

This paper aims to provide the project with both a theoretical and historical background regarding the concept of, and theoretical debate about, multilateralism and an analysis of perspectives concerning a new multilateralism for the 21st Century. It will cover, on the one hand, the many gaps of the multilateral legacy of the past six decades and, on the other, the new challenges of regional and global cooperation within an emergent, asymmetric, heterogeneous and multipolar world.

1. Multilateral cooperation: conceptual definition and history

Multilateralism has been defined in wider and narrower ways: according to Robert O. Keohane it is an “institutionalized collective action by an inclusively determined set of independent states”; it is also defined as a “persistent sets of rules that constrain activity, shape expectations and prescribe roles”¹. According to John G. Ruggie, “multilateralism is an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct...”². The minimum requirement (the number of club members) is very relevant when looking at multilateral arrangements from an historical point of view. Multilateral agreements, regimes and organizations emerge in the 19th century and consolidate their role despite the failures and tragedies of the violent first half of the so called “short century” (the 20th) because a number of states, notably the European states, are interested in increasing cooperation.

Research on multilateralism has had to take into account the challenge of the realist and neo-realist theoretical questioning, emphasizing competition among states, wars, protectionism and anarchy. How does multilateral cooperation interact with the self-interest of states? Several realist approaches even argue for dyadic cooperation. However, critics question the realist approach on two fronts:

a) under certain conditions, the theory of the state of nature, and game theory as well, views the rational self-interest of an autonomous state as a sufficient background for a contractual relationship with one or more other states: repeated game, side payments, negotiation in the longer run, may allow for an explanation of bilateral cooperation. However, a deepening of multilateral arrangements needs more preconditions in addition to self-interest: a certain degree of reciprocal trust, reputation, the support of domestic economic and non-economic demands, ideas and common aims of states, in some cases, a shared perception regarding external threats, extended state cooperation not tied to specific short term gains but based on mid- to long-term promises, states’ goodwill including the acceptance of a limiting and/or sharing of national sovereignty.

¹ R. O. Keohane, *After Hegemony*, Preface, Princeton University Press, 2004.

² J. G. Ruggie (ed.) *Multilateralism matters*, 1993

- Multilateral arrangements highlight the classical security dilemma. The way out of anarchy is based on the various concepts of collective security, security with the other and not against the other, and the indivisibility of peace. This is not only the case of the UN but also of security communities such as the EU or MERCOSUR. Even in the case of the NATO alliance, the basic principle of 'all for one' plays a crucial role.

In this section we will try to explore the historical roots of multilateralism in the controversial and contradictory civilization process of multipolar international relations. The history of multilateralism offers examples of routes away from anarchy, beginning with bilateral arrangements, and then with an increasingly institutionalized multilateral setting of international relations. In some of its historical versions, the multipolar balance of power is incompatible with anarchy. Multilateralism can be both institutionalized and informal, legally founded or only politically founded. Multipolarism can be based on conflicting state interests or understood as aiming at some form of co-operation and convergence among states. In some cases multipolar orders included common objectives such as stability and/or peace. Building a "security complex" including one's enemies (the North-East Asian Security Complex and the emerging East Asia Security Complex³), and even opposing alliances (such as NATO or the Warsaw Pact), may be considered a first step away from anarchy. The 19th Century European Concert was a clear example of the regulating of interstate conflict by conference diplomacy. Already Metternich conceived the European Concert as oriented towards stability and peace (albeit in his reactionary understanding). Later on, during the *Belle Époque*, 1871-1914, the European multipolar balance of power did offer a framework for the development of the first civilian multilateral arrangements. We fully understand that, seen from a non-European point of view, notably from a Chinese point of view, the European Concert look like the cradle of colonialism and imperialism, in Africa, America and Asia, including in China at the beginning of the 20th Century. However, the highly contradictory "Belle Époque" also provided forty-five years of liberal peace and stability within Europe, was the context of the first civilian multilateral agreements regarding mail, measures and weights and so on, and of the first wave of liberalizing of multilateral trade under the UK hegemony. The political struggle between liberal multilateralists and imperialists marked several domestic political spheres during these decades. We think that, in spite of the breakdown of this trend towards a civilizing sovereignty during the "Thirty Years War" between 1914-1945, this European multilateral legacy was important, and still matters.

However, it is true that the history of European multilateralism and its relationship with multipolarism is controversial and that the revived European multilateralism after 1945 was essentially based on US pressures (the Marshall Plan and the OECE) following the failure of the previous European state system. All in all, the current routinized multilateral intergovernmental relations, the set of regimes that distinguishes the EU co-operation system among member states (European Council and Council of Ministers) is also the legacy of a *longue durée* process which emerged during several centuries, before the era of American hegemonic stability. The deepening and broadening of European regional multilateralism in a post-hegemonic context strengthens the need for this kind of *longue durée* approach.

The gradual process of civilization of state sovereignties had already started in the 15th and 16th centuries among the Italian small states, and was Europeanized and definitely set in motion by the Westphalian Treaty (1648) and continued over three centuries until the final breakdown of the European Concert. The political principle which explains the roots of this "European states society" (F. Chabod⁴) became explicit only with the Wilsonian (1919) and Rooseveltian (Bretton Woods Conference) idea of American international multilateralism (Ruggie⁵). Already prior to this, and for several centuries, the balance of power had no longer

³ B. Buzan/ O. Weaver *Regions and powers*, CUP, 2003

⁴ F. Chabod, *Storia dell'idea d'Europa* in Y Hersant *Europes* Paris 2000 and *Idea d'Europa e politica d'equilibrio*, Bologna 1995

⁵ J. Ruggie, *Multilateralism matters*, New York, 1993

been an occasional alliance, but a project both theorized and consciously sought by state leaders as a principle of political action. What is the historical context of this? It happened after the crisis of the *Respublica Christiana* and the end of Middle Ages, in secularized Europe, when religion began to be a political instrument of independent national sovereigns. Modern diplomacy develops in the context of the mutual recognition of treaties, of borders, and the new habit of choosing a third party as referee and warrant of bilateral treaty implementation; and, last but not least, the system of “*copartagéant*”, limiting, on behalf of the balance of power, the minor states’ sovereignty. Stanley Hoffmann in his early book (1961) stressed the continuity between such an early step of reciprocal recognition between states (beyond anarchy) and the highest step of international law developing towards a ‘community law’⁶.

The literature is in agreement that for a properly working ‘balance of power’ the main (around five) actors must be similar, inasmuch as their economic and military power is concerned. In the past a system of the balance of power could exist thanks to a kind of hegemonic power. It is a matter of fact that in the 18th and 19th Centuries, England increasingly became the “holder of the balance” of a dynamic, multipolar, inclusive balance of power system, which, in spite of the 25 years “revolutionary system” (1789-1915, S. Hoffmann), and its conservative features, was able to adjust to change and eventually to integrate new emerging powers such as Russia, Germany and Italy. The historian F. Chabod emphasises that such a system of states was “interdependent” while “articulated”, and despite the division between states, politically united on the principle of the balance of power, the symbol of the recognition of the states’ common interests, as a kind of European *international distinctive identity*⁷. It was also the background for a kind of common rule for states’ behaviour, a political norm of action including diplomacy and war (*and jus in bello*). Combining unity and diversity was indeed the distinctive principle of European civilization, when compared with other continents; it is rooted in the common cultural background provided by both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It was in contrast to Europe of the Middle Ages on the one hand, and to non-Europeans, on the other, in two ways, first because nowhere had inter-state relations evolved in that way, and second, because of its colonial and imperialist relations with other continents.

H. Kissinger’s idealized picture of the European Concert of the 19th century⁸ ignores the evidence of such a combination of a setting of internal peace and the destabilizing global ‘age of empires’. However, in the 19th century “the concert of Europe carried out similar functions to those performed by contemporary international organizations, providing access to decision making by states not directly involved in a conflict, offering assurance to members about each others’ intentions, and requiring conformity to shared norms as a condition for acceptance as a member in a good standing”⁹.

Secondly, how does one explain the first multilateral arrangements regarding civilian issues, what D. Mitrany calls the specific “common interest”, for example the International Telegraph Union in 1865, without taking into account such a co-operative kind of multipolarism? This was the most significant of a series of significant multilateral arrangements¹⁰. Mitrany is wrong in contrasting functional cooperation with intergovernmental regimes, which are really two sides of the same coin. Multilateral cooperation and the central role of the British Pound (the *Gold Standard*) are some of the main pillars of the “*Pax Britannica*”, the instruments of the British

⁶ St. Hoffmann (1961) *International law...*

⁷ F. Chabod, *Idea d’Europa e politica d’equilibrio*, op cit, p.13-14

⁸ H. Kissinger, Speech at the Berthelsmann Foundation Forum, 2006

⁹ R. O. Keohane, H. Haftendorn and C. A. Wallander, Conclusions, in *Imperfect Unions*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 325

¹⁰ Universal Postal Union (1865), International office of weights and measures (1875), International meteorological organization (1878), International agriculture office (1907), International public hygiene office (1907), International statistics office (1913).