 2016). In 2016, The Hague's Permanent Court of Arbitration examined claims brought by Philippines against China and resolved nearly every claim in favour of the former (Williams, 2020). The Chinese government opposed this ruling and did not acknowledge its validity.

However, one should stress that, despite these and some other cases, China values international law. Even though it rejects third-party settlement of disputes in the South China Sea, China tries to frame its claims under UNCLOS and general international law (Morton, 2016). Despite the militarization of atolls and reefs, it has never crossed the threshold of aggression defined by international law (Mazarr et al., 2018). In fact, China is attempting to 'create facts on the ground' to legitimize its territorial claims under international law, i.e., it is building artificial islands to exercise effective authority and occupation so it can claim sovereignty over those territories, which UNCLOS does not explicitly preclude (Rato, 2020; Williams, 2020). Besides:

China is a signatory to hundreds of multilateral treaties and thousands of bilateral treaties [...] Chinese officials regularly invoke the importance of international law and seek to portray China as a 'staunch defender and builder' of international rule of law (Williams, 2020: 3)

Evidence suggests that China complies with international law to a large extent because, on the one hand, it is usually helpful for achieving Chinese goals and, on the other hand, it is a source of legitimacy. However, the aforementioned cases reveal that "China may refuse to comply with it when doing so suits its perceived interests" (Williams, 2020: 1), which is a signal that the institution of sovereignty is not yet internalized because that would imply acknowledging international law's authority to settle sovereignty disputes.

Second, some Chinese actions also reveal that support for absolute sovereignty, while rhetorically strong, is in practice more flexible and nuanced (Muller, 2016).

The first case usually mentioned is an alleged strategy of 'debt-trap diplomacy', under which China deliberately provides unsustainable amounts of loans to poor countries, so that it can seize important national assets when the countries struggle to pay them back (Chellaney, 2021). The textbook case for this argument is Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, which was leased to a Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) in 2017 for 99 years when the government was facing debt distress. The conventional story is that China trapped the government with debt, which then had to transfer the Port to China in exchange for debt relief – a so-called 'debt-equity swap'. In reality, it was the Sri Lankan government who asked for the loans in the first place, there was no transfer or seizure of assets (merely a lease), and the lease was

not exchange for debt relief, but for US dollars that were desperately needed, and then used, to pay non-Chinese debt (Jones and Hameiri, 2020).

One of the scholars responsible for the John Hopkins' database on over 1000 Chinese loans to Africa claimed that they had "not seen any examples where we would say the Chinese deliberately entangled another country in debt, and then used that debt to extract unfair or strategic advantages of some kind in Africa, including 'asset seizures'" (Brautigam, 2020: 6). It is true that Chinese SOEs acquire participations (or leases) in other country's ports, infrastructure and energy providers, and that in some countries with low debt-servicing capacity loans are repaid with natural resources, but that does not diverge from previous commercial practice and can hardly be seen as an infringement on sovereignty (Brautigam, 2020). So far, it seems like there is no sufficient evidence for 'debt-trap diplomacy' or to assert that Chinese developmental loans are 'sovereignty-eroding', but these events are still unfolding rapidly and further studies are needed to get a clearer picture on this before decisive statements are made.

On the other hand, the Chinese claims on the South China Sea (SCS) indicate it has not internalized the traditional stance on sovereignty that it advocates in rhetoric. The 'nine-dash line' displays China's sovereignty claims on the SCS. Chinese claims are quite expansive, encompassing almost the entire SCS; were they satisfied, it would mean the Chinese appropriation of the majority of other claimants' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ), granted to them by UNCLOS (Rato, 2020). This does not go well with the absolute interpretation of sovereignty, since it would undermine other states' territorial integrity. Moreover, there is no evidence that China exercised permanent authority and presence in those territories, which is UNCLOS's requirement for the establishment of sovereignty (Rato, 2020). China has evoked historic and historical rights over these waters, but "UNCLOS does not recognize historic rights as a basis for claiming sovereignty over waters" (Dupuy and Dupuy, 2013) and:

Although historical factors should, of course, be taken into account to a certain extent, their relevance must be limited to establishing whether a given state has exercised and still exercises authority *à titre souverain* over a defined area in an effective and continuing manner, and whether such exercise of authority has been accompanied by acquiescence by the third states concerned. None of these elements have been established by China (Dupuy and Dupuy, 2013: 141).

In addition, the events in Hong Kong between 2019 and 2020 constituted an encroachment on the sovereignty of this territory. The Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law state that Hong Kong is part of China, but also that it retains a high degree of autonomy. The scope of this autonomy comprises the maintenance of its own political and economic system,

executive, legislative and independent judicial power, and the safeguarding of fundamental freedoms and rights, with the exceptions being matters of foreign affairs and defence. Beijing has made some moves to abridge Hong Kong autonomy, which have intensified under Xi leading to the 2020 Hong Kong National Security Law (Shirk, 2022).

In February 2019, Carrie Lam proposed an extradition bill that would “allow the government to detain people wanted by Beijing and extradite them to mainland China” (Economy, 2021: 62). Strong and sometimes violent protests erupted, lasting for several months. Along with a crackdown on the protesters causing over 10,000 arrests, China unilaterally enacted a new Security Law for Hong Kong in June 2020, which made subversion, terrorism, separatism and collusion with foreign powers crimes under the law, and provided a mainland controlled authority in Hong Kong with powers to investigate these cases and trial them in the mainland (Shirk, 2022). The Joint Declaration and the Basic Law explicitly confer legislative and judicial power to Hong Kong, so this law effectively curtails these prerogatives and the political autonomy to which this territory is entitled. China could not have enacted this law, especially without consulting with Hong Kong officials, the law erodes rights like the freedoms of speech and to protest, and it allows China to pursue and trial Hong Kong citizens, giving it judicial powers on Hong Kong’s territories and allowing it to pursue political dissidents. This constitutes a clear violation of sovereignty.

If we take into consideration that the Chinese claims on the SCS and that ‘comprehensive jurisdiction’ over Hong Kong are part of its core interests, it becomes clear that Beijing, while putting up an advocative front of traditional sovereignty, stops complying with this institution when it harms these core interests.

I should also dismiss my earlier hypothesis that the institution may have constituted China’s core interest of sovereignty: if that were the case, China would present it in a way that did not undermine other states’ sovereignty. This constitutes sufficient evidence to assert that China has not yet fully internalized the institution of sovereignty, exhibiting partial internalization because it complies to a large extent, but stops doing so when its interests are in stake. This converges with Mazarr et al.’s (2018) argument that support for sovereignty is merely instrumental to advance Chinese interests rather than a socialized adherence.

6. China and the Institution of Human Rights

The institution of human rights postulates states must respect the basic rights of individuals and is constituted by several norms. First, we can divide human rights into two categories of human rights, although they are formally

indivisible (Donnelly, 2014; Donnelly and Whelan, 2017). On the one hand, we have the civil and political rights closely linked to Western culture and history. Some examples include not only the right to life, physical security, equal protection of the law, protection against slavery and torture, protection from arbitrary detention, but also other rights related with liberal democratic norms such as freedom of religion, expression, assembly and political participation. On the other hand, we have the economic, social and cultural rights. Some examples include the right to work under favourable conditions, right to food, clothing and housing, right to education, right to participate in the cultural life, right to property, right to healthcare and social security.

Second, though human rights are universal, interdependent, interrelated and indivisible in international law, they do not have the same strength in reality – there is an “implicit hierarchy evident in much ordinary thinking about human rights” (Donnelly and Whelan, 2017). Broadly speaking, there is a North-South dispute over the meaning of human rights: Western states favour civil and political rights, while states in the Global South privilege economic and social rights. Since ideas are backed by power, in practice there is a clear hierarchy within the institution that prioritizes the first set of rights (Barkin, 1998). The conditionality upon sovereignty on civil and political rights grounds is a product of the West and can be seen as a new ‘standard of civilization’ through which the Global South states are evaluated and awarded sovereign rights (Zhang and Buzan, 2019). This prevailing understanding of human rights is contested outside the West and many countries think of it as a form of cultural imperialism or a way to impose western values in the rest of the world (Barkin, 1998). When analyzing China’s internalization of this institution, I will focus mostly on the civil and political rights, given their highest salience in the institution’s normative core. China’s strategy has been to join the international human rights regime and act with it, but at the same time trying to reform it and proceeding with human rights violations at home.

The period from the end of World War II to the end of the Cold War saw the institutionalization of an extensive body of international human rights law (Zhang and Buzan, 2019), whose main constituents are six international human rights treaties with almost universal membership. The list follows by the order in which they came into force: International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Donnelly, 2014). China signed and ratified all of them, except the ICCPR, which was not ratified yet. China also signed and ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities (CRPD). This means that “China has ratified six of the nine core international human rights treaties” (Kinzelbach, 2013: 166), leaving the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance unsigned.

Since 1982, China has actively engaged with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). China has contributed to and supported the UN’s Human Rights Council’s (UNHRC) universal periodic reviews (UPR) on countries (Nathan, 2016). China has successfully moulded the UNHRC to its interests, whether regarding its composition, agenda or rules. First, it is composed by an Asian-African majority with great convergence of positions with Beijing (Zhang and Buzan, 2019). Second, it has contributed to the design of UPR as a state-led and non-condemnatory process (Zhang and Buzan, 2019). “China has found widespread support among other states for the position that it is up to each state to interpret how its international human rights obligations are interpreted and implemented within its domestic political system” (Nathan, 2016). Third, it managed the approval of many measures and regulations that limit greatly the role of NGOs (Nathan, 2016). Nevertheless, it is undisputed that China has shown great engagement with the UNHCR and a willingness to act constructively within the rules of this forum.

On the other hand, Beijing rejects international dispute settlement mechanisms, does not accept the compulsory jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and did not join the International Criminal Court (ICC). I’ve also shown how it accepted the R2P, while substantially limiting its application so it wouldn’t breach state sovereignty. This shows a pattern of integration in the international human rights regime with the exception of those treaties and organizations that could excessively breach its sovereignty.

However, Chinese relative integration in the international human rights regime stands in sharp contrast with its poor human rights record. This is a clear case where China engages with the institution in order to acquire legitimacy, avoid stigmatization and fend-off international criticism about repressive behaviours, something facilitated by the weak institutional mechanisms to monitor and enforce implementation of human rights provisions.

In fact, China does not subscribe to the Western-liberal view of human rights that is prevalent in the liberal international order. While joining its human rights regime, it has sought to transform it in light of Beijing’s understandings of human rights. Unlike prevalent understandings (see above), China subordinates human rights to sovereignty (Kinzelbach, 2012). Besides, China has argued that social and economic rights should be prioritized over civil and political rights (Breslin, 2018). China asserts commitment to both

sets of rights, but in a sequencing logic, taking the ‘right to development’ as the utmost priority and the most fundamental right. Again, this counters the normative core of the human rights institution that privileges civil and political rights, using them alone to assess state practices.

Despite accepting the universality of human rights, it has claimed at the same time that they should be adapted to national circumstances, taking into account economic, cultural and historic particularities (Breslin, 2018; Kinzelbach, 2012). In addition, China has contested the legitimacy of human rights monitoring, especially under the form of country-specific resolutions, arguing instead for dialogue based on non-confrontation and mutual respect (Foot, 2020). All these changes would increase state sovereignty, empower states to choose what human rights they want to implement (or not), and weaken international scrutiny. Nevertheless, China recognizes the value of the human rights institution as a tool for legitimation, so it has not sought to overthrow it, but rather to engage with it and transform it in line with its views and interests.

China’s view of human rights explains why China has made progress in securing economic and social rights, but has systematically violated civil and political rights at the same time (Nathan, 2016). The core interest of regime security precludes a robust protection of civil and political rights, since that could prompt the development of political opposition (Johnston, 2019).

The first example that comes to mind is the severe and wide-ranging repression of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet. Multiple sources report that Muslims in Xinjiang are arbitrarily detained without trial on the basis of their identity, while being also subjected to forced labour, mass surveillance, forced cultural assimilation and political indoctrination (Amnesty International, 2021; Freedom House, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Available data estimates that more than one million Uighurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim peoples were detained so far (Amnesty International, 2021; Freedom House, 2020). Besides, Chinese authorities “in Tibetan areas continue to severely restrict religious freedom, speech, movement, and assembly” (Human Rights Watch, 2021). This persecution and repression of ethnic minorities with the goal of ethnic assimilation is a major violation of freedom of conscience and religion.

Freedom of expression is also very limited. The party-state controls and censors media content via direct ownership of the main platforms, accreditation of journalists, penalties for public criticism and daily directives to media outlets and websites (Freedom House, 2020). Over the past years, the government has mounted a sophisticated system of online censorship. Some websites and apps, especially foreign ones, are blocked and the Chinese alternatives are tightly controlled (Ringgen, 2016). Online activity is closely monitored and scanned before or as content is posted, so those posts and

websites considered ‘politically sensitive’ can be immediately deleted or shut down (Amnesty International, 2021; Freedom House, 2020; Ringen, 2016).

The ability for citizens to protest against the government is highly curbed, whether online or on the streets. Freedom of assembly is limited because “protesters rarely obtain approval and risk punishment for assembling without permission” (Freedom House, 2020). Spontaneous protests are often met with police violence and mass detentions. Security agents act with impunity: arbitrary detentions without respecting presumption of innocence are common; so is torture and other forms of coercion (Freedom House, 2020).

Thus, the rights to physical security, protection from arbitrary detention and from torture are not safeguarded; neither is the rule of law nor the rights to presumption of innocence and to a fair trial. Opposing the Chinese government is not tolerated – it is a difficult and dangerous enterprise. Fundamental civil and political rights such as freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are not respected. China is a major violator of the prevailing human rights norms (civil and political rights), even though it made progress ensuring economic and social rights.

In sum, China has not internalized the institution of human rights. Its compliance is not significant enough to infer internalization. However, I believe it is more appropriate to classify Beijing as a norm-shaper than as an actor who seeks to overthrow the human rights institution.

7. China and the Institution of the Market

The market is one of the main institutions of the liberal international order. Almost every country in the world participates in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and Free-Trade Agreements (FTA) proliferate around the globe. The main task of this institution is to promote free international trade among countries, but it does so in a very Western-liberal way, stressing market mechanisms and reducing state intervention.

According to Staiger (1994), the obligations, hereby norms, of international trade can be divided into three categories: tariff commitments, most-favoured nation (MFN) and a ‘code of conduct’ regarding non-tariff barriers. The main norm is, of course, the imperative of reducing severally trade tariffs. “MFN treatment requires further that goods of any member country be given no less favorable treatment than goods of any other country, so that tariff concessions granted to one country must be extended to all member countries” (Staiger, 1994: 7). Also, the institution of the market implies a ‘code of conduct’ that discourages some domestic non-tariff policies that hinder the liberal way of trading. They include “a basic prohibition against quotas, restrictions on the behavior of state trading and monopolies, limits on the use of certain subsidies, standards for customs administration, and limits on

the use of exchange controls” (Staiger, 1994: 7). Thus, the market prescribes domestic policies to foster the liberalization of international trade, reducing the scope of the state’s intervention in the economy (e.g., restricting subsidies or ownership of companies) and increasing the freedom of the market (e.g., lowering tariffs, free movement of capital and companies, and fair competition between the latter).

Since Deng Xiaoping’s ‘reform and opening up’, China became a market economy, though preserving a large room for state intervention. During his term we saw economic reform policies that liberalized prices, fostered competitive markets, attracted foreign investment and stimulated private entrepreneurship (Economy, 2018). Consecutive Chinese reforms encompassed privatizations, attraction of FDI and transnational corporations, tariff reduction and the formation of a large (and predominant) private business sector (Naughton, 2018). Along the way, China has integrated into the global economy. In 2001, it joined the WTO signalling a willingness to lower trade barriers, discourage unfair practices and deepen the market (Economy, 2018). China has greatly benefited from international trade, experiencing high GDP growth rates and a stark increase in its global share of GDP – today China is the second-largest world economy (Zhao, 2018). Moreover, China spoke in defence of international trade several times. In this regard, Xi’s 2017 Davos speech is a landmark:

Whether you like it or not, the global economy is the big ocean that you cannot escape from. [...] We must remain committed to developing global free trade and investment, promote trade and investment liberalization and facilitation through opening-up and say no to protectionism. Pursuing protectionism is like locking oneself in a dark room. While wind and rain may be kept outside, that dark room will also block light and air (Xi, 2017b).

Besides, I’ve explained how China frames its ‘development’ core interest as one that requires further trade liberalization and integration in the global economy. This raises the possibility that China may have internalized the market institution, since it seems to have constituted its interests. However, reality is not that simple.

Evidence points out to an acceptable level of compliance regarding WTO obligations and a willingness to abide by the WTO rules and system (Nathan, 2016). China “has undertaken significant policy steps and domestic reforms to meet the conditions required by WTO membership” (Mazarr et al., 2018: 51). For instance, Johnston (2019) noted that the weight mean applied tariff was more than 30% during the Mao era, while in 2017 it was below 4%. Also, China has remained committed to the formal WTO dispute resolution process and generally complies with adverse rulings, though sometimes doing so in

a superficial way that circumvents the ruling's spirit (Mazarr et al., 2018; Williams, 2020). Although China sometimes pushes for favourable changes or resists unfavourable ones, this always happens within the WTO system (Morton, 2020). It seems that China complies largely with WTO's tariff rules and procedures.

A cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy has been the promotion of bilateral and multilateral FTAs. Some authors underline these FTAs are of low quality because they disrespect some legal safeguards and regulatory standards, namely at the environmental, economic and financial levels (Morton, 2020). However, the quality of these FTA has grown over time and they are nonetheless barrier-reducing agreements, showing a commitment to market values (Johnston, 2019).

Despite these efforts to comply with WTO's obligations, the promotion of FTAs and its reforms to become a market economy, some trade-restricting and anti-competitive behaviours that go against market norms persist (Mazarr et al., 2018). Although China generally complies with tariff commitments, the same cannot be said about non-tariff barriers. The key to understand this lies in the Chinese model of state capitalism, which arises from China's unique culture and historical experience (Xing and Shaw, 2013). This model entails elements of free market capitalism such as competition, liberalization and entrepreneurship, but it also leaves a large role for state intervention in the economy. "The state has long played a significant, even dominant, role in managing the country's economic affairs" (Economy, 2018: 100). The state tries to lead and direct economic development, particularly in core sectors, by regulating business enterprises, assisting national companies with subsidies and other preferential policies and, especially, by fostering state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Xing and Shaw, 2013).

The strength of SOEs is the hallmark of the Chinese model. Available evidence estimates that in 2017, the share of SOEs in China's GDP was between 23% and 28% (Zhang, 2019), and that they employed around 15% of the population (IMF, 2020). "Chinese SOEs also make up the vast majority of the largest firms in China and are heavily represented in all capital-intensive sectors" (Economy, 2018: 106). In 2020, 20 Chinese SOEs were amongst the top 100 largest global firms by revenues (IMF, 2020). Domestically, most of the largest companies are majority state-owned (Nolke et al., 2019).

SOEs are a tool for the CCP to direct economic development, develop core sectors and to expand Chinese participation in them globally. Beijing wants to establish 'national champions', whether public or private, in important sectors capable to lead and to compete with renowned multinationals (Economy, 2018). 'Made in China 2025', for example, is a strategy to increase domestic production and capture global market share in ten priority sectors

(e.g., robotics and aviation), which will be done by replacing foreign products by national ones and by injecting public money in national companies (Economy, 2018; Rato, 2020).

Despite its relative size, the share of the SOEs in the economy should not be overstated, as they are mostly concentrated in 'top-tier' sectors like petrochemicals, telecommunications and electricity – these sectors are dominated by large companies, and most of those are SOEs (Nolke et al., 2019). In 'mid-tier' sectors like machinery, high-tech, automobiles and electronics, SOEs presence is smaller and they compete with large hybrid and private firms (Naughton, 2018; Nolke et al., 2019). For most sectors, there is an intensely competitive product market and "private business is the predominant ownership form in Chinese industry" (Naughton, 2018: 339).

The problem with this large sector of public enterprise is that it counters market norms. Despite the reduction of direct subsidies, SOEs still benefit from easier and preferential access to credit and land at lower costs, and lower tax rates (Economy, 2018; IMF, 2020). SOEs share in the economy undermines fair competition between firms and private entrepreneurship overall, because SOEs are equipped with unfair advantages provided by the state (Xing and Shaw, 2013). These benefits also extend to some private national companies in core sectors like Huawei.

China also thwarts market norms in several other ways by engaging in intellectual property theft, corporate and cyber espionage, forced technology transfers as a condition to access the Chinese market, state subsidies, *inter alia* (Mazarr et al., 2018; Rato, 2020; Williams, 2020). Also against the spirit of market norms, the financial system and capital market remain mostly state-controlled and closed to foreign capital; the goal is to retain domestic enterprise control and independence from foreign capital – it flows mostly to the productive sector in the form of fixed investment (Nolke et al., 2019).

With 'development' the core interest, China has laid out its path and model for national development. As I have shown, such model encompasses both elements that are congruent and incompatible with market norms. I believe this reveals a substantive compliance with the market, but one driven by self-interest. China believes it is in its interest to be a market economy and to seek integration in the global economy – that is part of its 'core interests'. At the same time, China wants to preserve its distinct economic model, which encompasses elements incompatible with market norms, despite being a market economy. Thus, China complies with the institution by joining the global economy and participating in international trade, but does not do it fully, because that would imply the dismissal of economic practices that are part of Chinese interests.

This resonates with Weinhardt and ten Brink's (2020) finding that China's contestation to the liberal trade order varies between sectors and to the extent

that the ‘liberal compromise’ of those sectors clashes with the domestic economic preferences of those sectors, and with their domestic regulation and organization. In other words, China’s economic setup contemplates sectors organized in a way at odds with market norms and keeping it that way is part of their core interests, despite its willingness to comply with such norms in other sectors. This means that China, though complying substantially with the institution of the market, stops doing so when that harms its interests; that is to say that it has not yet fully internalized this institution, exhibiting partial internalization.

8. Conclusion

This article sought to assess if China internalized the main institutions of liberal international order: sovereignty, human rights and market. Internalization means “taking over the values and attitudes of society as one’s own so that socially acceptable behaviour is motivated not by anticipation of external consequences but by intrinsic or internal factors” (Grusec and Goodnow, 1994: 4), more concretely the belief in the righteousness of that behaviour. In this light, I proposed two internalization degrees. In partial internalization, the actor exhibits significant compliance with the analyzed institution or norm(s), but it stops doing so when compliance would undermine its interests. In complete internalization, the compliance is high quality and does not halt due to contradictory interests. Such separation is important because the actor’s commitment to the norms is instrumental in the first case, but deep in the second case, which should lead to a more durable compliance.

This is only a tentative operationalization of an undertheorized variable and should be criticized, revised and built on by others. Analyzing internalization is a task with huge potential because it reveals an actor’s commitment with rules and norms, unlike simply observing compliance for its own sake without accounting for its rationale or motivation.

My analysis points out that China has not fully internalized any of the liberal international order’s three main institutions. China exhibits partial internalization *vis-à-vis* sovereignty and the market. Regarding human rights, there is not enough compliance to even place China at this stage.

However, the conclusion that complete internalization has not occurred yet does not mean that it will not happen in the future and does not override the fact that China’s compliance with the liberal international order is overall high or, at least, certainly higher than many assume.

I tried to demonstrate that China does not wish to overtake the order, but rather to join it and act within it, abiding by many of its elements while contesting and trying to change some others. China wants to be seen as a responsible stakeholder of the order, so it can pursue legitimacy, status,

and avoid social sanctions. Beijing may not be satisfied with all the order's settings, but the changes it wants will probably come from the inside by transforming the order in a constructive manner in line with Chinese interests.

This article showed that China's engagement with international order is influenced by two (sometimes) contradictory drives: Beijing's core interests and the desire to pursue pro-social behaviour, i.e., to conform to the order's institutions. It also concluded that China acts within the liberal international order and complies with its norms largely, but stops doing so when that would undermine its interests. This reflects a selective approach to the order where Beijing supports and adheres to the elements that align with its interests, rejecting and challenging those who do not. The Chinese has left clear that its core interests are not negotiable and China will not concede in achieving them. Hence, the order can only accommodate China and earn its support if it is able to adapt to Chinese interests.

This conclusion differs from rationalist readings of the matter to the extent that it evinces a desire to pursue pro-social behaviour as a motivation for behaviour and cause for internalization – in this case, explaining why China mostly complies with the order's norms and institutions. It also avoids to assume China's interests *a priori* or to reduce them to abstract cost-benefit calculations. Internalization does not stem from such calculations, but from an overall desire to pursue pro-social behaviour, that is only forsaken when perceived core interests are at stake. Contra rationalism, these interests are actor-specific and endogenously generated.

I believe I left clear how the main institutions of liberal international order reflect Western-liberal values. Sovereignty was deemed conditional upon respect for human rights. The prevailing conception of human rights privileges civil and political over economic and social ones, allow for foreign intervention in case of severe violations of the former. The market promotes international trade in a liberal fashion and imposes neoliberal domestic policies. In this scenario, it is natural that China and other non-Western powers feel dissatisfied with the liberal international order and seek change. The order must change to fit China's interests and values if it wishes to retain its support.

Ikenberry (2011) said that the liberal international order is a liberal-hegemonic order. Earning support and consent from China and other non-western powers “means accommodating their challenges and proposed changes to the status quo of the distribution of power, institutional arrangement, and normative structure of world politics, and developing more inclusive ideas and interactions” (Acharya, 2018a: 8). In other words, this so-called liberal-hegemonic order needs to become less liberal and less hegemonic.

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Note

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