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EU multilateralism in a multipolar world

Katie Verlin Laatikainen

The iconic photographs depicting global summitry of the latter part of 2000s made visually clear that the structure of the international system was undergoing fundamental shifts. After the global financial crisis of 2008, instead of the closed conclave of the G7/8, the stage was packed with the much larger assemblage of the G20 leaders meeting in London and Pittsburgh to coordinate a multilateral response. Notably, the EU was represented in its own right, by Commission President Barroso amongst the G20 leaders. In contrast, at the Copenhagen Conference in 2009 to negotiate a new climate change treaty, the most revealing photograph captured the intimate, side-room negotiations among the US and so-called BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) that sidelined both the EU (and EU member states) and institutionalised multilateral negotiations to replace the Kyoto Protocol. These two summit photos reflect distinct visions of twenty-first century world order. Will multilateral institutions adapt to the changing distribution of power and the rise of non-Western countries as suggested by the emergence of the G20 in the process of multilateral management of collective problems, or will the emergence of the BASICS, the BRICs or some other acronym of rising powers entail an erosion of multilateral processes more closely associated with American (or Western) hegemony? What are the implications of emerging multipolarity for multilateralism and multilateral institutions? Where does the EU fit into the changing distribution of power in the twenty-first century, and what does multipolarity entail for the EU’s objective of promoting effective multilateralism?

The European Security Strategy of 2003 emphasised that the EU had to pursue its objectives ‘both through multilateral cooperation in international organisations and through partnerships with key actors’. Thus, the EU’s strategic approach embraces two somewhat contradictory visions of international order; one premised upon a rule-based multilateral order supported by international institutions and rule of law, the other an explicitly political order wherein great powers jointly coordinate amongst themselves issues of bilateral and collective concern. The EU’s commitment to multilateralism and international institutions has been thoroughly analysed in the contributions to this handbook. Other contributors have examined EU power and strategic relationships. This chapter takes a broader view of the EU’s role in the international system. It first reviews the intersection of multilateralism and multipolarity in IR scholarship, then explores literature on the EU’s power and position in the emergent multipolar system.
The final section of the chapter engages with the distinct theoretical traditions and offers suggestions for attempting to integrate the findings of multiple theoretical traditions in future research on the EU, multipolarity and multilateralism.

**Multipolarity vs multilateralism, or multipolarity and multilateralism**

While there are still a few holdouts (see Joffe, 2009 and Kagan, 2012), most scholars agree that America’s unipolar moment is rapidly disappearing, and this raises questions about the future of the multilateral system. Newman, Thakur and Tirman remind us that ‘the relationship between the distribution of power at the international level – in all its dimensions, hard and soft – and the nature of multilateralism is fundamental’ (Newman, Thakur and Tirman, 2006: 2). Yet it is surprisingly difficult to ascertain the impact of rising multipolarity on multilateralism because each of these is a central concern of distinct theoretical and scholarly literatures, and the empirical analyses associated with each reflect distinct historical realities. While there have been a few recent efforts to assess the impact of changing power configurations on multilateralism (see Grevi, 2009; Grevi and Vasconcelos, 2008; Newman, Thakur and Tirman, 2006), most analysts tend to privilege either international institutions or power, depending upon the central assumptions of institutionalism or realism respectively, in their evaluations of twenty-first century order.

**Multipolar visions of twenty-first century multilateralism**

Scholars of multipolarity are often working within the confines of neo-realism, which focuses on the distribution of power in the international system and how that distribution of power conditions outcomes. For these scholars, international institutions have an imperceptible impact on the behaviour of states, particularly the great powers, in an international system characterised by anarchy. Because this approach views international institutions as the epiphenomena of great power jostling, when power shifts geo-politically, they expect multilateral institutions established under earlier conditions of hegemony to transform accordingly.

The institutionalisation of multilateralism through generalised principles that Ruggie (1992) argues qualitatively defines multilateralism is marginalised in most realist accounts of multipolarity. Mearsheimer, a pre-eminent structural realist, argues that institutions ‘matter only at the margins … and have minimal influence on state behavior’, particularly for the most powerful states (Mearsheimer, 1994–95: 7). Krasner argues that international authority structures embodied in international organisations have a limited shelf-life because they ‘cannot dominate power asymmetries’ of the international system, and will transform as hegemony does (Krasner, 1995: 148). Even traditional realists like Hoffman argue that international institutions merely ‘reflect and to some extent magnify … the dominant features of the international system’ (Hoffmann, 1970: 390).

Typically, structural realism concerns itself with institutions under conditions of hegemony rather than multipolarity. Hegemonic stability theory associates the development of multilateral institutions to the preferences of a hegemonic power which can induce subordinate participation (Gilpin, 1982). Institutionalised collective action is assumed possible only under the tutelage of a hegemon which may establish multilateral mechanisms to secure public goods (for a critique, see Snidal, 1985). The emergence of new powers undermines both the willingness of the hegemon to provide collective goods and its ability to coerce other powers to support the order it established. Thus, the assumptions of neo-realism suggest that rising multipolarity in the twenty-first century will result in the erosion of the multilateral system established under American hegemony in the twentieth century.
But do the lessons of multipolarity hold for the twenty-first century? It is questionable whether these classical formulations of multipolarity offer much guidance for understanding the consequences of the rise of the BRICs. The early scholarship on multipolarity and system stability focused on the role of uncertainty. As more great powers are involved in processes of power-balancing and mutual adjustment, the level of uncertainty rises (Waltz, 1964; Deutsch and Singer, 1964; see also Bueno de Mesquita, 1978). The power balancing mechanisms elicited by scholars of multipolarity emanate from a nineteenth century world of multilateral uncertainty. While the Concert of Europe was indeed multilateral in nominal terms, it did not reflect the institutionalisation of multilateral coordination that emerged only in the twentieth century. This is the central insight made by Keohane’s rational institutionalist argument in *After Hegemony*. Keohane argues that American hegemony might have created the international regimes of cooperation in the twentieth century, but these institutions will persist after American decline because ‘institutions are necessary … to achieve state purposes … Agreements that are impossible to make under conditions of high uncertainty may become feasible when uncertainty has been reduced’ (Keohane, 2005: 184). Keohane acknowledges the role of power in crafting the post-WWII cooperative regimes under American hegemony, but argues that multilateral institutions will persist after the American decline because they continue to serve the interests of states by undermining uncertainty.

**Multilateral visions of twenty-first century multipolarity**

By contrast, institutionalist scholars of various stripes focus on the ways in which multilateral international institutions undermine anarchy and *tame* the ability of power to determine outcomes. They assume that the entrenchment of international institutions will muffle the consequences of a changing distribution of power, and as Ikenberry argues, rising powers will be socialised into the multilateral order because the existing order is ‘hard to overturn, but easy to join’ (Ikenberry, 2008: 23).

Institutionalists generally minimise considerations of power other than at the moment of institutional creation; instead, they tend to emphasise the independent impact that institutions can have as they evolve in ways unanticipated by their crafters, mould anarchy, and inhibit the ability of power to determine outcomes (Pierson, 1996; Ikenberry, 1998–99). Institutionalists, particularly of the reflectivist persuasion, emphasise the principles that infuse multilateral processes. As Ruggie memorably asserts, ‘What is distinctive about multilateralism is not merely that it coordinates national policies in groups of three or more states … but that it does so on the bases of certain principles of ordering relations among states’ (Ruggie, 1992: 567). The ordering principle of multilateralism is not power or relative capabilities, but ‘above all, non-discrimination’ (Ruggie, 1992: 566).

Institutionalists argue that this multilateral institutional system has fundamentally tamed the ability of disproportionate power to determine outcomes. Institutionalists thus are much more sanguine about the rise of multipolarity (Ikenberry and Wright, 2008). While the realist power transition theory holds that dramatic shifts in the global distribution of power often result in violent restructuring of the international system as revisionist powers challenge the dominant power(s) (Organski, 1968), Ikenberry argues that ‘nuclear weapons also limit the ability of a rising power to overturn the existing order’ (Ikenberry, 2008: 29). More critically, unlike the imperial systems of hegemony explored by Kennedy (1987), ‘the Western order is built around rules and norms of nondiscrimination and market openness, creating conditions for rising states to advance their expanding economic and political goals within it’ (Ikenberry, 2008: 28). The generalised principles and non-discrimination that are the hallmarks of the contemporary
multilateral system mean that ‘China does not just face the United States; it faces a Western-centred system that is open, integrated, and rule-based, with wide and deep political foundations’ (Ikenberry 2008: 24). Ikenberry and Kupchan have argued that international institutions reflect a sort of socialisation process that perpetuates institutional survival, regardless of changes in the distribution of power or the decline of hegemony (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990).

While institutionalism contains very different schools of thought – even more than rationalist, historical, and sociological variants – most proponents have an implicit or explicit agenda to delegitimise power as determinative of outcomes. They certainly reject realist contentions that institutions are the epiphenomena of power. Yet, Hoffmann is correct when he argues that international institutions reflect power as much as they deflect it. In their conceptualisation of interdependence, Keohane and Nye insisted that an interdependent world does not eradicate power but redefines it: asymmetries in interdependence can become sources of power (Keohane and Nye, 2012). Grevi attempts to incorporate this insight into his concept of interpolarity (Grevi, 2009). Interpolarity is meant to capture both the ‘existential interdependence’ and multipolar competition among twenty-first century great powers (Grevi, 2009: 24). Interdependence has shifted the calculus of power considerations in emergent multipolarity; rather than a material zero-sum orientation emphasising relative gains among unconstrained and unattached great powers, ‘the ability to shape multilateral cooperation or lead collective action in addressing international challenges becomes a central feature of power’ (Grevi, 2009: 24, my italics). Grevi is opening the way for power considerations to be applied to the institutional context of twenty-first century multilateralism. While Keohane sees multilateral institutions as a way to manage cooperation in the absence of hegemony, Grevi’s formulation suggests that institutions themselves might become a locus of great power competition, with consequences that have not yet been seriously contemplated by either neo-realist or institutionalist theories.

Taking multipolarity and multilateralism seriously – lessons from Gramsci

Both multipolarity and multilateralism have been heralded as the defining characteristics of the emerging twenty-first century order by these respective camps, with diametrically opposed results for world order. And yet it has become increasingly clear that each conceptualisation by itself is of limited applicability, not least because each formulation of the concept reflects particular historical circumstances that are unlikely to prevail in the twenty-first century.

Perhaps the most serious attempt to integrate an understanding of power and institutions in a conceptualisation of world order comes from those following the Gramscian tradition. In a complicated and often impenetrable prose, Gramscians argue that hegemony is both material and ideational, and it involves coercion, domination as well as ‘spontaneous’ consent by subordinate groups. The focus is on what Gramsci called the historical bloc, which is a dominant configuration of material capabilities, ideologies and institutions that frame state and collective action.

Robert Cox draws on a Gramscian notion of hegemony to explain the emergence, functioning and change in international institutions (Cox, 1983). Rejecting a materialist conception of hegemony, Cox argues that international institutions are mechanisms through which the norms of world hegemony can be expressed. International organisations are thus products of hegemonic orders and are thus likely to legitimate the norms of that order by absorbing efforts to establish counter-hegemonic orders by co-opting peripheral or subordinate elites. Thus, Gramscians take seriously both the influence of power and normative socialisation in their understanding of international institutions. T. J. Jackson Lears agrees that ‘Ruling groups do not maintain their hegemony merely by giving their domination an aura of moral authority through
the creation and perpetuation of legitimising symbols; they must also seek to win the consent of subordinate groups to the existing order’ (Jackson Lears, 1985: 569). Thus, international institutions are arenas for both manufacturing consent as well as potential sites for manufacturing dissent or even counter-hegemony.

The Gramscian approach helps reveal the limitations of both realism and institutionalism in assessing the impact of emergent multipolarity on the institution of multilateralism. Institutionalists have a bias toward the status quo and continuity of existing institutions and the constitutional orders they reflect, regardless of changing power configurations. Realists simply assume that institutions will wither away as the distribution of power shifts and revisionist powers attempt to reorder or overthrow the existing institutional order. Gramscians are agnostic about what might happen. When the elements comprising the historic bloc shift (which would include a shift in the distribution and configuration of power globally), there is a hegemonic crisis. Egan reminds us that such crises ‘provide opportunities for more thorough social change from below through a “war of position” in which subordinate classes create new social institutions and cultural practices in an attempt to replace those of the historical bloc. Rather than a full, frontal assault on the centers of power, the war of position is a coordinated, strategic process of mobilization … to construct a counter-hegemony’ (Egan, 2001: 77). Gramscians remind us that international institutions can be a site of contestation and the locus of creation of new historical blocs; they may also function to attract, co-opt (or socialise), or marginalise rising powers to the existing historical bloc. The predictive ability of this approach is rather constrained, but it does open avenues for rethinking how we scholars privilege one perspective over another.

The European Union in a multipolar world

How does the EU fit into a world thrown into flux by emergent multipolarity and a ‘crisis of multilateralism’ (Ruggie, 2003)? Very few scholars of the EU’s foreign policy, its global role, or its relationship with international institutions rely on the tenets of realism or neo-realism (Jørgensen, 2004). Hyde-Price has noted that scholars of EU foreign policy and the EU’s global role have steered clear of realist and neo-realist approaches because the key tenets of realism/neorealism (that international systems are anarchic, states are the primary actors, states are functionally similar, and states are rational, unitary actors) seem inapplicable to the case of the European Union (Hyde-Price, 2006). The dominance of institutionalism in scholarship of the EU and multilateralism is unmistakable. As Groom puts it, for Europeans ‘multilateralism is seen as a way of life rather than a question of power’ (Groom, 2006: 460). Yet, the EU is invariably depicted as central – even hegemonic – in twenty-first century multilateral order as an important, unique power in emergent multipolarity.

Assessing the power of the EU using the typical metrics of realism has been fraught because of the hybrid or sui generis nature of the union. For decades, scholars have consistently attempted to present the EU as a ‘different’ kind of power as Aggestam reviews in her contribution to this volume. The debate over the intrinsic nature of the EU’s power is far from over. What is rarely debated by EU scholars focusing on the nature of EU power is the assumption that the EU will be central in twenty-first century international relations as a champion of multilateralism. But how, at the systemic level, does the sui generis EU fit into the emerging multipolar context? Scholars focusing on the systemic role of the EU in emergent multipolarity fall roughly into three camps: those that embed the EU in a system of declining trans-Atlantic hegemony, those that see the EU as an autonomous competitor under conditions of multipolarity, and those that see the EU as a new hegemonic ‘superpower’.
The trans-Atlantic crisis? Liberal hegemony adrift

A rather diverse group of scholars tend to focus on the importance of the trans-Atlantic relationship in geo-politics, or the continued special role for ‘the West’ in upholding international order. This relationship is depicted in a variety of ways. One of the more peculiar experiences for scholars who work on EU foreign policy is to delve into the work of John Mearsheimer where the EU qua EU is often curiously missing (see especially Mearsheimer, 2003). When pressed to explain why Europe has experienced sustained peace after such horrific European conflicts in the first half of the twentieth century, Mearsheimer points to the special role of the US as an off-shore balancer, rejecting as an explanation some intrinsic socialisation process or ideational transformation that has occurred through European integration (Mearsheimer, 2010). He maintains that the US continues to play this role, though Mearsheimer notes that a number of European states (notably not the EU) have helped the US ‘police the globe’ via NATO. Presumably for Mearsheimer, the EU’s role in a rising multipolar world is to continue to huddle under American protection, while European states participate in a multi-polar order based upon revolving ‘coalitions of the willing’ rather than institutionalised, and constitutionalised relationships reflective of EU multilateralism (Mearsheimer, 1990; see also Waltz, 1993). Waning US power undermines not only the global multilateral order, but also the European one.

Other scholars are more apt to acknowledge the EU’s autonomous multilateral role on the world stage, but they may be no less optimistic than Mearsheimer about the decline of the Western partnership in the twenty-first century world order (Cooper, 2003; Ikenberry, 2008). Calleo, for instance, has long argued that internal European peace required regionalising the social market economy through the EU; this internal project which was made possible by American security guarantees during the Cold War (Calleo, 2001). Calleo, unlike Mearsheimer and Kagan, takes seriously the ideational and normative changes that have emerged from the European project, and argues that the lessons that Europeans have absorbed lead to different conclusions about global financial management. ‘Instead of a world economy where one radical imbalance (the American deficit) sustains another (the Asian Surplus), Europeans favoured a global regime where all countries and regions stay in external equilibrium because they guard their own internal imbalances’ (Calleo, 2001: 367). Calleo was hopeful that there could be a renewal of the Western-led order in the early years of the twenty-first century, but by 2009 the divergence was too great. America’s continued attachment to an untenable unipolar vision and Europe’s allegiance to a communitarian social market vision in a world of highly competitive global markets both contribute to a widening trans-Atlantic gap. Their different paths of ‘success’ in the twentieth century have left both sides of the West dangerously unprepared for the next century: ‘both are trapped in an unproductive nostalgia’ and Calleo advises that ‘balancing is often done better among friends than between enemies’ (Calleo, 2009: 164–65). It is the divergent historical paths of Europe and the US that are undermining the global liberal hegemonic order.

Kupchan largely agrees that the EU will emerge as a soft-balancer because ‘The return of balance-of-threat thinking, the divergence of interests and the dilution of a shared identity have led to a consequential erosion of the Atlantic order’ (Kupchan, 2008: 123). The Atlantic democracies continue to constitute a security community, but for Kupchan the distinctive ‘we-ness’ of the trans-Atlantic relationship has given way to mere peaceful coexistence. Indeed, most contributors to a volume analysing the crisis in the Atlantic relationship concluded the Atlantic relationship is not likely to collapse nor will it continue as currently institutionalised (see Risse, 2008). In this regard, the Obama Administration’s decision to wind down the biannual EU–US summits to an ‘as-needed’ basis in the aftermath of the Lisbon Treaty takes on greater significance (EU Observer, 27 March 2010). This loosening of the institutional foundation of the Atlantic
relationship raises difficult questions about the longevity of liberal hegemony and principled multilateralism in the face of rising multipolarity.

**Bracketing the EU—Europe competing in a multipolar world**

One of the more popular recent accounts of the shifting geopolitical terrain is Parag Khanna’s depiction of a multipolar marketplace where the United States, China and ‘Europe’ compete for the attention, loyalties and resources of a vast array of ‘second-world’ countries (Khanna, 2009). In Khanna’s view, these three are the essentially expansionist empires dominating twenty-first century multipolarity, ‘competing to mediate conflicts, shape markets, and spread customs’ (Khanna, 2009: xvi). One curiosity of Khanna’s account is the tidy bracketing of ‘Europe’. The EU is a ‘super-state’ (Khanna, 2009: 5), without any significant differences from the other two great powers other than divergent diplomatic styles (American coalition-building, European consensus-building, and Chinese consultation) which are not convincingly explained. For instance, while Khanna argues that the EU’s imperial success rests on the fact that ‘it does not dominate, it disciplines’ (Khanna, 2009: 6), those on the receiving end of EU conditionality may not appreciate the distinction (see Zielonka, 2008).

Khanna’s insistence on labelling these three powers as imperial obscures his potentially more important insight. While multipolar empires of the nineteenth century were certainly expansionist, balancing occurred amongst the great powers themselves, not the targets of their expansion (Aron, 1966). However, the success of expansion in twenty-first century is distinct because these three powers are competing in a marketplace for influence among ‘second world’ sovereign states, not conquering territory through superior military might. Thus, their legitimacy has to be demonstrated, and for Khanna, the balancing that occurs is fundamentally at the discretion of choices made by the countries of the second world, to which the bulk of his book is devoted. It is an interesting analysis that upends the traditional dynamics of multipolarity, but in the end Khanna reverts to the laws of equilibrium that scholars of multipolarity have often invoked. He concludes that ‘The multipolar order rising powers seek is not the same as the multilateral order than is required to manage it in practice … [M]ultilateralism will be more a matter of imperial coordination than channeling resources through common institutions’ and he advocates a new concert of great powers, the G3 (Khanna, 2009: 339–40). Why such a condominium would be acceptable and legitimate to the pivotal second world powers is unclear, and it reveals the limitations of Khanna’s revisionist realism.

Michael E. Smith’s concept of great power competition is more ideational than material. He argues that to compare the EU to a state, as Khanna does, is ‘inappropriate and limiting’ but that its emerging grand strategy reflects ‘the EU’s emergence as a global political actor, even a great power’ (Smith, 2011: 160). Smith argues that strategic actors pursue physical security, economic prosperity, and some degree of value projection, but in typical liberal institutionalist fashion he insists that these objectives need not result in zero-sum outcomes. The EU’s grand strategy is emphatically liberal and multilateral, according to Smith, but more intriguingly he also notes that ‘all grand strategies are inherently competitive in nature, and must take into consideration the grand strategies of the other major powers’ (Smith, 2011: 159). It is here that the liberal and multilateral nature of EU grand strategy becomes significant and a strategic resource for the EU rather than reflective of a collective good. While the EU and the US share liberal values (though the means by which those values are promoted may differ dramatically), Smith argues that ‘Institutionalized multilateralism – dominated by the UN system – in fact serves a dual purpose in EU grand strategy, as both a means and an end, and this trait is especially important in distinguishing the EU from other major global actors such as the US’ (Smith,
In this regard, the EU’s support for multilateral institutions is not simply reflective of liberal mutual gains, but a competitive advantage for a great power competing ideologically with other great powers, including the US. His account bears a passing resemblance to the insights of conventional multipolarity where great powers typically have cross-cutting cleavages in which their relations with other great powers; the combination of common and conflicting interests mitigate hostility and are central to power balancing (Deutsch and Singer, 1964: 394).

In strikingly language, Smith acknowledges that ‘some elements of EU grand strategy will mesh with American perspectives, others will conflict with them, and still others might have no relationship at all’ (Smith, 2011: 149).

The European superpower – the multilateral vanguard

Another school of thought – perhaps less compelling than it was before the sovereign debt crisis gripped Europe – holds that the EU is not simply one of a number of great powers in the twenty-first century geopolitical landscape, but the superpower of the twenty-first century (Reid, 2004; Rifkin, 2005; Leonard, 2005; McCormick, 2007). While several of these accounts are written by journalists functioning unambiguously as cheerleaders for the EU’s growing stature on the world stage, the point of departure for all these accounts is an assumption that is widely shared in liberal institutionalism, namely that the nature of the international system has fundamentally changed. Instead of a geopolitical system marked by anarchical competition, these observers focus on a system marked by interdependence, an environment where soft power is perhaps more important than hard power, and where non-state actors are increasingly salient. Slaughter argues that the international system has transformed from a sovereign system of states to a disaggregated order in which all sorts of actors are linked in networks (Slaughter, 2004). She identifies the EU as ‘the model for this world order’ because it governs through networks of government ministers and where supranational institutions are linked with national and sub-national institutions to more effectively exercise authority (Slaughter, 2004: 134).

In this new interdependent landscape, the EU is argued to be uniquely situated to succeed in the twenty-first century because it has best honed the tools of successfully managing interdependence. The primary assumption of most of these authors highlighting the supremacy of the European model is that interdependence has made obsolete the central concerns of neorealism and that the EU is much better positioned to exert influence in an interdependent, networked world where the prerogatives of sovereignty must and should give way to complicated, sovereignty-penetrating governance structures. The other great powers are ill-prepared for this new reality. The US appears to be moving toward irreversible decline because of its antiquated reliance on military muscle and unilateralism which only serves to isolate America in an increasingly interdependent world. Furthermore, they are dismissive of the prominence given to rising powers such as China, India or Brazil. McCormick, for instance, describes the focus on China and other BRICs as mistaken or at a minimum pre-mature, citing their relative poverty, limited productivity, and – except for China – the nearly non-existent globally positioned commercial enterprises that are so critical for exercising soft power (McCormick, 2011).

The European experiment thus has become a pole of attraction that is eclipsing the vaunted American dream: Rifkin argues that Europe’s willingness to live within constraints is a more viable model globally than America’s heedless consumerism, and the humanism of the European social model is more attractive than the competitive excesses of American capitalism (Rifkin, 2005). He maintains that the ‘European Dream’ is exportable even to places like China and India where the ‘the very idea that either of these nation-states could effectively contain and manage more than a billion people, each under the aegis of a singular national identity, is hard to
comprehend in a world where cross-cutting identities and loyalties are pushing people into more flexible networks of convenience’ (Rifkin, 2005: 359). While Rifkin may be underestimating the determination of the Chinese authorities to stifle any internal separatist dissent (note the Chinese government’s reaction recently to uprisings in Tibet, Urumqi, and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring), his larger point about the attractiveness of the European model of regional integration does find support in the evolution of the African Union, Mercosur and perhaps even China’s cultivation of regionalism through ASEAN and the SCO.

Overall, an interesting irony emerges from the scholarship on EU power and the EU’s position in the international system. Scholars are less and less timid about heralding EU power (of whatever sort), but they still tend to suggest that the EU’s rising power is (and is understood by others to be) liberal and benign, a model for networked governance in an interdependent world. That is, while the EU is increasingly understood to be a nearly ‘normal’ strategic actor, its role in the emerging multipolar system will be distinct because the EU is understood to reflect a unique expression of a particular set of norms, values, and constrained sovereignty that have emerged wholly from Europe’s exceptional internal experience. This normative bias creates an ideological blind spot that scholars should be much more explicit in addressing in future research on EU power and multilateralism: a sense of exceptionalism is perhaps the least exceptional thing about great powers.

The EU and effective multilateralism? A research agenda for a multipolar era

How will multipolarity and multilateralism, both of which emerged in distinctive historical settings, intersect in the twenty-first century? Where does the EU fit in? The mostly mutually exclusive orientations of scholarship on multipolarity and multilateralism leave us ill-equipped to explore the impact of twenty-first century multipolarity on multilateral institutions. Both the changing nature of power and its diffusion are certain to impact multilateralism in the next century, but partisans of realism and institutionalism provide rather dogmatic responses to these developments which constrain rather than encourage innovative ways of thinking about the interaction of power and institutions.

Scholars of the EU and international institutions for the most part reinforce this dogmatism by working largely within the confines of institutionalism. Despite the growing consensus that the EU is powerful, there is a strong current of thought that the EU’s multilateral nature is ‘naturally’ transferred to its external actions. Even as scholars concede that the EU is becoming a great power (materially, normatively or strategically), the assumption is that its own ‘effective multilateralism’ makes it a model for the promotion of effective multilateralism in international institutions. This assumption prevails because most analyses of the EU’s global relations (including my own) work from the inside-out. The narrative of EU multilateralism in international institutions has followed a rather predictable arc which is understandably EU-centric and but regretfully insular: analysts almost always begin with the internally-derived foundation for EU foreign policy (competence or authority), empirically establish what EU policies are, and then – if we are lucky – there is an assessment of the EU’s performance, which is sometimes seen as less than successful. But the EU never ceases being the miracle of multilateralism even if it fails in its multilateralising mission. The EU, *sui generis* beast that it is, is oddly detached from the environment in which it operates, which is somewhat surprising given the prominence of constructivist approaches in EU scholarship.

In a salutary development, some scholarship has begun to examine the EU from the outside-in (see Eckes, Lucarelli and Costa contributions to this volume). Some scholars have begun to
analyse how the EU learns from international institutions, importing norms and ideas as well as sending them outward (Costa and Jørgensen, 2011). However, it is striking that even this second-image reversed literature is about learning from institutions, which perpetuates the institutionalist bias in EU scholarship. Is it possible that the EU can learn from other sorts of actors as well, even rising powers? That scholars are not typically asking these questions reveals that most scholarship on the EU and international institutions is self-regarding. Even the external perceptions literature seeks to determine if others perceive the EU as it perceives itself, in essence holding up a mirror to the EU’s presumed intrinsic nature. Scholars may criticise the EU for failing to live up to its multilateral ambitions, but questioning the unique constitutive foundation of EU multilateralism is rare. The EU’s distinctive constitutional origins appear to have inoculated it from non-multilateral influences emerging from the broader international environment.

Of course, the game that scholars play in defending ‘isms’ is not limited to those analysing EU multilateralism. Lake argues that there is a tendency in International Relations scholarship to ‘narrow the permitted subject matter of our studies to those topics, periods and observations that tend to confirm the particular strengths of our tradition’ (Lake, 2011: 470). While some despair over these inter-paradigm debates and follow Lake in calling for a unified ‘lexicon’ or inter-paradigm foundation that incorporates insights from all theoretical traditions, Gil and Katzenstein have argued persuasively that disagreements among research traditions have served to strengthen and hone research questions and analysis (Gil and Katzenstein, 2011). They urge scholars to embrace analytic eclecticism, which is not a relativist free-for-all but rather involves ‘construct[ing] a problem-specific complex analytic framework that is capable of revealing the interconnections among discrete sets of mechanisms and processes normally explored in isolation’ (Gil and Katzenstein, 2011: 484). Different theoretical traditions provide important insights, even if based upon incompatible assumptions. Analytic eclecticism does not seek to unify these differences, but ‘begins with research questions that are framed so as to capture, rather than bracket, the complexity of interesting political phenomena. This requires expansive, open-ended formations of problems that do not privilege a priori mechanisms and processes normally favored by one paradigm, and that emphasize the complementarity or intersection of analytic puzzles identified by contending paradigms’ (Gil and Katzenstein, 2011: 483). Can scholars of the EU and multilateral institutions reframe research questions in a way that will invite innovative use of insights from other traditions? What would analytic eclecticism look like when applied to research on the EU, multilateralism, and multipolarity? Three examples are offered here that attempt to square the insights of different theoretical traditions to analyse the intersection of multipolarity and multilateralism and where the EU fits into that dynamic.

**Working from the outside-in: environmental challenges to EU multilateralism**

How does the international environment shape EU multilateralism? The EU’s predisposition to multilateralism has been described as ‘genetic’ or even reflective of the European ‘soul’ (Jørgensen, 2006: 31), and Groom describes the attachment to multilateralism as so ingrained that Europeans barely register the passing of unipolarity and the changing distribution of power in the international system (Groom, 2006: 460). But it is important to ground the EU’s multilateral proclivity to its historical and environmental context. It is perhaps easier to espouse the norms of liberal multilateralism when the international system is structured to promote the norms of liberalism. It may be more challenging to retain principled multilateralism in a world of multipolarity in which some Western generated norms and principles are increasingly contested by rising powers even as they embrace the global market (Halper, 2010). Laidi notes that
the EU is both more attractive and less convincing under conditions of emerging multipolarity; the EU’s lack of hard power makes it seem a ‘more reasonable’ power, but its lack of coercive capability makes it less convincing as well (Laidi, 2008: 138). The EU will have a comparative advantage over other great powers only when ‘shared sovereignty seems more beneficial than sovereignism in the global context’ (Laidi, 2008: 138). Laidi argues that the other great powers in the international system still view themselves as the ultimate guarantors of their own security, and so continued sovereignism defines the approach of the other major powers in the international system (Laidi, 2008: 7–12). Thus, in a multipolar environment in which norms and values are contested, the consequences for international institutions may be turbulent.

Examining the EU’s strategic partnerships from this perspective takes on new meaning. The conventional perspective is that these partnerships should be used to bolster multilateralism (Biscop, 2009), though some analysts take the EU to task for its failure to do so (Bendiek and Kramer, 2010). But what if the EU’s failure to promote effective multilateralism in these partnerships is instead a reflection of the EU learning to act like a great power? The EU sees strategic partnerships as a means to project its values, but Grevi notes that ‘for realist countries like China, Russia and India, strategic partnerships are essentially regarded as a tool to further their interests’ (Grevi, 2008: 155), not to further generalised principles of multilateralism. One of the insights of multipolarity is that relations among great powers are about mutual adjustment based upon common and conflicting interests, not about embedding generalised principles of multilateralism to support universalism. From the outside-in, the EU’s failure to project European or liberal norms and values through strategic dialogues with other great powers is not surprising, and it may instead reflect an EU learning to act strategically like a great power.

Furthermore, while the EU reflects multilevel governance and blended sovereignty internally, most international organisations remain fairly Westphalian in nature. The EU found this out to its dismay in the aftermath of the Lisbon Treaty, when its representation in the UN General Assembly was ‘downgraded’ when the EU delegation took over from the member state holding the rotating Council presidency (Laatikainen and Palouš, 2011). The effort to gain enhanced status for the EU delegation in the UN General Assembly was a fascinating episode in contortionism when looking from the outside-in. On one hand, that the EU had to convince other members of the UN that nothing had fundamentally changed as it sought enhanced status for the EU delegation; EU member states would continue to be permanent voting members of the UN. But complying with the Lisbon Treaty meant that the EU delegation would need enhanced powers to represent EU members of the UN who were now unable to represent themselves. Instead of reflecting multilateral principles of non-discrimination, the EU pressed UN member states to confer enhanced observer status to the EU so that the EU could comply with treaty obligations that had been promulgated entirely within the EU. The EU effectively asked the international community to accommodate its preferences. At first, UN member states refused, and in September 2010 the General Assembly deferred the motion. After a great deal of coordinated pressure by EU member states, with several rounds of démarches dispatched to the capitals of reticent countries, the resolution granting enhanced status was passed in May 2011. The resentment of heavy-handed political pressure that the EU exercised to get what it wanted continues among those states and regional groups like Caricom that opposed this shift. Despite institutionalised inter-regional cooperation with Caricom, the EU in this episode was not perceived as promoting effective multilateralism based upon generalised and widely-shared principles but an unambiguous great power bending a multilateral institution to its will. That it had to use rather muscular diplomacy in order to ensure EU actorness in the UN suggests considerable ambiguity about the relationship between EU power and multilateral institutions.
Lost in translation? The many meanings of multilateralism

Scholars of EU multilateralism, both internal and international, have used constructivist methods to excavate the meaning of multilateralism in the European context. It would be useful to apply the same depth of analysis to explore the meaning of multilateralism in the context of the other great powers. In a way, multilateralism is like motherhood – who could be against it? But what is multilateralism meant to actually do? Does it create a sense of community through ‘practice’, as Pouliot argues (Pouliot, 2011)? Is it meant to transform or domesticate relations between states, or to manage relations among great powers? Does multilateralism have the same meaning among those most responsible for upholding international order, the great power stakeholders?

Uncovering American conceptions of multilateralism has been a research agenda for some time, as US support for the multilateral order it helped to create has eroded since the 1970s. Foot, MacFarlane and Mastaduno describe the US as an ‘instrumental multilateralist’, unafraid to abandon multilateralism if other approaches are more efficacious in solving problems (Foot, MacFarlane and Mastaduno, 2003). Edward Luck has identified a strong sense of ‘exceptionalism’ in US political culture which depicts the US as a unique exemplar of liberal values (Luck, 2003). This exceptionalism means that US often feels that it is not subject to the same constraints as ‘the rest’ and thus the US can act unilaterally without undermining its central liberal values (Luck, 2003). But as indicated above, while the US and the EU may employ different mechanisms to pursue their values, their shared liberal values constitute the norms of Western hegemony that produced the multilateral system. Ruggie reminds us that ‘it was less the fact of American hegemony that accounts for the explosion of multilateral arrangements than it was the fact of American hegemony’ (Ruggie, 1992: 568). While the US and the EU may be strategically differentiated by their fidelity to multilateral forms, both are constitutive of Western hegemony. The real question, of course, is how the emerging powers understand multilateralism.

Vasconcelos argues that most rising powers ‘have a different conception of multilateralism from that of the European Union, closer to the containment of the more powerful states and the assertion of their own sovereignty than playing their part in building an effective multilateral system’ (Vasconcelos, 2008: 27), effective of course having been defined by those dominating the multilateral system.

Much of the literature on China’s rise focuses on whether it is a revisionist power or not (Johnstone, 2003; Shambaugh, 2005; Glaser, 2011). Analysis of the Chinese approach to multilateralism and international institutions is less developed but beginning to emerge. Some point to quantitative indicators of Chinese multilateralism, indicating the number of international organisations China has joined in recent years. China has even established multilateral organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Council in 2001, though Vasconcelos notes that while it multilaterally manages relations among the participants (Russia, China and the Central Asian states) it also has a ‘balance of power dimension’ that serves to challenge American interference in the region (Vasconcelos, 2008; see also Leonard, 2008). There is heated debate over whether multilateral participation is socialising China into the norms, values and institutions of the prevailing multilateral order (Ikenberry, 2008, 2011), or whether China’s participation in international institutions is a means to challenge those norms (Wang, 2000; Chin and Thakur, 2010).

A few studies are beginning to explore Chinese conceptualisations of multilateralism, with many suggesting that protecting sovereignty is the key objective of most Chinese conceptions of multilateralism (Klein et al., 2010). This suggests that the Chinese conceptualisation of multilateralism is fairly thin and does not have a normative component of universalism or indivisibility that Ruggie argues is central. While the slogan Peaceful Rise used by Chinese foreign policy experts was meant to assure others that China’s growth was non-threatening because it
reflected interdependence (Leonard, 2005), more recently the Chinese Foreign Ministry has promoted the concept of Harmonious World. Klein et al. have noted how the concept promotes a sovereignty based international system, but it also unmistakably emphasises hierarchy. As Ni argues, harmony is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, but the result of arduous coordination among the great powers (Ni, 2010), or what a neo-realist might call equilibrium that results from mutual accommodation among great powers (Zhao, 2010).

These studies highlighting the divergent Chinese conceptualisations of multilateralism raise critically important questions about the future ‘effectiveness’ of multilateral institutions from a European perspective. Other rising powers have distinct conceptions of multilateralism as well that do not correspond in great measure to European visions (Hampson and Heinbecker, 2011). Absent a sense of indivisibility, great powers are less likely to undertake obligations reflective of more universal notions of non-discrimination and community. Patrick calls the rising powers ‘irresponsible stakeholders’ who are ‘inclined to enjoy the privileges of power without assuming responsibilities’ (Patrick, 2010: 47), and he counsels America strike a new grand bargain with rising powers, ceding some authority in international institutions and sacrificing fixed alliances and formal organisations for ‘shifting coalitions of interest’ (Patrick, 2010: 51). It seems a distinct possibility, at least for the other great powers, that preserving ‘effective multilateralism’ looks very much like balance of power positioning. European promotion of universal values and liberal norms in such a context may increasingly be seen as hectoring and out of step with the evolution of multilateral preferences of great powers.

The persistence of multilateralism and the anarchy of institutions

Multilateralism’s focus on the principle of indivisibility confers legitimacy on actions taken on behalf of collective interests; moreover, multilateral action is often seen as the only effective means to combat problems that transcend territorial borders (Haass, 2010). But when universal international institutions fail to combat these shared problems – when they fail to perform – the legitimacy of multilateral institutions comes under fire. Haass is derisive of universal forms of multilateralism: “One man, one vote” may provide a sound basis for domestic politics, but on a global scale democracy (or, more precisely, democratic multilateralism) is a prescription for doing nothing’ (Haass, 2010: 1). He and others have pointed to alternative forms of multilateralism as the key to effectively solving collective problems; such alternatives include elite multilateralism or what Naim terms minilateralism such as the Gx systems (Naim, 2009), regional multilateralism (e.g. EU), functional multilateralism (small scale agreements or groups) or informal multilateralism which replaces negotiated treaty obligations with voluntaristic standards and norms (e.g. the Copenhagen Accord).

The innovations in multilateral frameworks ensure the survival of multilateralism as an institution, despite the emergence of new powers. But instead of existing organisations and international institutions simply becoming contested ground challenging hegemony, multilateralism grows, diversifies, and shifts farther away from universalism which was the original basis of legitimacy in twentieth century multilateral institutions (and central to the Gramscian historical bloc). This shift in multilateralism away from universalism may prove to be more ‘effective’ in either solving collective problems or attracting the commitment of great powers, but it also invites great powers to ‘forum shop’ among the available multilateral options. Instead of multilateral institutions serving to tame power and mould anarchy, such a disaggregated system of differentiated multilateral institutions would, contra Keohane, introduce more uncertainty into international relations. In such an environment, it is unclear which multilateral institution or organisation has the authority or responsibility for addressing a particular instance of collective concern. Should a peace operation
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(e.g. Libya) be undertaken by NATO, the UN, the AU, or the EU? Are crucial decisions about global financial crises to be taken within the formal chambers of the IMF or during the informal meetings of the G20? Such uncertainty may well produce an anarchy of institutions that great powers can exploit to play the games that great powers play. This uncertainty is further compounded by the multilateral participation of the EU, where internal questions over the EU’s competency, authority and representation in other international organisations are always fraught.

A twenty-first century international system that melds multipolarity to evolving multilateralism will function differently from the relatively institutionless nineteenth century multipolarity. It will also deviate from the twentieth century playbook of inclusive and legitimate multilateralism based upon universalism. As this last section has emphasised, understanding the intersection of power and international institutions in the twenty-first century, and where a shape-shifting EU fits in, requires that scholars use all the analytical and theoretical tools at their disposal.

References


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