

Review of G. John Ikenberry's "The Rise of China and the Future of the West"

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In *The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive*, Ikenberry argues that the rise of China will not necessarily result in the overthrow of the Western world order if Washington strengthens that order now. Ikenberry's contribution to debate over China's rise is valuable but could be improved in several areas.

Ikenberry begins with the realist argument that as China rises it will increasingly seek to influence the international system to serve Chinese interests generating intense competition with the U.S. and potentially resulting in the overthrow of the Western order. Ikenberry argues that this will not necessarily be the case as China faces an international order that is open, integrated, rules-based and easy to join. At the same time this system is difficult to overturn as nuclear weapons have deterred war among great powers.¹

According to Ikenberry, Chinese leaders recognise the advantages of the current system, especially the economic benefits, and want continued access and protections the system's rules and institutions provide.² If the U.S. strengthens these rules and institutions, China will have greater incentives for integration over opposition, increasing the likelihood of the system's survival even after U.S. relative power has decreased. In practical terms, Ikenberry argues that the U.S. should firstly re-establish itself as the primary supporter of the global order. Secondly, Washington should update and reaffirm the value of NATO and East Asian alliances to ensure cooperation with the Western order. Thirdly, the U.S. should renew support for multilateral institutions like the WTO, including pursuing efforts to conclude the Doha Round of negotiations. Fourthly, the U.S. should ensure the order is all-encompassing to prevent it fragmenting into bilateral and minilateral arrangements. Lastly, the U.S. should substantially increase efforts to integrate rising developing countries into key global institutions, such as the G-20 and a reformed UN Security Council.³

Ikenberry's argument could be strengthened by considering underlying assumptions and defining key terms. What exactly defines the Western order and what does Ikenberry mean by the overthrow of that order? Is it when

¹ G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (January/February 2008), 1

² *Ibid.*, 4

³ *Ibid.*, 5-6

current international rules and norms underpinned by Western liberal values are no longer observed or when international institutions cease to operate or to be effective? One could argue that rules, norms and institutions are only partially followed currently, including by the U.S. itself. Neo-realists led by Waltz argue that in the absence of a central authority, anarchy is the ordering principle of the international system.⁴ This suggests that the concept of the Western order is illusory, unless the U.S. is considered the central authority successfully enforcing order, which is debatable. Further, Ikenberry does not define how to identify a state that is operating within the Western order from one seeking to subvert it. Johnston argues that characteristics of status quo and revisionist states in the international system are vague and undertheorised.⁵ Ikenberry's analysis would benefit from defining the Western order and how to recognise when it is subverted by a revisionist state.

Ikenberry's should question his assumption that China, or any state, will be able to substantially change or overthrow the international order. The development of the global governance system is influenced by powerful trends that are arguably outside the control of one state, including globalisation, technological advancement, the rise of regional superstates, multipolarity and global issues like climate change and disease security. With the rise of multipolarity and powerful regional blocks, no state can dominate the international system in the way the U.S. has in the past. White argues that neither the U.S. nor China will be strong enough to lead Asia in the coming decades.⁶ This undermines Ikenberry's assumption that China will be able to overthrow the Western order. Considering the rise of multipolarity and external pressures on the international system, Ikenberry could instead debate at what point the global order could be considered universal, rather than 'Western' or 'Asian.'

Ikenberry's discourse overlooks intentions. According to constructivists, ideas and constructs of identity shape the way a state behaves.⁷ China has different ideas, strategic thinking and identity constructs to the West. Pan argues

⁴ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston, Addison-Wesley Pub.Co., 1979), 88

⁵ Alistair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security*, 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003), 8

⁶ Hugh White, *The China Choice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012), 5

⁷ Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories" *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (Spring 1998), 41

that China does not want to be a hegemon.⁸ China's leaders have recognised that states are interdependent and that cooperation is necessary to address issues such as counterterrorism, cyber security, nuclear non-proliferation and climate change.⁹ China is also susceptible to pressure from other states, for instance China 'switched off' its non-interference principle in Sudan to avoid boycotts of the 2008 Beijing Olympics.¹⁰ This suggests China's leaders are unlikely to overthrow the current order. On the other hand, China's leaders may be determined to overthrow the Western order and impose a Chinese or Asian order no matter how much the U.S. strengthens the current international system. When asked if China will accept its place in an international order designed and led by America, Lee Kuan Yew said "*absolutely not: China wants to be China and accepted as such—not as an honorary member of the West.*"¹¹ China's intentions could fluctuate depending on factors such as domestic politics, regime insecurity and interests in Taiwan and the South and East China Seas. Ikenberry's theory could be deepened by examining China's likely intentions.

Ikenberry's suggested course of action could prove counterproductive. Ikenberry argues that when China and other countries see the U.S. strengthening the system, U.S. power will be rendered more legitimate and Washington's authority strengthened.¹² Conversely, if the U.S. sets about strengthening international rules and institutions, other countries could perceive this as the U.S. seeking to dominate construction of global governance and increase Washington's control over other states as an act of U.S. neo-imperialism. This could incentivise China to overthrow the current system because it is seen as a U.S. construct of control and dominance. Reinvigorating NATO could be seen as a return to Cold War thinking and efforts to renew support for the WTO could be perceived as an attempt to dominate. However, Ikenberry is correct in saying

⁸ Zhongqi Pan, *A New Type of Major-Country Relations with the U.S.*, Lecture, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 15 February 2016

⁹ Wang Yi, *Toward a New Model of Major-Country Relations Between China and the U.S.*, Speech, Brookings Institution, Washington, 20 September 2013

¹⁰ Adaora Osondu, "Off and On: China's Principle of Non-Interference in Africa," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 4, no.3 (September 2013), 233

¹¹ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic* (24 September 2015), accessed March, 2, 2016,

<http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

¹² Ikenberry, "The Rise of China," 5

that if the U.S. seeks to exclude China, a fragmented minilateral system will result. The U.S. has sought to exclude China from the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, which has led China to develop the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in opposition.

Ikenberry puts forward a compelling argument for the U.S. to strengthen the existing international order to ensure that rising powers secure their interests through integration and accommodation rather than through war.¹³ However, Ikenberry's argument is based on several assumptions that require scrutiny. Although purporting to write about China, Ikenberry does not consider China's intentions or reaction to his proposed course of action.

¹³ Ikenberry, "The Rise of China," 5

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