

Sovereignty with Chinese Characteristics? Norms in a Changing World Order

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/05/27/sovereignty-with-chinese-characteristics-norms-in-a-changing-world-order/>

MERETE LOOFT, MAY 27 2024

The modern state system is understood to be based on the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which is said to have established the primary norms of state sovereignty and non-intervention. While this system first only applied to European states, it has since expanded to be the primary regulating system in the international realm. Due to this origin the concept is criticized as inherently Eurocentric, as it imposes a system based on Western ideas and values on the world.

Nevertheless, the notion of sovereignty is not only accepted but also embraced by non-Western countries, such as China. The utilization of the term 'sovereignty' has become prominent in the Chinese state's communication: following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's President Xi Jinping emphasized that "China is willing to work with Russia to continue supporting each other on their respective core interests concerning sovereignty and security" (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2022). The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has, furthermore, announced that the visit of U.S. House speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan postulated an "infringe[ment] on China's sovereignty" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Does this embrace of the concept of sovereignty by China thus serve as a proof that the concept of sovereignty is not Eurocentric?

This essay draws on the case of China in exploring and re-evaluating the notion of sovereignty. It highlights that China's meteoric rise raises questions about the usefulness of applying the Western-non-Western binary in analyzing concepts in contemporary international relations. The essay will start by delving into the literature on Eurocentrism as well as sovereignty, highlighting the relationship between these two debates. It then continues by suggesting a novel approach to analyzing sovereignty in the form of a combination of Krasner's theory of sovereignty as organized hypocrisy combined with Wallerstein's world-systems theory. In the subsequent analysis, China's discourse on and practices of sovereignty is assessed based on these theoretical considerations. The essay is concluded with a reflection about the reconsideration of core IR concepts within a changing world order.

A Non-Eurocentric Approach to the Concept of Sovereignty

In the past decades, an increasing number of scholars criticized the concept of Westphalian Sovereignty—as well as many other core IR theories and concepts—to be inherently Eurocentric. In his 2009 work, Hobson critically examines the prevalent Western perspective on the origin of state sovereignty. He argues that it is herein assumed that the concept developed independently in Europe and that this view neither considers the forms of sovereignty that existed in non-Western countries previous to the introduction of the Westphalian system, nor the influences that other regions had on its current understanding. Moreover, Kayaoglu (2010) argues that the narrative of Westphalian sovereignty carries the implicit notion that European states successfully resolved the problem of anarchy through a process of cultural development, reinforcing the notion that the remainder of the world is uncivilized and backwards.

Consequently, these scholars offer a counternarrative to the existing idea of the emergence of sovereignty: Hobson (2009) shows that the concept was shaped to a significant extent by Eastern influences. In a similar manner, Coe (2015) offers a non-European perspective on sovereignty by laying out how it evolved differently in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In their analysis of the Chinese case, Coleman and Maogoto (2013) as well as Carrai (2019) delve

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into the historical development of the concept in China and explore how the Chinese understanding diverges from the Western perspective. In her book, Carrai shows how Chinese bureaucrats interpreted international norms to suit the Chinese context and by doing so took an active role in shaping the international legal order. Coleman and Maogoto (2013) claim that the concept of “universal sovereignty” had already been prevalent in China before the emergence of the Westphalian order. This form of sovereignty was neither limited by God (as was the Westphalian sovereignty) nor by other territories, which were subordinate to the Chinese authority through a vessel state system. Their analysis suggests that such an understanding of sovereignty continues to be predominant in China, giving primacy to universal sovereignty over the universality of international law.

On the one hand, all these studies provide a more nuanced perspective on the concept and account for the agency that non-Western countries (in this case specifically China) had in the formation of internationally relevant norms such as sovereignty. This allows for a perspective in which Global South countries are not only portrayed as passive, but which acknowledges their role in the formation of the international order within the boundaries of structural differences. By scrutinizing the perspective from which we analyze a concept and contemplating alternative viewpoints, these studies prompt us to re-evaluate the assumptions underpinning international relations theory, which may lead to the reconsideration of core assumptions in IR theory.

On the other hand, this type of analysis focuses on ideational factors, falling short of the material causes that drive the behavior of actors. Eurocentrism—although more of a concept than a comprehensive theoretical framework—has predominantly been examined within the realm of a constructivist ontology. In this analytical lens, concepts are viewed as intersubjectively constituted, holding causal powers that influence social behavior by shaping the conditions within which they occur. However, this perspective often overemphasizes the role of ideas, like the principle of non-interference, as a causal factor for state action, thus overlooking the role of material factors, such as state power and interests, as drivers for government action.

A Material-Led Perspective on Sovereignty: Combining the Idea of Organized Hypocrisy with World-Systems Theory

An example of a more material-led theoretical view on the concept of sovereignty is provided by Krasner (1999), who argues that sovereignty is a form of ‘organized hypocrisy’. Basing his argument on a rationalist logic, Krasner uses a combination of realist and neo-institutional theory to argue that rulers of states act according to material interests rather than adhering to a greater norm. He lays out that in a world that lacks a centralized authority the norm of sovereignty matters but is not strong enough to restrict states’ behavior. Accordingly, the head of states will end up acting in alignment to their self-interests. Under these theoretical considerations, a situation of ‘organized hypocrisy’ emerges, in which states take the concept of sovereignty seriously, but ignore it frequently, when it goes against their self-interests.

Krasner’s analysis can be challenged on different grounds. It is based on the premise of rationally acting heads of states and an individualistic logic that falls short of seeing structures as more than just the aggregation of the behavior of individuals. Furthermore, his analysis of structures does not consider their historical emergence and thus falls into a presentist logic. However, the main observations of the book remain accurate: although the concept of sovereignty is widely accepted globally, the actions of states frequently diverge from this principle.

I argue that a deeper understanding of this phenomenon can be gained by adopting a new theoretical perspective on sovereignty. One that surpasses the limitations of Krasner’s analysis while at the same time providing a proper explanation to the contradiction highlighted in Krasner’s analysis: the paradox between the acceptance of an international norm and its ignorance in practice. In the following, I will, thus, lay out how adopting the ontological position of historical materialism in the form of Wallerstein’s world-systems theory can provide a theoretical explanation of Krasner’s observations that go beyond an individualist, presentist view.

Influenced by Marxist thought and Dependency Theory, Wallerstein (1979) posits that the interactions among states can be understood by analyzing them within a capitalist framework. According to his theory, countries are categorized into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral nations, each playing distinct roles in the world economy. Core

Sovereignty with Chinese Characteristics? Norms in a Changing World Order

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countries, characterized by advanced technology and industrialization, dominate the global market and exert significant influence over economic and political affairs. Semi-peripheral nations, in a transitional phase, are industrializing but have not yet reached the level of core nations, acting as intermediaries in the global economic structure. Peripheral countries, being the least developed, are economically dependent on core nations, often supplying cheap labor and raw materials. Within the logic of capitalist expansion, core states are expanding their production into peripheral states through the exploitation of labor and resources to avoid decreasing profits. Based on these theoretical considerations, the state's interests are thus viewed to be intricately tied to the country's position in the global capitalist system.

This theoretical perspective will be adopted in the subsequent analysis on China's shifting discourse on state sovereignty. The analysis will proceed in three steps. Firstly, China's discourse and practice in relation to sovereignty will be assessed, analyzing whether a situation of 'organized hypocrisy' indeed exists in the case of China. Secondly, in the analysis of the Chinese practices regarding sovereignty, then, a focus will be laid on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Lastly, it will show how such a contradiction can be explained when employing a combination of Krasner's concept of organized hypocrisy with world-systems theory.

An Analysis of the Chinese Discourse on and Practices of Sovereignty

The Chinese Discourse on State Sovereignty

As demonstrated in the essay's introduction, the Chinese government increasingly utilizes the concept of sovereignty in their official communication strategy. This framing of sovereignty as a means to advocate for non-interference is not confined solely to the discourse on Taiwan; it is a pervasive strategy employed by the Chinese government across various conflicts. Pradana and Auprayogi (2021) exemplify this by illustrating how Chinese media portrays the American presence in the South China Sea as a violation of their regional sovereignty. Emphasizing their territorial rights, the heightened occurrence of American warships is depicted as the primary cause fuelling the conflict. Lams (2018) further observes that the Chinese official discourse on foreign affairs not only highlights the state's peaceful nature but also underscores their unequivocal right to defend sovereignty by any means necessary. Additionally, the Chinese government actively shapes the discourse on sovereignty by introducing novel concepts, such as 'internet sovereignty' (Rolland, 2020, p. 45), and thereby rationalizing their closed internal and intricate system of censorship. These studies and examples collectively highlight the increasing significance of the sovereignty discourse within China's foreign strategy.

In a similar manner, the state's discourse on human rights has undergone a notable transformation since its inception in 1948 (Zhao, 2015). Despite active Chinese involvement in advocating for the inclusion of Confucian concepts in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its longstanding formal commitment to the international declaration, recent years have witnessed a shift in the narrative (ibid.). Currently, the universality of rights is frequently contested, with human rights now being depicted as a Western construct (Rolland, 2020, p. 29). It is essential to recognize that the two discourses, one on sovereignty and the other on human rights, are interconnected. Both conversations stand in relation to the broader debate surrounding the conundrum of upholding sovereignty versus adhering to international law. Consequently, both the Chinese understanding of universal sovereignty, as well as their challenge to the universality of rights and values, can be understood to constitute a counter-model to the Western system that centers universal rights, the primacy of international law and an understanding of sovereignty that is subordinate to these principles. In essence, the Chinese discourse reveals a strong push for a concept of a universal understanding of sovereignty that is not restricted by other norms such as human rights.

The Chinese Practices of Sovereignty and the Belt and Road Initiative

Examining the Chinese approach to sovereignty through the lens of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers a particularly interesting perspective to the Chinese practice in relation to sovereignty. Launched in 2013, the BRI stands as a significant Chinese infrastructure development program, positioned as a cornerstone in China's broader strategy to obtain a central role in the evolving global order (Rolland, 2020, p. 40). As the initiative gained momentum, discussions increased whether Chinese infrastructure investments, a pivotal facet of the BRI, might be

Sovereignty with Chinese Characteristics? Norms in a Changing World Order

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an infringement on the sovereignty of recipient states (Narins & Agnew, 2020). This discourse is grounded in the argument that the inherent “power asymmetries within inducements and foreign aid necessitate infringement on the receiving state’s sovereignty” (Wadehra, 2023).

Particularly the case of the 99-year concession of the Sri Lankan port has prompted discussions regarding the possibility of the port evolving into a strategic asset for China. Scholars, such as Carrai (2018), point out that this concession potentially enables the exertion of influence over Sri Lanka’s foreign and domestic policies. Likewise, a systematic examination of more than 100 contracts between Chinese state-owned entities and foreign governments concluded that cancellation, acceleration, and stabilization clauses within Chinese contracts could potentially give China the power to influence debtors’ domestic and foreign policies (Gelpern, et. al, 2022). Based on this, Carrai (2018) argues that China, “relying on the contested and political notion of sovereignty, is using similar legal techniques as Western powers used since the nineteenth century, and that its understanding of sovereignty continues to be malleable in order to accommodate new evolving interests”.

This exploration of the BRI underscores a divergence of the Chinese practices from the rhetoric laid out above. Despite the rhetoric of offering an alternative model to the Western order, the Chinese approach to the BRI mirrors historical strategies employed by Western nations, particularly in navigating norms of sovereignty.

‘Organized Hypocrisy’ from a World-Systems Perspective

The examples presented in the preceding section reveal a prevailing trend in Chinese discourse towards an increasing significance placed on the concept of sovereignty. Simultaneously, there has been a surge in criticism directed at China, asserting that its actions are an infringement upon the sovereignty of other nations. Hence, it can be argued that the actions taken by China are indeed a form of ‘organized hypocrisy’. However, this first step of the analysis does not yet provide an explanation for the reasons behind this condition. As this section argues, a more conclusive understanding of the underlying reasons can be formed when employing the world-systems theory to this puzzle.

In line with this argument, Zhang (2017) analyzes that after “three decades of fast economic growth [China has] recently shown serious signs of capital glut, overproduction and decreasing returns to capital, indicating the beginning of a phase of contraction and stagnation in the long-cycles of capitalist accumulation”. Drawing on the insights of the world-systems theory, such a state of decreasing returns gives China strong incentives to expand their capital expansion into other geographical areas. To ensure sustained growth and the accumulation of wealth in its pursuit of attaining a core position within the global order, China actively cultivates new relationships with peripheral countries. These relationships are strategically forged based on power disparities, aiming to establish arrangements that secure a continuous trajectory of economic expansion. According to the theory, these power differences are what sustain the wealth of core countries while simultaneously making economic development unattainable for peripheral countries.

Based on this understanding, the BRI and the analyzed infringements on sovereignty that are associated with it, are the result of China’s interest to expand their production into other geographical areas. Interest, in this case, is not solely the rational interest of a state leader but a material interest of sustained capital accumulation. In line with this logic, the Chinese discourse of the primacy of state sovereignty and negation of the concept of universal Human Rights does not stand in contrast to the practices of the BRI but are in line with them: If the discourse is understood to propose a counter model to the Western liberal world order, then it can be seen as a tool to legitimize a world order defined by a stronger Chinese state. In this way, discourse is not seen to be the primary motivation for a state’s behavior but rather a complementary ideational structure used to legitimize their actions.

Conclusionary Thoughts: The Relation Between Sovereignty and Eurocentrism Reconsidered

This essay set out to critically question one of IR’s core concepts—the idea of state sovereignty—and sought to explore its meaning within a changing world order. The Chinese discourse on the concept was chosen as a case study to exemplify that sovereignty can no longer be seen as a purely Western idea to which Global South countries

Sovereignty with Chinese Characteristics? Norms in a Changing World Order

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simply adhere but not contribute to. By analyzing the discourse as well as practice related to sovereignty it was showcased that, in line with Krasner's (1999) argument, the international practice of sovereignty can be seen as a form of 'organized hypocrisy': State actions are only subordinately influenced by ideas and discourse and primarily by state's interests. Yet, contrary to Krasner this essay suggests that interests cannot be understood solely through a rationalist perspective. Instead, a more nuanced understanding arises when they are approached through a framework rooted in a material ontology, aligning with the logic of capitalist expansion as delineated by the world-systems theory.

Following from this analysis, the concept of sovereignty and its application is not limited to the West with Global South countries passively applying what has been devised in other parts of the world. Not only its origins are not solely "Western" but, moreover, its (unequal) application, too, can be seen in different parts of the world. Viewing the concept of sovereignty as a strategic tool rather than a ruling norm in international relations will allow to explain seemingly contradictory discourse and practices. Indeed, by employing a coherent theoretical framework, we can discern a strategic alignment between China's discourse on sovereignty and its practices, revealing a pursuit of economic interests rather than a mere inconsistency between its rhetoric and actions. Not only its practices but also its discourse, framing their approach as a counter model to the Western order, serves as a legitimizing tool for China's actions on the global stage.

In re-evaluating the notion of sovereignty through the lens of world-systems theory, this essay shows how seemingly contradictory actions can indeed be coherent when assessing them in the light of a broader theoretical framework. Additionally, this discussion should encourage us to reconsider the narratives and theories evolving around the core IR concepts and explore how they function within a changing world order. Moreover, as China continues to play a pivotal role in shaping international relations, this essay highlighted the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of their practices as well as the discourses that underpin them.

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Sovereignty with Chinese Characteristics? Norms in a Changing World Order

Written by Merete Looft

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