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Multilateralism

Variants, Potential, Constraints and Conditions for Success

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In view of the current challenges facing world politics and its specific structural conditions (national sovereignty, power diffusion), multilateralism appears to be an almost indispensable form of international diplomacy. Nevertheless, it seems controversial: multilateralism is currently under fire, particularly from the White House and the State Department, whilst both China's President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin pose as advocates and defenders of multilateralism. On closer inspection, however, the controversy is not about multilateralism as a diplomatic procedure, but essentially about the question of which principles, values and organizations should determine the international order and thus shape international politics. At the same time, the inherent difficulties and limitations of multilateralism are often underestimated, and its potential overestimated. In order to make multilateralism as effective as possible, a realistic assessment of its preconditions and a wise understanding of the peculiarities of multilateral politics are therefore essential.

"Multilateralism" is axiomatic for German foreign policy. The same applies to the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy of the European Union (Article 21 EU-Treaty). It is in this spirit that the Foreign Office (together with the French Foreign Ministry) launched the "Alliance for Multilateralism" in September 2019. But what exactly does it mean when the Federal Foreign Office on its homepage describes "the commitment to multilateralism" as one of the "guard rails of German foreign policy"?

"Multilateralism": a clarification of terms

Furthermore, outside the EU, governments appear firmly committed to multilateralism, at least if we are to believe the ringing endorsements offered by China's President Xi Jinping, his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, or the Indian President Narendra Modi. Yet it is questionable that they all mean the same thing when they express their support for multilateralism.

So: what is multilateralism? First, it simply means the coordinated diplomatic interaction of three or more states (or other

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actors) in international politics. According to this definition, the term is not controversial; “multilateral” foreign and security policy stands in contrast to bilateral or unilateral action. This understanding of multilateralism (“Multilateralism I”) is therefore a purely formal category: multilateral policy is about the “how” not the “what”, about the conduct rather than the substance and goals of international politics. In short, this version of multilateralism is a diplomatic approach to achieving certain unspecified ends.

German foreign policy uses the concept of multilateralism with a different, rather more exigent interpretation (“Multilateralism II”). This combines coordinated diplomatic interactions of more than two actors with action within the framework of international organizations, oriented towards the principles and norms and carried out in accordance with the rules and regulations that underlie those organizations (such as, for example, the United Nations Charter). In this version, a multilateral foreign policy stands not only for a specific diplomatic approach, but also for a commitment to certain principles, substantive goals and methods of foreign policy — and for an underlying set of values.

Multilateralism thus comes to stand for foreign policy action within the normative framework of a system of ideas about what diplomacy should strive for, and by what means it should pursue its goals. Occasionally there is talk of a “multilateral system” that must be preserved (as, for example, in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry’s White Paper on multilateralism). This “system” is in fact the liberal, Western-style international order of 1945 in its renewed version of 1990.

“Multilateralism II” refers to foreign and security policies that seek to establish, maintain and further develop a specific, normative international order through specific forms of international diplomacy. The order may be the currently disintegrating liberal international order, but it could also be another, quite different order that would be based on a different ideology, although it would also be promoted “multilaterally”, i.e. together with others.

It is this meaning of the term that seems to prevail in international politics today. In this sense, the notion of “multilateralism” contains, conveys and transports norms and values; it identifies the ends and the appropriate means to conduct foreign policy; and it concerns the international order considered desirable and the regulatory policies considered conducive to it by a specific actor. These ideas will often not be made explicit, however, and even be deliberately disguised. Multilateralism in this sense is therefore no longer primarily about acting together with others, but rather about securing certain objectives and interests that are closely linked to highly specific (and possibly controversial) ideas of international order. Multilateralism II a priori does not say anything about *which* principles, values, norms, rules, organizations and procedures (should) be followed in the conduct of international affairs. But if “multilateralism” is elevated into a principle (as in the case of German foreign policy), or (more precisely) if it is freighted with certain principles and values, then we are in fact dealing with several, possibly very different and even controversial notions of multilateralism, with — as is currently the case — the views of important actors differing about the desirable ideological and normative foundations of the international order.

The fact that there is no broad consensus in world politics today on the principles and norms of the international order is ignored by the third meaning of the term multilateralism (“Multilateralism III”). Here, “multilateralism” refers to the “right” and “appropriate” answers to the current problems of world politics and thus stands for effective world governance. The European Union’s first Security Strategy of 2003 specifically used this understanding when it developed the notion of “effective multilateralism” as its guiding concept; today, however, the word “multilateralism” often seems to be equated with “effective global governance”.

If “Multilateralism II” stands for (various and controversial) regulatory ideas about world politics, “Multilateralism III” expresses the principle of hope. In order to fulfil this hope and to exploit the potential of effective multilateralism, however, two types of hurdles would need to be overcome. First, there must be consensus about the normative foundations and the concrete contents of multilateral diplomacy: what is at stake, what ends are to be achieved, what interests and values are to be accommodated and how — and what concepts of international order will thereby be promoted. None of this can be contested or controversial.

The second hurdle on the road to effective multilateralism concerns its organization and implementation. Even where there is broad agreement on principles, values and goals, we have necessary but not yet sufficient preconditions for effective multilateralism. Multilateral cooperation within the framework of the Paris Convention on Climate Policy demonstrates this: it is based on common principles, standards and procedures. Yet multilateral climate policy is far from slowing global warming to the desired and necessary extent. The specific problems and limitations of multilateral action are the crux here.

Why do we need “multilateral” foreign policy?

Anyone who argues in favour of multilateralism (i.e. for all three meanings of the term) generally relates it to three contextual assumptions — assumptions about the magnitude of upcoming global challenges, about the realities of power distribution in international relations, and about the enormous potential of cooperative strategies.

The dimensions of the challenges ahead. Some of the global challenges currently facing international politics may be of existential importance for the future of humankind — from climate change to the manifold destructions in our ecosphere, from the opportunities and risks of new technologies to the danger of nuclear war. At the same time, according to assessments by the respective expert communities, many of those challenges place extraordinarily high demands on the performance of international politics in terms of global governance: decisive progress often appears possible only when many actors work together in broad coalitions bringing together not only states, but also non-state actors such as international organizations, civil society actors or companies. The influence of even the largest powers (such as the USA or the People’s Republic of China) alone would not be sufficient.

Diffuse distribution of power and the principle of sovereignty. International politics will continue to be determined by the absence of hierarchy and a broad distribution of power. This is due on the one hand to generally accepted principles of the current world order, in particular the principles of territoriality and sovereignty of nation states, and on the other hand to the large number of state and non-state actors that influence the course of world politics. The United Nations is now approaching 200 state members, and there is also a rapidly, sometimes exponentially growing universe of governmental and non-governmental international organizations, civil society actors and transnational corporations.

The potential for shaping multilateralism. It is often assumed that if international cooperation were sufficiently broad, it would be possible to develop options on a global scale that would be analogous to those available to the nation state within its own territory, as the term “global governance” suggests. Science and technology and the organisational resources of governments and non-state actors can and should indeed provide the necessary problem-solving potential. This could be mobilized effectively if the (theoretically extensive) problem-solving capacities of the nation state were effectively coordinated through international cooperation. In practice, however, the state’s monopoly on the use of force and its (ideal or typical) extensive possibilities to shape politics within its own borders are often far less comprehensive and far less powerful than is assumed. These empirical deficiencies in statehood can — to a degree — be compensated by new forms of interaction between state and non-state actors and international organizations. Overall, however, the problem-solving capacity of multilateralism seems quite uncertain. Its potential for realising effective world governance will depend considerably on favourable conditions.

Multilateral diplomacy: advantages and problems

The strengths and weaknesses of multilateral diplomacy in dealing with global challenges seem obvious. Multilateral diplomacy not only offers better opportunities for dealing with complex tasks, it is also better able to legitimise the results achieved and thus tends to make them more sustainable, since they emerge from joint efforts. This is particularly true if the participation is considered representative, i.e. if all important interests and positions were represented.

So "together we are strong". Yes — but strength can show itself as stubborn persistence, but also as flexibility, adaptability and assertiveness. What kind of strength is required depends on the context. Multilateral negotiations tend to broaden their agenda in order to take better account of the different objectives and interests of the parties involved. This makes it difficult to set clear priorities. Multilateralism is more protracted and costly than bilateral agreements or a unilateral oktroi. While the results of multilateral agreements are generally broad and weighty, they may not be very effective in responding to the problem at hand because they are characterised by compromises and lowest common denominators. In principle, there is an inversely proportional relationship between legitimacy and effectiveness, which usually requires *trade-offs.* More legitimacy may have to be bought at the price of reduced effectiveness, more effectiveness at the price of reduced legitimacy. The same applies to the temporal dimension: negotiation outcomes that reflect broad-based multilateral participation may take longer, but they will probably last longer and thus be more sustainable. Conversely, urgent problems requiring rapid action can be better tackled by a small number of actors who are willing and able to move forward. Multilateral diplomacy is indispensable when fundamental issues of international governance have to be resolved. In acute crises and in specific problem contexts, on the other hand, the disadvantages of multilateralism are more significant.

Other inherent difficulties with multilateralism are the well-known problems of collective action. These include situations resembling the classic game theory prisoner's dilemma, in which the best solution to a conflict for all involved cannot be realized due to the absence of trust. Another problem is free riding and its weaker variant, in which the commitment to participate in collective action is half-hearted: after all, others are already taking care of the problem, so one's own efforts can be reduced if not stopped (which would be full free riding). In the worst case scenario, multilateralism can nurture illusions — such as the illusion that the world is making progress on military disarmament because multinational negotiations are dealing with it. In some cases, this has been the situation for decades, as with the Geneva Conference on Disarmament, which has not produced any significant results for over twenty years.

Thirdly, the implementation of multilateral agreements is generally left to the parties involved. In general, it is difficult to sanction violations of international agreements. Nevertheless, observation, monitoring and review mechanisms can be set up to improve the chances of successful implementation. International assistance can also be provided for corresponding national implementation measures where such possibilities exist and the support is accepted.

Conditions for effective multilateralism

Effective multilateralism therefore depends on a number of prerequisites. The most important concern the parties involved and their attitude. First, do they share a genuine interest in sustainable results, or does their participation in the multilateral negotiations merely serve tactical goals? Secondly, is there willingness to compromise, i.e. are the demands and expectations that have been made by the parties negotiable? Thirdly, is there willingness to act on the basis of "diffuse reciprocity" (Robert O. Keohane), i.e. to practise solidarity in the expectation that in the long run its benefits will outweigh immediate short-term disadvantages? Further prerequisites concern the (domestic) legitimacy of the negotiators and their ability to make binding commitments on behalf of those they represent, as well as organisational arrangements for the successful implementation of commitments made. If these conditions are not met, there is a risk that multilateral diplomacy will be unable to achieve anything positive and may even be harmful. Risks include agreements that prove unworkable (such as the UN protection zones in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s) or are irrelevant because they ignore the real problems (such as the Munich Agreement of 1938, which did nothing to stop Hitler's war preparations). Such agreements risk damaging the perception, reputation and credibility of multilateralism, and contribute to the erosion or creeping reinterpretation of the underlying international order. In the worst case scenario, multilateral negotiations can be tactically misused as smoke screens to conceal unilateral power politics.

In principle, the disadvantages of multilateralism can be mitigated and perhaps even eliminated by appropriate procedures, as long as the parties involved behave constructively and are willing to compromise. Essential for getting there, however, is wise and effective political leadership, either by one actor alone or by a core group in the negotiations. Their leadership tasks include structuring and advancing the agenda with a view to achieving effective results; ensuring that deadlines are met and that progress is made as quickly as possible; and breaking down blockades in the negotiations. In this context, it becomes clear that even a foreign policy that is consistently multilateral in orientation must also at times incorporate unilateral action and, above all, intensive bilateral diplomacy in order to make effective multilateralism possible. The importance of bilateral relations for the effectiveness of multilateral diplomacy is illustrated — both positively and negatively — by the role of the Franco-German tandem in the history and development of European integration. In general, it is difficult to imagine how coalitions could be successfully forged or crises overcome in negotiation processes without intensive bilateral diplomacy. However, bilateralism is certainly problematic for multilateral diplomacy when it is not treated as a component of good multilateralism but rather as an alternative to it.

The "Alliance for Multilateralism"

With the "Alliance for Multilateralism", German foreign policy — in close cooperation with France — initiated an "informal alliance" that aims to give multilateralism new momentum. Functioning segments of the current international order are to be preserved, fragile areas renewed and strengthened, and hitherto inadequately regulated parts are to be drawn into the multilateral order. At a meeting of the Alliance on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2019, some fifty states signalled their interest in participating.

The initiative builds on the strengths of German diplomacy. It persuaded France to serve as co-organizer of the New York meeting and then took on board five more states (Canada, Mexico, Chile, Ghana and Singapore), which demonstrated Germany's ability to forge coalitions. However, the composition of the group — the Freedom

House Index of 2019, which measures the degree of democracy and freedom in a country on a scale of 1 (most free) to 7 (least free), classifies Mexico and Singapore as "partly free", while Canada, Chile and Ghana are "free" — indicates that different ideological and regulatory ideas can come together in this informal alliance. What united the group under the perspective of "Multilateralism II" is therefore not necessarily principled multilateralism in the sense of German and European foreign policy. Indeed, there may not be a shared understanding of principles at all. Rather, the Alliance is about pragmatic agreements on specific issues. Although this is understandable, it is not without its problems. The Alliance concentrates on appeals in areas where agreements are relatively easy to reach because the interests of the parties involved are aligned (as in the case of the envisaged regime for lethal autonomous weapons systems of the future, in which those states that are primarily involved in such systems do not participate). It also helps that (as in the case of the appeal for humanitarian aid) agreements are of a non-binding nature. The Alliance thus focuses on secondary issues in international politics, which either avoid subjects where fundamental regulatory differences make agreements hard, or exclude these differences (and their protagonists) and thus arrive at agreements with limited relevance. However, the threat to the multilateral order manifests itself most immediately in its core areas, such as international trade, non-proliferation or human rights and international law. Agreements on subordinate issues may, of course, still contribute to securing the international order, if they work well and circumstances are favourable. Yet they could also become part of the erosion of the regulatory foundations of international order, for example by permitting the weakening of links between specific arrangements and the fundamental elements of the old, liberal international order, or by entering into agreements that implicitly or explicitly embody other, revisionist principles. It is certainly true that climate change is confronting foreign and security policy with completely new challenges, as one of the six initiatives of the Alliance for Multilateralism indicates. But what impact would the proposed referral of these issues to the United Nations have on the Paris Climate Convention? What added value would envisaged monitoring by the United Nations have compared to the corresponding efforts within the framework of UN climate policy? There is a danger that the effectiveness of climate policy will be impaired rather than enhanced by its link to security policy. Similarly, the support of the Alliance for Women's Rights, which focuses on the increased promotion of girls in educational systems in Africa, takes up existing initiatives of UNESCO and the G7 — but why? If the activities taking place within those frameworks are inadequate, the Alliance would need to explain how it can make those efforts more effective. Otherwise, there is a risk that existing efforts will be diluted.

Thus, the loose structure of the Alliance and its variable geometry harbours the danger that fundamental regulatory principles and norms of the existing international order could be gradually weakened or even redefined. Chinese diplomacy in particular is endeavouring to introduce its view of the international order into multilateral politics and thus to reshape it — for example, by strengthening the principle of non-interference in relation to universally valid human rights, or by measuring democracy in international politics by the participation rights of states (and thus of their respective rulers), but not those of the people in the states.

Strategically, a foreign policy that is consistently multilateral in the sense of German and European principles and premises should seek solutions to specific problems only where this would not imply damage to, or risks for, the future development of the international order. The Alliance's initiative to protect humanitarian aid organisations and their programmes for alleviating acute needs, for example, calls on states to disseminate knowledge of international humanitarian law and international humanitarian principles, to support aid organisations that are negotiating access to people in need, and to ensure “better” protection for aid workers. However, it is doubtful what added value this appeal could bring about: right-minded states will heed these demands anyway, while those that are less well-intentioned will either not heed them at all or fulfil their obligations at their own discretion. At the same time, however, the appeal helps to shift the focus of human rights policies towards “humanitarian disasters” — and thus away from the domestic political conditions of human rights within states, to the detriment of the worldwide observance of these rights.

Strategies and tactics for effective multilateralism

Activity for activity’s sake therefore involves risks; less can be more. On the other hand, the ambition level of the alliance should be raised, even if this increases the risk of failure. In order to make progress in key areas, coalitions with partners are needed (these can be sub-state or non-state actors, in addition to states and international organisations). And these partners should not only be able and willing to compromise on concrete issues, but also share fundamental normative and regulatory convictions. In the case of agreements in secondary areas, care must be taken to ensure that they do not have any indirect negative effects on the core areas of the international order.

Tactically, German and European foreign policy should make a vigorous effort to make multilateral processes as efficient as possible. Here, a distinction must be made between the output (the formal results of multilateral processes), their outcomes (i.e., their implementation) and finally their impact (the actual effects on the problem context). Advancing the negotiation processes will require persistent and resolute leadership. Of course, Germany does not necessarily have to provide this on its own. However, these critically important leadership responsibilities — in the sense of focusing the agenda, tight time management, exploring possibilities for compromise, and the effective implementation of agreements reached — demand intensive bilateral diplomacy, and occasionally also unilateral initiatives.

The principles and normative orientations of German and European foreign policy, and also a realistic assessment of power relations, suggest that German and European leadership in multilateral contexts must rely primarily on persuasion and incentives. This is less problematic than it may at first seem in view of current trends in world politics: the shifts in power towards authoritarian or neo-totalitarian political systems often obscure the impact of power diffusion that tends to limit the influence of such systems. In this respect, Germany and the European Union are not in a particularly bad position in terms of power politics. Doubts remain, however, as to whether German and European foreign policy are adequately mobilizing and utilizing their power potential. The most important cause for this weakness can be found in domestic political circumstances: up until now, European societies could not be persuaded to give foreign and security policies the importance they deserve and the resources they need.

To close this gap, or at least to reduce it, would require strategies aimed at strengthening Germany’s and Europe’s own power base. Two factors are particularly important in this respect: the enormous destructive potential of technological innovation for the future of our civilization, and the deep interdependencies between countries and societies, which are usually reciprocal but also asymmetrical: all parties concerned depend on each other, though not necessarily equally. The first factor suggests that military and economic deterrence will play a greater role in the future than has been the case over the last thirty years. With regard to the second factor, ways of instrumentalising asymmetrical interdependence politically will assume even greater political importance in international affairs. However, the metaphor of "weaponized interdependence", developed in this context, is as misleading as it is telling: analogous to the arguments by the arms lobby, it excludes the unintended, unexpected repercussions of using weapons on third parties and ultimately on the person who uses the weapon. (Note that the metaphor admits that it relates to *interdependence* and thus implicitly recognizes potentially negative effects on the actor herself!).

The power potential arising from asymmetric interdependence is therefore more difficult to actualize effectively and precisely than is usually recognized. Nevertheless, it must be taken seriously. Yet the possibilities for influencing other actors are not based on dependence per se, but on the vulnerability of the target to the threat or actual interruption of exchanges (or, alternatively, on the corruptibility of the addressee, i.e. his receptiveness to rewards and incentives, if these are brought into play with the aim of influencing interdependence relationships). A wise foreign policy of principled multilateralism therefore needs well-founded analyses of one's own vulnerabilities and those of one's partners and adversaries, as well as policies and programmes that reduce one's own vulnerabilities and target those of adversaries. The former will have to include educating one's own population about the opportunities *and* risks, the benefits *and* costs of multilateralism.

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