
A 'Friendly Elephant' in the Room?¹ The Strategic Foundations of China's Multilateral Engagement in Asia

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This article examines the link between China's grand strategy and its participation in multilateral organisations in Asia. It argues that Chinese multilateralism arises because multilateral organisations provide a highly effective mechanism for China to achieve its strategic objectives and not indicative of a more fundamental commitment by Beijing to promoting multilateral engagement on transnational issues more generally. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit, Six-Party Talks and the South China Sea disputes are used to highlight both the continuing importance of unilateralism/bilateralism in Chinese grand strategy and the complex nature of Beijing's multilateralism.

This article explores the connection between China's grand strategy and its participation in multilateral institutions. The purpose of this piece is threefold: first, to provide a more nuanced approach to the dominant discourse on Chinese multilateralism that predominantly focuses on China's socialisation (or otherwise) into prevailing international norms; second, to provide a more comprehensive explanation for the variations in Chinese approaches to multilateral organisations within Asia; and third, to contribute to a better understanding of the links between grand strategy, state behaviour and multilateralism more generally.

The primary contention is that Chinese multilateralism arises because multilateral institutions provide one of the most effective ways for Beijing to achieve its strategic objectives. So strong is the link between multilateralism and China's ability to meet its strategic objectives that where such multilateral institutions are absent, China finds it appropriate to create these organisations. At the same time, it is argued that China's support for multilateral institutions in Asia should not be taken as evidence of internalisation of the values of multilateralism, or a belief in the inherent benefit of creating international structures within which to address transnational problems. When China observes that achieving core elements of its grand strategy will be too difficult under the conditions created by

¹ The 'friendly elephant' recalls a comment made by the current Premier of China Wen Jiabao on 15 March 2004 when he stated: "Your mention of ASEAN puts me in mind of an ASEAN meeting I attended last year. I remember on that occasion that [then Malaysian Prime Minister] Mr Mahatir and [Prime Minister of Singapore] Mr Goh Chok Tong drew a vivid analogy between China and a 'friendly elephant'. They told me the rise of China would not pose a threat to their countries".

multilateralism, then Beijing is prepared to 'go it alone'. This is why, for instance, China continues to act unilaterally (or at best, bilaterally) in relation to outstanding territorial disputes in the South China Sea, despite the existence of multilateral frameworks that may provide effective collective approaches for addressing such regional issues.

In demonstrating the links between China's grand strategy and its approach to multilateralism in Asia, this article provides a brief overview of the dominant scholarly explanations of Chinese multilateralism. The purpose of this section is not to provide exhaustive accounts of these prevailing explanations but rather to show how shortcomings in these analyses have led to incomplete understandings of China's participation in multilateral institutions because they do not adequately acknowledge the role of China's grand strategy. This is followed by an outline of China's strategic objectives in Asia that shows how China has found its achievement of these goals limited by unilateral and bilateral approaches. It then explores the ways in which multilateralism within the Asian context can help China meet its strategic goals and identify some potential constraints. Following this theoretical examination, the article uses four multilateral institutions in which China is an active member—the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, ASEAN Plus Three, the East Asia Summit, and the Six-Party Talks—to show how multilateralism provides a highly effective mechanism for China to achieve its strategic objectives. By way of contrast, and to demonstrate that Chinese multilateralism is driven more by strategic focus than institutional commitment, China's resistance to supporting multilateral solutions, particularly the ASEAN Regional Forum, to manage the South China Sea territorial disputes is discussed. Finally the article highlights some possible implications of a new understanding of Chinese multilateralism for international engagement with China.

Contemporary Chinese Multilateralism and its Explanations

The second half of the twentieth century saw China gradually shift away from an isolationist foreign policy stance towards more active engagement in international organisations and multilateral forums. As China's interest in multilateralism increased, scholars begin to search for clues that China's forays into multilateral forums may hold as to Beijing's strategic motivations. Some researchers suggested that China's increased enthusiasm for multilateralism was based on purely rational considerations and cost-benefit calculations. Increased economic prosperity through trade and access to resources could only be achieved by China pursuing greater global integration.² Other researchers argued that rationalism could not explain the

² John Ravenhill, 'East Asian Regionalism: Much Ado About Nothing?', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2009), pp. 215-35; Yitzhak Shichor, 'China's Central Asian Strategy and the Xinjiang Connection: Predicaments and Medicaments in a Contemporary Perspective', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2008), pp. 55-73.

full spectrum of China's multilateralism. These analysts pointed out, for instance, that China's decision to join the global nuclear non-proliferation regime had more to do with its adoption of international norms regarding weapons proliferation than simple strategic calculation.³ Within both camps there were individuals who argued that multilateralism might prove to be a short-lived phenomenon for China. So long as Beijing did not have sufficient power to impose its will through other, unilateral means, it would rely on multilateral organisations to achieve its objectives.⁴

China's power has continued to rise in the early years of the twenty-first century and its support for multilateral institutions has not faded; if anything, China's interest in multilateralism has deepened. Beijing's support for multilateral organisations has expanded beyond active participation in existing institutions to initiating new institutions and promoting multilateralism more generally.⁵ This phenomenon has led some commentators to suggest that China is being socialised into the prevailing norms of the international system.⁶ Other analysts go further, concluding that China is not only heeding calls to become a responsible global power,⁷ but that Beijing's strategic objectives have been modified such that they accord more closely with maintaining the international status quo.⁸ While the motivations and behaviour of states do change over time, these explanations regarding China's socialisation (or otherwise) into the international system are inadequate because they obscure the mediating impact of institutions on state behaviour⁹ and risk incorrectly equating outcomes with intentions. At a

³ Gerald Chan, *China's Compliance in Global Affairs: Trade, Arms Control, Environmental Protection, Human Rights*, Series on Contemporary China, 3 (New Jersey: World Scientific, 2006); Michael D. Swaine and Alastair Iain Johnston, 'China and Arms Control Institutions', in Elizabeth Economy and Michel Oksenberg (eds.), *China Joins the World: Progress and Prospects* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1999), pp. 90-135; Alastair Iain Johnston and Paul Evans, 'China's Engagement with Multilateral Security Institutions', in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (eds.), *Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power, Politics in Asia* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 252-75; Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴ Michael Leifer, *The ASEAN Regional Forum*, Adelphi Papers 302 (London: IISS, 1996). Leifer suggests that the wariness with which ASEAN members view China's growing multilateralism is warranted.

⁵ Nicola P. Contessi, 'Experiments in Soft Balancing: China-Led Multilateralism in Africa and the Arab World', *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2009), pp. 404-35.

⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Treating International Institutions as Social Environments', *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2001), pp. 487-515.

⁷ Matt Spetalnick and Doug Palmer, 'WRAPUP 7—Obama to China: Behave Like "Grown Up" Economy', Reuters, 14 November 2011, <[http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/14/apec-idUSN1E7AD001201111114](http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/14/apec-idUSN1E7AD00120111114)> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

⁸ Kai Alderson, 'Making Sense of State Socialisation', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 27 (2001), pp. 415-33; Alice D. Ba, 'Who's Socializing Whom? Complex Engagement in Sino-ASEAN Relations', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2006), pp. 157-79.

⁹ Beth A. Simmons and Lisa L. Martin, 'International Organisations and Institutions', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2001), pp. 199-200.

policy level, they can prompt confusing or contradictory responses such as that articulated by former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd: "Calling himself 'a brutal realist on China' Rudd argued for 'multilateral engagement with bilateral vigour'".¹⁰ Similarly, China's strategic objectives cannot be deduced from its activities within multilateral institutions. Such a conclusion belies the complexity of the relationship between China's grand strategy and its multilateralism in Asia. A state's performance in multilateral institutions offers, at best, a partial insight into the strategic goals that may have led it to contemplate participation in these institutions in the first place. An arguably more useful approach for explaining Beijing's multilateral engagement is to *begin* with an analysis of China's strategic objectives in Asia and use this as the basis for considering the role that multilateralism may play as part of China's grand strategy in the region.

China's Strategic Objectives in Asia

Put briefly, Beijing's aims are to:¹¹ reduce Taiwan's international space; protect China's territorial integrity; establish conditions to facilitate continued domestic economic growth and development and secure regime stability; ensure regional stability; and promote multi-polarity. The purpose of this section is not to reproduce the detailed analysis conducted elsewhere of each of these strategic objectives.¹² Rather, the intention is to identify those

¹⁰ Confidential US Embassy Cable, sent 28 March 2009.

¹¹ It is important to note that there is some disagreement in the scholarly community as to whether China does in fact possess a grand strategy; see, for example, Feng Zhang, 'Rethinking China's Grand Strategy: Beijing's Evolving National Interests and Strategic Ideas in the Reform Era', *International Politics*, vol. 49 (2012), pp. 318-45. It is also important to acknowledge the complex relationship between China's grand strategy and its policy-making apparatus. Despite the overwhelming power of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCP), the development and implementation of China's grand strategy has some parallels with the contested nature of policy-making that occurs in other states. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the discourse on the existence or otherwise of a Chinese grand strategy or the impact of struggles within arms of the Chinese bureaucracy and polity for policy supremacy. Suffice to say that there remains broad agreement among elites as to China's strategic objectives, even as disagreement persists as to how best to achieve them and whether they constitute a coherent or deliberate 'grand strategy'. Wang Jisi, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 2 (April 2011), pp. 68-72. For an historical overview of the development of Chinese grand strategy see: Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2000).

¹² For example: Michael Clarke, "Making the Crooked Straight": China's Grand Strategy of "Peaceful Rise" and Its Central Asian Dimension', *Asian Security*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2008), pp. 107-42; June Teufel Dreyer, 'China's Power and Will: The PRC's Military Strength and Grand Strategy', *Revista De Ştiinţe Politice. Revue Des Sciences Politiques*, vol. 21-22 (2009), pp. 143-54; Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*, Studies in Asian Security (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Guoli Liu, 'Domestic Sources of China's Emerging Grand Strategy', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 43, no. 5 (2008), pp. 543-61; T. Y. Wang, 'Introduction: The Rise of China and Its Emerging Grand Strategy', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 43, no. 5 (2008), pp. 491-6; Rosemary Foot, 'Chinese Strategies in a US-Hegemonic Global Order: Accommodating and Hedging', *International Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 1 (2006), pp. 77-94; Swaine and Tellis, *Interpreting China's Grand Strategy*; Mark Beeson, 'Hegemonic Transition in East Asia? The Dynamics of

persistent elements of Chinese foreign policy that, when taken together, can be reasonably considered to comprise China's overall strategic focus in Asia.¹³

Reunification of Taiwan with the Chinese mainland has endured as a key objective for Beijing and is consistently articulated by Chinese leaders as such.¹⁴ China's military capabilities have developed with a predominant focus on, at a minimum, effectively challenging any moves by Taiwan (supported by the United States) to assert its independence more robustly.¹⁵ At best, China's aim is to maintain the circumstances where a military annexation of Taiwan is technically possible, even if it may not be necessarily politically desirable. In addition to its military efforts, Beijing also seeks to isolate Taipei economically and diplomatically, thereby reducing the international space within which Taiwan can operate.¹⁶

Defending territorial integrity is a strategic objective that had its genesis well before the borders of the current People's Republic were established. China's vast size, its ethnic diversity, and the fourteen land borders it shares with neighbouring countries, have all contributed to Beijing's interest in eliminating both perceived and actual threats to its territory. Defending borders is, however, more than just a matter of principle. China's western provinces are rich in natural resources and also provide an overland trade route to the oil- and gas-producing Central Asia and Middle East that avoids maritime chokepoints. With respect to its sea border, China's objectives are the protection of sea lines of communication and resisting potential encirclement or containment by foreign powers.¹⁷

Chinese and American Power', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 35, no. 01 (2009), pp. 95-112; Bernard D. Cole, 'Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power', *The Journal of Military History*, vol. 66, no. 4 (October 2002), pp. 1279-90.

¹³ It should be acknowledged that there is some disagreement among some scholars as to the appropriate categories into which China's strategic objectives should be divided. Suffice to say that my identification of these elements of China's grand strategy reflect the general consensus in the academic and policy-making communities both within and beyond China. For ease of analysis, each of China's strategic objectives is identified here as discrete goals, however it remains the case that at different points in history and in different forums, objectives are sometimes conflated or given varying degrees of emphasis. The following analysis makes no comment on the relative importance of each strategic objective or the timeframe within which China seeks to achieve each of these goals.

¹⁴ Jisi, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy', p. 4.

¹⁵ Gordon Arthur, 'China Versus Taiwan: Strait Talking', *Asian Defence & Diplomacy*, February 2012.

¹⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2011, A Report to Congress Pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2000* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 2011), <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

¹⁷ Shichor, 'China's Central Asian Strategy and the Xinjiang Connection: Predicaments and Medicaments in a Contemporary Perspective'; Hasan H. Karrar, *The New Silk Road*

Closely related to the goal of territorial integrity is China's strategic objective of maintaining the domestic and international conditions under which the nation can continue its economic growth and development. Sourcing natural resources to support local production, creating markets for Chinese exports and facilitating international trade are central to this goal.¹⁸ Securing economic prosperity is not, however, just an *idée fixe* or an end unto itself. It also underpins the legitimacy of the Chinese political leadership and the stability of the regime by dampening potential domestic discord. So important is internal stability (often equated with national security) that in 2007 the constitution of the ruling Communist Party of China (CCP) was amended to include four new 'missions' for the People's Liberation Army forwarded by President Hu Jintao, three of which are associated with ensuring domestic harmony and defending the CCP.¹⁹

In addition to maintaining domestic stability, China also aims to ensure stability in its neighbourhood. In a region characterised by unresolved border disputes, insurgencies, poverty, irregular migration flows, environmental pressures, transitional democracies, the presence of nuclear weapons, and autocratic regimes largely ostracised by the global community, the risk of a strategic shock occurring for China is very real. For Beijing, regional stability is necessary because it allows interstate trade to be conducted smoothly, which facilitates domestic growth and avoids resources being diverted away from national development towards addressing external threats. China is also keen to limit extra-territorial support for domestic opposition forces that could undermine regime stability.²⁰

China's final core strategic objective is the establishment of multi-polarity both in the Asian region and across the globe more generally.²¹ This vision for an alternative world order challenges the present predominance of the United States and, in the longer term, necessitates the recognition of China as a comparable power.²² The Chinese aim of multi-polarity also rests on

Diplomacy: China's Central Asian Foreign Policy Since the Cold War (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).

¹⁸ Mark W. Frazier, 'China's Domestic Policy Fragmentation and "Grand" Strategy in Global Politics', *Asia Policy*, vol. 10 (2010), p. 95.

¹⁹ The new missions are: "(1) providing an important guarantee of strength for the party to consolidate its ruling position, (2) providing a strong security guarantee for safeguarding the period of important strategic opportunity for national development, (3) providing a powerful strategic support for safeguarding national interests, and (4) playing an important role in safeguarding world peace and promoting common development." Cited in James Mulvenon, 'Chairman Hu and the PLA's "New Historic Missions"', *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 27, Winter 2009, <<http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM27JM.pdf>> [Accessed 17 August 2012], p. 2.

²⁰ Clarke, "Making the Crooked Straight".

²¹ Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Is China a Status Quo Power?', *International Security*, vol. 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003), p. 29.

²² Sheng Ding, 'To Build a "Harmonious World": China's Soft Power Wielding in the Global South', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2008), pp. 193-213. The goal of

entrenching state sovereignty as a fundamental principle of international relations that cannot be violated by what Beijing perceives as pecksniffian interventionism on the part of the United States and its Western allies.²³

The objectives broadly outlined in this section have persisted in Chinese strategic thinking and policy-making with respect to the Asian region for at least forty years, if not since the formation of the People's Republic.²⁴ Of course, the extent to which individual objectives are publicly acknowledged, conflated or viewed as distinct has shifted over time, as has the way in which the objectives are framed by each generation of Chinese leaders. These differences aside, China has so far not considered it necessary to significantly alter or remove any of the strategic objectives identified above. This fact alone should lead to closer consideration of any suggestion that growing Chinese participation in multilateral institutions provides strong evidence of fundamental changes in Beijing's strategic aims in Asia. A more likely conclusion is that China sees the usefulness of multilateralism for achieving particular strategic objectives only in certain circumstances. Multilateralism is therefore not a principle that China will champion when doing so would require tempering of its ultimate strategic goals, regardless of the potential effectiveness or efficiency of multilateral mechanisms. Multilateralism is also only pursued by China when unilateral and bilateral attempts to secure these objectives are considered limited or unduly costly.

The Limits of Unilateralism and Bilateralism

In the absence of an identifiable, ideological commitment to multilateralism, part of the explanation for China's recourse to multilateral institutions to achieve some of its strategic objectives must rest on the comparative inefficiency or ineffectiveness of alternative strategies. With respect to its aims of isolating Taiwan, safeguarding domestic and international stability, sustaining economic development, and promoting multi-polarity, China does appear to have maximised the strategic dividend that can be attained through unilateralism and bilateral arrangements.

Although the balance of forces across the Taiwan Strait is moving in favour of the PRC, mainland China's ultimate goal of unification does not appear to be realistic in the immediate future, even with Taiwan under the relatively sympathetic leadership of President Ma Ying-Jeou. While the United States remains the dominant military power in the region and maintains its support for Taiwanese independence, military confrontation brings costs that are at

power is not merely an end unto itself; rather attaining power and status will enable China to influence the trajectory of international relations. For China, regional power also requires that it is not surrounded by states that could readily threaten it or reduce its ability to manoeuvre.

²³ Daniel Lynch, 'Chinese Thinking on the Future of International Relations: Realism as the Ti, Rationalism as the Yong?', *The China Quarterly*, vol. 197 (March 2009), pp. 87-107.

²⁴ Jisi, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy'; Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge*.

present highly undesirable.²⁵ International isolation of the Republic of China (ROC) has also arguably reached the limit of what can be achieved by China acting alone. Taiwan currently enjoys diplomatic relations with only twenty-three states and since 1980 the PRC has successfully convinced twenty-four nations to cease their recognition of the ROC. China has pushed for international, *diplomatic* isolation²⁶ while simultaneously pursuing *economic* integration of Taiwan with the mainland. China is thus attempting to make its annexation of Taiwan increasingly inevitable in the eyes of the international community, if not the Taiwanese.

One of the paradoxes with which the Chinese leadership must contend is that the legitimacy of its rule is based on the delivery of remarkable rates of growth and development through economic integration; at the same time, growth and globalisation have exacerbated domestic pressures that threaten to undermine the undisputed authority of the current administration. Although China's growing middle class is not yet mobilising *en masse* around a coherent agenda, expressions of dissatisfaction with the current regime have risen substantially over the past twenty years, despite the crackdown on the Tian'anmen Square protests in 1989.²⁷ Industrialisation of China's outer provinces is also occurring in the face of persistent independence movements in Xinjiang and Tibet that are supported politically and financially by diaspora communities and self-determination activists.²⁸ Meanwhile, Beijing has observed the contagion effects of financial crises against which China cannot be insulated as it seeks greater market penetration.

The transnational nature of separatist movements, 'terrorism', natural resource demands and economic opportunities are beyond the ability of China to address by itself. To achieve favourable outcomes that reach across a number of nations requires a significant investment if done bilaterally and even then such outcomes are not guaranteed. In addition, China's closest friends in the region, Burma and North Korea, have been the subject of continued approbation on the part of the international community and these bilateral relationships have brought more political costs than economic or diplomatic benefits to the Chinese regime. In the case of North Korea, in particular, China is repeatedly called upon by the West to use its

²⁵ Richard C. Bush, 'The 2011 DOD [Department of Defense] China Report and Taiwan's Security', The Brookings Institution, 11 October 2011, <http://www.brookings.edu/articles/2011/1011_dod_china_report_bush.aspx> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

²⁶ Perhaps the best example of China bringing its considerable economic weight to bear in isolating Taiwan is in the formation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). See: Anna Samson, 'The Grand Weiqi Board: Reconsidering China's Role in Africa', *Security Challenges*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2011), p. 74.

²⁷ Murray Scot Tanner, 'China Rethinks Unrest', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2004), pp. 137-56.

²⁸ Karrar, *The New Silk Road Diplomacy*, Shichor, 'China's Central Asian Strategy and the Xinjiang Connection'.

presumed influence to stave off Pyongyang's brinkmanship.²⁹ The continued effectiveness of China's unilateral or bilateral efforts to maintain domestic legitimacy, sustain economic growth and ensure international stability is clearly under challenge.

The creation of a multi-polar world is perhaps the most difficult strategic objective for China to achieve unilaterally or through bilateral relationships in Asia. The United States has actively built its status in the region over the past sixty years through trade and investment agreements, extension of its 'nuclear umbrella', deployment of military assets, foreign aid and cultural exchanges.³⁰ While it is possible that China could challenge this primacy by simply focusing on building its economic and military capabilities and waiting for other states to be drawn to a Beijing alternative, it is difficult to conceive how United States' primacy could be challenged effectively without China similarly engaging in overt, sustained efforts to build a network or 'community' of states around it. If the final goal is one of political influence that can give effect to an alternative international order, then this is best achieved when Beijing's opinion as well as its power is respected.³¹ Acquiescence with China's opinion on global issues and support for its vision for a new international order can be attained piecemeal via bilateralism, or more convincingly secured through multilateral organisations.

Although unilateralism and bilateralism have played a useful role helping China achieve some strategic objectives to date, in many respects they have fallen short or proved not to be the most efficient way of securing the ends that China seeks. This is not to suggest that China has relinquished its belief in unilateralism. There are certain instances where China continues to hold that unilateral action is its best strategy, for example in dealing with its maritime territorial disputes. Nevertheless, where China has almost exhausted the possibilities of what is achievable through unilateral/bilateral action, multilateralism is filling its strategy gap.

²⁹ Insofar as recent reforms in Burma have led to a relaxation of international sanctions against that state, China has not been the default beneficiary of access to Burma's natural resources. See, for instance, the decision to suspend construction of the Chinese-backed Myistone hydroelectric dam or the investment agreement Burma signed with India in 2011. Francis Wade, 'China-backed Myitsone Dam "Suspended"', *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 30 September 2011, <<http://www.dvb.no/news/china-backed-myitsone-dam-%E2%80%98suspended%E2%80%99/17887>> [Accessed 14 August 2012]; 'India and Burma Expand Trade Ties', BBC, 14 October 2011, sec. South Asia, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-15304791>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

³⁰ Beeson, 'Hegemonic Transition in East Asia?'; Evelyn Goh, 'Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies', *International Security*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/08), pp. 113-57. It should be noted that United States' primacy in the region has persisted notwithstanding the impact of President Richard Nixon's 1969 'Guam doctrine', which led to the scaling back of Washington's direct military involvement in the Asia-Pacific.

³¹ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, 'Multilateralism in China's ASEAN Policy: Its Evolution, Characteristics and Aspiration', *Contemporary South-East Asia*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2005), p. 114.

The Promise of Multilateralism for China in Asia

In attempting to explain why China chooses to pursue multilateralism, this section suggests some of the ways in which achievement of China's strategic goals can be facilitated by multilateral organisations. There are certain, almost universal characteristics of multilateral institutions, as well as some unique features of international organisations within the Asian context, that can be harnessed to China's strategic advantage. The benefits for China that arise from participating in multilateral institutions include: reducing the level of strategic uncertainty that characterises China's immediate neighbourhood; bolstering the legitimacy of the Chinese regime; internationalising China's internal problems, thereby normalising what may otherwise be considered draconian domestic responses; creating opportunities for policy flexibility and trade-offs that maximise overall favourable outcomes for Beijing; avoiding resolution of controversial issues by taking advantage of the collective action dilemma; and diluting US power while expanding Chinese influence.

Participation in multilateral institutions necessitates acceptance of some common principles for governing behaviour and support for a framework within which issues of mutual concern can be managed. Institutionalisation of norms increases predictability regarding state behaviour and can improve the transparency of decision-making processes of different governments.³² Information flows that accompany multilateral engagement also allow for more efficient and effective strategic planning than could be achieved through bilateral arrangements. In addition, institutions can promote stability when they are used diplomatically to corral more volatile states into acting within established frameworks rather than pursuing unilateral action that might precipitate strategic shocks. Multilateral organisations can therefore act as ballast for regional relations in Asia. They smooth differences between states by appealing to commonalities and act as a check on state behaviour. Multilateral institutions create a safety valve for airing interstate tensions and provide timely information so that states can take effective pre-emptive action to shield themselves against potential external threats.³³ For China multilateralism can improve its ability to help prevent international crises, deal with belligerent allies and implement domestic policies that better respond to changes in the increasingly integrated international environment.

In addition to reducing strategic uncertainty, a mutually reinforcing sense of legitimacy is created when states join multilateral institutions. Members of a

³² Tsuyoshi Kawasaki, 'Neither Skepticism nor Romanticism: The ASEAN Regional Forum as a Solution for the Asia-Pacific Assurance Game', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2006), pp. 219-37.

³³ Stephen Aris, 'A New Model of Asian Regionalism: Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Have More Potential Than ASEAN?', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 2, no. 3 (September 2009), p. 456.

multilateral organisation confer general (although not blanket) approval for the behaviour of other states deemed worthy of inclusion within the institution. The benefits of membership also incentivise continued appropriate behaviour by member states. In addition, membership brings with it rewards, such as trade opportunities, that are shared across all members and which otherwise may be only obtainable unevenly or via a more time-consuming process. At the same time, the credibility of a multilateral institution itself is partly based on whether key nations consider it worthy of their attention. Take, for example, ASEAN Plus 1, ASEAN Plus 3 and ASEAN Plus 6, or the proposal to create an Asia-Pacific Community, which ultimately failed due to the lack of interest on the part of major players who were slated for membership.³⁴ In the establishment of a new institution, the prerogative of founding states to make membership decisions sends a message about which states are worthy of inclusion when solutions to collective problems are needed. Membership decisions also signify which states share a normative framework as well as delineate who can access certain benefits and who will be excluded. China can thus use multilateral organisations to unlock trade and investment opportunities as well as gain a diplomatic and economic edge over its regional competitors: the United States, Japan and India.

Multilateral institutions are created to respond to issues of transnational concern.³⁵ But the definition of what constitutes a transnational issue is fluid; states can choose to see the links between problems that arise within their territorial boundaries and similar challenges confronting other states, or they can determine that such problems are best tackled domestically. In this way, multilateral institutions can be used to internationalise otherwise domestic concerns, elevating the importance of problems to a level where collective responsibility is assumed and strong approaches by individual states to address these concerns are considered appropriate. For example, by recasting its domestic problem of independence movements as terrorism, China can use multilateral institutions to call on neighbouring states to help it deal with a problem that is taken to undermine both national *and* international security. The collective interest that states have for eliminating

³⁴ The APC was the brainchild of former Australian Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd who floated the idea at an East Asia Summit in 2008. The APC was to include all ASEAN states as well as the United States, Russia, Japan, India, China and Australia. Jia Qingguo, 'Realizing the Asia Pacific Community: Geographic, Institutional and Leadership Challenges', *East Asia Forum*, 28 July 2009, <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2009/07/28/realizing-the-asia-pacific-community-geographic-institutional-and-leadership-challenges/>> [Accessed 17 August 2012]; Peter Drysdale, 'Rudd in Singapore on the Asia Pacific Community Idea', *East Asia Forum*, 31 May 2009, <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2009/05/31/rudd-in-singapore-on-the-asia-pacific-community-idea/>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

³⁵ Joseph Juppile and Duncan Snidal, 'The Choice of International Institutions: Cooperation, Alternatives and Strategies', Unpublished manuscript dated 19 December 2009, based on an earlier paper presented at the the 101st Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA) (30 August-2 September 2005).

terrorism also increases international tolerance for China using draconian measures to quash terrorist threats and promote internal stability.³⁶

Not only do multilateral institutions have the potential to help China achieve its strategic objective of domestic stability and regime legitimacy, but these institutions provide a way for China to manage its growing prominence in the international arena.³⁷ Institutions allow Beijing to maintain policy flexibility rather than be pressured into behaving as others expect it should behave on account of its increasing economic, military and diplomatic power. For China, participation in multilateral institutions means that great power need not bring with it great responsibility. Instead, Beijing can use its membership of institutions as a proxy for its commitment to international norms without having to demonstrate how those norms have in fact been internalised or incorporated into a domestic policy program. Beijing can also use the international enthusiasm for 'engaging China' and encouraging its participation in multilateral institutions to trade off policy gains made in one arena against concessions made in others. China can further capitalise on the collective action problem that arises in multilateral organisations by using them as a place to 'park' controversial issues, such as domestic political reform and territorial disputes, which would otherwise require China's immediate attention.

Finally, multilateral institutions contribute to China's multi-polar vision because they can dilute the power of the United States.³⁸ This occurs when Washington is explicitly excluded from decision-making forums or its ability to act is constrained by the need to secure collective support. By limiting policy options for the United States in multilateral organisations, the pressure on Washington to rely on its bilateral relationships or behave unilaterally, rises. This not only increases China's ability to manoeuvre but also for Beijing to contrast itself as an embodiment of alternative norms and an alternative centre of power around which other states can coalesce. Multilateral organisations thus enable Beijing to seek gradual international acceptance for the norms it would like to see prevail. For China, multilateral institutions provide a mechanism for socialising like-minded states and

³⁶ Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang, *China Rising: Power and Motivation in Chinese Foreign Policy* (place: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

³⁷ Christopher R. Hughes, 'Nationalism and Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: Implications for Southeast Asia', *The Pacific Review*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2005), pp. 119-35; Hongying Wang, 'Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: The Limits of Socialisation', *Asian Survey*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2000), pp. 475-91.

³⁸ Ann Kent, 'China's International Socialisation: The Role of International Organisations', *Global Governance*, vol. 8 (2002), pp. 343-64; Ann Kent, *Beyond Compliance: China, International Organisations, and Global Security* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

creating external reinforcement for those values that underpin the Chinese regime.³⁹

Implementing Chinese Strategy through Multilateralism

Having established the potential benefits that multilateralism has for China to achieve its strategic objectives, this section examines China's role in four multilateral institutions in Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), East Asian Summit (EAS) and Six Party Talks (6PT) have been chosen because they provide a good cross-section of the institutions in which China is currently actively involved. These multilateral forums were established at different times, comprise different memberships and vary in their levels of institutionalisation. Despite these differences, all four have proved important mechanisms for China to achieve its strategic objectives. It is not the intention of this section to cover the history or inner workings of these multilateral organisations in detail as these institutions have all been studied extensively in isolation. There is, however, very little scholarly work that examines these multilateral organisations in comparative perspective and assesses the role they play in China's grand strategy. This section attempts, through an overview of these organisations, to compare China's approach to various multilateral forums and assess this participation as an expression of Beijing's grand strategy.

THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION

The SCO was established in 2001 at China's behest. It is a multilateral organisation that builds on the earlier *Shanghai Five* mechanism, as well as the bilateral relationships China has been fostering with Central Asian republics since their independence from the USSR in 1991. The SCO's current member states are China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with observer and dialogue status afforded to a further six states.⁴⁰ The United States is excluded from the grouping. The self-professed goals of the SCO are as benign as they are broad and include "promoting effective cooperation" and "moving towards the establishment of a new, democratic, just and rational political and economic international order".⁴¹ The normative framework underpinning the organisation is the 'Shanghai Spirit' encompassing values of mutual trust and benefit, equal rights, consultation, respect for diversity of cultures, aspiration towards

³⁹ Emilian Kavalski, 'Shanghaied into Cooperation: Framing China's Socialisation of Central Asia', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2 (2010), pp. 131-45; Ba, 'Who's Socializing Whom?'

⁴⁰ Mutlaq Al-Qahtani, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Law of International Organisations', *Chinese Journal of International Law*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2006), p. 130.

⁴¹ 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Website', n.d., <<http://www.secsco.org/EN/index.asp>> [Accessed xxxx 2012].

common development, non-alignment “non-targeting anyone” (sic) and openness.⁴²

For China, the impetus for establishing the SCO was intimately linked to its strategic objectives in Asia. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, China saw a need to develop a more efficient and effective strategy for addressing its concerns regarding access to natural resources and trade routes that were now under the control of a number of different states. In addition the SCO could also potentially support economic development, eliminate threats to domestic stability, remove the risk of independence movements gaining strength, promote regime legitimacy, and establish multipolarity and new international order. This does not, of course, deny the agency of the other members of the SCO.⁴³ As powerful as China is, it cannot force multilateralism when it is not supported by other states. However, although there may be a confluence of interest among SCO members, this alone does not explain why China has so vigorously pursued the formation of the SCO.⁴⁴ Rather, it is the utility of the institution for achieving Beijing’s objectives that drives its push for multilateralism in central Asia.

The SCO’s focus on mutual cooperation and economic development is granting China access to natural resource suppliers and trade corridors that allow Beijing to diversify its supply chain and trade routes away from reliance on contested maritime avenues and chokepoints.⁴⁵ The SCO’s aim to tackle the ‘three evils’—terrorism, separatism, and illicit drugs—mirrors the concern that China has to promote domestic and regional stability by neutralising separatist movements and establishing firmer control over its outer territories.⁴⁶ The most heavily institutionalised aspects of the SCO are thus its anti-terrorism programs.⁴⁷ China has also used the SCO to lubricate its efforts to resolve its outstanding land border disputes with member countries. China has relinquished some of its territorial claims in return for support for Beijing’s anti-terrorism initiatives and commitment to eliminating

⁴² Ibid.; Al-Qahtani, ‘The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Law of International Organisations’, 133.

⁴³ For an overview of the motivations of Central Asian republics joining the SCO see Ezeli Arakan, ‘The Interest of the Central Asian States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’, *Ege Academic Review*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2010), pp. 395-420.

⁴⁴ This appears to be the argument of writers such as Chien-Peng Chung, see: Chien-Peng Chung, ‘China’s Approaches to the Institutionalisation of Regional Multilateralism’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 17, no. 57 (2008), pp. 747-64.

⁴⁵ Arakan, ‘The Interest of the Central Asian States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’, pp. 401-2.

⁴⁶ Aris, ‘A New Model of Asian Regionalism’, p. 456.

⁴⁷ The first agreement adopted by SCO members was the Shanghai Convention on Fighting Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism. Jing-Dong Yuan, ‘China’s Role in Establishing and Building the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 19, no. 67 (2010), pp. 855-69. Note also the SCO’s Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS) in Tashkent.

any nascent transnational independence movement on their side of the new border.⁴⁸

China is actively using the SCO in three ways to promote multi-polarity. First, the Organisation is setting a very different example from Western coalitions such as NATO with respect to how to respond to aggressive action taken by states to quell domestic uprisings. Upholding the mantle of state sovereignty, non-interference has characterised the SCO's approach to the colour revolutions and similar pro-democracy/anti-regime mobilisations in Central Asia.⁴⁹ The SCO also serves to strengthen the strategic partnership between Russia and China with Russia undoubtedly occupying the junior position in the relationship.⁵⁰ China has used the SCO to negotiate highly preferable trading arrangements for natural resources with its neighbour as well as to draw Russia further within its sphere of influence.⁵¹

Second, although some analysts argue that the SCO is merely a forum for promoting economic development and trade or at most a coordinating mechanism for anti-terrorism activities, there are strong hints from China that it is considering broadening the military cooperation between member countries beyond existing military exercises⁵² and intelligence sharing.⁵³ The SCO continues to exclude the United States while granting observer status to Pakistan, India, Iran and Turkey. By doing so, the SCO has extended its geographical boundaries and populations covered by the SCO across the whole of Central Asia. It has also established a multilateral security institution that includes states that Washington has to date been unable or unwilling to engage with on more than a bilateral level.⁵⁴ The SCO is thus

⁴⁸ Sudha Ramachandran, 'China Plays Long Game on Border Disputes', *Asia Times Online*, 27 January 2011, <<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/MA27Ad02.html>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

⁴⁹ Arakan, 'The Interest of the Central Asian States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation', p. 406.

⁵⁰ For a good overview of the dynamics of the China-Russia relationship, see Bobo Lo, *The Unbalanced Triangle: What Chinese-Russian Relations Mean for the United States Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (New York: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

⁵¹ Significant levels of Chinese migration across the border into East Russia, exacerbated by Russian depopulation of this area is also serving to solidify the ties between Russia and China primarily on China's terms. For an exploration of this and other indicators of growing Chinese influence in Russia, see Robert S. Ross, *The Rise of Russia, Sino-Russian Relations, and U.S. Security Policy* (Copenhagen: Institute for Strategy, Royal Danish Defence College, 2009).

⁵² Michael Clarke, 'China's Integration of Xinjiang with Central Asia: Securing a "Silk Road" to Great Power Status?', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2008), p. 100. Chinese military activities to date include provision of military aid (e.g. US\$3 million to Kazakhstan in 2002 and US\$1 million to Kyrgyzstan in 2003, joint military exercises in Kazakhstan in 2003, and 'Peace Missions' in 2007 and 2009).

⁵³ Yu Bin, 'China-Russia Relations: Mounting Challenges and Multilateralism', *Comparative Connections: A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, no. 13 (2011), p. 14.

⁵⁴ For an interesting look at the impact should Iran be offered full membership of the SCO see: Matthew Brummer, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Iran: A Power-Full Union', *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2007), pp. 185-200.

positioning itself to become a counterweight to both NATO to its west and the United States' traditional military alliances to its east and south. For China, this serves an additional purpose of constraining Washington's excursions in the Middle East, as well as United States' bases in Central Asia, from encircling China or compromising Beijing's freedom of action within this region.⁵⁵ This is particularly important given that China has not yet developed the naval capacity to challenge the United States' regional maritime dominance effectively.

Third, under the rubric of encouraging 'diversity' in development, and the 'Shanghai Spirit', the SCO not only accepts the legitimacy of present authoritarian regime structures among its members but creates the circumstances in which such regimes can be further entrenched.⁵⁶ The SCO has embraced those governments that the United States has afforded pariah status, such as Iran, because of their violations of human right standards or failure to abide by the international norms Washington claims to promote. Membership of the SCO does not require a commitment to domestic political reform; if anything, it allows for repressive domestic practices to be externally reinforced by more powerful authoritarian states.⁵⁷ For China, the SCO represents a coalescence of states amenable to following the Chinese model of development, thereby legitimising Beijing's approach to domestic and foreign relations.⁵⁸

The shrewdness with which China approaches its activities in the SCO demonstrates how Beijing adjusts its policy mix so as to achieve overall optimal strategic outcomes. China has made concessions on its territorial claims in return for obtaining support for local and cross-border anti-terrorism operations, opportunities to exploit natural resources and unparalleled access to land trade routes in Central Asia. Domestic stability is thus promoted through economic growth and de-legitimising independence movements. China's promise of non-interference establishes mutual support for authoritarianism and further reinforces the legitimacy of the CCP's leadership, promoting a new Beijing consensus to rival the predominance of the Washington consensus.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Yuri V. Bossin, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Between Political Ambition and Economic Pragmatism', *Asia Insights*, no. 2 (2004), p. 14.

⁵⁶ Thomas Ambrosio, 'Catching the "Shanghai Spirit": How the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 60, no. 8 (2008), pp. 1321-44.

⁵⁷ Roy Allison, 'Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2008), p. 196.

⁵⁸ For a common articulation of the SCO's support for Chinese authoritarianism (if somewhat polemical) see: Albrecht Rothacher, 'Allying with an Evil Axis?', *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 153, no. 1 (2008), pp. 68-73.

⁵⁹ Michael Yahuda, 'China's Multilateralism and Regional Order', in Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne (eds), *China Turns to Multilateralism: Foreign Policy and Regional Security* (London: Routledge, 2007), 75-89; Kavalski, 'Shanghai into Cooperation'.

ASEAN PLUS THREE AND THE EAST ASIA SUMMIT⁶⁰

The APT was established in 1997 and includes the ten ASEAN members plus China, Japan and South Korea. Creation of the APT was prompted by the 1997 Asian financial crisis as well as the growing feeling of interconnectedness between ASEAN countries and their economically significant neighbours. In 2001 the APT convened an East Asian Vision Group that suggested that the APT should institutionalise its vision for an East Asian Community by evolving into the EAS. The first EAS was convened in 2005. Although the initial plan was that the APT be superseded by the EAS, division among APT members over who should participate in the EAS has resulted in both institutions persisting despite their now largely overlapping functions and activities.

China is a member of both the APT and the EAS. Beijing's participation in these organisations, and even its efforts to keep the two institutions operating alongside each other, allows it to further its strategic objectives in Asia. The establishment of the APT and EAS aligns with Chinese goals of economic development, regime legitimacy and the promotion of multipolarity. At the same time, participation in the APT/EAS has brought its own challenges for Beijing, not least its ultimately unsuccessful efforts to keep the United States, Australia, India and New Zealand out of the EAS. The way in which China has managed these difficulties—by continuing to participate in both multilateral organisations but in very different ways—is in itself indicative of how China's strategic objectives find expression through multilateralism in Asia.

The economic impetus for the APT and EAS was consistent with Chinese attempts to develop closer economic ties with ASEAN states, seen most clearly through the signing of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in 2000.⁶¹ Strengthening trade connections with ASEAN states was not only economically beneficial for China, but these links were later brought to bear in the negotiations for the establishment of the EAS. China used trade incentives for instance, to encourage Laos—the country

⁶⁰ Although the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) and East Asia Summit (EAS) continue to function as separate multilateral institutions, it was intended (and widely anticipated) that the EAS would eventually replace the APT. As such, the remits of the two organisations overlap substantially. Most analysts tend to see the APT and the EAS as essentially parallel institutions and that is also the approach I adopt in this article (see, for example, Adam Ward and James Hackett (eds) 'The East Asia Summit: Towards a Community—or a Cul-de-sac?', n.d.); Benny Teh Cheng Guan, 'Japan–China Rivalry: What Role Does the East Asia Summit Play?', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, vol. 52, no. 3 (December 2011), pp. 347-60; Jae Cheol Kim, 'Politics of Regionalism in East Asia: The Case of the East Asia Summit', *Asia Perspective*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2010), pp. 113-36. As argued in this section, it is China's approach to the APT and EAS that has been a major (if not the) contributing factor to the duplication between the APT and EAS.

⁶¹ China beat Japan in securing such an agreement with ASEAN and reports at the time indicated a sense of Tokyo's uneasiness regarding the implications of a closer trade relationship between those states over which Japan had traditionally been economically dominant, and China. Guan, 'Japan–China Rivalry'.

convener for India in ASEAN—not to campaign for the inclusion of India in the EAS.⁶²

China was insistent that EAS membership be limited, rather than follow the more expansive definition of 'Asia' supported by Japan and Indonesia. China's vociferousness was about more than a semantic disagreement over the construction of regional identity and the formation of an 'Asian community'; the utility of the EAS to further Beijing's broader strategic objectives was at stake. If the EAS included the United States and other middle powers, then China's relative power within the institution would decrease. This in itself was not especially problematic but for the fact that as an institutional mechanism for establishing an East Asian 'community', China was concerned that the EAS may broach issues of democracy and human rights. These issues were raised by Indonesia for possible inclusion on the agenda and are intimately connected with China's preoccupation with domestic stability and regime legitimacy. Exacerbating this risk for China was its unsuccessful bid to be one of the rotating chairs of the EAS, which would have given Beijing the opportunity to occupy a leadership and agenda-setting role.⁶³ China thus became concerned that it may be forced to face-off against the United States and emerging democracies in the region on sensitive issues in an institution over which Beijing could only exercise minimal (if any) control.⁶⁴

Even though the EAS was not the successor to the APT that China envisaged, Beijing refrained from (officially) relinquishing its membership of the EAS. Beijing not only continued to participate in the institution, but it became an advocate for broadening EAS membership beyond the 'ASEAN+3+3' formation to include Russia and other states with an 'interest' in East Asia.⁶⁵ China did this for three reasons, none of which are associated with an inherent political commitment to multilateralism. First, as an active proponent for establishing the EAS, China could not suddenly opt out without having to explain its about-face and risk reversing the strides it had made in boosting ASEAN confidence in China as the 'friendly elephant'

⁶² Kim, 'Politics of Regionalism in East Asia', p. 124.

⁶³ The chair of the EAS is a rotating one, but only among the ten ASEAN states. The current chair of ASEAN is also the chair of the EAS.

⁶⁴ To some extent, Beijing's fears have been realised. During the 2011 East Asia Summit, the United States and other EAS members cajoled a very reluctant China into discussing the South China Sea dispute. China's Xinhua news agency reported that Premier Wen Jiabao said: 'I don't want to discuss this issue [of the territorial disputes] at the [East Asia] Summit, however, leaders of some countries mentioned China on the issue. It's impolite not to make a return for what one receives.' 'East Asia Summit Takes Up S. China Issue at US Urging', *Agence France Press*, 20 November 2011, <<http://www.dawn.com/2011/11/20/east-asia-summit-takes-up-s-china-issue-at-us-urging.html>> [Accessed xxxx 2012].

⁶⁵ Mohan Malik, 'The East Asia Summit', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2006), pp. 207-11; Mohan Malik, 'China and the East Asian Summit: More Discord Than Accord', Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, February 2006, <<http://www.apcss.org/Publications/APSSS/ChinaandEastAsiaSummit.pdf>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

in the region. Second, even though China may have lost the ability to drive the agenda of the EAS, as a member of the institution based on consensus decision-making, China can still influence this agenda. Even if China fails in its attempt to prevent the EAS from canvassing certain matters, it can influence how contentious issues are ultimately collectively framed. Expanding EAS membership to all corners of the Asia-Pacific also means that China can rely on the problem of collective action to limit the practical effectiveness of the EAS as a regional security mechanism. China can use the requirement for institutional consensus to constrain the United States and its allies from acting in a manner directly counter to China's interest.

Finally, China understands that there is a far more potent way to limit the utility of the EAS and minimise the risk that the EAS may compromise China's strategic interests. Instead of allowing the EAS to supplant the APT, China has pushed for the APT to continue. In this way, the EAS has become a superfluous addition to the regional security architecture and a place where China can park controversial issues such as the South China Sea or East China Sea disputes, while still appearing to be committed to regionalism and multilateral engagement. By maintaining its prominence within the more exclusive APT, China is making a clear statement about which states it considers to have interests in the region that bear consideration. By keeping the APT versus EAS tussle alive, Beijing is also encouraging states in Asia to privilege a regional forum that excludes the United States and its allies, thus promoting China's goal of establishing multi-polarity.⁶⁶

The different behaviour exhibited by China in the APT and EAS arises because of the different contributions that the two multilateral organisations make towards China achieving its strategic objectives. Beijing has supported the APT and EAS insofar as they have assisted China to augment its trade relationships and establish itself as a regional power. When the institutions began to develop in a way that may compromise China's goal of regime legitimacy, Beijing has been careful to use its multilateral participation to better manage this risk.⁶⁷ It has also used its support for multilateralism in Asia to establish an alternative model for regional engagement with South-East Asian states that excludes the United States and promotes multi-polarity more generally.

⁶⁶ For an optimistic take on the future of China-ASEAN cooperation particularly with respect to non-traditional security issues and beyond the APT, see David Arase, 'Non-Traditional Security in China-ASEAN Cooperation: The Institutionalisation of Regional Security Cooperation and the Evolution of East Asian Regionalism', *Asian Survey*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2010), pp. 808-33.

⁶⁷ The APT and EAS illustrate the challenges that confront all states that attempt to use multilateral organisations to further their strategic objectives. As mentioned earlier, multilateral organisations often mediate or otherwise shape individual state behaviour. This fact does not change, however, the importance of strategic objectives in motivating states' efforts to behave in particular ways or pursue particular outcomes within multilateral organisations.

THE SIX-PARTY TALKS

The 6PT commenced in 2003 to address international concern regarding the potential development of nuclear weapons' capability by North Korea. The talks were prompted by Pyongyang's announcement in 2003 that it was formally withdrawing from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). The six states participating in the talks are China, the United States, Japan, South Korea, North Korea and Russia. Although the 6PT has been the primary multilateral organisation for addressing the question of a possible nuclearised Korean peninsula,⁶⁸ it is characterised by a relatively low level of institutionalisation owing to the 'stop-start' nature of the negotiations.⁶⁹ Talks were suspended in December 2008; however all parties appear to support the continued use of the 6PT to address this security concern.⁷⁰ This is despite the agreement brokered between the United States, China and North Korea in February 2012 for suspension of Pyongyang's nuclear program in return for food aid.⁷¹

China has remained one of the key drivers of the 6PT. China's pro-active role—hosting rounds of negotiations and conciliating between participants—is considered by many analysts to be indicative of Beijing's developing commitment to multilateral engagement.⁷² As one of the first states to develop a nuclear capability and the first to adopt a 'no first use' policy,⁷³ international norms of nuclear non-proliferation have long been supported by China. While participation in the 6PT is consistent with Beijing's broader stance regarding non-proliferation, given that China has an alliance relationship with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Beijing's assessment of the 'nuclear threat' posed by Pyongyang is not as grave as Washington's, this is not the fundamental reason for China's support for this

⁶⁸ This is excluding, of course, the six UN Security Council Resolutions that call for North Korea's compliance with the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and imposition of sanctions. (Resolution 825 calls on North Korea to return to the NPT and permit weapons inspectors to tour their nuclear production facilities; Resolutions 1695, 1718, 1874, 1928 and 1985 impose sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.)

⁶⁹ Jaysree Bajoria, 'The Six-Party Talks on North Korea's Nuclear Program', Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, 29 February 2012, <<http://www.cfr.org/proliferation/six-party-talks-north-koreas-nuclear-program/p13593>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

⁷⁰ 'North Korea Halts Nuclear Programme', *Al Jazeera*, 1 March 2012, <<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2012/02/201222915936296108.html>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

⁷¹ Steven Lee Myers and Choe Sang-hun, 'North Korea Agrees to Suspend Its Nuclear Program', *The New York Times*, 29 February 2012, sec. World/Asia Pacific, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/01/world/asia/us-says-north-korea-agrees-to-curb-nuclear-work.html>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

⁷² Jaewoo Choo, 'Is Institutionalisation of the Six-Party Talks Possible?', *East Asia: An International Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 4 (Winter 2005), pp. 39-58; James Cotton, 'North Korea and the Six-Party Process: Is a Multilateral Resolution of the Nuclear Issue Still Possible?', *Asian Security*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2007), pp. 27-44.

⁷³ China first adopted this policy in 1964, although some scholars have questioned the credibility of this commitment, suggesting that it is increasingly flexible. See, for example: Baohui Zhang, 'The Taiwan Strait and the Future of China's No-First-Use Nuclear Policy', *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2008), pp. 164-82.

multilateral organisation.⁷⁴ Rather, the 6PT is a very useful instrument for China to achieve its strategic objectives of regional stability, economic growth, domestic stability and multi-polarity.

Although it exercises a degree of influence over the North Korean regime, China has (privately) expressed frustration with the limitations of its bilateral relationship for effectively preventing provocative behaviour by North Korea.⁷⁵ Military action by Pyongyang would have the potential to destabilise the region, as would the use of armed force by Washington to neutralise what it perceives to be an unresolved global threat. Multilateral organisations thus provide a framework within which China can maintain regional stability by increasing the predictability of the North Korean regime and constraining the United States from acting unilaterally. China is not only seeking to avoid the possibility of being drawn into a nearby armed conflict, but to prevent an influx of refugees or the fallout from a failed state across the Yalu.⁷⁶ Any of these scenarios would drain China's financial resources and compromise continued economic development.

Analysts including Jaewoo Choo argue that it is premature to consider China's role in the 6PT as part of a broader plan to develop a new multilateral security arrangement in East Asia.⁷⁷ Nevertheless the broader strategic benefits for China with respect to achieving its goal of multi-polarity cannot be ignored. China has received international kudos for the leadership role it has played in the 6PT despite the institution failing to deliver on its aims of verifiable and irreversible disarmament by North Korea, or a security guarantee by the United States. China has also been able to demonstrate commitment to multilateral engagement while continuing to maintain an alliance relationship with a state considered a global pariah, supplying it with weapons and circumventing international sanctions.⁷⁸

In addition, the 6PT has enabled China to keep the issue of North Korea largely outside of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). For China this has four benefits. First, Beijing avoids having to choose publicly between the United States and North Korea. Engaging in behind-the-scenes diplomacy in the 6PT, Beijing can keep providing assurances to both sides in

⁷⁴ John S. Park, 'Inside Multilateralism: The Six-Party Talks', *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Autumn 2005), p. 77.

⁷⁵ 'US Embassy Cables: China's "Dislike" of North Korean Regime', *The Guardian*, 29 November 2010, sec. World News, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/231221>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

⁷⁶ Park, 'Inside Multilateralism: The Six-Party Talks', p. 77.

⁷⁷ Choo, 'Is Institutionalisation of the Six-Party Talks Possible?'

⁷⁸ Gordon G. Chang, 'Beijing Is Violating North Korean Sanctions', *Wall Street Journal*, 15 October 2009, sec. Opinion Asia, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704107204574474424116638040.html>> [Accessed 17 August 2012]; UN Security Council Resolution 1695 imposed a sanctions regime on North Korea. The resolution passed unanimously in 2006 after the DPRK announced a successful nuclear test: 'United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718 (2006)', (United Nations Security Council, 14 October 2006), p. 1.

a forum where merely coming to the negotiating table is considered a success.⁷⁹ Second, although there is nothing preventing the UNSC from trying to resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, the existence of the 6PT makes it less likely that the UNSC will seek to intervene. Thus China has taken an international security issue in which it has an acute interest away from the purview of an established UNSC process that Beijing does not dominate and can only influence through the blunt instrument of its veto power, and placed it within a forum where Beijing meets the United States as an equal partner, if not a superior force in the region.⁸⁰ Third, the 6PT creates an avenue for China to influence the tenor of any future reunification of the two Koreas, avoiding the prospect of a unified Korean peninsula falling entirely within the United States' realm of regional influence. Finally, by taking a strong lead in the 6PT, China is demonstrating a practical alternative to the UNSC. For China this is an important step along the path to multi-polarity. This is especially so in a post-Cold War world where the UNSC has been one of the main multilateral institutions the United States and its Western European allies have used to obtain international legitimacy for their foreign policy initiatives.

It is therefore not possible to construe China's active involvement in the 6PT as indicative of a broader, newfound commitment to multilateral engagement. The primary aim of China's participation in the 6PT has been to achieve its goals of regional stability and domestic harmony, not necessarily denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. This explains not only China's support for the institution, but how its bilateral relationship with North Korea has been mediated by (and in turn has mediated) Beijing's approach to the 6PT.

The four case studies discussed above show how important China's strategic objectives are in driving Beijing's participation in multilateral organisations in Asia. Whether China is creating a new multilateral institution or attempting to influence how an established institution operates, it is focusing on securing outcomes that further its strategic interests. As the following section demonstrates, when China finds that unilateralism is proving effective in allowing Beijing to achieve its strategic goals, then China readily bypasses multilateral forums. In the case of the South China Sea,

⁷⁹ For China, this is a preferable outcome to public stoushes where its obligations as an ally may conflict with its image as a multilateralist. See, for example, Beijing's attempts to suppress a UN report that found North Korea is violating the sanctions regime by selling weapons to Iran. Dan Bilefsky, 'China Delays Report Suggesting North Korea Violated Sanctions', *The New York Times*, 14 May 2011, sec. World/Asia Pacific, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/15/world/asia/15nations.html>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

⁸⁰ It is interesting that when discussing the North Korean nuclear issue, US government representatives repeatedly emphasise the centrality of China to resolving the matter. In part this may reflect Washington's desire to positively reinforce China's multilateral efforts but it also reflects a perception of the importance of China as a player in matters of international security; Washington could act unilaterally but it recognises that China's interests in the region must be respected. 'Foreign Policy Bulletin—Interviews Regarding the Six Party Talks', January 2006.

China prefers to 'go it alone', even as it continues to participate in a multilateral institution that could resolve these disputes.

The South China Sea Territorial Disputes: A True Case of Chinese 'Multilateral Engagement with Bilateral Vigour'?

The South China Sea (SCS) covers an area of approximately 648,000 square nautical miles making it one of the largest semi-enclosed seas in the world. Its sea lines of communication link the Pacific and Indian Oceans with over half of the world's merchant fleet passing through the Sea each year.⁸¹ Twenty-one of China's thirty-nine sea lanes pass through the SCS as do 80 percent of the Chinese ships transporting oil from the Middle East and Africa.⁸² The SCS has extensive fish stocks and it is also believed that the Sea holds significant deposits of oil, gas and hydrocarbons. Control of these waters and, to a lesser extent, freedom of navigation through them, is therefore of acute strategic importance. It is not surprising that territorial disputes have arisen between the six littoral states of the SCS as they each assert their sovereignty over parts of the Sea.

There is a wealth of scholarly contributions that outline the background to the SCS territorial disputes, assess the merits of the various territorial claims, and propose possible avenues for adjudicating between the competing interests.⁸³ The rising power of China has led to almost universal agreement that in order to prevent the dispute from escalating to the point of open armed conflict, such a solution must be multilateral in nature. There are three reasons for this conclusion: first, the claims themselves are overlapping and have conflicting bases, even when they emanate from the same state. Second, uncertainty regarding sovereignty rights has exacerbated the security dilemma for states in the region prompting increased militarisation in and around the SCS. Third, without a widely-accepted agreement in place, simple miscalculation (as opposed to a deliberate provocative act) could result in a serious military incident occurring.⁸⁴ This risk is heightened by states being required under

⁸¹ Nguyen Hong Thao and Ramses Amer, 'A New Legal Arrangement for the South China Sea?', *Ocean Development and International Law*, vol. 40, no. 4 (2009), p. 344.

⁸² Preeti Nalwa, "'Cheonan' Epilogue: Prelude to the Sino-US Incompatibility on the South China Sea Dispute', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 35, no. 2 (March 2011), p. 228.

⁸³ See, for example: Leszek Buszynski, 'ASEAN, the Declaration on Conduct, and the South China Sea', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2003), pp. 343-62; Leszek Buszynski and Iskandar Sazlan, 'Maritime Claims and Energy Cooperation in the South China Sea', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2007), pp. 143-7; Hasjim Djalal, 'Conflict Management Experiences in Southeast Asia: Lessons and Implications for the South China Sea Disputes', *Asian Politics & Policy*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2011), pp. 627-42; Andy Yee, 'Maritime Territorial Disputes in East Asia: A Comparative Analysis of the South China Sea and the East China Sea', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2011), pp. 165-93; Thao and Amer, 'A New Legal Arrangement for the South China Sea?'.

⁸⁴ Robert D. Kaplan, 'The South China Sea Is the Future of Conflict', *Foreign Policy*, October 2011, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/08/15/the_south_china_sea_is_the_future_of_conflict?page=full> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

international law to act forcefully to assert their claims or risk being considered to have abandoned those claims.⁸⁵

At the same time, there has been limited discussion as to why such a multilateral solution has not manifested,⁸⁶ save for lamentations about the collective action problem and expressions of optimism that a solution will develop in the fullness of time.⁸⁷ This is curious given the relatively long-standing existence of multilateral institutions in Asia that include all the disputant states and the conventional wisdom that Asian states are increasingly willing to address transnational issues through multilateral means. Most commentators suggest that the reason for the impasse has been China's preference for bilateral negotiations, but it is not explained *why* this preference exists or how it squares with China's supposedly growing enthusiasm for multilateralism. Nor is it explained why this particular maritime territorial dispute remains unresolved when China has successfully negotiated an end to almost all of its land disputes.⁸⁸ This analytical gap can be broached if one looks at China's overall strategic objectives in the region and the role that the SCS and multilateral organisations play in achieving these goals. Taking this approach, it is possible to see why Beijing remains confident in the utility of unilateral action and bilateral negotiations to achieve an outcome in the SCS disputes that meets its objectives. It is also possible to better understand the complex relationship that China has with the multilateral organisations of which it is a member.

The ambiguity that exists regarding sovereignty over the SCS is useful for China to the extent that it plays well with the nationalist fraction of its domestic audience. To date, Beijing has only taken limited steps to clarify its

⁸⁵ Alice D. Ba, 'Staking Claims and Making Waves in the South China Sea: How Troubled Are the Waters?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2001), p. 272.

⁸⁶ To the extent that a multilateral solution has emerged, it is one of mutual restraint. The various documents—such as the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, the 1992 ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Declaration on the South China Sea, the 1999 ASEAN-China Declaration on Conduct—and Track 2 initiatives by ARF have not touched on the fundamental question of sovereignty.

⁸⁷ See for example: Sam Bateman, 'Solving the "Wicked Problems" of Maritime Security: Are Regional Forums up to the Task?', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2001), pp. 1-28; Liselotte Odgaard, 'The South China Sea: ASEAN's Security Concerns About China', *Security Dialogue*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2003), pp. 11-24.

⁸⁸ One notable exception is Fravel who argues that China's current approach to the South China Sea (SCS) dispute is to adopt a delaying strategy. Fravel falls short, however, of exploring Chinese motivations for adopting this strategy or situating Beijing's approach in the context of China's broader strategic goals in the region. M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2011), pp. 292-319. Weissmann also argues that rather than an example of an unresolved dispute, the behaviour of affected states regarding the SCS is an example of effective conflict prevention: Mikael Weissmann, 'The South China Sea Conflict and Sino-ASEAN Relations: A Study in Conflict Prevention and Peace Building', *Asian Perspective*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2010), pp. 35-59.

so-called 'nine-dotted-line claim' to almost the entirety of the SCS.⁸⁹ In the absence of any explicit diplomatic concessions to possible sovereign rights of other states, China is able to maintain a position that is consistent with its strategic goal of protecting territorial integrity. This appeases both the nationalists who have the potential to threaten domestic harmony, and the more hawkish elements of the People's Liberation Army Navy.⁹⁰ For these groups, assertiveness on the SCS claim reflects positively on China's other outstanding territorial claim in the East China Sea.⁹¹ Unresolved competing sovereignty claims require parties to forcefully assert their claims through military/law enforcement action; with its comparatively superior naval capabilities, China can (militarily at least) afford to meet direct challenges to its sovereignty claims with armed force. Not only does it bank on winning a military confrontation, but Beijing is presuming that weaker competitor states would prefer to retreat or even concede their claims, rather than pursue costly military action.

As the gap between China's military capabilities and those of its neighbours grows, China has the upper hand in bilateral territorial negotiations. China's economic power can also be brought to bear in bilateral forums, while it risks being outweighed in multilateral organisations such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The SCS maritime dispute differs from China's territorial land disputes, where China was prepared to relinquish some of its claims in exchange for support to counter separatism and access to resources.⁹² In the case of the SCS, China has very little to gain, and much to lose, by allowing a multilateral process to potentially water down its claim. Economic imperatives are unlikely to motivate China towards a multilateral solution. The ability to tap the natural resource deposits in the SCS is presently more important to the other littoral states than China,⁹³ which has already enjoyed some success in diversifying its resource base. At the same time, China's strategic objectives of maintaining territorial integrity, preventing encirclement/containment by a hostile power, and achieving multi-polarity all intersect in the SCS and will be compromised if Beijing withdraws or negotiates away its SCS claims.

The only foreseeable way that China's unilateral/bilateral strategy for managing the SCS dispute could be undermined is if the United States

⁸⁹ M. Taylor Fravel, 'Clarification of China's Claim?', *China Power: A New World Order*, The Diplomat, 5 March 2012, <<http://the-diplomat.com/china-power/2012/03/05/clarification-of-china%E2%80%99s-claim/>> [Accessed 17 August 2012].

⁹⁰ For an analysis of the diversity of opinion in the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) regarding China's SCS strategy, see: Lyle Goldstein, 'Chinese Naval Strategy in the South China Sea: An Abundance of Noise and Smoke, but Little Fire', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2011), pp. 320-47.

⁹¹ Opinion on this matter in the PLAN is not universal. Goldstein points out that some in the PLAN believe that focus on the SCS may detract from China pursuing its claim on Taiwan. In these instances, ambiguity over China's claim may still prove useful. Ibid.

⁹² Ramachandran, 'China Plays Long Game on Border Disputes'.

⁹³ Fravel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', p. 301.

becomes involved and weighs in on the side of the other littoral states.⁹⁴ China has so far prevented this from occurring by allowing the ARF—a forum that excludes the United States—to begin discussing aspects of the SCS. China has thus been able to demonstrate a commitment to multilateral engagement, fostered optimism for the emergence of a multilateral solution, and discouraged United States involvement, while simultaneously avoiding settlement of the issue of sovereignty which remains at the crux of the disputes.⁹⁵ This fundamental question of sovereignty, tied as it is to China's broader strategic objectives in Asia, remains a matter that China prefers to address through unilateral/bilateral means rather than through multilateral organisations.

Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese multilateralism in Asia is best understood by looking at Beijing's enduring strategic objectives. China's current multilateral engagement is a means for it to achieve its strategic goals and not, as some commentators argue, indicative of a more principled transformation in China's approach to international relations. China only pursues multilateralism when unilateral or bilateral mechanisms prove limited in their ability to secure China's ultimate aims. When China's strategic objectives are used as the analytical starting point, the differences observed in Chinese participation across multilateral organisations are not just consistent, they are largely predictable.

In the practice of grand strategy, the Chinese pursuit of multilateralism in some respects is far from exceptional. After all, Beijing has long criticised multilateral institutions for (unfairly) benefiting those powerful states that oversaw the establishment of the current global order and crafted what are now considered international norms. But just as multilateral organisations have sometimes constrained major powers such as the United States, China has already experienced how multilateralism may not always deliver the strategic dividends Beijing seeks. As China becomes increasingly enmeshed in multilateral organisations, the costs of unilateral/bilateral action rise. Achievement of Beijing's core strategic objectives, however, will remain the key driver of its future decisions regarding multilateral engagement, not the reverse.

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⁹⁴ Ralf Emmers, 'The Changing Power Distribution in the South China Sea: Implications for Conflict Management and Avoidance', *Political Science*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2010), p. 124.

⁹⁵ Favel, 'China's Strategy in the South China Sea', p. 301.