

Chinese multilateralism: implications for Sino-US relations

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What impact will the rise of China have on the existing international system?

Multilateralism has become an essential part of China's international policy, with Beijing demonstrating much pragmatism in its attitude toward global multilateral institutions.

Firstly, China believes that multilateral diplomacy is a powerful instrument for coping with unipolarity and opposing hegemony — that is, pushing back against the predominant role of the US in global affairs. New concepts and ideas that China has put forth are often designed to undermine the moral ground of US unilateralism or bilateral arrangements. For Beijing, multilateralism will also help to facilitate the formation of a multi-polar world in which China is expected to play a more eminent role, together with other major powers.

Secondly, Beijing believes that its participation in multilateralism could help diminish the 'China threat' thesis and build a 'responsible power' image for China.

Thirdly, China believes that multilateral diplomacy can provide new platforms for international cooperation, especially in the East Asian region, to facilitate Chinese interests.

In the wake of the global financial crisis, there is a notable euphoria in China regarding the emerging global order. Decision-makers and analysts in China are optimistic that the recent financial crisis marks a decline in the West's influence over global multilateralism — providing an opportunity for China to become a more important player in international institutions. But they also acknowledge that there are constraints on China becoming a leading power in global multilateralism. The constraints, which mainly include China's own recognition of the still dominant role of the Western developed countries, the competition from other emerging powers against China's growing international influence, and China's reluctance to take too many international responsibilities, must be overcome if China is to formulate grand designs and play a leading role in global and regional multilateralism.

In many cases, China's proactivity in multilateral diplomacy will be done on a selective basis as it engineers an increase in its influence in global multilateral settings. But various concerns and constraints will make it unlikely that China will completely overhaul, or even dramatically reshape, the multilateral architecture at the global level.

Many factors that hinder China's leadership role in East Asian multilateralism — such as the predominant role of the US, regional states' concern of falling into the orbit of a Sino-centric regional order, and Beijing's lackluster interest in providing regional public goods — are likely to restrain it at the global level in the same fashion. China is likely to repeat what it has done in East Asian regional multilateralism in the past decade: participating, engaging and pushing for cooperation in areas that would serve Chinese interests, but avoiding taking excessive responsibilities, blocking initiatives that would harm its interests, and refraining from making grand

proposals.

In addition, China remains caught up in defining its identity, posturing as a leader of the developing world on some policy issues and siding with the developed countries on other issues. Thus, owing to such fetters, China's involvement in global multilateralism is guided by pragmatism rather than grand visions, which are traditionally associated with the US.

China will most likely strive to rise from within the existing international order. Washington, therefore, should be prepared to plan its China policy on this basis. Sino-US relations will largely be shaped by the dynamics of contentions for power and interest, as well as by cooperation and coordination between China and the US in various multilateral institutions.

P.S.

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