

Peaceful Hegemonic Transition and Change in the International Order: The Rise of China and the Role of the New Silk Road

The thesis of the work addresses the relationship between the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the hegemonic transition from the United States of America (USA) towards the People's Republic of China (PRC). These phenomena are contextualized within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which represents the PRC's project that will facilitate its assertion as a global hegemon. The main objective of the work is to analyze how the changing international order determines a peaceful hegemonic transition, identifying theoretical and empirical arguments whereby the international order is not only the result of hegemonic transition but can also be its determinant.

The thesis argues that, starting with the political and economic opening in 1978, the PRC has managed to become an integral part of the international order and the global economic system. However, the PRC increasingly asserts its dissatisfaction with those elements of the international order that infringe upon its interests. Moreover, the global context that followed the 2008 economic crisis highlighted the resilience of the Chinese economic model in contrast to the fragility of Western economic models. These circumstances fueled the PRC's ambition to reshape the international order through the BRI, a mammoth project aimed at creating a global infrastructure network connecting the PRC with Eurasian, African, and Asia-Pacific states.

In this context, the paper proposes using the specific concepts of the English School of International Relations to structure the analysis of the change in the international order and the PRC's influence on it. This approach will include the analysis of primary and secondary international institutions essential for understanding how the PRC reforms the international order to reflect its interests and values.

The first chapter of the paper discusses the main theoretical perspectives on hegemony, including realism, neorealism, liberalism, and the English School perspective, as well as specific theories related to hegemony (hegemonic stability, peaceful transition). Through this approach, the dominant theoretical and conceptual framework that underpins the central thesis of the paper is established. At the same time, this chapter examines the relationship between hegemony, international order, and change in international politics, from the perspective of international relations theories.

Realism, divided into classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism, emphasizes material power as the basis of hegemony. John J. Mearsheimer, an offensive realist, defines the hegemon as a state able to dominate the international system but disregards the influence of international institutions. Robert Gilpin, a classical realist, adds legitimacy and international recognition as key elements of hegemony. Neoclassical realism points out that hegemony involves four elements: brute power, the hegemon's ambitions, the role of dominant pole, and the willingness to apply power to maintain order. Neoliberals, in contrast, see hegemony as an essential function of the dominant state in maintaining the stability of the international political and economic system.

Between the realist and liberal paradigms, the English School is essential for the thesis due to its objective and comprehensive approach to international relations. Hedley Bull, the main exponent of this theoretical approach, emphasizes the importance of great powers in the functioning of international society, rejecting the predominance of brute power as the sole defining characteristic of this status, and adding to it the need for legitimacy and recognition of great powers in relation to other members of international society. Great powers, defined by military superiority and international recognition, contribute to international order by managing relations among themselves and exploiting their local preponderance. Ian Clark suggests that hegemony is legitimized through social recognition, being an institutionalized practice of leadership rights and responsibilities.

Robert W. Cox, representative of neo-Gramscianism, asserts that hegemony requires legitimate domination, based on consensus and limiting force. He emphasizes the importance of ideologies and institutions in maintaining hegemony, highlighting the functions of international organizations in expanding hegemonic world order and co-opting elites from peripheral states.

From the central theoretical perspective of the English School, the international order represents a pattern of activity that supports the basic purposes of state society. Basic purposes include the preservation of the state system itself, maintaining individual state sovereignty, ensuring peace (in terms of the absence of war among member states), limiting violence, keeping promises, and stabilizing possession through property rules.

The primary institutions of international society (such as sovereignty, balance of power, international law, great powers, diplomacy, and war) are fundamental to the international order as they directly contribute to the preservation of the basic purposes of international society. Primary

institutions can be identified and classified based on the sets of norms, rules, and principles governing international relations. Barry Buzan describes these institutions as those "deep social practices relative in the sense of being more evolved than designed" and legitimate in the eyes of international society members. Hedley Bull defines them as "customs and practices shaped towards achieving common goals" and clearly differentiates them from international organizations. Bull argues that "to understand the fundamental cause of such an order as exists in international politics, we must look not to the League of Nations, the United Nations, and such bodies, but to the institutions of international society which arose before these international organizations were established and which would continue to function (albeit in a different manner) even if these organizations did not exist." However, through specific practice, international organizations represent the place where primary institutions are produced and shaped, with primary international institutions being essential for maintaining international order, including recognition of sovereignty, balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war, and great powers.

Chapter 2 highlights the methodology used for the current thesis, justifying the application of the case study method reinforced by the process tracing method to investigate the case of hegemonic transition between the USA and the PRC, analyzed in relation to the BRI. The methodology is based on the case study method, defined as an analysis of a specific aspect of a historical event, and is useful for understanding complex phenomena, including changes in the international order and hegemonic transition. The case study method is complemented by process tracing, which involves detailed and empirical analysis of how initial conditions transform into case outcomes. This method allows for the exploration of Chinese political and strategic reasoning in relation to the international order and its ambitions. Also, stress tests recommended by Stephen van Evera are used to evaluate the validity of causal hypotheses.

The main hypothesis highlighted in the methodology chapter is that the hegemonic transition between the USA and the PRC will be peaceful and facilitated by the transformation of international institutions, with the BRI representing a crucial factor in this transition.

The relationship between hegemony and the change of the international order will be examined from the perspective of the PRC, testing the main hypothesis by identifying change indicators associated with the PRC's foreign policy and the functioning of the BRI.

Chapter 3 examines the context of the PRC's rise to the status of a great power and how hegemony is interpreted from different perspectives. The analysis also refers to how the concept of hegemony and international order are interpreted in Chinese political theory.

Over the past decades, the PRC's foreign policy has been influenced by its cultural and political history. Martin Jacques emphasizes that to understand the PRC's rise, one must understand its economic growth, but also its history, politics, culture, and traditions. Beginning in 1949, the PRC's foreign policy included Maoist-Leninist elements, but it significantly adapted following the liberal economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping.

Mao's regime had a revolutionary and anti-imperialist foreign policy, aimed at supporting the "Third World" in the global spread of communist revolutions. However, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, integrated the PRC into the international order and developed the economy through capitalist reforms. The rapprochement with the West, especially the USA and the European Union, became evident during Jiang Zemin's period, when the PRC began to promote the need to increase its global influence internally.

During Hu Jintao's tenure, the PRC adopted the concept of "soft power" and began to support stability and international cooperation. However, since the early 2000s, the PRC also started to exhibit greater assertiveness on the international stage, resulting in territorial disputes with regional countries and diplomatic conflicts with Western nations.

Xi Jinping has adopted a more aggressive foreign policy and proposed major projects like the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative). He promoted terms like "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and "a community with a shared future for humanity," redirecting the PRC's focus towards active global leadership. Under Xi's leadership, the PRC has significantly expanded its global influence, raising suspicions and concerns on the international stage regarding its hegemonic intentions.

Barry Buzan and other analysts see Sino-American tension as crucial for the future of the international order. There are concerns that as the PRC becomes less dependent on the USA, conflicts could arise. However, some believe that the integration of the PRC into the international order could transform it into a responsible great power.

The PRC uses its cultural and economic history to strengthen its international position. Understanding the PRC's perspective on world order involves acknowledging its Confucian legacy and contemporary projects like the BRI, which reflect both a pragmatic approach and an attempt

to legitimize the PRC's global influence. In the long term, the peaceful rise of the PRC and its foreign strategies will continue to redefine global dynamics, thus challenging the dominant position of the West and realigning global power towards the East.

Following the analysis of the Chinese thought system, a conceptual alternative to hegemony defined solely by material power and legitimacy can be identified. Yan Xuetong, for example, promotes moral realism in contrast to aggressive hegemony, emphasizing the concept of humane authority, while Zhao Tingyang reinterprets the classical Chinese philosophical concept of Tianxia as a superior framework for global governance. These ideas contribute to shaping a Chinese model of hegemony distinct from the Western one. Additionally, the perspectives of Bruno Maçães and Kent Calder on the BRI argue that this project is not just economic in nature, but represents an ambitious geopolitical vision aimed at transforming the global order.

Chapter 4 focuses on the role of the BRI in the PRC's foreign policy and how it changes the international order. It analyzes the impact of the BRI on the primary institutions of international society, which are transformed to reflect a fair distribution of power and the political diversity that the PRC pursues through its foreign policy.

The BRI is a broad project launched by the PRC in 2013 under President Xi Jinping, aimed at reviving ancient trade routes associated with the Silk Road and creating a modern infrastructure network between Eurasia, Africa, and South America. Through massive investments in road, rail, maritime, and communication infrastructure, the BRI aims to create a high level of economic prosperity for the PRC and its partner states, as well as the internationalization of the yuan and the management of the PRC's industrial overcapacity. Politically, the initiative seeks to strengthen international cooperation and reduce global tensions, providing the PRC with a regional and international leadership role.

The outcomes of BRI projects are notable, with numerous infrastructure projects being implemented, generating economic benefits for partner states and Chinese companies involved almost exclusively in their execution. However, the initiative is not without criticism: the financial dependence of some partner states on the PRC and the potential political and strategic implications of the projects raise questions about the sovereignty of partner countries and the primary institution of sovereign equality. Sovereignty is a central value of the PRC's foreign policy, being essential in its foreign policy context regarding territorial claims and Beijing's firm stance against external interventions in its internal affairs. Nevertheless, clear examples of "debt traps" associated with

projects like the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and the Bel-Boljare highway in Montenegro reflect significant debt risks that reshape the primary international institution of sovereignty. Regarding international law, the PRC often uses non-legally binding memoranda of understanding to protect its interests in the BRI. Additionally, the China International Commercial Court (CICC) is set up to resolve commercial disputes within the initiative, although its judicial independence is questioned.

BRI diplomacy is distinct, promoting multilateralism and strategic bilateralism. The PRC uses its economic influence to cement diplomatic relations, exemplified by collaborations with various states and forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and ASEAN. PRC diplomacy is currently characterized, among other things, by tensions with neighbors and mutually beneficial relationships with Latin American and Caribbean states through the China-CELAC Forum. Italy's withdrawal from the BRI and the evolution of Romania's relations with the PRC highlight the challenges and strategic reevaluations of some European states regarding the initiative. The PRC's active involvement in Africa, strategic acquisitions in Greece, and close relations with Hungary underline its regional and global influence.

The BRI reconfigures great power management, positioning the PRC as a central and influential power in the international system. Through involvement in the UN and collaboration with its specialized structures, the PRC challenges US hegemony and promotes a different vision of international order, especially by gaining a position of power through massive investments in Africa and Europe. The global competition between similar development-focused initiatives, such as the "Global Gateway" or the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, indicates the rivalry between Western and Chinese economic models.

In the area of environmental protection, although the PRC has been historically privileged by the international regulation process in this domain, it tries to assert its role as a leader in renewable energy and clean technologies, investing massively in wind and solar capacities. However, BRI projects raise significant ecological challenges when they are implemented in partner states. These challenges are due to the export of energy-intensive technologies and the increased dependence of partner states on fossil fuels. Although the PRC has established "Green Investment Principles" and ceased funding coal plants, pragmatic concerns still influence its decisions. The PRC's limitations in environmental protection are evident in its political and

economic ambitions, affecting its global image. Thus, even though the BRI plays a significant role in environmental protection, challenges remain essential for the initiative's future.

Chapter 5 focuses on the strategic competition between the USA and the PRC and the relationship between the "Chinese Dream" and the "American Dream." The latter is marked by tensions and the potential for a hegemonic conflict between the PRC and the USA. Kori Schake considers a peaceful hegemonic transition between the two states unlikely due to cultural and political differences. The USA aims to ensure the PRC respects international rules, and Michael Mazarr highlights the competition for influence over the global system. The USA promotes liberal principles and human rights, while the PRC values sovereignty and nonintervention.

Strategic documents issued in recent years by the American government identify the PRC as the main competitor to the USA, addressing military, economic, technological, and security aspects of the relationship with the Asian power. Tensions between the two nations are highlighted by Chinese internal policies, US activities in East Asia, and human rights issues in regions like Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Despite these conflicts, there are areas of collaboration between the USA and the PRC, such as trade and climate change.

Each of the last three American administrations has addressed the relationship with the PRC distinctly, highlighting its complexity and importance. Although the PRC claims to pursue a peaceful rise, critics suspect hidden hegemonic ambitions. The PRC's massive economic investments in various regions and its growing global influence raise questions.

Militarily, the PRC has invested significantly in modernization, adopting advanced technologies, yet the balance of power remains in favor of the USA. Tensions are also heightened by territorial issues, such as the Taiwan problem and claims over the South China Sea. The PRC seeks unification with Taiwan, prompting reactions from the USA, which supports the independence of the Taipei government and maintains an active military presence in the region.

The divergent approaches of the USA and the PRC regarding regional security and adherence to international law reflect different visions of stability and security in the Indo-Pacific. These tensions have the potential to destabilize the region and affect the global geopolitical balance. In conclusion, the complexity and dynamics of US-PRC relations require a balanced approach, based on dialogue and selective cooperation, avoiding escalation towards a major conflict.

Following this work, we can conclude that a peaceful hegemonic transition is possible through changes in elements of the international order, such as the primary institutions of international society. The PRC seems to pursue a balanced approach in its vision of international order, combining peaceful rise with a series of classic Chinese political thought conceptions. Thus, the BRI offers not only an economic strategy but represents a mechanism of power transition and a tool for changing the international order. Institutional change can influence how the hegemonic transition unfolds, providing the PRC with more influence and legitimacy on its path to becoming a hegemon.