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# True Multilateralism: Conceptual Development, Core Essences, and China's Practices

**Abstract:** At present, the profound changes unseen in a century are intensifying globally, and global governance encounters a growing array of challenges. The international community needs to advance global governance through true multilateralism. Nevertheless, unilateralism and hegemonism are undermining multilateralism, which faces significant obstacles. China actively advocates and practices true multilateralism, a concept it has proposed, refined, and developed. The core principles of true multilateralism include upholding fairness and justice, maintaining openness and inclusiveness, adhering to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, promoting extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, and keeping pace with the times. China advances true multilateralism through concrete actions, such as nurturing the idea of a community with a shared future for mankind, safeguarding the UN system, enhancing multilateral mechanisms, providing high-quality international public goods, and promoting legal frameworks in global governance.

**Keywords:** global governance, international order, true multilateralism concept, community with a shared future for humanity, PR China

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Multilateralism boasts profound ideological roots and an extensive history of implementation (Ma, 2024, pp. 13-14; Wu & Liu, 2020, p. 23; Liao, 2023, pp. 61-62). In the academic community of international relations, multilateralism is generally defined as the institutional framework for managing relations among three or more nations based on widely recognized principles of conduct. Since the end of the Cold War, globalization and multipolarity have continued to advance, making multilateralism a

widely accepted approach within the international community for promoting global governance. At its core, multilateralism entails coordination and cooperation among multiple stakeholders in the governance system. Recently, several nations have pursued various forms of “pseudo-multilateralism” to serve their own interests, significantly undermining the governance effectiveness of international multilateral institutions and posing a serious and immediate threat to world peace and development.

More than ever, the world needs to promote and practice true multilateralism to steer the globe from turbulent change toward stable development.

## I. Proposal and Development of True Multilateralism

The major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics focuses on the future and destiny of humanity. It contemplates the main challenges facing global governance in the context of the significant changes unfolding over the century and the underlying issues in effectively implementing multilateralism. It advocates that in the face of a myriad of complex global issues, upholding and practicing true multilateralism is the way forward. Overall, the evolution of the concept of true multilateralism proposed by China has followed the process below.

In April 2021, President Xi Jinping first put forward true multilateralism at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference.<sup>[1]</sup> From September 2021 to June 2022, in multiple international conferences, Xi elaborated extensively on true multilateralism, emphasizing the need to practice it and improve global governance. True multilateralism has since become the mainstream discourse of China on global governance.

In October 2022, the Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China stated that China plays an active part in the reform and development of the global governance system. It pursues a vision of global governance featuring extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. China upholds true multilateralism, promotes greater democracy in international relations, and works to make global governance fairer and more equitable.<sup>[2]</sup> This demonstrates that true multilateralism has been elevated to the will and strategy of China's ruling party.

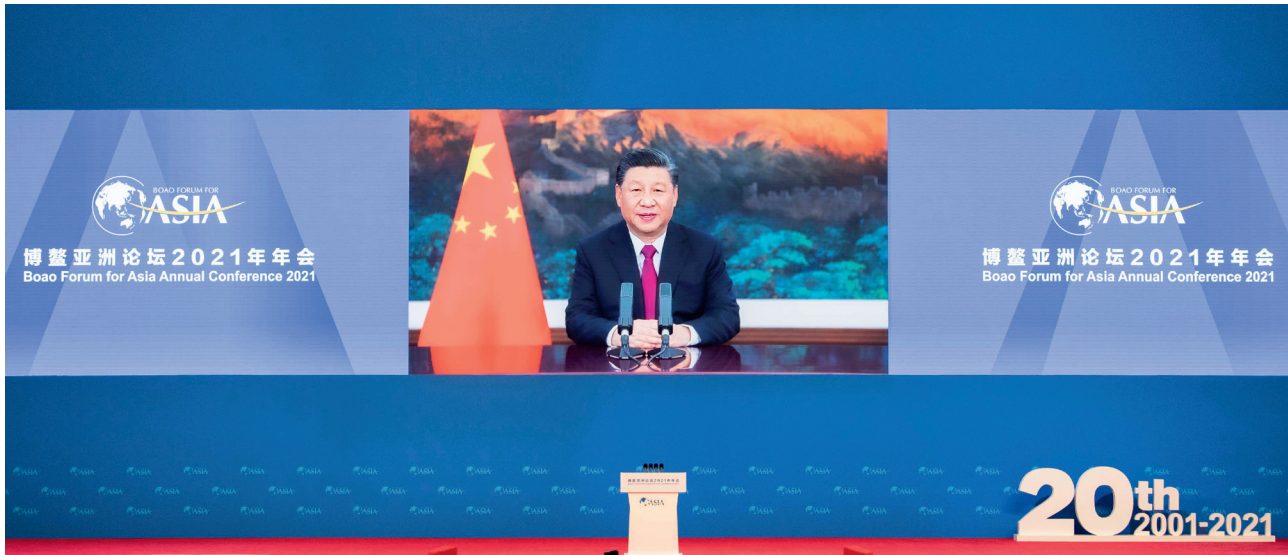
On July 1, 2023, with the implementation of the Law on Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China, the commitment to upholding and implementing multilateralism – as well as engaging in the reform and development of the global governance framework – was further established as an objective in China's development of foreign relations. The law emphasizes upholding the international system centred on the United Nations, preserving the international order based on international law, and maintaining the basic norms of international relations founded on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. It also underscores the global governance concept of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits; participating in the formulation of international rules; promoting the democratization of international relations; and

[1] Xi Jinping's Video Keynote Speech (Full Text) at the Opening Ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2021, Chinese Government Website, April 20, 2021, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-04/20/content\\_5600764.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-04/20/content_5600764.htm).

[2] Xi Jinping: Holding High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Striving in Unity for the Comprehensive Construction of a Modernized Socialist Country - Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Chinese Government Website, October 25, 2022, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content\\_5721685.htm?eqid=afd4626e0007882000000003647edae0](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-10/25/content_5721685.htm?eqid=afd4626e0007882000000003647edae0).

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The president of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, during his speech at the Boao Forum for Asia annual conference in Boao, Hainan Province, April 2021

Photo: Xinhua

making economic globalization more open, inclusive, balanced and beneficial to all.<sup>[3]</sup> In that way, the law further clarifies the core connotations of practicing true multilateralism and its significance in the process of China's diplomacy as a major power.

In the same year, the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs held in December stated that to keep the progress toward greater multipolarity generally stable and constructive, the purposes and principles of the United Nations

Charter must be observed by all, the universally recognized, basic norms governing international relations must be upheld by all, and true multilateralism must be practiced.<sup>[4]</sup> This means that, in the current and the coming period, true multilateralism will continue to be transformed into practical actions in China's foreign affairs work.

In June 2024, at the Conference marking the 70th Anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, Xi stated that advocating the vision of

[3] Law on Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China, Chinese Government Website, June 29, 2023, [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202306/content\\_6888929.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202306/content_6888929.htm).

[4] Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs Held in Beijing with an Important Speech Delivered by Xi Jinping, Website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, December 28, 2023, [http://new.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/202312/t20231228\\_11214409.shtml](http://new.fmprc.gov.cn/web/zyxw/202312/t20231228_11214409.shtml).

global governance featuring extensive consultation and joint contribution for shared benefit – and practicing true multilateralism – means insisting that international rules should be made and jointly observed by all countries. World affairs should be handled through extensive consultation, not dictated by those with more “muscles”.<sup>[5]</sup> This underscores China’s firm determination and resolve to advance global governance through true multilateralism.

In September 2024, the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation was successfully held. Xi attended the summit’s opening ceremony and delivered a keynote speech,<sup>[6]</sup> organically combining the core concept of true multilateralism with the grand vision of modernization for the Global South. His address delivered a powerful message that developing countries have an equal right to modernization. During his meeting with United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, who attended the summit, Xi emphasized that “practicing true multilateralism, supporting the UN to play a core role in international affairs, has always been a principle that Chinese diplomacy adheres to and will not change. At present, as the international situation becomes more turbulent and intertwined, the UN’s important role is even more prominent and should take more proactive actions”. This statement clearly indicates that practicing true multilateralism inevitably requires supporting the

UN – the core platform of multilateralism – and demonstrates China’s resolute stance in safeguarding the authority of the UN.

## II. Core Essence of True Multilateralism

True multilateralism is not only an innovative development of the global concept of multilateralism but also a creative transformation of the essence of China’s outstanding traditional culture, forming a theoretical system that is rich in thought, profound in connotation, and logically rigorous. Among its core principles, upholding fairness and justice is the primary criterion, openness and inclusiveness are essential, adherence to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter is the fundamental guideline, practicing extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits is the necessary path, and keeping pace with the times is an inevitable choice.

**(1) Upholding fairness and justice is the primary criterion.** Upholding fairness and justice underscores the moral foundation of true multilateralism. True multilateralism advocates for mutual respect, equal participation, and consultative cooperation in advancing global governance. This means that all countries share both governance responsi-

[5] Xi Jinping’s Full Text Speech at the Conference Marking the 70th Anniversary of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, Chinese Government Website, June 28, 2024, [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content\\_6959889.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202406/content_6959889.htm).

[6] Xi Jinping’s Full Text Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Chinese Government Website, September 5, 2024, [https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202409/content\\_6972495.htm](https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202409/content_6972495.htm).



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President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Serbia, H.E. Chen Bo, during the cornerstone-laying ceremony for the "Shandong Linglong Tire Co., Ltd." factory, Zrenjanin, March 2019.

Photo: Office of the President of Serbia

bilities and rights, thereby promoting the democratization of international relations, resisting all forms of hegemonic, high-handed, and bullying acts and collectively advocating for world peace and development. Advancing global governance through multilateralism must fully embody the principle of fairness and justice. Every nation, regardless of size, strength, or wealth, is an equal member of the

international community. An international order based on imperialism, hegemonism, or colonialism – which enforces hierarchical structures – is out of step with the trends of the times, and the pursuit of injustice and the law of the jungle, where the strong prey on the weak, is deeply resented.

**(2) Upholding openness and inclusiveness is essential.** Multilateralism and global governance share

an inherent consistency. Their commonalities are reflected in all-win value objectives, multi-layered actors, diverse issue areas, and pluralistic pathways (Wu & Liu, 2020, p. 23). Multilateralism upholds the cooperative spirit of openness and inclusiveness, emphasizing respect for diversity, rejecting closed and exclusionary approaches, and advocating open cooperation to address global issues. Openness and inclusiveness entail upholding the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind, seeking common ground while reserving differences, and building consensus to “maximize the openness and inclusiveness of cooperation mechanisms, concepts, and policies” (PDC & FMPRC, 2021, p. 161). It is through embracing openness and inclusiveness that we can steer and advance the healthy progression of globalization, stimulate global economic growth, and tackle the increasingly significant challenges we face worldwide. Only by maintaining openness and inclusiveness, and by upholding a civilization view characterized by equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and mutual accommodation – along with promoting the common values of humanity such as peace, development, equity, justice, democracy, and freedom – can we overcome ideological prejudices and achieve harmonious coexistence and collective progress in the international community. Actions by certain countries aimed to draw ideological lines and foster confrontations run counter to the principles of true multilateralism.

**(3) Adherence to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter is the fundamental**

**guideline.** True multilateralism steadfastly safeguards the international system centred on the United Nations, the international order based on international law, and the basic norms of international relations founded on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, while supporting the UN in playing a greater role in international affairs. Over the past 400 years, whether it was the European public law of the 17th century or the international order based on the international law of “civilized nations” during the colonial periods of the 18th and 19th centuries – although these systems were formally supported by multiple countries – their essence was still rooted in colonialism or hegemonism. It was only after the establishment of the UN Charter that a truly global multilateral international order could be realized (Ma, 2024, p. 16). The purposes and principles of the UN Charter provide crucial guarantees for global peace and development, preventing the international community from being dictated by those with stronger arms or larger fists.<sup>[7]</sup> True multilateralism further emphasizes that international relations should uniformly adhere to international law, with all countries observing international law and the universally recognized basic principles of international relations under a set of unified rules that clearly distinguish right from wrong, without any country resorting to “exceptionalism”.

**(4) Practicing extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits is the neces-**

[7] Xi Jinping’s Speech at the General Debate of the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly (Full Text), Xinhua News, September 29, 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-09/29/c\\_1116703645.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-09/29/c_1116703645.htm); Xi Jinping, Let the Torch of Multilateralism Light up Humanity’s Way Forward – Special Address at the World Economic Forum Virtual Event of the Davos Agenda, People’s Daily Online, January 26, 2021, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/0126/c1024-32011618.html>.

**sary path.** The global governance concept of extensive consultation, joint construction, and shared benefits is a distinctive connotation of true multilateralism. „Extensive consultation” entails that all countries pool ideas and engage in communication and dialogue on the basis of sovereign equality, thereby promoting fairness in rights, opportunities, and rules. “What kind of international order and global governance system is beneficial for the world and the peoples of all countries should be determined through discussion among the peoples of all countries, not decided unilaterally or by a select few.”<sup>[8]</sup> “Joint construction” means that all parties participate together and maximize benefits through cooperation – essentially, working collectively to enlarge the proverbial cake. In facing global challenges, no country can isolate itself; only by sharing risks and responsibilities, practicing true multilateralism, and cooperating hand in hand can effective solutions be found. “Shared benefits” involves distributing the outcomes of cooperation across various fields equitably, ensuring that the benefits of cooperation reach all countries, the international community, and the wider public, and ultimately allowing all parties to share in development opportunities and achievements.

**(5) Keeping pace with the times is an inevitable choice.** Keeping pace with the times reflects the timeliness and innovative spirit of true multilateralism. At present, the once-in-a-century upheaval is accelerating, with changes in the world, the era, and history unfolding in unprecedented ways. The foundational strength of multilateralism is undergoing

significant transformation, and new issues in global governance are emerging continuously, while the construction of multilateral mechanisms lags behind and deficits keep growing (Wu & Liu, 2020, p. 35). True multilateralism must also adhere to the principle of preserving its core values while innovating, and it must look to the future in order to continuously rejuvenate its vitality and enhance governance effectiveness. Otherwise, it will fall behind the times and be unable to adequately address emerging challenges.

### III. China's Practice of True Multilateralism

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China is not only an advocate of the concept of true multilateralism but also a practitioner, promoter, and leader in its implementation. China actively defends, develops, and promotes true multilateralism – taking the lead in upholding equality, cooperation, integrity, and the rule of law – thereby proving to be a responsible major country with a pivotal role in advancing the reform and improvement of the global governance framework.

**(1) Developing true multilateralism through the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind.** Xi proposed the concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind, advocating for a world characterized by lasting peace, universal security, common prosperity, openness and inclusiveness, and a clean and beautiful environment. He calls for all nations to jointly shape the destiny of the world, participate together in global governance

[8] Xi Jinping, Speech at the Celebration of the 95th Anniversary of the Founding of the Communist Party of China, Chinese Government Website, April 15, 2021, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-04/15/content\\_5599747.html](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-04/15/content_5599747.html).

and rule-making, and share the benefits of human development, thereby forging a new consensus on global governance through true multilateralism. The concept of a community with a shared future for mankind upholds openness and inclusiveness – it does not draw ideological lines, target specific groups, or form exclusive “cliques”; it advocates fairness and justice, emphasizing that no country should monopolize international affairs, dictate the fate of others, or dominate development advantages; it calls for harmonious coexistence, whereby countries, while seeking common ground while reserving differences, can achieve peaceful coexistence and common development; it champions pluralistic mutual learning, respecting different histories, national conditions, ethnicities, and customs, and promoting intercultural exchanges; and it underscores solidarity and cooperation, opposing “national priority” and advocating a shared destiny where all countries collaborate to address global challenges (Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2023). Since its proposal in 2013, the concept has been incorporated into UN documents multiple times and has received high praise and support from numerous national and international leaders (Jia, 2022).

**(2) Safeguarding the UN System and perfecting multilateral mechanisms.** First, China firmly upholds the authority and status of the United Nations. As the second-largest contributor to UN assessed contributions and a major contributor to UN peacekeeping, China has played an active role in promoting UN reform and enhancing the representation and

voice of developing countries. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has commended that since the restoration of its legitimate seat in the UN, the People’s Republic of China has become an increasingly important contributor to UN work and a major pillar of international cooperation.<sup>[9]</sup> Second, China is committed to perfecting multilateral mechanisms to further the development of true multilateralism. China actively promotes the reform of existing multilateral mechanisms toward a more just and equitable direction, strengthens solidarity and cooperation among the “Global South”, and enhances the international discourse power of developing countries. For example, China has actively promoted the African Union’s accession as a formal member of the G20. In addition, by working with various parties to lead international mechanisms such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China has continuously expanded these platforms – through measures such as membership enlargement – so that they become important platforms for emerging market countries and developing nations to safeguard their interests, enhance their international influence, and drive the reform and improvement of the global governance framework (Zhao & Tao, 2023, pp. 13-20).

**(3) Providing high-quality international public goods.** Firstly, to build a platform for more inclusive multilateral cooperation. China has injected new momentum into global development through high-quality Belt and Road cooperation and multilateral mechanisms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BRICS New Development Bank,

[9] United Nations Secretary-General: China Has Become an Increasingly Important Contributor to the UN and a Main Pillar of International Cooperation, China News Service, October 25, 2021, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gj/2021/10-25/9594811.shtml>.



and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Secondly, by proposing the “Three Global Initiatives”, China provides public goods for world peace and development. At the United Nations, China initiated the “Group of Friends of the Global Development Initiative”, attracting more than 70 countries.<sup>[10]</sup> The Global Security Initiative advocates a new path for security – characterized by dialogue rather than confrontation, partnership rather than alliance, and win-win rather than zero-sum outcomes – which has received support and praise from over 100 countries and international regional organizations. It has been incorporated into more than 90 bilateral and multilateral documents in China’s engagements with other nations and international organizations.<sup>[11]</sup> On June 7, 2024, the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly, by consensus, adopted a resolution proposed by China to establish an “International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations”. The resolution, centred on the core tenets of the Global Civilization Initiative – namely, the four key pillars proposed by Xi – received enthusiastic responses and broad support from the international community, fully demonstrating that the Global Civilization Initiative aligns with the trends of the times and meets current global needs.<sup>[12]</sup>

**(4) Advancing the rule of law in global governance.** Promoting the transformation of the global governance system requires advancing the rule of law in global governance and building an international legal order. China firmly upholds an international order based on international law, actively participates in the formulation and improvement of international rules, and promotes the rule of law in international relations, thereby providing legal safeguards for global governance. China actively practices the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Since their proposal 70 years ago, these principles have been enshrined in the Chinese Constitution, as well as in establishment communiques, bilateral treaties, and numerous important international documents with almost all countries with which China has diplomatic relations. They form the cornerstone of China’s independent and peaceful foreign policy and have become the universally applicable basic norms of international relations and fundamental principles of international law, setting a historical benchmark for international relations and the rule of law. China has also strengthened international law enforcement cooperation and promoted the rule of law in global security governance. By enacting laws such as the Law on International Criminal Judicial Assistance

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[10] Seminar on Joining Hands to Promote Global Development and Accelerate the Achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals organized by the Permanent Mission of China in Vienna, China International Development Cooperation Agency, November 29, 2023, [http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2023-11/29/c\\_1212308183.htm](http://www.cidca.gov.cn/2023-11/29/c_1212308183.htm).

[11] Report on the Implementation Progress of the Global Security Initiative (2024), by the China Institute of International Studies and the Global Security Initiative Research Center, p. 10, China Institute of International Studies website, July 18, 2024, <https://www.ciiis.org.cn/xwdt/202407/W020240718528334066314.pdf>; Press Conference on April 19, 2024, Hosted by Spokesperson Lin Jian, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China website, April 19, 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjdt\\_674879/zcjd/202404/t20240419\\_11285033.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/wjdt_674879/zcjd/202404/t20240419_11285033.shtml).

[12] Press Conference on June 11, 2024, Hosted by Spokesperson Lin Jian, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China website, June 11, 2024, [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt\\_674879/zcjd/202406/t20240611\\_11424807.shtml](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/wjdt_674879/zcjd/202406/t20240611_11424807.shtml).

and the Law on Anti-Organized Crime, China has solidified the legal foundation for combating organized crime. Under the framework of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, China has engaged in diverse and effective cooperation with other countries. In international law enforcement efforts against transnational drug trafficking, terrorism, and other challenges, China respects the sovereignty of other nations, abides by relevant conventions and agreements as guiding principles, clearly delineates the law enforcement authorities and responsibilities of all parties, and enhances joint law enforcement exercises.

global governance. It has forged a consensus among people worldwide in the pursuit of peace and development, aligning with the tide of historical progress and bearing immense global significance. It serves to purify multilateralism, sharply contrasting with unilateralism and various forms of pseudo-multilateralism. Whether in addressing current global challenges or jointly creating a better future for humankind, the international community must further join hands in practicing true multilateralism. Looking ahead, practicing true multilateralism requires commitment in five areas: first, steadfastly promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind; second, firmly upholding the authority of the UN Charter; third, resolutely safeguarding the right of all nations to participate equally in international affairs; fourth, maintaining a clear focus on action; and fifth, firmly opposing unilateral hegemony and all forms of “pseudo-multilateralism”.

## Conclusion

True multilateralism is an inevitable choice for humanity to address global challenges and advance

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