



International Relations and Defence Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Multilateralism

Wednesday 24 June 2026

11.30 am

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Members present: Lord Houghton of Richmond; (The Chair); Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon; Lord Alderdice; Baroness Blackstone; Baroness Crawley; Lord Darroch of Kew; Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie; Lord Grocott; Lord Lamont of Lerwick; Baroness Prashar.

In the absence of Lord Robertson of Port Ellen, Lord Houghton of Richmond was called to the Chair.

Evidence Session No. 4

Heard in Public

Questions 36 - 44

Witnesses

Professor Rana Mitter, ST Lee Professor of US-Asia Relations, Harvard Kennedy School; Dr Joel Ng, Head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

Examination of witnesses

Professor Rana Mitter and Dr Joel Ng.

Q36 **The Chair:** We have our two new witnesses, Professor Rana Mitter and Dr Joel Ng. First, I welcome you both. Thank you for making yourselves available to speak to the committee and offer your perspective on China's role in the multilateral system. This is now the fourth evidence session of our inquiry, which in general terms seeks to explore the future of the multilateral system and the UK's role within it. This session, as with the previous one that we have just had, is trying to explore the Chinese dimension of this going forward. The session is live-streamed on our parliamentary website. A transcript of what is said will be taken, and once available we will send you a copy of that transcript, so if you want to make any small corrections—not huge ones—you have an opportunity to do it. I remind the panel here that if you have any relevant interests you need to declare them when first speaking.

We have about 55 minutes for this session, so we will try to keep our questions short. Please have some discipline. We do not need to be lectured in the answer but just want the strategic points. Clarity is our friend in this.

I will start by asking you briefly to introduce yourselves and then we will get on to the main question session.

Professor Rana Mitter: Thanks very much indeed. I am the ST Lee Chair in US-Asia Relations at the John F Kennedy School of Government, the public policy school of Harvard University. As you can tell from my accent, I am more native to where you are at the moment, having taught for more than 20 years at Oxford. I am a specialist in the history, politics and international relations of modern China. It is a great pleasure to be with you here today.

The Chair: Excellent, lovely.

Dr Joel Ng: Thank you very much. I am head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies in Singapore, part of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. I am also the co-chair of the Singapore committee for the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific.

Q37 **The Chair:** That is great. Many thanks. As Chair, I take the privilege of the first question. Quite simply, how would you characterise China's vision for the international order? Is it revolutionary or revisionist in its approach to international affairs?

Professor Rana Mitter: You have possibly deliberately chosen what is often one of the exam questions that we set students, asking them what they think about exactly this question. The right answer is that it is a bit of both, but also more complex than that. In the interests of keeping it concise, broadly speaking, there are many aspects of the contemporary order, including the global economic order—aspects of the World Trade

Organization is a good example of that—where China is very concerned to keep things as they are at the moment. In that, it is probably different from Russia, which of course is a partner of China. Russia is perhaps more nihilistic in terms of the way in which it wants to change the global order. There are many aspects that China wants to keep the same.

Having said that, there are also particular areas where China is very keen to revise the order. The Human Rights Council of the United Nations would be a good example of that. China has moved in recent years very strongly to seek to redefine human rights much more along economic grounds and much less on the grounds of personal individual civil liberties. Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, as I am sure you all know, has spoken about the right to subsistence being the first human right. Rather than that being revolutionary, that is a way of taking the existing framing of one particular organisation, in this case within the UN, and redefining it according to terms that are more suitable to your geopolitical position. In those senses, I would say that China is in some ways quite happy with the world order as it is, but it wants to reshape it in ways that suit China's interests in terms of economic growth, state dominance of governance and moving away from what it would regard as overly individualistic values towards more collectivist ones, certainly at home but to some extent overseas as well.

The Chair: Dr Ng, feel free to disagree or complement whatever has just been said.

Dr Joel Ng: Yes, I agree quite a lot with what Professor Mitter said. I would characterise China's vision of international order as that of a peaceful and harmonious world—that is its own words—with itself taking a central place in the governance of that order. You will be familiar with the White Paper on global governance that it just released, which illustrates the way that it wants to reach that status or position. It is clearly serious in both aspects: that the order is peaceful, because it would benefit from a peaceful rise, and that it plays a leading role in that order, which is implicit in its conception of a so-called "just order". When it talks about a "just order", it means very much that China and other Global South states that have been historically underrepresented in that order get a much more prominent role. As Professor Mitter said, "revisionist" might be a bit too simple because there are many elements of the order that it wishes to preserve, and there is the fact that there are many states that have existing other sorts of dissatisfaction with the order that are not characterised as revisionist.

In the present moment, because of the way the US Administration have attacked the existing international order, China's defence of many parts of that order, especially UN-centred multilateralism, which it often identifies as "true multilateralism", as opposed to smaller subgroups such as G7, NATO, OECD and so on, are in fact quite critical right now for the maintenance of what is still established at the moment. China is also creating parallel structures outside this order, and it would give it greater prominence in the system because that is what great powers do when

they are faced with resistance within the system. This is a different way of establishing greater representation without necessarily shifting all the seats in the existing structures.

It is an important caveat to state that the liberal international order was a six or seven-decades project in the making, and I do not think China shares anywhere close to as ambitious a goal in creating an alternative China-led order. I do not see that it has demonstrated a willingness to spend the resources required. It does not have as many like-minded states in its corner. It also does not appear to have spent as many resources in terms of norm shaping.

Finally, China has rhetorically bound itself to respecting the development trajectories or unique historical experiences of states, a line that it has used to defend itself against western criticism but which can also be turned around to inhibit its own more assertive normative positions with other states. In short, it is still playing to diverse audiences around the world who do not share its political views and therefore has to deal with an order in which the aggregate norms are at variance with its own.

The Chair: Thank you very much. The next question was our most popular. I will ask Baroness Blackstone to ask it, and then others might double down on it—certainly Lord Lamont, I know.

Q38 **Baroness Blackstone:** Thank you very much. Professor Mitter, I know you have written extensively about the way history informs contemporary policy in China. Could you focus a bit on how it affects international work by China and particularly its involvement in multilateral organisations?

Professor Rana Mitter: Absolutely. Often, concrete examples are better than abstract statements. Let me give two brief examples that illustrate different aspects of the way in which China thinks about history. The overall framing is that China's perception of its own modern history in particular, from the Opium Wars starting in 1839 all the way up to the end of World War II in 1945 against Japan and then of course the civil war that ended with communist victory, was a period when China was on the back foot internationally and essentially was being bullied by the rest of the world. You can have your own historical arguments about how accurate that was, but broadly speaking there is a lot of historical evidence for that, and it shapes policy thinking even today. Every single person in the Chinese Foreign Ministry who works on policy will have learnt that framing of history and of modern history at school.

As I said, I have a couple of quick examples of this. The first one is new as of last year. I was in Beijing in the summer of 2025 and went to visit the big museum there. You might say it is almost an equivalent to the Imperial War Museum in London. It is the museum of what the Chinese call the war of resistance against Japanese aggression, which is their term for World War II. One thing that was entirely new for 2025 was a big gallery in that museum commemorating China's record in World War II and the United Nations. You spoke about multilateral organisations. I will briefly say why that new pavilion there is so important.

Bear in mind that, for us in Britain, World War II still remains very much in popular memory—I speak as someone who knows that “Dad’s Army” is still shown on BBC Two on Saturday nights. For the Chinese, too, the horrific loss of 8 million or 10 million people and the massive invasion of their country still sit as a kind of folk memory even though obviously very few people are alive today who remember that. One story that is told now is that from those ashes came China’s status not just as a member of the United Nations but as one of the first signatories to the United Nations when the UN Charter was signed in San Francisco in April 1945—China was at the head of the table, you might say—and that there is a continuity between that 1945 moment and the present day. The argument that China uses today is that, in a world where the United States is now causing turbulence, only China can be trusted with carrying on the legacy of that 1945 moment where it suffered in World War II, sacrificed millions of people and became part of the shaping of the new world.

The element that is not mentioned in the Chinese version is that it was not Chairman Mao, Mao Tse-Tung, but Chiang Kai-shek, the Chinese leader of that time and a nationalist, who was fundamentally and viscerally opposed to communism and Mao, who actually signed that charter. There are some parts of history that are used where they are useful and some that are not. That story in that big pavilion in the museum about China being a founder member of the UN is something you will hear Xi Jinping, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and various other Chinese dignitaries today talk about as a historical background to why they should have standing and why they have historical legitimacy in terms of shaping today’s UN.

I have one other quick example from more remote history. You will be aware, I am sure, in many cases that traditional thinking—what you might call the thinking of philosophers such as Confucius—as well as Daoism, the more long-standing philosophical tradition of ancient China, have come back into visibility in China in a big way in the present day. There is one particular phrase that you will find in the revised Chinese constitution of 2018—“shēngtài wénmíng”. We can get the transcript of that later. It is usually translated as “ecological civilisation”. It is a way in which China talks about something that economically we know about—its continued and growing dominance in post-fossil fuel green energy technology, which of course is hugely important to today’s world, not least for the UK and for the Global South. It places China’s prominence in that not just in terms of its mercantilist economic policies or its global economic ambitions but in terms of that philosophical tradition of China being a country that follows Daoist ways that bring nature and humankind together. Again, you can look into how convincing you find this philosophically, but the fact is that today China has considered it important enough to bring those historical and philosophical traditions from the past into its constitution to give what you might call a green sheen to its present-day geoeconomic policy. Those are two examples that I hope might be useful.

Baroness Blackstone: Thank you very much. Dr Ng, do you want to add anything at this point and then other people can come in?

Dr Joel Ng: No, that was a fascinating exposition by Professor Mitter.

Q39 **Lord Lamont of Lerwick:** Professor Mitter covered what I was going to ask. I will ask a wider, more fundamental question than Professor Mitter, as a UK person living in America, might be well placed to answer. It is about western policy to China. China is a rising economic power. It wants legitimately to increase the living standards of its citizens. It wants to avoid the middle-income trap and to go beyond being a middle-income country. That benefits the world. It is to the West's advantage as well. At the same time, America, where you are now living, sees China as a geopolitical rival and could be seen as trying to suppress the ambitions of China to improve the conditions and living standards of its people. Is there a way in policy of drawing a line between legitimately looking after your own security and your own interests and not being seen to be trying to keep down the living standards and aspirations of China?

Professor Rana Mitter: It is an excellent question. The answer is yes, absolutely. If I dare put a note of optimism into the discussion for a moment, it is possible that we may be in a moment right now where the US and China are moving, if not exactly to a period of co-operation—I think that is too much to expect—at least to a certain amount of what you might call *détente* Cold War-style in terms of some of the important areas where they are certainly in competition but where on both sides they are keen not to come into conflict.

One of the most important areas—and I think this is one of the areas that you are probably alluding to by implication—is technology transfer and the question of whether microchips, semiconductor chips, are going to be made available to China when they come from the US, and indeed more and more vice versa. On the one hand, we are likely to see that the science and tech ecologies of China and the United States are going to become a little more isolated in the short term. In other words, it is going to be harder for Chinese students, scientists and so forth, to work in the US, and it is already hard, obviously, for US actors to be present in China in those circumstances. At the same time, something is also emerging that we might not have imagined even two or three years ago when, under the Biden Administration, those first restrictions were put on chip sales, which is that China, to some extent, is responding by becoming inventive and finding workarounds in terms of some of those technological restrictions. Some of the questions that were very big even two years ago about whether cutting off those chips from China would essentially hold China back are now subject to a different question, which is: are both sides going to develop different and incompatible technology environments in which they just talk to each other less?

That is not necessarily an entirely desirable outcome since I think it is very important that the scientific and broader knowledge bases of both countries learn from each other. The current situation is less likely to lead to restrictions on both sides than it is possibly both sides following their

own paths. The Chinese and the Americans have both in recent years been talking much more about self-reliance. What I think this brings up—and this is a matter, I suspect, for this committee—is how actors such as the European Union and indeed the UK, which of course has its own very strong tech environment, are going to operate in a world that may become more bifurcated between China and the US in those areas. I am aware that Singapore has a great voice on this issue too, so I suspect that Dr Ng might well have some interesting thoughts from his viewpoint on that question, too.

Lord Lamont of Lerwick: Dr Ng, have you anything to add?

Dr Joel Ng: Yes. We recall that during the Cold War great powers rarely ever fought each other directly. Instead, they relied on proxies and battleground states for the conduct of their contestation. That is happening in the tech space right now as well. Whereas the two states do not directly confront each other, they are directing a lot of new rules and regulations against companies that may be Chinese or American or completely unrelated to either state, in which they become the collateral damage of their competition in which the new US industrial policy or Chinese security policy rules are being imposed and greatly constrain what those companies are able to do. In this way, rather than seeing a clear cleavage between economies—we are not seeing the complete disentanglement of interdependence—we are seeing that companies slowly but surely are making divisions within their own operations or in fact carving out new entities to do certain types of operations that are China-facing or certain types of operations that are US-facing and so on, in order to not benefit but to be least affected by the new competition rules.

I use this Cold War analogy because it is important that for third-party states that are not part of this competition we need to preserve the space and ensure that we do not allow too many battlegrounds to emerge. That means we need to keep things rules based and structured around clear and universal rules and principles—in this case, trade rules—so that the unfair or asymmetrical imposition of rules is not allowed to affect everyone around the world. I hope that answers your question about how to preserve security without impoverishing a target state.

Q40 **Baroness Fraser of Cragmaddie:** Dr Ng, you have advanced the term Sino-centric multilateralism. Could you describe the key characteristics of this approach? More practically, how does China pursue it with the Global South, which you already mentioned as being key, and how does it then play to the diverse audiences that do not agree with them?

Dr Joel Ng: Sino-centric multilateralism in its most minimal sense—it is purely descriptive—refers to China-led multilateral summits it organises around the world such as the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the China-CELAC Forum with the community of Latin American and Caribbean states, and so forth. More expansively, one could also use it to describe Sino-centric foreign policy in multilateral affairs. This is a bit more controversial or,

rather, more debatable, but it is very clear that China has an outsized role in many of the multilateral organisations in which it participates. Given its economic heft, it has greater tools at its disposal, an ability to push initiatives and fund projects that are desirable to both the partner states as well as China, and in that way to try to get the partner states to internalise China's interests as its own.

Regarding how China pursues it, indicators of successful Sinification of a multilateral grouping might include the declared pursuit of Chinese-specific interests, de-recognition of Taiwan and group dynamics that isolate a state critical of China. China presses these interests straightforwardly through diplomatic channels that are not exceptional for a state of its size. However, I do not see a lot of evidence of this necessarily because the states that are engaged with China will often push back when their national interests are at stake or when China becomes, or appears to become, too dominant.

The final thought about Sino-centric multilateralism that is important to remember is that in fact, when China organises all these summits, China is always outnumbered in these formats. Given its commitment to sovereign equality, it cannot pressure states into rapid alignment. Also, these summits are based on consensus, and this is much harder to obtain in these formats than it sometimes appears. The partner states themselves have a great deal of agency that often goes unrecognised by outsiders.

To give a specific example, if you think about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is often touted as one of the key anti-western multilateral groupings that China has started, it expanded in the last decade to include Pakistan and India. Once those two entered as members, they managed to jam each other up successively, continuously, and made the SCO a much less successful organisation than it might have been. The expansion of some of these formats also comes with growing pains for China, which is that agreements are much more difficult to reach.

Baroness Fraser of Craigmaddie: Professor Mitter, Dr Ng has just given us illustrative examples of China engaging in different multilateral organisations from what the western powers and those that do not agree with China engage in. What are the implications for those powers that do not agree with China and are not part of these separate organisations?

Professor Rana Mitter: Part of the answer could be to at least find ways to get some status with those organisations. If we think about them, Dr Ng mentioned the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. There are others. BRICS of course has become very well known. These days, it is formalised in terms of having its own secretariat meetings. The last one was Kazan in Russia, if I remember correctly. Certainly, they happen quite frequently. Yet that organisation has three countries, none of which talks to each of the other two equally, which is Russia, India and China. Obviously China and India have huge numbers of disputes, not least over the border in terms of security, yet they co-exist in that organisation.

This provides middle powers in a broad sense—we are all using that term after the Mark Carney speech at Davos earlier in the year—that is, countries that have significant geoeconomic and geopolitical heft of their own, which could be a UN Permanent Five Security Council seat or the ability to be involved in areas of growing importance such as international tech standards, to use their capacity.

To give one example where the UK is already present, the CPTPP, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which has a significant south-east Asian presence—Dr Ng will have some insights on that—is one example of how the UK has been able to try to find opportunities for what you might call a gathering of like-minded actors. The point about the CPTPP is that the US is not in it, China is not in it, but Japan is very much a like-minded actor with the UK, it is fair to say, and so are a variety of other countries that are going to be emerging markets important to the UK. Also, the topics that they look at—things like digital norms and standards, which are going to be important for the internet of things and for services agreements in the coming decade or so—are the places that are trying to push back against the idea that the only actors in the room are going to be the G2, the US and China. That is, I think, where those countries have an opportunity.

I mentioned Japan briefly. Perhaps I will just bring it up again. It is often underestimated, because of the European location of the UK and the growing warmth there now seems to be between the UK and the EU, to remember that Japan has for a long time been a country with strong links and a great interest in co-operation with the UK. It is worth noting that sometimes those sorts of actors are there and waiting to be talked to. It is a question of opening up the channels to do that.

Q41 Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: It is great listening to you both and gaining your insights. Dr Ng, I come to you first. You partly started answering the question that I was going to ask about Chinese influence, and particularly—this is a general question as well—about the levers that China can use. Quite often, we have seen in the field economic levers, military levers and security levers. Professor Mitter just used the term “like-minded”. I remember, as Foreign Office Minister, officials coming to me, saying, “And the like-minded Minister has said this”. My question is, first, within the existing multilateral structure, which organisations do you see China prioritising in terms of leveraging its influence? In doing so, do you see a kind of grouping, notwithstanding those responses that you have given, where China says, “Actually, these people are like-minded to us, and we need to focus on them first”?

Dr Joel Ng: As a self-declared defender of true multilateralism, it has to be the United Nations for the Chinese. Chinese contributions to the UN have been rising very greatly in the last decades. China naturally will seek greater representation in this format. It will also naturally, from its point of view, seek to change some of the bureaucratic practices and norms within it so that they are more friendly to the Chinese style of work, interests and so on, which will take a cultural adjustment for other states. This is more of a human resource issue than a nefarious agenda

here. Chinese officials, if you think about them, 20 years ago were rarely exposed to the West, frequently only spoke Mandarin and so on. The new, younger generation are a little bit more bold, they are coming of age now—I am of a similar age to many of them—and are fluent in English, French, Russian and so on, and therefore are able to press for greater representation in the UN system than they previously were able to, notwithstanding also the lack of their own contribution back in those days.

With respect to other international organisations outside the UN system, one of the key things is that most of them are designed to press sovereign equality. In south-east Asia, we are very strict about having an intergovernmental nature of regionalism, which means that China becomes just one member state of many in the ASEAN+ structures. China, therefore, has to engage south-east Asian states as small as Timor-Leste as a peer, a dialogue partner. Therefore, it does not manage to get as much influence as might be felt in the multilateral format. That is not to say it does not find other ways. Basically, the bilateral formats are the ways in which China is much more effectively gaining influence.

To bring it back to Sino-centric multilateralism, one of the key themes of Sino-centric summits that we observed was that they were multilateralising bilateral relations. That means they already had all these investment, infrastructure and development assistance projects with various bilateral countries. Bringing them together into a combined summit was a practical matter of not having to visit 100 states all at once but, rather, bringing all the states together especially to China—which was great optics for them—and therefore pressing that influence together. What emerges is a new property, which is, as I already mentioned, the outnumbering of China. I guess what happens is that, when you engage with China in the multilateral setting, one should be aware that the ability for China to press its outsized influence is hampered by the rules of the multilateral format at stake.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon: Thank you. Professor Mitter, in that context, China traditionally from our perspective—you will know this well—has been seen in a kind of transactional way in which it conducts itself within the existing rules of multilateralism. You and Dr Ng mentioned the UN as well. The rules of multilateralism as we see it, as opposed to how China sees it, are very different.

Professor Rana Mitter: That is right. Your question to Dr Ng was a question of where there would be institutions or organisations where China is seeking to increase its importance. Dr Ng mentioned the UN, which would certainly be my first example as well, so I will not repeat that.

The next most important thing and central to China's growth and influence is trade agreements. The single largest free trade agreement in the Asia-Pacific region now is RCEP, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. I mentioned the CPTPP before, in which China is not present. That is not because it does not want to be. It still would find

entry because of issues such as higher labour standards to be very difficult to manage, but it would very much like to be in that, too. RCEP, which has much lower barriers to entry, contains many regional actors, including Australia, which are not necessarily politically very friendly towards the Chinese, or not always. As you will be aware, there have certainly been many disputes, not least the undeclared boycott of Australian wine and products after then Prime Minister Scott Morrison wanted an international Covid inquiry. Yet signing up to RCEP was a sign, in a sense, that the old American-dominated model of trade in the region, which operated all the way into the 1990s and early 2000s, is essentially being displaced, and has been displaced, by a China-dominated trade structure. In that sense, moving Beijing to the centre of regional trade and making sure the organisations such as RCEP that underpin it are Chinese driven is part of that issue, too.

When we talk about “like-minded”, obviously every country in the world wants to increase growth and economic prosperity, and China uses the argument that it is, if I may borrow your word, not just transactional. Yes, of course, it is interested in transaction, but call transaction something else. Call it trade, mutual benefit or, to use the expression the Chinese like to use a great deal, win-win. That is the way in which it argues that those particular organisations are of benefit beyond China’s borders.

I have one other example beyond that in terms of that like-mindedness where China can make connections. Dr Ng made a really good point about how we should not overestimate how much China has the power to do whatever it wants. One argument that it uses now about the United States is that, because of tariffs and changing policy on many things, the US has become unpredictable or unreliable. You will have heard these terms on many occasions, not least from western European countries. China, therefore, now has to get itself into a situation where its argument that it is the reliable partner is actually borne out by the facts. If China says, “Join us. You may not like everything we do, but we are a reliable partner”, and then starts changing the rules on what you can import, what you can export and exit bans on entrepreneurs, which is one of the things that has happened recently with two tech entrepreneurs who wanted to move to Singapore from China, that makes outside actors much more nervous about whether China’s reliability is in some ways that different to that of the United States. Those questions are very important in terms of measuring up quite how much China is really able to find other actors who will be on the page with it, largely because it has always rejected, with a few exceptions such as North Korea, putting forward formal alliances. There has never been a Chinese version of the EU. There has never been a Chinese version of NATO, and it is unlikely that there will be one any time soon.

Baroness Crawley: Thank you very much, Professor Mitter and Dr Ng, for your insights. It is fascinating to listen to you. My question follows on from Lord Ahmad and Baroness Fraser. It is about the long-term effect on democratic countries such as the UK of this growing Chinese influence on

the multinational rules-based order. Do you see a polarised future—I am talking 20, 30 years down the line—where there is a split in multilateralism, where there is a Chinese-led multilateral organisation or bloc and a democratic-led multilateral bloc?

Professor Rana Mitter: Thanks very much, Baroness. It is a very thoughtful question. The very short answer is no, I do not think there will be a Chinese-led international order, largely because I do not think in the end—and Dr Ng made an allusion to this earlier—China has the desire to create the huge project that a global order involves. It involves a tremendous amount of cost. NATO, the EU and those organisations that have been mentioned did not come for free. In fact, one complaint of the current US Administration is that they cost the US far too much. Chinese taxpayers, even if they do not have a vote, would certainly have a voice in terms of China becoming too heavily involved in that direction.

It is also the case that in the end China's ruling Communist Party is much more concerned with keeping a really absolute, firm authoritarian grip on power at home, and that will always be a primary concern, in which global influence is important but secondary. That is as opposed to, at its height, the American and indeed Soviet projects of suggesting the rest of the world should be as they were. That has not been China's project.

Are there implications for democratic countries, which is the second part of your question? Yes, there are. I had a piece in the journal *Foreign Affairs* last year that made a case that is not inevitable—in fact, a long way from inevitable—but which I fear could be the case if we do not get our own houses in order in the liberal world. In some ways, the global vibe, if I can use a technical term, in terms of politics has turned in a much more authoritarian direction in general. Everyone knows voting in western Europe, in North America and a variety of other places has turned in that direction, not inevitably and not necessarily irreversibly, but the sense that collective values at a time of economic global crisis since 2008 perhaps take precedence over the long-standing attention to individual liberal civil rights has become quite widespread. I do not think China is particularly a driver of that tendency. China has been spending far more time at home. The exception would be Taiwan, where I think China has spent quite a lot of time trying to influence social media there. In terms of western Europe and the wider world, clearly there are agents of influence, but the sense that politics is changing is much more driven by economic factors from within.

If we in the liberal world—I will use that phrase—continue to go in that direction, yes, it makes it much more amenable to the kind of global order that China would prefer, not one led by China or where everyone is going to have to learn Confucian values or something of that sort, but the idea of a world where the following things are held to be self-evidently true. Basically, you need a really strong state to bring about economic prosperity and keep people in order, and if that means that certain people's individual rights are trampled on, too bad. Any liberal would clearly push back strongly against that, but liberals have been in

something of a minority recently. Also, there is the belief that trading arrangements have to become more autarchic. China talks about free trade in a way that the US does not at the moment, but both countries are quite keen on using tariff and non-tariff barriers. That particular post-WTO world is one that China, with its message of self-sufficiency, would not find hostile to its overall aims.

The final point I make—it is not the only point but I will keep this fairly disciplined—is to refer back to that point I made earlier, which is becoming more and more part of the way in which China makes its case for a Chinese added value proposition in the new global order. That is the idea that, in the world of tech where AI and data farms are going to eat huge amounts of anyone's energy, it is necessary to have green energy that will not exacerbate climate change, and in doing that China puts forward its own dominance in that field also as a global public good, which is defined by that term I gave you before: ecological civilisation. It is a term that is mostly still used at home in China at the moment, "shēngtài wénmíng", but I expect that we will hear versions of it made part of China's vision of global order in the next five, 10 or 15 years, particularly if the rest of the world continues to go in a less liberal and more collectivist direction.

The Chair: Dr Ng, do you want to come in on this? The next question is coming your way, so perhaps a brief supplementary, and then you are on.

Dr Joel Ng: I quote from our recent book, the one that the first questioner mentioned earlier. To quote Deng Xiaoping in 1994, "Some developing countries would like China to become the leader of the Third World, but we absolutely can't do that, this is one of our basic state policies. We can't afford to do it, and, besides, we aren't strong enough. There is nothing to be gained by playing that role; we would lose most of our initiative".¹ That is a key point.

Three years later, at the meeting of the Shanghai Five, the predecessor to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, its joint declaration showed the development of its thinking: "We must improve global governance and practice true multilateralism. In the world, there is only one international system, i.e. the international systems with the United Nations at its core. There is only one international order, i.e. the international order underpinned by international law. And there is only one set of rules, the basic norms governing international relations underpinned by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter."²

The point of raising that from almost 30 years ago is to show that China has been very consistent over decades about using the multilateral system and not bifurcating it to the extent that might be proposed in some scenario-planning exercises. Look at China's regional leadership as

¹ *The Dragon's Emerging Order: Sino-centric Multilateralism and Global Responses*, Singapore: World Scientific, 2026, p 17

² *Ibid*, p 18

perhaps a litmus test of whether it can lead a global order. Is there a north-east Asian regional organisation or multilateral system? No, because China cannot get along well enough with its nearest neighbours to create one. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, as I just mentioned, is the most successful one, and it is not doing very well. Instead, it is left to the south-east Asian states to use the ASEAN+ arrangements to get north-east Asian states to talk to each other because their own trilateral summit cannot get off the ground. One finds that China is sometimes its own worst enemy. It has the thinking of a big state, which therefore makes it a little difficult to understand the perspective of small states. This, for me, is one key reason why China cannot create a bifurcated order with itself as the lead.

The Chair: Great. We have 15 minutes to go and four more questions, so pace and brevity. I am sure you will deliver.

- Q42 **Lord Grocott:** You attached great significance to China's relationship with the Global South and the importance it attaches to that. How successful do you think it has been in its own terms in that engagement? The rider to that would be that I am still not clear in my own mind: is the overriding objective of the engagement with developing countries and the Global South primarily political or economic?

Dr Joel Ng: China has been very successful in growing its influence. In south-east Asia, we have a couple of indices that have been studying particularly the balance between the US and China as our great power partners. Both indices point to the fact that, first, all the south-east Asian states hedge quite a lot. That means there are states that are closer to China and states that are closer to the US, such as the Philippines with the US and Cambodia with China, but they are all moving towards the middle, with a slight bias towards China, because, historically, we were perhaps a little bit closer to the US at the end of the Cold War. This means that China has some advantage, but we should not expect a linear growth in its relationship.

In fact, when you look at the countries closest to China, you may find that they disagree with China or that they have a need for hedging against China at times. Cambodia most recently has been drawing very close to the United States where it can, of course, given its own difficulties historically with it. Even Myanmar about 15 years ago cancelled the Myitsone dam project, when it was then under the military rule of President Thein Sein, and it has never resumed that. China lost a lot of money on that project. The influence that China has with developing countries is great, but it plateaus at a certain point. China cannot get past some of this.

On whether its primary goal is to gain friends or economic advantage, to give a very unsatisfactory answer, it is both. China's infrastructure projects are well attested to having to do with the need for it to find a way to manage its vast domestic savings rate and put the money overseas in projects. At the same time, the ability of China's absorptive capacity to make terrible losses on some of these projects, where either

the projects were cancelled or debts were too great and therefore had to be written off, or maybe in the case of Venezuela the United States steps in and just blows everything out of the water, means that China seems to be using political rather than economic considerations to manage some of these things. It prioritises the relationship over the economic costs, and sometimes to such an extent that we will be staggered by some of the losses that it has made.

Professor Rana Mitter: Briefly, off the back of that, there are some particular relationships in the Global South, broadly defined, such as Vietnam, Zimbabwe, South Africa—and I have talked to people from all those places quite recently—where the shared revolutionary history from the Cold War, which is 50 or 60 years ago but still remembered, creates a particular emotional bond, which is separate from the purely pragmatic. Having said that, the primary way in which the political and economic combine—sorry to sound like a chorus of agreement here, but I absolutely agree with Dr Ng that it is both—is that right now one of the key projects that China has is making sure that the Global South, which we could think of instead as emerging large markets, has a technological underpinning that is largely Chinese. In terms of 5G and emerging AI technologies, when there is a stark choice between a western and a Chinese alternative, China uses its very high quality of production, its ability to roll out technology very fast, its highly subsidised pricing and what some people have called the state-driven subsidy model to essentially make sure that with these elements it gets in the door first, and then in economic and political terms it is in a much better position to have a strong influence in the economies of those countries.

Lest that be interpreted as purely meaning that everything that China does is exploitative, I am not saying that. If you look at countries like Ethiopia, which have taken some of those bargains, you can see that their growth rates have often increased very fast when they have taken that Chinese funding. There are also disaster stories like the Kenya-Uganda high-speed railway that Chinese money went into but has never actually run and was abandoned, a little like HS2, half way through. There is no universal story either of Chinese conquest or of Chinese failure. It is very much a series of pragmatic decisions underpinned by a genuine ideological belief that the Global South has reasons for affinity, historically, to China, and China, historically, as leader of the Bandung group, the Non-Aligned Movement, that sort of outfit, also has a connection with those sorts of countries.

Q43 **Baroness Prashar:** You both talked about China's strategy with regard to the United Nations, and yet China has led on the development of new multilateral organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and BRICS. Are these complementary or are they a challenge to the pre-existing multilateral system?

Professor Rana Mitter: The main thing to note about all these organisations is that in a sense they are experiments. They are China trying out a variety of multilateralisms that may or may not work out. We

have mentioned the Shanghai Cooperation Organization more than once by this stage. My take is a little like Voltaire's take on the Holy Roman Empire: it is not based in Shanghai, it does not co-operate very much, and it is not very organised. The AIIB is somewhat different in that it is a very important addition to what you might call the Paris Club group of lenders.

In the end, in terms of capital, AIIB is a boutique bank. It is there as much as anything to show that China can work by Paris Club rules. It had the very sophisticated Jin Liqueun as chairman for a long time. Sir Danny Alexander, a well-known figure in Parliament, was the vice-president for policy and strategy for a very long time. In the end, it was not the biggest of players. Much bigger loans came from very opaque Chinese state banks such as the China Exim Bank. Each of those institutions that you talked about plays a slightly different purpose in that kind of Sino-centric multilateralism that Dr Ng talked about, and you have to take each one assessed on its own terms and understand there are failures as well as successes. Joel, you have thoughts on this, I suspect.

Dr Joel Ng: Sure, thank you. I would deal with them in two lots. Much like Professor Mitter said, the financial institutions should be treated differently from the political ones, of which BRICS and SCO are distinct. For the political ones, it would not hurt to take a look at how slow ASEAN's development has been to give yourself a sense of the trajectory of these ones. It is going to be slow because consensus is really slow, and the divergence of interest in these organisations is great. The expansion of BRICS did not help it any. In fact, for me, it was déjà vu, because when ASEAN expanded the ASEAN Regional Forum in the 1990s, a great inclusive club of 25 countries that could not agree on anything, BRICS repeated the exact same mistake or decision, and now you have the Iran war splitting BRICS apart. The same thing happened with the SCO. These clubs may from the outside generate certain kinds of narratives in the West, but if you look at them on the inside you will see that there is much less than meets the eye.

As Professor Mitter said, financial institutions are different. They often operate by Bretton Woods rules, and yet, as he also pointed out, their size is tiny relative to the western institutions. They cannot perform their basic functions without the West and therefore have to be complementary to them. I will not repeat what he said about the AIIB. It is absolutely correct that the AIIB's capital is less than ADB's or the World Bank's. On financial macroeconomic stability, BRICS has a contingent reserve arrangement of \$100 billion. I have no idea what that would do in the event of an actual financial crisis, but my thought is not much. That is because we also have something called the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization in south-east Asia that China participates in, and it has a \$240 billion capitalisation, and we do not think that is enough to do anything relevant in south-east Asia. These organisations will have to draw on the IMF or special drawing rights in the macro-financial institutions, and they will not be able to operate on their own.

The Chair: Okay. I will ask two questions at the same time, you will both have a go at answering them, and we will just about meet the deadline. John, you ask yours first, and then Kim, and they can both have a couple of minutes each to respond.

Q44 **Lord Alderdice:** Are there areas of multilateral co-operation where UK and Chinese interests align with each other? Are these areas of collaboration, possibly? What about areas of potential conflict specifically between the UK and China?

Lord Darroch of Kew: My question complements that.

The Chair: It does.

Lord Darroch of Kew: The wisdom of the Chair. Thank you. This is really a question asking for your advice. I spent 40-odd years in the Foreign Office, and relations with China were always a challenge and always felt fragile because of China's sensitivities or anything that amounted to or looked like criticism or interference in its internal affairs or whatever. I have one quick example. When I took over as National Security Adviser, we were in a state where there were no senior political contacts between the British Government and the Chinese Administration because the Prime Minister, David Cameron, had spent 20 minutes having a cup of coffee with the Dalai Lama. Now, the Golden Era followed that, so we got things back on track. It is very fragile and always feels fragile. We should be co-operating and working with China on a whole range of international problems like climate change, the situation in the Middle East and Ukraine, especially in multinational fora, yet in the United Nations Security Council we disagree on almost everything. Do you have any brilliant ideas about what we could be doing better or differently to make this a more real objective for us?

Dr Joel Ng: Professor Mitter already outlined green technology as one of the key areas in which China has the lead. The UK is an island state. I come from an island state, too—a slightly smaller one. On climate change challenges, China has the technology and the UK has the institutional know-how. There is something to be said about co-operation on this. I also add that, maybe not so much on the specifics but rather as a symbolically important move, when two competitors or adversaries come together and agree on something, that is extremely powerful. At the very least, make an effort to engage with China and find out ways in which you can co-operate. Two countries as far apart as the UK and China agreeing on something would galvanise a great amount of momentum in something that you have a common interest on.

Regarding the digital domain, China has already stated in the global governance White Paper that it wants to set out new rules in rapidly changing domains such as digital technologies, areas of the fourth industrial revolution and so on. Again, the UK has great legislative experience of rule and norm shaping in the international arena. It behoves the UK and China to work together on some of these things, notwithstanding their philosophical differences.

As to advice, I really cannot say anything. I am not an expert on UK foreign policy at all. What I feel is a necessary question, and it applies as much to Singapore and south-east Asian states as the UK, is that strategic autonomy and values-based foreign policy have a trade-off with each other. The more you prioritise values, the more you close off certain kinds of options available. Only the UK alone can decide where that balance should lie. It is clear now that Europe in general and the West, or what has fragmented from the West, is now looking at strategic autonomy as a much greater priority. In that sense, if China is one of those options for exercising that autonomy, my only thought is that you need to have a more balanced narrative around China, not always China the threat, China the rival in need of confrontation and so forth. The UK has done quite a good job in this, not so much certain other states in the West. This is the level narrative that you might find useful as it comes to deciding how to approach and engage with China.

Professor Rana Mitter: That was a very comprehensive answer from Dr Ng there, so I have just a couple of quick points. If I am correct, during the couple of years of freeze between the Dalai Lama's cup of tea with David Cameron and the opening of the Golden Era, UK-China trade went up quite considerably, suggesting that sometimes business is just business.

In answer to Lord Darroch's challenge, if I had all the answers, I would probably be much more influential than I am. It is worth noting, first, that one of the things that China has these days—Dr Ng mentioned this earlier—is an immensely impressive cadre of younger trained diplomats, scholars and businesspeople who are multilingual and extremely internationally able. The UK developing more people who are able to deploy their skills the other way around is something that we are underpowered in. We have sent a succession of extraordinary well-equipped ambassadors both in terms of diplomatic and linguistic capacity: Peter Wilson, who is there now, Caroline Wilson³ before him, and Sebastian Wood and others will be known to many here. It is not as if there is a huge number of such people in the wider public sphere in the UK. Post Brexit, there was all this talk about getting more involved with understanding Asia. It might be something to put on the agenda to increase capacity in those areas so that there is a wider understanding. The reason is not to give China a soft ride but, rather, when China in those meetings says how angry it is about this or how outraged or horrified it is about that, it is important to have people who can understand the wider context and which parts of that are for real and which are perhaps part of a very skilful diplomatic set of positions that can be pushed back against.

That should be combined with the fact that there is still a whole variety of areas, it is worth remembering, where China has tremendous respect, even if it is not always openly talked about, for the UK. The UK is still regarded with great respect as one of the best places in the world to

³ Post-meeting note: witness added Dame Barbara Woodward to the list.

educate people. The fact that so many Chinese students in a whole variety of areas from economics to international relations to history come and study in the UK is a tribute both to Chinese willingness to go out and learn and to the UK's favourability as a place to welcome such people. That is a good sign and something that we should encourage at a time when US-China relations are perhaps, as I said, settling back into a kind of détente. This might be a moment for the UK to think about where it has those advantages and can safely and productively move into them, while being very aware of the real security and economic issues, which mean that, ironically, understanding China much better is an even more urgent task than it might have been a few years ago.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much indeed. That was evidence of the highest quality. We thoroughly enjoyed it. I am sorry if I had to bully you a little bit into accelerating to a conclusion. I have a duty of care here. Most of us have left 70 years of age in the rearview mirror, and it is 38 degrees in London, and we are surviving on paper cups of warm water and a single fan that we found in a cleaner's cupboard. I remind you of the fact that a transcript has been taken. It will be sent to you for any form of correction. With our warm thanks for your contribution, which was absolutely excellent, we now call this particular session closed.