



# Multilateral Institutions: Instruments of Defending and Creating Hegemony

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## Abstract

This study critically examines the transformation of multilateralism from a liberal institutional framework into a geopolitical instrument of influence. Multilateral institutions were established to uphold cooperation, peace, and liberal values in the post-World War II order. Major Powers, particularly China and the United States, utilize these institutions not solely for cooperation but as strategic instruments to assert and safeguard their hegemonic interests. Through a detailed analysis of China's engagement with institutions such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the paper explores how China projects its global vision and cultivates influence across the Global South. Simultaneously, it evaluates the United States' evolving multilateral strategy, including its leadership in platforms like the QUAD, AUKUS, and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGI), which collectively aim to counterbalance China's growing influence. Drawing on liberal and realist theoretical frameworks, this study questions whether contemporary multilateralism remains a mechanism for genuine international cooperation or whether it is utilized as a platform for competitive power projection. The findings highlight a critical shift in the global governance architecture, with profound implications for the future of the international order.

## Keywords

**Multilateralism, Hegemony, Global Governance, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Indo-Pacific Strategy,**

## Introduction

The idea of Multilateralism was the cornerstone of the post-WWII international order, where leaders were focused on cooperation between countries rather than competition, and therefore, institutions such as the United Nations, Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Countries

(OIC), World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In later periods, the World Trade Organization (WTO), ASEAN, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and many more have been developed. In a broader sense, these institutions were responsible for promoting liberal values, ensuring a congenial environment for the open market economy, as well as shared security of the Western world. However, the relevance of such multilateral organizations becomes dimmed when it is found that they are unable to resolve some deadly and long-lasting conflicts and protect the interests of the Western world led by the US. The necessity of such organizations further down since the invasion of Iraq by the US without having any official authorization from the United Nations. Invasion in Afghanistan and other Middle East and North African countries by the US and its Western allies jeopardized the multilateral and cooperative world order and led to US-led imperialism.

However, in the meantime, China has emerged as a global economic power to reorder the global balance of power. China has been developing several multilateral organizations for the last several mainly focusing on economic development, human development, trade, connectivity, and security to protect Chinese national interests and promote Chinese values. Seeing the growing influence of China all over the world through its multilateral organizations, the US refocuses its diplomatic strategy on multilateral cooperation in recent times which is reflected in the recently published National Security Strategy 2022.

Given the circumstances, the study will explore new dynamics of multilateral cooperation, whether the development of multilateral organizations is for cooperation or as instruments of asserting influence over allies.

### Emergence of multilateralism and multilateral organizations

The idea of multilateralism and multilateral organizations emerged to uphold liberal values after WWII. The liberal worldview is a sharp contrast to the realist and neo-realist worldview. Realists have emphasized the anarchic interpretation of international relations; however, this assumption understates the behavior of national actors often abide by the decisions issued by the interstates and transnational institutions aimed at managing political and economic relations and fostering interdependence in the international system (Tarzi, 2004). In contrast, liberalism tends to emphasize the impact of domestic and international society, interdependence, and international institutions (Ney 1988).



Keohane (1990) defines multilateralism as “the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or four states”. However, Ruggie (1992a) argued that the nominal definition of multilateralism misses the qualitative dimension of the phenomenon that makes it distinct. Ruggie (1992b) also argued that multilateralism not just coordinates national policies of three or more states, but it does so based on certain principles of ordering relations among those states. Multilateralism also refers to specific international treaties and agreements, such as Arms Control and the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

According to Riux (2023), the evolution of multilateralism can be divided into three historic phases, where the first phase (from the 19th century to WWII) of the development of multilateral institutions was based on the principle of sovereignty to ensure national security, political independence, as well as international law to manage disputes. The second phase of multilateralism is marked by the rule of law, the use of institutionalized dispute settlement mechanisms, and widespread reciprocity, which form the basis of a pragmatic and progressive liberal institutionalism to stable domestic order to ensure the primacy of human rights. The emergence of globalization, the rise of influential private sectors, and deregulated global capitalism eroded the nature of multilateralism. Riux (2023) also argued that the emergence of globalization and the digitalization process constitute the major adjustment challenges to International Organizations. The rise of new actors, sometimes more powerful than states, or in other words emergence of a plurality of actors such as firms and civil society organizations, posed challenges to International Organizations.

#### Shift in the world order: Is war inevitable?

The rivalry between China and the US is intensifying as China intends to translate its economic power into reshaping the current US-led global order. But can China supplant the existing global order by force or through other means? This transition toward global power is not a new phenomenon; it is rather a recurring theme in the international system (John Ikenberry, 2008). During shifts in power distribution, new challenger states often seek to convert their newly acquired power into greater authority to redefine the rules and institutions of the existing global system to serve their interests. According to realist scholar Mearsheimer (2006), China’s rise is likely to provoke intense security competition between China and the United States with significant potential for war. However, the opposing view regarding the likelihood of war (John Ikenberry, 2008) argues that “Not all power transitions generate war or overturn the old order,”



offering evidence from previous power transitions. Unlike imperial world orders, the current global order has evolved from Western liberal values, including democracy, rules and norms-based international institutions, and market openness, involving a diverse array of participants and stakeholders. Thus, any state's rise can be a part of it, and China has already experienced substantial economic gains, largely by engaging in the open order (John Ikenberry, 2008). As Lanteingene argues, "What separates China from other states, and indeed previous global powers, is that not only is it "growing up" within a milieu of international institutions far more developed than ever before, but more importantly, it is doing so while making active use of these institutions to promote country's development of global power status" (Lanteingene cited in Ikenberry & Lim, 2017). However, despite China developing within the liberal international institutions that could reduce anarchy and ensure stability in the existing world order, there is a lack of strategic trust in the relationship between China and the US; neither side fully believes the other. As a result, the US presents itself in Asia through a comprehensive diplomatic, military, and economic approach (Saunders 2014). Although competitive elements are evident in US-China relations, the outbreak of war is less likely. As former National Security Advisor Donilon (2013) stated, "We do not want our relationship to become defined by rivalry and confrontation...a better outcome is possible."

### Chinese Multilateral Initiatives: Nature and Objectives

In recent times, since the emergence of China in global politics with an ambition to be a "Pole" of the distribution of power, it has been observed that multilateral institutions are being used as a source of alliance building to defend or create hegemony, and to do so, either of the countries are forming new multilateral institutions or trying to establish their dominance in the existing one.

As discussed in earlier sections, multilateral institutions are the liberal model of cooperation and partnership, and this model of cooperation has been practiced in international politics since the end of World War II. Given the above discussion, the world order developed after WWII is based on the liberal belief of cooperation, democracy, openness, market, and rule-based international institutions negating realist perception of the anarchic system of world order and China was engaged from the beginning of the development of this international institution's driven world order such as member of UN Security Council. In the early 70's, China actively started to participate in multilateral organizations with membership in the UN Security Council



and gradually involved more international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1992, and adopted multilateralism in its diplomacy. With the pace of time, China has increased its presence and involvement in multilateral diplomacy, including hosting the 2014 APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting, the G20 Summit in 2016, and signing the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

China's intention to become a dominant political power has never been concealed. Chinese President Hu Jintao expressed the Chinese intention to be global in a UN General Assembly speech held in 2009: "A more developed China will make a greater contribution to the world and offer more opportunities to the world (Courmont 2012). According to the former foreign minister, Yang Jiech in the Munich Security Conference 2010:

"A more developed China will undertake more international responsibilities and will never pursue self-interest at the expense of the interests of others. That is why focusing on its development, China is undertaking more and more international responsibilities commensurate with its strength and systems" (Jiechi, 2010).

Unlike other economic powers, China has not limited itself to merely participating in the existing multilateral institutions; instead, it has sought to establish new ones. Since the beginning of the millennium, China has reaffirmed and strengthened its commitment to disseminating its ideas and insights regarding global economic growth by creating new multilateral institutions as tools for achieving higher objectives, potentially challenging those of other powers (Shambaugh 2011 as cited in Courmont 2012). Beijing aims to be active on the international stage without being aggressive, maintaining a low-profile stance; thus, China employs multilateralism as an effective means to achieve its goals and has officially positioned itself as a champion of this approach (Courmont, 2012). China has expressed its intention to create a new type of multilateral institutions based on cooperation, fostering a community of common destiny for humanity while prioritizing equitable, efficient, open, inclusive, and interconnected global governance for managing the global economy, trade, development, investment, finance, and energy (Chunxiao et al., 2016). Moreover, China perceives multilateral institutions as platforms to project its worldview on global issues, enhance its role in international cooperation, contribute to global security, and advocate for a fairer and more equitable world order (Yang Baoyan as cited in Chunxiao et al., 2016).



“Peaceful development” and a “harmonious world” are two fundamental concepts in China’s foreign policy doctrine. These ideas promote international cooperation and the peaceful resolution of disputes, which are also central principles to multilateralism and serve China’s national interest. (Courment 2012).

In the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2012, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, China proposed global cooperation for global communities as a Chinese responsibility (Xiaochun, 2018). To realize the notion of global cooperation for global communities, particularly with other developed countries, they emphasized several principles like amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness for expanding relations with neighboring countries (The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021).

Moreover, establishing or participating in institutions is not only helpful in influencing others to follow their interest, but it also enhances a state’s capacity to predict the behavior of other states. The rules, procedures, and information channels of institutions reduce the costs of cooperative behavior and increase the costs of defection. Therefore, China established several multilateral institutions with different norms, such as the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), 16+1, BRICS, New Development Bank (NDB) etc.

### **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): A Tool for Exertion of Chinese Influence**

China considers this Belt and Road Initiative as a means of extending help to developing countries to reduce poverty and improve their people’s lives so that the gap between North and South would be narrowed and, the deficit in development would be eliminated which eventually contribute to establishing a new model of international relations based on mutual respect, equity, justice, and win-win cooperation (State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2021). To attain this objective, from 2013 to 2023, according to the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China (2023), China signed more than 200 BRI cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and 30 international organizations across five continents to implement several signature projects and small but impactful projects.



Besides, China also engaged in several bilateral initiatives under this BRI Framework such as Russia's Eurasian Economic Union framework, Kazakhstan's Bright Road economic policy, Turkmenistan's strategy of reviving the Silk Road, Mongolia's Steppe Road plan, Indonesia's Global Marine Fulcrum initiative, the Philippines' Build Better More program, Vietnam's Two Corridors and One Economic Circle plan, South Africa's Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, Egypt's Suez Canal Corridor Project, and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

China does not confine its assistance to finance and infrastructure; rather, under this BRI framework, it extends its assistance in knowledge creation and sharing. China formed the Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development (ISSCAD) in 2016 at Peking University, and since then, 220 students from 59 developing countries have enrolled in Doctoral and Master's programs. In addition to this, China dispatched 20000 volunteers and volunteer Chinese language teachers to work in over 80 countries around the world (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Under this BRI framework, it is not clear to what extent receiving countries benefit, but the Chinese economy gets a boost. Through BRI, China has invested in partner countries worth USD 240 billion, whereas partner countries have invested in China worth USD 180 billion. The value of signed construction contracts reached USD 2 trillion, and the actual turnover of Chinese companies is worth USD 1.3 trillion. The total cumulative value of imports and exports from 2013 to 2022 is USD 19.1 trillion, which is growing with an average growth rate of 6.4%, which is 46% of total Chinese trade.

The number of participating countries and areas of cooperation under BRI is vast, extensive, and interlinked. China seeks to cooperate in all strategic areas through "soft connectivity" such as harmonized rules and standards, and strengthen people-to-people bonds, and through "hard connectivity" including infrastructure and financial assistance.

Even though the assistance under the BRI framework was made to developing countries in a bilateral mode, China brought all those beneficiary countries under a common platform called the BRI Forum for international cooperation and organized three summits with the participation of partner countries of the BRI. Through BRI, China is involved in several bilateral initiatives of major economic powers like Saudi Arabia and also developing



economies like South Africa and Egypt. Besides, BRI participating countries expanded their cooperation through more than 20 multilateral initiatives where China plays a critical role. Recently, in the ceremony of the 3rd Belt and Road Forum summit, the President of China emphasized multilateral cooperation,

“China will work with its BRI partner countries to strengthen the building of multilateral cooperation platforms covering energy, taxation, finance, green development, disaster reduction, anti-corruption, think-tank, media, culture, and other fields. China will continue to host the BRF and establish a secretariat for the Forum” (Jinping, 2023).

Under the BRI framework, China has built over 20 specialized multilateral dialogue and cooperation platforms in areas like finance, port, taxation, energy and environmental protection (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019), such as China-ASEAN (10+1) Cooperation, Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, Forum of China and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum, China-Central and Eastern European Countries Cooperation, Boao Forum for Asia, and CPC and World Political Parties Summit (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023). These platforms help those participating countries to achieve high-quality Belt and Road cooperation.

The above discussion makes one thing clear: China uses its economic abundance as a tool to build relationships, deepen connectivity and cooperation in trade and industrial capacity, and strengthen cultural and people-to-people exchanges through “six corridors, six roads, and multiple countries and ports” with less developed countries. Less developed countries are the beneficiaries of its loans.

#### Discussion:

The above discussion indicated the intention of China to exert its influence across the world. To accomplish its goals, China primarily positioned itself as a major developing country and expressed its eagerness to share its developmental experience with other developing countries to form a global community of shared future. It is noteworthy that China partnered with Small Island, Landlocked, and Least developed countries or in a broader sense countries of the Global



South. Countries of Global North are not members of the China-led and founded multilateral forum. Italy is a country of the Global North that participated in BRI, but left in 2023.

China considers development as the solution to all problems; therefore, primarily China assists the partner countries in infrastructure development, focusing on projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) such as the construction of ports, highways, rail networks, airports, urban public transport, economic corridor, power plants, etc.

However, the nature of development has shifted over the period from only infrastructure projects to human development-related projects; therefore, China formed the Global Development Initiative (GDI), which is a mechanism of providing support to attain the United Nations-formulated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

In the beginning, Chinese development cooperation was based on bilateral agreements, but later, China gradually built an informal global platform or alliance or forum with these development assistance-receiving countries. The platform of participant countries under BRI is known as the BRI Forum and the platform of participating countries under the Global Development Initiative (GDI) is known as the Group of Friends. Moreover, China did not confine itself only to infrastructural development rather also extended its partnership in knowledge creation and dissemination through educational exchange partnerships. China also intends to spread Chinese culture to spread its cultural dominance, accompanied by its financial dominance in the countries of the Global South. Besides establishing new global multilateral institutions, China strengthened its presence in regional multilateral institutions, like ASEAN, APEC, and EAS.

### Multilateralism for Retaining Hegemony: US Perception and Policy towards China

The USA perceives China as an authoritarian state. During the presidency of Donald Trump, the USA engaged in great power competition with China within the realm of trade. The Trump administration had an unrestrained relationship with China, marked by trade disputes, accusations of intellectual property theft, and geopolitical tensions. The two countries engaged in a trade war, with both sides imposing tariffs on each other's goods. The administration also took a tough stance on Chinese technology companies, such as Huawei, citing national security concerns. But during his presidency of Biden, this tension between the US and China was not



confined to trade and copyright issues but rather reached the larger ideological and strategic frame. The Biden administration has indeed marked the US-China rivalry as a feud between autocracy and democracy. This ideological framing reshaped the US foreign policy regarding China. The United States positioned itself as a champion of democratic values and human rights while characterizing China as an autocratic regime. The Biden administration believes that democracy will and must prevail, and China and Russia are two authoritarian states posing a threat to the US vision of a free, open, and democratic world. These authoritarian states pose a threat to international peace and stability by preparing for a war of aggression, leveraging technology, and being responsible for exporting of illiberal model of international order. China in the eyes of the US, has the intention to reshape the world order to create a world that is conducive to its highly personalized and repressive type of autocracy, and become an economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance its objective.

#### Does the US follow the path of multilateralism to counter China?

The USA wants a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order, where people can seek their basic and universal rights and freedom (National Security Strategy, 2022). In the National Security Strategy 2022, it is clearly stated that to avoid a world in which competition escalates into a world of rigid blocks and the New Cold War, the US supports every country, regardless of its size or strength, in exercising their freedom. As the US considers China as an autocratic state and identifies China's progress as authoritarian advancement, therefore US emphasizes building strong cooperation or alliances with like-minded democratic countries. In the G7 summit held in 2021, President Biden spoke about the dire need for multilateral action to address COVID-19, the global economic crisis, the accelerating climate crisis, and so much else. At the Munich Conference 2021, the President of the US also reemphasized the importance of transatlantic partnership, as well as reassured US commitment to the NATO alliance (Biden, 2021). The US President identified the US and China's relationship as a "contest with autocrats" and the world reached the "inflection point" to decide whether the century will be marked as the century of ascendancy of autocracy or dominance of democracy. Given this reason, the US developed several multilateral institutions such as QUAD, AUKUS, IPS, IPEF, and the newly proposed Spice Route which focus on deeper cooperation with allies in the areas of economy, and security—in the National Security Strategy (2022) of US stated that, "to build the strongest and broadest coalition of nations that seek to cooperate each other while competing with those powers that offer a darker vision and thwarting their effort to



threaten our interest” and need for strong and purposeful American role as never been greater. According to the statement of Harris, (2021), The United States will pursue a free and open Indo-Pacific that promotes our interests and those of our partners and allies In addition to deepening close bilateral relations we also work multilaterally through longstanding institutions like ASEAN, which remains central to the region’s architecture” with a vision to uphold the commitment to the international rules-based order, human rights freedom of the sea, peace, and stability. To counter Chinese threats, plans for the infrastructure program that will promote transparent, high-quality projects for developing countries need to be undertaken. The Biden administration is increasing cooperation among democratic allies, focusing on the ground of technology, trade policy, cyber-security, cyber-attacks, disinformation, and ensuring an open global internet. The US wants a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order, where people can seek their basic and universal rights and freedom (National Security Strategy 2022). In this strategic paper, it was also mentioned that great powers are actively working to advance two different visions and marked the era as an era of competition.

#### The Spice Route:

At the last G20 Summit held in India, a new economic corridor was proposed to enhance cooperation between the West and its Asian allies. The Spice Route, the proposed corridor, is considered the revival of ancient trade routes between the Indian Sub-continent and Europe. The proposed route is identified as the mechanism of sustainable and inclusive economic integration between India, the Middle East, and Europe. Under this corridor, leaders envision constructing railroads, infrastructure for Hydrogen production and transportation, and establishing an underground sea cable for telecommunication. The project, if materialized, would connect ports across the two continents to make trade and transport easier and faster by reducing transit time by up to 40%.

The presence of China all over the world through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under OBOR has changed the geopolitical landscape. The materialization of the Spice Route would bear utmost significance for the Western world, along with their Asian allies, as they are expecting to counter Chinese dominance through connecting vast markets of Europe, India, and the Middle East, ease of doing trade, transportation of fuel, and investing in colossal infrastructure.



### Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGI):

The Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII) is a joint initiative by G7 nations aimed at funding infrastructure projects in low- and middle-income countries. This \$600 billion collaborative initiative was launched in June 2022 during the G7 Leaders' Summit. President Biden and other G7 leaders officially introduced PGII as an impactful and transparent infrastructure-focused collaboration. PGII is designed to address the significant infrastructure needs of these nations. The initiative also supports the economic and national security interests of the United States and its allies. (The Office of the U.S. Coordinator for the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI), n.d.). PGII was initiated to reduce the infrastructure gap in developing countries and to speed up the progress of achieving the SDGs goals.

G7 countries offer an alternative to infrastructure financing and delivery models that often ignore environmental and social standards, exploit labor, and leave fund-receiving countries in a bad economic condition. Conversely, the U.S. government aims to offer an alternative model that can attract investments both from public sector and private sector, in areas such as clean energy, information and communications technology networks, transportation, and resilient health systems while also promoting liberal values such as gender equality and equity; raising labor and environmental standards; and promoting transparency, governance, and anticorruption measures (The Office of the U.S. Coordinator for the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI), n.d.).

### Discussion/Conclusion:

The above discussion shows that China adopts multilateralism as a diplomatic strategy and aims to expand its global influence through multilateral institutions. Consequently, China has launched several new multilateral organizations at the global and regional levels to support economic and human development, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). China's use of multilateralism as a diplomatic tool features several unique aspects, including a focus on economic, trade, and human development. Ideological differences do not hinder partnerships, especially with LDC countries, small islands, and landlocked nations, because China sees itself as a major developing country. Furthermore, China not only invests in infrastructure but also promotes



Chinese culture, education, and technology to increase its influence in partner countries. It has also expanded into financial sectors to serve as an alternative source of funding, establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB). Non-interference in the domestic affairs of partner countries is also a key element of China's diplomatic approach.

On the contrary, although the United States developed a multilateral world order after World War II, the US turned to a unilateral world order after the end of the Cold War. However, China's rise as an economic power and increasing global influence using multilateral institutions has led to the United States' renewed interest in multilateralism. As a result, the US formed several multilateral platforms with the followers of liberal ideology, and most of them are developed and Western countries. The nature of these platforms is security-focused, like AUKUS, QUAD, Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), and Pacific-centric to counter China. However, in recent times, to reduce Chinese influence on developing countries, the US established the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and proposed to establish a Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGI), a Spice Route to reach developing countries.

In sum, China, based on its ideology, is trying to build a multilateral world order to expand its global influence, similar to the world order that the United States built after World War II. However, after the end of the Cold War, the United States created a unipolar world order, thereby undermining the values of the multilateral world order. But now, the United States has turned its attention back to multilateralism, aiming to reduce the influence of the China-centered emerging multilateral world order. To reduce the influence of Chinese multilateral organizations, the United States is building new multilateral organizations of its kind. So it can be said that multilateralism and multilateral organizations have now become the instruments of global power struggle and influence.

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