The United Nations’ role in preserving peace

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Multilateralism is a reality in today’s international affairs and most observers rightly point to this fact as an indicator that states are increasingly seeking cooperation instead of pursuing selfish national policies. In this regard, the rise of multilateralism certainly is a positive development. However, multilateralism alone is no guarantee for its effectiveness. There always have been cases of failing or even failed multilateralism. Sometimes, failed multilateralism has had detrimental consequences. There have been cases of failed multilateralism that have contributed to the death of millions of people, in other cases, ill-conceived multilateralism just has cost billions of taxpayers money spent on more or less useless institutions.

What surprises so much is that for many years there was hardly any serious debate in the scholarly community on effectiveness of multilateralism or on the factors that contribute either to the success or to the failure of multilateralism. There were contributions to the debate about the merits, failures and limits of multilateralism, but there was a distinct lack of serious scholarly attention with the issue of effectiveness. In recent years this has changed due to research projects financed by the European Union, such as EU-Grasp, but on a whole, the international scholarly debate is still reluctant to deal with this issue.

One exception might be the field of collective security. The system of collective security, as enshrined in the UN Charter, has failed repeatedly in the 1990s and has led to controversial debates in the US and in Europe. These debates showed that different conclusions were drawn on both sides of the Atlantic. As a first step, these deficiencies will be analyzed. In a second step the differences over multilateralism will be analyzed. In a third step, it is argued that a more systematical analysis of the effectiveness of multilateralism is needed and that the issue of collective security might be a starting point to further research in that field.

The crisis of collective security in the 1990s

The system of collective security under the UN Charter is an existing multilateral, international order, subscribed by all member states of the United Nations. It is based on the renunciation of the use of force in interstate relations as well as on the entrustment to an international body (the UN Security Council) of the main responsibility for maintaining and preserving international peace. Seen from a social science perspective, the United Nations system of collective security...
establishes a kind of global social contract by which states are to renounce one crucial aspect of sovereignty – the use of force – and where one multilateral committee – the Security Council – is entrusted with the task of supporting states in their endeavours to solve problems peacefully and of guaranteeing security, either through mediating efforts or through sanctions and punishment (including military interventions) in cases of threats to international peace. The main instruments of collective security are laid down in chapters six and seven of the UN Charter. While chapter six contains a system of instruments for the peaceful solution of conflicts among states, chapter seven details how to proceed in case of states that are violating international peace (Malanczuk, 1997: 385–429).

What is often overlooked is that while chapter six sees the United Nations more as a provider of services for states being principally inclined to resort to mediation, chapter seven stipulates that the United Nations (acting through the Security Council) is to uphold international order and that the authority of the United Nations has to be defended against actors defying this order. This peculiar role of the Security Council of upholding international order reflects historical experience of at least two centuries, in particular of the 1930s. European history of the past three centuries contains ample evidence that international order can only be secured if a group of strong and responsible states work together and are ready to defend this order against actors challenging it. History is also full of examples, too, where international order collapsed because of the lack of such cooperation and resolve – the latest example being the collapse of the system of collective security of the League of Nations.

The United Nations since its beginning has never been able to fulfil the functions outlined in Chapter seven of the Charter, with the Korean War being the only exception. During the times of the East–West conflict, however, rather a quasi-order emerged, which was organised by the USA and the Soviet Union. It was driven by the desire of both superpowers to avoid a major war between them. After 1989, no formal agreement on the nature of the future international order was concluded, however, as was reaffirmed during the summit meeting of the members of the UN Security Council in January 1992, the UN system of collective security was considered by the community of states as the only existing international order.

In looking at the record of the Security Council in dealing with the task of upholding international order and authority since 1989, the picture is bleak:

- While the UN response to the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq from August 1990 could be termed – albeit with many qualifications and reservations – as a successful case of collective security, the subsequent establishment of an arms control regime suffered under a lack of consequentiality and a massive mission creep. It led to an endless prolongation of the sanctions regime, which – due mainly to a lack of cooperation on the side of Iraqi authorities – resulted in starvation among the Iraqi population and demanded the lives of hundreds of thousands of them, most likely 800,000 to 900,000 human lives. Ultimately, the UN regime over Iraq was discredited and compromised to a degree unforeseeable in the early 1990s.

- The Serb attacks against Croatia and Slovenia in 1991 and against Bosnia–Herzegovina in 1992, involving strategies of ruthless shelling of cities and of ethnic cleansing, generated only lukewarm responses by the United Nations Security Council. Until 1995, only half-hearted measures were applied by which no major impact on the scene could be achieved. The case of Bosnia–Herzegovina is a textbook example of how fast international humanitarian and political norms erode if there is no international institution upholding these norms and acting on their behalf. While the level of atrocities in early summer 1991 was limited, it increased considerably later that year as it became obvious that international intervention on
behalf of political and humanitarian norms would not take place. About 250,000 people were killed during these times until NATO ended the war in 1995.

- The Security Council has responded so far with no sufficient action against the repeated breaches of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty by North Korea.
- The Security Council failed to intervene in the civil war in Rwanda in 1994; although all indications suggested that a major humanitarian catastrophe was pending. The resultant massacre of up to 800,000 (mostly) Tutsis in spring 1994 could have been prevented, had the Security Council been ready to mandate the dispatch of a small military contingent of 5,000 to 10,000 soldiers in time.
- The Kosovo crisis in 1997 and 1998, which resulted again in Serbia practicing ethnic cleansing and ethnic killing, found the Security Council deeply divided over how to react. Eventually, NATO took over under US leadership and managed to solve the problem by first threatening and then by executing military force against Serbia in the spring of 1999.

This list could be complemented by other cases, be it the inactivity of the UN with regard to the bloody wars in Sudan or in Central Africa, be it the inactivity with regard to the Middle East conflict, and most recently with regard to the situation in Syria. Many observers have agreed since that the system of collective security has not been able to solve (or even to address) the major and strategically relevant challenges to world security. In particular, it had not been able to deal with actors defying UN authority directly. The authority upholding side of the social contract has not been fulfilled. The Security Council itself has been either too reluctant to authorise the use of force or the lack of unity, resolve and consequentiality among its members prevented the Security Council to take those measures that were necessary.

While most observers agreed that there was a need to improve the effectiveness of collective security, the opinions about what to do differed greatly. The Brahimi Report from 2000 as well as the recommendations made by the Secretary General’s High Level Expert Group in 2004 clearly acknowledged these problems and tried to bridge them with proposals to improve peacekeeping and peace building. Their recommendations boiled down towards making preventive diplomacy, peace-keeping and peace building cornerstones of collective security. This was a wise decision, because the task of keeping international order is something the permanent five members of the Security Council have to address first. However, the main problems could not be solved: the lack of unanimity among the members of the Security Council, the limited readiness of the states member to the UN to devote resources to the UN, the lengthy decision-making procedures and the exhausting debates within the Security Council, and the proneness of the UN system for evasive action did not stop. Some pointed to the necessity to reform the Security Council by adding more permanent members to better represent the different regions and peoples of the world – but it was hard to demonstrate how an enlargement of the Security Council should bring about an improved system of collective security.

The crisis of collective security was not the only one, however. A look at the past two decades reveals that there has been a broader crisis of multilateralism. As John Gerard Ruggie put it, this crisis is a crisis of its effectiveness (Ruggie, 2003). Just at the moment of history where most of the world seemed to be in agreement that multilateralism was to become the preferred modus operandi of the ‘international community’, not only the UN system of collective security utterly failed, as since the end of the 1990s the negotiations on further reductions in tariffs and trade restrictions within the WTO have brought no results. On the contrary, old and new protectionist sentiments are stronger than ever, and there is more and more public resentment and even resistance to globalisation and free trade (Gilpin, 2002, James, 2001). In the field of global climate policy, where it seemed that a new promising form of multilateralism – global governance – would
emerge, the failure of the Copenhagen Summit in December 2009 has signalled that also here the effectiveness of multilateralism is in question.

**Different conclusions**

While the debate within the UN about the effectiveness of collective security was oriented towards finding practical solutions to problems that seemed solvable, a more fundamental debate emerged in the US. As a result, a quite radical reshaping of US attitudes towards collective security and multilateralism at all took place. The US since the Second World War had considered herself to be a global power of order that might resort to multilateral cooperation as well as to unilateral military intervention. In Europe the conclusions that were drawn were different. The European experiences of reconciliation after World War II as well as of the peaceful end of the Cold War were seen as a proof that any kind of traditional power politics would not pay off. As a consequence, Europeans tended towards civilian means of conflict resolution and towards a greater role of multilateral institutions. As the civilised means of multilateralism failed to yield results in the Balkans as elsewhere, the US began to act more and more unilaterally, while the Europeans increasingly became concerned with US unilateralism.

To understand these differences between Europeans and Americans, one has to start with the role of multilateralism in US foreign policy. Multilateralism has been a tool of US foreign policy since the 1920s and it has been revised and reshaped by various administrations since then (Fleming, 1938; Boyle, 1999; Ikenberry, 2001). Indeed, most of today’s existing forms of multilateralism go back to initiatives by the US. Their creation was part of the US led approach to reorganise international relations after the Second World War (Ikenberry, 2001). The role of multilateralism was mainly seen as instrumental, i.e. multilateralism was conceived of as an instrument to achieve certain purposes and to solve problems, which otherwise might have a negative influence on international order. For US diplomacy after WW II the resurrection of European economies, the re-establishment of a global financial system and of free trade as well as the containment of communism and of the Soviet military threat were the main concerns (McMahon, 2009: 40–41). Multilateral institutions were being measured along their ability to contribute to the solution of these problems. Hence, the effectiveness of multilateral institutions with regard to their ability to solve problems moved into the centre of attention. As a consequence, many global institutions were either abandoned (such as the League of Nations) or sidestepped. In some ways the United Nations became more or less irrelevant after 1947. Its main tasks – providing peace, free trade and protection of human rights – were effectively taken up by either special organisations (such as IMF and World Bank) that were under some form of control by the US and its allies or by institutions outside the UN system (such as the GATT negotiations in the field of free trade or NATO in the field of security). What remained was a UN system that was mainly a debating circle.

Despite its crucial role in bringing about multilateralism, the US has never relied on multilateral institutions alone. Rather, all US administrations – not to speak of Congress – have always been torn between the wish to act through multilateral institutions (which is difficult, but which holds the prospect of broad acceptance and legitimacy) on the one hand and the temptation to act unilaterally on the other hand, since this promises to be more efficient and rapid (Hoffmann, 2002; Stewart, 2002). What made the second Bush Administration so peculiar was that it tilted radically towards unilateralism in an unprecedented way. However, unilateral tendencies were already there during the era of the Clinton Administration. In both cases, there were deeply felt frustrations over the international handling of regional crises (Krause, 2004a).
A turning point certainly was the crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina. While there have been no self-critical debates in Europe about the botched job done in the Balkans until this very day – except in the Netherlands where the performance of the Dutch battalion during the siege and fall of Srebrenica triggered off a thorough debate about the shortcomings of the UN approach – the discussions in the US were much more to the point. In both parties and among the various think tanks the failures of international interventionism in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina were discussed with much candour. Among them, neo-conservative intellectuals and politicians provided the most radical criticism – not always the most intelligent one (Halper and Clarke, 2004). They depicted the Western multilateral approach as wrong and indecisive from the beginning and demanded a stronger US leadership role in favour of freedom, democracy and human rights. These authors shaped the political opinion within the Republican Party, which, after November 1994, had won the majority in both Houses of the US Congress. The main subject of criticism was the treatment of Bosnia-Herzegovina through the UN Security Council.

The scepticism of Republicans about the effectiveness of multilateralism grew in 1998, when Saddam Hussein – encouraged by France and Russia – tried successfully to reinterpret and eventually to shed off the constraints of the UN-disarmament regime. During spring and summer of 1998 the US Congress conducted extensive hearings about Iraq during which almost all witnesses testified that – in light of Iraqi defiance and lack of support by key allies – there was no point in keeping up the UN inspection regime and that regime change in Baghdad would be the only option left. Based on these hearings, Congress passed a legislation in consensus with the Senate and an overwhelming majority in the House in October 1998 – the Iraqi Liberation Act – which arrived at the conclusion that it was no longer useful to pursue the option of trying to disarm Iraq through the United Nations and that regime change was the preferred US policy towards Iraq. The coming to power of the second Bush Administration further radicalised this scepticism. There was an influx of militant (neo-)conservative thinking on US foreign policy unprecedented so far. These conservatives had always been the spearheads of criticism directed at the European allies. They also resisted international institutions and alliances, which were said to compromise the liberal goals the US should pursue. The resultant invasion of Iraq, which was preceded by a deep international (and transatlantic) crisis marked the climax of US criticism of multilateralism. It also marked a partial shift in the policy of the Bush Administration, since failure to succeed in Iraq was rightly attributed to its unilateralism and its ignorance towards the allies’ advice. The experience of failed unilateralism brought the Bush Administration towards multilateral institutions, mainly NATO and the IAEA. However, the readiness to cooperate remained limited. Scepticism towards global multilateralism remained. The Bush Administration started to redo many areas of multilateral diplomacy with fervour unknown so far. This related mainly to the withdrawal from the Kyoto Climate Protocol as well as to the retreat from the negotiations on a verification protocol for the Biological Weapons Convention. Also the opposition against the International Criminal Court (ICC) has to be named here and many other instances where US opposition to multilateral negotiation fora has become a source of rather constant irritation for Europeans.

The positions taken by Democratic politicians during these years were not significantly different as many in Europe had wished to see. Their positions towards the UN system were definitely more moderate than the ones taken by Republicans, but the UNSC was more than often criticised by Democrats for being unable to solve current international crises. Even a devoted multilateralist such as John G. Ruggie stated in 2003: ‘It is no exaggeration to say the United Nations today lacks the capacity to act predictably on its core mission: to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.’ Some leading thinkers of the Democrats – some of them meanwhile in leading positions within the Obama Administration – suggested that it
was better to invent a new international organisation for dealing with security problems, for instance a community of democratic nations (Ikenberry and Slaughter, 2006). One can argue that there was definitely a larger readiness to look into the potential of multilateralism, but with a view rather to devise new forms of multilateralism than to stick to old ones, in particular to the clumsy UN system.

The emotional way the debates over the regime change in Iraq were led in Europe and in the US have rendered it extremely difficult to carry on a rational and balanced debate. In order to conduct this debate, one has to look at the core arguments brought forward by the more moderate critics of multilateralism in the US. The main criticism was directed at the system of collective security:

- Collective security was said to be ineffective due to the lack of unity among the members of the Security Council, in particular in cases where astute dictators had tried to play out various big powers against each other (Ayoob, 1993; Righter, 1995).
- By the same token, the lack of consequentiality was being cited as a further weakness. Even in cases where the Security Council could agree on measures and sanctions against individual states, the implementation was usually considered to remain inconsequential and half-hearted.
- As a corollary, the enormous potential of the UN system for strategies of evasion and buck-passing has been cited as particularly strong in the field of collective security (‘evasive multilateralism’).

The criticism against collective security has also spread to other forms of multilateralism. A lot of this critique was directed at multilateral negotiations:

- The original purposes of negotiations were said to have become compromised by the sheer nature of multilateral consensus seeking. Negotiations, it was argued, too often end up with results that do not reflect the original purposes and, even worse, have perverse effects (in particular in the field of human rights). Instead of addressing and solving real problems, the results were often undue limits on the behaviour of those states – most notably the US – that have more international responsibilities than others.
- Multinational negotiations were said to tend towards trendy or lopsided solutions which are more than often anti-Western or directed against the US and Israel.
- The open and public nature of multilateral negotiations as well as the increasing involvement of NGOs was seen as another element of irritation, since both entail the danger of undue populism and erratic results.

But it is not only the nature of open multilateral negotiations that has caused concern among critics, rather existing international instruments and organisations have also become subject to criticism:

- International multilateral organisations, in particular the UN, were criticised for further incompetence and overspending. Mainly the principle of ‘one state one vote’ as well as the principle of ‘equal regional distribution’ was being called decisive in impeding the efficiency of international organisations.
- Multilateral organisations were also credited with being too slow and too ineffective because of their complicated procedural and institutional setup. It has often been argued that they show typical signs of bureaucratic inertia and the arrogation of overseeing rights.
- Multilateral organisations were said to show symptoms typical of large organisations, such as the tendency to become more concerned with themselves than with their environment or the tendency to forget about their original purposes.
- Initially, European reactions to these arguments were quite negative, even when they were brought up by main-stream American politicians and scholars. In most parts of Europe the
The dominant view was that multilateralism was the most important way to structure international relations and to address problems and challenges in many areas. Most European governments, as well as public opinion and pundits from academia, thus, have reacted to this kind of criticism with a dogged defence of multilateralism. Since the Obama Administration has taken over, this line of argumentation on the European side has subsided. While President Obama has shown his readiness to work with others in multilateral forms of cooperation, he repeatedly has made it clear that he, too, would go alone if multilateral organisations fail to act decisively.

Most European governments have already realised that there is a need to take the US criticism of multilateralism into account. They have devised a formula of ‘effective multilateralism’, which already found its way into the European Security Strategy of December 2003. However, ‘effective multilateralism’ so far has remained more or less a formula without any yardstick to measure effectiveness. The predominant logic behind the EU’s ‘effective multilateralism’ seems to be the acknowledgement that the UN system of collective security in the field of peacekeeping and peacebuilding has been ineffective and that the EU is ready to demonstrate how effective multilateralism could look like. In the European Security Strategy (2003), updated in 2009, the EU has formulated as her general strategic objectives a ‘more active’, ‘more capable’ and ‘more coherent’ EU foreign and security policy, declaring ‘the European Union [ … ] inevitably a global player’. The EU’s foreign policy activities since that include:

- peace and reconciliation interventions (in areas such as the Congo and Aceh);
- humanitarian and development actions (in Darfur, in the Pacific and in relation to the UN’s Millennium Development Goals);
- growing security ambitions in terms of an autonomous EU military capacity (separate from NATO);
- and a growing international diplomatic role as seen in Iran and Lebanon, for example.
- Characterisations of Europe’s global role vary enormously: to the one extreme, the EU is defined as a ‘superpower’ (Whitman, 1998), as the leading environmental and development actor; to the other it has been criticised in the past as essentially a ‘hobbled’ civilian actor that eschews military intervention. The literature even debates whether the EU possesses ‘actorness’ and whether it can be effectively compared to state actors (Bretherton and Vogler, 1999). More recently the notion of ‘normative power Europe’ or ‘soft power’ has emerged (Manners, 2006; Sjursen, 2006). The EU approach to multilateralism also has been characterised as being different (and sometimes even conflicting) to the US approach. However, very little research has been done so far on the effectiveness of multilateralism from a European viewpoint.

Some point to the fact that the EU has its own sui generis experience of ‘internal’ multilateralism that was pretty effective (Tardy, 2009; Lazarou et al., 2010). Thus, the phrase ‘effective multilateralism’ was coined as a brand for European multilateralism, distinct from the multilateralism of the United Nations, which often had turned out to be less effective. In practice, the EU is trying to forge different kinds of partnerships with states and with other international organisations with the stated goal of basing these relationships on effective multilateralism (Krause, 2003; Gultekin-Punsman and Nikolov, 2008; Zhang, 2008; Peterson and Steffenson, 2009). However, many authors agree in that, despite the effectiveness of the EU’s internal multilateralism and despite undeniable leadership of the EU in addressing ‘global challenges’, multilateralism at the global level is by and large still unchartered terrain for the EU (Krotz, 2009). While the global demand for multilateralism is increasing, major powers, including the EU, often lack the capacities needed to make it efficient (Smith, 2003).
A research project conducted by the University of Kiel and the Istituto Affari Internazionali in Rome analyzing the record of the EU in the field of peacekeeping and peacebuilding came to conclusions that confirmed these sceptical assessments (Krause and Ronzitti, 2012). In most cases that were put to scrutiny, the EU didn’t fare better than the United Nations. On the contrary, in some cases the UN was better prepared for dealing with delicate political situations in which neutrality was much more important than effectiveness on the ground. On the other hand, the successful cases of UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding were often those of lesser international strategic relevance, and often ‘success’ was quite modest. These analyses showed that, whether an actual form of multilateralism is indeed effective or not, can only be decided after a closer and differentiated examination of the cases. Any analysis needs much more scrutiny than simply looking for reasons that militate in favour of the one or the other theory. Such a differentiated approach has to go deep into the subject matter (i.e. the institutional architecture, the policies pursued by the states and non-state actors involved, the choice of instruments selected and the conditions under which their implementation was applied to the solution of a particular ‘global challenge’). There are other research projects and papers that seem to indicate that there is an emerging debate in Europe about the future of multilateralism that includes aspects of its effectiveness.2

The political debates about the effectiveness of multilateralism in the field of security and security governance owe most of their controversies to the existence of fundamental differences over the nature of international politics, society and the degree to which progress towards peace and stability is possible. In other words, behind these political debates there are different theoretical assumptions which need to be taken up. In the following the political debates are brought into a relationship with the respective theoretical approaches.

Effectiveness of multilateralism under different theoretical frameworks

What makes such efforts difficult, however, is the fact that effectiveness of multilateralism – be it state multilateralism, multilateralism of international organisations or multilateralism involving non-state actors (global governance) – has been on the sideline of research on multilateralism for more than thirty years (Bouchard and Peterson, 2010). Although there is a long tradition of research on multilateralism (or related research on regimes and global governance) in international affairs, very little literature can be found that deals explicitly with the effectiveness of multilateralism. However, since the early 1990s, there has been a debate about multilateralism being in a crisis, from which one can draw many insights. As part of that debate, one can identify more or less implicit assumptions about the effectiveness of multilateralism that could serve as a basis for a deeper analytical approach. These assumptions are based on institutionalist and realist theories of international relations. Depending on whether one looks at it from an institutionalist or from a realist perspective, the issue of effectiveness has different connotations. Institutionalism focuses on what keeps governments interested in multilateralism, while realism looks at public goods that need to be provided and the role that a hegemon plays with regard to the attainment of these public goods. Beyond institutionalism and realism, however, there are four more theoretical approaches that deserve to be taken up: (1) liberal theories that intend to improve the effectiveness of multilateralism by regaining the liberal momentum; (2) global governance theories that look for non-state actors as a source of additional effectiveness; (3) theories of minilateralism claiming that effectiveness of multilateralism varies with the number of actors involved; and (4) theories of organisational and inter-organisational behaviour, which look at internal or interorganisational dynamics.

In institutionalist regime theory the focus of research as well as of theory building has always been on explaining why states cooperate within institutions and why states stay interested in
institutions. International institutions, such as international law, basic international norms and principles, international organisations, international regimes or multilateral negotiation fora are considered to have a lasting impact on the way states behave in an otherwise anarchic environment. International institutions are credited with offering states the option of an alternative approach to utter anarchy and the security dilemma. For institutionalists, states can get used to rule based international behaviour and will understand that they fare better with institutions than without them. Furthermore, they expect a long-term educative and civilising effect on the behaviour of states emanating from institutions.

The main belief of institutionalist thinkers is that multilateralism is effective so long as institutions persist and so long as institutions sustain a dynamic of their own. Multilateral institutions are effective if states continue to cooperate within their frameworks and refrain from pursuing unilateral solutions. Multilateralism is considered to be effective if it further spreads to more and more political areas and if existing institutions acquire new responsibilities. The main purpose of institution building is the creation of a rule based world – and the closer one gets to this point the more effective multilateralism has demonstrated to be.

This is a cogent, albeit quite simple line of argumentation. Given the fact that institutionalist theory is today the dominant one in International Relations, it explains why there is so very little scholarly work on the effectiveness of multilateralism. Most institutionalist scholars do not understand why there is a need to muse about the effectiveness of multilateralism, because, in the end, we will see whether or not multilateralism will succeed.

There are, however, institutionalist scholars who have found it worthwhile to start theoretical and empirical research on the effectiveness of multilateralism. Their concern is to look at ‘behavioural pathways or causal mechanisms that link institutions to behaviour and that ultimately determine the extent to which individual regimes succeed in solving the problems that motivate their creation’ (Young, 1997: 14). This means, they want to explore why states stay within existing institutions, and how much the actual performance of a given institution could contribute to them changing their mind. Again, in the words of Oran Young, ‘effectiveness is a matter of the contributions that institutions make to solving the problems that motivate actors to invest the time and energy needed to create them’ (Young, 1999: 3). Institutionalist regime theory, from this angle, looks at effectiveness of multilateralism under the aspect of those problems a given multilateral institution, in the eyes of the contributing governments, is supposed to solve. In this regard, they come close to the notion of problem-solving that is paramount in realist regime theory. However, unlike realist theory, the subjective nature of problem solving is in the centre. Effectiveness becomes a ‘political’ term, since the subjective perception of effectiveness is said to be the crucial factor that keeps governments involved in multilateral institutions. That means, there is no objective measurement of whether or not a problem has been effectively solved; it is only the subjective judgement of individual government that counts. By the same token, this logic is also constructivist in nature.

Seen from an institutionalist perspective, the notion of effectiveness hence entails the recognition that a variety of perspectives is emerging as part of the political process by which state actors make up their mind whether or not to stay in an international institution. Whether individual governments conceive of an institution as successful might depend on the kind of rational priorities they have in mind. Some put into the forefront the attainment of certain goals; others are more interested in the implementation of certain provisions and the compliance by other partners, or they may be interested in a general behavioural change or social learning by all parties involved (Young, 1997: 13). Some put procedural effectiveness in the forefront, by which compliance of the state parties to a given agreement or regime is meant (O’Neill, 2009: 106). This might serve as an explanation for why so many institutionalists do
not care too much about regime effectiveness, or, if they do, they focus only on how a regime
or a given kind of multilateralism has changed the behaviour of the respective states. This would
not exclude, as Oran Young states, the consideration of whether problems get solved, but ‘it
merely insists that such claims focus on how behavioural changes, attributable to the operation
of the regime, are responsible for the improved environment’ (Young, 1999: 5). Institutionalists
(be it classical or neoliberal) hence tend towards looking at institutions from the vantage point
of how much they pave the way towards a world in which more continuing institutions spell
more effectiveness. This view is criticised by realist authors, who argue that the sheer number,
size and volume of activities of international institutions not necessarily must imply that the
world is becoming effectively more rule based.

In realist theory, the focus is rather put on the attainment of public goods and the role of a
powerful hegemon – primarily the US – in this regard. The issue of effectiveness is by-and-
large something that has to do with the ability of the hegemon to provide public goods. It is the
hegemon ‘who has the resources to provide the collective good needed to make such a system
function effectively’ (Krasner, 1983c: 357). Hence, effectiveness depends on the willingness, the
determination and the ability of the hegemon (or the hegemons) to deliver a public good. As a
consequence, whenever realists care about the effectiveness of multilateralism, they think in
terms of major collective goods – such as peace or free trade – being provided by a hegemon
and whether or not the hegemon can sustain the multilateral regime. Although realist regime
theory shares many similarities with liberal-institutionalist regimes theory, there is a point of
distinction: while institutionalists believe in the power and attraction of international institu-
tions, realists believe in the power of those who control the sources of power. And many of
them today are concerned that the US is losing its hegemonic power, which means decreasing
effectiveness of US hegemonic multilateralism (Ferguson, 2004; Kupchan, 2002; Grevi, 2009;
Haass, 2008). But for the analysis of effectiveness, the difference is on a quite crucial point:
while institutionalists see success when states stick towards an international institution
(an international convention, a regime or an international organisation), realists rather ask: ‘how
much has multilateralism actually contributed towards solving the problems?’

In the early 1990s an attempt was made by John G. Ruggie to narrow the gap between the
institutionalist and the realist positions by arguing that multilateralism cannot be treated as a
generic concept void of any substance. What he was pointing to was that effectiveness of multilateralism is the larger the more liberal democracies are involved. His main argument was
that the current multilateralism of the Western world is different from others – for instance the
Soviet multilateralism or earlier forms of multilateralism – because it was structured by the
US in a liberal way and because it was supported by a liberal US polity. Only this gave the US
effort so much credit and provided for its success – so successful that it has served as a model for
the European Union in its emerging efforts toward using multilateralism as an instrument to
shape its environment (Ruggie, 1993). This theory has been taken up by other authors who
have developed it further (Ikenberry, 2001, 2006; Nye, 2002; see also Mandelbaum, 2002).
Ikenberry, for instance, stresses that US-led multilateralism is interesting for smaller and
medium-sized states, since it constrains a hegemon (Ikenberry, 2006).

As a consequence of these and other debates a liberal theory approach has taken shape that
builds upon John G. Ruggie’s points. It contends that, during the past decades, multilateralism
has lost its liberal momentum and hence is losing its effectiveness. The loss of this momentum
has become evident in the United Nations, where liberal democracies are in the minority. As a
consequence, the General Assembly, the ECOSOC as well as many special institutions (such as
UNCTAD, the Human Rights Commission, etc.) have become places where ideological
debates and anti-Western rhetoric dominate. These organs are said to have become ineffective

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because they have been hijacked by ideologues and unimaginative bureaucrats. Even the Secretariat of the UN as well as the secretariats of many suborgans are suspected of having too many personnel and of indulging in paternalism. As a way to re-establish liberal multilateralism, many authors recommend that multilateralism should be carried out either by liberal democratic nations alone or at least in a configuration in which liberal democracies are in the majority (Ikenberry and Slaughter, 2006; Daalder and Lindsay, 2007).5

In a similar fashion, the effectiveness of multilateralism is taken up by the global governance school. It challenges the established forms of international multilateralism in a different way. The main argument is that multilateralism needs to depart from the state-centric assumptions of IR scholarship in order to become more effective. Governments or international organisations alone do not suffice in order to cope with the complexity of today’s international or global problems and the concomitant lack of effectiveness can be overcome by including non-state actors in policy networks. The proponents of this approach stress that non-state actors have become progressively more assertive in demanding a voice at the top decision-making tables (Thakur, 2002: 270) and that they may be helpful in addressing global problems in many ways. The important thing is to include them in public-policy networks. Global public policy networks, encompassing state and non-state actors, could provide for more sensitivity toward coming problems, a higher degree of public support for the legitimacy of decisions made within these networks, a better inclusion of knowledge needed to address global problems, and improved effectiveness in implementing decisions made within the framework of global public policy (Reinicke and Deng, 2000; Cooper, 2002; Slaughter, 2005; Lucarelli and Fioramonti, 2009). Furthermore, global public policy networks could help to regain a new liberal momentum by relying less on formal international institutions, which often are too clumsy and too much shaped by forces that do not necessarily work for the common good. The architecture of such networks should be purpose oriented (Slaughter, 2005). Most authors agree that any such network must address a growing number of ‘global challenges’ (Jones et al., 2008).

The approach of minilateralism, however, looks in a totally different direction. It proposes reducing the number of actors involved in multilateralism rather than to expanding them and looking for smaller forms of multilateralism. Its basic idea is that ‘big N’, i.e. 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 areas (Naim, 2009). This is because too many voices might lead to too many different opinions, which might impinge upon the effectiveness of multilateralism. This approach is based on Mancur Olson’s theory on the logic of collective action. Olson argued that ‘the larger the group the farther it will fall short of providing an optimal amount of a collective good’ (Olson, 1968: 35). Other studies based on economic calculations have followed and were applied to climate politics (Barrett, 2005; Barrett, 2007). Although it has been shown that even larger multilateral institutions might work (Kahler, 1993), it can also be demonstrated that in the past international problem-solving often was taken out of large international frameworks and was taken up in smaller, more discrete and business oriented forms of multilateralism (Krause, 2004a, 2004b, 2010).

The minilateralist approach has a sociological background; it is based on assumptions about the behaviour of human beings operating within defined frameworks and structures. The approach of organisational and inter-organisational behaviour is of a similar nature. It takes into account the internal rules and organisational imperatives of multilateral international organisations. These organisations can be understood as international bureaucracies that operate in their area of responsibility as quite autonomous actors with their ‘own internal logic and behavioural proclivity’ (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 3). As bureaucracies on a national level, international
bureaucracies show deficiencies that can result in distinct ‘pathologies’ (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004: 39–41):

1. **Irrationalities that go along with rationalisation**: Since international bureaucracies usually operate under conditions of tight operational rules, their activities might not correspond to the situation on the ground. They might stick to operational procedures which are not apt to the local situation, since there are no other rules. If rules become an end in itself, it might happen that missions will be ‘tailored to fit the existing rules’.

2. **Bureaucratic universalism**: International bureaucracies are under the obligation to apply general rules in solving often regional or local problems and to look at them from a universalistic perspective; international bureaucracies hence tend towards flattening diversity.

3. **Normalisation of deviance**: In connection with the above mentioned deficiencies international bureaucracies often have no other chance than to allow deviances from rules by local actors. This, on a whole, is harming the consequentiality and authority of the international bureaucracy, thus minimising its effectiveness.

4. **Insulation**: International bureaucracies are often at places where they are far away from action and, hence, have the propensity to devise parochial worldviews. A lack of adequate feedback might also be the case.

5. **Cultural contestation**: International bureaucracies consist of men and women of different cultural background. They also represent different ideological views. Also, within large bureaucracies, a differentiation takes pace along subunits. As a consequence, disputes over the allocation of resources take place in international bureaucracies that have far reaching implications.

These are all factors contributing to deficiencies in the behaviour of international bureaucracies. In short, multilateral international institutions show serious deficiencies in terms of effectiveness, because they are instruments of a rule-based world and because they are heavily regulated, often with provisions for decision-making procedures that do not allow for rapid reaction or courageous actions. Furthermore, these internal mechanisms might provide for timid reactions and might be responsible for the inability to deal with major security issues. While this has been noted with regard to the inability of the Security Council on various occasions, so far no solution has been found to overcome this principal dilemma of multilateral organisations. There have been proposals by the Brahimi Commission as well as by then UN Secretary Kofi Annan (based on recommendations of a high level expert group), which included a broad range of useful proposals (Brahimi, 2000; Annan, 2004). However, so far this problem has not been solved (Holt and Berkman, 2006).

Any solution is complicated by the intricacies of cooperation among multilateral organisations, such as the UN, the EU, NATO or the African Union, which have been subject to analyses, too. The EU has made several efforts in the past to cooperate with and reinforce other international organisations – in particular, the United Nations system, but also the OSCE, NATO, the African Union as well as international financial organisations, such as the IMF, the World Bank and WTO and lesser known organisations, such as International Maritime Organization (Jørgensen, 2006b; Jørgensen, 2009b; Maull, 2005).

**Concluding remarks**

All theoretical approaches mentioned are very general in nature. However, it does not make too much sense to raise the issue of effectiveness of multilateralism in a generic way alone. Most of the general hypotheses formulated by different theories turn out to be useful only to a
limited degree. Rather some of the recommendations by liberal critics of multilateralism were applicable in one case, while in other cases tenets of realist theory were much more promising. In other cases, recommendations made by public policy theorists are applicable. Therefore, there is no point in applying one theory or methodological approach alone. Given the complex nature of the substance under examination, the whole set of theories mentioned earlier has to be applied to this research effort. Thus, the generic statements provided by different theories can be used to devise relevant working hypotheses.

Whether an actual form of multilateralism is indeed effective or not can only be decided after a closer and differentiated examination of the case, i.e. solution of a particular 'global challenge', which needs much more scrutiny than simply looking for reasons that militate in favour of the one or the other theory. Such a differentiated approach has to go deep into the subject matter (i.e. the institutional architecture, the policies pursued by the states and non-state actors involved, the choice of instruments selected and the conditions under which their implementation was applied to the solution of a particular 'global challenge').

Notes

3 Whereby we do not mean structural realism, but the realist regime theory or politico-economic approaches and all those, who care about the rather tectonic changes in the world (Krasner, 1983c: 356).
4 A typical example of such a broad-based strategic study about the possibility and the dangers of sustaining the international economic order can be found in Gilpin, 2002.
5 In essence, this argument goes back to German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who, in his article on 'Eternal Peace' from 1796, had already claimed that a league of nations was only feasible if it was supported by states with a republican order.

References


