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Discerning States' Revisionist and Status-Quo Orientations: Comparing China and the U.S.

Abstract

International relations literature is replete with references to states' motivations as revisionist or status-quo oriented. Such attributions are especially prevalent in discourse on the power-transition theory, suggesting that the danger of war rises when a revisionist China catches up to a status-quo U.S. Such attributions, however, are rarely supported by systematic empirical evidence providing a direct comparison of Chinese and U.S. conduct. We undertake an analysis of how these countries have behaved differently over time according to their policy pronouncements, their participation in international institutions and agreements, and their voting in the United Nations. Our analysis challenges the conventional wisdom that a rising power tends to be revisionist whereas an incumbent hegemon is invariably committed to the defense of the international order.

Introduction

In his inaugural speech, Donald Trump declared "From this day forward, it's going to be only America first — America first" (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2017/jan/20/donald-trump-inauguration-speech-full-video>). After becoming president, he rescinded the U.S. agreement to join the Trans Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Accord. He also demanded renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement, claiming that it was "the worst trade deal in history" (<https://www.cnbc.com/video/2016/06/28/trump-nafta-worst-trade-deal-in-history.html>), and threatened to withdraw from it unless he could obtain more favorable terms. He further insisted on building a border wall with Mexico and withdrew from the multilateral nuclear deal that the U.S., along with other major powers, had reached with Iran (one that the U.S. had voted to support in the United Nations Security Council along with all other Council members). Under Trump, the U.S. also withdrew from the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the U.N. Human Rights Council. His statements and actions suggest greatly diminished U.S. enthusiasm to support those multilateral institutions that Washington had forged and supported in the past, a liberal international order that has been described as "open, integrated and rule-based" (Ikenberry, 2008: 24). He introduced a sharp turn toward a more unilateral, nationalist and assertive U.S. foreign policy. In the December 2017 U.S. *National Security Strategy* document he officially labeled China and Russia as "revisionist powers" threatening U.S. interests ([NSS - Whitehouse.gov](#)).

Just when Trump was questioning globalization and the liberal economic order, Chinese President Xi Jin-ping came to their defense in Davos, Switzerland. He argued on January 17, 2017 that "many of the problems troubling the world are not caused by economic globalization"

(<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/full-text-of-xi-jinping-keynote-at-the-world-economic-forum>). In his words, “There was a time when China also had doubts about economic globalization, and was not sure whether it should join the World Trade Organization. But we came to the conclusion that integration into the global economy is a historical trend.” Thus, China is embracing and even defending this trend while paradoxically, the U.S. has become more critical of it even though it has been historically the champion of a liberal economic order.

This phenomenon seems odd because most realists and even many liberals have traditionally assumed that an incumbent hegemon must necessarily be committed to the defense of the existing international order. It is a satisfied or status-quo power because it has supposedly the most to gain from this order. Conversely, a rising state is usually said to challenge this order because it is assumed to be dissatisfied and revisionist, seeking to alter the existing norms and rules of international conduct. This view claims that a rising power is necessarily dissatisfied and revisionist because it did not have a voice in shaping and creating the current international order. Such expectation, however, overlooks the effects of socialization as the rising power becomes more engaged with other states. This country’s very rise also gives it an increased stake in the international order that has permitted its ascent thus far. As a result, it should have less incentive to upset this order even though it now has more capability to challenge it. Conversely, a declining hegemon should have a smaller stake and hence less incentive to defend the existing order and more reason to demand its revision in the hope of arresting and reversing its decline. It is in a better position to demand such revision because it still has more capability than others to alter the rules to further extend its advantages.

The current literature does not consider these possibilities. It instead shuttles its logic in attributing a revisionist motivation to the rising power and a status-quo motivation to the ruling power. It focuses on a rising power’s increased capabilities to challenge the existing international order without considering that it has now a larger stake in preserving this order than before. At the same time, it emphasizes a ruling power’s stake in this order even though this stake is diminishing due to its relative decline. Given this decline, this country should be more motivated to change the international order and should have less incentive to defend it (as suggested by recent U.S. trade spats with not only China but also its neighbors and allies). Moreover, the extant literature fails to consider that even though the rules of the current system are rigged in favor of the ruling power (e.g., Gilpin, 1981; Organski, 1958), it may still try to change them to advance its interests even further because after all, it has the greatest capability to do so. Although this literature has taken up the socialization of a rising state like China in multilateral diplomacy (e.g., Johnston, 2008), it has overlooked why this same process has seemingly worked in reverse when an established hegemon like the U.S. decides to withdraw from UNESCO, boycotts the International Labor Organization, abrogates the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and rescinds its support for the Trans Pacific Partnership, the Paris Climate Accord, and the International Criminal Court. These are not isolated events but suggest an increasing pattern.

Thus, current discourse on the revisionist or status-quo orientations of states tends to take the attribution of these orientations for granted rather than treating it as a matter subject to contesting interpretation (for an important exception, see Johnston, 2003). Why should the incumbent hegemon refrain from changing international rules after it has attained global supremacy and especially when this supremacy may be in jeopardy? Offensive realists would/should at least expect this country to continue its push for more advantages and power until it has attained undisputed world domination (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2001: 45). Is a rising power necessarily revisionist and a threat to destabilizing the international order because it now

has more power to upend it? Or alternatively, can a declining power also be dangerous because it has an incentive to wage a preventive war to forestall an impending power transition (e.g., Copeland, 2000; Levy, 1987, 2008)? Is it possible for a rising power to become more status-quo oriented, and a declining hegemon to become more revisionist? How have Beijing and Washington's conduct altered over time with their changing capabilities and stakes in international relations?

Theoretical Motivation

These questions bring us to the power-transition theory, our paper's focus.¹ It has often been applied by international relations scholars to study "China's rise," addressing particularly the danger of war between this country and the U.S., the incumbent global hegemon. This interest in a possible conflict between the world's two largest economies has been further promoted by Graham Allison's (2017) recent book calling attention to the so-called Thucydides' Trap, suggesting that a war between a rising state and a ruling state becomes more likely when their power relationship becomes more balanced. Allison refers to sixteen historical cases of power transition with all but four of them ending in war. It is not clear, however, why these cases were chosen but not others (for instance, Germany's peaceful overtaking of Britain and France after World War II was included in his study but not China's peaceful overtaking of Japan and Russia). There appears to be a serious sample bias, a problem shared by the power-transition theory. This theory includes the Franco-Prussian War and the Russo-Japanese War as positive examples supporting its proposition but disregards the Spanish-American War and dismisses the U.S. peaceful overtaking of Britain before both world wars (Organski and Kugler, 1980).

As originally formulated (Organski and Kugler, 1980), the power-transition theory explains war occurrence as a joint product of two variables. The probability of war is expected to increase when a rising state overtakes an incumbent hegemon, *and* when this rising state is motivated by a revisionist agenda. In subsequent analyses, however, the second variable has been largely ignored by scholars. Some even argue that the most powerful country simply cannot be a revisionist state. For example, Ronald Tammen and his coauthors (2000: 9) state, "By definition, the dominant power is satisfied . . . [and therefore] is the defender of the status quo. After all, it creates and maintains the global or regional hierarchy from which it accrues substantial benefits." This view naturally strips the concept of revisionism of any additional analytic content that is separate from a country's relative power, and treats a country's revisionist, or status-quo, motivation as a matter of definitional fiat rather than empirical assessment. Moreover, by stipulating that the dominant power is *necessarily* a status-quo power, one is by default assigning any rising power that disagrees with it to the category of dissatisfied or revisionist states. This

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¹ Other scholars have discussed whether a rising power is inherently revisionist or a hegemon is status-quo oriented. For example, Ikenberry (2008) argues that China will not overthrow the existing liberal order because this order is easy to join but hard to resist. For offensive realists, such as Mearsheimer (2001) and Layne (2002), *all* states are inclined to be expansionist and therefore revisionist, although Mearsheimer considers the U.S. to be uniquely status-quo oriented after establishing its own regional hegemony. Brooks and Wohlforth (2008) argue that the existing hegemon may have an incentive to reshape the international order. We offer systematic evidence pertaining to this debate.

sleight of hand thereby equates any opposition to the incumbent hegemon as an attempt to undermine the international order. By treating the dominant power and the international order as synonyms, a disagreement with the incumbent hegemon is transformed into a challenge to the global community.

Several scholars have confronted directly the need to incorporate states' foreign policy orientation or motivation in their application of the power-transition theory. However, their operationalization of this concept of revisionism (or its opposite, status-quo orientation) seems problematic. They have used, for example, a state's military spending or its alliance portfolio to infer its revisionist or status-quo orientation (e.g., de Soysa et al., 1997, 1998; Kim, 1996; Kim and Morrow, 1992; Lemke and Reed, 1996, 1998; Lemke and Werner, 1996; Werner and Kugler, 1996). These variables, however, tend to be correlated with the other independent variable in the power-transition theory (namely, the measurement of national power) and its dependent variable (the occurrence of war). These tendencies threaten valid interpretation due to multicollinearity and endogeneity. This is because military spending and alliances are also used to measure national power, thus conflating a country's revisionist or status-quo orientation with its power. It is also not unnatural for a state to increase its defense expenditure and seek allies in preparation for an anticipated war, thus causing the endogeneity problem. Such behavior does not say much about its revisionist or status-quo orientation. Moreover, a state's international alignment – whether it joins an alliance led by the dominant power – does not say anything about this orientation, unless of course one assumes that the dominant power is always a status-quo power and, ipso facto, its allies are also committed to the international order. Indeed, it is a truism to say that states that go to war against each other are dissatisfied with each other and with their current relationship. But this is very different from saying that one or the other belligerent must be dissatisfied with the existing international order.

Some people conflate power structure and international order. Power structure refers to the distribution of power in the international system. A rising power will certainly affect the existing power configuration in the system. If international order is defined as the distribution of national power, then changes in major states' relative capabilities naturally threaten to upset this order. This definitional move renders any claim about the relationship between interstate power shifts and international order tautological. Moreover, because all countries are presumably interested in improving their international status or power position, this move is tantamount to characterizing all such motivations as revisionist.

Henry Kissinger (2014: 9) reflects on the above distinction when he says international relations consist of two components: “a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraints where rules break down, preventing one political unit from subjugating all others.” It is important to emphasize this distinction: the interstate system based on the distribution of power, coexisting with the international society where rules, norms and institutions play an important role in shaping states' outlook and behavior. Some people take the position that when an incumbent hegemon pursues and even extends its primacy, it cannot but be preserving the international status quo. They thus equate “status quo” with the hegemon's continued and even enhanced dominance. They perceive any changes to the existing distribution of power as a threat to this country's dominance and hence a challenge to the international “status quo.” We disagree with this view because it confuses the two components of international relations just explicated. This flawed view would interpret any action by the hegemon, regardless of how it may affect the existing international normative consensus, as intended to defend the status quo. In this view, the hegemon cannot be a

revisionist state by definition. Concomitantly, it would treat any change to the existing distribution of interstate power, such as when a late-rising state makes relative power gains, as revisionist by default.

Such view clearly contradicts the power-transition theory which, as already explained, relies on two variables to predict war between great powers: changes in the distribution of interstate power and whether a rising state is revisionist. When speaking about the latter variable, Organski and Kugler (1980) have in mind whether this state seeks to challenge, or revise, the prevailing international order defined as the norms and rules adopted by most states. It is important to emphasize again that in this conception, the international order is *not* the same as the existing interstate distribution of power. Otherwise, power-transition theory's two variables would be duplicative. It should also be evident from this discussion that changes in interstate power distribution do not necessarily imply changes in international order as just defined (He and Feng, 2018; Welch, 2018). So even if China overtakes the U.S., it does not mean that the U.S.-led international order will necessarily be upended.

We suggest and document below several empirical indicators of Beijing and Washington's behavior toward international order, behavior that reflects in our view their revisionist or status-quo orientation. All too often, current discourse tends to deploy labels of revisionist or status-quo impulses as a rhetorical device without any attempt at empirical assessment. We argue that there is a compelling need to be transparent and systematic in disclosing the evidence and logic used to support these attributions. Other analysts may well disagree with our indicators or rationale, but it is necessary and important for them to suggest better alternatives.

Our focus on comparing China and the U.S. directly and explicitly distinguishes this analysis from most other studies. Other analysts have asked whether China is a revisionist or status-quo country (e.g., Johnston, 2003; Kastner and Saunders, 2011). They do not, however, compare China with the U.S. They therefore do not ask the extent to which Beijing's behavior is different from Washington's or the conduct of other major powers. By examining changes in Chinese and U.S. behavior over time, we hope to address whether a rising state's increasing power will necessarily make it more revisionist and aggressive (as offensive realism would suggest, Mearsheimer, 2001) and conversely, whether a declining hegemon can become less committed to the existing international order and increasingly motivated to object to its prevailing rules. For example, has China become a more status-quo state as it gains more relative power, and has the U.S. become less so as it suffers a relative decline? Does relative power or relative stake exercise more influence in their respective policy orientation? Which country has become more aligned with the rest of the international community and which country finds itself more often outside of general international consensus?

One cannot obviously just rely on a government's words to predict its future intentions which is always subject to change. Therefore, we rely on evidence from words as well as deeds. Naturally, to the extent that these two kinds of data correspond and to the extent that data from many different sources converge, we will have stronger confidence in our inferences. The costlier, longer and more irreversible are a state's announcements and conduct, the more credible should be its commitment to its declared intentions (Fearon, 1995). As just alluded to, we do not believe any individual indicator can be conclusive about a state's foreign policy orientation or intention. We therefore accept and encourage multiple indicators while acknowledging that they can each have important limitations. However, if multiple indicators from different sources converge on the same interpretation, then we can have more confidence in the construct validity

of our measurement. Contrary to other scholars' tendency to assign binary labels of revisionist and status-quo states, our approach emphasizes the direction of their change over time to become more, or less, revisionist. Moreover, we do not insist that one of the two countries studied here must be revisionist and the other must be status-quo oriented; both China and the U.S. can be revisionist to varying extent and this tendency can be different in different issue areas.

Commitment to International Order: Three Empirical Probes

When one talks about the revisionist or status-quo tendencies of a country, one is referring to its support or rejection of the international order. This order reflects widely shared normative principles about the legitimacy of ruling elites, the sanctity of borders and treaties, the limits on the use of force, and respect for another state's legal sovereignty, territorial integrity and traditional sphere of influence. A state's official declarations and actual conduct pertaining to these norms are germane to our purpose.

A second type of information is pertinent to discerning a state's foreign policy orientation. Its record of joining international accords and conventions communicates its predisposition to abide by international consensus as represented by these multilateral treaties. A state's decision to join an international organization can also be a sign of its willingness to participate in the "focal points" of international cooperation (Keohane and Martin, 1995). Naturally, when a state withdraws from an international organization or rejects it (e.g., Germany, Japan, the USSR and the U.S. with respect to the League of Nations, and China with respect to the United Nations prior to 1971), it conveys an opposite message. Similarly, when the U.S. and China decline to join the International Criminal Court, they both stand outside the emergent international consensus to prosecute war criminals. When the U.S. withdraws from the Paris Climate Accord but China pledges to still honor it, their decisions also convey different messages. Trump's announced intention to create a Space Force seems to presage the weaponizing of outer space in seeming violation of the U.N. Treaty on Outer Space. In enforcing the "zero-tolerance" policy on illegal immigrants by detaining separately young children and their parents who crossed the U.S. border illegally, his administration disregarded the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (a treaty that the U.S. has declined to join). Although being a member state of an international organization or a signatory to an international agreement does not necessarily mean that a country is committed to supporting the current international order, being outside of such organizations and agreements certainly means a rejection of or at least a profound skepticism about this order.

We can examine a third source of information about a state's revisionist or status-quo orientation. A state's voting record in the United Nations shows the extent to which its preferences are aligned with the rest of the global community. When it finds itself frequently in the minority in these votes, it is out of step with the international consensus. To the extent that international order is represented by the norms or rules being accepted and articulated by most countries, a state that objects consistently to this majority preference cannot obviously be speaking for the international community. Such a state's commitment to the international order is problematic. It has a revisionist agenda in the sense that it wants to alter and challenge the norms and rules preferred by most others.

International rules and norms are clearly not fixed but have rather evolved over time. Our indicators point to tension among principles about appropriate international conduct. Sovereignty

has been the foundational principle of the modern state system since 1648. However, post-1945 international conventions and organizations have tried to limit sovereign immunity and restrain states' discretion. Emergent international consensus prohibiting aggressive war and genocide, and those legitimating the responsibility to protect victims of atrocities comes to mind as leading examples. States can forge multilateral institutions to bind others diplomatically, economically and militarily, while also proclaiming their sovereign right to prevent illegal immigration, practice economic nationalism, and exempt their citizens from being prosecuted abroad for alleged war crimes as shown by recent U.S. conduct. Similarly, China can be assertive in advancing its territorial claims in the South China Sea while concurrently negotiating with ASEAN states about legally binding code of conduct to resolve their disputes. Such behavior can coexist and thus defy simple binary characterizations of states' motivations as either status-quo oriented or revisionist. As we emphasize in our discussion below, *changes* in states' behavior over time and their *relative* support for established institutions and general international consensus are instructive. In which *direction* has Washington and Beijing's behavior evolved? Has their respective participation in international organizations and conventions increased or decreased? Have their policies become more – or less -- aligned with the rest of the world?

It is possible for states to change their intentions or policy orientations. A ruse or deception is always possible. This said, when words are backed up by deeds, rhetoric becomes more credible. Moreover, joining international organizations and acceding to international treaties are not empty gestures. They can provide important and costly signals (reneging on treaty obligations can be costly to one's international reputation and even arouse domestic opposition). Similarly, casting vetoes is costly to a country's popularity or public relations. Our proposed indicators can therefore be instructive about states' revisionist or status-quo orientations.

Westphalian Principles and Restrictive Normative Order

State sovereignty and non-interference in others' domestic affairs are the bedrock of the modern state system since the Treaty of Westphalia. In the early decades of the People's Republic and especially during its Cultural Revolution, China openly promoted the violent overthrow of other countries' ruling elites. It supported insurgency movements in neighboring countries and advocated worldwide revolution through armed violence. It had rejected the United Nations and fought U.N. forces in Korea. It joined only a handful of international organizations. It had numerous border skirmishes and even a limited war with Vietnam in 1979. Since its economic opening, Beijing has abandoned its vocal support for armed insurrections. With the major exception of India, it has settled its land borders with its neighbors (Fravel, 2008). Its maritime claims in the East and South China Seas, however, have become a source of tension. In contrast to the Soviet Union, China has thus far refrained from mounting an ideological challenge or forging military alliances to compete with the U.S. in regions deemed by Washington to be important to its national interest (the Western Hemisphere, the Middle East, and Western Europe). It has even agreed to impose sanctions on its only ally, North Korea, over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program. In sharp contrast to its international posture in the 1950s and 1960s, Beijing has professed that it will respect the sovereignty of other states and refrain from interfering in their domestic affairs. It has also reversed its earlier stance on arms control

agreements and international peacekeeping missions, so that it is today an active participant in both areas.

Although Washington's foreign policy in the early decades after World War II had emphasized support for incumbent governments to fend off domestic insurgency and foreign subversion supporting the communist cause, there has been a reversal in recent years such that it now routinely questions the legitimacy of those ruling elites that are anathema to it, intervenes abroad in the name of humanitarian relief or nation building, and openly promotes regime change in unfriendly countries. The geographic situation of the U.S. is such that it has land borders with only two countries (whereas China has land borders with the largest number of neighbors in the world), and its boundaries have been settled with Canada and Mexico some time ago albeit not without crises or wars. Compared to China, however, the U.S. has been involved in many more wars and armed interventions. Whether by covert or overt means, it has overthrown or sought to overthrow in recent memory quite a few governments just in the Western Hemisphere (e.g., Guatemala, Panama, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Chile, and of course Cuba) as well as attacking others in the "far abroad" (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Serbia) aimed at least in part at changing their regimes. Judged by the traditional Westphalian principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in others' domestic affairs, the U.S. has become more the revisionist power whereas China has become more the status-quo power.

Historically, a restrictive normative international order entails not only reciprocal acknowledgment of the legitimacy of ruling elites, but also acceptance of rules limiting the resort to force, the binding nature of international commitments, and respect for other states' traditional spheres of influence. When there is widespread adherence to these norms, international relations have been more peaceful and stable (Kegley and Raymond, 1994). The logic of preventive war presented by the George W. Bush administration and the invasion of Iraq without the authorization of the United Nations Security Council signal a major departure from the emergent international consensus regarding the legitimate use of force. U.S. withdrawal from the multilateral nuclear deal with Iran, even though the International Atomic Energy Agency has certified on numerous occasions that Tehran has complied with its terms, augurs another dangerous precedent concerning Washington's commitment to international agreements. The repudiation of the Paris Climate Accord, the Trans Pacific Partnership, the U.N. Law of the Sea, the Kyoto Protocol, the Ban on Anti-Personnel Landmines, and the International Criminal Court (in addition to other well-known cases in a more distant past involving the League of Nations and the International Trade Organization) after Washington had participated in extensive negotiations to join these treaties, suggests a U.S. tendency to recoil from binding itself to international commitments even though it often insists that others do so.

NATO expansion to incorporate former members of the Warsaw Pact and even former republics of the Soviet Union, and Western support for various "color revolutions" in Russia's "near abroad" (especially the Ukraine) can naturally be seen by Moscow as an infringement on its traditional sphere of influence. Naturally, the U.S. has also established bases, deployed troops and formed alliances around China, even while proclaiming the Monroe Doctrine to exclude other major powers' influence from the Western Hemisphere. Charles Maier (2015: 98) remarks that "The United States supports a whole structure of formal and less formal commitments to the security of the states in the western Pacific. Their proximity to China means that Beijing perceives an asymmetry of claims. After all, China has no equivalent set of commitments in the Caribbean or Western Europe."

Chinese maritime claims in the East and South China Seas are also germane. Beijing has resorted to building artificial islands and increasing its patrol of the contested areas. It has, however, refrained from resorting to the outright use of force in these sovereignty disputes in recent years. It has instead relied mostly on its civilian coast guard to assert its claims. Parallels to those U.S. actions mentioned above do not come easily to mind. One can, however, readily recall U.S. conduct during its period of rapid ascendance when it annexed the Hawaii archipelago, supported Panamanian rebels to build the Canal, and fought the Spanish-American War with its invasion of Cuba, seizure of Puerto Rico and Guam, and colonization of the Philippines. It also declared the Monroe Doctrine to exclude extra-regional powers from the Western Hemisphere, and it took large amounts of territory from Mexico. This history is pertinent because many proponents of the power-transition theory try to explain away the absence of war in the wake of U.S. overtaking Britain by claiming that the U.S. was a status-quo power (presumably in the sense that Washington did not seek to displace the then-prevailing rules under British hegemony, and not in the sense of maintaining the existing balance of power in the Western Hemisphere or Asia Pacific). Yet when other rising powers, such as Japan, sought to play by the same rules of imperialism and territorial conquest, they were labeled anti-status quo. As Henry Cabot Lodge (quoted by Mearsheimer, 2001: 238) remarked, the U.S. had compiled “a record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequaled by any people in the nineteenth century.”

International Institutions and Accords

A state’s decision to join and stay in an international organization is itself *prima facie* evidence of its willingness to take part in multilateral diplomacy and to stay engaged with the international community. Thus, membership in or absence from international organizations is a useful indicator of a country’s status-quo or revisionist tendencies (Chan, 2004). Although it had a very low profile in its early days, the People’s Republic of China has since the 1980s joined many international treaties and international organizations so that its profile is now at a level comparable to its peers. Moreover, on a variety of issues but especially on matters of arms control, international peacekeeping, maritime cooperation, environmental protection, and climate change, Beijing has reversed its earlier stance so that it is now a strong proponent of international initiatives in these issue areas. This is not to say that China’s positions on all matters important to the international community have shown similar progress. Like the U.S., it has lagged in some areas but has caught up with prevailing global norms in other areas (Foot and Walter, 2011).

Like membership in an international organization, ratification of and accession to international accords or treaties signify a state’s decision to adhere to international norms and rules. This decision communicates to the world that a state intends to abide by these agreements. The so-called screening effect refers to the idea that states already intending to live up to the terms of these agreements will join them (von Stein, 2005). Therefore, joining an international agreement is informative about a state’s predisposition and is instructive in “separating” (or distinguishing) it from other states that do not have this predisposition. International accords and treaties, however, can have another separate constraining effect such that they cause a state to behave in a way that it would not have conducted itself were it not for the legal obligations that it has now taken on. Despite realists’ skepticisms, some states do take their legal commitments seriously such as when they resisted Washington’s pressure not to surrender U.S. personnel

accused of war crimes in contradiction to their preexisting obligations as parties to the Rome Statute creating the International Criminal Court (Kelley, 2007). Support for international norms and rules, however, does not have to be limited to a state's sense of legal obligation. Socialization experiences resulting from participating in international institutions can alter a country's identity and change its self-defined interests in such a way that transforms it into a "responsible stakeholder" (e.g., Johnston, 2008). A country can also change perceptions of its identity and interests in the opposite direction so that a long-standing member of the international community can become increasingly estranged from it.

Just as a decision to sign on to an international accord or treaty can be instructive, a decision to withdraw from such agreement communicates important information. The announcement by the George W. Bush administration that it would abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty was significant. Similarly, although not quite a decision to withdraw from an existing agreement, the U.S. Senate's refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1999 (despite President Bill Clinton's support) was indicative of its foreign policy orientation. On other occasions – such as those involving the Panama Canal Treaty, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty and the nuclear deal with Iran (during the Obama administration) – the international agreements negotiated by the president came to fruition. But they were "close calls." The intense domestic controversies accompanying their passage communicated to the outside world the difficulties encountered by the chief executive in trying to gain "domestic ratification" (Putnam, 1988) for deals already reached with foreign counterparts. Naturally, when the U.S. rescinds its support for multilateral accords already successfully concluded – such as the Paris Climate Accord, the International Criminal Court, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal) – it communicates an even louder message.

Although one would perhaps want to see a two-by-two table reporting the frequency of Chinese and U.S. accession to international conventions (showing those that have entered into force for both countries, for neither, and for one but not the other), we present in Table 1 a more informative albeit incomplete picture rather than a simple quantitative summary. The most important take-away from this table is that both Washington and Beijing have signed and ratified a large majority of multilateral treaties that have entered into force for them.² The government

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² The information on U.S. international treaties is drawn from *A List of Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States in Force on January 1, 2017*, compiled and published by the U.S. State Department, available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/273494.pdf>. China does not publish a similar annual report of international treaties that are in force for China. Its international treaty information is taken from different sources, including the annual list of China's international treaties (in Chinese) published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under "Treaties and Regulations" at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/tytj_674911/tyfg_674913/ and information listed under "Policy Documents" at http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/tytj_674911/zcwj_674915/. In compiling China's treaty information, the authors have consulted the United Nations Treaty Collection at <https://treaties.un.org/Pages/Home.aspx?clang=en> as well as the European Union Treaty Office's treaty database at <http://ec.europa.eu/world/agreements/default.home.do>. Since there is no single authoritative source that publishes an updated and complete list of China's

sources of these two countries report literally hundreds of multilateral treaties that each has joined (not all of them are reported in Table 1),³ and they are both parties to such international agreements as the Antarctic Treaty, the conventions to ban chemical and biological weapons, the convention to prevent genocide and to punish its perpetrators, the convention to suppress terrorist bombings, and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. While this phenomenon shows that these countries are cooperating on and supporting many issues of concern to global governance, the more interesting aspect of Table 1 points to those instances whereby one or the other country has chosen to stand outside of these conventions. For instance, China has thus far declined join the international covenant on people's civil and political rights, and the U.S. has similarly decided to remain outside of the Paris Climate Accord, the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), and UNESCO. It is, of course, when the two countries have acted differently that are most informative about their support for and commitment to international rules and norms. As mentioned earlier, overtime changes in a country's behavior is also instructive. Compared to the United States, China as a latecomer has acceded to more international institutions and accords. Beijing has been more proactive in joining them since the late 1970s. In recent years, it also has actively promoted international conventions in areas such as preventing weapons in the outer space, cyberspace security, international peacekeeping, code of conduct for the internet, South-South cooperation, and climate change, while Washington has become more defensive on these issues.

Table 2 provides a list of international treaties that the U.S. has signed but Congress has thus far declined to ratify. Some of them have languished for decades waiting for Senate action, and some have been signed and ratified by China despite U.S. inaction (e.g., conventions to eliminate discrimination against women and people with disabilities, to protect people's social, economic and cultural rights, UNCLOS). Table 3 lists those international treaties that the U.S. has withdrawn or intends to withdraw from.⁴ We have not found comparable instances for China.

[Tables 1, 2 and 3 Here]

Voting in the United Nations

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international treaties, the authors acknowledge possible inaccuracies in the number and titles of the international treaties and agreements that China has signed and ratified so far.

³ The inventories of treaties collected by us are available upon request. Due to limited space, we have abbreviated Tables 1 and 2 to exclude many treaties from our inventories, such as those that are regional or bilateral in nature, security treaties with exclusive membership, derivative protocols or agreements for which the main treaties have already been listed, protocols for implementing treaties, and treaties that do not pertain to China and the U.S.

⁴ Washington's withdrawal from international treaties could require different executive and congressional actions. These actions include executive withdrawal or termination pursuant to prior authorization from Congress, executive withdrawal or termination without prior authorization but subject to subsequent approval by Congress, and unilateral executive withdrawal or termination without necessary authorization or direction by Congress. See Stephen P. Mulligan, "Withdrawal from International Agreements: Legal Framework, the Paris Agreement, and the Iran Nuclear Agreement", Congressional Research Service Report R44761, February 9, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44761.pdf>

The United Nations is the international community's most authoritative voice, and the positions taken by the majority of its member states come closest to reflect global consensus. This consensus has changed over time, and a state's voting record can tell us the extent to which its preferences have become increasingly or decreasingly aligned with the rest of the world. When one claims that a state has a revisionist agenda, one is arguing that it has sharply discordant preferences from most others and that it is therefore motivated to challenge their preferences and norms.

Table 1.
Multilateral Treaties, Conventions, and Institutions: Comparing China and the U.S.

Titles of Treaties, Conventions, and Institutions	China	The United States
Antarctic treaty (December 1, 1959)	Accession 06/08/1983; Ratified on 06/08/1983; Entered into force 06/08/1983	Signed 12/1/1959 Entered 6/23/1961
Treaty banning nuclear weapon tests in the atmosphere, in outer space and under water (Partial Nuclear Test Ban, Moscow) August 5, 1963	N/A	Signed 8/5/1963; Entered into force 10/10/1963
Treaty on the prohibition of the emplacement of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction on the seabed and the ocean floor and in the subsoil thereof (February 11, 1971)	Accession 02/18/1991; Ratified on 02/18/1991; Entered into force on 02/18/1991	Signed 2/11/1971 Entered into force 5/18/1972
Convention on the prohibition of the development, production and stockpiling of bacteriological (biological) and toxin weapons and on their destruction (April 19, 1972)	Accession/Acceptance 11/15/1984; Ratified 11/15/1984; Entered into force on 11/15/1984	Signed 4/10/1972 Entered into force March 26, 1975
Protocol on restrictions on the use of mines, booby-traps and other devices (Protocol II) (October 10, 1980)	Signed 9/14/1981; Ratified on 04/07/1982	Signed 4/8/1982; Entered into force 3/24/1995
Convention on the prohibition of the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and on their destruction (January 15, 1993)	Accession 01/15/1993; Ratified on 12/30/1996; Entered into force 04/29/1997	Signed 09/03/1992; Entered into force 05/25/1997 for the US
Statute of the International Atomic Energy Agency (October 26, 1956)	Accession 01/01/1984; Entered into force 01/01/1984	Signed 10/26/1956; Entered into force 07/29/1957
Convention on nuclear safety (June 17, 1994)	Signed 09/20/1994; Ratified 04/09/1996	Signed 09/20/1994; Ratified 04/11/1999
Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage (November 21, 1972)	Acceptance 12/12/1985; Entered into force on 03/12/1986	Acceptance and Ratification 12/07/1973

Vienna convention on diplomatic relations (April 1961)	Accession 11/25/1975; Entered into force 12/25/1975	Signed 04/18/1961; Entered into force for the U.S. 12/13/1972
Convention on consular relations (April 1961)	Accession 07/03/1979; Entered into force 08/01/1979	Signed 04/24/1961; Entered into force for the U.S. 12/24/1969
The United Nations framework convention on climate change (May 22, 1992)	Accession 06/11/1992; Ratified 01/05/1993; Entered into force on 03/21/1994	Signed 06/12/1992; Ratified 10/15/1993; Entered into force 03/21/1994
The United Nations convention to combat desertification in those countries experiencing serious drought and/or desertification, particularly in Africa (January 14, 1994)	Accession 10/14/1994; Ratified on 02/18/1997; Entered into force 05/19/1997.	Signed 06/17/1994; Entered into force for the U.S. 02/15/2001
The Paris Agreement regarding The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Paris Accord) (December 12, 2015)	Accession 04/22/2016; Ratified 09/03/2016; Entered into force 11/04/2016	Signed 04/22/2016; Withdrew 06/01/2017
Articles of agreement of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, formulated at the Bretton Woods Conference (July 1–22, 1944)	Accession 04/14/1980; Entered into force 04/14/1980	Signed 12/27/1945; Entered into force 12/27/1945
Articles of agreement of the International Monetary Fund, formulated at the Bretton Woods Conference (July 1–22, 1944)	Accession 04/01/1980; Entered into force 04/01/1980	Signed 12/27/1945; Entered into force 12/27/1945
Convention on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (December 14, 1960)	N/A	Signed 12/14/1960
Agreement establishing the Inter-American Development Bank (April 8, 1959)	Accession 12/29/2008; Entered into force 01/12/2009	Signed 04/08/1959; Entered into force 12/30/1959
Articles of agreement establishing the Asian Development Bank (December 4, 1965)	Accession 03/10/1986; Entered into force 03/10/1986	Signed 12/04/1965; Entered into force 08/22/1966
Agreement establishing the African Development Fund (November 29, 1972)	Accession 05/03/1985	Signed 11/29/1972; Entered into force for the U.S. 11/18/1976
Constitution of the World Health Organization (July 22, 1946)	Accession 07/22/1946; Entered into force 07/22/1946.	Signed 07/22/1946; Entered into force for the U.S. 06/21/1948
Convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide (December 9, 1948)	Ratified 04/18/1983; Entered into force 07/17/1983	Signed 12/09/1948; Entered into force for the U.S. 02/23/1989
Convention on the political rights of women (March 31, 1953)	N/A	Signed 03/31/1953; Entered into force for the

		U.S. 07/07/1976
International convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination (March 7, 1966)	Accession 12/29/1981; Entered into force on 02/28/1982	Signed 09/28/1966; Entered into force for the U.S. 10/21/1994
International covenant on civil and political rights (December 16, 1966)	Signed 10/05/1998; Not yet ratified	Signed 10/05/1977; Ratified 06/08/1992; Entered into force for the U.S. 09/08/1992
Convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (December 10, 1984)	Accession 12/12/1986; Entered into force 11/03/1988	Signed 10/10/1984; Entered into force for the U.S. 11/20/1994
Universal copyright convention (1952)	Accession 07/01/1992; Ratified on 07/01/1992	Signed 09/06/1952; Entered into force 09/16/1955
United Nations convention against corruption (October 31, 2003)	Accession 12/10/2003; Ratified 10/27/2005; Entered into force 02/12/2006	Signed 12/09/2003; Entered into force for the U.S. 11/29/2006
Convention on the high seas (April 29, 1958)	N/A	Signed 04/29/1958; Entered into force 09/30/1962
Convention on the territorial sea and the contiguous zone (April 29, 1958)	N/A	Signed 04/29/1958; Entered into force 09/10/1964
United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (December 10, 1982)	Signed 7/29/1994; Ratified 6/27/1996	Signed 7/29/1994; not yet ratified
Treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (NPT) (1968)	Accession 03/09/1992; Entered into force 03/09/1992	Signed 07/01/1968; Entered into force 03/05/1970.
Convention for the protection of the ozone layer (March 22, 1985)	Accession 09/11/1989; Entered into force 12/10/1989	Signed 03/22/1985; Entered into force 09/22/1988
Montreal protocol on substances that deplete the ozone layer (September 16, 1987)	Accession 06/13/1991; Entered into force 08/20/1992.	Signed 09/16/1987; Entered into force 01/01/1989
Convention relative to the treatment of prisoners of war (August 12, 1949)	Accession on 07/13/1952; Ratified on 12/28/1956	Signed 08/12/1949; Entered into force 02/02/1956
Treaty on principles governing the activities of states in the exploration and use of outer space, including the moon and other celestial bodies (Outer Space Treaty) (1966)	Accession 12/30/1983; Entered into force 01/12/1984	Signed 01/27/1967; Entered into force 10/10/1967

Charter of the United Nations (1945)	Signed 06/26/1945; Ratified on 09/28/1945; Entered into force 10/25/1971 (for PRC)	Signed 06/26/1945; Entered into force 10/24/1945
Marrakesh Agreement establishing the World Trade Organization (WTO) (April 15, 1994)	Accession 12/11/2001	Signed 12/30/1994; Entered into force 1/1/1995
Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), (November 16, 1945)	Accession 09/13/1946; Joined as member state 11/04/1946	Founding member 11/04/1946; Withdrew in 1985 and rejoined in 2003; The U.S. will withdraw from UNESCO again at the end of 2018.
Constitution of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (October 16, 1945)	Signed 10/16/1945; Entered into force 10/16/1945	Founding member and Signed 10/16/1945
The Kyoto Protocol to the Convention on Climate Change (December 11, 1997)	Accession 05/29/1998; Ratified on 08/30/2002; Entered into force 02/16/2005	NA
Articles of Agreement of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (June 29, 2015)	Founding member and signed 06/29/2015; Ratified on 11/04/2015; Entered into force 12/25/2015	NA
International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime Apartheid (November 30, 1973)	Accession 04/18/1983; Entered into force on 05/18/1983	NA
Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaty (May 23, 1969)	Accession 09/03/1997; Entered into force 10/03/1997	Signed 04/24/1970, not yet ratified
Protocol I and II to the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone Treaty (April 11, 1996)	Accession 04/11/1996; Ratified 07/03/1997;	NA
Additional Protocol Ii and Iii to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (August 8, 1986)	Accession 02/10/1987; Ratified on 10/21/1988	NA
Additional protocol II to the treaty of the prohibition of nuclear weapons in Latin America (Treaty Tlatelolco) (February 14, 1967)	Accession 08/21/1973; Ratified on 06/12/1974	Signed Additional protocol I to the Treaty, 05/26/1977, ratified 11/23/1981; Did not sign Additional protocol I

Table 2. U.S. Multilateral Treaties Pending Ratification

U.S. Multilateral Treaties Pending Ratification	Treaty Conclusion Time	Did China Join?	U.S. Signing Time
Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties	May 23, 1969	Accession September 3, 1997	April 24, 1970
International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights	December 16, 1966	Signed October 27, 1997; Ratified February 28, 2001	October 5, 1977
American Convention on Human Rights	November 22, 1969	No	June 1, 1977
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	December 18, 1979	Signed July 17, 1980; Ratified November 4, 1980; Entered into force September 3, 1981	July 17, 1980
Protocol II Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts	June 10, 1977	Signed September 2, 1983; Entered into force March 14, 1984	December 12, 1977
Convention on Biological Diversity	June 5, 1992	Signed June 11, 1992; Ratified January 5, 1993	June 4, 1993
United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea	December 10, 1982	Signed December 10, 1982; Ratified June 7, 1996	July 29, 1994
Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty	September 10, 1996	Signed September 24, 1996; not yet ratify	September 24, 1996
International Labor Organization Convention No. 111 Concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation	June 25, 1958	Acceded January 12, 2006	June 25, 1958
Protocol for the Protection of Cultural Property in the event of Armed Conflict	May 14, 1954	Acceded January 5, 2000	May 14, 1954
Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade	September 10, 1998	Signed August 24, 1999; Ratified March 22, 2005	September 11, 1998
Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel	December 9, 1994	Acceded September 22, 2004	December 19, 1994
Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants	May 22, 2001	Signed May 23, 2001; Ratified August 13, 2004	May 23, 2001
1996 Protocol to the Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter, 1972	November 7, 1996	Ratified June 29, 2006; Entered into force October 29, 2006	March 31, 1998
Protocols 1, 2, and 3 to the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty	March 25, 1996	Additional Protocol Ii and Iii: Signed February 10, 1987;	March 25, 1996

		Ratified October 21, 1988	
Protocols I and II to the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty	April 11, 1996	No	April 11, 1996
Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities	December 13, 2006	Signed March 30, 2007; Ratified January 8, 2008; Entered into force August 31, 2008	June 30, 2009
Protocol to the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia	May 6, 2014	Signed May 6, 2014; Ratified April 24, 2015; Entered into force August 17, 2015	May 6, 2014
The United Nations Convention on the Use of Electronic Communications in International Contracts	November 23, 2005	Signed July 6, 2006	November 23, 2005
The United Nations Convention on the Assignment of Receivables in International Trade	December 12, 2001	No	December 30, 2003
The Beijing Treaty on Audiovisual Performances	June 24, 2012	Signed June 27, 2012; Ratified April 24, 2014; not yet entered into force	June 26, 2012
The Arms Trade Treaty	April 2, 2013	No	September 25, 2013
United Nations Convention on Transparency in Treaty-Based Investor-State Arbitration	December 10, 2014	No	March 17, 2015
Convention on the Rights of the Child	September 2, 1990	Signed August 29, 1990; Ratified March 2, 1992	Feb 16, 1995 signed
Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants	May 22, 2001	Signed May 23, 2001; Ratified August 14, 2004	May 23, 2001
Basel Convention On Control Of Hazardous Wastes	March 22, 1989	Signed March 22, 1990; Ratified December 17, 1991	March 22, 1990

Table 3. Treaties That the U.S. Withdrew or Intends to Withdraw From

Treaty Title	Time of withdrawal	Action	Notes
1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty	June 13, 2002	President George W. Bush	Signed in 1972 by Washington and Moscow to slow the nuclear arms race
UNESCO	December 31, 2018	State Department announcement	
Trans-Pacific Partnership TPP	June 1, 2017	President Donald Trump executive order	
North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)	Pending renegotiation results	President announcement	
Paris Agreement (UN Climate Change Accord)	June 1, 2017 (cease participation)	President Trump's executive order	The Paris Agreement does not allow parties to submit a notice of withdrawal until November 2019.
The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Iran Nuclear Deal)	Pending Congressional action	President Trump announced not-certify decision	Pending Congressional action in 90 days

China did not become a member of the United Nations until October 1971. Prior to that time, its seat was taken up by Taiwan which with the support of the U.S. and its allies, had claimed to represent China. Since 1971, China has become an active member of the United Nations as well as other international organizations (e.g., Johnston, 2003, 2008). From 1971 to 2015, there were 4,199 roll call votes taken in the General Assembly and China took part in 4,194 ballots after joining in late 1971 (Voeten, 2013; Voeten et al., 2009, 2017). A country can take four positions on a vote: yes, no, abstain, and absent. As to be expected, the motions put to a vote in the General Assembly are typically passed with large majorities. Thus 75.1% of the votes cast by all countries were in the affirmative and only 4.7% were in the negative, with abstentions (10.8%) and absences (9.3%) taking up the remainder. These overall figures provide a benchmark for assessing the extent to which a country is in or out of step with the rest of international community.

[Table 4 Here]

China has been in the General Assembly's voting majority on most occasions. As shown in Table 4, 78.8% of its votes were "yes" and only 3.3% were "no." In contrast, only 21.9% of U.S. votes were "yes" and 54.2% were "no." Thus, the U.S. finds itself often isolated in the General Assembly. China and the U.S. represent the opposite ends of the voting spectrum among the Security Council's five permanent members. "Yes" votes cast by the USSR/Russia, France and Britain constituted 72.5%, 43.8% and 42.3% respectively of their ballots, whereas their "no" votes were 9.7%, 20.9% and 25.8%. China's voting position has been much closer to those of India and Brazil which have had an even higher percent of "yes" votes (83.6% and 86.6% respectively). In comparison, Japan occupies a middle position between these large developing countries and the U.S. and its European allies, with 58.2% of its ballots being in the affirmative and 9.6% in the negative.

In the U.N. General Assembly, some issues are called "important issues." Examples include recommendations on peace and security, the election of Security Council and Economic and Social Council members, and budgetary questions. "Important issues" require a two-thirds majority to be adopted whereas other questions are decided by a simple majority.

[Table 5 Here]

There were 381 roll call votes on "important issues" taken by the U.N. General Assembly during 1971-2015. On these occasions, 65.4% of the votes cast by all countries were in the affirmative and 6.4% were in the negative. Once again, the U.S. was in the minority for this subset of issues. Table 5 indicates that 46.7% of the votes cast by Washington were "yes" and 51.7% were "no." In comparison, 62.5% of the votes cast by Beijing were "yes" and 15.2% were "no." China's positions on these issues were closer to other major states, such as Britain (59.3% "yes," 16.3% "no"), France (61.4% "yes," 12.1% "no"), and India (60.6% "yes," 14.2% "no").

The basic picture is not altered if another time period or issue area is selected. For instance, Peter Ferdinand (2014: 665) reports that during 1974-2008, 83.7% of all the ballots cast in the General Assembly were "yes" votes and only 4.6% were "no" votes (the remaining 11.7% were abstentions). Compared to these benchmark figures, China's record was 88.1% "yes," 2.8% "no" and 9.1% abstentions and the corresponding figures for the U.S. were 20.2%, 56.2% and 23.6%. Surprisingly, even with respect to voting patterns on just the issue of human rights, China has supported these resolutions more often than the U.S., France and Britain (Primiano and Xiang, 2016). Thus, China has been more often within the international consensus than outside it. In contrast, the U.S. has found itself increasingly in the minority. Even with respect to those issues that Washington has declared to be especially important to its foreign policy agenda, the

Table 4. Selected Countries' Voting Behavior in the UN General Assembly (1971-2015)

	USA	China	UK	France	Russia	India	Brazil	Japan
Yes	21.9% (919)	78.8% (3303)	42.3% (1776)	43.8% (1841)	72.5% (3046)	83.6% (3511)	86.6% (3637)	58.2% (2443)
Abstain	23.1% (969)	8.4 % (352)	31% (1300)	33.9% (1425)	16.8% (707)	11.1% (466)	10.8% (455)	31.7% (1330)
No	54.2% (2274)	3.3% (140)	25.8% (1083)	20.9% (876)	9.7% (408)	4.5% (188)	1.4% (58)	9.6% (402)
Absent	0.9% (37)	9.5% (399)	1% (40)	1.4% (57)	0.9% (38)	0.8% (34)	1.2% (49)	0.6% (24)
Total	100% (4199)	100% (4194)	100% (4199)	100% (4199)	100% (4199)	100% (4199)	100% (4199)	100% (4199)

Sources: Voeten, Strezhnev and Bailey (2009, 2017).

Table 5. Selected Countries' Votes on "Important Issues" in UN General Assembly (1971-2015)

	USA	China	UK	France	Russia	India	Brazil	Japan
Yes	46.7% (178)	62.5% (238)	59.3% (226)	61.4% (234)	56.2% (214)	60.6% (231)	86.6% (3637)	61.4% (234)
Abstain	1.6% (6)	19.7% (75)	24.4% (93)	26% (99)	25.5% (97)	24.9% (95)	17.6% (67)	30.7% (117)
No	51.7% (197)	15.2% (58)	16.3% (62)	12.1% (46)	17.3% (66)	14.2% (54)	0.3% (1)	7.9% (30)
Absent	0% (0)	2.6% (10)	0% (0)	0.5% (2)	1.0% (4)	0.3% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Total	100% (381)	100% (381)	100% (381)	100% (381)	100% (381)	100% (381)	100% (381)	100% (381)

Sources: Voeten, Strezhnev and Bailey (2009, 2017).

gap between its preferences and those of the rest of U.N. membership has widened over time (Voeten, 2004). This gap was noticeable even in the decade before George W. Bush's presidency and thus suggests not just a Trump phenomenon. It signifies an enormous reversal from the early days of the United Nations when the U.S. had enjoyed the support of a supermajority of this organization's members.

A similar pattern has prevailed in the Security Council. By definition, a veto is a decision by a minority to defy and block a majority's wish (Chan, 2016). A permanent member of the Security Council has the option of being absent or abstaining, thus permitting a resolution preferred by the majority to pass -- even while indicating its serious reservation. However, a veto signifies a deliberate and public gesture to stand outside of the international consensus. It publicizes a country's objection to the position preferred by the majority.

In the early years of the United Nations, the USSR resorted most frequently to its veto power (<http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/veto>). It had in fact cast 57 consecutive vetoes in the 1940s and 1950s. This record was broken in October 1956 when Britain and France cast their first veto on the Palestinian question. Since the early 1970s, the U.S. has used its veto power with increasing frequency. It did not cast its first veto until March 1970 (along with Britain) on a resolution pertaining to Southern Rhodesia. But from then, it has gradually replaced the USSR/Russia as the country casting the largest number of vetoes -- and has at one time cast an unbroken string of 28 vetoes (often on resolutions about the Middle East).

Between 1946 and 2016 (51 years), the average number of vetoes cast per year was 2.06 for the USSR/Russia, 1.55 for the U.S., 0.57 for Britain, and 0.31 for France. China of course did not join the United Nations until October 1971, after the US attempt to deny its membership was defeated in the General Assembly. Beijing was very sparing in using its veto power in the earlier years of its membership but had more recently joined Russia in vetoing several resolutions on Syria. Still, it had cast a veto on only ten occasions between 1971 and 2016. If one considers only the period since China has been a U.N. member (1971-2016), the average number of vetoes per year was 0.51 for the USSR/Russia, 0.53 for Britain, 0.31 for France, 1.73 for the U.S., and 0.22 for China. By this measure, China has not been an obstructionist on the Security Council and has been more within the international consensus than the other permanent members. By comparison, the U.S. has found itself more out of step with emergent international consensus on various issues but especially those on Arab-Israeli relations.

Although it was the leader of an overwhelming majority in the 1940s and 1950s, the U.S. finds itself increasingly in the minority as its global preponderance waned over time. As mentioned earlier, although one may quibble with some aspects of the indicators employed in this analysis, our conclusion emphasizes the extent and direction of Beijing and Washington's changing behavior and their relative performance and this evidence is quite decisive in these respects. Washington's increasing isolation in the United Nations reflects a process of delegitimation (Modelske, 1987; Schweller and Pu, 2011) that has been going on for some time now. It acquires added significance when juxtaposed with the relative popularity of Beijing's policy positions in this international body.

Conclusion

Labels such as revisionist and status-quo orientations tend to be a product of social and political construction. They are often intended to frame discourses for reasons of political persuasion and mobilization, and sometimes bear little correspondence with what the pertinent states have said

and done. This tendency reminds one of Antonio Gramsci's (1971) remarks about the hegemony of certain ideas, that these ideas can have a strong influence on people's thoughts, beliefs and perceptions even though they are based on shaky premise and questionable evidence.

Both Beijing and Washington can find themselves out of step with the world's majority opinion reflecting most other states' preferences. Their foreign policy orientations also vary by issue areas, and these orientations have evolved over time. Thus, a country can be a defender of the status quo on some issues while being motivated by a revisionist agenda on other issues. Its motivations cannot be adequately assigned to simple binary categories, and they are hardly static or fixed. Like the other great powers, China and the U.S. have not hesitated to defy public opinion or international conventions when they feel that their vital interests would be otherwise compromised. As Graham Allison (2016) has remarked, "None of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council have ever accepted any international court's ruling when (in their view) it infringed their sovereignty or national security interests." Beijing has rejected the Permanent Court of Arbitration's jurisdiction to judge its maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Washington has likewise refused to accept the International Court of Justice's ruling against it for mining Nicaragua's ports and supporting contras seeking to overthrow its government.

The basic trend is unmistakable. Although the People's Republic was ostracized by the international community in its early years, it has over time assumed a more active and constructive role in international organizations. It has joined various multilateral accords or arrangements (such as those on nuclear nonproliferation and peacekeeping missions) that it has denounced earlier. In contrast, whereas the U.S. was the champion of international institutions in the 1940s and 1950s, it has recently become sharply critical of them and has turned increasingly against multilateralism. This evidence raises questions about the existing literature's assignment of status-quo and revisionist orientations to the U.S. and China respectively. It suggests quite conclusively that a greater stake and more extensive engagement with the international community has inclined Beijing to become a more responsible stakeholder, whereas the direction and extent of overtime change in U.S. conduct and attitudes point to the opposite conclusion. Therefore, a rising power does not necessarily present a greater threat to the international order simply because it now has more capabilities to upend it. On the contrary, its increased stake can influence it to become more committed to the prevailing international order. One vivid example is China's recent initiation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which has played a complementary, instead of substitutive, role to the existing global financial governance, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Thies and Nieman, 2017). At the same time, it will be wrong to assume that a declining hegemon will always be committed to this order as its stake in it diminishes. The latter phenomenon can instead incline it to become more revisionist and reluctant to support the existing order.

Our indicators naturally have their limits. Clearly not all international organizations, treaties or U.N. votes are equally important. Future research can pursue more detailed case studies in different issue areas that focus on, for example, how well do China and the U.S. comply with the treaties they have joined (e.g., Chayes and Chayes, 1993; Downs et al., 1996). Such micro-level analyses can complement the macro-level descriptions offered here. Foot and Walter (2011) provide an outstanding example of such analysis. Future researchers may also select cases that lend themselves to "critical tests" seeking to determine how Beijing and Washington have acted on those occasions when realist impulses pull them in one direction while normative considerations (the "logic of appropriateness," March and Olsen 2004) draw them in the opposite direction. The International Criminal Court and North Korea's nuclear

weapons program are possibly such candidates to inquire about how they have responded to “hard choices” when realpolitik and international norms collide most directly. These “hard” cases help to address the so-called selection concern – that states accede to those international accords whose compliance is easiest for them to meet (or whose terms they are already predisposed to fulfill).

Future research can also seek to develop further this study’s policy and theoretical implications. For example, if China is becoming more a status-quo power, does it mean that a policy to integrate it in the existing Western-dominated order is succeeding (e.g., Ikenberry, 2008), and that efforts to contain or oppose its rise are ill-advised? Moreover, can the threat to international order come not just from a rising upstart’s challenges but also from a declining hegemon’s disenchantment and desertion? Other questions spring to mind. Shouldn’t a declining hegemon be able to recognize the increasing status-quo inclination of a rising upstart? If so, why the danger of a transition war? Could it be due to the rising upstart’s inability to make credible commitment (Fearon, 1995)? Or could it also stem from the declining hegemon’s preventive motivation (Copeland, 2000; Levy, 1987, 2008)? Could China’s recent status-quo tendencies be a transient phenomenon, reflecting a hedging strategy to bide time and keep open future options while building strength under the current international regime (Schweller and Pu, 2011)? More generally, what conditions are likely to dispose rising states to become more status-quo oriented, and what conditions are likely to abet a declining hegemon’s revisionist impulses? How would the extent of shared culture, economic interdependence, and physical proximity between them interact to shape their respective orientations and consequently, the danger of a transition war? Finally, how can domestic politics influence foreign policy orientation, encouraging transitioning states’ status-quo or revisionist tendencies (e.g., Schweller, 1992; Snyder, 1993)?

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