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# Contending Narratives of the International Order: US/Chinese Discursive Power and Its Effects on the UK\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The multifaceted competition between the United States and China has attracted much scholarly attention. Existing studies tend to focus on the material dimensions of the US-China rivalry. In this article I analyze the master/counternarratives produced by the two great powers that are intended to exercise their discursive power in shaping the geopolitical environment and legitimizing their global roles. Specifically, I examine the competing US and Chinese narratives on the international order and assess the impact of these narratives on shaping the values and interests of the United Kingdom. My research demonstrates that China's world order narratives have limited influence on the United Kingdom due to the fundamental differences in their political values, ideologies, and systems. Nevertheless, British leaders and policy elites are becoming more receptive to Chinese narratives, given China's growing economic power and "disciplinary power" to coerce other countries to accept its preferred narratives, as well as the uncertainty faced by the United Kingdom in the post-Brexit international economic environment.

**KEYWORDS:** US, China, UK, discursive power, narratives, liberal international order, world order.

The multifaceted competition between the United States and China in international relations is a significant phenomenon in the twenty-first century, which could have profound implications for global peace and prosperity. This competition is explained in the extant literature largely in terms of a classic geopolitical contest over political influence, economic dominance, and military power (see, for example, Friedberg 2012; Mastro 2015). According to this view, the two countries are believed to be engaging in a geopolitical rivalry as a result of China's rapid rise as a great power and the changing balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. A classic theoretical interpretation of this contest is the power transition theory, which postulates a "Thucydides trap" between a dominant power that tussles to maintain its hegemonic position in the international system and a rising power that attempts to challenge the prevailing international order (Organski and Kugler 1980; Allison 2017). This analysis

is underpinned by realist theory, which emphasizes such material factors as strategic balance and military capabilities in explicating the US-China rivalry and its wider implications (Gilpin 1980; Till 2012; Mearsheimer 2014, chap. 10). What is omitted from this literature is serious consideration of the metanarratives produced by both the United States and China that are intended to exercise discursive power in shaping the geopolitical environment and influencing the thinking and action of other actors.<sup>1</sup>

Central to the discursive rivalry between the United States and China is their competing narratives on the existing international order and its future development. While the United States has been a fervent advocate of the liberal international order (LIO), China has begun active and proactive promotion of its vision and discourse on world order. These narratives target a wide range of audiences in Asia, Europe, and other parts of the world. This article focuses on the analysis of the narratives generated by the two rival powers during the Barack Obama administration and Xi Jinping era. Specifically, it assesses the extent to which the contending US/Chinese narratives have succeeded in shaping the values and interests of the United Kingdom, a long-standing friend and ally of the United States with whom the UK share many common values. Yet Britain is keen to develop a closer relationship with China, which was described by the former British Prime Minister David Cameron as “a golden era” (Shirbon 2015). The British responses to the changing international order offer an interesting case study for assessing the effects of the US-China narrative competition.

This article makes an original contribution to the literature on the international order and US-China relations by demonstrating the significance of competing US/China narratives on the international order in shaping international perceptions and exercising discursive power on third parties. In particular, I demonstrate how the United States and China are vying for dominant narratives on the international order that reflect their national identity, cultural traditions, domestic ideology, political systems, foreign policy goals, and future aspirations. In terms of methodology, the study uncovers the deeper or hidden meanings of the narratives produced by the United States and China through discourse analysis.

There has been much debate on the definition of discourse analysis in the academic literature (see, for example, Alba-Juez 2009, chap. 1). Discourse analysis is often referred to as “language in use,” as it deals with the study of both “text” and

“context.” According to Deborah Schiffrin, “text” is “the linguistic content ... but not the inferences available to hearers depending upon the contexts in which words, expressions, and sentences are used,” while “context” is “a world filled with people producing utterances: people who have social, cultural, and personal identities, knowledge, beliefs, goals and wants, and who interact with one another in various socially and culturally defined situations” (Schiffrin 1994, 363). As Gillian Brown and George Yule argue, the analysis of discourse “cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which those forms are designed to serve in human affair” (Brown and Yule 1983, 1).

The primary sources for analyzing the US and Chinese narratives are official documents such as the speeches and statements of political leaders and government officials, as these documents provide the most authoritative conduits through which they perform their “speech acts.” Some articles written by influential policy elites and media sources are also consulted given their important role in constructing the narratives on the international order. While the analytical focus of the article is on the Obama–Xi Jinping era, the discursive rivalry between the United States and China will be considered in the light of the Trump presidency and Brexit. The article begins with a theoretical discussion of the complex relationships between narratives and “reality” from a constructivist perspective, focusing in particular on the performative functions of “speech acts.” The second section provides an analysis of America’s narratives of the LIO and how this is linked to its concern of the China challenge. The third section examines China’s critique of the US-led LIO and its narratives on the changing international order within which China aspires to play a more prominent role. This is followed by a consideration of the effects of the use of discursive power by the United State and China on the United Kingdom.

### **Master/Counternarratives of the International Order and US-China Discursive Power Rivalry**

From the constructivist perspective, the world does not exist as an objective reality. Rather, the “reality” is historically and socially constructed (Wendt 1999). The narratives of what type of international order should be established or maintained has been contested ground for social construction between the United States and China through their articulation and dissemination of particular discourses. However,

this discursive rivalry and its implications for third parties have received scant scholarly attention (Weissmann 2018).

It can be argued that discourses are not simply representations of the reality but discursive activities or “speech acts” (Searle 1969; Austin 1975) that seek to construct the social reality. To Nicholas Onuf, “Language is both representative and performative. People use words to represent deeds and they can use words, and words alone, to perform deeds” (Onuf 1989, 82). In other words, language enables actors to construct or create their social world. As Onuf argues, “Speech acts are social performances, that is, they have direct social consequences. ... Because people respond to them with their own performances, not always spoken, the patterns of speech acts and related performances constitute those practices that make the material conditions and artifacts of human experience meaningful” (Onuf 1989, 183). Speaking is thus “an activity with normative consequences” (Onuf 2001, 77).

Similarly, in their formulation of the concept of securitization, Barry Buzan, Ole Weaver, and Jaap de Wilde refer to speech acts as the “process of constructing a shared understanding”; “it is the utterance itself that is the act” in the sense that “by saying the words, something is done” (Buzan, Weaver, and de Wilde 1998, 26). As David Campbell observes, “The world exists independently of language, but we cannot *know* that (beyond the facts of its assertion), because the existence of the world is literally inconceivable outside of language and our traditions of interpretation” (Campbell 1998, 6). Thus, language or discourse refers to not only the articulation of ideas but also the contention of what constitutes the reality. As Hayden White asserts, discourse aims to “*constitute* the ground whereon to decide *what shall count as a fact* in the matter under consideration and to determine *what mode of comprehension* is best suited to understanding of the facts thus constituted” (White 1978, 3).

Why have US and Chinese leaders and elites paid so much attention to the narratives of the international order? These narratives are best seen as what Jean-François Lyotard calls “metanarratives,” which offer an overarching schema that explains and orders human experience and knowledge (Lyotard 1984). Essentially, a metanarrative is “a big story” that provides a guiding framework within which smaller stories are told. Metanarratives can be instrumental in rationalizing or legitimizing specific forms of power relations. As the international order or world order is about

“the distribution of power and authority among the political actors on the global stage” (Falk 1999, 29), it provides a metanarrative for the leading advocates of a particular order to shape the behavior of the actors within the international system.

Karl Schonberg is right in arguing that “language enables human beings to communicate, but also traps them within the set of meanings attached to the words they use” (Schonberg 2009, 11). As such, the narratives on the international order manufactured by Washington and Beijing in their “communicative space” with each other and with the third parties are designed to “trap” them within the specific boundary of the articulated language. This can be seen as attempts by the United States and China to exert their discursive power through specific language or discourse. Many scholars of discourse studies concur that language is indispensable in the exercise or assertion of power (Fairclough 2001; van Dijk 2008). Indeed, Michel Foucault considers discourses part of broader social processes that are closely associated with power relations. To Foucault (1972), discourses are constantly exploited by different groups of people to reinforce, contest, or subvert existing power-knowledge relations. Similarly, Linus Hagström and Björn Jerdén contend that power could be defined as the capacity of actors and discourses to produce effects (Hagström and Jerdén 2014; see also Morriss 2002). This interpretation of power is particularly useful in elucidating why the United States and China are using carefully crafted narratives of the international order to produce the effects on other actors that would serve their respective interests. In essence, the United States has been producing and maintaining the dominant narratives on the LIO. At the same time, China has become increasingly active in generating its counternarratives that accept certain elements of the US narratives but challenge other aspects of the liberal narratives by advocating its own version and vision of the world order. Both countries are striving to make their own narratives attractive to a wide range of audiences in the international system.

The discursive battle between the United States and China in their narratives of the international order is usefully understood through Michael Damberg’s conceptualization of master (or dominant) narratives and counternarratives. Damberg maintains that master narratives are setting up “routines” through various means and that they have a tendency to “normalize” or “naturalize” the routines, which can “constrain and delineate the agency of subjects” and reduce “the range of their actions.” These master narratives provide helpful “guidance” and a “sense of

direction” for the subjects (Damberg 2004, 360). He believes that the construction of counternarratives does not necessarily mean a complete rejection of the master narratives, as “complicity and countering are activities that go hand-in-hand” (Damberg 2004, 353). In other words, master narratives “are not automatically hegemonic” and “complicity with them does not automatically result in being complicit with or supportive of hegemonic power-knowledge complexes” (Damberg 2004, 360). Through the analysis of the contending US and Chinese narratives of the international order, this article hopes to make a unique contribution to the theorization of master/counternarratives in the context of international relations and US-China relations in particular.

### **The Liberal International Order and Global Leadership: US Narratives under Obama**

For over seventy years US leaders have been actively promoting the vision of an LIO led by the United States (Brands 2016), although the term LIO rose to prominence only with G. John Ikenberry’s writing on liberal internationalism (see, for example, Ikenberry 2011a) and it was rarely used by US politicians and elite newspapers prior to the Obama years.<sup>2</sup> Despite differences over specific policies, successive US governments have been committed to such values as democracy, liberty, freedom, and the free market. All these values, regarded by US leaders and policy elites as significant symbols of their national identity, are also essential to the construction of a liberal world order. As Gideon Rose, editor of *Foreign Affairs*, observes, “[For] generations, the central challenge for U.S. foreign policy has been straightforward: consolidate, protect, and extend the liberal international order that the United States helped create after World War II” (Rose 2015).

To be sure, there has long been a debate among US politicians and elites over the direction of US foreign policy. The isolationists argue that US military involvement in other regions such as Europe and Asia should be limited. This is because the United States is sufficiently secure due to its geographical location, military strength, and economic power. It is therefore unnecessary for the United States to define its national interest too broadly to include the protection of the security and freedom of all its friends and allies in various parts of the world. This view has been contested by other US leaders however, including former president

Obama, who saw the global leadership of the United States as vital to maintaining a liberal democratic international order. Obama was zealous in sustaining the master narrative of the LIO. He used passionate and effective language to disseminate the discourse that US national interest and security could be enhanced immensely in a rules-based international system, where major international economic and security issues would be resolved through multilateral institutions and international organizations.

These types of narratives were echoed by many other officials and diplomats in the Obama administration. For instance, in a 2015 security conference speech in Berlin, Ambassador John B. Emerson replicated Obama's liberal discourse that the transatlantic alliance "was built on the understanding that a rules- and values-based international order was mutually beneficial for all, and it was made possible because of our shared interests, shared history, and shared sacrifices" (Emerson 2015).

In his "speech acts" (Searle 1969) at the United Nations in September 2016, Obama reaffirmed his conviction in a US-led rule-based international system: "[We] are all stakeholders in this international system, and it calls upon all of us to invest in the success of institutions to which we belong. ... Many nations have shown what kind of progress is possible when we make those commitments" (Obama 2016). This point was emphasized in relation to China by Robert D. Hormats, Under Secretary for Economic, Energy, and Agricultural Affairs in the Obama administration:

Over the past decade and a half, China has enjoyed dramatic growth, thanks largely to its own reforms and hard work of the Chinese people. . . . But China's dramatic growth is also due to a stable global financial system, market access benefits of WTO membership and enormous capital inflows. ... The global system becomes more valuable to China as it becomes more intertwined with the fortunes of the rest of the world, and therefore it has a greater stake in the success of that system. (Hormats 2011)

Thus, rising powers like China could be integrated into a US-led liberal international system as a "stakeholder" (Ikenberry 2008). Indeed, Obama believed that the United States should continue with its efforts to engage China with the hope that it would become a US partner in tackling various global issues. In support of Obama's narratives, Deputy Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken maintained, "Rather than constraining us, the rules-based international order has legitimated, preserved, and amplified our power over time" (Blinken 2016b). Here the language could not have



been more explicit – the metanarratives on LIO played a significant role in rationalizing the power relations between the United States and other countries in the world.

Another important element of the LIO narratives is the theory of democratic peace, which postulates that democracies do not fight democracies (Doyle 1983). This is rooted in US political ideology that underscores the liberal values of freedom and democracy. It is therefore in the national interest of the United States to promote democracy around the world, which was historically linked to its foreign policy during the Cold War years. Indeed, Obama was keen to promote democracy and democratization in the world. This was evidenced by his decision to support political and economic reform in the Middle East and North Africa following the Arab Spring in 2011. As Obama put it, “It will be the policy of the United States to promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy” (White House 2011). But given the US experience in Afghanistan and Iraq under the George W. Bush administration, he was disinclined to get enmeshed in military conflicts in countries not seen as core interests for the United States such as the Ukraine and Syria. Nevertheless, Obama’s conception of US national identity was underpinned by the political values of liberalism in that it should play a leading role in promoting liberal democratic ideas and governance and democratic peace (White House 2010b). Obama made this argument explicitly at the US Military Academy at West Point in 2014: “America’s support for democracy and human rights goes beyond idealism - it is a matter of national security. Democracies are our closest friends and are far less likely to go to war” (White House 2014). Moreover, Obama asserted that the United States “created webs of commerce, supported an international architecture of laws and institutions, and spilled American blood in foreign lands” to “advance the basic rights upon which our Nation was founded.” He went on to say that “our support for universal rights is both fundamental to American leadership and a source of our strength in the world” (White House 2010a). The “social performances” (Onuf 1989, 183) of Obama’s democratic peace narratives were intended for the preservation of an international order that mirrored American liberal values and the assertion of US power in the world.

During a visit to Poland, Blinken quoted Pope John Paul II in his speech: “Every generation needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.” He argued strongly that “it is the inherent

right of citizens in a democracy to make their country's decisions and determine their country's future," and that "all members of the international community are bound by common rules and should face costs if they do not live up to the solemn commitments that they make." "These principles," according to his rule-based order narratives, "are the fundamental rules that underpin the international order that together we have sought to build, sustain, and as necessary adapt." He went on to emphasize how the building of "an international system of institutions, of rules, of norms dedicated to peace and progress" made an immense contribution to the prevention of "a return to war between and among great powers" and the creation of "a safe, stable environment in which countries could grow and develop to the benefit of all their citizens." Specifically, the vision of the "transatlantic project" between the United States and Europe was believed to have flourished which provided "a foundation of democracy and stability" that had underwritten "an unparalleled period of peace and prosperity for Europe, the United States, and much of the world" (Blinken 2016a). This is a powerful speech act in celebrating the virtues and benefits of the LIO in the context of strengthening US-Europe relations.

Indeed, the promotion of liberal ideas and a ruled-based international order was central to Obama's thinking in defining the national identity of the United States. In US narratives of the LIO, China has often been depicted as an illiberal regime that does not respect the universal values of democracy and human rights. China's human rights practices are regularly condemned by US officials and in the US Department of State's annual human rights reports.<sup>3</sup> During Xi Jinping's visit to the United States in September 2015, Obama raised the issue of human rights with him. In a Joint Press Conference with Xi in the White House, Obama made his position clear: "I again affirmed America's unwavering support for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all people, including freedom of assembly and expression, freedom of the press and freedom of religion. And I expressed in candid terms our strong view that preventing journalists, lawyers, NGOs and civil society groups from operating freely, or closing churches and denying ethnic minorities equal treatment are all problematic" (White House 2015). By criticizing China's lack of political freedom and poor human rights record, the Obama administration was in effect questioning the moral position of China in the LIO. In the meantime, the Obama administration raised serious concerns about the security implications of China's military developments and lack of transparency in its defense budget (US

Department of Defense 2013). This could be seen by China as questioning the sincerity of the rhetoric of “peaceful rise” that underpinned its pledge to be a responsible power in the international community. Specifically, the Obama administration was alarmed by China’s military activities relating to its territorial disputes with other Asian countries in the South and East China Seas. While the official US position on the question of sovereignty was neutral, Obama emphasized America’s treaty obligations to support its regional allies such as Japan and the Philippines (Felsenthal and Spetalnick 2014). In this sense, Obama’s narratives on the US “pivot” to Asia or rebalancing strategy could be viewed as a necessary step of exercising US leadership in building a liberal order in the Asia-Pacific (Bumiller 2011; Clinton 2011). In US narratives, China was characterized as a rising power with an undemocratic system, growing military capabilities, and revisionist intentions that would seriously undermine peace and stability in the international order. Consequently, the best way to guarantee China’s “peaceful rise” was to support the rule of law and advocate greater freedom of expression and religious freedom in the country and gradually integrate China into the US-led LIO. Here the Obama administration’s “speech acts” could be seen as what Nicholas Onuf would consider “an activity with normative consequences” (Onuf 2001, 77).

Indeed, the dominant narratives of the role of the United States in the world on the basis of its political values were prevalent among US elites during the Obama era. A prime example of this was the publication of a report prepared by a bipartisan task force of foreign policy and national security experts.<sup>4</sup> The report argued that the United States’ global role should be based on the belief that “the advancement of an open, rules-based international order that promotes universal values of liberty, democracy, human dignity, and economic freedom is essential to the security and economic vitality of the United States” (Goldgeier and Volker 2013, 2). Similarly, a 2014 Brookings report recommended that President Obama’s overarching foreign policy goal in the remainder of his second term should be “to reassert American leadership in a rules-based international system in which norms are not only articulated but also, wherever possible, enforced” (Kagan and Piccone 2014). Another report produced by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace supported a policy of democracy promotion and the Obama administration’s efforts to rebuild America’s democratic reputation following the decline in US standing as the champion of democracy under the Bush administration (Carothers 2012). This

indicated that the perception of US leaders on the centrality of liberal values and norms to America's national identity and the international order was widely shared by its elites.<sup>5</sup>

While agreeing that US interests can be secured through the exercise of its global leadership role, many US leaders believe that the United States' preeminent position in the world is best preserved by maintaining its military superiority over other great powers. This would help prevent rising powers such as China from challenging US preeminence. America should therefore support multilateralism but be prepared to act unilaterally if this is needed for the protection of US interests. The discourse and practice of US foreign policy under the George W. Bush presidency were a clear reflection of this perspective. Although Obama was much more enthusiastic about tackling global and regional issues through multilateral means, the preservation of US military power remained a significant part of his narratives of America's role in upholding the US-led LIO. When Obama spoke on the Asia-Pacific region in 2011, he made it clear that "we will allocate the resources necessary to maintain our strong military presence in this region" and that "we will preserve our unique ability to project power and deter threats to peace." He also indicated that the United States was modernizing its defense posture across the Asia-Pacific with greater flexibility and new capabilities "to ensure that our forces can operate freely" and to help "allies and partners build their capacity, with more training and exercises" (Obama 2011). Obama's power narratives were articulated in his address at the UN General Assembly in 2013: "The United States of America is prepared to use all elements of our power, including military force, to secure our core interests" (Obama 2013).

It was apparent that Obama sought to maintain a liberal unipolar system or what G. John Ikenberry has called a "one-hub" international system with America at the center (Ikenberry 2011b). This system is based on a liberal order that is best seen as "an organizational complex in which the United States is the organisational hub" (Ikenberry 2011b, 242). In this metanarrative, US unipolarity was established on the basis of not only US economic and military power but an American-led open and rule-based global system, which could be joined by other great powers. What distinguished Obama from other US presidents was that he was more willing to involve other countries and engage adversaries in the exercise of US leadership. This is evidenced by the proposal of building a multipartner world presented by

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2009 (Clinton 2009). This type of global leadership reflected Obama's conception of America's identity as a benign hegemon, which aspired to build an LIO under US leadership with the cooperation and participation of other countries. It is a recurring theme in his "speech acts": "We stand for an international order in which the rights and responsibilities of all nations and all people are upheld. Where international law and norms are enforced. Where commerce and freedom of navigation are not impeded. Where emerging powers contribute to regional security, and where disagreements are resolved peacefully. That's the future that we seek" (Obama 2011).

### **China's Counternarratives – Liberal International Order with Chinese Characteristics?**

Obama's vision and mission of sustaining establishing an American-led LIO was welcomed by many US friends and allies, including those in East Asia. However, America's narratives of the international order in the Obama years and their manifestation in US foreign policy caused considerable apprehension in China. While China benefited substantially from the existing international economic order, it was concerned about the political and ideological challenge of US liberal unipolarity. Obama's decision to fortify US relations with other democratic countries in the Asia-Pacific, such as India, Japan, South Korea, and Australia, on the basis of common values was viewed by China as a move to undermine its moral and political authority as a regional leader and a key player in the LIO (Ma 2016).

Between 1989 when the Cold War ended and 2008 with the beginning of the global financial crisis, Chinese scholars and policy elites engaged in a rigorous debate on what path China should follow in pursuing its great power status, and how it should relate itself to the outside world (Li 2009). While many Chinese analysts were apprehensive of the security intentions of the United States and Japan, their discourse on China's position in the international system in relation to other major powers was rather subdued. They recommended a nonconfrontational approach to handling great power relations and territorial disputes with other Asian countries. However, this identity discourse began to change in 2008 when the global financial crisis seriously undermined the economic strengths of many of the dominant players in the world economy. While the United States and other Western powers were still

struggling to revive their economies, China had recovered from the financial crisis. The Chinese economy achieved an impressive growth rate of 8.7 percent in 2009 (*BBC News* 2010).

The Chinese economy continued to grow after 2009, which enabled China to strengthen its trade relations with neighboring countries and expand its international influence. Following the global economic downturn, Chinese elites were much more confident in arguing for the case of alternative development models including the Chinese model. They suggested that China needed to create the kind of environment that would assist it in fulfilling its great power aspirations (Cai 2010; Pan 2010). China's swift recovery from the global financial crisis that continued to hit many countries across the world boosted Chinese confidence and led to a reassessment of the global strategic environment. To many Chinese analysts, America's weakened position and China's continued rise were a clear indication of the changing global balance of power. They began to produce the narratives that advocated the adoption of a more proactive and assertive international strategy. While appreciating the rationale behind Deng Xiaoping's motto "hiding our capabilities and biding our time" (*tao guang yang hui*), they argued that China should be more active in "accomplishing something" (*you suo zuo wei*) in a propitious international environment and have the ambition of "striving for achievement" (*fenfa you wei*) in Chinese foreign policy (Xu 2014; Zhao T. 2015).<sup>6</sup> China's attempts to establish itself as a sea power or a "strong maritime power" (*haiyang qiangguo*) could be seen as an indispensable part of constructing its identity as a global power that would be capable of protecting and expanding its regional and global interests (Li 2016).

When Xi Jinping became the top leader of China in 2012, he wasted no time in promoting his vision of the "China Dream" (*Zhongguo meng*) or the "rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu fuxing*). At a high-level foreign policy meeting in 2014, Xi outlined his strategic view of China's great power diplomacy (*daguo waijiao*) in the changing international environment to a group of senior party and government officials (Xinhuanet 2014), which signified a clear policy departure from Deng Xiaoping's guidance on "keeping a low profile" in international affairs. A major ambition of President Xi is to reappraise and redefine China's position in the current international order. Some Chinese elites contend that the international order is intimately linked to the distribution and redistribution of power in the international

system (Yan 2015). As Chinese economic and military power grows, they argue, it is time for China to make an effort to reshape the international order that has hitherto been driven and dominated by the United States (He 2017).

In the past few years there have been growing discussions on strengthening of China's "discursive power" (*huayu quan*) in international relations in Chinese academic and policy circles (see, for example, Zhao L. 2015). The publication of a major article on the importance and necessity for China to compete with the West for "international discursive power" (*guoji huayu quan*) in *Xuexi shibao* indicates the high-level attention paid to the topic.<sup>7</sup> This article has appeared subsequently on the State Council Information Office's website (Zhang 2017). According to the article, a country's discursive power is not derived automatically from its material power; it has to be cultivated and developed strategically. Of all the areas in China's competition with the West for discursive power, "political discursive power" (*zhengzhi huayu quan*) is believed to be the most significant one. This is the area where China is advised to increase its capability to thwart the "discourse offensive" (*huayu gongji*) from the West and shape the international discourse on major global issues and policy debates to its advantage. China's emphasis on the discursive rivalry with the West/United States reveals its understanding of the critical role of metanarratives in constructing the social world and constituting the perceived reality in international relations. As Madam Fu Ying, a senior adviser to Xi Jinping, put it in 2015, "China ... needs to come up with its own narratives to allow the world to read and understand China better" (Fu 2015).

Specifically, Chinese policy elites have been actively engaged in manufacturing their narratives of the international order. They believe that it is crucial for China to "make its voices heard" (*fachu ziji de shengyin*) in the debate on the virtues and drawbacks of the "global liberal order" (*quanqiu ziyou zhixu*).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, since the early 2010s there has been a concerted Chinese effort to challenge the merits of the US master narratives on the LIO and to produce Chinese counternarratives on the international order that reflect China's changing identity discourse, national aspirations, and expanding global influence. A recent article published in the Chinese Communist Party's flagship newspaper *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*) under the pseudonym of Xuanyan presents a very powerful narrative on China's position in the world in relation to the changing international order (Xuanyan 2018).<sup>9</sup> The article declared, "The drawbacks of capitalism-led

political and economic systems are emerging; the global governance system is experiencing profound changes and a new international order is taking shape.” It went on to say how China had contributed to the solution of the common problems encountered by humankind through “Chinese wisdom” (*Zhongguo zhihui*) and “Chinese solutions” (*Zhongguo fang an*), which was widely recognized in the world. Thus, the narratives continued, “China has become an important source and stabilizer for world economic growth, as well as an important guardian and advocate of world peace and development and human civilization and progress.” The article asserted that China was “more confident and more competent than any time in history to grasp this opportunity.”

It is this level of confidence that has led China to actively advocate reform of the existing international order. To Chinese leaders and elites, it is only natural for rising powers to advocate their preferred conceptions of the world order, which was exactly what the United States and the former Soviet Union did after World War II. Despite their criticism of the LIO, Chinese leaders have not rejected all the key components of the US-/Western-dominated international order. Rather, they have embraced certain aspects of the LIO arguing that China is willing and able to make a positive contribution to the reform of the international system. Indeed, Chinese policy elites (whether they are Realists or Liberals) have advocated the idea that China should be actively involved in the reform and reconstruction of the existing international order (Wang 2015; Yan 2015).

The dominant Chinese narratives suggest that China does not intend to create a new international order to replace the present one. As Ambassador Fu Ying said, China “achieved leapfrog growth within the existing international order and China’s future opportunities for development come from it.”<sup>10</sup> If anything, this international order is believed to have offered China “the platform for exercising greater international role.” Thus, China “has every reason to continue supporting and participating in the international order and system.” While it is necessary to “improve,” “update,” or “reshape” the international system and international governance, she maintains, “reforming does not mean discarding everything or complete replacement” (Fu 2015). Indeed, Xi Jinping has expressed his commitments to “upholding the international order and the international system” that are based on “the purposes and principles of the UN Charter” (Xi 2015b). In his keynote address at the opening of the 2018 Boao Forum for Asia in April 2018, Xi used the occasion to communicate the



narratives that China would not “attempt to overturn the existing international system,” and that it would “stay as determined as ever to build world peace, contribute to global prosperity and uphold the international order” (Xi 2018a). Similarly, in a signed article published in a Spanish newspaper ahead of his state visit to Spain in November 2018, Xi reiterated his narratives to the European audience that China would work with Spain to “uphold multilateralism and free trade, and jointly contribute to improving and safeguarding the international order” (Xi 2018b).

In China’s counternarratives of the current LIO, two particular areas are believed to be in need of reform. The first area is the US/Western emphasis on the central role of liberal ideology in the international order. Clearly, China’s political ideology and political system are fundamentally different from those of the United States. The liberal values underscored in American narratives are precisely the values that are contested by the Chinese government. While US identity is built on such values as freedom, democracy, and liberty and the notion of American exceptionalism, the construction of China’s national identity is closely associated with the renewal of the Chinese nation and Chinese cultural traditions. The divergence in their identity discourse has become much more conspicuous in the past decade, which has influenced their different conceptions of and preferences for the future world order.

To Chinese leaders, the definition of a “liberal” regime is defined by the United States according to its values and criteria. As such, the US conception of the LIO is said to be ideologically driven. In China’s counternarratives, an international order built on the division of “liberal” and “nonliberal” countries is based on the rules of a zero-sum game that has become obsolete. They contend that this division was exploited by US leaders to justify its hegemonic activities such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq that blatantly violated the UN Charter. As stated by a former Chinese vice-foreign minister, this type of ideologically motivated, Western-dominated discourse and narrative on the international order is an “extension of the Cold War mentality” (*lengzhan siwei de yanxu*), and the meaning of the “global liberal order” (*quanqiu ziyou zhixu*) should not be defined solely by the United States, which is against the fundamental principles of democracy (He 2017).

This is why the demands for respect for different cultures, civilizations, and social and political systems figure prominently in Chinese narratives on the international order. As Xi Jinping put it in his 2015 speech to the United Nations

General Assembly, “Each civilization represents the unique vision and contribution of its people, and no civilization is superior to others. ... The principle of sovereignty ... means that all countries’ right to independently choose social systems and development paths should be upheld” (Xi 2015a). The same narratives were repeated in Xi’s 2017 speech in Geneva. To “establish a fair and equitable international order,” he maintained, “the sovereignty and dignity of all countries ... must be respected, there must not be any interference into their internal affairs” (Xi 2017a). The future world order, according to one senior Chinese academic, should “accommodate more political, economic and cultural diversity than the current one that has been dominated by Western values and culture” (Wu 2018).

Another area for reform in China’s counternarratives of the LIO is the inequitable distribution of power in a range of international institutions. In particular, emerging powers and developing countries are believed to be underrepresented in the decision-making process of such institutions as the UN, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank. This point was made specifically by Xi Jinping in his 2017 Geneva speech: “All countries should jointly shape the future of the world, write international rules, manage global affairs and ensure that development outcomes are shared by all” (Xi 2017a). China’s narratives of an ideal international order tend to emphasize equality among all nations regardless of their size, wealth, and power. As Xi argues, “Countries, big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are all equal members of the international community ... they are entitled to participate in decision-making, enjoy rights and fulfil obligations on an equal basis. Emerging markets and developing countries deserve greater representation and voice” (Xi 2017a). The international order, Chinese leaders and elites contend, should be built upon the principles of “democratization of international relations” (*guoji guanxi minzhuhua*), “mutual respect” (*xianghu zunzhong*), and “win-win cooperation” (*hezuo gong ying*).<sup>11</sup>

In Chinese narratives, the reform of global governance (*quanqiu zhili*) is an essential part of reshaping the international order (*chongsu guoji zhixu*) (He 2017). Following the advice of some leading Chinese foreign affairs experts, Xi Jinping has stressed the need for China to make a greater effort to “promote the reform of the unjust and inequitable arrangements within the existent global governance system” (Xi 2016). He has also called for the “strengthening of the theoretical study of global governance” and the “training of the specialist personnel” in this area (Xi 2015b).

Indeed, Xi has assiduously articulated the narratives of his vision of the international order in various domestic and global forums. In his report at the Chinese Communist Party's Nineteenth National Congress in October 2017, he said that China would "continue to ... take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system, and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance" (Xi 2017c). At a high-level government meeting in February 2017, Xi reportedly stated for the first time that China should "guide" (*yindao*) the international community in "shaping a new international order that is more just and equitable" and in "maintaining international security" (*Studying China* 2017). The report affirmed that China has both the qualifications (*zige*) and ability (*nengli*) to provide leadership for a new international order.<sup>12</sup>

It is within this narrative context that China has launched the BRICS Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the "One Belt, One Road" initiative. These initiatives clearly indicate China's discontent with the existing rules and regulations of various US-dominated international institutions. With its growing economic power and political clouts, China is evidently seeking to reshape various aspects of the international order. As Suisheng Zhao points out, the accession of the European countries to the AIIB "was seen as a powerful testament to China's role in the reconstruction of global governance" (Zhao 2018, 648). The "Belt and Road" project may be created to build infrastructure links across central and South Asia toward Europe and Africa and to develop new markets in all these areas. But this initiative could be viewed as a way of laying the material foundation for China to construct an alternative global order in the future (Nordin and Weissmann 2018).

Indeed, China is increasingly vocal in articulating its conception of a future global order based on "Chinese wisdom." Essentially, Chinese challenge to America's master narratives on the LIO is its failure to recognize the substantial changes in the global economy within which China and other emerging and developing countries have been playing a much more significant role. Another alleged flaw in America's LIO narratives is its preoccupation with the liberal ideology, which is seen to be far too restrictive. Chinese leaders and elites are aiming to generate their counternarratives that go beyond US/Western liberal values to encompass many common values of the countries around the world. They believe that China has both the credentials and capability of providing leadership for such a

new international order. The concept of “working together to construct a community of human destiny” (*gongtong goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti*) as a “Chinese solution” to the world’s complex problems is designed to gain the moral high ground in contesting US discursive power.

In 2008 G. John Ikenberry argued that “the United States cannot thwart China’s rise, but it can help ensure that China’s power is exercised within the rules and institutions that the United States and its partners have crafted over the last century” (Ikenberry 2008). Ten years on, China has redefined its great power identity, and Chinese narratives of the international order certainly suggest that it is now seeking to revise the rules and restructure the institutions originally set up by the United States and its allies. In a highly contentious article, Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, two members of the Obama administration, argued that “the liberal international order has failed to lure or bind China as powerfully as expected” and that “the gap between American expectations and Chinese realities has grown” (Campbell and Ratner 2018, 61, 69).<sup>13</sup>

It appears that China has succeeded in promoting its counternarratives within the parameter of America’s master narratives. As the US narratives of the international order have been normalized or naturalized for decades, it is difficult for China to act completely outside of the discursive boundary established by America. After all, China has benefitted substantially from the LIO in building up its great power status and capabilities. Chinese leaders’ pledge to uphold the existing international order while challenging or rejecting certain elements of it seems an effective way of countering the metanarratives of the US-led LIO. In many ways, the US master narratives offer some useful “guidance” and a “sense of direction” for Chinese leaders in constructing their counternarratives. Thus, China is able to contest America’s master narratives without supporting its “hegemonic power-knowledge complexes” (Damberg 2004, 360).

### **The Effects of the US-China Discursive Rivalry on the UK**

The analysis in preceding sections clearly revealed an intense discursive competition between the United States and China in relation to their narratives of the (liberal) international order. The ultimate goal of a state in constructing and spreading particular narratives of its “reality” is to make them attractive to and

accepted by third parties as well as its domestic audiences, with the likelihood of shaping their perceptions and behaviors that would serve the state's interests. If narratives can produce such effects, then the state may be able to turn its discursive power to actual power. This is why Nicholas Onuf argues that "speaking" in foreign policy is "an activity with normative consequences" (Onuf 2001, 77). This section considers the effects of the US-China discursive rivalry on the United Kingdom, focusing specifically on whether and to what extent the competing US/Chinese narratives of the international order has the capacity of shaping the United Kingdom's values and interests.

It is worth noting that the United Kingdom played a significant role in building the post-1945 LIO, which can be traced to the signing of the Atlantic Charter between President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill in August 1941. This joint declaration is widely believed to have set out the liberal principles of the LIO. Thus, the United States and United Kingdom share the fundamental values that underpin the rules and norms of the international system, including multilateralism, free trade, international law, human rights, and so on. However, since the election of Donald Trump as US president, the United States seems to be abandoning its leadership role in the LIO. With his "America First" foreign policy orientation, President Trump has shown a hostile attitude toward some traditional liberal values (Schake 2018; Wolf 2018). Unlike the Trump administration, the British government has not displayed any inclination to retreat from liberal internationalism despite the UK's decision to withdraw from the European Union. On the contrary, Prime Minister Theresa May has passionately defended the key values of the LIO. Some of her statements are reminiscent of the US narratives of the international order in the Obama era.

In her speech to the Lord Mayor's Banquet in November 2017, Theresa May emphasized the common values that were shared by the United Kingdom and the United States and other European countries, and the importance of supporting an international rules-based system, free markets, and fair societies. She spoke of the need to "defend the rules based international order against irresponsible states that seek to erode it" as a "task of a global Britain" (May 2017b). In spite of her disagreement with Trump on climate change, free trade and other issues, she believed that the "role of the United States in shaping the global order is as vital now as it has ever been," and that the US-UK relationship is underpinned by "an alliance

of values and interests” between the peoples of the two countries. While recognizing that the LIO “is in danger of being eroded,” May affirmed that the United Kingdom was determined to “secure the best possible Brexit deal” that “strengthens the liberal values we hold dear.” In the meantime, she maintained, the United Kingdom would work with other countries “to adapt and defend the rules based order on which our security and prosperity depends” (May 2017b).

In her speech delivered to the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017, May reiterated her strong belief “in a rules based global order” and urged the international community to “maintain” and “build” support “for the rules-based international system” (May 2017a). In fact, her vision of building “a truly Global Britain” after Brexit is firmly rooted in the LIO. In particular, she champions the liberal values of free trade and multilateralism. May insists that the United Kingdom is “by instinct a great, global, trading nation,” and that it embraces “genuine free trade” which is “the basis of our prosperity” and “the best way to cement the multilateral partnerships and cooperation that help to build a better world.” She has argued that a post-Brexit Britain will “become even more global and internationalist in action and in spirit too.” While this is in stark contrast to the trade policy of the Trump administration, the United Kingdom has no intention to take over America’s leading role in the international order. Instead, it seeks to “play a full role in underpinning and strengthening the multilateral rules-based system,” to “uphold the institutions that enable the nations of the world to work together,” and to “continue to promote international cooperation” (May 2017a).

As a major Western liberal democracy, the United Kingdom’s ideological position is undoubtedly closer to that of the United States. After all, the United Kingdom and the United States have collaborated closely to build and sustain the post–World War II international order. Certainly, there have been strains on their “special relationship” and the two countries have had different positions on specific issues such as the Suez crisis, the Vietnam War, and the Libyan operation in the Obama era. The United States does see Britain’s role in the world primarily as part of the European project and a leading member of the Atlantic alliance rather than a world power. That was why Obama made an exceptionally unusual intervention during the United Kingdom’s referendum campaign by publicly supporting David Cameron’s position on remaining in the EU (Kuenssberg 2016). Nevertheless, there are more convergences than divergences in the narratives on the LIO in the United

States and United Kingdom. As Thomas Raines, head of the Europe Programme at Chatham House, puts it, “If Britain has had a ‘grand strategy’ in the post-Cold War period, it is to support, sustain and strengthen a so-called liberal international order – the expansion of democracy and free markets, the growth in multilateral institutions and the development of international law.” The distinctiveness of the United Kingdom’s worldview, he argues, is that “Britain has a unique contribution to make to this global order,” and that “it ought to be at the top table, or punching above its weight” (Raines 2018/2019, 31, 32).

Indeed, British politicians have become more active in the past few years in generating their narratives of the international order through various official channels including the debates in Parliament. The majority of the parliamentarians agree on the need to maintain and strengthen the LIO in the face of the challenges of rising populism, Brexit, and illiberal forces from Russia and other countries (House of Lords 2017; House of Commons 2018). As Baroness Anelay of St Johns stated in a House of Lords debate, “The rules-based international order is clearly fundamental to our security and prosperity. We will face challenges. Noble Lords have reflected carefully on them. However, I am confident that, working with our key friends and allies and with the support of British parliamentarians in both Houses, we can navigate the development of a more resilient, inclusive international order over the coming years in line with our values and interests” (House of Lords 2017).

However, this liberal consensus seems to be dwindling in British politics. Some Conservative politicians are supportive of “a harder-nosed, more interest-driven policy” in the areas of aid, climate change, and immigration (Raines 2018/2019, 32). It appears that the Conservative Party has been able to absorb many followers of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the right-wing political party whose mission is to take the UK out of the EU. But this could push the Conservative Party toward the antiliberal direction that could undermine some key values of the LIO. Equally challenging is the emergence of Jeremy Corbyn, an outspoken critic of the multilateral institutions championed by liberal supporters, as the leader of the Labour Party. For decades, Corbyn has been critical of US foreign policy and the role of NATO. In a recent foreign policy speech at the Chatham House, Corbyn contended that “the approach to international security we have been using since the 1990s has simply not worked.” He expressed strong opposition to the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria as well as Western military interventions in

Somalia and Yemen, although he accepted that “military action, under international law and as a genuine last resort, is in some circumstances necessary.” He said that “a Labour government will want a strong and friendly relationship with the United States. But we will not be afraid to speak our mind. . . . Waiting to see which way the wind blows in Washington isn’t strong leadership.” He declared that “a Labour government will conduct a robust and independent foreign policy—made in Britain” (Corbyn 2017). The world order narratives presented by Corbyn are clearly not the same as the narratives shared by many other British politicians in both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. Yet it is possible for Corbyn to become the next British Prime Minister given the extensive grassroots support for his policy as indicated by the results of the 2017 general election.

The challenge for the May government is that she is facing enormous challenges from her party, Parliament, and the country to fulfil her vision of “Global Britain.” A recent opinion poll revealed that the British public remained deeply divided in their views on Brexit, with 47 percent of the population still preferring to leave the EU (NatCen 2018). This is not a positive sign for Global Britain and the LIO that May seeks to promote.

Ironically, if we look at the speeches given by President Xi and Prime Minister May in 2017, it appears that the two leaders have much in common in their global economic outlooks in that they both expressed their appreciation of the positive impact of free trade and economic globalization on the people across the world. May recognized the need to “ensure free trade and globalisation work for everyone” (May 2017a) and to “deliver fair and equitable growth for all” (May 2017b), while Xi argued that “we should strike a balance between efficiency and equity to ensure that different countries, different social strata and different groups of people all share in the benefits of economic globalization” (Xi 2017a). Both leaders advocated multilateral cooperation, although Xi went further to suggest that all countries should be “entitled to participate in decision-making, enjoy rights and fulfill obligations on an equal basis,” and that “emerging markets and developing countries deserve greater representation and voice” (Xi 2017a). The UK seems amenable to China’s narratives on promoting a more equitable international system and reforms in global governance. Indeed, May acknowledges that “global economic growth is increasingly being driven by emerging economies and powerhouses in the East,” and that “the West cannot write the rules of this century on its own.” She has indicated that the



United Kingdom will “work with partners in Africa, Asia and beyond in building consensus and taking practical steps towards a global economy that works for everyone” (May 2017b).

Indeed, the United Kingdom and China have been able to cooperate in many areas, especially in trade and education. For example, the United Kingdom was the first Western country joining the AIIB established by China in 2015. The United Kingdom is China’s second largest trade partner in Europe (€62 billion), and it is the EU’s top recipient for Chinese foreign direct investment (€23 billion in 2016). Despite some initial hesitation, the May government has approved the controversial €7 billion Hinckley Point nuclear plant, which will be heavily financed by Chinese investment. China has also invested in Thames Water, the Heathrow and Manchester airports, and various major British companies.

More recently, May indicated her commitment to maintaining the “Golden Era” of the UK’s relationship with China “as a vital trading partner” and “a fellow permanent member of the Security Council whose decisions together with ours will shape the world around us” (May 2017b). In January 2018 the Prime Minister paid a high-profile visit to China with a delegation of fifty British business leaders, which led to the signing of business deals worth some nine billion pounds to both countries. Although May refused to offer a formal British endorsement of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, a UK bank that traveled with her raised the prospects of providing more than one billion pounds of credit for the infrastructure project. May said that the United Kingdom was considering “how we can build further on that golden era and on the global strategic partnership that we have been working on between the UK and China” (*Deutsche Welle* 2018). This was followed by another high-level visit in July 2018 by the UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt to China, where he discussed the possibility of a free trade agreement between the two nations. During his visit, Hunt commented that “the rise of China and China’s economy and Chinese power can and must be a positive force in the world” (Kuo and Wintour 2018). Despite these optimistic words, the United Kingdom has not accepted China’s narratives of the international order without reservation. Although China and Britain share similar views on the need to tackle the challenge of economic globalization and promote international cooperation, there remain fundamental differences in their political values and systems.

Meanwhile, the increasingly close economic relationship between the United Kingdom and China has given China the ability to exercise what Mikael Weissmann calls “disciplinary power” (Weissmann 2018) in pressuring the United Kingdom to accept and adhere to China’s preferred narratives, especially in the light of the economic context of Brexit. Given the difficulties in its trade negotiations with the EU for a post-Brexit deal, the British government is under immense pressure to foster stronger trade relations with non-EU countries, particularly emerging economies like China and India. As the *Spectator* observes, “a ground-breaking free-trade agreement between Britain and the world’s ascendant superpower would be the great boon the UK government so desperately needs” (Auslin 2018). For the United Kingdom, the disciplinary consequences of not accepting the Chinese narratives of the international order could be rather significant, as it is facing much uncertainty in the post-Brexit international economic environment. One important component of China’s world order narratives is its insistence on the principles of “non-interference into the internal affairs of other countries” and “respect for each other’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity.” This would no doubt include such issues as criticism of China’s human rights record, its territorial claims in the South China Sea. There is ample evidence from Asia, Europe, and Australia showing how China has been able to utilize its disciplinary power to coerce various countries to accept the Chinese narratives through either rewards or punishments, or both (Auslin 2018; Brown 2018; Weissmann 2018).

On August 31, 2018, a Royal Navy warship sailed close to the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea to flex its military muscle in the region. This was immediately challenged by a frigate and two helicopters dispatched by China (Graham and Nicholls 2018). The Chinese ministry of national defense protested and described the act as “a provocation and an infringement on Chinese sovereignty” (Zhang 2018). Britain’s “freedom of navigation” operations were condemned by Beijing as a move “to seize whatever opportunity it can to get into Washington’s good books” and “to revive the ‘special relationship’” with the United States. An editorial in *China Daily* put it bluntly that the United Kingdom could be “losing more than it can gain” as “it is no longer the gateway to continental Europe.” The editorial gave an explicit warning that “China and the UK had agreed to actively explore the possibility of discussing a free trade agreement after Brexit, but any act that harms China’s core interests will only put a spanner in the works” (*China Daily* 2018).

As Lord Howell, a senior Conservative politician and chairman of the House of Lords International Relations Committee, warns, “The power, wealth and ubiquitous influence of China itself leaves Britain now no choice but to adjust its stance massively, for reasons of both prosperity and hard global strategy” (Howell 2018). The British leaders have to decide on the extent to which it would accept the Chinese narratives of the international order and how they would write their “story” in the post-Brexit world. As Nicholas Onuf argues, “People use words to represent deeds and they can use words, and words alone, to perform deeds” (Onuf 1989, 82). Thus, Kerry Brown cautions, “Ensure you know the tale that you want to tell about yourself before you dally with a country which will already be clear about the story that they have for you” (Brown 2018, 31).

Given China’s capability and readiness to exert disciplinary power over the United Kingdom in influencing it to acquiesce to its narratives of the world order, more British politicians, commentators, and business leaders are becoming receptive to Chinese ideas and concepts. In this sense, Chinese narratives may have some influence in shaping the United Kingdom’s interests. However, the available evidence suggests that the United Kingdom is apprehensive toward China’s narratives of the international order. While British leaders appreciate the necessity to reform the architecture of the current international system and update the rules of multilateral institutions to make them more effective and inclusive, they are troubled by China’s geopolitical ambition that underpins its metanarratives of a “harmonious world.” This is why May was reluctant to endorse the Belt and Road Initiative officially when she was in Beijing in January 2018.

Behind China’s benevolent narrative of “working together to build a community of shared future for mankind,” the United Kingdom detects its nationalist mission of realizing the “China dream” in a “new era” that is intended to make China a global power in the twenty-first century. Perhaps the most significant concern for British leaders and policy elites is the repression as an expression of China’s one-party system and its communist ideology (Khan 2017; Phillips 2017). In this sense, it is difficult for the Chinese narratives of the international order to have any meaningful effects on the United Kingdom’s liberal democratic values. As Allan, Vucetic, and Hopf (2018) argue, China is unlikely to lead a successful counterhegemonic challenge to the LIO, as its authoritarian identity conflicts with the democratic ideology of other great powers within the current order. The LIO may not be

functioning as it should, but what is needed, in the words of the British diplomat Laura Clarke, is “a reinvigoration of the values that underpin it” (Clarke 2018). In the post-Brexit and Trump era when many of the liberal values are being questioned or challenged, the British government has not abandoned these values. Rather, it remains committed to strengthening “the liberal values we hold dear” (May 2017b) and defending the rules-based international order that was constructed in partnership with the United States and other European countries. However, given the volatility in UK politics and the growing xenophobic sentiment among the British public, it is difficult to predict the extent to which this commitment can be sustained.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored how US and Chinese leaders and policy elites have employed specific narratives to construct and advocate their different conceptions and visions of the international order. It seeks to make a distinctive contribution to the extant literature on US-China relations, which tends to focus heavily on the material dimensions of international relations such as economic strength and military power. Specifically, the article contributes to the literature on the theorization of master/counternarratives in an IR context by providing empirical evidence from the US-China discursive rivalry. Our analysis of the discursive battle between the two great powers demonstrates that both the United States and China have exploited their adeptly constructed narratives of the international order to assert their power and influence in international affairs. Drawing upon the insights of discourse analysis and constructivist theory, the article reveals how the particular narratives of the two countries reflect their different national identity, political ideology, national strategy, and future ambitions.

My analysis of the US narratives of the LIO during the Obama administration clearly indicates the significance of these narratives in reinforcing America’s power and its global leadership role in the international system. Similarly, the Chinese narratives in the Xi Jinping era reveal China’s strong desire to move beyond its previous position of keeping a low-profile to exert greater influence on the future direction of the world order. Behind the intense US-China discursive competition lies an ambitious objective of shaping the nature and structure of the international order. For many years, the United States was able to dominate the master narratives of the

LIO, which helped rationalize and legitimize US hegemony. Since 2010 this has been contested by Chinese leaders and elites who have actively produced their counternarratives of the world order, arguing and pushing for the restructuring of the existing international order and reforms in global governance that would reflect China's perspectives and interests.

If the outside world was unsure about how to interpret China's ambiguous discourse of its relationship with the existing world order in the early 2010s (Breslin 2013), the narratives analyzed in this article clearly unveil a more coherent Chinese vision of an alternative order, one that China is confident it can shape and lead. This has presented a huge challenge to the United States and the West at a time when the LIO is in deep crisis. The resurgence of populism and nationalist and xenophobic sentiments in America and across Europe, coupled with Trump's disdain for the liberal norms and institutions, have shaken the foundation of the LIO. This provides fertile ground for China to advocate its version of the LIO and project itself as the patron and leader of a new international order.

This article has assessed the impact of the contending US/Chinese narratives on the United Kingdom, a close ally of the United States but an important trade partner of China. Our findings indicate that while the United Kingdom accepts the need for reforming the US-led LIO, Chinese world order narratives appear to hold little attraction. There is no evidence showing that China's discursive power has increased in terms of its capacity to shape the values and interests of the United Kingdom. Despite its reservations about President Trump's foreign policy, the British government remains a firm supporter of the liberal values that underpin the LIO. If anything, it has sought to play a significant role in sustaining the liberal world order when the current US administration has effectively abdicated as the leader of the postwar LIO. However, as discussed earlier, this would be a very difficult task for the UK government given the uncertain political and economic environment after Brexit.

Meanwhile, one should be aware that China's narratives of the international order have attracted much more attention from the international community in the past few years, particularly from developing countries. Trump's "America First" policy in various areas such as international trade, climate change, and human rights has seriously undermined the position of the United States and the liberal values underpinning US global leadership. While the LIO is facing unprecedented challenges, China has stepped up its efforts in generating and disseminating its

counternarratives of the international order which, combined with its growing economic power and “disciplinary power,” may become more acceptable to a wider range of countries. If this were to happen, China’s discursive power could be transformed into real power with profound implications for the future international order, global peace, and stability. This is an ongoing and immensely important issue that should be closely observed by both scholars and policymakers in the coming years.

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<sup>1</sup> The notable exception is Weissmann (2018). For studies on the China-Japan narratives rivalry, see Gustafsson (2014) and Hagström (2012).

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Alastair Iain Johnston for drawing my attention to this point. Following the discussion with Professor Johnston, I used the keywords “liberal international order” to search three elite American newspapers, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*, via Factiva. The results clearly indicated that the term LIO has been mentioned more frequently in these newspapers only since 2000, particularly in the past ten years.

<sup>3</sup> For America’s annual human rights reports, see the US Department of State at [www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to point out that this task force was a self-selected, independent group trying to influence the policies of the Obama administration during his second term.

<sup>5</sup> But these reports may be seen as somewhat critical of Obama in his first term for not doing enough on the democracy agenda.

<sup>6</sup> Yan Xuetong, the prominent realist international relations scholar at Tsinghua University, has used the theory of moral realism to show how China’s strategy of “striving for achievement” (*fenfa you wei*) has been successful in enhancing its political legitimacy as a rising power and shaping a favorable international environment for China to achieve its “national rejuvenation” (*minzu fuxing*). See Yan (2014).

<sup>7</sup> *Xuexi shibao* or *Study Times* is an open-source newspaper published by the Party School of the Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, He (2017). He Yafei is a former vice-minister of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and co-chairman of the Centre for China and Globalization (Zhongguo yu quanqihua zhiku), a leading Chinese think tank.

<sup>9</sup> The Chinese word *xuanyan* means manifesto, which could imply that the article should be treated as some kind of manifesto from the Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>10</sup> Madam Fu Ying is the chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee, China’s National People’s Congress. She is a former ambassador to the United Kingdom and vice-minister of foreign affairs.

<sup>11</sup> In the Chinese lexicon, “democratization of international relations” (*guoji guanxi minzhuhua*) means that decision making in international relations should not be monopolized by the great powers (read the United States here). The term “mutual respect” (*xianghu zunzhong*) implies that smaller countries or non-Western nations deserve greater respect from the Western powers, especially the United States. Conceptually, “win-win cooperation” (*hezuo gong ying*) is closely linked to “mutual respect” (*xianghu zunzhong*), both of which are designed to promote “mutually beneficial co-operation” in a more just and equitable international system. These Chinese concepts emphasize the importance of inclusiveness and cultural coexistence in pursuing the “common interests of mankind.”

<sup>12</sup> Here the “new” international order referred to a future international order that would be reformed along the lines advocated by Xi Jinping.

<sup>13</sup> Kurt Campbell is the former US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific affairs (2009–2013), and Ely Ratner is the former Deputy National Security Adviser to Vice President Joe Biden (2015–2017).

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