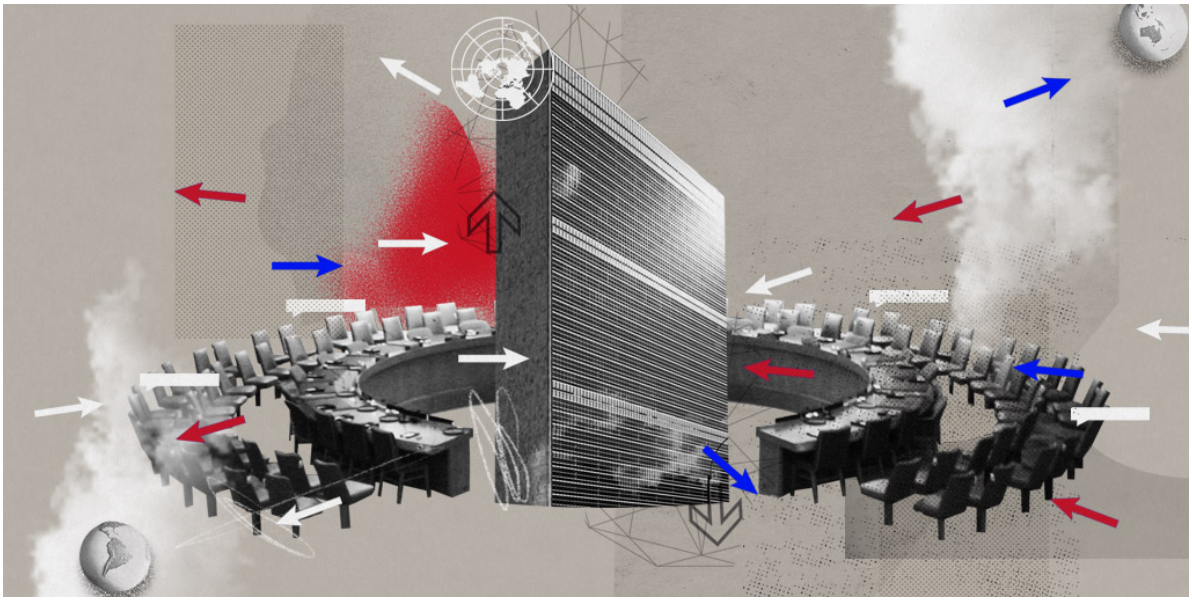
CHINA AS AN INTERNATIONAL LIBERAL ORDER SUPERPOWER

China’s Multilateral Diplomacy

Zhang Qingmin



Illustrator: Sr. García

Multilateralism, according to one of the most frequently quoted definitions, is “an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of ‘generalized’ principles of conduct” [1]. International organizations (IO), the major institutional form of multilateralism, are an instrument to tackle challenges that transcend national borders. How China utilizes these instruments is an intrinsic part of China’s overall foreign policy and features China’s multilateral diplomacy. This paper traces China’s multilateral diplomacy, which has been shaped by its relations with the West and has evolved with China’s own policy adjustments.

A Bumpy Road to International Organizations

Giving birth to one of the great ancient civilizations, China has formed a China-centered system, which is known as the “Chinese-Barbarian Order” or the “Tribute System” in its relations with peripheral nations throughout its long history. Unlike the Westphalian order, which was anarchic and based on the principle of sovereignty equality, the “Tribute System” was hierarchic with China at the apex. However, since its door was forced open by Western warships and cannons in the 19th century, China suffered from one invasion after another. As a result of its defeats, China was in the end drawn into the Westphalian system passively and found itself in a subordinated position. This process was remembered as the one hundred years of humiliation in Chinese history.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949 after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defeated the Nationalist Party, whose Republic of China (ROC) government fled to Taiwan. The New Government demanded that the United Nations (UN) expel the representatives of the Taiwan authorities and replaced it with its new permanent representatives to the UN. Due to the US support to the ROC, the PRC's demand was not accepted. Constrained by the Cold War confrontation, China's contacts with the international community were initially limited to its relations with the Soviet-led socialist countries and a few neighboring countries. To add to these issues, the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s left China further trapped in isolation from the international community.

Excluded from most IOs, China's posture towards the international system from 1949 to 1971 was characterized by Kim as "system-transforming", which passed through "the stages of optimism, frustration, disenchantment, rebellion, disinterest, revived hope, and a sophisticated diplomatic campaign to gain its UN seat" [2]. After the PRC gained its seat in the UN on October 26th, 1971, the posture became "system reforming", since the PRC considered the UN system to be unfair and in need of reform.

> China's posture between1949-1971 was "system-transforming". After the PRC gained its seat in the UN on October 26th, 1971, the posture became "system reforming"

China's *opening-up* in 1978 spurred it to start the process of integration into the international system, forming a comprehensive network of China/global linkages in the 1980s. China began to participate in the UN human rights conference as an observer in 1979, and has been elected to the Human Rights Commission since 1982. China joined the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1980, and resumed its observer status in the General Agreement and Tariff and Trade (GATT) in 1982. Integrated into the UN centered international system, China began to avail the institution to help China's economic development. This distinctive behavior towards the UN was referred to as "system-maintaining and system-exploiting" [3].

Comprehensive and Active Engagement

The end of the Cold War removed the political obstacles of exchanges between the East and the West, accelerating the speed of globalization to new highs. Global issues, which require multilateral cooperation have grown exponentially in number and in complexity, thus creating a need for global solutions. IOs became more important and multilateral diplomacy has become more active than ever before.

China regarded globalization as a double-edged sword, which can be carefully made use of, and energetically expanded its multilateral diplomacy with remarkable achievements. For example, China was a member of only 21 international governmental organizations (IGO)

and had acceded to only 45 international treaties in 1977, the year before China opened up to the outside. By 2015, China had joined more than 130 IGOs, including the UN and its special organizations and almost all global intergovernmental organizations, and has signed or acceded to 400 multilateral international treaties [4]. The multilateral mechanism China has accessed comprises such global organizations as the UN, the WTO and WHO, regional ones such as the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO) and ASEAN+3 Dialogue Mechanism, and trans-regional ones as the Asian-European Summit, APEC, and BRICS.

China's multilateral diplomacy was not only comprehensive. It has changed from a passive to an active participator, even an advocator and a leader in multilateral diplomacy. China proposed the establishment of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in 2000. The FOCAC was followed by the Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum launched in 2004, and the China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum started in 2011. China promoted the establishment of the SCO in 2001, hosted the six-party (China, the United States, Russia, Japan, the Democratic Republic of Korea, and Republic of Korea) talks on the Korean nuclear issue during 2003-2009, and proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. To facilitate the implementation of the BRI, China launched the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2016.

> The year before opening up to the outside, China was a member of only 21 international governmental organizations and had acceded to only 45 international treaties. By 2015, China had joined more than 130 IGOs, including the UN and its special organizations and almost all global intergovernmental organizations, and has signed or acceded to 400 multilateral international treaties

Multilateral diplomacy has been a major test ground of China's proactive diplomacy after Xi Jinping became the Secretary General of CCP Central Committee in 2012. One highlight has been China's consistence in multilateral diplomacy, especially in hosting multilateral summits. Major events included the 4th summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in May 2014, the 22nd APEC leaders' informal summit in November 2014, the conference commemorating the 70th anniversary of the victory of the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War in 2015, the 11th summit of the G20 in Hangzhou in September 2016, the 1st and 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017 and May 2019, the FOCAC's Beijing summit in 2018, the 9th BRICS summit in 2017, the 18th meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the SCO in June 2018. Leaders participating in these home court multilateral summits increased year by year and such tendency was only suspended by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. China availed the advantage of hosting these summits to exert its impact on new global and regional issues by setting the conference agendas and the tones of the keynote speeches.

The UN as an Example

The UN is the banner and benchmark of multilateralism. China's activities within and policies toward the UN mirrored its policy toward IO's and multilateral diplomacy. As China ascended economically, it no longer criticized the US but supported it by fulfilling its obligations. China's financial contribution to the UN regular budget is an example of this development. China's share of the UN total annual budget was less than 1% of in 1995, and it increased to 5.15% in 2012, 7.9% in 2016, and 12.01% in 2019, next only to the US [5].

The PRC attitude towards UN peacekeeping (UNPK) operations is another telling story. Due to its direct military engagement with UNPK forces during the Korean War (1950-1953), the PRC found itself in a very awkward position on the UNPK missions after its seat was restored. As a permanent member of the of UNSC, China tried not to have anything to do with UNPK operations until the 36th UN general assembly in 1981 when it started to favor in principle peacekeeping operations. China began to pay its due to UNPK operations in 1982 and its share has been on the rise, remarkably so in the new century. China's share of UNPK budget in 2010 stood at only 3.95%, which increased to 10.2% in 2016, and further increased to 15.22% in 2019 [6], thus becoming the second largest financial contributor to UNPK operations.

China became a member of the UN Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations in 1988. In 2001, China established its peacekeeping office with its Defense Ministry, and participated in the Class-A Stand-by Arrangements Mechanism for the UNPK operations in 2002. In December 2013, China began to dispatch 395 organic security and peacekeeping troops to Mali. By August 2020, China has dispatched 40,000 military personnel to 25 UN peacekeeping missions [7], thus making it the largest troop and police contributor among the five permanent members of the UNSC.

> As China ascended economically, it no longer criticized the US but supported it by fulfilling its obligations. China's financial contribution to the UN regular budget is an example of it

Another example of China's proactive multilateral diplomacy is the UNSC. Among the five permanent members of the UNSC, China's exercise of veto is the lowest, but this situation seems to be changing. China's first veto was casted in 1965 by the ROC government and the PRC has exercised the veto power twice in 1972, twice in 1990s (1997 and 1999), twice in the first decade of the 21st century (2007 and 2008). Nonetheless, this number increased to six times (2011, 2012, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2017) in the last decade, all on the Syrian issue. This shows China no longer hesitated to exercise its veto power, indicating that a more confident China is more willing to exert its influence within the UN system.

Multi-faceted Multilateral Diplomacy

China’s proactive multilateral diplomacy is not confined to the UN. It is also seen in the WTO, the WHO, and other areas. China formally applied to restore its membership in GATT in 1986 and the review process took 15 years until China became the 143 member of the WTO in 2001. Once accessed to WTO, China has adhered to the principle of keeping a balance between rights and obligations while following the WTO rules to fulfill its obligations. Joining the WTO greatly accelerated China’s economic development.

However, the economic growth the WTO has brought to China and other developing countries led to criticism from some countries, especially the US. The WTO dispute settlement regime is at risk of paralysis as the vacancy of its appellate body members cannot be filled, certain members raised tariffs by abusing the security exception clause, and some members taking unilateral approaches in disregard of the WTO’s multilateral rules. China supported necessary reform of the WTO to enhance its authority and efficacy and put forward three basic principles on WTO reform. Firstly, the WTO reform shall preserve the core values of non-discrimination and openness. Secondly, it shall safeguard the development interests of developing members, which are entitled to special and differential treatment as compared with developed members. And, thirdly, it shall follow the practice of decision-making by consensus and rules should be made by the international community jointly [8].

> The inability of the WHO to coordinate its member states’ actions to limit the devastating COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the crisis it faces. US unilateralism under President Trump considerably exacerbated the crisis, while China increased its support to WHO through higher budget contributions

The inability of the WHO to coordinate its member states’ actions to limit the devastating COVID-19 pandemic has drawn attention to the crisis it faces. US unilateralism under President Trump considerably exacerbated the crisis, while China increased its support to WHO through higher budget contributions. Namely, China’s share of the organization’s annual budget has increased to 12.0058% in 2020 from 3.1892% in 2012. When the US suspended its due contribution to the WHO in 2020, China decided to contribute US$ 50 million in cash to support WTO.

On climate change issues, China has actively participated in the negotiation under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), such as the 3rd Meeting of the 13th Conference of the Parties of UNFCCC at Bali in 2007, the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009, the Cancun Conference in 2010, the Durban Conference in 2011, the Doha Conference in 2012, the Warsaw Conference in 2013, and the Paris Conference on Climate Change in 2015. In climate issues, it has acceded to more than

50 international treaties or conventions on environmental protections.

Divergent Multilateralism

The challenges that the WTO and WHO face show that the multilateral system which emerged from the ashes of two World Wars is in dire need of reform, given the sensitive status quo around major IOs. Though countries generally agree on the significance of multilateralism, major IOs have been mired into division and confrontation. Countries accuse each other of not following existing rules and norms, they differ on whether and how existing IOs should be reformed, on how multilateralism should be implemented, and on what norms should be based.

Considering multilateralism to be "in its DNA," the EU has been vigorously advocating for a multilateral rules-based international. The EU and China have reaffirmed "their commitment to multilateralism… with the United Nations (UN) at its core" and the "rules-based multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core" and agreed "to make more contributions in upholding multilateralism" [9].

The US government reversed course in US foreign policy from unilateralism to multilateralism after Joe Biden replaced Donald Trump as President. In the Asia Pacific area, the US spearheaded the (the US, Japan, Australia, and India) Quad Alliance for "a free, open rules-based order, rooted in international law to advance security and prosperity and counter threats to both in the Indo-Pacific and beyond" [10]. Across the Atlantic, the US is trying not only to reinforce G-7 and NATO but to form a new Democracies Ten (D-10) by inviting the leaders of Australia, India, South Africa, and South Korea to participate in the 2021 G-7 summit in Carbis Bay, Great Britain. The G7 Summit Communiqué also affirmed their goal to foster "strategic alignment and coordinated action among a group of like-minded, influential democracies to advance a rules-based democratic order" [11].

During a telephone conversation with US Secretary of State Blinken before the D-ten summit, China's top diplomat, Yang Jiechi, expressed China's disagreement with the US on international order. He said:

> "There is only one system and order in the world, which is the international system with the UN at the core and the international order underpinned by international law, instead of the so-called system and order preached by a small minority of countries."
>
> "There is only one set of rules, which are the basic norms of international relations governed by the purpose and principles of the UN Charter, instead of so-called rules formulated by a small minority of countries."

> “There is only one kind of multilateralism, which is based on the purpose and principles of the UN Charter as well as international law, and in line with that, countries treat each other as equals for win-win cooperation.”
>
> Cao Desheng, “Chinese diplomat urges US to get ties back on right track”, China Daily, 12 June 2021.

The conversation clearly demonstrated the divergence between China and the US about multilateralism. First of all they differ on the values on which it should be based. It is a consensus that multilateralism is built around a distinct set of values and aspirations. The US emphasized that common values are based on human rights, democracy, free markets, open societies, and gender equality at the individual level, and sovereign equality of states and nonaggression between states at the system level.

China, on the other hand, emphasizes the principles of equality of all nations, non-aggression and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs which are enshrined in the UN Charter, while not discarding the values based on individual right. China spoke very highly of democracy but with a focus on the democratization of international relations, which means that international affairs should be addressed through extensive consultation rather than decided by one country or a few and each country should have a say on international affairs regardless of its size, power and wealth.

Secondly, they differ on the kind of IOs that underpin multilateralism. The US criticizes China as a revisionist country challenging the rules and norms of the international system, and considers that the existing IOs, such as the WTO, have been unfair, giving discriminative privileges to China. It intends to reinforce and build alliances of multilateralism with like-minded countries or small-group multilateralism, as the Quad arrangement and D-10 represented.

China considers, in turn, that the US is a revisionist country, which has been challenging the existing international system with the UN as its core and the UN charter as its basic norm. In China’s view, it is defending the existing world order with consistent policy: upholding the authority and status of the UN, committing to openness and inclusiveness instead of closeness and exclusion, opposing selective multilateralism [12]. China considers the so-called “value-based” “small-group multilateralism” to be “dangerous and destructive” as it demonstrated the old logic of alliance and containment and would only incite group confrontation [13].

Third, they differ on who should be the actors of multilateralism. This is not so salient as the first two differences, but it does showcase the different values that the U.S. and China support. While preferring “small-group multilateralism”, the US prefers multi-stakeholder arrangements, or a network of private actors, in which governments remain nonetheless

major players. China, while advocating for inclusiveness in multilateralism, prefers a state-centered approach with the central government playing a predominant role. Their differences are not completely exclusive and contradictory but they do differ in what the US and China prioritize.

> China considers the US to be a revisionist country, which has been challenging the existing international system. China sees itself as defending the existing world order with consistent policy: upholding the authority and status of the UN, committing to openness and inclusiveness instead of closeness and exclusion, opposing selective multilateralism

If the small group-multilateralism succeed, China would be excluded from those "value-based" IOs. This would return China to a position similar to its isolationism between 1949-1971. Under that circumstance, China depended upon other developing countries and rewarded them in exchange with staunch support by speaking on their behalf. Since the end of the Cold War, China has continuously gained support from other developing countries, including on human rights issues, on the international arena . China has reciprocated by standing with and speaking for other developing countries. Its UN policy insists that reforms shall accommodate the propositions and concerns of all UN members, "especially those of the developing countries"; the reform of the UNSC" should prioritize increasing the representation of developing countries" [14]. In the economic domain, China reinforced its aid to other developing members via multilateral organizations and insisted that the reform of WTO should safeguard the special and differential treatment for developing members. Pressure from the West will only make China more confrontational, thus making it further lean to towards developing countries.

Conclusion

What drove China's policy toward the international system and shaped China's multilateral diplomacy? Some argue that China's policy has been a result of calculated rational choice, others consider it a tactical adaptation process, still others hold that this is a learning process (genuinely internalizing multilateralism). Lampton's summary after reviewing these views aptly catches this process: "Beijing may initially be entering into encumbering international relationships based on tactical considerations, but that international involvement is a slippery slope… What starts out as tactical adaptation may slowly change into "learning" (permanent change). Adaptive learning may the most appropriate conceptualization" [15].

However, China's policy toward multilateralism has never been a result of unilateral efforts on the Chinese side. It has been a bilateral and interactive process. When China tried to change the world order through revolution, it not only failed in reaching this goal but it also

locked itself in a position that was economically backward and political isolated. When the world isolated China, it did not only deprive China of the opportunity to change but it also helped create a revolutionary enemy. When China changed its policy and external behavior, it not only changed its relations with the outside world but also created a favorable environment for sustained high economic growth. When the world began to embrace China, it has not only made it a strong power but also a responsible and constructive one.

The truth is that China's future has been so bound up with that of the world that the influence of China in the world and the influence of the world in China today are both unprecedented. China has been a vital component of the world and it has become an important member of the international system. China cannot realize its development while being isolated from the world and thus is committed to further opening up. Enhancing China's benign relations with the international system is not only an urgent task for Chinese foreign policy but also for the world, especially the Western world, which has a long desire to shape China's behaviors.

REFERENCES

1 — John Gerard Ruggie (1992): "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution", *International Organization*, 46 (3), p. 571.
2 — Kim, Samuel (1994): "China's International Organizational Behaviour". In: Thomas W. Robinson, David Shambaugh (eds.), *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 431.
3 — *Ibíd*.
4 — "Gongtong haiwei zhanhou guoji zhixu [Jointly Defending the Post WWII World order]", *People's Daily,* 15 April 2015.
5 — UN General Assembly document A/73/350/Add.1, December 24, 2018. Available online.
6 — Zhang Qingmin (2019): *Contemporary China's Diplomacy*, Beijing: China International Press, p.143.
7 — The State Council Information Office of the PRC (2020) *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations.*
8 — "Zhongguo tichu shimao zuzhi gaige de lichang [China puts forward its positions and proposals on WTO reform]", *People's Daily,* 24 November 2018, p. 6.
9 — "China-EU Summit Joint statement Brussels, 9 abril 2019. Available online.
10 — "Quad Leaders' Joint Statement: 'The Spirit of the Quad'". Available online.
11 — "Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué". Available online.
12 — Xi, Jinping, "Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity's Way Forward". Available online.
13 — "Xinhua Commentary: Guarding against all forms of pseudo multilateralism". Available online.
14 — "China's Position Paper on UN Reforms (full text)". Available online.
15 — Lampton, David (2001): *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform*, Stanford, Califòrnia: Stanford University Press, p. 34-35.



Zhang Qingmin

Zhang Qingmin is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Diplomacy, School of International Studies, Peking University. His teaches and does research on diplomatic studies and theory of foreign policy analysis with an empirical focus on China. He has published 7 books, including *U.S. Arms Sales Policy toward Taiwan: a Decision-Making Perspective*, *Contemporary China's Diplomacy*, and *Foreign Policy Analysis*; translated from English to Chinese *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House: A Personality Studies*, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, and *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World: Theories and Practice*. He has contributed many book chapters and articles to scholarly journals in both Chinese and English. With rich international experience of teaching, he has taught Chinese foreign policy related courses at more than 10 universities in four continents.