



China's multilateralism: higher ambitions

by Alice Ekman

China's ambitions to reshape the regional and international order have never been as high as under President Xi Jinping's leadership (scheduled to last until 2022 at least). Beijing seeks to lead the reform of global governance, and, as it is about to chair the G20 for 2016, sees the next two years as a key period to achieve results. China will also host the BRICS summit in 2017 and is likely to consolidate its informal leadership of this group and strengthen relations with each member in the run-up.

Furthermore, China will not only continue to reinforce its participation in existing institutions and summits but also, simultaneously create new ones in which to play an active role, building on its newfound self-confidence following the successful launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

A multi-pronged strategy

While Beijing is still keen on IMF reform, its ambitions transcend global economic governance and extend to environmental (as proven by its role in the COP21 negotiations), cyber and even cultural governance. China's activism also increasingly seems to be shifting towards the construction of new cooperation mechanisms.

China will doubtless proactively consolidate its leadership of existing groups, in particular the G20 and the BRICS under its presidency (Chinese officials are already lobbying for the establishment of

a permanent G20 secretariat based in Beijing). But China is also likely to accelerate the creation of new regional and international mechanisms in a variety of fields. In the security domain, Beijing is currently trying to revive the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which includes more than 20 states (but excludes Japan and the US). It is also the forum in which it first unveiled its 'Asia for Asians' security concept ('Asian community of common destiny'). China is also trying to consolidate the Xiangshan Forum, an annual Beijing-based regional security dialogue which it promotes as a potential alternative to the Shangri-La Dialogue.

But Beijing may also create larger-scale, more comprehensive frameworks that could still emerge during the mandate of President Xi Jinping. The White Paper on China's military strategy published in May 2015, for example, explicitly advocates promoting 'the establishment of a regional framework for security and cooperation.'

In addition, over the past months, the Chinese government has increasingly promoted its 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) strategy as a tool to create new international frameworks. Chinese officials and researchers are working on the implementation of 'OBOR multilateral diplomacy', and frequently present OBOR as a platform for the gathering of senior domestic and international actors from various spheres and fields (including construction, transport, energy, telecommunications).

Accordingly, this platform is now boosting China's summit diplomacy – a tool the government is presently heavily investing in to support Xi Jinping's 'great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'. Furthermore, Beijing is also organising a growing number of large-scale international events, including in Europe, where it has already set up and hosted ministerial-level meetings under the OBOR banner in 2015, with plans for more in 2016.

Harmonising agendas

China is also focusing on integrating its various initiatives as they emerge. For Beijing, the link between old and new institutions is not a source of concern; it is naturally established via an alignment of their agendas with China's own national priorities. Beijing not only welcomes overlaps between the agendas of various institutions, but even encourages them. In particular, China has prioritised infrastructure development on its foreign and domestic policy agenda (as it is conscious of its assets in this sector, as well as the saturation of its domestic market), and has moved it up the agenda of as many multilateral institutions and informal fora as possible, often quite skillfully (as was the case with the BRICS' New Development Bank).

Infrastructure development is now at the forefront of not only the BRICS agenda, but also the G20 and all OBOR-related fora. More often than not, it is also promoted as being 'complementary' to the initiatives of each counterpart – be it the 'Juncker Plan' with the EU, the Eurasian Economic Union with Russia, or the 'Maritime Axis' with Indonesia.

Eurasian focus

In the coming years, China's international activism will focus primarily on its neighbourhood – in a broad sense, i.e. Eurasia as a whole – as the Chinese government considers regional leadership a prerequisite for global leadership. On the European continent, Beijing is likely to be proactive especially towards the least developed countries inside and outside of the EU, for instance by consolidating high-level dialogues.

The deployment of China's 'great power diplomacy', with OBOR at its core, is likely to have an impact on the EU, especially through the promotion of infrastructure development projects and supporting regional frameworks formed in Beijing. In 2012, China launched a new framework for dialogue with 16 Central and Eastern European countries (the so-called '16+1' cooperation format) which includes EU members and non-members, involves annual meetings of heads of governments, and is now

also combined with OBOR gatherings (as was the case at the 4th 16+1 summit held in Hangzhou last November).

Given its experimental and flexible diplomatic approach, China's framework could potentially be applied to 'any group of countries + 1'. Rumors that similar frameworks will emerge in other parts of Europe are therefore likely to persist.

Beijing will also continue to primarily invite individual member states to its various initiatives, despite assurances that it is a strategic partner of the EU as a whole. In this context, lessons from the launch of the AIIB may have to be drawn so that the EU can respond in a more coordinated way to China's forthcoming – and probably numerous – invitations to join new or revived institutions, frameworks and fora of all types. As Beijing is well aware of the international concerns surrounding China's rise and the complexity of setting up new multilateral institutions, it will continue to promote more informal and flexible cooperation mechanisms that are nevertheless strongly interconnected and gradually aim to stealthily reshape governance.

Beijing is achieving all of this through a peculiar mix of communication techniques, moulded over time through a large propaganda apparatus inherited from the Soviet Union combined with input from international public relations firms. Communications strategies are centrally coordinated and involve a variety of dissemination channels (media, academia, business, and diaspora associations). Messages tailored to the target audience are accompanied by more subtle 'learn from China' rhetoric and implicit references to the 'decline' of the West and its political system.

These messages are being supported by large-scale training programmes for officials from developing countries: China's Ministry of Commerce trains over 20,000 officials from such countries annually, according to official figures. In his COP21 speech last November, Xi Jinping announced the provision of 1,000 new training opportunities 'for tackling climate change'. Xi's speech also extensively emphasised 'South-South cooperation'.

One of the strategic objectives of the 2003 European Security Strategy was to build an international order based on effective multilateralism. Since then, China has actively and efficiently pushed for the same objective – but on its own terms.

Alice Ekman is Head of China Research at IFRI and an Associate Analyst at the EUISS.

