



ALLIANCE POLICY COORDINATION BRIEF

OCTOBER 2019

# Responding to China's Complicated Views on International Order

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## + CONTENTS

China Risk and China Opportunity for the U.S.-Japan Alliance	i
Papers in this Series	ii
Issue Background	1
The Stakes	2
Recent Developments	4
Potential Risks	5
Potential Opportunities	6
Next Steps	6
About the Authors	8
Notes	8



## China Risk and China Opportunity for the U.S.-Japan Alliance

How should the risks and opportunities presented by a continually rising, increasingly self-assertive China be addressed? This is a pressing issue for the international community, particularly for the United States and Japan, whose alliance has proactively helped form and maintain the liberal, rules-based international order for the past several decades.

To enhance mutual understanding and encourage effective policymaking, the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have convened a small group of U.S. and Japanese scholars to examine the risks and opportunities accompanying China's ascendance. This group includes China specialists, alliance experts, and authorities on trade and security issues in the Asia Pacific.

Led by Mataka Kamiya and James L. Schoff, the group has conducted research and facilitated dialogue since April 2017 through private roundtables and public symposia that seek to further U.S.-Japan cooperation and coordination on China policy. The project examines different perspectives between the alliance members and discusses ways in which Washington and Tokyo can effectively respond to China's rise. An accompanying series of policy briefs explores various China-related risks and opportunities for the U.S.-Japan alliance in the areas of regional and international order, trade and technology, security, and foreign relations. To learn more about the project, [click here](#).

*JFIR, together with the project's U.S. team members, wish to thank the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership respectively for their generous support, without which this project would not have been possible.*

—Mataka Kamiya and James L. Schoff, Project Leaders and Co-editors

## Policy Brief Series:

- “Managing Risks and Opportunities for the U.S.-Japan Alliance Through Coordinated China Policy”  
*Shin Kawashima, Mataka Kamiya, and James L. Schoff*
- “Responding to China’s Complicated Views on International Order”  
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## Issue Background

For the last several years, it has become increasingly common for scholars and strategists on both sides of the Pacific to assert that China is challenging the international order both regionally and globally. In fact, Beijing has become more explicit about its desire to revise the liberal international order created by the United States and supported by Japan. For example, on May 28, 2019, the major Japanese national daily *Asahi Shimbun* carried an [interview](#) with Chinese People's Liberation Army Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu, a professor at China's National Defense University and the author of a national bestseller called *The China Dream*. In that interview, Liu explained Beijing's desire to build a new international order in East Asia as a substitute for the current order led by the United States, and he called for Japan to cooperate with China.

Such a dramatic conclusion, however, should be considered in detail. As new great powers rise, the distribution of benefits in international politics often does not represent the distribution of power, and observers tend to associate the dissatisfaction of ascending powers with challenges to the political status quo and a willingness to upend the prevailing system. If China appeared to be a revolutionary power, seeking to overturn the rules of various regimes of the international system broadly, this would undoubtedly be seen as a profound threat in both the United States and Japan. China's behavior toward the regional and international orders is, however, far more complex.

Some international observers believe that China is not a revolutionary power, but a revisionist one that aims to increase its influence, adjust some rules in its favor, and change aspects of the order that it views as undermining its interests, rather than seeking to upend the system entirely. Indeed, in the [words](#) of one scholar, Beijing is “revisionist” without being “revolutionary.” China, for its part, asserts that it supports the aspects of the existing order that center on the UN and related institutions, but not other components of this order, notably the international promotion of human rights and the U.S. alliance system. According to Chinese diplomat [Fu Ying](#), China is “offering its own ideas and initiatives to improve the international order system.” Chinese strategists clearly hold views of the international order that do not track neatly with those of their Western counterparts, and China's approach presents both risks and opportunities for the U.S.-Japan alliance.

The United States and Japan have described the concept of the international order with some consistency in general terms, referring regularly in [joint summit readouts](#), in [2+2 statements](#), and on other [prominent diplomatic occasions](#) to the promotion of “shared values” featuring “respect for human rights,” “freedom,” and “democracy” as well as “free and open markets,” “high trade and investment standards,” and the “rule of law.”<sup>1</sup> In their 2015 [Joint Vision Statement](#), the allies highlighted the importance of a “strong rules based international order, based on a commitment to rules, norms and institutions that are the foundation of global affairs and our way of life.”

The [purpose](#) of a regional order (according to the allies) is to “effectively promote peace, security, stability, and economic prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region.” Other [key characteristics](#) include “respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity,” “adherence to international law and their shared

commitment to upholding freedom of navigation and overflight,” and a commitment to having “disputes . . . resolved peacefully and free of coercion.” Such an [order](#) means, as former U.S. president Barack Obama put it, “large countries, small countries, all have to abide by what [are] considered just and fair” rules, essentially the opposite of a regional order based primarily on power.

Since U.S. President Donald Trump took office, Washington and Tokyo have maintained such attitudes. In the most recent April 2019 [joint statement](#) of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee (2+2), the two allies declared, “the Alliance will continue to play an indispensable role in upholding a rules-based international order and promoting the shared values of the American and Japanese people.”

While there is, of course, variation in the Chinese narrative about the liberal international order, some features are common. China was briefly recognized as a founding member of the UN Security Council, but the Chinese civil war and the subsequent decision by much of the world to recognize the Republic of China as the legitimate seat of power for the country saw the People’s Republic of China (PRC) excluded from incipient forms of order from the late 1940s until the early 1970s. Beginning with the U.S. shift of diplomatic recognition in 1979, however, Chinese views on order began to shift, as Beijing became the beneficiary of open global economic rules and institutions.

Many Chinese scholars nonetheless continue to insist that the idea of a single liberal international order is mythical; that the modifier “liberal” implies that this system is threatening the Chinese Communist Party’s one-party rule and seeks to democratize China from without; and that the article “the” implies U.S. ownership over that order in its entirety. In contrast, when Beijing discusses regional order, it frequently [talks](#) about building “a more just, equitable, fair, democratic and representative international political and economic order” in the future tense, a vision that China aims to have an influential role in helping to implement. Many Chinese scholars also point to numerous instances in which the United States has violated or opted out of supposedly constraining forms of order—such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq or Washington’s nonratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)—to argue that hegemons have the privilege of hypocrisy. Whether or not this characterization is accurate, it is deeply held. This also implies that a rising China will seek to make the international order friendlier to Beijing without flouting it entirely.

## The Stakes

China is a member of nearly all the [international regimes](#) for which it is eligible. Knowing that Beijing participates in these institutions, however, does not reveal much about whether it has really become socialized, or why it might adopt [distinct strategies](#) toward different regimes and rules. Indeed, a brief examination of China’s foreign policy strategies toward various aspects of the

international order reveals a complex mixture of behaviors, some of which should be categorized as order breaking and some of which are order upholding.

Regional hegemony is a precondition to China’s global rise, so its regional behavior might be more obviously revisionist. Additionally, Beijing is quick to note the vast benefits it has received from the international economic order, but it has been assertive over its sovereignty claims and is investing in a **historic overhaul** of its **military**. In particular, China has used gray zone activities to press its claims in the East and South China Seas. Moreover, Beijing has long accepted many forms of international order without necessarily accepting all of the associated norms, particularly those related to liberal democracy (such as human rights). Each of these factors suggests that China is most likely to fashion a strategy toward international order that is highly complex and seek to advance its interests without, at least from its subjective point of view, necessarily provoking backlash from other international actors. Such a strategy, however, may not work as intended, and it may lead to growing tensions or even conflicts with other countries.

Table 1:  
**China’s Approaches to International Order**

	<b>Economic</b>	<b>Security</b>
<b>Global</b>	<i>Reformist</i> World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, G20	<i>Increasing Contributor</i> UN budget, peacekeeping, climate change
<b>Regional</b>	<i>Entrepreneur</i> Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Belt and Road Initiative, BRICS Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organization	<i>Challenger/Spoiler</i> UNCLOS/maritime disputes, East and South China Seas, North Korea, ASEAN, U.S. alliances

Table 1 highlights key areas that could be impacted negatively by China’s approaches to international order, most notably in a regional security context. The table also indicates possible opportunities in the economic and global security realms, depending on how differences between the Chinese and allied approaches to international order are mitigated or reconciled.

## Recent Developments

If the United States and Japan are to fashion appropriate rejoinders to China's challenges to order where they do occur, Washington and Tokyo must reach some common understanding of Beijing's complex behavior toward various institutions, norms, and rules. Only then can they fashion a strategy that seeks to defend against any attempts China makes to change important forms of order. A failure to identify Beijing's strategy and to fashion appropriate alliance responses is likely to result in a shifting economic, political, and security status quo in Asia, with China most likely to flout rules related to regional security and most likely to try to create new ones in the regional economic space.

The United States and Japan also need to recognize that, even though they are determined to maintain the U.S.-led, rules-based international order and although other liberal democracies and many others in the international system support that determination, it will be important to obtain constructive cooperation from the second largest economy in the world on the supply of the international public goods necessary to form and maintain the international order.

On the global level, China generally **tends to uphold** rules, laws, and norms and is particularly fond of UN institutions. Beijing has increased its funding to the UN overall and its support of peacekeeping operations in particular; China also now stands as the **global leader** on climate change, albeit out of **self-interest** and by default. (Notably, China's climate leadership is largely born of national interest and U.S. abdication and does not necessarily portend a pattern.) In global economic institutions, China has insisted on **IMF and G20 reforms** but has worked within existing frameworks in the service of this goal. Beijing has all but broken the World Trade Organization (WTO), but this is due to the prejudicial structure of the Chinese economy and the WTO's ill-preparedness to deal with it, rather than specific Chinese actions that violate existing rules.

There is one clear exception to this characterization: China engages in systematic efforts to undermine the **international human rights regime**—an example of liberal democratic global governance that it sees as fundamentally threatening to its regime. This reality is all the more troubling given recent developments in China, most notably the **detention** of approximately 1.5 million Muslims in what have been termed transformation through re-education centers in Xinjiang, a subject that has been receiving growing international attention over the past year. The Chinese government justifies its actions as necessary for maintaining national security, but international human rights advocates have **sharply criticized** the detention centers.

On the regional level, China has sought to change or directly challenged existing forms of order more assertively. By unveiling new institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing has revealed itself as a regional economic and development entrepreneur. Despite early international angst, it now seems that the AIIB may

proceed with a governance model that is basically consistent with existing international standards. This is **less true** of the BRI, whose unsustainable debt may provide China with systematic, coercive political leverage. If Beijing proceeds with early plans to set up a tribunal system to adjudicate BRI disputes, this essentially extralegal form of regional institution building would raise the chance of rules-based regional rivalry.

With regard to the regional security order, an increasing number of cases have been observed in which China attempts to challenge the existing rules-based order in East Asia. Such concerns are particularly intense in Japan. Tokyo's newest National Defense Program **Guidelines** maintain, "China engages in unilateral, coercive attempts to alter the status quo based on its own assertions that are incompatible with existing international order." Moreover, the guidelines highlight China's behaviors in the East China Sea around the Senkaku Islands and in the South China Sea—such as the large-scale, rapid reclamation of maritime features, which are being converted into a military foothold—as examples of such attempts.

China has challenged or spoiled existing laws and institutions most consistently on regional security issues. Whether by its heterodox interpretation of UNCLOS and the South China Sea island building campaign, its tendency to be a leaky valve on enforcing sanctions on North Korea, or its proven ability to deadlock and scuttle measures by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Beijing has often secured its interests by selectively challenging rules without replacing them. China remains trenchantly opposed to U.S. alliances as relics of the Cold War, and Beijing has been able to advance its **South China Sea claims** without activating U.S. alliance commitments or provoking direct conflict. In most of these cases, China has not expressly sought scofflaw status; often, it actually uses existing rules to hinder prevailing institutions when they are prejudicial to its security interests, by employing an arbitration exception clause to UNCLOS, for instance, or exploiting ASEAN's reliance on consensus. In advancing its island claims as long-standing matters of sovereignty, Beijing is actually invoking rules-based aspects of Western order, however disingenuously.

In response to this evolving situation, the United States, Japan, and other allies and partners should continue to share their views and perceptions of Chinese motives and behavior as well as exchange information and intelligence, so as to provide a foundation that will further advance regional cooperation.

## Potential Risks

Washington and Tokyo must consider what risks Beijing's variegated behavior toward the international order portend for U.S. and Japanese interests generally and for the U.S.-Japan alliance in particular. U.S. and Japanese analysts and decisionmakers are likely to find that there will be

important differences that arise in terms of security and economic issues and at the regional and global levels.

China's sharpest challenges to the international order—and the ones with the most direct implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance—are likely to come through its efforts to reshape the regional security landscape in its favor (to insulate its own sharp power moves). Beijing's desire to undermine U.S. alliances and its pursuit of its maritime claims in the East and South China Seas are among the most urgent regional security challenges facing the U.S.-Japan alliance. China's attempts to secure political and diplomatic leverage through its expanding regional economic influence also pose serious challenges to U.S. and Japanese interests. Additionally, China will likely seek to identify and expand any gaps between the United States and Japan. Beijing's approach to regional security and economic issues thus presents serious challenges that demand careful consideration and coordination by U.S. and Japanese policymakers, policy planners, and analysts.

China's global behavior may be very different from its regional behavior in several respects, but it still poses challenges of its own. In some cases, the United States and Japan may need to work together to defend important international regimes. Human rights appears to be quickly emerging as an important example, as illustrated by Chinese mass detentions in Xinjiang and the potential for Beijing to not only develop technology for repression at home but also to export such technology to autocratic regimes around the world.

## Potential Opportunities

In areas in which China's global behavior does not undermine important rules and norms, increased Chinese engagement may present some opportunities to the United States and Japan. For example, pursuing greater cooperation on climate change might help to advance shared interests. Additionally, China's growing ability to participate in anti-piracy and humanitarian assistance operations could create new chances for security cooperation. At the same time, however, greater Chinese participation in these types of activities could come with challenges of its own. For example, Beijing could build on its growing activities in these areas to further expand its security footprint (as with its first overseas military base in Djibouti) or to increase its diplomatic influence in areas it views as important to its economic and security interests.

## Next Steps

The United States and Japan should develop a shared understanding of China's strategy toward the international order, a task that is likely to require additional research on Beijing's evolving approaches to different aspects of that order at the regional and global levels. The two allies should

promote closer consultation and coordination on their respective policies toward China to avoid misunderstanding the other's intentions. For example, in the first several years of the Obama administration, Japan was concerned about what it perceived as Washington's tendency to emphasize the former aspect of its strategy of engagement and hedging toward China. More recently, Washington has been somewhat frustrated to observe the increasing willingness of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration to collaborate with Beijing on infrastructure building in third countries. While even close allies like the United States and Japan may have some differences at times, closer consultation and coordination can help reduce such misunderstandings.

The two countries would be well served to engage with other allies and partners that have similar perspectives and share their interests in bolstering the international order in the face of challenges posed by China. The like-minded countries the United States and Japan might approach, at least initially, could include Australia, France, India, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and the United Kingdom, each of which has important interests at stake in supporting key aspects of the existing international order.

After reaching a shared understanding of the problem, Washington and Tokyo should work together with these countries to fashion appropriate responses to protect the aspects of the international order that may be most at risk. Working in concert with these countries, and perhaps other allies and partners, could offer Washington and Tokyo important advantages in working to bolster and maintain the international order as China becomes increasingly capable of challenging some of its key components both regionally and globally.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> These words and phrases (and those in the following paragraph) appear regularly in official documents including U.S.-Japan 2+2 statements (such as those from 2006, 2007, 2011, 2013, and 2017); joint summit statements from 2014, 2015, and 2017; and others (including bilateral and trilateral joint statements with Australia at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore).

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