

The Crisis of Multilateralism

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When Barack Obama assumes power as the 44th President of the United States in January 2009, there certainly will be a shift in the U.S. attitude towards international cooperation and multilateralism. The disdain of the Bush-Administration for the UN and other forms of multilateralism and the derogative language about “soft Europeans” have already given way to a more cooperative approach, but there might be further changes in that direction. In particular, after the Democrats have been able to keep their majorities both in the Senate and the House, we surely will see a major shift in U.S. foreign policy. We will see a President who is much more ready to work within the framework of multilateralism and who will forego unilateralism; and we will see a Congress much more ready to cooperate with others in the field of climate change and energy security as well as other issues. Many Europeans are already becoming triumphant because of what they consider to be Americans finally accepting the wisdom of “our” multilateral, inclusive approach in world politics. Will Europeans actually witness the triumph of their liberal multilateralism over neoconservative U.S. unilateralism in the coming years? Will the U.S. ruefully rejoin the family of civilized nations that are practising cooperative diplomacy and will we witness a new era of cooperative multilateralism?

This article argues that such hopes are ill placed because there is a deeply rooted scepticism within the U.S. about the efficacy and utility of some forms of multilateralism, in particular the UN system, which will linger on. This scepticism is neither – as is argued by structural realist theoreticians – the consequence of the Bush-Administration’s neo-imperialistic temptation under conditions of unipolarity, nor is it a product of the neo-conservative ideology, as it is argued by liberal institutionalists. It is rather the consequence of frustrations over the inability of UN multilateralism to efficiently address the main international problems in the fields of security, trade, development, and climate change. What we will see is a growing readiness of the coming U.S. Administration to explore with their European and Asian allies ways to reform multilateralism that promise to be more effective. This will result in increased requests upon Europeans to assume added responsibilities and to upgrade burden-sharing. It is argued here that there is a high probability that this attempt will be frustrated, because most Europe-

ans do not understand the nature of U.S. concerns about multilateralism and are unwilling to shoulder additional burdens. On the contrary, there is a high probability that the European belief according to which there are distinct differences between the European approach towards international affairs (civil power approach, open and inclusive multilateralism, limited resort to military instruments, cooperation with other multilateral fora, in particular the UN) will rather turn into ideologies that will be used in order to fend off critique focussing on the inability of Europe to address some of the main problems of today's world.

This paper proceeds as follows: In a first step the main concerns that have been voiced in the U.S. about multilateralism will be presented. From there, the crisis of multilateralism will be analysed. Differences between Democrats and Republicans will be also addressed. The paper then turns to the way Europeans conceive this debate and why so many in Europe have failed to understand the nature of the problem.

Differences between Americans and Europeans in the assessment of multilateralism have been discussed since the early 1990s. In Europe they were interpreted as the consequence of the emergence of two fundamentally different political cultures: the U.S. was seen as the unipolar power, as the sole global superpower that was to shed off all constraints on its freedom of action, while the Europeans were credited with having devised an alternative way of dealing with international affairs, which was more peaceful and promising than the American one (Kantian approach). Another interpretation was that Europeans were already living in the Kantian world of cooperation, while the USA considered itself to be in a world of anarchy.

It is argued here that these differences rather have to be seen against the backdrop of different conclusions drawn from the international crises that occurred after the end of the East-West-conflict. Both Europeans and Americans found themselves in a period of surprise and irritation after the end of the Cold War in light of the fact that there were new regional conflicts to cope with. This was a period of grave failures in Western policy as well as of internationalism. These experiences caused a reshaping of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. considers itself to be a global power of order (*Ordnungsmacht*) that is using multilateral cooperation as well as military instruments, whereby the selection is dependent upon its respective utility. In Europe the conclusions that were drawn were different. The European experiences of reconciliation after World War II as well as of the peaceful end of the Cold War were seen as a proof that any kind of traditional power politics does not pay off. As a consequence, Europeans tend towards civilian means of conflict resolution and towards a greater role of multilateral institutions. As the civilized means of multilateralism failed to yield results in the Balkans as elsewhere, the

U.S. began to act more and more unilaterally, while the Europeans increasingly became concerned with U.S. unilateralism rather than with the problems themselves.

Multilateralism has been a tool of U.S. foreign policy since the 1920s and it has been devised and shaped by various Administrations. Indeed, most of today's existing forms of multilateralism go back to initiatives by the U.S. Their creation was part of the U.S. led approach to reorganize international relations after World War II. The role of multilateralism was mainly seen as instrumental, i.e. multilateralism was conceived of as an instrument to achieve certain purposes and to solve problems, which otherwise might have a negative influence on international order. For U.S. diplomacy after WW II the resurrection of European economies, the re-establishment of a global financial system and of free trade as well as the containment of communism and of the Soviet military threat were the main concerns. Multilateral institutions were being measured according to their ability to contribute to the solution of these problems. Hence, the effectiveness of multilateral institutions moved into the center of attention. As a consequence, many global institutions were either abandoned (such as the League of Nations) or sidestepped. In some ways the United Nations became more or less irrelevant after 1947. Its main tasks – providing peace, free trade and protection of human rights – were effectively taken up by either Special Organisations (such as IMF and World Bank) that were under some form of control by the U.S. and its allies or by institutions outside the UN system (such as the GATT negotiations in the field of free trade or NATO in the field of security). What remained was a UN-system that was mainly a debating circle.

Despite its crucial role in bringing about multilateralism, the U.S. has never relied on multilateral institutions alone. Rather, all U.S. administrations – not to speak of Congress – have always been torn between the wish to act through multilateral institutions (which is difficult, but which holds the prospect of broad acceptance and legitimacy) on the one hand and the temptation to act unilaterally on the other hand, since this promises to be more efficient and rapid.¹ What made the Bush-Administration so peculiar was that it has tilted radically towards unilateralism in a way unprecedented to date. However, unilateral tendencies were already there during the era of the Clinton-Administration. It was the consequence of deep felt frustrations over the international handling of regional crises.

¹ Stanley Hoffmann, "The United States and International Organizations," in: Robert J. Lieber (ed.), *Eagle Rules? Foreign Policy and American Primacy in the Twenty-First Century* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall 2002), pp.342-352; see also Patrick Stewart (ed.), *Multilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy. Ambivalent Engagement* (Boulder Col. : Lynne Rienner 2002).

When the East-West conflict was over in 1990, there was a broad international consensus that the UN should assume more responsibilities in the field of international security. The most relevant event was the summit meeting of the UNSC in January 1992, whose participants formally affirmed their intention to revive the so far dormant system of collective security with a central role of the UNSC. However, due to the fact that the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait had already shown the weaknesses of the Security Council when dealing with such a challenge, the wars in former Yugoslavia (Slovenia 1991, Croatia 1991/1992, and, worst of all, Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992-1995) demonstrated the inability of the system of collective defence to cope with such challenges. The same was true with the handling of Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

It was during this period that the respective debates in the U.S. and in most European states took different paths. While there have been no self-critical debates in Europe about the botched job done in the Balkans until this very day – except in the Netherlands where the performance of the Dutch battalion during the siege and fall of Srebrenica triggered off a thorough debate about the shortcomings of the UN approach – the discussion in the U.S. was much more to the point. In both parties and among the various think tanks the failures of international interventionism in the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina were openly discussed. Among them, neo-conservative intellectuals and politicians provided the most radical criticism. They depicted the western approach as wrong and indecisive from the beginning and demanded a stronger U.S. leadership role in favor of freedom, democracy and human rights. These authors were very successful in shaping the political opinion within the Republican Party, which, after November 1994, had won the majority in both Houses of the U.S. Congress. The main subject of criticism was the treatment of Bosnia-Herzegovina through the UN Security Council.

The skepticism of Republicans about the effectiveness of multilateralism grew in 1998, when Saddam Hussein – supported by France and Russia – tried successfully to reinterpret and eventually to shed off the constraints of the UN-disarmament regime. During spring and summer of 1998 the U.S. Congress conducted extensive hearings about Iraq during which almost all witnesses testified that – in light of Iraqi defiance and lack of support by key allies – there was no point in keeping up the UN inspection regime and that regime change would be the only option left. Based on these hearings Congress passed a legislation in consensus with the Senate and an overwhelming majority in the House in October 1998 – the Iraqi Liberation Act – which arrived to the conclusion that it was no longer useful to pursue the option of trying to disarm Iraq through the United Nations and that regime change was the preferred

U.S. policy towards Iraq.² The coming to power of the second Bush administration further radicalized this skepticism. There was an influx of militant (neo-)conservative thinking on U.S. foreign policy unprecedented so far. These conservatives had always been the spearheads of criticism directed at the European allies. They also resisted international institutions and alliances, which were said to compromise the liberal goals the U.S. should pursue. The resultant invasion of Iraq, which was preceded by a deep international (and transatlantic crisis) marked the climax of U.S. criticism of multilateralism. It also marked a partial shift in the policy of the Bush-Administration, since failure to succeed in Iraq was now being attributed to its unilateralism. The experience of failed unilateralism brought the Bush-Administration towards multilateral institutions, mainly NATO and the IAEA. However, the readiness to cooperate remained limited. Skepticism towards global multilateralism remained. The Bush administration started to redo many areas of multilateral diplomacy with fervor unknown so far. This related mainly to the withdrawal from the Kyoto Climate Protocol as well as to the retreat from the negotiations on a verification protocol for the Biological Weapons Convention. Also the opposition against the International Criminal Court (ICC) has to be named here and many other instances where U.S. opposition to multilateral negotiation fora has become a source of rather constant irritation for Europeans.

The positions taken by Democratic politicians during these years were not significantly different as many had wished to see. Their positions towards the UN system were definitely more moderate than the ones taken by Republicans, but the UNSC was more than often criticized by Democrats for being unable to solve current international crises. Even a devoted multilateralist such as John G. Ruggie stated in 2003: “It is no exaggeration to say the United Nations today lacks the capacity to act predictably on its core mission: to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”³ Some leading thinkers of the Democrats suggested that it was better to invent a new international organization for dealing with security problems, for instance a community of democratic nations.⁴ One can argue that there was definitely a larger readiness to look into the potential of multilateralism, but with a view to rather devise new forms of multilateralism than to stick to old ones, in particular to the clumsy UN-system.

² Iraq Liberation Act (Public Law 105-338) from October 31, 1998.

³ John G. Ruggie, *This Crisis of Multilateralism is Different?*, Speech delivered at the UNA-USA National Forum on the United Nations, June 26, 2003, to be found on the website of the United Nations Association of the United States of America and the Business Council for the United Nations (www.unausa.org); see also John Van Oudenaaren, “What is ‘Multilateral’?”, *Policy Review*, No. 117 (February 2003), pp. 33-47.

⁴ G. John Ikenberry and Ann Marie Slaughter: *Forging a World of Liberty under Law. US National Security in the 21st Century. Final Report of the Princeton Project on National Security.* Woodrow-Wilson School: Princeton University, September 2006.

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

1. Collective security was said to be ineffective due to the lack of unity among the members of the Security Council, in particular in cases where astute dictators have tried to play out various big powers against each other.⁵
2. By the same token, the lack of consequentiality was being cited as a further weakness. Even in cases where the Security Council could agree on measures and sanctions against individual states, the implementation was usually considered to remain inconsequential and half-hearted.
3. As a corollary, the enormous potential of the UN system for strategies of evasion and buck-passing has been cited as particularly strong in the field of collective security (“evasive multilateralism”).

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

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

⁵ C.f. Mohammed Ayoob, “Squaring the Circle: Collective Security in a System of States,” in: Thomas G. Weiss (ed.), *Collective Security in a Changing World* (Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner 1993), pp. 45-62; see also Rosemary Righter, *Utopia Lost. The United Nations and World Order* (New York: Twentieth Century Fund Press 1995).

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

- International multilateral organizations, in particular the UN, were criticized to further incompetence and overspending. Mainly the principle of “one state one vote” as well as the principle of “equal regional distribution” was being called decisive in impeding the efficiency of international organizations.
- Multilateral organizations were also credited with being too slow and too ineffective because of their complicated procedural and institutional setup. It has often been argued that they show typical signs of bureaucratic inertia and the arrogation of overseeing rights.
- Multilateral organizations were said to show symptoms typical of large organizations, such as the tendency to become more concerned with themselves than with their environment or the tendency to forget about its original purposes.

European reactions to these arguments were quite negative, even when they were brought up by main-stream American politicians and scholars. In most parts of Europe the dominant view today is that multilateralism is the most important way to structure international relations and to address problems and challenges in many areas. Most European governments, as well as public opinion and pundits from academia, thus, have reacted to any kind of criticism on multilateralism with a dogged defense of multilateralism. One might even argue that the undiplomatic and often very arrogant behavior of the Bush-Administration was a good excuse for many European supporters of multilateralism to eschew a well-balanced debate about the advantages and disadvantages of multilateralism. Hence, a distinct form of European ideological thinking on multilateralism – as the opposite to the neo-conservative ideology of unilateralism – has set in. In face of the coming change in the U.S. presidency it is high time for Europeans to rethink multilateralism and to get engaged in an enlightened debate about multilateralism with the U.S.

A couple of European governments have already realized that there is a need to take the U.S. criticism of multilateralism into account. They have at least devised a formula of “effective multilateralism,” which has found its way into the European Security Strategy of December 2003. They also point to the fact that the reform of the United Nations should bring about major changes. However, “effective multilateralism” so far has remained more or less a formula without any yardstick to measure effectiveness. The UN reform, in particular the reform

of the security sector, has yielded only limited results. A reform of the UNSC has not taken place so far and it is doubtful whether change is possible or whether change is needed.

What is needed is an inventory of the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of multilateralism. There have been cases of successful multilateralism as well as cases of outright failure. In order to approach the issue of discerning between effective and less effective variations of multilateralism it might be useful to discern between at least five different forms of multilateralism. For each of them the question of effectiveness puts itself in a different way:

1. Collective security: This is according to the UN Charter the main system for preserving peace (chapter 6 and 7 of the UN Charter); however, its effectiveness is being put into question.
2. The multilateralism of international finance and trade: These are institutions which usually have limited membership or unequal rights and obligations, but which are usually credited with a relatively high performance (WTO, IMF, World Bank).
3. Open functional multilateralism: This type of multilateralism deals mainly under the UN umbrella with military and non-security-related aspects of international life. The agenda is, in principle, open ended and almost inexhaustible and, sometimes, unavoidably overlaps with collective security and multilateral trade institutions. Open functional multilateralism is based on the notion that states might prefer to solve common problems in a multilateral way. Meanwhile, the sheer number of fora for multilateral negotiations as well as multilateral conventions, organisations and regimes is hard to count. It is this type of multilateralism which most critics refer to when they talk about the ineffectiveness of multilateralism.
4. Closed functional multilateralism: Such forms of multilateralism have been developed as instruments to seek opportunities for international co-operation when open multilateralism has failed to yield results. NATO is a typical case in kind. Closed multilateralism often takes the form of directorates or a cartel. Typical examples are the Group of Seven (G7) and Group of Eight (G8), the various contact groups and the various export-control regimes (including the Nuclear Suppliers Group [NSG], Australia Group, Missile Technology Control Regime [MTCR] and the Wassenaar Arrangement). As a rule, closed functional forms of multilateralism seem to yield better results than open functional forms of multilateralism.
5. Epistemic multilateralism: This type of multilateralism is the quasi-permanent co-operation that exists among like-minded states in a broad range of fields, such as the

European Union (EU) and, to a lesser degree, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Epistemic multilateralism is usually credited as being the most effective one.

What is needed is a critical European debate about multilateralism that avoids both the uncritical support of all kinds of multilateralism (ideology of multilateralism) and the hypercritical disdain of any kind of multilateralism (ideology of unilateralism). This debate should also be led with American participation, since there the critical reappraisal of multilateralism has a much longer tradition. This debate should have the following items on its agenda:

- A sober and critical appraisal of the benefits and deficits of the different kinds of multilateralism under different conditions. This appraisal has to take into account experiences that were made during the past 20-30 years.
- The readiness to change existing forms of multilateralism, even to give up institutions and legal instruments if they turn out to be no longer efficient. This will be difficult to achieve, since there are many who cling to all kinds of multilateralism.
- The readiness to devise new and effective forms of multilateralism if the need arises. Again, this sounds easier than it is in reality, since many prefer existing institutions even if they have turned out to be ineffective.
- The acceptance that there is a trade off between effectiveness and legitimacy (participation). Accepting this trade off means it is sometimes extremely difficult to arrive at optimal solutions.
- The readiness to put into question whether there really is a need for a radical reform of the Security Council. One might rather argue that it is better to find solutions to the security problem by invoking functional default institutions (such as NATO).
- The readiness to devise new forms of multilateralism to deal with climate change. The current format of open functional multilateralism seems to be inappropriate to overcome the current impasses.