

Whither Multilateralism? The Growing Importance of Regional International Societies in an Emerging Multipolar Era

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Multilateralism has been among the most important characteristics of international politics since the end of the Second World War, and regimes increased in both number and importance in the wake of the Cold War as a hallmark of the supposed post-Cold War “liberal era”. The purposes of multilateral organizations range from collective defence and security, to trade and economic cooperation, and can be formalized in an institutional structure, or be purely normative in character. The unipolar moment of American hegemony that defined the post-Cold War era allowed for an expansion of multilateralism and the global international society that existed for nearly twenty years. This new world order saw states actively engaged in issues at the global level that previously had difficulty reaching global political and normative agendas, such as climate change, human rights and security, and free trade. Complementing the normative foundations of global international society was the creation of a series of regional international societies that, in many cases, saw the expansion and implementation of state integration and cooperation. Recent events at the global level, including the election of President Trump, the outcome of the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (UK), and the ongoing emergence of regional powers such as Russia and China, have all served to foster notions about whether states will retreat into independent, isolationist strategies and away from the multilateralism that has long been a key variable in facilitating cooperation between states. This paper argues that, while states, especially emerging powers, may retreat from the global multilateral regime, they will continue to use regional international societies to advance their normative and

political agendas. In doing so, multilateralism in the emerging multipolar era will evolve and may be strengthened at the regional level.

THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE MULTILATERAL SYSTEM

Despite fears to the contrary, the global multilateral system is not in retreat and, in some ways, has been reinforced by recent threats that have emerged as a result of populist movements and leaders, and other challenges to multilateralism. It is also important to note that challenges and skepticism about multilateralism, even from Western states, is not a new phenomenon. From the outset of the post-WWII multilateral regime, certain states expressed hesitation about imbedding themselves too far into a regime that could potentially affect their independence and sovereignty. Often overlooked in discussions about multilateralism is the fact that, despite regimes and institutions taking on liberal characteristics, multilateralism is a strategic choice made by self-interested states about how to advance their interests and influence world order. Further, the structure of the international system at a given point in history will impact if and how states use multilateralism as a strategy, what kind of order states strive to create and negotiate, and what norms will be focused on by those states that make up multilateral arrangements and institutions. Ultimately, multilateralism is a means through which states pursue their interests, and whether or not a state will partake in intensive or weak multilateralism can shift depending on strategic preferences. This idea can be summarized as follows:

1. Multilateralism is a chosen [state] strategy...States do not choose strategies lightly and the proliferation of multilateralism in the [international] system is a clear indication that states have identified the strategy as producing payoffs.
2. The strategy of multilateralism can change...Strategies are meant to evolve as the defined interests of a state change over time.¹

From the outset, even liberal Western states expressed scepticism about certain aspects of the global multilateral regime, focused mainly on the United Nations (UN) given the role the UN plays and its size and scope. For

¹ Robert W. Murray, "Realist Multilateralism: Cooperation in the Emerging Multipolar System," in *Seeking Order in Anarchy*, ed. Robert W. Murray (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2016), 99.

instance, Charles de Gaulle in referring to the UN as “*le machin*” fiercely denounced UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld and refused to fund the peacekeeping operations in the Congo, contributing to the UN’s most serious financial crisis. The crux of de Gaulle’s opposition to the mission and more, his inflammatory comments about the UN, had more to do with protecting France’s national interests and the general desire to make France great than it did with the UN.² Also noteworthy from this example is that, even in the face of fierce opposition to multilateral institutions such as the UN, de Gaulle’s criticisms did not seriously hinder the development of the UN, or any other multilateral institution. In fact, the scope of the UN expanded considerably during this time.³

Even throughout the tense years of the Cold War, multilateralism expanded in both size and scope, and in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, multilateralism became a cornerstone of the post-Cold War international society that emerged. According to Tom Keating:

Drawing initially from the view that western liberal values prevailed in the Cold War, and operating under the security blanket of American unipolarity, Canada along with other western governments began pressing international and regional institutions to advance liberal values...One can read into these practices an attempt to use multilateral diplomacy and international institutions to design an international order based more firmly on substantive principles reflecting human rights, democracy and liberal economic practices.⁴

Recognizing that states see multilateralism as a means of advancing their interests and influencing order is important in understanding that trends and preferences around multilateralism are not static. This can also help to explain why, even in recent times, when observers have pointed out threats to multilateralism that arrangements and institutions have continued to grow in number and importance, as states see multilateralism as inextricably linked to their survival. Bosco notes:

² David Bosco, “We’ve Been Here Before: The Durability of Multilateralism,” *Journal of International Affairs* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2017), 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁴ Tom Keating, “The Twilight of Multilateralism in Canadian Foreign Policy?” in *Readings in Canadian Foreign Policy*, 3rd ed., eds. Duane Bratt and Christopher J. Kukucha (Don Mills; Oxford University Press, 2015), 57.

The UN's renaissance after the Cold War is a reminder of how institutions can go dormant, only to flourish when geopolitics thaw. That dynamic of marginalization and revival has occurred even more recently. When the Bush administration invaded Iraq without UN approval, some observers worried that the institution was mortally wounded. But a few years later, the Security Council had dispatched a record number of peacekeepers to hotspots around the world.⁵

PERSPECTIVES FROM AND ROLE OF KEY COUNTRIES IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Perhaps the most worrying trend recently regarding multilateralism is the stance taken by President Trump. Throughout his election campaign and during his time as President of the United States (US), President Trump has consistently vilified multilateral institutions for being negative for the United States either due to financial costs, perceived trade deficits, or allies identified as laggards that have become too comfortable relying on the United States for either economic or physical security. Kristen Boon claims:

From plans to dramatically reduce funding for multilateral institutions, to draft executive orders signaling the potential withdrawal from various international treaties, to the decision to bomb a Syrian airstrip without Security Council authorization (or the support of a coalition of other states), President Trump has demonstrated a disinterest in the institutions and instruments that normally act as a forum for international cooperation. Unlike his predecessor, who took the position that “multilateralism regulates hubris,” President Trump’s actions indicate that the United States may be withdrawing from its leadership role in international law and institutions.⁶

Despite rhetorical and Twitter-based claims about the United States scaling back its multilateral commitments, the Trump Administration has yet to pursue a meaningful policy approach to multilateral withdrawal. The idea that the United States ought to withdraw from international agreements and focus more on the homeland is also not a view that resonates with Americans. In January 2017, the Program for Public Consultation released a major poll

⁵ Bosco, “We’ve Been Here Before,” 15.

⁶ Kristen Boon, “President Trump and the Future of Multilateralism,” *Emory International Law Review* 31 (2017), 1075.

that “found no evidence that the American public has tired of international engagement and is going through a phase of isolationism” and less than one in ten Americans endorsed “withdrawal from most efforts to solve international problems.”⁷ Beyond public attitudes towards the possibility of withdrawing from multilateral arrangements, major policy documents and initiatives of the Trump Administration continue to either overtly see continued utility in the United States’ participation in multilateral organizations, or at the least, seek to tolerate them within the Trumpist worldview.

One key example of continued support for the role of multilateralism in American foreign policy can be found in President Trump’s 2017 National Security Strategy. A few noteworthy examples of where multilateralism has been used as a tool of American foreign policy in the Trump Administration include statements such as: “We will advance American influence because a world that supports American interests and reflects our values makes America more secure and prosperous. We will compete and lead in multilateral organizations so that American interests and principles are protected.”⁸ When discussing Tools of Economic Diplomacy, the Strategy document notes:

We will work with like-minded partners to build support for tools of economic diplomacy against shared threats. Multilateral economic pressure is often more effective because it limits the ability of targeted states to circumvent measures and conveys united resolve...When the United States partners with other states, we develop policies that enable us to achieve our goals while our partners achieve theirs.⁹

In an effort to wed the populist values underpinning the Trump Administration’s worldview, claims have been made about “improving” multilateral arrangements for the United States rather than simply withdrawing all together. Under the subheading, “Achieve Better Outcomes in Multilateral Forums,” the National Security Strategy document reads, “The United States must lead and engage in the multinational arrangements that shape many of the rules that affect US interests and values.”¹⁰ Some of this “improvement”

⁷ Steven Kull, “Americans on the U.S. Role in the World,” Program for Public Consultation, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, January 2017, http://www.publicconsultation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/PPC_Role_in_World_Report.pdf.

⁸ “National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (December 2017), 4, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 40.

effort has been focused on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), where Trump has accused allies of not sufficiently paying their way by not meeting the two percent of GDP spending target,¹¹ yet on 8 February 2018 both the United States and Germany offered to host two proposed new NATO commands aimed at deterring Russia in a show of support for the alliance's military build-up that has echoes of the Cold War.¹²

One area of considerable concern under the Trump Administration has been his view of international trade deals, and the global trade system more broadly. Immediately upon taking office, Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which frustrated allies and according to some, empowered China. Withdrawal from the TPP by the United States marked a major economic opportunity for China—a state that has not been shy to use multilateral institutions to further its own strategic advantage. Southeast Asian elites see the United States losing strategic ground to China, and Trump's Washington as less interested in the region, less dependable, and less likely to uphold free trade.¹³ In the North American context, Trump's stringent position on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has surprised many, considering Trump has been openly attacking and criticizing long-time American allies Canada and Mexico.¹⁴ In all, the American support for the global security and trade regimes remains unclear as presidential words often do not match action, but such uncertainty and unpredictability has dramatically impacted perceptions about American support for multilateralism.

The Brexit vote and ongoing negotiations about the future of the United Kingdom in the European Union (EU) have served to further concerns about multilateralism in the Western world. It is clear that, despite Brexit negotiations being in progress, there is significant sentiment within the UK that

¹¹ Peter Baker, "Trump Says NATO Allies Don't Pay Their Share. Is That True?" *New York Times*, 26 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/world/europe/nato-trump-spending.html>.

¹² Rovin Emmott, Andrewa Shalal, and Phil Stewart, "Fearing Russia, United States, Germany offer to host new NATO commands: officials," Reuters, 8 February 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-russia/fearing-russia-united-states-germany-offer-to-host-new-nato-commands-officials-idUSKBN1FS2OX>.

¹³ ASEAN Studies Centre, "How do Southeast Asians View the Trump Administration?" 3 May 2017, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/centres/asc/pdf/ASCsurvey40517.pdf>.

¹⁴ Emily Tamkin, "As NAFTA Talks Restart, Canada and Mexico Are Unfazed by Trump's Threats," *Foreign Policy*, 31 August 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/31/as-nafta-talks-restart-canada-and-mexico-are-unfazed-by-trumps-threats/>.

multilateralism negatively affects UK interests and that the UK would be better served outside of a regional multilateral arrangement.¹⁵ Despite attitudes within the UK that led to the outcome of the Brexit referendum, there is an argument to be made that the EU can be a stronger alliance after Brexit by virtue of the level of cooperation and unification required from within EU states to successfully negotiate Brexit.¹⁶ Regardless of the outcome of Brexit negotiations, the impact of the initial UK referendum and future attitudes of other EU states who may exercise their right to withdraw should the EU be perceived to no longer serve their national interests are worthy of concern.

One of the core questions surrounding the future of multilateralism is how emerging great powers in an evolving international system that becomes multipolar in nature will approach multilateralism and multilateral institutions. In this calculation, examining the behaviour and attitudes of both China and Russia regarding multilateralism becomes important. What is evident from recent actions of both China and Russia is that multipolarity is likely to mean a greater emphasis on regional international societies than the global society of states, and global organizations may play less of a role than regional institutions or arrangements. In addition to emerging powers like China and Russia, one of the strategies other states have adopted in response to Trump and Brexit has been to recommit or further entrench into various forms of multilateralism, such as the Paris Climate Accord and the Trans-Pacific Partnership 11 deal. Before examining regional multilateral strategies, it is important to define what a regional international society is, how they differ from global international society, and how this affects state behaviour.

REGIONAL INTERNATIONAL SOCIETIES IN THE CONTEXT OF CHINA AND RUSSIA

The idea of international society, or a society of states, is grounded in the idea that self-interested states have, throughout history, come together both in formal and informal ways to collaborate and negotiate international order. States consciously negotiate the normative or institutional framework of a society of states in a given historical era, and the level of cooperation, integration and

¹⁵ John Redwood, "It's not just the UK that will benefit from Brexit. The EU will too," *The Guardian*, 20 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jun/20/not-just-uk-benefit-brexit-eu>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

stability between states in international society greatly depends on the structure of the international system at the time, the strategies and policies of the great power(s) dominating the system, and the influence from world society, or the domestic level. Robert Jackson summarizes international society as a conceptual tool by stating:

The conceptual key to international society is the manner in which sovereign states associate and relate: the character and modus operandi of their association and relations. It is formal in a significant way: it involves procedural standards of conduct, an essential normative basis of which is international law. However, it is also substantive in an equally significant way as it involves the pragmatic encounters of the separate national interests of those same independent states which, although subject to international law, are still free to lay down their own foreign policies.¹⁷

There are two variants of international societies—global international society, which describes the society of states across the world, and regional international society, which describes how states in particular regions have negotiated more concentrated versions of sub-global order. The normative and institutional frameworks of global international society and regional societies need not align or be the same, and regions need not be geographically bound. Like global international society, regional societies are typically dominated by the great powers within a given region and states negotiate the type of regional order they want. “Because the logic of anarchy works more powerfully over shorter rather than longer distances and because states living in close proximity with one another may be forced to establish by dialog and consent common rules and organizations for the conduct of their relations, regional/sub-global international societies may be created as a result.”¹⁸ As in global international society, multilateralism can be a strategy used by states in regional international societies as a means of formalizing their cooperation or can also complement the normative structure of a regional international society.

As the international system continues its evolution toward multipolarity, states are faced with the need to determine their approach to alliances and strategies that will both allow them to survive and also to pursue their interests. This need applies to great powers, as well as middle and minor powers,

¹⁷ Robert Jackson, *The Global Covenant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 102.

¹⁸ Yannis Stivachis, “International society and regional integration in Central Asia,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5 (2014), 71.

and one of the strategies states have been increasingly using is to negotiate regional international societies as a means of mitigating anarchy and strategizing around the emergence of a new systemic structure. Yannis Stivacthis argues there are three components to regional integration that can assist in determining the development of regional international societies: “1. the extent of dialog and consent to common rules and institutions among states, 2. the nature of the conduct of inter-state relations, and 3. recognition of common interests in maintaining agreed upon arrangements.”¹⁹ By examining the recent behaviour of China and Russia, it is clear that regionalism has become an important tool through which both states see value in exercising power, and more, that multilateralism plays a key role in approaches to establishing and maintaining regional order.

Matthias Vom Hau has identified four common strategies for international power projection being employed by BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) as a multipolar system emerges:

1. Issue leading: Involves coalition building and group formation entailing a multilateralist approach;

2. Opportunity seeking: Involves establishment of close bilateral relations with developing countries perceived as being of economic or strategic importance through trade agreements, bilateral treaties, or development partnerships and are often coupled with strategic investments. The focus of engagement here is countries, not organizations;

3. Region organizing: Involves leadership in organizations that represent a geographically defined area. This organization provides a forum for the multilateral negotiation of security, economic concerns, and regional identity construction;

4. Region mobilizing: Focuses on the cultivation of strategic and economic ties with neighbouring countries—multilateral or bilateral trade agreements. Regional mobilization is usually economically, politically and ideologically well-integrated within a particular region, and often acts as mediators for great powers and/or regional entry points for capital and trade.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid, 72.

²⁰ Matthias Vom Hau, “How the BRICS Exert Influence in the Global Politics of Development,” *e-International Relations*, 24 October 2017, <http://www.e-ir.info/2017/10/24/how-the-brics-exert-influence-in-the-global-politics-of-development/>.

Though a more regional focus has become increasingly evident in the behaviours of China and Russia as the system evolves, both are still actively engaged at the global level. A prominent recent example of China's global engagement strategy is the announcement of the One Belt, One Road initiative, through which China has expressed its intention to build or expand highways, railways, ports, pipelines, and power plants, and which could grow as large as \$1.3 trillion over the next decade.²¹ China has also invested significant resources in becoming a global clean energy leader. With the United States' withdrawal from the Paris accord, China has recognized an opportunity to be a leader in the area.²² China has also been using multilateral institutions like UNESCO to serve its strategic interests recently in its effort to extend its sphere of influence. This move "reflects Beijing's desire to project a more visible 'soft power' profile around the world and fill a political void left by the American administration that has grown skeptical of multilateralism."²³ China's engagement in global international society on soft power matters has been coupled with strengthening its relative power position regionally.

China's regional behaviour has been focused on political, security and economic matters, and demonstrates that regional international societies are just as important in the contemporary international system as global international society. As the system continues to evolve toward multipolarity, China has taken steps such as those outlined above to pursue its interests globally, but China continues to play a significant role regionally. Beyond military expansion, China's aggressive stance in the South China Sea, and the ongoing quest for balance with India, China has become an integral regional player in matters of economics and finance. China has helped fund two new and operational development banks, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank. China's commercial banks, the China Development Bank and the China Export-Import Bank, also lend

²¹ Jason Scott, Emi Nobuhiro, and Iain Marlow, "U.S.-Led Group Mulls Asia Infrastructure Effort Amid China Push," 18 February 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-18/u-s-led-group-mulls-asia-infrastructure-plan-australia-says>.

²² Amy Myers Jaffe, "Green Giant," *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/green-giant?cid=int-fls&pgtype=hpg>.

²³ Colum Lynch and Elias Groll, "As U.S. Retreats from World Organizations, China Steps in to Fill the Void," *Foreign Policy*, 6 October 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/06/as-u-s-retreats-from-world-organizations-china-steps-in-the-fill-the-void/>.

abroad.²⁴ With the expected retreat of American interest in Asia, this is a massive opportunity for China to assert itself as a regional economic power, and it has proven already through these actions that it intends to capitalize on this opportunity and is doing so by working through multilateral institutions.

Russia's global involvement differs greatly from that of China, given its aggressive actions both militarily and in the realm of cyber security. Russia remains an important player at the United Nations Security Council table by virtue of its status as a member of the Permanent 5, but sanctions and its increased status as an international pariah state have forced Russia to rely on its regional international society as a means of pursuing its interests. The Russian invasion of Crimea and Ukraine in 2014, as well as its ongoing support for the Assad regime in Syria, has served to significantly undermine Russia's ability to emerge in a multipolar structure with an improved power position outside of its regional international society. In Ukraine, Moscow views itself as merely pushing back against the expansion of the United States, NATO, and the EU, which it perceived as a threat to its own national interests. To counter Russia's inability to use its relative power position globally, it has sought influence through regional multilateral organizations.

Moscow has sought to make the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) a source of status for Russia on the global scale, while Beijing has been orienting the SCO toward China's economic goals in Central Asia where Russia is increasingly wary of competition with China.²⁵ The SCO is also of value to Russia, as it provides a forum for cooperation with both China and India, which was admitted as a member along with Pakistan in 2017. Among the challenges to the SCO growing in influence and success has been the inability of its member states to abandon national interest and work collectively. Russia has been working to strengthen the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a way for Moscow to increase its status in relations with NATO.²⁶ Despite the CSTO not being widely perceived as influential or well-functioning, Russia sees extraordinary value in a regional alliance predicated on the principle of collective security.

²⁴ Homi Kharas, "Multilateralism under stress," Brookings Institution, August 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/global-20170731-blum-homikharas-brief-5.pdf>.

²⁵ Mikhail Troitskiy, "Power, Status, and Entanglement: Russia's Evolving Approach to Multilateral Institutions," *Russian Politics & Law* 24, no. 5-6 (September-December 2016), 416.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 416-417.

Perhaps the most successful example of Russian regional multilateral engagement has been in the Arctic. The Arctic has become a crucial area of focus for Russia, and its ongoing cooperation with the other Arctic states, including the US and other NATO members, seems to contradict its behaviour elsewhere in the geopolitical landscape and challenges the notion that problems in global international society automatically mean issues regionally. This demonstrates that states consciously negotiate order to suit their interests, and that these interests can differ greatly at the global level versus regional level. Stivachtis argues:

Opening the regional level of analysis might have serious implications for understanding institutions and norms like sovereignty, diplomacy, balance of power and others which exist and are performed at both global and regional level as, in many cases, regions form their own sub-global (regional) international societies which co-exist with global international society.²⁷

The Arctic international society has allowed Russia to cooperate with other Arctic states, observer states, and indigenous groups in ways that have led to the emergence of a regional society of states built on the foundation of multilateralism and engagement. Robert Murray and Heather Exner-Pirot emphasize the institutional framework of the Arctic international society:

Although the international system has evolved, state interests in the Arctic have remained largely intact and have led to normative institutions predicated on cooperation and multilateralism. These include: (1) efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region, echoed more contemporarily in the confidence-building efforts attempted through the Arctic Chiefs of Defense Staff meetings (though suspended after only two gatherings in 2014 after the Crimea intervention); (2) the establishment in 2015 and continuing efforts of an Arctic Coast Guard Forum; and (3) a premium placed on cooperation with regards to economic, scientific and environmentalist endeavors, manifested in the work of the Arctic Council, various scientific organizations, fishery regulations, the establishment of mandatory polar shipping guidelines, and the large number of other Arctic conferences and forums on a variety of topics.²⁸

²⁷ Yannis Stivachtis, "Shifting Gears: From Global to Regional—The English School and the Study of Sub-Global International Societies," *System, Society and the World: Exploring the English School of International Relations*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert W. Murray (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2015), 69.

²⁸ Robert W. Murray and Heather Exner-Pirot, "Regional Order in the Arctic: Negotiated Exceptionalism," *Politik* 20:3 (2017), 52.

Though the narrative around potential Russian aggression in the Arctic continues to exist, history and current evidence show quite clearly that Russia has been an important player in the establishment and conduct of a cooperative Arctic society of states.

CONCLUSION

This paper does not mean to argue that the existing and emerging threats to multilateralism are not to be taken seriously, but instead, argues that multilateralism has never been safe from scrutiny and criticism, even from those states perceived to be the guarantors of multilateral norms and institutions. Further, the ongoing evolution of the international system does not eliminate states' desire to pursue their interests, but rather, necessitates a shift in strategy away from multilateral institutions that may be subject to systemic dynamics and toward those at the regional level. If states, especially great powers, perceive their interests to be threatened or difficult to pursue at the global level, they will naturally seek to capitalize on regional spheres of influence. This is especially true in a multipolar systemic structure, as there are more competing powers and alliances become even more important. Multilateralism, even for those emerging great powers like China and Russia, has not eroded, but rather, has begun to shift to a more regional character. Powers in the emerging world order continue to demonstrate the strategic benefit of multilateralism and the growth in both the number and importance of regional institutions is likely to continue as multipolarity emerges.

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