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53 Multilateralism under challenge?

Power, international order, and structural change

Edited by Edward Newman, Ramesh Thakur and John Tirman

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United Nations University, 53-70, Jingumae 5-chome,
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo, 150-8925, Japan
Tel: +81-3-3499-2811 Fax: +81-3-3406-7345
E-mail: sales@hq.unu.edu general enquiries: press@hq.unu.edu
http://www.unu.edu

United Nations University Office at the United Nations, New York
2 United Nations Plaza, Room DC2-2062, New York, NY 10017, USA
Tel: +1-212-963-6387 Fax: +1-212-371-9454
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Emanuel Adler's chapter, "Communitarian multilateralism" problematizes what he describes as "classic forms of universal intergovernmental multilateralism". He suggests that these have been under challenge not only by global hegemonic pressures, but also by underlying structural forces that include the weakening of sovereignty, the growing global role of non-state actors and policy networks, and the transferring of liberal practices and institutions from national to international and transnational spheres. In an attempt to cope with these challenges, multilateralism has been transforming itself and taking new forms.

Adler forwards two propositions: that institutions evolve together with collective epistemic understandings, and that constructivist International Relations theory helps us to understand new, viable forms of multilateralism. On the basis of this, he presents a novel conceptual model, namely, "communitarian multilateralism", which he suggests is thriving. This relies on communitarian practices of collective-identity formation that depend not only on material power, but also on collective epistemic understandings. It involves institutionalized efforts to socially construct multilateral communities of practice amongst like-minded actors which engage in the same practice – for example, security communities. Adler cautions, however, that communitarian multilateralism is unlikely to contribute to global governance because its practices are inherently exclusive.

Robert O. Keohane's chapter, "The contingent legitimacy of multilateralism", questions the presumption which underscores multilateral action –

knowledge society
community responsibility
for security & peace
+ the liberal world

Communitarian multilateralism

Emanuel Adler

www.williamadler.com

Classic forms of universal intergovernmental multilateralism, such as the United Nations (UN), have been under challenge at least since the end of the Cold War. Whilst global hegemonic pressures account in part for this challenge, it is also (and mainly) a challenge from underlying structural forces, including the weakening of sovereignty, the increasing global role of non-state actors and policy networks,¹ and the transfer of liberal practices and institutions from national to international and transnational spheres, most strikingly in Europe.² In an attempt to cope with these challenges, multilateralism has been transforming itself and taking new forms. Unlike "old" multilateral forms, the "new multilateralism"³ seeks to coordinate state actions; but it also amounts to a primitive yet increasingly elaborate hybrid system of international and transnational governance⁴ that addresses national and transnational societal needs to solve problems – such as cleaning up landmines around the globe⁵ – that states have been unable or unwilling to deal with. The new multilateralism may be less amenable to state control and hegemonic power influence. As in the International Criminal Court (ICC), it may be more legally binding than its older interstate counterpart. As in multilateral trade negotiations, the new multilateralism raises concerns of legitimacy, focused on accountability, responsibility, and transparency.⁶

Despite the ideological bias of George W. Bush and the American neoconservative movement against classic and primarily new forms of multilateralism⁷ – a bias that grew stronger after 9/11 and the United States' hegemonic-driven response to it – new multilateral practices and

institutional forms continue to grow; but so has resistance to them. Because of multilateralism's adaptive capacity, hegemonic powers may now have a better understanding of the limits of their material power and of the opportunities for harnessing regional democratization practices to promote their hegemony. At the same time, as attested by the Bush administration's appointment of John Bolton in 2005 – a strong opponent of the UN – as the US ambassador to the organization, and by the rather disappointing results of the UN's 2005 World Summit, recent drives to reform the UN system are not guaranteed success.

Thus the evolution of multilateralism has been and probably will continue to be contingent, if not non-deterministic and chaotic. Not only has multilateral institutionalization been historically inefficient, it also has exhibited complexity; although new forms of multilateralism have adapted in an attempt to survive, they nevertheless are challenging multilateralism's inclusiveness and sources of legitimacy.⁸

Moreover, national and transnational processes of identity change, often materialized as novel practices, may produce either institutional resistance or innovation, and these "throw off course the presumed linearity of history."⁹ Hence it would be presumptuous to pretend to study the evolution of multilateralism in a short article and predict its future direction. Instead, building on two assumptions – that institutions evolve together with collective epistemic understandings and that constructivist IR theory¹⁰ can make new forms of multilateralism visible – this chapter will identify and describe a novel and adaptive institutional form I call "communitarian multilateralism". Although incompatible in part with classical and "new" multilateral institutions, communitarian institutional forms may nevertheless help to provide a bridge between regionalism and multilateralism and establish multilateral relations on firmer ground.

Communitarian multilateralism, which transcends liberal transaction-based relations and relies instead on communitarian practices of collective-identity formation that depend, not only on material power, but also on collective epistemic understandings, is thriving. Not only does it merit our attention, it also illustrates the opportunities and challenges facing multilateralism.

By "communitarian multilateralism", I mean primarily institutionalized efforts to socially construct multilateral communities, either as a corollary of the expansion of communities of practice¹¹ – like-minded groups of individuals who engage in the same practice – and/or as inclusive forms of security, which security communities, such as the European Union (EU), use in their attempt to stabilize their environments. Security partnerships, like the "partnership for peace" of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and constructed social spaces or "regions", like a "Greater Middle East", the "Mediterranean region", the "European Neighbour-

hood' space, and the area marked by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), are communitarian practices par excellence.

The first section of the chapter proceeds from John Ruggie's seminal contribution to our understanding of multilateralism to describe the epistemic challenges posed to old and new multilateralism. The second section briefly explains why a constructivist approach may help make communitarian multilateralism noticeable, although other theoretical perspectives have failed. The third section defines communitarian multilateralism in more detail. The next section applies it to NATO and the EU, with special reference to security partnerships and new social spaces or regions currently under "construction". The fifth section discusses communitarian multilateralism in a normative context, and the conclusion asks where exclusive forms of multilateralism, such as communitarian multilateralism, may be headed.

The epistemic challenges to multilateralism

The main sources of multilateralism's current "malaise" are epistemic. They derive, however, from neither a lack of transparency and expert information¹² nor from the latter's excesses,¹³ but from the intersubjective background knowledge that constitutes multilateralism as such. In the early 1990s, when John Ruggie defined multilateralism as a "generic institutional form", he was expressing an epistemic (and early constructivist) understanding of institutional reality, which he had first introduced to the discipline in 1975.¹⁴ To recapitulate, Ruggie argued in 1993 that multilateralism is

an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct: that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence.¹⁵

By this Ruggie meant that multilateralism can exist, and is what it is, because of states' intersubjective normative and cause-effect knowledge of what are "appropriate generalized principles of conduct."¹⁶ Because the latter are rooted in collective epistemes,¹⁷ which, borrowing from Michel Foucault, Ruggie defined as collectively "dominant way[s] of looking at social reality, a set of shared symbols and references, mutual expectations and a mutual predictability of intention,"¹⁷ multilateralism "logically entail[s] an indivisibility among the members of a collectivity with respect to the range of behaviour in question."¹⁸ It also involves the expectation

of what Robert Keohane called "diffuse reciprocity", an "arrangement [which] is expected by its members to yield a rough equivalence of benefits in the aggregate and over time".¹⁹

In Ruggie's view, moreover, epistemic factors enter international organization with the realization that collective (and thus political) problems exist, through the effects of interdependence, the need for appropriate responses to collective problems (such as international regimes), and the conceptualization of legitimate authority.²⁰ This epistemic approach to institutional reality means, of course, that generalized principles of conduct do not stand apart from actors' strategic interests but enter into the social construction of these interests.

Building on Ruggie's epistemic foundations of the multilateral approach he helped conceptualize, let us consider contemporary epistemic sources of multilateralism's "malaise". These derive from the non-linear and chaotic nature of the evolution of multilateral institutional forms and from gaps in practitioners' and academic observers' understanding of historical change, power and its limitations, and the role of practice and moral purpose in international organization.

(1) One of the most significant epistemic (and social-epistemological) challenges that confronts multilateralism is the need to overcome practical and social-science knowledge of institutional change as the result of efficient history, weighty objective forces, and rational templates.²¹ This type of understanding is bound to lead practitioners and academics doubly astray, by producing over-optimistic expectations which can come crashing down under the weight of practice, and by generating a paralyzing inaction and loss of institutional potential for adaptation. A crash of expectations, paralysis of will, and the collective feelings these arouse endanger multilateralism, because they tend to obscure its positive outcomes and may provide the opponents of multilateralism with an opportunity to find fault with it. Avoiding this epistemic challenge requires us to realize that change "may weave among paths rather than speeding down regulated highways",²² and thus a healthy sense of "epistemic humility".

In addition, thinking about change in linear ways may prevent us from recognizing that multilateralism may actually be strengthened by new emerging collective identities – for example, regional or global non-sovereignty-constituted networks and communities – that, from a narrow interstate perspective, seem to threaten multilateralism. Multilateralism may adapt and be transformed because of the ways in which new identities become embedded in practices, which, in turn, trigger the creation of new social purposes and new rounds of adaptation. What starts instrumentally and in local environments may later evolve into new multilateral practices,²³ such as NATO's secu-

ity partnership practices, which became the wellspring of new interests and the reason why NATO capabilities are now used collectively and multilaterally. Actors may not realize it, but they may be creating new multilateral orders via their day-to-day practice.²⁴ Thus the "poverty of imagination" about multilateralism consists in resisting new forms of multilateralism for short-term reasons, without leaving an opening for the possibilities of inventiveness, learning and persuasiveness that can create new collective goods and solve currently unmanageable national and international problems.²⁵ Communitarian multilateral practices, for example, are beginning to organize regional orders around socially constructed regional identities, which possess an innovative capacity to broaden institutional choices and solve regional and even global problems. NATO's cooperative-security partnership and region-making practices again come to mind.

(2) Collective understandings marked by notions of sovereign exclusion, military definitions of national security, and a deep suspicion of the ability of international organizations (IOs) to deal with the most pressing security and economic challenges are making a comeback (if they ever lost ground), especially in the United States. The American people's collective identity of exceptionalism, its narrative of possessing the ideal political regime, together with their country's material power and territorial insularity, elicit a resistance to institutional innovations that threaten US sovereignty, such as the transfer of identification from national to transnational communities. There are both material and epistemic limits, however, to US resistance to these innovations. It is incumbent on academia to understand whether and how non-sovereignty innovations can reach a tipping point in the US.

(3) The growing disjunction between existing multilateral organizations and the collective knowledge and identities they are based on, on the one hand, and practices and related identities that rely on communities and networks of the like-minded for ordering global relations, on the other hand, poses another major epistemic challenge. This is particularly true because transnational communities and networks are increasingly becoming the locus of international learning and agenda-setting and the source of political actions. As Anne-Marie Slaughter recently stated, "[g]lobal governance is not a matter of regulating states the way states regulate their citizens, but rather of addressing the issues and resolving the problems that result from citizens going global - from crime to commerce to civic engagement."²⁶ Dealing with this epistemic challenge requires turning functional relations and practices into political ones and endowing functional relationships, not only with democratic values and practices,

but also with fairness. In other words, one of the crucial epistemic problems of multilateralism is how to turn "global governance" into "good global governance" and functional practices into "best practices."²⁷

Another important epistemic challenge to multilateralism rests on a widespread misunderstanding of power. Academics and practitioners alike believe that material power gives strong states the ability to create, control, and abolish international and transnational institutions.²⁸ But power enters international organization not only in the form of material resources, but also as dominant cause-effect and normative understandings and discourses that help construct practices and transform social structures.²⁹ A misreading of power by political actors may have deleterious consequences for multilateral relations and global governance. When materially powerful or hegemonic states, for example, act without the backing of legitimate authority and of consensual cause-effect and normative knowledge, they risk achieving opposite results because of the resistance they generate. Materially weaker states, on the other hand, can sometimes exert immense power if and when, with the backing of transnational networks, they create epistemic and normative revolutions that legitimate new "practised identities" to the point that practices later come to be taken for granted. In such cases, even hegemonic powers are likely to discover that hegemony "may in fact prescribe moral responsibilities with a constitutive self-enforcing quality."³⁰

Multilateralism is threatened by a lack of what Jennifer Mitzen³¹ called "ontological security" - the need for a secure identity, order and continuity. Current ontological insecurity arises from the perceived threat to the identities of states and to the basic definition of roles and rules in the present international system. This threat is fuelled by a sense that the current order is breaking down and the future is quite uncertain. This challenge to multilateralism goes deep down to the foundation of our epistemic order. But because "different temporal orders coexist, each with its own propensities to engage with others and to respond to change",³² solutions may be found to this epistemic challenge when the balance of resistance to and innovation in multilateralism is resolved in favour of the latter, at which time new multilateral practices, rules, and institutions become legitimized.

Constructivism can help

A constructivist approach may help us think through the epistemic problems afflicting multilateralism and identify new multilateral institutional

forms. First, constructivism is foremost a *communitarian approach*. As such, it is well suited to explore communitarian multilateralism. Until a few years ago, a communitarian IR approach existed mainly in the normative IR theoretical debate between cosmopolitans, most of whom hold a liberal theory of justice and employ a rationalist or individualist methodology,³³ and communitarians, who take communities as the key to understanding moral action.³⁴ Ever since constructivism penetrated IR theory, however, the communitarian approach has become a leading contender in analytic IR theory. Because constructivism highlights the structure of social reality,³⁵ the new turn to communitarian IR has meant not only that political communities and their potential transformation are studied in more appropriate and global perspectives, it has also highlighted the "community-shared background understandings, skills, and practical predispositions without which it would be impossible to interpret action, assign meaning, legitimate practices, empower agents, and constitute a differentiated highly structured social reality".³⁶ In other words, turning to a communitarian approach in IR attempts to make knowledge, along with the communities within which it develops and evolves and from which it diffuses, one of the leading ontological factors in the study of IR. From a communitarian IR perspective, knowledge also, and primarily, the intersubjective background or context of expectations, dispositions and language that give meaning to material reality and help explain the constitutive and causal mechanisms that participate in the construction of social reality.

Second, via constructivism, *power* enters IR theory not only as material and institutional resources, but also as the ability of collective understandings and linguistic practices to construct social reality, as epistemic authority, and as the remote control exerted by institutions through their determination of the explicit and tacit rules of the game.³⁷ A more complex and sociologically richer (but also more discriminating) understanding of power can help us understand not only who determines whether, and what, institutions get the action, but also why certain ideas become multilateral institutions and others do not.

Third, constructivism construes *change* not only as historical sequences of events, the replacement of one material structure by another or a transformation of beliefs in people's minds, but primarily as the evolution of the "order of things"³⁸ or as "cognitive evolution".³⁹ The latter refers to a collective learning process that consists in the expansion, in time and space, of the background knowledge that constitutes practices and thus in the expansion of communities of practice. Hence cognitive evolution can make room for normative change. Adler and Bernstein,⁴⁰ for example,

now that combined changes in knowledge, values and material power can lead to better practices and a fairer global governance system. Consequently, studying change entails rooting analytical IR theory in political theory as well as providing normative IR theory with ontological and systematic tools for arguing why normative futures are not only desirable, but also achievable.

Finally, constructivism sensitizes us to the *construction of new social and geographical spaces* by means of security partnerships. In recent years, a grasp of this mechanism has given birth to a communitarian practice of region-building, including the European Union's attempts to stabilize its "near abroad" with a "neighbourhood" policy and the heroic but probably futile American attempts to construct the "Greater Middle East" as a democratic region.

Communitarian multilateralism

Classic notions of multilateralism assert that states may choose to coordinate their behaviour by multilateral institutions when, regardless of short-term instrumental considerations, "generalized principles of appropriate conduct" help fixed preferences converge (neo-liberalism) or help constitute states' cooperative reasons or preferences ("modernist" constructivism). In either case, normative knowledge enters states' calculations of preferences and policy coordination with other states. States, however, may change their preferences and behaviours without having to change their identities and discursive practices first. Politics enters this institutional form in states' efforts to persuade other states of the need to attain collective purposes and to influence institutional dynamics in their favour.

Communitarian multilateralism is both "deeper" or socially "thicker" and more "minimalist" than classic (and "new") forms of multilateralism. It is deeper because cooperation results from a change of and coordination between identities and practices, rather than behaviours, and because collective identities and shared practices help constitute the common good" of communities of shared identities and practice. The common good can be measured, for example, in terms of stability and peace, economic welfare and good (community) governance. Communitarian multilateralism is also deeper than classic multilateralism, because the construction of multilateral institutionalized reality results not only from collectively shared norms, but also from shared practices. This means that, for example, if practice has evolved to empower non-sovereignty-based actors, such as social movements and NGOs, to play a role in global or regional agenda development, or standard setting, non-state actors then become an intrinsic part of multilateral institutional forms.

