

# China and Global Governance: Opportunistic Multilateralism

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## Abstract

US policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC) has come under increasing attack in Washington, as a growing chorus of analysts paints the PRC as a revisionist power seeking to undercut existing multilateral institutions. We observe, however, that China's approach to multilateralism varies across different issue areas, and we argue and show that China's approach differs depending on the strategic landscape of any given context. We conclude that it is thus a mistake to view China through a single lens as either a 'revisionist' or a 'status-quo' power.

Nearly a decade and a half has passed since Robert Zoellick, then Deputy Secretary of State, famously called on China to become a 'responsible stakeholder' in the international system. Responsible stakeholders, Zoellick argued, 'recognize that the international system sustains their peaceful prosperity, so they work to sustain that system' (Zoellick, 2005). His speech encapsulated post-Cold War US policy toward China, where American leaders believed, or hoped, that as China became more integrated into existing international regimes it would buy into the system and actively help to maintain it.

In Washington today, however, this approach is under attack. To an increasing degree, the American foreign policy community has concluded that China seeks to supplant the United States as the prime mover of global multilateralism, to route-around the existing order, or even to dispense with multilateralism altogether and to establish instead a China-centric hierarchy in Asia (Barma et al., 2014; Mastro, 2019).

These fears are grounded in a rising awareness that China's government has some goals that run counter to American interests and to liberal norms more broadly. China has shown a willingness to defy accepted international norms in its human rights record, its treatment of religious and ethnic minorities, and the regulation of the internet (Freedom House, 2018; Millward, 2016; U.S. Department of State, 2015). China's recent territorial moves in the South China Sea and along its border with India, as well as its rhetoric over the status of Taiwan, show that China has at times been willing to challenge the status quo (Brown, 2018; Buckley and Horton, 2019; Watkins, 2015).

The reality that Beijing is willing to defy norms that have become well-accepted in the West and challenge US interests, especially in the context of China's dramatic rise as an

economic and military power, has led to a growing fear in Washington that America's post-Cold War approach to China has failed (Pence, 2019) as more analysts debate whether the whole previous approach of 'engagement' to China was mistaken from the outset (Friedberg, 2018; Johnston, 2019).

## Asking the right questions

It is important to recognize, however, that even though Beijing has many goals that conflict with Washington's, China still has a substantial stake in the continued functioning of international regimes. China, for instance, is deeply exposed to the risks of climate change, its development strategy depends on continued access to foreign markets, and it sees a strong security interest in ensuring that regional powers like Japan and South Korea continue to forgo producing their own nuclear weapons. Climate change, trade, and nuclear nonproliferation are just three of the many issues that are important to Beijing but that can only realistically be addressed through effective multilateralism.

To be sure, Chinese actions sometimes resemble the sort of 'irresponsible' behavior that Zoellick hoped to dissuade Beijing from pursuing. Beijing at times is content to free ride on the efforts of other countries to advance multilateral cooperation on particular issues. China, for instance, was reluctant to work hard to advance Doha Round negotiations in the World Trade Organization (WTO), and it has generally been content to let other powers take the lead in addressing nuclear proliferation (Lim and Wang, 2010, Pang and Lye, 2013). In other cases, Beijing has been willing to play hardball to alter international regimes in ways that advance its particular interests. China was generally viewed, for example, as the key obstacle to a climate accord at the

2009 Copenhagen conference, as Beijing sought to protect a set of Chinese priorities even at the cost of scuttling progress on a global accord (Lynas, 2009).

At other times, however, China has actively worked to build and sustain multilateral cooperation. Zoellick, in his speech, credited China with playing a constructive role on the North Korean nuclear issue by organizing and leading the Six-Party Talks (see also Medeiros, 2007). More recently, after the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, China has shown a greater willingness to advance international cooperation on climate, including playing a key role in facilitating the 2015 Paris Agreement (Schreurs, 2017).

Given this variation in Chinese behavior, asking whether China is becoming a 'responsible stakeholder', or whether it seeks to undermine the US-led international order, is asking the wrong question. Rather than asking *whether* China values multilateralism generally, we should instead try to understand *how* China approaches multilateralism, and *when* it is willing to advance multilateral cooperative efforts. We argue that China uses multilateralism strategically. That is, whether China engages constructively in support of multilateral efforts, plays hardball, or simply sits on the sidelines depends on Beijing's assessment of which of these strategies is most likely to advance Chinese interests.

A varied and strategic approach to multilateralism is not unique to China. Although the United States has helped to build and sustain a range of multilateral regimes, Washington also plays hardball or sits on the sidelines when doing so advances its interests (or, at least, how its leaders perceive those interests). The US has of course threatened to exit international climate change regimes, and has several times done so, and the US has threatened to exit UNESCO, exited, demanded reforms, and exited again (Borger, 2001, Nauert, 2017). The Trump administration's use of threats to exit multilateral regimes as a lever to demand changes to the workings of those regimes – such as NATO, NAFTA, and the Universal Postal Union (Cumming-Bruce, 2019) – is not an aberration.

In other words, just as analysts should not treat China's approach to multilateralism as a constant feature of the country's general disposition (and thus, for instance, labeling China either a 'status-quo' state or a 'revisionist' state), they should also avoid overlooking the similarities between China's approach and the approach of other great powers before it, including the United States.

Understanding China's strategic motivations is vitally important for American decision-makers, who may otherwise fall into the trap of observing Chinese efforts to revise *some* international regimes and mistakenly concluding that China is therefore *generally* revisionist or insincere in its commitments to *other* regimes. China, like the United States, needs functional global multilateralism, and like the United States, it is likely to engage multilateral regimes issue-by-issue in ways that recognize those needs.

### China's strategic approach to multilateralism

Due to Beijing's growing but still limited resources and clout, we expect that China will tend to be selective about

deep engagement with multilateralism, after making practical calculations by issue area. Our previous examples show that China's approach varies widely by issue area. China sometimes sits on the sidelines of multilateral efforts at cooperation, or even holds up cooperation in order to extort a more favorable bargain for itself, but at other times China has been willing to play a leadership role, sacrificing its other objectives for the sake of general agreement.

How, then, does Beijing choose among these different approaches? While numerous factors undoubtedly drive Chinese behavior in any given context, in our recent book we highlight two broad features of China's strategic environment tend to influence China's behavior across a range of different issue areas (Kastner et al., 2019).

First, how strong are China's outside options? That is, if China chooses not to contribute to cooperative efforts in some issue area, what is its government's expectation about whether other powers, like the US, will solve the problem in a way that suits Chinese interests? While China's government is not always transparent about how it assesses its outside options, we can learn quite a bit about these assessments from public statements and scholarly writings about sensitive issues. We can also draw inferences based on how Chinese leaders respond to changes in the international environment. China's outside options, in a particular issue area, are strong to the degree that China expects favorable outcomes even if it does relatively little.

Second, to what extent do other powers, like the United States, view China's active participation as crucial to successful cooperation in some issue area? In other words, how indispensable is China?

China is most likely to invest in building effective international cooperation when its outside options are weak. In such circumstances, leaders in Beijing will recognize that sitting on the sidelines will either result in a problem that Beijing cares about going unresolved, or being resolved in a way that undercuts Chinese interests. China sometimes invests in cooperation not primarily because it strives to be seen as 'responsible', but rather because it fears that Chinese interests will be undercut if it allows other powers to deal with the issue.

It is worth emphasizing that the United States, like China, does not tend to build institutions from the goodness of its heart; rather, it does so because sometimes building institutions represents the only viable path to solving a problem. Constructing the postwar order – including institutions such as the UN, GATT, and so on – was difficult and necessitated some costly tradeoffs for Washington since in order to build the credibility of those regimes the US had to refrain from pushing its advantage to win short-term commercial or military benefits. Ultimately the US was willing to pay those costs because the likely alternatives, such as the reconstruction of European colonial empires, were much worse from the standpoint of US interests.

What if China's outside options are better relative to the other major powers? Then China will be in a position where it can walk away from cooperation, expecting that its interests will be served even if it doesn't actively contribute to

solving a particular problem. If other powers at the same time view Chinese contributions as essential for sustaining multilateralism, China will have considerable bargaining power: Beijing, that is, will be in a position to demand concessions in exchange for its active participation, just as the United States has done in the past with UNESCO, the World Bank, and even, under the Trump Administration, NAFTA and NATO.

Finally, when China's outside options are good but China is not seen as an indispensable diplomatic player for a particular multilateral regime to succeed, China is likely to free ride on American and other efforts to maintain regimes. Under these circumstances, China doesn't possess leverage that it can use for extortion (since other states do not see China's active contributions as necessary for regime success), but it also can walk away from cooperative efforts confident that its interests will be served whether it participates or not.

So because the strategic landscape can vary across issues, China might show constructive leadership on some issues even as it plays hold-up or free rides on other issues.

### China as free rider

In calling out behavior that failed to live up to the ideal of 'responsible stakeholder' in 2005, Zoellick mostly pointed to examples of Chinese free riding on the efforts of others to build and sustain workable cooperative institutions.

China's approach to the global nuclear nonproliferation presents an example of free riding. China benefits from the nuclear nonproliferation regime generally, in that the regime promotes stability and reduces the incentive for countries to engage in arms races both globally and specifically in East Asia. So, China has a strong interest in maintaining the system. However, the United States and its allies also benefit from a world with less nuclear proliferation, and continue to take extensive actions to maintain that system. This gives China space to passively support the regime without making substantial efforts of its own. It is therefore not surprising that while the United States under several prior administrations has sought to strengthen the regime, such as with the Proliferation Security Initiative under the George W. Bush administration and the Nuclear Security Summits under the Obama administration, China has stayed on the sidelines (Brown, 2015).

China's approach to the global trade regime also exemplifies free riding. China benefits from the system overall; indeed, its entire development strategy, on which the survival of the ruling party rests, depends on continued access to world markets. However, because the United States and other developed powers also benefit from the system, Chinese leaders understand that they can rely on these others to induce others to join and to lend credibility to the system when necessary. During the last, inconclusive round of WTO negotiations, while the US, EU, Japan, and others contributed drafts and sought to organize like-minded countries to support various reforms, China was largely silent (Hopewell, 2016).

In each of these cases, China enjoyed strong outside options because its leaders understood that they would largely get what they wanted – a functional regime that created international cooperation along lines that benefit China – whether they took any actions themselves or not. In each of these cases, moreover, China's active participation in helping to sustain cooperation was not seen as indispensable to regime success. To be clear, with both nuclear proliferation and trade, China's compliance with rules was important. Key areas of dispute with Beijing involved Beijing's willingness to adhere to those norms. But China was, for the most part, not seen as critical to constructing the rules themselves.

### China as spoiler

As China has risen in status, what it means to be 'irresponsible' has changed as well. It includes free-riding, but also includes actively holding up (or spoiling) cooperative efforts so that Beijing can extract concessions that advance Beijing's particular interests.

Consider the case of the global financial system. The centerpiece of the global financial regime is the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is designed to help bail out countries to prevent a crisis in any one country from infecting the broader world economy; the IMF imposes strict criteria on borrowers to prevent them from relying on these loans as a way to avoid having to make balanced financial decisions themselves.

However, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis revealed the limits of the International Monetary Fund's ability to prevent crashes from diffusing. China responded by building, throughout the 2000s, alternate avenues to lend in a crisis, through bilateral swap agreements (Grimes, 2008). These actions, though, raised international alarms as they would have undermined the ability of the IMF to use its stringent loan criteria to prevent states from taking advantage of international bailouts (Feigenbaum, 2015). In other words, China's outside option was getting better, even as other developed countries' outside options got worse.

Meanwhile, during the global financial crisis that began in 2007, other major powers increasingly viewed China's active participation in global financial governance as indispensable to finding a solution to the crisis (Bergsten, 2009). Any proposed solution would require the legitimacy that would come from active Chinese buy-in, and China itself had become too big to fail. In this context, it became relatively easy for China to ask for revisions to the governing structure of the IMF that would give China, and other developing countries, a greater say in policy and lending decisions. After several years of bargaining, the US acceded to China's requests for more representation on the IMF's governing board (Prasad, 2016).

China's ability to play hold-up on global financial governance did not result in a failure of cooperation; to the contrary, it led to an outcome that has increased the fairness and legitimacy of IMF decision-making. China's approach to climate change – particularly prior to 2010 – is often seen in

a less charitable light. Consider for instance the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit, where China is widely viewed as having spoiled a potential agreement that would have led to binding national targets, including on developing countries.

China was able to hold up cooperation at Copenhagen in part because its outside options were strong. From China's standpoint, national development continued to take precedence, and Beijing was willing to walk away from international solutions that left developing countries paying the bulk of the costs, on their own, of adjusting to clean energy. At the same time, as both the largest developing country and also the largest carbon-emitting country, China's active participation in a climate change solution was widely seen as critical to the legitimacy of any bargain reached. China's success in holding up international cooperation to take decisive action on climate at the summit established that it would be willing and able to sabotage agreements that did not place a substantial share of adjustment costs on developed countries (Kastner, Pearson and Rector, 2019).

What these episodes – international finance and climate change – had in common was that China not only had strong outside options, but there was also a widely-shared understanding that active Chinese participation was indispensable for regime success. Like a monopolist that had cornered the market on a critical ingredient, China was able to bargain hard for a high price on its full participation in maintaining multilateralism.

### China as investor in global governance

Finally, China has at times showed a willingness to assume more of a leadership role, where it is willing to actively invest in building and maintaining multilateral cooperative institutions.

Consider, for instance, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), in which China has invested considerable resources – both financial and, especially, diplomatic. The AIIB largely mimics the governing institutions and development criteria of existing multilateral development banks (MDBs), and Beijing invited the US and other developed countries to join the AIIB and to hold it accountable to the same internationally-recognized criteria that they apply to other MDBs (Yang, 2016).

Beijing clearly has much to gain from regional economic development and increased connectivity. Yet the World Bank's limited resources are not enough to fill in for all of the infrastructure development missing in the region (Asian Development Bank, 2017; Desal and Vreeland, 2015). Moreover, pursuing a purely unilateral solution – such as, most obviously, efforts undertaken via the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – has drawbacks of its own. Most obviously, relying solely on BRI leaves China vulnerable to risk (both economic, should investments go bad, and political, should the initiative provoke backlash due to fears of Chinese imperialism). The AIIB offered Beijing a way to mitigate these problems by enabling China to bind itself to a multilateral institution of China's making (Hung, 2015).

Thus, while a complex set of factors clearly pushed Beijing to launch the AIIB, part of the story appears to reside in a set of rather poor outside options for China – including relying on existing MDBs or relying exclusively on unilateral initiatives to finance infrastructure development in the region. The case contrasts with our earlier example of the IMF, where we suggested that China's outside options were stronger. In that case, the potential loss of credibility and effectiveness for the IMF was at least as much a problem for the United States and Europe as it was for China, in particular since the 2007 financial crisis showed that the West was at least as exposed to financial disruption as China was. Furthermore, since China could play a unique role in helping to solve this problem – *the West's problem* – it was in a good position to demand payment for it in the form of greater recognition within the system.

Another example of China's willingness to invest in multilateralism concerns security in Central Asia. With the collapse of Russian hegemony in Central Asia by the late 1990s, China became increasingly exposed to instability in the region. As underdevelopment and weak political institutions fed insecurity, there was a growing risk that separatist movements, unstable border regions, and transnational terrorism would put Chinese regional economic interests at risk as well as inflame tensions that could spill over into Xinjiang, a province in Western China populated by the Uighur ethnic minority.

In that light, China's creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) makes sense. An institution in which China agreed to share authority with other states in the region (at first just countries in Central Asia, later expanded to others throughout Asia), the SCO enhanced security cooperation among domestic security agencies and oversaw the establishment of a joint counterterrorism center.

What these examples have in common is that China's outside options were weak, so it investing in building institutions that would meet a need that would not otherwise have been served – or that would have been served in a way that was contrary to Chinese interests.

### Strategic calculations can change

Because China's behavior responds to the international strategic environment, when that environment changes China's behavior often changes as well. China's evolution on climate change after Copenhagen illustrates this as well. After 2009, China's approach shifted as circumstances changed. With the growing possibility of a developed-country bloc that excluded China imposing a one-sided regime, imposing mandatory and verifiable emissions cuts, and with China having won core representation in the informal institutions that were working toward an international climate regime, China was willing to more actively invest in cooperation.

The shift in the locus of negotiation to the US and China in the lead-up to the Paris meetings produced an agreement that did not establish binding targets for each country; rather, each country had a self-determined national target (Hart and Dotson, 2015). Critically, the approach set up a

system whereby countries could count emission reductions outside their jurisdictions as a way to meet targets – a precursor to a global system of tradable permits that would create incentives for firms in developed countries to subsidize reductions in developing countries. During this period, Chinese leadership helped pave the way for a new emerging regime.

Just as China's outside options got worse on climate during the Obama administration, the Trump administration's decision to step back on climate multilateralism has taken the pressure off China, since now the threat of a developed-country bloc approach to climate is more remote. Although China took the lead in hosting the preliminary meetings prior to the 2018 climate summit in Poland, it did not make substantial moves to advance the agenda or to offer any concessions for the sake of a more ambitious agreement for implementing the Paris framework. China's stance continues to evolve. Whereas at the 2018 climate summit in Poland, China continued to express the imperative for developed countries to take leadership on climate (Basu, 2018), in the 2019 G20 summit in Osaka Beijing appeared to commit to more drastic climate action (Stanway, 2019).

### Implications for US policy toward China

Understanding that China's approach differs across issue areas depending on the strategic setting has implications for American engagement.

First, it is a mistake to resist China's institution-building, such as the SCO and AIIB, on the grounds that China's behavior in other areas shows that it cannot be trusted. Where China has an interest in credible multilateral regimes because its alternatives are weak, it has largely attempted to build the same kinds of multilateral institutions – with shared governance and accountability – that the United States and others have built in previous eras. While institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization obviously serve Chinese interests, and there are serious concerns that its counterterrorism cooperation has been stretched to include the suppression of minority groups, the SCO has benefits that extend more widely. The broader benefits arising from the AIIB are even clearer.

Second, when China acts through multilateral institutions rather than unilaterally it is at least partly because it feels it needs the credibility and accountability that comes from multilateralism. In these cases, China uses multilateralism out of necessity. The US can and should include itself in the process as a way to enhance both China's credibility and ensure that these new institutions also serve American aims. The AIIB is again instructive here. China was (and appears to remain) willing to give up its veto power on the AIIB board if the United States joins. Both countries could benefit from more effective development financing in Asia.

Third, the US should not prematurely cede institutional leadership to China, since active American leadership may be necessary as a goad to keep China involved. Consider, as an example, the lost momentum on climate. During the

Obama Administration, active American leadership was a spur to China to engage in the issue; Chinese leadership in the lead-up to the Paris Agreement emerged at least partly out of a fear that the US would turn to the European Union to make a deal that would be less solicitous of Chinese interests. During the Trump presidency, as the United States has stayed on the sidelines, the pressure on China to show leadership has subsided. Without the threat of a US/EU agreement, China has been less active than it was at the end of the Obama administration.

China, like every other country, is selective and strategic about how it chooses to invest in multilateralism. Rather than pursuing 'responsible stakeholderism' or 'revisionism' as an overall agenda, China engages with multilateralism in different ways, depending on the strategic context of each issue. So, although China has in some times and places acted as a spoiler or a free rider, in other times and places it has acted as a leader, investing in institutions for the common good. By thinking about strategies of multilateral engagement from China's perspective, Washington may be able to avoid the pitfalls that come from caricaturing Beijing's motives.

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