

DAVID MORRIS: A NEW ERA OF RISK: WHY WE NEED A NEW, SUSTAINABLE INTERNATIONALISM TO MANAGE THE RISE OF CHINA

GERGELY SALÁT¹

Publisher: Ethics International Press Ltd
Year of publication: 2025
ISBN: 978-1-80441-890-1
Number of pages: 262

One of the most pressing global questions of the past one or two decades has been how the world should respond to the rise of China. It is no surprise that this issue has inspired countless books and even more shorter writings; almost everyone who contemplates the great questions of our time has offered their own perspective on how the rise of China should be handled. The rise of the East Asian superpower has indeed brought enormous changes: it ended the unipolar order, but rather than restoring the bipolar Cold War system, it created a situation without historical precedent. The most defining feature of this new reality is that, while it exhibits many classic elements of great power competition, it is also characterised by deep interdependencies between the rising power and almost every other global actor, dependencies that did not exist in previous world orders. These complex and often tangled interconnections make the situation highly complicated, opaque, and difficult to manage.

The China Problem

Over time, Western literature on “What to do about China?” has grown increasingly pessimistic. In the post-Cold War euphoria of the 1990s, many believed that China would eventually integrate into what is commonly referred to as the liberal, rules-based international order. There was also a long-standing illusion that, at the same time, China’s internal political system would gradually evolve to resemble liberal democracies.

¹ Gergely Salát, PhD, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, *Eurázsia Szemle*.

By the early 2010s, however, some had already begun to view China as a potential threat. By the end of that decade, the dominant narrative in Western discourse was that revisionist China had become the primary challenger to the global order that had been so comfortable for the Western world. By the 2020s, it had become increasingly rare to find analyses that did not depict China’s rise as a fundamental problem or even an existential threat.

In politics, this shift has been accompanied by trade wars, technology embargoes, and a broader program aimed at containing China, whether explicitly named as such or not. These efforts are often framed using terms like “decoupling” or “de-risking”. However, the reality is that the China issue cannot be resolved through trade measures, and decoupling or de-risking is largely unfeasible. The deeply embedded interdependencies in the global system mean that dismantling existing networks would be damaging for all parties involved. Moreover, a powerful China is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and any rational policymaker should base their decisions on this reality.

Risk Management and New Internationalism

David Morris’s book, *A New Era of Risk*, addresses this complex issue. His life experience not only qualifies him but also uniquely positions him to propose an approach that could facilitate the development of a sustainable *modus vivendi* with China. Morris is a former Australian and multilateral diplomat and adviser to businesses, think tanks, and the United Nations. After decades of professional engagement with China, he completed a PhD in 2024 at Corvinus University of Budapest. He is the founder and president of 1EarthVillage, a forum for de-polarising dialogues, based in Australia. He has spent most of his professional life engaging in negotiations, consultations, and diplomatic efforts to find compromises and avoid conflicts, and this approach is clearly reflected in his book. His book’s most important contribution is the application of risk management tools to the China question. His central argument is that instead of illusions and/or hysteria, the challenges posed by China’s rise should be treated as manageable risks and addressed accordingly.

Risk management has a well-developed methodology in the business world. Companies typically do not seek to avoid risks altogether, as doing so would mean missing out on enormous opportunities and, over time, would lead to stagnation or decline. Instead, they aim to keep risks within manageable limits. Successful economic actors do not view the world in black and white; rather, they assess risks realistically on a case-by-case basis, take steps to minimise them, and prepare for potential damage control if adverse outcomes materialise. Morris advocates extending this approach to decision-making regarding China. However, he goes beyond merely proposing a problem-solving technique; he calls for the creation of a new system, which he terms “sustainable internationalism”. He defines it as follows: “A sustainable internationalism would mean an approach to international relations that does not collapse into conflict, that would provide the basis for realist competition between nations but also necessary international cooperation against collective challenges such as climate change. A new, sustainable internationalism would need to tolerate and indeed be committed to diversity, rather than an idealist expectation that one world view can prevail over all others, indeed instead of a chauvinistic view that one world view should prevail.” In the present context, Morris’s suggestion is a very brave one.

A New Era of Risk

“The sky is changing. Nobody really knows how the international order, business environment and everyday life will evolve after the seismic disruptions underway in the 2020s. Risk has become the new normal.” These opening lines of the Preface set the tone for the entire book. In his lengthy introduction, Morris presents his personal life story, explaining how the ideas in the book took shape and what experiences led him to stand among the few who, instead of embracing the currently fashionable trend of confrontation, advocate for accepting China’s rise and finding ways to coexist peacefully, balancing competition with cooperation.

In Chapter 1 (Why we need a new, sustainable internationalism), Morris begins by outlining the need for a new global framework to manage risks associated with China’s growing influence. He critiques the prevailing narrative that portrays China as an inevitable threat, arguing that such an approach could escalate tensions and lead to unnecessary conflict. Instead, he suggests that international actors – including states, businesses, and institutions – must find ways to navigate interdependence through pragmatic risk management rather than ideological confrontation. It is worth noting that most of the book was already completed before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine further intensified international tensions, and by the time Donald Trump was re-elected – bringing new uncertainties to the global system – the book was already in print. This means that the situation has since worsened, making Morris’s message even more relevant.

Chapter 2 (A new era of risk – How the rise of China changes everything) examines the key disruptions shaping the modern world, including the shift from US global dominance to a multipolar system, rising protectionism, and the acceleration of climate change. Morris argues that China’s growing economic and technological influence challenges the old world order but does not necessarily mean inevitable conflict. He also highlights the risks posed by the US-China rivalry, particularly in technology, trade, and military strategy. He critiques the trend of escalating sanctions and economic decoupling, warning that such actions could destabilise global markets. Instead, he suggests that managing risks through strategic engagement and institutional cooperation could lead to a more balanced global order. In the opinion of this review’s author, it is regrettable that the world is heading in the opposite direction.

The next chapter (Chapter 3: China and the new risks of interdependence) explores the complexities of economic interdependence with China. Morris discusses the paradox where countries that rely on China for trade and investment also fear its political influence. The chapter analyses the risks of economic dependence, such as supply chain vulnerabilities and political coercion, while also acknowledging the opportunities China provides for global development. He argues that international actors must adopt a nuanced approach, one that hedges against over-dependence on China while avoiding unnecessary hostility. He critiques the simplistic “China threat” narrative and calls for a more evidence-based risk assessment.

Case Studies

In the following chapters, Morris moves to a lower level of abstraction and presents specific Chinese projects along with their impacts. The first among these is the Belt and Road Initiative (Chapter 4: Risks and opportunities on the Belt and Road), China’s grand vision for the Afro-Eurasian supercontinent that purportedly aims at enhancing connectivity. He acknowledges the economic benefits of BRI projects but highlights the political and financial risks associated with them, including debt sustainability, governance issues, and geopolitical tensions. Through case studies of BRI projects, Morris illustrates how some countries have benefited while others have struggled with challenges such as environmental concerns and local opposition. He suggests that improved governance, transparency, and multilateral cooperation could mitigate these risks.

Three very concrete case studies follow. Out of the many available options, Morris selected three topics that represent three crucial areas – finance, technology, and infrastructure – each with varying degrees of success. These cases effectively illustrate the diversity of projects involving Chinese participation and highlight that there is no universal “recipe” for their success or failure, nor is their fate predetermined. Some initiatives will succeed, while others will fail, and their outcomes will ultimately depend on specific circumstances. Generalisations are neither possible nor useful.

The first case study (Chapter 5: New international institutions – The case of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank [AIIB]) focuses on China’s efforts to reshape global financial institutions, analysing the story of the AIIB. Morris argues that the AIIB represents an attempt to address infrastructure financing gaps in the developing world while also positioning China as a global leader in economic governance. While some Western analysts view the AIIB as a challenge to US-led financial institutions, Morris suggests that it could serve as a model for a more inclusive and cooperative international financial system. He notes that the AIIB has adopted best practices in governance and environmental sustainability, making it a credible alternative to traditional multilateral lenders.

In the next case study (Chapter 6: New technologies – The case of Huawei), Morris examines the global controversy surrounding Huawei and China’s technological rise. He discusses the fears surrounding China’s dominance in 5G and digital infrastructure, particularly concerns about cybersecurity, espionage, and technological dependence. Rather than outright bans, he argues for a risk management approach that includes stronger cybersecurity frameworks, transparent regulatory standards, and international cooperation on digital governance. He warns that a complete decoupling of technology ecosystems could fragment the global economy and hinder innovation.

In Chapter 7 (Failing state – Belt and Road risks in Myanmar), the last of the case studies, Morris illustrates the complex risks involved in China’s overseas investments. Myanmar’s political instability, ethnic conflicts, and weak governance have made BRI projects particularly challenging. He examines the Kyaukphyu deep-water port project, highlighting the concerns over Chinese control, local opposition, and environmental risks. He argues that China’s experience in Myanmar demonstrates the limits of its influence and underscores the need for responsible investment strategies.

Sobriety Above All

Following the case studies, Morris focuses on more general questions. Chapter 8 (A new great game in Eurasia?) analyses the geopolitical competition in Eurasia, where China, Russia, and Western powers are vying for influence. He examines the shifting dynamics of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the BRI, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). He argues that while China is increasing its economic influence in Central Asia, it is unlikely to replace Russia as the dominant power. He also suggests that regional actors are using China's rise to their advantage by balancing multiple external relationships rather than aligning with one major power.

The main points of the book are put forward in Chapter 9 (Towards a new, sustainable internationalism). In this final chapter, Morris outlines his vision for a new international framework that balances competition and cooperation. He argues for an approach that (i) acknowledges global interdependence rather than promoting economic decoupling, (ii) promotes pragmatic risk management over ideological confrontation, (iii) strengthens multilateral institutions to address shared challenges such as climate change and technological governance, and (iv) encourages regional cooperation rather than imposing a rigid US-China binary framework on global politics. He concludes that while China's rise poses risks, it also presents opportunities for reshaping international cooperation. A balanced, strategic approach – rather than fear-driven policies – will be key to managing global stability in the coming decades.

A New Era of Risk presents a compelling argument for moving beyond simplistic narratives about China's rise. Rather than seeing China as an existential threat or an inevitable hegemon, Morris urges policymakers, businesses, and international organisations to adopt a nuanced approach that emphasises risk management, institutional cooperation, and sustainable internationalism. While Morris may be labelled an idealist, his analysis, grounded in case studies and empirical observation, provides valuable insights for navigating the complexities of a changing world order.

Reading the book is a very refreshing experience. In recent times, experts, politicians, and opinion leaders have often presented an overly simplistic view of US-China competition, frequently portraying it as a struggle between the forces of good and evil. There seems to be an unspoken assumption that China is not a legitimate actor in the international order and that this order must be defended against it. Morris takes a completely different approach, and if his book were to be described in a single word, it would be “sobriety”. A significant part of the international discourse appears to have forgotten how to think rationally and to assess various phenomena in their proper context. However, if we wish to avoid major conflicts, we must find a way to coexist in the manner Morris proposes.