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Conceptualising Multilateralism Can We All Just Get Along?

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Conceptualising Multilateralism: Can We All Just Get Along?¹

Abstract²

Multilateralism is a poor, ugly duckling among concepts used to study international relations. Yet, new, interesting and primordial questions have arisen about its role in modern IR. We argue that three analytical tasks must be undertaken to conceptualise multilateralism. First, a conceptual framework for understanding it must be developed. Second, a modern definition of multilateralism is needed that can guide further research. Third, a set of research questions must be mapped that a research programme on multilateralism should tackle. We focus on the four main factors that condition multilateralism: 1) different contexts, 2) different goals, 3) different forms, and 4) different meanings. We find that multilateralism in practice has outpaced our understanding of its role in 21st century IR. We go beyond the ambitions of a 'review article' to propose a systematic research programme on multilateralism.

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Table of contents

Introduction	3
Defining Multilateralism	6
Different Contexts	11
The Birth of Multilateralism	12
Wilsonianism and the League of Nations	12
Postwar Multilateralism	13
Multilateralism, Unipolarity and Globalisation	15
Multilateralism through Time and Space	16
Different Goals	17
Different Forms	20
Tougher Rules, New Multilateralism?	22
Different Meanings	25
Conclusion	29
References	32

Conceptualising Multilateralism: Can We All Just Get Along?

Introduction

Multilateralism is a poor, ugly duckling among concepts used to study international relations (IR). Arguably, multilateralism is not a core concept in the same league with anarchy, sovereignty, or interdependence. If so, such a result is ironic. After the Cold War ended, renewed optimism about the potential of international institutions such as the United Nations (UN) or European Union (EU) led to burgeoning interest in multilateralism on the part of both academics and practitioners. At the time, Caporaso (1992) complained that multilateralism was being used to describe a variety of different forms of international cooperation, but still was not adequately conceptualised. His response was to resort to a cocktail of ‘sociology, experimental psychology, organisation theory, and game theory’ to try to plug the gap (Caporaso 1992: 604). The exercise was both creative and interesting. But it failed insofar as multilateralism continued (and continues) to be used in a variety of ways to refer to different modes and forms of cooperation.³

Perhaps one reason why is that, despite claims to the contrary (Crawford and Jarvis 2001), IR remains an American-dominated discipline (Hoffmann 1977). In IR, as in other disciplines, theory tends to follow practice. Gaddis (2004) argues that only Franklin Roosevelt amongst all Presidents ever successfully ‘sold’ multilateralism to the United States (US) public. Multilateralism might be poorly conceptualised because, in practice, America ‘does not do’ multilateralism.⁴

A different, but compatible ‘reason for the paucity of theory concerning multilateralism is that there may be so little multilateralism in practice’ (Caporaso 1992: 600). By one calculation, no major new multilateral agreement has been agreed since the mid-1990s (Naím 2009b). The World Trade Organisation (WTO) is now a teenager. The same is true of the last major multilateral security agreement: the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Even it has not deterred India, Pakistan and North Korea – soon joined by Iran? – from becoming nuclear powers.

³ To illustrate the point, one recent work concludes that multilateralism is merely an ‘extended policy’ of cooperation (Touval and Zartman 2010: 227).

⁴ Of course, US foreign policy debates feature a rich and diverse mosaic of opinion about multilateralism, with leading practitioners (Talbot 2008) and academics (Ikenberry 2006) stressing its virtues, especially in wake of the George W. Bush presidency (Leffler and Legro 2008).

A like-minded view would consider multilateralism to be an artefact of the Cold War. Interest in multilateralism first developed when it came to be seen as a solution to the problem of nuclear proliferation. It also became a battle cry for the non-aligned movement, led by Nehru's India. The Cold War is now history. Attempts at multilateral arms control have been, on balance, ineffective.

The view that multilateralism is an anachronism is companionable with one that considers it a 'weapon of the weak' (Kagan 2002: 4). By this view, states that seek multilateral agreements are those that lack power to impose solutions to international problems. Most European states could be categorised as such. Kagan (2008: 42) considers post-war India's wish to be 'the harbinger of a new set of principles of peaceful coexistence and multilateralism...a European-style worldview before Europeans themselves had adopted it'.

Even the most hard-boiled multilateralism sceptic must concede some basics. Globalisation, broadly defined, creates powerful incentives for states to cooperate. After the (allegedly) relentless unilateralism of the George W. Bush administration, the US elected an 'untested multilateralist in foreign affairs' (Delbanco 2008). Barack Obama's inaugural address and later speeches in Cairo, Oslo and at the United Nations (UN) 'made clear his liberal-internationalist preference for multilateralism...[in] dealing with other countries, whether 'friends' or adversaries' (Viotti 2010: 210). The claim that Europe's own experience of multilateralism can never be replicated is frequent. But it is challenged by evidence that other regions of the world, including Asia, increasingly look to the EU for lessons that can be learned about how cooperation can solve transnational problems, albeit with little interest in European-style institutionalisation (see Katzenstein 2005, Kang 2007; Calder and Fukuyama 2008; Frost 2008; Green and Gill 2009). The EU now seeks partnerships with emerging powers with the explicit goal of building multilateralism (Grevi and de Vasconcelos 2008).

Of course, global demand for multilateralism may be increasing, but major powers may lack either the will or capability to supply it. Cynics might argue that Obama's America – because of domestic political constraints - is no more engaged in building multilateralism than was Bush's. Meanwhile, European integration has stalled. Emerging powers – Brazil, Russia, India and China (collectively known as BRIC) – act more unilaterally as they gain political confidence.

Ultimately, whether or not demand for multilateralism remains unmet is an empirical question. Even the question of how we can 'measure' demand is contentious. The devil may be in the detail, with wide variance between issue-areas. Pressure for multilateral cooperation has no

doubt intensified in the cases of financial governance and climate change. Can we say the same about trade or arms control?

In short, there may be good reasons for multilateralism to remain under-conceptualised. Nevertheless, new, interesting, and even primordial questions have arisen about its role in modern IR. Is multilateralism just a 'subset' of cooperation or a specific construct in IR? If demand for multilateralism continues to outpace supply, why does this shortfall exist? Is multilateralism merely a weapon of the weak? Or do strong states pursue it selectively when it serves their interests? Are we moving to a fundamentally more multilateralised international order?

We review 21st century multilateralism in theory and practice, and find that it *does* constitute a distinctive ordering device in IR. We also uncover evidence of growing interest, even amongst major powers, in multilateral solutions to transnational problems that are externalities of globalisation. For example, the 2008-10 financial crisis suddenly made the Group of 20 (G20) most 'systemically important industrialized and developing economies'⁵ – a previously obscure and young (less than 10 years old) configuration – the main forum for debates about how shared policy commitments might restore global economic growth. China and Russia both seek multilateral cooperation within multiple institutions, notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Klein *et al* 2010). The EU is funding multiple, large research programmes into multilateralism as part of its doctrinal commitment to 'effective multilateralism'.⁶ Academic interest is by no means confined to Europe: Robert Keohane *et al* (2009: 28) have urged that scholars make multilateralism a major focus of IR research that is 'deeply empirical' and based on 'comparative institutional analysis'.

We seek to lay the groundwork for such a research programme. Our's is an exercise in *pre*-theorizing, which takes the prior step of developing a conceptual framework that can guide investigation:

Conceptual frameworks or perspectives provide a broad language and a form of reference in which reality can be examined. They go further than a model in providing interpretations of relationships between variables. Conceptual frameworks achieve a greater depth and breadth in their attempts to explain reality (Stoker 1999: 18).

⁵ This form of words is used by the G20 to describe itself. See http://www.g20.org/about_what_is_g20.aspx (accessed 12 January 2011).

⁶ The EU's 2003 European Security Strategy commits the Union to 'an international order based on effective multilateralism' and 'a rule-based international order' (European Union 2003: 14-15; see also Lazarou *et al* 2010). Under its Framework research programme 7, the EU is funding three large projects on multilateralism. The present authors are participants in MERCURY (see <http://www.mercury-fp7.net>), which focuses on the EU's own contribution to effective multilateralism. The two additional programmes are EU-GRASP (see www.eugrasp.eu), on 'Changing Multilateralism: The EU as a Global-Regional Actor in Security and Peace', and EU4SEAS (see www.eu4seas.eu), which will study 'The EU and Sub-regional Multilateralism in Europe's Sea Basins: Neighbourhood, Enlargement and Multilateral Cooperation'.

The need for conceptual depth and breadth leads us to ask far more questions than we answer. But many questions about multilateralism remain unanswered. We cull the research literature on multilateralism, but go beyond the ambitions of most review articles. Our's is an exercise in mapping, systematically, a set of questions for a research programme on multilateralism. We identify dependent variables that need to be explained so that scholars can identify what independent variables could be incorporated into testable hypotheses. Above all, we argue that research needs to focus on one elemental dependent variable: the (recent) widening and deepening of multilateralism.

We begin by examining contending definitions of multilateralism. This exercise moves over well-travelled ground, but we cover it in order to propose a modern, 21st century definition. We then focus on the four main factors that condition multilateralism: 1) different contexts, 2) different goals, 3) different forms, and 4) different meanings.

Defining Multilateralism

As the Cold War ended, Keohane (1990) argued that multilateralism had developed a momentum of its own. It had increasingly become both an objective and ordering device in IR. Yet, multilateralism at this point still 'served as a label more than as a concept defining a research program' (Keohane 1990: 731).

For Keohane (1990: 731), multilateralism is 'the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through *ad hoc* arrangements or by means of institutions'. It thus involves (exclusively) states and often (not exclusively) institutions, defined as 'persistent and connected sets of rules, formal and informal, that prescribe behavioural roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations' (Keohane 1990: 733; see also Keohane and Nye 2000a; 2000b).⁷ Multilateralism becomes institutionalised when enduring rules emerge. Institutions thus 'can be distinguished from other forms of multilateralism, such as *ad hoc* meetings and short-term arrangements to solve particular problems' (Keohane 1990: 733). Multilateral institutions, by implication, take the form of international regimes or bureaucratic organisations.⁸

⁷An implied assumption in Keohane's work appears to be that purely *ad hoc* multilateralism is likely to lead to institutionalised multilateralism, as states find themselves unable to enforce the terms of agreements they make with each other (see Keohane 1998; Keohane and Nye 2000b).

⁸Keohane (1990: 733) defines regimes 'as institutions with explicit rules, agreed upon by governments, that pertain to a particular set of issues in international relations'. Bureaucratic organisations usually accompany regimes: they 'assign specific role to their employees' and monitor and manage 'a set of rules governing states in a particular issue-area'.

Keohane's definition of multilateralism was dismissed as 'nominal' by John Gerard Ruggie (1992: 564) on the grounds that it neglected the '*qualitative* (emphasis in original) dimension of the phenomenon'. To illustrate, the preamble of the UN Charter implies that multilateralism means 'establish[ing] conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of [international law](#) can be maintained'. Multilateralism thus involves justice, obligation, and a sort of international rule of law. What makes it distinctive, and matters more than the number of parties or degree of institutionalisation, is the type of relations it spawns.

For Ruggie, multilateralism meant 'coordinating relations among three or more states...in accordance with certain principles' that order relations between them. Multilateralism represented a 'generic institutional form (emphasis in original)' and implied institutional arrangements that 'define and stabilize property rights of states, manage coordination problems and resolve collaboration problems'. But it often took place in the absence of international organisations, which are a 'relatively recent arrival and still of only modest importance' (Ruggie 1992: 567-568).

Crucially, Ruggie argued, multilateralism is built on principles that distinguish it from other forms of IR such as bilateralism and imperialism:

- generalised principles of conduct,
- indivisibility, and
- diffuse reciprocity

First, three or more states⁹ engage in multilateral cooperation when relations between them are based on principles that identify 'appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to particularistic interests of the parties' (Ruggie 1992: 571). Cooperation is governed by 'norms exhorting general if not universal modes of relations to other states, rather than differentiating relations case-by-case' (Caporaso 1992: 602).

Second, multilateralism is based on a specific social construction: indivisibility. It can take various forms, but in all cases it constitutes 'the scope (both geographic and functional) over which costs and benefits are spread' when actions are taken that affect the collectivity (Caporaso 1992: 602). For instance, peace is usually deemed indivisible in a collective security system.

⁹Ruggie (1992: 568) notes that everyone agrees that multilateralism is not bilateralism. But, as Caporaso (1992: 603) suggests, the term does not presuppose any specific number of states in the way that unilateral, bilateral, trilateral and universal do: 'Multilateralism suggests 'many' actors, but is unspecific as to what number constitutes many. 'Many' could refer to anything from a minimum of three actors to a maximum of all'.

Third, members of a collectivity expect 'a rough equivalence of benefits in the aggregate and over time' (Ruggie 1992: 571; see also Keohane 1986). Diffuse reciprocity underpins the hypothesis that multilateralism helps solve problems of *coordination* on which transaction costs are high and states are mostly indifferent to outcomes (such as on international telephony or river transport). When international problems demand coordination, governments are happy to lose today as long as there is the prospect of winning tomorrow. But only rarely can multilateralism be expected to solve *collaboration* problems, such as those of collective security, when governments have grave fears about the consequences of 'losing today'. Diffuse reciprocity also helps explain why powerful states, while invariably choosing institutions that serve their interests, may find that multilateral arrangements become more attractive to them as they value the future more highly.

For Ruggie (1992), international orders, regimes and organisations could be multilateral in form, but need not be. An international regime might not operate on the basis of indivisibility: the United States or United Kingdom have 'particularistic interests' within the International Organization of Securities Commissions (IOSC), which promotes sound regulation of securities markets. These interests make any collectivity that groups them together with (say) Albania, Serbia, or Tanzania in this issue-area a very unrestrictive one. Put simply: for an international organisation to qualify as a case of multilateralism, it coordinates relations among states on the basis of organizing principles. In principle (if not always in practice), the same rules apply to all.

Here, modern multilateralism differs from earlier versions: the same rules might apply to all *states*, but states are not the only actors that partake in multilateralism (see Keck and Sikkink 1998; Cooper 2002 and Hampson 2003; Kaldor 2003; Keane 2003; Jones and Coleman 2005). Non-state actors – multinational corporations, non-governmental organisations, and the secretariats of IOs – may push states to make multilateral commitments or even agree to such commitments between themselves. One recent example is agreement by airlines within their trade association, the International Air Transport Association, to cut net emissions by 50 per cent from 2005 levels.¹⁰ It is also notable that the G20 actually consists of 19 states: the EU is its 20th member.

Alternatively, non-state actors may act as roadblocks to new multilateral agreements, such as on climate change, or even seek to scupper existing cooperation as, for example, on

¹⁰ See IATA (2009) 'A global approach to reducing airline emissions', available from http://www.iata.org/NR/rdonlyres/DADB7B9A-E363-4CD2-B8B9-E6DEDA2A6964/0/Brochure_Global_Approach_to_Reducing_Aviation_Emissions_280909.pdf (accessed 15 November 2009).

whaling. In any event, non-state actors 'have become progressively more assertive in demanding a voice at the top decision-making tables' (Thakur 2002: 270). 21st century multilateralism is not an exclusively intergovernmental phenomenon.

Whatever actors are involved, the question of what makes multilateralism *effective* inevitably arises. Martin (1992) observes that multilateral organisations vary both in the degree to which they are effective and institutionalised: 'one may be strong, the other weak' (Caposaro 1992: 602). Multilateral organisations may also be forums where actors become socialised to the principles of multilateralism: the admission of China to the WTO might be a case in point. Multilateralism can be a means, a tool or a strategy to achieve other goals, such as good governance, migration control, or economic liberalisation.

But multilateralism is not a panacea. Smith (2010) demonstrates how it can have odious effects: adherence to the 'same rules for all' within the UN Human Rights Council – with European support - led to the toleration of human rights abuses, to the discredit of both the UN and EU. There is empirical evidence to suggest that dictatorships that practice torture are more likely to accede to the multilateral UN Convention Against Torture than dictatorships that do not (Vreeland 2008). Martin (1992) concedes that multilateralism may not always be the most efficient means to promote international cooperation. Thinking retrospectively, Kahler (1992: 707) insists that multilateralism can be a chimera:

The collective action problems posed by multilateral governance were addressed for much of the postwar era by unilateral great power collaboration disguised by multilateral institutions and by derogations from multilateral principles in the form of persistent bilateralism and regionalism.

Naím's (2009b) more contemporary (and positive) view is that 'minilateralism', which seeks to develop cooperation only between the states that really matter in an issue-area, is often more effective than inclusive multilateralism involving all or most states. If the goal is to promote development in Africa, the states vital to the task and their number might be different than, say, those required to strike a multilateral agreement on nuclear proliferation. To give a concrete illustration of where minilateralism makes sense, it might be argued that it is ludicrous to give land-locked Luxembourg or the Czech Republic a say on EU fisheries policy that is equal to that of maritime states such as France, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

In summary, numerous attempts have been made to define the essence of multilateralism while still allowing for its nuances and limitations. Meanwhile multilateralism has flourished in practice. In the roughly 30 years after 1970, the number of international treaties more than tripled, leading to a significant increase (by about two-thirds) in international institutions

(Ikenberry 2003: 536). The subsequent decade brought the birth of the G20, multilateralisation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and radical enlargement of the EU. Yet, there still exists no single, accepted definition of multilateralism, let alone a coherent, conceptually-driven research programme to investigate it.

In fact, multilateralism may be most clearly understood when we consider what it is *not*. It is not unilateralism, bilateralism or (arguably, see below) inter-regionalism. It contrasts with imperialism, or cooperation based on coercion, as in the case of the Warsaw Pact. Multilateral cooperation is voluntary. It is not entirely ad hoc: it is based on rules that are durable and (at least potentially) affect the behaviour of actors that agree to multilateral cooperation. Ultimately, all interpretations stress three main dimensions:

1. the importance of rules;
2. inclusiveness in terms of the parties involved or affected; and
3. voluntary cooperation that is at least minimally institutionalised.

As such, multilateralism in its modern, 21st century guise may be defined as:

Three or more actors engaging in voluntary and (essentially) institutionalised international cooperation governed by norms and principles, with rules that apply (by and large) equally to all states.

All competing definitions agree that multilateralism, at minimum, involves a minimum of three actors (usually states). Critics might argue that this is to set the bar too low. But there are imaginable cases of multilateralism that could have major impacts on IR involving only a few actors, which need not all be states. Major international agreements – on emissions reductions, regulatory cooperation, and rights for workers – might involve, even necessarily, non-state actors. Consider what might be accomplished in terms of industry retrenchment and the embrace of green technologies by cooperation between just 3 actors (only 1 of which is a state): the US, the EU, and the automobile industry.¹¹

Our definition specifies that participation in multilateral cooperation must be voluntary. Dependency theorists could pose hard questions about whether it is innately coercive for the same rules to apply to all, powerful as well as weak states, even leaving aside the concessions frequently made to Great Powers. Nonetheless, our definition assumes that most, if not all, international actors have real choices when they decide whether or not to partake in multilateral cooperation.

¹¹In fact, the 'automobile industry' is not a single industry, despite considerable cross-investment by both American and European manufacturers. Any agreement on regulatory cooperation would logically require the consent of 2 automobile associations: the (American) Alliance of Automobile Association and the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association (known as ACEA).

On institutionalisation, we must hedge our bets. By definition, all multilateral cooperation is *essentially* institutionalised.¹² That is, it may or may not spawn tangible international organisations, with headquarters, staffs, and delegated powers. The G20, as one example, employs no permanent staff. But there is no question that policy cooperation within it has become institutionalised in that it is governed by norms and principles.

We argue that the same rules must apply, *by and large*, equally to all: generally and for the most part, all states must play by the same rules. When the UN agrees a resolution, it applies equally to all states. But only five states enjoy permanent membership and veto power on the UN Security Council. Moreover, participants in multilateral cooperation may not be states. Non-state actors do not possess sovereignty under international law, the ability to sign treaties, or a monopoly on the use of force. Thus, by definition, the same rules that apply to states in multilateral cooperation cannot apply to them.

Plenty of cases of modern multilateralism apply rules differently to different states. As we demonstrate, claims that today's multilateralism is more binding, rules-based, and demanding than past versions have genuine substance. But the 'old' multilateralism – with its opt-outs, derogations, and special privileges for Great Powers - lives on in the UN, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and elsewhere. Our definition therefore reflects caution about claims of a 'new', stronger, 21st century multilateralism.

Different Contexts

In the broadest sense, research on multilateralism must investigate time and space. That is, a research programme must include examination of both the historical evolution of the international order *and* the dimensions of that order – determined by the distribution of power and patterns of interdependence – at any given time. It may also have to depart from the strictures of most IR theory and investigate sub-systemic political space: politics at the domestic level of individual states — especially Great Powers — that have eased or stymied multilateralism in different historical eras. As Ruggie (1992: 592) argues, 'a pronounced shift toward multilateralism in economic and security affairs requires a combination of fairly strong international forces and compatible domestic environments'. Here, we can offer only the most truncated raw material for an investigation of the conditions that have encouraged states

¹²By 'essentially', we mean fundamentally, inherently, intrinsically and necessarily institutionalised: rules must exist that are durable and (potentially) affect the behaviour of actors even if parties to an agreement only meet once and no administration exists to ensure enforcement.

(and, recently, non-states) to embrace or reject multilateralism. But we show that research on multilateralism cannot be ahistorical or neglect political space at multiple levels.

The Birth of Multilateralism

Multilateral agreements have sprung up through history mainly to manage relations between states in areas where interdependence is inescapable. As early as the 17th century, multilateral arrangements were proposed to manage property issues, such as the governance of oceans. Multilateral cooperation, however, was relatively rare until the 19th century, which witnessed a surge of new treaties on (*inter alia*) trade, river transport and public health. The International Telegraph Union, the Universal Postal Union and the International Office of Public Hygiene all had their origins in the 1800s.

19th century multilateralism was spurred by the political, social and economic transformations generated by the Industrial Revolution. Rising volumes of international transactions not only increased the scope for disputes between states. They also prompted states to protect their sovereignty, even as they agreed to common rules to facilitate economic exchange.

Most multilateral agreements in the 19th century did not generate formal organisations. The most important, the Concert of Europe, was an almost purely informal framework in which four European powers — Austria, Great Britain, Prussia, Russia (later joined by France) — agreed to consult and negotiate on matters of European peace and security. The result was peace in Europe for nearly forty years. However, the Concert was imposed by statesmen on docile publics. Its legitimacy was gravely damaged by the revolutions of 1848 and the surge in nationalism they generated. The Concert never became a truly multilateral organisation. But it paved the way for 20th century multilateralism by establishing that issues of peace and security could be addressed in international fora, and by recognizing the special roles, rights and obligations of Great Powers.

Wilsonianism and the League of Nations

In contrast to prior forms, multilateralism in the early 20th century yielded multiple formal organisations. Multilateralism thus was transformed. It came 'to embody a procedural norm *in its own right* — though often a hotly contested one — in some instances carrying with it an international legitimacy not enjoyed by other means' (Ruggie 1992: 584; emphasis in original).

The advocacy of Woodrow Wilson was crucial in this transformation. The only political scientist ever to serve as US President, Wilson's Fourteen Points, presented to the US

Congress in January 1918, urged the creation of 'a general association of nations'. Wilsonianism thus became a doctrine that prescribed the spread of democracy, free trade and strong international law to create an international order that 'would replace older forms of order based on the balance of power, military rivalry and alliances [...] power and security competition would be decomposed and replaced by a community of nations' (Ikenberry 2009: 12; see also Mead 2002). Specifically, Wilson championed an international body with universal membership, binding rules and a dispute settlement mechanism. He studiously avoided use of the term 'collective security'. However, intense negotiations, mainly between the British and Americans at Versailles in 1919, focused on precisely this issue.

The result was the League of Nations. Its Covenant committed member states not only to the renunciation of war, but also to accepting 'the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments'. Article 10 of the Covenant's preamble required members 'to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League'. States were threatened by political and economic sanctions if they resorted to war, with force used only as a last resort.

In no sense did the League's Covenant find universal approval. Its collective security provisions were the primary reason for the US Senate's rejection of American membership. Wilson himself was pivotal in establishing the conditions for negotiations on a new international system based on collective security with the League as a mechanism for dispute resolution. But he failed to coax the domestic political conditions required for US entry (see George and George 1964; Cooper 2002).

The League was disbanded in 1946. It failed, first, because membership was not universal: the US never joined and major players such as the Soviet Union and Germany withdrew. Second, the League faced multiple crises during an economic depression and became deeply unpopular in a number of countries including Germany. Finally, the League's Covenant was plagued by loopholes, ambiguity, and over-ambition (Armstrong *et al* 2004: 29). Precisely why the League failed continues to be debated. But factors rooted in the domestic, as well as the international, level of political space were central to its demise.

Postwar Multilateralism

Whatever its failings, the League of Nations was an essential precursor to international institution-building after 1945. In less than a decade, multilateral accords creating the Bretton Wood agreements and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the UN, and NATO were agreed. Why such a 'spike' in multilateralism? Central to any explanation is

the role of the emergent hegemonic power, the US, and its leaders, particularly Franklin Roosevelt. For the US, 'multilateralism in its generic sense served as a foundational principle on the basis of which to reconstruct the post-war world' (Ruggie 1992: 586). For weaker states, multilateralism thus not only promised benefits but also constrained a hegemon (Ikenberry 2003).

When work began on the UN Charter, it was clear that it would be a collective security organisation and thus follow in the steps of the League. However, past traumas coaxed consensus on the need to recognise the privileged role of Great Powers. Offering the US, Soviet Union, France, the UK and China permanent membership on the UN Security Council, and thus effectively a veto, not only marked a return to balance-of-power. It also acknowledged the necessity of unanimity among major powers as a prerequisite of multilateral cooperation. Decisions of the Security Council – effectively, a *directoire* – were equally binding on all UN members. Unlike the League, the UN's role extended to economic and social affairs and human rights.

The US also threw its weight behind the creation of a multilateral economic system. It became clear during the Second World War that only multilateral cooperation could act as an antidote to the protectionism of the 1920s and 30s. New multilateral agreements were thus struck on a stable exchange rate system, a reserve unit of account (the gold standard), and the reduction of trade barriers,

Crucially, bipartisanship on foreign policy between the two major US political parties emerged during the war and persisted after it ended. It was nurtured assiduously by the White House: Roosevelt took Republicans' reservations about the UN seriously enough to work to incorporate them in the Charter. Two pillars of the foreign policy of his successor, Harry Truman, were that a stable and prosperous Europe and a rules-based international economic order were central to US interests. In the end, the Marshall Plan and GATT enjoyed broad bipartisan support (see Ikenberry 2003; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007). The domestic politics of multilateralism thus shifted in the US, albeit in response to international changes.

The Cold War also ushered in a new and unprecedented international context. On one hand, tensions between the US and the Soviet Union permeated the entire UN system, making unanimity between major powers difficult, often impossible, to achieve. On the other, the construction of the iron curtain convinced Washington to support the creation of NATO in 1949, with an attack on one member treated as an attack on all. But the American commitment to multilateralism was not doctrinal. No multilateral security agreement ever

materialised between the US and East Asian states, with the US preferring bilateral agreements with Japan and South Korea.

It is not impossible to imagine a different post-war US approach. As one of two dominant powers, the US could have shunned multilateral commitments and intimidated its Western allies into submission. Equally, as Martin (1992: 787) argues, weaker allies in a bipolar system might have threatened to exit their alliance to 'create incentives for a dominant power to accept smaller benefits in exchange for long-term growth and stability...[since] the credibility of threats to exit determines the long-term costs and benefits of multilateralism'. Yet, there was never a credible threat that West European allies would exit the alliance, leaving aside the special case of France and NATO. By the same token, within the multilateral institutions it had championed, the United States was always 'unlikely to give up long-term gains for short-term gains at the expense of its allies' (Martin 1992: 787; see also Weber 1992).

Multilateralism, Unipolarity and Globalisation

When the Cold War ended, many predicted that the international system would shift towards multipolarity, thus undermining multilateralism. However, '[w]hat the 1990s wrought is a unipolar America...more powerful than any other great state in history' (Ikenberry 2003: 538). Many expected the US to eschew multilateralism. Yet, Washington gave crucial political backing to the development of new multilateral economic agreements including the WTO and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC). It also was instrumental in the 'robust multilateralism' that was embraced, and the complex division of labour between multiple international organisations that emerged, in response to war in the Balkans (Talbot 2008: 3). It was at least 'permissive' of a process of considerable strengthening of the UN's systems for peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and humanitarian aid (Jones and Forman 2010).

In other areas – including arms control, environmental affairs and some human right issues - US support for new multilateral initiatives ranged from patchy to nonexistent. After the Republican Party captured control of Congress in 1994, multilateralism became a 'wedge' issue used to seek partisan advantage, with Republicans insisting 'that the [Democratic] Clinton administration's penchant for multilateralism was compromising US sovereignty' (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007: 25). The bipartisan consensus crucial to US support for post-war multilateralism crumbled quickly.

Partisanship became even more entrenched during the administration of George W. Bush. Many of its top officials openly aired their mistrust of international institutions, and the US

renege on a range of multilateral commitments (see Feith 2008). Still, questions of multilateralism dominated US foreign policy debates. Future historians may concur with a senior American diplomat: 'the Bush administration's failing has not been its instinct for unilateralism and its disdain for multilateralism. Its failing too often has been how poorly it has practiced multilateralism' (Ross 2008: 5).

In any event, the 2000s witnessed rapid advances in interdependence spurred by globalisation. The internationalization of financial regulation, diseases, and the threat of catastrophic terrorism created fresh demand for multilateral solutions. As generic comments on multilateralism go, Ikenberry's (2003: 540) comes as close as any to unchallenged veracity: 'as global interdependence grows, so does the need for multilateral coordination of policies'.

Multilateralism through Time and Space

Our review of the evolution of multilateralism over time and space has analogies to Waltz's (1999) claim about neorealism: it tells us a few, important things without pretence to anything more. The first is that consistent patterns in the development of multilateralism are elusive, leaving aside how rising interdependence – as during the Industrial Revolution or modern era of globalisation – increases demand for multilateralism. Even here, there are caveats: advances in multilateralism have been reversed (as seen by the demise of the Concert of Europe) and variable between issue-areas. Second, in defiance of most IR theory, multilateralism clearly thrives or dies as a consequence of alignments at multiple dimensions of political space. Multilateralism was transformed into a form of cooperation with more legitimacy than other forms in the 20th century because of systemic changes: it was embraced both because it was inclusive – in the case of the UN - *and* exclusive – in the case of NATO. Yet, multilateralism has been spurred or stymied through history by changes at the sub-systemic level of domestic politics, such as the revolutions of 1848 or postwar bipartisanship in US politics. Third and finally, economic crisis appears to advance multilateralism: for example, the Bretton Woods agreements could be viewed as a delayed response to the Depression and the demonstrable failure of economic nationalism. Yet, the WTO was created in absence of any deep economic slump. Whether the financial crisis of 2008 and beyond yields a strengthening of multilateral institutions such as the G20 remains an open question. It is one among many hypotheses about multilateralism that cry out for empirical testing.

Different Goals

If much about the evolution of multilateralism remains ambiguous, it is clear that the different *goals* that lead states to embrace it condition what form it takes. Here, we encounter elephant in the room-type questions. Have universally accepted norms and principles of multilateralism ever existed? Do they exist now? If so, what they are? Can multilateralism be effective even if states have different goals for cooperation? What explains variation between different issue-areas?

A first step in answering such questions is to consider how different IR theories view multilateralism (see table 1). Realists of all stripes contend that states inevitably pursue different objectives when they agree to multilateral cooperation because they are driven by incompatible interests. International institutions are either weak or act to obscure hegemonic control, as in the cases of the IMF or Non-Proliferation Treaty. Interdependence is increasing but remains a weak motivator of state behaviour (Waltz 1999). Any notion of a 'global consensus' on multilateralism is a myth.

For their part, institutionalists assume that the goal of multilateralism is to solve shared problems. Globalisation generates wealth and (sometimes) inter-cultural understanding. But it also creates problems that states cannot solve by themselves. Thus, they create international institutions that act as focal points for bargaining and help ensure that they keep their commitments to one another (Keohane 1990).

Perhaps ironically, many constructivists would agree with realists that since multilateralism is an –ism, it is 'an ideology "designed" to promote multilateral activity' (Caporaso 1992: 601). Where they differ is on how much IR can be transformed by multilateralism, with constructivists viewing it as truly transformative (see Wendt 1999). Neofunctionalists would go even further in viewing multilateralism as inherently normative. Just as European integration has seen one act of new cooperation become a springboard for the next, multilateralism begets more multilateralism: *that* is its goal (see Rosamond 2005).

Table 1. Theoretical Models of Multilateralism

Theoretical Perspective	neorealist	liberal institutionalist	constructivist	neo-functional	radical/critical /3 rd world
Model of Multilateralism	weak (hegemony)	cooperative / functional	normative	integrative	dependent

Critical or dependency theorists reject any suggestion that multilateralism promotes international harmony: its purpose is to exploit the weak. Most multilateral organisations

have had their rules written by a sub-group (often hegemonic) of the eventual latent membership. Differences in rules (IMF) or equivalence in rules (WTO) expose the rhetoric of multilateralism as concealing dependency (Gill 1997). In short, different theoretical positions yield very different views about the basic objectives of multilateralism.

A second step is to consider whether universality is precluded by different functional objectives in different issue areas. The question is central to multiple debates about multilateralism. One is about whether we can resort to economic models to describe, explain and predict why and when multilateralism emerges: should we expect the 'supply' of multilateralism to be responsive to demand for it? Surely, it depends on the issue-area.

Regulatory cooperation illustrates the point. A flurry of activity in the early 1990s between the US and EU led to speculation that these two economic giants could create a 'transatlantic economic space'. Within it, economic exchange would no longer be hampered by different regulatory regimes. Eventually, regulatory policy cooperation would be multilateralised, with a progressively larger number of states embracing it (see Pollack 2001). One effect would be to sustain claims that 'bilateralism is not the opposite of multilateralism, but an efficient component' in building it through 'dyadic diplomacy', especially between Great Powers (Verdier: 439).

In practice, the results of transatlantic regulatory policy cooperation have been modest (see Peterson and Steffenson 2009; Pollack and Shaffer 2009).¹³ A major reason why is that both the EU and the US have powerful, autonomous, and strong-willed regulatory agencies. Most consider international cooperation to be a far lower priority than providing 'high quality' domestic regulation. Thus, even in areas where there is powerful demand for cooperation — particularly from large multinationals that do business in both markets — it has not materialised. Caporaso (1992: 612) presages this result: 'A great deal of intragovernmental coordination and power would be required to tailor regulatory policy to the specifications of foreign trade...I am sceptical about generalizing the conditions of economic exchange to multilateral settings'.

As a third step, debates about the trade-off between inclusiveness and effectiveness must be confronted. Is *regionalism* — often viewed as on the march globally (Fawcett 1996; Telo 2001; Acharya and Johnston 2007) — compatible with a more multilateral world? Is it hypocritical for states, such as those of the EU, to seek 'an ever closer union' between

¹³ As a partial caveat, Young (2009: 682) concludes that 'rather being characterised by conflict or co-operation... the transatlantic regulatory relationship is really one of tolerance, in which the vast majority of regulatory differences are not resolved, either amicably or through litigation'.

themselves while also seeking to promote multilateralism globally? More generally, how can the ideal number of parties to any multilateral agreement be determined? Is minilateralism more effective than universal multilateralism?

Theoretical work on solving cooperation problems suggests potential answers via the '*k* group' solution (Orbell *et al* 1991). Cooperative solutions are frequently behaviourally dependent on a consensus within a large '*n*' group. But '*n*' often exceeds the number of states needed to produce an optimum result, which could be agreed far more easily within a sub-set '*k*' group. To return to an earlier example, a solution to the over-fishing of European waters requires agreement by land-locked EU states even though they have no resources (coastal waters and fishing fleets) to contribute to the common good of conserving fish stocks (besides convincing their citizens to eat pollack instead of cod).

Naím (2009b) posits that relatively small *k* groups could solve problems of nuclear proliferation or poverty in Africa. Mattoo and Subrahmanian (2009) argue that the large '*n*' Doha round of the WTO would do almost nothing, even if it succeeded, to solve the real problems of trade in the 21st century: fluctuating commodity prices, financial instability, the insecurity of middle class workers, and environmental insecurity. They propose a Bretton Woods II, based on institutionalised cooperation by *k* groups in specific issue-areas and a sharing of tasks between international organisations, to tackle the new multilateral trade agenda.

The mini- v. multilateral dilemma plagues the EU itself. A Union of 27 states illustrates Caporaso's (1992: 607) injunction that 'the smaller the *k* group, the easier it is to cooperate but the less multilateral the arrangement would be. The larger the *k* group, the more multilateral the cooperative arrangement might be but the more difficult it is to pull off cooperation'. Arguably, the EU's present '*n*' of 27 is larger than the *k* group needed to solve most European cooperation problems. The same dilemma is illustrated by the G20. The financial crisis of 2008-10 muted concerns about its inclusiveness. The urgent need for economic policy cooperation made determining the *k* group (the G20's members represent 80 per cent of the world economy) a relatively simple matter. But should the G20 become a major institution for economic policy cooperation, cries of *directoire* are certain to be heard from excluded states.

Ruggie (1992: 574) argues that 'the multilateral form should not be equated with universal geographical scope: the attributes of multilateralism characterise relations within specific collectivities that may and often do fall short of the whole universe of nations'. But he offers

little guidance about how to find the *k* group or whether regionalism — especially deep regionalism of the European kind — is compatible with multilateralism. The EU itself is committed, at least rhetorically, to exporting its own habits of peaceful, deep cooperation to other regions *and* seeking to agree inter-regional cooperative agreements between itself and its ‘clones’. One hopeful scenario is that ‘the new regionalism, with EU support, could represent an open “post-modern” model of a “renewed international system”’ (Smith 2008: 108). The project of ‘renewing’ the international system points us back to the need to study how goals determine form in the design of multilateralism. And, surely, inter-regionalism, and what determines its success or failure, must feature in any research programme on multilateralism.

Different Forms

If multilateralism is to be conceptualised, a first step is to classify its different forms. IR scholarship often resorts to obfuscatory classifications that fail to capture what is distinctive about multilateralism. For example, a scheme that classifies different modes of international governance as ‘soft’ (the UN General Assembly), ‘medium’ (the WTO or IMF) or ‘hard’ ends up concluding that a ‘hard’ Great Power coalition is most effective because it has ‘unparalleled legitimacy’ (Rosecrance 2008: 107). On the contrary, multilateralism involves rules, norms, principles, and reciprocity that bestow on it more legitimacy than other forms — especially hegemonic — of international cooperation.¹⁴

An alternative view presents institutionalised, crystallised, and aspirant multilateralism as distinct ideal types (see Table 2). Rules-based organisations such as the WTO reflect institutionalised multilateralism. New international norms, rules and organisations - such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), more active international judicial intervention, or efforts to tackle climate change – are examples of crystallising multilateralism: they are ‘becoming’ as opposed to ‘being’, and are still not fully established. The emergence of international norms on child labour or foreign investment reflects aspirant multilateralism: ‘norms inform foreign policy behaviour in the absence of codified rules or even the prospect of establishing them’ (Peterson et al 2008: 8-9).

¹⁴ As Zartman and Touval (2010: 8) sum, ‘[t]he philosophy of multilateral cooperation...confers legitimacy as one of its benefits, more so than unilateralism or bilateralism, although it does so at the expense of efficiency and possibly even of effectiveness’.

Table 2. Forms of Multilateralism

	<i>Institutionalised</i>	<i>Crystallising</i>	<i>Aspirant</i>
<i>Characteristics</i>	rules-based international organisations are established	new international rules and organisations are in the process of being established	norms inform foreign policy behaviour in the absence of any formally-codified rules
<i>Examples</i>	• WTO	• judicial intervention and the ICC • climate change post-Kyoto	• child labour • foreign investment

Source: Peterson et al 2008: 9

In exploring different forms of multilateralism, a central concern must be compliance or non-compliance (that is, violation of rules). As such, we inevitably are drawn to scholarship on international law. It helps us confront debates about whether 21st century multilateralism is more binding and demanding than earlier forms, thus creating stronger incentives for states — especially Great Powers — to resist it.

Most debates about international law distil to a single question: does it actually influence the conduct of states, including their compliance behaviour? The traditional view is that international law (both treaty and customary law) directly affects the behaviour of states: ‘state conduct that is consistent with international law must necessarily have been caused by international law’ (Glennon 2005: 964, see also Hathaway and Lavinbuk 2006). States recognise a juridical obligation to follow agreed international rules or law. They thus conform to the norm: ‘[t]he rule and the rule alone’ affects the behaviour of states (Glennon 2005: 965).

Rationalist legal scholars are more circumspect. Goldsmith and Posner (1999, 2005) question whether international law is an independent force affecting states’ behaviour, or whether it emerges from states acting rationally to maximise their interests. In other words, ‘the rule does not cause states’ behaviour, it reflects their behaviour’ (Goldsmith and Posner 2005: 3).

For their part, constructivists insist that multiple factors determine state behaviour and that the evolution of social norms shapes both the development of international law and the conduct of states (see Finnemore 1996; Reus-Smith 2004; Glennon 2005; Hathaway and Lavinbuk 2006). International law is thus a social structure of IR that is deeply influenced by non-legal (or sub-legal) norms: ‘[f]or a variety of reasons, policy-makers in a given state may

well determine that in certain circumstances it is in the state's interests to honour a given norm even though that norm is not considered binding' (Glennon 2005: 961).

Wherever else they differ, scholars working at the interface of IR and international law broadly agree that compliance is a pivotal feature of multilateralism (see Koh 1997; Byers 1999; Hathaway 2002; Glennon 2005). Its evolution is shaped, in particular, by violations of agreements. Excessive violation of a rule, whether embodied in norms or a treaty, occurs when a sufficient number of states decide that the benefits produced by the violation of a rule offset potential costs (Glennon 2005: 940). If enough states adopt the negating behaviour, the behaviour ceases to be a violation. In effect, the rule is replaced by no rule. Guantanamo Bay, abuses at Abu Ghraib, and extraordinary rendition of terrorist suspects are recent examples. Russia, Japan and Italy have also resisted complying with international agreements, most notably in the domain of environmental relations (see Chayes 2008). The question is whether multilateral agreements and their rules are *changed* by such violations. Have these violations been excessive to the point where rules and norms have lost their obligatory character?

These examples reflect the fundamental ambiguity or 'desuetude' of multilateralism, drawn from the Latin term *desuescere*, meaning 'to become disaccustomed to' (see Glennon 2005: 942). Ambiguity inevitably arises when states give conflicting signals as to whether they remain bound by a rule. Such ambiguity cannot be dismissed even by those who claim that a 'new' multilateralism has emerged in the 21st century, which is more binding, institutionalised, and demanding for states. What is really new may be thornier, and possibly unprecedented problems of compliance.

Tougher Rules, New Multilateralism?

Over time, a rich variety of scholars have claimed to have uncovered a 'new multilateralism' (Camps and Diebold 1983; McRae and Hubert 2001; Ikenberry 2003). Prominent among them is Robert Cox (1997), whose five-year project on 'Multilateralism and the UN System' criticised state-centric approaches to multilateralism and the privileges offered to Great Powers. The project yielded an unapologetically normative typology that assigned causal significance to an emergent global civil society (Cox 1997; see also Krause and Knight 1995).

More recently, Ikenberry (2003; 2006; 2009) has argued that there is something truly new about 21st century multilateralism: it is more demanding and necessitates more concessions on the part of states. Previous forms were more accommodating to Great Powers, offering

more reservations, exemptions, veto powers or weighted voting mechanisms. Such provisions were widely-accepted means for increasing the number of signatories to multilateral treaties and agreements. The old multilateralism offered relatively unthreatening cooperation.

In particular, vehement criticism of the United States (US) for its insistence on accommodation mechanisms may be viewed as indicative of a new multilateralism (see Patrick and Forman 2002; Ignatieff 2005; Jones and Forman 2010; Muldoon *et al* 2011). For Chayes (2008: 51), the ‘freedom to impose [reservations and exemptions] has become a *sine qua non* for American treaty ratification’. Washington has been by no means alone in seeking to qualify its commitments. But the type and scope of provisions it has sought, repetitively and almost systematically, sets it apart (Koh 2003; Moravcsik 2005; Chayes 2008).

The International Criminal Court (ICC) is a case in point. In negotiations on the ICC’s Rome Statute, the US delegation sought permanent exemptions and reservations for American soldiers. It focused on Article 12, which sets out the Court’s jurisdiction,¹⁵ claiming that it did not recognise the special role that the US plays as a military power that shoulders risks and responsibilities providing global public goods, such as peace and stability (Scheffer 2001; Mayerfeld 2003). Other parties argued that granting exemptions to the US would sacrifice the Court’s underlying premise of non-selective enforcement of justice: the *sine qua non* of multilateralism. Where would the line be drawn if one exemption were granted?

Despite dissatisfaction with the Statute, President Bill Clinton (2000) finally signed it on the last possible day for signature, stating that the US would ‘remain engaged in making the ICC an instrument of impartial and effective justice in the years to come’. But he also made clear that more work had to be done on the Statute before US ratification could be considered. In May 2002, just two months before its entry into force, the Bush administration officially ‘unsigned’ the treaty and declared that the US did not intend to become party to it.

The ICC has been described as a ‘newer style of multilateralism in which the scope of the agreement is universal and the binding character is law-based and anchored in international judicial authority’ (Ikenberry 2003: 542). States, including major powers, are asked to embrace the principle of non-selective enforcement of justice with fewer qualifications than in the past. However, the Rome Statute does contain exceptions, including the possibility of a seven year exemption for the prosecution of war crimes. Although only two states (France

¹⁵The full text of the Rome Statute may be found at: <http://untreaty.un.org/cod/icc/index.html> (accessed 14 March 2010).

and Colombia) requested the exemption, its mere existence suggests that some of the old multilateralism lives on. Moreover, the ICC's limited jurisdiction – dealing with dramatic violations of human rights such as genocide and crimes against humanity – make it difficult to consider it illustrative of any wider pattern of multilateral cooperation.

International trade offers another testing ground for claims of a new multilateralism. Historically, the US has championed trade agreements, including the GATT and the WTO. The GATT worked on the basis of consensus, which implied no special treatment for major powers. In fact, it allowed 'weak states to block positive-sum outcomes that they deemed to have an inequitable distribution of benefits' (Steinberg 2002: 345). The preference for consensus reflected the dynamics of the Cold War, the accession of a large bloc of developing countries in the 1950s, and the widely-held view that 'it would be impossible to reach agreement on a weighted voting formula and expand the GATT into a broad-based organisation that could attract and retain developing countries' (Steinberg 2002: 345; see also Curzon and Curzon 1973; Porges 1995).

The WTO thus appeared to mark a step-level change when it was created as the GATT's successor in 1995 (see Wilkinson 2000). According to its Disputes Settlement Understanding (DSU), states became legally obliged to deliver on the terms of sanctions that were assessed against them. The WTO thus became a poster child for the new multilateralism.

In fact, non-compliance with WTO rules has been a frequent practice of major players, including the US and the EU. Undeterred, advocates of a new multilateralism argue that non-compliance in the international trade area is fundamentally different than, for example, gross violations of human rights. As Trachtman (2007: 127) observes, the rules of the WTO are 'not like the international law proscription of genocide or aggressive war: [they do] not normatively demand compliance at all costs'.

Nevertheless, violation of WTO rules by some members can have severe impacts on others. In a sense, the DSU was designed to accommodate states affected by non-compliance. It operates on the 'consensus minus 1' principle, so that a state found to be violating WTO rules can be sanctioned and legally obliged to offer remedies to aggrieved states. It thus demands compliance from states with agreed international rules with more force than did the GATT. But the WTO is a less clear-cut case of the new multilateralism than is sometimes claimed.

Similarly, arms control agreements have displayed features of both the old and new

multilateralism. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) was ratified by the US Senate in 1997 only after it added 28 conditions to the treaty's resolution of ratification. Their inclusion in a treaty that was originally designed to prohibit any exceptions prompted other states including India, China and Japan also to add reservations (Chayes 2008: 54).

In contrast, the Ottawa Convention on landmines is an unusually pure case of the new multilateralism. Again, the US demanded changes and exceptions, including a geographical exception for the use of landmines in Korea and a definition of landmines that would allow the use of mixed-system anti-tank mines. The US delegation also asked for a deferral period for compliance, as well as the right to withdraw during periods of armed conflict (Wareham 1998: 234-235). Nearly all the US proposals were dismissed after most signatories insisted that the treaty should have no exceptions. In December 1997, 122 states signed a convention categorically prohibiting the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of anti-personnel mines.

Other recent arms control cases reflect a similar aversion to exceptions and reservations. They include a convention on cluster munitions and negotiations on the creation of a global Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) covering international transfers of conventional arms. On balance, modern arms control appears to confirm the shift towards a new multilateralism.

The debate about whether multilateralism is advancing in a secular fashion is ultimately about whether we are witnessing a process of convergence towards an essentially single, binding and more demanding form. On one side, sceptics argue that form follows function: the new multilateralism is considerably more visible on arms control than it is on trade, even leaving aside human rights. On the other, the emergence of more institutionalised and rules-based agreements sustains the argument that we are moving towards a new, more fundamentally multilateralised international order.

Different Meanings

Claims that the international order is becoming progressively more multilateral are challenged by different cultural visions of multilateralism. Consider 'sovereignty-based' multilateralism, which is frequently cited by Chinese policy-makers as a normative objective (Xinbo 2009: 68). The 1997-8 Asian financial crisis opened eyes in Beijing to how far economic interdependence had progressed in the region. Subsequently, China both took active, specific steps to help stabilise the region's economies and shifted more generally towards 'enthusiastic embrace of multilateral diplomacy' (Gill and Green 2009: 20). This

stance has shapes Chinese foreign policy choices in a regional context in which 'East Asian governmental regionalism has grown dramatically in the past few decades' (Kang 2007: 72). Other major powers now seize on China's wish to be seen to embracing multilateralism, as illustrated in comments by Timothy Geithner, the US Treasury Secretary, on a new early warning mechanism agreed by the G20 to warn of excessive trade deficits: 'It's a very pragmatic approach, a very multilateral approach...it allows China to point to a set of multilateral commitments.'¹⁶

Equally, however, Chinese enthusiasm for multilateralism is firmly based on the understanding that domestic matters, such as human rights in China, are nobody else's business. A flourishing of new Asian initiatives – the region now hosts about 100 multilateral groupings – owes much to Chinese support. Yet, the main focus of most scholars of Asia remains explaining why the region exhibits an "organisation gap" – a paucity of multilateral organisation' compared to other regions in the world (Calder and Fukuyama 2008: 1). Asia is still home to intense nationalism, raw territorial disputes, and far more ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity than – say – Europe. China's political and economic rise might well manifest itself in multilateral leadership in the region, but 'both Hobbes and Kant are alive and well in Asia's multilateral process, and neither can claim dominance over the region's future' (Gill and Green 2009: 13).

Multilateralism Chinese-style contrasts with what is often considered to be gospel in Washington: 'any multilateral order is a sham— the strong do what they like while the weak talk and establish institutions'.¹⁷ American realists, such as Kagan (2002), claim that there exists a distinct, American-style multilateralism that is merely 'a cost-benefit analysis, not a principled commitment to multilateral action as the cornerstone of world order'. In fact, multilateralism is viewed differently by different American political tribes, and even within them. One outlook — by no means exclusive to Democrats or Republicans — sees multilateralism as a route to democracy promotion and the emergence of a 'liberal peace' (Doyle 1986; Cox *et al* 2000). In a sense, this view underpinned the George W. Bush administration's commitment to 'transformational diplomacy' (see Jervis 2006; Rice 2007; Ikenberry *et al* 2009). Perhaps ironically, the question of whether Bush was, in practice, 'the heir of Woodrow Wilson', became a debating point by the end of his administration (Ikenberry 2009: 1). Equally, the commitment of Bush's successor, Barack Obama to a 'new spirit of multilateralism' was severely compromised when moves to join the UN Human Rights Council and increase the US financial contribution to the IMF were met with widespread domestic political opposition (see Morris 2009; O'Conner 2009). What these cases may

¹⁶ Quoted in *Financial Times* (UK edition), 9 November 2010, p.6.

¹⁷ John Van Oudenaren (2007) 'Containing Europe', RSS: American Future, available at: http://americanfuture.net/?page_id=142 (accessed 12 July 2007).

illustrate is that political salesmanship of multilateralism involves nuance and ambiguity about its likely results, and Washington politics is (mostly) 'intolerant of nuance and ambiguity' (Freedman 2008: 506).

Even when Washington politics allows a US administration to commit itself to multilateralism, structural factors may constrain American behaviour. As an (allegedly) hegemonic power, the US faces the challenge of rendering its commitment to multilateralism credible (Karns 2008). Is the US attitude towards multilateralism based on assumptions about the desire of other states to shackle American power? Realists would contend that such assumptions outlast any administration.

Of course, the US has provided leadership in the creation of the UN and the WTO, plus the Summit of the Americas, the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and the enlargement of NATO. Nevertheless, the US Senate's two-thirds majority hurdle for treaty ratification remains a powerful obstacle to the new multilateralism (Cowhey 1993; Karns and Mingst 2002; Lyman 2002). Perceptions of threat and vulnerability post-9.11 have prompted aggressive American behaviour in negotiations on arms control, container security, and the handling of data on airline passengers (Price 2005). Yet, one (surprising) result was 'substantive cooperation' on counterterrorism within APEC (Gill and Green 2009: 7). Again, multilateral cooperation varies considerably between different issue areas. Generally, however, American exceptionalism must be a focus for any research programme on multilateralism.

So must the question of whether multilateral cooperation encourages non-democratic states to adopt democratic habits. Cooperation of any kind may not be possible with China on North Korea, Iran, or Asian security if the US or EU puts democratisation at the centre of its policy. Multilateral cooperation between non-democracies is always unlikely to promote democracy. Keohane (*et al* 2009) claim to have uncovered the empirical conditions under which multilateralism leads to net gains in democracy. But they also insist on the need for far 'more comprehensive analysis of the effects of multilateralism on democracy' (Keohane *et al* 2009: 28). Such analysis also must be comparatively *cultural*.

Because both multilateralism and democracy are understood differently in different cultures, Europe's cultural commitment to multilateralism bears scrutiny. By one view, it is deeply-rooted in the experience of the Union's history and institutions. But it may well be the opposite of universal. We may even find different cultural understandings of multilateralism in different EU member states. To illustrate, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, argued

in 2009 that the problem of climate change could be solved only if states were willing to 'give up powers to multilateral organisations, whatever the cost'.¹⁸ But it is an open question whether her view was shared by her (say) Polish or Czech counterparts. Germany's strong support for multilateralism even contrasts with France's commitment to a foreign policy that seeks (somehow) to combine 'preeminent multilateralism, autonomous regional groupings, and unapologetic nationalism' (Bowen 2005: 95; see also Moreau Defarges 2004). Different cultural understandings of multilateralism within the EU may help explain why, in the words of former EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson, 'nothing divides us more than Russia'.¹⁹

Russia itself may have developed a distinct cultural understanding of multilateralism as part of a shift towards a Czarist 'sovereign democracy'. Moscow's view could be seen as a product of symbiosis between Vladimir Putin's iron rule and the return of Russia to something approaching Great Power status. As Kagan (2008: 55) puts it, 'strength and control at home allow Russia to be strong abroad. Strength abroad justifies strong rule at home. Russia's growing international clout also shields Putin's autocracy from foreign pressures'.

What room could there be in this equation for Russia embracing multilateralism? The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) reveals that there is room. Formally created in 2001, the SCO brings Russia together with China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India, Iran, Pakistan and Mongolia have observer status. The June 2009 SCO summit was hailed by the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, as an opportunity for its participants (which included Brazil in trade discussions) to 'build an increasingly multipolar world order'. Multilateral economic policy cooperation within the SCO could be used, according to Medvedev, to undermine an 'artificially unipolar system [based on] one big centre of consumption, financed by a growing deficit, and thus growing debts, one formerly strong reserve currency, and one dominant system of assessing assets and risks' (quoted in Hudson 2009: 9).

The Obama administration sought to attend the June 2009 summit as an observer, but was rebuffed. The summit deliberately sought to expand trade between major economic players in way that offered no role for the US or its currency. The importance of the goals in shaping multilateralism is reflected in a Russian worldview that insists 'we have reached our limit in subsidizing the US military encirclement of Eurasia while also allowing the US to appropriate

¹⁸Quoted in 'Germany's foreign policy: a new game of dominoes', *The Economist* (UK edition), 14 November 2009: 49.

¹⁹Mandelson made the comment to a meeting of the General Affairs Council (of EU Foreign Ministers) in July 2006. Interviews, Directorate-General for Trade, European Commission, Brussels, 10-11 September 2006.

our exports, companies and real estate in exchange for paper money of questionable worth' (Hudson 2009: 9).

The SCO's remit has expanded from a narrow focus on border stabilisation between China and its Asian neighbours to cooperation on economic and energy issues, water rights and (especially) action against the 'three evils' of separatism, extremism, and terrorism. A 2005 SCO declaration calling for the US and its allies (although not naming them) to set a date for the withdrawal of their military forces from 'the territories of SCO member states', at a time when several thousand American troops used bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as platforms for action in Afghanistan, caused alarm in Washington and other western capitals.²⁰ Yet, fears that the SCO is developing into an anti-western alliance capable of genuine collective action, as opposed to summit declarations, seem at least premature. Thus far, it has been mostly hamstrung by Chinese-Russian rivalry (Cooley 2009).

Still, the SCO surely merits further study. It is a case in which multilateralism is certainly not a 'weapon of the weak'. It also suggests that we are some distance away from any universal, cross-cultural understanding of multilateralism.

Conclusion

Our sub-title reprises the words of Rodney King, whose brutal beating by police officers triggered the 1992 Los Angeles riots. It points to a *double entendre*. First, can IR scholars 'get along', accept a modern definition of multilateralism, and pursue a research programme that leads to its conceptualisation? Second, is there sufficient will and agreement on the virtues of multilateralism amongst the world's political elite to sustain a process of further multilateralisation of the global order?

We have seen that multilateralism has been defined and understood in different ways. We concur with Ruggie (1994: 556) that 'there is unavoidable ambiguity in defining this term'. Scholarship on multilateralism still suffers from a lack of an agreed conceptual framework, a common language, and set of references with which to examine its development.

Yet, as we have argued, multilateralism is both distinctive and more than just a sub-set of cooperation. Even if claims of a new multilateralism cannot always be validated,

²⁰In fact, Uzbek President Islam Karimov eventually set his own date for withdrawal of US forces – likely with the active encouragement of Beijing and Moscow - in response to the Bush administration's criticism of Uzbekistan's dreadful human rights record.

multilateralism in practice has outpaced efforts to understand it. Our analysis of the main factors that condition multilateralism - different contexts, goals, forms, and meanings – has raised far more questions than it has answered because so many basic questions about remain unanswered. They include:

- When is multilateralism *not* a weapon of the weak? Historically, under what circumstances have Great Powers embraced it?
- What determines what type of multilateralism emerges in any specific era or issue-area? Does the specific type of multilateralism that emerges depend on what objectives are being sought?
- What determines how many states are parties to a multilateral agreement? Can we demonstrate empirically that minilateralism is advancing more quickly and is more effective than inclusive multilateralism?
- Can inter-regionalism be a means to the end of extending and deepening multilateralism? If so, under what conditions? Or does it inevitably undermine multilateralism?
- What is really new about 21st century multilateralism? Is the ICC a ‘rogue case’? Will the post-2008 financial crisis yield more and stronger multilateralism? What is the role of non-state actors in modern multilateralism?
- Is Ikenberry (2003: 540) right that ‘demands for multilateral agreements — even and perhaps especially by the United States - will increase’? Is American exceptionalism unassailable or surmountable?
- Is there evidence of an emergent, cross-cultural understanding of multilateralism in the 21st century? Precisely what accounts for different understandings in different cultures, and what are the differences (as revealed, say, by discourse analysis of government foreign policy documents and media portrayals)?
- Under what circumstances has multilateral cooperation encouraged non-democratic states to adopt democratic habits? How is the trade-off between inclusiveness and democracy promotion best-managed in the design of new multilateral agreements?

To be clear, there is much in the existing literature on which such a research programme can build, including the three essential features of multilateralism. The first is generalised principles of conduct. Consider the case of Russia’s attempt to agree a declaration in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation condemning the US role in the 2008 conflict in Georgia. It was quietly shelved when the Chinese delegation made clear that, in their view, the proposal was inconsistent with the basic teleology of the SCO. Thus, a generalised principle was established: geopolitical disputes would not distract the SCO from its core task of confronting the ‘three evils’ of separatism, extremism, and terrorism.

Indivisibility — in some form — is a second, minimum condition of multilateralism. The stalling of the Doha Development Round illustrates. Emerging states blocked agreement on the grounds, broadly speaking, that the costs and benefits were not spread equitably between all parties in any settlement that had been proposed.

Diffuse reciprocity also continues to be a defining condition of multilateralism. Parties to any multilateral agreement must be prepared to lose today, and remain a party that agreement, on the grounds that they might win tomorrow. In other words, cooperation must be minimally durable — that is, institutionalised — to be called multilateralism.

If we can agree what constitutes multilateralism, we can begin to answer the questions we have posed, particularly one that trumps all others: is the international order becoming, in a secular and durable way, more multilateralised? Debates about whether we are witnessing a transition to a more multilateral international order persist, not least because of disagreement about what constitutes compliance and whether international laws or norms have tangible impact on the behaviour of states. There are good reasons to be pessimistic about the future of multilateralism, but also evidence that multilateralism is expanding and deepening in the 21st century. We still do not seem to understand why with much precision. It is worth investment of time and thought into considering whether, how and why one of the ugly ducklings of IR might one day emerge as a useful, perhaps even beautiful, swan.

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