

The concept of multilateralism can mean different things. In practice, it is synonymous with complexity. Multilateralism is a tool for organising complexity and making it amenable to negotiation, by working towards a single negotiating text and goal. Many different theories have been developed to explain the internal dynamics of multilateral negotiations. These range from different international and integration theories to systems theory, decision theory, game theory, coalition theory, organisation theory, agenda setting, globalisation and new institutionalism, and so on. This multiplicity of theoretical approaches illustrates how diverse multilateral negotiation in practice relies on dynamic pluralised inputs and how different approaches identify the interplay between strategies and functionally linked management of power.

## 1. Why Multilateralism?

Multilateralism refers to negotiations and relations based on one-to-many states rather than one-to-one state interaction. In the case of relations between China and the EU, this has an internal and external dimension for the EU. Internally, EU member states, through their institutions and internal processes and practices of collaboration and integration, try and overcome or reconcile any differences, rivalries or disagreements they may have regarding all manner of relations with China. The advantage of this is that it allows them externally to develop a common position among themselves that can be presented to China. This benefits China because it means that China does not have to repeat negotiations with every EU member state. Instead, it can explore how each of the EU 27 goes about implementing commonly agreed goals –for example on boosting green industry– and see how this matches best with its own priorities in international multilateral negotiations.

For the EU27, multilateral negotiation and multilateral international diplomacy inevitably means that member states have to negotiate internally to reconcile their own positions. They try to create unity between negotiation at the actual and symbolic levels which means that, despite differences of opinion and disagreement, there is always a high probability of convergence and agreement. Generally, the EU seeks to apply the same principle of high commitment to achieving a constructive outcome in its international multilateral diplomacy. This is one of the reasons why the EU's new External Action Service is expected to reduce complexity and engineer greater consensus and uniformity in the presentation of the EU's position to third states and organisations<sup>1</sup>.

This is seen as desirable for three key reasons. First, multilateral negotiations are seen as a means of settling differences, not escalating them. Second, international multilateral negotiations are viewed as a tool to contribute to global order. Third, international multilateral negotiations allow participants to structure interaction, procedures and systems for managing both mundane, routine issues, learn from that experience,

---

<sup>1</sup> See spokesman of the High Representative Catherine Ashton's statement on Hong Kong Brussels, 25 June 2010 A 113/10, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/115504.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/115504.pdf)

and institutionalise constructive interaction. This has the potential to lead to productive relations that can be sustained over the longer term, and to channel disagreements over sensitive issues or crises through processes designed to lead to constructive outcomes.

A strong organisational basis for international multilateral negotiation helps to ensure that existing, unproductive antagonisms do not derail progress even if they appear to be sharper within the relatively protected confines of the multilateral negotiations. In short, multilateral negotiations provide a framework for pursuing common interests and insulating them, where possible, from deeper, problematic conflicts among the parties and in the wider international environment. This has been illustrated many times in GATT negotiations and within the EU<sup>2</sup>. Success is not guaranteed, nor can it be predicted. However, a constructive approach to resolving disputes is in-built to a greater or lesser degree: a greater degree in the case of integrated organisations like the EU, a lesser degree in the case of GATT. International multilateral negotiation provides an interface for structures, procedures, cultures and negotiation processes to be used to build consensus through group processes, coalition building, mediation and informal collaboration with associated institutions (like the European Parliament, in the EU's case), and adopting different leadership styles imaginatively to capitalise on the plurality of actors and stakeholders involved in different issues. This means that successful outcomes neither need nor respond to a powerful hegemon but depend upon high commitment to achieving shared goals.

Multilateralism is a term that has been applied to trade relations between states, especially state-to-international organisation relations during a transition phase from moving from bilateral state-to-state relations to a more comprehensive relationship based on common criteria. The reasons for doing so often related to the way in which multilateralism would simplify relations by developing a set of common criteria for a deepening relationship. Typically, this is associated with closer political links between the partners, even at times of disagreement and conflict.

A major benefit of multilateralism is that it permits all manner of relations to develop to mutual benefit at many different levels. Multilateralism allows for the emergence of relations between and among states in non-threatening, positive ways. Multilateralism in these senses relies on the tools of soft diplomacy to foster mutual understanding. It therefore creates an environment where sport, cultural, and educational exchanges and links can take place and be led by the sporting bodies themselves. This makes them less dependent on government-to-government diplomacy. It offers greater scope for development and initiatives and allows the partners themselves to improve mutual understanding in creative and innovative ways that extend beyond the usual diplomatic elites to commercial partners and other actors. This can be especially useful to governments wishing to focus on high diplomacy issues, such as international relations and foreign policy and human rights.

Multilateralism has two dimensions: a vertical one, and a horizontal one. The vertical dimension rests on the tools of soft diplomacy to create the basis for preparing, creating and sustaining mutual understanding and sound relations across varied aspects of modern activity, often separate from and independent of government intervention, direction and control. The horizontal dimension rests on exploiting the capacity building of the horizontal dimensions in order to develop strong state-to-state relations controlled and managed by governments.

---

<sup>2</sup> See chapters by Sjostedt and Lodge in W. Zartman(ed)(1994) *International Multilateral Negotiation: Approaches to the Management of Complexity*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

In the case of the EU and GATT, for example, multilateralism has provided a framework for comparing and overcoming different rules and regulations that disadvantage or benefit certain members over others. The aim is to create common ground and equal opportunities based on accepted principles of fairness. While efforts may fall short of the objective, the attempt is made to reconcile differences in constructive ways. At the same time, it must be recognised that multilateralism can be problematic if third parties seek to undermine multilateral arrangements. For example, states can try and gain competitive advantage vis-a-vis the EU's member states by trying to negotiate bilateral agreements with each member and setting each member state against the other in order to strike a hard bargain. This is one of the reasons why the EU's founding treaties gave competence for specific areas of 'external relations' (that is trade and commerce) to the EU Commission and reserved foreign policy to the foreign offices of the member states. However, trade and commerce are no longer seen as soft diplomacy but are recognised as part of the strategy of states' international and foreign policies. That is not to say that the trade and commerce are managed by governments in the EU. It is to recognise the importance they have to prosperity and economic wellbeing and to ensuring that the diplomatic environment is conducive to allowing independent trade and commercial relations to flourish.

The EU itself, as well as member states, have various programmes designed to help bodies develop relationships based on mutual interest between themselves and China. For example, in 2009-10, the UK Sustainable Development Dialogues Programme led by DEFRA resulted in the UK cities of Glasgow and Sheffield working with Nanjing and Wuhan to exchange experiences on urban regeneration and affordable housing. Mutually beneficial lessons were shared about improving transport planning, integrating it with land-use and promoting development through public sector investment<sup>3</sup>. As will be shown below, these are crucial elements in realising wider green energy and economic goals. First, however, an example of a new EU policy area is presented because this offers scope for developing future soft diplomacy interaction and because it is relatively new is open to initiatives and influence. It is another policy area that can be linked to the strategic agenda in EU – China relations. Following this brief overview, two strategic areas of China-EU relations are presented.

## 2. Multilateralism and EU soft diplomacy: the example of sport

Sport is seen as a tool of diplomacy that readily transcends linguistic and cultural divisions, and that helps to cut poverty and foster development. The EU Commission supports this positions and joined with FIFA to promote football as a means of boosting the development of the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Its 2007 White Paper on Sport introduced a more general use of sport as a tool in the EU development policy. In May 2010, the International Olympic Committee opened the first joint forum between the IOC and the United Nations (UN). At it, the importance of partnership was discussed by sporting officials and UN representatives in order to leverage the IOC's recently obtained UN observer status and strengthen cooperation in the field of development through sport<sup>4</sup>.

The Lisbon Treaty came into force on 1 December 2010. Article 165 provides the EU with a competence for sport. It opens the door to new areas of multilateral cooperation by granting the EU Commission with a formal

---

<sup>3</sup> See Local Government association news at [www.lga.gov.uk](http://www.lga.gov.uk) accessed February 2010.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.olympic.org/en/content/The-IOC/?articleNewsGroup=-1&articleId=90146>