

January 26. 2022 – Nele Noesselt

Debates on Multilateralism in the Shadow of World Order Controversies – Visions of Global Multilateralism Could Overwrite the Concept of Multipolarity

In the global competition for discursive and rule-making power, multilateralism is becoming a focus not only of German and American, but also of Chinese foreign policy. In doing so, China is cleverly using key building blocks of existing debates on “democratic” or “multilateral” world orders to claim the label of “true multilateralism” for itself. Recognizing the multilayered attributions of meaning and the changing interpretations of the concept of multilateralism thus requires close observation of Chinese discourses surrounding international order. Otherwise, Nele Noesselt argues, transatlantic initiatives to maintain a liberal world order run the risk of recognizing alternative ideas of order too late - and thus of failing to respond adequately to signs of fragmentation and erosion within existing global multilateral institutions.

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In recent years the concept of multilateralism has become a coveted object in strategic foreign policy statements, especially by those states that see themselves as co-creators of the global order. In these strategic role and position articulations, multilateralism is not solely understood in structural terms as a format of interactions between multiple actors. Rather multilateral negotiation formats and institutions are imagined as rule- and norm-based networks. Those who participate must accept the *acquis communautaire*. However, actors who create new multilateral formats or reform existing institutions have opportunities for rule-making and rule interpretation. While the People’s Republic of China (PRC) initially focused on bilateral formats, there has been an increased interest in cooperation with regional multilateral formats, such as ASEAN or the regional organizations in Latin America (UNASUR/PROSUR, CELAC) since the mid-1990s. Under Xi Jinping, new multilateral

institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)ⁱ and the New Development Bank (NDB)ⁱⁱ of the BRICSⁱⁱⁱ have been initiated. The PRC acts increasingly self-confident on the international stage and is visibly aware of its increased economic and monetary power, converting this power into voice. Neither China's efforts of reforming the United Nations (UN) nor redistributing voting rights in the Bretton Woods organizations (IMF, World Bank) or initiating new banks (AIIB, NDB) represent an alternative order diametrically opposed to the existing institutional structure.^{iv} Beijing is concerned with the symbolic recognition of being an equal partner and its right to participate in the official shaping of the international system. Moreover, PRC is opposing unipolar orders – associated with the global leadership role of the US.

In 2021 the Chinese journal *Guoji Zhanwang* 国际展望 (*Global Outlook*) published a summary of an inner-Chinese roundtable on models of world order in the 21st century.^v This overview documented the – from the Chinese perspective – distorted global role ascriptions of the PRC by the US and contrasted these with Chinese role articulations. It further noted that the world was currently in a phase of reorganization and realignment. The ideas formulated in these contemplations on visions of world order did not operate primarily with terms from pre-modern Chinese state philosophy or Maoist formulas of world order (Intermediate Zone theory, Three Worlds theory) but concentrated on multilateralism. This focus may seem surprising at first glance. After all, the magic formula for which Beijing had tried to win comrades-in-arms had initially been the vision of a multipolar world. Turning this vision into reality was anchored as a central goal in strategic partnership declarations – e.g., with Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union^{vi}. In the summary of the 2021 roundtable discussion, there are 36 references to the concept of multilateralism but not a single mention of the term multipolarity.

ⁱ Ren, Xiao (2016), China as an institution-builder: the case of the AIIB, *The Pacific Review*, 29:3, 435-442.

ⁱⁱ Cooper, Andrew F. (2017), The BRICS' New Development Bank: Shifting from Material Leverage to Innovative Capacity, *Global Policy*, 8, 275-284.

ⁱⁱⁱ BRICS = Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa

^{iv} Ferdinand, Peter/Wang, Jue (2013), China and the IMF: from mimicry towards pragmatic international institutional pluralism, *International Affairs*, 89:4, 895-910.

^v Zhou, Guiyin et al. (2021), 中国与国际秩序笔谈：观念与战略 (China and International Order: Visions and Strategies), *国际展望* (*Global Outlook*), 1, 16-47.

^{vi} Turner, Susan (2009), Russia, China and a Multipolar Order: The Danger of the Undefined, *Asian Perspective*, 33:1, 159-84.

Over the past decades, the PRC has repeatedly criticized the unipolar concentration of power in the hands of the United States, and it has coined alternative models of order and rule. These were usually presented in official speeches at key anniversaries of the UN. With the "Harmonious World" (和谐世界), the PRC criticized the global governance concepts of the "West" and presented a model of global peace and development; with the "Peaceful Rise" (和平崛起), it countered neorealist analyses of China that predicted an inevitable conflict between the old power centers and the rising PRC.^{vii} However these "Chinese" concepts lacked pulling power and were widely classified as mere strategic narratives of Chinese foreign policy, not as potentially universal ideas of world order.^{viii} The Chinese leadership and its advisory circles have followed these adverse reactions of foreign countries. Under the fifth generation of leadership, concepts supposedly related to pre-modern Chinese state philosophy – primarily directed at a Chinese audience to whom they suggested a historical-cultural continuity of Chinese foreign policy^{ix} – increasingly were replaced by terms used in "international" policy debates. These core terms are not adopted uncritically but instead modified and filled with new content. Often this happens unnoticeable – although there is a "Chinese" definition of the term, this is not verbalized when used in foreign policy statements. This transition to "universal" terms comes at the end of a long learning process, which Alastair Iain Johnston, in his study on China's role behavior in international organizations from 1980 to 2000, describes as a gradual process. Johnston illustrates here how Beijing has slowly evolved from a rather passive observer to an active player.^x

The banking and financial crisis in the US and parts of the eurozone were used by China as an opportunity to declare the "Western" model of capitalism a failure.^{xi} This criticism was not justified ideologically but was presented as fact-based reality. In other areas, too, the Chinese side attested a contradiction between theory and lived practice to the "West," personified by the United States. For example, the PRC

^{vii} Noesselt, Nele (2010), *Alternative Weltordnungsmodelle? IB-Diskurse in China*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
^{viii} Glaser, Bonnie S./Medeiros Evan S. (2007), *The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of 'Peaceful Rise'*, *The China Quarterly*, 190, 291–310.
^{ix} Yan, Xuetong (2011), *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
^x Johnston, Alastair Iain (2008), *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
^{xi} Wang, Hongying/Rosenau, James N (2009), *China and Global Governance*, *Asian Perspective*, 33:3, 5-39.

repeatedly denounced that the noble ideal of democracy had not yet been applied to international relations and that instead hegemonic power structures would characterize world politics. The most recent subject of this war of ideas and meanings is the concept of multilateralism. Beijing uses the phrase "true multilateralism" (真正的多边主义) to criticize US global politics and postulate that the US by calling the order multilateral and rules-based is only trying to hide its particular power interests. The PRC's models of world order, in contrast, are committed to the basic idea of inclusive, equal multilateralism.

The Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi not only used the phrase "true multilateralism" in his keynotes at conferences and workshops at Chinese universities and think tanks^{xii} but also in his statements during the Chinese chairmanship of the UN Security Council in 2020.^{xiii} He bluntly contrasted Chinese theory and realpolitik in multilateral cooperation contexts with the lived "unilateral bullying" of other actors – without directly naming the United States.

The Struggle for Discursive and Rule-Making Power in the 21st Century

Since the US presidential elections in November 2020 and the inauguration of the Biden administration, the symbolic competition between Washington and Beijing to interpret and shape the world has increased. The return of the US to multilateral agreements such as the Paris Protocol and the commitment to NATO is accompanied by the credo that the current task is to stabilize the foundations of the liberal, rule-based world order, which has been partially shaken (*building back a better world*). In contrast to Trump's strategy of direct bilateral confrontation with the PRC, Biden is counting on multilateral alliances with liberal democracies. Chinese commentators classify this tendency as "selective" multilateralism.^{xiv} They emphasize that, as QUAD for instance illustrates, the US is now operating with exclusive small-scale networks in its foreign and security policy, far from the basic principles of open, global multilateralism. At the (virtual) World Economic Forum in

^{xii} [Xinhua \(2021\), Wang urges countries to practice real multilateralism, July 3.](#)

^{xiii} [China Daily \(2021\), Wang acclaims power of multilateralism \(by Zhang Minlu\), May 10.](#)

^{xiv} [Global Times \(2021\), Doubtful US will embrace real multilateralism, January 26.](#)

Davos in January 2021, Xi^{xv} defined multilateralism as cooperative consultations (on an equal footing). He formally rejected the decoupling envisioned by the US and highlighted an open, multilateral world trade system coordinated by the G20 (i.e., not by the G7). Yang Jiechi cited this in his blazing speech on global multilateralism connecting it to the community of common destiny (人类命运共同体),^{xvi} which is a Chinese concept on the theory and practice of global governance in the 21st century as coined by Xi Jinping. The brief history of multilateralism that Yang outlines exemplifies the selective reinterpretation from a Chinese perspective: he equates the beginning of modern multilateralism with the founding of the UN but illustrates it as a fluid, transformative concept with cross-references to the Chinese model of a multipolar world order.

The Chinese critique of multilateralism also responds to the (neorealist) scenario of an undermining of the liberal, multilateral, rule-based order by autocracies such as the PRC (or Russia). The PRC defines itself as the world's only proper people's democracy and sharply rejects any criticism of its political regime. Publishing a Chinese white paper in December 2021 on the concept of democracy – titled "China: Democracy That Works"^{xvii} – the PRC actively counters the Western liberal concept of electoral democracy and presents the (Chinese) ideal of a functioning, procedural democracy - described as a "whole-process people's democracy." In another statement, also published in December 2021, the Chinese side contrasts this ideal(ized) image of the PRC's democratic practice with the negative image of US democracy.^{xviii} By classifying US governance practices as anti-democratic, China denies the narrative of Beijing challenging the liberal-democratic US-centered order and calls any attempt by the US and its allies of exporting their "democracy" model illegitimate.

More than three decades after the Cold War has ended, the global political debate seems to – once again – think in terms of old bloc patterns and system antagonisms. States such as the PRC and Russia denounce the Western democracies' conception

^{xv} [Xi, Jinping \(2021\), Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity's Way Forward \(Special Address by H.E. Xi Jinping at the World Economic Forum Virtual Event of the Davos\), Agenda.](#)

^{xvi} [China Daily \(2021\), Firmly Uphold and Practice Multilateralism and Build a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.](#)

^{xvii} [State Council of the PRC \(2021\), China: Democracy That Works, December 4.](#)

^{xviii} [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC \(2021\), The State of Democracy in the United States, December 5.](#)

of "multilateralism" as forming exclusive, hermetically closed circles. The sanctioning of Russia resulting from the Crimean crisis and the following return to the G7 format^{xix} is interpreted as a strategic move by the Western industrialized nations to shape the rules of world trade according to their own distinct interests and desires. The PRC, the world's second-largest economic power, relies on G20 multilateralism as a counterweight.^{xx} This forum does not allow all the states of the world to have their say, but it at least enables the leading economic powers of the Global South to take part in negotiations. Nevertheless, a shift in Beijing's foreign diplomacy became apparent during the global pandemic. Whether this was due to China's measures to contain COVID-19 and related travel restrictions or if it marks a general turnaround in Chinese foreign policy remains to be seen. The Chinese president (like his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin) did not travel to the 2021 G20 summit in Rome (October 2021), nor did he attend the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), held in Glasgow from October 31 to November 12, 2021. Xi attended the G20 meeting via video, emphasizing the principle of "true multilateralism" and stressing that the G20 should adhere to the basic principle of an open, multilateral world trading system.^{xxi} That the (Chinese) notion of "true multilateralism" is mentioned in connection with Xi Jinping's slogan of the "community of shared destiny for humanity" seems to indicate that both concepts somehow belong to a *Chinese* blueprint for reforming the existing world order.

A written statement by the Chinese president was published on the COP26 conference website. It contains a short passage that the global climate goals could only be achieved through "multilateral consensus."^{xxii} While this statement refers to China's new environmental and climate protection attempts, it does not primarily operate with Chinese world order terminology. It emphasizes the complementarity between Chinese reform policies and global targets. However, the core consensus published by the Chinese delegation at COP26 was a joint, i.e., bilateral, statement by the US and China on climate protection.^{xxiii}

^{xix} In 1998, the seven leading economies had officially admitted Russia to their ranks, so by 2014 meetings had taken place in a G8 format.

^{xx} Kirton, John J. (2016), *China's G20 Leadership*. London; New York: Routledge.

^{xxi} Xinhua (2021), Full text: Remarks by Xi Jinping at Session I of the 16th G20 Leaders' Summit, October 30.

^{xxii} The Document is available (in English and Chinese) online:

https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/CHINA_cop26cmp16cma3_HLS-WLS-cn.pdf.

^{xxiii} US Department of State (2021), US-China Joint Glasgow Declaration on Enhancing Climate Action in the 2020s.

Climate protection as well as nuclear security are two key issues on which, as China analyst and IB researcher Thomas Christensen emphasizes,^{xxiv} Washington can't avoid dealing with Beijing - regardless of any declarations of failure, and thus discontinuation, of the US engagement strategy. However, one will not always succeed in making binding commitments with Beijing. In early 2022, for example, all five UN veto powers stressed that they would adhere to the basic principles of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). At the same time the PRC announced that it would continue to modernize its nuclear weapons.^{xxv} Moreover including the PRC in new arms control treaties is anything but simple.

Despite all efforts to involve the PRC (often bilaterally) – even after the declared failure of the US engagement policy – skepticism remains high among the US and its democratic partners as to what extent Beijing might attempt to anchor "Chinese" principles globally via multilateral formats. The founding of the "Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations" in 2021, to which 19 mostly non-democratic states belong, including the PRC, Russia, and North Korea, especially caused concerns. As early as 1971, China's permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was taken away from the Republic of China and transferred to the PRC. In its position papers, the PRC repeatedly emphasizes the central importance of the UN in resolving global political issues. The PRC actively participates in UN committees and working groups – such as the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the Human Rights Council. Given the ongoing disputes in the South China Sea and controversies on Chinese human rights policies at home, China-critical observers warn of a gradual embedding of Chinese ordering principles in UN work and an undermining of universal human rights going unnoticed. China does not question the UN's *raison d'être* but calls for generally reforming the international institutional order and for strengthening the voice of the states of the so-called Global South. As early as the Mao era, the PRC had positioned itself to advocate these states' interests by declaring the Chinese Three Worlds theory. The concept of South-South cooperation as well as new alliances in defense of the UN Charter and "true multilateralism" symbolically tie in with this claim. It stands by the strategy of not operating with alternative concepts of order but redefining the

^{xxiv} [Christensen, Thomas \(2021\), US-China Relations in a Post-Covid-19 World \(conversation with Jeenho Hahm\), October 2021.](#)

^{xxv} [China Daily \(2022\), Ministry dismisses claims of nuclear capabilities, January 5.](#)

content of established key concepts (as outlined above). Or, according to the Chinese narrative, to preserve the original content of these concepts and bring the world – sailing under the false flag of multilateralism – back on course.

Transatlantic Consensus in a Fragmented World?

The US's transatlantic partners are likewise responding to the perceived challenge posed by the PRC's increased global presence: the coalition agreement of the so-called German "traffic light" coalition promised to strengthen multilateralism, with a particular reference to global coordination via the WTO and the UN. Here the declared goal is to focus on environmental and social standards jointly (instead of unilaterally) within the framework of the transatlantic partnership. The principle of multilateral cooperation is especially emphasized when it comes to global climate protection policies (keywords: Agenda 2030, Paris Agreement); the challenges to the multilateral, rule-based order by autocracies, which the coalition partners plan to counter with the Alliance of Democracies and the Alliance for Multilateralism, is viewed with concern. The principle of multilateralism is used in this statement in two connotations. On the one hand, it stands for negotiation and dialogue formats involving more than two actors – such as the G7 or the G20. On the other hand, it is linked to liberal-democratic governance principles and regime types. With regard to the PRC, increased systemic rivalry seems to be the widely-shared forecast, although the official coalition agreement formally attributes China a threefold role identity as "partner, competitor, rival" (in line with the EU's current China strategy). While emphasizing that cooperation formats should be maintained, the joint paper of the "traffic light" coalition also stresses that transatlantic coordination facing China is necessary and that strategic dependencies (on China) should be reduced.^{xxvi}

This also includes areas such as the Internet and big data. While fragmentation tendencies are emerging worldwide at the regional level (keyword "overlapping regionalism"), Beijing focuses on cross-border standardization, not least regarding its Belt and Road Initiative. This concerns the standardization of the transcontinental

^{xxvi} The document is available online:

<https://www.tagesspiegel.de/downloads/27829944/1/koalitionsvertrag-ampel-2021-2025.pdf>.

transport infrastructure and the setting of global standards along the "digital" Belt and Road Initiative proclaimed by China. By the 2030s, the PRC plans to become the world's Artificial Intelligence (AI) innovation center.^{xxvii} Smart city models and AI-based solutions "made in China" could then be considered the binding standard worldwide – which explains why the EU is not only concerned about questions of ethical standardization of the Internet and AI but has likewise set up new commissions on the foreign and geopolitical dimensions of AI. Corresponding standards in "ethical AI" are being reviewed in Germany.

In the 21st century the old antagonism between competing economic systems of the Cold War has been replaced by the competition for global supremacy between states with varying models of capitalism. The new rivalry is also about securing spheres of influence by establishing the core elements of one's model as a global guideline. Beijing does not officially invoke to re-establish an "old" order with China as the gravitational center – imagined as the philosophically rediscovered tianxia 天下 as a counter-model to "Western" conceptions of world order^{xxviii} – but rather dissects and re-codes central bricks of "Western" debates on order. Henceforth, identifying these "Chinese" ideas of order within existing concepts will require, even more than before, an intensive, context-sensitive engagement with original Chinese statements and the precise awareness of the discourses conducted in China on these concepts.

^{xxvii} [国务院关于印发新一代人工智能发展规划的通知.](#)

^{xxviii} 赵汀阳 (2005), 天下体系: 世界制度哲学导论. 江苏教育出版社.