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Part VI

Global institutional contexts and EU multilateralism
The European Union and multilateralism

Robert Kissack

It is fitting that at the end of a volume dedicated to surveying the relationships between Europe (understood as both European Union institutions and its member states) and multilateral institutions, we turn to consider the scholarly literature that informs, and is informed by, these relationships. As John Ruggie made clear in the title of his 1993 edited volume, multilateralism must be understood through theory and praxis, and this chapter attempts to do just that, proceeding in five sections. The first contextualises the study of multilateralism in the field of EU foreign policy scholarship as it has developed over the last decade. Sections two through to four review the literature on multilateralism from within the EU research community and the discipline of International Relations more generally. Attention is paid to the changing nature of multilateralism since the end of the Cold War and the changing nature of constituent parties to multilateral agreements. The final section suggests directions for future research.

Why has the EU caught the multilateral bug?

Multilateralism has been the subject of serious scholarly debate within the discipline of IR for over two decades, beginning with Robert Keohane’s call for a research agenda into multilateralism – defined as cooperation between three or more states, ideally crystallising into a regime or an organisation to provide durability over time (Keohane, 1990). Ruggie argued that considering the quantitative element of multilateralism alone was insufficient and it must be complemented with an understanding of its qualitative elements. Multilateralism is

an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of ‘generalised’ principles of conduct, that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard for the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence.

(Ruggie, 1992: 571)

The article ‘Multilateralism: the Anatomy of an Institution’ is a clear articulation of constructivism as a research paradigm in IR because it advocates using social theory to understand the development
of common normative expectations between states engendered by participation in multilateral institutions. From a sociological perspective, institutions are durable when all states accept them as legitimate and behave accordingly. While some scholars have followed Ruggie’s approach (e.g. Caporaso, 1992), others remained faithful to Keohane’s positivist methodology (e.g. Martin, 1992). Robert Cox analysed multilateralism through the lens of critical theory, challenging the state-centric assumptions of both Ruggie and Keohane (Cox, 1997). Common to all, however, is a focus on the post Second World War institutional architecture created under US leadership. The United Nations, the Bretton Woods Institutions, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), NATO, and the OECD (emerging out of the Marshall Aid plan) were all founded according to American values and underwritten by the US Treasury. As Ruggie has pithily stated, it was ‘American hegemony, not American hegemony’ that led to the creation of the multilateral system as it currently is (Ruggie, 1992: 593). But we should not be too hasty to think of 1945 as the ‘Year Zero’ for multilateralism, or that the US has a monopoly on its creation. For G. John Ikenberry, 1945 heralded the fifth generation institutional order setting out relations between victors and vanquished since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 (Ikenberry, 2001). The multilateral elements of today’s order have developed gradually over time, playing a central role in the present constitutional settlement. For Friedrich Kratochwil, the origins of multilateralism lie in the Concert of Europe practiced by the Great Powers after 1815 (Kratochwil, 2006), while Ruggie cites the expansion of global trade under the Pax Britannica of the nineteenth century as an early example of multilateralism in practice (Ruggie, 1992: 578–83). From these perspectives, multilateralism has been around in Europe in some form for nearly two centuries. Moreover, Miles Kahler argues that ‘even in the early years of the postwar era when the power of the United States in most issue-areas was at its peak, the United States sought collaborators, particularly in Western Europe’, and that ‘Atlantic powers’ formed a ‘minilateral’ core that ‘provided the essential frame for a multilateral order’ (Kahler, 1992: 686). Thus, while the United States played a preeminent role in the creation of the current multilateral system (Ikenberry, 2003; Kams, 2008), Europe is neither a stranger to multilateralism in a historical sense, nor a passive observer in the current system.

It took over a decade for EU foreign policy scholars to take an interest in multilateralism. Klein et al. note that the Nice Treaty ‘mentions the notion of multilateralism, albeit only indirectly, by references to the promotion of international cooperation and the respect for the principles of the United Nations and the Helsinki Final Act’ (Klein et al., 2010: 27). The European Security Strategy of December 2003 introduced ‘effective multilateralism’ into the lexicon of EU foreign policy (Council of the European Union, 2003), although there is little agreement on what this exactly entails (Kissack, 2010). For Laatikainen and Smith, the key issue is how supranational multilateralism practiced by the EU can work within the intergovernmental multilateralism of the UN (Laatikainen and Smith, 2006). Jørgensen notes that it ‘is often claimed that the European Union’s embrace of effective multilateralism is caused by the Union’s own genetic codes’ (Jørgensen, 2009: 13). More recently, Lazarou et al. have argued that effective multilateralism has become a doctrine guiding EU foreign policy. More specifically, while ‘there is no explicit reference to the existence of a “doctrine of multilateralism” in key EU texts, we examine here whether the treatment of multilateralism in key EU documents … justifies the argument that the EU is in the process of formulating an “evolving doctrine of multilateralism”’ (Lazarou et al., 2010: 13). In comparison with famous foreign policy doctrines such as those of Monroe or Truman, the authors’ cautious approach seems sensible. One reason why clarifying the concept has taken so long is that the majority of early work addressing effective multilateralism was not overtly preoccupied with such theoretical issues, and instead concentrated on EU policy performance, either focusing on how to improve the way the EU operated in multilateral
institutions, or testing it empirically (Biscop, 2004; Ortega, 2005, Wouters et al., 2006). Later followed theoretically driven literature interrogating the interaction of the EU and the multilateral system, either in edited volumes such as Laatikainen and Smith (2006), Jørgensen (2009), Costa and Jørgensen (2011), or monographs by Kissack (2010) and Koops (2011). Much, if not all, of this research uses an institutional framework of analysis – most often incorporating elements of sociological and historical institutionalism, and occasionally rational institutionalism (Hall and Taylor, 1996).

The wider international picture was undoubtedly an important catalyst for the EU’s focus on multilateralism. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, led by the US and joined by a number of EU member states (inter alia Italy, Spain, the UK and several Eastern European states then in the accession process), not only gave us a glimpse of an unrestrained hegemon disregarding the UN Security Council, but also revealed divisions in the EU that made a mockery of the ambition of a common foreign policy. Effective multilateralism became a common denominator that all EU members could accept, and it served a useful purpose in distancing the EU from the unilateral policies of the US (although it did lead to a discussion about the possible end of the transatlantic alliance – see Calleo, 2004; Cox, 2005; Anderson et al., 2008). Effective multilateralism, insofar as it means supporting the UN system and upholding international law, firmly located the EU in opposition to the (in)famous 2002 US National Security Strategy that declared the US ready to launch pre-emptive wars.

There are at least four competing explanations for why multilateralism became central to EU foreign policy, and why it received so much scholarly attention. The first is the international political environment of the early 2000s, where US unilaterism cast a long shadow over Europe. The second is that the EU, as a ‘sub-system’ of the international system, has come furthest along the road of transforming relations between its members from one based on power to one based on international law. Robert Cooper labeled such a system ‘post-modern’, insofar as supranational authority challenges the Westphalian inside/outside dichotomy around which modern states are constructed (Cooper, 2000). Here, ‘domestic’ preferences are reflected in EU foreign policy. Thirdly, effective multilateralism is a strategy (or perhaps a doctrine) that weaves a number of EU foreign policy goals into a single, coherent message. Karen Smith identifies these as strengthening democratic principles and human rights, promoting regional integration, conflict prevention, promoting international coordination in emergency situations, fighting arms proliferation, terrorism and the trafficking or illicit drugs, and promoting good governance, and all require coordinated international cooperation (Smith, 2003: 13). Sven Biscop’s arithmetic that ‘Effective Multilateralism = Global Governance’, by which he meant the provision of global public goods, is in this respect accurate (Biscop, 2004: 27). Finally, from a more skeptical perspective, Robert Kagan argues that the EU’s preference for multilateralism is a result of its relative weakness in the international system, especially vis-à-vis the US. ‘America’s eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century statesmen sounded much like the European statesmen of today, extolling the virtues of commerce as the soothing balm of international strife and appealing to international law and international opinion over brute force. ( … ) Two centuries later, Americans and Europeans have traded places – and perspectives’ (Kagan, 2002: 2). Adrian Hyde-Price, also taking a realist perspective, characterised Europe as a ‘balanced multipolarity’ within a unipolar world, stressing the need for European powers to coordinate their own relative positions before engaging in global politics more generally (Hyde-Price, 2006: 64). Seeing the EU as an aggregation of middle powers makes their attraction to international organisations all the more expected. Limited space precludes a more detailed survey of what has gone before; the more pressing matter at hand understanding how the study of multilateralism has progressed.
The international system and multilateralism

The end of the bipolar structure of the international system after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s had an enormous impact on multilateralism. The conciliatory air around the United Nations and in the UN Security Council opened up new opportunities for UN action, but corresponded to increased demands on the international community to respond to failed states and humanitarian crises. For Robert Keohane, this profoundly affected the legitimacy of the UN, and by extension, the legitimacy of twentieth-century multilateralism (Keohane, 2006). He argues that UN legitimacy must rest on either the quality of its decision-making (inputs) or the effectiveness of its policy actions (outputs). Since all policies are the result of political compromises, output legitimacy cannot be ensured and UN legitimacy is determined by its decision-making processes. Yet the UN remains an intergovernmental organisation where membership is granted according to sovereign status, rather than democratic credentials. As twenty-first-century UN policies increasingly impact on domestic politics, the democratic deficit of UN multilateralism is exposed. For many scholars, however, the most important reason for questioning multilateralism in recent years was the unilateral turn of the US, explicitly after the election of President George W. Bush (but latently during the end of the Clinton Administration too, on this see Calleo, 2004). The ‘unsigning’ of the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court and the hostility with which international organisations were generally viewed exemplify the unilateral tone in US foreign policy during this time, with the high water mark being the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Karns, 2008: 9). Disregard for multilateralism was fuelled by neo-conservative thinkers arguing that unilateralism was the policy of choice in a unipolar world (Krauthammer, 1990–91), an argument turned on its head by Guzzini (2006). He critiques the view that US military supremacy is sufficiently fungible to translate into a real-world power advantage that the spending figures suggest. Instead, he argues that neo-conservatives justified a unilateral foreign policy through exaggerating the true nature of unipolarity.

Multilateralism was not entirely eclipsed during the last two decades, especially in two of the most important issues requiring multilateral organisation; trade and collective security (Ruggie, 1992: 571). The EU has contributed to the practice of multilateralism in both areas. The creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 promised to expand the limited trading preference system of the GATT to the global level. The EU championed widening WTO membership in order to spread both the norms of free trade and open markets, and to make international trade law more robust. Early optimism turned to pessimism as negotiations over the Doha Development Round have dragged into their tenth year without any clear end in sight, and the EU must be apportioned part of the blame for this situation (Cottier and Elsig, 2011). One reason for the deadlock is the radical restructuring of the core group of states at the heart of the negotiations, which in the aftermath of the 2003 Cancun Ministerial meeting includes Brazil, China and India alongside the incumbent EU and US. Additionally, the EU (as well as the US and Japan) has been reluctant to give up protectionist policies on agricultural products, while continuing to promote liberalisation in new areas. Finally, while the EU remains committed to the WTO on a rhetorical level, it has placed more emphasis on securing bilateral and bi-regional trade liberalisation agreements (Meunier, 2007). Such actions do not signal confidence in foreseeing the completion of the Doha round in the near future.

The collective security agenda has radically altered over the last 20 years, too. Reduced superpower patronage led to incidents of state collapse, while others were blighted by ‘new wars’ in which traditional distinctions between civilian and combatant were blurred, new forms of violence were used, and control of economic resources and means of production by sub-state actors became more common (Kaldor, 2007). Rising levels of mobility for people, information
and goods made the transmission of infectious diseases and the smuggling of illegal goods (inter alia drugs, people and weapons) easier and more harmful. In 2004, a UN High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change reported to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan that there were six pressing security issues; economic and social threats (including diseases), inter-state conflict, civil wars, nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, terrorism and organised crime (UN, 2011). Crucially, this report reflected what had already been informally acknowledged in the UN Security Council for many years, that threats to international peace and stability emanate from a wider range of circumstances than simply the inter-state wars envisaged in the UN Charter. The EU had acknowledged these threats a year earlier in its own security strategy. Also in 2004, a group of leading scholars and practitioners published A Human Security Doctrine for Europe: The Barcelona Report of the Study Group on Europe’s Security Capabilities (Barcelona, 2011), promoting a human security doctrine – meaning the protection of human life is the overwhelming priority of military and civil intervention. Although the concept of human security was developed in the UN in the mid-1990s, the Barcelona report urged the EU to adopt human security as its central foreign policy doctrine on moral, legal and enlightened self-interests grounds. The concept resonates with the EU’s (self) identity as a normative power, its sui generis status in international politics, and its fundamental goals of maintaining peace through cooperation and the rule of law. Despite these well-grounded arguments, human security remains peripheral in the EU’s security strategy (the term appears only twice in the 2008 progress report), the EU has nevertheless become an actor of some significance in collective security, as it is broadly understood today. It saw the need to integrate peacekeeping, civilian law enforcement and state-building apparatus earlier than other international actors, and articulates a clear vision of the meaning of security in the twenty-first century. While the EU is more frequently associated with ‘doing the dishes’, in place of ‘doing the cooking’ (traditionally a US forte), their significance cannot be overlooked (Moravcsik and Nicolaidis, 2005).

There have been other innovations in multilateral institutional design that go beyond consolidating established policy spheres of cooperation. ‘The ICC represents 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’, in contrast to the ‘older multilateralism [that] came with escape clauses, veto rights, and weighted voting mechanisms’ (Ikenberry, 2003: 542, 544). The European Union strongly supports the ICC, taking a leading role by ensuring its member states ratified the Rome Statute and petitioning other states to do the same (Groenleer and van Schaik, 2007). ICC membership is widespread among African, European, and Latin American states, and far less so in the Arab and Asian regions. Furthermore, a number of powerful states avoid the commitments of ‘new multilateralism’ by remaining staunchly against ratification, including the United States, China, India and Russia. Margaret Karns’ analysis of a decade of multilateral institution building up to the end of the Bush Presidency in 2008 notes the lack of US leadership and its loss of moral authority to promote its interests in the international community (Karns, 2008: 10–12). By contrast, while the EU had not performed exceptionally, its member states are comfortable with supranational political and legal authority scrutinising domestic practices and enforcing international law.

**Emerging powers and multilateralism**

The arrival of the Obama Administration was supposed to herald a new era of US multilateral leadership, but early policy initiatives in support of nuclear non-proliferation and membership of the Human Rights Council were rapidly replaced by cautious pragmatism. While the study of multilateralism at the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century focused on US
unilateralism and EU effective multilateralism, it ended with a different one: gauging emerging powers’ commitment to multilateralism and how best to incorporate their interests. Nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in Copenhagen in 2009 at the COP 15 negotiations of the UNFCCC. After two weeks of negotiations towards a comprehensive climate agreement with binding limits (the culmination of two years of UN coordination), the US, Brazil, South Africa, India and China issued their own final declaration (Falkner et al., 2010). The EU and the UN had been circumvented by a group of powerful states that recognised the importance of curbing climate change, but remained unwilling to be legally bound by international law to reduce emissions. Crucial to our understanding of multilateralism in the twenty-first century is exploring the relationship between multilateralism, multipolarity, and the interests and values of the emerging powers of the Global South.

Multilateralism and multipolarity share a prefix but not necessarily much else. While some authors have argued that multilateralism is more likely in a multipolar world (c.f. Zaki Laidi), Ruggie pointed to the hegemonic position of Britain and the US during periods of extensive multilateral institution building. A number of recent works have explored how Brazil, China, India and South Africa view the current multilateral institutional system (Grevi and de Vasconcelos, 2008; Klein et al., 2010; Johnston, 2008). The central questions for consideration focus on values, fairness/equality and multilateral mechanisms. Are universal values such as human rights protection, democratic practices and good governance, universal or (liberal) Western? At the heart of the issue is the relationship between individuals and the state, and individuals to each other, with regard to gender, religion, age, class, etc. The European Union has traditionally been a strong supporter of human rights promotion, but in recent years it has witnessed the tide turn against it. Detailed annual studies by Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner demonstrate that the EU is increasingly marginalised in UN votes supporting human rights by states constituting an ‘axis of sovereignty’ (Gowan and Brantner, 2008, 2009). Similarly, Karen Smith’s research on the Human Rights Council shows that the EU is increasingly marginalised by well-organised opposition from Asian and African states, despite being better coordinated than ever (Smith, 2010). One recent human rights success story was the adoption of a UNGA resolution calling for a moratorium on the use of the death penalty in 2007. The EU, while significantly involved, also worked alongside nine co-authors from across the five UN regions, with Brazil also playing an important role (Kissack, 2011). By contrast, China is a leading state within the ‘axis of sovereignty’, and India and South Africa lie between the two, depending on issue area.

There are, of course, some shared values of the international community that are undoubtedly universal, namely those that promote and protect systemic plurality. The norm of state sovereignty as domestic authority and non-intervention by foreign actors is widely supported by all emerging powers. Among states in the Global South, protecting their sovereignty is an expression of their independence from, and formal equality with, former colonial masters. Overzealous efforts to reconfigure the norms of sovereignty along the lines of proactive cosmopolitanism (Taylor, 1999) have been too closely associated with humanitarian interventions and regime change. In its place, there is a gradual acceptance of responsibility to protect (RtoP) as noted in articles 138 and 139 of final declaration of the 2005 UNGA (60th session), and more recently Michael Doyle argued that UNSCR 1973 authorising military strikes in Libya is a further acceptance of the norm (Doyle, 2011). Elsewhere in the multilateral system, the convening of the G20 at the level of heads of state in Washington 2008 as a response to the financial crisis formally acknowledged that the G8 of leading industrial states was no longer fit-for-purpose as a steering group for the global economy. Alongside China, India, Brazil and South Africa, Indonesia, Argentina, Mexico and Turkey have become recognised as key economic players. As part of its crisis management role, the G20 is overseeing the re-balancing of the global economy towards a more equitable
distribution (primarily through reducing Northern deficits and Southern surpluses). In parallel, a deal has been agreed to reallocate around five per cent of IMF quotas from ‘over-represented states’ (Europeans) to ‘under-represented states’ (emerging economies). As noted above, this is a central part of President Obama’s pragmatic strategy for keeping emerging powers engaged with US designed multilateral institutions. Significantly for the US, its formal control exercised through its veto capacity is matched with formidable informal influence through US educated staff, the BWI’s location in Washington, and concern for the views of the US Senate (Woods, 2003). Richard Gowan puts it thus: ‘the US is gambling with European assets’ (Gowan, 2010).

Finally, what do emerging powers think are the most appropriate multilateral mechanisms? Ruggie stresses generalised principles of conduct, meaning that all parties treat each other the same. The EU’s interpretation of this, and one that unpinned Ikenberry’s ‘new multilateralism’, is the rule of law, and is in keeping with the European model. The US has always been much less willing to accept legally binding commitments, evidenced in its fewer treaty ratifications, explained by the reluctance of the Senate to pass the necessary laws, and justified by the narrative of US exceptionalism. The Rome Statute of the ICC and the Kyoto Protocol are the most recent examples. In Copenhagen 2009 the US stood shoulder to shoulder with emerging powers on the question of binding treaties – does this mean that multilateralism is turning its back on robust international law? The COP 15 example is a special one insofar as the US and China are in a standoff regarding curbing emissions. Developing states will only consider binding limits once developed states have committed, but the US (unlike the EU) is unwilling to commit without its major rival China doing likewise. This is not to say that China is advocating a policy of inaction – its most recent five-year plan contains environmental goals that are arguably more likely to be met than if they were targets set in international law. Amongst all this the position of the EU appears in flux. During the years of US unilateralism, the EU portrayed itself as a bridge-builder between the Global South and the US. Today, it seems that roles are being reversed, as the EU becomes the staunchest supporter of ‘new multilateralism’, robust international law and strengthening international organisations, while the US finds common ground with the emerging powers over the preservation and maintenance of the Westphalian status quo.

Changing constituents of multilateralism

With the notable exception of Cox, one important shortcoming of much of the early literature on multilateralism was its state centricity. One possible reason for this was the development of global governance as a field of study, broadly speaking originating as the study of public policy above the level of the state (Reinicke, 1998). Drawing on the concepts and tools used to study domestic politics, multiple levels of governance and private actors (profit or non-profit) were more easily incorporated into global governance studies. Meanwhile, although transnational and transgovernmental networks (such as epistemic communities and technical negotiations between governments) were part of the landscape of IR, they belonged for the most part on the margins in the sub-field of international organisation. Recent scholarship recognises that non-state actors are evermore important in global governance and multilateral regimes. As Bouchard and Peterson argue, a deal to cut emissions agreed between the EU, the US and automotive industry would be an extremely significant multilateral agreement, ‘but only one of the actors is a state’ (Bouchard and Peterson, 2010: 8). For this reason they argue that the definition of multilateralism should be refined to specify three or more actors, not states. ‘Multilateralism is three or more actors engaged in voluntary and (essentially) institutionalised international cooperation governed by norms and principles, with rules that apply (by and large) equally to all states’ (Bouchard and Peterson, 2010: 8). Luk van Langenhove has proposed a similar
definitional change, coining the term ‘Multilateralism 2.0’ to describe a situation where ‘there are players other than sovereign states that play a role and some of these players challenge the notion of sovereignty that makes the system much more open’ (Van Langenhove, 2010: 266). Most significantly, it also paves the way for greater citizen participation in multilateral governance, potentially overcoming the legitimacy shortfall noted by Keohane above. Both reconceptualised definitions provide an opportunity to study the overlap between regionalism and multilateralism. Regional (economic) integration organisations (R(E)IOs) are becoming increasingly important in multilateral organisations as actors in their own right, and as examples of how multilateralism can prosper in smaller groups. Moreover, this shift clearly serves the EU’s interests well, since it does not fit comfortably into state-based multilateralism. As well as being a driver of ‘new multilateralism’ in terms of more demanding commitments, the EU is a driver of multilateralism with constituents beyond the traditional Westphalian state.

How does the shift toward a multilateralism of state and non-state actors resonate with shifting power constellations in the international system? To what extend can a multilateralism favoured by China and other emerging powers that enhances the importance of state sovereignty be reconciled with a call for multilateralism to include other actors? Those in favour of expanding the definition of multilateralism do so to expand its usage across increasing diverse international and transnational relations, rather than condemn inter-state cooperation to the past. Bouchard and Peterson’s definition is fully compatible with solely state-based multilateral cooperation, while Van Langenhove says that there ‘are signs that Multilateralism 2.0 is partially here already. But of course there are also strong forces to continue with Multilateralism 1.0’ (Van Langenhove, 2010: 266). Research into multilateralism is heading in two directions, which while not necessarily in opposition, nevertheless point to different priorities for understanding the current system. Exploring the plurality of actors permitted into multilateral arrangements suits the EU because it legitimises its participation as an actor in its own right, something especially pertinent post Lisbon Treaty and to the wider ambit of the EU’s legal personality. Beyond the theoretical debate, recent events in the UN General Assembly point to the unwillingness of many UN members to grant additional privileges to the EU to allow it to utilise its legal personality in a manner similar to the rotating presidency (Emerson and Wouters, 2010). In May 2011 an agreement was reached allowing the EU to take the floor in the UNGA early in debates, although the deal also allows other regional organisations to enjoy similar privileges.

Future research on multilateralism

What direction should research into multilateralism take over the next decade? First and foremost, there is the issue of durability. Is multilateralism in decline, or at the very least, what does the future hold for the multilateral system founded on American hegemony when American hegemony is in decline (Ruggie, 1992: 593)? In the short term, such concerns are good for the business of studying of multilateralism because they provide relevant and interesting research questions. IR scholars have been preoccupied with US decline during the 1970s (hegemonic stability theory) and 1980s (regime theory), so assuming it is not third time (un)lucky, reduced US power in the international system need not mean the end of multilateralism. Secondly, building on the assumption that there will be no fundamental restructuring of the current order, rather an evolution incorporating new powers, what sort of multilateralism might emerge, and will be worthy of the name? Seeing multilateralism through Ruggie’s constructivist framing, there can be no doubt that multilateralism will thrive. He identifies multilateralism as a ‘generic institutional form of modern international life, and as such has been present from the start’ (Ruggie, 1992: 567). According to this line of argument, far from being threatened by
sovereign-respecting states, multilateralism will continue to be relevant. This echoes Mark Leonard’s observation that states in the Global South do not see globalisation as eroding their sovereignty, but instead as the means through which it becomes affirmed. The European view that globalisation increases the importance of multilateralism, while also undermining state sovereignty, is not the experience shared globally.

This leads to a third research agenda exploring alternative conceptions of multilateralism and where they originate. Christian Reus-Smit has convincingly argued that the post Second World War multilateral order is based on domestic political, economic and social factors in Europe from the early nineteenth century (Reus-Smit, 1997). More recently, a group of scholars have compared EU, American and Chinese views on multilateralism, noting their differences (Klein et al., 2010). No attempt has yet been made to link the current national/European positions to a longue durée of political, cultural and historical understanding. However, if one accepts Reus-Smit’s argument that domestic values are projected into multilateral institutions, this would appear to be a possible route toward understanding alternative multilateralisms. The final research agenda has already begun – it is to explore how the Lisbon Treaty will help or hinder the EU in becoming a more coherent actor in the multilateral system. The most important issues are the EU legal personality, the External Action Service and the position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs. While all of these are intended to make the EU more internally coherent, it is currently unclear what impact this will have on the EU’s external representation in formal multilateral institutions. The perceptions of third states are important because they determine the scope of action the EU can credibly carry out according to generalised principles. As we have already seen, the days of the EU being an undisputed norm-setter are potentially nearing an end, leading to a new era in which the EU must either conform to alternative norms, or attempt to forge its own path. Neither alternative is easily done under the goal of effective multilateralism as it is presently understood. Institutionally, the EU’s drive for greater collective representation has chafed against the grain of UN intergovernmentalism, and a pragmatic approach is being taken by diplomats to accommodate the EU in the UN system.

Let us not end on such a gloomy note. Multilateralism can be understood as both a means and an end. It is a way of conducting foreign policy, as well as a goal of foreign policy. In areas such as trade and security, it helps overcome collaboration and cooperation problems that would otherwise yield significantly sub-optimal outcomes. But returning to the sociological dimension, multilateralism is strengthened through participation, even when its results are meagre, simply by virtue of consolidating its position as ‘the only game in town’. Vincent Pouliot has recently elaborated on this idea in his work on multilateralism as an end in itself (Pouliot, 2011). The establishment of ‘communities of practice’ engender specific behavioural patterns that are legitimised over time, in a similar way to security communities establishing the unthinkability of war among members. The argument runs that over time, emerging powers will become socialised into accepting multilateralism as the basis of international relations, regardless of what their position is at the present moment. And this brings us back to Ruggie’s original observation, that multilateralism can only be understood through a combination of theoretical insight and practical observation. The study of multilateral institutions looks set to continue for a good number of years to come.

Notes

1 To illustrate the change in the UNSC, between 1946 and 2008 there were 477 Chapter VII resolutions, 21 between 1946 and 1990 and 456 between 1990 and 2008. By contrast, in the same time period there were 216 resolutions vetoed (including some where two or more vetoes were used), of which 192 occurred before 1990 and 24 afterwards (Johansson, 2009; Global Policy, 2011).
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References


