

Constructing Global Hegemony: U.S.-China Strategies and the Struggle for the Indo-Pacific

Master Thesis - Erasmus Rotterdam University

Adrián De los Santos Bonilla

Student number: 737466

Supervisor: Dr. Mark Hay

10-06-2025

Word Count: 18519

Table of contents

Chapter 1. Introduction.....	3
Research question and sub-questions.....	4
Main theoretical and conceptual framework.....	4
Historiography.....	6
Contribution to the field.....	12
Sources.....	12
Methodology.....	14
Chapter 2. An International Stage: The Liberal International Order.....	16
The United States and China's Rivalry in the Liberal International Order.....	19
Indo-Pacific in the Liberal International Order.....	21
Chapter 3. United States: The Hegemon in Crisis.....	23
The Indo-Pacific in the US Grand Strategy.....	23
Narrating Order: Liberal Values and Language.....	27
Strategic Rivalry: The Response to China.....	31
Hegemonic Crisis: Strategic Responses to a Changing Indo-Pacific.....	34
Chapter 4. China: The Rising Hegemon.....	36
The Indo-Pacific: China's backyard.....	36
Constructing a Counter-hegemonic Alternative: China's Order-Building.....	39
A Quest for Hegemony: Chinese Discourses on the United States.....	44
Contesting consent: Reordering in the Indo-Pacific.....	47
Chapter 5. Conclusions.....	49
Bibliography.....	52
Primary sources.....	52
Secondary sources.....	53

Chapter 1. Introduction

The global order, long dominated by the United States, is currently experiencing a turning point as China and other regional powers emerge, in what effectively is a challenge to the American hegemony over the liberal international order. A challenge that has crucially altered the global order, immersed in a crisis where the backbone of the Liberal International Order: multilateralism, free trade and human rights, are questioned and downplayed by the leading hegemon. In this international landscape, the thesis sheds light on how the global order is structured and how the challenger and the hegemonic powers, China and the United States, are changing it through their foreign policy.

Although the relationship between these two nations has shifted from confronting enemies during the Cold War to cooperative trade partners from 1970 onwards, the 21st century saw the beginning of the quarrel over influence in the international system that peaked during Trump's presidency when the subsequent trade war started and diplomatic relations eroded.¹ Therefore, the time frame of this thesis encompasses from 2010, after China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001 as part of the efforts to integrate itself within the liberal order and its rise became undeniable, to the end of 2024.² It is also important to define the geographical area in which our study will focus.

Considering the global nature of the conflict and the multiple scenarios where both countries confront each other, the Indo-Pacific region has been selected as the geographical space for this thesis as it is the region where China and the United States compete directly and whose recognition as a geographical entity has been promoted due to the growing relevance of its seas and bordering countries. Finally, this thesis's approach to the ongoing convulsion in the global order will be performed by analysing the strategies of both actors towards the designated region of the Indo-Pacific with the objective of shaping the global order and influence over it. The focus will be on those foreign policies of an economic or political nature carried out to strengthen themselves or debilitate the adversary's global position.

¹ Milan Babic, "Let's talk about the interregnum: Gramsci and the crisis of the liberal world order," *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 777, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaz254>.

² Gregory Chin, and Ramesh Thakur, "Will China Change the Rules of Global Order?," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2010): 126, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/0163660X.2010.516145>.

Research question and sub-questions

This thesis will address the following research question: ‘How are China and the United States trying to (re)shape the global order through their strategies in the Indo-Pacific region?’ This question is crucial for assessing not only the evolving dynamics of the U.S. and China relations but also their impact on the international system, from global governance to international and humanitarian law. Nonetheless, as part of the development of the main argument, there are secondary questions whose answers are relevant to our study.

These questions, to a great extent, relate to the different chapters of the thesis that can be found in Appendix II. The first sub-question is: ‘What is the current state of the global order, and how is it being contested in the Indo-Pacific region?’ Answering this question will provide a general contextual framework for the thesis, as the first chapter will examine the state of global order and the turmoil around the shifts currently occurring. In the subsequent chapters, the question ‘What are the strategies of China and the United States in the Indo-Pacific and to what extent do they shape the broader global order?’ will be answered separately by independently analysing their respective policies towards the region.

Main theoretical and conceptual framework

The thesis will adopt the Neo-Gramscian theory of International Relations.

Neo-Gramscianism's origins date back to Antonio Gramsci's work, an Italian Marxist intellectual of the 20th century. His ideas were adapted to International Relations by numerous scholars, but with special prominence to Robert Cox and his works such as ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders.’ As a core idea of this theory, power is exercised through hegemony in the international system. Hegemony is understood as a combination of coercion and consent underlined by institutions, ideology and material capabilities. A definition significantly opposed to that of realism, where hegemony is based on material power, military and economic, and refers exclusively to states. At the same time, Neo-Gramscian theory extends it beyond the states to global elites and ideological systems such as neoliberalism.³

Theory is an important aspect of the thesis since it provides the lenses and framework through which to analyse complex phenomena such as those affecting a shifting global order. From this theory, we will extract and apply key concepts to our case study to profoundly analyse it, those concepts are: hegemony, passive revolution, historic bloc and agency. As

³ Robert. W. Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” *Millennium*, 10, no. 2 (1981), 139, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298810100020501>.

mentioned earlier, hegemony is the dominance of a class or bloc by means of coercion and consent that shape the norms governing the international system. It can also be referred to as cultural hegemony for the role that ideas and culture play, a factor of discrepancy with other Marxist schools.

Hegemony is built on historical structures, a term closely related to Gramsci's historical blocs and coined by Cox. These structures consist of three forces: ideas, material capabilities, and institutions, and they interact in an interdependent correlation where each influences and shapes the others equally. The overarching structure of power enclosed in the historical structure is represented by a historic bloc that imposes its hegemony upon the global order and generates counter-hegemonic forces to challenge the status quo. These concepts will prove useful when studying the (neo)liberal order led by the United States with its allied states and a constellation of alliances, and the response from China, a counter-hegemonic force of new norms and institutions and a coalition of developing countries.⁴

Another essential concept for our research is the passive revolution. Passive revolution is a process whereby the elites co-opt emerging forces, preventing them from changing the dominant order. As part of the analysis, the thesis will argue that the actions presented by China, from the beginning of the 21st century to the present day, represent a gradual adaptation to the neoliberal order instead of a direct challenge or confrontation. For instance, China would be using the tools that the global order provides to reconstruct a parallel structure within it. As Cox describes, international actors will use their influence in the system to shape or introduce new values for their benefit instead of rejecting or revolting against it.

Not only has China drawn upon their influence, but the United States has historically also acted upon the global order by leveraging its hegemony, making passive revolutions a useful concept to explain the changes in governance when the elites introduce changes to avoid further demise of their power. Finally, agency is a fundamental aspect to consider in international relations as a discipline. The nation-state is not to be deemed as the sole actor on the world stage. Transnational elites, understood as elites whose influence reaches farther beyond the state borders, play an important role in promoting the interests of the states to which they serve. These elites consist of policymakers, politicians and corporations,

⁴ Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," 135-136.

representatives of international capitalism with the ability to influence liberal institutions such as the IFM or the WTO.⁵

In an analysis based on two states' policies, it is vital to incorporate as many of these other influential actors as possible or recognise the constraints of limiting our research.

Neo-Gramscian theory provides a comprehensive framework for analysing the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. By focusing on the key concepts previously examined, we will be able to capture the complexities and approach the nuances of an intricate subject as the reshaping of global order.

Historiography

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the central theatre of global confrontation, with the two major contingents, China and the United States, displaying their ambitions and interests throughout the region. This region encompasses some of the most relevant chokepoints for international trade and vital areas for the global economic flow of capital from the South China Sea to the Strait of Malacca and onward towards the Indian coasts, connecting the economic powerhouses of Southeast and South Asia with China and the United States to the East and with Africa and the Arabian Peninsula to the West. The Indo-Pacific's growing relevance in recent decades is the justification for the construction of such geography, as David Harvey's concept of 'spatial fix' showcases, the structuring of new geographies corresponds to the need of global capitalism to move capital across borders to defer crisis.⁶

In a context of international turmoil, the United States' pivot to Asia explains the renewed interest towards the region, and the widespread use of the term by Western governments exemplifies its success and replacement of bygone terms like Asia-Pacific. At the same time, the rise of China conferred the region with international economic relevance while defying the United States' hegemony regionally, as it is the geographical area where they collide, as well as globally.⁷

Thus, the Indo-Pacific has become one of the geographic scenarios where the global order is contested. The strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the region highlights deeper questions about the world order and its future. There are some common

⁵ William I. Robinson, "Gramsci and Globalisation: From Nation-State to Transnational Hegemony." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 8 no. 4 (2005): 564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230500205243>.

⁶ David Harvey, *The limits to Capital*, (Basil Blackwell, 1982): 418.

⁷ Gurpreet S. Khurana "What is the Indo-Pacific? The New Geopolitics of the Asia-Centred Rim Land." In *Geopolitics by Other Means the Indo-Pacific Reality*, ed. Axel Berkofsky and Sergio Miracola. (Ledizioni, 2019): 17-18.

points to most authors who reflect upon the shifts in the liberal international order. First of all, there is a liberal international order serving as the structure of an institutionalised international system whose leading power is the United States with the West, the European Union and other associated countries from the Americas and Asia, as their ideological and material partners and China's rise as the prominent challenge to the stability and continuity of the order. Liberal authors such as Robert Keohane and John Ikenberry showcase the hegemony of the United States over an order based on economic, military and political cooperation framed in international institutions. The crises of such order are, in their own words, a result of the lack of democracy in international institutions and the challenge that increasing authoritarian states across the globe, such as China or Iran, pose to the legitimacy of the order.⁸

Amitav Acharya incorporates two relevant points to the discussion and against Ikenberry's claims. He argues the liberal order was never a world order but an overextended American order once the Soviet Union fell and the bipolar world order ended. Furthermore, he puts coercion at the centre of the expansion of the liberal order instead of consent, refuting the crisis of authority and the erosion of the United States' position as the unipolar hegemon as a recent event, highlighting that contestation and rebellion against it have always existed.⁹

Finally, Robert Cox, the father of Neo-Gramscian theory, adds the social and critical analysis that the world order consists of values and norms established by the elites of a powerful country, first within national limits, which then expands into other states. For Cox, the social revolution in which the dominant class gains control of a state marks the beginning of the establishment of hegemony, which other states will emulate via passive revolution since their elites will not have experienced said social revolution.¹⁰

Therefore, the world order is associated with a predominant mode of production to the benefit of the dominant class. The economic, political and social structure of the world order is equally important to understand its continuance, which is predominantly international institutions whose role is to establish the universal norms that the national classes and other forces must follow and that sustain the economic order.¹¹

The counter-hegemonic forces would be those who challenge these norms and attempt to establish alternative institutions. Multipolarity or global disorder are terms used to describe

⁸ John Ikenberry, "The Next Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2020): 142, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26985688>.

⁹ Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, (Polity PR: 2020): 38-39.

¹⁰ Robert W. Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (1983): 171.

¹¹ Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method." 172.

the new period unravelling from the rise of China, but the role of counter-hegemonic or integrationist power is still to be analysed. As an example, liberal author Daniel Drezner does not identify China as a thorough challenger of the liberal order. Nonetheless, he finds aspects of Trump's policies to initially be more challenging to the liberal norms than the revisionist aims of China.¹²

From this debate, we move forward to the scholars' work about our actors: China and the United States. As mentioned before, the role of China is a subject of debate. The discussion revolves around the role of China within the liberal order and how its resurgence can affect its equilibrium and rules. In their article, Nana de Graaff, Tobias ten Brink and Inderjeet Parmar provide a complete analysis of the literature on the Chinese role and what retaliation might provoke from the United States. Although they mention the openness of China towards the liberal order, they consider it a hybrid approach where China has partially accepted the rules of the game while keeping its model of state capitalism, ideologically communist, against the neoliberal governance promoted by the Washington consensus, which leads us to their second point: the Chinese alternative. China is a power on the rise, promoting its agenda, economic values and political equidistance, within existing institutions and establishing a parallel set of institutions, avoiding the deadlock in those where Western determination preserves intact liberal rules.¹³

However, China's integration into the liberal order is further studied by Shuhong Huo and Inderjeet Parmar, who highlight the willingness of the integration process of China but also, by using the hegemony concept of Gramsci, determine the role of the Ford Foundation and the exportation of knowledge from the United States to China as the primary source fostering the limited economic liberalisation experienced since 1978. As they framed it, the Chinese elites favoured the knowledge network as the channel to reproduce the American model, respecting Chinese characteristics. At the same time, it was welcomed by the American elites as China joined their framework, thus reinforcing the liberal system and opening new markets and possibilities for both shores of the Pacific.¹⁴

They disregard the liberal and realist approach of a mutual benefit relation between nations to reinforce the national elites' economic interests, drawing attention to the

¹² Daniel W. Drezner, "Counter-Hegemonic Strategies in the Global Economy," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 529-30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604985>.

¹³ Nana de Graaff, Tobias ten Brink and Inderjeet Parmar, "China's rise in a liberal world order in transition – introduction to the FORUM," *Review of International Political Economy* 27, no. 2 (2020): 201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1709880>.

¹⁴ Shuhong Huo and Inderjeet Parmar, "'A New Type of Great Power Relationship'? Gramsci, Kautsky and the Role of the Ford Foundation's Transformational Elite Knowledge Networks in China," *Review of International Political Economy* 27, no. 2 (2019): 242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1625427>.

Neo-Gramscian concept of a Transnational class, ignoring the priorities of the people. Finally, it is interesting how they conclude that even though both countries profited from the newly established friendship, their structural position in the international system and their elites' national interests led them to a new stage of tense relations, as they have remained until the present day.¹⁵

Continuing with a more Neo-Gramscian theoretical approach, Serafettin Yilmaz tries to elaborate on the concept of historical bloc and China. The formation of a Chinese-led historical bloc is ongoing, China actively promotes institutions and organisations such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), BRICS or the Belt and Road Initiative in the economic sphere and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in the security sphere. Once China has the economic cooperation and the ideological approximation of the nations' willingness to join a new historic bloc, it will develop, and those institutions will serve as the platform to promote the universal norms and values, as their counterparts from the United States, NATO and the IMF do.¹⁶

He argues that the historic bloc is being constructed and reflects on a key topic, the idea that this bloc is following the US-led order and not challenging it, as mentioned above by most authors. He discards the prevalence of the liberal order in the Chinese project as permanent, but as a natural phenomenon due to its conception within the broad international system. Therefore, it is expected that China will continue following the political and economic structure of the global order unless its revisionist agenda faces a static system, in which case alternatives would be explored with a higher risk of rupture.¹⁷

He concludes by showcasing the geostrategic advantages for China and Asia of a Chinese-led historic bloc and how it could balance the American influence in the region by creating new spaces for cooperation and integration. The Chinese counter-hegemonic project is based on economic challenges but has not materialised into an ideological alternative or the construction of a new hegemony, amidst the efforts of Xi Jinping.¹⁸

On the other hand, the United States is the hegemon of the liberal order, the architect of the array of international institutions and organisations promoting democratic values and free trade. Nonetheless, the perception has radically changed after the rise of China, and the United States' hegemony is at risk. While the role of China as an emerging power has been

¹⁵ Huo and Parmar, “‘A New Type of Great Power Relationship’? Gramsci, Kautsky and the Role of the Ford Foundation’s Transformational Elite Knowledge Networks in China,” 251

¹⁶ Serafettin Yilmaz, “China, Historical Blocs and International Relations,” *Issues & Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 210.

¹⁷ Yilmaz, “China, Historical Blocs and International Relations,” 211-12.

¹⁸ Yilmaz, “China, Historical Blocs and International Relations,” 213.

explained considering its contradictions, the United States presents its own. As the hegemonic power, they are the guardians of the ideological and economic bases of the global order. However, John Ikenberry swiftly turns his attention to the Trump administration as a wrecking ball of the American project for the world. The criticism of Trump from liberals authors is based on the assumption that the United States has built throughout history the liberal order, which is confronted by the protectionism and the isolationism of ‘America First’, pillars of the 47th president’s agenda. Needless to say, it gave momentum to China as it aligns closer to the ideas of free trade and multilateralism inherent to the liberal order.¹⁹

The focus on Trump derives from his controversial handling of liberal principles in foreign policy. In Hal Brands’ interpretation, the United States still holds immense power within the liberal order, which can be perceived as threatening, and the discourse of unilateralism presented by Trump affects that perception and the basis of the U.S. leadership: consent. Brands showcases consent as a tool of the American order to maintain a certain degree of stability, preventing allies from pursuing alliances and alternatives to its hegemony. Such a scenario would have been triggered by Trump’s policies, facilitating the proximity of Western actors to China.²⁰

Nonetheless, the U.S. hegemony after the Second World War had been constructed on opposite premises. The Bretton Woods institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, idealised within the Washington consensus, were conceived to prevent an economic crisis with enough potential to subvert the American order and to establish a structure of international organisations fomenting the U.S. norms and values universally. The United States managed to spread its influence and leadership of the global order by creating a financial global economy in which its institutions were the pillars. While it created new opportunities for investment in the international market, it also provided consent to the U.S. hegemony by tacitly accepting the rules since the United States provided both economic and security services²¹. Specifically in the Indo-Pacific, the United States has established a net of partnerships like the ones with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, as well as alliances such as AUKUS and Quad.

¹⁹ John Ikenberry, “The Plot against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive Present at the Destruction,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2017): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40204443>.

²⁰ Hal Brands, “The Unexceptional Superpower: American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump,” *Survival* 59, no. 6 (2017): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1399722>.

²¹ Mehmet Ali Ak, and Hamza Yurteri, “The Power Transition Basis of Counter-Hegemony in the Context of Neo-Gramscianism: The China-U.S. Rivalry in World Politics,” *Journal of International Affairs* 28, no. 2 (2023): 203.

Another relevant debate around the role of the United States in the global order concerns the term ‘imperialism’. Inderjeet Parmar draws attention to the question of the origins of the liberal order and the American supremacy over it. He reflects on the origins of institutional liberalism as part of the issue and mentions the term ‘ultra-imperialism’ coined by Karl Kautsky as defining the current situation where national elites collaborate through class alliances to exploit the world's resources. An interesting approach that could showcase the contradictions of both the United States and China as neo-imperialist powers.²²

His analysis concludes with an important statement on how the unequal structures of power of the global order are built on a hierarchical, imperial, and racial and class domination are embedded in the structure of the international order, meaning that the United States-United Kingdom axis created a liberal order based not only on economic exploitation but on deep ideological conceptions such as racism and civilisational myths that are not part of the outspoken discourse of liberal institutionalism. He also highlights those aspects in the speeches of Donald Trump, whose disruption into power has shaken the bases of global politics.²³

Mehmet Ali Ak and Hamza Yurteri describe a legitimacy crisis when the United States began using tools of coercion, since it was one of the only nations with such capacities, to achieve national and strategic goals. Effectively ignoring the institutional architecture of the international system, in addition to the consecutive economic crises such as the 1971 and 2008 crises, has damaged the image of the liberal order and challenged the U.S. hegemony by eroding its structural base. They compared the U.S. counter-hegemonic efforts against the United Kingdom in the 19th century with what the Chinese are currently accomplishing. Interestingly, the main difficulty of a Chinese expansionist global order is that its model emerged as a consequence of the national circumstances and experience. Nonetheless, the United States finds itself in a period of uncertainty faced by a counter-hegemonic power that has just recently appeared to make progress towards a different structure of power among the two main competitors, away from unipolarity.²⁴ To explain this process, the concept of hegemony has proved to be adequate, as many authors analyse the rise and fall of a hegemon as well as the steady challenge from a counter-hegemonic power. This historiographic revision has attempted to address the main debates around the rise of China and the role of

²² Inderjeet Parmar, “The US-led liberal order: imperialism by another name?,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix240>.

²³ Inderjeet Parmar, “The US-led liberal order: imperialism by another name?,” 171-2.

²⁴ Ali Ak, and Yurteri, “The Power Transition Basis of Counter-Hegemony in the Context of Neo-Gramscianism: The China-U.S. Rivalry in World Politics,” 212-13.

the United States in the Indo-Pacific in a global order defined as being in a transitional period with no clear outcome.

Contribution to the field

The global rivalry between the United States and China is a contemporary topic that has been studied by multiple authors, as we have demonstrated in the previous section. Liberals authors prioritise the explanation of why the failure is a national one, while critical theorists and Marxists focus on inequalities and the alternative. My thesis aims to occupy the space of those academic papers contributing to the study of an ongoing systematic change in the global order by understanding the policies of the main actors and their goals. Nonetheless, this thesis presents innovative approaches, like the geographical and theoretical. The geographical framework provides an adequate scope for a thesis. In focusing the analysis on the Indo-Pacific, we managed to study the interactions of the United States and China in the most critical place, where the regional power of China and the US's global influence are at stake. Furthermore, the results of the analysis could be extrapolated to other regions of the planet where the confrontation between these powers is currently ongoing.

The theory plays an important role in the analysis of the policies put forward by both states. Grasping the meaning behind an alliance or a treaty, the economic implications and the social impact are as important as considering those political movements. In most papers, the Neo-Gramscian theory and concepts have been applied to the global order, but on a general basis without deepening the analysis at a regional level. Thus, this thesis will expand on the regional scope and theoretical applicability of Cox's adaptation of Gramsci's ideas to explain international phenomena, attending to the material and ideal realities. Finally, by merging the regional scope and the Neo-Gramscian theory, my thesis contributes to a broader field of International Relations and History by offering a critical understanding of how power and institutions shape an evolving global order.

Sources

The primary sources used in this thesis are core elements to the analysis of how China and the United States seek to shape the global order in the Indo-Pacific. Given the focus of this thesis, reports and other official documents are the main collection in the research, but notable speeches from prominent figures have also been assessed.

In the case of China, two official websites have been fruitful in gathering the primary sources needed to explore the Chinese vision of global order. The speech ‘Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity’s Way Forward’ delivered by Xi Jinping in 2021 was retrieved from the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, one of the two websites employed to obtain primary sources for the Chinese chapter. The other website is the English version of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, the chief administrative authority and national government of China, in which its digital archive is located.

The documents obtained from this archive are known as white papers. White papers are policy documents published by the Information Office of the State Council of the PRC and are used to express the government’s position, objectives and policies in specific and relevant matters, both international and domestically. They are a powerful tool for the Chinese government’s efforts to spread its narrative to a national and international audience, as they are published in Chinese and English. Five white papers have been selected from this online archive for their relevance to the topic. The 2010, 2015 and 2019 white papers concerning National Defence, the 2017 white paper regarding the Asia-Pacific region and the 2023 white paper titled: ‘A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions.’ This last white paper is particularly relevant to grasp the Chinese discourse since it summarises its global ideal values and policies into one paper.

On the other hand, the United States documents are diffused in multiple government websites and the National Archives (NARA), which provides an insight into the American worldview. Due to the abundance of official documents and reports, the American primary sources are specifically selected from those tackling the Indo-Pacific. The five primary sources for the United States’ chapter are one speech and four reports, three of them published by the Department of Defence (DoD) and one by the Department of State. The speech ‘Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament’ delivered by Obama in 2011 was obtained from the White House Archives of his administration. Chronologically, the first report analysed is ‘Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defence’, released in 2012, which, alongside the 2017 ‘National Security Strategy’ report, are the two documents with a broader scope beyond the Indo-Pacific.

The other two reports are Indo-Pacific reports from 2019 and 2022. The first one, the ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy Report’, is the first Indo-Pacific report from the Department of Defence, while the last one is the ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States’, which is the only one from the sources released by the Department of State. Both are vital to the thesis as

they depict the American understanding of the region from various perspectives and frame its policies, capabilities and values. In addition to their relevance to the study, these papers were chosen to represent each American administration falling within the timeframe. Therefore, each report corresponds to one administration from Obama to Biden, with the Trump administration accounting for two different reports since the Indo-Pacific report from the Trump administration does not provide as much detailed information as Biden's report, since it is primarily focused on security.

In both cases, the public nature of the source means there will be bias, which is not necessarily counterproductive as long as their affirmations correspond to the truth, which can be determined by contrasting them. This is closely linked with the intentionality of these sources, a vital aspect to be considered since government reports on foreign affairs or any other matters that are publicly available convey a message of strength and a desired position beyond the proper analysis that internal documents have.

Another important factor regarding the Chinese sources is the use of the translated version; this is not ideal, since the original source may have a slightly different meaning or connotation that may be lost in the process of translation. Nonetheless, most of the Chinese government's speeches and websites are already translated, resulting in an almost similar product compared to the Chinese version without foreign interpretation. The selection of official pages and archives when selecting the primary sources also guarantees that the analysis will be based on truthful and unmodified documents.

Methodology

This thesis adopts a qualitative, critical approach rooted in the Neo-Gramscian theory to analyse the US-China relations in the Indo-Pacific and how they shape the global order. The research will emphasise the material, ideological and institutional grounds, employing the analysis of political discourse as well as the historical evolution while selecting a specific case study to examine the strategies put in place by the Chinese and American governments. Selecting a case study is an adequate manner to achieve a proper insight into the subject of study while maintaining a broad scope, illustrating through a thorough analysis of both realities and their historical background, the different perspectives and objectives related to their vision of the global order and their position in it. When deciding on a case study, it is vital to consider its relevance and the wider implications of the research. In this case, the

Indo-Pacific is the colliding scenario of the two major players in the global order, thus, the justification is implicit in its importance.

However, extracting tendencies and extrapolating the results to other geographical areas is a dangerous task that can be prevented without further study. There is also a comparative perspective between the policies of the United States and China. Still, the main focus is not to compare their policies but to understand the meaning and the intention behind them. By combining primary and secondary sources, our methodology ensures a comprehensive analysis of the empirical and theoretical research. The limitation of this study is the theory in use, as its focus underrepresents what other theories may contemplate as the most important aspects of the analysis, especially realism and liberalism. Nonetheless, the chosen methodology is a robust framework for analysing the dynamics of Sino-American relations.

Chapter 2. An International Stage: The Liberal International Order.

This chapter examines the international system as a scenario in which the rivalry between the United States and China develops and their position within the evolving global order, connecting this with the role of the Indo-Pacific region. The chapter proceeds to briefly study the emergence and establishment of the Liberal International Order and the ongoing systematic crisis affecting the American and Chinese leverage over it. Finally, we analyse why the Indo-Pacific has materialised as a key geographical arena. In doing so, this chapter lays down the contextual and conceptual framework for the following chapters.

The concept of global order refers to the overarching set of rules, norms, institutions, and relations that form a structure that regulates interactions between states and other international actors. The aforementioned definition is as broad as possible to be widely accepted by the mainstream IR theories, liberalism and realism, as well as by neo-Gramscianism. Certainly, there are nuances to it. Mearsheimer, an exponent of realism, depicts the global order as a group of international institutions governing the relations between states and dealing with those outside the institutional framework. The state is the sole actor, and a great power constrains itself to the rules and norms of such institutions, considering they benefit its position.²⁵

Nonetheless, his position clashes with the interpretation of Cox. He conceives ‘world orders’, a nuanced denomination of global order, as the outcome of historical structures composed of three forces: ideas, material capabilities and institutions. Although the state is relevant, it is not the only actor influencing the structure; transnational companies and elites are acknowledged as possessors of agency insofar as their actions are founded and affected by those of the historical structure. A world order is the product of historical configurations of forces and not a permanent structure; the structure is evolving, and so are the logics guiding its actors.²⁶

The Liberal International Order (LIO) is one of the most popular terms to depict the current global order. The origins of the LIO are disputed; Mearsheimer argues that the ideas behind the global order were guided by realist principles until the fall of the Soviet Union, marking the end of the bipolar global order and the dawn of the new liberal order led exclusively by the United States.²⁷

²⁵ John J Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 9, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342.

²⁶ Cox, “Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,” 135-136.

²⁷ Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” 21.

While liberal authors like Deudney and Ikenberry situate the beginning at the end of the Second World War in 1945. They claim that the conglomerate of institutions, the economic system and values were forged after the defeat of Nazi Germany. Materialising in the creation of the United Nations and the monetary agreement of Bretton Woods, while running parallel to the Soviet-led order. An important highlight from their article is the mention of the liberal order as a Western-led order, as the hegemony of the United States is a key aspect.²⁸

Although Deudney and Ikenberry examine the different aspects of the liberal order based on the ‘theory’ behind it - liberal internationalism-, the elements of the LIO are presented through an article by the critical theorist Amitav Acharya, who enunciates the foundations of the liberal order in four ideas, which he identifies as decaying. These are: free trade, multilateral institutions post-Second World War, the growth of democracy and liberal values. As the threats that those values are facing, he mentions the reduction of global trade, the increased negotiations outside international institutions, the surge of authoritarianism, and the erosion of social liberal values. In the upcoming section, we will tackle his claim that Trump is the consequence and not the cause of the stated threats to the liberal order.²⁹

These four elements and the LIO strengthened after the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the communist bloc, which resulted in the solid extension of the liberal order to a global scale and the rise of the United States as the only great power. This period will be known as the unipolarity moment, as no other state challenged the United States’ hegemony. However, we are currently facing a new international context, a crisis of the LIO. Ikenberry argues that the cause of the crisis is the overextension of the liberal institutions to the rest of the world, a global expansion that has decimated the authority and legitimacy of the norms and institutions that once were trusted and followed by Western liberal democracies, including the role of the United States. He states that the rise of authoritarianism and other great powers, namely China, is a realignment of power within the Liberal International Order. Such framing is embedded in a discourse based on a sense of community within the Western states in opposition to the Rest and how the inclusion of the latter in a freshly expanded global order distorted the structure and led to the struggle to accommodate the liberal order to these new actors and their demands.³⁰

²⁸ Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, “The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order,” *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 180, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001795>.

²⁹ Amitav Acharya, “After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 272-74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941700020X>.

³⁰ G. John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iax241>.

The optimism of Ikenberry contrasts with the criticism of other liberal authors as Druzin, whose work outlines the dangers of antagonising China.³¹ Critical theory authors such as Milan Babic use Gramsci's concepts to argue that not only is the order in crisis, but heading towards its decay. A key aspect of Gramsci's thinking applied by Babic is the idea that a crisis is not a static state but a process. He defines this moment as 'interregnum' since the new order has not yet been defined and the old one is still in place. Lastly, Babic identifies the crisis of the LIO as an organic crisis. Contrary to conjunctural crises, which are the daily basis of political activity, organic crises are those affecting the pillars of the order due to lingering contradictions. In this case, the mismatch, as he references it, is between the core values of the LIO and the willingness of the state to abide by them.³²

In this context, the transition from a unipolar order to a multipolar order can be considered as the consequence of the hegemonic crisis under which the United States and the states belonging to the capitalist core are confronted with the emergence of other states, primarily from the Global South. The reach or the change from unipolar to multipolar order is discussed by academics as an ongoing affair and noted with different names, such as multipolarity, multiplex order, or it has even been denied entirely.³³ From a neo-Gramscian perspective, the struggle is between the well-established historical bloc comprised of Western capitalist states and the rising alternatives prompted by the emergence of China, Russia and other contenders. Nonetheless, that state's new position in the system is not the only cause for the hegemonic crisis, which started after the 2008 economic crisis. Thereafter, the neo-liberal narrative collapsed as their institutions collided and the standard of living declined.³⁴

Therefore, the LIO is currently in a transition –interregnum– period where the heart of the structure is being challenged by states both strictly aligned with the order, capitalist core, and those more traditionally considered to be challengers or emerging powers, which have changed the unipolarity model to an increasingly multipolar one. Exploring this idea, the next section will discuss the role of the United States and China in the LIO.

³¹ Bryan H. Druzin, "How to Destroy the Liberal International Order," *Duke Journal of Comparative & International Law* 34, no.1 (2024): 1-37.

³² Babic, "Let's Talk about the Interregnum: Gramsci and the Crisis of the Liberal World Order." 771-72.

³³ Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order,"; Stephen G. Brooks, and William C. Wohlforth. "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Global Position." *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2016): 13.

https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00225. and Muhammad Muzaffar, Zahid Yaseen and Nazim Rahim, "Changing Dynamics of Global Politics: Transition from Unipolar to Multipolar World," *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal* 1, no.1 (2017): 58, <https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/1.1.6>.

³⁴ Jonathan Pass, "(Re)Introducing World Hegemony into the 'Global Organic Crisis,'" *International Affairs* 100, no. 1 (2024): 329, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaad230>.

The United States and China's Rivalry in the Liberal International Order

Having established the characteristics of the LIO, this section aspires to determine the position of the United States and China within the structure of the global order. The United States is presented as the founder and long-standing defender of the liberal order, while China's role as a challenger power is studied to explore the academic debate around its nature. This section explores how both states have engaged with the liberal order and how its crisis is influenced by their rivalry.

American hegemony is one of the essential elements constituting the LIO; the consequences of this draw differing opinions. Ikenberry ties the liberal order to the United States's hegemonic role due to the power and influence exercised by the latter. Nonetheless, the crisis of the American hegemony is the end of an era within the LIO and not the demise of the order, since, as we established before, Ikenberry argues that the liberal order is suffering from a realignment of the power among states. He does not criticise the American leverage over the system, but instead praises and highlights the vital role of the West in conceiving and then delivering the LIO to the world.³⁵

Inderjeet Parmar challenges this vision and contemplates the nuances of the American hegemonic design of the liberal order. He charges against Ikenberry, whom he deems as Eurocentric, and the American hegemony as an elitist, colonialist and class-based hegemonic project. Parmar, applying the neo-Gramscian theory, recognises the importance of coercion and consent in developing the American hegemony; not only has the U.S. managed its influence through military action or economic pressure, but also by a process denominated elite socialisation.³⁶ The integration of the elites of the Global South states was a necessary step to successfully expand the LIO to a global scale while maintaining the underpinning imperialist and capitalist discourse. At this point, the concept of transnational capitalist class is useful to grasp the impact of the shared interests of the elites, regardless of the state. We can articulate this idea as Parmar does, by mentioning the main opposition to the liberal order, the authoritarian nationalist and the left-wing parties, all sharing the idea to bring back their sovereignty. Meanwhile, the political elites move towards liberal policies, pursuing further economic integration.³⁷

³⁵ Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" 21.

³⁶ Inderjeet Parmar. "The US-Led Liberal Order: Imperialism by Another Name?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 160. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix240>.

³⁷ Parmar. "The US-Led Liberal Order: Imperialism by Another Name?" 162.

Accordingly, the United States is the hegemon of the liberal order, whose elites have permeated into the international institutions and constituted the core of the structure. On the other hand, China came into the spotlight as its emergence was inevitable, as it posed a challenge to the American hegemony. To what extent China is also contesting the liberal order is part of an academic controversy. Parmar focuses on the economic and intellectual cooperation between the U.S. and China after the 1970s to formulate the notion of a special great power relationship where both states have benefits and losses from their approximation. Although their elites have profited significantly from the increasing trade, economic integration, and shared knowledge, a situation that only changed after Trump took office in 2016 and the official discourse towards China turned from the efforts to incorporate it into the liberal order to an open hegemonic confrontation.³⁸

China is certainly increasing its assertiveness towards achieving its goals, which will be studied further on in this thesis, but that includes balancing its status within the liberal order, an unnerving situation for the United States. Nonetheless, China has adopted and adapted to the values and norms of the LIO, even if the domestic policies do not adhere to them. This has created a contradiction between the state-directed economy and China's foreign economic policy that moves the country closer to the capitalist economic system. Regarding this, Naná de Graaff and Bastiaan van Apeldoorn have studied the evolution of the US-China relation with the liberal order and concluded three possible scenarios: conflict, Chinese incorporation into liberalism and coexistence. In any of those scenarios, the actions of China do not necessarily imply the creation of a new global order but the desire to reform the American hegemony insofar as the order was designed to benefit Western polities and has not significantly been reshaped to allow new powerful actors to assume their role. Therefore, the role of China as a great power is better defined as reformist instead of the traditional revisionist terminology.³⁹

Finally, it is compelling to examine the work of Steve Chan regarding the power-transition theory, in which he analyses how well this theory reflects the current conduct of China and the United States. It is relevant because he introduces the notion of a reactionary hegemon who actively engages in revising the global order to reflect their own values and interests. Traditionally, the theory states that the revisionist great power was the one ascending and not the established hegemon but the United States has, since the beginning

³⁸ Parmar. "The US-Led Liberal Order: Imperialism by Another Name?" 168.

³⁹ Naná De Graaff and Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn, "US–China Relations and the Liberal World Order: Contending Elites, Colliding Visions?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 124–26. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix232>.

of the LIO, incompletely embraced multilateralism and selectively refused to join some of the most relevant international organisations such as the International Criminal Court or challenged core values as free trade. This behaviour intensified during Trump's first term.⁴⁰

Consequently, China and the United States' position in the global order is questioned. A hegemon facing a crisis and a rising regional or great power involved in reformist practices are presumed to be mobilising their foreign policy towards reshaping the LIO to achieve their strategic objectives.

Indo-Pacific in the Liberal International Order

The Indo-Pacific, far from being a passive or neutral region, has become central to the articulation of contention of the differing approaches to the liberal order held by China and the United States, and thus, it is the geopolitical area where their interests and territories converge and where their outright global competition began. Throughout this section, we will uncover the strategic and economic value of the conceptualised Indo-Pacific region, further acknowledging how the region reflects and shapes the broader struggle over norms, institutions and hegemony in the global order.

The geopolitical relevance of this region can be attributed to multiple factors: an important part of the developing countries in the world are located in the area. Only the Asian Bank is expected to accumulate 50% of the global GDP, reaching 48% in 2017. If we include the American area of the Indo-Pacific, it rises to 72% of the global GDP.⁴¹ Understandably, the rise of the Indo-Pacific can be explained by its position as an economic powerhouse. Accordingly, the economic war between China and the U.S. had its focus on the region. While the U.S. led the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), China developed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) alongside the ASEAN countries and other U.S. allies like Japan and Australia. The Biden administration launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework after Trump had withdrawn the U.S. from the TPP prior to its entry into force. The Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are two Chinese initiatives of great economic impact, the latter posing a challenge to the IMF and World Bank as an alternative institution.⁴²

⁴⁰ Steve Chan, "Challenging the Liberal Order: The US Hegemon as a Revisionist Power," *International Affairs* 97, no. 5 (2021): 1347, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaab074>.

⁴¹ Khurana "What is the Indo-Pacific? The New Geopolitics of the Asia-Centred Rim Land." 14.

⁴² Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "International Order Transition and US-China Strategic Competition in the Indo Pacific," *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 2 (March 4, 2023): 247, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2160789>.

In the institutional field, both China and the U.S. have devised various international organisations with broader or more specific purposes. While China has fostered economic cooperation with ASEAN and led security organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the United States has forged a net of intelligence and security alliances like AUKUS and Quad, while also approaching ASEAN countries in forums like the East Asia Summit. Chinese influence coupled with a renewed American interest in the region and their divergent approaches are a challenge to multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific.⁴³

The dynamic confrontation between the Chinese and American initiatives showcases the subjacent power struggle and the battle to shape the LIO in their interest, by luring other states into accepting their hegemonic rule through institutional and economic integration. The Indo-Pacific is the scenario where the two great powers of the liberal order are determining their fate.

⁴³ He and Feng, “International Order Transition and US-China Strategic Competition in the Indo Pacific,” 246.

Chapter 3. United States: The Hegemon in Crisis

The Indo-Pacific has emerged as the principal geopolitical and strategic geographical space in which the United States encounters the challenges to its global leadership. Since the 2010s, the U.S. foreign policy has experienced a substantial regional reorientation, placing the Indo-Pacific at the heart of its struggle to manage power transitions, normative influence, and operate in an evolving global order. As analysed in the previous chapter, the Indo-Pacific has become a key region to assert America's deeper ambitions at a worldwide scale: reassert its hegemony over the Liberal International Order, contest the Chinese influence over the region and the global order, and redefine the principles of liberal hegemony and the LIO in an environment of confrontation.

This chapter examines the role of the United States in shaping the Indo-Pacific region through an analysis of selected primary sources, particularly official strategy documents and security reports, from the successive administrations. These sources serve not only as policy blueprints but also as discursive tools through which the United States has framed allies, threats and reproduces how it envisions its role as hegemon of the world order. In this chapter, instead of studying the LIO as a static framework, it focuses on how the U.S. has engaged with the Indo-Pacific as it attempts to adapt, defend and even reinvent the liberal order in the face of emerging powers and alternative hegemonies. In doing so, this chapter assesses the last three American administrations from Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' to Trump's rupture and finally Biden's discourse of strategic competition, each iteration reflecting both continuity and change in U.S. hegemonic strategy in the region.

The chapter is structured in the following sections: the first section situates the Indo-Pacific in the U.S. grand strategy, tracing its ascent to core strategic priority. The second analysis examines how liberal values and norms are appealed to in the region to legitimise the U.S. discourse and course of action. The third section examines the framing of China in these documents as the primary strategic opponent. Finally, the fourth section reflects on the contradictions and limits of the U.S. agenda in the Indo-Pacific, notably the tensions between the liberal values and the strategic goals.

The Indo-Pacific in the US Grand Strategy

The Indo-Pacific is a term primarily designed to illustrate the U.S. strategic reappraisal of Asia, especially the Pacific region, including the Indian Ocean. Initially, the popularised term in U.S. geopolitics was Asia-Pacific, which was expanded to include the

Indian subcontinent, in an attempt to counterbalance the Chinese influence while also acknowledging its strategic value as a geographical outpost. India rose to a prominent economic and security partner in the region, and the American approach has been to lure India into their sphere of influence. Although the Indian government has kept itself in an apathetic position towards the U.S., it has joined American-led regional initiatives such as the Quads, a partnership between Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. for a prosperous Indo-Pacific.⁴⁴

The ‘Pivot to Asia’ was the Obama administration’s strategic realignment from the Middle East and the Mediterranean to Asia. The starting point was an article by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, where she envisions Asia-Pacific, a soon-to-be Indo-Pacific, as a future driver of global politics. In her article, Clinton includes the Indian subcontinent as part of this region, and thus, this article becomes the discursive cornerstone of the renewed U.S. strategy towards Asia. What she also states in her remarks is that the pivot to Asia is part of a major political strategy where their involvement in the Middle East and surrounding areas, namely Iraq and Afghanistan, is no longer worth the expenditure of energy and resources that were to be reallocated to the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁵

Clinton’s article was the mere beginning of the narrative of hegemony through an increased presence in the area. In a speech addressing the Australian parliament, President Obama declares the same principle as Clinton: the U.S. will gradually withdraw from their active wars and focus on a crucial region, as the Indo-Pacific is presented by reaffirming its geopolitical value. Obama describes his country as a ‘Pacific nation’ and bows to strengthen their position in the region to allow the United States to shape it and its future.⁴⁶ Both sources are from 2011 and belong to the process of narrative-building towards the conceptualisation of the Indo-Pacific in the American reconfiguration of a lasting hegemony. Furthermore, the Indo-Pacific is framed as the main theatre of a contest for global leadership.

This idea can be traced to the Strategic Guidance report (2012) with the unequivocal title of ‘Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense’ where the

⁴⁴ Muhammad Saeed, “From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition,” *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 03, no. 04 (2017): 504, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740017500324>.

⁴⁵ Hillary Clinton. “America’s Pacific Century.” *Foreign Policy* April 21, 2025. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

⁴⁶ Barack Obama. *Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament*. (White House Archives. November 17, 2011). <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

U.S. policymakers insist on the rebalance to Asia-Pacific to tackle global security concerns and American influence over global issues while expanding the concept to include the Indian Ocean and calling for an enhanced multilateralism, particularly with India.⁴⁷ On the economic grounds, this translated into Obama's trade flagship: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

Under the TPP, the biggest economies of the region, excluding China, joined a free trade agreement under the hegemonic norms of the U.S.. As Mastanduno states, through the TPP, the United States impose its economic rules and global dominance over the so-called Asia-Pacific, and this was the reason why China could not afford to join.⁴⁸

Nonetheless, the TPP was short-lived as it was signed by all future members but the United States, which, after the election of Donald Trump, withdrew from the TPP. Trump's decision marks the beginning of a new approach to trade but also to America's hegemony and role in the region. From free trade to protectionism and from multilateralism to one-to-one bilateral agreements, that is the formula that the Trump administration applied to shift the foreign policy of his predecessor and, more profoundly, the American foreign policy since the end of the Second World War.⁴⁹

The Trump administration embraced the Pivot to Asia, and the nomenclature change from Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific was reflected in official documents. The Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019) continues the narrative of a reinforced presence in the region. However, there are divergences in the rhetoric, several cases are related to the liberal values and norms as well as the handling of China and therefore will be studied in the following sections, but there are three ideas central to Trump's government strategy for the Indo-Pacific: China's emergence is conceived purely as a threat to U.S., the focus on military alliances and 'economic fairness'.⁵⁰

Combined, these three elements are the core of the 'free and open' Indo-Pacific Strategy put forward by Trump's administration, accounting for the three spheres of action: economic, governance and security. It is a continuation of the rebalance strategy of Obama since the core idea has remained unchallenged, but includes those features previously discussed in Trump's policies. The IPS uses an assertive tone to showcase the need of the

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. (Washington, DC.: Department of Defense, 2012), 2.

<https://ntrlnnis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2012103890.xhtml>.

⁴⁸ Michael Mastanduno, "A Grand Strategic Transition? Obama, Trump and the Asia Pacific Political Economy," In *The United States in the Indo-Pacific*, ed. Oliver Turner and Inderjeet Parmar. (Manchester University Press, 2020), 180.

<https://www.manchesterhive.com/display/9781526135025/9781526135025.00019.xml>.

⁴⁹ Mastanduno, "A Grand Strategic Transition? Obama, Trump and the Asia Pacific Political Economy," 185.

⁵⁰ Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019), 4.

U.S. partners to share the burden of military cooperation, a transactional approach that the report maintains in trade and defense, clashing with the more conciliatory tone of Obama, whose strategy was to incorporate partners to build networks of cooperation and mutual support while asserting the U.S. hegemony, an objective seemingly abandoned by Trump.⁵¹

In any event, the National Security Strategy's (2017) section on the Indo-Pacific summarises the core principle of Trump's new arrangement towards hegemony, the 'balance of power'. The international presence of the United States, pursued by the previous administration as part of a U.S. hegemonic position, had been discursively driven by economic and multilateral cooperation. During the Trump administration, the partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific must actively contribute to sustaining the American hegemony. This does not entail a retreat from the area but a new approach to pursue the 'free and open' strategy.⁵²

The Biden administration's policy in the Indo-Pacific builds upon Trump's strategy in certain aspects but diverges in tone and execution. The Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022) unveils its first pillar to continue advancing towards an 'open and free' Indo-Pacific. Both documents advocate for open access to maritime routes and other 'shared domains' in the economic sphere. While Trump's agenda pursued bilateral trade agreements, Biden resumes a broader collaboration with 'like-minded' nations in efforts to build a networked Indo-Pacific by improving their existing alliances and fostering cooperation among their allies.⁵³

Although regional governance in both presidencies differs, the political, economic and security objectives and concerns seem to align as previously stated with promoting liberal democracy and sovereignty, military deterrence and economic freedom at the core of the U.S. strategy for the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁴ Another convergence is the recognition of the Indo-Pacific as a vital geographic space for the future of the global order and the U.S., as stated in both strategies, which actively pursue a growth in American influence. On the contrary, the national interests are also portrayed markedly differently. While the Department of Defense under Trump established four key factors: Protect the American people, promote the American prosperity, preserve peace through strength and advancing American influence;⁵⁵ Instead, the Biden administration approaches the region from a broader angle, avoiding the

⁵¹ U.S. Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, 3.

⁵² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), 46.

⁵³ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. (Washington, DC: White House, February 2022), 9.

⁵⁴ Zongyou Wei, "The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Impacts on Asia-Pacific Order," *East Asian Affairs* 02, no. 02 (2022): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2737557922500085>.

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2019), 15.

nationalist discourse and entangling its interests to those of the Indo-Pacific and ties them to their allies and regional institutions.⁵⁶

Beyond discourse and regional framing, the material foundations of the U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific reveal the intertwined nature of its involvement and efforts. The geopolitical value adds up to the economic and security realms, explaining why shaping the order in the Indo-Pacific is bound to provoke a global order transformation. The U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report (2019), during Trump's presidency, elaborates on the material reasons of the American presence: the South China Sea is one of the most trafficked global shipping routes, and nine of the ten busiest seaports are located in the area. It is also a region that accounts for 60% of global GDP while concentrating two-thirds of its growth. It contributes to the U.S. since the value of its trade in the region adds up to \$2.3 trillion, and it is the origin of a quarter of its exports.⁵⁷ The economic wealth of the Indo-Pacific and the emergence of China as a counterbalance to American hegemony are enough justification for an unprecedented deployment of American troops in the area. The United States Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) confirms the presence of 375,000 civilian and military personnel deployed in the Indo-Pacific, a sizeable amount of them accounting for military personnel. It also includes 200 warships and almost 2,500 aircraft.⁵⁸

Taken together, the narrative discourse of three American administrations, the relevance of the scenario and its material conditions showcase a growing interest from Washington in the Indo-Pacific. From an initial regional pivot started by the Obama administration, the Indo-Pacific has become the core of American foreign policy. Trump and Biden, although from different standpoints, recognised the vital value of the region and reinforced the U.S. role in its dynamic. The three administrations, through their defence and regional reports, have included the Indo-Pacific in their Grand Strategy to support the U.S. hegemonic role and sustain that position within the Liberal International Order.

Narrating Order: Liberal Values and Language

To examine U.S. policy in the Indo-Pacific beyond the surface-level objectives, it is necessary to adopt a conceptual lens to capture the meaning and ideology behind narratives. Drawing from neo-Gramscian theory, particularly from Robert Cox, this section will uncover

⁵⁶ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 7.

⁵⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 1-2.

⁵⁸ U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, "About USINDOPACOM," accessed May 6, 2025, <https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/#:~:text=These%20commands%20are%20headquartered%20in%the%20USINDOPACOM%20area%20of%20responsibility>.

the discursive project found in the official documents analysed, framing them beyond the material strategies studied in the previous section, to find how it is aimed at securing consent to the global order that the United States desires. In this view, hegemony is not only political or economic dominance but the ability to construct a narrative for global politics considered as common sense.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is described by Cox, and can be outlined as the intersection of coercion and consent with a primordial role for the latter. Power, in its materialistic consideration, is not as important in a neo-Gramscian conception of hegemony as it is the ability to appease the social forces. Moreover, the state as an actor cannot be separated from the social classes under its rules and the dominant class that designs the narrative embedded in the order.⁵⁹ Cox adapts the concept to international relations and showcases the three-fold nature of hegemony: an economic, social and political structure. World hegemony is implemented through a series of universal norms, institutions, and mechanisms to be replicated by all states and international organisations, which are a reflection as well as a promoter of them. Hegemony, at any scale, is in harmony with the dominant mode of production and class, but for the purpose of this thesis and section, the political dimension of hegemony will be studied.⁶⁰

Therefore, the narrative building of consent and the legitimisation of a certain global order will be explored from the official reports and documents from the United States' Government. Following neo-Gramscian, the existence of the Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC) as described by Professor William I. Robinson is acknowledged as well as their influence and the representation of their interests in liberal international institutions as the IMF or the WTO. In addition, Robinson reflects on the role of the state as an entity that does not exercise hegemony but the social groups controlling it. The alignment of the values of the capitalist American elite with the foundations of the LIO, free trade, multilateral institutions post-Second World War, the growth of democracy and liberal values, determines the trends in American foreign policy.⁶¹

The Obama administration, as we have examined previously, begins the transitional period where the Indo-Pacific moves from a peripheral position to the core of the U.S. global strategy. The Department of Defence (DoD) report has a grandiloquent tone when praising

⁵⁹ Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method." 164.

⁶⁰ Cox, "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method." 171-72.

⁶¹ William I. Robinson, "Gramsci and Globalisation: From Nation-State to Transnational Hegemony," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 8 no. 4 (2005): 564-565, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230500205243>.

the leadership of the U.S. in shaping the international system. Similarly, it welcomes the collaboration with its allies to achieve global peace, security and stability. When it comes to the Indo-Pacific, the document highlights the vital nature of the relationship with allies and partners in the region to ensure stability and growth. Overall, the report calls for the ‘rebalance’ towards the region to involve a deeper relationship with their existing allies by increasing security and economic cooperation through international organisations as ASEAN.⁶²

Although the Obama administration does not address the core values of the LIO in the first document after the Pivot to Asia, it decisively advocates for multilateralism and hints at economic freedom and demands shared responsibility over security. The aforementioned speech by Obama in the Australian parliament provides an insight into where these core values were situated in the Indo-Pacific strategy and how his administration is actively urging regional actors to integrate and participate in the LIO. Obama proclaims that he believes in an international order where national and individual rights are upheld, where international laws and norms are enforced, free trade is respected, and most importantly, emerging powers contribute to regional security by accepting the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Later on, Obama clears up any doubts surrounding the U.S. involvement in the region and reaffirms the leadership over the Indo-Pacific by compromising its presence to deter military actions, fulfil their obligations with fellow allies and project power.⁶³

Obama’s promise to uphold ‘core principles’ in the region, where he also vows to stay, as the U.S. is a Pacific actor whose position in the region must be ‘larger and long-term’ to shape it, is the central point from which the consent is being built. Another vital aspect of Obama’s speech is the naturalisation of American leadership in the Indo-Pacific and how it draws other states to participate in the U.S. hegemonic project for the region. Coercion does not play a role in his strategy.

The Trump administration discourse is a departure from a more balanced and persuasive tone to a more belligerent and assertive one. The Indo-Pacific is the scenario of a geopolitical competition, and the United States is presented as the protector of the rules-based order. By doing so, the Trump administration is effectively positioning itself with the responsibility of a great power in the region. In the early message of the Secretary of Defence in the Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, he actively engages with the idea of preventing any

⁶² U.S. Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, 2.

⁶³ Obama. *Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament*.

revisionist agenda from changing the rules and norms of the free and open regional order, while committing to uphold and enhance them.⁶⁴

The IPSR defines the principles upheld by the U.S. in this report as common and sustaining the current order. Those principles are: the rule of law, free and fair trade, sovereignty and peaceful resolution of disputes. By safeguarding those principles and promoting liberal democracy values as transparent governance and a resilient social society, the Trump administration claims to seek an international order where no nation exercises hegemony over the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, this affirmation is an outright contradiction of the four points as part of the U.S. National Defence Strategy, where remaining the preeminent military power in the world and advancing a global order leading to American prosperity and security are the main objectives. Furthermore, the balance of power is emphasised, and the upkeep of a network of allies and partners is recognised as key to achieving their strategic goals and order stability, partners and allies with whom they share a set of values and a vision of the global order. This can be seen in the three regional objectives to sustain their hegemonic role: preparedness, partnerships and networked region.⁶⁶ The NSS justifies the hegemonic position of the United States as a demand from regional partners to maintain the liberal order in the Indo-Pacific.⁶⁷

Even though Trump's administration manifests a strong commitment to the core fundamental values of the LIO, there is a marked claim for allies and partners to contribute reasonably in the defense network as well as a fierce push for a 'fair' trade characterised by bilateral agreements in detriment of multilateral free trade treaties like the TPP.⁶⁸

Trump's policies in the Indo-Pacific reaffirm the liberal values of the Liberal International Order while introducing some reforms seeking to bring a greater benefit to the U.S. domestically and internationally. Coercion is not implicitly mentioned as a tool while consent is as part of the LIO system of membership, while consent is a key factor to participate and integrate in the US-led global order.

Biden builds upon the strategy of Trump and pursues further hegemonic positioning in the region. On Biden's presidency, the Pivot to Asia has been completed, and the most disruptive feature of Trump's first term is his disregard for multilateralism, which the Biden administration swiftly amends.⁶⁹ The strategy launched by the Indo-Pacific Strategy, without

⁶⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, IV.

⁶⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 5-8.

⁶⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 16.

⁶⁷ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 46.

⁶⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 54.

⁶⁹ Wei, "The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Impacts on Asia-Pacific Order," 2..

considering China, contains a less conflictive tone. Biden also continues the ‘free and open’ strategy in the Indo-Pacific, as guaranteeing free trade, sovereignty, and political freedoms are the outspoken objectives of this strategy.⁷⁰

Biden’s tone approaches consent as a tool to regain the lost trust during Trump’s presidency. This is the major challenge to Biden’s return to multilateralism, Trump’s bilateral focus and ‘America First’ policies, which he tackles by asserting the beneficial effects of American hegemony in the region on the international order and its allies. In doing so, Biden calls for the construction of a ‘collective capacity’ in the new age of the Indo-Pacific to allow a thriving common action. Once again, norms and values are claimed to be shared and built by its allies and partners in the region, with a special consideration for the Quads but proclaiming support for the emerging powers and their regional leaderships.⁷¹

While the Obama administration laid the groundwork for a reorientation to the Indo-Pacific based on stability, partnerships and liberal governance, the Trump and Biden administration explicitly embraced the ‘free and open’ framework and liked it to the promotion of a rules-based international order and its core values: sovereignty, free trade and navigation, rule of law and transparency. Although both administrations agree on reforming the rules of the system to improve its competence and establishing partnerships to tackle the challenges to their order, Trump diverges on the methodology by adopting a balanced approach where alliances are a sum-zero game. On the other side, Biden emphasises the role of these partnerships in advancing their strategic goals and maintaining order. In the three administrations, the strategy to lure nations into accepting the U.S. dominance is through the consent of the rules-based order.

Strategic Rivalry: The Response to China

The Pivot to Asia was not a deliberate decision by the Obama administration, it was a reaction to the rise of China as a regional actor in the Indo-Pacific. As China has expanded its economic reach, diplomatic connectivity and military capabilities, the American administrations have adopted diverse policies to tackle and at some point, contain the Chinese emergence and role in the Indo-Pacific since it potentially possesses a risk to the balance of power and the hegemonic position of the United States and the Liberal International Order. While the tone has steadily become more confrontational, it has varied between administrations from Obama’s cautious engagement to an open, systematic rivalry.

⁷⁰ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 6.

⁷¹ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 9-10,18.

As in the previous sections, this traces the answer of three American administrations to the entrenchment of China in the Indo-Pacific to grasp the divergences and points of continuity in the U.S. approach to China, aiming to understand its shifting position from strategic partner to systematic rival.

A regional power, that is how China was deemed by the Obama administration back in 2017, and the Pivot to Asia was the answer to the challenge posed by it. The concern expressed in the DoD report is not only related to the rise of China as a regional rival, but also the leverage over the global order that an increasing military and economic growth provided China with. Furthermore, China is regarded as a possible threat to the American economy and security, and since both countries have a special commitment to the region, the U.S. demands a display of the strategic intentions to avoid ‘friction’ in the region.⁷²

As previously noted, Obama’s speech can be worthwhile to explore the early engagement with China as a rising power. Obama expresses his desire to cooperate with Beijing while insisting on the relevance of Chinese respect for the liberal order as well as human rights on Chinese soil.⁷³

The Obama administration was cautious, referring to China in a diplomatic and luring tone. Even though the rise of China is perceived as a possible threat to the rules-based order, China is seen as a potential partner in the Indo-Pacific. The Obama strategy is to contain the emergent economic and military might of China by integrating it into the international order. There are no coercive measures, consent is invoked to allow China to adapt its domestic illiberal regime to a liberal international environment.⁷⁴

In this sense, the Trump administration introduced a political shift by declaring the People’s Republic of China a revisionist power. The Indo-Pacific is presented as the scenario of the confrontation between China and the international system. The PRC is framed as the most benefited country from the ‘free and open’ Indo-Pacific. Hence, the rejection or challenge to the global order that the Trump administration perceives from China is regarded as an unfair advantage since, as the Indo-Pacific Strategy states, China would be profiting from the system while eroding its values and norms.⁷⁵

In the aforementioned report, the United States accuses the PRC of pursuing global hegemony by asserting dominance over the Indo-Pacific while also cutting off the access of the U.S. to the region. Overall, the U.S. condemns Chinese economic and diplomatic

⁷² U.S. Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership*, 2.

⁷³ Obama. *Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament*.

⁷⁴ Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” 34.

⁷⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 7.

‘coercive’ measures towards other sovereign countries and demands that China abide by the LIO rules. Nonetheless, the cooperation with the PRC is not off the table, as long as China’s initiatives as the Belt and Silk Road, long-term peace and prosperity align with American interests.⁷⁶

Under Trump, China has effectively become a strategic rival not only in the Indo-Pacific but potentially worldwide. Biden does not amend this position and points to the PRC as the main challenge in the Indo-Pacific. The economic, military and technological capabilities, besides the undermining of human rights and international law and their coercive behaviour towards U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. The portrayal of China is similar in both administrations, a strengthening regional power with global aspirations that threatens the stability and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific. Nonetheless, the Biden administration emphasises protecting the order based on shared values, an idea that has been present between administrations, from China’s attempts to transform it and ‘update’ it to safeguard the order.⁷⁷

The Obama administration began recognising the importance of China when its geopolitical surge was undeniable. The approach was to bring the PRC to the liberal order under the American hegemony. Chengxin Pan resolves that the United States was both optimistic about the possibility of socialising China into accepting their values and norms in the LIO as well as ‘anxious’ about the military and economic capabilities that had the opportunity to deny American access to Asia, primarily the South China Sea.⁷⁸

Trump and Biden converged in their strategic framing of China as the principal threat to U.S. hegemony. Trump’s administration rapidly broke the ambiguity by openly transforming the rhetoric towards China by redefining it as a rival in ideological terms, and the use of balancing measures as greater economic activity, as well as increasing military operations in the region. Furthermore, its unorthodox approach and disregard for allies and partners undermined its ability to build a broader consensus and action against China.⁷⁹

In contrast, the Biden administration put forward a strategy, more coherent with traditional core liberal values, to reinforce the liberal historical bloc in the Indo-Pacific. A bloc based on strategic partnerships, economic alignment and liberal values. The IPS

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report*, 10.

⁷⁷ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, 5.

⁷⁸ Chengxin Pan. “The ‘Indo-Pacific’ and Geopolitical Anxieties about China’s Rise in the Asian Regional Order.” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68, no. 4 (August 8, 2014): 457.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2014.884054>.

⁷⁹ Wei, “The Biden Administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Impacts on Asia-Pacific Order,” 16.

constructs a discursive appeal to democracy, shared interests, rules-based order, and the consent sought among allies and partners, embedding the strategic competition with China into the American hegemonic project. Biden's vital difference with Trump is his alignment with the core ideas of multilateralism and economic integration in the Indo-Pacific. The new scope marks the consolidation of a new strategic moment in which rivalry with China has become a core element in the reproduction and safeguard of the Liberal International Order.⁸⁰

Hegemonic Crisis: Strategic Responses to a Changing Indo-Pacific

As this chapter has demonstrated, the Indo-Pacific has transitioned from the realm of ideas to become the central arena in the United States' efforts to sustain and reassert its global hegemony amid the crisis of the Liberal International Order. Through an evolving set of policies and strategies, the successive American administrations have tried to navigate the complex challenges posed by the rise of China: regional decay and order instability. Despite the unsteady rhetoric and instruments over time, the underlying objective has remained consistent: to preserve a regional balance of power leading to U.S. hegemony and reinforce the pillars and values of the Liberal International Order. In this concluding section, the key findings will be analysed through critical lenses, drawing from neo-Gramscian theory to reveal both the ambitions and contradictions of the United States' strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

In spite of the tone and emphasis in the speech and reports examined throughout this chapter, the U.S. strategy for the Indo-Pacific has proved a notable degree of continuity since 2008. The Obama administration introduced the 'Pivot to Asia,' later rebranded as the rebalance, with the emphasis on economic cooperation, diplomatic engagement and the strategic shift of military assets to the Indo-Pacific. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is showcased as one of its main results. The Obama's approach was founded on the premise that the U.S leadership would be broadly accepted by upholding the values of the LIO, such as multilateralism.⁸¹

The Trump administration broke the liberal consensus and challenged the core values of the LIO. In Trump's Indo-Pacific reports, his administration prioritised security over economics, withdrew from the TPP as a result of the bilateral approach to diplomacy and trade. It also embraced a confrontational posture towards the PRC, leading up to the

⁸⁰ Wei, "The Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Impacts on Asia-Pacific Order," 12.

⁸¹ Michael Mastanduno, "A Grand Strategic Transition? Obama, Trump and the Asia Pacific Political Economy," In *The United States in the Indo-Pacific*, Oliver Turner and Inderjeet Parmar. (Manchester University Press, 2020), 179.

<https://www.manchesterhive.com/display/9781526135025/9781526135025.00019.xml>.

declaration of China as a revisionist power. A narrative continued by the Biden administration, which maintained the competitive framing while repositioning the U.S. as the hegemon of the rules-based liberal order, embracing its values and transforming them into policy by strengthening alliances, emphasising the liberal values and engaging in multilateral partnerships as the Quads. Both administrations have recognised the strategic role of the Indo-Pacific.⁸² In each administration, the objective remained constant: to shape the regional and global order to align it with U.S. interests and norms, counterbalancing the rise of China, and securing the American influence over global governance.

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, it can be understood as the consolidation of a hegemonic project aimed at recreating a liberal historical bloc. This bloc aligns material capabilities, economic power and military presence; ideological leadership, liberal values, rule of law and democracy; and institutional structures like alliances and multilateral frameworks of action into a coherent order securing legitimacy and domination. The analysis has explored how the U.S. has built a discourse beyond coercion, based on consent among regional allies and partners. This is evident in Biden's emphasis on multilateral diplomacy and economic frameworks. However, the fragility of the hegemonic order has been made visible by the crisis of consent stemming from the decline of the U.S. and the alternative that the rise of China provides. The United States' strategy in the Indo-Pacific reflects the systematic pressure on its leadership and how it is trying to rearticulate the Liberal International Order to align with its interests while stabilising the historical bloc supporting it.

This strategy unfolds in a world order in crisis, a crisis with the potential to unleash a transition of power. One of the competing centres of power is China. As the United States is actively working to uphold their normative and strategic dominance in the Indo-Pacific, China is shaping an alternative global governance rooted in material and ideological differences. The next chapter analyses China's strategy in the Indo-Pacific through the successive Chinese leaderships to grasp their positioning on Chinese ambitions and contestation of the US-led liberal order.

⁸² Weixing Hu, "The United States, China, and the Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Rise and Return of Strategic Competition," *China Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 136.

Chapter 4. China: The Rising Hegemon

The Indo-Pacific is the geographical area that directly witnessed the rise of China. It can be described as China's backyard since the crucial defence and economic choke points, the South China Sea and the Malacca Strait, are located in the region. As stated in the White Paper 'China's National Defence from 2010, the renewed interest and growing presence of other powers like the United States pose a threat to the People's Republic of China's regional and global objectives and their role as an order challenger.

In a similar fashion to the last chapter, this chapter explores the Chinese strategies shaping the Indo-Pacific through the assessment of primary sources, particularly state reports and speeches. The dissimilar nature of the Chinese regime entails an analysis relying heavily on bureaucratic papers instead of the more political and varying American foreign reports from different administrations. These official documents showcase the discursive and ideological structure behind the foreign policy of the Chinese state and President Xi Jinping, whose term as President covers the totality of the timeline of this thesis. As such, these reports frame the threats, allies and strategic responses to the evolving global and regional order in the Indo-Pacific from the acknowledgement of the increasing involvement of the United States to recent parallel institutional building and assertiveness.

The chapter is structured in the following sections: the first section examines the position of the Indo-Pacific in China's grand strategy. Thereafter, the second section analyses the Chinese strategy in the Indo-Pacific from a rising regional power to a global order challenger, including the ideological and institutional foundations of the PRC's alternative historical bloc, framing the role of China in the Liberal International Order. Finally, the third one encompasses the rivalry between China and the United States, how it is framed in the White papers and how it relates to the previous sections.

The Indo-Pacific: China's backyard

The Indo-Pacific plays a vital role as a theatre in the global order competition. While China is not foreign to the increasingly strategic framing of the region by the United States and its allies, it deliberately avoids this terminology and continues to use the more traditional and India-excluding term of Asia-Pacific. This seemingly conceptual distinction reveals a contestation of the American framework and its ambitious regional hegemony by rejecting the reordering of their geographical space. As an example, the American state documents adopted the Indo-Pacific concept by replacing the Asia-Pacific, and they were followed by

their allies, like France or the United Kingdom, which launched their own Indo-Pacific reports. On the other hand, the several White Papers from 2010 to 2023 examined throughout this chapter do not include a single mention of the Indo-Pacific, but instead, the Asia-Pacific retains its central position.⁸³

China's National Defence White Paper was published in 2010, one year prior to the conceptualisation of the Pivot to Asia in Hillary Clinton's article. The Chinese narrative displayed in this first analysed report describes the defensive nature of China's defence strategy. Following this statement, the emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region is part of the Chinese defensive approach to its geographical area of influence. In contrast, the American growing interest in the region is stressed as a concern to Chinese strategic priorities and development, which is described as peaceful.⁸⁴

There is a significant omission regarding the rejection of the Indo-Pacific and the role of India, only mentioned as part of the tightening ties through the years. Nonetheless, the deliberate exclusion of the Indian Ocean highlights the Chinese prioritisation of their backyard over an overextended American geographical construct. Contesting the U.S. terminology must be framed as a challenging action towards American hegemony in the region. Hence, the persistent and continued use of the Asia-Pacific concept is not only a choice of preferential geographical activity or partnership but a move in the path towards the building of a counter-hegemonic project under the leadership of the PRC.⁸⁵

The study on the Chinese strategy in the Indo-Pacific revolves around its discursive notion of the concept, which is heavily attached to their area of preference, and continues to be named Asia-Pacific. Therefore, the subsequent analysis follows the most relevant White Papers produced on the matter of national defence and foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific, considering the lack of recognition of the Indo-Pacific in official state documents, while acknowledging the relevance of the Indian Ocean for its global and regional ambitions.⁸⁶

In the White papers from 2010 and 2015, the Asia-Pacific region is framed in an increasingly concerning security scenario. A 'new situation' in the international system characterised by economic globalisation and an increasing multipolarity that threatens

⁸³ De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn, "US–China Relations and the Liberal World Order: Contending Elites, Colliding Visions?" 120.

⁸⁴ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defense in 2010*. (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2010): 2.

⁸⁵ Ali Ak, and Yurteri, "The Power Transition Basis of Counter-Hegemony in the Context of Neo-Gramscianism: The China-U.S. Rivalry in World Politics," 206.

⁸⁶ Saeed, "From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition," 501.

Chinese interests in Asia-Pacific, as the maritime rights and interests are disputed. The proposed solution to the new challenges is cooperation and dialogue to ensure stability.⁸⁷

In 2017, five years after the swearing-in of Xi Jinping as President of the People's Republic of China and also five years after the Pivot to Asia of the Obama Administration, a White Paper was published targeting Asia-Pacific security cooperation. It is a vital acknowledgement from the Chinese state of the strategic relevance of this region at the core of the Chinese counter-hegemonic strategy. The Asia-Pacific is presented as an economic and trade powerhouse that has become the most dynamic region in the world, while connecting the potential changes in the international system to those occurring in the region. In regards to the role of China in the region, it is self-conceived as one of the most important members of the Asia-Pacific 'family', a soft claim of hegemony later emphasised by the active role in shaping institutions and partnerships in the region and its mediation role with other 'major' actors.⁸⁸

The 2019 White Paper maintains a similar narrative of the Asia-Pacific situation, drawing a stable region where geopolitical struggles threaten the paradigms and institutional structure that China has built at a regional level. The South China Sea, a core strategic area for China, is mentioned as an improvement over the past years, and South Asia is included in the analysis of the Asia-Pacific. As previously mentioned, the role of India to balance out the rise of China has not been addressed by the White papers, but the strengthening ties are mentioned in 2019 as a sign of stability for the region. The report mentions the peaceful resolution of 12 out of 14 border conflicts that China had with neighbouring countries as part of its strategy to prioritise peaceful resolution of differences and increasing mutual trust to contribute to the stability of the 'neighbourhood'.⁸⁹

Finally, the most recent 2023 White paper focuses on the concept of a global 'Community of Shared Values'. While there is no specific mention of the Asia-Pacific region, China elaborates on its vision of the global order through diverse bilateral and multilateral projects and partnerships, which will be further discussed in this chapter. In the same line of the argument, the global orientation of the document shows a tendency of globalising Chinese

⁸⁷ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's Military Strategy*. (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2015): 4.

⁸⁸ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*. (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2017): 1.

⁸⁹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defense in the New Era*. (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2019): 35.

ambitions as Chinese-led regional structures are exhibited as examples of what this community would be at a global scale.⁹⁰

The role of ASEAN in the Chinese strategy has remained constant throughout the years, and the various white papers are nuanced updates of the same idea. The economic and trade bloc serves as the testing ground for Chinese initiatives to be reproduced at a global scale and a fierce attempt to hinder American influence in the region. More specifically, China presents itself as a volunteering actor to provide public security to Asia and the Asia-Pacific region within the mechanism of multilateral institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation or enhanced participation in bilateral reunions within ASEAN.⁹¹

China's role in the Indo-Pacific is marked by the discursive contestation and material ambitions that reveal a complex and calculated strategy. By rejecting the concept of the Indo-Pacific and insisting on Asia-Pacific, China is not only denying the global ordering from the United States and its allies but also asserting its views on how the alternative must be constructed. The consecutive white papers draw a consistent blueprint of what role Asia-Pacific plays in the Chinese grand strategy. A role that has gradually evolved from its neighbourhood to a core piece of its quest for the advancement of a counter-hegemonic alternative to the United States. In the following section, the ideological foundations of China's strategy in the Indo-Pacific will be examined to further grasp the core ideas of the Chinese counter-hegemonic project and how it is vertebrated in the Asia-Pacific region.

Constructing a Counter-hegemonic Alternative: China's Order-Building

Exploring China's understanding of the Indo-Pacific is a first step in grasping the complex ambitions of the rising power. These ambitions are underpinned by a set of rules and normative principles challenging the liberal foundations of the global order or shaping them towards their strategic objectives. Peace, development and a community of shared future are core pillars of the Chinese counter-hegemonic proposal. China has been actively engaging in the formation of a historical bloc opposed to the liberal historical bloc led by the United States. Drawing on Neo-Gramscian theory, this section examines the consent that China aims to generate in the Asia-Pacific region, pursuing a new model based on its own institutions, values and normative framework.

⁹⁰ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*. (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2023): 36.

⁹¹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, 2.

A prior observation to be formulated is that a rising historic bloc originates within an existing historic bloc from which it retains ‘residues’ that linger on the new model of economic and political institutions. A key element of this process is consent, as an essential piece of hegemony which requires international actors to pursue widespread acceptance of their structures, making them susceptible to continue once a new order has been adopted or in the transitional period.⁹²

Through the 13 years that comprise the Chinese white papers, China has outlined the ideological and material structure of the global order that it envisions. This period is predominantly marked by the tenure of Xi Jinping but begins under the leadership of Hu Jintao. Due to the nature of Chinese foreign policy and its political system, abrupt changes are not a common feature of policy-making and policies and values stay steady throughout time. Nonetheless, the impact of two different leaders in shaping China’s foreign policy and order-building cannot be disregarded, and will be addressed during the analysis in this section.⁹³

The ‘China’s National Defence in 2010’, the earliest white paper analysed in this thesis, is the only document from the Hu Jintao mandate. As such, it will provide an initial image of the values put forward by the People’s Republic of China. Beforehand, it is vital to highlight the ideological nature of its values. Grzegorz Kołodko, former Finance Minister of Poland and researcher, studied the development of the socio-economic system of China from an early socialist experience to an increasingly state-led capitalist economic model, which he describes as socialist capitalism or capitalist socialism.⁹⁴

The synergy or contradictions present in the Chinese model directly influence and reflect on international values and norms fostered by China. The 2010 white paper outlines how the PRC portrays the ideal global order while developing its national security agenda. The core values upheld throughout the document are cooperation, peace and development with an emphasis on mutual benefit, stability and dialogue. These values aligned with the regional security initiatives from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to an increased partnership with ASEAN through the China-ASEAN Defence and Security Dialogue (CADSD) and other bilateral partnerships with South Korea, India and Japan.⁹⁵

⁹² Yilmaz, “China, Historical Blocs and International Relations,” 211.

⁹³ Shin Kawashima, “Xi Jinping’s Diplomatic Philosophy and Vision for International Order: Continuity and Change from the Hu Jintao Era,” *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, no. 1 (2019): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2019.1652426>.

⁹⁴ Grzegorz W. Kołodko, “Socialism, Capitalism, or Chinism?” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 4 (2018): 298, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.10.002>.

⁹⁵ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China. *China’s National Defense in 2010*, 11.

The 2015 white paper ‘China’s Military Strategy’ is the first from the Xi Jinping era, in what has been described as a more assertive China. In this document, the narrative follows the same path, which, as mentioned before, is consistent with the policy of continuity in Chinese foreign policy. Nonetheless, as this document focuses not only on defence policy but military one, it offers nuances providing a more complete picture of the values pursued and how they are implemented through various policies, bringing up concepts such as peaceful development and active defence.⁹⁶ A key element is relativism. China focuses on national sovereignty and non-interference, while the liberal order enthrones liberal democracy and its human rights.⁹⁷

This position can be observed in the 2017 white paper when arguing for how the regional security framework should be, it calls for the need of a future with multilayered and diversified characteristics based on the diverse history, political system and level of development of the countries in the region. China commits itself to the ASEAN-led mechanisms of security, aspiring to improve the existing mechanisms and opposing the introduction of new ones, which implicitly rejects the American alternative international organisations.⁹⁸

The 2017 white paper is especially relevant for its focus on the Asia-Pacific region. The six points developed on China’s vision on the security cooperation in the region can be analysed to grasp a blueprint of the global order it is aiming for. The values derived from those points are: non-interference in internal affairs and respect for the institutional layout of the region with an emphasis on respecting sovereignty over ‘rule of law’ while upholding international law and norms; the promoting of partnerships to enhance cooperation regardless of shared values or not since countries who shared a common ground benefit from building mutually beneficial frameworks and closer economic ties leading to economic integration to prevent conflicts. In doing so, as stated in the document, states would align their interests and enhance stability and cooperation. In spite of nuances and minor adjustments, the values pursued by China in the global sphere resemble those advocated by the LIO. A prime example of these values materialised in an initiative is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an economic project described as common development and mutually beneficial for all countries participating.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China’s Military Strategy*. 1.

⁹⁷ De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn, “US–China Relations and the Liberal World Order: Contending Elites, Colliding Visions?” 120.

⁹⁸ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China’s Military Strategy*.

⁹⁹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, 1-2.

The BRI has been controversial and perceived as a threat by the United States and liberal scholars who argue against the Chinese influence and potential risk for the liberal order and the states participating in the initiative. Nonetheless, the BRI aligns and is consistent with the liberal order and its values as it actively promotes both free trade initiatives and economic integration on a basis of win-win cooperation. The compatibility of the BRI with the LIO is not necessarily against the idea that it poses a challenge to its institutional and economic liberal structure by providing alternative developing opportunities and financial aid.¹⁰⁰

Another inherent value of the Liberal International Order present in the Chinese narrative is multilateralism. In 2021, Xi Jinping delivered a speech at the World Economic Forum Virtual Event of Davos under the title ‘Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity's Way Forward.’ As it has been previously noted, the white papers have outlined the cornerstone of Chinese consent. In this case, Xi Jinping takes the lead after two years of the pandemic with a worldwide damaged image of China and reiterates the importance of unity for humanity. The tone of the speech is conciliatory and provides an insight into the values showcased in the white papers. He insists on win-win cooperation, commitment to international law and norms, while rejecting ‘supremacy’ and embracing change as inevitable and beneficial for the future. By embracing multilateralism, China is committed to upholding those values while promoting a change, as at the end of his speech, Xi Jinping emphasises the Chinese push for a turn in international relations where mutual benefit, peace and dialogue are at the centre. He also includes the Global South's struggle for development and participation in global affairs as a Chinese objective, as well as a deeper involvement of China in global economic governance, pushing for a fair globalisation. Furthermore, he envisions one shared future for all humanity, which links his speech to the last white paper.¹⁰¹

The 2023 white paper ‘A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions’ follows the message of Xi Jinping’s speech and discloses China’s vision for the future global order. Throughout the different white papers, culminating in Xi Jinping’s speech, a process of order-building can be identified and analysed as a passive revolution. More specifically, those official documents describe the concepts and values from which

¹⁰⁰ Lee Jones, “Does China’s Belt and Road Initiative Challenge the Liberal, Rules-Based Order?” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 13, no. 1 (March 2020): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-019-00252-8>.

¹⁰¹ Xi Jinping, *Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity's Way Forward*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. January 25, 2021.

China is constructing consent to its initiatives and values in its intent to establish a counter-hegemonic historic bloc.¹⁰²

The core ideas of this last white paper are the closest China is to defining the global order that it aspires to establish. Three key points match with Cox's concept of historical structure and its three components: material capabilities, institutions and ideas.

Interdependence reflects the material capabilities, as globalisation and its effects on productivity and the spread of technology are key economic features. Then, the institutions are framed as global governance, which itself is framed as suffering simultaneously from multiple crises. Finally, the ideas have been repeatedly depicted, but in this final white paper, they are condensed. Most importantly, China calls for new ideas to tackle the international relations' challenges in current times, denouncing old concepts and fostering its previously mentioned set of values. This examination could serve as the blueprint for assembling the core elements of the Chinese historic bloc.¹⁰³

The 2023 white paper also offers a closer look at the values for the community of shared future, a Chinese concept for what can be understood as the global order. The second part of the white papers outlines the different values that the international community should adopt to enhance the international system. These ideas include reforms to those values or characteristics of the LIO. Multipolarity and partnerships, within the model of this community, are opposed to an alliance-based model defined as conflictive. Hegemony is depicted as tyrannous since no state should have the power to impose its ideological model or organise exclusive blocs, nor dominate global affairs. Instead, China calls for respect for diversity and international law above power to allow coexistence in harmony. In the security and political realm, it calls for cooperation and the establishment of shared interests to safeguard peace and equality for every state in accordance with the principle of sovereignty. Efforts towards a greener economy and measures to protect the environment are also cited.¹⁰⁴

In this section, the values and norms making up the counter-hegemonic movement originating from China have been deduced from its white papers. The counter-hegemony pursued by China is part of its order-building efforts, which are not a mere reaction to U.S. hegemony but ideologically driven, rooted in a set of values promoting an alternative vision of international relations and the LIO. The narrative, institutional proposals like the Asian

¹⁰² Ali Ak, and Yurteri, "The Power Transition Basis of Counter-Hegemony in the Context of Neo-Gramscianism: The China-U.S. Rivalry in World Politics," 210-11.

¹⁰³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*, 5-7.

¹⁰⁴ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*, 8-12.

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, seek to forge consent and legitimacy for its emerging order, especially among those states marginalised under the institutions of the Western-led liberal system. In Neo-Gramscian terms, these values and institutional structure are the ideological framework of a potential historic bloc. Beijing is attempting to craft an alliance based on material interests and shared geopolitical views to challenge American hegemony embodied in the LIO. The extent to which the counter-hegemonic historic bloc can establish itself and lure other states to join mostly depends on its normative and material appeal and the U.S. reaction.¹⁰⁵

The next section explores how China, from its counter-hegemonic project, frames and contests the existing hegemon, the United States.

A Quest for Hegemony: Chinese Discourses on the United States

The process of order-building from a counter-hegemonic position requires promoting new values, but also demands contesting the legitimacy of the existing hegemon. As examined in the previous section, China has constructed an alternative narrative and set of values. This section examines the framing of the United States in Chinese white papers as a declining and destabilising hegemon, focusing on the formal depictions of American hegemony and exploring how it contributes to the Chinese undermining of the prevailing ideological consensus to serve its formation of an alternative historic bloc.

The following section analyses the key themes in the China-U.S. rivalry from a Chinese standpoint, considering how Chinese white papers depict three major topics relevant to the United States and its role in the LIO: the U.S. declining power, the consequences of the U.S. hypocrisy in foreign policy and the instability that it generates in the international system.

A key theme underlying the white papers is the United States' decay as a hegemon, incapable of upholding the global leadership of the international system. Although the white papers do not explicitly mention the United States or its decay, there are statements related to the conditions and transformations in which the global order is submerged that are connected to the U.S. and its hegemonic role. In the 2019 white paper, international stability and peace are argued to be in danger, and the global order is undermined by hegemonism, unilateralism and power politics. This assertion is followed by a recognition of the growing 'international

¹⁰⁵ Yilmaz, "China, Historical Blocs and International Relations," 213-4.

strategic' competition while connecting it to U.S. policy. More specifically, it denounces the adjustment of its national security and the adoption of unilateral policies, as it has bolstered competition among powers. It also criticises the expansionism of NATO.¹⁰⁶

Undoubtedly, China is framing the U.S. as a disruptive and destabilising hegemon whose unable or unwilling to abide by the values and norms of the global order under which the U.S. has built its hegemony. At the same time, the discursive narrative of China fully rejects the turbulent throne of hegemony. From a military point of view, the Chinese Army is conceived as a force to maintain global peace, serving its country for defence purposes and outrightly denying the possibility of using its resources to pursue hegemonic or expansionist actions.¹⁰⁷ On a broader scope, China dismisses the realist approach to hegemony as a result of power struggle and as a source of legitimacy, while characterising its position as a developing nation whose achievements are to be managed by its own efforts instead of by subjugating other states. In the same line of thought, hegemony is portrayed as the first inevitable step towards decline while denying the quest for hegemony as an essential part of a power's rise.¹⁰⁸

There are two arguments to be reflected upon about China's posture towards hegemony. Firstly, it can be assumed that the white papers refer implicitly to the U.S. and their foreign policy when arguing about hegemony, since it is the existing hegemon and the direct rival to China in and out of the Indo-Pacific. Secondly, the Chinese approach to hegemony is marked by their lack of resources to outperform the U.S. influence or military capabilities at a global scale, which results in an anti-hegemonic approach where consent is swiftly built against the idea of a leading power, but an alternative one leaning towards a *primus inter pares* position. Hu and Weng argue in favour of this stance and provide an insight into the Indo-Pacific region by disputing the Chinese actions in the region and advising a more friendly approach to guarantee a friendly relationship with the ASEAN countries, from an otherwise assertive policy that would potentially drive them closer to the United States. In doing so, they are signalling the contradictions and constraints of building consent that China is facing.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defense in the New Era*, 3-4.

¹⁰⁷ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's Military Strategy*, 1.

¹⁰⁸ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*, 7.

¹⁰⁹ Weixing Hu, and Weizhan Meng. "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Response." *China Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 167.

Another issue related to the Chinese perception of the U.S. is the presumed hypocrisy and detrimental effects on the stability of American policies, specifically its foreign policy and actions in the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, China frames the U.S. as a threat not only to its own interests and national security but to the equilibrium of the global order and the Asia-Pacific *status quo*. In the 2010 white paper, prior to the official launch of the U.S. ‘Pivot to Asia’, China mentions explicitly the U.S. as part of the increasingly volatile situation in the Asia-Pacific region due to the strengthening of the U.S. military presence through the enhancing of regional alliances and involvement in security affairs and in a domestic aspect, from the U.S. support to the Taiwanese cause.¹¹⁰

In Xi Jinping’s speech, he criticises the Cold War mentality and the coercive measures as sanctions, the imposition of decoupling or intimidation.¹¹¹ Following his lead, the 2023 white paper discusses the negative effects of unilateralism and advocates for stability through cooperation since it argues that one country cannot guarantee the security of the rest of the world. It also includes a protest against the concept of universal values, considered a Western creation that disregards the other civilisations and obstructs an equitable global order.¹¹²

In the same white paper, China rejects two practices that it deems as ‘double standards’. The first one is ‘selective multilateralism’, which is the use of multilateralism as a tool to achieve hegemony.¹¹³ Secondly, it denounces the double standard in international law or its selective use.¹¹⁴ In a similar trend, it rejects the adoption of individual national laws as international law and the use of the ‘rule of law’ as a pretext to not abide by it.¹¹⁵ In these cases, as in most of the previous ones, the documents do not refer to or mention the United States. Still, rather, the Chinese historic bloc is being built in opposition to its hegemony and by contrast to its policies and norms. It can be deduced that China is directly challenging and rejecting the U.S practices on the international stage.¹¹⁶

Even though China’s counter-hegemonic project is directly opposed to the United States, the tone of the white papers rarely turns out aggressively against the U.S. Nonetheless, they provide examples related to Western or American practices on the international order

¹¹⁰ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defense in 2010*, 2.

¹¹¹ Xi Jinping, *Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity's Way Forward*.

¹¹² State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*, 9-10.

¹¹³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*, 20.

¹¹⁴ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*, 9.

¹¹⁵ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*, 2.

¹¹⁶ Yilmaz, “China, Historical Blocs and International Relations,” 208.

that are deemed hypocritical or destabilising. Furthermore, China challenges the liberal norms and values but fails to materialise an ideological construction that is able to lure the Global South states and other countries outside the core of the liberal order into its alternative historic bloc. As Yilmaz notes, China has begun a passive revolution by contesting norms, values and institutions of the LIO as an alternative to the American hegemony, not as an alternative order. The next step is to expand those ideas and values within more states and into their population.¹¹⁷

Contesting consent: Reordering in the Indo-Pacific

From the last years of Hu Jintao to the assertiveness of Xi Jinping, China has not limited its engagement in the Indo-Pacific to a mere defensive reaction to the United States' increasing presence in the Indo-Pacific. Instead, it is an essential element of the Chinese contestation of the existing global order. Throughout this chapter, the role of China has been unveiled as a counter-hegemonic power whose efforts have been towards the establishment of an alternative historic bloc while contesting the consent of the American hegemony. In doing so, China seeks to challenge the ideological foundations of the U.S. hegemony by promoting alternative values within the liberal order as sovereignty, multipolarity, win-win cooperation and mutual benefit.

The ideological foundations that have been explored during the chapter, as well as the framing of the U.S. as the oppressive hegemon, correspond to the conformation of a discursive narrative to reshape the global order and defy the legitimacy of the existing rules and norms. Consequently, bringing down the pillars of American hegemony and establishing a new set of values, serving as the cornerstone of the building efforts of an emergent historic bloc that aspires to reorder the Indo-Pacific and, by extension, the international system.¹¹⁸

China finds itself in a complex position; it is the rising power in the Indo-Pacific, and the global hegemon has turned its foreign policy towards this area. China has perceived the rebalancing strategy as a threat to its national security and strategic interests in the region. In the first section, it was determined that China rejects the Indo-Pacific construct as an American hegemonic concept and prefers to use the long-established Asia-Pacific to refer to its neighbouring and preferred area. This can be framed as part of the broader strategy of contesting American consent, but it encounters the same limitations as the spreading of the Chinese historic bloc, which are the acceptance of other states. In this case, multiple

¹¹⁷ Yilmaz, "China, Historical Blocs and International Relations," 216.

¹¹⁸ Yilmaz, "China, Historical Blocs and International Relations," 212.

countries, including ASEAN as an international organisation, have released their own Indo-Pacific reports and frameworks, which suggests a failure to align their neighbours to their ideological agenda or that China should embrace American ideas to fight them from within.¹¹⁹

This dichotomy is present in the academic debate around the role of China and its pretensions around the Liberal International Order. Nonetheless, this chapter has enlightened how the Chinese counter-hegemonic project is being constructed from a liberal basis, which in accordance with Neo-Gramscianism, is how counter-hegemonic movements originated, as liberalism is the system in place.¹²⁰

Therefore, the values and norms proposed by China, in addition to the alternative international organisations, are a compound that form the underpinnings of the contestation to American hegemony, not the LIO. To what extent these values are actively challenging the liberal order currently or in the future would be an interesting topic to be researched, but for the matter of this thesis, China is performing a revisionist movement rather than a reformist one. The best example for this affirmation is the Belt and Road Initiative, which threatens the existing regional and international mechanisms by challenging its values and rules, not the global order itself.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Hu, and Meng. “The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China’s Response.” 167-168.

¹²⁰ Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method.” 170-171.

¹²¹ Jones, “Does China’s Belt and Road Initiative Challenge the Liberal, Rules-Based Order?” 129, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-019-00252-8>.

Chapter 5. Conclusions

This thesis delves into the question: ‘How are China and the United States trying to (re)shape the global order through their strategies in the Indo-Pacific region?’ Through the analysis of the United States and China’s official reports and documents, this thesis has managed to identify and determine each country’s position in the Liberal International Order and their role in the ongoing crisis and the relevance of the Indo-Pacific in this dispute.

The theory that has supported this analysis is Neo-Gramscianism, a critical IR theory whose concepts have been vital to grasp and define the complexities of this study and whose limits will be acknowledged in this chapter.

This chapter is not only a closure of the thesis, but it will also compare the Chinese and American strategies in the Indo-Pacific and how they relate to each other, and the broader implications that they have for the existing global order crisis. This chapter is divided into two main sections; the first one summarises the main findings of the three analytical chapters, while the second one serves as a comparison of the U.S. and China’s friction points studied throughout the thesis.

This thesis has framed the current global order as in a profound crisis characterised by a period of contestation and transformation. In this context, Chapter 2 explores the Liberal International Order (LIO) and finds that the U.S. hegemony, its main advocate, is experiencing a crisis of consent and legitimacy. While the material and economic relations are still in place and the international institutions remain as global references, their ideological coherence is increasingly contested. Drawing on Neo-Gramscian terms, this period is known as the interregnum, where no hegemonic project has yet consolidated to achieve a global consensus.¹²²

The interregnum of the LIO has two principal actors, the United States and China, which are engaged in the struggle to reconstruct the future global order, with the Indo-Pacific as its primary theatre since it is the geographical area where both countries collide. Chapter 3 shows that the United States is actively seeking to adapt the LIO to its geopolitical anxieties, the rise of China. It has selectively promoted liberal values while reinforcing its strategic dominance of the Indo-Pacific through alliances and military presence, while forging a narrative emphasising the defence of the LIO. Its practices and the Trump administration have revealed contradictions in its discourse and weakened its capacity to secure consent

¹²² Babic, “Let’s Talk about the Interregnum: Gramsci and the Crisis of the Liberal World Order.” 772-73.

from other states, particularly from the Global South. This chapter identifies the United States as a hegemon in crisis, as the global order that it champions.¹²³

On the other hand, Chapter 4 demonstrated the role of China as a counter-hegemonic emergent power. Its project is grounded in alternative values such as non-interference, sovereignty and multipolarity. Initiatives like the Belt and Road showcase how China challenges U.S. legitimacy and seeks to construct a historic bloc that offers an alternative vision of the LIO. Nonetheless, it has been argued that this project remains incomplete as its ideological and structural bases face limitations.¹²⁴

The Indo-Pacific has been the silent witness of the struggle between the emerging and the decaying or at least fading hegemon, since both powers have engaged in a multilayer struggle for consent and influence in the region that reflects the broader dynamics of order-building. The following comparative analysis outlines the values and norms that each power promotes, the discursive strategies employed to frame their rival, the tools deployed and the success in reordering or preserving global consent.

There are four key aspects in which the United States and China have been analysed in this thesis: the values and norms they promote, their vision of global order, how they frame each other and the success and limitations of their hegemonic projects. The United States defends and fosters the traditional liberal values like the rule of law, open markets and democracy, while China focuses on sovereignty, cooperation and non-interference. China focuses on building parallel institutions as the AIIB and the SCO, and partnerships over alliances, as the U.S. focuses on revitalising alliances as Quad and AUKUS. In their discursive strategy, this translates into an American narrative around shared values and multilateralism, while China delegitimises American leadership and advocates for mutual benefits and respect for international law.

In their vision of global order, the United States has adopted policies to rearticulate the LIO to match U.S. interests and counterbalance the rise of China, which is framed as an authoritarian revisionist power, posing a systematic challenge to the LIO's existence and a threat to the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, China is engaged in contesting the U.S. on ideological grounds while still embedded in the capitalist global structures in which its

¹²³ He, Kai, Huiyun Feng, Steve Chan, and Weixing Hu. "Rethinking Revisionism in World Politics." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14, no. 2 (2021): 186. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poab004>.

¹²⁴ Jones, "Does China's Belt and Road Initiative Challenge the Liberal, Rules-Based Order?" 132, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-019-00252-8>.

alternative historic bloc takes form. China sees the U.S. as a declining power that selectively applies liberal norms and threatens its sphere of influence and Asia-Pacific stability.¹²⁵

The comparison of U.S. and Chinese strategies in the Indo-Pacific reveals a complex and evolving contest for hegemony in both material and ideational terms. While the United States seeks to preserve its leadership, China is constructing its counter-hegemonic project. However, both powers find significant contradictions in their projects: the U.S. must reconcile the disagreements between its liberal discourse and unilateral practices. China's projects need to ensure broader support and overcome domestic contradictions. The Indo-Pacific serves as the primary arena where this strategic rivalry has been unveiled, as it's the region where they test their policies and projects of order-building.¹²⁶

Ultimately, this thesis has demonstrated that the rivalry between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific is a struggle over legitimacy, values and the direction of the Liberal International Order. By applying Neo-Gramscianism, it becomes evident that both powers are engaged in a contest to shape consent to foster their historic bloc or preserve their leadership over the global order. The Indo-Pacific, as a dynamic and contested region in this evolving order, will continue to be a key battleground in this struggle. Future research on the U.S.-China rivalry and the evolution of the LIO must pay close attention not only to shifts in material power but also to the ideational justification and narratives of hegemony, where consent is achieved or lost.

¹²⁵ He, Kai, and Huiyun and Feng. "International Order Transition and US-China Strategic Competition in the Indo Pacific." 256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2160789>.

¹²⁶ Ali Ak, and Yurteri, "The Power Transition Basis of Counter-Hegemony in the Context of Neo-Gramscianism: The China-U.S. Rivalry in World Politics," 215.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Jinping, Xi. *Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity's Way Forward*. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China. January 25, 2021.

Obama, Barack. *Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament*. White House Archives. November 17, 2011.

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defense in 2010*. Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2010.

State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's Military Strategy*. Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2015.

State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation*. Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2017.

State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *China's National Defense in the New Era*. Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2019.

State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*. Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2023.

U.S. Department of Defense. *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*. Washington, DC.: Department of Defense, 2012.

<https://ntrl.ntis.gov/NTRL/dashboard/searchResults/titleDetail/PB2012103890.xhtml>.

U.S. Department of Defense. *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*. Washington, DC: Department of Defense, June 2019.

White House. *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*. Washington, DC: White House, February 2022.

White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: White House, December 2017.

Secondary sources

Acharya, Amitav. “After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order.” *Ethics & International Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 271–85.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S089267941700020X>.

Acharya, Amitav. *The End of American World Order*. Polity PR: 2020.

Ak, Mehmet Ali, and Hamza Yurteri. “The Power Transition Basis of Counter-Hegemony in the Context of Neo-Gramscianism: The China-U.S. Rivalry in World Politics.” *Journal of International Affairs* 28, no. 2 (2023): 194-221.

Babic, Milan. “Let’s talk about the interregnum: Gramsci and the crisis of the liberal world order.” *International Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2020): 767-786. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz254>.

Brands, Hal. “The Unexceptional Superpower: American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump.” *Survival* 59, no. 6 (2017): 7-40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1399722>.

Brooks, Stephen G., and William C. Wohlforth. “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China’s Rise and the Fate of America’s Global Position.” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (January 2016): 7–53. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00225.

Castro, Renato Cruz De. “The Obama Administration’s Strategic Pivot to Asia: From a Diplomatic to a Strategic Constraint of an Emergent China?” *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 25, no. 3 (2013): 331-349.

Chan, Steve. “Challenging the Liberal Order: The US Hegemon as a Revisionist Power.” *International Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September 6, 2021): 1335–52.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaab074>.

Chin, Gregory, and Ramesh Thakur. “Will China Change the Rules of Global Order?” *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2010): 119-38.
<https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/0163660X.2010.516145>.

Clinton, Hillary. "America's Pacific Century." *Foreign Policy* (blog), April 21, 2025. Accessed May 4, 2025. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

Colgan, Jeff D., and Robert O. Keohane. "The Liberal Order Is Rigged: Fix It Now or Watch It Wither." *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2017): 36–44.

Cox, Robert. W. "Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 12, no. 2 (1983): 162-175.

Cox, Robert. W. "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." *Millennium*, 10, no. 2 (1981), 126-155.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298810100020501>.

De Graaff, Naná, and Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn. "US–China Relations and the Liberal World Order: Contending Elites, Colliding Visions?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 113–31. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix232>.

De Graaff, Naná, Tobias ten Brink and Inderjeet Parmar. "China's rise in a liberal world order in transition – introduction to the FORUM." *Review of International Political Economy* 27, no. 2 (2020): 191-207. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1709880>.

Deudney, Daniel, and G. John Ikenberry. "The Nature and Sources of Liberal International Order." *Review of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (April 1999): 179–96.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001795>.

Drezner, Daniel W. "Counter-Hegemonic Strategies in the Global Economy." *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019): 505–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2019.1604985>.

Druzin, Bryan H. "How to Destroy the Liberal International Order," *Duke Journal of Comparative and International Law* 34, no.1 (2023): 1-37.

Harvey, David. *The limits to Capital*. Basil Blackwell, 1982.

Heiduk, Felix, Gudrun Wacker, and Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik. "From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Significance, Implementation and Challenges." *SWP Research Paper*, 2020, 9/2020. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2020RP09>.

He, Kai, and Huiyun and Feng. "International Order Transition and US-China Strategic Competition in the Indo Pacific." *The Pacific Review* 36, no. 2 (2023): 234–60.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2160789>.

He, Kai, Huiyun Feng, Steve Chan, and Weixing Hu. "Rethinking Revisionism in World Politics." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14, no. 2 (2021): 159–86.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poab004>.

Huo, Shuhong, and Inderjeet Parmar. "'A New Type of Great Power Relationship'? Gramsci, Kautsky and the Role of the Ford Foundation's Transformational Elite Knowledge Networks in China." *Review of International Political Economy* 27, no. 2 (2019): 234-57.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1625427>.

Ikenberry, G. John. "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>.

Ikenberry, John. "The Next Liberal Order." *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (2020): 133-142.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26985688>.

Ikenberry, John. "The Plot against American Foreign Policy: Can the Liberal Order Survive Present at the Destruction." *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 3 (2017): 1-7.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40204443>.

Ishii, Junya. "Indo-Pacific Diplomacy, the Quad and Beyond: Democratic Coalition in the Era of U.S.–China Global Competition." In *From Trump to Biden and Beyond*, edited by Earl A. Carr, 151–73. Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2021.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-4297-5_10.

Jones, Lee. "Does China's Belt and Road Initiative Challenge the Liberal, Rules-Based Order?" *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2020): 113–33.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-019-00252-8>.

Kawashima, Shin. "Xi Jinping's Diplomatic Philosophy and Vision for International Order: Continuity and Change from the Hu Jintao Era." *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, no. 1 (2019): 121–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13439006.2019.1652426>.

Khurana, Gurpreet S. "What is the Indo-Pacific? The New Geopolitics of the Asia-Centred Rim Land." In *Geopolitics by Other Means the Indo-Pacific Reality*, edited by Axel Berkofsky and Sergio Miracola. Ledizioni, 2019.

Kolodko, Grzegorz W. "Socialism, Capitalism, or Chinism?" *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 285–98.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.10.002>.

Mearsheimer, John J. "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order." *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–50. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00342.

Parmar, Inderjeet. "The US-led liberal order: imperialism by another name?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 151-172. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix240>.

Pass, Jonathan. "(Re)Introducing World Hegemony into the 'Global Organic Crisis.'" *International Affairs* 100, no. 1 (2024): 323–43. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiad230>.

Saeed, Muhammad. "From the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Sino-U.S. Strategic Competition." *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 03, no. 04 (January 2017): 499–512. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740017500324>.

Stokes, Doug. "Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order." *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 133–50.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix238>.

Robinson, William I. "Gramsci and Globalisation: From Nation-State to Transnational Hegemony." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 8 no. 4 (2005): 559-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230500205243>.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. "About USINDOPACOM." Accessed May 6, 2025.
<https://www.pacom.mil/About-USINDOPACOM/#:~:text=These%20commands%20are%20headquartered%20in,the%20USINDOPACOM%20area%20of%20responsibility>.

Hu, Weixing, and Weizhan Meng. "The US Indo-Pacific Strategy and China's Response." *China Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 143-76.

Yilmaz, Serafettin. "China, Historical Blocs and International Relations." *Issues & Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 191-222.