

WESTERN RBO VS CHINA'S TRUE MULTILATERALISM: IMPLICATIONS FOR SERBIA

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Abstract: As the world marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the United Nations' founding, a crucial global fault line sits in the rivalry between the Western "rules-based world order" (RBO) and its challengers in the East and Global South. During the Joseph Biden administration, the United States of America, the European Union, NATO, and the G7 called for the upholding of RBO as a resilience mechanism in preserving the Western-dominated post-Cold War order against what they consider "autocratic challengers". On the other hand, critics have labeled the RBO as an instrument of the political West, which has used "double standards" and "unique cases" to interpret international law according to its needs and thus effectively undermine the UN system. Therefore, China's President Xi Jinping contrasted the fallacies of the RBO with the concept of "true multilateralism", calling for a return to the principles of the UN Charter, "shared benefits", and "indivisible security". The article contrasts the two concepts. It looks at four RBO cases with implications for the Republic of Serbia and concludes that it has been detrimental to Serbian national interests. In such circumstances, the appeal of "true multilateralism" stands to gain in Serbia's foreign policy thinking.

Keywords: United Nations; rules-based world order; true multilateralism; United States of America; EU; China; Serbia

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Global fault line

When China's Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi chaired a February 2025 United Nations Security Council high-level meeting on revamping multilateralism, he chose the ripe moment to do so: a month into Donald Trump's second U.S. presidency, at the beginning of US-Russia direct talks on restoring trust and working for a peace deal in Ukraine, and at the outset of the year marking the 80th anniversary of both the end of the Second World War and of the founding of the United Nations. Indeed, at a moment when global security architecture is trembling with anxiety. Beyond the impact of the conflicts with worldwide repercussions in Ukraine and the Middle East, the securitization discourse flooding Europe and the narrative of the Thucydides Trap regarding Sino-American relations, a crucial fault line sits in the rivalry between the Western "rules-based world order" (RBO) and its challengers in the East and Global South.

As the UN Charter turns 80 and the Helsinki Final Act marks its 50th anniversary, both documents remain dramatically weakened by the breaching performed during the apotheosis of the post-Cold War U.S. unipolar moment and its RBO legal coating. The UN and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe mirror a profound crisis of performance and trust in multilateralism.

On the other side, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, the People's Republic of China has vastly expanded the scope and the normative capacities of its multilateral foreign policy to pursue both internal and external stability. Furthermore, it has contrasted the RBO's fallacies with the concept of "true multilateralism" outlined by Xi in 2022 and made it compatible with China's new global development, security, and civilization initiatives.

While it is too early to assess the impact of Donald Trump's second presidency on US foreign policy practice and multilateralism in general, it is important to note that the majority of the liberal democratic West – epitomized by the European Union and the US Democrats of Joseph Biden/Kamala Harris – remains committed to the concept of the RBO.

Given the particular importance of the EU-Serbia-China triangle for Serbia's reform, development, and foreign policy, it is vital to contrast the implications of the concepts of Western liberal RBO and Beijing's "true multilateralism".

RBO

During Joseph Biden's presidency (2021-2025), his US administration, the European Union, NATO, and the G7 as the "minilateralist" crown of the political West have consistently underlined in their official statements the need to uphold the "rules-based international order" as an overhauled catchphrase for the Western liberal international world order. Already at the beginning of Biden's presidency and ahead of Russia's 2022 military operation in Ukraine, Walt has argued that "a ready ability to use the phrase 'rules-based international order' seems to have become a job requirement for a top position in the US foreign-policy apparatus" (Walt 2021). Although the concept had been used before, including at times by the Trump administration, the inflation of its use coincided with the period following the humiliating U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and in the context of Biden's narrative accompanying the follow-up "strategic partnership" with Ukraine in Eastern Europe and the formation of AUKUS (Australia, UK, US) in the Asia-Pacific. Biden's RBO narrative framed the Russian Federation and China as "authoritarian/illiberal threats" to the RBO "democracies" — hence the "Summit for Democracy" in December 2021, which reflected "a prominent view within the Biden administration that assembling a global coalition of democracies can counter China's rise" (Pepinsky 2021). Russia's military operation in Ukraine two months later shifted the focus more intensively towards Moscow's threat to the RBO.

Thus, its supporters see the RBO as the "foundation of liberal internationalism and a resilience mechanism in preserving the post-Cold War order — epitomized by the US 'unipolar moment' — against non-Western 'autocratic transgression'" (Mitić 2024a). On the other hand, the challengers, primarily but not exclusively China and Russia, argue the RBO "incorporates a set of mechanisms that selectively lean on elements of international law, interpret them freely and creatively, and align them with the interests of the political West, using double standards and the principle of 'unique', sui generis cases to fit the needs, thus effectively undermining the UN system" (Mitić 2024a). Indeed, there are two distinct interpretations of the RBO. According to the first one, closer to its proponents, it is a concept based on principles of international law plus "the standards and recommendations of international standard-setting organisations and conferences and rules made by non-state actors" (Dugard 2023, 225). However, the second view, closer to RBO critics, view it as "the United States' alternative to international law, an order that encapsulates international law as interpreted by the United States to accord with its

national interests” (Dugard 2023, 225). Talmon considers that the term “rules-based order”, in fact, “blurs the distinction between binding and non-binding rules, giving the impression that all States and international actors are subject to this order, irrespective of whether or not they have consented to these rules” (Talmon 2019). He points to the fact that while international law is “general and universal”, the “rules-based order seems to allow for special rules in special-sui generis cases” (Talmon 2019).

True Multilateralism

In April 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping outlined the concept of “true multilateralism” at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, before further elaborating in September 2021 at the Sixth Eastern Economic Forum, the 13th BRICS Summit, the 21st meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly. Xi argued that the practice of “true multilateralism” opposes actions that “undermine the international order and cause confrontation and division by claiming to use so-called rules: in the world there is only one international system, i.e. the international system with the United Nations at its core (...) There is only one set of rules, i.e. the basic norms governing international relations underpinned by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter” (Xinhua 2021).

The timing of Xi’s promotion of the concept coincided with the Biden administration’s similar RBO effort and could be interpreted as China’s answer. However, it would be flawed to judge the concept as simply reactive, particularly to the Biden administration, as it is a concept in line with the overall diplomatic thought of Xi Jinping, from the “community with a shared future for mankind” to the flagship Belt and Road Initiative. The concept is contrasted to “pseudo-multilateralism”, used by a group of states to “protect their self-serving agendas, significantly diminishing the effectiveness of international multilateral institutions’ governance” (China Institute of International Studies 2024, 3). The first feature of “pseudo-multilateralism” is its reliance on the RBO: “under the pretext of a ‘rules-based international order’, the authority of the United Nations has been compromised by the imposition of exclusive ‘small-circle states’ within the international community, disregarding fairness and justice” and imposing “small-circle rules” which “only safeguard the interests of the ‘small circles’ and even target and undermine the interests of others” (China Institute of International Studies 2024, 14). This practice involves “selectively adhering

to or dismissing the foundational norms of international relations, established by the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter” (China Institute of International Studies 2024, 15). Other features of “pseudo-multilateralism” include the promotion of “universal values” in neglect of civilizational diversity, a Cold War zero-sum mindset over “indivisible security”, “small group collective action” featuring unilateral sanctions, ignoring multilateral commitments to global governance and applying “double standards in all areas of international relations”, effectively “undermining the international system with the United Nations at its core” (China Institute of International Studies 2024, 15-17). In contrast, “true multilateralism” focuses on the principles of the UN Charter as a foundational guideline”, on extensive consultation, joint contribution, shared benefits and adapting to changes, particularly the rise of the Global South, global development and preventive diplomacy (China Institute of International Studies 2024, 44-46). On the other side, a research group at the US Army War College argued that “true multilateralism” is part of China’s grand strategy, which aims to “develop and shape a China-led alternative to the US-led rules-based international order by 2035 through a “Covert Hegemonic Ambition” (CHA) strategy (Flury et al. 2024, 3). The team argues that the PRC has not formally articulated it but that “this grand strategy highly likely centers on aligning global governance with ‘Xiism,’ a combination of China’s core national interests and Chairman Xi’s ideological orientation”, which must adhere to Xi’s vision of “community of common destiny” and using hybrid tactics of economic, political and legal warfare, favorable energy and tech standards creation, cyber warfare and information/cultural influence operations (Flury et al. 2024, 3). Such framing is in line with the critical narrative that Western think-tanks had employed against Xi’s 2022 Global Security Initiative (GSI), one of the three initiatives (the two others being the 2021 Global Development Initiative and the 2023 Global Civilization Initiative) compatible with the BRI and “true multilateralism”. According to this framing, the GSI presents an alternative to the Western-led security order. This frame argues that China is seeking to promote a “China-led alternative” (Freeman and Stephenson 2022); “challenging the U.S.-led liberal international world order” (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2023); “a manifesto for an alternative system of international affairs to the current ‘rules-based’ order led by the United States and its partners in Europe and the Indo-Pacific” (Schuman, Fulton and Gering 2023); “a roadmap and ideological framework for China’s ambition to re-shape the international order” (Legarda and Stec 2022); an attempt to “build support among countries in the global south for a narrative

that positions China as the logical successor to a U.S.-led multilateralism that Beijing insists is failing to keep the peace” (Kine 2022).

It was thus not surprising to see China’s MFA Wang Yi Security Council address the UN SC high-level meeting themed “Practicing Multilateralism, Reforming and Improving Global Governance” in February 2025. At the meeting, Wang argued UN members “need, more than ever, to remind themselves of the founding mission of the UN, reinvigorate true multilateralism, and speed up the efforts to build a more just and equitable global governance system” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2025). He outlined four key proposals.

The first one is “upholding sovereign equality”, meaning that members “must practice international rule of law, ensure the effective implementation of international law, and reject double standards and selective application”, while “any unilateral sanction that circumvents Security Council authorization lacks legal basis, defies justification and contradicts common sense”. The second one, “upholding fairness and justice”, argued that international affairs “should no longer be monopolized by a small number of countries” and that reform is urged particularly in the light of the inclusion of the Global South. Third, in “upholding solidarity and coordination”, UN members should “replace confrontation with coordination, prevent lose-lose through win-win cooperation, and break down small circles”. Finally, fourth, by “upholding an action-oriented approach” and “in the face of protracted wars”, UN agencies “should seek solutions rather than chant slogans” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2025).

Serbia’s troubling RBO experience

For the Republic of Serbia and the Serb nation in general, the rivalry between the concepts of RBO and “true multilateralism” generates implications for key issues of territorial integrity, sovereignty, identity, political independence, security, and economy. We will delve into four key cases.

The first one is the case of the 1999 NATO aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Conducted at the apotheosis of the U.S.-led unipolar order, it was also the peak of the RBO, as NATO countries — led by three Western UN Security Council members — decided to bomb Yugoslavia without the approval of UN SC members China and Russia. Indeed, despite clear warnings by Beijing and Moscow. In an important blow to UN multilateralism, NATO countries breached international law and ignited ire

and profound strategic changes in foreign policy assessments of China and the Russian Federation. In the aftermath, the two countries – humiliated at both the UN level and at the level of military action involving the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade – vowed to speed up the process of multi-polarization.

The second case is the EU-US masterminding of the “unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo” (UDI), again in breach of international law, the UN Charter, and Moscow’s and Beijing’s warnings. At the G8 Summit in June 2007 in Heilegendamm, Russian President Vladimir Putin had warned that the “Russian position is clear, based on the territorial integrity of states and UN Security Council Resolution 1244, under which Kosovo is an undeniable part of Serbia” (...) but, “if we come to the conclusion that in today’s world the principle of the people’s right to self-determination is more important than the principle of territorial integrity of states, then it must be applicable to all the regions in the world, and not only where our partners want it to apply (...) the principles of self-determination in that case must be applied also to nations of the former Yugoslavia, and to the nations living the post-Soviet space” (Mitić 2007a). This was a clear warning that Moscow would not allow an RBO-style “sui generis” case. Nevertheless, at the December 2007 European Council, EU leaders agreed to mastermind “Kosovo’s UDI” based on a plan by Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt (Mitić 2007b). The document, entitled “A European Strategy for Kosovo”, admitted that “trying to settle the question of the status of Kosovo without being able to anchor this process in the UN Security Council will be a most challenging task both in terms of respect for international law and handling the different challenges on the ground in Kosovo, the wider Balkan region as well as elsewhere”, but that the EU must develop an EU policy with “a semblance of respect for international law” (Mitić 2007b).

Beijing and Moscow never accepted the “sui generis” narrative and indeed viewed both the NATO 1999 aggression and the 2008 “Kosovo UDI” as cases of RBO arrogance and Western “rules-setting”. However, with an increased use of memory politics in Beijing and Moscow regarding 1999 and 2008, particularly in the context of the conflict in Ukraine, RBO proponents have felt the urge to dismiss this narrative by pushing Serbia into “legitimizing 1999” and “legalizing 2008” (Mitić 2024b). Thus, in the aftermath of Russia’s military operation in Ukraine, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz prepared a plan for the “normalization of relations” between Belgrade and the Priština authorities, under which Serbia is supposed to abandon its policy of preventing “Kosovo” from joining

international organizations and opposing “Kosovo statehood symbols”, such as passports, diplomas, and vehicle registration plates (N1 2022). This plan was backed by an ultimatum from EU and US envoys in Belgrade on January 20, 2023, requesting that Serbia accept the process or face political and economic consequences (RTV 2023). It ultimately led to the so-called “Ohrid Agreement,” which, if implemented, would preclude Serbia from completing talks with the EU without at least “de facto” recognizing “Kosovo” as a separate entity. Such a scenario would mark an important victory for the legitimization and legalization of violations committed by Western powers under the RBO umbrella in 1999 and 2008.

The third case involves the issue of Bosnia-Herzegovina and, more particularly, the pressure against the leadership of Republika Srpska. In yet another demonstration of the RBO, Western members of the UN Security Council nominated German opposition politician Christian Schmidt to the post of the “High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina” without the approval of Russia and China in the UN Security Council. The refusal of Republika Srpska to accept such a “nomination”, particularly in the light of Schmidt’s attempts to strip the entity from its property in violation of the 1995 Dayton accords, led to an escalatory crisis, including a trial against the President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik and one of the most serious political-security crises in the Balkans since the 1990s. Again, under RBO rules, the Dayton Peace Accord has been subject since 1995 to interpretation in line with the “spirit”, not the Accord’s letter.

Finally, the fourth case involves the issue of unilateral, non-UN sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. These have included “Serbian specific” sanctions against the President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, the Vice-Prime Minister of Serbia Aleksandar Vulin, and Serbia’s Minister for International Economic Cooperation Nenad Popović. They also targeted Serb entities within broader international packages of restrictive measures, such as EU sanctions against Serbian companies suspected of “assisting” Russia in the conflict in Ukraine or US sanctions targeting the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS), which has a majority Russian ownership.

On the other hand, China’s “true multilateralism” has conformed to Serbia’s key national interests to a large extent. This is perhaps best understood through the example of the Global Security Initiative proposed by Xi at the 2022 Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference and operationalized in February 2023 by two concept papers, including one on the political settlement of the conflict in Ukraine. The key elements of these documents imply respect for the territorial integrity of all states -- without

double standards -- and opposition to the expansion of alliances and to unilateral non-UN sanctions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023). Such principles address the disrespect of Serbia's territorial integrity by the majority of the political West regarding Kosovo and Metohija, Serbia's proclaimed military neutrality, and Serbian experiences with non-UN sanctions.

Conclusion

Political changes in the US following Donald Trump's re-election, Russian military successes in Ukraine, increasing tensions between sovereignist and liberal-democratic parties across the European Union, the failure of the European Commission's agenda of "geopolitical" empowerment, the refusal of three-quarters of the globe to align with Western sanctions against Russia and overall multi-polarization have weakened the appeal of the RBO. In the context of the aforementioned cases, such development is certainly not detrimental to Serbian interests.

Serbia has pursued an Eastward-looking hedging strategy despite being an EU candidate country surrounded by NATO members. In such circumstances, there have been attempts by Western powers, in particular proponents of the RBO, to pressure Belgrade to "de-hedge" voluntarily or through "wedging strategies" of coercion or "selective accommodation" (Mitić 2024a; Crawford 2021). Nevertheless, Serbia's position has remained firm in opposing double standards and sticking to the key principles of the UN Charter, in addition to preserving military neutrality and opposing non-UN sanctions.

Under such circumstances, the appeal of "true multilateralism" stands to gain in Serbia's foreign policy thinking despite limitations due to the country's specific geographic and geopolitical environment, internal political divisions, and the unpredictability of future European and global security arrangements.

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