

Why China's Understanding of Multilateralism Matters for Europe

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How China conceives multilateralism and its engagement in multilateral organisations is key to establishing whether multilateralism provides China and the European Union (EU) with common ground vis-à-vis the most urgent global issues. Beijing holds that it does, since “China and Europe are two major forces for multilateralism”. The EU’s appreciation of the matter is more mixed: in 2019, it famously singled out China as a “systemic rival” – as well as a partner and an economic competitor – based on the argument that it promotes “alternative models of governance”.

At the root of the discrepancy between these two assessments lies China’s long-time stance on multilateralism, which de facto downplays the differences between its own understanding of multilateralism and the more demanding conception in Europe’s DNA. This attitude has led to a widespread perception of ambiguity on China’s part, exposing it to the criticism that it takes an instrumental and even malicious approach to multilateralism and international organisations. The fact that today China claims to be the champion of “true multilateralism” somehow adds to the original problem. Consequently, it increases the risk of misunderstandings about multilateralism’s role in China–EU relations in a changing global order. Since the price to be paid for persistent ambiguity may well be further disappointment and recrimination on both sides, reckoning with China’s understanding of multilateralism is crucial. It is then urgent to establish whether, and eventually in which domains, multilateralism can provide the EU and China with a common rationale and mode of engaging the international community in addressing significant challenges.

China’s “true multilateralism”

Multilateralism has been prominent in Beijing’s recent foreign policy discourse. 2021 saw the 50th anniversary of the People’s Republic of China’s United Nations (UN) membership and its permanent seat at the Security Council, and the concomitant 20th anniversary of its World Trade Organization (WTO) membership, two milestones in China’s relationship with international governmental organisations (IGOs) that embody multilateralism. The occasion provided the leadership with many opportunities to praise the country’s contribution over the years. However, the discourse, far from being purely celebrative, reflects various substantial reasons for the importance that the Chinese leadership

currently attaches to China's participation in multilateral endeavours. In the past, international organisations – famously portrayed as stages – were mainly seen as venues for making China's voice heard and to show that the country was playing by the rules to stave off the frictions that its rise might engender. More recently, China's participation in IGOs has been crucial in conveying its vision on numerous issues to the international community and signalling its recently achieved major country status, which typically comes with greater global responsibilities. Having overcome the “watching strategy” typical of the initial learning phase, China has become a proactive player. It created a multilateral development finance institution, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which now has over 100 approved members. It steered the process that led to the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a vast free trade agreement that entered into force on 1 January 2022. Beijing's growing multilateral engagement is based on an understanding of this organisational form that stands out clearly in the numerous speeches President Xi Jinping and Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi have devoted to the prospects of international cooperation over the past couple of years.

China's leadership, as mentioned, has put forward a conception of what it views as “true multilateralism”, as opposed to “fake” or “pseudo-multilateralism”. In support of this claim, it first and foremost asserts that such a conception recognises the centrality of the UN and consequently rules out the unilateralism that has been a common practice of the powerful within the international system. The second feature of “true multilateralism” can be inferred by looking at what – in Beijing's view – characterises “fake multilateralism”: it is a “pretext” to “form exclusive blocks” or “to divide the world along ideological lines”. “True multilateralism”, on the contrary, is inclusive, not ideological, or selective, since it is the diversity of the international community that “will unleash the great power of multilateralism”.

Given that multilateralism is a method to create and uphold a rules-based order through the workings of institutions, the issue of rules must be dealt with. China's leadership does so in line with its sensitivity to sovereign independence. “[T]here is but one set of rules in the world, i.e. the basic norms of international relations underpinned by the UN Charter,” Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently said in an interview with the Xinhua news agency, contrasting these fundamental norms with “false” or “gang” rules. Elsewhere he had been even more explicit: “The crux of the matter is: What kind of “rules” are being talked about? If they mean the UN Charter and international law, repetitious references to the “rules” sound rather redundant. If they only mean rules set by several or a group of countries, that would amount to imposing the will of the minority on the majority. That is not true multilateralism.”

This understanding of legitimate international rules explains why most observers underscore the precedence of practice over rules in the Chinese conception of multilateralism. In this

respect, President Xi has been clear: “Multilateralism is about having international affairs addressed through consultation and the future of the world decided by everyone working together.” Consensus and accommodation are the basis of interstate coordination. Praising “voluntarism, consensus-building, flexibility, pragmatism and incremental progress” in his address to the APEC Economic Leaders' meeting in November 2020, President Xi endorsed the “approach of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits”. Two last features mentioned while considering the fundamental ingredients of multilateral endeavours are “a commitment of major countries to lead by example” and the production of public goods to meet the people's expectations.

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In a nutshell, Beijing's approach to multilateralism is meant to reflect the fundamental principles enshrined in the UN Charter: sovereign equality and self-determination, non-interference in states' domestic affairs, and the peaceful settlement of disputes (although the Chinese position concerning the war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine has exposed a conspi-

cuous double standard). For this reason, cooperation cannot be other than a consensus-building process leading to shared solutions when interests coincide or voluntary accommodation occurs. Rule-making is thus limited to areas where consensus can be reached, maybe thanks to rules aptly crafted so that they do not impinge significantly upon states' sovereign autonomy.

If robust global governance were the goal, this understanding of multilateralism could be problematic. Instead, it is aimed at supporting a “world order” where interstate arrangements are expected to provide only the degree of stability and coordination that is necessary to allow domestic political entities to thrive while self-governing. China's preferred conception of order is epitomised by its extensive recourse to consultation “platforms”, also referred to as “mechanisms” to mark their difference from fully fledged organisations. To reach out to countries in various world regions, Beijing opted for thinly institutionalised arrangements like the Central and Eastern Europe 16+1 mechanism (2012), the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF, 2004) and the long-established Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, 2000). Far from being prompted to stick to multilateralism, within such platforms and independently of them, Beijing continues to pursue a foreign policy in which bilateralism plays a significant role. After all, connecting with potential partners

one by one is how China has undertaken to develop the Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi's signature project. From a European perspective, however, to address present challenges a more demanding form of cooperation is needed than the multilateralism based on non-binding agreements and consensus that China favours.

Multilateralism and the rules-based order

That multilateralism can be conceived in different ways is not intuitive. Its nominal definition, after all, points to the number of countries involved: a cooperative endeavour is multilateral if it includes more than two parties. However, by scrutinising the relations that develop within this sort of framework, scholars have concluded that "high-performing" multilateralism displays features that relate to the quality of relationship between the countries involved rather than their number. In other words, China's platforms, mostly intended to facilitate bilateral relations, and the EU, itself the outcome of a multilateral process, can only be understood by referring to different conceptions of multilateralism.

The more demanding – and productive – "qualitative multilateralism" is characterised by three features. The first is general rules reflecting shared principles. The second is the perceived indivisibility of the group involved, stemming from the recognition that the problem to be addressed (e.g. climate change) or the opportunity to be seized (e.g. reciprocity in international trade) is indivisible. The third feature is diffuse reciprocity, meaning that players do not need individual or immediate rewards to cooperate. The we-feeling that stems from indivisibility fosters trusting relations, so that collective long-term gains are a sufficient motive for embarking on a multilateral endeavour. This sort of "expanded solidarity" is needed, for example, to effectively tackle climate change since those who will suffer most from the impact of global warming are the future generations that cannot reciprocate.

How does "qualitative multilateralism" work? And why does it perform better than the nominal variant? Let us look at its three features in action. By following the (general) rules, players develop mutual expectations that they will stick to their word rather than try to reap individual benefits. Consequently, they can curb the pressure to conduct their calculations in terms of narrow national interests – a recipe for disaster in an interdependent world plagued by decades of negative externalities resulting from sovereignty-led decision-making. Complying with the rules thus fosters the group indivisibility that motivates the group itself to socially construct new problems as indivisible. For example, it pushed the EU to swiftly frame health and energy as shared problems in the wake of, respectively, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war waged by the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Even if it is seldom made explicit, this sort of multilateralism intuitively entails some degree of accountability, and this is why the staunchest sovereignty supporters stick to the nominal conception. It is clear that China's "true multilateralism" differs from qualitative multilateralism (which, however, is not equated in its discourse to false or fake multilateralism).

Qualitative multilateralism is transformational, while China's more conservative conception settles for coordination.

Beijing's understanding downplays the role of rules emphasising practices such as consultation and accommodation, to preserve sovereignty. As far as indivisibility is concerned, the concept of "community with a shared future for mankind" could hint at a comparable solidarity. For multilateralism to go beyond the coordination of national policies, though, it is necessary that leaderships embrace indivisibility and act responsibly on this basis. Given the dramatic diversity of conditions that the global population experiences – as the Chinese leadership often underscores – humankind could take a long time to develop a sense of shared destiny, and in fact may never do so. Lastly, in Beijing's understanding political trust does not originate from accountability but is, rather, conceived as an outcome of "strategic communication". In the end, "qualitative multilateralism" is in principle transformational, while China's more conservative conception settles for coordination.

Supporters of "qualitative multilateralism" have singled out China's adoption of a less demanding form of multilateralism in disguise as instrumental to gaining legitimacy for the country's conduct. After all, multilateralism has been equated to a constitutional norm in the current rules-based order. In this view, the AIIB is identified as a flagship project showing that Beijing can promote an IGO akin to established ones, with adherence to international law at its very core. Recently, China's multilateralism, intended as proactive participation in multilateral organisations, has also been deemed malicious, since it uses international venues to circulate its own understandings of key concepts such as human rights, development and the rule of law, while not supporting the form of principled multilateralism they embody. Even more controversial is China's claim that its own multilateralism is "true multilateralism". Such a claim can be taken as an attempt to make it the norm (literally, what should be considered normal) in international relations, providing fellow states with an alternative model of governance to the rules-based order. Once the ambiguity that stems from the common usage of the term "multilateralism" is dispelled, the discrepancy in the EU's and China's assessments of the role it can play in their relations is easier to explain. At issue is, in fact, the future of the order.

Multilateralism: common ground or further cause of disaffection?

Given the stakes, the difference in their respective understandings of multilateralism could quickly become a further cause of disaffection in the EU–China relationship. However, a modest and yet relevant goal that China and the EU apparently share at present is working to create a rationale for sustained dialogue on the role and possible achievements

of multilateralism. The goal is to avoid a full-blown, bloc-type fragmentation of the international system, sparking existential competition between groups that would imperil economic relations no less than diplomatic ones. A critical uncertainty in this regard is represented by the system-wide long-term consequences of the war Russia has waged against Ukraine, since they may end up tearing apart the fabric of rules-based interstate relations past the point of no return.

In recent troubled years, however, Beijing has identified as a priority the prevention of a new Cold War or a full-blown zero-sum competition in world politics. China's claim that multilateralism is "false" or "fake" when used as a pretext for "enthusiastically putting together exclusive small circles or blocs that polarize the world" has to be understood in this context. Nonetheless, countering this unwelcome development gives Beijing one more reason to stay true to its preferred inclusive – not ideological, or selective – understanding of multilateralism. Platforms or mechanisms of the kind China has launched can convene countries that are not only diverse in many respects but whose loyalties differ. The 16+1 mechanism includes both EU and NATO members. The RCEP includes Australia and New Zealand, which belong, together with the US, Canada and the UK, to the Five Eyes, a group with surveillance and intelligence purposes. This turnout would be impossible if the arrangements required participants to subscribe to general principles beyond goodwill or openness. We could then conclude that China's understanding of multilateralism today allows its leadership to keep different groups knitted together, albeit loosely. A prominent Chinese scholar, Yan Xuetong, has recently put it as follows:

"As long as individual states remain members of clubs on both sides of the [China–US] divide, it will not be in their interest to throw in their lot with one side only. This bipolar configuration will cause some tension, but on the whole, it will be far

less dangerous than all-out, Cold War-style competition."

China, today, opts for multilateralism to make interstate relations more complex and divisions between groups less clear-cut, in addition to strengthening its own connective power. This is a good reason to openly claim multilateralism's crucial relevance, even if Beijing may appear inconsistent by putting so much emphasis on a relatively undemanding form of it, whose effectiveness seems to be limited even by the modest aims it is meant to serve. The EU, which shares with China a concern that the international system may fragment, has many good reasons to stand firm behind its own conception of multilateralism. Supporting the rules-based order is the principal means to ensure that governance provides strong enough reasons for fellow countries to carry on their cooperative endeavours. While the EU is ready to learn "the language of power" if forced to do so, its priority is, however, to invest in a working international system where tools other than raw power can be effective. A conversation with China on the different understandings of multilateralism and their respective roles in international policymaking could be part of such an investment.

Multilateralism can provide the EU and China with a rationale and a mode of engaging each other and the whole international community in addressing shared challenges. However, ambiguity should be overcome through responsible dialogue. The preservation and renovation of a rules-based order deserve a clear-eyed approach to diversity. What happens when the basic rules of international relations are disregarded is, unfortunately, being demonstrated before our very eyes.

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