Leif-Eric Easley, "Multilateralism, not Multipolarity: China's Changing Foreign Policy and Trilateral Cooperation in Asia," *JoongAng Daily* (with *International Herald Tribune*), March 14, 2008, page 11; *IHT-Asahi Shimbun*, March 17, 2008; *China Post*, March 29, 2008, page 4; *OMNI*, March 31, 2008, page 1.

Multipolarity describes a global distribution of power where major countries share roughly equal influence. Multilateralism is a means for addressing global problems based on the cooperation of multiple countries. One does not necessarily indicate or cause the other, but the relative emphasis of these concepts is telling about China's changing approach to international affairs.

The Chinese foreign policy discourse about multipolarity goes back to Mao Zedong's call for developing countries to rise up against capitalist nations. During the Cold War, multipolarity provided a competing vision to the power politics of the Soviet Union and United States. As the Cold War ended, arguments about multipolarity were aimed against the lone superpower's post-Tiananmen efforts to "contain" China.

Even after relations between China and the United States improved, multipolarity remained an important concept for advocating the "democratization of international relations" (国际惯系民主化 *guojiguanxi minzhuhua*). China's democratic international order would place legitimacy with the United Nations, where China wields great influence.

China's Foreign Ministry website explains the theory that "multipolarization on the whole helps weaken and curb hegemonism and power politics, serves to bring about a just and equitable new international political and economic order and contributes to world peace and development."

Polarity has been an obsession of realist studies of international relations for decades, and there is still no consensus on what global configuration of power is most stable. Factors other than polarity – such as international institutional constraints and who wields power for what – matter a great deal. But much history and many scholars suggest that all else being equal, a multipolar world verges on war as major countries compete for advantage.

Multilateralism appears a safer bet for curbing power politics and contributing to peace and development. The relative power concerns of multipolarity imply zero-sum competition, whereas multilateralism recognizes the challenges and opportunities of global interdependence. When countries act upon shared interests and put aside differences to address transnational issues, better policy outcomes are possible. Of course, multilateral talk is easier than multilateral results. Nonetheless, a significant change is underway in China's foreign policy as the discourse of multilateralism overtakes that of multipolarity.

A search in Chinese reveals that "multipolarity" (多极化 *duojihua*) is still featured on the Chinese Foreign Ministry website, but references to "multilateralism" (多边主义 *duobian zhuyi*) are increasing in official papers and speeches. Meanwhile, a full text search of Chinese academic and policy journals from 2000 to 2007 shows a gradual decline in discussion of multipolarity and a dramatic increase for multilateralism.

There are at least six notable reasons why multipolarity appears of waning importance in the Chinese foreign policy discourse.

First, global empirical trends defy old debates about polarity. The continued strength of the United States does not fit traditional concepts of multipolarity. At the same time, the world is too interdependent and other powers too influential to label the international system as unipolar.

Second, China is benefiting greatly from the stable international environment defined largely by the United States as the sole superpower. Chinese scholars point out that globalization under "one superpower and several great powers" (一超多强 *yichao duoqiang*) is allowing China to focus on economic development and domestic reforms.

Third, China's weight in international affairs has dramatically increased and Beijing is about to host the summer Olympics. A discourse on multipolarization is no longer needed for national pride as China overcomes its historical victimization.

Fourth, now that China has reclaimed its great power status, Beijing is not much interested in multipolarization if it means the rise of its rivals. China has reservations about the growing power of India and increasing assertiveness of Japan, and the desires of both countries to join the UN Security Council. China has also been careful to avoid a Russian resurgence in Central Asia and a unified ASEAN that excludes China.

Fifth, Beijing has found that talk of multilateralism makes for better public relations than calls for multipolarity. Multipolarity carries anti-American undertones and raises concerns among other states that a rising China may have revisionist intentions. Beijing has also witnessed there can be push back when a government that does not yet practice democracy at home calls for a more democratic order abroad.

Finally, focusing on multilateralism rather than multipolarity allows greater ideological coherence for China's foreign policy. Multipolarity, anti-hegemonism and non-interference are the old concepts of a relatively weak and isolated China. The new concepts of a strong and globally engaged China – peaceful rise (和平崛起 *heping jueqi*), win-win diplomacy (双赢外交 *shuangying waijiao*), and harmonious world (和谐世界 *hexie shijie*) – are more consistent with multilateralism, not multipolarity.

China should be credited for its "new security concept" (新安全觀 *xin anquan guan*) involving increased participation in international institutions, as this demonstrates China is embracing multilateralism in positive ways. Yet, just as other countries can do more to address charges of unilateralism and Cold War oriented alliances, China can better pursue "responsible stakeholder" foreign policies that support multilateralism.

A clear impediment to multilateralism in Northeast Asia is the lack of regional security mechanisms. Experts have recently laid out rationales for a U.S.-Japan-China Strategic Dialogue and a U.S.-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Security Committee. The problem is that the former would raise concerns in Seoul about being "passed" and the latter would raise concerns in Beijing about being "contained." A new forum including all four countries would add little value to the existing Six-party Talks and ASEAN dialogues because disagreement about the role of alliances and maintaining relations with Taiwan would inhibit substantive progress.

The next American president would thus be well advised to launch parallel U.S.-Japan-China and U.S.-Japan-South Korea strategic dialogues, where senior officials would coordinate security policies. The two trilateral mechanisms would be separate meetings with different agendas, but would be linked as building blocks for a future regional security architecture.

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