Chinese Views on Global Governance Since 2008–9: Not Much New

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China’s global governance ideology shows much continuity between pre- and post-2008–9 periods. Authoritative, semi-authoritative, and non-authoritative sources on Chinese views all generally indicate that China’s proposed changes to the existing international order—such as reforming the international system to correct “unjust” arrangements, strengthening the influence of developing countries, expanding the idea of state sovereignty into new areas of state behaviors, and buttressing the equality of sovereignty—are adjustments of that order only, not radical acts of departure or overturn. Indeed, China reaffirms its commitment to an open economic system and other long-standing features of the Liberal International Order while resisting proposed changes regarding, for example, humanitarian intervention. Thus, differences between pre- and post-2008–9 are largely matters of degree, not kind. One caveat is that some non-authoritative sources since 2008–9 suggest an emerging debate within China over Beijing’s rigid support for state sovereignty and its past relatively passive stance toward many areas of global governance.

Global governance refers to the ways in which global affairs are managed among nation states and non-state actors in the absence of a global government. It normally denotes those structures, processes, and norms—usually organized into “regimes”—that provide public goods for the global community. Such public goods include security provisions (e.g., against WMD proliferation, terrorism, and other nontraditional security threats), environmental protection, global and regional economic stability, human rights protections, and the like. International regimes exist in all of these and other areas.

The current form of global governance is often described as the “Liberal International Order” (hereafter referred to as LIO). This refers primarily to a set of values, institutions, and processes centered on the promotion of open trade and liberal or free-market economic systems; the provision of economic and social assistance to developing states; the protection or advancement of human rights among individuals and social/ethnic groups, both internationally and within individual nation-states; and opposition to the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). More recently, efforts to improve the global environment and slow climate change have been added to this list.

Since at least the mid-1980s, China has generally complied with the formal norms and structures of the above global governance regimes. Today, however, some observers of China’s rise are arguing that Beijing is now using its growing power and influence on the world stage to more extensively and fundamentally undermine many of the main features

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of the LIO, especially in areas such as human rights, global and regional free trade, and development assistance.

However, other observers argue that, despite its newcomer status and authoritarian political system, China has profited immensely from the LIO, especially in the economic realm, and continues to have few incentives to upend that order. Moreover, according to this argument, China’s alleged revisionist or revolutionary views and actions in the area of global governance amount to limited modifications designed primarily to increase Chinese influence within existing international bodies, or to create new, supplemental (not alternative) bodies, often in response to Western stonewalling or a strong need for such entities in certain areas, such as international investment.

Obviously, any serious effort to assess China’s relationship to the existing system of global governance today requires a close examination not only of Chinese views, but also of policies and practices over time and in relation to the key elements of the LIO, as scholars have done in the past. Unfortunately, no detailed study has yet emerged covering the Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping eras. The CLM format cannot remedy that shortcoming, given its short length. However, as we have undertaken with other foreign policy–related topics, it does permit a close reading of Chinese views on global governance occurring in recent years, thus offering a frame of reference for more comprehensive studies of actual behavior.

This article will examine in some detail Chinese views on global governance, focusing in particular on the most recent period, from roughly 2008–2009 to the present (i.e., the late Hu Jintao and early Xi Jinping eras). This time span is selected because many observers believe it marks the beginning of a growing level of Chinese “assertiveness” and “contrariness” in behavior and approaches in the foreign policy realm, and a general proclivity to offer concepts or structures that appear to challenge some key tenets of the LIO.

As in past issues of the Monitor, the examination of Chinese views is divided into authoritative, quasi-authoritative, and non-authoritative sources in order to distinguish between official and unofficial perceptions, and to identify possible differences and lines of debate within both official and unofficial leadership and elite circles. The second section offers some implications of the preceding findings for the outside debate over China’s stance toward global governance.

Chinese Views

Chinese views on global governance generally stress six basic interrelated themes.

First, the need for the system of global governance to affirm and strengthen the values of justice, equality, freedom, and democracy in the global order. This is to be obtained largely through efforts to increase the status and effectiveness of international law and those international bodies charged with overseeing and implementing it, in particular the United Nations.
Second, following from the preceding requirement, the need to undertake greater efforts to reform, but not overturn, the system of global governance, in order not only to correct “unjust and improper arrangements,” but also to manage an array of increasingly challenging global problems, regarding, for example, economics, health, and nontraditional security.

Third, the promotion of the preceding types of reform requires greater efforts to protect and advance the interests of developing states within the global order. According to the Chinese, such states are most often the victims of unjust, undemocratic, and unequal international policies and actions, especially those undertaken by developed nations. Chinese leaders assert that Beijing will always play a major role in promoting the interests of developing states within the global order.

Fourth, the core feature of the global order and hence the bedrock of any system of global governance must be “the principle of the equality of sovereignty.” This principle maintains not only the right of every state to preserve its territorial integrity and remain free from outside interference in its domestic affairs, but also its right to “choose its own social order and development path.” Such rights are seen as essential to the advancement of the above reforms, especially for developing states.

Fifth, the core principle of state sovereignty in international relations must also be reflected in those norms emerging in new areas of state behavior, such as the cyber realm.

Sixth, the system of global governance must promote the maintenance or expansion of open economic systems and resistance to protectionism. Such systems will ensure continued economic growth for all states and promote deeper levels of cooperation.

Section 1.01 Authoritative Sources

Over the years, authoritative Chinese sources, including most notably (and recently) Xi Jinping, have frequently stressed the need to make the system of global governance more just, free, equal, and democratic. 

Moreover, Xi has linked this objective to the overall goals of establishing a “community of common destiny” and “a new model of international relations with win-win cooperation as the core.” While the former notion has been explicitly enunciated by earlier Chinese leaders, the “new model” is a new concept most closely associated with Xi.

Taken together, these goals and features are seen to constitute a view of “global governance with prominent Chinese characteristics,” according to Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Equally important, Wang has suggested that this Chinese view toward international relations (and hence global governance) constitutes the “transcendence of the doctrine of traditional international relations based on realism” or realpolitik, a point examined in much greater detail by quasi- and non-authoritative sources (see below).
For many years, senior Chinese officials have also repeatedly stressed the pivotal role of the UN in creating a more just, etc., system of global governance, as indicated above.11

As Vice Foreign Minister Li Baodong stated in September 2015:

The United Nations, being the most authoritative and representative intergovernmental organization, is the major platform for G77 to take part in global governance and promote multilateralism. We must take a clear-cut stand in safeguarding the UN authority and stature and advocating for its greater role in global governance.12

In order to attain the above goals, authoritative Chinese sources place an especially strong emphasis on the need for deeper and more extensive efforts to reform the current system of global governance. Although this objective was often mentioned by earlier senior Chinese officials, Xi Jinping in particular has been especially strident in pushing it. During an October 2015 Politburo session, Xi observed that “the purpose and principles of the UN Charter have not been effectively implemented, resulting in . . . injustices and rivalries,” and stated that it is “imperative” to reform such deficiencies.13 He particularly called for “establishing new mechanisms and rules for international economic and financial cooperation and regional cooperation.”14 And he singled out the need for organs such as the IMF and World Bank to allow for greater representation for emerging economies and developing countries.15

At the same time, some authoritative sources also stress that despite greater stridency on the need for reform, “such reform is not about overturning the current system or starting all over again.”16

As suggested above, both before and after 2008–9, authoritative sources have repeatedly stressed the protection and expansion of the rights and influence of developing states in the system of global governance as a key component of reform toward a morejust and democratic order. And such sources often emphasize the key role of China, as a developing nation, in advancing the interests of such states.17

In addition, senior Chinese officials directly connect China’s approach to global governance, and link Xi’s “new model of international relations” in general to the interests of developing countries.18

As is well known, virtually all Chinese sources of all types, both before and after 2008–9, stress the importance of the principle of state sovereignty in the system of global governance. Among other things, this principle is viewed as a key guarantor of the freedom and equality of developing states (including China) within the global order.19

Recent authoritative sources also stress the need to apply the concept of sovereignty to new areas of global affairs, such as activities within the cyber realm. Indeed such sources have labeled cyber security as “a new pivot in global governance.”20 A new framework of
norms based on cyber sovereignty is seen as necessary in order to “[keep] cyber space in order, [boost] the confidence of various parties and [achieve] common security.”

Finally, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly to some observers, senior Chinese officials place considerable emphasis on the need for the system of global governance to maintain and expand economic openness, regionally and globally. Xi Jinping and earlier Chinese officials have stressed this point on many occasions.22

Section 1.02 Quasi-Authoritative Sources

The quasi-authoritative source “Zhong Sheng” (Voice of China, hereafter referred to as ZS) generally echoes the six main themes noted above, especially regarding the creation of a more just and democratic global economic order, and the development of a more equal, rules-based, UN-centered process for dealing with international conflicts and crises. However, ZS articles also provide more argumentation and examples than authoritative sources to explain and justify Beijing’s efforts to reform the current system of global governance in these and other areas.

As specific, recent examples of Chinese attempts to build this new order, ZS cites the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative and the AIIB, along with China’s major participation in various multilateral conferences on regional and global issues (such as the G20, the recent Paris Climate Conference, and the recent China-Africa Cooperation Forum). These actions supposedly confirm that China is indeed “a responsible major power.”23 The contrast with some negative Western assessments of the impact of those initiatives is striking.24

Moreover, as with authoritative sources, ZS also stresses the point that these and other Chinese-led initiatives center on advancing “the representation and right to speak of new market economies and developing economies” and thus constitute a “beneficial addition and perfection of the current international financial system.”25 Indeed, for ZS, “[d]evelopment issues should be at the center of global economic governance.”26 The source adds, in justifying this stress on developing nations in building a more just, etc., global order, that the 2008 global financial crisis showed that “current global economic governance is far from perfect,” thus echoing views expressed by Xi Jinping.27

However, while stressing the need for reform of the global economic system of governance in the above ways, ZS also asserts that China will maintain strong support for an open and inclusive global and regional free-trade network.28 Significantly, for ZS, such support, along with its involvement in many current institutions of global governance, indicates that China “does not advocate for the overturn of the current international order, but rather the development and innovation of that order, making it more reflective of the interests and demands of . . . developing countries.”29

As with other types of sources both before and after 2008–9, ZS places the effort to make the system of global governance more democratic and just within the larger evolution of the international system toward greater multipolarity and, most notably, away from the past “hegemonic,” power-oriented Western mentality. While, as seen above, this link
between reforms in global governance and the movement away from the West’s alleged realpolitik beliefs is also evident in some authoritative sources, ZS’s analysis is arguably more critical of the West, and the United States in particular. In fact, ZS chastises Western states for not having the courage to “give way” (西方国家尚未找到让度的勇气).  

ZS also lambasts the United States for violating international norms and using “hegemonic means” (霸道) in dealing with crises, citing the Syrian crisis as an example of the United States attempting to bypass the UN and start a conflict without relying on political means (i.e., negotiations). ZS faults the United States for attempting to use mere “policy concepts” (and not established norms) regarding humanitarian intervention, including the so-called responsibility to protect (R2P) notion, as excuses for military intervention.  

Section 1.03 Non-Authoritative Sources

As with quasi-authoritative sources, Chinese scholars and journalists generally echo the authoritative position on global governance, but also provide even greater detail on the content, driving forces, and larger international context of that stance. As above, many place the system of global governance within the context of growing multipolarity, involving the rise of developing states, led by China, and the evolution away from the past realpolitik, power-centered views of the international system held by Western states.

As noted, many non-authoritative sources view China as a major force influencing the future system of global governance, especially through such initiatives as the OBOR and AIIB and its expanding network of global partnerships. This emphasis has arguably been more prominent in recent years than before 2008–9, probably reflecting China’s greater international presence.

Several non-authoritative sources examine the alleged injustices of the global economic and financial order in considerable detail, focusing on the presumably unfair advantages it provides to developed states.

One source asserts that the resulting resistance of developed states to the evolution of the traditional global power structure away from power-centered, realpolitik values and toward more democratic approaches is creating tensions that reveal “the hegemonic nature of global governance” (都使全球治理的霸权特征依然十分突出).

Another source sees such tensions as resulting in a competition for the right to set global rules.

Yet another source goes much further, coming very close to arguing for China to eventually overturn the existing, Western-dominated global governance system, proposing, in its place, extensive, far-reaching democratization-centered “transformations” (转型). Nonetheless, this source still describes that effort as a kind of reform.
However, as noted above, most non-authoritative sources, both before and after 2008–9, to varying degrees argue against China overturning the existing structure of global governance. In fact, one source states that China and other developing states are beneficiaries of the current system and do not have the capacity to subvert that system. 37

Several non-authoritative sources also criticize the Chinese view and stance on global governance in various ways. For example, one source describes China’s role in global governance as excessively limited and as largely “a supporting role” of passivity, with the partial exception of its expanding involvement in global economic governance. 38

Another source argues that the best way for China to carry out changes in the global governance system is for it to improve its ability to provide public goods, largely by increasing its hard power and soft power via greater opening up. “Opening up is China’s main driving force for the provision of global public goods” (扩大开放是中国为全球提供公共品能力建设的重要推动力). 39

In a different and arguably more controversial line of criticism, some non-authoritative sources argue for adjustments in China’s past categorical approach to the principle of sovereignty. For example, a scholar at Xiangtan University asserts that growing economic interdependence and the rise of non-state actors and non-traditional security threats in the international order have diminished the effectiveness of approaches based on narrow understandings of state power and sovereign rights. This results in a need for greater flexibility in China’s non-interference policy, if Beijing is to participate in global governance as a “responsible power.” 40 Similarly, another source argues for the need for China and other powers to more fully recognize the fundamental fragmentation of power in the international system in ways that dilute sovereign rights and nation-centered interests. 41

Some non-authoritative sources argue that China’s approach to sovereignty has already changed, from a more insular and unilateral view to a more open and cooperative view that brings domestic institutions and legal procedures into greater conformity with international norms and processes and endorses a more cooperative, problem-solving approach to international governance. 42 A similar argument regarding China’s increasing acceptance of international norms and processes in recent years is found in a broad study of the PRC’s historical relationship to global governance. 43

Concluding Remarks

The above examination of Chinese views on global governance suggests that a very high level of continuity in outlook exists between the earlier reform period and the period since 2008–9. The same six basic themes presented above have been dominant in Chinese writings and statements of all types during both periods, including the emphasis on building a more just, democratic, etc., global order through greater reforms; a focus on the rights of developing states in this effort; support for an open economic order; the centrality of the principle of sovereignty and the need to apply that principle to new arenas such as the cyber realm.
Among authoritative and quasi-authoritative sources, the post-2008–9 period has arguably evinced a stronger emphasis (especially under Xi Jinping) than the earlier Hu and Jiang periods on the injustices of the existing system of global governance and the need to increase the role of international law and the UN. Both quasi- and (especially) non-authoritative sources stress to a great degree the impact on global governance of the supposed transformation occurring from the past power-centered, realpolitik international order defined and dominated by Western industrial states (led by the United States), toward a less power-centered, more pluralistic and cooperative order exemplified by Xi’s notion of a “new type of international relations.” In addition, the post-2008–9 period arguably exhibits a greater emphasis on the need for China to play a greater leadership role in shaping the system of global governance, reflecting Xi’s more assertive tone. But these apparent differences between pre- and post-2008–9 are largely matters of degree, not kind.

Perhaps the most notable features of Chinese views on global governance in the post-2008–9 period occur among non-authoritative sources. These include: 1) differences over the implications of China’s proposed changes for the existing system of global governance; and 2) criticism of various aspects of the existing official Chinese view and stance, including the emphasis on state sovereignty, as well as attacks on China’s supposed “passivity” and limited role in leading and shaping the system of global governance.

In the former area, some scholars and journalists apparently interpret Beijing’s support for a more democratic and just global order in particular as tantamount to the eventual transformation of the system of global economic (at least) governance toward the “new type” of relations espoused by Xi, thus replacing the Western-dominated power-oriented system. And yet, many other sources describe this change as an adjustment of the existing order only, not a radical departure or overthrowing of that order.

Perhaps more notably, this adjustment does not come close to suggesting that China wishes to overturn the existing order in the way that some outside scholars think. Although many Chinese sources of all types place the evolution of the system of global governance within the larger context of the supposed transition from the Western-dominated, power-centered realpolitik order to the cooperative “win-win” multipolar order long espoused by Chinese leaders (now termed a “new type (or model) of international relations”), few if any sources view that larger context as demanding a change in the basic tenets of the LIO.

The most potentially radical changes pushed by Chinese sources involve the restructuring of (largely economic) international entities to better reflect the growing power of developing states and the extension of the concept of sovereignty to the cyber realm. A third features involves a resistance to change, in the form of opposition to the R2P concept becoming a routine norm justifying outside intervention in a sovereign state’s affairs in support of humanitarian goals. Neither of the first two changes would amount to the upending of the existing order. Indeed, if implemented in a genuinely cooperative and limited manner, both could improve and strengthen the existing system. While the third feature could undermine the LIO’s stress on individual rights if carried too far, the R2P
concept is not yet an integral part of the LIO. Moreover, as indicated above, there are signs that Beijing has become somewhat more flexible in assessing humanitarian interventions in recent years.44

In fact, there is virtually no evidence among the sources consulted that China desires to replace existing economic institutions such as the IMF and WB with genuinely alternative entities, or the current global system of free trade in favor of a mercantilist, exclusionary network of international economic relations (quite the contrary), or to undermine the WMD proliferation regime, or even to reject the role of human rights in assessing state behavior. Indeed, many Chinese sources continue to assert the importance of most such features of the LIO. Moreover, as we have seen, some scholars even chastise China for not being more active in supporting the existing order, and hint at the need for Beijing to modify its stance toward sovereignty to bring it more into line with existing standards. In short, arguments insisting that China since 2008–9 has adopted a new approach to global governance, and that this approach involves the overturning of the LIO can find almost no support among open Chinese sources of whatever type.

Notes


8 See Jiang, “Report at 16th Party Congress.” Jiang says, “We stand for establishing a new international political and economic order that is fair and rational.” Also see Jiang, “Report at the 15th National Congress,” and Jiang, “Report at 14th Party Congress.”


11 See, for example, Xi, “Speech at 70th UN General Assembly General Debate.”


17 For example, Hu, “Report at 17th Party Congress.” Hu says, “we will continue to…uphold the legitimate demands and common interests of developing countries.”


26 Zhong Sheng, “Responsibility and Pursuit.”

27 Zhong Sheng, “Pushing Forward.”

28 Zhong Sheng, “Pursuing a strong country, but not hegemony; promoting cooperation and all-win.” (国强不图霸 合作促共赢), People’s Daily, May 19, 2015.


31 Zhong Sheng, “The United States: Relying on War to Protect International Norms?” (美国，靠战争维护国际准则?), People’s Daily, September 2, 2013. ZS asserts that both concepts are “far from mature international norms, not to mention far from current international law” (远未形成成熟的国际法规则，更谈不上取代现有国际法).
Su Ge, “Holding on to the initiative in a time of change” (格局转换中把握主动权), *People’s Daily*, December 12, 2015. Su Ge is the president of the China Institute of International Studies.


Li Daokui and Xu Xiang, “BRICs cooperation mechanism under the perspective of global governance” (全球治理视野的金砖国家合作机制), *China and Globalization* (中国与全球化), 260 (2015). Li and Xu are both professors at Tsinghua University.


Cai Tuo, “How China should join in international governance” (中国如何参与全球治理), *International Review* (国际观察), 1 (2014): 1–10. Cai is a professor at the China University of Political Science and Law. Also see an earlier article by the same author: Cai, “Global Governance.” Cai states that global governance should be rooted in “civil society and the construction of grassroots democracy.” (基层民主).

Zhu Dawei, “The Strategy of Peaceful Rise and China’s Participation in International Systems” (“和平”崛起战略与中国的国际制度参与), *Journal of Jishou University (Social Science Edition)* (吉首大学学报 [社会科学版]) 29: 3 (May 2008), 88–95. Zhu argues that China should build its image as a “responsible major power” while increasing its ability to defend its interests.
