Lecture October 14

The Chinese Uni-bilateralism

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Abstract

The authors call for a reevaluation of the existing structural perspective on the threat of rising powers to the international system, and the implications of such threats for conflict resolution research. We suggest distinguishing between institutions in terms of ideal states and institutions in terms of their methods to understand China's current conflicts and conflict resolution processes, based on its past record of using different unilateral methods to achieve an ideal state of bilateralism—a tendency that we view as a China-specific institutional style. Distinctions between ideal states and methods can also help clarify situations in which China, as a unilateral actor, willingly shows self-restraint at the expense of national interests for the sake of achieving bilateral or multilateral goals. Further, a bilateral approach to achieving relational security has the potential to backfire due to factors such as miscommunication or China-centric reactions to events, yet it also testifies to the potential for self-restraint and a concern for relational security that transcends structural uncertainties associated with protecting national interests.

Rethinking Rising Power and Conflict Resolution Structural Explanations

International relations (IR) theorists have explained cross-nation conflict and conflict resolution from both structural and process perspectives. Researchers of the potential of China's rise leading to conflicts may be interested in using similar approaches, with a structural explanation largely relying on analyses of China's relative power and interests.[1] Process analysis requires attention to style to understand the relevancy of China's choices and its interactions with other nations.[2] A process approach assumes that conflicts and conflict resolution cannot be determined until they actually occur. Given the structural uncertainties generated by China's rise, any understanding of Chinese of conflict/conflict resolution policies requires analyses of styles

[1] For a discussion of how conflicts and conflict resolution behavior can be structurally determined, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).
[2] Peter J. Katzenstein, *Sinicization and the rise of China: civilizational processes beyond East and West* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

that reveal how interactive processes between China and other nations have evolved over a series of policy choices.

One particular mode of process analysis looks at decisions emerging from three types of institutional mechanisms—that is, choices made among multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral frameworks or various combinations in the interest of conflict resolution. China's rise compels it and its counterparts to choose among multiple institutional frames. In this particular case, China's mixed use of tactics based on multilateral harmony, bilateral agreements, and unilateral self-protection is creating anxiety among other states looking for consistency and predictability. In this regard, we suggest distinguishing between the concepts of institution as ideal state and institution as method when analyzing the conflict and conflict resolution processes associated with a rising China. It appears that China is using a mix of unilateral methods and bilateral ideals that are revised according to the actions of other states. Such mixes of institutional processes raise doubt and suspicion, since unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral conceptual divisions block sophisticated analyses of a "Chinese style" of conflict resolution, and suggest that China's approach is no more than a strategy to exploit institutional processes for its own goals. This lack of conceptual capacity for sophisticated analysis calls for refinement of conceptual divisions associated with the three processes.

We will begin this paper with a critical examination of the theoretical literature on multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral choices and mixed practices, and then use hard/soft versions of American uni-multilateralism and Chinese uni-bilateralism to underscore the complexities of these divisions. Last, we will analyze China's diplomatic shifts with its Southeast Asian neighbors through the lens of uni-bilateralism, defined as a combination of unilateral methods and bilateral ideals. We believe that refining these institutional categories can prevent hasty structural judgments regarding the nature of and motivations behind Chinese conflict resolution in light of its national self-interests. Instead, the room for process analysis will be opened and whether or not China's counterpart shares the same mix and how it reacts accordingly become important subjects.

Is the 'harmonious world' policy being shelved?

Since the end of the Cold War, the world's existing hegemonic power, the United States, has perceived China's rising power and political system as threats. Pessimists describe as

inevitable a serious confrontation between the two, while optimists assert that multilateral or bilateral approaches can be used to accommodate China's rise.[3] Multilaterally, Western-dominated rules and institutions are facilitating China's international integration.[4] Bilaterally, American engagement with China is aimed at encouraging China to act as a responsible power.[5] However, even among optimists who welcome China's multilateral efforts, there are those who believe that China is only using multilateral and bilateral means in support of its own national interests, and is biding its time for opportunities to resist and revise the established order.[6]

Against this analytical background, the new leadership coming to power at the 18th Party congress in 2012 has raised the high-profile slogan of 'the China Dream'. In October 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping further extended it to include a new platform specifically for dealing with neighboring countries. The platform replaces China's "harmonious world" foreign policy, which emphasized a "striving for achievement" (*fenfa youwei*).[7] The new platform constitutes a move away from multilateralism and toward unilateralism.[8] However, as is often the case with pronouncements from Beijing, few details have been given on how such a transition will take place. We believe that the replacement of the harmonious world principle is due to China's acknowledgment that other nations will continue to view it as a threat or profiteer, regardless of its desire to be recognized as a responsible power. Apparently China does not believe that it will ever be able to meet Western expectations, and consequently it should invest in making friends in addition to making money. The uncharacteristic new platform nonetheless retains the spirit of a harmonious world because it specifically includes as its mission the

[3] David Shambaugh, 'Containment or engagement of China?', *International Security* 21: 2, Fall 1996, pp. 180-209; Victor Cha, 'Powerplay: origins of the U.S. alliance system in Asia', *International Security* 34: 3, Winter 2009/10, pp. 158-196.

[4] John Ikenberry, 'The rise of China and the future of the West', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 1, January/February 2008, pp. 23-37.

[5] In a September 21, 2005 speech to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick repeated the argument for why the U.S. government should replace its Cold War containment policy toward China with a policy that encourages China to work with the U.S. and to become a responsible stakeholder in the current and future international order. See Robert B. Zoellick, 'Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?', Remarks to National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 21 September 2005, New York City [online]. Available from http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm [Accessed 10 March 2014].

[6] Evan S. Medeiros and M. Taylor Fravel, 'China's new diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs* 82: 6, November-December 2003, pp. 22-35.

[7] See, 'Xi Jinping's important talk on China's neighboring diplomacy', *Xinhuanet*, 25 October 2013 [online]. Available from: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-10/25/c_117878897.htm [Accessed 10 March 2014].

[8] Alastair Iain Johnston, 'How new and assertive is China's new assertiveness?', *International Security* 37: 4, Spring 2013, pp. 7-48.

breeding of an international 'life community' (*mingyun gongtongti*) between China and its neighbors.[9] Therefore, it is not a simple move toward unilateralism. As we will argue, it sanctions an unusual combination of bilateralism and unilateralism, without a form of multilateralism that one might expect to be adopted, or at least mentioned, by a responsible major power.[10]

IR scholars have variously considered multilateralism in the form of collective security and cooperation among three or more actor-states, bilateralism as reciprocal bonds between two states, and American unilateralism in the form of preemptive intervention. Chinese foreign policy has been consistently distinguished from multilateralism,[11] despite its active participation in UN peacekeeping efforts and President Xi's proclaimed commitment to multilateralism.[12] This preference for a mixed bilateral/unilateral approach has its roots in China's experiences with Western powers at the end of the Qing dynasty, as well as a culturally sensitive Sino-centrism that is 'less receptive to Western advocacy of multilateralism and security through co-operation on arms control and disarmament'.[13] Samuel Kim, a veteran China watcher, reached the same conclusion two decades ago:

> In most domains, [China] seems to be propelled by unilateralism in bilateral clothing, with a little Asian multilateral regionalism [added].[14]
>
> What is giving rise to the growing perception of a rampant rising dragon in the post-Tiananmen and post-Cold War era is Beijing's assertive unilateralism in its legislative pre-emptive strike in creeping southward expansionism, in the fastest-growing military

[9] See, 'Xi Jinping's important talk on China's neighboring diplomacy'.
[10] Some view the adoption of a multilateral approach by a rising power as involving endogenous change in that power's normative characteristics and identity. See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in international institutions, 1980-2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).
[11] See, for instance, Frans-Paul van der Putten, 'Harmony with diversity: China's preferred world order and weakening Western influence in the developing world', *Global Policy* 4:1, February 2013, pp. 53-62.
[12] Chen Zhi, 'Xi Jinping meets with UN secretary-general Ban Kimoon', *Xinhua News*, 17 February 2014 [online]. Available from: http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2014-02/07/content_2584753.htm [Accessed 10 March 2014]
[13] Yuan Jingdong, 'Culture matters: Chinese approaches to arms control and disarmament', in Keith R. Krause, ed., *Culture and security: multilateralism, arms control and security building* (London and Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999), p. 86.
[14] Samuel S. Kim, 'China's pacific policy: reconciling the irreconcilable', *International Journal* 50: 3, Summer 1995, p. 469.

budget, and in a major naval and air build-up with power projection capabilities that include aerial refueling technology.[15]

In the eyes of China watchers, the abstract yet clearly multilateral harmonious world theme that emerged in 2005 under Hu Jintao's leadership is no longer convincing in the contexts of multiple maritime disputes with China's neighbors and a lukewarm attitude toward global governance. The 'striving for achievement' alternative is emerging during a period in which Chinese foreign policy is increasingly being viewed by other countries as more assertive, expansive, and self-revealing. Xi's bilateral goal of friend-making and unilateral call for striving for achievements are very similar to assertions long suspected by earlier Chinese foreign policy critics. While the three approaches differ in their conceptualization of an ideal state and methods to achieve it, they are similar in terms of the extent to which they address the challenge of conflict resolution in an anarchical world that describes China's rise as a problem 'out there'.[16] In contrast, China's shift between unilateralism and bilateralism suggests an alternative solution that tolerates, transcends, or simply acknowledges distinctions between China, its neighbors, and the world at large. Accordingly, Chinese advocacy for a sense of life community with its neighbors testifies to the country's taking of the other countries not as a problem out there but as part of the Chinese world.

That China is a problem under anarchy and yet anarchy is not part of the Chinese world composes an irony. An analysis of this irony asks us to recognize China's adoption of the unilateral method to achieve the bilateral ideal state. The unilateral method implies anarchy but the adherence to the bilateral order confines anarchy. Theoretically that's why understanding Chinese conflict resolution requires distinguishing between unilateral ideal states or goals and bilateral or multilateral ideal states or goals, as well as the uni-, bi- and multilateral methods used to achieve them. Since the 'ideal state' refers to what will be achieved in the future, unilateralism might be linked with China's Middle Kingdom status, bilateralism, a life community consisting of China's immediate neighbors, or multilateralism in the form of participation in UN collective security and peacekeeping efforts. The unilateral method emphasizes China's self-initiated effort

[15] Samuel S. Kim, 'China's pacific policy', p. 477.
[16] For example, for F. Andrew Brewin, a longtime Canadian New Democratic Party politician, to engage China and bring China into the multilateral framework were vital to achieving peace in his time. See Stephanie Bangarth, 'Bringing China in: the new democratic party, China, and multilateralism, 1949-68', *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 20, 2013, pp. 203-215.

to achieve a goal or ideal state, the bilateral method emphasizes the mutual consultations required to achieve them, and the multilateral method emphasizes the formation of a collective resolution. According to criticisms of Chinese unilateralism and Xi Jinping's self-imposed requirement to establish life communities with its neighbors, China represents a uni-bilateral model whereby the first method is used to achieve the second's ideal state.

According to our comparison of Chinese and American forms of unilateralism, it appears that the US prefers multilateral ideal state aimed at applying extensive (therefore multilateral) and universal rules to international relations, while China prefers a bilateral ideal state involving stable and presumably reciprocal relationships, even at the expense of multilateral rules. To achieve ideal bilateral or multilateral states via unilateralism requires considerable confidence and trust in the unilateral actor. Regarding the American mix of unilateral method and multilateral ideal, its reputation is dependent on consistently prescribed standards, effective monitoring, and interventions in response to perceived wrongs. Regarding the Chinese mix of unilateral method and bilateral ideal, credibility is based on self-restraint and a willingness to disregard differences with the other side, as well as an inclination for compromise to consolidate, or confrontation to restore, relationships regardless of the relative power of the parties involved.

Institutional mechanisms

Distinguishing among three types of institutional mechanisms—that is, choices made among multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral frameworks or various combinations in the interest of conflict resolution—can assist in clarifying state preferences for certain goals or methods in general, as well as China's inconsistent choices among unilateral, bilateral and multilateral policies in particular. The three types of institutional mechanisms have their respective conflict resolution policy implications: all three methods can be used to achieve ideal states associated with the other two. This appears to be especially true for unilateral ideal states: John Mearsheimer describes how unilateral processes can be used to achieve a unilateral ideal state of hegemonic stability in his analysis of how a major power is dependent on its own efforts to achieve peace by achieving dominance.[17] In contrast, Aaron Friedberg explains how bilateral processes were used to preserve unilateral peace during the hegemonic power transition from the

[17] Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*.

UK to the US after World War II.[18] According to Robert Keohane, the Western countries that benefited from the existing hegemonic order willingly shared the burden within a multilateral framework in order to sustain the unilateral order led by the United States.[19]

Table 1 about here.

It is also possible for the three institutional methods to contribute to reciprocal bilateralism as an ideal state. William Tow (1999) describes in detail the San Francisco system in which the US established a series of bilateral defense treaties via its unilateral initiation with each specific partner.[20] Brantley Womack traces the changes and continuity in the asymmetrical model that has maintained the constantly evolving bilateral relationship between China and Vietnam for nearly two thousand years.[21] Wang Jisi describes how multilateral Six-party Talks were used in support of bilateral conflict resolution between the US and North Korea, as well as achieving a series of alternative bilateral agreements involving China.[22]

The multilateral ideal state in which national actors abide by shared rules has been analyzed in terms of all three approaches—for example, the critical analysis of Peter Van Ness of the unilateral enforcement of anti-terrorism laws under the Bush Doctrine attests to America's unilateral approach to multilateralism.[23] The analysis of John Gaddis (1986) of Cold War alliances rooted in a bi-polar system is a detailed description of the bilateral method of achieving multilateral conflict resolution.[24] Finally, the use of multilateral methods to establish multilateral

[18] Aaron Friedberg, *The weary titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895-1905* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); see also A. F. K. Organski, *World politics*, 2nd edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1968).
[19] Robert O. Keohane, *After hegemony: cooperation and discord in the world political economy* (N.J: Princeton University Press, 1984).
[20] William Tow, 'Assessing U.S. bilateral security alliances in the Asia Pacific's "southern rim": why the San Francisco system endures', Discussion papers, Asia/Pacific Research Center, Institute for International Studies, Stanford University, 1999, pp. 1-36.
[21] Brantley Womack, *China and Vietnam: the politics of asymmetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[22] Wang Jisi, 'China's search for stability with America', *Foreign Affairs* 84: 5, September-October 2005, pp. 39-48.
[23] Peter Van Ness, 'Conclusion', in Melvin Gurtov and Peter Van Ness, eds., *Confronting the Bush doctrine: critical views from the Asia-Pacific* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 260-269.
[24] John Gaddis, 'The long peace: elements of stability in the postwar international system', *International Security* 10: 4, 1986, pp. 99-142

cooperation has been the focus of a number of global-governance studies, especially in the area of economics.[25]

Based on this background, Chinese unilateralism should not be conveniently analyzed in the same manner as American unilateralism. For example, the US interventionary approach to global governance is inadequate for understanding instances of unilateral decisions such as China's establishment of an East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone, targeted at Japanese claims of sovereignty in the region. The reason is that global governance is a multilateral condition, whereas the Sino-Japanese relationship is a bilateral condition. After reviewing various multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral peacemaking efforts in international politics, we will look at different ways that China is applying unilateralism to achieve bilateral ideal states—for instance, using perceptions of the other side's intentions within a bilateral framework, and then offering concessions or applying sanctions regardless of power differences. While China is not unique in this respect, it does stress bilateral over multilateral conflict resolution, while the United States believes in a multilateral and universal order as its guiding principle.

MULTILATERAL EFFORTS

The multilateralism literature does not differentiate between the multilateral ideal state of peace or conflict resolution and the multilateral methods used to achieve them. As Ruggie has observed, discussions of multilateralism typically address both the value and institution of peace as well as methods to resolve conflicts[26]—in other words, multilateralism is a collective process involving three or more states that are in agreement with 'generalized principles of conduct … without regard to the particularistic interests of parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence'.[27] Multilateral discourses were common in the post-Cold War era because they addressed not only the end of fundamental ideological competition,[28] but also interdependency and greater cooperation among nation-states. In reality, the enforcement of generalized principles of collective action is obviously not guaranteed in all situations that call

[25] Robert O'Brien, Anne Marie Goetz, Jan Aart Scholte, and Marc Williams, *Contesting global governance: multilateral economic institutions and global social movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
[26] John Ruggie, 'Multilateralism: the anatomy of an institution', *International Organization* 46: 3, Summer 1992, pp. 561-598.
[27] John Ruggie, *Multilateralism matters: the theory and praxis of an institutional form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 11.
[28] Francis Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man* (New York: Free Press, 1992) .

for collective actions. While the need for collective action theoretically requires multilateral agreement, in practical terms it has always been the US that has taken unilateral initiatives to push for multilateral action. Underlying multilateral discourses are considered a liberal democratic means by which nation-states yield their political power. The US, however, consistently preaches and imposes unilateralism instead of democratic participation, thereby ensuring that multilateral rules or 'common interests' fit in with its own values.

In fact, even those who talk about achieving multilateral ideal states retain suspicion regarding multilateral methods of policymaking. Historically, multilateral international organizations such as the League of Nations, the United Nations, and NATO have failed to transcend the anarchy that emerges from the fear that nations have of 'subordinating themselves to a common authority'.[29] This does not mean that nations do not understand the concept of an ideal state of peace, but the concept calls for a strong leader to achieve a multilateral ideal. Kindleberger[30] and Olson[31] are among political economists addressing the need for a single leader to provide collective goods and to punish free riders so as to protect common interests.[32] Thus, Beth and Robert Yarbrough believe that the most serious problem facing post-WWII international organizations is enforcement, since all countries have incentives to engage in opportunistic behavior by reneging on their commitments to liberalization.[33]

For some, a solution to the enforcement problem is dependent on American ability to bring all other actors on board,[34] therefore collective action analysts continue to debate on whether cooperation is possible during and after the decline of a dominant hegemonic power.[35] Robert Keohane describes the Western countries' multilateral tolerance of hegemonism in the interest of conflict resolution during the decline of a dominant power willing to participate in

[29] Hedley Bull, *The anarchical society: a study of order in world politics* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1997), p. 45.
[30] Charles P. Kindleberger, 'Dominance and leadership in the international economy', *International Studies Quarterly* 25: 3, 1981, pp. 242-254.
[31] Mancur Olson, *The logic of collective action* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).
[32] Also see similar discussion in Joseph Lepgold, 'NATO's post-cold war collective action problem', *International Security* 23: 1, Summer 1998, pp. 78-106.
[33] Beth V. Yarbrough and Robert M.Yarbrough, (1986) 'Reciprocity, bilateralism, and economic "hostages": self-enforcing agreements in international trade', *International Studies Quarterly* 30, 1986, pp. 7-21.
[34] Richard N. Haass, 'What to do with American primacy', *Foreign Affairs* 78: 5, September-October 1999, pp. 37-49.
[35] Robert O. Keohane, *After hegemony: cooperation and discord in the world political economy* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1984).

police actions.[36] He supports the idea of hegemonic indispensability by stressing that 'cooperation is possible after hegemony not only because shared interests can lead to the creation of regimes, but also because the conditions for maintaining existing international regimes are less demanding than those required for creating them'.[37] Keohane believes that acknowledging common interests alone is insufficient for inducing nations to support specific mixes of unilateralism and multilateralism. While he specifically praises international regimes that 'make[ ] common action to produce joint gains [seem] rational',[38] Keohane admits that American hegemonic leadership and a multilateral framework are equally important.[39] The multilateral consensus among the Western countries supports US unilateral hegemonism, which, in turn, supports a much broader multilateral liberal order. This two-step mechanism means that US unilateralism is both the ideal state for the Western countries to enjoy the liberal order and the method for achieving the liberal ideal outside the West, depending on the context.

The failure to distinguish between a multilateral ideal state and the unilateral methods used to achieve it likewise confuses policy analysis. In our view, the consistent US preference for unilateralism since WWII is mistakenly perceived by some observers as evidence of an increasingly selective and ambivalent attitude towards multilateralism, especially since the 1990s.[40] In other words, the US promotes multilateralism as long as it supports American objectives. But unilateralism has long been Washington's preferred approach, regardless of international reaction—the ambivalence is actually more about how much the US should promote its own values through multilaterally installed common values. Rathbun errs when suggesting that American movement between unilateral and multilateral approaches reflects a 'growing ideological divergence between the Republicans and the Democrats not only on foreign policy, but also on domestic political questions'.[41] The issue is not about whether or not to adopt a multilateral method (since both Republicans and Democrats show a preference for

[36] Keohane, *After hegemony*.
[37] Keohane, *After hegemony*, p. 50.
[38] Keohane, *After hegemony*, p. 78.
[39] See Ch. 9 and Ch. 10 in Keohane, *After hegemony*. This point is also raised by the critique of Keohane's institutionalist argument from the realist side. See Joseph M. Grieco, 'Understanding the problem of international cooperation: the limits of neoliberal institutionalism and the future of realist theory', in David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and neoliberalism: the contemporary debate* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 301-308.
[40] David Malone and Yuen Foong Khong, eds., *Unilateralism and U.S. foreign policy: international perspectives* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).
[41] Brian C. Rathbun, *Trust in international cooperation: international security institutions, domestic politics, and American multilateralism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 2.

unilateralism), but the degree to which they believe that American values represent common values to be enforced multilaterally.

BILATERALISM

IR scholars have also overlooked distinctions between the bilateral ideal state and bilateral methods to achieve an ideal state. A bilateral ideal state of conflict resolution exists between two national actors whose power balance is either symmetric or asymmetric. Bilateral methods are most commonly reflected in the self-restraining behaviors of the two parties so as to validate the idea that reciprocity is more important than self-interest. Such a situation is not possible in a zero-sum game; therefore self-restraint only makes sense when the two sides are willing to consider forming a 'greater self' instead of focusing on the defense of their respective immediate interests. China's tactical use of self-restraint to nudge the other side toward a bilateral perspective is actually a unilateral approach in disguise. Alternatively, using multilateral processes to build confidence and bridges between two conflicting parties attests to the application of multilateral methods to achieve a bilateral ideal state. In sum, certainty (as opposed to specific interests or generalizable rules) represents a higher level of value defining a bilateral ideal state, but the method used to achieve that state may be unilateral, bilateral, or multilateral.

A great deal of scholarship on bilateral conflict resolution is found in analyses of the mutual assured destruction (MAD) strategy (an ideal state of peace) and confidence building (a method to achieve it). Originally a Cold War defense doctrine,[42] the rationale behind MAD was deterrence, with both the United States and Soviet Union understanding that a nuclear conflict would completely destroy both countries.[43] However, whether or not MAD or a similar state of balance should be viewed as an example of bilateralism depends on whether the two sides perceive the central issue (e.g., nuclear competition) in the same way, thus determining whether one side or the other is willing to initiate a conflict. If both sides view nuclear competition in the

[42] Herman Kahn, *On thermonuclear war* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960); Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American foreign policy: theory and practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974).
[43] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

same way, a never-ending arms race could end up as an example of a 'security dilemma' scenario.[44] Regarding confidence building, the bilateral approach requires mutual agreements and information exchanges concerning military forces and armaments in order to reach an ideal state of mutual predictability. Such a state can be applied to an arms race, trade barriers, or agricultural subsidies. The main defects of confidence building as a method are resource asymmetry and misunderstandings due to structural factors—another facet of the security dilemma.[45]

Another example of a bilateral ideal state is the longest and closest bilateral relationship in modern history, that between the United States and Japan.[46] As Hughes and Fukushima note, Japan has 'safeguarded key constitutional prohibitions and independent military capabilities that have allowed it to retain a measure of security autonomy vis-à-vis the United States'.[47] Actually, the US unilaterally created Japan's constitutional self-restraint to establish a sense of trustworthiness. The situation is much more complex in Europe, where both bilateral and multilateral approaches have been used. Germany has adopted multilateral methods to stabilize the US-German bilateral relationship.[48] According to Gould and Krasner,

> The leaders of Germany have chosen to bind themselves, to tie their own hands by enmeshing their country in multilateral institutions from which extrication would be prohibitively costly. As a member of NATO and the EU, Germany has restricted its own autonomy and thereby made itself less threatening. Japan, in contrast, has not enmeshed itself in multilateral institutions.[49]

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[44] Robert Jervis, 'Cooperation under the security dilemma', *World Politics* 30, January 1978, pp. 167-214.
[45] Andrew J.Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's search for security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Edward Friedman, 'Building new vital mutual interests for a better future: a commentary on Wang Jisi and Kenneth Lieberthal's addressing US-China strategic distrust', *Journal of Contemporary China* 22: 81, 2013, pp. 367-378
[46] T. J. Pempel, 'Challenges to bilateralism: changing foes, capital flows, and complex forums', in Ellis S. Krauss and T. J. Pempel, eds., *Beyond bilateralism: U.S.-Japan relations in the new Asia-Pacific* (Stanford, Cal: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 1-36.
[47] Christopher W. Hughes and Akiko Fukushima, 'U.S.-Japan security relations: toward bilateralism plus?', in Ellis S. Krauss and T. J. Pempel, eds., *Beyond bilateralism: U.S.-Japan relations in the new Asia-Pacific* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 59.
[48] Charles A. Kupchan, 'After pax Americana: benign power, regional integration, and the sources of a stable multipolarity', *International Security*, 23: 2, Fall 1998, pp. 40-79; Erica R. Gould and Stephen D. Krasner, 'Germany and Japan: binding versus autonomy', in Kozo Yamamura and Wolfgang Streeck, eds., *The end of diversity? Prospects for German and Japanese capitalism.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 51-88.
[49] Gould and Krasner, 'Germany and Japan', p. 53.

One reason for this difference is that European multilateralism is constructed more upon a foundation of general trust, while the bilateral security framework in Asia evolved via partnerships initiated unilaterally by the United States to enlist individual, strategically important Asian countries. Rathbun may be correct in arguing that a 'general trust' with a multilateral disposition may produce stronger binding commitments,[50] whereas the 'strategic trust' of individual Asian countries involved American self-interest calculations that did not require self-restraint. Most of today's bilateral agreements in Asia were established according to America's Cold War containment strategy.[51] Relationships between certain Asian countries (e.g., Japan and South Korea) remain difficult due to unresolved historical grievances, thus blocking the development of a 'general trust' or even 'generalized principles of conduct' that are often found in multilateral frameworks.[52]

There is clearly a trend in America's China policy toward engagement and away from containment. According to Robert Ross, the U.S. bilateral approach to China entails confidence-building mechanisms such as 'mutual intelligence collection' and security dialogues aimed at an ideal state of mutual understanding that at the same time avoids miscalculations.[53] The ideal state in this policy is multilaterally defined according to frameworks such as the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), 1996 Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty, and the Zangger Committee (the implementation arm of NPT export control provisions)—efforts that required considerable compromise regarding short-term U.S. interests. However, China's rise and related challenges to American dominance is causing the U.S. to occasionally return to a unilateral approach, thereby affecting the credit of compromises made elsewhere. Despite occasional examples of self-restraint, the US is primarily a unilateral actor in terms of trying to convince China that supporting an ideal state as described by the US is in China's own interests, and of urging China to abide by international norms under unilateral U.S. leadership.

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[50] Rathbun, *Trust in international cooperation.*

[51] Henry Nau, 'From bilateralism to multilateralism', in Henry R. Nau, *At home abroad: identity and power in American foreign policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 152-189.

[52] Ruggie, *Multilateralism Matters*, p. 11. According to Nobuo Okawara and Peter Katzenstein, 'In the case of Japan and the Asia-Pacific, an even more important reason is that multilateralism is not yet astrong and unquestioned collectively held norm either in Tokyo or in any of the other capitals in the Asia-Pacific', in Peter Katzenstein, *Rethinking Japanese security: internal and external dimensions* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 120.

[53] Robert Ross, 'Engagement in US China policy', in Alastair I. Johnston and Robert S. Ross, eds., *Engaging China: the management of an emerging power* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 176-206.

UNILATERALISM

The ideal state for unilateralism is stability maintained by a 'world police', a role that the US has essentially played since WWII; currently it is practicing unilateralism in the name of anti-terrorism. Washington uses a mix of multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral tactics to ensure a form of unilateralism that supports its interests in global issues, and toward that end regularly vetoes efforts promoted by other states. In the 21st century, its bilateral efforts often consist of enlisting of support from national actors with which it has bilateral defense agreements—in Asia that means South Korea and Japan. In contrast to the Cold War period during which bilateral agreements constituted the ideal state of conflict resolution through containment, in the age of global governance, these bilateral relationships are the bases of interventionary method to synchronize the world with the American values. Using unilateral methods to achieve a unilateral ideal state is only possible when you are a superpower. Today, that superpower believes its national interests represent the best interests of all other nations.

It is possible to distinguish between soft and hard unilateralism. American use of multilateral methods to achieve a unilateral ideal state is an example of soft unilateralism, and its use of unilateral methods to impose its will in a multilateral setting is a 'hard' example. Soft unilateralism based on a multilateral approach is methodologically open-ended, and has a high likelihood of failure in terms of synchronizing the actions and wishes of other nations to fit with US goals. The same can be said about Chinese versions of hard and soft unilateralism, with the former consisting of sanctions to control bilateral relationships, and the latter opening bilateral relationships to negotiations that do not guarantee what China would consider as appropriate relations.

Understanding distinctions between unilateral ideal states and unilateral methods helps China watchers appreciate the country's shifts between hard and soft Chinese uni-bilateralism, defined as the adoption of unilateral methods to intervene in a bilateral relationship. In China's case, it believes it is justified to take such an approach based on prior acts of unilateral self-restraint that give it the legitimacy to request the other side to reciprocate. In soft Chinese uni-bilateralism, China consults with the other party about the concessions it is ready to provide, and then expresses its expectations for the other party to participate in a bilateral relationship, one that China controls so as to support its own interests. As with the American hard and soft

versions of uni-multilateralism, Chinese hard and soft versions of uni-bilateralism are positioned along a continuum whose two ends are extremely hard unilateralism and full equality.

Regarding Chinese institutional behavior in international relations, cycles of hard and soft uni-bilateralism offer an alternative explanation to power and interests.[54] China and its neighbors do not always clash over national interests—China and Myanmar have maintained a peaceful relationship that transcends serious differences in alliances, ideology, regime type, immediate interests, and complex ethnic issues along a shared border. China's refusal to use its influence with North Korea is another typical example. China's relationships with Myanmar and North Korea do not fit well with any existing model of alliance, exchange, or strategic relationships. Territorially defying the balance of power, China has made concessions to both countries. Strategically, they have shown inconsistency in their reactions to Chinese requests or demands. During the Cold War, Myanmar was considered a U.S. ally, and today it appears to be courting the favor of both the U.S. and China. The changing choice of alliance simply cannot explain the successful conflict resolution with China.

There is at least one situation over which China seems willing to escalate a confrontation over a relatively minor issue: visits to Yasukuni Shrine by Japanese politicians and national leaders. The shrine contains the names of over 2.4 million Japanese who died during various wars, including 14 who were convicted of major war crimes involving China. In response to one such visit, China unilaterally announced the creation of an Air Defense Identification Zone over disputed areas between the two countries. The maritime disputes with Vietnam, the Philippines, and Japan focus on a few shoals that China sometimes has no more intention to take for its exclusive control than laying China's claim. China has also unilaterally ceased exchanges with some nations that hosted the Dalai Lama or supported Taiwanese pro-independence leaders or who have sold weapons to Taiwan. The Taiwan issue was also the trigger for two missile crises in 1995 and 1996. However, such heated confrontations can easily cool down just as quickly when the perceived offender simply changes its tone.

Communication failure has been offered as the reason for the 1969 border clash between China and the Soviet Union.[55] We believe this kind of failure is an example of uni-bilateralism

[54] Huang Chiungchiu and Shih Chihyu, *Harmonious intervention: China's quest for relational security* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014).
[55] Richard Wich, *Sino-Soviet crisis politics: a study of political change and communication* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

that stresses a self-restraint on the part of the weaker party that symbolizes a 'greater self' that China considers beneficial to both sides. When China is the stronger party, China's alleged self-restraint was intended to impress the weaker party, who was expected to respond by expressing appreciation for China's middle kingdom status. Shih and Yin offer the following sequence to explain how China's conflict resolution approach often fails within the cycle of hard and soft uni-bilateralism:[56]

1. Beijing unilaterally compromises on a certain point involving (sometimes core) national interests to demonstrate its willingness to create a harmonious bilateral relationship. This implicitly imposes a duty on the other party to not push further on the issue.

2. In response to the short-term compromise, the other party neither refuse nor accepts (and possibly does not even comprehend) its responsibility to reciprocate.

3. Beijing unilaterally perceives that the two sides have achieved a harmonious greater self, adapts accordingly, and occasionally seeks reconfirmation from the other side.

4. The other party's external and internal politics compel it to publically express its non-compliance with China's unilateral role expectations.

5. Beijing loses face, reacts negatively and strongly, and presents its self-perceived restraint as justification for imposing sanctions, often symbolic at first.

6. The other party views Beijing's symbolic sanctions as confirmation of its malicious intentions, thus fulfilling the prophecy that it would eventually be betrayed.

To turn bilateral relationships such as those with historic adversaries (e.g. Japan) and the world's current great power (i.e. the United States) into a life community is a task that Xi Jinping appears to have taken on—that is, a request for another cycle of soft uni-bilateralism that will allow other parties to decide when and how to join the middle kingdom in creating a greater self. By itself, such a cycle does not explain how soft uni-bilateralism might turn into hard uni-bilateralism—that is, the stage in which China imposes its middle kingdom ideal state in the form of unilateral concessions and sanctions. It must take into account the judgments of Chinese leaders regarding the responses of other parties, especially in terms of whether or not on-going events indicate that China's soft uni-bilateralism is running into a bottleneck, if not a deadlock.

[56] Shih Chihyu and Yin Jiwu, 'Between core national interest and a harmonious world: reconciling self-role conceptions in Chinese foreign policy', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6: 1, Spring 2013, pp. 59-84.

Chinese uni-bilateralism can be analysed on three levels. The first involves traditional values as a reference for both a Chinese unilateral ideal state and the method used to achieve it. Self-restraint has consistently been used as the method, and China as the Middle Kingdom has consistently been used as the foundation for different versions of the ideal state.[57] The second level incorporates modern Chinese strategic thinking into the materially and emotionally vulnerable consequences of invasion by imperialist forces in modern history.[58] The memory of this consequence urges China to rely on soft tactics such as self-restraint to achieve stable reciprocal relationships without expressing concern for any specific ideal state. The third level describes contemporary Chinese behavioural patterns as reflecting the country's current rise, one that entails nostalgia for the Middle Kingdom as a restored ideal state.[59]

Chinese Uni-bilateralism in Southeast Asia

Historically, unilateralism is a familiar Chinese method for interventions in Southeast Asia. Kang presents evidence indicating that it was Chinese hegemony, and not China's refusal to assume a hegemonic role, that contributed to a multilateral period of prosperity, regional peace, and stability in Asia during the pre-modern period.[60] In contrast, contemporary China's involvement in multilateral global and regional organizations has been widely applauded in the West as a sign that China is willing to abide by certain international principles, rules, and norms.[61] But China's multilateral participation is more a method than an ideal state, since multilateralism embedded in political liberalism appears to be a poor fit with China's current situation. In contrast, China's own multilateral ideal state takes variety for granted, as opposed to liberal universalism.[62] Since China's acquiescence to multilateral methods is purportedly to express friendliness toward the US, it serves a bilateral purpose.

Many IR researchers have made the dual observations (a) that China is showing greater willingness to follow a multilateral line in its handling of disputes and foreign relations,[63] and (b)

[57] Ren Xiao, 'Traditional Chinese theory and practice of foreign relations: a reassessment', in Zhang Yongnian, ed., *China and international relations: the Chinese view and the contribution of Wang Gungwu* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 102-116.
[58] William Callahan, *China: the pessoptimist nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[59] Martin Jacques, *When China rules the world: the end of the western world and the birth of a new global order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).
[60] David C. Kang, *China rising: peace, power, and order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
[61] Medeiros and Fravel, 'China's New Diplomacy'.
[62] van der Putten, 'Harmony with Diversity'.
[63] Wang Jianwei, 'Managing conflict: Chinese perspectives on multilateral diplomacy and collective

based on China's traditional preference for bilateralism,[64] its increasing involvement in multilateralism is mostly limited to economics and not security.[65] For example, in 2002 China signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, but only after it rejected a more restrictive draft proposed by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). One reason for its rejection of a South China Sea Code is that the code requires multilateral negotiations, and China says that it wants to reserve the right to engage in bilateral negotiations on South China Sea disputes, which the Declaration permits.[66]

One reason for China's bilateral preference is the fear, expressed before the 1990s, of other countries 'gang[ing] up on China'.[67] Different scholars have reached different conclusions about the nature of China's increasing involvement in multilateral institutions:[68] optimists view it as a legitimate effort to integrate into the international community, while pessimists view it as a tactic in defence of national interests. Medeiros and Fravel describe China's current willingness to participate in multilateral agreements in international affairs as a 'New Diplomacy' involving 'a less confrontational, more sophisticated, more confident, and, at times, more constructive approach toward regional and global affairs'.[69] However, from China's perspective, its choice of a bilateral framework covers its aversion to multilateral processes aimed as synchronizing a sense of rational thinking among multiple parties. China's preference for bilateral approaches to

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security', in Deng Yong and Wang Feiling, eds., *In the eyes of the dragon: China views the world* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), pp. 73-96; Yuan Jingdong, 2000, *Asia-Pacific security: China's conditional multilateralism and great power entente* strategic studies institute. [Online] Available from: http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=72 [Accessed 10 March 2014]; Kuik Chengchwee, 'Multilateralism in China's ASEAN policy: its evolution, characteristics, and aspiration', *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27: 1, April 2005, pp. 102-122; Wu Guoguang and Helen Lansdowne, *China turns to multilateralism: foreign policy and regional security* (London: Routledge, 2008); Barthelemy Courmont, 'Promoting multilateralism or searching for a new hegemony: a Chinese vision of multipolarity', *Pacific Focus* XXVII: 2, August 2012, pp. 184-204; Joel Wuthnow, Li Xin and Qi Lingling, 'diverse multilateralism: four strategies in China's multilateral diplomacy', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 17, 2012, pp. 269-290.

[64] As David Shambaugh has pointed out, 'China's strong preference is to deal with nation-states bilaterally, rather than with international regimes multilaterally', in Shambaugh, 'Containment or engagement of China?', p. 206; Avery Goldstein also noticed that 'China's clear preference for bilateral, rather than multilateral, approaches to resolving its international conflicts *has* diminished the prospects for effective regional institutions', in Avery Goldstein, 'Great expectations: interpreting China's arrival', *International Security* 22: 3, Winter 1997/98, p. 68, Italics are original.

[65] Wang, 'Managing conflict'.

[66] Xiong Tao, *Nanhai gefang xingwei xuanyan de qiyuan, kunjing, yu chulu* [The declaration on the conduct of parties in the south China sea: origin, plight, future] (Master Thesis, Jinan University, China, 2012).

[67] Wang Yuankang, *Harmony and war: Confucian culture and Chinese power politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 202.

[68] Wuthnow, Li, and Qi, 'Diverse Multilateralism'.

[69] Medeiros and Fravel, 'China's New Diplomacy', p. 22.

conflict resolution makes it difficult to win the trust of weaker parties, thus putting China in the position of having to make unilateral concessions to demonstrate its intentions and trustworthiness.[70]

Past evidence indicates that Chinese negotiators prefer using unilateral concessions to create reciprocal relationships in order to soften the positions of other parties. Further, Chinese scholars such as Ye and Li have commented on a number of bilateral achievements during the past two decades:

> Since 1991, China has settled border conflicts with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Russia, Tajikistan, and Vietnam—and it has sometimes done so on less-than-advantageous terms. In fact, in most of these agreements, China received only 50 percent or less of the contested territory … Although China still clings to its claims over the [South China Sea] islands, it has now repeatedly committed itself to settling disputes peacefully, based on international law. After four years of negotiation, ASEAN and China signed a long-awaited declaration on a code of conduct for such matters in 2002. Interestingly, the final document included most of the draft language sought by ASEAN, and little of what was offered by China.[71]

But some Southeast Asian scholars believe that the shift from bilateral to multilateral approaches such as the ASEAN example is not about multilateralism[72] because they perceive China-ASEAN discussions as essentially bilateral in spirit, while at the same time reducing pressure for genuine multilateral negotiations involving the US and other Western powers. Reasons for rejecting a true multilateral approach, even within the confines of ASEAN, were listed by former PRC Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi during the 2010 ASEAN Regional Foreign Ministers' Forum in Hanoi:

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[70] Charles L. Glaser uses rational choice theory to explain how such self-sacrificed and self-restrained behavior is preferred in a bilateral, competitive state relationship. See Charles L. Glaser, 'When are arms races dangerous?' *International Security* 28: 4, Spring 2004, pp. 44-84.

[71] Ye Zicheng and Li Hongjie, eds., *Zhongguo da waijiao* [Chinese diplomacy] (Beijing: World Press, 2009), p. 172.

[72] That is, China's multilateral involvement is motivated by an aspiration to shape the rules of game. See, Kuik, 'Multilateralism in China's ASEAN policy'.

> What will be the consequences if this issue is turned into an international or multilateral one? It will only make matters worse and the resolution more difficult. International practices show that the best way to resolve such disputes is for countries concerned to have direct bilateral negotiations. Asia has already stood up and gained its dignity. Asian countries can properly address each other's concerns on the basis of equality and mutual respect.[73]

Using China-Vietnam relations as an example, the complexity of Chinese attitudes toward Vietnam has allowed Vietnam to exert what Hensengerth[74] and Thayer[75] refer to as 'the power of the weak'. According to the Chinese perspective, good deeds by China are rarely (if ever) acknowledged, and in some cases are used as targets for criticism. They note that after World War II, China helped Vietnam create a navy at a time when China had very limited resources. General Ming Zheng (2011) complains that in the 1950s and 1960s, despite the significant shortcomings of their own naval forces, the Chinese government offered Vietnam some of its own vessels, plus training in how to use them.[76] He also observes that China provided safe harbours for the Vietnam navy during the American War. Ming Zheng criticizes Vietnam for forgetting these past acts of generosity and other examples of relational bonds between the two. However, from the Vietnamese perspective, which is very much bilateral methodologically as well as idealistically and in line with the Chinese bilateralism, the weak party can only resort to shaming in order to force a settlement with China. During the 2014 maritime dispute, for example, Le Hong Hiep (2014) analyses on behalf of Vietnam to conclude that 'the most important thing Vietnam can do now is to name and shame China internationally'.[77]

The Chinese argue that they have controlled the Spratlys and other islands in the South China Sea ever since the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE to 8 CE), and have exerted specific

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[73] Yang Jiechi, 'Chinese FM refutes fallacies on the south China sea issue', *China Today*, 25 July 2010 [online]. Available from: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-07/25/content_11046054.htm [Accessed 8 December 2013]

[74] Oliver Hensengerth, *Regionalism in China-Vietnam relations: institution-building in the greater Mekong subregion* (London: Routledge, 2010).

[75] Carlyle Thayer, 'Vietnam and rising China: the structural dynamics of mature asymmetry', *Southeast Asian Affairs* 1, 2010, pp. 392-409.

[76] Zheng Ming narrates, and Wang Dan collates, 'Zhongguo haijun yuanyue huigu' [Review of Chinese Navy Support for Vietnam], *Xiandai Chuanjian* [Modern Ships] 9, 2011, pp.10-15.

[77] Hiep Lehong, 'Chinese assertiveness in the south China sea: what should Vietnam do', *The National Interest*,15 May 2014 [online]. Available from: http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/chinese-assertiveness-the-south-china-sea-what-should-10468 [Accessed 22 May 2014].

claims over the Spratlys since the Qing dynasty (1644 to 1911 CE).[78] Beijing also claims that other countries in the region—including Vietnam—unanimously acknowledged Chinese jurisdiction over the Spratlys before the 1980s.[79] However, significant domestic divisions exist among Vietnamese citizens regarding their government's China policy, with some claiming that what China perceived as consent was actually an example of Vietnamese self-restraint.[80] Still, China views such criticisms as evidence that it is dealing with a unitary, unreliable, and calculating actor.

Vietnam and other countries denied China's right to exclusive access to natural resources in the South China Sea following the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Despite what it views as strong historical claims, China has been willing to use bilateral negotiations and dialogue to address the dispute. In 1984 Deng Xiaoping said that China needed 'to solve international disputes based on new situations and new questions … under some situations we can solve the problem by the idea of "one country, two systems", and some by the way of "joint development"'.[81] Based on his belief in China's historically supported sovereignty over the South China Sea, Deng proclaimed that 'China has the right to propose such suggestions, and it is only China's self-proposing that such suggestions can be valid. If we do this way [joint development], then we do not need to use force to solve the disputes'.[82]

Vietnam's assessment indicated a rather uneven perception, in which expectations of Chinese economic assistance remained high in the early 1970s despite suffering from China's economic sanctions. More importantly, faith in the bilateral relationship held Vietnam from turning toward the former USSR until 1975.[83] This explains, at least partially, why Vietnam signed a joint communiqué in 1991 expressing a shared interest in resolving the issue via

[78] Xiao Yu, 'Zhongyue nanhai zhengduan wenti qianxi' [Analysis of the Sino-Vietnam south China sea dispute], *Xue Lilun* [Theory Research] 23, 2012, pp. 19-20.
[79] Chu Zhaofeng, 'Nanhai wenti de lailong qumai' [The beginning and subsequent development of the south China sea issue], *Junshi Shilin* [Martial Historical Facts] 9, December 2011, p. 34; Wong Shan, 'Nanhai zhengduan chengyin ji weichi zhidao' [The cause of the south China sea dispute and the way to deal with It], *Xingshi yu Zhengce* [Situation and Policy] 1, 2012, pp. 17-25.
[80] Alexander L. Vuving, 'Strategy and evolution of Vietnam's China policy: a changing mixture of pathways', *Asian Survey* 46: 6, November/December 2006, pp. 805-824.
[81] Cited in Zhong Feiteng, 'Guonei zhengzhi yu nanhai wenti de zhiduhau: yi zhongyue, zhongfei shuangbian nanhai zhengce xietian weili' [Domestic politics and the institutionalization of the south China sea issue: bilateral policy coordination in Sino-Vietnamese and Sino-Philippines relations], *Dangdai Yatai* (Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies) 3, 2012, p. 108.
[82] Zhong, 'Domestic politics and the institutionalization of the south China sea issue', p. 108.
[83] Kosal Path, 'China's economic sanctions against Vietnam, 1975-1978', *China Quarterly* 212, 2012, pp. 1040-1058.

negotiations. In 1992, Vietnam leader Le Kha Phieu visited China to discuss Sino-Vietnam cooperation,[84] In 1995 the two countries signed another communiqué on establishing 'an expert group dealing with maritime problems, and to conduct dialogue and negotiation',[85] in 1999 they signed a treaty addressing land border issues, and in 2000 they signed agreements on defining a maritime border and sharing associated economic benefits.[86] Two years later, China and all ASEAN member countries, including Vietnam, signed a Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, in which all parties promised self-constraint, to work toward establishing mutual trust mechanisms, and to maintain an atmosphere of cooperation until all disputes are resolved.

The Vietnamese public found it difficult to understand the subtleties of China's public stances regarding Vietnam's claims to sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, and focused instead on their country's silence and restraint over a maritime confrontation that claimed Vietnamese lives. By 2010, China was arguing that sufficient mechanisms were in place, but that Vietnam was not showing sufficient appreciation of Chinese concessions—in other words, Vietnam had fallen into a pattern of 'saying one thing, but doing another'. Beijing was particularly incensed over signs that Vietnam was trying to establish links with the United States and/or Japan to balance the pressure it felt from China.[87] Apparently Vietnam was trying to maintain a position between showing too much and too little compromise in order to present an image of an independent country without disrupting a bilateral relationship with its most important neighbour.[88]

In summary, China's uni-bilateralism in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship alternates between soft and hard versions. Soft uni-bilateralism appears to be prevalent when it comes to meetings between high-level officials, but the Vietnamese leadership is clearly more sensitive to domestic politics. In 2010 the Vietnamese Defence Department publically outlined its position

[84] Ye and Li, eds., *Chinese diplomacy*, p. 407.
[85] Zhong, 'Domestic politics and the institutionalization of the south China sea issue', p. 101.
[86] Ye and Li, eds., *Chinese diplomacy*, p. 407.
[87] Cheng Hanping, 'Lun nanhai zhengduan zhong de daguo yinsu ji yu nanbian guojia de zhanlve hudong' [On the greater power factor in south China sea disputes and China's strategic interactions with southern countries], *Dongnanya Zhichuang* [Window of Southeast Asia] 2, 2011, pp. 24-29; Cheng Hanping, 'Yuenan: zhengduo nanhai zuixiaozhang' [Vietnam: arrogant in contending for south China sea territory], *Shijie Zhishi* [World Affairs], 22, 2011, pp. 17-19; Ding Guo, (2011) 'Yuenan ruhe gaodiao liangxiang nanhai' [How Vietnam became high-profile in the south China sea], *Wanbao Wencui* [Literature] 21, November 2011, pp. 8-9; Zheng, 'Review of Chinese navy support for Vietnam'.
[88] Vuving, 'Strategy and evolution of Vietnam's China policy'.

on the South China Sea dispute, emphasizing the importance of peaceful negotiations between China and Vietnam, resisting foreign intervention, and rejecting a plan to internationalize the issue.[89] However, in 2011 as well as 2014 there were outbreaks of anti-Chinese protests in Vietnam regarding the South China Sea dispute, and Vietnam staged local voting on the largest Spratly Island as part of its national election to legitimize Vietnamese ownership. Reducing tensions over that act required a special Vietnamese envoy to Beijing.[90] Still, China refrained from sending naval forces to the area until spring 2014, a clear sign that it did not want the situation to escalate, thus putting it in a position of breaking its promise to achieve resolution by peaceful means.[91] The cycle of hard unilateralism re-emerges in spring 2014 as long as China unilaterally decides that Vietnam fails the spirit of the greater self.

Conclusions

Shifts between soft and hard uni-bilateralism indicate that China acknowledges relational security goals that transcend its typical concern for national interests. This is different from a national interest explanation that fails to logically treat an interest conception that is not embedded exclusively in China's own interest calculus, but is instead embedded in consideration of bilateral or relational concerns. This new approach is also different from past institutional approaches in that the making, reproduction, and restoration of relationships often call for unilateral efforts that reflect an internal drive for relational security as opposed to institutional incentives. Most importantly, judgments that determine shifts between hard and soft versions are usually not addressed in national interest or institutional analyses, since power or incentive structures tend to reduce judgments to sheer agency—in other words, judgments tend to be analyzed as simply the consequence or reflections of structural settings. However, judgment represents an independent uni-bilateral variable that determines how events, ideology, intention, credit, legitimacy, and prospects, together with the other side's reactions, come together to encourage decisions to shift.

[89] See, 'Yuenan buzhang cheng jiang heping jiejue nanhai wenti' [Vietnam defense minister claims south China sea dispute will be solved by peaceful means] http://www.360doc.com/content/10/0607/15/941458_31768477.shtml [Accessed 13 December 2013].
[90] See, 'Dai Bingguo guowu weiyuan huijian yuenan lingdaoren teshi Hu Chunshan' [Chinese state councillor Dai Bingguo meets with Vietnam special envoy Hu Chunshan] http://politics.people.com.cn/GB/14999294.html [Accessed 13 December 2013].
[91] See, 'Waijiao biandiao: zhongguo "zhanling yu tiaoxin" celve henyouxiao' [Diplomatic changes: China's "occupying and provoking" strategy is effective], http://www.chinareviewnews.com [Accessed 2 May 2003].

Refining conceptual division of institutional process of conflict resolution allows distinctions between ideal states and the methods used to achieve them to make it possible to generate a division of hard and soft versions of unilateralism and bilateralism. It also helps explains situation in which unilateral actors willingly show self-restraint for sake of bilateral or multilateral goals at the expense of common-sense national interests. Further, the bilateral approach to achieving relational security has the potential to backfire due to problems such as miscommunication or China-centric reactions to events, but it also testifies to the possibility of self-restraint and concern for relational security that controls the structural uncertainties associated with protecting national interests.

Table 1. Ideal States and Institutional Styles Associated with Unilateralism, Bilateralism, and Multilateralism.

State / Style	Unilateral Peace	Bilateral Peace	Multilateral Peace
Unilateralism	Medium unilateralism (Mearsheimer, 'tragedy of power').	Hard uni-bilateralism (Tow, 'San Francisco system').	Hard uni-multilateralism (Van Ness, 'Bush Doctrine').
Bilateralism	Soft uni-bilateralism (Rock, 'hegemony transfer').	Medium bilateralism (Womack, 'asymmetric model').	Hard bi-multilateralism (Gaddis, 'long peace').
Multilateralism	Soft uni-multilateralism (Keohane, 'after hegemony').	Soft bi-multilateralism (Wang Jixi, 'six-party talks').	Medium multilateralism (O'Brien, 'global governance').