

Illiberal Ends, Multilateral Means :

Why Illiberal States Make Commitments to International Institutions*

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· **Key words** : illiberal states, multilateralism, international organizations, neoclassical realism, constructivism

ABSTRACT

Why do illiberal states make commitments to multilateral international institutions? The existing literature on multilateralism has been dominated by neoliberal institutionalism and liberal-minded constructivism and needs a reality check. This article suggests an eclectic explanation of illiberal states' commitment to multilateral international institutions by combining neoclassical realist and constructivist views on state behavior. I argue that illiberal states join

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multilateral international institutions because they want more power and wealth in issue areas affecting the potential of their international reach in a way deemed appropriate and legitimate.

I . Introduction

Since the 1990s, an increasing number of countries have sought membership in multilateral organizations in diverse issue areas, ranging from trade and money to the environment and human rights. The renewed and much expanded wave of multilateralism coincides with the international spread of democracy and the deepening of globalization in the post-Cold War context. This led some scholars to confirm the links between international organizations, globalization, and world peace.¹⁾ Most multilateral arrangements created by the United States and its Western allies tend to impose a universal code of conduct on participating countries, and compliance is expected and has been observed. Increasing participation and compliance have allowed some scholars to generate arguments about the “legalization of world politics”²⁾—as the argument goes, when multilateral means prevail, illiberal ends become difficult to achieve.

This optimism needs to be balanced with a careful examination of the following question: why do illiberal states³⁾ make commitments to multilateral

1) A prime example is Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

2) For an overview of this theme, see Judith Goldstein, Miles Kahler, Robert O. Keohane, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Introduction: Legalization and World Politics,” *International Organization* 54-3 (Summer 2000), pp. 385-399.

3) The meaning of illiberal states as used throughout this article is much closer to what Naazneen Barma and her colleagues have dubbed “open authoritarian regimes” than to Fareed Zakaria’s well-known notion of “illiberal democracy.” While the term illiberal democracy focuses on the deficiency of new democracies in terms of constitutional liberalism, open authoritarian regimes refer to nondemocracies which, “due to the very nature of connectivity in the international system, are strategically placed to arbitrage their consumption of international public goods.” Naazneen H. Barma, Ely Ratner, and Regine A. Spector, “Open Authoritarian Regimes: Surviving and Thriving in the Liberal International Order,” *Democracy and Society* 6-2 (Spring 2009), p. 9; Fareed Zakaria, “The

institutions in spite of the gap between their domestic political economies and the global liberal order in terms of social purpose? A great majority of countries participating in multilateral arrangements are not liberal democracies with market-oriented economies. Although the number of democratic regimes has steadily increased from seventy-seven in 1994 to ninety-five in 2011,⁴⁾ the past decade has also seen the emergence of “illiberal democracies” which may meet minimum requirements of democratic governance but show a low degree of respect for liberal political values such as “the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property.”⁵⁾ Moreover, there are still obviously nondemocratic states such as China, while Russia, another illiberal great power, seems much closer to “competitive authoritarianism”⁶⁾ than a fragile democracy. The other leg of illiberalism is about the way in which the national economy is governed. According to Economic Freedom Ratings for the year 2009 compiled by the Fraser Institute, major illiberal states are located in the bottom half with Russia ranked 81st, China 92nd, and Brazil 102nd out of 141 countries.⁷⁾ In these countries, policy preferences and actual policies regarding the economy are likely to be “authoritative” rather than “market-oriented.”⁸⁾

These qualities could be translated into sharply different preferences in illiberal states dealing with various global issues, particularly when a multilateral approach to those issues is conceived of as encroaching on national sovereignty. Collective self-reliance or bilateral balancing rather than multilateral bandwagoning would seem a more reasonable choice for illiberal

Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76-6 (November-December 1997), pp. 22-43.

See also Chansoo Cho, “Explaining Cooperation among Illiberal States: A Social Constructivist Challenge,” *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 8-2 (December 2010), pp. 234-236.

4) Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, *Global Report 2011: Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility* (Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace, 2011), p. 12.

5) Fareed Zakaria, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

6) Steven Levitsky and Lucian A. Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13-2 (April 2002), p. 52.

7) James Gwartney, Robert Lawson, and Joshua Hall, *Economic Freedom of the World: 2011 Annual Report* (Vancouver: Fraser Institute, 2011), p. 9.

8) The distinction between authoritative and market-oriented principles is drawn from Stephen D. Krasner, *Structural Conflict: The Third World against Global Liberalism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 6.

states.⁹⁾ But many illiberal states seek to be unshackled by the constraints of global liberalism in part by relying on multilateral arrangements. Why?

This question fails to invite the scholarly attention of many realists and neoliberal institutionalists. For realists who prioritize the dimension of power, the adjective *illiberal* does not add any significance to states' actions and inactions in an anarchical world. States, liberal and illiberal alike, may choose to participate in a multilateral framework for global governance if doing so is considered better serving their interests in terms of power. Even then, the realist argument goes, "IGOs [intergovernmental organizations] are only marginally influential in world politics and ... typically reflect status quo power relations."¹⁰⁾ For neoliberal institutionalists, illiberal states' growing interest in multilateral forums needs no separate explanation other than the functionalist view coupled with the logic of noncooperative games. International institutions provide a forum where self-interested states, liberal and illiberal alike, learn the habit of cooperation. Most, if not all, realists and neoliberal institutionalists share the rationalist conception of state behavior, which does not assign any special meaning to illiberal states' embrace of multilateralism. Meanwhile, some constructivist scholars view illiberal states as being "socialized into" international institutions over time.¹¹⁾ In short, international relations scholarship has paid little attention to the *illiberalness* of state actors with regard to multilateral arrangements. This is problematic to any observers who are sensitive to subtle, or sometimes quite stark, differences between liberal and illiberal states in their attitudes toward multilateral arrangements in world politics.

This article sheds light on illiberal states' engagement with international institutions by combining the neoclassical realist sensitivity to the relationship between systemic constraints and domestic factors¹²⁾ with the constructivist

9) Collective self-reliance as an alternative for Southern states is mentioned in *ibid.*, p. 30.

10) Charles Boehmer, Erik Gartzke, and Timothy Nordstrom, "Do Intergovernmental Organizations Promote Peace?" *World Politics* 57-1 (October 2004), p. 2.

11) For example, see Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980-2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

12) For an overview of neoclassical realism, see Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51-1 (October 1998), pp. 144-172. Jeffrey Taliaferro provides a good elaboration on Rose's characterization of the perspective in "State Building for Future Wars: Neoclassical Realism and the Resource-Extractive State," *Security Studies* 15-3 (July-September 2006), pp. 481-491.

conception of state behavior. Recent international relations scholarship has pointed to the compatibility between realism and constructivism,¹³⁾ and this rediscovery is both interesting and useful when considering the growing importance of illiberal states in global forums. Illiberal states well understand the logic of power politics that shapes the institutional framework for global governance. They join multilateral organizations to minimize the cost incurred by not complying with the dominant system. They also see in multilateral organizations an environment under which their desired goals or cherished social purposes can be achieved with greater efficiency. Finally, multilateral arrangements may seem attractive to illiberal states because the former provides the latter with a testing ground for alternative ideas about global governance. These features can be explained more fully by an eclectic approach introduced in this article.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The second section examines the tenuous ties that bind neoliberal institutionalism to constructivism and suggests the need to perform a reality check on the predominantly liberal-minded literature. The third section describes a possible mix of neoclassical realism and constructivism as a better way to understand the intention and behavior of illiberal states regarding multilateralism. The fourth section enumerates the reasons why illiberal states make commitments to international institutions by looking at an illustrative case of China. I conclude with a brief discussion of this research's implications for power transition.

II . Multilateralism: Weak Ties that Bind Constructivism to Neoliberal Institutionalism

Neoliberal institutionalism and liberal-minded constructivism dominate the discourse on multilateralism. Multilateralism has become a bridge between these two heterogeneous paradigms. But the idea that multilateralism binds constructivism to neoliberal institutionalism is weak on two grounds. First, neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism focus on multilateralism for different reasons. While the former views multilateral arrangements in

13) See the essays in the forum on "Bridging the Gap: Toward a Realist-Constructivist Dialogue," *International Studies Review* 6-2 (June 2004), pp. 337-352.

international life in instrumentalist and consequentialist terms, the latter conceives of multilateralism as a process of intersubjective understandings. Second and more importantly, constructivists tend to believe that multilateralism has its own intrinsic value as an end, which few neoliberal institutionalists would accept. When multilateralism is conceptualized by constructivists as standing on its own feet,¹⁴⁾ the contents can be as diverse as the regime characteristics of participating countries.

Although neoliberal institutionalism is a complex mixture of liberalism, functionalism, and some elements of realism, its emphasis on institutions can be traced back to the classical tenets of liberalism. Classical liberals saw war as a mistake that can be avoided if individual decisionmakers think and act rationally. Well-designed institutions can help individuals and states to make better decisions. Liberals envisioned the possibility of cooperation among nations through the web of international organizations. Thus the close links between multilateralism and liberalism have both historical and intellectual origins. Historically, multilateralism was a form of institutional architecture that shaped the efforts to create international organizations after the end of World War I. Intellectually, the conception of multilateralism is related to the liberal notion of rationality. Multilateralism grows out of reasoned calculation and behavior along with the backing of well-built, properly enforced institutions.

From a neoliberal institutionalist perspective, participation in multilateral institutions is a good thing primarily because the benefit of joining them outweighs the cost of engaging in bilateral transactions in a fundamentally anarchical world. Following Robert Keohane's conceptual scheming in *After Hegemony* (1984), neoliberal institutionalists have distanced themselves from a normative assessment of multilateral institutions, while endorsing an interest-based approach. Neoliberal institutionalist advocates of multilateralism suggest two reasons for states to engage with the particular form of global governance. First, all states, regardless of regime type and level of economic development, can reap benefits from joining multilateral arrangements. If

14) Some variants of institutionalism—for example, historical institutionalism—can be said to be more sensitive to the independent role (or structural aspects) of the “institutional organization of the polity and economy.” Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms,” *Political Studies* 44-5 (December 1996), p. 937. In this regard, structuralism is an epistemological bridge between historical institutionalism and constructivism.

states act in a rational fashion, that is, by employing a cost-benefit analysis, they will see that their interests are served within the frameworks of more universal and inclusive institutions. Particularly, neoliberal institutionalists place importance on the merit of reducing transaction costs and achieving higher transparency through multilateral organizations regarding various global issues. Second, increasingly complex interdependence leads states to resort to multilateral means in search of better solutions to issues at hand.¹⁵⁾

The neoliberal argument about the institutional inducements of multilateralism is functionalist in character. The logic allows one to surmise that the institutional setting of multilateralism itself has the effect of relieving states' common concern about being cheated. For illiberal states, this concern frequently becomes acute in bilateral agreements with another illiberal state largely because they have relatively limited information of each other and thereby may misinterpret signals in communication. Although the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact of 1939 "is not the only legal agreement between rival nations and governments that preceded or at least did not prevent war,"¹⁶⁾ the historical analogy is more likely to affect illiberal states' foreign policy choices. Audience costs of multilateralism discourage states from reneging on commitments and give them peace of mind regarding other states' deviation from the agreement at least in the foreseeable future. Some empirical evidence that audience costs within multilateral organizations are not insurmountable enough to discourage states from backtracking on international commitments¹⁷⁾ should not bother neoliberals that much. For neoliberals, as Vincent Pouliot aptly put it, "the value of multilateralism primarily rests with its outcome: so long as they can deliver results, multilateral channels are worth pursuing."¹⁸⁾

Neoliberals' rationalist and consequentialist conception of multilateralism does not fit well with the constructivist notion of multilateralism as a process of "collective identity formation." As Alexander Wendt pointed out, neoliberal

15) Vincent Pouliot, "Multilateralism as an End in Itself," *International Studies Perspectives* 12-1 (February 2011), p. 20.

16) Erich Weede, "Threats to Détente: Intuitive Hopes and Counterintuitive Realities," *European Journal of Political Research* 5-4 (December 1977), p. 412.

17) A typical example is the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s poor record of making member countries comply with its loan conditionality. See Susanne Lohmann, "Why Do Institutions Matter? An Audience-Cost Theory of Institutional Commitment," *Governance* 16-1 (January 2003), p. 108.

18) Vincent Pouliot, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

institutionalists have distanced themselves from neorealists by relaxing the “assumption of state egoism” but retained and refined the notion of “self-interested actors as constant and exogenously given.”¹⁹⁾ Despite the widespread misunderstanding that constructivists place more weight on nonstate actors,²⁰⁾ constructivism does not negate the centrality of the state in world politics. Nor do they deny that “[s]ocial construction occurs in the context of the material world.”²¹⁾ A defining claim of constructivists is that once constructed, ideational factors exist and operate quite independently of the material environment. Although some neoliberals and realists point to the importance of legitimacy in international institutions,²²⁾ they do not see a sense of appropriateness (and the lack thereof) as a separate source of state action.

Constructivist endorsement of multilateralism as a form of international interaction has been driven more by the intellectual tradition’s emphasis on the norms-based nature of the social and political world. It does not necessarily mean that constructivists are fixated on making normative, let alone moral judgments on the reality of world politics. Instead it indicates two characteristics of constructivist scholarship: (1) understanding norms as constitutive of social facts and (2) stressing the causal role of norms. Contrary to the neoliberal institutionalist preoccupation with the utility of multilateral arrangements, constructivists have paid attention to the value of multilateralism as an “architectural” or “organizing principle” of international life.²³⁾ Multilateralism is distinguished from unilateralism, bilateralism, or minilateralism not just in terms of the number of participants but also has distinct properties such as “indivisibility, generalized principles of conduct, and diffuse reciprocity.”²⁴⁾ John Ruggie, a leading proponent of the constructivist

19) Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *American Political Science Review* 88-2 (June 1994), p. 384.

20) This misunderstanding springs from the fact that a disproportionate number of seminal works on nongovernmental organizations have been produced by constructivists.

21) Brent J. Steele, “Liberal-Idealism: A Constructivist Critique,” *International Studies Review* 9-1 (Spring 2007), p. 25.

22) For example, see Robert O. Keohane, “The Globalization of Informal Violence, Theories of World Politics, and the ‘Liberalization of Fear,’” *Dialogue IO* 1-1 (Spring 2002), p. 37; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “International Relations Theory and the Case against Unilateralism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 3-3 (September 2005), pp. 517-519.

23) John Gerard Ruggie, “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution,” *International Organization* 46-2 (Spring 1992), p. 568, p. 572, and p. 586.

24) James A. Caporaso, “International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations,” *International Organization* 46-3 (Summer 1992), p. 602.

camp, emphasized the difference between formal multilateral organizations and the “generic form of multilateralism.”²⁵⁾ Neoliberal institutionalists such as Keohane slight the distinct nature of the latter, while constructivists see multilateralism as a “matter of routine.”²⁶⁾

Formal multilateral organizations tend to be placed at the center stage of neoliberal scholarship on multilateralism, and the criterion for role assessment is their functions within the existing intergovernmental organizations. This “widespread functional view of multilateralism”²⁷⁾ parallels the instrumentalist conception of multilateral organizations maintained by realists. For neoliberal institutionalists, international institutions are a multilateral means to liberal ends such as economic openness and human rights protection. This instrumentalist conception of multilateralism does not disappear even when one accepts Lisa Martin’s distinction between multilateral institutions and the institution of multilateralism.²⁸⁾ Multilateral institutions include the “formal organizational elements of international life,” which can be found in many international organizations such as the United Nations, the IMF, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. The institution of multilateralism, by contrast, “is grounded in and appeals to the less formal, less codified habits, practices, ideas and norms of international society.”²⁹⁾ This aspect of multilateralism is much closer to the constructivist view because it explicitly touches upon the ideational factors. But it is noteworthy that neoliberal institutionalists highly value the norms of multilateralism largely because they help to increase the efficiency of formal organizations.

For neoliberal institutionalists, the crucial hurdle in making multilateralism work is the presence of a much larger number of players. Collective action problems such as free riding are to be solved if multilateral arrangements could work on a sustained basis. As a solution to collective action problems, reciprocity is given pride of place within the neoliberal institutionalist literature on interstate cooperation and international regimes. When

25) John Gerard Ruggie, *op. cit.*, p. 567.

26) Vincent Pouliot, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

27) *Ibid.*, p. 19.

28) Lisa L. Martin, “Interests, Power, and Multilateralism,” *International Organization* 46-4 (Autumn 1992), pp. 765-792.

29) James A. Caporaso, *op. cit.*, p. 602.

neoliberal institutionalists pinpoint reciprocity as the condition for cooperative activity, they do not specify the exact number of participating countries. “The term ‘multilateral’ does not analytically presuppose any particular number of countries in the way that unilateral, trilateral, and universal do.”³⁰⁾ If more than two countries are involved in joint efforts to produce coordination or collaboration, neoliberals believe, multilateralism is at work. Neoliberals’ focus on the organizational mechanism leads to their ignorance of the contents of multilateral governance.

When the dimension of power as distinct from economic interests is not taken seriously enough even in an era of globalization, the varieties of social purposes are likely to be put aside. Neoliberal institutionalists face two different, but interrelated, shortcomings in accounting for the growing importance of multilateral arrangements. First, they incorporate too much of neorealist components into their theorizing about multilateralism by ignoring the extent to which different social purposes affect state behavior. Second, they tend to presume that multilateralism as a procedural innovation generates better outcomes in “liberalizing” world politics in a very wide and thus obscure sense of the term. As Wendt aptly pointed out, “institutions may be cooperative or conflictual,” while many regime theorists tend to “equate institutions with cooperation.”³¹⁾ When one just stops seeing regimes as seamless problem-solving mechanisms in themselves, many seamy undersides of conflicting worldviews can be brought back to empirical analysis.

Liberal constructivists such as Ruggie fail to redress the shortcomings of neoliberal institutionalism in explaining why states commit themselves to international institutions and why some multilateral arrangements lead to conflict rather than cooperation. Multilateralism as a “demanding organizational form” has the effect of tying the hands of participating countries up to a more universal set of principles, while encouraging states to “avoid policies based on situational exigencies and momentary constellations of interests.”³²⁾ What liberal constructivists fail to acknowledge is that rules and decisionmaking

30) *Ibid.*, p. 603.

31) Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46-2 (Spring 1992), p. 399.

32) James A. Caporaso, *op. cit.*, p. 604.

procedures—and, in some cases, even norms and principles³³⁾—shaped by liberal states can be used by illiberal states for purposes counterpoised to the liberalization of world politics.

III. Taking Illiberalism Seriously: Neoclassical Realism and Constructivism

This article employs an eclectic approach to understanding why illiberal states are willing to join multilateral institutions shaped by liberal states, especially the United States, even when they feel disadvantaged, divested of their cherished sovereignty, or just ignored within liberal-dominated, multilateral arrangements. As discussed in the previous section, neoliberal institutionalists have provided a rational choice theoretic explanation for state behavior with respect to multilateralism. But it was a general theory of state behavior which can be applied to any state regardless of regime type, though it cannot be denied that there are links between democracy and multilateralism. What neoliberal institutionalists overlook is that interests can be shaped by ideas in some instances and that regime type deeply affects the ways in which states interact with each other and engage with international organizations. This is where constructivists may contribute to theorizing states' varying incentives to join multilateral institutions. This line of reasoning is not so new to international relations scholarship. I would argue here that constructivist correction to the conventional wisdom maintained by neoliberal institutionalists can be more rewarding when it is combined with the neoclassical realist account of foreign policy behavior.

Recent international relations scholarship has paid well-deserved attention to the compatibility between realism and constructivism.³⁴⁾ Anyone who points to the hidden affinity between realism and constructivism would be tempted to disassociate the latter from the liberal tradition. Such a temptation is healthy because “[t]he fact that many of the well-known mainstream

33) China's recent efforts to revise human rights norms in favor of national variations could be an example. See Naazneen Barma and Ely Ratner, “China's Illiberal Challenge,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 2 (Fall 2006), p. 65.

34) J. Samuel Barkin, “Realist Constructivism,” *International Studies Review* 5-3 (September 2003), p. 326.

constructivists focus on issues like human rights, security communities, or multilateralism does not make them liberal idealists.”³⁵⁾ Moreover, the liberal bias of some constructivists has kept them blind about the possibility that illiberalism of various stripes provides an ideational foundation for state action.³⁶⁾ Constructivism, if it is devoid of the liberal bias, does not have a strong, normative overtone, as contrasted to both realism and liberalism (including the neoliberal institutionalist variant).

It is widely agreed that constructivism is much closer to an epistemological correction to the dominant paradigms in the study of international relations (and other fields of political inquiry) than to a genuine research program. As Ruggie himself put it, “social constructivists reject ... the presumption or pretense that their study constitutes the totality or even the main part of the social scientific enterprise.”³⁷⁾ This self-characterization may be viewed as an admission of weakness for some critics of constructivist scholarship who tend to dismiss the latter’s claim for paradigmatic coherence. But the very fact of being a corrective lens allows constructivists freedom to choose from the menu of dominant paradigms in international relations theorizing for the purpose of providing a better account of international outcomes in question. Illiberal states’ behavior can be better explained when one combines some elements of realism with constructivism than when one continues to rely on the conceptual tools provided by neoliberal institutionalists.

Constructivists can incorporate the core of realist ideas such as balancing and security dilemma into their work because they believe that those ideas shape reality. Of course, constructivists may take up the liberal or institutionalist viewpoint of world politics which assigns a larger role to multilateral organizations. Either way, constructivists are interested in demonstrating the causal power of ideational factors such as identity and culture rather than choosing to believe or disbelieve the tenets of realism or liberalism. What they want to show is that the state of international affairs is not predetermined by material factors of one kind or another and that the current structure of international politics and the pattern of state behavior can

35) *Ibid.*, p. 335.

36) Fiona B. Adamson, “Global Liberalism Versus Political Islam: Competing Ideological Frameworks in International Politics,” *International Studies Review* 7-4 (December 2005), p. 547.

37) John Gerard Ruggie, “What Makes the World Hang Together? Neo-Utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge,” *International Organization* 52-4 (Autumn 1998), p. 856.

be altered by changes in ideational factors. In this sense, constructivist scholarship deals with more foundational issues and change of the international system itself. This is why many constructivists draw on the intellectual insights of critical sociology in a wide sense of the term.

Seen in this light, the eclectic approach here resembles the perspective employed by what Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink call “critical constructivists.”³⁸⁾ Not all constructivists accept the primacy of ideas as a causal variable to the same degree, but critical constructivists are more explicit in their skepticism about an autonomous role for ideas. Instead, they view ideas as “more tightly linked to relations of material power” and focus on revealing the “ideational structures” of political action.³⁹⁾ From this perspective, ideas can be good or bad; there should be no prejudgment about the social desirability of specific ideas. Although constructivist empirical research has been concentrated in “nice norms” such as promoting human rights and preserving the environment,⁴⁰⁾ what would interest critical constructivists is bad norms or norms usually deemed uncongenial to international cooperation. Multilateralism in itself is neither good nor bad. Like many other “social facts”⁴¹⁾ in international life, its contents are shaped by the political context which is set on the foundation of power relations. Illiberalism as an organizing principle of the domestic political economy can be a driving force behind state actions favoring multilateral arrangements if power relations allow. Here is where neoclassical realism comes in.

According to Gideon Rose, neoclassical realism makes two distinct claims. First, a country’s foreign policy choice reflects “its place in the international system and ... its relative material power capability.” Second, a country’s foreign policy choice is not dictated by “systemic pressures”; rather the latter “must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level.”⁴²⁾ A neoclassical realist perspective would conceptualize multilateralism as, for the most part, a means suited to the specific needs of states and thus in this

38) Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001), p. 398.

39) *Ibid.*

40) *Ibid.*, pp. 403-404.

41) John Gerard Ruggie, *op. cit.* (1998), p. 856.

42) Gideon Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

sense shares instrumentalism with neoliberal institutionalists. But neoliberals see multilateralism as an institutional solution to collective action problems, while neoclassical realism allows us to view multilateralism as a political choice derived from a country's specific conditions. And those conditions include "the extent to which identities are manipulated, if not created, by self-serving elites,"⁴³⁾ which should attract scholarly attention from critical constructivists.

For neoclassical realists, a first step to conceptualize illiberal states' participation in multilateral institutions is to relax the neorealist assumption of self-help. "Structural realism properly understood" or "contingent realism" is open to the possibility of cooperation among states who consider cooperation as the best way to "achieve their security goals."⁴⁴⁾ Just as neoclassical realism may be understood as a "logical and necessary extension of structural realism,"⁴⁵⁾ so constructivism cannot be fully appreciated without linking it to other structural theories of social and political development. Both realism and Marxism (and world-systems theory) focus on the conflictual nature of society and the process and outcomes of great-power contest. Realists, particularly in the Waltzian tradition, would dismiss the Marxist preoccupation with class as a second-image interpretation of the world and thus as inappropriate for understanding international relations. But at the same time various brands of realism would accept part of the Marxist idea that interstate conflict erupts due to asymmetry in economic power. To the contrary, the realist-neoliberal disagreement tends to be more consistent. Structural realists would dismiss some neoliberals' emphasis on domestic factors as inappropriate for systemic analysis, and more importantly, realists in general feel uncomfortable with the liberal claim that interstate relations can evolve from discord to harmony via some sort of institutional arrangements. Constructivists may join realists in their objection to the liberal naiveté or complacency about many global issues. A keyword uniting these different strands of theorizing about international relations would be *structure*

43) Robert Jervis, "Realism in the Study of World Politics," *International Organization* 52-4 (Autumn 1998), p. 988.

44) Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security* 19-3 (Winter 1994-1995), pp. 51-52.

45) Brian Rathburn, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical Realism as the Logical and Necessary Extension of Structural Realism," *Security Studies* 17-2 (June 2008), pp. 294-321.

as distinct from functions dictated by it.

One must understand the meaning of structure properly, which in turn requires us to look into the contingent nature of international anarchy. When one views structure in association with functions it brings about, the end result is a very reified (or static) notion of structure which is best exemplified in Parsonian structural functionalism, Althusserian Marxism, and Waltzian neorealism. In these paradigms, “systemic interaction does not transform state interests.”⁴⁶⁾ However, when structure is analytically detached from functions, much room is made available for empirical probe into the process through which structure operates among *willing* actors, not agents executing functions assigned to them. Neoclassical realists and constructivists, especially those inspired by Wendt who formulated constructivism as a “structural theory of the international system,”⁴⁷⁾ are in a more favorable position to describe and explain the interplay between the systemic context and state actors’ preference.

Neoclassical realism is best distinguished from neorealism or structural realism in its keen interest in accounting for a country’s foreign policy behavior. When one stops explaining away foreign policy behavior as epiphenomenal relative to the structure of international anarchy, multilateralism can be analyzed with more empirical richness. It is so because multilateral institutions provide states with the arena in which they pursue national interests defined in both material and ideational terms. Underestimation of norms and institutions is a noticeable part of realist ideas but does not have to be an essential characteristic. It was neorealists who downplayed the role of international organizations to the point of just reflecting the systemic distribution of power. More empirically-oriented realists would accept the claim that states, particularly great powers, want to take advantage of international institutions in their effort to increase relative gains.⁴⁸⁾ While retaining the centrality of material interests driving states, neoclassical realists expand their analytical purview into the cultural foundations of state behavior.

Seen from the eclectic approach, the illiberal motivation does not have to be so different from the liberal one because changing distribution of relative capability shapes states’ incentives for participating in multilateral

46) Alexander Wendt, *op. cit.* (1994), p. 384.

47) *Ibid.*, p. 385.

48) Charles Boehmer, Erik Gartzke, and Timothy Nordstrom, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

institutions. Like liberal states, illiberal states want to reap the benefits from multilateral arrangements, while avoiding harms inflicted by bilateral or minilateral arrangements. But neoclassical realists making the most of constructivist scholarship and vice versa place much importance to the transmission belt through which those systemic settings are translated into specific foreign policy choices. For both of them, structure is the starting point for empirical analysis but is not reified as the unchanging law of anarchy. Instead, structure provides an arena in which state actors define national interests under specific conditions. Domestic factors and ideational sources of political action, therefore, come to the fore in their analysis.

Although a majority of illiberal states have nondemocratic regimes, they are as interested as states with a democratic regime in minimizing the “costs of renegeing on international commitments” mostly in economic issues,⁴⁹⁾ but also increasingly in the issue areas of the environment and human rights. Some illiberal states with nondemocratic government participate in multilateral institutions in order to compensate for the deficiency of procedural legitimacy at home. Even nondemocratic states, if they are not totalitarian, face challenges from domestic political actors, mostly elites. “Autocratic audience costs”⁵⁰⁾ should be taken into account in explaining why illiberal states try to make good on the promises they made. Neoclassical realists are cut out for this job of looking closely at the domestic political process in which illiberal states’ incentives for playing the game of multilateralism are generated. And finally, illiberal states make commitments to international institutions as a way to advance genuinely different ideas about global governance. To elaborate on this last point would become much easier for neoclassical realists when they draw on the constructivist notion of “struggles for recognition.”⁵¹⁾ Illiberal states want to be recognized as they are even when they seem to accept the terms and conditions of liberal multilateral institutions. Compliance might be construed as a signal sent by illiberal states who want to be recognized as legitimate members of the international

49) Songying Fang and Erica Owen, “International Institutions and Credible Commitments of Non-Democracies,” *Review of International Organizations* 6-2 (2011), p. 145.

50) Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization* 62-1 (Winter 2008), pp. 35-64.

51) Brian Greenhill, “Recognition and Collective Identity Formation in International Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 14-2 (June 2008), p. 345.

community rather than a result of power politics.

IV. Illiberal States' Calculus of Participation in Multilateral Arrangements

This section is devoted to demonstrating the strength of the eclectic approach suggested in the previous one, using an illustrative case of China. China provides us with a useful case because since the end of the Cold War the country's foreign policy has been torn between the desire to participate in multilateral governance and the desire to keep its own values and social purposes intact. China's membership in international organizations increased from twenty-one in 1977 to fifty-one in 1996, and one Chinese source reports that the country is a member of 298 international organizations as of 2003.⁵²⁾ This record of rapid growth reflects China's "ability to shift influence towards new institutions that might not necessarily be grounded in the same philosophical underpinnings."⁵³⁾ In turn, an eclectic approach combining neoclassical realism and constructivism is useful in explaining the illiberal state's commitments to multilateral institutions because it allows us to make a balanced estimation of how systemic constraints, domestic factors, and norms, identity, and ideas are at play.

This eclectic approach can be applied to empirical analysis in two stages. The first stage is to look at the systemic context in which illiberal states engage in multilateral institutions. This is what both neoclassical realists and constructivists with no liberal bias would do to analyze specific foreign policy choices. The bipolar system during the Cold War laid the foundation for illiberal states' involvement in multilateral organizations. Systemic competition over hegemony between the United States and the Soviet Union induced the two superpowers to resort to the politics of numbers in efforts to win more support from countries around the world.⁵⁴⁾ The end of the Cold

52) Hongying Wang and James N. Rosenau, "China and Global Governance," *Asian Perspective* 33-3 (Fall 2009), p. 22.

53) Stephen Olson and Clyde Prestowitz, "The Evolving Role of China in International Institutions," The Economic Strategy Institute, January 2011, p. 7.

54) The politics of numbers was exploited by illiberal states to the extent that it exacerbated America's growing disenchantment with the United Nations system. The U.S. withdrawal

War tilted the balance in favor of the United States and its Western allies, while illiberal states like China were left with three options: social mobility, social competition, or social creativity. Social mobility is to adopt the dominant system for the purpose of getting accepted as a full member. Social competition is to challenge the dominant system for the purpose of establishing “equal or superior status.” Social creativity is to turn to areas of strength within the dominant system without directly competing with the hegemon or a group of great powers.⁵⁵⁾ In the post-Cold War context, social competition was tried by China (and Russia) during the first part of the 1990s; however, globalization, nontraditional security threats, and the rise of global terrorism turned out to be a more crucial systemic environment in which the illiberal state has oscillated between social mobility and social creativity.⁵⁶⁾

The second stage of the eclectic argument is to look into ideational factors and assess the role of norms which are cultivated under particular circumstances in shaping illiberal states’ policy choices regarding multilateral institutions. Neoclassical realists are interested in explaining different forms of a country’s adjustment to similar external conditions and find analytical value in specific ideas affecting policy outcomes. Illiberal states like China are not drawn into the multilateral fold passively; instead, they actively choose multilateral arenas as an interlocutor with their own ideas and worldview.⁵⁷⁾ As Ann Kent pointed out, “China’s attitude to international organizations and to the international community in general is heavily influenced by moral

from UNESCO in 1984 is a case in point. See Christopher C. Joyner and Scott A. Lawson, “The United States and UNESCO: Rethinking the Decision to Withdraw,” *International Journal* 41-1 (Winter 1985/1986), pp. 37-71.

- 55) Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34-4 (Spring 2010), p. 67, quote on p. 72. In constructing these concepts, Larson and Shevchenko heavily draw on social identity theory developed by Henri Tajfel. See Henri Tajfel and John Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict,” in William G. Austin and Stephen Worchel (eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), pp. 43-46.
- 56) Yong Deng and Thomas G. Moore, “China Views Globalization: Toward a New Great-Power Politics?” *The Washington Quarterly* 27-3 (Summer 2004), pp. 117-136; Andrew Monaghan, “An Enemy at the Gates or From Victory to Victory? Russian Foreign Policy,” *International Affairs* 84-4 (July 2008), p. 731.
- 57) Thomas G. Moore, “Racing to Integrate or Cooperating to Compete? Liberal and Realist Interpretations of China’s New Multilateralism,” in Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne (eds.), *China Turns to Multilateralism: Foreign Policy and Regional Security* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 43.

principles.”⁵⁸⁾ It is noteworthy that Chinese leaders have shown keen interest in constructivist ideas in international relations scholarship.⁵⁹⁾ This interest reflects the country’s preoccupation with status seeking not just in terms of material but also in terms of ideational power. Multilateral institutions provide illiberal states with an arena in which they criticize the policy ideas of liberal states, particularly the United States. China has repeatedly emphasized the normative contents of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which should be “mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, cooperation, respect for diversified civilizations, and common development.”⁶⁰⁾

As an illiberal state, China has long found itself at odds with the liberal world order created under U.S. hegemony and maintained even after the relative decline of American predominance. Historical experience with Western imperialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generated a deep-seated mistrust of liberal states and a strong preference for national sovereignty. The acute sense of alienation caused by the Security Council membership issue strengthened the anti-liberal posture of Communist China. But the end of the Cold War and the spread of globalization have brought a drastic change to the international environment facing China, which had already spent years modernizing its economy through the introduction of the market mechanism. Unlike China’s wishful thinking that the post-Cold War world would be multipolar, the United States has remained the sole superpower, and other liberal states, individually or as a group, have not challenged American leadership. Overall enhancement of national power largely driven by rapid economic growth was not considered as sufficient to justify China’s path to revisionism. These systemic qualities induce China to pursue engagement with the international community largely along the line suggested by the United States and other liberal states. But China’s response to continued American hegemony was multifaceted.

China has sought membership in two different types of multilateral

58) Ann Kent, “China’s International Socialization: The Role of International Organizations,” *Global Governance* 8-3 (July-September 2002), p. 346.

59) Yong Deng, *China’s Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 40-41.

60) Stephen Aris, “A New Model of Asian Regionalism: Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Have More Potential than ASEAN?” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22-3 (September 2009), p. 457, footnote 7.

organizations governing issues of interest to different countries in varying degrees. On the one hand, China has dealt with international organizations or regimes that were created under the influence of U.S. hegemony and other Western countries. A typical example would be the country's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) on December 11, 2001 after more than fifteen years of negotiation efforts. On the other hand, China has been eager to participate in multilateral organizations, many of which are based on a particular region and/or a group of adjacent countries. The SCO, which was created in 2001, is a recent example of a club of like-minded, illiberal states. As the second type of multilateral grouping is often created and maintained as a protective shield against the intrusion of U.S. and Western influence, a more intriguing case would be the first type. But even the second type has the effect of reducing flexibility in foreign policy and increasing exit costs.⁶¹⁾ For example, China's growing involvement in multilateral groupings with Southeast Asian countries in building a new international financial architecture can be a burden heavy enough for the would-be regional hegemon.

The two forms of multilateral interaction involving illiberal states, "collective self-reliance"⁶²⁾ and participation in liberal regimes, originate from different goals pursued by illiberal states. While collective self-reliance refers to multilateral grouping among illiberal states sharing a set of common interest and identity in given issue areas, participation in liberal regimes is driven by illiberal states' need to avoid being excluded in multilateral arenas. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is a prime example of collective self-reliance. As one U.S. official put it, the ARF is closer to a grouping of "potential antagonists talking to each other trying to clear up any misperceptions"⁶³⁾ than to an international organization such as NATO based on the notion of collective security. Russia's engagement with the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the SCO was also driven by the country's desire to reduce the pressures imposed by the "growth of potentially anti-Russian institutions."⁶⁴⁾

61) Thomas G. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

62) I borrow this term from Stephen D. Krasner, *op. cit.* See especially ch. 1.

63) Quoted in Amitav Acharya, "Multilateralism: Is There an Asia-Pacific Way?" *NBR Analysis* 8-2 (1997), p. 10.

64) Kristi Govella and Vinod K. Aggarwal, "Russian Foreign Policy: Challenging the Western Liberal International Order?" in Aggarwal and Govella (eds.), *Responding to a Resurgent Russia: Russian Policy and the Responses from the European Union and the United States* (New York: Springer, 2011), p. 4.

Compared to China, Russia is more inclined toward “great power multilateralism,” but the underlying motive is not so different. Dimitri Medvedev, former president of Russia, in characterizing the country’s commitment to the SCO, used a contrast between “an increasingly multipolar world” and “an artificially unipolar system.”⁶⁵⁾ In this regard, collective self-reliance among illiberal states is sometimes considered as challenging the dominant liberal order.

China’s effort to project itself onto the world took various forms including foreign aid, mostly without any organizational and/or programmatic links with existing multilateral aid providers. Particularly, China’s looming presence in Africa has been regarded as a success in its “independent foreign policy” which is a euphemistic term for “independence from American power.”⁶⁶⁾ China’s recently heightened focus on Africa is based on the calculus of defending its position in the area of human rights. As China has been facing the charges of human rights violation over the past two decades, it felt the need to win support from other illiberal states. African countries have been the perfect target for China’s proactive foreign policy in two respects. First, African countries are resource-rich but lack in infrastructure and technology necessary for any level of sustained economic growth. As the world’s fastest growing industrial economy China in recent years has been experiencing the gap between resources and economic ambition, and African countries became attractive as a supplier of raw materials. These material considerations should not be underestimated, but it must be noted that China has projected an image of itself as the leader of developing countries. And that is why a second consideration looms larger from the perspective of the eclectic argument. Many African countries including Zimbabwe, Sudan, and Eritrea have a notorious record of human rights violations, while China has been building a quid pro quo relationship with those countries in multilateral forums of human rights protection.⁶⁷⁾

China’s multilateral diplomacy has revealed its ideology more clearly in Latin America. Soon after its accession to the WTO, China began to step up its efforts to create a club of illiberal states. Latin American countries’ bitter experiences with market-oriented economic reforms based on the “Washington

65) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

66) Joshua Eisenman and Joshua Kurlantzick, “China’s Africa Strategy,” *Current History* (May 2006), p. 219.

67) *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Consensus” provided a favorable condition for China to act as “a born-again multilateralist”⁶⁸⁾ in a region traditionally considered as belonging to the American sphere of influence. China provided generous development aid to several debt-stricken countries of the region, while participating as a permanent observer in regional multilateral forums such as the Organization of American States. Meanwhile, behind the façade of these efforts to enhance economic interdependence, China engaged in public diplomacy emphasizing the efficacy of state-directed capitalism and the desirability of “win-win relations.”⁶⁹⁾

Finally, it would be necessary to identify different motivations of illiberal states to take advantage of multilateral arrangements in accordance with the relative power of those states. For great powers like China and Russia, multilateralism is most of the time a means, not an end, of achieving desired goals such as preserving their spheres of influence particularly by reducing U.S. presence. For middle powers like Brazil, multilateralism serves as a means of acquiring what they want by employing the politics of numbers. But at the same time those countries tend to place greater emphasis on the value of multilateral procedures regardless of outcomes. Middle powers are likely to be satisfied more easily by being invited and to seek stability within the existing multilateral arrangements.⁷⁰⁾ Recognition from others, in many cases, is the prime goal of illiberal states in dealing with multilateral institutions, but differences exist in the level of expectation. It is noteworthy that Chinese planners regard the country’s “contact with the West” as “a process of trying to let them understand China, as well as a process of influencing them to some extent.”⁷¹⁾ An eclectic approach put forward here notes that those differences derive from cultural peculiarities as well as power disparities.

68) Joshua Kurlantzick, “China’s Latin Leap Forward,” *World Policy Journal* (Fall 2006), p. 36.

69) *Ibid.*, pp. 35-38.

70) Jean Daudelin and Sean Burges, “Moving In, Carving Out, Proliferating: The Many Faces of Brazil’s Multilateralism since 1989,” *Pensamiento Propio* 33 (2011), p. 38.

71) Quoted in Joshua Cooper Ramo, *The Beijing Consensus* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2004), p. 28.

V. Conclusion

In this article I have sought to highlight an important but under-researched question: why do illiberal states commit themselves to multilateral arrangements based on the principles, norms, rules and decisionmaking procedures set by liberal states? This question is closely related to scholarly discourses on “power transition,” which address the relationship between the changing distribution of power and the status of the international order. The frequency and intensity of illiberal states’ participation in multilateral institutions have much to do with their relative power measured in terms of the proportion of an existing hegemon’s capability. For example, Jack Levy estimates that “[i]f a great power ... acquires at least 80 percent of the power of the dominant state, it is defined as a ‘challenger’ to the dominant state and to that state’s ability to control the international system.”⁷²⁾ If one accepts this operationalization, here is an easy answer. Illiberal states join multilateral institutions largely because they do not have enough power yet to revise the international order as a whole. They do so because liberal states, the biggest beneficiaries of the dominant system, have “go-it-alone power.”⁷³⁾ This line of reasoning is parsimonious but ignores many other important dimensions of illiberal states’ calculus. This article has suggested an alternative way to conceptualize illiberal states’ incentives and motivation to play within the limits of multilateral arrangements.

Illiberal states have been actively participating in multilateral organizations over the past two decades, and there is good reason to believe that they will keep on doing so. Multilateral arrangements provide illiberal states with the best venue for pushing for the politics of numbers. And participation in multilateral organizations and regimes facilitates illiberal states’ efforts to extract resources from their own societies to achieve various foreign policy goals. The fact that more and more countries join the bodies of global governance should be welcome news, but it also needs a sophisticated

72) Jack S. Levy, “Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China,” in Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (eds.), *China’s Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 13.

73) Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Gruber, “Power Politics and the Free Trade Bandwagon,” *Comparative Political Studies* 34-7 (September 2001), pp. 703-741.

explanation. Multilateralism as an organizing principle of international life emerged at the end of World War II, particularly under the auspices of American hegemony. The United States wanted to rebuild a liberal world order by combining its newly acquired hegemonic power and the multilateral institutional arrangements inherited from the interwar period. There were three potential benefits the United States could reap from multilateral institutions, according to Martin, which are “(1) lower transaction costs, (2) the deflection of challenges to the institution by its weaker members, and (3) increased stability under conditions of changes in relative power.”⁷⁴⁾ But the United States did not give full attention to the possibility that those benefits could be reaped by illiberal states who pursue goals at least partly incompatible with its social purpose.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government’s failure to appreciate the rebound effects of multilateralism has gone hand in hand with the scholarly inattention to different motives driving illiberal states toward the multilateral fold. Multilateralism is not just a means by which illiberal states pursue their national interests; it is part of changes in ideational contents of global governance. An eclectic approach combining neoclassical realism and constructivism has been put forward for a better explanation of the changes, and it needs to be prepared for further questions regarding the literature on power transition. A standard question would be whether a rising illiberal state or coalition of illiberal states will be accommodated into the dominant system or attempt to revise it in a very fundamental way. This question deserves scholarly attention, but future research employing an eclectic approach suggested here needs to focus on a more probable reality: “the emergence of an alternative international order that exists parallel to the predominant order.”⁷⁵⁾ Will an emerging and expanding club of illiberal states lead to the institutionalization of world politics in a way that the Cold War made countries in each bloc coordinate their foreign policies?⁷⁶⁾ This is an

74) Lisa L. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 783.

75) Naazneen Barma, Giacomo Chiozza, Ely Ratner, and Steven Weber, “A World Without the West? Empirical Patterns and Theoretical Implications,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2-4 (Winter 2009), p. 528.

76) Karl Loewenstein, “Sovereignty and International Co-operation,” *American Journal of International Law* 48-2 (April 1954), p. 223. Loewenstein’s piece was brought to my attention by a reviewer for this journal.

essentially empirical issue that could affect not just great powers, both liberal and illiberal, but also a vast majority of lesser powers, again both liberal and illiberal.

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