

DEFINING MULTILATERALISM: EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES OF MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

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Multilateralism has become a norm of interstate relations and a defining characteristic of the international community of independent states. Today, however, the international system is no longer simply about interstate relations. Globalization and global communication revolution have made the world a smaller place, taking interdependence to a significantly new level and changing the patterns of interactions between states, market actors, and civil society on the international level.

There is no question that globalization creates incentives for states to engage in international cooperation. Thus, the article outlines the empirical research of scholars on multilateralism to advance theoretical debates about its role in the field of International Relations, questioning to what extent do states tend to share a basic understanding of what goals they seek when they agree to multilateral cooperation.

Keywords: *civil society, international organizations, international cooperation, multilateralism, globalization.*

DEFINIREA MULTILATERALISMULUI: EVOLUȚIE ȘI PROVOCĂRI DE COOPERARE MULTILATERALĂ

Multilateralismul a devenit o normă a relațiilor interstatale și o caracteristică definitorie a comunității internaționale. Astăzi, însă, sistemul internațional nu se referă doar la relații interstatale. Globalizarea și dezvoltarea tehnologiilor informaționale și celor ale comunicării au transformat lumea, au plasat interdependența la un nivel semnificativ nou și au schimbat modelele de interacțiuni între state, actori pe piață și societatea civilă la nivel internațional.

Circumstanțele globalizării creează stimulente pentru ca statele să se angajeze în cooperare internațională. Prezentul articol aduce în evidență cercetarea empirică a savanților asupra multilateralismului pentru a promova dezbaterile teoretice privind rolul acestuia în domeniul relațiilor internaționale, analizând dimensiunea pe care statele au tendința să coopereze și să contureze obiectivele de bază pe care le caută atunci când acceptă cooperarea multilaterală.

Cuvinte-cheie: *societate civilă, organizații internaționale, cooperare internațională, multilateralism, globalizare.*

DÉFINITION DE MULTILATÉRALISME: ÉVOLUTION ET DÉFIS DE LA COOPÉRATION MULTILATÉRALE

Le multilatéralisme est devenu une norme des relations interétatiques et une caractéristique déterminante de la communauté internationale. Aujourd'hui, cependant, le système international ne concerne pas seulement les relations interétatiques. La mondialisation et le développement des technologies d'information et de la communication ont trans-

formé le monde, porté l'interdépendance à un niveau sensiblement nouveau et modifié les modes d'interaction entre les États, les acteurs du marché et la société civile au niveau international.

Les circonstances de la mondialisation incitent les États à s'engager dans la coopération internationale. Cet article met en évidence les recherches empiriques des chercheurs sur le multilatéralisme pour promouvoir des débats théoriques sur son rôle dans les relations internationales, analysant la dimension que les États tendent à coopérer et décrivant les objectifs fondamentaux qu'ils recherchent lorsqu'ils acceptent la coopération multilatérale.

***Mots-clés:** société civile, organisations internationales, coopération internationale, multilatéralisme, mondialisation.*

ОПРЕДЕЛЕНИЕ МУЛЬТИЛАТЕРАЛИЗМА: ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ И ВЫЗОВЫ МНОГОСТОРОННЕГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА

Многосторонность стала нормой межгосударственных отношений и определяющей чертой международного сообщества. Однако, сегодня международная система - это не только межгосударственные отношения. Глобализация и развитие информационных и коммуникационных технологий изменили мир, вывели взаимозависимость на совершенно новый уровень и изменили модели взаимодействия между государствами, участниками рынка и гражданским обществом на международном уровне.

Обстоятельства глобализации побуждают государства участвовать в международном сотрудничестве. В данной статье освещаются эмпирические исследования ученых по многосторонности, направленные на продвижение теоретических дебатов о ее роли в международных отношениях, анализируется степень, в которой государства склонны к сотрудничеству, и обозначены основные цели, которые они преследуют, принимая многостороннее сотрудничество.

***Ключевые слова:** гражданское общество, международные организации, международное сотрудничество, многосторонность, глобализация.*

Introduction

Multilateralism has become a norm of interstate relations and a defining characteristic of the international community of independent states. Today, however, the international system is no longer simply about interstate relations. Globalization and global communication revolution have made the world a smaller place, taking interdependence to a significantly new level and changing the patterns of interactions between states, market actors, and civil society on the international level.

There is no question that globalization creates incentives for states to engage in international cooperation. Thus, the article outlines the empirical research of scholars on multilateralism to advance theoretical debates about its role in the field of International Relations, questioning to what extent do states tend to

share a basic understanding of what goals they seek when they agree to multilateral cooperation.

Ideas and discussions

At the beginning of 1990s, Keohane [9] argued that multilateralism had developed an impulse of its own and had become increasingly important, in the field of International Relations. According to Keohane multilateralism at this point still 'served as a label more than as a concept defining a research programme'.

The preamble of the UN Charter provides that multilateralism implies "establishing conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained". Thus, multilateralism involves justice, obligations, and the aspect of inter-

national rule of law. For Keohane (10, p. 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”. By definition, then, it involves exclusively states and mainly, but not exclusively institutions, defined as “inherited patterns of rules and relationships that can affect beliefs and expectations, and as potential tools for the pursuit of their own objectives”. [11, p. 96] Multilateralism becomes institutionalized when “multilateral arrangements with persistent rules” emerge, and thus multilateral institutions “can be distinguished from other forms of multilateralism, such as ad hoc meetings and short-term arrangements to solve particular problems”. [10, p. 733] Multilateral institutions, by implication, take the form of international regimes or bureaucratic organisations. Keohane defines regimes “as institutions with explicit rules, agreed upon by governments, that pertain to 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 state in a particular issue-area”. As such, the study of multilateralism connects to the study of international organizations.

Ruggie extended Keohane’s definition to the ‘qualitative dimension of the phenomenon that makes it distinct’. What mattered more than the number of parties or degree of institutionalisation was the type of relations that existed between parties. Multilateralism meant “coordinating relations among three or more states”, but “in accordance with certain principles” that order relations between them. Multilateralism represented a ‘generic institutional form’ and implied institutional arrangements, persistent sets of rules that affect the behaviour of actors that “define and stabilize property rights of states, manage coordination problems and resolve collaboration problems”.

However, multilateralism itself needed to be differentiated from multilateral organisations, which were a “relatively recent arrival and still of only modest importance”. [19]

Ruggie concluded that multilateralism was based on organizing principles that differentiated it from other forms of international relations such as bilateralism and imperialism: generalized principles of conduct, indivisibility and diffuse reciprocity.

First, multilateralism entails three or more states between whom relations are based on “generalized” principles of conduct that identify “appropriate conduct for a class of actions” without regard to particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrences. [19, p. 571] The interaction of states is governed by “norms exhorting general if not universal modes of relations to other states, rather than differentiating relations case by case”. [4, p. 602]

Second, indivisibility is a specific social construction. It may 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. [4, p. 602] For example, the collectivity may consider peace or threats to peace as indivisible, as in the case of a collective security system.

Third, diffuse reciprocity means that members of a collectivity expect to benefit from multilateralism in the long term and on a variety of issues, they expect the arrangement to “yield a rough equivalence of benefits over time”. [20, p. 571]

According to Caporaso, a distinction must also be drawn between the institution of multilateralism and the terms “multilateral” and “multilateral organisations”. Multilateral cooperation is a phenomenon that occurs between states but not only states. Many scholars, such as Keck, Sikkink, Cooper, Hampson, Kaldor, Keane have recognized the growing influence in international relations of non-state actors, often

linked together into transnational advocacy networks. Non-state actors – multinational corporations, non-governmental organisations, and the secretariats of international organisations – may push states to make multilateral commitments or even agree to such commitments between themselves.

Multilateral organisations may also be forums where actors become socialized to the principles of multilateralism. Multilateralism may become a means, a tool or a strategy to achieve other goals, such as good governance, migration control, or economic liberalization.

Moreover, multilateralism may be effective or not, at different levels of the international order: system multilateralism, foundational multilateralism, and contract multilateralism. [15]

System multilateralism is relations between states based on sovereignty, mutual recognition and formal equality. It is governed by legal and diplomatic practices. Perhaps the best example of system multilateralism is the UN.

Foundational multilateralism occurs at an intermediate level, and includes some, not all, states in the international order. It is based on agreed, specific principles – such as nondiscrimination in trade – and is indivisible in character: all must play by agreed rules and there are means for enforcing them. Ruggie [20, p. 12] offers the post-war liberal international economic order, mainly limited to advanced industrial democracies, as an example of foundational multilateralism. NATO or the EU are other examples.

Contract multilateralism may entail formal agreements among groups of states, such as treaties. But it works mainly based on unwritten or qualified rules and norms. Examples include the Concert of Europe or the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

Multilateral cooperation is voluntary, it is not agreed on a completely ad hoc basis. All interpretations stress three main dimensions: the importance

of rules applied consistently and equally to all participating states; inclusiveness in terms of the parties involved or affected; and cooperation that is institutionalised.

In the broadest sense, research on multilateralism investigate both time and space. It examines the historical evolution of the international order and the dimensions of that order, determined by the distribution of power and patterns of interdependence, during any given historical period. Moreover, scholars investigate political space beyond the structural features of the international order. Politics at the domestic level of individual states, especially great powers, historically have facilitated or debilitated multilateralism. As Ruggie argues, “a pronounced shift toward multilateralism in economic and security affairs requires a combination of strong international forces and compatible domestic environments”. [20, p. 592]

Multilateral agreements have sprung up throughout the modern era mainly to manage relations based upon the principle of state sovereignty. 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 range of new treaties on trade, river transport and public health. Multilateral organisations including the International Telegraph Union, the Universal Postal Union and the International Office of Public Hygiene had their origins in the 1800s. Multilateral agreements during this period were mostly responses to 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 that degenerate into conflicts, but they also prompted states to protect their sovereignty, even as they agreed to common standards and regulations to facilitate economic exchange.

Most multilateral agreements in the 19th century did not generate formal organisations. For example, the Concert of Europe was an informal framework in which four European powers Austria, Great Britain, Prussia, Russia (later joined by France) - agreed to consult each other and negotiate on matters of European peace and security. Following the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, European powers were eager to return to a more stable European order. The Concert was created in 1815, the five Concert powers considering themselves the ‘principal arbiters of Europe’s affairs’, and even gave themselves the right to ‘confer international legitimacy: that is the very right to exist as states’. [1, p. 4] They used this self-appointed right to recognise the statehood of Belgium and Greece.

The Concert preserved peace in Europe for nearly forty years. Its legitimacy was gravely damaged by the revolutions of 1848, which reinforced the power and priority of national interests. While the Concert never became a multilateral organisation, it paved the way for a new kind of multilateralism in the 20th century by establishing a forum in which issues of peace and security could be addressed, and by recognising the special roles, rights and obligations of major powers. In contrast to prior forms, the multilateralism of the 20th century brought the creation of formal multilateral organisations. The status of multilateralism was thus transformed and came, as Ruggie mention “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”. Multilateralism achieved a new sort of legitimacy not least due to the strong advocacy of Woodrow Wilson. The only political scientist ever to serve as US President, Wilson had been a longtime supporter of an international order based on multilateral, collective negotiations by the time of his election in 1912. His Fourteen Points

urged the creation of “a general association of nations”. According to Wilsonian doctrine, a peaceful international order required the spread of democracy, free trade and international law. A new kind of international order “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”. [16, p. 12]

Specifically, Wilson championed the creation of an international body with universal membership, binding rules and a dispute settlement mechanism. Wilson never actually used the term “collective security”. However, intense negotiations, mainly between the British and Americans on the creation of such an international body at Versailles in 1919, focused on precisely this issue. The Covenant of the League of Nations committed its member states to collective security. They not only had to renounce war, but also to accept and establish “the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments” (Preamble). Article 10 of the preamble committed its 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, not military retaliation, if they resorted to war.

Over its 17 year existence, the League was mostly unsuccessful in the security arena. It failed, according to Armstrong [1, p. 29], for a number of reasons. First, it did not achieve universal membership. The US never joined and major players such as the Soviet Union and Germany withdrew. Second, the League faced multiple political crises during a worldwide economic depression, and became deeply unpopular in a number of countries including Germany, where it was strongly associated with the Treaty of Versailles. Finally, the League’s Covenant was plagued with loopholes and ambiguities,

and proved to be over-ambitious and mostly inapplicable. The question of why the League failed continues to be debated.

Multilateral cooperation in new international organisations (IOs) was widely considered the only way to manage the post-World War II international order. In the space of less than ten years, a multitude of multilateral organisations were launched, including the Bretton Wood agreements and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the UN, and NATO.

Why was multilateralism the preferred approach? The role of the emergent hegemonic power, the US, and its leaders at the time, particularly Franklin Roosevelt, was certainly central. For the US, “multilateralism in its generic sense served as a foundational principle based on which to reconstruct the postwar world”. Moreover, the United States found itself in an unparalleled position of power in 1945. Thus, for weaker states, multilateralism not only promised benefits, but also constrained a hegemon. [15]

Roosevelt envisaged a post-war security order based on cooperation, negotiations and consultations between the major powers, with the UN at its heart. Specifically, the UN recognised the role of great powers, such as the US, but also the Soviet Union (along with France, the UK and China), by granting them veto power in the Security Council. The veto not only reflected a return to a balance-of-power in the international order. It also acknowledged the importance of unanimity among major powers. [2, p. 40] Unlike the League, the UN had universal membership and decisions taken by the Security Council – effectively, a *directoire* – were binding in character. The UN’s role extended to economic and social affairs and human rights.

According to Ikenberry, the US also vigorously sought to establish a multilateral economic system as an antidote to the protectionism of the 1920s and 1930 that had hindered international trade, con-

tributed to the Great Depression, and exacerbated economic friction between states. It became clear during the Second World War that only multilateral cooperation – on a stable exchange rate system, a reserve unit of account such as the gold standard, and the reduction of trade barriers – could guard against a recurrence of such problems. The introduction of the Marshall Plan and growing US involvement in European economic affairs reflected the widely-shared conviction in Washington that the US would benefit from a system that could open trade and investments in the region. Such cooperation was strongly encouraged by the White House: Roosevelt took into serious consideration Republicans’ reservations about the UN and made a point to incorporate them in the Charter. Roosevelt’s successor, Harry Truman, followed a similar strategy in economic affairs. In particular, he argued that it was in the US interest to have a stable and prosperous Europe. In the end, “the Marshall Plan and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade both enjoyed broad bipartisan support”. [14, p. 13] The domestic politics of multilateralism shifted in the US, but largely because of changes in the international order.

The Cold War then ushered in a new and unprecedented international context, at the same time, the construction of the iron curtain pushed the US to support the creation of what was effectively a new multilateral system. NATO was launched in 1949, with an attack on one member treated as an attack on all.

When the Cold War ended, despite many predictions that the international system would shift towards multipolarity, thus undermining multilateralism, there were developed new multilateral economic agreements including the WTO and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC).

The 2000s witnessed advancing interdependence spurred by globalization. The internationalization

of issues such as financial regulation, disease control, and counterterrorism increased demand for multilateral solutions. As generic comments on multilateralism go, the claim that “as global interdependence grows, so does the need for multilateral coordination of policies” comes as close as any to unchallenged veracity. In fact, one of the more obvious and testable hypotheses for students of multilateralism is that, assuming global interdependence is not reversed, “the demands for multilateral agreements will increase”. [5, p. 540]

If structural shifts in the international order and domestic politics within Great Powers can advance or obstruct multilateralism, the different goals that lead states to embrace multilateral cooperation condition how it works in practice.

First, it is needed to consider how different International Relations theories view multilateralism. According to Keohane, the institutionalists assume that the goal of multilateralism is to solve shared problems. Globalization generates wealth and intercultural 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. Alternatively, realists contend that states have different interests and thus inevitably seek different objectives when they agree to multilateral cooperation. Interdependence is increasing but is still only a weak motivator of state behaviour. [23] Gill affirms that critical or dependency theorists would reject the assumption that multilateralism means the absence of particularist interests so that the same rules apply to all. Most multilateral organisations have had their rules written by a sub-group of the eventual latent membership. Differences in the rules (International Monetary Fund; IMF) or equivalence in rules (WTO) expose the rhetoric of multilateralism as concealing relationships of dependency. [8] To this end, differ-

ent theoretical positions yield very different views about the basic objectives of multilateralism.

One indicator suggesting that multilateralism is on the rise is the increased frequency with which IR scholars focus on the interplay between international law and international relations. Constructivists argue that international law has become a social structure, built on norms recognised by states, that shapes world politics. Multilateralism is the most common and distinctive source of international “legislation”, or the most frequent mode of formulation and enactment of legally binding international rules. [18, p. 38]

In the context of researching different forms of multilateralism the central concern focuses on the extent that multilateralism tends to evolve according to a common pattern. Thus, exploring experts’ debates about compliance and non-compliance, could be considered whether 21st century multilateralism is more demanding than earlier forms, thus creating stronger incentives for states to resist it.

Peterson has taken a rather different approach, identifying three categories of multilateralism: aspirant, crystallizing and institutionalized. The establishment of rules-based organisations such as the WTO would be categorized as institutionalised multilateralism. The emergence of new international rules and organisations, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), more active international judicial intervention, or international efforts to tackle climate change - would be considered crystallizing multilateralism. The emergence of international norms on child labour or foreign investment is evidence of aspirant multilateralism. In this category, “norms inform foreign policy behaviour in the absence of codified rules or even the prospect of establishing them”. [17, p. 9]

Over time, scholars as Cox, McRae and Hubert have claimed to identify a “new multilateralism”. Ikenberry has argued that the multilateralism in

the 21st century is more demanding than past versions and necessitates more concessions on the part of states. Previous forms were more accommodating to the interests of major players, often containing provisions for reservations, exemptions, veto powers or weighted voting mechanisms. The “old” multilateralism recognised the status of major powers and offered them relatively unthreatening cooperation.

For example, the UN Charter includes various mechanisms of accommodation such as the power of veto on the Security Council (Article 27). Such provisions reaffirm that states retain some control of their sovereignty. They are widely-accepted as a means for increasing the number of signatories to multilateral treaties and agreements. [5]

The GATT worked on the basis of consensus: no decision was adopted if a member state formally objected to the proposed decision. Consensus also 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”. [21, p. 345) As Steinberg suggests, the preference for consensus decision-making resulted from multiple factors. They included the accession of a bloc of developing countries in the 1950s, the dynamics of the Cold War, 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 organization that could attract and retain developing countries’.

As successor to the GATT in 1995, the WTO appeared to mark a step-level change. According to its Disputes Settlement Mechanism (DSU), states would be legally obliged to deliver on the terms of sanctions that were assessed against them. The WTO is thus a prime example of the new multilateralism for advocates of the view that something changed in the transition out of the Cold War.

In fact, non-compliance with WTO rules has

been a frequent practice of major players, including the US and the EU. But non-compliance in the international trade area may be perceived differently than, for example, violations of human rights. As Trachtman [22, p. 127] highlighted, 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, the violation of WTO rules by some members may have a severe impact 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 appears to strengthen multilateralism and ensure compliance with agreed international rules.

In contrast, the Ottawa Convention on landmines appears to be an unusually pure case of the new multilateralism. Most signatories strongly defended the position 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.

Even if the international order of the 21st century is a more multilateral one, different cultural understandings of multilateralism may still lead states to define differently the problems that cooperation seeks to solve. Connecting with questions about the universality of multilateralism, perhaps cultural differences rule it out entirely. [13] For example, “sovereignty-based” multilateralism is spoken of in China as a normative objective. Chinese policymakers readily concede that international cooperation is desirable and necessary. But they also insist it must be based on the strict understanding that domestic political matters, such as human rights in China, are nobody else’s business.

The question of whether multilateral cooperation encourages non-democratic states to adopt demo-

cratic habits was pointed by Keohane, Macedo and Moravcsik in their work “Democracy-enhancing multilateralism”, finding an explicit trade-off between effectiveness and democracy in building multilateralism. [12] Multilateral cooperation between non-democracies is always unlikely to promote democracy. Keohane and his colleagues 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”. [12, p. 28]

Thus, considering the dimension of multilateralism in the 21st century, compared to other historical periods, the modern era features more and more demanding forms of multilateralism, since multilateralism involves fundamental ambiguities, especially on what constitutes compliance and whether international laws or norms have genuine, tangible impact on the behaviour of states.

Conclusions

A number of factors are driving the transition – structural changes in the international system, periodic crisis and disasters (e.g., inter-and intrastate conflicts, economic collapse and catastrophic environmental events) that shock the system, shifts in the international system’s characteristics or nature due to competitive pressures for resources and mandates, new and expanded norms, and domestic politics. One of the more important consequences of this transition has been the pluralization of international relations, which is causing the shift from the centralized institutional forms and mechanism of governance and shaping the contours of 21st century world politics. But, despite these pressures, most mechanisms for international decision making are exclusive to states.

The new dynamics of world politics arising out are forcing to manage relations among a wider set

of global actors and creating the new mix of participants and roles in the structure and governance of the international system and order. Clearly, the characteristics of the multilateral stage are large and growing, and the roles they play in contemporary world politics are both diverse and complex. Multilateralism encompasses this complexity, anchors the practices and means of interaction of states, non-state actors and international organizations, enabling to tackle transnational and global problems collectively and to realize common goals.

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