

Sino-Russian Approach to Global World Order: Humanitarian interventions as a frame of reference

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Author Bio

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Abstract

From a vantage point of institutions, the paper examines Sino-Russian responses to UN humanitarian interventions attempting to interpret China and Russia's world-order policies and strategies within the Global World Order (GWO). Drawing on both realist and internationalist perspectives, the paper argues that China and Russia's integration into key international institutions, particularly their roles as veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), provides significant insights into their world-order orientations. Sino-Russian responses and reactions to the UN-proposed Responsibility to Protect (R2P) interventions in Kosovo, Georgia, Crimea, Libya, Syria, and Myanmar reveal a complex realist approach. Both nations seemingly view R2P as a tool of Western imperialism, selectively opposing interventions based on geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. Overall, Sino-Russian strategies reflect a nationalist-driven realism aimed at balancing US dominance, prioritising regional stability and spheres of influence, and challenging the spread of liberal democracy.

Keywords: Humanitarian intervention, Responsibility to Protect (R2P), Global World Order (GWO), Liberal World Order (LWO), China, Russia, Realism.

Introduction

The Global World Order (GWO) is viewed as the structural and hierarchical organisation of nations based on power relationships, economic affluence, institutional partnerships and ideological values. Understanding the intertwined hierarchies widely varies due to scholarly perspectives from unique vantage points. From a *realist* school of thought adhering to a military-might-centric perspective, US scholar Mearsheimer defines *order* as “an organised group of international institutions that help govern the interaction among the member states”,

noting that “great powers create and manage orders”. In the current GWO, China and Russia share an ambition for global leadership, capturing scholarly attention that Sino-Russian approaches are in conflict with Western liberal values. China’s economic growth competes with that of the US, whilst Russia’s post-Cold War recovery is a new threat to the West. In contrast, scholarly debates around economic cooperation and internationalism view these two as peacefully integrating into a liberal world order (LWO).¹ Ole Wæver views the GWO through a culmination of four domains, namely, *power* (military might), *economics* (economic growth), *institutions* (e.g., UN) and *values* (i.e., ideological alignment).² From such a holistic viewpoint, I contend the vantage point of *institutions* to be productive in attempting to understand Sino-Russian approaches to the LWO: over the years China and Russia have been integrated into influential multilateral organisations and global institutions like the UN; they remain two veto-wielding members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which deploys humanitarian interventions like the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). I argue that the *vantage point* of their *institutional* responses to UN humanitarian interventions helps locate their LWO orientations. A retrospective analysis of unilateral military actions and Sino-Russian reaction to proposed R2P interventions in Kosovo, Georgia, Crimea, Libya, Syria and Myanmar will characterise Sino-Russian world-order policies as a carefully maintained *realist* notion against Western and allied powers.

Theoretical Perspectives: Sino-Russian Approaches to the LWO

In this section, we discuss the LWO, a culmination of liberalism and democracy, or simply *liberal democracy* to locate the Sino-Russian positionality. The European international society

¹ John Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–50.

² Ole Wæver, “A Post-Western Europe: Strange Identities in a Less Liberal World Order,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2018): 75–88.

“provided most of the DNA” to modern world orders³: America’s 20th century *Pax Americana* succeeded Britain’s 19th century *Pax Britannica*.⁴ These great powers ‘manage’ the orders reflecting **power** dynamics.⁵ The evolution of the US-led order until the Cold War was characterised by a “Western-oriented security and economic system” that internationalism scholar Ikenberry understands as Liberal Internationalism 2.0.⁶ Western Europe and North America’s precedence in finishing state-building vis-à-vis the colonised world enabled the West to build an affluent **economic** system which remains a founding pillar of LWO.⁷ For Ikenberry, its evolution (i.e., Liberal Internationalism 3.0) is defined by expanding “memberships in core governing institutions to rising non-Western states”, and “rule-based system”, indicating accommodation of China and Russia, and rising regulatory role of **institutions**.⁸ Over time, the LWO transitioned through the industrial-imperial era and post-colonial times before entering the age of modern globalisation, accommodating the Western ideal of liberal democracy⁹ and *liberal* ideals such as human rights as a universal value.¹⁰ It intensified the **value** contrast in the presence of non-democratic communist China and Cold War rival Russia.

In an increasingly complicated LI3.0 era, Sino-Russian approaches, LWO sustainability and the evolving US hegemony at play remain subject to scholarly debate. The end of the Cold War put the final nail in the coffin of communism, which competed against liberal democracy at the state-hegemonic levels. This led Francis Fukuyama to suggest that history has ‘ended’.

³ Wæver, “A Post-Western Europe”, 75

⁴ Georg Sørensen. “Institutions and Liberal World Order.” In *A Liberal World Order in Crisis: Choosing between Imposition and Restraint*, 141-167. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011.

⁵ Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail,” 9

⁶ John Ikenberry, “Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2018): 17–29.

⁷ Mohammed Ayoob, “Making Sense of Global Tensions: Dominant and Subaltern Conceptions of Order and Justice in the International System,” *International Studies* 47, no. 2–4 (2010): 129–141.

⁸ John Ikenberry, “Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order,” *Perspectives on Politics* 7, no. 1 (2009): 71–87.

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History,” *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3–18.

¹⁰ Kofi Annan, “Do We Still Have Universal Values?” Third Global Ethic Lecture, 2004.

However, a *realist* perspective views the fungibility of China's growth into the military might could clash with the US/West.¹¹ Sørensen sees China's approach to the LWO as an opportunistic move for "the promotion of national greatness and power", not for embracing liberal values.¹² Ikenberry suggests that China's illiberal-authoritarian government's mercantilist strategy is a good fit when the LWO is "relatively open and liberal in orientation" with little possibility of large-scale power transitions.¹³ Although China does not brandish its values against liberal democratic ideals, *nationalism* can push China towards conflict since nationalism fuels its growth. Despite China's peaceful exploitation of the LI3, its *realist* intentions cannot be ignored. Historically, the US invasion of Iraq is a salient example of a conflict for the sake of "national security".¹⁴

Geoeconomics also explains China and Russia's economic advances as a new form of mercantilism without any "superior modality", with the least chance of translating commercial quarrels into political conflicts.¹⁵ China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to support its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) strategy, which, with the new Silk Road initiatives, demonstrates that "China is now starting to take on a leadership role to reflect its position as a rising global power. These initiatives made China the centre of geoeconomics and geopolitics in the region and beyond".¹⁶ Russia's energy politics, as a foreign policy tool in the EU, also bears geoeconomic notions¹⁷ as Pierini notes, "an overarching goal [for Russia] is to maintain or expand its energy markets in neighbouring western Europe and China, two of the

¹¹ John Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160–162.

¹² Sørensen, "Institutions and Liberal World Order," 155

¹³ Ikenberry, "Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive," 27

¹⁴ Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," 8

¹⁵ Edward Luttwak, "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce," *The National Interest* 20 (1990): 17–23.

¹⁶ Hong Yu, "Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank," *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 5 (2016): 353–368.

¹⁷ Antto Vihma, "Geoeconomic Analysis and the Limits of Critical Geopolitics: A New Engagement with Edward Luttwak," *Geopolitics* 23, no. 1 (2018): 1–21.

world's largest oil and gas consumers".¹⁸ The instruments of conflict are also economic, as Russia uses its energy policies as leverage to counter Western Europe, aiming to increase its influence and safeguard its energy markets. Sino-Russian economic and institutional progress through BRICS challenges US efforts to undermine Russia and affirms its status as a great power in the post-Cold War era.¹⁹ BRICS accommodation is characterised by "Chinese economic policy balanced by Russian geopolitical leadership", which is not essentially a basis for a new order but has the potential to become one.²⁰ Alternatively, coalition-building through BRICS²¹ can potentially lead to a new form of pluralism against the Western-dominated global order.²² These reinforce Sino-Russian resistance to the spread of LWO to not "allow the US [-led West] to dominate the international system economically, militarily, and politically".²³

The significance of institutions as a vantage point

Mearsheimer believes that an LWO inspired by liberal democracy "can arise only in unipolar systems where the leading state is a liberal democracy".²⁴ Russian and Chinese disbelief in liberal democracy somewhat challenges unipolarity if not liberal democracy. China's rise challenges how the US as a unipolar power may lead the LI3.0 but scholars are divided as to how the LI3.0 will evolve. China's rise may indicate "the end of unipolarity", especially

¹⁸ Marc Pierini, "Russia's Energy Politics and Its Relevance for the European Union," *Carnegie Europe*, 2019.

¹⁹ Bobo Lo, "The Illusion of Convergence - Russia, China and the BRICS." *Ifri*, March 2016.

²⁰ Lo, "The Illusion of Convergence: Russia, China and the BRICS," 19, 23, 26–27.

²¹ Shiping Tang, "China and the Future International Order(s)," *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2018): 31–43.

²² Andrew Hurrell, "Beyond the BRICS: Power, Pluralism, and the Future of Global Order," *Ethics & International Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2018): 89–101.

²³ Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail," 34

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7

because American economic power declined since the 2008 recession²⁵ Ikenberry suggests²⁶ that a reformed liberal order such as LI3.0 needs to be “more universal and less hierarchical” and the US needs to “cede authority and control to a wider set of states and give up some of its hegemonic rights and privileges”. He offers an ‘evolutionary’ form of power transition, in which the US-led hegemonic LWO experiences shifts by accommodating others (e.g., Russia and China) while liberal characteristics such as “openness, rules and multilateral cooperation” persist.²⁷

Contrarily, Mearsheimer perceives²⁸ US to be aware of Sino-Russian advances and “actively wanting to help integrate China and Russia into this system by aligning them with as many global institutions as possible and offering liberal democracy to them as the new alternative”. The US aims to engage China in trade and global institutional memberships are envisaged by its liberalisation strategy; and their inclusion into global institutions like the IMF, World Bank and WTO indicates that “this engagement was working favourably”.²⁹ Based on Sino-Russian willingness toward integration, the end of unipolarity may evolve into a possibility of peaceful power transition - according to Rauch and Wurm’s exposition, a rising state such as China, satisfied and easy-going with the LWO, will be accommodated by the US hegemon into “a much more nuanced order that strives to retain dominance but still manages to include/integrate other powers into the system taking their concerns and interests seriously”.³⁰

²⁵ Christopher Layne, “This Time It’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and the ‘Pax Americana’,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2012): 203–213. Also see Sørensen, “Institutions and Liberal World Order,” 148

²⁶ Ikenberry, “Liberal Internationalism 3.0,” 80

²⁷ Ikenberry, “Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive,” 18

²⁸ Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail,” 23

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24, 26

³⁰ Carsten Rauch and Iris Wurm, “Making the World Safe for Power Transition: Towards a Conceptual Combination of Power Transition Theory and Hegemony Theory,” *Journal of Global Faultlines* 1, no. 1 (2013): 50–69.

Figure 1: Hegemony

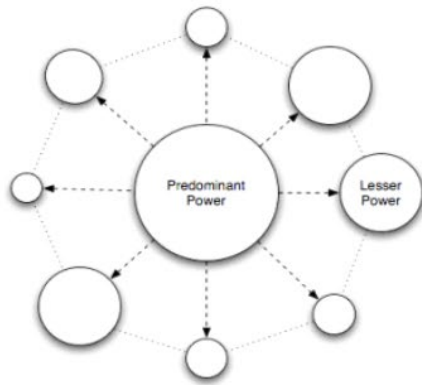
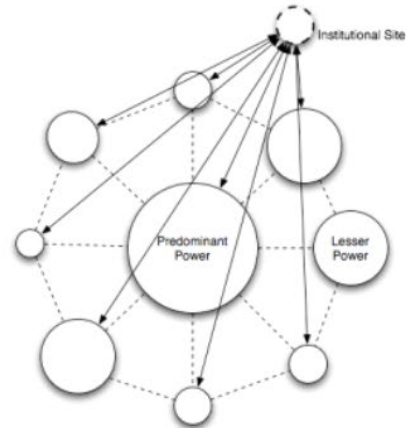


Figure 2 'liberal hegemony'



Source: Nexon and Wright (2007, p. 256)

How 'Institutions' mediate supremacy between predominant powers and peripheral powers in a liberal hegemony.

However, the persisting role of hegemony cannot be ruled out. Rauch and Wurm explain³¹ that in contrast to a flat unipolarity, constitutional order/liberal hegemony will be at play where “influence is exercised through an institutional site”, as proposed by Nexon and Wright.³² China strategically engages with global powers to integrate within the UN framework and challenge existing hegemony using an institutional upper hand.³³ It increasingly leverages economic strength and institutional integration. Russia, ambitious to revive lost glory, envisions an alternative order hinging on regional cooperation, aiming to challenge both the LWO and the Westphalian principles underlying the LI3.0. Hence, this brings the focus to the *institutions'* domain, in which the Sino-Russian responses and interactions are worthy of attention. By taking the UN as a site under the institution domain to understand Sino-Russian

³¹ Ibid., 60

³² Daniel Nexon and Thomas Wright, “What’s at Stake in the American Empire Debate,” *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007): 253–271.

³³ Rosemary Foot, “‘Doing Some Things’ in the Xi Jinping Era: The United Nations as China’s Venue of Choice,” *International Affairs* 90, no. 5 (2014): 1085–1100.

institutional interactions, we now employ the theoretical framework drawn above to facilitate a retrospective analysis of Sino-Russian responses to R2P interventions.

UN Humanitarian Interventions (R2P): an institutional vantage point

R2P is a 2005 UN-adopted unanimous global commitment, enabling the international society to take decisive action through the UNSC to protect populations from “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” when a state itself “manifestly fail” in providing protection.³⁴ Despite successes in mediating conflict (e.g. Kenya 2008) and providing humanitarian assistance (e.g. Myanmar Cyclone), R2P was criticised by the Third World³⁵, because of a *realist* perception that states don’t care about others unless interference benefits their national interests.³⁶ A state may not be “subjected to diplomatic or military sanctions as a result of a casual use of a general humanitarian ‘license to kill’” which any permanent UNSC member will always hinder, however, great power can still abuse the humanitarian doctrine by legitimising power infringement.³⁷ The UNSC permanent members are termed P1 (US) as the unipolar leader, P3 (US, UK and France) as ‘the West’ and P2 (Russia and China) as the non-West representing the NATO-defined second and the third world respectively. There is scholarly pessimism about UNSC functions due to the veto belonging to the P5 (US, UK, France, Russia and China) which “does not reflect the actual distribution of 21st century power”.³⁸ Washington can bypass the UNSC for national interest to proceed unilaterally with

³⁴ Alex J. Bellamy and Paul D. Williams, “The New Politics of Protection? Côte d’Ivoire, Libya and the Responsibility to Protect,” *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 825–850.

³⁵ Tonny Brems Knudsen, “The Responsibility to Protect: European Contributions in a Changing World Order,” in *The European Union and International Institutions*, ed. Knud Erik Jørgensen and Katie Verlin Laatikainen (London: Routledge, 2013), 157–170.

³⁶ Tonny Brems Knudsen, “Humanitarian Intervention Revisited: Post-Cold War Responses to Classical Problems,” in *The UN, Peace and Force*, ed. Michael Pugh (London: Routledge, 1997), 199–218.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 157-159

³⁸ Thomas G. Weiss, “The Sunset of Humanitarian Intervention? The Responsibility to Protect in a Unipolar Era,” *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 2 (2004): 135.

military action, indicating the P1's superiority. Such imbalances provide the basis for being critical of R2P's role and agenda. Our focus is on how the 'P2-influence' affects the UNSC's roles in humanitarian interventions, which makes the R2P an interesting site of contestation of powers, and essentially a vantage point from where Sino-Russian approaches to the LWO may be portrayed with increasing clarity.

Methodology

Based on the theoretical framework and by adopting a qualitative-comparative approach, retrospective analyses of six examples – Kosovo (1999), Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), Libya (2011), Syria (2011-), and Myanmar (2015-) – will provide concrete instances to assess Sino-Russian reactions to the R2P doctrine and their geopolitical strategies within the UNSC, particularly because Sino-Russian responses to these country unrests are important to show the power play between P2 and P3/P1. The country examples were selected based on their relevance in reflecting Sino-Russian engagement with the LWO and their realist, nationalistic approaches toward humanitarian intervention. China and Russia exhibited active and passive roles, particularly in Russian interactions with NATO interventions in Kosovo, Georgia, Crimea and Libyan examples. NATO actions were justified in Kosovo and Libyan examples under humanitarian pretexts, while in Syria, Crimea and Georgia, Russian counter to Western interventions were justified by its sovereignty and strategic interests. Geopolitical rivalries in Syria and Myanmar make them complex examples of diplomatic-institutional responses and a non-interventionist approach rather than military intervention. Primary data sources are UN Security Council resolutions, official government statements, and reports from UN, NATO, and Human Rights Watch etc. Academic literature and expert commentary on Sino-Russian geopolitics, international relations, and R2P constitute the secondary sources. The analytical

focus is examining key themes such as sovereignty, regional interests, and strategies to balance Western hegemony through the UNSC by investigating the rhetoric used and actions resorted to by Sino-Russian actors to understand their framing of interventions and realist motivations. Such analyses, however, are limited in scope for confinement within the UNSC context without delving deeply into influences of other multilateral structures, arrangements and coalitions (e.g., Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD), Indo-Pacific alliance against China).

Kosovo (1999), Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014)

The NATO-led peace-support operation to hinder Serbian action against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo since 1999 established the Kosovo Force as a humanitarian intervention, which some scholars suggesting it was merely “three months of bombing”.³⁹ NATO’s intervention bypassed UNSC authorisation, which China and Russia opposed by claiming that it violated Serbian sovereignty.⁴⁰ Geopolitically speaking, NATO presence in neighbouring Kosovo was a threat that constituted a major cause for opposition.⁴¹ In contrast, Russia’s unilateral military action in the 2008 Georgia-Russia War violated Georgian sovereignty and exhibited double standards due to neglecting the humanitarian standards highlighted in the Kosovo unrest. Russia’s justification, based on protecting ethnic Russians, echoed the humanitarian rationale used by NATO in Kosovo, but Russia used this selectively to serve its strategic interests – which, Kurowska rightly terms⁴², to be driven “out of particularistic interest”. During the Crimean annexation (2014), Russia used similar discourses of moral obligation of ‘protecting

³⁹ Ramesh Thakur, “R2P after Libya and Syria: Engaging Emerging Powers,” *The Washington Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2013).

⁴⁰ Knudsen, “The Responsibility to Protect,” 162

⁴¹ BBC, “Why Russia Opposes Intervention in Kosovo,” *BBC News*, 1998.

⁴² Xymena Kurowska, “Multipolarity as Resistance to Liberal Norms: Russia’s Position on Responsibility to Protect,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 14, no. 4 (2014): 489–508.

compatriots' of a former Soviet Union territory⁴³, closely reflecting its selective use of humanitarian intervention and sovereignty principles seen in Kosovo and Georgia. Putin used the same rhetoric used in Georgia, presenting Russia as the protector of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers, "We hoped that Russian citizens and Russian speakers in Ukraine, especially its southeast and Crimea, would live in a friendly, democratic and civilised state that would protect their rights in line with the norms of international law".⁴⁴ In these three examples, Russia vindicated its interventions on humanitarian grounds but remained critical of NATO actions when it sensed a geopolitical threat from the West.

Libya (2011)

The UNSC's first international R2P operation was in Libya. China, due to its non-intervening foreign policies towards others' domestic affairs, has been generally critical of R2P.⁴⁵ However, it abstained alongside Russia from voting against UNSC Resolution 1973 which legitimised the use of force against Libyan targets, which may be because blocking it would have drawn criticism and tarnished their international reputation.⁴⁶ The Arab League's recommendation for a Libyan intervention (representing regional ownership) is why Russia did not block an intervention.⁴⁷ All BRICS countries objected when NATO ignored restrictions against directly targeting Libyan leader Gaddafi, which indicated a shift from a politically neutral position to a regime change attempt.⁴⁸ Russia warned about the use of force in strict compliance with Resolution 1973 while China warned against such attempts "under the guise

⁴³ Ibid., 502

⁴⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," *Kremlin*, March 18, 2014.

⁴⁵ Andrew Garwood-Gowers, "China and the 'Responsibility to Protect': The Implications of the Libyan Intervention." *Asian Journal of International Law* 2, no. 2 (2012): 375-393.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 385

⁴⁷ Kurowska, "Multipolarity as Resistance to Liberal Norms," 498

⁴⁸ Thakur, "R2P after Libya and Syria," 69-70

of protecting civilians”⁴⁹ and demanded an immediate ceasefire opposing arbitrary interpretation of the resolution.⁵⁰ P2 remained critical of NATO actions despite initial UNSC endorsement, seemingly apprehensive of NATO advances in their spheres of influence.

Syria (2011-)

China and Russia vetoed R2P interventions in Syria nearly 20 times as of 2024 but it may not resemble a straightforward strategic clash between P2 and P3.⁵¹ Russia apprehended the rise of extremist forces beyond Syria which explains why it backed Assad and vetoed R2P, fearing that a regime change like Libya might spread unrest affecting the Northern Caucasus. Interestingly Russia, a long-term ally of President Assad, teamed up with the US when striking a deal to surrender Syria’s chemical weapons.⁵² Chinese aversion to interventions was based on what China learnt as a failure to uphold R2P norms in Libya⁵³. China's attempts are instead in favour of mediating the Syrian crisis through proposals for UNSG dialogue and consultation.⁵⁴ Thus Russia and China sidestepped Syrian interventions by blaming what went wrong in Libya, “China and Russia remain resolutely opposed to any resolution which could set off a chain of events leading to a 1973-type authorisation for outside military operations in Syria”.⁵⁵

Myanmar (2015-)

⁴⁹ Garwood-Gowers, “China and the 'Responsibility to Protect,’” 387

⁵⁰ Bellamy and Williams, “The New Politics of Protection?,” 825-850

⁵¹ Simon Adams, “Failure to Protect: Syria and the UN Security Council,” *Occasional Paper Series*, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2015.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 15

⁵³ Garwood-Gowers, “China and the 'Responsibility to Protect,’” 388

⁵⁴ Ruan Zongze, “Responsible Protection,” *China Institute of International Studies*, May–June 2012.

⁵⁵ Thakur, “R2P after Libya and Syria,” 71

China and Russia were persistently averse to interventions in the Myanmar unrest that displaced thousands of Rohingyas, even by opposing a UN resolution to end the military campaign causing the unrest.⁵⁶ Despite UN evidence of genocide and ethnic cleansing, China and Russia boycotted talks over potential interventions.⁵⁷ They provided Myanmar with weaponry, including those used in the crackdown against the Rohingya⁵⁸ whose repatriation from neighbouring Bangladesh failed due to Sino-Russian obstacles.⁵⁹ Russia is well-known for its arms export worth over one billion to Myanmar in exchange for an energy deal.⁶⁰ China always favoured Myanmar, particularly due to the regional collaboration, Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor, as part of China's OBOR initiative.⁶¹ In an OBOR news briefing, a Chinese envoy underestimated human rights by reiterating that 'economic development' such as the BCIM-EC connectivity can solve the Rohingya issue as China was building a deep seaport and energy terminal in Rakhine – home to the Rohingya.⁶² The blending of narratives of economic development in the Rohingya crisis reflected the view that "China's goal is not to solve the problem of Rohingya ethnicity in Myanmar, but to take advantage of

⁵⁶ AFP. "China and Russia Oppose UN Resolution on Rohingya." *The Guardian*, December 24, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/24/china-russia-oppose-un-resolution-myanmar-rohingya-muslims>.

⁵⁷ Michelle Nichols, "U.N. Security Council Mulls Myanmar Action; Russia, China Boycott Talks." *Reuters*, December 14, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-un/u-n-security-council-mulls-myanmar-action-russia-china-boycott-talks-idUSKBN1OG2CJ>.

⁵⁸ Shibani Mahtani, "North Korea, China and Russia Are Arming Myanmar's Military Despite Genocide Accusations, U.N. Report Finds." *The Washington Post*, August 5, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/north-korea-china-and-russia-are-arming-myanmars-military-despite-genocide-accusations-un-report-finds/2019/08/05/f4dd49d0-b531-11e9-acc8-1d847bacca73_story.html.

⁵⁹ Joshua Carroll, "Why the UN Failed to Save the Rohingya." *Al Jazeera*, June 28, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/united-nations-failed-save-rohingya-190628024749391.html>.

⁶⁰ Ludmila Lutz-Auras. "Russia and Myanmar – Friends in Need?" *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 34 no 2. (2015): 165-198.

⁶¹ K Yhome, The BCIM economic corridor: Prospects and challenges. *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*. 2017 <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-bcim-economic-corridor-prospects-and-challenges/>.

⁶² BenarNews. "Bangladesh: Chinese Envoy Rapped for Linking Rohingya Crisis to Economic Trade." *BenarNews*, May 10, 2019. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/bangladesh-rohingya-05102019212330.html>.

them for their geostrategic reasons”.⁶³ These country examples will be related to scholarly arguments in the next section, attempting to understand how P2 approaches the world order.

Sino-Russian approaches to LWO from a vantage point

Soft balancing against unipolar power

Soft balancing strategies may explain why China and Russia deliberately counter US hegemony and LWO.⁶⁴ Russian self-styled ‘humanitarian’ interventions in **Georgia** and **Crimean** annexation are attempts to thwart NATO advances in Eastern Europe.⁶⁵ These attempts, with control over Armenia and **Ukraine**, are Russia’s geopolitical moves to curb Western grip over Eastern Europe⁶⁶ because less capable states (e.g. Russia as a weak power) use ‘soft’ balancing against unipolar or hegemonic powers⁶⁷. Russia’s move against NATO in East Europe fits within the idea of *territorial denial* - a soft balancing strategy against the US and allied powers. China neutrally refrained from condemning Russia's actions outright in both Georgia and Ukraine. Vetoing against a **Syrian** intervention by paralysing the UNSC⁶⁸ is an effort to contain extremist conflicts from affecting the North Caucasus⁶⁹ but Russia could have a geo-economic interest: an oil-exporting Russia gains from political instability in the Middle East, in addition to the fact that China is a big oil consumer.⁷⁰ Despite quadruple vetoes, Russia itself hard balanced against the US by unilaterally supporting Assad in military actions.

⁶³ Achmad Ismail, “Motives and Rivalry of Superpower Countries: The United States and China in Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis.” *Jurnal Hubungan Internasional* 7, no. 1 (2018): 107-117.

⁶⁴ Robert Pape, “Soft Balancing Against the United States.” *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 7-45.

⁶⁵ Bob Dreyfuss, “Full Text and Analysis of Putin’s Crimea Speech.” *The Nation*, March 18, 2014. <https://www.thenation.com/article/full-text-and-analysis-putins-crimea-speech>.

⁶⁶ Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers.” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014): 69-79.

⁶⁷ Pape, “Soft Balancing,” 36-37

⁶⁸ Weiss, “The Sunset of Humanitarian Intervention?,” 13

⁶⁹ Adams, “Failure to Protect,” 14-15

⁷⁰ Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics,” 73

Following Russia's intervention, several Middle East representatives forged arms deals with Moscow, and Saudi Arabia pledged investments in Russian agricultural projects.⁷¹ Russia, often considered a "weak power", may aspire for such subservience through "mutual trust building to cooperate" as an instance of *signals of resolve to balance* – another soft balancing strategy that might lead to *entangling diplomacy* between Russia and MENA countries (some were West European colonies) against US-allied forces. Russia's veto by exercising institutional leverage against a Syrian intervention and hard-balancing against the US may be two sides of the same coin representing a realist opposition to US-allied powers. In the power domain, the tension between Russia and P1/P3 is subtly visible in these balancing strategies.⁷² These instances refer to a *realist* notion against the Western powers.

Institutional ambitions vs geoeconomics

Rising powers seek great power status and "reputation as responsible stakeholders in the management of international order and justice."⁷³ China's critical decision-making role reflects its 'great power status' in the UNSC concert system. China's institutional ambitions are connected to humanitarian interventions since many Chinese principles of 'peace' resonate with UN norms, which drives China's interest in integrating further into the UN system.⁷⁴ China's President committed to "step up efforts to promote the peaceful settlement of international disputes," for which China aims to increase activity within the UN framework.⁷⁵ Its growing 'socialisation' in institutional settings, participation in multilateral fora and negotiating processes including R2P made it self-conscious about its national image

⁷¹ Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria." *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2016): 106-113

⁷² Stent, "Putin's Power Play," 2

⁷³ Knudsen, "The Responsibility to Protect," 83

⁷⁴ Foot, "Doing Some Things," 1088

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1099-1100

worldwide.⁷⁶ China gave up ideological resistance to the West to integrate into the international society while advocating for reforms, and adopted a ‘reformist revisionist’⁷⁷ position in accepting the market and international institutions. China’s role in forging institutional arrangements is reflected in its attempts to influence the articulation of R2P following the **Libyan** intervention, indicating an attempt at UNSC reform.⁷⁸ China’s prestige within the UNSC has been augmented by its increased financial contributions to peacemaking operations⁷⁹ while its development assistance in peacekeeping in Africa is notable.⁸⁰ This is possibly to expand its overseas business interests, warranting a more “outward-looking foreign policy” to consider intervening in other states’ internal affairs to safeguard Chinese interests.⁸¹ This gradually turned Chinese non-interference into emergence as a global power seeking a greater role in conflict management.

However, the reality was different in **Myanmar’s** Rohingya issue as China restrained all possibilities of R2P interventions. China’s geoeconomic interest in OBOR and BCIM-EC presumably supersedes its institutional ambitions of making peaceful settlement. OBOR is part of China’s alternative economic ambitions and another soft-balancing strategy of *economic strengthening* by forming regional blocs, such as the RCEP.⁸² In this context, **Myanmar** is a neighbour that China will not meddle with. China’s explanation of the Rohingya issue through a narrative of economic development – that it would resolve the Rohingya crisis by leveraging on the people and their homeland the Rakhine state instead of humanitarian intervention – is symptomatic of its priority and emphasis on geoeconomics over human rights. Furthermore, it

⁷⁶ Garwood-Gowers, “China and the 'Responsibility to Protect,’” 382

⁷⁷ Buzan, Barry. “China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010): 5-36.

⁷⁸ Garwood-Gowers, “China and the 'Responsibility to Protect,’” 376

⁷⁹ Foot, “Doing Some Things”, 1088

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 1094

⁸¹ Garwood-Gowers, “China and the 'Responsibility to Protect,’” 382

⁸² Hong Yu, “Motivation behind China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.” *Journal of Contemporary China* 26 (105): (2017) 353-368.

opposed all UNSC moves to disallow military intervention near its vast economic projects, resisting to protect regional affairs and hegemony - hinting at a realist defence. A powerful China would emphasise “national sovereignty in international law” to push forward its mercantilist agenda which is the driving force for many of its ambitions.⁸³

Subaltern realism when convenient

Scholars remain sceptic about R2P interventions with or without UNSC authorisation: Ayoob terms this as “arm twisting of major powers such as the US”.⁸⁴ During NATO infringements in **Kosovo** and **Libya**, the P2 observed an imperialistic aggression towards regime change⁸⁵, which was evident in Serbia (1999) and Iraq (2003). There is a clear realist threat of the Western powers, which the P2 is averse to, and it resembles some notions of Ayoob’s proposition of *subaltern realism*.⁸⁶ He notes that major powers calculate shared interest or trade-offs “to enhance their respective strategic and economic interests in their spheres of influence” and this substantially affects third-world perceptions of humanitarian intervention.⁸⁷

The **Libyan** case hinted that R2P can be an excuse for P1/P3 to remove unfriendly governments using NATO forces, and to endorse actions which render the ‘humanitarian’ aspect of the intervention cynical.⁸⁸ China-Russia's double veto on Syria and joint critical stance on R2P in line with other BRICS countries also support Ayoob’s proposition that collaborative criticisms come through regional alliances (e.g. BRICS) due to their imbalance of power and economic

⁸³ Yan Xuetong, “The Age of Uneasy Peace: Chinese Power in a Divided World,” *Foreign Affairs* 98 (2019): 40–49.

⁸⁴ Mohammed Ayoob, “Third World Perspectives on Humanitarian Intervention and International Administration.” *Global Governance* 10 (2004): 99-118.

⁸⁵ Vladimir Matic. “Regime Change in Serbia and Iraq: What Have We Learned About the Legacy of Autocracies?” *Wilson Center: Global Europe Program*, 2011.

⁸⁶ Ayoob, “Third World Perspectives,” 100

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 101

⁸⁸ Ayoob, “Third World Perspectives,” 113

might,⁸⁹ in this case, due to the imbalance between P2 and P1/P3. He argues that the vast majority of conflicts in the post-WWII era occurred in the post-colonial subaltern states where the international order instrumentally intervened in the issues of peace and conflict.⁹⁰ In that context, China and other non-Western states were suspicious of R2P as an instrument of Western imperialism.⁹¹ Although Russia is known as a weak power and China a rising power, in terms of vetoes or when being critical of NATO actions they assume a *subaltern realist* position to hinder UNSC moves, and eventually the West.

Resistance to liberal values

A subaltern perspective proposes that the implementation of human rights in the Third World is an appropriation of “the industrialized, representative and responsive states” of Western Europe and North America.⁹² Humanitarian interventions caused regimes to change into democracy which, from a subaltern perspective, is perceived as a Western imperialistic outcome of spreading liberal democracy as a core LWO ideology. Within UNSC, China joins forces with Russia attempting to balance the P1/P3. In **Syria**, Chinese and Russian quadruple vetoes against intervention were more of a ‘strategic clash’ between P2 and P3 on a range of issues around UN peacekeeping.⁹³ One of these may be resisting the spread of liberal democracy. In **Libya**, when NATO forces targeted Gaddafi, China and Russia were particularly vocal in favour of “strict compliance” with Resolution 1973.⁹⁴ Russia’s trouble with NATO

⁸⁹ Mohammed Ayoob, “Inequality and Theorizing in International Relations: The Case for Subaltern Realism,” *International Studies Review* 4, no. 3 (2002): 27–48.

⁹⁰ Ayoob, “Making Sense of Global Tensions,” 130

⁹¹ Garwood-Gowers, “China and the ‘Responsibility to Protect,’” 378

⁹² Ayoob, “Making Sense of Global Tensions,” 133

⁹³ Adams, “Failure to Protect,” 20

⁹⁴ Bellamy and Williams, “The New Politics of Protection?,” 836, 845

was how it appropriated “the language of R2P to serve unilateral political purposes,” and whether it would adopt ‘the Libya model’ as a strategy for future interventions.⁹⁵

China’s (with Russia’s) controlling attempts on R2P and stern reminders to NATO to adhere to UNSC resolutions in Libya characterise how it opts to defend sovereignty from Western infiltrations. Resistance to UNSC intervention also suggests impeding the West due to the perception that the UNSC is bent towards P1, which seeks to spread liberal democracy as a value imposed by force. Russia therefore bestows itself with a “responsibility to contain Western hegemony,” as Kurowska writes, “The politics of forceful democratisation, often justified in the name of humanitarian intervention, are seen in this context as a tool for gaining influence and of exclusion”.⁹⁶ Russia thus takes an anti-hegemonic stance against such spread of values by vetoing against R2P interventions. Russia (perhaps also China) seems to oppose post-communist ‘end of history’ to pave an open highway for liberal anti-pluralism, an ideological homogeneity synonymous with liberal democracy. Russia’s normative contestation is marked by this counter-hegemonic posture⁹⁷ as Russia viewed NATO’s unilateral Kosovo intervention violating UNSC resolutions, despite its own military intervention in **Georgia** and **Crimea** did not comply with UN. Allison sees Russia’s intervention in Georgia as part of Moscow's broader response to Western actions.⁹⁸ This double standard may be indicative of Russia’s realist motives in both its interventions to subjugate regional states and in defending the spread of Western values. BRICS may be China and Russia’s pathway to a ‘new pluralism’ to counter the Western-led global order.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Kurowska, “Multipolarity as Resistance to Liberal Norms,” 501

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 495-503

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 503

⁹⁸ Roy Allison, “Russia Resurgent? Moscow’s Campaign to ‘Coerce Georgia to Peace,’” *International Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2008): 1145–1171.

⁹⁹ Hurrell, “Beyond the BRICS,” 97

Conclusion: Subtle Realism

The world-order policies of China and Russia were approached through some key scholarly perspectives, firstly to define important aspects around *power*, *economics*, *institutions* and *values* domains. Although Russia demonstrated soft balancing along hard-line actions and exemplified countering Western hegemony, China's extremely cautious institutional-strategic efforts were to avoid conflict and warmongering and balance the West. Sino-Russian active and passive responses to UN humanitarian interventions aimed to provide insight into their strategies and influence from a critical vantage point where the above domains critically interlinked and overlapped. Both powers adopted opportunistic and selective stances on the R2P, viewing it as a tool for Western imperialism. The Kosovo, Libya, Syria, and Myanmar examples illustrate the scepticism of the P2 towards R2P. In Kosovo and Libya, Russia and China were critical of interventions that bypassed UNSC authorisation, seeing them as imperialistic actions. In Syria and Myanmar, their resistance to R2P interventions highlighted prioritisation of sovereignty and regional interests over humanitarian concerns. China's resistance to R2P is influenced by its geoeconomic ambitions, as seen in Myanmar, where economic interests in the OBOR initiative outweighed humanitarian considerations. Meanwhile, Russia's Georgian and Crimean interventions, although framed in humanitarian terms, were primarily strategic efforts to counter NATO's influence and assert regional dominance. Sino-Russian resistance to liberal values and their efforts to balance US hegemony underscore a broader strategic clash within the UNSC. Their actions reflect a desire to maintain regional stability and protect national interests while challenging Western dominance.

Furthermore, P2 seems to prioritise their geopolitical and geoeconomic interests over everything, even at the expense of human rights, to resist Western humanitarian interventions, hegemony, and the spread of liberal democracy as a value that forms the basis of the contemporary order. The basis for the coupling of Russia and China is traceable in their

communist past beyond their non-Western identities, and in their strong sense of *nationalism* that Mearsheimer aptly termed “the most powerful ideology in the world”.¹⁰⁰ Contesting nationalisms between P2 and P3 suggests that China and Russia are seemingly more *realist* in their treatment of humanitarian interventions, where a power play inspired by nationalistic ideals dictates their approaches to LWO. The P2’s balancing acts, particularly in the economic and institutional realms, demonstrate their nuanced, albeit sometimes contradictory, stance on humanitarian interventions as part of their broader contest with Western powers.

¹⁰⁰ Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail,” 8

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