

Pax Britannica, Pax Americana, and the Indo-Pacific: Structural Change and the Constraints on Pax Sinica

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Abstract

This article focuses at the changing dynamics of global order from the perspectives of Pax Britannica and Pax Americana, and the strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific in the present times. Based on the hegemonic stability theory and power transition debates, it suggests that the Indo-Pacific is now the primary region of geopolitical and economic engagement, but this does not mean it is a seamless move to a Chinese Pax Sinica. Rather, the article shows how in global order, there is a diffusion of power, a deepening of contestation in the regions and a weakening of the conditions of singular hegemonic power. China has been building its influence in the region in economic, military and diplomatic ways, but a stable Pax Sinica is still far from settling in, due to continued strategic rivalry from the United States, middle power balancing and the continued presence of institutional and normative constraints. The article concludes that the Indo-Pacific represents a shift from the hegemonic peace to a contested and multipolar paradigm and that it has significant implications for the twenty-first century understanding of “Pax”.

Keywords: Pax Britannica, Pax Americana, Pax Sinica, Indo-Pacific, Global Order, Hegemony, Power Transition, Multipolarity, Strategic Contestation

1. Introduction

Global order studies have traditionally focused on the “Pax” periods of dominance, with periods of peace and openness and institutional leadership defined by a hegemonic state that influence international norms and state behavior. The two main points of reference in this literature are Pax Britannica and Pax Americana, where the former established a system of global trade routes, naval supremacy, and norms of empire and the latter, American leadership of multilateral institutions, forward-deployed alliances security, and a liberal economic order. In the first case, material preponderance, together with institutional capacity and normative legitimacy, created a relatively stable international environment, while in the latter it did so in combination with other factors. Relying on these historical analogies, new scholarship has judged that we are witnessing transformations today that are comparable to those of the past, and examined whether current conditions for stable hegemony are similar to those in the past.

The Indo-Pacific is gradually becoming the new strategic hotspot of the world. It is a point of economic dynamism, demographic weight, and maritime trade chokepoints, and great power competition, in particular between the U.S. and China, has grown more acute. The geographic shift changes the understanding of Euro-Atlantic models of order, and brings into question if there is a shift of systemic

leadership. In this context, the notion of 'pax sinica' (Chinese-led order) is once again a central part of scholarly and policy discussions. Those who support the notion of an alternative regional order say China's economic statecraft, its investments, its technology and its naval power suggests that there is a material basis for an alternative order. Critics highlight the modest scope of China's alliances, the lack of norms, and that China has a lot of institutional entrepreneurship that can be said to reinforce existing institutions instead of replacing them.

This paper explores the reasons behind the resurgence of Pax Sinica and the implications of its Indo-Pacific moves for a transition to hegemony or for ongoing contestation of an American-centred order. The research problem is the combination of two interrelated puzzles. There are several reasons why the Pax framework has been revived in analyses of the rise of China in the face of these empirical differences between classical hegemonies and modern power diffusion. The reasons for the revival of the Pax framework in analyses of China's rise are several. Second, what does the strategic rebalancing of the Indo Pacific mean: is it the transition from Pax Americana to Pax Sinica or is it a period of competitive pluralism in which no one power possesses the full set of the attributes of Pax?

The paper deals with two research questions to tackle these quandaries. Were there signs of a change from Pax Americana to something else in the Indo Pacific? This question requires an analysis of structural influences (military, economic, institutional) and soft power vectors (normative appeal, legitimacy). Do the conditions exist and are they sufficient for the emergence of Pax Sinica? Paper also examine the criteria of historical hegemonies against the material preponderance, durability of institutions, ability to set rules, and to provide public goods and assess the performance of China in respect of these criteria.

Paper contends that the present situation mirrors structural transformation, but not so much the hegemonic replacement. China's rise has changed the fundamentals of the balance of power in the Indo Pacific and spread the bundle of characteristics of a Pax era regime but it has not yet assembled the features of a regime with historical Pax characteristics. Rather, there is heightened contestation, strategic leadership by some and institutional bricolage where China exerts influence on some economic and normative areas, and the United States has strategic military and institutional anchors in other areas. The paper will be dedicated to three sections. First, it operationalizes hegemonic criteria and makes comparisons between historical cases. Second, it compares empirical indicators in the Indo pacific in terms of military, economic, and institutional aspects. Third, it analyses implications for regional order and policy, with a focus on scenarios where structural change takes place without a clear winner to follow.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The term "Pax" has a heuristic function in international relations which designates a durable order, guaranteed by the strength of a power, which is relative in nature, which is guaranteed by the ability and institutions of this power. To understand the discussions surrounding "Pax Americana", "Pax Sinica" and the "Indo-Pacific" today, it is necessary to understand what scholars are referring to by "Pax". The three pillars are consistently found across the literature: security provision, economic leadership, and a normative/institutional authority. Security provision involves the ability and political commitment of the dominant power to prevent large-scale conflict, to police critical domains (sea lanes, airspace, cyberspace) and, when needed, to project power to maintain order. Economic leadership is an expression of the hegemon's responsibility for the maintenance of open markets, the provision of liquidity, and the

provision of public goods such as the stable currency, a system of international trade rules, and international investment regimes. Normative and institutional authority refers to the ability to influence rules, norms, and institutional structures, and comprises the ability to dominate agendas in multilateral institutions, to be able to appeal to the norms of other actors, and to have the administrative mechanisms to deal with collective governance. These three dimensions comprise an analytical bundle, which historical Pax orders (Pax Britannica and Pax Americana) had, in varying degrees.

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) provides the main theoretical framework for connecting the “Pax” concept with systemic outcomes. Classical HST is based on the theory that a single dominant state, with its overwhelming powers, can deliver public goods (security, open trading system, stable finance) and thus minimise free-riding incentives and transaction costs between states. In one of its stronger iterations, HST suggests that the degree of openness and economic order in the world depends directly on how strong the hegemon is, i.e., the stronger the hegemon, the more stable the orders, and the weaker the hegemon, the more unstable the orders and the rise of protectionism. In addition to HST, power transition theory emphasizes the dynamics of the transition from a status quo power to a new challenger. It claims that a major revisionist or ‘total war’ becomes more possible when a discontented challenger reaches a parity level with the dominant power, creating a risk of confrontation at transition times. HST and power transition theory combine to provide parsimonious predictions of order and agency, when HST is strong, so is order, and when power moves, so do the agencies of accommodation and contestation (Gavris, 2021) (Chan, 2007).

But the realities of today make it clear that linear models of succession to hegemony are limited. First, the objection to teleological or deterministic interpretations stresses that historical analogies are not valid: Pax Britannica and Pax Americana have been born in special technological, institutional and normative environments, which do not necessarily fit into the contemporary one. The nineteenth-century British order was based on maritime superiority and empire-building networks, while the post-1945 American order had its own legacy from the war, the trajectory of decolonization, and the economic integration of new multilateral institutions. The failure to acknowledge these context-specific mechanisms can risk exaggerated notions of structural inevitabilities and understated notions of agency, institutional stickiness and path dependency (Parchami, 2009).

Second, the interdependence and multidimensionality of the international system have increased, where the single-variable hegemonic models have lost explanatory value. The economic interdependency, transnational governance and technological diffusion engender webs of mutual vulnerabilities, which limit unilateral action and make the replacement of one hegemon with another difficult. Deep economic interaction, for instance, between the United States and the European Union (EU) and China creates leverage and constraints. Leverage does not always equal freedom of action when it is coupled with extensive trade, investment and knowledge networks. Likewise, the emergence of non-state actors (multinational corporations, ‘tech platforms’, transnational advocacy networks) and regional institutions (ASEAN, African Union) spread the control and lead to overlapping governance structures.

Third, multipolarity and regionalism have permitted plural order to emerge that can coexist with global hegemonic orders, but not replace them. In the modern state, the orders suggest are differentiated: local powers, regional security architectures; parallel economic institutions (such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and World Bank); competing norm bundles (developmental state norms and liberal institutionalism). The general picture suggested by these arrangements is that the world becomes multi-

polarized into sub worlds, in which the actors dominate in certain fields but not in others (military, economic, technological) and which lack a hegemonic actor.

This theoretical approach is used as a basis for the empirical study that is conducted here. The paper can then assess whether the changes in the Indo Pacific are a classic case of “Pax,” a “managed Pax,” or a “plural Pax,” given that each of these three elements have been operationalized, while also taking into account the criticisms of a linear succession. The framework includes tangible elements such as military deployments and alliances (security provision), trade networks and financial instruments (economic leadership), and institutional initiatives and normative diffusion (normative/institutional authority), while acknowledging the interdependence and multiplicity of institutions that hinder simple inferences about hegemonic transition. This blended approach aims to balance theoretical clarity with empirical sensitivity to contemporary complexity.

3. Pax Britannica: Foundations and Decline

Pax Britannica was a new order that developed throughout the nineteenth century, which was based on a material predominance, institutional customs and practices and the ideology of British Pax. Pax Britannica was a new order, based on the material supremacy, institutional customs and practices, and the ideology of Pax Britannica that emerged throughout the nineteenth century, which served to maintain relative stability and commercial openness in the British world. Neither of these abilities, naval superiority nor industrial-commercial strength was separate but they were mutually dependent. The Royal Navy's supremacy in the sea was a weapon and a symbol of Britain's worldwide influence. Sea power provided security of trade routes, policy, and the ability to exercise expeditionary power to secure colonial possessions and maritime chokepoints. Naval superiority also made it less likely that great-power naval coalitions might be able to challenge British interests, thereby ensuring a certain degree of security provisioning that worked to Britain's and trading partners' advantage (Morris, 2010).

In parallel with the control of the sea was Britain's industrial superiority. The Industrial Revolution provided Britain with manufacturing advantages, new technologies, and productivity increases, which led to a capacity for exporting and earning capital surpluses. British companies and investors provided manufactory products, shipping, and credit to distant markets, establishing tight commercial networks from the Atlantic to Asia. Merchant shipping, steamship lines and the telegraphic communication create a network of global markets, and lower the cost of transactions for commercial actors. The naval capabilities supported each other, with naval protection lowering shipping risk and industrial production creating the economic foundation for naval expansion and overseas investment.

In addition to material power, there were also institutional and normative dimensions of Pax Britannica which influenced the exercise of power. Free trade ideology was the promotion of central. Britain's economic policy was more pro-open market and more pro-trade liberalization, especially after the repeal of the Corn Laws (1846). Free trade was simultaneously an ideological and a strategic objective, for it was a way of legitimating British economic dominance and simultaneously making other states part of Britain-dominated trade networks, thus generating a commercial stability interest. Britain's normatively claimed liberal ideas were packaged as universalist liberal ideas, and facilitated the diffusion of preferences for open markets among elites beyond Europe.

The British had also relied much on informal empire and financial leverage, not just formal territorial control. Britain's normal practice was to blend direct rule with areas controlled by unequal treaties, protectorates and financial dependency. London became the world's financial centre; British banks and

capital markets funded infrastructure projects and sovereign debt, all around the globe. For much of the nineteenth century the gold standard, centered around Britain, offered monetary stability and allowed investment and trade to cross borders. Through informal empire Britain gave itself the power to rule without the administrative burden of a universal territorial governance and by using finance, trade and diplomacy, it assumed a de facto hegemony in many areas.

These were Pax Britannica's strengths, but over time, structural causes undermined the Pax Britannica. Strategic overextension was one of the major sources. Naval supremacy and policing colonies and protecting distant trade routes were increasingly costly and burdensome. The price of maintaining an imperial order had to be paid and this imposed pressures at home and limited Britain's capacity to modernise every aspect of its power at once. The competition of new powers, particularly the industrialization and naval development like Germany and the United States, compounded by over extension, produced competitors capable of challenging Britain's supremacy owing to their economic and military capabilities. The asymmetry that had favoured Great Britain was weakened by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the spread of industrial power and the emergence of the military powers of the continent.

The twentieth-century turmoil of war and revolution acted as a catalyst for decline. Both World Wars had a huge human and economic toll, damaged the economies of Europe, and changed the power dynamics to the United States and subsequently the Soviet Union. The financial pressures of war and the pressures of reconstruction reduced Britain's financial base, and her imperial obligations were less politically and economically viable. The interwar years also highlighted the shortcomings of the gold-standard-based order and prompted a protectionist reaction that challenged the liberal economic principles that Britain had espoused. Formal imperial structures were further broken down by decolonisation movements, and the new states in Africa and Asia embarked upon a variety of development and foreign-policy courses that lessened the power of the British (Friedman, 2020) (Gough, 1990).

The combined strength of Pax Britannica is a demonstration of the need for a process of synergy between material capacities, institutional structures, and normative justifications. Naval and industrial power made it possible for Britain to pay for security and commerce, and financial systems and informal empire for an extension of its rule-making influence. However, strategic overreach, the rise of rivals and the jolt of total war stress the fragility of the hegemonic arrangements when the costs of leadership outstripped the resources at their disposal and when other powers were reshaping international capabilities. These historical dynamics provide a comparative baseline to evaluate subsequent claims of hegemonic successions, such as the notion of Pax Americana and the emergence of new alternatives in the Indo-Pacific.

4. Pax Americana: Continuity and Adaptation

Pax Americana is a product of the cataclysm of 2nd World War and the geopolitical rearrangements that occurred after. The United States harnessed wartime gains like industrial capacity, intact infrastructure, technological superiority, and unprecedented military capabilities to create a multilateral institutional framework for organizing the international system and for preventing the resurgence of protectionism and great-power war. The Bretton Woods system was central to this construction. The outcome of the Bretton Woods conference of 1944 was three organizations: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), and the institution of rules

for trade liberalization under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). They were supported by the U.S. commitment and resources, and offered ways to stabilize the exchange rate, post-war reconstruction aid, and the gradual development of economic integration based on rules. A network of security pacts—NATO in Europe, bilateral pacts in the East Asian region (especially Japan and South Korea), and an international array of access agreements—backed economic institutions and kept U.S. military forces deployed forward in strategic locations around the world (Eric Louw, 2020).

The military and economic aspects of Pax Americana were complementary aspects of hegemony. On the military side, the United States acquired global force projection capacity: carrier strike groups, overseas bases, expeditionary logistics, and joint operational readiness, enabling quick responses to events in theatres. These assets supported extended deterrence for allies, stabilised key areas and had the function of protecting maritime commons essential for international trade. The credibility of U.S. security guarantees reduced allies' incentives for arms races or independent balancing, thereby stabilizing alliance networks and creating predictable security externalities for global commerce

Military control was matched by dollar dominance in terms of economy. The US supplied a safe haven for the dollar, and robust capital markets to support liquidity across the globe. As long as the dollar was convertible into gold, and the United States had agreed to keep the dollar stable, there was confidence in international payments and long-term investment, under Bretton Woods. The dollar's dominance would remain even in the formal demise of Bretton Woods in 1971, as U.S. financial markets were deep and prolific, dollar invoicing was prevalent, and venerated financial institutions were in place. American companies and capital were also responsible for the development of technology and multinational production, and their economic power was transferred across the boundaries of nations through trade, investment, and the norms of transnational corporate governance.

Yet in Pax Americana, there are persistent and increasing problems that make the story of the untroubled U.S. hegemony more complicated. First, the nature of power diffusion has changed, which has impacted the distribution of capabilities that previously made a U.S.-led order near self-evident. American preponderance has also been diminished in some areas by economic and military modernization of other states, most notably China, but also other powers in the region, including the European Union. China's continued economic growth, industrial modernization and strategic investment in the maritime and aerospace sectors have resulted in a changed geographic landscape of contested zones of influence in the Indo-Pacific. The era of unilaterality in establishing global tech standards is gone due to technological competition, particularly in the telecommunications industry, semiconductors, and the artificial intelligence field.

Secondly, Strategic overstretch is operational and political. The U.S. forces and commitments worldwide, including alliance mandates, counterterrorism and freedom of navigation operations, adds high operational costs and frequent political trials on the subject of burden-sharing. Military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and their prolonged stay in both countries brought a sense of frustration about the limits of force to meet political ends and spurred domestic debate about the viability of long-term foreign deployments. These debates make the maintenance of the entire set of public goods typically linked with hegemonic leadership difficult for the United States.

Third, the global economic dynamism and supply chains have been geographically rearranged with the economic centre shifting to Asia. But trade and investment increasingly turn to Asia, and new regional governance arenas and financing tools like the Asian Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and supply-chain deals are providing other avenues to governance. China's Belt and

Road Initiative (BRI) and connections in trade and investment can corroborate or undermine U.S.-led institutions. At the same time, the fragmentation of global value chains, the backlash against globalisation and protectionist measures have made liberalisation easier than it was in previous decades of Pax American (Cohrs, 2018).

They don't always signal a coming fall of U.S. leadership. Instead, they create a more complex and flexible arrangement. The U.S. has demonstrated its ability to innovate institutions and revitalize alliances, such as NATO's post-Cold War changes, security cooperation agreements like the Quad and economic measures like trade dialogues and selectively adopting industrial policy to ensure critical supply chains. American economic statecraft has evolved from advocating free access to markets coupled with selective investments and export restrictions in key industries. In military terms, the United States has been seeking "force posture changes" with the emphasis on "distributed lethality," "alliance interoperability," and new domains (space, cyber) to maintain deterrent (Cohrs, 2018).

From an analytical point of view, the durability of Pax Americana relies on the capacity of the United States to deliver adequate public goods and allied and partner networks to adjust to common responsibilities and shifting dangers. A new, but still stable, American-centered order will still hold if the United States revises its pledges and partners further enhance functional cooperation. On the other hand, if the diffusion of capabilities and the emergence of other institutions further intensify, where the U.S. does not adapt or align with these institutions, then the system could become divided into multiple regional orders and domain-specific hierarchies. These pathways can only be measured empirically by observing indicators, such as defense spending, alliance cohesion, dollar usage, institutional participation rates, and technology standards, with in the Indo-Pacific context.

5. The Indo-Pacific as the New Strategic Core

The Indo-Pacific is the new strategic heart of the world, gathering the world's fastest-growing economies, the most important maritime routes and the most important great-power rivalry between the United States and China. It is not just a geographical heartland, but also one of economic heft, security concerns, and institutional innovation, which, in combination, define its role in determining the future architecture of international order and the regional signal of the onset of hegemonic transition, contestation, or structural change without replacement. There are three pillars of the economic dominance of the Indo-Pacific, namely, trade flows, supply chains and demographic trends. First, it is the source of the vast part of global maritime trade and a growing proportion of world GDP. Some 60% of global maritime trade and many important energy transportations flow through its waters, linking the biggest trading countries of the world, namely China, the United States, Japan and South Korea, with the world's fastest-growing emerging markets in Southeast Asia and India. Economic integration has been strengthened and trade costs lowered through trade liberalization agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Second, the Indo-Pacific is the center of international supply chains for electronics, semiconductors, shipbuilding and textiles. The manufacturing regions in China, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam and India provide intermediates to the global market; any disruption in the flow of these intermediates is a systemic risk. The centrality has driven up "China plus one" sourcing strategies and investments in alternative production sites. Third, more than half of the world's population lives in the region, where India, Indonesia and Vietnam have young and growing labour markets that offer human resources for future growth. In Japan and South Korea, on the other hand, increasing ageing population is pushing

technological adaptation, resulting in a demographic diversity that unites youth and advanced capacity. Control of the critical sea lanes and rising naval competition in the Indo-Pacific is the geopolitical weight. Key chokepoints, including the Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Straits and the South China Sea, are used to transport energy from the Middle East to Asia and manufactured products around the world. The global economic repercussions of control or disruption of these routes would be immediate and far-reaching, making them strategic arenas of competition (Medcalf, 2014) (Hu, 2020).

As China strengthens its naval operations, the United States continues with freedom-of-navigation exercises, naval competition has grown stronger. Today, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has become the largest naval force in the world by hulls and equipped with cutting edge surface combatants, submarines, aircraft carriers and missile systems with the aim of dominating the region. China's aggressive stance in the South China Sea, which involves building islands, deploying military hardware, and enforcing claims on the sea, has sparked tensions. Extended deterrence, carrier strike groups, and alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines constitute the U.S. response. This rivalry is not confined to the U.S.-China binary where India is undertaking a naval rearmament, Japan is focused on defense technology exports, and Australia is pursuing the nuclear powered sub deal (AUKUS) with the U.S. and U.K. in a broader regional shift toward maritime powers (Parmar, 2022).

The great powers have shifted their attention to 'Indo-Pacific'. The United States officially embraced an Indo Pacific Strategy focused on strengthening alliances, rebalancing military posture and economic engagement. The 2022 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report presents the concept of forward-deployed forces in the region, greater interoperability, and a Quad (U.S.-India-Japan-Australia) framework for facilitating security, technology, and infrastructure cooperation. China's approach is to increase economic and military presence via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a policy to finance ports, railways and energy infrastructure in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Africa. While China talks about development partnerships and what it calls a "community with a shared future", assertive claims to maritime areas and economic coercion have stirred resistance in the region. Regional reactions are related to complicated hedging strategies. The ASEAN countries work for "centrality" to remain independent without becoming attached to any one power. Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines boost defense ties with the U.S., maintain economic ties with China. The 'SAGAR' doctrine of India is focused on maritime security and connectivity in the Indian Ocean region. The AUKUS cooperation between Australia, the UK and the US underscores their shared dedication to security and technological progress in the region (He, 2018).

The new strategic core is the Indo-Pacific due to its economic weight, maritime value and strategic shifts. Trade flows, supply chains and demography are an essential economic infrastructure. Great power behavior is influenced by security demands induced by sea lanes and naval competition. Strategic reorientations generate a multi-layered, networked order that cannot be easily categorized, and that can be unhegemonic simply by being multi-layered and networked. To examine this dynamics is crucial to investigate the region's impact on the changing nature of Pax Americana, the new Pax Sinica, or a structural shift without hegemonic replacement. In subsequent sections of the empirical analysis, these propositions will be empirically examined by using measurable indicators of power, institutions, and economic integration.

6. Pax Sinica: Concept, Claims, and Realities

Historically the term “Pax Sinica” referred to the Chinese-led regional order but in current strategic debates it has come into use as a catch-all phrase for the Chinese-led regional order and thus it has been used in many different contexts. Historically, Pax Sinica means times of Chinese domination during imperial regimes, such as the Tang and Ming, when a “tributary system” ruled regional relations. There, the polities were subject to the imperial rule with ritual submission, granted trade privileges and protection, and functioned in a hierarchical structure based on Confucian values and on the legitimacy of the emperor. Sovereignty was porous and relational, allowing internal autonomy within the states but symbolizing China's supremacy. In contrast, contemporary Pax Sinica usage assumes modern sovereign equality and asks whether China can build the bundle of powers (security provision, economic leadership and institutional power) that define a hegemonic order. What is at stake in this consideration of the conceptual tension is the question of whether China's rise is a repetition of previous hierarchical regionality, or a different kind of power that could establish a new order that accommodates current conceptions of sovereignty.

Pax Sinica claims are supported by Chinese influence in the economic, military and diplomatic spheres. In terms of economy, China has made unprecedented progress in terms of trade, investment and financing infrastructure. It is the biggest trading partner for most of the ASEAN countries, an important source of capital investment for regional development plans and the backbone of regional supply chains. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), encompassing the Maritime Silk Road, has sponsored digital infrastructure, energy grids, and railways throughout Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa and more. These investments result in dependencies and leverage where recipient states receive capital and connectivity but may be subjected to political conditions and debt sustainability issues and be pressured to cooperate. Beyond this, China's economic importance applies to technology in the telecommunications sector (such as 5G) and the semiconductor packaging industry, as well as digital platforms that are defining the information environment in the region.

China's military modernization is in line with economic growth. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is the largest navy in the world by number of ships, and is becoming increasingly capable of operating in the blue waters with its new aircraft carriers, advanced submarines and long-range missile systems. Beijing has been quick to build anti-satellite weapons, hypersonic missiles and cyber capabilities to protect against U.S. interference and dominate the region. China has constructed military installations and artificial islands in the South China Sea, established coast guard and naval presence and asserted claims over the sea. These are steps that indicate the adoption of coercive means to influence the security situation in the region and gain control over the key sea lanes (Yumlembam & Yumlembam, 2026).

The influence of China is further enhanced by regional diplomacy. Beijing relies on bilateral engagement and multilateral forums, as well as normative entrepreneurship, to strengthen the relationship. Platforms of economic integration and political alignment include the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement, membership in the East Asia Summit and the role of BRI cooperation framework leadership. China encourages narratives of development through sovereignty, non-interference and state-led development that resonates with states that are hesitant to accept conditions imposed by the West. But economic pressure like restrictions on trade with countries that go against Beijing's agenda has also caused friction and nudged closer to Beijing's agenda some regional allies.

Three pillars underpin claims in support of Pax Sinica narratives infrastructure projects, trade dependency and regional centrality. First, the BRI provides concrete infrastructure projects that connect recipient countries with China through physical and financial connections. Ports such as Gwadar (Pakistan), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar) and even possible ports in the Pacific have increased China's strategic reach and offer potential to use China's ports for maritime operations. Secondly, there is structural leverage due to trade dependence. Some ASEAN countries have been dependent on China for their exports, import and investments and this imbalance could be exploited politically, where the states might change their stance on a political issue to prevent economic retaliation. Third, Chinese centrality is based on its being the economic hub of the Asia region. Being the biggest economy in the region, China establishes standards for trade, investment and technology and its domestic market is a gravitational force for regional trade (Saran, 2018).

But these assertions have to be balanced against empirical realities that temper the Pax Sinica thesis. Unlike the Pax Americana, the security alliances that underpinned it are not as dense in China, nor are they as enduring. Security alliances in China are restricted and frequently business-like. The leadership is still uncertain, with the establishment of alternative institutions by China (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), while many states in the region are still going to the Western financial markets and institutions built by the United States. China's narrative of sovereignty and development has an appeal to some states, but not so to others, who are more bound by the liberal democratic norms of the U.S. and its allies. Furthermore, the threats of economic coercion and debt sustainability issues have led to "BRI fatigue" and diversification among the recipients.

China's ascent has transformed the balance of power in the region and, in fact, established areas of Chinese influence, but not a "bundled set of attributes of a hegemonic regime like the historical Pax". The outcome is not a clear Pax Sinica but rather a multi-layered and contested order with China's selective leadership and the critical military and institutional anchors of the United States. There is structural change in the Indo-Pacific without a simple hegemonic replacement.

7. Structural Constraints on Pax Sinica

In spite of China's astonishing economic rise and military modernization, there are deep structural limitations that make it impossible to create a Chinese-led Pax, a "pax sinica" in the sense that was seen in the past. The constraints are linked and play out across four arenas: continuous U.S. presence, balancing and resistance in the region, institutional and normative constraints, and legitimacy and leadership issues. Together they create a contested order where one that is not a complete Chinese hegemony, but rather influenced by Chinese rules.

Persistent U.S Presence

The United States has a long tenured military and strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific that is the main bulwark of Pax Americana and primary obstacle to Chinese hegemonic consolidation. First, extended deterrence and security architecture is based on U.S. military alliances. Formal partnerships with Japan, South Korea, Australia and the Philippines provide the U.S. forward bases, interoperable forces and joint operational capabilities that allow it to respond quickly anywhere in the world. Such as the coalitions that decrease allies' motives for balancing independently and establish a networked security system to limit China's military domination of the region. The U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, for instance, has been the basis for the presence of American troops in a strategic zone while the Philippines' Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) grants access to several bases close to the South China Sea.

Secondly, strategic partnerships are a way to increase the U.S. influence into the informal arena. The Quad (U.S., India, Japan, Australia) and AUKUS (U.S., UK, Australia) are coordinating on security, technology and infrastructure, and on the development of nuclear-powered submarine capabilities and advanced defense technologies, respectively. These minilateral arrangements establish flexible cooperation mechanisms, which can evolve and respond to the changing nature of threats without the need for alliances. The U.S. also has regular strategic partnership engagements with regional nations through the exchange of intelligence and defense technology, naval exercises, and other measures that build regional interoperability and deterrence. The result is a security architecture that is based on bilateral alliances and multilateral coordination, thus inducing redundancy and resilience that cannot be easily emulated by China (Freeman Jr, 2012).

Regional Balancing and Resistance

Chinese hegemony is met with multiple constraints from the regional powers, both in terms of what they can provide in terms of hard security and what they can do in terms of strategic hedging. India, Japan and Australia are the major players in this balancing architecture. “SAGAR” doctrine aims at the security and connectivity of the Indian Ocean and India's increasing maritime capability and involvement in the Quad underscores its intention to prevent Chinese imperialism. Japan has enhanced its defense posture, rose defense spending, and sold defense equipment to the ASEAN countries, and has kept the alliance with the United States as its key security pillar. Australia's AUKUS alliance and defense modernization demonstrate strategic priorities to pursue the alignment with the U.S. power while building up their own capabilities (Dosch & Christopher, 2008).

ASEAN members engage in hedging to maintain a balance between security cooperation with the U.S. and others and engagement with China. In the countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Philippines, they reinforce defense relations with Washington, but economic ones with Beijing. This “omnidirectional” policy enables ASEAN countries to reap economic advantages from China without having to fully go along with China to the detriment of their national autonomy. What this produces is a regional order in which no single state will be able to dominate and states will have diversified partnerships to share the risk.

Institutional and normative constraints

Global governance institutions and financial systems continue to be based on arrangements led by the U.S. that limit the institutional leadership and normativeness of China. First is that global governance institutions like the IMF, World Bank and WTO are still based on Western decision-making processes and values. Although China has developed other institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative, many regional states are still relying on U.S.-backed institutions and Western financial markets due to their reliability, transparency, and track record. For example, the AIIB runs in parallel to the World Bank, and China is a major borrower from the Western-influenced financial institutions.

Second, currency and financial systems reinforce dollar dominance and limit China's ability to provide alternative public goods. The U.S. dollar is the most widely used reserve currency, representing about 60% of foreign exchange reserves and most of the invoicing of international trade. The structural barriers to the internationalization of the Yuan include deep U.S. capital markets, financial instruments that are widely denominated in dollars, and network effects. The Yuan's current share of global reserves is less than 3%, and the capital controls make it less convertible, while China has been pushing Yuan-denominated trade and currency swap agreements. This financial imbalance limits Chinese ability to

bear the burden of regional liquidity and make available the economic public goods that are a hallmark of hegemony (Kumari et al., 2017).

Legitimacy and leadership challenges

Legitimacy and leadership are big issues in China that render its normativeness questionable and its hegemonic capacity extremely limited. The first is a lack of trust between regional countries because of China's aggressive position on the sea and economic pressure and its mysterious decision-making. South China Sea island-building, the aggression by the Chinese coast guard against the Philippines and Vietnam, and the restrictions on trade against countries that have taken sides against Beijing have led to resistance and hedging. The Chinese were seen as being more of a forcing than an assisting ally in lowering the willingness to accept China's leadership and raise the desire to be closer to U.S. security guarantees. Second, as a result of comparative or normative contestation, the power of China to project universalist legitimacy is constrained. China's emphasis on development-centric narratives that stress sovereignty, non-interference, and state-led development resonates with some states but runs counter to the liberal democratic ideas being espoused by the U.S. and its allies. This normative difference does not result in any regional order, but rather in different value systems competing. As long as China's normative frame of reference has not been as widely resonant through material power and appeal (democracy, human rights, rule of law) as the U.S., it cannot be expected to generate voluntary compliance and maintain hegemonic authority.

These structural restraints act together to block the formation of a complete hegemonic order, Pax Sinica. The U.S. military presence and networks of alliances offer anchors of security that can't be matched by China. By balancing with China, India, Japan, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), countries in the region have built several barriers to the dominance of the Chinese. China's ability to offer economic public goods is constrained by institutional and financial systems rooted in the U.S.-led framework. The contestation of legitimacy and contestation over norms erode the normativeness and ability of China to establish hegemonic authority. This is not a shift from Pax Americana to Pax Sinica, but rather a new form of order with new structures and new relationships but with continuing U.S. anchors, and diversified regional partnerships. This analysis supports the paper's central thesis that the Indo-Pacific represents intensifying contestation within a pluralistic order rather than straightforward hegemonic succession.

8. Implications for Global Order

The structural dynamics of the Indo-Pacific are not suggestive of a simple shift from one Pax to another, but of a new order, one that is contested, with no defined hierarchy and a growing strategic rivalry. The implications of the transformation for notions of international stability, institutional design and the future of global governance are far-reaching.

It is now a region of contestation, in which no single state holds all the cards in the security, economic and institutional game. First, the lack of hierarchy is a sign of the spread of capabilities and of the continuity of power centers. The United States still has key military assets, such as armies deployed forward, networks of military alliances, and naval superiority in certain areas, but China has economic superiority, regional supply line dominance and is rapidly gaining maritime capabilities. India, Japan and Australia are emerging as major middle powers with strategic autonomy and their own capabilities. It thus produces a disintegrated power structure in which various actors dominate in various fields, with

the U.S. dominating the security domain, China the trade and investment domain, and regional players the geographic and functional ones.

Second, competition increasingly becomes strategic in many aspects. Maritime freedom-of-navigation operations and security guarantees by alliances are compromised by the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea in the competition for command of the oceans. In the competition for command of the oceans, geographical security guarantees and the freedom of navigation are at stake and are threatened by the Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. Economic competition includes technology standards (semiconductors, 5G, AI), control of the supply chain, and investment flows. Institutional competition refers to parallel institutions—whether U.S.-backed, such as the Quad, AUKUS, or others, or China-backed, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, AIIB, or others. The multi-dimensional rivalry generates "friction points" that have the potential to generate greater instability if they are misjudged or escalate (Shahzada & Khan, 2022).

There is no hierarchy per se in the absence of hierarchy, new mechanisms for competing must be found. Contested orders theory, a twist on the traditional hegemonic stability theory, would suggest that in a contested order, the provision of public goods is shared out and states have to deal with a number of overlapping public goods systems, which increases transaction costs. This gives rise to opportunities for innovation (such as minilateral cooperation, functional alignment) and opportunities for fragmentation (such as competing standards, redundant institutions).

The Indo-Pacific dynamics also exhibit a historical trend towards regulated competition and mixed models, rather than a single Pax order. Firstly, the fall of hegemony as the key actors in the global ordering process is an example of the shortcomings of linear models of succession. Historical Pax periods—Pax Britannica and Pax Americana—have been created in the historical context under special conditions of technology, institutions, norms, which do not clearly correspond to complexity. The British system of the 19th century was based on naval-industrial superiority and imperial entanglements, while the system after 1945 was U.S.-based and had the legacy of two world wars, including the multi-lateral network of institutions. However, current conditions of power diffusion, technologisation and the advent of non-state actors produce complex patterns of mutual vulnerability, making unilateral action difficult and easy hegemonic change more complex (Liu, 2020).

Second, the shift from "hegemony" to "managed competition" is an indicator of the development of hybrid and multipolar systems linking hierarchy with horizontal cooperation. Local powers become important components of regional security architectures (India in the Indian Ocean, Japan in East Asia) and U.S. security guarantees remain. Economic governance includes parallel institutions, where states are in both U.S.-led and China-led institutions depending on its functional requirements, not ideological considerations. Technology governance is a clash between competing standards bodies and export control regimes, resulting in fragmented global markets. These mixed models yield a "multi-order" system in which the various domains are governed differently. Security might be alliance-based, driven by U.S. leadership; trade could take place via China-led supply chains and diversified; technology may be divided into rival ecosystems. This complexity is managed in different ways by states, most notably by having several powers in various spheres without becoming aligned (Kratiuk, 2023).

The consequences for world governance are enormous. First, institutional design should not be based on universalist concepts, but should allow flexibility and functional specialization. Comprehensive multilateral treaties are less useful than minilateral agreements or sectoral treaties, or adaptive governance systems. Second, there is a relative lack of connection between stability and the provision of

hegemonic public goods and greater reliance on mechanisms of managing competition where conflict prevention mechanisms, channels of crisis communication, and norms of strategic restraint. Third, states are interdependent, which can be both a leverage and constraint – they can leverage on economic tools but are also at risk of receiving counter-leverage. This change undermines the traditional forecasts of hegemonic transition. This change is a challenge to the conventional forecasts of hegemonic transition. We should not look for a war or a distinct succession but for an extended contestation in which leadership is partial, institutions are bricolaged, and hierarchies are specific. The Indo-Pacific is the arena to see if international order can be flexible and survive the fragmentation and/or conflicts of multipolarity.

Contested order in the Indo-Pacific, and the fading of single Pax orders, marks a major shift in global politics. With no clear hierarchy and growing strategic rivalry, mechanisms of power transition need to be reformed. Hegemony moves to managed competitiveness, leading to hybrid arrangements of both horizontal cooperation and hierarchical elements. It is important to grasp these dynamics for policy makers in a world in transition without the replacement of hegemony, where stability requires adaptive institutions, diversified partnerships and strategic restraint rather than a single hegemonic power. The changes of the modern period do not have the simple meaning of unproblematic successions of hegemony.

9. Conclusion

The paper asks if there is a shift from Pax Americana to Pax Sinica in the Indo Pacific or if it is a new 'Pax' in which the order changes but the Hegemon does not. The analysis shows that China's rise has changed the balance of power in the region significantly but has failed to bundle up the attributes of security provision, economic leadership, and normative/institutional authority that are required for a comprehensive hegemonic order. The Indo-Pacific is not just about something that's going to be taken over, but about contestation. The Indo-Pacific is not like a step on the succession of any simple hegemony, but about contestation in a pluralistic system. The key finding is that there is no hegemonic replacement as a part of structural change. China has an economic advantage, a control of supply chains and a steadily improving maritime power, but no dense alliance network, institutional leadership or normative appeal that historically underpinned Pax periods. The U.S. keeps its military bases, alliances and dominion over the financial system. Regional powers such as India, Japan, Australia and the ASEAN nations have strategic autonomy by engaging in hedging strategies between engaging with powers. The result is a contested order with selective Chinese influence coexisting alongside enduring U.S. anchors and diversified partnerships.

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