As China's economic and political prowess increases on the world stage, shifting the relative power balance of the 20th century, China's impact on the international regimes has raised some concern: will China's rise be disruptive to the existing international norms and institutions? What is China's performance record on international regimes so far? What is China's strategy behind its record and its future trajectory? Andrew J. Nathan, Professor of Political Science of Columbia University, examines China's past behavior, postulates its rationale and projects into the future.

International regimes are systems of norms, which can be formal in the form of treaties and institutions, or informal and emerging. Today's international regimes are much more complicated than the 17th-century Westphalian system. After World War II, a swath of international institutions emerged. The United Nations (UN), the Bretton Woods system governing global financial and economic order, arms control and disarmament, organizations governing international aviation and global health issues, and many others are important institutions affecting our daily lives.

To access China's performance record vis-a-vis these institutions, Nathan first defines what it means by a country's compliance with an international regime. It is really a spectrum from complete rejection at one extreme to complete compliance and embrace at the other extreme, with various degrees of compliance and violation in between. In the Mao era, China rejected the international system in principle and stayed outside of it. This is an example of one of the two extremes. Countries can formally join a regime by signing a treaty but violate the agreed norms most of the time; or comply only with formality, but violate selectively in spirit in some areas. These would be scenarios between the two extremes.

After China took the UN seat in 1972, it began to belong to the international system and to participate in more and more international organizations. Would this trend result in an overthrow of the existing regime, or not yet but only a matter of time as China becomes even more powerful? Having examined China's record after its accession into the WTO in 2001, Nathan thinks that China is generally moving in the direction of compliance, even though China may have complied with the WTO resolutions grudgingly after losing cases, brought by the U.S. and other countries for violating the norms, to the WTO dispute resolution mechanism. Similarly in many other areas, China has largely complied with or steadily converged to the international standards, such as the international aviation regime, the international public health regime (sharing more information after the SARS break out in 2003), financial and economic related regimes, wild life protection, arms control and dis-armament.
Nathan points out two areas where China's compliance is problematic - one is the currency issue, the other is in the human rights area. China has been charged for manipulating currency - deliberately keeping the RMB undervalued - by some American politicians, although this charge has become muted in recent months. One of the IMF bylaws prohibits currency manipulation, but this norm and the definition of currency manipulation are widely contested. In the human rights area, China formally acknowledges and accepts the international standards, complies largely in form, but has significant omissions in practice according to the spirit of the international standards.

According to Nathan, it is only natural for any major country which belongs to an international regime to have a negotiating position and to attempt to influence and shape the regime, which keeps changing anyway. The question is what's behind the negotiating positions of this major country? The answer to this question sheds light on its future behavior.

In the Doha Round of trade negotiations, China does not see much benefit for itself if this round succeeds because China's interest lies in smoother trade relations mainly for manufactured products, while the Doha Round mainly pushes for trade liberalization in services areas and agriculture. Thus China chooses to support the negotiating positions of other developing countries on the one hand, and pushes for regional free trade areas on the other hand, to advance its own interests. On the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), as China's labor costs continue to move up, China will eventually move closer to the U.S. positions in terms of protecting labor rights, human rights standards and environmental standards. Thus China's trade positions are self-interested and instrumental, in Nathan's view. With the same rationality, China signed the treaty to ban space weapons, knowing that it will mainly constrain technologically advanced countries like the U.S.

On issues of humanitarian intervention and U.N. peace keeping operations, China has made its own contributions. In the U.N. Security Council, China often sides with the U.S. but with one subtle caveat: China would only intervene in another country with the consent of the government in question. China sometimes abstains and rarely opposes a resolution by the U.N. Security Council. When it does oppose, it's always with Russia, never by itself.

Based on China's past behavior, Nathan concludes that China is basically respectful of international regimes overall, but leaves room to run its own authoritarian regime at home; and that China's behavior is driven by rational calculations based on its national interests. Whether this pattern of China’s behavior will continue into the future will depend on what its national interests will be. Nathan predicts that in most areas China will join the existing international norms and institutions with no revolutionary change; in international regimes related to human rights, China will continue to prefer more authoritarian governance, run by efficient technocrats, to more democratically elected bodies.