

# Multipolarity, Multilateralism and Beyond ...?EU–China Understandings of the International System

International Relations  
27(1) 30–51

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DOI: 10.1177/0047117812463153

ire.sagepub.com



**David A Scott**

Brunel University

## Abstract

The European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) both use the terms 'multipolarity' and 'multilateralism' in their 'public diplomacy' rhetoric and in their analyses of the international system. However, while the EU stresses multilateralism, the PRC remains explicit in its welcome of multipolarity. Yet shifts are apparent. In part, there may be some 'international socialisation' in play in which EU multilateralism usage, normative underpinnings, rub off on the PRC. In part, both terms are being supplemented by still wider overlapping terms of references for an untidy multilevel international system, such as 'interpolarity', 'asymmetrical multipolarity', 'region-polarity', 'inter-regionalism', 'multilateralising multipolarity' and 'multi-multilateralism'. An untidy multilevel EU may find it easier to operate in such a shifting international system than a tidy sovereignty-sensitive PRC?

## Keywords

China, constructivism, European Union, international system, multilateralism, multipolarity

## Introduction

This is a study of two international relations (IR) terms, namely, *multipolarity* and *multilateralism*. They are looked at through the usage of them by the European Union (EU) and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Why look at these two terms in a single comparative paper? After all, these are different types of statements concerning the international system. The term 'multipolarity' is a measurement of the distribution of power as concentrated in several poles of power, those poles being Great Powers. The

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### Corresponding author:

David A Scott, Brunel University, 3 Silver Hill, Rochester, Kent ME1 3JL, UK.

Email: david.scott@brunel.ac.uk

term ‘multilateralism’ is a process; a way of acting that involves several states (big, medium, or small) working together as a matter of practice. Comparisons are further complicated by the nature of the EU and the PRC as rather different political creatures; the EU is a regional organisation with some supranational powers, while the PRC is a sovereign state.

However, they are both international actors of growing significance in the international system. Consequently, how the EU and the PRC view the international system is juxtaposed and compared here, precisely because both of them are significant actors able to impact on the structure and workings of the international system. EU and PRC usage of these two terms in their *public diplomacy* language says something about each of these two actors, as well as something about the structural processes and trends affecting the international system as a whole and within which these two actors are operating. Both terms are being subject to further re-conceptualisation as the very nature of the international system shifts.

These two IR words (‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’) are English terms, a common international medium for both actors in their public diplomacy language and for academic analysis. They represent deliberate use by the EU and the PRC for an audience, the international community. Consequently, it is EU and PRC statements and related commentaries in English that are analysed to see how these terms are deployed. In the case of the PRC, the line between academic and official state discourse on these two terms is a porous one; while English-language sources like the *People’s Daily* (and its *Global Times* offshoot), the newspaper of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, further blur the line between official statements and secondary domestic commentary but are all the more usable for that.

Four main points arise about these words ‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’. First, there is a clear difference of emphasis and of timing between the EU and PRC use of these two terms, with the PRC having adopted a more frequent and overt use of ‘multipolarity’ in its public diplomacy language than has the EU. Second, there is a degree of convergence in the last decade with both actors frequently invoking ‘multilateralism’, but this masks a divergence between a normative (values) EU use of multilateralism terminology versus a more instrumental PRC use of multilateralism terminology. Third, there may be an important long-term identity-related process of socialisation going on, in which the PRC’s deployment of multilateralism in its public diplomacy language is now starting to move from an instrumental to a normative usage, perhaps in part resulting from the PRC’s interaction with the EU. Fourth, the terms ‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’ are also themselves shifting in the international system, overlapping and widening through incorporating the role of regions and of various transnational forces.

In terms of the structure of this article, a general initial section discussing the two words ‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’ is followed by consecutive sections looking at the respective treatment of these two terms by the EU and the PRC. This juxtaposition brings out comparisons, the similarities and differences in the EU and PRC diplomatic lexicon. A further section follows on how these terms play out in EU and PRC comments on each other and on their self-proclaimed ‘strategic partnership’.

## The terms and IR theory

*Multipolarity* is a structural-descriptive measurement word for the existence of several centres of power, multiple ‘poles’, in the international system. As such, multipolarity is a particular distribution of strength analysis. The process leading to multipolarity is *multipolarisation*, and the policies designed to facilitate such a process is *multipolarism*. Other distribution patterns include the two-bloc *bipolarity* of the Cold War, where power was concentrated between the United States and the Soviet Union, and *unipolarity*, where there is only one main pole of power, represented in America’s so-called unipolar moment in the post-Cold War 1990s. The multipolarity pattern now emerging is not so much a matter of fixed permanent alignments. Rather, this post-Cold War multipolarity involves diffused and fluid alliances of the moment coalescing around different issues and with differential power capacities across the hard power–soft power spectrum. However, multipolarity retains its basic structural sense of pointing to differentiated power distribution in and across the international system, with new rising centres of power that include the EU and the PRC.<sup>1</sup> This gives the concept of multipolarity coherence and practical consequences, in which multiple centres of power bring the possibility of multiple relationships, partnerships and alignments between these various poles of power. At this point, we are in the world of strategic geometry and power politics, the stamping ground of IR *realism*.

Meanwhile, *multilateralism* is a way of operating in the international system, a process in Ruggie’s view that ‘coordinates behaviour among three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct’.<sup>2</sup> Ruggie’s preceding definition is clear enough but can be adjusting here to take account of the EU’s nature as not a national-level state but rather a regional organisation with some supranational powers and some increasing capacity to operate multilaterally as an international actor. Multilateralism frequently has the sense of the international actor operating with a wider range of other states than just other Great Powers. Interactions for international actors like the EU and the PRC can be not only with other states but also with other regional and international organisations. At this point, we are in the world of cooperative idealism, the stamping ground of IR *liberalism-functionalism*.

EU and the PRC usage of the terms ‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’ shines a light on the identity that each actor sees for itself in the international system and the image that it wants to show the world; two matters that are not necessarily identical. At this point of identity and image, IR *constructivism* theory can be brought into play behind the empirical examples of public diplomacy language usage. Within IR constructivism, Onuf reckoned that ‘constructivism fosters a sensitivity to language ... Speech and its derivatives (rules, policies) are the media of social construction ... Performative speech is the basis of, and template for, normative conduct’.<sup>3</sup> Norms, ‘values’ in other words, are though highly contextual, politically and culturally laden, both in the abstract and in the actuality of language encapsulation. Hopf’s sense of ‘the promise of constructivism in international relations theory’ was because it brought out ‘the power of knowledge, ideas, culture, ideology, and language, that is, discourse ... ideas are a form of power ... discursive power’.<sup>4</sup> Such talk of *discursive power* echoes Boulding’s sense almost a half century ago on how public images of international actors emanate from a ‘universe of discourse’.<sup>5</sup>

Discourse analysis, traditional and critical, of EU and PRC deployment of multipolar and multilateral terminology in their public diplomacy language is what this article aims to do, through close scrutiny and contextualisation of their respective deployment of these two terms.

Having set out the terms, it is now to empirical deployment of them that we turn, the ways in which the EU and the PRC use and understand ‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’. We can bear in mind Renard and Biscop’s advice, in their study of EU multilateralism and multipolarism, that ‘in international politics, rhetoric and the choice of words are never innocent’; something that is also very true in the case of the PRC.<sup>6</sup>

## EU and multilateralism

One explanation for the European stress on multilateralism is to see it as a response to American unilateralism under the Bush Presidency of 2001–2009.<sup>7</sup> Another explanation is to consider it as reflecting a degree of EU failure in grasping the nettle of hard power multipolarity game playing. This is Renard’s argument; that faced with ‘this rising multipolarity ... it is in the interest of the EU ... to promote an international order based on systemic and rule-based multilateralism because the EU is simply unable to play [multipolar] realpolitik with other global players’.<sup>8</sup> The EU has no developed Great Power military presence, so its focus on multilateralism can be seen as in the EU’s interests, because it offers an alternative non-military avenue for its presence in multilateral negotiation, for which it is well equipped.

However, European multilateralism has its own positive roots. Grant’s sense is that ‘the concept of multilateralism is engrained into the DNA of European politicians, since the Union is itself a multilateral construction’.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the various EU members constantly negotiate between each other (and with the EU institutions), through a process of internal multilateralism in the flow of EU policymaking and adjustments. This is why Groom talks of ‘multilateralism as a way of life in Europe’.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Keohane talks of EU ‘supralateralism’; Lucarelli considers the EU as a ‘champion of multilateralism’, Higgot reckons on the EU having a ‘normative disposition for multilateralism’, and Macaj sees an ‘imperative multilateralism’ on the part of the EU.<sup>11</sup>

This is not to deny that different EU levels can stress different themes, with the EU Commission particularly strong on deploying supranational and multilateralism language. This is also not to deny that EU member states still operate their own external foreign policies within varying degrees of common, or not, European positions. They remain member states with international capacities, with which other actors like the PRC interact. Indeed, Franco-Chinese rhetoric frequently deploys ‘multipolarity’ in Joint Statements about their self-proclaimed ‘strategic partnership’. Nevertheless, it remains true and noticeable that amid a gradual process of integration; for the EU ‘multilateralism represents the formally preferred option (as defined explicitly in the Lisbon Treaty)’.<sup>12</sup> The *Treaty of Lisbon*, which came into effect in 2009, affirmed in its Article 21.h that ‘the [European] Union shall ... promote an international system based on stronger multilateral cooperation’.

Its own nature as a regionally derived organisation means that EU multilateralism operates not only at the national level with other non-EU states but also at the global

level in multilateral frameworks ('intersecting multilateralisms') and with other regional structures (its 'interregionalist agenda').<sup>13</sup> Typical of EU multilateralism-laden inter-regionalism was its 2007 Summit *Joint Declaration* with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), to:

Develop ASEAN-EU consultations/cooperation in multilateral fora ... in order to strengthen the multilateral system and, where appropriate, to develop joint positions; and enhance the role of multilateral cooperation in Asia ... and promote regional and multilateral counter-terrorism efforts ... promote energy security and multilateral measures ... support ASEAN in implementing the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAS).<sup>14</sup>

A numeric count of the whole text shows multilateralism appearing six times and multipolarity no times, a simple but revealing enough statistic. With regard to Asia, the EU's *Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships* document, released in 2001, recorded an EU 'priority' of 'encouraging Asia to play a greater role in multilateral fora'; with 'multilateralism' evoked 17 times but 'multipolarity' none.<sup>15</sup> With regard to Latin America, the EU's *Strategy Paper 2007–20013* invoked 'multilateralism' four times, but 'multipolarity' none.<sup>16</sup>

As such, multilateralism is part of EU values and principles, an attractive norm that is frequently emphasised by the EU, part of its so-called normative power that Diez and Pace see as 'a discursive construction'.<sup>17</sup> There is an irony here, as commentators like Fiott question the impact of such EU normative soft power in a hard power multipolar world.<sup>18</sup> However, in their analysis of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Adler and Crawford argue that such norms (the value and stress placed on multilateralism by the EU) provide a different paradigm to *balance of power* (multipolarity) frameworks and that such multilateralism norms may 'diffuse in time and space (geographically and functionally)'.<sup>19</sup> How far such multilateral norm practice has also diffused from the EU to the PRC is a further question in this present article.

Certainly, the EU frequently cites multilateralism as a desirable practice for itself and others or more precisely what it calls *effective multilateralism*. Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy from 2004 to 2009, argued that 'never has the world needed effective multilateralism more than today ... multilateralism is the only effective approach'.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, multipolarity was absent in her speech. While the EU's 2003 *European Security Strategy* avoided any mention of 'multipolarity', it mentioned 'multilateralism' five times. This included a section 'An International Order Based on Effective Multilateralism', in which 'the development of a stronger international society, well-functioning international institutions and a rule-based international order is our objective'.<sup>21</sup> Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy from 1999 to 2009, stressed the EU's position as a normative, values-fostering and multilateralism-orientated actor: 'Europe is a new form of power. A force for good around the world. A promoter of multilateralism, international law and justice'.<sup>22</sup> EU claims are consequently high, 'at a global level, Europe must lead a renewal of the multilateral order'.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, and significantly, EU official rhetoric with other major states, potential Great Power partners in a multipolar world, generally and deliberately evoke multilateralism rather than multipolarity. Take for example EU statements drawn up with India,

another major rising power. The EU–India 2005 Summit, which proclaimed their ‘strategic partnership’, referred in their *Joint Action Plan* to ‘multilateralism’ eight times but left multipolarity unused as a term.<sup>24</sup> Four years later, their 2009 Summit *Joint Statement* started off with a section on ‘strengthening the multilateral system’, in which ‘both India and the EU agreed on the importance of an effective multilateral system’, with three mentions of ‘multilateralism’ against none for ‘multipolarity’.<sup>25</sup> The trip to India in 2010 of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, brought her own emphasis: ‘the EU and India share both aspirations and fundamental values, notably a commitment to multilateralism in world affairs’.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, PRC–India joint statements habitually stress their common interests in a ‘multipolar world’.

The President of the European Commission, Jose Barroso, considered the role of multilateralism in a substantive 2010 policy paper *The European Union and Multilateral Global Governance*. He argued for ‘the EU’s role in reinforcing multilateral rules and institutions at the global level. Multilateralism is the right mechanism to build order and governance in a multipolar world, and the European Union is well-placed to make a decisive contribution’ to the debate.<sup>27</sup> His goal was ‘to create a normative framework’ and ‘stimulate the reinforcement of multilateral institutions’.<sup>28</sup> Barroso’s pinpointing of multilateralism as a ‘normative framework’ is significant. In his eyes, Europe could set an example (e.g. to the PRC): ‘the creation of an institutional multilateral order in Western Europe’ meant that ‘the European Union can play an important role in the reinforcement of multilateral global institutions’.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, Barroso reckoned that ‘the European Union indeed is indispensable partner for global multilateralism’, given ‘our experience with multilateral reciprocity, the core of European politics’.<sup>30</sup> While multilateralism has been the dominant discourse formulation for the EU, what of its deployment of ‘multipolarity’ language?

## EU and multipolarity

At the EU level, multipolarity has appeared intermittently in its public diplomacy rhetoric. In 2002, Pascal Lamy, the French EU Commissioner for Trade gave ‘multipolarity’ as an ‘objective and principle’ of EU external policy.<sup>31</sup> His successor as EU Commissioner for Trade, Peter Mandelson, also deployed multipolar language; fittingly enough in a speech concerning the EU and China. In that particular presentation, Mandelson argued that ‘in this multi-polar world, the challenge for the EU and China is to create a strategic vision of the kind of partnership we want ... The EU is an essential component of a multipolar world’.<sup>32</sup> EU security deliberations have included Solana’s sense that ‘this is increasingly a multipolar world’, within which the EU is operating.<sup>33</sup> Great Power multipolar relationships were the outcome for Solana: ‘a stronger Europe with a common strategic vision is also a Europe capable of consolidating relationships with the other great partners’ like the PRC.<sup>34</sup>

While its ‘strategic partnerships’ are generally officially described in multilateral tones by the EU, there has been some recognition of multipolarity in EU official rhetoric. For example, as soon as the EU–India Summits commenced in 2000, the phrase ‘global actors in the multipolar world’ was deployed in their *Joint Declarations* of 2000, 2001,

2002, 2003 and 2006. In 2003, the EU's *A Maturing Partnership* document on relations with the PRC edged towards a degree of multipolarism with its analysis that 'China's geopolitical vision of a multipolar world, and the Chinese perception of the EU as a partner of growing importance, also provide a favourable context' for the EU–China strategic partnership, in which 'the EU as a global player on the international scene, shares China's concerns for a more balanced international order'.<sup>35</sup>

As already noted, the President of the European Commission, Jose Barroso, has given some thought to the role of multipolarity and multilateralism for the EU. However, he acknowledged some advantages to multipolarity: 'there are, clearly, some virtues in a multipolar international society. It limits "hegemonic" power, which can often be a source of instability'.<sup>36</sup> Barroso openly adopted multipolar terminology in one speech in 2011:

the bi-polar system of the world before 1989 has been replaced by a multi-polar, more unstable and more unpredictable world ... if Europe wants to play its role in this new world, our nation states must realize that they do not have the power or influence to do so alone.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, he warned that 'it would be unwise to overlook the risks associated with multipolarity'.<sup>38</sup> Lessons remained from the past: 'the dangers of ... multipolar strategies in terms of expansion and competition for dominance ... attempts to create a multipolar balance of power ... ended up in violent competition between great powers'.<sup>39</sup> This was why he argued:

I do not agree with those who believe that a multipolar world will solve all the problems we face today. Europe tried a multipolar balance of power in the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth century ... but let us not forget that multipolar systems are based on rivalry and competition.<sup>40</sup>

It was not just lessons from the past; it was also the present in which 'the bipolar system of the world before 1989 has been replaced by a multipolar, more unstable and more unpredictable world'.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, 'having delegitimized multipolar power politics in the European continent', Barroso felt that 'the [European] Union must now work to prevent the emergence of this [multipolar] model on a global scale'.<sup>42</sup> In contrast to the EU, the PRC has made much greater use of overt multipolarity language, to which we can now turn.

## China and multipolarity

Since the 1990s, 'multipolarity' (*duojihua*) has been a frequently invoked term by the PRC in its analysis of China's international environment.<sup>43</sup> Hence, treatment of China and multipolarity is considered before treatment of China and multilateralism. Deng Xiaoping was clear enough on multipolar openings for China back in 1990: 'in [the] future when the world becomes three-polar, four-polar or five-polar ... in the so-called multi-polar world, China too will be a pole'.<sup>44</sup>

In terms of Deng's 'future', as China rises, it seeks to facilitate this process of multipolarisation. It was for this reason that the *Joint Statement* issued by China and Russia in

1997 was entitled *Multipolarisation of the World and the Establishment of a New International Order*. Chinese scholars recognise the importance of multipolarisation for China's strategic calculations. Wang Jisi argued in 2001 that 'the key notion and belief in China's conceptualization of international politics today is "multipolarization"', while 4 years later, Ren Xio's sense of multipolarisation was that 'no other theoretical reasoning has greater impact upon actual Chinese foreign policy than this'.<sup>45</sup> Yet this theoretical reasoning has also been a practical exercise, the PRC media describing China's diplomacy (including its public diplomacy language?) as 'a pragmatic line that China has to walk in a multi-polar era taking shape faster than we had foreseen'.<sup>46</sup>

The PRC 'stresses' the role of multipolarity in the international system: 'world multipolarization, as the requirement of history' as the *People's Daily* put it.<sup>47</sup> One of Hu Jintao's first major foreign policy speeches in 2001 emphasised that 'multipolarity constitutes an important base' for Chinese foreign policy.<sup>48</sup> Hu continued over the years, in 2007 and 2010, for example, to call for 'the establishment of a multipolar world'.<sup>49</sup> A rebalancing of the international system was what he had in mind: 'the progress toward a multipolar world is irreversible ... the international balance of power is changing'.<sup>50</sup>

In any multipolar setting, it is relations (and balancing calculations) with other poles of power that become important. Hence, Zhang Yongjin's sense that 'central to the [Chinese] multipolarization discourse are Great Power relations', a discourse encapsulated in the PRC formulation *daguo shi guanjian* 'Great Powers are the key'.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, 'multipolarity' has regularly featured in *Declarations* drawn up by the PRC with other significant powers like Russia, India, France and Iran, as well as in other groupings like RIC (Russia, India, China) and BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China).

In contrast, multipolarity has never featured in PRC-US Declarations. This is not surprising. Anti-hegemony (*fan ba*) remains a key Chinese imperative, faced as it is with more powerful neighbours: previously in the shape of the now-defunct Soviet Union and currently in the shape of the United States. The PRC has been clear enough on trying to facilitate a multipolar world, in which 'multi-polarization on the whole helps weaken and curb hegemonism'.<sup>52</sup> Admittedly, such a process is officially described as not being aimed at the US and its power: 'our efforts to promote the development of the world towards multipolarization are not targeted at any particular country'.<sup>53</sup> However, at the *Global Times*, Wang Yizhou was explicit enough that 'one of the basic goals of multipolarity is to prevent the United States from becoming the one and only hegemonic power in the world and to preempt its possible negative impact or pressures on China'.<sup>54</sup>

Such compensatory balancing is why the PRC sees the United States as unable in the long term to retain its so-called unipolar moment gained in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Amid long-term 'decline' (*shuai luo*), US 'unipolarity' (*danjihua*) is envisaged as giving way to multipolar settings for the coming century. The official PRC view is that this is a structural process: 'the multipolarization process may be zigzag, protracted and full of struggles, but this is a historical trend independent of human will'.<sup>55</sup> There may then still be an asymmetrical distribution of power between the US and the PRC, but a plurality of power centres can compensate for that in Chinese thinking, as long as they do not balance against China.<sup>56</sup> As the PRC's *National Defense in 2008* put it: trends of 'world multi-polarization are gaining momentum ... major powers ... continue to compete with and hold each other in check, and groups of new emerging

developing powers are arising. Therefore, a profound readjustment is brewing in the international system'.<sup>57</sup> Such an underlying analysis lay behind the China–Russia *Joint Declaration* in 2008 that 'the trend towards a multi-polar world is irreversible', a formula repeated in the *China's National Defense in 2010* that 'progress towards ... a multi-polar world is irreversible'.<sup>58</sup> In the wake of US economic difficulties in early 2009, the *People's Daily* argued that 'a new phase of multipolar world power structure will come into being in 2009, and the international order will be correspondingly reshuffled'.<sup>59</sup> Financial shifts brought similar deployment of multipolar language in the *People's Daily* in 2010.<sup>60</sup>

Various Chinese scholars inside the PRC (like Chen Dongxiao) and outside the PRC (like Shen Dingli and Chen Zhimin) have been blunt on the 'balancing' dynamics within emerging multipolar structures.<sup>61</sup> Such approaches fall into the Great Powers School of thought within PRC debate; those who continue to 'argue that China should concentrate its diplomacy on managing its relations with the world's major powers and blocs ... while paying relatively less attention to the developing world or multilateralism'.<sup>62</sup> However, while 'multipolarity' has been a strong feature of PRC public diplomacy language, it has been supplemented (though not necessarily supplanted) by a rising use of 'multilateralism' language. We can now turn to this development.

## China and multilateralism

Advocacy of 'multilateralism' (*duobian zhuyi*) has been a relatively slow development for the PRC. A somewhat 'conditional' hesitation surrounded its initial deployment and usage in the 1990s.<sup>63</sup> Suisheng Zhao's retrospective judgment is that 'China's involvement in multilateralism at the time [1990s] was mostly aimed at promoting "multipolarization" in an attempt to counter U.S. preponderance rather than adopting multilateralism per se'.<sup>64</sup>

Following what has been dubbed a 'turn to multilateralism', official deployment of the term 'multilateralism' became noticeable.<sup>65</sup> In the PRC's *China's Defense in 2004* (and then 2006, 2008, 2010) reviews, it was indicative that both terms were used, but 'multipolarity' was overshadowed by 'multilateralism' usage, that is, 3:19 (multipolarity:multilateralism) in 2004, 1:5 in 2006, 1:9 in 2008 and 2:11 in 2010. Again, the simple numerical counting is important given the very deliberate crafting of terminology by the PRC. By 2009, the *People's Daily* was talking of China's 'embrace of multilateralism'.<sup>66</sup> At the start of 2012, the PRC Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi gave an image reassurance rationale for the policy, 'Chinese leaders' participation in multilateral summits [is] to show that China is a big responsible country on the multilateral stage'.<sup>67</sup>

Among the academic community in China, it is significant that Chinese academic and policy journals after 2000 showed a gradual decline in discussion of multipolarity and a dramatic increase for multilateralism. PRC scholars like Chen Dongxiao pinpoint the 'strategic value of multilateral diplomacy, which has served [an instrumental choice of word] as a new stage to improve China's national image'.<sup>68</sup> Similarly for Pan Zhongqi, 'the transformation of China's diplomacy ... from bilateral engagement to multilateral

engagement ... is closely related to China's image of world order and the dynamic change of its image gap'.<sup>69</sup>

Some authors see a *practical multilateralism* of the 1990s (in which the PRC joined existing Western-shaped organisations on their terms) giving way to a more *strategic multilateralism* in which China has sought to adjust such organisations and set up new structures.<sup>70</sup> This is reflected in PRC assertions that 'multilateral participation will benefit China in its strategies gearing up to a peaceful rise'; for 'only through partaking in the multilateral institutions, can emerging economies [like China] possess the likelihood to alter the existing international power structures and operating rules'.<sup>71</sup> This PRC multilateralism operates not only with other states but also with regional organisations, reflecting Song Xinning's sense of a PRC's shift 'from bilateralism to regional-multilateralism'.<sup>72</sup> A centre stage for PRC advocacy of global multilateralism has been the UN Security Council, where the China's veto can maintain Chinese sovereignty. Hence, Hu Jintao's line that 'we should uphold the [UN] Council's authority by adhering to multilateralism ... by strengthening multilateral cooperation, enhancing the role of the United Nations and maintaining the authority of the Security Council in particular'.<sup>73</sup> Chinese multilateralism can also be seen as hard-headed (IR *realism*) calculation to restrain US unilateralism.<sup>74</sup>

However, the PRC continues to lay emphasis on maintaining 'sovereignty' (*zhuquan*) and resisting what it sees as outside 'interference'. As the *Global Times* put it, 'sovereignty reigns supreme in rebalanced world order'.<sup>75</sup> Thus, for one PRC scholar Huang Jin, 'beneath this [sovereignty] stance is China's lingering suspicion of foreign powers and their dominance in IMGs (Informal Multilateral Groupings) ... as a result, China's participation in the IMGs remains clouded with scepticism'.<sup>76</sup> It is noticeable that China continues to block formal multilateral forums like ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the East Asia Summit (EAS) from dealing with sovereignty and territorial negotiation issues in the South China Sea. The PRC refused Vietnamese attempts to raise the issue at ASEAN, with the PRC media arguing instead that 'Vietnam is making the issue a multilateral one and even involving more international players outside Asia. However, its strategy will not be a successful one because China opposes such moves'.<sup>77</sup> US attempts to raise the South China Sea issue at the July 2010 ARF meeting were met with similar dismissal by the PRC Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi: 'if this issue is turned into an international or multilateral one, it will only make matters worse and the resolution more difficult ... the best way to resolve such disputes is for countries concerned to have direct bilateral negotiations'.<sup>78</sup>

Where does this leave the PRC and multilateralism? From an explicitly Chinese position, Song Xinning summarised that in the PRC, 'we are still uncomfortable with multilateralism, and prefer bilateralism and multipolarity'.<sup>79</sup> Shambaugh has pinpointed three multilateralism variants within PRC discourse, variants that he linked to wider IR theory. Shambaugh's first variant was the *Selective Multilateralism* school, in which multilateralism 'is a tactic, not a philosophy. Proponents are not [IR] Liberal Institutionalists, but are more an internationalist version of realists'.<sup>80</sup> This is why Huang Weiping and Song Xinning argued that 'for China, multilateralism is more like a kind of diplomatic tool rather than a mechanism for international order'.<sup>81</sup> Shambaugh's second variants were those within the *Asia First* school, like Qin Yaqing, 'who push for multilateral

regionalism ... drawing their intellectual inspiration from international relations constructivism abroad. They emphasize normative behaviour'.<sup>82</sup> Shambaugh's third variants, within the *Globalism School*, were those who were 'interested in soft not hard power, and put their faith in diplomacy and pan-regional partnerships. They are more supportive and trusting of multilateral institutions than the Selective Multilateralists'.<sup>83</sup> The PRC government seems to be still in the (former) camp of tactical 'selective multilateralism', but continuing use of multilateralism rhetoric may shift it into the (latter) camp of genuine *normative multilateralism*.

## Multipolarity and multilateralism terminology in EU–China relations

Because of their different backgrounds and different concerns, the EU and China have not had identical takes on the role of 'multipolarity' and 'multilateralism' in the international system. In part, this reflects their differing attitudes to sovereignty. As one PRC scholar summarised, 'historically, sovereignty is what Europeans invented and what the Chinese were forced to accept, today it is what Europeans try to bury and what the Chinese hold dear'.<sup>84</sup> This conceptual gap in EU and PRC deployment of 'multipolarity' and 'multilateralism' terminology can be teased out by looking at their *Joint Declarations* and other statements made by them on each other and on their relationship, in which as Callahan argues 'language politics' is indeed in action.<sup>85</sup>

With regard to the language actually appearing at EU–China Summit meetings, multilateralism is used, and multipolarity is generally left unused. China may have wanted to insert 'multipolarity' into their first 1998 Summit, but any such hopes came up against EU reluctance to use the term, for fear that it might antagonise the USA. Scrutiny of EU–China *Joint Declarations* shows 'multilateralism' terminology appeared in their 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009 and 2012 Summits. The 2007 *Joint Declaration* had such evocation by the EU and China:

Emphasising the paramount need for effective multilateralism, leaders stressed their strong support for a fair, just and rules-based multilateral international system with the UN playing a central role ... The two sides maintained that multilateralism served as an important means to resolve international disputes ... The two sides stressed the importance of multilateralism in the fight against terrorism.<sup>86</sup>

In contrast, 'multipolarity' nowhere appears in summit-level *Joint Declarations* between the EU and China. However, while this initially suggests some EU–PRC convergence, divergent usage can be seen in the ways in which the PRC continues to often have 'multipolarity' in its *Joint Declarations* drawn up with other major partners, while the EU tends not to now. The divide is not absolute, but there remains a difference between the two actors in their frequency of use of the two terms.

Given its own preference for multilateralism over multipolarity language, EU sources have been more than ready to see multilateralism at play in China's foreign policy. In 2003, the EU Commission judged that the 'EU and China share views on the importance of multilateral systems and rules for global governance'.<sup>87</sup> Elsewhere in the

EU machinery, Solana stressed in 2005 how ‘multilateralism and respect for international law are fundamental tenets of the EU’s foreign policy. And I know the same is true for China’.<sup>88</sup> Back in the Commission, Ferrero-Waldner’s sense, or perhaps hope, was that ‘our vision is a world governed by *rules* created and monitored by multilateral institutions. And I know China shares this approach’.<sup>89</sup> The same year, 2005, the EU Commission President Barroso told Wen Jiabao of ‘our shared belief in multilateralism’.<sup>90</sup> His predecessor as Commission President, Romano Prodi, repeated this identification that China and the EU had ‘a common vision of the principle of multilateralism’.<sup>91</sup> This certainly indicates something of the EU’s own preference for multilateralism language, but does it with regard to the PRC?

While, like Barroso, the PRC also asserts that in the EU–China relationship, ‘both sides stand for multilateralism’, it is not clear that the EU’s more normative sense and commitment to multilateralism is actually the same stand as China’s more instrumental–tactical sense and commitment to multilateralism.<sup>92</sup> Conversely, given its own frequent usage of multipolarity language, PRC sources have been more than ready to see multipolarity at play in China–EU links. This may, or indeed may not, be accurate in terms of the EU’s own self-perceptions, and it may perhaps strengthen such (implicit) tendencies within the EU, but it certainly indicates something of China’s own continuing (explicit) interest in the EU as a ‘multipolar’ partner. Such balancing perceptions about the EU (then the EEC) were prominent in the 1970s and 1980s when the PRC was looking for partners to balance against the Soviet Union. They have re-emerged in the last decade, though the EU has remained reluctant to balance (or at least use balancing language) as a multipolar partner for China against the US.<sup>93</sup>

Despite such EU reserve, the PRC leadership has remained ready to give a multipolar slant to their relationship. The first-ranking Vice-Premier (and probable successor to Wen Jiabao as prime minister) Li Keqiang argued in 2009 that ‘both China and the EU are the motivators of world multipolarization’.<sup>94</sup> Wen Jiabao asserted in 2010, at a joint EU–China Press Conference, that ‘we both stand for world multipolarity’, in which ‘we believe Europe is an independent pole in the world’.<sup>95</sup> The ironical thing, as already noted, is that the EU leadership does a similar but opposite thing, claiming that they share a common multilateral vision with the PRC. It was revealing that Barroso’s contribution at that joint EU–China Press Conference was instead to not mention multipolarity but instead to invoke multilateralism.<sup>96</sup>

Military commentators in the PRC have also employed such linkage. Colonel Wang Guoqiang’s analysis in 2002 was that ‘deepening cooperation between China and the EU can further promote the development of the multipolar process ... China will align with Europe’.<sup>97</sup> Two years later, Major General Pan Zhenqiang was reckoning on ‘European integration further moving ahead as one of the positive signs that the world is moving towards healthy multipolarity’, and that ‘in China’s perspective, the strengthened ties between the two sides [EU-China] will be an integral part of a multipolar world in the future’.<sup>98</sup> PRC analysts such as Huo Zhengde, Zhang Linchu and Zhuang Yixiang, Feng Zhongping and Yang Jiemin continue to interpret EU–China links in general multipolar frames.<sup>99</sup> Chen Zemin was pointed with one European audience:

In the future, we can expect China to maintain system balance ... System balance demands that the international system should be a multi-polarized one with no single power dominating the system. To pursue that goal, China needs to build and consolidate strategic partnerships with like-minded states, using soft balancing tools, to ensure that the remaining superpower [the US] would not resort to unilateral and hegemonic foreign policy... China has still very strong soft-balancing motivations to invest in the relationship with Europe.<sup>100</sup>

Other PRC scholars like Mei Zhaorong and Zhang Xiaoming have been ready to point out the EU's balancing potential, alongside the PRC, vis-à-vis the US in such a multipolar setting and multipolarisation process.<sup>101</sup>

Are such differences between the EU and the PRC in emphasis and usage of the terms 'multipolarity' and 'multilateralism' an issue between these two actors? In one interesting speech in 2005, appropriately enough titled *The EU, China and the Quest for a Multilateral World*, Ferrero-Waldner expressed reservations over use of multipolarity languages, with China in mind it would seem:

China and the EU are obviously interested in the nature of global politics in the 21st century. Some [China?] have talked of building a 'multipolar world'. For the EU, however, it is not the number of poles which counts, but rather the basis on which they operate. Our vision is a world governed by *rules* created and monitored by multilateral institutions.<sup>102</sup>

However, both actors evoke multilateralism when appearing on their common public platforms. We can conclude then that a feature of EU–China encounter is that the strong advocacy of multilateralism by the EU may be strengthening the appearance of multilateral language on the part of China, a *socialising* effect on China? Chinese scholars like Song Xinning see Europe's focus on 'effective multilateralism' as something that China could learn, and is learning, from.<sup>103</sup> All of this has resonance with traditional Confucian tenets on the efficacy of outward ritual, including language formulations, bringing about inward long-term transformation of attitudes.<sup>104</sup>

IR constructivism would also see normative identity change shaped through international ['social'] encounter situations where language is being deployed. At Fudan University, the China and EU in the World Project at Fudan (CEUWPF) has pushed this line. Chen Zhimin, for example, has been very aware of the applicability of Alexander Wendt's *social constructivism*:

using Wendt's terms, we can argue that China is internalizing the norms and logic of global market ... internalization ... has not only affected Chinese foreign behavior, but also constructed China's identity about what China is and what China wants.<sup>105</sup>

Elsewhere at Fudan, Zhongqi Pan similarly reckons that 'China's engagement in the international system is a process wherein China steadily embraces and internalizes various international norms, endorsing what is referred to as a process of state socialization'.<sup>106</sup> Wendt's social constructivism was precisely what another PRC scholar Su Changhe was pointing to, when talking of 'a Chinese socialization and institutionalization process during its [China's] participation in multilateral institutions'.<sup>107</sup> However, this still leaves the question of how far, and when, China's adoption of such

multilateralism rhetoric will become grounded in such normative belief. Any penetration of norms is still at an early stage. This is the whole point of the international socialisation argument; whereby over time psychological dynamics of self-attribution, self-persuasion and internalisation may then root such multilateralism language (and multilateralism policies) in norms of belief.<sup>108</sup> Time is the key issue here. It remains difficult, if not impossible, to say how much internal grounding has really taken place within the government of the PRC, though it has moved in this direction. More time should bring more movement though.

## Conclusions: beyond multipolarity and multilateralism?

One immediate finding is that the interests of the EU and the PRC are, on reflection, differently served by these concepts. Multilateralism makes China look good, whereas multilateralism serves (as seen earlier with Renard) as a compensation for EU weaknesses to operate in a multipolar Great Power way. Conversely, China's greater ability to operate a Great Power foreign policy enables it, but also encourages it, to maintain a strong sense of multipolar Great Power partnerships and of multipolar rhetoric. An irony is that discussion of how 'multipolarity' and 'multilateralism' are used by the EU and the PRC in their public diplomacy discourse needs to take into account further systemic changes in the international system itself. This has generated further adjustments of the two terms, and their supplementation by further terminology to describe the structure and workings of the international system.

One shift in multipolarity can be tracked through Acharya's distinction between *strategic multipolarity* and *normative multipolarity*. Whereas 'strategic multipolarity' is tied to (military and economic) *hard power* calculations in a 'balance of power' framework; 'normative multipolarity' is more tied to *soft power* ideational resources, such as an adherence to, and advocacy of, international law and institutions and a strong sense of collective national or regional identity.<sup>109</sup> The PRC has had a military balance of power sense of 'strategic multipolarity', as with its strategic partnership with Russia, but this causes some problems of image outside the PRC and is something that the EU has shied away from. The soft power diffusion of 'normative multipolarity' has been something that is more compatible with multilateralism; a rhetoric that both the EU and China have adopted in their Summit *Joint Declarations* on advocacy of shared rules, international law and international institutions.

A further shift can be seen in consideration of location of 'power'. As Barroso noted, the EU (and the PRC), operate in 'a world composed of multiple global and regional powers, by a number of relevant institutions, and by powerful non-state actors'.<sup>110</sup> This is an interesting definition that gets away from just state centres of power. Consequently, '21st century multipolarity differs in fundamental ways from the past examples of multipolar balance of power. The concentration of power in a number of poles [multipolarity]' goes 'hand in hand with fragmentation into multiple centres of power, such as international institutions, nongovernmental organizations, private corporations, global networks, including financial networks and so on'.<sup>111</sup>

This talk of different non-state centres of power has affected multilateralism, with *multilateralism 1.0* supplemented by *multilateralism 2.0*. The former (*1.0*) has been dominant since 1945, being centred on the state and their interactions in the international

system. The latter (2.0) is a more recent development, bringing in a much wider range of non-state actors among whom multilateral relations are possible. Van Langenhove argues that:

by embracing the principle of ‘effective multilateralism’, the EU has clearly indicated to be willing to contribute to reforming multilateralism. But the paradox might be that its own member states [and China] with their own [multilateralism] 1.0. forms of diplomacy are perhaps not ready yet for such a move.<sup>112</sup>

Sovereignty-state fixation may then be a problem for both a Brussels faced with its member states in its internal system and for a Beijing seeking to maintain China’s sovereignty in the international system. Strong national actors like China may be able to operate clearly within a multipolar framework and to a degree within state-centred (*multilateralism 1.0*) settings. However, the erosion of state sovereignties (*multilateralism 2.0*) in the international system probably poses more challenges to a sovereignty-retaining China than it does to a sovereignty-pooling EU?

In a complicated and multifaceted world, both terms may be too narrow. Not only are both terms ‘multipolarity’ and ‘multilateralism’ being refined (*strategic multipolarity* → *normative multipolarity* and *multilateralism 1.0* → *multilateralism 2.0*); in addition, they are also being overlaid with other wider and overlapping terms like ‘interpolarity’, ‘asymmetrical multipolarity’, ‘region-polarity’, ‘multilateralising multipolarity’ and ‘multi-multilateralism’.<sup>113</sup> Questions of ‘region-polarity’ are also linked to the ‘inter-regionalism’ or ‘Third Generation regionalism’ language that has arisen in recent years and for which the EU is a more than willing voice.<sup>114</sup> To conclude, paradoxically a multilevel and often untidy EU that blurs the national–regional–transnational boundaries may be more easily able to operate in such untidy cross-cutting international settings than a national-level tighter sovereignty-bound PRC.<sup>115</sup>

## Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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**Author biography**

David A Scott, PhD, currently delivers the Asia-Pacific side of the International Relations programme at Brunel University, with particular reference to the rise of China. In recent years, his articles on China's role in the international system have appeared in journals like *Asian Security*, *Asia-Pacific Review*, *Geopolitics*, *International Studies* and *Journal of World-Systems Research*. Three books of his, a trilogy, have been published on China's role in the international system, including '*The Chinese Century*'? *The Challenge to Global Order* (Palgrave, 2008). Various articles have also appeared on China–EU relations in the *Asia Europe Journal* and also other pieces on China–EU comparative regionalism.