

Conceptualising Multilateralism

Can We All Just Get Along?

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MERCURY is financially supported by the EU's 7th Framework Programme
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Conceptualising Multilateralism: Can We All Just Get Along?¹

Abstract

Multilateralism is a poor, ugly duckling amongst concepts in the study of international relations. Our central aims are to provide a conceptual framework for understanding multilateralism and – in particular - a single, modern definition that can guide further research. We provide a platform for research that truly conceptualises multilateralism by reviewing contending past definitions, before focusing on main factors that condition multilateralism: 1) different contexts, 2) different goals, 3) different forms, and 4) different meanings. If we raise more questions than we answer, it is because so many questions about multilateralism remain unanswered.

February 2010

<http://www.mercury-fp7.net/index.php?id=10072>

Multilateralism is a poor, ugly duckling amongst concepts in the study of international relations (IR). Arguably, multilateralism simply does not qualify as a core concept in the same way as anarchy, sovereignty, or interdependence. If so, such a result is ironic. After the Cold War ended, renewed interest amongst policy-makers in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) led to burgeoning academic interest in multilateralism. At the time, Caporaso (1992) argued that while multilateralism was frequently used by IR scholars to describe a variety of different forms of cooperation and institution, it still was not adequately conceptualised. His response was to resort to a cocktail of 'sociology, experimental psychology, organization theory, and game theory' to try to conceptualise multilateralism (Caporaso 1992: 604). The exercise was both creative and interesting. But it failed insofar as it did not stop scholars from using multilateralism in a variety of ways to refer to different modes and forms of international cooperation.

Perhaps an important reason why multilateralism is so poorly conceptualised 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 neglected in theory because, in practice, America 'does not do' multilateralism, at least not any longer or on the most important issues of security and wealth.²

A slightly different, but compatible 'reason for the paucity of theory concerning multilateralism is that there may be so little multilateralism in practice' (Caporaso 1992: 600). Naím (2009b: 135) asks, 'when was the last time you heard that a large number of countries agreed to a major international accord on a pressing issue?' His answer: 'Not in more than a decade'. 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 – joined soon by Iran? – from becoming nuclear powers.

Equally compatible is the view that multilateralism is now an historical 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, which sought to develop a 3rd way alternative to alignment with either other superpower. The Cold War is now history. Attempts at multilateral arms control have been, on balance, ineffective. India's desire to promote multilateralism seems a rather low priority of its current foreign policy.

The view that multilateralism is an anachronism is companionable with one that considers it a 'weapon of the weak' (Kagan 2002: 4). That is, the only states that seek multilateral agreements are those that lack the power to impose solutions to international problems that serve their own interests. Most European states, especially its many small ones, could be categorised as such. Kagan (2008: 42) starkly labels post-war India's wish to be 'the harbinger of a new set of principles of peaceful coexistence and multilateralism which if applied properly would transform the world' as 'a European-style worldview before Europeans themselves had adopted it'.

If any or all of these views are valid, then perhaps multilateralism deserves to remain under-conceptualised. IR scholars might be advised to focus their attention elsewhere. Yet, we find evidence to suggest growing interest, even amongst major powers, in multilateral solutions to transnational problems – such as global warming, international terrorism, and disease control – that are the externalities of globalization. The 2008-10 financial crisis suddenly made the Group of 20 (G20) most 'systemically important industrialized and developing economies'³ – an 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's commitment to multilateral economic cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has become a prominent feature of its 21st century foreign policy (Klein *et al* 2010). After the (allegedly) relentless unilateralism of the George W. Bush administration, the US elected an 'untested multilateralist in foreign affairs' (Delbanco 2008): Barack Obama. The European Union (EU) – equipped with a new and stronger foreign policy machinery after ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (2009) – is funding multiple, large research programmes into multilateralism as part of its doctrinal commitment to effective multilateralism.⁴ Academic interest in multilateralism is by no means confined to Europe: Robert Keohane and colleagues (2009: 28) have recently urged that IR scholars make multilateralism a major focus of research that is 'deeply empirical' and based on 'comparative institutional analysis'.

Of course, it is possible that global demand for multilateralism is increasing, but that states – particularly major powers – lack either the will or capability to supply it. Multilateralism sceptics could point to evidence that Obama's America seemed not much more concerned to build multilateralism than Bush's, that European integration had stalled, and that emerging powers – Brazil, Russia, India and China (collectively known as BRIC) – increasingly asserted themselves in unilateral ways. Even if we accept skeptic's view, interesting questions arise. If demand for global governance continues to outpace supply, why does this shortfall exist?

Even this question is underpinned by assumptions that are by no means unchallengeable. Whether or not demand for multilateralism remains unmet is an empirical question. Can we really 'measure' demand for multilateralism? It may be that demand is variable between issue-areas. It has certainly risen in the cases of financial governance and climate change. Can we say the same about trade or arms control? Is multilateralism perhaps a condition that arises spontaneously when states decide it is in their own interests, as opposed to a sort of commodity that can be 'supplied'?

Ultimately, even those who are most skeptical about multilateralism must concede some basics. There is no question that globalisation, broadly defined, creates incentives for states to engage in international cooperation. It might be argued that Europe's own experience of multilateralism is *sui generis* and will never be replicated elsewhere. Yet, there is growing evidence that other regions of the world, particularly Asia⁵, are looking to the EU for lessons can be learned about how multilateral cooperation can solve transnational problems. The EU is trying, at least, to forge different kinds of partnerships with the BRIC powers with the stated goal of building multilateralism (Grevi and de Vasconcelos 2008).

Our purpose is to try to lay the groundwork for research that truly conceptualises multilateralism. We are mindful of the need for empirical research on multilateralism to help advance theoretical debates about its role in IR, being convinced – as we are – of the veracity of Susan Strange's injunction that we can only theorise about that which we know empirically, and know well (see Palan 1999). We wish to be clear that ours is an exercise in *pre-theorising*, which takes the prior step of developing a conceptual framework that can guide investigation of multilateralism. We remind ourselves of what a 'conceptual framework' can be expected to do:

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).

That need for greater conceptual depth and breadth leads us to ask far more questions – about how multilateralism is defined, what causes it, what effects it has, and so on – than we answer.

In a sense, we are seeking to identify dependent variables that need to be explained so that scholars can identify what independent variables might lead us to develop testable hypotheses about multilateralism.

We begin by examining contending definitions of multilateralism. This ground-clearing exercise moves us over well-travelled ground. But it must be covered for us to propose, as we do in our conclusion, a modern, 21st century definition of multilateralism. Our main focus is on the 4 main factors that condition multilateralism: 1) different contexts, 2) different goals, 3) different forms, 4) different meanings.

1) Understanding Multilateralism

As the 1990s dawned, Keohane (1990; 1998) argued that multilateralism had developed a momentum of its own. It had become important, even increasingly important, in IR. Yet, according to Keohane (1990: 731) multilateralism at this point still ‘served as a label more than as a concept defining a research programme’.

According to the preamble of the UN Charter, multilateralism implies ‘establish[ing] 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 a sort of international rule of law. For Keohane (1990: 731), multilateralism is ‘the practice of co-ordinating 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 (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).⁶ Multilateralism becomes institutionalised 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’ (Keohane 1990: 733). Multilateral institutions, by implication, take the form of international regimes or bureaucratic organisations.⁷ As such, the study of multilateralism equates (essentially) with the study of the behaviour of states within international organizations.

For Ruggie (1992: 564), Keohane’s definition was too ‘nominal’ and neglectful of the ‘qualitative (emphasis in original) 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. Obviously, 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’ (emphasis in original). It implied institutional arrangements (persistent sets of rules, formal and informal, that affect the behaviour of actors) that ‘define and stabilize property rights of states, manage coordination problems and resolve collaboration problems’ (Ruggie 1992: 567-568). However, multilateralism needed to be differentiated from multilateral organisations, which were a ‘relatively recent arrival and still of only modest importance’.

Ruggie further contended that multilateralism was constructed on the basis of certain principles that differentiated it from other forms of IR such as bilateralism and imperialism:

- generalized principles of conduct,
- indivisibility, and
- diffuse reciprocity.

First, multilateralism entails three or more states⁸ 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' (Ruggie 1992: 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' (Caporaso 1992: 602).

Second, multilateralism is based on a specific social construction: indivisibility. 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 (Caporaso 1992: 602). For example, the collectivity may consider peace 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. In other words, they expect the arrangement to 'yield a rough equivalence of benefits in the aggregate and over time' (Ruggie 1992: 571; see also Keohane 1986). Diffuse reciprocity is an important reason why it may be hypothesised that multilateralism is effective in solving problems of coordination on which transaction costs are high and states are mostly indifferent to actual 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. On the other hand, multilateralism rarely solves collaboration problems, such as those of collective security (see Dannreuther 2007), when governments have grave fears about the consequences of 'losing today'. The concept of diffuse reciprocity also helps explain why powerful states, while invariably choosing institutions that serve their interests, may find multilateral arrangements become more attractive to them as they value the future more highly.

Ruggie argues that international orders, regimes and organisations can be multilateral in form, but need not be. To illustrate, an international regime may 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. To put it as simply as possible: if an international organisation is a multilateral organisation, it coordinates relations among states on the basis of organizing principles. The same principles – or rules – apply to all.

According to Caporaso (1992), 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 have recognised the growing influence in IR of non-state actors, often linked together into transnational advocacy networks (see Keck and Sikkink 1998; Cooper 2002 and Hampson 2003; Kaldor 2003; Keane 2003). 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. One recent example is agreement by airlines within their trade association, the International Air Transport Association, to cut the net emissions they produce by 50 per cent from 2005 levels ahead of the Copenhagen international climate change summit.⁹ It is also notable that the G20 actually consists of 19 nation-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 whaling. In any event, there is widespread consensus that non-state actors 'have become progressively more assertive in demanding a voice at the top decision-making tables' (Thakur 2002: 270). Research on multilateralism thus may need to depart from the time-honoured, state-centric assumptions of IR scholarship.

Whatever actors are involved, the question of what makes multilateralism effective inevitably arises. For her part, Lisa Martin (1992) argues that multilateral organisations, or formal organisations with more than two members, may follow to various degrees the organizing principles of the institution of multilateralism: ‘one [organization] 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 may become a means, a tool or a strategy to achieve other goals, such as good governance, migration control, or economic liberalisation.

However, multilateralism is not a panacea: its organizing principles can have odious effects. A case in point is the UN Human Rights Council, in which adherence to the ‘same rules for all’ principle – with European support - led to the toleration of human rights abuses, to the subsequent discredit of both the UN and EU (Smith 2008). Martin (1992) concedes that multilateralism may not always be the most efficient means to promote international cooperation. Similarly, Nain (2009) insists that ‘big N’, inclusive multilateralism involving all or most states is a far less effective route than ‘minilateralism’, which seeks to develop cooperation only between the states that really matter in specific issue-areas. If the goal is to promote development in Africa, the states vital to the task, and the number of them, might well be different than, say, those required to strike a multilateral agreement on nuclear proliferation. To give a concrete illustration, 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.

Moreover, multilateralism may be effective – or not – at different levels of the international order (Ikenberry 2003):

- system multilateralism,
- foundational multilateralism, and
- contract multilateralism.

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 non-discrimination in trade – and is indivisible in character: all must play by agreed rules and there are means for enforcing them. Ruggie (1993: 12) offers the post-war liberal international economic order, limited mainly limited to advanced industrial democracies, as an example of foundational multilateralism.

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

Despite the emergence of this and other useful definitional typologies, we might conclude that scholarship on multilateralism has made little progress even as multilateralism, in practice, has flourished over recent decades. Ikenberry (2003: 536) illustrates the latter point: ‘at a global level, between 1970 and 1997, the number of international treaties more than tripled; and from 1985 through 1999, the number of international institutions increased by two-thirds’. 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 or imposition, as in the cases of the Warsaw Pact or European imperialism, which may well still impact upon the behavior of post-colonial states when confronted with choices about proposed new multilateral agreements (such as the Doha Development Round or Nuclear Proliferation Treaty). Multilateral cooperation is voluntary. It is not agreed on a completely ad hoc basis. Ultimately, all interpretations stress three main dimensions: the importance of rules – applied (usually) consistently and equally to all participating states; inclusiveness in terms of the parties involved or affected; and cooperation that is voluntary and (more or less) institutionalised.

If we have specified what is distinctive about multilateralism, we must also acknowledge that it comes in many different varieties. We also must confront a multitude of questions about it that remain unanswered. What determines what type of multilateralism emerges in any specific era or issue-area? What determines how many states participate? What determines how ‘effective’ it is? In the remainder of this paper, we consider the four main contingencies that condition multilateralism.

2) Different contexts

In the broadest sense, research on multilateralism must investigate both time and space. That is, it must examine 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 era. Here, we can offer little more than the raw material needed for an historical investigation of the international conditions that have encouraged states to embrace multilateralism, and those that have not. But at least we can demonstrate that research on multilateralism cannot be ahistorical.

What's more, research must 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 (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’.

The Birth of Multilateralism

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 surge of new treaties on (inter alia) 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.

These multilateral agreements were 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. 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 thus created in 1815 to limit 'the extent of cheating [...] by providing a forum within which intelligence could be shared, actor intentions questioned, and justifications for actions proffered and assessed' (Ruggie 1992: 580). The five Concert powers considered 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' (Armstrong et al 2004: 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. However, it mostly predated European democracy and was imposed by statesmen on docile publics. 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 20th century multilateralism by establishing that issues of peace and security could be addressed in international fora, and by recognising the special roles, rights and obligations of major powers.

20th Century Multilateralism

In contrast to prior forms, the multilateralism of the 20th century brought the creation of formal multilateral organisations, as opposed to loose, informal agreements. The status of multilateralism was thus transformed. It came 'to embody a procedural norm in its own right [emphasis in original] – though often a hotly contested one - in some instances carrying with it an international legitimacy not enjoyed by other means' (Ruggie 1992: 584).

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 long-time 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' (Ikenberry 2009: 12; see also Mead 2002).

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 not only to the renunciation of war, but also to the acceptance and establishment of '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. The use of force would only be considered at later stages.

The League's Covenant did not meet with universal approval. Its collective security provisions were one of the main reasons why the US Senate rejected American membership. Wilson himself had been pivotal in establishing the political conditions for negotiations on a new international system based on collective security and the creation of the League. Nevertheless, the

United States failed to join the first multi-purpose multilateral organisation offering worldwide membership (see Cooper 2002).

Over its 17 year existence, the League (disbanded in 1946) was mostly unsuccessful in the security arena. It failed, according to Armstrong *et al* (2004: 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. But the factors highlighted by Armstrong *et al* (2004) all are ones that clearly can condition the success and evolution of multilateralism.

Post-1945: US-led Multilateralism

There is no debate about the failure of the League of Nations to maintain peace and security. By one view, however, it succeeded in establishing a new vision of the international order. 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 on the basis of which to reconstruct the post-war world' (Ruggie 1992: 586). 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 (Ikenberry 2003).

Roosevelt envisaged a post-war security order based on inter-state cooperation and consultations between the major powers, with the UN at its heart. When work began on drafting its Charter, it was clear that it would be a collective security organisation, and thus follow in the steps of the League of Nations. Yet, the trauma of past experience helped coax consensus on the need for the UN to be different from the League. 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 (Armstrong *et al* 2004: 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.

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, contributed 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 post-war 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 up trade and investments in the region (Ikenberry 2003).

Bipartisanship between the two major US political parties on foreign policy increased markedly during the war and persisted after its conclusion. It was nurtured assiduously by the White House: for example, Roosevelt took into serious consideration Republicans' reservations about the UN and made a point to incorporate them in the Charter. His successor, Harry Truman, made central to his foreign policy the arguments that it was in the US interest to have a stable and prosperous Europe and a rules-based international economic order. In the end, 'the Marshall Plan and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade both enjoyed broad bipartisan support' (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007: 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. On one hand, tensions between the US and the Soviet Union not only permeated the entire UN system. They meant that unanimity of the major powers, which was central to the UN's effective functioning, was difficult – often impossible - to achieve. The UN's role in maintaining peace and security during the Cold War was thus limited. 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. But Washington's commitment to multilateralism was pragmatic more than doctrinal: no multilateral security agreement ever materialised between the US and East Asian states, with the US preferring bilateral agreements with states such as Japan and Korea (Ikenberry 2003: 536).

The US role in developing multilateralism in the immediate post-war period was crucial, as was its renewed commitment to it as the bipolar system of the Cold War emerged. As one of the two dominant powers, the US could have shunned its multilateral commitments and exploited its Western allies. Equally, as Martin (1992: 787) argues, weaker allies in a bipolar system may threaten to exit an alliance and thus create incentives for a dominant power 'to accept smaller benefits in exchange for long-term growth and stability, pushing a hegemon towards a multilateral rather than discriminatory solution to cooperation problems...the credibility of threats to exit determines the long-term costs and benefits of multilateralism'. Although there was never a credible threat that West European allies would exit the alliance (leaving aside the special case of France and NATO), 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).

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 that is more powerful than any other great state in history' (Ikenberry 2003: 538). Some expected that its dominant position would lead the US to eschew multilateralism. Yet, Washington actually championed 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 IOs that emerged, in response to war in the Balkans (Talbot 2008: 3).

In other areas - such as arms control, environmental affairs and some human right issues - the US struggled to support new multilateral initiatives. In the 1990s, 'international institutions and treaties fast became the stuff of partisan conflict, especially after the Republican Party captured control of the Congress in 1994', with Republicans insisting 'that the Clinton administration's penchant for multilateralism was compromising US sovereignty' (Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007: 25).

The bipartisan consensus that had been crucial to US support for post-war multilateralism declined dramatically.

Sharply partisan positions on multilateralism 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 reneged on a range of multilateral commitments (see Bolton 2007; Kupchan and Trubowitz 2007). Still, questions of multilateralism dominated debates about Bush’s foreign policy. 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 advancing interdependence spurred by globalisation. The internationalisation 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 (Ikenberry 2003: 540). 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 - even and perhaps especially by the United States - will increase’ (Ikenberry 2003: 540).

3) Different Goals

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. Here, we confront 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? To what extent do statespersons tend to share a basic understanding of what goals they seek when they agree to multilateral cooperation?

These macro-questions raise subsidiary questions. Can multilateralism be effective even if states have different goals for cooperation? Does the specific type of multilateralism that emerges in any given issue area depend on what objectives are being sought? Does it depend on whether states have truly collective objectives?

Three analytical tasks must be undertaken to begin to answer such questions. First, we need to consider how different IR theories view multilateralism (see table 1 below). 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). Neofunctionalists would go further and argue that, just as European integration has historically seen one act of new cooperation become a springboard for the next, multilateralism logically begets more multilateralism: that is its goal (Rosamond 2005).

Table 1. Theoretical Models of Multilateralism

<i>Theoretical perspective</i>	neorealist	liberal institutionalist	constructivist	neo-functionalism	radical/critical/ 3 rd World
<i>Model of multilateralism</i>	weak (hegemonic)	cooperative/ functional	normative	integrative	dependent

Alternatively, realists contend that states have different interests and thus inevitably seek different objectives when they agree to multilateral cooperation. International institutions are weak. Interdependence is increasing but is still only a weak motivator of state behaviour (Waltz 1999). Any notion of a 'global consensus' on multilateralism is a myth. Perhaps ironically, many realists would agree with constructivists that since multilateralism is an -ism, it is 'an ideology "designed" to promote multilateral activity' (Caporaso 1992: 601). Where they would differ would be on how much IR can be transformed by multilateralism.

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 (often hegemonic) 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 (Gill 1997).¹⁰ In short, different theoretical positions yield very different views about the basic objectives of multilateralism.

Second, we must ask whether universality is precluded by different functional objectives in different issue areas, such as the protection of human rights v. economic cooperation. The question of functionality is central to multiple debates about multilateralism. One is about whether we can resort to economic models to describe, explain and predict what forms of multilateralism emerge and how they develop. Consider the very simple question: should we expect the 'supply' of multilateralism to be responsive to demand for it? Surely, it must depend very much on the issue-area.

Regulatory cooperation illustrates the point. A flurry of activity on this front 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 might be 'exported', or multilateralised, with a progressively larger number of states wishing to get in on the act (see Pollack 2001). Over time and in practice, however, results have been modest (see Peterson and Steffenson 2009; Pollack and Shaffer 2009).¹¹ A major reason why is that both the EU and (especially) the US have powerful, autonomous, and strong-willed regulatory agencies that consider international cooperation to be a far lower priority than providing high quality domestic regulation. Thus, even in areas where, for reasons of political economy, there is powerful demand – particularly from large multinationals that do business in both markets (Cowles 2001) – for multilateral cooperation, it has not materialised, or at least not in sufficient supply. 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'. He confesses to being 'skeptical about generalizing the conditions of economic exchange to multilateral settings'.

Third, we must confront separate debates about how inclusive or exclusive multilateralism must be in order to be 'effective'. Is regionalism, which could be argued to be on the march globally (Fawcett 1996; Telo 2001; Frost 2008), compatible with a more multilateral world? Is it hypocritical for states, such as those of the EU, to seek 'an ever closer union' between themselves while also seeking to promote effective multilateralism globally? More generally, how can the ideal number of parties to any multilateral agreement be determined? Is minilateralism, by definition, more effective than universal multilateralism?

Theoretical work on solving problems of cooperation suggests potential answers via the 'k group' solution (Orbell et al 1991). To simplify considerably, cooperative solutions are frequently behaviourally dependent on a consensus within a large 'n' group. But 'n' often far exceeds the number of states needed to produce an optimum result, which could be agreed much 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 Doha round of the WTO, even if it produces an agreement, will do almost nothing 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. The new Union of 27 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 basic problem in the 21st century is that its n of 27 is larger than the k group needed to solve most European cooperation problems. The same dilemma is illustrated by the G-20. The financial crisis of 2008-9 seemed to mute concerns about its inclusiveness. The urgent need for economic policy cooperation made determining the k group a relatively simple matter. But should the G-20 become a major institution for future economic policy cooperation, cries of directoire are certain to be heard from states that are not members.

Ruggie (1992: 574) argues that 'the multilateral form should not be equated with universal geographical scope: the attributes of multilateralism characterize 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 itself – 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 2003: 95).

This project points us back to the need to study how goals determine the type of multilateralism that emerges. Surely, more research is needed on inter-regionalism, what determines its success or failure, and with what implications for multilateralism. Here, as elsewhere, we need to determine whether inter-regionalism can be a means to the end of extending and deepening multilateralism, and under what conditions. Or, alternatively, does it undermine multilateralism?

4) Different Forms

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 (see Reus-Smit 2004, Armstrong et al 2007). 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 (Reus-Smit 2004: 38).

Here, we explore different forms of multilateralism. Our central concern is: to what extent does multilateralism tend to evolve according to a common pattern? We explore debates about compliance and non-compliance (or violation of rules). We also consider whether 21st century multilateralism is more demanding than earlier forms, thus creating stronger incentives for states – especially great powers – to resist it.

Varieties of Multilateralism

Multilateralism clearly takes different forms. Recall Ruggie’s (1992) categorisation of international orders, international regimes and international organisations. All can be multilateral in character. Ikenberry’s (2003) system multilateralism, foundational multilateralism, and contract multilateralism operate at different levels of the international order.

One of us, together with colleagues (Peterson et al 2008) has taken a rather different approach, identifying three categories of multilateralism: aspirant, crystallising and institutionalised (see Table 2). The establishment of rules-based organisations such as the WTO would be categorised as institutionalised multilateralism. The emergence of new international rules and organisations - such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), more active international judicial intervention (see Birdsall 2009), or recent international efforts to tackle climate change - would be considered crystallising multilateralism: it is ‘becoming’ as opposed to ‘being’ multilateralism, and is still not fully established. 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’ (Peterson et al 2008: 8-9).

Table 2. Forms of Multilateralism

	Institutionalised	Crystallising	Aspirant
<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>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WTO 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • judicial intervention and the ICC • climate change post-Kyoto 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • child labour • foreign investment

Source: Peterson et al 2008: 9

The point is that different scholars have used different approaches to conceptualise multilateralism. Where consensus can be found is on the role of non-legal norms and legal rules in the development of multilateralism. If we are concerned with how international rules and norms affect the actual behaviour of states, we inevitably are drawn to scholarship on international law.

International Law, State Behaviour and Compliance

Most debates about international law (IL) ultimately distil down to a single question: does it actually influence the conduct of states, including their compliance behaviour? Traditional IL scholars view international law (treaty law and customary law) as directly affecting 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).

In contrast, rationalist IL scholars are more circumspect. Goldsmith and Posner (1999, 2005) have questioned whether international law is an independent force affecting states’ behaviour. It

may simply emerge from states acting rationally to maximize their interests. In other words, 'the rule does not cause states' behaviour, it reflects their behaviour' (Goldsmith and Posner 2005: 3).

Glennon (2005) and others insist that multiple factors can affect state behaviour. Influenced by constructivism, these scholars explore how the evolution of social norms has affected the development of international law and the conduct of states (see Finnemore 1996; Reus-Smith 2004; Hathaway and Lavinbuk 2006). They highlight the role of norms in the development of international law as a social structure of IR. International law is viewed as deeply influenced by non-legal norms. Thus, both international legal rules and norms may influence states' compliance behaviour:

Foreign-policy decision-makers are affected by sub-legal norms just as they are affected by legal norms [...] For 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 honor a given norm even though that norm is not considered binding (Glennon 2005: 961).

Wherever they stand on how international rules influence the conduct of states, most scholars agree that the question of compliance is a pivotal feature of multilateralism, especially when enforcement mechanisms are weak or absent (see Koh 1997; Byers 1999; Hathaway 2002; Glennon 2005). Is the UN irrelevant in IR if some of its members ignore some of its rules? Violation of agreements often leads to some rules being replaced by others. These violations, however, have to be widespread or excessive. Glennon (2005: 940) argues that excessive violation of a rule, whether embodied in norms or a treaty, occurs when a sufficient number of states recognise that the benefits produced by the violation of the rule offset the negative effects of the violation. 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 and abuses at Abu Ghraib are two prominent recent examples. The question is whether multilateral organisations 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? Chayes (2008: 55-9) argues that Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib are examples of (American) non-compliance that have significantly impacted on IR.

We might conclude that these examples reflect of the fundamental ambiguity or 'desuetude' of multilateralism: the Latin term desuescere, meaning 'to become disaccustomed to', and describes what arises when states give conflicting signals as to whether they remain bound by a given rule. In any event, the question of compliance is crucial to the evolution of multilateralism. In fact, claims of a 'new' multilateralism in the 21st century, which is more demanding for states, raise questions about changing state behaviour and the possibility of new and thornier problems of compliance.

New Multilateralism, Tougher Rules?

Over time, a variety of scholars have claimed to identify a 'new multilateralism' (Cox 1997; McRae and Hubert 2001; Ikenberry 2003). For example, Robert Cox's 5-year MUNS project on Multilateralism and the UN System critiqued traditional, state-centric approaches to multilateralism and the privileges it traditionally ensured for Great Powers. He and his team advocated a bottom-up approach, which in particular acknowledged the impact of an evolving global civil society (see Cox 1997; see also Krause and Knight 1995).

More recently, Ikenberry (2003; 2006; 2007) has argued that there is something truly new about multilateralism in the 21st century: it 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 mechanisms such as the power of veto on the Security Council (Article 27). Such provisions reaffirm that states Great Power retain some control of their sovereignty. They have been widely-accepted as a means for increasing the number of signatories to multilateral treaties and agreements (see Chayes 2008).

Increasingly, however, the United States (US) has been criticised for its insistence on accommodation mechanisms (see Patrick and Forman 2002; Ignatieff 2005). Chayes (2008: 51) argues that the 'freedom to impose [reservations and exemptions] has become a sine qua non for American treaty ratification'. The US is by no means alone in seeking reservations and exemptions, but the type and scope of provisions it requests, repetitively and almost systematically, sets it apart (see Koh 2003; Moravcsik 2005; Chayes 2008).

Hostility towards American demands was a particularly prominent feature of negotiations on the creation of the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC is often cited as a textbook example of the new multilateralism. Attempts to establish such a court were rebuffed until the Cold War ended. Subsequently, the project gained momentum after the creation of ad hoc courts such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) by the UN Security Council.

During negotiations on the ICC's Rome Statute, the US delegation sought permanent exemptions and reservations for American soldiers. The US focused on Article 12, which sets out the Court's jurisdiction,¹² claiming that it did not recognise the special role that the US plays as military power that shoulders risks and responsibilities in providing global public goods, such as peace and stability, that no other state comes even close to undertaking (see Scheffer 2001; Mayerfeld 2003). The demands of the American delegation in negotiations on the ICC reflected the 'traditional approach for multilateral agreements - that is, to give major powers special opt-out and veto rights that make the binding obligations more contingent and subject to state review' (Ikenberry 2003: 542).

Other parties to the negotiations argued that granting exemptions to the US would sacrifice the Court's underlying premise of non-discriminatory and non-selective enforcement of justice: the sine qua non of multilateralism. Where would one draw the line if one exemption were granted? Other states would then equally have the right to apply for exemptions.

Despite US opposition to the Statute, on the last possible day for signature (31 December 2000), President Bill Clinton finally signed the Statute, stating that the US would 'remain engaged in making the ICC an instrument of impartial and effective justice in the years to come' (Clinton 2000). But he also made clear that Washington was dissatisfied with the Rome Statute and that more work had to be done before its ratification in the US could be considered. In May 2002, just two months before the entry into force of the Statute, the Bush administration officially 'unsigned' the treaty and declared that it 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). However, the Rome Statute does contain exceptions. Most notable amongst them is the possibility of a seven year exemption for the prosecution of war crimes. Although only two states have requested this exemption, France and Colombia, its mere existence suggests that some of the old multilateralism lives on.

In other ways, the ICC does validate claims of a new multilateralism. Within it, states, including major powers, are asked to make more concessions than historically they have made. However, the ICC deals with specific human rights issues such as genocide and crimes against humanity. On these issues, we might expect that exceptions would be tolerated less than in other issue-areas. The question remains whether the new multilateralism is also present in other areas of IR, such as international trade and arms control.

Multilateralism in trade agreements, including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the WTO, has always been championed by the US. 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' (Steinberg 2002: 345). The preference for consensus decision-making resulted from the dynamics of the Cold War, the accession of a 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 organization that could attract and retain developing countries' (Steinberg 2002: 345; see also Curzon and Curzon 1973; Porges 1995).

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, gross violations of human rights. As Trachtman (2007: 127) suggests, 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. But it is a less clear-cut case of the new multilateralism than is sometimes claimed.

Similarly, arms control agreements signed in the last two decades have displayed features of both the old and new multilateralism. The Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) confirms that the old multilateralism has not disappeared. In April 1997, the US Senate ratified CWC, but only after it added 28 conditions to the treaty's resolution of ratification. The inclusion of the US conditions 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 appears to be an unusually pure case of the new multilateralism. Negotiations were fraught not least because the US, again, demanded changes and exceptions, including a geographical exception for the use of landmines in Korea and a revised 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). While some of amendments were supported by a few states, including Australia and Japan, almost all the US proposals were dismissed. In fact, 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. Interestingly, an EU member state that is non-aligned in military terms – Finland – refused to ratify the Ottawa Convention on the grounds that its long land border with Russia gave it unique geopolitical status (Bergman and Peterson 2006: 150). The absence of exceptions or reservations in the Convention, according to the Finnish delegation, left them little choice but to opt out, just as the US eventually did.

Other recent arms control cases reflect a similar aversion to exceptions and reservations. They include the adoption of a convention on cluster munitions and negotiations on the creation of a global Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) covering international transfers of conventional arms. In general, multilateral arms control broadly appears to confirm the emergence of a truly new multilateralism.

The debate about whether multilateralism in the 21st century is advancing, and becoming more stringent and less tolerant of exceptions, is ultimately one about whether we are witnessing a process of convergence towards an essentially single, binding and more demanding form. On one side of the debate, sceptics argue that form follows function: the new multilateralism is considerably more visible on arms control than it is on trade, or even human rights. On the other, the emergence of more institutionalised and rules-based international agreements sustains the argument that we are moving, in a linear fashion, towards a more multilateralised international order.

5) Different meanings

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 problem(s) that cooperation seeks to solve. Inevitably, we reconnect with earlier questions about the universality of multilateralism. Perhaps cultural differences rule it out entirely (see Klein *et al* 2010). For example, ‘sovereignty-based’ multilateralism is spoken of in China as a normative objective. Chinese policy-makers 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.

Contrast multilateralism Chinese-style with a view that seems widely-held – especially on the political right - in Washington: ‘any multilateral order is a sham— the strong do what they like while the weak talk and establish institutions’.¹³ In reality, multilateralism is viewed differently by different American political tribes, and even within them. One view – by no means exclusive to Democrats or Republicans – holds that multilateralism is the 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). In fact, 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 as 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 illustrate is that political salesmanship of multilateralism involves nuance and ambiguity about its likely results, and ‘Washington politics is intolerant of nuance and ambiguity’ (Freedman 2008: 506).

Even when Washington politics allows a US administration to commit itself to multilateralism, there are structural factors that may constrain. As a hegemonic power, the US faces

the challenge of rendering its own 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 naturally outlast any administration. By this view, the US

has always sought to exempt itself from being bound too tightly by international law though in a variety of ways: rejection, non-ratification, ratification with reservations, negotiating of special rights in international regimes; non-compliance of different kinds (between outright violations and genuinely different interpretations of obligations); non-compliance through implementation of funding practices (Price 2005: 137; see also Chayes 2008).

Historically, as we have seen, the US has supported and provided leadership for multilateralism in different forms, including 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. US participation, however, has been characterized by mixed results and 'mixed messages', and has depended on the nature of the issue (GATT/WTO vs. UN/UNESCO) (Karns 2008: 9; see also Karns and Mingst 1995; Luck 1999). Domestic politics inevitably plays a crucial role in determining the attitude of the American political class, as well as those of other states, towards multilateralism (Cowhey 1993; Karns and Mingst 2002; Lyman 2002). The US Senate's two-thirds majority hurdle for treaty ratification is a powerful obstacle to the new multilateralism (Price 2005: 137; see also Lyman 2002; Wallace 2003; Chayes 2008). US perceptions of threat and vulnerability post-9.11 have played a major role in determining American strategy in negotiations on arms control, container security, and the handling of data on airline passengers (Price 2005). American exceptionalism must inevitably be a prime focus of attention for any investigation into cultural understandings of multilateralism.

So must the question of whether multilateral cooperation encourages non-democratic states to adopt democratic habits. Keohane et al (2009: 26) find an explicit trade-off between effectiveness and democracy in building multilateralism. No policy cooperation of any kind may be possible with China on issues such as North Korea, nuclear proliferation, and Asian security if the US or EU puts democratisation at the centre of its policy towards China. Multilateral cooperation between non-democracies is always unlikely to promote democracy. Keohane and his colleagues (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). We would add that such research also must be comparatively cultural.

Because both multilateralism and democracy are understood differently in different cultures, Europe's own 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. And we cannot neglect the possibility that, in fact, there are different cultural understandings of multilateralism in different EU member states. For example, the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, made clear her conviction (at the 2009 20th anniversary celebrations of the fall of the Berlin Wall) that the problem of climate change could be solved only if states were willing to 'give up powers to multilateral organizations, whatever the cost'.¹⁴ But it is an open question whether her conviction was shared by her (say) Polish or Czech counterparts. Different cultural understandings of multilateralism even within the EU may help explain why, in the words of former EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson, 'nothing divides us more than Russia'.¹⁵

Russia itself may be developing its own cultural understanding of multilateralism as part of a shift towards a Czarist 'sovereign democracy'. Moscow's view of multilateralism may be seen as an artefact of the 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 possibly be in this equation for Russian advocacy of multilateralism? The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) reveals that there is room. The SCO is an Asian regional organization that brings Russia together with China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India, Iran, Pakistan and Mongolia have observer status. The SCO is emerging as a factory for economic policy cooperation, especially on energy questions. 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 SCO summit as an observer. They were rebuffed, hardly a surprise given that the summit sought to expand trade between major economic players in way that offered no role for the US or its currency. We are, necessarily, drawn back to the importance of the goals of multilateralism when we confront 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 our exports, companies and real estate in exchange for paper money of questionable worth' (Hudson 2009: 9).

Of course, different cultural understandings can clash between partners in multilateral cooperation. A Russian attempt in 2008 to agree an SCO summit declaration that condemned US interference in Georgia following the outbreak of military hostilities with Russia in 2008 was quietly shelved when the Chinese delegation made clear that, in their view, the purpose of the SCO was economic cooperation tout court. But the SCO surely merits further study. It appears to be a case where multilateralism is not a 'weapon of the weak'. It also suggests that we are some distance away from a cross-cultural understanding of multilateralism that would sustain any claim of universality.

Conclusion

Our sub-title reprises the words of Rodney King, whose brutal beating by LA Police triggered the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and points to a double entendre. First, can IR scholars 'get along' and agree on how to define multilateralism, thus allowing the pursuit of research programme that leads to its conceptualisation? Second, can state and non-state actors agree on the virtues of multilateralism, thus leading to a (continued?) multilateralisation of the global order?

Bringing together both strands of the entendre, we have argued that multilateralism in practice has outpaced efforts to understand it. Scholarship on multilateralism suffers from a lack of an agreed conceptual framework, and a form of language and set of references with which to examine its development. We have shown that multilateralism has been defined and understood in different ways. Our review of the four main factors that condition multilateralism - different contexts, goals, forms, and meanings - has raised far more questions than it has answered. Yet, we

hope to have identified dependent variables to inform a research programme into multilateralism that specifies the independent variables needed to develop testable hypotheses about multilateralism.

We also can offer our own definition of multilateralism to inform such a research programme:

Multilateralism is three or more actors engaging in voluntary and (more or less) institutionalised international cooperation governed by norms and principles, with rules that apply (more or less) equally to all.

We have reflected carefully on the choices that inevitably must be made in arriving at a truly modern, functional definition. All competing definitions agree that multilateralism, at minimum, involves a minimum of three actors (almost always states). Critics might say that this is to set the bar too low, especially given debates about mini- v. multilateralism and k group v. n group multilateralism. But there are many imaginable cases of multilateralism that could have major impacts on IR involving only a few actors, which need not all be states. We have seen that major international agreements – on emissions reductions, regulatory cooperation, and rights for workers – might involve, even necessarily, non-state actors. Consider, just as one example, what might be accomplished in terms of industry retrenchment and the embrace of green technologies, between just 3 actors (only 1 of which is a state): the US, the EU, and the motor industry.

Our definition specifies that 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. But we assume that most, if not all, international actors have real choices when they decide whether or not to partake in multilateral cooperation, notwithstanding existential questions about the nature of power in IR.

We have hedged our bets on the question of institutionalisation as a way to acknowledge the fundamental ambiguity of multilateralism. By definition, all multilateral cooperation is more or less institutionalised. It may or may not spawn tangible international organisations, with headquarters, staffs, and delegated powers. The G20, for example, still employs no permanent staff. But there is no question that policy cooperation within it has become, in the broadest sense of the term, institutionalised in that it is governed by norms and principles.

We have also hedged our bets about claims of a new multilateralism: we argue that the same rules must apply more or less equally to all. We have reviewed the evidence and found that there is real substance to claims that 21st century multilateralism is more binding, rules-based, and demanding. But the old multilateralism still lives in, say, the UN Security Council, the IMF, and even the EU: its weighted voting provisions have always privileged its 'Great Powers' even if a touch of the new multilateralism is now visible in, say, the rule that all 27 member states – big or small - now have a right to nominate one European Commissioner.¹⁶

Our definition is by no means incompatible with earlier ones that specify the minimum conditions that must be met for any international agreement to be truly multilateral. We concur that multilateralism must involve generalised principles of conduct and that their specific nature defines the nature of the multilateralism. The recent case of Russia's attempt to agree a political declaration in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation condemning the US role in the 2008 conflict in Georgia is illustrative. As China insisted, a generalised principle of conduct within the SCO is that it focuses,

exclusively, on multilateral economic and energy cooperation and does not let geopolitical disputes distract from those tasks.

We also consider indivisibility – in some form – a minimum condition of multilateralism. The stalling of the Doha Development Round illustrates the point. Emerging states have blocked agreement on the grounds, broadly speaking, that the costs and benefits are not spread equitably between all parties in all proposed settlements thus far.

Moreover, we consider diffuse reciprocity 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, multilateralism must be minimally durable to be called multilateralism. The principle of diffuse reciprocity is perhaps most deeply embedded in the EU: all its member states chafe and object to what it agrees at one time or another, but all are playing a long game.

More generally, is the new multilateralism emerging, as the international order shifts, in a secular and historically durable way, towards more multilateralisation? Compared to other historical periods we have examined, our modern era features more – and more demanding – forms of multilateralism. Again, multilateralism involves fundamental ambiguities, especially on what constitutes compliance and whether international laws or norms have genuine, tangible impact on the behaviour of states. After 10 years of the George W. Bush era, and with few signs of any shift to bipartisanship in the US Congress, there are good reasons to be pessimistic about the future of multilateralism. Enormous cultural differences persist in terms of how multilateralism is understood in different parts of the world. Nevertheless, there are signs that multilateralism is expanding and deepening in the 21st century. It is certainly not a strength of IR scholarship that we still do not seem to understand why with any precision. Surely, it worth investing time and thought into whether, how and why one of the ugly ducklings of IR might one day emerge as a beautiful swan.

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Word length: 12006 main text
14900 all in (title, abstract, bib. notes)

¹ For thoughtful comments on earlier drafts, we are grateful to participants at the 9-10 July 2009 MERCURY workshop in Köln, the 18 February 2010 panel on 'Multilateralism: Revisiting Praxis, Rethinking Theory' at the International Studies Association conference in New Orleans, the 3-4 March 2010 plenary MERCURY conference at Scotland Europa in Brussels, the 15 March 2010 meeting of the University of Edinburgh's International Relations Society, the 30 March 2010 meeting of the Political Studies Association in Edinburgh, and especially to MERCURY's coordinator, Mark Aspinwall and Jean Jean-Michel Baer of the European Commission.

² Of course, there is a rich and diverse mosaic of opinion within US foreign policy debates about the relevance and importance of multilateralism, with many leading practitioners (Talbot 2008) and academics (Ikenberry 2006) stressing its virtues, especially in wake of the George W. Bush presidency (Leffler and Legro 2008).

³ This form of words is used by the G20 to describe itself. See http://www.g20.org/about_what_is_g20.aspx (accessed 22 March 2010).

⁴ 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 Edwards *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/index.php?id=10072>), 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'.

⁵ See for example Bill Tarrant, 'ASEAN seeks to create one big village', Reuters On-Line, 8 April 2009 (available from <http://blogs.reuters.com/global/2009/04/08/asean-seeks-to-create-one-big-village/>; accessed 22 March 2010). See also Frost (2008).

⁶ One 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).

⁷ Keohane (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'.

⁸ Ruggie (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'.

⁹ See Pilita Clark and Fiona Harvey (2009) 'Airlines set precedent with plan to reduce emissions', *Financial Times* (UK edition), 23 September: 13; 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](http://www.iata.org/NR/rdonlyres/DADB7B9A-E363-4CD2-B8B9-E6DEDA2A6964/0/Brochure%20Global%20Approach%20to%20Reducing%20Aviation%20Emissions%20280909.pdf) (accessed 15 November 2009).

¹⁰ We are particularly grateful to Mark Aspinwall for suggesting this form of words.

¹¹ As a partial caveat, a recent analysis by 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'.

¹² The full text of the Rome Statute may be found at: <http://untreaty.un.org/cod/icc/index.html> (accessed 14 March 2010).

¹³ John Van Oudenaren (2007) 'Containing Europe', *RSS: American Future*, available at: http://americanfuture.net/?page_id=142 (accessed 12 July 2007).

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

¹⁵ Mandelson made the comment to a meeting of the General Affairs Council (of EU Foreign Ministers) in July 2006. Interview, Directorate-General for Trade, European Commission, Brussels, 11 September 2006.

¹⁶ Of course, all Commissioners must take an oath of independence from their member state after they are nominated. But the right of each EU state to nominate 1 Commissioner – compared to the regime of the past in which Great Powers (Germany, France, Italy, the UK, and Spain) had the right to appoint 2 could be considered emblematic of a new multilateralism at the heart of the EU.