

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Dragon's Emerging Order: Sino-centric Multilateralism and Global Responses.* Edited by Joel Ng. Singapore: World Scientific. Hardcover: 216pp.**

As China has become one of the most consequential drivers of structural change in the global order, the question of its role in multilateralism has grown especially urgent. Its expanding economic and diplomatic reach places it at the centre of efforts to reshape existing institutions and to build alternative multilateral arrangements. Understanding whether China wants to supplement, reform or subtly redirect these multilateral structures is, therefore, critical not only for scholars of international relations but also for policymakers grappling with the future of global governance. *The Dragon's Emerging Order* addresses these questions across twelve chapters, combining theoretical discussions with empirical case analyses.

In Chapter One, Joel Ng sets out the volume's *problematique*: how should Sino-centric multilateralism be defined amid China's growing activism in shaping and creating institutions. He also outlines the case selection, focusing on globally significant groupings that support Beijing's vision of a multipolar order and regional "China-plus" frameworks. Importantly, Ng emphasizes that despite China's influence, other participating states retain agency in shaping the outcomes.

The next chapter, by Ng and Alan Chong, offers the conceptual and theoretical discussion. They argue that there is a distinct philosophical root to China's vision of multilateralism. An ideal type of the principles of "Sino-centric multilateralism" is constructed to highlight China's distinct approaches and preferences, including

sovereignty and equality, cooperation and development, multipolarity, anti-hegemonism, anti-bloc politics, adherence to international law and support for the United Nations. Beijing's objectives, they argue, are to secure a peaceful international environment for China and to avoid a security dilemma.

Subsequent chapters turn to empirical analysis. Su-Hyun Lee's chapter on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) shows how development finance serves as a central pillar of China's multilateral strategy, contrasting the BRI's stated developmental vision with its actual financing patterns. While the initiative is framed as promoting development through concessional lending, much of the funding is directed towards projects with limited development impact, highlighting a gap between rhetoric and implementation.

Nazia Hussain's chapter on BRICS examines its relevance to global governance, China's strategic interest in the grouping and debates over the group's expansion. BRICS is presented as an effort to reshape global governance by challenging Western-dominated frameworks and advancing the interests of emerging economies, a goal that aligns closely with China's support for the platform. However, the chapter gives less attention to internal heterogeneity within BRICS, which may constrain its cohesion and transformative capacity.

Regional case studies further illustrate the diversity of China's multilateral engagements. Jodie Yuzhou Sun's analysis of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and Rodrigo Fracalossi de Moraes's discussion of the China-CELAC Forum, a cooperation mechanism with Latin American and Caribbean states, highlight relatively successful partnerships that have evolved from symbolic dialogue platforms into more structured mechanisms for cooperation. Institutionally "minimalist", these frameworks allow China significant agenda-setting power while still enabling other states to shape outcomes. They also demonstrate how China's multilateralism can be effective where economic asymmetries translate into cooperative partnerships, with symbolic and diplomatic value playing an important role.

Other regional experiments are more complicated. Jose Miguelito Enriquez examines China-ASEAN relations, highlighting the tension between economic interdependence and strategic mistrust in the context of the South China Sea dispute. While both sides are closely integrated economically and China is a key ASEAN dialogue partner, ongoing maritime disputes and ASEAN's fear of an overbearing, hegemonic China also constrain deeper strategic

alignment and limit trust within the partnership. Alica Kizekova's chapter on China's relations with countries in Central and Eastern Europe argues that Beijing has struggled to gain strategic traction in the region. Despite initial optimism surrounding the "17+1" framework, diverging interests within the region and EU scrutiny have limited China's influence. This chapter is particularly valuable because it introduces a corrective to overly optimistic assessments of China's global reach.

The volume includes chapters that broaden the scope to global institutions. Alan Chong surveys the history of China's engagement with the G7 and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) from the Cold War until the present. These global movements are admittedly not the central focal points of China's multilateral engagements, and at times, China's actual stance on certain issues also differs from them. Yet these bodies remain useful for China to exercise its soft power, to build its "anti-hegemonic" credentials and to frame itself as a champion of Global South interests. While BRICS, the G7 and the NAM serve as key platforms for China's engagement with the Global South, the G20 represents a broader arena where both developing and advanced economies are present and where China increasingly seeks a stronger voice in global economic governance. At the G20, over time, China has evolved from a cautious participant into a more assertive actor promoting its own policy preferences and institutional visions. However, as Dipinder S. Randhawa's analysis suggests, China remains a pragmatic stakeholder, prioritizing stability over systemic disruption. Taken together, these dynamics underscore the broader argument that China does not reject the existing system of global governance but wants to recalibrate and reshape it from within.

Chapter Eleven by Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit introduces an important counterpoint by emphasizing the agency of regional states. Rather than portraying smaller states as passive recipients of Chinese influence, this chapter highlights their ability to negotiate, resist and shape outcomes within Sino-centric frameworks. This adds analytical balance to the volume by avoiding a purely China-centric narrative.

In the concluding chapter, Ng argues that attempts to isolate China are unlikely to succeed, that shifting global dynamics create opportunities for smaller states to assert their agency and that Sino-centric multilateralism differs from liberal models by prioritizing state

sovereignty and maintaining a strongly intergovernmental character rather than delegating authority to supranational institutions.

Overall, *The Dragon's Emerging Order* makes a useful contribution to the growing scholarship on China's approach to multilateralism, a relatively underexplored dimension compared to studies of its bilateral diplomacy or grand strategy. The volume offers a nuanced and accessible account of China's diverse multilateral engagements, making it valuable to both specialist and general readers. However, it leans more towards descriptive analysis than sustained theoretical innovation, and as with many edited collections, it suffers from uneven conceptual coherence across chapters. The inclusion of in-depth analysis of key China-led institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation could have provided more concrete illustrations of China's multilateral vision and further strengthened the book's overall contribution.

NGEOW CHOW BING is Associate Professor at the University of Malaya, Malaysia. Postal address: Institute of China Studies, 4th Floor, Bangunan IAS, Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; email: ngeow.c@um.edu.my.