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AUKUS and “Rules-Based Order”: Change and continuity in great power relations in 2021

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Summary

The withdrawal from Afghanistan and efforts at forging a “stable and predictable” relationship with Russia have been key indicators of US priorities in the Biden administration’s first year. However, the most important dimension of US foreign policy in 2021 has centred on relations with Beijing.

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As the so-called Indo-Pacific region increasingly takes centre stage, two key developments stand out: the formation of AUKUS and persistent contestation over the “rules-based international order”. While the former points to the advent of a more complex and unpredictable global order even beyond the Pacific theatre, the latter recalls trends which long predate the pandemic.

The worst of both worlds

The AUKUS deal hints at a regional move from mere security cooperation (e.g., the Quad) toward a more alliance-type logic. This marks a clear shift in Washington’s priorities: unlike the Trump administration, whose emphasis on great power competition placed Russia a much closer second behind China, Biden has pivoted his country’s focus more substantially towards Asia. That said, a recent Global Posture Review, while pledging certain improvements to US military infrastructure in the Pacific theatre, contained “no

major reshuffling of forces”. This comes on the back of a recent claim by the White House’s Middle East coordinator that Washington was not planning to deprioritize the Middle East.

The evident shift in US *political* and *strategic* focus toward Asia, when combined with a persistent *military* posture of global primacy, represents the worst of both worlds. In particular, it leaves the US with ambiguous options in the current standoff over Ukraine. Washington’s pivot to Asia may convince Moscow that Europe is now a theatre of secondary importance to the US, potentially allowing the Kremlin to conclude that an opportune moment has arrived for military intervention. However, the alternative of a more significant US military commitment to Ukraine could further enflame tensions by crossing Russia’s shifting red line on the level of NATO presence in Ukraine that Moscow is prepared to tolerate.

The US under Biden has also stepped up its rhetorical defence of the “rules-based international order”. Of course, Beijing is likely to pay little heed to Washington’s appeals to follow “the rules” given that the latter has also bent or broken them on myriad occasions. This perceived double standard erodes Western influence on the global stage, exacerbating security situations even beyond the Pacific theatre. For instance, the current migrant crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, among other things, serves the purpose of uncovering the hypocrisy behind EU stances advocating for human rights and the rule of law.

Sino-American contestation

Yet this Sino-American normative contestation also reveals a deeper trend which predates the pandemic: sustained litigation over the rules of the international game and over *who* gets to write the rules.

Recent months have been filled with supposed watershed moments in international history, such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the COVID-19 pandemic itself. The pandemic may bring about lasting change in some respects, from supply chains to economic interventionism. But while COVID has strained international cooperation and accelerated great power competition, it did not create these trends. For its part, the end of the US war effort in Afghanistan may symbolically mark the end of the era of Western-led nation-building and raise questions about how “liberal” the international order remains. However, the withdrawal was also aimed at allowing the US to shift its focus toward a great power competition already underway.

In other words, post-pandemic (geo)political developments are not occurring in a vacuum. Rather, they are building upon existing – and inherent – tensions flowing from competition over status in a world where Washington has sought to retain its position as the sole term-setting power of consequence. The US undertook its “pivot to Asia” before Xi Jinping’s rise to power and implementation of a more assertive Chinese foreign policy. This points to rising Chinese *power* rather than specific Chinese *actions* as the fundamental source of today’s Sino-American confrontation.

A revisionist power seeks to overturn the international order substantially, if not in its entirety. This does not accurately characterize China’s intentions, which centre more on the desire to be recognized as an equal great power within the existing order. In wishing to set the terms of engagement for other states – and to retain a prerogative to violate the rules periodically when it deems this to be in its interest – Beijing is merely following the example set by the US over the past three decades.

Attempting to displace the US as the world’s exclusive term-setter is not akin to opposing the international order. Part of the confusion stems from how the prevailing discussion surrounding international order has been conducted over recent years. The most common depiction of the “liberal international order” has been one rooted in institutions established by the US after World War II. As such, when these institutions were globalized after the Cold War, irrespective of the unipolar balance of power that prevailed at the time, it became natural to assume that US pre-eminence and the rules of the international order were inherently intertwined. Moreover, the liberal order is implicitly associated with US leadership due to liberalism’s historical connection to the two-century-long rise of Anglo-Saxon global hegemony.

To the extent that ideas are real and help to shape international reality, one can conceive of the liberal order as a structure that exists within global politics. But it is not synonymous with international order writ large. Nor are many of the liberal order’s alleged components – Western leadership, free trade, liberal values – universally practiced or recognized as legitimate. If one acknowledges that the liberal order remains but one component of today’s web of international institutions and practices, then China’s ambitions inevitably appear less far-reaching.

Three conservative revisionists

It is possible to attribute revisionist aims to all three major powers. Washington wishes to transform the world along liberal democratic lines and entrench a unipolar order where none previously existed. For their part, Russia and China seek to erode liberal values from existing global institutions and discourse and revise the security

architectures of their respective regions. At the same time, there is a conservative element to all three powers as well. The US wants to preserve its position as the world’s pre-eminent power. Russia wants to avoid losing its centuries-old status as a great power and influence over its “near abroad”. And China wishes to safeguard the conditions which have facilitated its development while cautiously integrating into an international order whose rules it did not author.

Nonetheless, even if no power is contesting today’s order outright, this does not mean that the order is secure. In a sense, all three powers are revisionist in that they seek to shape the yet-to-be-determined rules of the future. And irrespective of their aims, competing understandings of the norms upon which today’s international order is based leads to contestation of those norms – and therefore to their gradual revision.

The task for Eastern Europe

At the end of 2021, the world therefore finds itself facing a nested challenge. Persistent pre-pandemic great power dynamics are now compounded by the uncertain consequences of Washington’s more developed pivot toward the Pacific. The task for Eastern Europe is to find creative ways to embody an island of stability in an otherwise uncertain world.

That said, political developments within Belarus have damaged prospects for East-West dialogue, while EU-Russia relations suffered a near-total breakdown following HRVP Josep Borrell’s disastrous trip to Moscow earlier this year. With the EU’s ability to use term-setting in its own neighbourhood as a means of enhancing its global influence now curtailed, perhaps it is not coincidental that Brussels has now pivoted its focus toward the “Indo-Pacific” as well.

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