

Rising from Within: China's Search for a Multilateral World and Its Implications for Sino-US Relations



Mingjiang Li

*What impact will the rise of China have on the existing international system? This article attempts to provide some clues for a better understanding of this issue by examining China's views on and policy toward international multilateralism in general and some of the newly emerging multilateral mechanisms in particular, including the Group of 20 and the BRICS. The article concludes that while China will become more proactive in its multilateral diplomacy, in many cases selectively, and increase its influence in global multilateral settings, various concerns and constraints will make it unlikely for China to completely overhaul or even dramatically reshape the multilateral architecture at the global level. China is likely to repeat its pattern of the past decade in East Asian regional multilateralism: participation, engagement, pushing for cooperation in areas that would serve Chinese interests, avoiding excessive responsibilities, blocking initiatives that would harm its interests, and refraining from making grand proposals. In addition, China is stuck in defining its identity, and caught up between posturing as a leader of the developing world on some issues and siding with the developed countries on other policy issues. Given all of these constraints, China's involvement in global multilateralism is likely to be guided by pragmatism rather than grand visions. The article also argues that China will most likely strive to rise from within the existing international order. Washington should be prepared to plan its China policy on this basis and Sino-US relations will be shaped largely by the dynamics of contentions for power and interest as well as cooperation and coordination between China and the United States in various multilateral institutions. **KEYWORDS:** China, multilateralism, BRICS, Group of 20, Sino-US relations, Chinese foreign policy.*

CHINA'S PHENOMENAL RISE IN RECENT DECADES HAS SPARKED AN INTENSE international debate on the impact of the reemergence of the "Middle Kingdom" on the existing international system. An important dimension in addressing this issue is China's policy toward multilateralism, particularly major global multilateral institutions. Scrutinizing China's perception and policy toward multilateral institutions and regimes may provide some useful clues for observers to ascertain whether it is rising as a status quo or as a revisionist power.¹ Understandably, most studies thus far have focused on the implications of China's approach to multilateralism for Sino-US relations and US

global leadership, heating up the debate on China's rise with a wide range of views. Generally speaking, there are three camps of thought in the debate, including those observers who believe that China will successfully integrate into the existing order, those who argue that China has been selectively participating in and using multilateralism for other purposes, and those who believe that China will ultimately overhaul the system.

Some scholars are unequivocally sanguine about the prospect of China becoming an integral part of the existing international order. This profuse optimism, to a large extent, is built on a positive assessment of China's involvement in various international institutions.² Ann Kent, for instance, concludes that, as compared to its behaviors prior to the early 1980s, China's "acceptance of, and integration into, the international system have been nothing short of extraordinary."³ Alastair Johnston observes that China has demonstrated a cooperative attitude toward international security regimes from 1980 to 2000 largely as a result of social learning.⁴ Edward Steinfeld argues that China has continued to integrate itself into the Western economic order and adheres to the rules set and dominated by the West.⁵ Rosemary Foot posits that China has chosen accommodation to cope with a US-hegemonic global order while simultaneously attempting to hedge and dilute US supremacy by seeking to establish solid relations with other partners and attempting to push for a more egalitarian world system.⁶ John Ikenberry has put forth a strong argument that, although the rise of China will inevitably weaken US power and dislodge the unipolar structure, the US-led liberal international order will persist and ultimately integrate a more powerful China into that order.⁷

The second school of thought maintains that China has pragmatically regarded multilateral institutions as political tools for the furtherance of its national interests. Among the observers in this category, some are cautiously optimistic and others are more concerned about the uncertainties that China's involvement in global multilateralism might engender. Those who are cautiously optimistic highlight China's willingness to accept and participate in the existing international system while noting that it uses the system mostly in a pragmatic fashion to maximize its own interests. They believe that China prioritizes participation in multilateral institutions where it can exercise more decisionmaking or bargaining power; facilitate its domestic economic development; restrain the hegemony of the United States for the purpose of pushing for "multipolarity" in the international system; and improve China's international image.⁸

On the other hand, pessimistic pragmatists believe that China has been taking a "supermarket" approach in its participation in the international institutions. They allege that China is merely "buying what it must, picking up what it wants, and ignoring what it doesn't," largely because the Chinese leaders "see the international scene as fundamentally one of competition, not condominium."⁹ Many scholars believe that China's sheer size, rapid increase of power, and current display of growing assertiveness "represent a challenge to

the established global order” and that the future global multilateral architecture is “far from clear and not at all determined.”¹⁰ There is always the possibility that China might “use its influence in international institutions as a spoiler instead of a partner.”¹¹ Others are concerned that some Chinese values or normative preferences might lead to a clash with the West over how to jointly address global issues, especially with regard to humanitarian intervention.¹²

The third and final school of thought is firm in its pessimistic view regarding China’s participation in international multilateral institutions. John J. Mearsheimer strongly believes that there is almost no possibility of China successfully becoming part of the existing international order and that “China and the United States are destined to be adversaries as China’s power grows.”¹³ Believing that the widespread positive view of China embracing the existing international order is deeply mistaken, Martin Jacques argues that “an increasingly powerful China will seek to shape the world in its own image.” He cautions that “in coming decades, the West will be confronted with the fact that its systems, institutions and values are no longer the only ones on offer.”¹⁴

The debate has gained new momentum in the wake of the financial crisis when Beijing displayed unprecedented confidence in engaging with various international institutions and started to make new proposals to reform various global economic and financial regimes.¹⁵ The global financial crisis of 2008–2009 was widely perceived in China as marking the decline of the Western powers, particularly the United States, and the weakening of their dominance in the global system.¹⁶ Related to this perception, many Chinese believe that it is opportune for China to play a more active role in shaping the future multilateral world. Certainly, designing a proper strategy in China’s multilateral diplomacy is a Herculean undertaking and, in recent years, there has been a heated debate in China as to what kind of multilateral world will best serve China’s national interests and what China should do to pursue its goals in its multilateral diplomacy.¹⁷

In this article, I examine China’s recent changing posture and policy toward the major emerging multilateral institutions and explore the debate among Chinese policy analysts to gain a better understanding of the long-term trajectory of China’s search for an optimal posture in multilateral diplomacy. My focus is on the motivations for China’s growing activism in multilateralism fora and China’s perceptions and attitudes toward some of the newly emerging multilateral regimes and processes. I conclude that various concerns and constraints will render it impossible for China to completely overhaul or even dramatically reshape the multilateral architecture at the global level, even as it becomes more proactive in its multilateral diplomacy, albeit selectively, and seeks to increase its influence in global multilateral settings.

China is likely to repeat what it has done in East Asian regional multilateralism in the past decade: increasing participation and engagement, pushing for cooperation in areas that would serve Chinese interests, avoiding the assumption of responsibilities that it deems burdensome, blocking initiatives that

are seen as harmful to its interests, and refraining from making grand proposals. Another notable constraint on full-bore participation in the burdens no less than the benefits of multilateral institutional life is the fact that China is faced with the difficult task of identity definition as it is caught up between posturing as a leader of the developing world on some issues and siding with the developed countries on other policy issues. Given all these constraints, China's involvement in global multilateralism is likely to be guided by pragmatism rather than grand visions. It is hard to imagine, at least in the foreseeable future, that much of China's morality-ridden rhetoric with regard to multilateralism will be easily translated into concrete policy proposals to be embedded in the future multilateral world. Based on the findings that support the views of the pragmatist school of thought, I argue that China will most likely strive to rise from within the existing international order and recommend that Washington should be prepared to plan its China policy on this basis. On this note, I posit that Sino-US relations will be shaped largely by the dynamics of contentions for power and interest as well as cooperation and coordination between China and the United States in various multilateral institutions.

China Views Emerging Multilateral Institutions: Expectations and Constraints

The origins of China's interest in global multilateralism can be traced to the reform and opening up program launched by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s. China began the continuous process of integration into the international system with its accession to numerous international institutions and regimes in the 1980s. However, the pace of China's activism in multilateralism and participation in the international system increased ostensibly after its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. As seen from its actual behaviors and various policy pronouncements by top Chinese decisionmakers, China has indeed entered a historical new phase in its participation in global multilateralism.¹⁸

China's interest and confidence in global multilateral processes surged further in the wake of the 2008–2009 global financial crisis. As mentioned earlier, the policy community in China believes that the recent financial crisis has marked a notable decline of the West and a significant reduction of Western influence in global multilateralism. While acknowledging that there are many constraints preventing China from assuming significant leadership in global multilateralism, several Chinese policy analysts believe that the time has come for China to rise up as a more important player in international institutions. This combination of euphoria and concerns is well reflected in the mainstream views in China regarding Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) and the Group of Twenty (G-20), two of the newly emerging multilateral institutions.

Multilateralism for Multipolarity

Among the Chinese policy community, there is a strong conviction that multilateral diplomacy is a powerful instrument for the building and acceleration of a multipolar world. It is the firm belief of these analysts that multilateralism is an effective tool for checking the unilateral impulses of the United States. From the Chinese perspective, a more institutionalized international order would be more stable than the current one that is dominated by one single superpower. China regards participation in multilateralism as a useful means to push for a more equitable and fair international political and economic order and ultimately to strive for a larger share of decisionmaking power in various international institutions, especially in the economic and financial institutions (the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund), and boost its international influence.¹⁹ Beijing feels that it will be too difficult for China alone to wrestle power from the Western developed countries, but it would be more possible if China collaborates with other like-minded emerging powers as a joint venture.

Such considerations have led China to be supportive of the BRICS grouping. Beijing's positive attitude in the BRICS is rooted in three major considerations. First of all, the BRICS countries boast a strong economic force. Even before the addition of South Africa to the grouping, Chinese analysts frequently made the point that the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) countries hold 42 percent of the global population, 14.6 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP), and 12.8 percent of the global trade. In recent years, the economic growth rates of the original four countries have also been impressive, contributing to almost one-half of global economic growth. And the four countries together hold a huge amount of international foreign reserves.²⁰ Second, China believes that this joint venture among the BRICS countries is possible because they have many common positions and interests in international relations, particularly in the economic arena.²¹ Third, for China, the BRICS, as a new institution, is not only significant in and of itself but, more important, it could serve as a powerful proxy to push for the reforms of other major existing international institutions. As such, Chinese analysts believe that the BRICS countries should unite in their negotiations with the developed world to promote their common interests in world politics. They believe that the BRICS mechanism will have "major significance for the whole world" because this new multilateral institution is likely to accelerate the development of the multipolarization of the international structure and to reform the unfair and unreasonable international political and economic system.²²

China's expectations of the BRICS mechanism have been translated into concrete policy behaviors in recent years; for instance, in the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Before the G-20 summits, the finance ministers and governors of the central banks of BRICS countries met to discuss issues of common concern and to coordinate their positions. For instance, during the

April 2009 London G-20 summit, the BRICS countries publicized a joint statement requesting more voting power and representation in the IMF.²³ These emerging powers have held several ministerial meetings to synchronize their positions on climate change and also have worked together to pressure the developed countries to take more responsibilities for the reduction of carbon emissions. More recently, China hosted the first summit of the BRICS after South Africa was admitted to the group at the Bo'ao Forum for Asia in April 2011. The primary goal of the summit was to coordinate the positions of the member countries on major international issues before the French summit of the G-20.

Compared to the BRICS grouping, the G-20 is perhaps far more important for China. Besides its importance in tackling many challenging global economic and financial issues, the G-20 is also viewed by Beijing as a tangible and crucial step toward multipolarization of the global power structure. China believes that the G-20, to some extent, represents the current balance of power in the world. Many Chinese analysts subscribe to the belief that the G-20, with a membership encompassing the developed Group of 8 (G8), the BRICS countries and other developing countries, and the European Union (EU), signifies the growing importance of emerging economic powers and reflects the changing economic power balance between the developed nations and newly emerging powers. They maintain that the growing importance of the G-20 also means that US hegemony is being challenged and confirms the indispensability of emerging powers in solving global problems.²⁴ China believes that the G-20 is a forum in which emerging powers, especially China itself, can make their voices heard and attempt to obtain a larger share of representation and voting power in major international economic and financial institutions.²⁵

Furthermore, China believes that the institutionalization of the G-20 and the greater voting power given to the emerging economies will have profound implications for the shaping of the future international order. Chinese policy analysts argue that the gradual displacement of the G8 by the G-20 suggests that the global governance system is readjusting in accordance with the international economic power structure, which is moving from the complete dominance of the developed countries toward "North-South co-governance." Also, the emergence of the G-20 signifies the recognition by the rest of the world, especially the Western world, of China's rise.²⁶ The G-20, although presently an economic forum in nature, is likely to have a catalyzing effect on the emergence of new orders in the global political and security sectors as well.²⁷ They thus conclude that the G-20 is "a great positive historical move" and "a major breakthrough" in the evolution of a new world order.²⁸ By and large, Beijing is satisfied with its achievements through the G-20 meetings in the past few years. China believes that, because of its growing economic clout, its participation in the G-20 has contributed to the shift of power and a structural change

within G-20 toward emerging economies.²⁹ Moreover, the functioning of the G-20 has significantly upgraded China's global status.³⁰

Multilateralism for Cooperation

It would be misleading to suggest that China regards global multilateralism as a completely zero-sum game. As a major power and with its economy becoming increasingly interdependent with the rest of the world, China does believe that multilateral diplomacy can provide new platforms for international cooperation, primarily for the realization of Chinese interests, but at the same time for the provision of international public goods. In some respects, China now understands that many of the newly emerged transnational externalities such as climate change, global financial instability, resource depletion, international terrorism, environmental degradation, and pandemics cannot be tackled effectively by any single country, but have to be addressed through multilateral cooperation with other states. Over the past decades, participating in multilateral cooperation in dealing with various regional and global challenges also has been a good learning experience for China. The evolution of China's behavior in multilateral cooperation in dealing with the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, international peacekeeping operations, and nuclear nonproliferation demonstrates the positive impact of social learning on China as it has become more supportive of relevant international norms.

Regarding the BRICS mechanism, since it still is in its emerging stage, China has not developed clear ideas of how the five countries could forge effective cooperation, except an avid interest in using it as a proxy to contend with the developed West as noted above. However, Chinese analysts have mentioned that in general the BRICS countries could further explore bilateral and multilateral cooperation in their economic relations; for instance, in currency swaps, more liberal trading arrangements, investment facilitation measures, climate change, and the development of new energy resources. These countries could also work together to resist protectionist trade measures by some developed countries. They believe that such cooperation has become even more necessary in the wake of the global financial crisis.³¹

Since its inception in 1999, the G-20 has focused on some of the most challenging economic problems facing the world, especially problems in the international financial system. China maintains that the G-20 is a good mechanism for the common economic good of many countries.³² It views the G-20 as a good platform for coordinating the macroeconomic policies of the world's major economies in order to stabilize the global economy so that China's own economy will not be negatively affected by dramatic fluctuations.³³ China also believes that the G-20 will create many opportunities for itself to participate in international affairs and cooperate with other countries for tangible economic benefits. According to Chinese policy analysts, the main tasks for China in the G-20 include collaboration with other members to oppose trade protectionism,

to push for a low-carbon economy in dealing with global climate change, and to establish a new global financial order. In the global financial sector, China could work to push for further international financial monitoring cooperation and further reform of the international monitoring system and the international credit rating system. They recommend that China should also strive to bring about additional reform of various international financial institutions, primarily involving the decisionmaking and higher representation for developing countries in the IMF, and push steadily for the diversification of the international currency system and support for the stability of the system.³⁴ In some respects, China has been successful. For instance, it has been able to increase its own IMF quotas from 3.72 percent to 6.39 percent and its voting power from 3.65 percent to 6.07 percent to become the third most powerful member at the IMF.³⁵

Multilateralism for China's "Peaceful Rise"?

Chinese officials and scholars have frequently argued that China's active participation in global and regional multilateralism epitomizes its intention of a "peaceful rise." They also argue that further engagement with multilateralism is one path where China could realize its peaceful rise. The fact that the Chinese elite harbors this perception is noteworthy, regardless of whether China's participation in multilateralism will eventually help its peaceful rise. Beijing believes that its participation in multilateralism could help diminish the "China threat" theory and build a "responsible power" image for China.³⁶ Contrary to its earlier perception that many of the international institutions were simply policy tools controlled by the most powerful countries, Beijing has realized that active participation in various multilateral regimes can help reduce the apprehensions of other countries toward China's rise. In addition, China has attempted to sugarcoat its preference for global multilateralism in highly moral terms, with repeated statements that one of its purposes in building global multilateralism is to achieve the goal of *hexie shijie* (a harmonious world). In recent years, the Chinese leadership has laboriously preached the Confucian vision of a new world order centered on the concept *he* (peace, harmony, union). Official statements constantly advocate *he er bu tong* (harmonious, but different) and *he wei gui* (peace as the ultimate objective). Beijing believes that this rhetoric can help build and project a pacifist cultural image for China.³⁷ It also helps demonstrate Beijing's cautious approach to putting itself in the limelight by working within the current international framework through its membership in the UN and regional cooperative initiatives.³⁸

In the security realm, China has advocated new ideas in multilateral security arrangements. To cope with the new international situation and challenges in the 1990s, the Chinese government proposed a new security concept in a series of defense white papers and advocated this concept numerous times in various multilateral forums. According to this new security concept, the

post-Cold War order requires all states to pursue a security policy that features “mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination.”³⁹ China’s advocacy of a new security concept, in the eyes of some external observers, is an update and expansion of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence formulated during the Cold War.⁴⁰ China has offered little thought as to how the new security concept can be put into practice to ensure international peace in an anarchic world. This has led to the suspicion that China has certain pragmatic objectives in promoting this concept; for instance, trying to expand China’s influence in ways seen as nonthreatening to its neighbors and trying to balance US global power in a manner that serves China’s interests.⁴¹

Because China holds the G-20 in high regard, some Chinese analysts have argued that the G-20 could potentially contribute to China’s peaceful rise. Although the G-20 may not be the best platform and there are still many uncertainties about its future (see further discussion about this in the next section), these analysts prescribe the G-20 as a preferred choice during the transitional period for China’s peaceful rise and the upgrading of its status to a major world power. In their opinion, the next three decades will be a crucial period for China’s rise and more frictions with the United States are to be expected. At the same time, China needs a fairly predictable, flexible, and nonconfrontational external environment to ensure the smooth progression of its grand plan for national rejuvenation. As such, the analysts believe that the G-20 possesses certain characteristics, such as elasticity, representation, flexibility, and maneuverability, to help create that external environment. They think that the G-20 can serve as a useful mechanism for mitigating conflicts between China and the United States to avert the potential clashing of the two titans, given that many bilateral thorny issues could be discussed and possibly solved through multilateral mechanisms. On the other hand, it would be easier for China to deal with the sole superpower if it had the support of like-minded states within the BRICS grouping and, at the same time, divert or reduce pressures on China alone as other emerging powers may share China’s positions and concerns. In this sense, China believes that the G-20 is a fairly ideal institution for China, at least at this stage.⁴²

Constraints of the BRICS and G-20

Beijing realizes that there are significant limitations for cooperation in these emerging multilateral institutions. China understands that there are also quite a number of constraints for multilateral cooperation among the BRICS countries. In addition to the different economic structures and levels of development among the five countries, a number of other differences have surfaced—India and Brazil have different preferences regarding the liberalization of agricultural products; China and India have engaged in competition over oil and gas resources in Russia and Central Asia; and Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa are not happy to see an acceleration of the interna-

tionalization of the Chinese currency, the renminbi or yuan (RMB).⁴³ Some Chinese analysts note that the cooperation among BRICS countries could also be limited at the global level because the West continues to enjoy predominant economic and technological prowess. In the foreseeable future, the BRICS countries will have to give priority to their respective cooperation with the Western developed countries instead of cooperation among themselves.⁴⁴ Beijing understands that the other members of the BRICS grouping may be attracted to other multilateral regimes. Russia is a member of the G8. Ideologically, India as “the largest democracy” in the world is strongly interested in forging cooperation with the “most powerful democracy”—the United States. Brazil is a member of the Organization of American States, in which the United States serves as the leader. India, Brazil, and South Africa have a separate loose gathering in the name of “dynamic democracies.”⁴⁵

Therefore, even if China were eager to further strengthen cooperation among the BRICS, other parties may not reciprocate China's enthusiasm.⁴⁶ China has also realized that the BRICS mechanism is likely to generate some impact on global economic issues, but will have little impact on global security matters. Ultimately, China is likely to regard the BRICS grouping as a useful multilateral platform for other larger political goals; for instance, contending with the Western powers for a larger share of decisionmaking power at the global level, as noted above.

As for the G-20, many Chinese analysts have noted a number of challenging constraints, despite acknowledging it as a good opportunity for China. First of all, the G-20 is generally an expedient, ad hoc, and underinstitutionalized forum. As a result, its policy proposals and prescriptions are of a non-binding nature for its members. It will take more time and effort to upgrade the G-20 into an institution for dealing with global governance, including broad international consensus on the definition of its functions; the establishment of a long-term and effective mechanism; the balance between representation and efficiency; and the differentiation of roles between the G-20, the UN, and other international organizations.⁴⁷ Some Chinese analysts believe that it may be unrealistic to expect any significant institutionalization of the G-20 because the 2008–2009 financial crisis that gave birth to the G-20 has not generated as deep a global recession as the Great Depression of the 1930s and, consequently, the dominant position of the West has not been fundamentally weakened. In this sense, the G-20 may have to contend with the G8 for leadership if the former is to become the leading institution in global governance.⁴⁸

In addition, the G-20 was initiated by the developed countries. Analysts in China have a fairly consensual view that the developed countries intended to use the G-20 only as a policy tool to encourage the major developing countries to contribute to the solution of various global economic and financial problems. The creation of the G-20 was intended neither to fundamentally reform the existing global economic and financial system, nor to genuinely allow the

developing countries to enjoy a greater role in the global economic system.⁴⁹ Many Chinese analysts note that the US willingness to engage in the G-20 mechanism stems from its primary interest to integrate other powers, including China, into the existing rules and regimes and to persuade the developing countries to share international responsibilities.⁵⁰

Moreover, China believes that, given the diversity of its members in terms of economic development and concerns, rivalry and competition are inevitable in the G-20. Ultimately, the developing countries in the G-20 may be disappointed by the mechanism because they may not be able to contend with the developed countries on an equal footing. At the global level, there remains a wide gap in wealth and knowledge between the developed and developing economies. And the Western developed countries still dominate the agenda setting and discourse in global governance. The status quo of “global governance equals Western governance” has not been fundamentally changed.⁵¹ Many Chinese scholars note that, within the G-20, there is relatively little divergence among the developed countries whereas there is much divergence among the developing countries. Furthermore, the internal political and economic structures of the emerging powers are still very much flawed. There continue to be numerous concerns about long-term political stability and the prospect of economic restructuring in many emerging powers.⁵² As a result, the G-20 may not be able to coordinate the positions and policies of its members effectively.⁵³

Many Chinese observers note that the G-20 is unlikely to become the key multilateral institution and that many uncertainties remain with regard to the future of the G-20.⁵⁴ It may gradually become more institutionalized and play a more important role in the world economy as globalization deepens and economic interdependence among major economies further develop. But it also is possible that the regime could eventually become irrelevant as the world financial and economic situation improves to the point that member states of the G-20 might find it more convenient to turn back to various regional groupings or smaller groupings such as the G8, EU, North American Free Trade Agreement, and BRICS.⁵⁵

Regarding the future relations between the G8 and the G-20, Chinese analysts are divided in their views. Broadly speaking, there are three proposals. One view is that, with the mitigation or possibly the end of the global financial crisis, the ministerial meeting of the G-20 will resume its function to serve as a dialogue mechanism between the developed and developing countries under the Bretton Woods system and the G8 will continue to tackle problems such as climate change, African development issues, and global trade under the G8+5 mechanism. The second view is that the G-20 will become more institutionalized and is likely to expand to include security, social, and environmental issues in its discussions and replace the G8 as the center for global governance. The third view is that the G-20 will become more institutionalized

but will confine itself to economic and financial issues, and the G8 will continue to play its role in other areas under the G8+5 mechanism.⁵⁶

Many analysts in China believe that the second scenario would be preferable for China. They argue that replacing the G8 with G-20 would mean a significant move toward the realization of a multipolar world. They support this argument further by justifying displacement of the G8 by the G-20 with the fact that it is far more representative and influential economically and, in the coming decades, the growth rate of the G-20, especially the emerging economies, will continue to be faster than that of the G8 so that the emerging economies will account for a much larger share of the total global economy.⁵⁷

Dilemmas in China's Search for a Multilateral World

In addition to the pragmatic approach to various multilateral institutions and regimes, China has a few notable dilemmas to overcome if it attempts to come up with grand designs for global and regional multilateralism and seeks to play a leading role in regional and global multilateralism.

Multipolarization Versus "China First"

For many years, China has advocated a multipolar world. The Chinese vision for multipolarity was largely aimed at checking the global influence of the United States. However, this vision has an inherent dilemma for China. To build a multipolar world, China would have to allow and encourage other emerging powers to become stronger and play a larger role in international politics. These powers would include some of China's neighboring countries such as Russia, India, and Japan, with which China has had unpleasant historical relations. Such unpleasant historical issues with these regional powers include czarist Russia's territorial expansion into the Far East at the expense of the Chinese empire and the Sino-Soviet hostilities during much of the Cold War, the Sino-Indian border war in 1962, and the militaristic Japan's bullying of China from the late nineteenth century to the end of World War II. Today, in the Asian continent, the relationships between China and these neighboring powers are rife with competition and rivalry in Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia. Encouraging these powers to be independent poles in international politics would entail a larger role for these neighboring giants in subregional and global affairs, which may contradict with China's own aspiration to become a dominant power in East Asia and eventually a global power.

Although Chinese analysts believe that China could obtain a better position in the global multilateral order by joining hands with other emerging powers, such as Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa, doing so poses a serious challenge for China. It essentially is the same logic as noted above. To encourage other emerging powers to work with China to build a multipolar world, Beijing will need to support a larger political role of those countries in

various international multilateral institutions. Chinese analysts tend to believe, perhaps rightly so, that augmented profiles of other emerging powers in world politics would weaken China's international influence. This is exactly the reason why China has straightforwardly resisted any effort for the admission of certain emerging powers to the UN Security Council as new permanent and veto-wielding members. This dilemma is clearly evident in the case of the BRICS grouping. While Beijing regards the BRICS mechanism as a useful vehicle for China to promote multipolarity in world politics and to push for major reforms of international multilateral institutions, it is also concerned that other members of this loose coalition, particularly India and Brazil, might attempt to utilize this platform to aggrandize their own international influence in order to support their admission into the UN Security Council as permanent members. In fact, at the end of the first summit of the BRICS countries in June 2009, India and Brazil did attempt to bring up this issue. China resisted the attempt by saying that the BRICS forum was mainly tasked to discuss the impact of the financial crisis and was not supposed to discuss the reform of UN Security Council membership.⁵⁸

Leadership, Identity, and Responsibility

At the current stage, China is worried that a Chinese leadership role in major multilateral institutions and regimes would incur unbearable responsibilities for China. China's apprehension of taking on too much international responsibility is evident in its refusal of the G2 (China and the United States) proposal. China believes that the G2 concept was a US conspiracy to nominally upgrade China's international status but, in reality, to make China accept international responsibilities that would be beyond its capability.⁵⁹ Many Chinese analysts believe that China should continue its "low profile" strategy in global multilateral diplomacy due to several considerations. First, China has been the main beneficiary of the existing international regimes. At this stage, China should continue to integrate itself into the existing regimes instead of creating new ones. Also, China's economic and military power is still limited and it has a huge population with mounting domestic problems. Therefore, China does not have the power to change or challenge the existing global regimes, which remain dominated by Western powers. Even if China should attempt to do so, it would only invite suspicion and even hostility from the West and, as a result, China's ascent in the international system may be hampered. Second, China should focus on its contiguous neighborhood and play an even more active role in East Asian multilateral institutions. Because China is currently one of the leading powers in the region, it should bide its time and move on to assuming world power only when regional states have recognized China's dominance.⁶⁰

The leadership versus responsibility debate in China is also largely about China's questions regarding its own identity. How should China define its identity? Is China a developing country or a developed power? This quandary

is clearly evident in its consideration of joining the G8. Many Chinese analysts are against the idea of China becoming an official member of the G8 on the basis of several considerations. In addition to various economic reasons, Beijing is not sure how it should present itself in the G8. Some Chinese observers argue that, if China joins the G8, it would lose much freedom in its actions and find it hard to convince other developing countries that China represents their interests. This will be contradictory to China's international strategy of positioning itself as the protector of and pioneer for the interests of the vast developing world.⁶¹

In light of these considerations, some Chinese policy analysts argue that the best option for China is to engage with the G8 as a dialogue partner. In this way, China can avoid taking responsibilities that are beyond its capabilities, and at the same time China can be free to position itself as a bridge between the developing world and the developed countries to push for global multilateralism and solutions to global problems in a fashion that best serves China's national interests.

There are many other issues that make it difficult for China to clearly define its international identity. On many economic issues, China shares the same or similar views with the developed countries. But on many other issues regarding global governance, China tends to side with the vast developing world. The mainstream thinking in China, both in the official policymaking circle and the scholarly community, seems to stress that China should still treat "South-South solidarity" as a cornerstone in China's foreign policy. This means that in multilateral diplomacy, China will more or less side with the developing world and, at the same time, pay attention to coordination with the developed countries. China is aware that, in order to transform itself into a major global power, it should also consider taking on certain international responsibilities and international obligations that are commensurate with its national strength and capabilities.⁶²

No matter how the situations in China and the rest of the world evolve, it will inevitably be a significant challenge for China to balance its views and positions in the G-20. To overcome this dilemma, some analysts suggest that, because the future international structure is likely to be multipolar, China may have to opt for multilayer international multilateral institutions in different functional areas. They propose that China should promote an implicit G2 and an explicit G-20, and use these two institutions to promote and participate in other institutions. They also suggest that China should pay attention to three key issues: (1) regard the Sino-US strategic dialogue as the key to China's peaceful rise; (2) treat the G-20 as the most important platform for China's international economic cooperation; (3) use the ASEAN+3 platform as the most important one for China's regional cooperation. They conclude that China should regard the G-20 highly, but should not overestimate its role. While China seeks to maintain its low profile, it should simultaneously attempt to

play an important role in the G-20. And, finally, it should continue to define its role as a major power to advocate for and represent the common interests of the developing world.⁶³

Tianxia Versus Westphalia

If there has been any Chinese thought for a grand design of a new multilateral world at all, it would have to be the Chinese discourse on the concept of *Tianxia* (all under heaven). Chinese scholars argue that, historically, the Chinese view of the world order was heavily influenced by the *Tianxia* concept. In the twenty-first century, China's quick rise in the international system has made its foreign policy community rethink whether and how China should have its own vision of world order that may lead to a posthegemonic world. To fulfill the goal of developing the Chinese school of international relations studies and applying China's perspective on the new international order, some Chinese scholars and philosophers like Zhao Tingyang suggest that, rather than borrowing concepts developed out of Western experiences in international relations, China should create its own concepts about the world order and world institutions by reviving the idea of *Tianxia* as the key concept in restructuring the world order.⁶⁴ Zhao argues that traditional China has always favored peace, stability, order, and generosity toward other nations as, traditionally, its relations with neighboring countries have been very different from the Western experience, which has been rife with violence, wars, power politics, and hegemony. Zhao suggests that the *Tianxia* conceptualization could lead to "a form of selfless global unity" supported by "a global hierarchy where order is valued over freedom, ethics over law and elite governance over democracy and human rights."⁶⁵ From the imperial China's perspective, *Tianxia* blurs the conceptual boundaries between empire and the world, domestic politics and international politics, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism. These scholars advocate an all-inclusive cosmopolitan system that would help solve global problems through building multilayer multilateral institutions that promote cooperation and embrace divergences in a magnanimous way.

Despite the lofty objective in the *Tianxia* notion, many factors are likely to render the vision of building a future world order on the grounds of China's traditional *Tianxia* worldview a utopian endeavor. First, since the beginning of its modernization and open-door process more than a century ago, China started to accept the norm of sovereignty established by the Westphalia system and looked at world politics using a similar lens as the Westerners. In fact, China has become a staunch defender of the Westphalia system by maintaining a rigid stance on the inviolability of sovereignty and noninterference in domestic affairs. Second, "the *Tianxia* system's main problem is that it doesn't explain how to get from an unstable and often violent present to the harmonious future."⁶⁶ Third, *Tianxia* has yet to receive Beijing's official endorse-

ment. The Chinese leadership worries that official support of the *Tianxia* discourse would feed into the “China threat” thesis and thus be harmful for China’s rise.

Conclusion

My analyses in this article provide abundant evidence to support the second school of thought on China’s role in the international order. I suggest that China harbors no grand revisionist ambition to overthrow the existing international system. China would be happy if it could play a larger role in the existing system and is prepared to attempt to achieve this goal by gradually reforming the decisionmaking structure of various existing multilateral institutions and regimes. My findings also confirm the mainstream Chinese argument that China has no incentive to create a new international system because it has been the biggest beneficiary of the existing system over the past three decades. China seems to be confident that it can continue to use these existing multilateral institutions to achieve its pragmatic objectives; for instance, balancing the predominant power of the United States, having a voice on major international issues, striving for more influence in world politics, improving its own international image, and pushing for cooperation in areas and on issues that would serve Chinese interests.

Despite the fact that China has attempted to use various multilateral forums to advocate ideas, some of which are derived from its traditional Confucian philosophy (e.g., “a harmonious world,” a *Tianxia* worldview, and a new security concept), it remains generally weak in shaping discourse in international forums.⁶⁷ China is still undergoing an intense domestic debate on whether it should abandon and how it should modify the late Deng Xiaoping’s *tao guang yang hui* (hide brightness and nourish obscurity) or low-profile international strategy. Until the debate produces some sort of consensus, China’s multilateral policy is likely to be at least partially affected by the path dependence of the low-profile policy prescription. Pragmatism, however, does not mean that China will not seek to be more active in international multilateralism. On the contrary, various signs in recent years unmistakably indicate that China will attempt to be more broadly and deeply involved in multilateral diplomacy at the regional and global levels. However, China’s involvement in international multilateralism is likely to be highly selective, as the cautiously pessimism school of thought argues. China is likely to treat the UN as the most important multilateral institution to deal with international political and security issues and regard the G-20 as the most important multilateral arrangement to cope with international financial and economic problems. At the same time, Beijing will meticulously utilize other ad hoc multiparty regimes and platforms, such as the BRICS grouping, to protect its national interests and aggrandize its international influence.

China's "rising from within" option will be a tough challenge for Washington and likely will also, to a large extent, help shape the patterns of Sino-US relations in the near future. On the one hand, this approach will help soothe US anxiety toward China's rapidly rising power. It will contribute to the mitigation of negative perceptions and attitudes associated with power transition. US policymakers and analysts who prefer an engagement policy with China will be able to find positive evidence in China's accommodation of the global order to make their case. More important, if China is eager to rise from within the existing international institutions, it would help create potential opportunities for China and the United States to cooperate and collaborate on many international issues of common concerns. Such cooperation would, in return, further bind the bilateral relations between the two countries.

On the other hand, the ultimate goal for China, as I discuss in this article, is to secure Chinese interests and compete for more decisionmaking power in the international system. China has demonstrated three pathways to realize these goals. First, it has attempted to use its own power and influence to balance US hegemonic power on issues that do not serve Chinese interests. This was usually done in coalition with other developing countries; for instance, in areas of human rights and humanitarian interventions. Second, it has sought to leverage the collective influence of other emerging powers to bargain and wrestle power from the incumbent Western leading powers. And third, it has attempted to trade burden sharing for power sharing. In the Chinese understanding, the United States and other Western powers are eager to bring China and other emerging powers on board to share responsibilities in tackling various global issues, but they are not willing to give up their much larger share of the decisionmaking power. China, together with other emerging powers, is likely to continue to press hard to have a larger say in international affairs when it is urged to take more responsibilities. This has evidently been the case during the recent global financial crisis, particularly with regard to the restructuring of the IMF. It appears that China and other emerging powers will continue to be successful in gradually grabbing more decisionmaking power from the United States and other Western powers. A reasonable option for the United States is perhaps to "support reconfiguration of the global architecture to incorporate China into the discussion both of the development of international rules and of what it means to be a 'responsible stakeholder.'"⁶⁸ Barring any dramatic change of the United States' China policy, China's "rising from within" behavior is likely to allow the current state of "frenemies" or "neither friends nor foes" in Sino-US relations to be sustained in the foreseeable future. 🌐

Notes

Mingjiang Li is an assistant professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is also coordinator

of the China Program and coordinator of the MS in Asian Studies Program at RSIS. He is the editor and coeditor of six books, the most recent of which is *Soft Power: China's Emerging Strategy in International Politics* (2009). He has published papers in *Security Challenges*, *Panorama*, *The International Spectator*, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *China: An International Journal*, and *China Security*. A short version of this article appeared in *The International Spectator* 45, no. 4 (2010). The author wishes to thank Chen Gang for his insightful views and Bui Ngoc Na Uy and Irene Chan for their research assistance.

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