

“China and the EU should work together to defend multilateralism”

70 years ago, the newly founded People’s Republic of China emerged from a period of foreign invasion and interference. From its very beginnings, China positioned itself against hegemony and power politics. However, international cooperation came to form a corner stone of the People’s Republic foreign policy. In my career as a diplomat, I have followed China’s progress in making multilateralism the basis of its foreign policy – particularly after the Cold War, as globalization ushered in a new wave of multilateral momentum.

Today, while China is a fervent supporter of the existing multilateral system, it equally believes the latter is in need of modification and perfection.

While multilateralism may at times require countries to reach beyond their national interest for the greater good, it should not provide cover for major powers to thwart other countries’ aspirations. With respect to issues such as territorial sovereignty, greater emphasis should be given to sovereign rights. Parties directly involved in a given dispute must be allowed to work out solutions by means of negotiating. China believes in solving disputes through peaceful means such as dialogue and negotiation. Where Beijing feels compelled to use force, it does so for the purpose of self-defence. It follows that multilateralism should be applied



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mainly in areas of common interest to international society in order to meet common risks and challenges. By means of multilateral cooperation, we can avoid following the logic of zero-sum games in international affairs, thus forestalling confrontation.

The word “unilateralism” in international politics carries negative connotations, and is often associated with terms such as “hegemony” and “power politics”. According to the realist theoretical framework, unilateralism is the game of the powerful. As Thucydides famously put it “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Given its experience of being invaded and bullied,

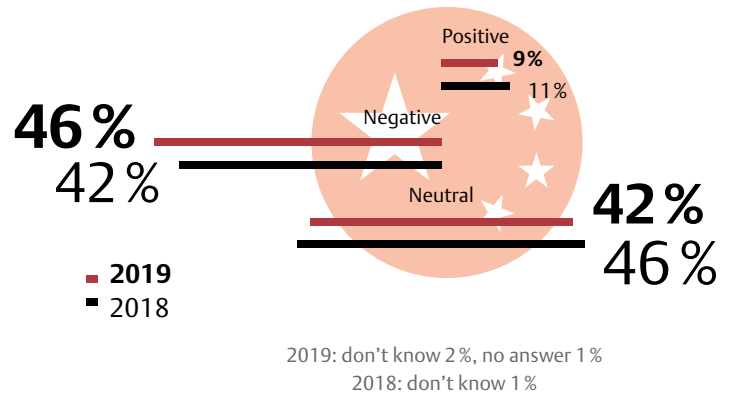
China is intuitively against unilateralism, constantly reminding itself not to practice unilateralism.

Moreover, China needs to enrich its experience in international affairs and develop its own theoretical framework. While we may often need to borrow Western terms to express our thoughts for the time being, Chinese thinkers and practitioners should enrich them with our own insights and perspectives. Take the term of “globalization” for example: While China supports globalization and considers it to be an important and irreversible trend, Beijing will not accept the West’s “political globalization” which intends to impose the latter’s political system and values onto the world. Yes, there are certain advantages to the Western system. Beijing does not deny this and has been learning from the West in order to perfect its own system. But as a sovereign nation, China will need to find and pursue its own path, as is its undeniable right. Another example pertains “global governance”. While we value the existing structures, the international community should be open to modifying these to accommodate changes and to better meet new challenges. Artificial Intelligence is a case in point. On the one hand, AI will bring great benefits to humankind by improving our living and working conditions in previously unimaginable ways; on the other, AI comes with complex risks and challenges, and successful solutions will require humankind to think and act together.

President Xi Jinping’s idea of building “a community with a shared future” strongly reflects China’s belief in multilateralism. It can be seen as both an anticipation of better global governance as well as a way to solve our shared problems together.

The world is rapidly changing, as the past few years have demonstrated, partially due to China’s growth. However, the principle cause of uncertainty lies in the United States’ strategic readjustments and Washington’s emphasis on “America First”. It is not an exaggeration to say that the world once more finds itself at a crossroads. Its future depends on the path we choose. The choices we need to make are not simply about one country choosing between multilateralism or unilateralism, liberalism or conservatism. Instead, by choosing one and not the

What is your view of China’s growing influence?



other, we are collectively changing the direction in which the world will go: Will we choose to maintain peace and development, or to slide into confrontation or even wars? Are we to continue economic globalization and advocate inclusion and collaboration? Or do we want to regress to mutually hostile camps and zero-sum games?

China continues to hold on to its belief in peace and development, as well as in peaceful cooperation as the way to meet international challenges. An international order based on multilateralism can provide protection to this peaceful path and therefore demands our unwavering support.

Europe is a pioneer in the practice of multilateralism, with the European Union as living proof. European integration has greatly benefitted not only its countries and peoples, but has also contributed to the long-term peace and prosperity of the world at large. In recent years, many European leaders including the German Chancellor Angela Merkel have called for the world’s attention to focus on the challenges to multilateralism and its institutions. While admitting the need for improving the current multilateral institutions, European leaders believe that there is no better choice than multilateralism – a view China shares. This is the moment therefore for China and the EU as well as the European countries as such to work together to defend multilateralism while exploring how to reform and improve the latter in order to respond to the 21st century’s challenges – together.

