

# Sino-US Competition and the Emerging Network of Liberal Coalitions

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As it witnesses rising China's assertive diplomacy and growing military might, Washington is seeking to restrain Beijing's economic growth and technological development. The Biden administration's digital-liberal coalition initiative resonates with liberal states which have growing concerns about democratic backsliding all over the world and China's undue influence on other countries' domestic politics and civil society. The United States and its liberal allies are increasingly likely to cooperate in technological innovation, the development of standards and norms, and the protection of human rights, resisting this authoritarian threat to their interests and values. However, it is unclear whether and how China will adjust its foreign-policy strategy and which option non-liberal and/or developing states will prefer in this uncertain era of Sino-US order competition in global politics.

**Keywords** Sino-US competition, international order, liberal coalition, alliance network, power transition, anti-Chinese mood

## Introduction

What is the future of international relations? In the post-pandemic world, few claim to offer a definitive answer to that question. However, most agree that US-China relations will be a crucial factor in the future world order. Although the two powers agree on the need for cooperation on some issues, such as climate change, many experts now describe their relationship as strategic or hegemonic competition over global—especially Asian—political and economic matters (e.g., Mearsheimer 2014, chap. 10; 2021). Some even suggest that we could be entering a new Cold War in which the United States and China will each develop and lead its own coalition, dividing the world into two competing and conflicting blocs (e.g., Nathan 2020; Pei 2019). In contrast, others insist that it would be nearly impossible for the two powers to decouple due to their high level of economic

interdependence, which has been a major source of both countries' prosperity and stability in the post-Cold War period (e.g., Christensen 2021; Nye 2021).

US-China competition is not a problem for these two countries alone. Most, if not all, states around the world are seriously concerned about the implications of this competition between two great powers. In particular, Asian states face a choice between the rising power and the declining hegemon, as their preferences concerning political, economic, and military issues based on their interests and values increasingly conflict. When the United States and China clash on such issues as the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, protests in Hong Kong, and the human rights of Uighurs in Xinjiang, their allies and neighbors must make tough decisions regarding whom to support—America, China, or neither. Nearly all Asian states have adopted a hedging strategy, declining to choose one nation over the other and attempting to maintain good relations with both sides. But as the competition grows in intensity, many agree that this hedging strategy will not remain viable for long.

The present article analyzes recent developments among the US-led coalition of democratic states. Since President Joe Biden's inauguration, the United States has sought to restore its longtime relations with its allies in Asia and Europe, which were damaged by the Trump administration's "America first" policies. The Biden administration's goal is to construct a complex multilateral network rather than simply a multilateral security coalition—one based on common interests, shared values, and advanced technology. The US alliance policy aims to maintain a global position of leadership in opposition to China and Russia, which are clearly identified as challengers to America's national interests and values, as well as to the liberal international order. America's allies and friends do not endorse the idea of containing China, but they do hope to maintain the rules-based order that has been built and consolidated under American leadership since the end of World War II. At this time, how the liberal network composed of multiple coalitions will grow or change remains unclear. However, there is definitely a relationship between the US strategy for this network and the democratic economies' concerns about the possibility of a world without a liberal order.

Before addressing the emergence of this liberal network, I will discuss Sino-US competition within the frameworks of power transition and order transition and explain how the United States has changed its China policy from engagement to prevention since the 2008 global financial crisis. I will then examine the current US approach to China and the responses of its partners, focusing on the Biden administration's strategy toward its Asian and European allies and the anti-China mood that has developed in liberal states such as Australia and South Korea. Lastly, the study discusses how Washington aims to mobilize its own and its allies' resources through (re)building multiple coalitions of liberal states across security, technology, and values, and highlights how the strategic interaction between the declining hegemon (the United States) and its status-quo

partners (democratic advanced economies) has become sufficiently conspicuous and vibrant to constrain, at least to some extent, China's ambitions and assertive behavior.

## China's Rise and the International Order

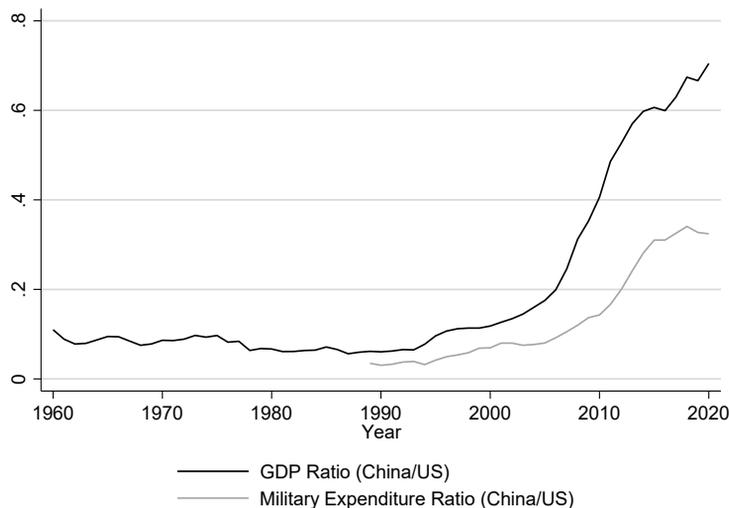
Just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a debate began over the durability of the ensuing unipolar system. Some balance-of-power theorists, such as Christopher Layne (1993) and John Mearsheimer (1994/1995), predicted the emergence of an anti-US coalition among major powers as a natural response to American dominance of the international system. But liberals opposed this idea, stressing the complex interdependence among the United States and other major powers and America's role as a benign hegemon providing public goods—specifically, institutions that enhanced security and prosperity for all members of the international order (e.g., Ikenberry 2001). Liberal scholars supported the idea of engaging former members of the Soviet bloc as well as China (e.g., Christensen 2006; Shambaugh 1996). Although realists preferred containing China so as not to allow the creation of “a monster,” the Clinton administration adopted the liberal option by declaring a strategy of engagement and enlargement. Against this background, China has maintained rapid and steady growth since the 1980s, becoming the world's leading manufacturer in the twenty-first century and rivaling the United States as the world's largest economy in Asia.

The United States maintained its engagement strategy with China until the 2008 global financial crisis. As US power seemed to decline more rapidly than expected in the late 2000s, China's foreign policy toward its neighbors became more assertive. In particular, Beijing claimed its historical sovereignty over the South China Sea and began to build artificial islands there, generating serious concerns among Southeast Asian states and forcing the United States to reconsider its China policy. In other words, China's rise led to an upsurge in its neighbors' and the US's fears about China. After the US economy recovered during Barack Obama's second term, many US experts asserted their country's superiority over China and other rising powers, but they were reluctant to advocate for continued engagement with China. As it declared a US “pivot to Asia,” the Obama administration made efforts to network with its Asian allies, most of which had been aligned bilaterally with the United States during the Cold War. For example, Washington tried to reinvigorate the trilateral relationship among the United States, South Korea, and Japan by functioning as a mediator to resolve its two Asian allies' deep and long-lasting animosity. It also strengthened the multilateral relationship among the United States, Australia, and Japan, and pulled India into its own orbit, moving beyond the lingering distrust between those two nations.

Since the late 2000s, US experts in foreign affairs have changed their minds regarding whether China is satisfied with the current international order. Based on the theory of power transition that was originally suggested and developed by A. F. K. Organski and his students (Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980), many wondered whether China would catch up with the United States and whether China would be dissatisfied with a US-led international order. Although the world experienced a peaceful transition in global leadership in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because the declining power (Britain) and the rising power (the United States) saw each other as ideologically similar and politically compatible (Schake 2017), many rising powers have been regarded as revisionist and challenging, especially by hegemons and their allies. Until the global financial crisis, China seemed happy to grow under America's wing, which afforded essential elements for growth, such as capital and market opportunities. China expanded and deepened its economic relationships with major states and became a member of many international organizations. But its assertive diplomacy in the South China Sea and its Belt and Road Initiative changed China's image from the partner to the challenger of major states, especially the United States.

The power gap between the United States and China has shrunk rapidly since the late 2000s. As illustrated in Figure 1, the ratio of China's GDP to that of the United States rose from 0.11 in 1996 to 0.20 in 2006 to 0.60 in 2016 and then to 0.70 in 2020. Although China's relative military capability is weaker than it is in the economic realm, China's military expenditure has also undergone increasingly rapid growth, from 3 percent of US spending in 1990 to 7 percent in 2000, 14 percent in 2010, and 32 percent in 2020. There has been a time lag between the decreases in the economic and military power gaps, but US policymakers and other experts have certainly perceived that China is growing not only as an economic power but also in the military realm, unlike Japan and Germany in the post-World War II era. This is the background against which the Obama administration declared America's pivot to Asia, as it recognized the Asian dragon's increasing capabilities and influence. Although there has been no direct confrontation between the United States and China over leadership in Asia, it seems evident that the United States does not wish to share Asian leadership and influence with its primary competitor.

As the United States recovered from the financial crisis, American policymakers and experts began to stress its superior power and status. They suggested implicitly or explicitly that there was little likelihood of power transition between the United States and China. For example, Joseph Nye (2015) and Michael Beckley (2018) provide succinct explanations as to why the twenty-first century is still an American century, not a Chinese one. They make their case with reference to many facets of national power—not only economic but also military, diplomatic, and in terms of demographic structure, research and development, technology, and allies. As a leading power since the end of World War II, the United States has

**Figure 1.** Comparison of US and Chinese Power, 1960-2020

Source: World Bank National Accounts Data (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-US>); SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (<https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>).

amassed considerable military, economic, and technological resources and has consolidated its position as a trusted ally and authoritative leader in international society. Moreover, the United States and other major powers have little incentive to challenge each other and thus risk the security and prosperity they now enjoy under the unipolar system (Monteiro 2014).

However, US global leadership has faced its most serious challenge not internationally but in the domestic arena. The 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president prompted the world to debate the future of the liberal international order. The Trump administration exhibited little willingness to maintain a US-led order; instead, Trump seemed ready to rupture the international status quo in pursuit of national interests. As a result, the liberal world order that had become established since the end of World War II, and more firmly so since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, was challenged not only by a rising China and a revived Russia but also by a declining hegemon and its weary public. In this sense, the United States became a revisionist state that showed little respect for international norms, agreements, and treaties such as the Paris climate agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (Chan 2021). As this development displayed a clear distinction between power transition and order transition, more scholars began to examine what causes an order transition, how power and order interact, and how their interaction affects international politics. For example, Kai He and Huiyun Feng (2020) suggest three levels of order transition: norm-based, power-

based, and institution-based. Each level is divided in turn into three arenas: security, politics, and economy.

Overall, scholars and experts have examined Sino-US relations in increasingly varied ways during the last two decades. Some have focused on the two great powers' competition at the dyad level, their main area of concentration being great power politics and hegemonic transition. Who will be the ruler in international politics? Will we see a new global hegemon? Others have considered whether and how Sino-US relations will lead to system-level changes in international relations. Few dispute that the international order has been seriously affected by great power competition and wars in previous eras, especially the Napoleonic Wars and World Wars I and II (Ikenberry 2001). After defeating Nazi Germany and imperial Japan, the United States began to install and expand an international order based on liberal democracy and free trade. During the era of this post-war order, politically democratic and economically open states could increase their power, prosperity, and status. Another turning point could arise in the coming decades.

The current competition between the United States and China will affect not only their influence and status but also those of many other states. The result of their competition will shape the international environment in which all states strive to survive and prosper. Most Asian states have already been caught in a dilemma. When China was generally observing the liberal order and not risking conflict with the United States, its neighbors expected a durable order in which a dominant power could successfully engage a rising power as a satisfied member of international society. But today, a gloomier picture prevails, because the continuance of the liberal international order is less certain. It could even be replaced by a new hegemon, at least in Asia. This is why many international relations scholars have turned their attention to prior instances of non-liberal, hierarchical orders like the Chinese world order in East Asia (Kang 2010).

In this situation, more emphasis has been placed on the two major powers' allies and friends as a factor in international politics. Woosang Kim (1991) has argued that international war tends to result not from a power transition between great powers but from a transition in their alliance blocs. Since having strong and reliable allies provides significant advantages, we should, when examining the US-China competition, also take the strength of their international coalitions into account. However, it is not easy to forecast what coalitions will emerge, because many interlinked factors will influence the future, including the two powers' strategies and interactions as well as their allies' decisions and domestic politics. Nevertheless, given the uncertain future of the liberal international order, more studies are now focusing on liberal US allies' responses and their combined strategies, seeking to anticipate what role they will play in the near future and whether they can overcome collective action and free rider problems, even in the absence of a dominant hegemony.

## America's Turn toward the Indo-Pacific Region

As a response to China's economic and military rise, the United States shifted its China policy from engagement to prevention during the Trump administration. Washington gave up trying to deal with China's hostile intentions and began seeking instead to curb its economic capabilities. By increasing its levies on Chinese goods and protecting US advanced technology, Washington initiated a trade conflict with Beijing. Although some warned that nobody would benefit from a conflict between the world's two largest economies, the Trump administration justified its hardline policy on China by emphasizing the rising power's challenges to the US economy as well as to its security and values (White House 2020). Indeed, Trump's move gained support from the American public as well as from some experts. Some realists, such as Randall Schweller (2018), defended the new approach as an appropriate adaptation to changes in American power and influence in global politics. According to them, the proponents of spreading the liberal international order during the post-Cold War period pursued ambitious foreign-policy goals, such as promoting democracy, that were beyond America's capabilities, wasting its resources and influence. The Trump administration turned away from this fruitless path.

However, the Trump administration failed to effectively exploit its valuable Cold War legacy—a strong network of allies—to restrain China. By criticizing longtime US allies and major media outlets, President Trump weakened global trust in and respect for American leadership and democracy. In contrast, the Biden administration has stressed its willingness to work with its allies and friends in dealing with authoritarian and transnational challenges, declaring that “America is back.” Indeed, although the two administrations have shared the goal of preventing China from catching up with the United States, they have differed in their methods. Unlike the Trump administration which stressed the rising power's “numerous challenges to United States' national interests” (White House 2020), the Biden administration has highlighted the rules-based order seriously challenged by Beijing and called for a liberal coalition, creating and driving multilateral cooperation such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad—the US, Japan, Australia, and India), AUKUS (the US, UK, and Australia), and the Summit for Democracy (e.g., Blinken 2022). These moves have immediately generated concern and opposition in China, but they have also restored, to some extent, the confidence of fellow democracies in American leadership and the liberal international order.

The United States now has at least two reasons to fortify its network of alliances. First, it has many liberal partners. Its allies have increased in number and liberalized since the 1950s. The United States has continuously increased the number of its defense pacts, from thirty-six in 1951 to forty-three in 1971, fifty-

**Table 1.** Levels of Political Democracy and Economic Dependence on the US

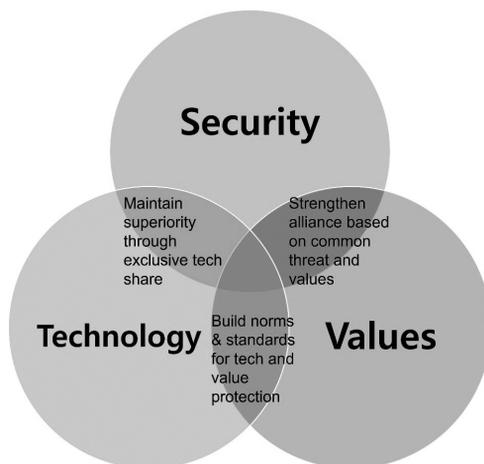
Year	Polity Score/ Polity IV dataset (-10 to 10)			Liberal Democracy/ V-Dem dataset (0 to 1)			Economic Dependence on US (Bilateral trade/GDP)		
	All	US Allies	US Asian Allies	All	US Allies	US Asian Allies	All	US Allies	US Asian Allies
1950s	-0.24	2.42	5.08	0.27	0.36	0.47	0.053	0.073	0.060
1960s	-0.92	2.98	4.03	0.25	0.39	0.42	0.033	0.050	0.045
1970s	-2.18	1.91	1.61	0.23	0.38	0.39	0.037	0.055	0.044
1980s	-1.31	4.06	3.53	0.25	0.41	0.45	0.042	0.071	0.039
1990s	1.79	6.43	8.16	0.33	0.50	0.58	0.048	0.096	0.038
2000-2012	2.95	6.77	7.09	0.37	0.54	0.59	0.040	0.080	0.031

Sources: Polity IV Dataset (Marshall, Gurr, and Jaggers 2019); V-Dem Dataset (Coppedge et al. 2021); Historical Bilateral Trade and Gravity Dataset (Fouquin and Hugot 2016); Formal Interstate Alliance Dataset v.4.1 (Gibler 2009).

two in 1991, and fifty-five in 2001, through bilateral and multilateral alliances. Overall, the level of liberal democracy among its allies has risen, reaching its highest level in recent years, as the allies' polity and liberal democracy scores have averaged 6.77 and 0.54, respectively, in the period 2000-2012. US allies in Asia show a similar pattern, and their average level of liberal democracy is slightly higher than that of all US allies (see Table 1). The United States, which previously worked with certain dictators against other dictators, now has many democratic friends with which it shares not only security interests but also political institutions and identities as it witnesses and seeks to respond to the rise of an authoritarian power.

Second, the United States' liberal partners represent a greater portion of the global economy but are less dependent on the US economically. After World War II, these partners, including Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, South Korea, and Australia, became major economies with advanced technology, at least partly due to public goods provided by the United States. The rest of the world—i.e., all major states other than the two great rivals (the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the United States and China today)—is more significant today than it was previously, and some argue that a multipolar world or a world without poles is emerging or has emerged (Kupchan 2012; Zakaria 2009). Moreover, it is natural for the United States to make efforts to restore interdependence between itself and its allies, which has weakened in Asia since World War II and globally in the years since the Cold War ended. As summarized in Table 1, the economic dependence of America's Asian allies on

Figure 2. Linkage of Security, Technology, and Values



Source: Jung (2021, 301, Figure 9-2).

the United States has continuously decreased since the 1950s, and their level of dependence on the United States has been lower than that of all states since the 1980s. The level of dependence on the United States of all America's allies, which increased from the 1960s to the 1990s, has shown a decreasing trend over the past decade or more.

How can the Biden administration restore its alliance network? What efforts can it make to establish a durable and efficient coalition among liberal and developed states? Washington has decided to mobilize its allies and partners by linking three sectors: security, technology, and values (see Figure 2). Its goal is not just to restore traditional security alliances but to build a complex network of alliances encompassing all three of these sectors of concern. This is a viable plan because its longtime friends are status-quo powers, leaders in technological innovation, and supporters of liberal values at home and abroad who share many US concerns across the three sectors. Many key questions overlap the boundaries between sectors. How can democracies decrease their vulnerability to foreign intervention in defense networks and domestic politics (security and technology)? What norms and standards should be established to protect individual privacy and civil society from state and foreign surveillance (technology and values)? What policies should be adopted to counter foreign autocracies' military aggression and violations of human rights (security and values)? In emphasizing these concerns, Washington has proposed a liberal-digital network that seeks common security and prosperity in opposition to authoritarian challenges.

The Biden administration has initiated a complex network of alliances in Europe and Asia. In September 2021, the United States and the European Union

formed a Trade and Technology Council (TTC) aimed at strengthening economic and technological cooperation bilaterally and promoting “a democratic model of digital governance” globally (European Union 2021). Although some conflicting interests exist among states and companies on the two sides of the Atlantic, they agree on the need for greater cooperation to achieve a more just and more prosperous Europe and America (duPont 2021; Hillman and Grundhoefer 2021). The TTC’s ten working groups cover many issues across the economic, technological, and normative sectors, including “technology standards cooperation,” “climate and clean tech,” “misuse of technology threatening security and human rights,” and “global trade challenges.”

With its Asian allies and their companies, Washington embarked on building the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and supply chains for high-tech products such as semiconductors and large-capacity batteries (Tyson and Zysman 2021; White House 2021a). At summits in April and May 2021, respectively, political leaders of the United States and Japan, and of the United States and South Korea announced their plans for deep and expanded cooperation on advanced technologies, supply chains, climate change, and global vaccination programs (Blue House 2021; White House 2021b). Subsequently, Samsung decided to construct a semiconductor fabrication plant in Texas, and other semiconductor and battery companies also indicated their plans to invest in manufacturing high-tech key products, in accordance with the agreements between political leaders. Although it is unclear how America’s Asian allies and their companies will survive the trend toward deglobalization and decoupling, they all recognize the increasingly strong need to build reliable supply chains and to fight economic and industrial espionage and digital authoritarianism, as seen in the 2022 summits between the presidents of South Korea and the United States and among Quad leaders (Fedasiuk 2021; Solís 2021).

Indeed, most international issues between the United States and China are multi-sectoral. The Hong Kong protests may seem to be a normative issue related to human rights and protecting democracy. But they are also a serious security issue for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), whose main concern is internal stability. The Biden administration has sought to persuade other liberal states to impose sanctions on products from Xinjiang, claiming that the Chinese government is engaging in human rights violations and forced labor there. When the United States and its Five Eyes allies (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom) refused to use Huawei’s information and communication products, their rationale was grounded in national security, not economics. Hence, many US foreign-policy experts have suggested a digital (or tech) alliance network among liberal advanced economies since the Trump administration, even though the United States under Trump showed little interest in projecting a strong alliance strategy (e.g., Imbrie et al. 2020; Rasser et al. 2020). The Biden administration has now brought this idea of a US-led liberal-digital alliance into

being.

In short, the United States is directing its efforts toward preventing China's economic rise. By sanctioning Chinese products, sharing advanced technologies with liberal allies, and building resilient supply chains for key products, Washington aims to maintain its superiority over this rising, challenging power. To its benefit, the declining hegemon has many longtime allies and partners that are liberal and powerful. Rather than risking a military confrontation with China, it has focused on restraining the challenger's economic rise, which has been helping to fund its military development and assertive diplomacy. Unlike his predecessor, President Biden prefers an alliance-based response, stressing common threats, advanced technology, and liberal values. Washington has focused on strengthening its capacity to lead technological innovation in crucial economic sectors, such as renewable energy or communication and information networks, without opening up opportunities for Beijing's latecomer advantage and economic espionage.

One dilemma Washington faces is how to deal with politically illiberal but strategically important states. As discussed above, many longtime US allies are liberal and advanced economies. But there are other potentially significant partners for Washington in its competition with China and Russia. Good examples are Vietnam, Singapore, and Saudi Arabia, which were not invited by the United States to the 2021 Summit for Democracy (Tiezzi 2021), although there were some controversial countries—including Pakistan, Angola, Iraq, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo—among the 110 invitees (Zakheim 2021). Who is qualified to be a US partner? To restrain the aggression and influence of authoritarian states, the United States should pull these states' neighbors and key regional players into its orbit. If not, Beijing and Moscow may seize the opportunity to attract uninvited states, creating an anti-liberal authoritarian coalition. The remaining task for the Biden administration is working out how to create a cohesive and efficient coalition among liberal states without losing non-liberal partners that are up for grabs between Washington and Beijing.

### Multiple Coalitions of Politically Liberal and Technologically Advanced States

What will the future US-led liberal coalition look like? The answer to that question depends mainly on the responses of liberal US allies and partners. Will they choose one state over the other or maintain their hedging strategy? We may see more variation in their foreign policies toward the United States and China than is currently observed, depending on the contested states' geographic locations, economic vulnerabilities, and ideological identities. However, we can expect liberal states to align themselves with the United States and work toward

maintaining a rules-based order as they become increasingly concerned about (1) democratic backsliding all over the world and (2) the intensification of China's undue influence over their democratic processes and economies.

First, the United States and its liberal partners now share stronger concerns about the worldwide decline of democracy, which is often referred to as democratic backsliding. According to Freedom House (2021), the level of democracy decreased in seventy-three countries in 2020 and increased in only twenty-eight. This declining trend has continued for the last fifteen years. Based on quantitative analysis and case studies, Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2021) point to sixteen democracies in which there has been autocratization, reversion or erosion away from electoral or liberal democracy, over the period 1997-2019 as illustrating a complex causal path from political polarization to democratic backsliding.<sup>1</sup> Since the late-1990s, in the wake of the wave of democratization that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many scholars have highlighted the increasing number of mixed regimes—something which they have termed “immature democracy” (Mansfield and Snyder 1995), “illiberal democracy” (Zakaria 1997), or “competitive autocracy” (Levitsky and Way 2002)—that failed to become fully democratized. Over the past decade, these scholars' focus has switched from democratization to autocratization. The pandemic has accelerated concerns over a further and stronger wave of democratic backsliding that has accompanied economic recession and the growth of political extremism.

In this uncertain era of autocratization, liberal democracies are likely to try to build a deeper and stronger affinity with each other and further develop their cooperation. Although many countries have long supported a high level of cooperation between democracies, some suggest that the more democracies there are among the world's states, the less cooperation and peace there is among them (Gartzke and Weisiger 2013). Indeed, we witnessed a split between the United States and its longtime partners during the Iraq War, about ten years after the end of the Cold War. In this regard, the Biden administration's emphasis on common values such as human rights and liberal democracy may draw not only attention but also support from liberal elites and publics within and across democracies. As long as Washington is seeking to protect existing democracies rather than promoting the creation of new ones, it can justify its global leadership and mobilize resources more easily. But one difficulty facing the United States is how to persuade the American public to support the idea that this American leadership role is consistent with its national interests.

Second, since the late 2010s liberal (and non-liberal) states and publics across the globe have been increasingly concerned about China's economic as well as political influence. The CCP's covert activities aimed at changing its image and legitimizing its power in Australia and New Zealand have been exposed, attracting much attention from US allies and other states. Using political donations and the Chinese media, mobilizing the Chinese diaspora and students,

and coercing individuals and groups unfavorable to the CCP, the Chinese government has increased its influence not only over liberal states' economies and politics but also over their civil societies and academia, with the purpose of drawing them into the Chinese orbit (Anderlini and Smyth 2017; Hamilton 2018). The warning bell has been rung in other regions too. For example, Thorsten Benner and his colleagues (2018) concluded that China's influence over political and economic elites, public opinion, civil society, and academia in European states had been underestimated compared to that of Russia. They strongly suggested that Europe should collectively confront China's influence in order to protect its own values and interests. Such analyses of China's covert efforts to influence politics and economics in foreign states have enhanced liberal groups' awareness of the authoritarian plot against them (e.g., Brattberg et al. 2021; Cardenal et al. 2017; Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020).

Unsurprisingly, public opinion on China in democratic states has become increasingly unfavorable over the last decade or so. According to Pew Research Center studies (Silver, Devlin, and Huang 2021; Silver, Huang, and Clancy 2022) of sixteen liberal democracies, between 2007 and 2022, there was an average 28.6 percentage point increase in the proportion of respondents who held an unfavorable ("very unfavorable" or "unfavorable") view of China (see Table 2). More than 60 percent of the public in all the democracies studied, except for Greece, now have a negative view of China. Other polls yield very similar results. The proportion of the Australian population who viewed China favorably decreased from 61 percent in 2006 to 32.44 percent in 2021 (Lowy Institute Poll 2021), and there was a significant decrease in the proportion of South Koreans who regarded China's image as that of a cooperator—from 46.4 percent in 2007 to 14.5 percent in 2021 (IPUS 2022). Many analyses show that there is a growing anti-Chinese mood not only in the West but also in other regions, including East Asia (Choe 2021), Southeast Asia (Hutt 2020), and Africa (Sibiri 2021).

It should be noted that political leaders of liberal states may wish to take account of or even exploit their constituents' negative views of China, especially during election campaigns, economic troubles, and times of social unrest. Democratic leaders cannot easily disregard Beijing, which is a crucial economic partner, but they should be more responsive to their citizens who are anxious about the rising power's threats to their way of life. Of course, "China bashing" can hurt a country's economy and carry a high cost. So, the most crucial factor for the liberal coalition is whether the United States and its allies can build a resilient and effective supply chain in a short time. Without it, support among a liberal audience for making an economic world without China could wither, if not disappear altogether. Up to now, liberal audiences in Asia and Europe have generally supported their governments' decisions to participate in the US-led global economy and technological innovation.

The remaining question is how effectively and continuously the United States

**Table 2.** Unfavorable Views of China in Liberal Democracies

Country	2007 (%)	2021 (%)	2022 (%)	Change 2007–2022
United States		76	82	
Canada	37	73	74	+37
Sweden	40	80	83	+43
Netherlands		72	75	
Germany	54	71	74	+20
Belgium		67	61	
France	51	66	68	+17
United Kingdom	27	63	69	+42
Italy	61	60	64	+3
Spain	43	57	63	+14
Greece		42	50	
Japan	67	88	87	+20
Australia	40*	85	86	+46
South Korea	42	77	80	+38
Taiwan		69		
New Zealand		67		
<b>Average</b>	<b>46.2</b>	<b>67.1</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>+28.6</b>

\* Surveyed in 2008

Source: Silver, Devlin, and Huang (2021, 33-36); Silver, Huang, and Clancy (2022, 32-36).

can mobilize the resources of its worried liberal partners against the authoritarian challenges. In an era of international deglobalization and domestic polarization in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington should try to rally foreign democracies without causing domestic opposition. Up to now, the Biden administration has invigorated and driven various alliance organizations in at least three sectors: security-intelligence (e.g., the Five Eyes), technology-economy (e.g., the Chip Alliance and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework), and values-norms (the Summit for Democracy). Some alliances extend across two or three sectors, such as the US-EU Trade and Technology Council (technology and values) and the Quad (security, technology, and values). Rather than one big tent, smaller tents of various sizes have been (re)built for various liberal allies and partners whose concerns related to China and Russia differ according to their geographical locations, degree of economic interdependence, and technological level.

This strategy for building a network of liberal coalitions covering multiple sectors represents the United States' prescriptions for the roles to be played by each of its allies and partners. Washington does not expect all-round players but instead assigns each state a certain role. For example, South Korea has been asked to be a member of the global supply chain for semiconductors and other critical products, while Australia and the United States have launched another military alliance with the United Kingdom to continue their intelligence sharing. In its meetings with the European Union and its member-states, the United States calls for the establishment of norms and laws protecting maritime freedom and freedom in cyberspace. Rather than distinguishing between core allies (e.g., members of the D-10 strategy forum and the T-12 group of techno-democracies) and others (Cohen and Fontaine 2020; Gordon and Jai 2021), Washington is seeking to act as the hub of multiple liberal coalitions, each of which is composed of more specifically like-minded states with common concerns.

Some expect a new Cold War in global politics. But it is too early to predict the future of Sino-US relations. In the wake of the pandemic, the leaders of the two great powers recognize the need to cooperate in combating transnational challenges such as climate change and COVID-19. Instead of confronting China in all sectors, the United States aims to restrain its growth by allying with liberal powers through multilateral or minilateral coalitions. The Biden administration aims to create a complex network of multiple alliances based on common security threats, technology, and values, relentlessly emphasizing how authoritarian powers are challenging the liberal world's values and interests. The declining hegemon's approach to the rising power may drive the world into two leagues, rather than two rigid blocs, in which states interact more with members of their own league politically, economically, and culturally but also cooperate occasionally with members of the other league (for a similar view, see Owen 2021).

In response to the US-led alliance network, China has built and strengthened its regional institutions, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), most of which are regarded as having been designed to undermine and displace existing institutions. Some experts now insist that China already initiated a strategy to displace the United States in global politics some decades ago, at the time of the "traumatic trifecta" of the Tiananmen Square protests (1989), the Gulf War (1990-91), and the Soviet Union's collapse (1991) (Doshi 2021). What should be noted is that Beijing frames many areas of US-China conflict, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, and Hong Kong and Xinjiang, as sovereignty issues, which it considers to be nonnegotiable (Economy 2022, chap. 3). However, their competition over some issues does not necessarily prevent their cooperation over others. That the two great powers are in competition seems inevitable, but this can be managed by their leaders as long as they believe in the need for a strategic framework that will ensure stability and prosperity for both sides.<sup>2</sup>

## Conclusion

The United States under Trump and Biden has shifted its policy toward China from engagement to prevention. By working to restrain Beijing's economic rise, Washington is seeking to maintain its influence and status in international politics. Toward this end, the Biden administration has sought to build a complex alliance network among liberal states that share not only common values but also technology and security interests. Its emphasis on the authoritarian threat resonates to some extent with liberal states' growing concern about China's influence over their domestic politics and civil society. There is an increasing feeling among the United States and its liberal allies that they share a threat perception and an interest in cooperating in the areas of technological innovation, standards and norms development, and human rights protection. The emergence of this liberal network will affect China's strategy toward its neighbors and major states and the future of international relations.

Since the 2010s the United States and China have entered an era of order competition in global politics. The two great powers are competing to be order-makers, rather than order-takers, through acquiring superior power, establishing norms, and building institutions. They criticize each other for challenging stability and order in international politics. In this situation, the rest of the world will have to decide what course to take. Overall, liberal states in Asia and Europe are responding positively to the establishment of US-led multilateral coalitions across the sectors of security, technology, and values. However, not all liberal states will be satisfied with their roles prescribed by Washington.<sup>3</sup> It is inevitable that the United States and its allies will negotiate their roles in the liberal international order as they work together for democracy and freedom in world politics.

The many politically illiberal and economically developing states constitute another factor that will affect the future of the international order. These states have stuck to their hedging strategy between Washington and Beijing, but they are becoming increasingly concerned about their strategic choice. I believe their decisions will be affected mainly by the visions and strategies the two great powers have for an international order. Which order is more attractive for a middle power in the post-pandemic world? Which public or club goods can be promised and provided through a revised or new order? The leaders of the two great powers should pay attention to which international order is perceived as beneficial and legitimate not only by their domestic constituents but also by an international audience.

## Acknowledgements

This research was financially supported by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University under the project of “Laying the Groundwork for Unification.” The author thanks Seungjoo Lee, Hakjae Kim, and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful and helpful comments.

## Notes

1. The sixteen countries are Bolivia (2007-2019), Brazil (2016-2019), Dominican Republic (2014-2018), Ecuador (2009-2017), Greece (2017-2019), Hungary (2011-2019), Macedonia (2010-2016), Nicaragua (2005-2019), Poland (2016-2019), Russia (2000-2019), Serbia (2013-2019), Turkey (2010-2019), Ukraine (2010-2018), United States (2016-2019), Venezuela (1998-2019), and Zambia (2016-2019). See Haggard and Kaufman (2021, 13, Table 1).
2. For the concept of “managed strategic competition” between the United States and China and their possible joint strategic framework, see Rudd (2022, 13-16).
3. In this regard, future studies need to pay attention to how the United States, liberal states, and illiberal states have voted in the United Nations (UN) during the Trump and Biden eras. The global annual average for all countries’ voting coincidence with the United States in the UN General Assembly decreased from 36.6 percent during the Obama era (2009-2016) to 31.5 percent in the Trump era (2017-2020). See US State Department (2021, 6).

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