

# Spatial Fragmentation of, and US Support for, the Main Multilateral Institutions of the Western Order

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**Abstract** The growth of China-led minilateral initiatives mostly of a regional character has challenged the main multilateral institutions of the Western order and, ultimately, US authority. Faced with a progressive delegitimation of the institutional architecture that it promoted after World War II, the US, under the Obama administration, has acted to defend the existing main multilateral institutions of the order (UN, IMF, WB and WTO), attributing them with a strategic role. More than being radical, though, the reforms enacted have been incremental and pragmatic, but always imperfect. More importantly, they have not altered US influence, which is exercised mostly through informal means. This, however, has left room for dissatisfaction and more reform requests, but has added credibility to threats to use the alternative organizations created at the regional level, and this risks undermining not only the existing universal multilateral institutions, but also the existing American-led institutional order.

## 1 Introduction

The growth of the so-called rising powers has amplified reform requests of the main multilateral institutions of the liberal international order promoted by the United States (US) with the support of its Western allies at the end of World War II, and expanded after the end of the Cold War: United Nations (UN), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/World Trade Organization (WTO). However, even when reforms have been agreed, consent towards the reformed institutions has not increased, and initiatives suggesting contestation have been taken. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the New Development Bank (NDB), the Chang Mai Initiative, the Contingency Reserve Arrangement (CRA), are just a few of the many

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recent minilateral initiatives created by the rising powers, in particular China, that have been presented as a response to the unresponsiveness—at times outright ineffectiveness and unrepresentativeness—of universal institutions such as the IMF or the WB that had *already* been reformed (see, among others, Patrick 2015). However, the promotion by the US of minilateral inter-regional free trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), both of which risk undermining the WTO, the organization that has most successfully adapted to power shifts, signals that a discontent, evident during the 2016 presidential election, is also present in the US.

All of this indicates a widespread dissatisfaction with the main institutions of the current American-led international order, and a potential delegitimation of the order itself. While some of these initiatives maintain an inter-regional character, others, and in particular the AIIB, are regional in character and potentially capable of redefining institutional roles and power relations in specific areas, leading to a spatial fragmentation of the international order, and potentially pointing towards a “multiplex world”, that is, a composite world in which the American-led liberal hegemonic order is declining regardless of whether or not America itself is declining (Acharya 2014).

It remains to be seen whether the new initiatives will substitute or remain complementary to the existing universal institutions of the American-led liberal hegemonic order, but they already constitute an alternative path for dissatisfied coalitions. However, while attention has been paid to the challenges posed by the rising powers to the American-led liberal international order, less attention (among exceptions, see Vezirgiannidou 2013) has been paid to the promoter of that order and those institutions: the US. Indeed, the US reaction to the creation of the AIIB, the new China-led development bank for Asia, and its decision not to become a member of the new organization, and to request its traditional allies to do the same—a request followed only by Japan—indicate an American unease towards these new initiatives, but also a weaker support from the countries that traditionally backed the American-led liberal international order. It is therefore worth exploring whether, in view of the current power shift (both in terms of rising powers and the decline of its traditional allies), but still preeminent, the US is supporting the institutions of the international order it promoted, and keeping them relevant, or if it is renegotiating the institutional order.

After analysing the theoretical aspects of the relationship between the US and the main institutions of the American-led liberal hegemonic order, the chapter will identify the role played by the universal multilateral institutions in relation to the US, focusing on the National Security Strategies (NSSs) of the Obama administration (the administration that has so far been most affected by the power shift) as well as on the US commitment to support and/or reform them. The chapter will then investigate the current relationship of the US with the four universal multilateral organizations (UN, IMF, WB and WTO), analysing the US position on their reform: whether it opposed, promoted or consented to the reform; the outcome; and what it means for US influence within these institutions. It will be shown that important differences between the four international organizations are present,

but also that, in view of an increasing delegitimation, and despite domestic constraints, over time the US has become more assertive in its defence of the existing institutions, trying to enlarge its otherwise weakened coalition to consent to pragmatic but imperfect adaptations, rather than far-reaching reforms.

## 2 The US and the Institutional Order

The organization of the international political system promoted by the US with the support of its Western allies at the end of World War II represents an innovation, compared to previous orders (Ikenberry 2001).<sup>1</sup> It is based on leadership sharing, a system of rules and multilateral universal institutions, yet it promotes American interests and values. This is reflected in the four main universal institutions. The UN project was basically an American creation (Puchala 2005, p. 573). In the financial and development areas, the structure, location, and mandate of the IMF and WB were determined by the US (Woods 2003, p. 92). In the trade area, the US played a leading role in GATT negotiations and promoted its transformation into the WTO in the 1990s (Sen 2003, p. 116). Thanks to special privileges and factors related to governance, funds and personnel, in these institutions the influence of the US on decision-making outcomes has traditionally been remarkable.

The US combined its hegemonic role with multilateral institutions to share transactional costs and give the hegemonic structure a greater stability (Attinà 2011, p. 97). By choosing an international order based on multilateralism, the US created legitimate and durable rules and institutions capable of promoting its interests, while reassuring weaker states of power restraint by the dominant state. These rules and institutions moderated power asymmetries, and, over time, path dependence and the growth of institutional dividends made institutional change more difficult (Ikenberry 2001, 2011).

This innovation was made possible by the domestic character and preferences of the US (Ruggie 1993), but also by an environment in which norms of self-restraint in the use of force by states, democratic practices, a world public opinion, norms of sovereign equality and universal participation, and the principle that legitimate authority is based on reciprocally binding agreements that should be equally applied to all members started being diffused (Ikenberry 2001; Modelski 2008; Finnemore and Jurkovic 2014; Reus-Smit 1997; Hurd 2007). Once established, multilateral institutions have introduced formal procedures in the government of the global political system that have transformed the political organization into an institution-based leadership organization and, through agreed procedures for collective decision-making, have linked formal-legal institutions, political legitimacy and democracy (Attinà 2008, p. 125). This creates the expectation that within multilateral organizations decision-making processes should be(come) inclusive

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<sup>1</sup>The terms organization and order will be used interchangeably.

and democratic. The relationship between the US and the current main institutions of the American-led order is then subject to pressures deriving from changes in material factors, especially power shifts, but also from institutional and normative factors, taking place at both the domestic and the international level.

Besides being a hegemon, the US is a great power. This creates a role tension. When no real challenger is on the horizon, it is more difficult for the US to sacrifice its short-term interests in favour of long-term ones (Cronin 2001). The US has always tried to build its institutional order, avoiding real restraints on its policy autonomy and political sovereignty, and to gain as much policy discretion as possible, while locking in weaker states (Ikenberry 2003), and hegemony provides the US with the privilege of instrumental or pragmatic use of multilateral organizations (Foot et al. 2003). However, the recently more frequent US recourse to unilateralism has been traced to structural factors: the end of the Cold War and the greater difficulties for American Presidents to resist parochial groups and veto players who oppose multilateralism at home. These structural factors are an obstacle towards American re-engagement with multilateral institutions, and allow—at most—fragmentary and incremental adjustments in different areas and institutional venues (Skidmore 2005, 2012).

Over time, this risks undermining the already weakened institution-based leadership order. But, whether and how the US should promote institutional reforms in view of power shifts is highly debated. According to Brooks and Wohlforth (2009, 2016), because the US is still in a position of strength and lacks immediate competitors, it should reform international institutions now that it can still persuade other states to adapt the existing institutions to the new challenges. But, this opportunity will not be available for long. Others are more sceptical that this is possible. Some believe that unipolarity is already over, so the US is no longer capable of organizing the international system: it has neither the credibility nor the legitimacy to do so, and rising powers have no interest in locking themselves in now, as they will shortly be able to reshape the international system and construct an order that reflects their interests, norms and values (Layne 2012). Others share the assumption of unipolarity, but believe that the US cannot reform international institutions now because there are no systemic reasons for weaker states to cement US power advantage into a new institutional order (Voeten 2011), or that being a unipole is not a sufficient reason to reform the institutions (Legro 2011). Schweller (2011) argues that the conditions for the US to reform the international institutions no longer exist because we have already entered a delegitimation phase, in which practices of soft balancing and criticism of the existing order are undermining and challenging the legitimacy of the hegemon's right to rule, and its established order. Finally, once in place, international organizations gain autonomy and authority (Finnemore and Barnett 2004), making attempts at reshaping them more than difficult.

Whether the new minilateral and regional organizations should be taken as an indicator of contestation in the transition from a hegemonic to a post-hegemonic era, and whether they can undermine the existing multilateral institutions, are widely-debated topics. Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) minimize the contestation element. They believe that the rising powers are only asking for an increased status

requiring minor changes to the existing order, and that initiatives such as the AIIB do not threaten the order's basic arrangements of principles. Other scholars acknowledge an element of contestation. Although there is no alternative yet, more states are seeking voice and authority, asking for a seat at the table. And the struggle for the revision of political hierarchy is taking place *both* within the main institutions of the current international order and within regions. In this respect, both the reform requests of the old institutions and the creation of the new ones, such as the AIIB, are forms of contestation. However, the non-Western states that are contesting US authority still do so operating *within* the postwar multilateral system (Ikenberry 2015a, b).

A third group of International Relations (IR) scholars emphasizes the contestation component of the new institutions. It is believed that the rising powers are already challenging the pecking order, and that they ask for a new consensus on the ordering rules that define legitimacy based on their own conceptions regarding what constitutes a legitimate order (Kupchan 2012). The analysis of Barma et al. (2007, 2013, 2014) indicates that an increasing fragmentation of the international order already exists. According to them, the growing connectedness of the non-Western world has led from contestation to competition, because the non-Western world does not recognize itself in terms of Western values, and is acting to protect its own values and interests. Institutions such as the AIIB are not substitutes for the Western-led multilateral institutions of the liberal world order and do not replace it yet, but they will shortly become an alternative. Their creation has been related to institutional competition for global governance (Ratner 2014): in the case of the AIIB, China was forced to bypass existing international institutions, because its voting share at the IMF was not commensurate with its position in the global economy. But, this was just the last move in a long list of Chinese efforts to create institutions that exclude the US and its allies. Accordingly, it would make no sense for the US to resurrect the post-World War II institutions, in which it has lost leverage anyway. On the contrary, the US should try to acknowledge the challenge; let non-Western initiatives that complement US interests live; be open when it opposes them; and seek to shape them from within, when possible (Barma et al. 2007, p. 29, 2013). Acharya (2014) agrees with Barma, Ratner and Weber that the representation of the global character of the American-led liberal hegemonic order is somewhat a myth and that the American world order is coming to an end, and that it cannot be reconstituted. In a decentred, complex and multidimensional world, new actors, besides the rising powers, are relevant, and the US can only try to accommodate, rather than coopt, all of them. But, it will have to adapt to a new multilateralism that is less conducive to American power and purpose, and to a new order made and managed in a more diversified, complex and decentralized way. Indeed, Patrick (2015) claims that both the G.W. Bush and Obama administrations have already tried to treat the rising powers as responsible stakeholders that could be integrated smoothly into the existing Western liberal order. And failed. This eventually led the US itself to an increasing use of minilateral solutions that remain inadequate for solving global problems.

Minilateralism does not necessarily undermine multilateralism in the short term, and may actually complement it. The new minilateral institutions could then be considered part of regime complexity and forum shopping: nothing really new (Voeten 2014). However, long-term consequences of the widespread adoption of minilateral initiatives are less predictable, especially if they were deliberately promoted to delegitimize universal multilateral institutions. Interestingly, American and Chinese brands of minilateral initiatives show some differences. American minilateralism is normally inter-regional or global, but ad hoc in nature, and tends to substitute multilateral organizations when they cannot act or when a minilateral solution is more effective. On the contrary, the strand of minilateral initiatives promoted by China has mostly a regional character, and points towards a stabilization of alternatives to multilateral organizations at the regional level under Chinese leadership, and therefore to the redefinition of institutional roles and power relations at the regional level. By exercising leadership in these initiatives, China builds support for an alternative to an order that, at the regional level, has seen Japan as the main actor. It also enlarges its supporting coalition, making it costlier for the US to operate in the area, and creating the preconditions to project this support also into the existing universal multilateral institutions in which China is asking for a greater role. In this respect, it seems to be in opposition more to American authority as expressed through existing multilateral organizations than to multilateralism per se, and therefore points towards a potential spatial fragmentation of the international order, allowing China regional preeminence and autonomy from existing multilateral organizations that it cannot control. The new minilateral initiatives have a significant bargaining leverage in relation to existing universal multilateral organizations because they add credibility to dissatisfied actors. Indeed, the use of newly created institutions to challenge existing ones when dissatisfied coalitions are present, and change is difficult, has been described as a common phenomenon (Morse and Keohane 2014), and institutions facing severe competition have been found more prone to reflect changes in state interests and power (Lipsky 2015a): it is the threat of exit, and therefore the existence of outside options, that justifies the distributional change so that the organization can reflect power changes over time. This is the reason why changes in the WB (which in its area has 28 competitors) are easier than changes in the IMF (which in its area has six competitors). Therefore, the AIIB will hardly undermine the WB (Lipsky 2015b), but can support its change. The importance of alternative organizations to support the credibility of threats during the negotiations phase, and promote institutional adaptation on account of power shifts, has also been highlighted by Zangl et al. (2016), who also note that the result of adaptation will be imperfect, because institutions can only adjust in a path-dependent manner.

These strands of literature suggest that, in view of the ongoing contestation and delegitimation process, it is important for the US to decide whether it wants to maintain the existing institutions, but it also suggests that serious obstacles exist. The creation of new organizations is a contestation of the current multilateral institutions of the American-led liberal hegemonic order, but this contestation takes place unevenly, leaving the possibility of outside options in some areas more than

in others. Eventually, should it succeed, institutional adaptation would be imperfect and its chance of being favourable to the US would depend on the American capacity to create a stronger coalition within the organization.

### 3 Multilateral Institutions in the US Security Strategy

Variations in US attitudes towards multilateral institutions have always been present, but the G.W. Bush administration is generally associated with having the greatest distance towards them. Less acknowledged is the fact that over time it re-engaged with multilateral institutions and, once it became evident that new powers were rising, it tried to integrate them within the existing institutions (Patrick 2015). However, it is the Obama administration that has so far had to deal with the effects of power shift the most, so it is useful to focus on this administration and analyse the changing role of multilateral institutions in its security strategies.

Coming after the Bush administration, Obama put US re-engagement with multilateral institutions at the centre of his programme (for a different view, see Skidmore 2012). Being aware of global challenges, his rhetoric was very supportive of the existing universal multilateral institutions, but acknowledged the need to adapt them to the new reality (Obama 2007a). Rebuilding and reform of multilateral institutions (in the case of the UN *far-reaching reform*), thanks to the US capacity to widen support towards them and to turn the rising powers into real stakeholders, was presented as an integral element of US leadership (Obama 2007b)<sup>2</sup>. In this early view, the importance that Obama attributed to the existing multilateral institutions, their reform and the involvement of a broad support coalition, was clear. Indeed, when announcing his national security team, Obama (2008) referred to the need to have global institutions that work to face global challenges, and to the UN as being indispensable and imperfect, indicating that commitment to multilateralism meant commitment to reform the existing multilateral institutions. During this speech, he also announced the return of the US Permanent Representative to the United Nations to the position of member of the cabinet, and as an integral member of his team. Another initial important symbolic action was the payment to the UN of US arrears that had accumulated between 2005 and 2008, and the payment of the 2009 peacekeeping obligations in full, because the US could not otherwise lead from a position of strength (Rice 2009). This was a remarkable change, considering that arrears payment has traditionally been a thorny issue in US-UN relations (Smith 2004; Rosenthal 2004). Nevertheless, in September 2015 the US owed peacekeeping dues for 2014 and 2015 totalling more than \$2 billion, and still owed its 2015 dues to the UN's regular budget (Fitzgerald 2015).

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<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, though, he only mentions weak Secretariat management practices, overextended peacekeeping operations, and resolutions condemning Israel passed by the UN Human Rights Council.

Given the increasingly *sovereigntist* Congress (Drezner 2012), it has been extremely difficult for Obama to undertake bold multilateral initiatives, because to bypass the Congress the only option left was to use presidential or executive agreements (Skidmore 2012; Bellinger 2012). Indeed, partisan polarization, and conservatives' propensity to oppose treaties has led to a higher propensity of the Obama administration to use executive agreements (Voeten 2012; Peake et al. 2012; Peake 2016). However, this *stealth multilateralism* (Kaye 2013) signals a feeble domestic support that weakens the US position when it comes to reforming multilateral institutions. Domestic opposition makes it more convenient for US administrations to invest in forms of informal cooperation or minilateralism rather than engage in far-reaching reforms of the existing universal multilateral institutions (Skidmore 2012; Patrick 2014, 2015). Nevertheless, the Obama administration attributed a strategic role to multilateral institutions.

Comparing the two NSSs of the Obama administration, released in 2010 and 2015, a potential evolution in its attitude toward multilateral institutions emerges. The structure of the two documents might suggest an attention that is fading away: the 2010 NSS is considerably longer than the 2015 one, and it dedicates an entire paragraph of the section "International Order" to strengthening institutions and mechanisms for cooperation, while the same section of the 2015 NSS is organized around regions and alliances. However, the content of the 2015 NSS is less rhetorical and more incisive, and the part concerning multilateral institutions comes before those on alliances and regions, and frames them.

The 2010 NSS introduces the restructuring of international institutions in the section "Renewing American Leadership—Building at Home, Shaping Abroad", going back to the post-World War II international order building experience, strictly linking institutional reforms to American leadership and making it instrumental to American leadership. In the introduction, there is awareness that the international architecture of the 20th century needs to be restructured and adapted to respond to the new threats. But, it is also stressed how important and useful it has proven to be over time. It is considered "destructive" (White House 2010a, p. 3) to walk away from the existing international institutions, and a priority to strengthen them to face global threats that no country alone can solve. Reform efforts should make the international institutions more representative, and therefore give voice but also responsibilities to the emerging *powers*, thus suggesting that accommodation of the new great powers – more than a move to democratizing the institutions – is what the US will try to achieve. The document also stresses the importance of reaching reform together with like-minded nations. Coupled with the attention towards allies and partnership, this suggests the intention to make reforms together with the traditional European and Japanese partners (those who must sacrifice the most). In the section "International Order", dedicated to strengthening institutions, the importance of *leading* global efforts to modernize the infrastructure of international cooperation is stated up front. Again, reference is made to an intent of accommodating emerging powers, rather than to a more general increase of representativeness and responsiveness of the current institutions. Reform towards increased effectiveness is the other important point. The UN receives great attention: the US



supports reforms that improve the management of the organization, but also reform of the Security Council to enhance its performance, credibility and legitimacy. The strategy also mentions that the US is renewing leadership in the WB and IMF, leveraging US engagement and investments in these institutions.

The 2015 NSS puts much greater stress on American leadership and strength in a context in which power is shifting. In the introduction, while reference is made to a rule-based international order, to be advanced by US leadership, international institutions are only mentioned in passing, after state partners, non-state and private actors, and along with regional organizations (White House 2015, p. 3). The UN appears again in the section on “Security”. Here, the Obama administration pledges to bolster the capacities of the UN, as well as those of regional organizations. It promises to meet financial commitments, and to press for reforms in the area of peacekeeping. In the section on “Prosperity”, the G-20 is a vehicle to *reinforce* the core architecture of the international economic and financial system. The WTO is explicitly addressed. The US reaffirms its commitment to governance reforms of the IMF and WB to make them more effective and representative. Explicit reference is made to the importance of the TTIP and the TPP, that together would put the US at the centre of a free trade zone covering two-thirds of the global economy. The change in perspective of the US, though, becomes clear in the “International Order” section, in which the post-World War II institutional architecture is defined as essential and still crucial, and the US pledges to continue to embrace it. But, it is also acknowledged that it has never been perfect, and aspects of it are increasingly being challenged. The causes of stress are identified in resource demands, competing imperatives among member states, and the need for reform in some policy and administrative areas. Strengthening and modernization of the institutions is explicitly referred to, but no mention is made of thorough reforms, nor of the need to accommodate emerging powers. Given that the strategy places US leadership in the context of the existing architecture, strengthened but not thoroughly reformed, it is a defence of those existing multilateral institutions that have “served us well for the past 70 years” (White House 2015, p. 23; contra, see Davidson 2015).

A comparison of the two NSSs reveals a changed attitude of the US. Multilateral institutions gained a strategic importance. But, the need to reform them to accommodate the rising powers seems to have left room to a much more defensive stance of the existing institutions, to be marginally, not thoroughly, reformed to *adapt* to the current needs, in terms of responsiveness to global problems more than to voice requests.

It is too early to figure out whether the existing universal multilateral institutions will have a strategic role for the Trump administration, and very few indications are available so far. The new administration will act within an already weakened order, and it has already declared that several elements of the Obama strategy will change. Attention to sovereignty, as opposed to internationalism, and tendency towards isolationism, may clash with support to the existing multilateral institutions. Indeed, the WTO—but also the TPP (now cancelled) and the TTIP—has already come under attack, and speculations circulate regarding a possible US membership of the AIIB. And the choice of a politician with no foreign policy experience and not close

to the new president as US permanent representative to the UN might be an indicator of a limited interest in the UN. Nevertheless, the choice of somebody known for a capacity to mediate, rather than that of more favoured hawkish candidates, Trump's interest in keeping dialogue with Russia and China open, and the US history of instrumental use of existing multilateral institutions, suggest that we should not yet preclude—among others—the possibility of a selective engagement with multilateral institutions.

## 4 The US and Reforms of the Multilateral Institutions

The issue of reform is crucial to understanding the US position towards multilateral institutions. It is, however, important to understand what kind of reform the US asks for and what it allows, and whether there is a common or different pattern in each of the four institutions (UN, IMF, WB and WTO). Accordingly, each of these will be analysed separately. The description of reform will be preceded by a brief account of existing analyses of US influence on them.<sup>3</sup>

### 4.1 *United Nations*

The UN is the organization that is most present in the NSSs of the Obama administration, as a pillar of its security strategy, and it was the main pillar of the post-World War II American-led international order. It is also the organization that attracts the highest number of reform requests. Especially under attack is the Security Council (UNSC), for its restricted membership and the veto power of its permanent members. The dynamics in the two bodies are remarkably different. While in the initial years the US enjoyed a vast support in the General Assembly (UNGA), which it used to overcome stalemates in the UNSC, starting with the decolonization process and the entrance of new members, it progressively lost support to the point of becoming progressively marginalized. While the US voting cohesion in the UNGA on votes that the US deems important is not as low as in earlier times (in 2006, for instance, it was 27.2%), in 2015 it was 43.2%: the US has trouble getting its initiatives approved, and often finds itself in a minority group (Department of State 2006, 2015). Quite a different situation exists in the UNSC, where the US, together with its European allies, is not only the decisive coalition, but in recent years has dramatically increased its control of the Security Council's agenda-setting and decision-making outputs (Monteleone 2015). Other means of influence are the budget and personnel. If, over time, it has managed to reduce

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<sup>3</sup>The present work will not focus on all the many possible sources of influence (Cox and Jacobson 1974).

**Table 1** Contributions to the UN regular budget of the top ten contributors approved by the UNGA on December 23, 2015

Member state	Percentage
United States	22
Japan	9.680
China	7.921
Germany	6.389
France	4.859
United Kingdom	4.463
Brazil	3.823
Italy	3.748
Russian Federation	3.088
Canada	2.921

Author's elaboration from A/RES/70/245, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/245](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/245). Accessed 10 September 2016

**Table 2** Contributions to UN peacekeeping of the five permanent members approved by the UNGA on December 28, 2015

	Effective rate in 2015	Effective rate in 2016
China	6.6368	10.2879
France	7.2105	6.3109
Russia	3.1431	4.0107
United Kingdom	6.6768	5.7966
United States	28.3626	28.5738

Author's elaboration from A/70/331/Add.1, [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/331/Add.1](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/331/Add.1). Accessed 10 September 2016

its contributions, the US is still by far the main contributor to the UN budget (Tables 1, 2), has traditionally used the payment of its dues and arrears as a leverage (Smith 2004; Rosenthal 2004), and still does (Sengupta 2016). As for personnel, the US has by far the largest permanent mission and comprises five ambassadors, one of which is for management and reform only (Table 3). This allows it to gain more influence, especially in the agenda setting phase (see, among others, Panke 2013). Another means of influence is related to the US special position (shared with the other permanent members) when it comes to the selection of the Secretary General.

As already mentioned, the US permanent mission at the UN has a very high rank diplomatic profile, and one of the five ambassadors deals exclusively with UN reform and management, evidence of the importance of the issue. Nevertheless, the US has shown no interest in governance reform of the UN. It has in the past agreed with the possibility of enlarging the Security Council to a few members, possibly of its choice. Clinton favoured Germany and Japan, Bush focused on Japan only, and Obama in 2010 promoted the possibility of India, without engaging too much

**Table 3** Top 20 permanent missions to the UN by size, June 2016

Permanent mission	Units of personnel
United States	157
China	87
Russian Federation	84
Germany	76
Japan	51
United Kingdom	43
Nigeria	38
France	37
Brazil	36
Republic of Korea	35
Saudi Arabia	30
Senegal	30
Venezuela	29
Vietnam	28
Turkey	28
Italy	26
Spain	26
South Africa	26
Egypt	25
India	20

Author's elaboration from ST/PLS/SER.A/306, <http://www.un.int/protocol/sites/www.un.int/files/Protocol%20and%20Liaison%20Service/bb305.pdf>. Accessed 10 September 2016

(Bosco 2015). The Obama administration has declared to be open, in principle, to a “modest” expansion of both permanent and non-permanent Council members<sup>4</sup>. But, the US has never asked for it, and has always stated, as a precondition, that enlargement should not impact effectiveness. It also considers (like China and Russia) that it is non-negotiable for permanent members to abandon their veto power. That is why, at the end of the day, it is happy with no reform, like China and Russia. Nevertheless, as Bosco (2015) highlights, this is the most requested reform, and, although the US would have no qualified majority in the UNGA to pass its own reform, it could eventually face one promoted by some other state that wins the required two-thirds majority of the UNGA, and it would have to pay the very high political cost of using its veto power on a proposal that has gathered broad support. In the meantime, the US is allowing informal procedural reforms of the UNSC to reach greater effectiveness.

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<sup>4</sup>Statement by Ambassador Rosemary DiCarlo in the General Assembly Plenary Debate on the Security Council Annual Report and Reform, New York, November 15, 2012, reported in Blanchfield (2015, p. 2).

Conversely, the US has shown great interest in reforming the managerial aspects of the UN and in reducing its contributions. In this respect, the Obama administration has continued along the same lines as the Bush administration. As effectively summarized by Nossel (2016), UN reform for the US centres heavily on ensuring the responsible use of US funds, and, despite a dedicated ambassadorial position and its rhetoric, Washington has not been serious about deeper UN reform. This attitude resonates with political documents (including the NSS) and speeches. Since the beginning of Obama's mandate, explicit reference was made to spending US money wisely, containing the growth of the UN budget, and increasing efficiency and accountability. Accordingly, in 2010 the US successfully fought to preserve the mandate of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, and to reform how the UN undertakes "administrative and logistics support for UN field operations (the Global Field Support Strategy) to capture efficiencies within peacekeeping operations and improve the UN's capacity to support complex field missions" (White House 2010b). In 2011, UN Reform included UN arrears; budget discipline; UN peacekeeping; oversight and accountability; transparency; human resources reform (White House 2011). These were better articulated in 2012, and concerned: containing the growth of the UN budget and pressing the issue of efficiency and fiscal accountability at the UN (the issue of reduction of US contributions being the most important point); boosting transparency and advancing oversight and accountability throughout the UN system; promoting an effective UN (US leadership has been instrumental in advancing a reform of how the UN undertakes administrative and logistics support for UN field operations, in streamlining contractual arrangements within the UN, and in harmonizing conditions of service for field-based staff across the various organizations in the UN system); and—new item—promoting integrity (the US fought to prevent "abusive governments seeking leadership positions at the UN"; prevented reimbursement for troops who have been repatriated for disciplinary reasons; and fought for "all worthy non-governmental organizations" to have access to the UN) (US Mission to the UN 2012b). Indeed, economy, accountability, integrity and excellence are the four key pillars of the UN reform agenda of the US (Table 4) (US Mission to the UN 2012a). No major change in the position of the Obama administration on UN reform has since been registered (Blanchfield 2015, pp. 7–9).

All in all, this seems to be a domestic-looking reform agenda, one that speaks to the Congress and American public opinion, rather than to the world. It does not aim at changing either the rules—especially the decision-making rules—or the roles, and certainly not the function of the UN as a pillar of the American-led international order. It is also a very conservative agenda: while using the rhetoric of reform, the US allows the organization to slowly and incrementally adapt, but it keeps the structure as it is; and it may grant some governance reforms, but does not promote them. The most important reform, concerning the UNSC, is not addressed. All of this points to a preference to keep the organization as it is, because it is already conducive to US interests.

**Table 4** Pillars and goals of the UN reform agenda of the US

Pillar	Goal/action
Economy	• Bring discipline and restraint to UN budgets
	• Shrink the bureaucracy and right-size of UN staff
	• Bring private sector sensibility to the UN
	• Deploy 21 <sup>st</sup> -century information technology
	• Reform the budget process
	• Revitalize the ACABQ
Accountability	• Strengthen internal oversight
	• Increase transparency throughout the UN system
	• Encourage a broader global “UN Accountability Community”
	• Improve UN procurement processes
	• Open the doors on UN websites
	• Lead by example
Integrity	• Forge a new coalition to improve HRC membership
	• Require criteria for member states to hold leadership positions
	• End peacekeeper misconduct
	• Stop discrimination against Israel
	• Fight for fairness in the Fifth Committee
Excellence	• Overhaul the human resources system to reward performance
	• Deploy the right people to the right place at the right time
	• Unify assistance and programme delivery
	• Trim outdated “Mandates”
	• Create a culture of evaluation for effectiveness

Author’s elaboration from US Mission to the UN (2012a)

## 4.2 IMF and World Bank

The influence of the US on the IMF and WB has traditionally been very high (Woods 2003; Oatley and Yackee 2004; Dreher and Jensen 2007; Stone 2008, 2011; Kilby 2009; contra, see Lyne et al. 2009). Woods (2003) has traced US influence within both the IMF and the WB in formal and informal elements and her analysis remains valid as of today (in the case of the IMF, confirmed by Stone 2011). According to Woods (2003), the US influences the two organizations through their financial structure, formal and informal processes shaping the use of resources, staffing and management, and formal structures of voting and power. In practice, all of them are strictly related. In both organizations, the US is by far the biggest funder and this is reflected in the decision-making process, and particularly in the number of votes available (Table 5).<sup>5</sup> Almost all the other major shareholders

<sup>5</sup>Both the IMF and the WB pool the resources of their members and use that capital to fund lending to members in need, so they are less dependent than the UN on contributions for their operations.

**Table 5** Distribution of quotas and votes in the IMF as of September 11, 2016 and WB (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD) as of August 29, 2016

State	IMF quota (%)	IMF votes (%)	State	WB (IBRD) quota (%)	WB (IBRD) votes (%)
US	17.47	16.54	US	17.48	16.54
Japan	6.49	6.16	Japan	7.54	7.15
China	6.42	6.09	China	4.86	4.62
Germany	5.61	5.33	Germany	4.40	4.19
UK	4.24	4.04	UK	4.12	3.92
France	4.24	4.04	France	4.12	3.92
Italy	3.17	3.03	India	3.19	3.04
India	2.76	2.64	Russia	3.03	2.89
Russia	2.72	2.60	Saudi Arabia	3.03	2.89
Brazil	2.32	2.23	Italy	2.63	2.52

Author's elaboration from IMF, <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/memdir/members.aspx>. Accessed 11 September 2016; and WB, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/BODINT/Resources/278027-1215524804501/IBRDCountryVotingTable.pdf>. Accessed 11 September 2016

are traditionally close allies of the US, and the potential competitors have limited weight. This makes it easier for the US to gather support in both organizations. Interestingly, this is already the result of a major reform (see below) and leaves the US veto power on the most important decisions regarding major changes (requiring 85% majority). US contributions to the WB are still the biggest, but they are less essential for the functioning of the organization. Nevertheless, as in the IMF, its quota provides the US veto power over the most important decisions (requiring 85% majority). However, the US influences the WB, also thanks to the funds it provides to the IDA, and thanks to co-financing and trust funds. Although over time other elements have also been identified as influential in the decision-making process, leading to lending decisions (among others, Chwieroth 2013; Nelson 2014), and although literature is clear in not confusing it with full control (Stone 2008), “the record of lending from both institutions strongly suggests a pattern of US interests and preferences” (Woods 2003, p. 103). Besides the formal decision-making process, another informal way of pressure concerns the auto-selection of proposals: senior managers of both the WB and the IMF would hardly present recommendations risking US disapproval (Woods 2003, p. 107). Staff selection plays an important role, too. While nationality has diversified over time, staff recruitment has traditionally favoured staff educated in economics in Western, especially American universities, favouring *intellectual monocropping*, that tends to have an important influence on the programmes (Evans and Finnemore 2001; Nelson 2014). Indeed, as of today, despite a greater attention to the problem in both organizations, the IMF staff is heavily biased towards American nationality (Table 6), and the staff are predominantly educated in American or European universities (Table 7). In the case of the Economist programme, the main entry

**Table 6** Top ten nationalities in the IMF staff, 2015

Nationality	Percentage
US	23.1
UK	4.4
China	4.4
India	4.3
France	4.1
Germany	3.1
Canada	2.8
Italy	2.6
Brazil	2.1
Japan	2.1

Author's elaboration from IMF (2015, p. 58–64)

**Table 7** Educational diversity in the IMF

Region/country where the university is located	Bachelor degree (%)	Master's degree (%)	Ph.D (%)
Africa (sub-Saharan)	4.7	2.1	0.8
China	4.3	1.5	0.9
East Asia	7	1.7	0.6
India	5.1	2.6	0.3
Asia (other)	1.6	1.1	0.3
Transition countries	4.5	5.4	3.6
France	2.9	6.9	4
Germany	1.5	2.8	2.7
Italy	1.8	–	3
United Kingdom	6.7	11.7	9.9
Europe (others)	6.2	7.8	8.5
Middle East and North Africa	3.1	1.2	0.3
United States	37.3	46.7	62.6
Canada	3.5	3.6	2.3
Other Western Hemisphere	9.7	3.5	0.3

Author's elaboration from IMF (2015, p. 50–51)

point to the organization, staff are educated in American or European universities only (Table 8). As for top management, it is customary that the President of the World Bank is a candidate favoured by the US, while the managing director of the IMF is a candidate favoured by West European members. Interestingly, both Lagarde (French) and Kim (American) have been reconfirmed at the helm of the two organizations, this time with little or no competition nor discussion. The final way of influence concerns the executive boards. In these, all members are represented, but not all are present, and only the biggest contributors have a single seat each. Although they tend to operate by consensus, the voting power of member



**Table 8** Economist programme 2015

Region where the university is located	Percentage
Europe	55 (25% of which in the UK)
US and Canada	45
Other regions	0

Author's elaboration from IMF (2015, p. 42)

states is taken into account in determining the result, so it is “a key ‘behind-the-scenes’ element in decision-making” (Woods 2003, p. 111). In combination with a very large delegation, that allows the US to garner support, this heavily influences decision-making outcomes. In the IMF, this also means that the US is usually the only active participant (exceptions are France and the UK, normally on the American side) (Stone 2011, p. 57).

As these data reflect a post-reform situation, it is useful to see what kind of reform has been approved and what has been the US position towards it. The IMF, as the organization with the fewest recorded changes and the least number of challengers (Lipsy 2015a), received many calls for reform, especially after the 2007 financial crisis. The first changes had taken place in 2006, with the decision to increase quotas from underrepresented countries such as China, South Korea, Turkey and Mexico, and in 2008, with financial and governance reforms to regain credibility and legitimacy. This led, in 2010, to the adoption of a reform package that included a doubling of quotas and a shift towards emerging countries, which allowed emerging countries more influence in the decision-making process and imposed a change in the composition of the executive board to increase representativeness. The adopted reforms have reduced the decision-making power of European countries, which were overrepresented, and allowed China to become the third shareholder after the US and Japan, while India, Russia and Brazil entered the top ten list of shareholders (Table 5).

However, besides the rhetorical emphasis on the rebalancing of the IMF to increase representativeness of developing countries, many scholars (among others, Wade 2011; Woods 2010; Lesage et al. 2013) have highlighted that the change has been minimal, and that those who controlled the IMF still do. The voting shares of the developed countries that were already controlling the decision-making process have been reduced from 57.9% to 55.3% (Wade 2011, p. 364). In the case of the African countries, voting shares have been reduced from 5.9% to 5.6% (Wade 2011, p. 364). The US has reduced its quotas, but it is still the only country with veto power on the most important decisions, while Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (the so-called BRICS) do not have enough shares to veto decisions, even when acting as a bloc (Lesage et al. 2013, p. 11). According to Woods (2010, p. 56), the biggest winners of the reform were South Korea, Singapore, Turkey, China, India, Brazil and Mexico, so countries considered close to the US benefitted too, and “the results do little to offset the perception of emerging economies that the IMF is mostly a US organization”.

Reconstructing the US negotiating position, Lesage et al. (2013) argue that, coming after the financial crisis, the US had a strong preference for boosting international liquidity, but was aware of the need to involve the emerging powers. This also fitted well with its intentions to renew the institution and preserve its mission. The reform would have been disadvantageous for the European members that were over-represented, but not so much for the US, which, despite being under-represented would have maintained its veto power, a non-negotiable point. So, the reforms would have led to a stronger institution still led by the US, and in which the emerging members would have been induced to internalize US-promoted monetary rules and norms (Lesage et al. 2013, p. 14). Accordingly, the US pressed its European allies to make the biggest sacrifices and maintained an institution in which it has great influence. Moreover, as highlighted by Stone (2011), the US influences the IMF mostly through its informal power, so it may well have been more interested in ceding formal power, provided this did not affect its informal power. However, the US Congress stalled ratification until December 2015, so the reform was implemented only in February 2016. This has also caused a delay in another quota review, now set to conclude by October 2017 (Treasury Department 2016, p. 5), and it is considered one of the causes behind the Chinese decision to promote the AIIB. It remains to be seen whether more far-reaching reform requests of the IMF will emerge. Interestingly, in 2016 the only minor obstacle between Lagarde and its second term was the excessive attention dedicated to European countries, but she was reconfirmed nonetheless.

Reform requests had also been addressed to the WB, which responded in 2010 with an important set of reforms. The US played a major role in the reform of the WB. According to Vestergaard and Wade (2013), however, the reform allowed Western states to retain their dominant voice. Before the reform, the US (alone) and European countries (collectively) had veto power on the most important decisions, and the most advanced economies (Part I countries) — not the beneficiaries of the Bank loans (Part II countries) — had more than half of the votes. After the reform, the share of developing and transition countries increased from 42.60% to 47.19%, while the share of developed countries reduced from 57.40% to 52.81%, leaving the latter group the majority (Vestergaard and Wade 2013, p. 153). What is more important, the WB obtained this result by reclassifying high-income countries (such as South Korea, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Hungary, Poland and Kuwait) as middle-income countries, rather than by carrying out a major reform of the quotas. So, according to Vestergaard and Wade (2013, p. 153), the reality is that “the voting share of developing countries (in the proper sense of the term) increased from 34.67% to only 38.38% while the developed (high-income) countries retained more than 60%”. Moreover, the few gains made by developing countries were eroded by non-compliance, with a promise by several high-income countries not to subscribe to the full amount of shares they would be entitled to, and by the inability of the low-income countries to subscribe in full to the increase in the amount of shares to which they are entitled (Vestergaard and Wade 2013, p. 154). European countries as a bloc, and Japan as a single country, were the biggest losers in the reform. However, by subscribing to unallocated shares, “*Japan, Germany, and*

*Canada have more voting power today than they had prior to the voting reforms, and the loss of voting power incurred by United Kingdom and France in the voting reform has been almost fully reversed*” (Vestergaard and Wade 2013, p. 159). China, Brazil and Turkey are the countries which gained the most. Russia should have lost quotas, but it managed to maintain its position by threatening to block the reform process. According to Vestergaard and Wade (2015, p. 7), the final result is that today developing countries have less voting power than that agreed in the 2010 reform. They also highlight that this lack of real reform (in both the WB and the IMF) causes frustration in non-Western countries, to the point of considering the exit option (Vestergaard and Wade 2015, p. 10). In this respect, Kim’s lack of competitors for the position of President of the WB can be taken as a sign that there is both less pressure for a change and a lack of interest in the organization, given the now existing alternative options.

With the reform, the US has maintained its veto power and predominance in the organization. The US is now “*reviewing* [emphasis added] options for improving governance structures so as to reflect the growing weight of emerging markets in the global economy” (Treasury Department 2016, p. 10). Indeed, in 2015 the WB launched another shareholding review to discuss a possible redistribution of voting power in 2017 and “The United States strongly support this roadmap, believing that these discussions will help make the World Bank even more representative of global realities” (Treasury Department 2016, p. 12). Other US priorities include: “(1) enhancing IDA’s effectiveness in fragile and conflict-affected states, supporting private sector development and jobs, promoting opportunities for women and girls, and mobilizing domestic resources); (2) advancing the discussion on the proposals to leverage IDA’s equity; (3) advocating for our strategic priorities, including climate resilience and crisis response; (4) pressing for a successful conclusion to the shareholding formula negotiations; (5) reaching consensus on a more effective and up-to-date environmental and social safeguards framework; and (6) urging adoption of a World Bank-wide evaluation policy to better support learning and accountability” (Treasury Department 2016, pp. 13–14).

### 4.3 WTO

Analysing the GATT in the 1970s, Curzon and Curzon (1974) distinguished between the most influential developed countries of North America, Western Europe, and Japan, on the one hand, and the less-developed countries, on the other. They also warned that influence in the GATT was related not just to a country’s share of world trade, but also to the balance between protectionist and free trade forces in the domestic political arena. This warning is still valid today, and it helps better understanding the US position.

The WTO is in a different league, in comparison to the previously analysed organizations. First of all, it is the prosecution of the GATT, but it is also a *new* organization, born in 1995. Secondly, decisions are made by consensus, and the

governance formally leaves less room for influence (here the US has no veto power). Thirdly, starting from the 1970s, the negotiation rounds saw the EU and then Japan becoming as relevant as the US, and therefore oftentimes the emergence of competition among allies. However, in the Doha round it became evident that the US is not capable of exerting as much influence as before, even when acting in concert with the EU. Fourthly, China and Russia have joined the organization recently (2008 and 2012 respectively). Fifthly, rising powers share with the US the basic assumptions regarding international trade, and therefore learnt the rules of the organization immediately, and play by these rules. Sixthly, it has better adapted to changes in economic—especially trade—power, including all the rising powers, and has been less subject to reform requests. As a paradox, the progressive reduction of US influence within the WTO, together with the creation of a deadlock in negotiations of the Doha round launched in 2001, have reoriented the American interest towards minilateral solutions in the form of free trade agreements (FTAs).

Nevertheless, the WTO is normally considered a pillar of the American-led hegemonic order. Its consensus decision-making process has been defined as “organized hypocrisy in procedural context”, because it hides power differences to legitimize its outcomes (Steinberg 2003, p. 342). Indeed, in the previous rounds, the US and the EU have managed to dominate the agenda-setting process. As Sen (2003) highlights, the US played a prominent role in promoting and defining the scope and evolution of the GATT, and then in promoting its transformation into an international organization — defining its architecture — in the 1990s. More importantly, the defining principles of the GATT/WTO originate in US practice, so “The identity and functioning of the WTO are, partly, a manifestation of US structural power” (Sen 2003, p. 130). This means that, while formally the US is a member with no special status or powers, it has informally managed to exert some influence.

Sen (2003, p. 131) identifies US channels of influence in the sensitivity of the WTO bureaucracy to US views; its unspoken veto over appointment of the WTO general director and key staff; its capacity to be an effective negotiator thanks to its capacity to navigate complex legal systems; and its administrative capability to deal with the global economic agenda. Another vehicle of influence can be found in the accession process to the organization (Stone 2011, pp. 97–102). The process is led by the leading exporter of each product. This means that the US and the EU are the main participants. The accession process cannot be invoked as a pretext for extracting concessions, but the US and the EU are the only members who may violate that norm. Another element of structural power for the US is provided by the great size of its economy, particularly its market, that has traditionally allowed it to control the agenda and achieve its objectives by partially exiting or threatening to do so (Stone 2011, p. 94). This has enabled the US to influence the previous negotiating rounds. Finally, while not all countries have the legal and financial capabilities to recur to the very articulated Dispute Settlement Mechanism, and must choose when to initiate a dispute, the US can easily do that, and indeed it is the first initiator (Table 9), and it has a high success rate.

**Table 9** Top ten WTO members involved in disputes, 1995–2015

	Complainant	Respondent
USA	109	124
EU	96	82
Canada	34	18
Brazil	27	16
Mexico	23	14
India	21	23
Japan	21	15
Argentina	20	22
Korea, Republic of	17	15
China	13	34

Author's elaboration from WTO, [http://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/booksp\\_e/anrep\\_e/anrep16\\_chap6\\_e.pdf](http://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/anrep_e/anrep16_chap6_e.pdf). Accessed 12 September 2016

In the case of the WTO, the main reform request has involved the demand by India and Brazil to be included in the so-called Quad, the core negotiation group during negotiation rounds traditionally made of the US, EU, Japan and Canada. Indeed, the Quad was highly influential because it prepared WTO decisions and de facto set the agenda. According to Zangl et al. (2016), the US and the EU initially resisted the change until the Seattle failure of 1999, when for the first time a WTO ministerial conference did not manage to reach an agreement. That failure revealed that to save the WTO, institutional reforms were needed. Negotiations were “hard-nosed”, and the US and the EU both threatened to withdraw and focus on bilateral trade agreements outside the WTO (Zangl et al. 2016, p. 181). Brazil and India managed to create support coalitions favouring change, while the US and the EU made attempts at dividing them. But, in 2004 the latter had to accept the greater support for the two developing countries, and therefore replaced Japan and Canada with India and Brazil. Another meaningful change concerns the head of the organization, as for the first time a Brazilian candidate was appointed in 2013.

Nevertheless, the institutional change did not break the deadlock of the Doha round. It remains to be seen whether the WTO has adapted better than the other organizations to changing conditions (Narlikar 2010) and now registers a form of reformist multipolarity that grants it great stability (Efsthathopoulos 2016). In the meantime, the deadlock has caused the US to start negotiating the TPP and the TTIP, and to consider them strategic. Still, until recently the US has declared itself to consider the WTO a “vital” aspect of its trade and investment policy, to support the expansion of WTO membership, and to be interested in strengthening the WTO's core functions (WTO 2014, p. 4). It has also claimed that it is firmly committed to preserving and enhancing the WTO's rule (WTO 2014, p. 6, 8). Indeed, the negotiations on environmental goods agreement promoted in 2014 by the US within the WTO framework are an indicator that the American interest toward the institution is still present. But, a stalled WTO would be of limited value for the US. The two FTAs may be an important element during negotiations because they signal a credible exit

option. They also set higher standards whereby, if the two agreements were to enter into force, they would be capable of imposing themselves *de facto* on other countries, even if the WTO managed to overcome its deadlock. Nevertheless, they also risk undermining the WTO (Hartman 2013). It remains to be seen whether the US will retain this strategy, as both the 2016 presidential candidates had declared to be against the two FTAs, and Trump has also declared himself to be against the WTO, thus signalling a potential return to protectionism.

## 5 Conclusions

In the short term, the growth of minilateral alternatives to the existing main universal multilateral institutions does not pose an existential threat to the existing international order. While minilateral institutions can complement universal multilateral ones, and be of support in providing effective *ad hoc* solutions to specific problems, they are hardly a substitute when it comes to identifying solutions to global problems. Still, they pose a challenge. The regionalization of minilateral organizations, such as the AIIB promoted by China, is a negotiating tool to gain leverage within the existing universal institutions, in order to attain an increasing role (both through the existence of credible alternative options and through the creation of a larger supporting coalition), and as a way of redefining institutional roles and power relations at the regional level. It is a signal that, should decision-making processes of universal multilateral institutions remain non-inclusive of the rising powers, spatial fragmentation of the order might ensue. However, as long as the major powers are interested in keeping a role in the universal multilateral institutions, the latter remain more relevant arenas for global competition. But, some of the regional minilateral initiatives that have been promoted signal a potential loss of interest in those arenas where major actors are underrepresented, and in that they pose a challenge to the American authority on which the current international order is based.

In its history, the US has had an intermittent relationship with multilateral institutions. However, in view of the progressive delegitimation of the institutional architecture that it promoted after World War II, and ultimately its authority, under the Obama administration the US has acted to defend the existing order. Despite more reformist claims, the reforms of the main universal multilateral institutions promoted by the US tend to be limited, and only partially responsive to power shifts, moving towards pragmatic but incomplete adaptation—when inevitable—rather than far-reaching reform. The approved reforms have also reflected a reshuffling of the traditional coalition supporting the US, now weakened, and the inclusion of new members. Most importantly, the informal means of influence of the US remains intact.

Although still dominant, the grip and influence of the US on the four universal institutions is no longer homogeneous. The WTO is the institution in which the US has lost influence the most, and it is also the one in which it may eventually lose its

role as indispensable actor. This is the reason behind the attempt at creating its own unilateral alternatives, now jeopardized by the Trump administration. The IMF and WB are the institutions where China-led regional multilateral initiatives might erode US influence the most. The UN is the universal institution in which China is greatly investing to increase its role, and it is also that in which the US is most entrenched, and where it promotes managerial but not governance reforms.

The US is at a crossroads. Promoting deeper reforms leading to a greater inclusiveness of the other major powers in the crucial decision-making processes might keep the order, but it would be a less American order. Keeping the stronghold on the institutions might be beneficial in the short term, but in the long term it risks making them irrelevant, and ultimately this too might erode the American-led order. The candidate Trump has expressed a third option: abandoning them because they are no longer conducive to American interests. But, it would hardly be surprising if, later into his administration, he chooses otherwise.

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