

Multilateralism to the Rescue?

Beijing's Support for Multilateral Institutions during the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

During the global COVID-19 crisis, China has portrayed itself as a “champion of multilateralism” – defending UN institutions and its own multilateral initiatives in a variety of spheres. China’s approach has, however, often been criticised for undermining multilateralism through its use of multilateral platforms as arenas to contest US leadership. This paper examines the official Chinese discourse on multilateralism during the COVID 19 crisis in the years 2020 and 2021 in light of Beijing’s multilateral diplomacy in the Global South, exemplified by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the China-CELAC Forum (China–Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum). The authors argue that China’s growing multilateral engagement must be understood in the context of a multilateral system that was already in crisis before the pandemic due to its inability to resolve major global challenges. The term “multilateralism” is essentially used by Beijing to discursively oppose “unilateralism”. While its active multilateral engagement may be able to prevent and resolve major global crises in the future, Beijing’s approach offers limited multilateral spaces for deliberation and contestation by weaker states and non-state actors.

Keywords: China, multilateralism, diplomacy, foreign policy, COVID-19 crisis, FOCAC, CELAC, CCF

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, Beijing has radically stepped up its engagement in existing multilateral institutions (Liu 2020). It has also established new formal and informal multilateral spaces, many of which are designed to govern its signature foreign policy plan – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beijing increasingly portrays itself as a champion of multilateralism, a feature that has become particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. After having

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initially controlled the spread of the coronavirus at home, Beijing used the pandemic as a springboard to expand its already extensive collaboration with low-income countries.¹ In doing so, it extended strong support for existing multilateral institutions and highlighted the need to further develop new forms of multilateralism.

In this paper we explore the evolution of the discourse and practice of Chinese multilateralism during the COVID-19 pandemic and examine whether Beijing's current approach may remedy the crisis of multilateralism as previously identified in the literature (Zürn 2021). In identifying such crises, scholars often adopt John Ruggie's definition of multilateralism as "an institutional form that co-ordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct" (Ruggie 1992: 571). Multilateralism's main purpose, Ruggie argues, is to modify the "state's self-serving behavior by specifying appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence" (*ibid.*: 11). This is also the definition adopted here. We understand the multilateral system as a set of multilateral institutions and their resulting interactions. Multilateral institutions are "the formal organizational elements of international life" that are characterised by permanent locations and postal addresses, distinct headquarters and ongoing staffs and secretariats (Caporaso 1992: 602).

In order to study how Beijing's support for multilateralism has potentially been strengthened during the COVID-19 crisis, we first reviewed official Chinese declarations of support for multilateralism in the year 2020 as evidenced in reports in Xinhua News – the official state-run news agency and the largest and most influential media organisation in China.² While we are aware that we could have chosen alternative sources and that many nuances may potentially be lost when translated into English, we nonetheless believe the articles offer a glimpse of how Beijing understands multilateralism and of the strategies it adopts to counteract major powers such as the United States while promoting and strengthening its version of a multi-bilateral agenda.

Second, we explored how Chinese multilateralism evolved in two regional contexts, Africa and Latin America, through a literature review and collection of data on Beijing's actions during the COVID-19 crisis. While numerous studies of Chinese multilateral practices focus on the World Trade Organization, UN organisations, multilateral financial institutions and Beijing's regional relations in Asia, Beijing's multilateral efforts through the Forum on China-Africa Co-

1 China was, for example, quick to extend support for the purchase of masks and other sanitary equipment to help countries in Latin America and Africa cope with the crisis. See, for example, Telias / Urdiñes 2020.

2 This study was completed in early 2021. The search on Xinhua.net included all articles published in 2020 on "multilateralism". We identified around 40 relevant news reports, covering bilateral meetings between Chinese officials and their counterparts in Asia, Africa and Latin America; speeches delivered by President Xi, Foreign Minister Wang Yi and high-ranking leaders; statements by various world leaders that affirm China's role in upholding the values of multilateralism; and interviews with "experts" from the Global South as well as UN officials.

operation (FOCAC) and the China–Community of Latin American and Caribbean States Forum (China-CELAC Forum, or CCF) have been much less studied. Nonetheless, although Africa and Latin America are perhaps not overtly a part of Beijing's current core strategic interests, access to their natural resources and markets, as well as their political support, are of great importance to the Chinese leadership (Creutzfeldt 2017). At the same time, close ties with China are crucial for sustaining the long-term development strategies of numerous Latin American and African countries. We have chosen to include both regions, as we consider Chinese multilateralism to be a form of cooperation that evolves through interactions with numerous actors at different levels in different parts of the world. Our goal is to contribute to the growing literature that views China's multilateralism as a result of a process of socialisation into international institutions (Jones 2020) in addition to a relational and contested process of “co-production” that occurs both transnationally and in specific places (Oliveira / Myers 2021).

We argue that Beijing's ability to become a legitimate regional leader in multilateral settings depends on the degree to which it is able to establish a basic consensus around common goals upon which a deep form of multilateralism can rest. It also depends on the degree to which multilateral institutions are able to incorporate broad societal interests, i.e., not just the narrow interests of African and Latin American elites. Beijing is emulating an institutional form of multilateralism that was established by Western powers. While a main driving force at the global level appears to be the goal of resisting US hegemony and unilateralism, China's regional-level multilateralism not only ensures access to resources necessary for its own development, but extends bilateralism with the aim of seeking political support in international arenas. This became clearly evident during the COVID-19 crisis, as will be discussed further below.

We begin with an overview of recent debates on Chinese approaches to multilateralism before examining how these approaches evolved in 2020, i.e., following the onset of the pandemic. Thereafter we briefly review this emerging Chinese multilateralism vis-à-vis the FOCAC and the CCF, focusing particularly on how such multilateralism has evolved during the COVID-19 crisis.

Multilateralism with Chinese characteristics

Beijing has engaged with multilateral institutions for several decades. After a period of estrangement from the multilateral system following Sino-Soviet tensions and growing polarisation in the early 1960s (Dittmer 2011: 21), China's inclusion into the United Nations in 1971 was followed by a period of increased membership in international organisations (ibid.). Between 1977 and 1988, the People's Republic of China signed 124 multilateral treaties, an increase of more

than fifteen times compared with the period from 1949 to 1970. Already by 1989, China had joined 37 major intergovernmental organisations, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Hoo 2018). Since its inclusion into the World Trade Organization in 2001, Beijing's foreign policy has increasingly taken on a multilateral orientation (Moore 2011, Kastner et al. 2020).

With China being one of the biggest beneficiaries of globalisation, this initial enthusiasm for the multilateral system encompassed primarily the economic domain (Yahuda 2011). However, in recent years, Beijing has moved from this selective multilateralism (Rajan 2016) to involvement in a wider range of multilateral spaces, including international security institutions and multilateral human rights regimes (Paltiel 2011, Wu / Lansdowne 2011, Yuan 2011). In the process, it went from being a "rule-taker" to a "rule-breaker", but also increasingly a "rule-maker" by establishing numerous new formal and informal, regional and global institutions – such as the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Stephen 2020).

There are numerous ongoing and heated debates about how China is actively shaping and reshaping the principles of international cooperation. On the one hand, some argue that Beijing is upholding rather than undermining a global order based on liberal principles and a set of multilateral institutions, in place since World War II, under US domination.³ As China has benefitted enormously from the traditional multilateral system, it is often viewed as a staunch defender of multilateralism as well as a norm entrepreneur contributing to the further development and evolution of multilateral cooperation (Stuenkel 2016). On the other hand, Chinese scholars typically claim that the principles of win-win, non-interference, solidarity and mutual respect that China emphasises in its international engagements offer new forms of global leadership and partnerships without preaching the virtues of any particular form of societal organisation or political process (Zhao 2005, Xueting 2019). Policymakers in Beijing do not pursue a unified model of multilateralism; rather, they adopt different modalities to accommodate different geopolitical and geo-economic conditions (Wu / Lansdowne 2011).

However, several scholars argue that China is adding new layers to (and deepening) the so-called "crisis of multilateralism" – associated with the multiple failures of goal achievement and the flawed and undemocratic governing structures of multilateral institutions, many of which predated the rise of China (Morse / Keohane 2014, Chin 2015). Moreover, this crisis has been further exacerbated by the ambivalent and instrumental attitude of the United States towards international institutional reform.

3 Several authors focus on how China is reproducing the main tenets of current global capitalism and is socialised into a multilateral system that it engages with, rather than undermines. See Stuenkel 2016, Jones 2020 and Lee et al. 2020.

Some scholars have therefore highlighted the extent to which Beijing is essentially competing with Western powers by establishing parallel institutions that embed a different set of values that prioritise discretion and speed at the expense of transparency and democracy (Ellis 2017). In doing so, China displays its economic muscle and its vision of multipolarity while “strongly promoting a multilateralism that makes China an important actor but limits the responsibilities that come with such a status” (Courmont 2012: 184). Accordingly, China’s grand strategy is both “pragmatic and proactive” as it strives for a balance between opportunities and duties (ibid.). Similarly, Daniel Lemus Delgado argues that in the Chinese perspective, “multilateralism does not mean equality, but a world ordered by hierarchy in which China sees itself as an older brother: a guide, an assistant, and a role model (Delgado 2015: 15)”.

Nuancing this argument, Scott Kastner, Margaret Pearson and Chad Rector (2020: 3) argue that Beijing has been an “inconsistent player in multilateral settings” and that three types of behaviour characterise its approach to multilateralism: accepting, investing or holding up. Since becoming a member of the WTO in 2001, it has largely “*accepted* and complied with existing rules” rather than taking a pro-active stance to change the rules of the game (ibid.: 4). In relation to the North Korean nuclear issue, China has over the years *invested* more time and effort in mediating and in being a part of a multilateral dialogue to ease tensions. And since the 2008 financial crisis, China has pursued a *hold-up* strategy vis-à-vis the international financial regimes, “conditioning active participation in regime maintenance on a set of concessions favorable to PRC interests” (ibid.: 4).

In addition to the challenges caused by major international circumstances, such as the Iraq War and the Trump administration’s withdrawal from the World Health Organization and its reluctance to support multilateral organisations, Beijing’s rivalry with Washington has also contributed to the crisis of multilateralism by questioning the legitimacy of major multilateral institutions. Indeed, rather than functioning as forums for resolving global problems, international institutions have been transformed by this rivalry into arenas for power struggles between states aspiring for regional and/or global leadership. One of the key strategies embraced by states and regional organisations in the ensuing tug-of-war for institutional supremacy is “forum shopping”. While such a strategy may serve the interests of particular states, it is unable to resolve major crises (Rüland 2012). Thus, in the context of a “power diffusion from the West towards the South and East”, there appears to be a move towards “contested multilateralism” – a strategy adopted by states, multilateral organisations and non-state actors to use multilateral institutions, existing or newly created, to challenge the rules, practices or missions of existing multilateral institutions (Morse / Keohane 2014).

What is seldom discussed in the debate on the crisis of multilateralism is the fact that the legitimacy of the post WWII-multilateralism rested not only on the acceptance of Western leadership, but also on its ability to offer arenas for smaller states and civil society actors to contest great power dominance (Cox 1992). One resulting outcome of this process was the rise of “complex multilateralism” (O’Brien et al. 2000), in which a variety of governing structures are coordinated by states as well as non-state actors such as the private sector (Brinkerhoff / Brinkerhoff 2011, Andonova 2017). While some question the legitimacy of the multilateral system due to new forms of market-based multilateralism (Bull / McNeill 2007) that arguably favour Western societies and elites (Bexell et al. 2010), the discourse on the topic illustrates the multi-centredness of Western models of multilateralism.

Beijing has used the concept of multi-stakeholder governance to characterise the new regional arrangements it has promoted in Africa and Latin America. However, it is unclear whether and to what extent this will contribute to establishing platforms for the incorporation of weaker states and non-state actors. In the ensuing sections, we will examine how Beijing projects and articulates its understanding of multilateralism in a time of global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic before we explore how this plays out regionally in Africa and Latin America in relation to FOCAC and CCF.

China’s perspective on multilateralism before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021)

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic placed China at the heart of many discussions on global governance and multilateralism. When the epidemic began attracting international attention in January 2020, the strength of the Chinese state was on full display. Beijing began implementing mass quarantines and disseminated evidence of its extraordinary logistical capacity to construct new hospitals within record time. Soon thereafter the inward-looking narrative shifted to one in which Beijing began pursuing a more aggressive public relations campaign to address growing racism against Chinese citizens abroad and the general international backlash that began blaming China for intentionally spreading the virus. The Chinese government as well as private businesses decided to ship essential medical equipment and donated vaccines to large parts of the world (so-called “mask diplomacy”; Telias / Urdinez 2020), partly as a continuation of China’s previously announced “Health Silk Road” project. For this, Chinese leaders, and business tycoons such as Jack Ma, received much praise and gratitude from recipient countries.⁴ Beijing also appeared to have stepped up its support for multilateral organisations, as the leadership of the United States

on the global arena became increasingly questioned. Yet, it is unclear to what extent Beijing's COVID-19-induced responses entail a new commitment to multilateralism. In the first half of 2022, especially since the spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, China has struggled to implement a “zero-COVID” policy and several major cities (such as Shanghai) were placed under lockdown for weeks, resulting in considerable criticism at home and abroad. Our study, however, focuses mainly on the events that transpired in 2020. We begin by first discussing what multilateralism has come to mean for the Chinese leadership as portrayed in the official media.

While the term multilateralism is mentioned in many news reports in China, it is seldom defined. It is typically used interchangeably with “international order”, “globalisation”, “global governance”, the “UN system” and the role and responsibilities of the “international community”. President Xi has made support for multilateralism a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, arguing that “multilateralism will win over unilateralism” and that “[h]umanity lives in a global village where the interests and destinies of all countries are intertwined”.⁵ He has also argued that forums for international economic cooperation such as the G20 must “uphold multilateralism, openness, inclusiveness, mutually beneficial cooperation, and keep pace with the times”.⁶ Foreign Minister Wang Yi has similarly argued that fighting COVID-19 requires an effective multilateral response to ensure that “mankind, living in a global village together” is assured a “shared future”.⁷ In their speeches, political leaders and diplomats repeatedly highlighted the important role that multilateralism played in promoting global development and peace in the post-WWII period. And according to the Chinese perspective, it is wrong for countries to blame globalisation for their problems, since such attributions are unfounded and “incite the Cold War mentality and create estrangement and confrontations among countries”.⁸

The theme of the Munich Security Conference at the start of 2020 was “Westlessness”, a concept coined for the occasion that denoted the loss of the common understanding of what it means to be part of the West. The concept relates to the belief held by some that following the rise of China and others, disruptive decision making was emerging in new centres of power, and that

4 The following article sums up a series of comments praising Jack Ma: “Jack Ma Wins Praise for Donating Face Masks and Coronavirus Testing Kits”, *The Indian Express*, 16 March 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/trending/trending-globally/coronavirus-jack-ma-wins-praise-for-donating-face-masks-and-coronavirus-testing-kits-6316626/> (accessed 14 June 2022).

5 “Update-Xi Focus: Multilateralism Will Win Over Unilateralism: Xi”, *Xinhuanet*, 10 November 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/10/c_139506464.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

6 “Xi Urges G20 to Uphold Multilateralism, Openness”, *Xinhuanet*, 21 November 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/21/c_139533539.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

7 “Chinese FM Calls for Adherence to Multilateralism, Solidarity Infight against COVID-19”, *Xinhuanet*, 31 March 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/31/c_138934877.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

8 “Senior Chinese Diplomat Calls for Joint Efforts to Uphold Multilateralism”, *Xinhuanet*, 6 September 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/06/c_139346668.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

the West (especially Europe) was too slow to adapt. China's foreign minister used the Munich forum to further elaborate on a set of integral features of multilateralism.⁹ One core feature was the pursuit of "common development", which is not possible when the development of only a handful of world powers is prioritised: "It is not multilateralism if only the Western countries prosper while the non-Western countries lag behind forever. It would not achieve the common progress of mankind."¹⁰ Another aspect of multilateralism for China was for major powers to take on major responsibilities, which builds on the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" that Beijing has long promoted in many global forums, including in the UN. Other features of multilateralism mentioned by the foreign minister included the centrality of UN institutions and the rule of law in promoting peace and in the fight against global injustice.

An oft-heard argument is that even as China seeks to embed its international activities in multilateral organisations, many of its international cooperation policies are conducted bilaterally. A good example of this was the first official forum of its flagship multilateral project – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – in 2017, when over 200 bilateral agreements were signed (Jakóbowski 2018). Despite repeatedly warm endorsements of multilateralism, most speeches and statements were also carefully formulated to advocate in favour of extensive bilateral consultations – an idea that President Xi repeated at the 2019 BRICS summit in Brasilia.¹¹ Thus, there were numerous reports in 2020 of bilateral interactions between China and countries around the world. A common thread in such reports was that China and country X had agreed to strengthen communication and coordination of issues of mutual interest and relevance in multilateral platforms, including co-construction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Illustrative examples included meetings with Peru, Senegal, Spain, Cambodia and the European Union.¹²

Multilateralism was almost always used to attack what officials termed the "unilateralism" pursued by some countries, most notably the United States. The general tenor in most of the reports was that multilateralism was under attack even before the onset of the pandemic: "multilateralism has been under vicious assault, while protectionism and isolationism have been on the rise in

9 "Spotlight: 'Westlessness' Discussions at MSC Highlight Need for Multilateralism", Xinhuanet, 17 February 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/17/c_138789375.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

10 "Chinese FM Calls for Multilateralism at Munich Security Conference", Xinhuanet, 16 February 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/16/c_138787345.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

11 "Xinhua Commentary: Multilateralism Matters", Xinhuanet, 21 September 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/21/c_139384836.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

12 "China Ready to Safeguard Multilateralism with Peru: Chinese FM", Xinhuanet, 6 November 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/06/c_139496057.htm (accessed 14 June 2022); "China, Spain to Jointly Safeguard Multilateralism", Xinhuanet, 24 December 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/24/c_139615246.htm (accessed 14 June 2022); "Let China-Africa Cooperation Shine as Example of Multilateralism: Chinese, Senegalese Presidents", Xinhuanet, 12 October 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/12/c_139433976.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

recent years”.¹³ Accordingly, “victory over the ravaging Covid-19 pandemic depends on how well countries around the world can work together”.¹⁴ At a meeting of the United Nations Economic and Social Council in July 2020, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated: “We need to say no to unilateralism. We need to oppose any act of walking away from international organizations and treaties or replacing them with something out of nowhere. No one should challenge or undermine universally recognized rules out of selfish interests.”¹⁵ There were thus frequent references to how certain countries, especially the United States, had undermined the global order by withdrawing from the World Health Organization (WHO) and had generally weakened the UN system. While the rejection of unilateralism was justified by championing the causes of globalisation and scientific and technological progress, China also emphasised how emerging markets and developing countries have changed the global political and economic landscape. However, it placed considerable responsibility on affluent nations and multilateral institutions (without specifying any by name) to act to save the existing world order by providing debt relief.¹⁶ Other Chinese officials reiterated, in an obvious attack on US policy, the official Chinese position that “international order is by no means an order where some countries are above others” and that “[s]overeign equality and multilateralism still remain the mainstream in today’s world”.¹⁷

In the media reports, the UN was seen to provide a legitimate arena for consultations based on respect for national sovereignty, territorial integrity and the rejection of hegemonism. The message appeared to be simple: the world is better off thanks to the UN, which has “fostered closer ties and deeper cooperation, and the global economic and social development has made a giant leap forward”.¹⁸ Hence, support for multilateralism meant safeguarding the authority of the UN. While the pandemic naturally enough resulted in considerable focus on the WHO, other UN agreements such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Climate Accords, peacekeeping, counter-terrorism and the WTO-centred multilateral trading regime also found frequent mention.¹⁹

13 “Opinion: Multilateralism the Panacea for COVID-19 Pandemic”, Xinhuanet, 26 June 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/26/c_139169108.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

14 “Opinion: Multilateralism the Panacea for COVID-19 Pandemic”, Xinhuanet, 26 June 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/26/c_139169108.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

15 “China Voices Support for Multilateralism at UN Conference”, Xinhuanet, 18 July 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/18/c_139221917.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

16 “Chinese Envoy Calls for Multilateralism, Cooperation for Sustainable Development”, Xinhuanet, 15 July 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/15/c_139212781.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

17 “Senior Chinese Diplomat Calls for Joint Efforts to Uphold Multilateralism”, Xinhuanet, 6 September 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/06/c_139346668.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

18 “Xinhua Commentary: Multilateralism Matters”, Xinhuanet, 21 September 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/21/c_139384836.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

19 “Chinese Envoy Highlights Importance of Further Promoting Multilateralism in Counter-terrorism Efforts”, Xinhuanet, 11 July 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/11/c_139203934.htm (accessed 14 June 2022); “Chinese Envoy Stresses Multilateralism, Unity at UN Human Rights Council Session”, Xinhuanet, 15 September 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/15/c_139370748.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

For example, there were some explicit links between highlighting China's "people-centered approach" in poverty reduction and future global progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.²⁰ Already in early January 2020, China's permanent representative to the United Nations, Ambassador Zhang Jun, insisted that implementation of the 2030 Agenda was proceeding too slowly. He argued for greater attention on peacebuilding in post-conflict settings, the formulation of country-specific development strategies, the importance of strengthening state capacity and the need to build social consensus in order to achieve sustainable development.²¹ And in February 2020, another senior diplomat, Wu Haitao, praised China's ability to play an "active role in addressing regional and international hotspot issues" and reiterated the country's commitment to "facilitating the peaceful settlement of international disputes ... holding the position of objectivity and impartiality".²²

In mid-April 2020, Foreign Minister Wang Yi threw Beijing's weight behind the WHO and its beleaguered Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. With an explicit reference to Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus being the first head of the organisation from a developing country, the minister boldly declared that supporting the WHO and its leadership equated to safeguarding "the philosophy and principle of multilateralism".²³ Beijing accused Washington in June 2020 of undermining the WHO's work, which threatened to "derail the very much needed global cooperation on containing the outbreak".²⁴

In August 2020, China's top legislator Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, highlighted China's provision of COVID-19 assistance to 150 countries and international organisations. Pledging to provide two billion dollars in international assistance over the next two years, he urged country legislatures to "firmly safeguard multilateralism, and promote global anti-epidemic cooperation and economic recovery".²⁵ And foreign minister Wang Yi argued that "countries, irrespective of their size, strength and wealth, are equal" and that "dialogue and consultation should be the way forward in addressing differences and disputes, rather than unwarranted unilateral actions such as economic blockade, financial sanctions, acts of bullying and power politics,

20 "Chinese Envoy Calls for Multilateralism, Cooperation for Sustainable Development", Xinhuanet, 15 July 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/15/c_139212781.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

21 "Chinese Envoy Calls for Multilateralism, Development in Maintaining Peace and Security in Fragile Contexts", Xinhuanet, 7 January 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/07/c_139649978.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

22 "Chinese Envoy Calls On Int'l Community to Reaffirm Commitment to Multilateralism", Xinhuanet, 19 February 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/19/c_138796623.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

23 "Supporting WHO Means Safeguarding Multilateralism: Chinese FM", Xinhuanet, 19 April 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/19/c_138989595.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

24 "Opinion: Multilateralism the Panacea for COVID-19 Pandemic", Xinhuanet, 26 June 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/26/c_139169108.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

25 "China's Top Legislator Calls for Safeguarding Multilateralism", Xinhuanet, 20 August 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/20/c_139303094.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

and still less gross interference in other countries' internal affairs".²⁶ Several news articles advocated the view that there was no better venue to seek global solutions to global problems than the UN. Such consistent support for the UN fits into a wider pattern where Beijing believes it has the strong backing of many developing countries in UN-led forums.

“Co-produced” regional multilateralism during the COVID-19 crisis

Beijing's opposition to unilateralism and promotion of a multi-bilateral agenda provide a glimpse of the future of Chinese multilateralism in light of recent pandemic-related challenges. In this section, we briefly discuss the above findings in relation to the FOCAC and the CCF.

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)

FOCAC is an illustrative example of Beijing's foreign policy push to “at least rhetorically declare its aim of overhauling the global order and advance a traditional hostility to hegemony” in the guise of “globalization” (Taylor 2013: 31). As Deborah Brautigam (cited in Tiezzi 2020) notes, FOCAC has over the years “evolved into a platform for deal-making, as well as a highly anticipated venue for Chinese leaders to announce specific pledges for development assistance and investment”. Beijing has also used FOCAC as a blueprint to showcase new regional platforms for negotiating and shaping overarching mechanisms that guide China's activities in that particular part of the world. It is thus an important case for studying how Chinese multilateralism has evolved during the COVID-19 crisis in the context of this forum.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, FOCAC, established in 2000 and with planned ministerial summits every three years, aims to promote and further strengthen “pragmatic cooperation” on political and economic matters for the mutual benefit of China and Africa.²⁷ In recent years, the Belt and Road Initiative has complemented and often also exceeded commitments on education and human resource development made at various FOCAC summits (King 2020).

FOCAC propagates Beijing's idea of mutual benefit through the transfer of knowledge, capacity building initiatives and equality of opportunities for both Chinese and African governments and businesses (Dzinesa / Masters 2009,

26 “China Voices Support for Multilateralism at UN Conference”, Xinhuanet, 18 July 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-07/18/c_139221917.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

27 “Characteristic of FOCAC”, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/gylt/tlj/t157576.htm> (accessed 14 June 2022).

Ibonye 2020). To a significant extent, it provides “an alternative paradigm of engagement that represents a refreshing break from the past relationship with traditional donors” (Naidu 2007: 293). Although there are numerous ongoing debates on whether, and the extent to which, FOCAC has impacted African development,²⁸ the overtures from Beijing are appealing to African leaders (Hon 2010). As Christopher Clapham (2006: 3) argues, “one very important reason why China’s involvement in Africa has been so widely welcomed and readily accommodated has been that it fits so neatly into the familiar patterns of rentier statehood and politics with which African rulers have been accustomed to maintain themselves”.

For China and its partner countries in Africa to achieve greater global influence for their policy positions, Beijing has argued that it must continue to develop its own multilateral mechanisms that differ from Western-led efforts. An illustrative example of this argument was expressed by the Chinese Foreign Minister, who after a tour of five African countries in January 2021, stated that Beijing was ready to actively promote tripartite or multi-party cooperation with Africa so that the continent becomes “a big stage for international cooperation, not an arena for competition between major countries”.²⁹ However, despite the official rhetoric, critics claim that FOCAC simply imposes a “Beijing-centric paradigm of globalization” (Ibonye 2020: 1). Jakub Jakóbowski (2018: 661–662) argues that Chinese-led regional platforms such as FOCAC are anchored in “Chinese norms of non-binding agreements, voluntarism and consensus, derived from the tradition of South-South cooperation”. These norms help sustain institutional structures that are “flexible” and “loose”, enabling Beijing to simultaneously pursue both bilateral and multilateral approaches. Thus, FOCAC and other Chinese-led regional platforms – while “nominally multilateral” – serve as important arenas for developing and managing bilateral relations (*ibid.*).

The hosting of high-level summits and meetings of administrative and political leaders at various levels develops an overarching set of intergovernmental mechanisms, albeit for implementation and further bilateral negotiations. Even when multilateral forums such as FOCAC are in session, bilateral interactions on the sidelines of such events and subsequent high-level political visits are crucial for the actual realisation of activities, and multilateral events often feature bilateral negotiations. One reason why most interactions with China tends to take place on a bilateral basis is the lack of consensus among African countries, which prevents them from negotiating in FOCAC as a bloc. This has the potential to undermine African agency in such a multilateral forum (Euka 2001). Moreover, although FOCAC programmes and the negotiations at the summits have a continent-wide scope, not all countries are equally important and only

28 Cf. Davies 2007, Euka 2011, Moyo 2012, Delgado 2015.

29 “China Appreciates Investment in Africa from Other Countries: FM”, People’s Daily, 11 January 2020, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2021/0111/c90000-9807857.html> (accessed 14 June 2022).

Algeria, Egypt and South Africa have comprehensive strategic partnerships with China.

When responding to criticisms of FOCAC, Chinese scholars typically point to challenges related to effective public administrations in, and insufficient policy support from, African countries and the lack of contact between researchers and policymakers in both China and Africa (Tang et al. 2020). They argue that regular high-level FOCAC meetings enable the coordination and implementation of long-term political plans for China and Africa as well as providing a venue for achieving consensus on global issues such as climate change (Zhiming Tu / Kai Zhang 2017, Hongming 2018). Policymakers in Beijing believe that the mutual respect between China and Africa and the absence of political conditionalities differentiates FOCAC from the bilateral relations of Western powers on the continent (Li 2018). Moreover, China's growing influence in world affairs gives FOCAC countries more bargaining power and increased space in negotiations with major world powers and other emerging economies (Zhiming Tu / Kai Zhang 2017). Others highlight the benefits of engaging in FOCAC given that China provides an alternative political and economic model of development that is more in tune with African needs (Zhou / Liu 2010).

There is also often a tendency in the China-Africa discourse to overestimate China's agency and underestimate Africa's (Van Staden et al. 2018). For example, although Beijing does set the agenda – and African countries may not know in advance what Beijing plans to unveil at the summits – African leaders are nonetheless able to influence overarching frameworks of discussion at FOCAC events, as illustrated by the integration of the African Union's Agenda 2063³⁰ in the action plan of FOCAC VI (ibid.). And although the FOCAC framework has been criticised for power imbalances, patrimonialism and a dependency relationship between China and African states, it has also resulted in the cancellation of debts and expanded Africa's access to world markets (Eureka 2011).

These features – the combination of multilateralism and bilateralism as well as the attempt at linking engagement in Africa to a global agenda – have also been evident during the COVID-19 crisis. In bilateral consultations with African countries, explicit mention has often been made of cooperation under the FOCAC umbrella. In some cases, there has also been talk of multilateralism being boosted by medical cooperation and the promise of the Chinese vaccine being supplied to partner countries.³¹ Beijing's efforts to engage with the continent has involved a variety of actors at multiple levels. These include state-owned enterprises, private companies and the local Chinese diaspora. In addition to contact with

30 Agenda 2063 is the African continent's strategic framework for inclusive social and economic development, continental and regional integration, democratic governance and peace and security. The Agenda aims to reposition Africa as a dominant player in the global arena.

31 "China's Resolve to Bolster COVID-19 Global Medical Cooperation a Boost to Multilateralism, Says Expert", Xinhuanet, 17 June 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/17/c_139146782.htm (accessed 14 June 2022).

country-level actors, Beijing has over the years also engaged with AUDA-NEPAD (the African Union’s Development Agency) and the African Union’s NEPAD Monitoring and Evaluation Framework with the goal of tracking the progress, and assessing the impact, of various projects and development partnerships.³² Similarly, Beijing is often in dialogue with Regional Economic Communities (regional groupings of African states) – including the East African Community, the Economic Community of West African States and the Southern African Development Community – on trade and investment agreements (Terrefe / Bénazéraf 2015), infrastructure financing and support for the African Continental Free Trade Area. However, Beijing’s efforts to adopt a continental approach have not had the desired impact. This is partly due to the fact that the African Union did not become a full member of FOCAC until 2010, after being an observer for almost a decade. In addition, the weak institutional capacity of the African Union and its Regional Economic Communities, and “the peculiarities of Chinese diplomacy, which relies heavily on government-to-government ties” (Carrozza 2018: 2) have further limited the continental approach.

FOCAC, on the other hand, has provided Beijing a platform to exert greater influence on the continent. Through FOCAC-related activities and events, Beijing has been able to practice bilateralism on a grand scale. However, the unequal distribution of resources provided under the FOCAC umbrella remains a challenge, as some African countries continue to enjoy better access to loans and investments from China than do others (Benabdallah 2021).

This imbalance has been aggravated during the pandemic. As of June 2021, Beijing claimed to have provided “more than 350 million doses of vaccines to the international community, including vaccine assistance to over 80 countries and vaccine exports to more than 40 countries”.³³ However, its commitment to Africa in 2021 fell far short of expectations and a large majority of supplies made their way mainly to four countries – Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Zimbabwe.³⁴ This opened the doors for the United States to, albeit belatedly, make a contribution and distribute 25 million vaccine doses to African countries through the COVAX alliance.³⁵

Africa has benefitted more from another major Chinese initiative during the COVID-19 crisis: debt relief. When in April 2020 China joined the G20’s Debt

32 “NEPAD and China to Strengthen Transparent and Accountable Partnerships in Africa”, Nepad, <https://www.nepad.org/news/nepad-and-china-strengthen-transparent-and-accountable-partnerships-africa> (accessed 14 June 2022).

33 “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Wang Wenbin’s Regular Press Conference on June 2, 2021”, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/202206/t20220621_10707226.html (accessed 15 July 2022).

34 “China COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker”, Bridge Beijing, <https://bridgebeijing.com/our-publications/our-publications-1/china-covid-19-vaccines-tracker/> (accessed 14 June 2022).

35 “African Countries to Receive First U.S. Donated COVID-19 Vaccines in Days – Gavi”, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/african-countries-receive-first-us-donated-covid-19-vaccines-days-gavi-2021-07-16/> (accessed 14 June 2022).

Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), it marked the first time that Beijing had agreed to be part of a multilateral debt relief programme. Four Chinese lenders – the Export-Import Bank of China (Eximbank), China Development Bank, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China and China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) – participated in debt restructuring in 2020 and 2021. As of June 2021, China had provided at least \$12.1 billion in global debt relief in 2020 and 2021. Over \$1.3 billion in DSSI relief from Eximbank and CIDCA was provided to 23 countries, of which 16 are African (CARI 2021).

Despite most interactions being premised on bilateral consultations, the image promoted by China is one where FOCAC contributes to African development through continent-wide relationships, including diplomatic, commercial and military cooperation. However, this does not mean that all countries participate equally (Taylor 2013). Beijing not only controls the entire FOCAC process, but also sets the agenda and determines the type of declarations issued and the formulation of the resulting outcomes.

The China-CELAC Forum (CCF)

The CCF is institutionally similar to, and modelled on, FOCAC (Zhou 2018). Like FOCAC, it aims to establish a “comprehensive cooperative partnership based on equality, mutual benefit and common development” (CCF 2015: 5). The context of the CCF’s creation and its evolution as a platform for multilateralism was, however, very different from that of FOCAC. CELAC, upon which CCF is built, was partly the result of an aspiration to create a multipolar world in which Latin America viewed itself as playing a significant role (Rigirozzi / Tussie 2012). It was launched as a platform for regional dialogue in 2010 and established in December 2011 with a founding document strongly emphasising independence and anti-colonialism. As such, it clearly distanced itself from the US-dominated Organization of American States (OAS) (Segovia 2012) and sought to be an overarching institution encompassing the totality of Latin America and the Caribbean states (Vadell 2019). Although interpretations of CELAC’s mandate differ, it was instrumental in increasing Latin American autonomy and reducing the influence of the United States in the region, which was a long-standing goal of the countries involved (Tickner 2013, Long 2018).

After 15 years of rapidly expanding economic relations with Latin America, China saw the formation of CELAC as a welcome opportunity to establish a platform for inter-regional dialogue (Zhou 2012).³⁶ A regular dialogue mechanism with the foreign ministers of the “leadership troika”³⁷ of the CCF (the predecessor

36 See also “Hu Jintao Sends Congratulations on the Establishment of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States”, China News, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2011/12-04/3506135.shtml> (accessed 14 June 2022).

37 This consisted of the three countries leading the forum. The first troika was Chile, Venezuela and Cuba. It was then expanded to include four members, sometimes referred to as the “amplified troika” and sometimes as “the quartet”.

of the Dialogue of Foreign Ministers of China and the “quartet” of CELAC) was established by China in August 2012. At the 2nd summit of CELAC in January 2014, member countries adopted the “Special Declaration on the Establishment of the China-CELAC Forum” laying the foundation for China-CELAC to initiate the overall cooperation process. In July 2014, President Xi held a meeting with CELAC leaders in Brasilia, where a decision was taken to establish the CCF, later supported by the establishment of a US\$35 billion China-CELAC financing facility earmarked for development finance to the CELAC region. During the first Ministerial Forum held in Beijing in January 2015 a declaration that set out the goals for the ensuing multilateral collaboration between China and Latin American countries was adopted. During the second Ministerial Forum in Santiago de Chile in 2018, Latin American and Caribbean countries were invited to become a part of the Belt and Road Initiative,³⁸ following which 21 countries (excluding three of the four largest economies – Brazil, Mexico and Colombia) signed BRI-related agreements.

As on the African continent, Chinese multilateralism in Latin America has been criticised for being merely a façade for bilateral agreements and offering an arena for China to contest US hegemony and interests (Ellis 2019). Some scholars have also warned against the way in which the CCF, and overall Chinese engagement, has increased Latin America’s dependence on China (Jenkins 2012, Stallings 2020).

However, one may question whether the Chinese preference for bilateralism is by design or by default. By the time the CCF was established, the fragile regional unity and partial consensus around a set of developmental goals that had allowed for the creation of CELAC was already showing cracks. In the context of the economic crisis generated by the fall in commodity prices of 2014 and the deep political and economic crises in Venezuela and Brazil, regional cooperation all but broke down due to ideological polarisation and conflicts (Legler 2020). During the China-CELAC meeting in 2015, when the development agenda was defined, the Latin American countries had no explicit joint foreign economic policy strategy (Wise 2020). The aspirations of global multipolarity fell completely off the agenda towards the end of the 2010s, and multilateralism in UN organisations was opposed in action and discourse by major regional actors. Thus, the region itself lacked any basic consensus regarding its political direction or any other joint principles upon which an inter-regional multilateralism with China could be based. The Union of South American States, established in 2008, was dissolved, and CELAC suffered the exit of its largest member, Brazil. Regional health organisations (first and foremost the Pan American Health Organization) also suffered from political conflicts and defunding (Herrero / Nacimiento 2020).

38 <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/images/2ForoCelacChina/Special-Declaration-II-CELAC-CHINA-FORUM-FV-22.1.18.pdf> (accessed 14 June 2022).

This was partly fuelled by increasing tension between China and the United States, casting a shadow over regional cooperation in Latin America. It has long been clear that China-Latin America relations cannot be understood without taking the latter's proximity to the United States into account (Denoon 2017, De Stange 2020). As Fabricio Rodríguez and Jürgen Rüländ (2022: 477–78) put it: “China uses Sino-LAC interregional relations as a formally multilateral, yet chiefly national interest-led quest to establish a cooperative counter-hegemonic strategy against the US beyond its traditional Asian perimeter of interests.” Yet, it was not until the latter part of the Trump administration that the US took on the challenge of China more directly by, for example, transforming the Inter-American Development Bank into a battleground for US-China rivalry, leading to even deeper multilateral crises (Politi 2019).

After China introduced health as a part of its BRI-programme in the “Health Silk Road” of 2017, this also became a part of the cooperation with CELAC, although without high priority (Flores Fuenzalida / Fulcherón 2020). However, China moved rapidly to assist Latin America after the COVID-19 outbreak. Over 530 Chinese medical-related donations were made in 33 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean between mid-February and June 2020 (Telias / Urdinez 2021). These donations came not only from the Chinese government, but also from many private corporations and foundations, contributing to the diversification of China–Latin America relations (Sanborn 2020). China also early on announced US\$1 billion worth of loans intended for Latin America's medical purchases from China.

Most of the donations were made bilaterally, as were most of the later contracts signed for the provision of Chinese vaccines.³⁹ On several occasions, the provision of medical supplies or vaccines was accompanied by pressure to support China's political priorities. This was particularly felt by the remaining countries in the region that recognise Taiwan.⁴⁰ Tellingly, the Brazilian government sent Marcos Pontes, the minister of technology, to Beijing to negotiate vaccines – in return for opening the competition for Brazil's 5G concession to Huawei (Stuenkel 2020).

Nevertheless, China's overall performance in Latin America during the COVID-19 crisis may have strengthened its position as a leader of multilateralism. First, China and Latin America continued to hold multilateral meetings to reaffirm their desire to work jointly. At the July 2020 conference with the CELAC countries, China outlined a series of CCF meetings to be held to address the crisis. It claimed that “the two sides need to enhance communication and coordination in multilateral fora and on global governance, support the UN-centered multi-

39 See <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/timeline-latin-americas-race-covid-19-vaccine> for an overview (accessed 14 June 2022).

40 Of the 14 countries in the world that recognise Taiwan, 9 are in Latin America and the Caribbean: Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

lateral system and the international order underpinned by international law, reject unilateralism, protectionism and bullying practices, and work together to build an open world economy and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of developing countries”.⁴¹ China continued to pursue the multilateral agenda through an initiative on digital technology and innovation related to COVID-19.⁴²

Second, China has appeared as a staunch supporter of the multilateral COVAX mechanism and announced early on its support for open access to its vaccine patents. Importantly, for the Latin American public, this has contrasted markedly with the United States’ reluctant approach and stinginess regarding vaccine donations (Lozano 2021). Yet, perhaps most importantly, in its health diplomacy in Latin America, after having been accused of favouring left-wing allies in Latin America for over a decade, during the COVID-19 crisis China has appeared to consciously avoid taking sides in the polarised regional political landscape. In sharp contrast again to the US, it has collaborated closely with countries on the left and right of the political spectrum, thus possibly easing some of the tensions undermining multilateralism in Latin America in the first place (Bull 2021).

Yet, while China’s health diplomacy during the pandemic may have strengthened its role as a promoter of regional multilateralism, other events may have weakened it. China’s investment and trade in the region are still largely focused on natural resources and energy in spite of recent diversification. While there is increasing evidence of diverse practices among Chinese businesses, there is some evidence that Chinese investments are more prone to provoking conflicts than those of other countries (Ray et al. 2015). One reason for this is that Chinese entities have failed to establish dialogue with civil society groups and environmental and social movements, either bilaterally or in the CCF. As a result, environmental concerns or conflicts have led to the cancellation of a large number of infrastructure projects.⁴³ While this does not appear to have weakened the appetite of Latin American elites for Chinese finance, trade or investments (Bull 2020), such stoppages weaken the legitimacy of China as a leader in the eyes of part of the Latin American public and could fail to generate regional consensus beyond summits, which could ultimately undermine China’s ability to emerge as a strong leader in Latin America.

41 See https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1800563.shtml (accessed 14 June 2022).

42 See <https://www.gob.mx/sre/prensa/foro-de-cooperacion-china-celac-sobre-tecnologia-digital-para-el-combate-a-la-covid-19?idiom=es> (accessed 14 June 2022).

43 For example, the independent journalistic platform dialogochino.net (partly in collaboration with Armando Info) has documented a number of aborted projects in Venezuela as well as projects being delayed or altered due to environmental conflicts in Peru, Colombia, Brazil and Argentina.

Concluding remarks

The scaling up of investments under its flagship BRI is making China a more active collaborator on the world stage, including in countries where democracy and natural resource governance is weak. While refusing to impose normative conditions on bilateral collaboration, Beijing is increasing its efforts to influence the norms and rules of multilateral cooperation. Under Xi Jinping, China has expressed a desire to reshape the international system and the global rules of the game. There is concern in some parts of the world that we are perhaps witnessing the emergence of a less “committed” form of multilateralism that downplays international deliberation and enforcement.

During the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, Beijing reaffirmed its commitment to multilateralism by espousing the virtues of the UN system and the spirit of the UN Charter in addition to expressing strong support for the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement. Beijing also used these opportunities to attack any unilateral attempt by a major Western power such as the United States to resolve global challenges. Since the UN celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2020, it was natural to expect considerable attention to the role and impact of the UN in media reports from this period. China played an active role in formulating the 2030 Agenda and has subsequently highlighted the close linkages between the BRI and the Sustainable Development Goals – implying that support for the BRI equates to support for achievement of the latter. China’s white paper on international development cooperation, published in January 2021, also indicates the Chinese leadership’s warm embrace of existing multilateral institutions and continued support for the further strengthening of Chinese-initiated regional forums and financing mechanisms.⁴⁴

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic thus far, Beijing has cultivated close ties with countries in the Global South – promising delivery of vaccines as well as providing debt relief. However, while China has promised continued support for FOCAC and CCF, it continues to pursue bilateralism on a grand scale. There is thus a growing interest in better understanding how leaders in Africa and Latin America can best articulate their needs and interests at these high-level forums.

While China’s recent engagements may not result in radical changes to existing multilateral institutions, it is also important – while evaluating Chinese engagement – not to hold it up against an imaginary past of broadly efficient and legitimate institutional arrangements. Rather, multilateralism, as here understood, was already in crisis for a variety of reasons. Nonetheless, this multilateral system has traditionally offered a platform for deliberation and communication of norms and principles that also allows weaker states and non-states actors to contest

44 “Full Text: China’s International Development Cooperation in the New Era”, The State Council, The People’s Republic of China, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/202101/10/content_WS5ffa6bb-bc6d0f72576943922.html (accessed 14 June 2022).

existing patterns of dominance. What we have seen emerging over the course of 2020 is Beijing's promotion of a form of multilateralism that places China in the lead while seeking to deepen bilateral alliances. While nominally emphasising a multi-stakeholder approach in Latin America and Africa, such multilateralism provides only limited mechanisms for involving civil society organisations and social movements in deliberating the merits of development projects.

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