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US-China Relations: Can the Rules-Based International Order Survive Great Power Competition

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SYNOPSIS

*The deteriorating state of US-China relations has generated concerns that the current international order is in danger of unravelling. To arrive at a new modus vivendi, **BENJAMIN HO** suggests that policymakers consider three attributes of what a rules-based order ought to be and strive to make adjustments where necessary.*

COMMENTARY

How durable is the current rules-based international order, and can it survive great power competition between the United States and China? Events over the past year, particularly the Ukraine conflict and tensions over the Taiwan Straits, have brought to sharp focus the danger of US-China relations spiralling out of control, and what this might mean for the wider world. That said, if both Beijing and Washington were to view their interests as best served *by not going to war with one another*, then the key question that would deserve closer scrutiny is whether the *existing international order is able to survive the current competition* between the United States and China.

Part of the anxiety among countries in the West about China's rise lies in uncertainty regarding Beijing's ultimate objective and whether it has intentions of upending the rules of the existing global order, largely written by the United States following the end of the Second World War. Put simply: should the rules that govern international behaviour be modified to reflect the changing configuration of political power, and, if so, what should these new arrangements look like?

International Order, Global Rules, and Domestic Conditions

Rules, by definition, are made by actors and institutions for some purpose. The question of “whose rules” can also be posed as “who rules”, and hence is not likely to find any form of satisfactory answer, unless one is favourably disposed towards the party that rules. Rather than label these rules as being “Western” or “non-Western” and thus embrace or reject them outright, one ought to interrogate the content of the rules and examine what they tell us about the nature of society and social life that they represent.

In other words, the fact that rules were made in a previous era for the preservation of international order back then does not make them invalid for a new era. Likewise, challenges to international order should not always be dismissed or viewed as threats just because existing powers do not agree or feel threatened by them. It is the substance of the rules – and not simply their authorship – that should be examined in order to arrive at a conclusion regarding their validity and legitimacy.

To use the analogy of traffic rules to help make sense of the discussion on international order, one might argue that the rules of the road are as universal as it gets, regardless of whether one is driving in Singapore, Beijing or Washington DC. Someone who is able to drive competently in one country is not likely to find driving in another place a radically different proposition. At the same time, there is a need to account for specific contextual and situational peculiarities, such as why cars in some places slow down to allow another car to filter into their lanes upon due signalling, while cars in other places speed up to prevent the same thing from happening! This has much to do with domestic conditions and driving habits.

In other words, when we talk about international order, we cannot divorce it from the domestic conditions that have given rise to the shaping of such an order. Furthermore, in our currently globalised and interconnected world, international and domestic forces interact in a manner that is far more intense and with greater relevance than in the previous, less globalised age. Put simply, what happens internationally has domestic consequences while what happens domestically has international implications.

Seen this way, any discussion of international order needs to account for domestic political developments. However, the fact that different countries have varied political conditions does not mean they are unable to talk to or understand one another reasonably well. This is where rules come into play, for they help provide a level of predictability and order to our understanding of one another’s intentions and to live and work together in spite of our individual or domestic differences. I would like to suggest the following three attributes or characteristics of a rules-based order.



Given the current great power competition between the US and China, the rules that govern international order may be modified to reflect the changing configuration of political power according to the attributes of a rules-based order. *Image from Unsplash.*

Anatomy of a Rules-Based Order

First, the rules of *enforcement*. It goes without saying that rules which cannot be enforced cannot – by definition – be called rules. Having rules that can be enforced allows us to set and place boundaries to our actions, without which it would be impossible to meaningfully live or engage with one another. Imagine a football match where the referee is not able to enforce the rules of the game or where the boundary lines between players and spectators can be breached without consequence. It would be utter chaos! The ability to enforce the rules enables the game to run smoothly and the outcomes to be viewed as largely valid.

Domestically, every country has its own rules and state authorities to ensure that these rules are being enforced – some better than others. Internationally, we also need rules to ensure that it does not become a free-for-all where anything and everything goes. Unfortunately, that is where similarities between international and domestic life end. As scholars of international relations would say, the world is in a state of anarchy and, unlike the domestic space where rules can be enforced, there is no higher authority to enforce such rules internationally.

There is some truth to this contention, but I disagree. In a speech at the 2019 S. Rajaratnam Lecture, Singapore's Chief Justice Sundaresh Menon argued that "despite the absence of a coercive sovereign, the critique that international law is without force is simply inconsistent with observable reality and must therefore be discarded. ... The oft-quoted observation of Professor Louis Henkin, a renowned scholar in international law, still holds true today – that 'almost all nations observe almost all principles of international law ... almost all of the time.'" Thus, with regards to our discussion on the rules of international order, one might say that it is in the interests of states to play by the rules of the international order *even* if those rules are not always enforceable.

Second, the rules of *enablement*. If rule enforcement is all there was to our discussion of international order, then it would be a very restrictive conversation. Fortunately, this is not the case. Rules – paradoxically speaking – also enable social activity and social

flourishing. Imagine driving on a busy street with all the traffic lights malfunctioning and with no traffic police to direct traffic. The outcome would be disastrous. In this way, rules – instead of restricting movement – actually enable movement, without which we would all come to a standstill.

Of course, one can pivot to the other extreme of installing traffic lights every few hundred metres, that is, to introduce more rules and measures into the international order. The question then would be whether these rules enable more than they disable. Are rules an expansive view of political life or a restrictive one? What are the trade-offs that need to be considered, and are these acceptable to those who write the rules and those who are bound to live by those rules? These are tough questions which can by no means be answered by any one person.

One of the most germane topics of political science today concerns the future of international order (or, as some would say, the liberal rules-based international order). Whatever criticisms we may have about such an order, it would be fair to say that such an order has enabled more than it disabled. The promotion of free trade, collective security, and establishing international institutions by means of the rule of law has allowed many countries to prosper.

Whether such an order would continue indefinitely into the future is not clear, nor is it clear what kind of alternatives would replace it. But if an alternative order is indeed emerging, then we need to ask the fundamental question: does it enable social life to take place and flourish, or would it end up disabling our collective ability to work and relate with one another?

Last, the rules of *engagement*. We live in a globalised and interconnected world in which the frequency of interactions is far more pronounced than in the past. Some scholars term this a “network society”, that is, a society that is connected by mass telecommunication networks. While this is good in some ways, as demonstrated by the ability to connect and work during the past three years of the pandemic, it can also be a problem, particularly if the rules of engagement are not clear.

For instance, how would actors relate to and interact with one another in this new social and political age? What are the rules of engagement that ought to be prescribed to ensure that interaction does not result in conflict – intentional or otherwise? What mechanisms are there for arbitration if states cannot agree on how those rules are to be interpreted? From trade to space to cyberspace, we see some of these problems concerning the uncertainty of the rules of engagement being played out right now, and it is unclear what the future will look like.

Taken together, the rules of enforcement, enablement and engagement – in my view – are not abstract political theories to be debated but do carry real-world implications. Certainly for small states like Singapore, how these rules evolve will have a deep impact on their policies. To return to the earlier analogy, road conditions affect small cars much more than bigger ones, and while states may not all agree on their destinations or end goals, they owe it to their citizens to establish and abide by fair and effective rules to ensure that their people arrive there safely.

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