



Institutional Revisionism in International Politics: The Product of Rising, the Child of Decline or Something Else?

Igor Istomin

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

ISBN 978-5-907318-28-1



© The Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club, 2021

42 Bolshaya Tatarskaya st., Moscow, 115184, Russia

About the Author*

Igor Istomin

Associate Professor, Department of Applied International Political Analysis,
MGIMO University; Senior Scholar, Davis Center, Harvard University

** The author expresses sincere gratitude to Igor Denisov, Paul Kalinichenko and William C. Wohlforth for their invaluable comments on various aspects of the report.*

Summary

Mutual accusations in revisionism have become an essential element of rising rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China. At the beginning of the 21st century states associate revisionist policies with the challenges to global governance rather than territorial expansion. Global governance developed into a multi-level network of agreements, interstate fora, and transnational bureaucracies. It confers a range of rights and obligations to states, regulates access to crucial markets, and contributes to international stability. It is not surprising that the major powers seek to influence the rules of the game to advance their interests. However, not all deviations or contestations of existing institutions represent cases of revisionism. The latter manifests itself in attempts to undermine or replace the established institutions of global governance with alternative regulatory frameworks. This policy manifests through the rhetorical denial of existing norms and organizations, combined with consistent practical steps aimed at weakening them.

Throughout history, Russia, the United States and China adhered to different approaches to the international order. The United States, both during its rise and times of relative decline, strived to shape international institutions in accordance with its interests. Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump, despite their great differences, tried to revise global governance to maintain American predominance. In this context, it is reasonable to expect further efforts to transform existing norms and regimes from the administration of Joseph Biden. However, it struggles with the lack of fresh ideas for transforming international institutions so far.

While the United States consistently pursued revisionist policies in the international arena, Russia has often acted as a staunch institutional conservative. At some points during the Soviet era, Moscow switched to a more proactive course seeking revolutionary changes in the international order. However, today Russia returned to a mostly conservative agenda, except for its dissatisfaction with the regional architecture in Europe. Such a course is justified due to the sizeable institutional legacy from the Cold War period, on which the Russian Federation relies in its foreign policy. At the same time, it needs to be aware that, despite its efforts, other major powers will inevitably seek more extensive revisions of norms and regimes which emerged in the second half of the 20th century.

Finally, China's approach to global governance has undergone sweeping transformations in recent decades. China demonstrated a drastic evolution from the leading dissident to the existing norms and regimes to their dedicated student and a cautious contestant. For a long time, Beijing remained an outsider on the periphery of the international order (until 1971, the PRC was not represented in the UN). However, after the launch of a policy of reform and opening up, it started to seek integration into the global governance. While China publically calls for adjustments in the international institutions, it remains cautious in its practical steps. This approach facilitated greater convergence of Russian and Chinese perspectives on global governance since the 1990s. They became synchronized in the accentuation of the UN's central role in international order and opposition to the Western attempts to export its political model as a generally recognized norm.

In the early 2020s, the Russian and American views on global governance seem relatively stable, representing two opposite poles of staunch conservatism and adamant revisionism. Beijing confronts a greater choice between maintaining its adherence to the existing institutions and the temptation to use increased material power to attempt reshaping global governance. In the latter case, we will face a severe competition between the two revisionist worldviews, while the Russian-Chinese rapprochement will undergo a serious test.

Contents

- 5 Introduction
- 7 Promises and Perils of Multilayered Global Governance
- 12 Politics of Global Governance and the Role
for Institutional Revisionism
- 18 American Proficiency in Revisionist Gambits
- 26 Russia as an Institutional Conservative
- 33 China's Path from Pariah to Stakeholder
in Global Governance
- 39 Conclusion

Introduction

Mutual accusations expressed by major powers regarding the revisionist policies of their counterparts became routine in recent diplomatic exchanges. In this regard, the United States suspects Russia and China in attempts to undermine the ‘liberal rules-based world order.’ The US National Security Strategy of 2017 openly designated Russia and China as revisionist powers.¹ Lately, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo argued that the Chinese Communist Party “subverts the rules-based order that our societies have worked so hard to build.” He also characterized Moscow as “a destabilizing authoritarian force.”²

On their part, Moscow and Beijing portray Washington as an irresponsible power in global politics, which defies international norms. Russian President Vladimir Putin argued that it was the United States, that after the end of the Cold War, decided to remodel the world according to its unilateral designs. He continued that when existing international law stood on the way of these American interests, it was “declared worthless, obsolete and subject to immediate demolition.”³ The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Li seconded this critique, arguing that the “challenge to the current international order and system is that the United States, the strongest country in the world, places its own interests above everything else, and takes this as its code of conduct.”⁴

Attempts to stigmatize the opposing side through its representation as revisionist are not entirely new. The notion gained popularity in the first half of the 20th century when international scholars distinguished proponents of status-quo in interwar Europe and their rivals.⁵ However, the meaning of revisionism changed in the last one hundred years, as it lost its previous connection with the readjustment of territorial possessions. In this timeframe, the sources of national strength and prosperity untied from the amount of land a state has under its control. Now, they depend more on utilizing human, financial, and technological capital, contingent on the access to international markets for raw materials, goods, services,

¹National Security Strategy of the United States. The White House. December 2017. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>

²Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the Fiscal Year 2021 State Department Budget Request. July 30, 2020. URL: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-before-the-senate-foreign-relations-committee-on-the-fiscal-year-2021-state-department-budget-request/>

³Vladimir Putin. Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club. October 24, 2014. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>

⁴Wang Yi. Interview on Current China-US Relations Given by State Councilor and Foreign Minister to Xinhua News Agency. August 6, 2020. URL: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1804328.shtml

⁵For the classical debates on revisionism and status-quo powers, see Carr E. H. *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: an introduction to the study of international relations*. London, Macmillan, 1940. 312 p.; Morgenthau H. *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*. N.Y.: A. A. Knopf, 1948. 489 p. See, also recent entries on the topic Rynning S., Ringsmose J. Why are revisionist states revisionist? Reviving classical realism as an approach to understanding international change // *International Politics*. 2008. Vol. 45. No. 1. P. 19–39; Davidson J. *The origins of revisionist and status-quo states*. Springer, 2016.

money, and knowledge.⁶ As a result, the institutions of global governance acquired major significance for the national interests. Similarly, increasing interdependence made states reliant on regimes ensuring international security.

For the long-term competitiveness of a state, increasing influence on norms and regimes became more consequential than an extension of territorial control. While global governance evolved in a multilayered network of regulations, interstate fora, and transnational bureaucracies, revisionist policies refocused on challenging international institutions rather than claiming land. However, institutional revisionism is harder to define than challenges to territorial possessions.

The following analysis will adhere to the restrictive understanding of revisionist policies. It will associate revisionism with explicit attempts to undermine and replace established institutions of global governance by some alternatives. Such policies imply a rhetorical challenge to the legitimacy of existing norms and organizations as well as explicit and consistent activities aimed to weaken them. The latter could include open renunciations of previous commitments or regular deviations from them.

Therefore, individual transgressions of existing norms do not constitute revisionism. They could be compared to the car run on the red light, which does not lead to the abandonment of the traffic regulations. Likewise, purely discursive grievances regarding institutions do not constitute revisionism, either, if they are not accompanied by practical steps. Since talk is cheap, they do not lead to strategic consequences without a genuine commitment to pay the burden for challenging existing institutions.

This report seeks to assess the dependence of revisionism on structural changes in the international arena, focusing on the explanation of the current policies of the three major powers – China, Russia, and the United States. The disputes on the issues of the global governance that were outlined earlier emerge in the context of the shifts in the balance of power. In many cases, experts attribute revisionist policies to either rising or declining states. The following analysis challenges these explanations. Instead of defining strategies in terms of states' structural positions, it looks at the continuities in their stance on global governance across time.

It is especially relevant to explore the reasons behind Sino-Russian alignment on global governance, which consolidated since the 1990s

⁶ Rosecrance R. N. *The rise of the trading state: Commerce and conquest in the modern world*. N.Y.: Basic Books, 1986.

despite different power dynamic and historical legacies of the two states. Meanwhile, Moscow and Washington which both reached the peak of their international standing at approximately the same time and played a leading role in creating the international order after the Second World War adopted dissimilar attitudes towards this heritage. The exploration of historical trends positions the United States as a relentless revisionist striving to adjust international institutions to its preferences continuously. On the other hand, Russia has a long tradition of institutional conservatism, which it pursued with only a few deviations. Finally, China remains excessively cautious and vague in its initiatives on global governance, despite its increasing weight and growing record of operating through international institutions.

Recent publications tend to restrict their comparisons to the historically limited timeframes, focusing on the current developments.⁷ This report follows a different approach by taking a longer view. The following section will set the stage for deliberations by presenting the state of global governance. After that, the report will debate alternative perspectives on the role of international institutions and the competing explanations of the revisionist policies. They will precede an analysis of Washington's perspective on international institutions as well as a review of the record of Moscow and Beijing in global governance. The concluding section will seek to explain policy implications from the analysis of potential relations among major powers.

Promises and Perils of Multilayered Global Governance

The role of international institutions remains the subject of intense debate among experts. The very definition of this phenomenon is open to wide-ranging disputes.⁸ There is also some confusion regarding its delineation from such related notions as norm, rules, laws, and regimes. Meanwhile, without a clear explanation of the nature and current state of international institutions, it would be impossible to deliberate on today's revisionism. Therefore, this

⁷ See, for example, Karmazin A., Hynek N. Russian, US and Chinese Revisionism: Bridging Domestic and Great Power Politics // *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2020. Vol. 72. No. 6. P. 955–975.

⁸ For broader discussion of various interpretations of the notion, see Duffield J. What are international institutions? // *International Studies Review*. 2007. Vol. 9. No. 1. P. 1–22.

section aims to explore the key categories for the report and to assess their application to the recent global environment.

The most widely accepted approach interprets institutions as points of convergence of expectations among states about mutual behavior. International norms represent the core of regulations defining the standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity.⁹ While interpretation and enforcement of norms face multiple challenges, they rely on additional mechanisms, which enhance their legitimacy and effectiveness. For a start, norms tend to acquire greater formality through incorporation in the international law, or at least in political commitments of states and technical guidelines.

Since the 19th century, growing institutionalization also led to the creation of special bodies, where states deliberate on the implementation of norms and develop further regulations.¹⁰ It also produced transnational bureaucracy in the form of the secretariats of international organizations and other similar entities monitoring compliance and supporting states in fulfilling their obligations. As a result, individual norms, rules, and organizations combine into complex regimes, which define regulation in a designated issue area.¹¹

The global governance in the shape that it took by the early 21st century represents a multilayered network of regulations, interstate fora that elaborate new rules, and transnational bureaucracies supporting them.¹²

⁹Katzenstein P. J. Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security // *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* / ed. by Peter J. Katzenstein. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. P. 6.

¹⁰Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine established in 1815 became the first standing international body, followed by the Commissions of the Danube River (1856) and International Telegraph Union (1865).

¹¹On international regimes, see Krasner S. D. Structural causes and regime consequences: regimes as intervening variables // *International organization*. Vol. 36. No. 2. 1982. P. 185–205; Haggard S., Simmons B. A. Theories of international regimes // *International organization*. Vol. 41. No. 3. 1987. P. 491–517; Levy M. A., Young O. R., Zürn M. The study of international regimes // *European journal of international relations*. 1995. Vol. 1. No. 3. P. 267–330.

¹²On the evolution and current state of global governance, see Барабанов О. Н., Голицын В. А., Терещенко В. В. *Глобальное управление*. М.: МГИМО-Университет, 2006; *Глобальное управление: возможности и риски* / отв. ред. В.Г. Барановский, Н.И. Иванова. М.: ИМЭМО РАН, 2015; *Governance without government: order and change in world politics* / ed. by J. N. Rosenau, E. O. Czempiel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Rosenau J. N. *Governance in the 21st Century* // *Global Governance*. Vol. 1. No. 1. P. 13–43; *Our Global Neighborhood. The Report of the Commission on Global Governance*. 1995. URL: <http://www.gdrc.org/u-gov/global-neighbourhood/>

Historically, norms emerged from the practices of international interaction and tacit bargaining among actors. Since the 19th century, the states refined mechanisms for developing new regulations and monitoring mutual compliance. Such mechanisms include international organizations with legal status (such as the UN, World Bank, and IMF) and less formal associations (G7, G20, and BRICS).

The notion of “global governance” itself is much younger than the phenomenon that it describes.¹³ It received broad recognition in the early 1990s when the end of the Cold War led to the drastic institutional readjustments. Its proponents defined global governance as a broad network of international regimes, which provides a degree of ordering in the absence of a viable world government. They praised this decentralized institutional design for flexibility and pragmatic eclecticism.¹⁴

The global governance incorporated disparate norms and organizations, which often emerged independently from each other through an extended timeframe. For example, it encompasses norms of sovereignty and diplomatic immunity dating back to the 18th and early 19th century, rules of warfare that matured on the verge of the 20th century, standards of human right protection which took root after the Second World War, and principles of environmental conservation, which only started to emerge in the 1970s.

In parallel to the proliferating global institutions and norms, there is much space for separate regulations in various areas of the world. Despite the progress of globalization, ‘rules of the game’ in individual regions differ and remain uneven in terms of density. Europe is overcrowded with multiple and even competing institutions (centered around the Council of Europe, EU, NATO, and OSCE). Meanwhile, the Middle East lacks a single regional framework incorporating all local actors. Tensions in those regions demonstrate that both extremes are prone to controversies.

The creation of the UN provided a degree of ordering to this panoply of norms and regimes. Its Charter defined the core principles of international

¹³ On the rise of academic studies of global governance, see Hewson M., Sinclair T.J. *The Emergence of Global Governance Theory // Approaches to global governance theory / M. Hewson, T. J. Sinclair, T. Sinclair.* N.Y.: Suny Press, 1999. P. 3–22.

¹⁴ See, in this regard Finkelstein L. S. *What is global governance? // Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations.* 1995. Vol. 1. No. 3. P. 367–372.

law, although they are not always easily reconcilable with each other. In particular, many controversies surround relations between the commitment to non-intervention and the protection of individual rights. The UN also brought most international organizations, which existed by that time under its umbrella. Still, the global governance ended up being a noodle bowl of various institutions rather than a coherent framework of regulations and mechanisms.

Its various elements sometimes contradict each other, creating an opportunity for forum-shopping by states. Major powers are especially prone to apply those regulations and operate through those organizations that serve their interests better.¹⁵ The division of competencies between regimes is sometimes blurred, as some issues fall in-between various functional areas. Moreover, in some instances, regional institutions claim primacy over the global ones, based on the logic of subsidiarity. For example, the EU Court of Justice requires Member-States of the European Union to settle their disputes through itself rather than through international courts.

Contradictions between regulations in issue areas and disputes over their boundaries debilitate global governance. They create a sense of confusion, diminishing its ability to prescribe the behavior of states coherently. As a result, the level of uncertainty in international politics increases. However, such contestations represent a normal part of international affairs. They sometimes even clarify existing norms, which eventually makes them stronger and more enforceable, rather than weaker.¹⁶

The content of global governance is also murkier as some norms and mechanisms acquired uneven legitimacy in international relations. They are accepted by several, but not necessarily all states to the same degree. In those instances, when norms and mechanisms have not yet consolidated, the opposition to them hardly means revisionism, as there is no preceding

¹⁵ Drezner D. W. The power and peril of international regime complexity // Perspectives on politics. 2009. Vol. 7, No. 1. P. 65–70.

¹⁶ On the role of contestation in the evolution of norms, see Wiener A. Contested compliance: Interventions on the normative structure of world politics // European journal of international relations. 2004. Vol. 10. No. 2. P. 189–234; Wolff J., Zimmermann L. Between Banyans and battle scenes: Liberal norms, contestation, and the limits of critique // Review of International Studies. 2016. Vol. 42. No. 3. P. 513–534; Deitelhoff N., Zimmermann L. Things we lost in the fire: How different types of contestation affect the robustness of international norms // International Studies Review. 2020. Vol. 22. No. 1. P. 51–76.

consensus that is challenged. Instead, we often see the struggle between the two alternative regimes, based on incompatible but not necessarily antagonistic principles.

For example, the model of ‘liberal democracy,’ is perceived as the only legitimate form of government in some parts of the world, but not the other. Moreover, attempts of international players to prescribe national political institutions contradict the principle of non-intervention which has lengthier history and greater acceptance. It is not surprising that debates over sovereignty and democracy ended up being one of the most contentious issues for global governance.¹⁷ In contrast, the principle of ‘free trade’ acquired broad if not universal recognition by the end of the 20th century. Therefore, attempts to challenge it are less compatible with the existing status-quo. However, many states seek to go around it using non-tariff barriers, which stay in the grey area.

Overall, the key characteristics of global governance are high complexity and the lack of centralization. They create preconditions for disputations over interpretation and the validity of institutions as well as a demarcation between various regimes. All these types of conflicts over norms do not always presume principled revisionism. However, the growing scope of international institutions and their intrusiveness in the domestic practices establish grounds for potential dissatisfaction and the strive to replace them.

This type of disagreements envisages a drastic departure from the status quo, unlike routine contestation over interpretations of norms. They presume alteration of rather than within established regimes. While discrimination of such fundamental charges against global governance from more subtle disputes confronts greater difficulties than in the domain of traditional revisionism dealing with territorial claims, it still points to the qualitative difference in the gravity of the challenge. Therefore, it is essential to identify conditions which encourage principled breach with the institutions rather than attempts to ensure interests through manipulating their provisions.

¹⁷For the legal debate on the issue, see Wippman D. *Defending Democracy Through Foreign Intervention* // *Houston Journal of International Law*. 1996. Vol. 19. P. 659–681; Maogoto J. N. *Democratic Governance: An Emerging Customary Norm?* // *University of Notre Dame Australia Law Review*. 2003. Vol. 5. P. 55–80; Petersen N. *The Principle of Democratic Teleology in International Law* // *Brooklyn journal of international law*. 2008. Vol. 34. P. 33–84.

Politics of Global Governance and the Role for Institutional Revisionism

The question of “why major powers invest in challenging international institutions?” is not as simple as one might think. If emerging standards of behavior are really that strong, then it is not clear how states would dare to seek changes in them. On the other hand, if they are weak, then what is the point to waste resources on such assaults. This paradox points to the need to specify what we mean by ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ institutions. It is no surprise that despite the skyrocketing rise of global governance, the academic world remains deeply divided on its role.

It is possible to capture major cleavages in this debate by focusing on the assessment of their policy impact and durability by representatives of competing approaches (see, Table 1). Ironically, most perspectives are not well suited to explain the eagerness of major powers to invest in challenging international regimes. Their difficulty in accounting for it reflects a paradox that revisionism presumes believes that institutions are consequential and amenable at the same time.

TABLE 1. ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS		
	durability	
consequences	low ←	high →
high ↑	Institutions have a low impact on states, but hard to change (Krasner)	Institutions have a high impact on states and hard to change (Keohane, Finnemore, Sikkink)
low ↓	Institutions have a low impact on states and easy to change (Mearsheimer)	Institutions have a high impact on states, but easy to change (Gilpin, Organski, Kugler)

Source: adopted in a revised form from Krasner S. *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999. P. 57¹⁸.

¹⁸Krasner provides slightly different classification and positions some of the approaches differently. Specifically, his association of institutionalism with transactional approach towards international regimes seems problematic (see, below).

Perhaps, the most influential school of thought attributes great importance to the international institutions. It highly appreciates their ability to bind states and prescribe specific behavior. It also presumes that with time norms and organizations become increasingly robust to the point that they turn out to be self-sustaining and can survive even significant structural changes in the balance of power. Such a strong belief in international regimes led to the designation of the supporters of this approach as institutionalists.¹⁹ Representatives of this camp argued that liberal norms and organizations could endure the weakening of the United States, which remained their sponsor in previous decades.²⁰

This argumentation leaves little room for revisionism on behalf of even the strongest states. As mature institutions are 'easy to join but hard to overthrow', hence attempts to seek dramatic changes become fruitless and even counterproductive. Such an approach presumes that international regimes turn out to be increasingly resilient through time, allowing only incremental adjustments and limited contestation within relatively stable institutional boundaries.²¹ Institutionalists are poorly equipped to explain drastic reverses in international regimes and decay of norms, associated with revisionist policies.

The antithetical perspective criticizes fascination with international institutions. Such scholars as John Mearsheimer claim that while concerns regarding national survival and prosperity overburden foreign policy decision making, states do not accept any meaningful restraint in pursuance of national interests.²² The proponents of this approach point to instances when states violated those international norms that they found inconvenient. Moreover, states often refuse to join international regimes that they do not like or abandon them after finding some norms unfavorable for themselves. For example, neither India, nor Israel, nor Pakistan signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, while North Korea withdrew from it.

By presenting revisionism as viable, such skepticism has a hard time explaining investment that states make in shaping international regimes. If

¹⁹Keohane R. O. *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton: Princeton university press, 1986; Keohane R. O., Martin L. L. *The promise of institutionalist theory // International security*. 1995. Vol. 20. No. 1. P. 39–51.

²⁰Ikenberry G. J. *Liberal Leviathan: The origins, crisis, and transformation of the American world order*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

²¹Mainstream constructivist argument regarding norm diffusion through a 'life cycle' fits this interpretation as well, see Finnemore M., Sikkink K. *International norm dynamics and political change // International organization*. 1998. Vol. 52. No. 4. P. 887–917.

²²Mearsheimer J. J. *The false promise of international institutions // International security*. 1994. Vol. 19. No. 3. P. 5–49.

institutions are purely transactional and epiphenomenal (meaning that they simply reflect power relations), there is no need to spend time and efforts to revise the norms. It is not meaningful to promote norms or international organizations, which unable to restrain other states. It is much more advisable to ignore them and act as if they do not even exist. Meanwhile, revisionism presumes conscious attempts to replace established institutions with some preferable alternatives.

Apart from these two opposing perspectives, there are more nuanced approaches towards the role of international institutions. The one advanced by Stephen Krasner portrays international regimes as durable, but not necessarily restraining. It pictures a situation in which states demonstrate rhetorical deference to existing regimes and eager to invest in their preservation, but at the same time engage in pervasive incompliance. According to this perspective, the durability of institutions could be partly attributed to their laxity, meaning that they do not get on the way of strong states too often. Krasner specifically, points to the record of interventions into domestic affairs of weaker states, which major powers conducted regularly throughout history. Such instances were inconsistent with the norm of national sovereignty but did not seek to replace it and did not lead to its demise.

Such behavior, captured in the notion of 'organized hypocrisy', also does not fit well with the institutional revisionism. Various opportunistic policies, including 'forum-shopping' mentioned earlier, are prolific and even mundane in international politics, but they do not originate from systematic attempts to undermine institutions. On the contrary, they could reflect the strength and vitality of norms which are able to withstand even grave violations.²³ Moreover, states engaged in organized hypocrisy often go a great length to demonstrate that their actions follow the relevant regulations, contributing, therefore, to their reaffirmation.

Finally, the last approach mirrors the preceding one. It claims that institutions could be influential without becoming durable and resilient. This perspective attributes to the international regimes some leverage in

²³In this regard, Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie famously concluded: "whether or not violations also invalidate or refute a law (norm) will depend upon a host of other factors, not the least of which is how the community assesses the violation and responds to it" (Kratochwil F., Ruggie J. G. *International Organization: A State of the Art on an Art of the State* // *International organization*. 1986. Vol. 40. No. 4. P. 767).

regulating behavior of states, especially smaller ones. It makes investments in shaping global governance attractive for major powers, as a rule by law decreases their expenditures on direct coercion. The strong states have fewer reasons to worry about low-level resistance to their preferences even if they cannot avoid defection by highly motivated actors.

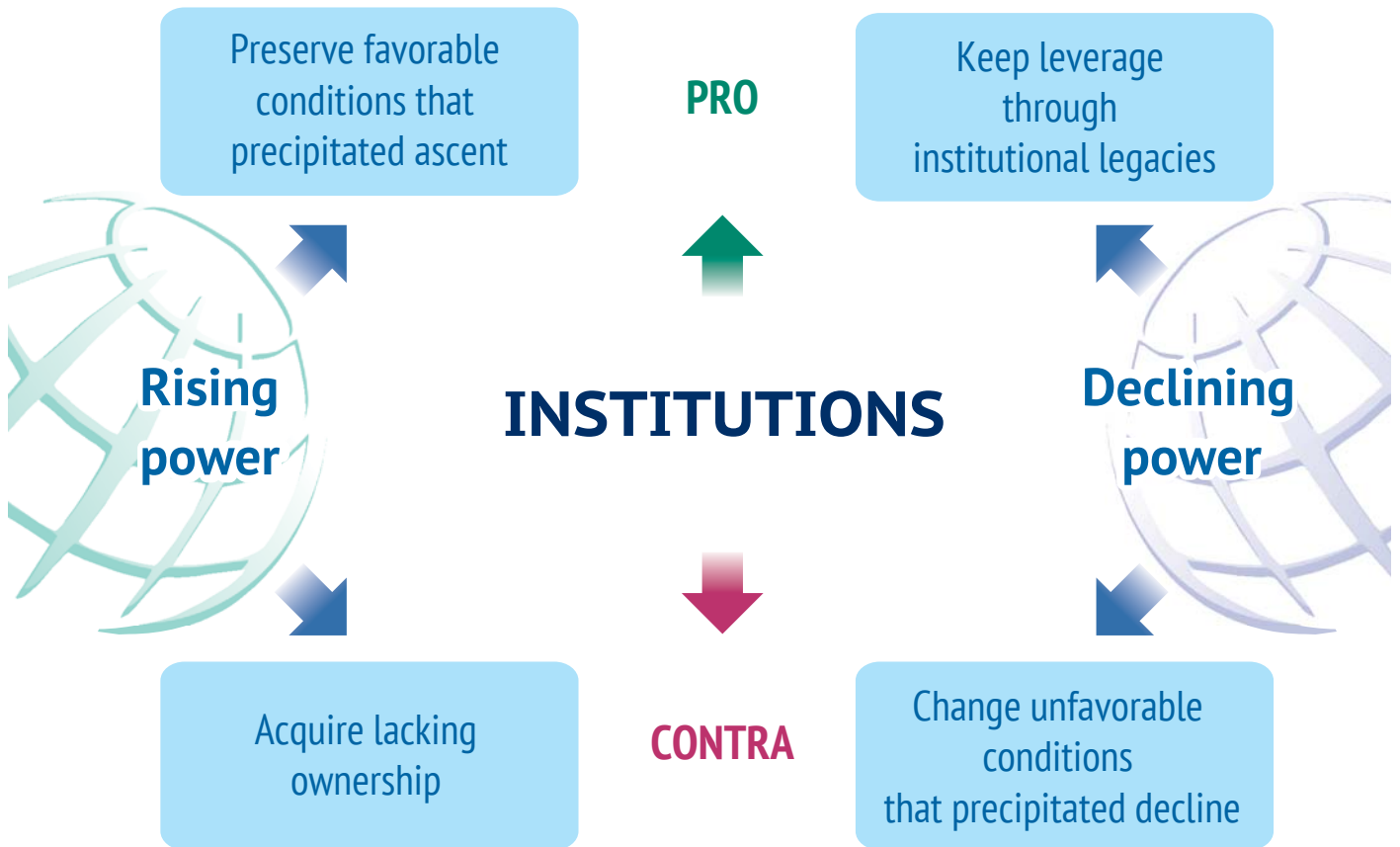
This perspective does not treat institutions as self-reliant, making their enforcement dependent on a powerful backup from a strong state. Norms diminish the need to recourse to coercion, but the threat of retaliation for offences should be credible. The rule by law in international relations does not necessarily transform into the rule of law in which regulations would bound the strong states without additional stimulus. As institutions are never entirely neutral, each major power finds powerful incentives to change the rules of the game to its benefit.

The combination of potential benefits and relative amenability to substantial alterations provides an impetus for major powers to revise international institutions in their favor. Institutional revisions become both possible and attractive. Moreover, the lack of opportunities for a strong state to affect international regimes could lead to the weakening of global governance. In such instances, a major power faces a formidable temptation to ignore undesirable institutions if it is impossible to replace them. Then, the level of hypocrisy or outright obstructionism could rise at the expense of the semblance of the international order.

The claim that institutions are consequential, but not exceptionally resilient provides foundations to assess the role of norm-creation and norm-revision as part of the power struggle in international politics.²⁴ The state of the global governance as an uneven playing field leads to the question: which players (and more specifically which major powers) are more likely to become revisionist? The two antagonistic propositions define the debate on this issue. Both place the dynamic of rising and decline at the center of the explanation. In other words, revisionism is attributed to the changes in the balance of material strength among states, but specific presumptions of the two approaches substantially differ (see, Picture 1).

²⁴See, Hurrell A. Power, institutions, and the production of inequality // Power in global governance / ed. by M. Barnett, R. Duvall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. P. 33–58.

PICTURE 1. STRUCTURAL INCENTIVES FOR AND AGAINST REVISIONISM



Source: the author's ideas

The first explanation attributes revisionism to the rising powers, which seek to undermine those institutions that others forced upon them at the time of their weakness. As they did not have the chance to voice their preferences and affect regimes at the time of their inception, they lacked ownership in existing regulations.²⁵ On the other hand, the previously dominant powers remain mostly satisfied with the institutions

²⁵For the debate on the extent of revisionism of the rising powers, see Schweller R. Rising powers and revisionism in emerging international orders. Valdai papers. 2015; Ward S. Status and the challenge of rising powers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017; Thies C. G., Nieman M. D. Rising powers and foreign policy revisionism: understanding BRICS identity and behavior through time. University of Michigan Press, 2017; Murray M. The Struggle for recognition in international relations: status, revisionism, and rising powers. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018; Menegazzi S. Rising powers and the reform of global economic governance: the BRICS and the normative challenge ahead // Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences. – 2020. – T. 13. – №. 1. – C. 135–150.

that they created. As their material preponderance fades away, they become increasingly reliant on these institutional legacies to secure their preferences. This explanation prioritizes historical primacy in the construction of global governance and presumes the lack of feedback between institutions and the production of the national strength.²⁶

An alternative explanation emphasizes the importance of this reverse link between institutional and material domains. It starts with the presumption that international institutions introduced by the dominant power were somehow responsible for its subsequent decline. Meanwhile, a rising power benefited from them, as they created conditions for its ascent. Therefore, the proponents of this logic expect the declining state to become the leading revisionist hoping to prevent further deterioration of its position by preventive actions. Its emerging competitor should be mostly satisfied with the rules of the game as they are, avoiding the burdens for maintaining them.²⁷

Henceforth, the two explanations establish opposite expectations regarding the behavior of states in various structural positions. The current international trends defined by the rapid shifts in national strength and acute tensions among major powers represent a promising background to assess the validity of the competing claims. The attitudes of China, Russia and the United States towards global governance appear especially relevant, as they play such a crucial role in the debates over international institutions. However, instead, of making a single-shot assessment of their policies within a limited timeframe, let us take a longer historical perspective to examine whether the structural dynamic is sufficient to explain them.

²⁶For the theoretical roots of the power transition argument, see Organski A. F. K. *World politics*. N.Y.: A. Knopf, 1958; Organski A. F. K., Kugler J. *The war ledger*. University of Chicago Press, 1981; Tammen R. et al. *Power transitions: strategies for the 21st century*. New York: Chatham House, 2000.

²⁷For explaining the overall logic of prevention in the policy of a declining power, see Gilpin R. *War and change in world politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. P. 190; Levy J. S. *Declining power and the preventive motivation for war* // *World Politics: A Quarterly Journal of International Relations*. 1987. Vol. 40, No. 1. P. 82–107; Copeland D. C. *The origins of major war*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. On the lack of revisionist tendencies among currently rising powers, see Bordachev T. *Revisionism of powers in the changing historical context* // *Russia in Global Affairs*. 2018. Vol. 16. No. 3. P. 46–65; Newman E., Zala B. *Rising powers and order contestation: disaggregating the normative from the representational* // *Third World Quarterly*. 2018. Vol. 39. No. 5. P. 871–888. While the explanation based on power transition theory fails to recognize the effect of institutions on national strength, the second approach faces its own logical gaps. It does not provide reasons which lead the dominant state to design institutions, so detrimental to its long-term interests.

American Proficiency in Revisionist Gambits

The policies of the United States since 2016 caused disruptions in the institutions of global governance. In its early days, the Trump administration ripped apart the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), negotiated by its predecessors.²⁸ This decision became a prologue for further challenges to international regimes. The United States openly called to transform the norms of the global economy, blaming their counterparts in trade imbalances. It imposed restrictions on imports from selected countries, renegotiated NAFTA, and threatened the WTO dispute resolution mechanism.²⁹ It also left the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's Nuclear Program and Paris Climate Agreement.³⁰

From its inception the Trump administration questioned the utility of arms control, withdrawing from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and Open Skies Treaty.³¹ It abandoned such international bodies as UNESCO and the World Health Organization and walked away from financial contributions to other organizations, such as the UN Population Fund.³² The United States adopted derogatory rhetoric, blaming a wide range of mechanisms of global governance as unfair and discriminatory. The combination of these activities reflects a consistent revisionist trend.

²⁸The United States Officially Withdraws from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Office of the United States Trade Representative. January 30, 2017. URL: <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2017/january/US-Withdraws-From-TPP>

²⁹For an overview of the trade policies under the Trump administration, see U.S. Trade Policy: Background and Current Issues. Congressional Research Service. September 15, 2020. URL: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10156>

³⁰Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The U.S. White House. May 8, 2018. URL: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/>; Pompeo M. On the U.S. Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. U.S. State Department. November 4, 2019. URL: <https://www.state.gov/on-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-the-paris-agreement/>

³¹Statement From Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper on the INF Treaty. U.S. Department of Defense. August 2, 2019. URL: <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/1924386/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-mark-t-esper-on-the-inf-treaty/>; Brown C. Treaty on Open Skies. U.S. State Department. November 22, 2020. URL: <https://www.state.gov/treaty-on-open-skies/>

³²Nauert H. The United States Withdraws From UNESCO. U.S. State Department. October 12, 2017. URL: <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-withdraws-from-unesco/>; Ortagus M. Update on U.S. Withdrawal from the World Health Organization. U.S. State Department. September 3, 2020. URL: <https://www.state.gov/update-on-u-s-withdrawal-from-the-world-health-organization/>; Statement by UNFPA on U.S. Decision to Withhold Funding. United Nations Population Fund. April 4, 2017. URL: <https://www.unfpa.org/press/statement-unfpa-us-decision-withhold-funding>

American and foreign observers largely attributed the challenge posed by Trump's administration to global governance to the erratic personality of the president. Another popular interpretation attributed Washington's disaffection with international institutions to its hegemonic decline.³³ However, an assessment of a preceding history positions Trump's policies within a lasting tradition, instead of viewing them as an extraordinary deviation. The United States has a long track record of revisionism extending back to its early dates, which is somehow overlooked in the heat of the contemporary debates.

Even before the United States emerged as the global power, it repeatedly sought revisions in the rules of international politics. In the following periods, it often sought to demolish institutions of its own making. Therefore, Washington's policies contradict efforts to relate revisionism to a specific structural position or trend in the balance of power, questioning the validity of both explanations presented in the previous section. Nevertheless, they reflect a very pragmatic approach rather than an ideological commitment to institutional transformations.³⁴

As early as 1823, the United States announced the Monroe doctrine, which warned the European powers against acquiring new possessions in the Western hemisphere.³⁵ Although there was nothing revolutionary in proclaiming exclusive sphere of interests, American policy contradicted the norms of the colonial struggle. The imperial control of European states extended by the military might, and no region was off the table by default. The United States did not have the strength to support its claims vis-à-vis potential rivals and could not establish its own domination in Latin America. However, it called for the special treatment anyway.

As its power grew and American self-confidence increased the number of cases in which Washington challenged existing norms proliferated. In 1899 the Secretary of State John Hay demanded the European powers to treat foreign nationals non-discriminatory in their respective spheres of interest

³³ See, in this regard, also Daalder I. H., Lindsay J. M. *The Empty Throne: America's abdication of global leadership*. N.Y.: PublicAffairs, 2018; Jervis R., Gavin F.J., Rovner J., Labrosse D.N. (eds). *Chaos in the liberal order: the Trump presidency and international politics in the twenty-first century*. N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2018; Haass R. *Present at the Disruption: How Trump Unmade US Foreign Policy* // *Foreign Affairs*. 2020. Vol. 99. No. 5. P. 24–34.

³⁴ See also Mastanduno M. *System Maker and Privilege Taker: US Power and the International Political Economy* // *World Politics*. 2009. Vol. 61. No. 1. P. 121–154.

³⁵ Monroe J. *Seventh Annual Message to Congress, December 2, 1823, in the Annals of Congress, (Senate), 18th Congress, 1st Session, pages 14, 22–23.*

across China, pronouncing an 'Open Door' policy.³⁶ This request appeared during the "second colonial age", defined by imperial protectionism. Shortly after, Theodore Roosevelt reinterpreted the Monroe Doctrine, proclaiming the United States the sole arbiter to disputes in Latin America.³⁷ His demands ran against the long-established practice, denying the right of the European powers to claim commercial debts through the 'gunboat diplomacy', as they used to.³⁸ By this time, the United States announced its institutional innovations from the position of strength.

During the First World War, Washington truly entered the global stage with a plan to reorganize international politics, announced by Woodrow Wilson.³⁹ The United States called to redraw the rules which governed relations between European powers. It argued against secret diplomacy and trade protectionism while promoting freedom of navigation. It also called for national self-determination, regulated arms reduction, and the creation of a universal organization committed to preserve peace. While the United States possessed a colossal material advantage over European states, it compelled them to accept much of the program. However, it eventually refused to join the League of Nations itself and turned to the policy of isolationism.

During the Second World War, the United States developed a new program to reconstruct an international order.⁴⁰ Once again it openly professed it as a departure from the prior defunct international arrangements. Unlike previously, it committed to the key institutions that it helped to create this time. Even then, Washington retained a somewhat ambiguous attitude to global governance. For example, the International Trade Organization that it initiated never materialized due to the opposition in the US Congress. It was substituted by a less ambitious General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.⁴¹

³⁶ Declarations by France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Japan, and Russia accepting United States proposal to "Open Door" policy in China, September 6, 1899 – March 20, 1900. URL: <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000001-0278.pdf>

³⁷ Roosevelt T. Fourth Annual Message to Congress. December 06, 1904. URL: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/fourth-annual-message-15>

³⁸ The United States itself engaged in 'gun-boat diplomacy' both in the Western Hemisphere and other parts of the world.

³⁹ Wilson W. Address of the President of the United States, delivered at a joint session of the two houses of Congress, January 8, 1918. URL: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp

⁴⁰ The Atlantic Charter. August 14, 1941. URL: <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp>

⁴¹ Toye R. Developing multilateralism: The Havana charter and the fight for the International Trade Organization, 1947–1948 // *The International History Review*. 2003. Vol. 25. No. 2. P. 282–305.

The United States also took the lead in creating the Bretton-Wood system to relaunch international finance. It replaced Britain as the key guarantor of financial stability by restoring a slightly adjusted “gold standard”. Nevertheless, once Western Europe and Japan emerged as economic competitors in the 1970s, Washington renounced its commitments, putting an end to converting the dollar into gold.⁴² It pushed for the Jamaica Accord, which guided the transition to floating exchange rates. In less than a decade, the Plaza Agreement introduced new adjustments favoring Washington by enabling it to devalue the dollar against other currencies.⁴³ The United States managed to position itself as both the main guarantor and the leading revisionist in the international financial system.

It sought these revisions during the period marked by deep pessimism regarding the future of the American power due to the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War, oil shocks and economic hurdles.⁴⁴ The end of the Cold War reversed Washington’s fortune. The only remaining superpower hastened to promote market economy and democratic regimes in the formerly socialist countries. It supported the admission of new members to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It also converted GATT into a World Trade Organization with extended competencies. While George H.W. Bush proclaimed the dawn of the “New World Order”, in reality, the United States sought expansion of the Western institutions rather than their replacement with new arrangements.⁴⁵

The neoliberal norms of deregulation that the United States advocated under the ‘Washington Consensus’ undercut the preceding Keynesian principles, to which it committed until the 1970s.⁴⁶ American policies implemented by the international financial institutions triggered a backlash

⁴² Gray W. G. Floating the system: Germany, the United States, and the breakdown of Bretton Woods, 1969–1973 // *Diplomatic History*. 2007. Vol. 31. No. 2. P. 295–323.

⁴³ Announcement the Ministers of Finance and Central Bank Governors of France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Plaza Accord). September 22, 1985. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20181203002708/https://www.margarethatcher.org/document/109423>

⁴⁴ Such pessimism manifested in the debate on imperial overextension, see Kennedy P. *The rise and fall of the great powers: economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York : Vintage Books, 1987.

⁴⁵ Bush G. H.W. Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Persian Gulf Crisis and the Federal Budget Deficit. September 11, 1990. URL: <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2217>. Compare with A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement. U.S. White House. July 1994. URL: <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf>

⁴⁶ Williamson J. Democracy and the “Washington consensus” // *World development*. 1993. Vol. 21. No. 8. P. 1329–1336.

from the anti-globalist movement, which criticized it as the assault on the welfare state and social justice.⁴⁷ Although, the promotion of market reforms forwarded further the free trade principles that the United States sponsored since the Second World War, it presumed greater intrusiveness of international financial regulators, advancing new limitations on national sovereignty.

Even greater resistance caused Washington's political agenda, which revised the rationale and conditions for the use of force. In the 1990s, the United States challenged the central authority of the UN Security Council in mandating the use of force in international politics. It also started to profess that sovereignty was contingent on the performance of governments in ensuring civil and political liberties. Washington claimed that violations in such instances provided sufficient grounds for forcible external interventions.⁴⁸ Ironically, in the early years of the Cold War, the United States met international efforts to strengthen human rights protection with reluctance, given its domestic contestation over racial and other minority affairs. It changed its attitude only in the 1970s.⁴⁹ Since then, Washington gave precedence to human rights concerns over the sovereignty privileges. It also engaged in the business of democracy promotion.⁵⁰

By the early 2000s, Washington's eagerness to circumvent the sovereignty norm reached its peak with the positioning of the regime change at the core of the US policy.⁵¹ One of the officials in the Bush administration famously proclaimed: "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create

⁴⁷ The notion anti-globalism is somewhat misleading, as proponents of this movement called for another kind of globalization (see, Broad R. The Washington consensus meets the global backlash: shifting debates and policies // *Globalizations*. 2004. Vol. 1. No. 2. P. 129–154).

⁴⁸ Initially, this approach benefited from advocacy by transnational activists. However, by the mid-1990s the United States accommodated it to the point of leading major military operations in the name of humanitarian interventions. See, for example, Худайкулова А. В. Новое в управлении международными конфликтами // *Международные процессы*. 2016. Т. 14. № 4. С. 67–79; Wheeler N. J. *Saving strangers: Humanitarian intervention in international society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Ayoob M. Humanitarian intervention and state sovereignty // *The international journal of human rights*. 2002. Vol. 6. No. 1. P. 81–102.

⁴⁹ Sikkink K. *Mixed signals: US human rights policy and Latin America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.

⁵⁰ Istomin I. A. The logic of Counterpoint: Aspirations of liberal hegemony and Counter-Ideological Alignment // *Russia in Global Affairs*. 2019. Vol. 17. No. 2. P. 8–34.

⁵¹ Bush G. State of the Union Address. The White House. January 28, 2003. URL: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/print/20030128-19.html>

our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do".⁵²

Such attitude guided the US-led interventions in Yugoslavia (1999) and Iraq (2003). In both cases, Washington failed to obtain the mandate for the use of force from the UN Security Council. Moreover, the United States appointed John Bolton, who was openly dismissive of the United Nations, as its representative to the organization.⁵³ These cases cannot be treated as routine examples of organized hypocrisy, as they were openly positioned as precedents of broader global transformations.⁵⁴ Although the failures of the military operations shook the American self-confidence, they did not convince the United States to abandon its transformational agenda.

It continued extensive support of democratization through providing funds, training and political coverage for local activists. The rising contestation of liberalism, including in the Western countries, led Washington to define international rivalries in terms of a deadly struggle between liberal democracies and autocratic dictatorships.⁵⁵ Such an approach brings disagreements over internal politics back in the center of

⁵² Suskind R. Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush. *The New York Times*. October 17, 2004. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>. Earlier Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright claimed similarly: "we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future" (Albright M.K. Interview on NBC-TV "The Today Show" with Matt Lauer. February 19, 1998. URL: <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>).

⁵³ Back in 1994 he claimed: "There's no such thing as the United Nations" (see, Haag M. 3 Examples of John Bolton's Longtime Hard-Line Views. *The New York Times*. March 22, 2018. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/22/us/politics/john-bolton-national-security-adv.html>).

⁵⁴ See, for example, President Bush Discusses Freedom in Iraq and Middle East. U.S. White House. November 6, 2003. URL: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html>; Bush G. W. State of the Union Address to the 108th Congress, Second Session. January 20, 2004. URL: https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf; Bush G.W. The Second Inaugural Address. January 20, 2005. URL: https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf

⁵⁵ For example, the US State Secretary Mike Pompeo called for the 'Alliance of Democracies' (see, Pompeo M.R. Communist China and the Free World's Future. The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. July 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/>). Meanwhile, President-elect Joe Biden during his election campaign announced plans to arrange a 'Summit for Democracy' (see, The Power of America's Example: The Biden Plan for Leading the Democratic World to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century. URL: <https://joebiden.com/americanleadership/#>).

geopolitical tensions, similarly to the Cold War period. It is hard to classify it as truly revisionist tendency as ideological divisions traditionally played a significant role in rivalries between major powers.⁵⁶

Since the 2000s, Washington realized that neoliberal principles that it professed in previous decades do not necessarily benefit it in the long run. The reduction of trade and capital barriers stimulated the relocation of industrial production in Asian countries due to their excessive endowments of cheap labor. China profited the most from this trend, transforming into a dynamic competitor for the United States. Through time it transformed from an assembly line for American corporation into economic and even technological competitor.

Washington responded to this challenge initially by efforts to readjust rules of international trade through the Doha Round of the WTO. However, this attempt failed due to the renewed tenacity of developing states standing to the American pressure.⁵⁷ In the 2010s, Washington sought to achieve similar goals by circumventing the multilateral trade system through preferential agreements with privileged partners. They sought to use exclusive groupings as the core constituency of the future economic order. The United States expected that due to their gravitational weight in the world markets, they would later attract other states, including China, to accept renewed norms of global governance.⁵⁸

In a bit of irony, the TPP corresponded with some of the ideas advocated by the anti-globalist movement back in the 1990s. Washington wrested with these groups during the Clinton presidency, but, it embraced their slogans of globalization 'with a human face' a decade later when it became clear that neoliberal deregulation does not serve American interests anymore.⁵⁹ Therefore, the TPP presumed not only assurances

⁵⁶ See, Haas M. L. *The ideological origins of great power politics, 1789–1989*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

⁵⁷ Cho S. *The demise of development in the Doha round negotiations* // *Texas International Law Journal*. 2009. Vol. 45. P. 573–601.

⁵⁸ Рогов С. М. Шариков П.А., Бабич С.Н., Петрова И.А., Степанова Н.В. *Доктрина Обамы. Властелин двух колец*. Российский совет по международным делам. 2013. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/doktrina-obamy-vlastelin-dvukh-kolets/>

⁵⁹ A very symptomatic reflection of this evolution could be found in the report prepared by the Center for American Progress for the Obama presidential campaign. This think tank became close to the Democratic administration in its early days (*Change for America: A Progressive Blueprint for the 44th President* / ed. M. Green, M. Jolin. NY.: Basic Books, 2009).

for the protection of intellectual property and access to government procurements but also higher standards of social and environmental protection.⁶⁰

Ironically, Donald Trump was labeled a revisionist after he left the initiative, designed to reshape the rules of the global economy. In this light, Trump's protectionism represented just a different kind of revisionism in comparison with Obama's policies. The two administrations diverged in tools rather than in aims. They both called for the retention of American dominance even at the expense of the institutions that the United States previously created. Illustratively, the key figures of the forthcoming Biden team, while rejecting the legacy of the last four years, also emphasize that the return to the 'status quo ante' in global governance is impossible.

There are no signs that the United States will cease its attempts to revise the rules of the world economy in the forthcoming years.⁶¹ However, the Biden administration faces a challenge to find new ways to reshape international institutions. It is openly hostile to Trump's policies but recognizes its inability to come back to Obama's program in the changed circumstances. Unlike the previous two Presidents, Biden enters the White House without an exact program, lacking fresh ideas on how to adjust global governance.

The United States record is enlightening in the context of the debates on relations between changes in national strength and revisionist tendencies. The preceding pages demonstrate that Washington engaged in relentless efforts to transform international institutions throughout its history. It sought changes when it was a weak state, when its global role increased, when it found itself on the top of the international hierarchy and when it faced growing competition. Therefore, its policies do not correspond to either of the two explanations, which attributes revisionism exclusively to the rising or declining powers.

⁶⁰ Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement. Office of the United States Trade Representative. URL: <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/trans-pacific-partnership/tpp-full-text>

⁶¹ See, for example, an article co-authored by the potential National Security Advisor Anthony Blinken in the Washington Post (Blinken A. J., Kagan R. 'America First' is only making the world worse. Here's a better approach. The Washington Post. January 1, 2019. URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/america-first-is-only-making-the-world-worse-heres-a-better-approach/2019/01/01/1272367c-079f-11e9-88e3-989a3e456820_story.html). A glimpse on the potential directions of the American policies provides the recent influential report Making U.S. Foreign Policy Work Better for the Middle Class. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2020. URL: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/USFP_FinalReport_final1.pdf

As the previous analysis demonstrates, not every American policy could be classified as genuinely revisionist under the definition provided earlier. It was also engaged in more subtle contestation within existing regimes or murky disputes on the demarcation between various norms and principles. At times it preferred to play the rules rather than challenge them directly. However, revisionism is not a flavor of this or that administration, but a recurring and consistent component of the American foreign policy.

The United States initially emerged as a revolutionary force in history, claiming to become the 'City upon a Hill'. However, it did not pursue a coherent ideological program throughout its history. Washington's approach towards global governance reflected transactional interests rather than principled commitments. It changed its attitude towards such institutions as sovereignty, collective security, free trade, and even human rights more than once. These shifts did not mean that the United States underappreciate the importance of international institutions.

Quite the opposite, Washington made substantial investments in shaping global governance, which reflected the importance attached to regulatory restraint. The American policy demonstrates that institutions if approached strategically become an essential tool for a major power to advance its preferences. However, effective manipulation requires a rare combination of certain obliviousness regarding preceding legacies, normative flexibility, and political creativity. Washington's revisionist policies outgrow from enormous self-confidence and relative institutional competence.

Russia as an Institutional Conservative

The policies adopted by the United States through history corresponded to the argument that major powers seek revisions in institutions to ensure their preferences but contradicted specific explanations of how structural dynamic determines such efforts. Is the American record of institutional revisionism representative for the strong states in general? Or is Washington an outlier, while other major powers advance their interests differently? The analysis of Russian policies also tests the limits of structural explanations, as its institutional activism

often served conservative purposes aiming to preserve the status quo rather than to modify it.

Russia played an essential role in the construction of the international institutions throughout much of its history. In the early 19th century, it became one of the founders of the “European Concert” to preserve regional stability through regular conferences of major powers. It was the starting point for greater institutionalization of international relations in the following centuries. At the Vienna Congress, Russia also induced most European states to join the Holy Alliance. While it was clouded in vague spiritual rhetoric, its practical purpose was to protect hereditary monarchies from the assault of the revolutionary forces.⁶²

Therefore, this new institution aimed to preserve the status-quo which became fragile since the French experiment in republican government. When the post-Napoleonic unity of the major powers cracked in the 1830s, Russia sought to reinforce conservative principles through cooperation with Austria and Prussia, while avoiding a clash with liberal Britain and France. Its enduring commitment to the spirit of the Holy Alliance after the demise of this coalition manifested itself in the Russian opposition to the European Revolutions of 1848–1849. Russia’s hostility towards potential changes reflected in its assistance to Austria in suppressing the Hungarian revolt.⁶³

In the second half of the 19th century, Russia acquitted credentials as an advocate of the emerging humanitarian law and arms control. Saint Petersburg Declaration of 1868 which prohibited explosive and incendiary projectiles became an early attempt to address technological risks of the industrial age.⁶⁴ Russia also played a leading role in the Hague peace conferences of 1899 and 1907, which placed additional restrictions on means and methods of war.⁶⁵ Such initiatives did not require revisionism as they established regulations in newly evolving fields.

⁶² See, Орлик О.В. Россия в международных отношениях 1815–1829 гг. (От Венского конгресса до Андрианопольского мира). М.: Наука, 1998; Кудрявцева Е.П. Венская система международных отношений и её крушение (1815–1854 годы) // Новая и новейшая история. 2014. № 4. С. 88–106.

⁶³ Орлик И. И. Венгерская революция 1848–1849 годов и Россия // Новая и новейшая история. 2008. № 2. С. 21–40.

⁶⁴ Declaration Renouncing the Use, in Time of War, of Explosive Projectiles Under 400 Grammes Weight. Saint Petersburg, 29 November / 11 December 1868. URL: <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/INTRO/130?OpenDocument>

⁶⁵ Рыбаченок И. С. Россия и Первая конференция мира 1899 года в Гааге. М.: Росспэн, 2005; Валеев Р. М. Роль России в проведении Гаагских конференции мира // История государства и права. 2009. № 12. С. 2–5.

Their goals were conservative. Russia applied institutional means to preserve existing status-quo, shaken by technological progress. This logic guided its policies after the Napoleonic wars, when its international weight reached its peak, and later in the century when it experienced a relative decline. The situation had to change after 1917 when the new Bolshevik government openly challenged prevailing social and political structures, not to mention the international system.

Despite its radical rhetoric, Soviet Russia pursued ambivalent policies. Almost immediately after the Russian revolution and especially since the Genoa Conference in 1922 Bolsheviks sought international recognition, while simultaneously working to undermine capitalist states through subversive activities.⁶⁶ As a result, the policy of 'peaceful coexistence' remained revisionist in its aspirations but restrained in the actual challenge that it posed. With time the efforts to promote the World Revolution waned, while the material power of the Soviet Union grew. The high point for Moscow's acceptance of the interwar order occurred in the mid-1930s with its accession to the League of Nations in 1934.

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union became one of the principal co-sponsors of the new international institutions along with the United States. Its contribution was especially noticeable for regimes strengthening international security. At the same time, it had limited leverage over global economic governance (ironically, for the government that emphasized the importance of the economic base over the political superstructure). Moscow played an important role in the inauguration of the UN and later in promoting nuclear non-proliferation and arms control. It also insisted on codifying social and economic rights of individuals alongside political and civil liberties. Thus, the Soviet Union helped to expand the scope of international institutions prescribing specific domestic arrangements within sovereign boundaries.

Moscow, similarly to Washington, showed ambivalence to the non-interference principle throughout the Cold War. It accepted in its diplomatic rhetoric the sanctity of the national sovereignty. However, Soviet adherence

⁶⁶See, in this regard Макаренко П. В. Нарком Г.В. Чичерин и дуализм советской внешней политики // Хичеринские чтения. «Революционный 1917 год»: поиск парадигм общественно-политического развития мира. Тамбов: ТГУ, 2017. С. 269–279; Худолей К. К. Эволюция идеи мировой революции в политике Советского Союза (эпоха Коминтерна и социализма в одной стране) // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Политология. Международные отношения. 2017. Т. 10. № 2. С. 145–165.

to the Marxist universalism incited its support of Communist movements across the globe. Closer to its borders, it established patronage over the newly established regimes in Eastern Europe under the principle of socialist solidarity. Moscow jealously policed against any defections from its camp, to the point of using force in Hungary and Czechoslovakia to impose sympathetic elites. Nevertheless, it felt increasingly compelled to soften its domination, loosening control over the Eastern bloc.⁶⁷

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Soviet Union spearheaded the calls for national liberation and self-determination, undermining institutions of preceding colonial rule. It accompanied such rhetoric by substantial assistance to the insurgent movements, hoping to attract the developing world on its side. In this area it acted as a true revisionist force, disrupting attempts of the European powers to retain their influence after granting political independence to their possessions.⁶⁸ The Soviet Union demonstrated an appetite to challenge institutions that predated its rise in the early Cold War. It faced difficulties in the process to balance its commitment to the non-interference, national determination, and socialist solidarity.

By the mid-1970s Moscow transferred to the conservative position, aimed to preserve the bipolar status-quo.⁶⁹ That was the time when it reached the zenith of its power and international influence. It remained involved in the incremental expansion of the international law (for example, through the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea). However, it did not cherish dramatic revisions of existing regimes. Despite the differences between the Soviet Union and the United States and their intense rivalry throughout the Cold War, there was a broad consensus between the two on the overall framework of global governance and tacit cooperation to ensure compliance of the third parties.

In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union moved back to a more activist institutional position. As Moscow increasingly felt the burdens of confrontation with the United States, it challenged the logic of the bipolar

⁶⁷ Мусатов В.Л. Кризисы в европейских соцстранах (Венгрия – 1956 г., Чехословакия – 1968 г., Польша – 1980–1981 гг.) и политика Советского Союза: диссертация на соискание степени к.полит.н. М.: 1995.

⁶⁸ Денисов А. В., Урнов А. Ю. СССР и деколонизация Африки // Азия и Африка сегодня. 2010. № 12. С. 15–20.

⁶⁹ Худoley К. К. Эволюция идеи мировой революции в политике Советского Союза (подъём и распад мировой системы социализма) // Вестник Санкт-Петербургского университета. Политология. Международные отношения. 2018. Т. 11. Вып. 1. С. 53–85.

confrontation and announced the 'new political thinking'.⁷⁰ These Soviet initiatives sought to compensate for the negative trends in the balance of power by changing the rules of the game defining the Cold War. However, Moscow was not able to translate its flashy rhetoric into specific initiatives to reform international institutions. Instead, it moved to seek rapprochement with its long-term opponent mainly on the American terms. In the process, it accepted at least partially Western agenda of individual liberties, free market, and democratization.⁷¹

Although the Russian Federation which emerged in 1991 inherited only a portion of the Soviet material strength, it continued to accommodate the American-led changes in the global governance only to a limited degree. Since the mid-1990s it became increasingly dissatisfied with Washington's strive to redefine global governance based on the liberal agenda. It openly rebutted efforts to sideline the UN Security Council and legitimize humanitarian interventions. In many ways, the newly established Russian Federation adopted a more coherent stance on the sovereignty principle than its Soviet predecessor. It emerged among leading critics of the external conditionality on the domestic practices of states.

Nevertheless, Moscow attracted accusations in revisionism, which referred primarily to its treatment of the Post-Soviet neighbors, recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and reintegration of Crimea. In the 2010s, charges also extended to the cybersphere and the domain of information operations. Much of this critique focused on Russian ad-hoc reactions to the specific circumstances in individual instances, rather than conscious revisionism of existing institutions. Although Russia defined the Post-Soviet space as an area of its special responsibility and privileged interests, implications from these statements often remain vague.⁷²

In several cases, Moscow pointed to the historical links to explain its sensitivities towards developments in its neighborhood. However, Russia accepted the territorial boundaries after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For a long time, it refused to recognize breakaway regions, which emerged

⁷⁰ Польшов М. Ф. МС Горбачев и новое политическое мышление: истоки, основные идеи, результаты // Новейшая история России. 2012. № 2 (4). С. 136–152.

⁷¹ It found a vivid representation in the Paris Charter for a new Europe, see Charter of Paris for a New Europe. November 21, 1990. URL: <https://www.osce.org/mc/39516>

⁷² See, for example, Шкель Т. Пять принципов президента Медведева. Российская газета. 01.09.2008. URL: <https://rg.ru/2008/09/01/princyp.html>

from protracted conflicts in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, or Transnistria.⁷³ Changes in its attitude towards two of these entities reflected practical necessities caused by developments on the ground rather than shifts in its principled approach. There is also only thin evidence that Moscow attempts to export its domestic institutions, despite popular claims.⁷⁴

As with other major powers, there is plenty of evidence that Russia seeks to play existing institutions for its benefits and deviates from them occasionally, but it also struggles to justify these actions through the language of international law rather than suggest dramatic changes in the existing institutions.⁷⁵ Its attitude toward global governance remains rather conservative. One reason for such a tendency is Russian reliance on institutional legacies inherited from the Soviet period. Primarily, it kept the permanent seat in the UN Security Council and the rights of the nuclear state under the non-proliferation regime. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Russian statements repeatedly highlight the importance of international law and the central role of the UN as its guardian.⁷⁶

Moreover, since the 1990s, Russia entrenched itself even deeper in the institutional network than its Soviet predecessor. It became a member of the IMF, World Bank, and participant to the European Convention on Human Rights. In 2012, it acceded to the WTO after eighteen years of negotiations. Despite its token solidarity with BRICS on the voting powers in the international financial institutions, Russia does not demonstrate strong revisionist tendencies towards global economic governance either. It shaped its integration initiatives following the Western models (the Eurasian Economic Union mimicked many of the EU elements). Russian accessions to the Kyoto Protocol and Paris Climate Agreement are illustrative, as Moscow took commitments despite a skeptical attitude towards climate change argument.

⁷³ Федулова Н. «Замороженные» конфликты в СНГ и позиция России // *Мировая экономика и международные отношения*. 2008. № 1. С. 57–67.

⁷⁴ Obydenkova A., Libman A. Understanding the foreign policy of autocratic actors: ideology or pragmatism? Russia and the Tymoshenko trial as a case study // *Contemporary Politics*. 2014. Vol. 20. No. 3. P. 347–364; Kolstø P. Authoritarian Diffusion, or the Geopolitics of Self-Interest? Evidence from Russia's Patron–Client Relations with Eurasia's De Facto States // *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2020. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2020.1806209

⁷⁵ See, in this result, for example, Vladimir Putin. Address by President of the Russian Federation. March 18, 2014. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

⁷⁶ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. November 30, 2016. URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248; Vladimir Putin. Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club. October 22, 2020. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64261>.

Moscow was hesitant to withdraw support from even those regimes, which became less conducive to its preferences. For example, the Soviet Union played the leading role in the launching of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.⁷⁷ Although the Helsinki Final Act was treated as a victory for the USSR, its norms produced foundations for a critique of Moscow's policies and ran against its immediate interests. The reference to the right of states to choose their security arrangements under CSCE undermined Soviet opposition to the NATO-membership of unified Germany and further expansions of the Alliance.

Nevertheless, Russia did not abandon the Helsinki Final Act and placed high hopes in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, established in the 1990s. It took more than a decade before Moscow finally disillusioned with the OSCE and suggested building the new European security architecture.⁷⁸ It also attempted to recalibrate the commitment to rights of states to ensure their defense through exclusive alliances with the renewed emphasis on the principle of indivisibility of security (which was earlier proclaimed by the CSCE).

More generally, Europe remains the one region where Russia indicates strong interest to revise existing institutions. It is caused by Moscow's dissatisfaction with the dominant role that NATO acquired in the region since the 1990s.⁷⁹ It relies mostly on rhetorical persuasion in attempts to establish the All-European/Euro-Atlantic framework from Lisbon or even from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The most significant practical reflection of its opposition to the existing arrangements was its withdrawal from Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty.⁸⁰ As its efforts to reshape European architecture proved fruitless, Moscow seems increasingly complacent with the continuation of regional bipolarity defined by the divide between Russia and NATO.⁸¹

⁷⁷ On the Washington's initial attitude to the Helsinki Final Act, see Snyder S. B. "Jerry, Don't Go": Domestic Opposition to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act // *Journal of American studies*. 2010. Vol. 44. No. 1. P. 67–81.

⁷⁸ See, also Kropatcheva E. The evolution of Russia's OSCE policy: from the promises of the Helsinki final act to the Ukrainian crisis // *Journal of contemporary European studies*. 2015. Vol. 23. No. 1. P. 6–24.

⁷⁹ For explanation of the Russian frustration with the European arrangement, see Baranovsky V. Russia: a part of Europe or apart from Europe? // *International Affairs*. 2000. Vol. 76. No. 3. P. 443–458.

⁸⁰ However, it took place only after NATO states failed to ratify its adapted version.

⁸¹ See, for example, В МИД считают, что Запад использует ОБСЕ для контроля над восточным пространством. ТАСС. 23.11.2020. URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/10073409?noredir=true>

The preceding analysis demonstrates an entirely different approach to international institutions than in the case of the United States. Although Russian and Soviet experience in institution-building is extensive, this major power demonstrated a slighter appetite to advance changes in international politics by introducing new norms and regimes. With few exceptions, it usually acted as a conservative force sticking to the preservation of existing norms or introducing new institutions aimed to prevent rather than encourage changes. The most significant Soviet deviations from this pattern occurred in the early 1920s, 1950s – 1960s and late 1980s when Moscow found itself in radically different structural positions (when its power was at its low point, its peak, and the decline, respectively).

Both Russia and the Soviet Union were neither too active nor immensely successful in pursuing revisionist policies. Currently, Moscow returned to its usual position of conservative power, calling for the revival of international institutions that took shape during the Cold War era. While compliance with some of its policies with the prevalent norms is up for debate, Russia does not signal ambitious intentions to change the institutions of global governance. Its revisionist attitudes concentrate on the situation in Europe. However, even this dissatisfaction with the institutional framework in this region reflects its long-term grievances of being left on its outskirts, despite Moscow's sense of geographic, cultural, and economic belonging.

China's Path from Pariah to Stakeholder in Global Governance

Despite the differences separating Moscow and Washington, both reached the peak in their power approximately in the second half of the 20th century (Russia experienced another peak in the early 19th century, but the United States managed to stay on top after the Soviet collapse). They orchestrated the construction of the current system of global governance after the Second World War. This commonality makes the distance in their

attitudes to its institutional legacy, especially striking. On the other hand, China occupied a different international position, enjoying limited ownership in some of the key institutions.

The menace of Chinese revisionism plays a central role in the debates on the prospects of global governance. However, its approach towards international institutions is difficult to interpret through explanations focusing only on the patterns of ascent and decline. China demonstrated a drastic evolution from the leading dissident to the existing norms and regimes to their dedicated student and a cautious contestant. Moreover, its record demonstrates that there could be a substantial distance between reformist rhetoric and practices that come from Beijing.

For centuries China dominated its part of the world, organizing a regional order under a tributary system.⁸² The arrival of the European powers to Asia diminished its standing. Since the First Opium War in 1839 – 1842, China experienced the ‘hundred years of humiliation’.⁸³ It had limited ability to define its domestic policies, let alone shape the rules of global governance. Nevertheless, enormous Chinese potential got credit after the Second World War during the creation of the United Nations. China became one of the founders of this organization and acquired permanent seat at its Security Council.

This status was a mostly symbolic acknowledgement as the Civil War in the country once again undermined its agency in international affairs. Moreover, the People’s Republic of Chinese, which emerged from the Communist victory in 1949, struggled to secure external recognition. Thus, the Kuomintang government continued to represent China in the UN until 1971. In these circumstances, Beijing had little opportunities to affect international institutions from within and adopted a critical stance towards most emerging regimes.

Developments in domestic politics and Soviet-Chinese split only reinforced its skeptical attitude towards global governance. It perceived international institutions as instruments of hegemonic domination. For example, China refused to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty or the

⁸² Kang D. C. *East Asia before the West: Five centuries of trade and tribute*. N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2010.

⁸³ See, Scott D. *China and the international system, 1840–1949: power, presence, and perceptions in a century of humiliation*. N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2008; Kaufman A. A. *The “century of humiliation,” then and now: Chinese perceptions of the international order* // *Pacific Focus*. 2010. Vol. 25. No. 1. P. 1–33.

Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. It also criticized peacekeeping as practice inconsistent with the non-interference principle. It claimed that both superpowers disrespected the national sovereignty of other states and demonstrated acute sensitivity to the issue of interference in domestic affairs (which did not preclude it from extending assistance to communist insurgencies across Asia).

Beijing emerged as a loud voice of dissent against international order, despite its limited material strength. To compensate for its constrained capabilities, it attempted to promote a wide coalition of the Third World countries that would be able to challenge the Western oppression. In 1954 China and India announced the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence, which secured broad support at the Bandung Conference next year. However, the coalition of the developing states remained too loose and internally divided to present a viable alternative to the existing institutions. Therefore, Beijing's dissent did not lead to any substantial revisions in international regimes.

Since the 1970s, its skeptical attitude to the global governance started to fade away after normalization of the Sino-American relations and Opening of China under Deng Xiaoping. China's opposition towards international institutions evolved in the inverse direction to its strength. Beijing slowly began to introduce elements of a market economy, gradually reducing barriers for international businesses. This path eventually enabled it to join the WTO in 2001 after more than two decades of reforms. Integration in the global economy and existing regimes regulating international trade and finance helped transform China into an international powerhouse.

While Chinese policies were driven by the strive to increase national prosperity, they led to broader changes in its attitude towards international institutions. Through time Beijing reversed its attitude to many institutions that it previously deplored. For example, it switched from criticizing peacekeeping to becoming one of the leading contributors to the UN operation.⁸⁴ It also joined the nuclear non-proliferation regime in 1992 as another reverse of its policies.

These shifts occurred under the strategy of 'hiding one's capacity while biding one's time' proclaimed by Deng Xiaoping. It presumed low profile

⁸⁴ On the evolution of the Chinese policy towards peacekeeping, see Fung C. J. What explains China's deployment to UN peacekeeping operations? // *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*. 2016. Vol. 16. No. 3. P. 409–441.

and non-confrontational policy, creating preconditions for China's rise. Although Beijing retained its previous sensitivities to the issues of national sovereignty, it also became more cautious in expressing its dissatisfaction with Washington on a wide range of matter. It preferred to hide behind Russia's more forceful criticism of the American policies undermining the UN authority and promoting liberal values. On the other hand, China also demonstrated reluctance to the American calls for it to become a 'responsible stakeholder'. Beijing viewed them as attempts to transfer burdens for supporting conditions favorable for the United States on its shoulders.⁸⁵

Despite its increased acceptance of previously established regimes, China remained somewhat less committed to some international institutions than Russia. For example, it did not ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, nor it accepted the OECD-guidelines in providing development assistance (unlike Moscow). Nevertheless, the policies of the two states in international institutions largely converged since the 1990s. Similarly, to Moscow, Beijing supported the central role of the UN Security Council in authorizing the use of force and accepted the principle of sovereignty as mostly unconditional. The two states aligned closely with their commitment to the existing international institutions and came up with joint initiatives of new regimes in such areas as regulation of the Internet and outer space.⁸⁶

As China's power grew by the late 2000s, it partially abandoned the previous approach of keeping a low profile. Instead, it demanded a greater voice in global fora, including international financial institutions. These aspirations faced opposition from Washington. For example, the US Congress blocked the IMF reform (which transferred greater voting powers to China and other non-Western states) for five years. Such stumbling blocks fueled Beijing's interest in the creation of alternative international institutions, such as the New Development Bank of BRICS and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Moreover, China started to speak about the need to reform global governance to adapt to changing international realities.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Лексютина Я. Китай как ответственная великая держава // Международные процессы. 2018. Т. 16. № 2. С. 60–72.

⁸⁶ See, Соглашение между правительствами государств – членов Шанхайской организации сотрудничества о сотрудничестве в области обеспечения международной информационной безопасности. URL: <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/902289626>; РФ и Китай представили проект договора о предотвращении размещения оружия в космосе. September 4, 2017. URL: <https://tass.ru/kosmos/4529409>

⁸⁷ See Денисов И. Е., Адамова Д. Л. Формулы внешней политики Си Цзиньпина: основные особенности и проблемы интерпретации // Китай в мировой и региональной политике. История и современность. М.: ИДВ РАН, 2017. С. 76–90.

Under the leadership of President Xi, it proclaimed aspirations to create the “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind” and to achieve a “New Model of Major Country Relations.”⁸⁸ In line with its ambitions, Beijing announced the ‘Belt and Road’ initiative, which promised to step-up Chinese investments abroad. However, its rhetoric regarding global governance is rich in catchy slogans but short on specifics. It is hard to discern normative innovations and real differences in the Chinese approach except for the criticism of political conditionality, promoted by the IMF and the World Bank.

Overall, the practice of AIIB and other Chinese institutions providing funding abroad, as well as the stance that was taken by senior officials nominated by China, mostly resembles traditional policies pursued by the international financial institutions. The differences in the patterns of Beijing’s lending are often better explained by the lack of competences rather than as a conscious attempt to do things differently than the West. Meanwhile, the overall tendency to use financial leverage to increase its political clout internationally does not distinguish China from other major powers.⁸⁹

In 2017 President Xi used his speech at the World Economic Forum to take a stand in support of the globalization and economic interdependence. He confessed that “the global governance system has not embraced those new changes and is therefore inadequate in terms of representation and inclusiveness,” pointing to the omissions and anachronisms in rules regulating international trade and finance.⁹⁰ Even with these caveats, the

⁸⁸ On these concepts, Ломанов А. Новые концепции китайской внешней политики // *Азия и Африка сегодня*. 2017. № 12. С. 8–18; Семёнов А. В., Цвык А. В. Концепция “общего будущего человечества” во внешнеполитической стратегии Китая // *Мировая экономика и международные отношения*. 2019. Т. 63. № 8. С. 72–81; Денисов И. Е. Концепция «дискурсивной силы» и трансформация китайской внешней политики при Си Цзиньпине // *Сравнительная политика*. 2020. Т. 11. № 4. С. 42–52. The latter formula is adopted primarily to describe Sino-American relations (see, Ku M. The Motives and Effects of China’s “New Model of Major Country Relations” in China-US Relations // *Journal of International Relations*. 2015. Vol. 3. No. 1. P. 17–42). See also preceding debate on the ‘Beijing Consensus’ as an alternative to the ‘Washington Consensus’ Виноградов А. В., Дегтерев Д.А., Спирина Д.В., Трусова А.А. «Пекинский консенсус» в международном и внутрикитайском политическом дискурсе // *Проблемы Дальнего Востока*. 2018. № 3. С. 17–28.

⁸⁹ For a more comprehensive critique of the representation of Chinese practical steps as revisionist, see Denisov I. Chinese and western values in modern political discourse in China // *Social Sciences*. 2016. Vol. 47. No. 2. P. 70–79; Breslin S. Global reordering and China’s rise: Adoption, adaptation and reform // *The International Spectator*. 2018. Vol. 53. No. 1. P. 57–75; Johnston A. I. China in a World of Orders: Rethinking Compliance and Challenge in Beijing’s International Relations // *International Security*. 2019. Vol. 44. No. 2. P. 9–60.

⁹⁰ Jointly Shoulder Responsibility of Our Times, Promote Global Growth Keynote Speech by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China at the Opening Session of the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2017. Davos, 17 January 2017. URL: http://www.china.org.cn/node_7247529/content_40569136.htm. See, also Tang S. China and the future international order (s) // *Ethics & International Affairs*. 2018. Vol. 32. No. 1. P. 31–43.

Chinese leader sounded like a voice for moderation and continuity in institutional regulations compared to his American counterpart.

Similarly to Moscow, Beijing faces growing criticism regarding its practical steps, which are sometimes interpreted as de-facto revisionism. Such charges concentrate primarily on Chinese policies in its neighborhood. Like other major powers, its opportunistic attempts to advance national interests in these instances do not necessarily imply broader revisions in the rules of the game in the international arena. Recently, China also became more engaged in ongoing contestations regarding the scope of the non-interference principle versus democratic norms and human rights protection. However, as mentioned earlier, these disputes emerge in a somewhat grey area where major powers appeal to various portions of international law.

Beijing's policies reinforce the conclusion that relations between power trends and revisionism are far from straightforward. China cherished radically revisionist attitudes when it was so weak that it had little prospects to implement its vision. It gradually accepted institutions of global governance primarily for the strategic reasons, and this compliance benefited it enormously. Although Beijing signaled an appetite for some revisions in global governance since the early 2010s, it is not yet clear to what extent China is eager or capable to go beyond solemn rhetoric into promoting actual changes.

There are even signs of a growing debate within the country on the risks of overextension (also referred to as strategic overdraft) and desirability to retrench to a less ambitious stance.⁹¹ Beijing's cautious ambivalence draws a stark distinction with American self-confidence in institution-building. It also departs from Moscow's vocal conservatism on the matters of global governance.

However, close alignment with Russia on those issues became an important result of the evolving Chinese stance on international institutions. It proceeded despite differences in historical legacies and structural trends

⁹¹ Денисов И.Е. Внешняя политика Китая при Си Цзиньпине: преемственность и новаторство. Контуры глобальных трансформаций: политика, экономика, право. 2017. Т. 10. № 5. С. 83–98; Лукин А. В. Дискуссия о развитии Китая и перспективы его внешней политики // Полис. Политические исследования. 2019. № 1. С. 71–89; Goldstein A. China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform, and Resistance // International Security. 2020. Vol. 45. No. 1. P. 164–201.

between the two states. China's rapid rise and the previously marginal status during the Cold War did not preclude Beijing from sharing Moscow's concerns regarding the preservation of the existing institutions. The two states joined forces in opposition over Washington's revisionist initiatives of reshaping rules in a global economy and its efforts to universalize the model of political liberalism.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis demonstrated that the structural dynamic of changing material capabilities is not sufficient to explain revisionist policies. There is no doubt that current major powers appreciate the importance of global governance. As a result, disputes over international institutions constitute an important source of their tensions. However, the role that major powers attribute to international institutions does not predetermine their strategic choices in favor of supporting existing regimes or seeking their replacement. Their policies reflect the recurring patterns of behavior and at the same time grave inconsistencies in their attitude to the international regimes.

The United States, in times of its ascent and decline, demonstrated the strive to continuously reshape norms and regimes that fit their interests. The recent transition of the American leadership did not change this deeply entrenched operational code. While Biden team committed to abandoning many of Trump's policies, there is little prospect that it will seek a rollback to the preceding status-quo. However, the one challenge that the new administration faces is relative drainage in fresh ideas about possible ways to revise international institutions.

Therefore, the departure of Donald Trump does not presume prospects for greater understanding with Moscow and Beijing on the issues of global governance for Washington. Revisionist tendencies led to deep divisions between the United States and the two other major powers. Despite diverging trajectories of national development, Russia and China retain a strong commitment to operate through the existing institutional framework rather than seek its replacement.

Although some foreign observers point to the differences in their attitudes towards global governance,⁹² their attitudes on international norms and regimes converged over the similar agenda of preserving the centrality of the UN machinery and opposition to the Western attempts to export its political model as a generally recognized norm. Russia, in particular, demonstrates its firm commitment to institutional conservatism, which fits its historical record. Meanwhile, China which previously was critical of global governance, found ways to improve its position through international institutions. The two states came to similar policies, even though through different pathways.

In the current circumstances, Russian and American approaches to global governance are relatively fixed and represent the two opposing poles of uttermost conservatism and relentless revisionism. Henceforth, Beijing faces the most acute choices of the three major powers. China could try to respond to the increasing tensions with the United States by developing its own approach to revising international institutions in some different direction. This choice would foster competition between the two revisionist visions advocated by Beijing and Washington. However, it would also test the reliability of Sino-Russian alignment. Otherwise, China could prefer to work through existing institutions even if they do not remain in future as beneficial for it as they used to be in the previous decades. This approach would require greater diplomatic discipline on behalf of Beijing, but it is also viable.

⁹² See, for example, Kaczmarek M. Convergence or divergence? Visions of world order and the Russian-Chinese relationship // *European Politics and Society*. 2019. Vol. 20. No. 2. P. 207–224.

 ValdaiClub

 ValdaiClub

 ValdaiClub

valdai@valdaiclub.com



Council on Foreign and Defense Policy



RIAC
Russian International
Affairs Council



MGIMO
UNIVERSITY



NATIONAL RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY