

Module Detail	
<b>Subject Name</b>	<b>Political Science</b>
<b>Paper Name</b>	<b>International Relations Theory and Politics</b>
<b>Module Name/Title</b>	<b>Multilateralism</b>
<b>Pre-requisites</b>	
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>To describe the Concept of Multilateralism in International Politics</b></li> <li><b>To discuss Rationalist and Reflectivist Theorisation on Multilateralism: A Comparison of Western and Indian Perspectives</b></li> <li><b>Role of institutions and norms in defining Multilateralism in an ever-changing world.</b></li> <li><b>To analyses the transformed nature of contemporary world order that has tended to add additional layers to the traditional definition and practice of Multilateralism.</b></li> <li><b>To discuss the distinctive conceptualization of Multilateralism by rationalist and Reflectivist approaches in Western and Indian IR</b></li> </ul>
<b>Keywords</b>	Multilateralism, Institutions, United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), Sovereignty, IMF, EU, Trade, International Politics.

Role	Name	Affiliation
<b>Principal Investigator</b>	<b>Prof. Ashutosh Kumar</b>	<b>Department of Political Science, Panjab University CHD.</b>
<b>Paper Coordinator</b>	<b>Dr. Jayati Srivastava</b>  <b>Shibashis Chatterjee</b>	<b>Associate Professor, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.</b>  <b>Professor, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata</b>
<b>Content Writer/Author (CW)</b>	<b>Dr. Deepshikha Shahi</b>  <b>(Assistant Professor)</b>	<b>Janki Devi Memorial College, DU.</b>
<b>Content Reviewer (CR)</b>	<b>Dr. Jayati Srivastava</b>	<b>School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.</b>
<b>Language Editor (LE)</b>	<b>Dr. Jayati Srivastava</b>	<b>School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University,</b>

New Delhi.



## Module-14

### Understanding Multilateralism: Concept and Praxis

Multilateralism has been traditionally understood as an institutionalized collective action by an inclusively determined set of sovereign nation-states. As such, it is a significant instrument for ordering and reordering world politics. Multilateralism and the world order share a dialectical relationship. Multilateralism institutionalizes a world order by embedding new norms into it. However when the existing norms become dysfunctional with the passage of time, multilateralism redefines or displaces them, thereby transforming the very world order that it once helped to institutionalize. Therefore the concept and praxis of multilateralism can be scrutinized at two levels: ‘institutional’ and ‘normative’. While the institutional facet of multilateralism has been more stressed by the ‘rationalist’ theories, the normative aspect of multilateralism has been more emphasized by the ‘reflectivist’ theories.<sup>1</sup> The functioning of the institutional and normative dimensions of multilateralism eventually transforms with the corresponding contextual change in the world order. This chapter aims at developing a conceptual and praxeological understanding of multilateralism against the backdrop of a shifting world order. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section assesses the role of institutions and norms in defining multilateralism in an ever-changing world. The second section analyses the transformed nature of contemporary world order that has tended to add additional layers to the traditional definition and practice of multilateralism. Finally, the third section sets out to discuss the distinctive conceptualization of multilateralism by rationalist and reflectivist approaches in Western and Indian IR<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> In International Relations (IR), the rationalist theories focus on ‘behavioural regularities’ in specific institutions over time and space. They assume scarcity, competition and rationality on the part of the actors. The reflectivist theories underline the importance of ‘inter-subjective meanings’ derived from values, norms and practices that vary across culture. For a detailed discussion on this, see Robert O. Keohane. 1988. ‘International Institutions: Two Approaches’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol.32, No.4, pp. 379-396.

<sup>2</sup> As emerging powers take centre stage in international economic, political and security affairs, norms and institutions are contested and different worldviews co-exist uneasily. Giovanni Grevi, Álvaro de Vasconcelos assert that the priorities and the decisions of major global and regional powers will define the scope for cooperation and highlight the sources of competition and conflict over the next ten years. See 2008. ‘Partnerships for Effective Multilateralism: EU

## Defining Multilateralism: Institutions Vs Norms

The first documented use of the term ‘multilateral’ to describe an international arrangement dates back to 1858, whereas the noun form of the word – ‘multilateralism’ – only came into use in 1928, in the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>3</sup> James Caporaso points out that the noun comes in the form of an ‘ism,’ suggesting a belief or ideology rather than a straightforward state of affairs.<sup>4</sup> A definition outlined in US foreign policy in 1945 supports this observation.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the nature of world politics changed almost beyond recognition due to unprecedented developments in the sphere of economy and politics.<sup>5</sup> In the economic sphere, the technological revolution in transport and communications closely integrated national economies by facilitating increased cross border flows of trade, investment and finance. In the political domain, the collapse of communism and the triumph of capitalism gave way to a world with a single dominant neoliberal political ideology. These developments created conducive atmosphere for enhanced exchanges among nation-states. In this changed circumstantial backdrop, multilateralism was defined as international governance of the ‘many’, and its fundamental principle was ‘opposition of bilateral and discriminatory

---

Relations with Brazil, China, India and Russia’. ISS. Available at <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/partnerships-for-effective-multilateralism-eu-relations-with-brazil-china-india-and-russia/> [Accessed March 18, 2013] Since India is increasingly acknowledged as an ‘emerging power’ in the evolving multilateral world, a systematic understanding of the Indian perspective on multilateralism becomes significant. However, the idea to explore the concept of multilateralism within ‘Indian IR’ does not aim at suggesting the institutionalization of an Indian school of IR. It merely refers to the intellectual contributions made by the scholars of Indian origin towards theorising multilateralism.

<sup>3</sup> Powell, Lindsay. 2003. *In Defense of Multilateralism*. Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy. Available at <http://www.yale.edu/gegdialogue/docs/dialogue/oct03/papers/Powell.pdf> [Accessed March 17, 2013]

<sup>4</sup> Caporaso, James. 1992. ‘International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations’. *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 3, pp. 600-601.

<sup>5</sup> Nayyar, Deepak. (ed.) 2002. *Governing Globalization*, Oxford, p. 3

arrangements' that were believed to enhance the leverage of the powerful over the weak and to increase international conflict.<sup>6</sup>

The theory and practice of multilateralism gained momentum in the post-Cold War world, wherein multilateralism was broadly defined in two different ways.<sup>7</sup> The definition that gave central importance to 'institutions', projected multilateralism as institutionalized collective action by three or more independent nation-states. It held that the institutions with a truly multilateral character were open to all nation-states meeting specified criteria. The rules of multilateral institutions were publicly known and persisted over an extensive period of time. Robert O. Keohane, who defined multilateralism in institutional terms, wrote in 1990: 'Defining multilateralism in strictly institutional rather than normative terms, makes it possible meaningfully to ask causal questions about whether multilateral institutions promote norms...Such a definition also facilitates inquiry into whether strictly institutional forms are normatively legitimate.'<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Keohane argued that the norms underlying the multilateral institutions by no means superseded the sovereignty of nation-states. The states were the most important actors in world politics and the multilateral norms were created by states. In fact, the states dominated the process of decision-making in multilateral institutions. He asserted that multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) performed valuable functions for states. They reduced the costs of preparing and implementing agreements, they helped to supply information about other states' policies, and they increased the costs of renegeing on commitments, thereby enhancing the credibility of promises made by the states associated with a multilateral set up.

John Gerard Ruggie agreed that Keohane's definition was accurate but he criticized it for being nominal and incomplete. In 1992, Ruggie observed that what was distinctive about

---

<sup>6</sup> Kahler,Miles. 1992. 'Multilateralism with Small and Large Numbers'. *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 3, p. 681.

<sup>7</sup> Keohane, R.O., 2006. *The Contingent Legitimacy of Multilateralism*, GARNET Working Paper, n. 09/06. Available at [http://rrii.150m.com/t08/Robert\\_O.\\_Keohane\\_-\\_The\\_Contingent\\_Legitimacy\\_of\\_Multilateralism\\_GARNET\\_Working\\_Paper\\_No0906.pdf](http://rrii.150m.com/t08/Robert_O._Keohane_-_The_Contingent_Legitimacy_of_Multilateralism_GARNET_Working_Paper_No0906.pdf) [Accessed March 17, 2013]

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

multilateralism was not merely that it coordinated national policies in groups of three or more states. In fact, other organizational forms also did such coordination. The peculiarity of multilateral organizations was that they coordinated national policies on the basis of certain ‘principles’ of ordering relations among those nation-states. While Keohane called for evaluating the norms of multilateralism through its institutional framework, Ruggie assigned a greater role to norms or principles in understanding the functioning of multilateral institutions, thereby designing an alternative definition of multilateralism.

Ruggie’s alternative definition restricted multilateralism to action among three or more states on the basis of ‘generalized principles of conduct’. Two corollaries of the generalized principles of conduct were: ‘indivisibility’ among the members of a collectivity with respect to the range of behaviour in question; and ‘diffuse reciprocity’ expected by each member to yield a rough equivalence of benefits in the aggregate and over time<sup>9</sup>. Indivisibility can be thought of as the scope (both geographic and functional) over which costs and benefits are spread. The generalized principles of conduct usually come in the form of norms exhorting general if not universal modes of relating to other states, rather than differentiating relations case-by-case on the basis of individual preferences, situational exigencies, or prior particularistic grounds. Diffuse reciprocity adjusts the utilitarian lenses for the long view, emphasizing that actors expect to benefit in the long run and over many issues, rather than every time on every issue.<sup>10</sup> Keohane opines that Ruggie’s definition is most valuable for studying possible transformations in world politics.

At the beginning of the twenty first century, another phase of transformation in world politics became visible. Firstly, the UN system as a multilateral forum had transformed both in terms of the strength and character of its members and the scope of its numerous specialized agencies. Secondly, the UN system was not the only instrument of multilateralism. The cropping up of multiple regional organizations (EU, SAARC, ASEAN, SCO, APEC, G4, G6, G8+5, G20,

---

<sup>9</sup> Ruggie, John Gerard. 1993. Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution. In John Gerard Ruggie (ed.) *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form*. Columbia University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Caporaso, op.cit.

G77, BASIC, BRICS, IBSA) provided alternative venues for operationalizing multilateralism. Additionally, the onset of a worldwide financial recession in 2007 began to expose loopholes in the existing multilateral arrangements and presented a changed context to the theory and practice of multilateralism. It is evident that the design of multilateral organizations and their associated law by many nations, each of which has its own concerns, is a very difficult task. This task has been made more difficult in the last decade or so by major changes in economic and geopolitical relations and worsening disequilibria in global commodity, currency and asset markets.<sup>11</sup> One way to capture this changed context of multilateralism is to use the metaphor of 'Multilateralism 2.0'<sup>12</sup> which stresses how the playing field and the players in multilateralism are currently changing.

### **Multilateralism 2.0: Towards a Novel Definition of Multilateralism in the Contemporary World Order**

The multilateral arrangements are being transformed by two major developments in the contemporary world. The first is the trend towards 'multi-polarity' as expressed by the emergence of 'rising powers' that have started acting as key players in world politics. Unlike the historical phases when only a few or even one player dominated the geopolitical game, today it seems that several nation-states are becoming dominant players as global or regional actors. The voting behavior of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) in the UN and their presence in the G20 exemplifies this trend. In their drive to mould the functioning of world politics in accordance with their national or regional interests, these rising powers have

---

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd, Peter. 2012. 'Multilateralism in Crisis'. ARTNeT Working Paper Series No. 114.

<sup>12</sup> Langenhove, Luk Van. 2010. 'The Transformation of Multilateralism Mode 1.0 to Mode 2.0', *Global Policy*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 263-270.

organized themselves on the basis of various ‘issue-based’ multilateral forums such as IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa) and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China).<sup>13</sup>

The second and related development is marked with the proliferation of regional organizations and their increased influence on the exercise of multilateralism. Since 1974, the European Union (EU) for instance has been an observer in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). But on 3 May 2011, UNGA improved the EU’s status by granting it speaking rights. The UNGA resolution also opened the door for other regional organizations to request the same speaking rights. While some UN members warned that this could unbalance the ‘one state, one vote’ rule within the UN, the others argued that this opening towards regional organizations brought with it new opportunities.

Together these two developments illustrate that multilateralism is no longer only a play between states: various regions as well as other actors are present and are profoundly changing the multilateral game.<sup>14</sup> Thakur and Van Langenhove wrote: ‘The policy authority for tackling global problems still belong to the states, while the sources of the problems and potential

---

<sup>13</sup> As the relative economic weight of China and several others has come to match or exceed that of the middle-ranking G7 economies, the world economy has shifted from ‘unipolar’ toward ‘multipolar’, less dominated by the G7. Robert H. Wade investigates how this change is being translated into changes in authority and influence within multilateral organizations like the G20, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). He argues that the alarm bells are ringing in G7 capitals about G7 loss of influence. According to a WikiLeaks cable from the senior US official for the G20 process, from January 2010, it is remarkable how closely coordinated the BASIC group of countries [Brazil, South Africa, India, China] have become in international fora, taking turns to impede US/EU initiatives and playing the US and EU off against each other. However, Wade suggests that the shift in power is much smaller than the headlines or private alarm bells suggest. The US remains the dominant state, and the G7 states together continue to exercise primacy, but now more fearfully and defensively. See Wade, Robert H. 2011. Emerging World Order? From Multipolarity to Multilateralism in the G20, the World Bank, and the IMF. *Politics & Society*, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 347-378.

<sup>14</sup> Langenhove, op.cit.

solutions are situated at transnational, regional or global level'.<sup>15</sup> As such the building blocks of multilateralism, the nation-states, seem to be less and less capable of dealing with the challenges of globalization. But because the multilateral world order is so dependent on the input of nation-states, multilateralism itself is not functioning well. Langenhove observes: '...what was once an exclusive playing ground for states has now become a space that states have to share with others. It is a fascinating phenomenon: both supra- and sub-national governance entities are largely built by states and can therefore be regarded as 'dependent agencies' of those states. However, once created, these entities start to have a life of their own and are not always totally controllable by their founding fathers. These new sub- and supra-entities are knocking on the door of the multilateral system because they have a tendency to behave 'as if' they are states. This actorness gives them, at least in principle, the possibility to position themselves against other actors, including their founding fathers! All of this has weakened the Westphalian relation between state and sovereignty.<sup>16</sup>

The comparative decline of state sovereignty has paved the way for the emergence of supra-national multilateral bodies like the European Union (EU). In practice, the West expects multilateralism to foster governance (transcending the traditional understanding of sovereignty whenever it appears to be necessary), whereas the other actors seem to expect that multilateralism should 'reproduce sovereignty': not surprisingly China, India and Russia tend to identify multilateralism with the workings of the UN. To tackle this challenge emanating from the safeguarding of sovereignty, the European Security Strategy (ESS), the first ever common strategic document of the EU, adopted by the European Council in December 2003, accords a central place to the concept of 'effective multilateralism'. Effective multilateralism has been described by the ESS as 'the development of a stronger international society, well functioning

---

<sup>15</sup> Thakur, Ramesh and Langenhove, Luk Van. 2006. Enhancing Global Governance Through Regional Integration. *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 233-240.

<sup>16</sup> Langenhove, 2010, op.cit.

international institutions and a rule-based international order'.<sup>17</sup> As such, it stresses that 'international organizations, regimes and treaties' can become effective if the EU is 'ready to act when their rules are broken'. 'Effective multilateralism' thus appears to imply enforceable multilateralism.

Though a serious thought has been devoted for improving the effectiveness of EU's multilateral policies, Andornino Giovanni and Anna Caffarena opine that the concept of 'effective multilateralism' has been neither clearly defined in theoretical terms nor appropriately understood in practical sense.<sup>18</sup> A severe blow to EU's aspired 'effective multilateralism' came in the aftermath of the recent financial recession when particular member states of the EU badly suffered while the better off members states seemed reluctant to help them out. This became most obvious when Germany and the other creditor countries did not want to commit more billions of Euros to pull Greece out of its economic death spiral.<sup>19</sup>

Besides the complexity generated by multiple levels of governance (supra- and sub-national governance), another development that has often obstructed the smooth operation of multilateralism is the growing 'US unilateralism'. The exercise of an excessively unilateralist role by the US (hegemon) gives a setback to the general spirit of multilateralism. Shridath Ramphal wrote: 'The paradox and the tragedy of recent times is that even as the need for a multilateral approach to global problems has become more manifest, support for internationalism has weakened-eroded by some of the strongest nations. This is most true, of course, of the United

---

<sup>17</sup> Biscop, Sven and Drieskens, Edith. 2005. *"Effective Multilateralism and Collective Security: Empowering the UN"*. [also IIEB Working Paper, No. 16, March 2005]. Available at <http://aei.pitt.edu/3075/> [Accessed March 20, 2013]

<sup>18</sup> Giovanni, Andornino and Caffarena, Anna. 23 – 25 March, 2010. Engineering a Global Framework for Europe's Strategic Policy-Making. A paper presented at Network Seminar on *Europe and Global Challenges* held at Torino World Affairs Institute, Italy.

<sup>19</sup> Greece has shown keen support for the EU project and is a member of the Eurozone; however, Greece's relationship with the EU has become increasingly strained over the last couple of years, due to the country's economic problems. For a detailed discussion on this, see 2012. Greece and the EU: Battle of the (third) Bailout. *The Economist*. Available at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/charlemagne/2012/11/greece-and-eu> [Accessed March 20, 2013]

States, whose recent behaviour has served actually to weaken the structure of multilateralism, including the UN itself.<sup>20</sup>

Historically, multilateralism has largely been a post-World War II element of US foreign policy. The US policies such as the Monroe Doctrine (1903) were unilateral. Although American involvement in World War I seems to be a multilateral alliance with Great Britain and France, it was in fact a unilateral venture. The US declared war against Germany in 1917, almost three years after the war began in Europe; it cooperated with Great Britain and France simply because they had a common enemy; aside from combating the German spring offensive of 1918, it refused to follow the alliance's old style of trench fighting; and, when the war ended, the US negotiated a separate peace with Germany. When President Woodrow Wilson proposed a truly multilateral organization – The League of Nations – to prevent another such war, Americans refused to join. Only World War II pulled the US toward multilateralism. At the end of the war, the US became involved in a flurry of multilateral diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian activity, thereby joined the war's victors in the creation of the UN (1945), International Monetary Fund and World Bank (1944) and World Health Organization (1948). The US and its Western allies also created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 and followed that up with the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) and the Organization of American States (OAS). However, this short span of multilateral endeavors took a back seat with the increasing US interest in 'going it alone'. Cornwell went on to cite instances of the George W. Bush administration 'going it alone': opting out of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, scuppering the tightening up of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, and "refusing to ratify the statutes of the International Criminal Court of Justice.<sup>21</sup> It is widely held that the US refusal to go along with the international consensus is detrimental to the general well-being of the international community.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ramphal, Shridath. 1988. Preface to Harrod and Sahrijver (eds.) *UN Under Attack*. Gower. Jones, Steve 'What is Multilateralism?'. Available at <http://usforeignpolicy.about.com/od/introtoforeignpolicy/a/What-Is-Multilateralism.htm> [Accessed March 22, 2013] However,

<sup>21</sup> Cornwell, January 26, 2002. Weekend Review, The Independent, p. 4

In response to the criticism of US unilateralism, a new concept – ‘new multilateralism’ – has been generated. In 2009, Johanna Mendelson Forman wrote: ‘Almost a decade into the twenty-first century, the United States has yet to think strategically about a new multilateralism that will address the threats our nation faces – threats not only from other states but from forces that do not respect borders. These so-called transnational threats – including the spread of infectious disease such as HIV/AIDs; the perils of organized crime, which can destabilize fragile states; the increased impact of global warming on development and sustainability of agriculture; the unchecked proliferation of nuclear weapons; and the ongoing internal conflicts that negatively affect regional development – are all areas where the global mechanisms provided through UN agencies can be used to expand our national capacities to address them...If multilateralism is used effectively, the United States can rebuild its reputation in the community of nations’.<sup>22</sup> While Forman discusses the concept of new multilateralism to emphasize the need to remake the reputation of US which has been maligned due to the excessive unilateralism, and to highlight the continued relevance of US-UN partnership, Ngaire Woods carves out this concept in the light of the transformed role of multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In 2010, Ngaire Woods questioned: ‘In the wake of the global financial crisis, three G20 Summits have reinvigorated global cooperation, thrusting the IMF centre stage with approximately \$1 trillion of resources. With China, Brazil, India, Russia and other powerful emerging economies now at the table, is a new more multilateral era of governance emerging?’<sup>23</sup> She concluded that a new order might emerge in which multilateral institutions – such as the IMF – end up with only a limited role to play alongside emerging national and regional strategies, unless a more radical transformation begins. In response to the arguments put forth by Woods, the Advisor and Deputy Division Chief in the IMF’s Strategy, Policy and Review

---

<sup>22</sup> Forman, Johanna Mendelson. 2009. Investing in a New Multilateralism: A Smart Power Approach to the United Nations, CSIS. Available at [http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/090128\\_mendelsonforman\\_un\\_smarterpower\\_web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/090128_mendelsonforman_un_smarterpower_web.pdf) [Accessed March 18, 2013]

<sup>23</sup> Woods, Ngaire. 2010. Global Governance after the Financial Crisis: A New Multilateralism or the Last Gasp of the Great Powers? *Global Policy*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 51-63.

Department, Isabelle Mateos y Lago and Yongzheng Yang, wrote: While we agree that maintaining the momentum of multilateral cooperation in a post-crisis era will not be easy, the reforms under way give greater hope for continued multilateralism than Woods' analysis may suggest'.<sup>24</sup>

An optimistic assessment of new multilateralism echoed in the writings of Robert O. Keohane, Stephen Macedo, and Andrew Moravcsik. They argued: '...participation in multilateral institutions—defined broadly to include international organizations, regimes, and networks governed by formal international agreements—can enhance the quality of domestic democracy. To be sure, some instances of multilateralism have undemocratic implications, but multilateralism can also enhance domestic democracy in a number of important ways. Involvement with multilateral institutions often helps domestic democratic institutions restrict the power of special interest factions, protect individual rights, and improve the quality of democratic deliberation, while also increasing capacities to achieve important public purposes. Under some plausible circumstances international cooperation can thus enhance the quality of democracy even in reasonably well-functioning democratic polities.'<sup>25</sup>

Starting from a traditional understanding, wherein multilateralism was viewed as the acting together of several sovereign nation-states for executing a common course of action, to new multilateralism, that encompasses the influence of growing number of national, supra- and sub-national actors, the conceptual and praxeological dimensions of multilateralism have undergone a sea change. This change has been captured by the theories on multilateralism that can be broadly categorized under two heads: rationalist and reflectivist. Since IR as an academic discipline remains dominated by the West, most of the rationalist and reflectivist theorisation on

---

<sup>24</sup> Lago, Isabelle Mateos y and Yang, Yongzheng. 2010. 'The IMF and a New Multilateralism'. *Global Policy*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, pp. 223-225.

<sup>25</sup> Keohane , Robert O., Macedo, Stephen and Moravcsik, Andrew. 2009. 'Democracy-Enhancing Multilateralism'. *International Organization*, Vol. 63, pp. 1-31.

multilateralism was initiated by the Western scholars. However, this Western theorisation has been further expanded by the Indian scholarship on multilateralism.<sup>26</sup>

### **Rationalist and Reflectivist Theorisation on Multilateralism: A Comparison of Western and Indian Perspectives**

The initial efforts towards theorising multilateralism in the West can be traced to the works of Keohane, Ruggie, Cox and Rosenau. While Keohane subscribes to the rationalist tradition, and Cox and Rosenau are committed to the reflectivist school, Ruggie lies somewhere in between.<sup>27</sup> Keohane defines multilateralism as the ‘practice of coordinating national policies in a group of three or more states’ through institutional arrangements having ‘persistent set of rules that constrain activity, shape expectations and prescribe roles’.<sup>28</sup> Keohane’s views find resonance in the writings of Ruggie. According to Ruggie, ‘multilateralism depicts a generic institutional form in international relations that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct’.<sup>29</sup> A careful study of Keohane and Ruggie suggests two necessary ingredients of the Western rationalist theorising on multilateralism: (1) perpetual regulatory framework and institutional structure; (2) universal state-centric appeal. Though the issues of ‘rules’, ‘institutions’ and ‘state-centrism’ are re-iterated in the Indian rationalist theorising on multilateralism, their perpetuity and universality are effectively problematized.

---

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion on the distinctiveness in Indian theorisation on multilateralism, see Deepshikha. February 2013. ‘The Indian Scholarship on International Relations and Multilateralism’. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. XLVIII, No. 05, pp.

<sup>27</sup> Though Ruggie gives central importance to multilateral norms/principles, his definition of multilateralism also acknowledges the significance of multilateral institutions.

<sup>28</sup> See Keohane, Robert O., 1988. International Institutions: Two Approaches. *International Studies Quarterly*, 32(4), pp. 379-396; Keohane, Robert O., 1990. Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research. *International Journal*, 45(4), pp.731-764.

<sup>29</sup> Ruggie, op.cit.

Deepak Nayyar opines that there is a need not only to change or adapt the existing multilateral rules or institutions, but also to create the missing rules or institutions particularly to govern global macroeconomic management, international financial structure, transnational corporations, cross-border movement of people and international public goods and public bads.<sup>30</sup> He highlights three major problems in this regard: First, there are different rules in different spheres. For instance, the WTO is more open in the sphere of trade flows and capital flows but less open in the sphere of technology flows and labour flows. Second, there are rules for some but not for others. There are no rules for surplus countries, or even deficit countries, in the industrialized world which do not borrow from the multilateral financial institutions, but the IMF and the World Bank set rules for borrowers in the developing world and in the transitional economies. Third, the agenda for new rules is partisan. The attempt to create a multilateral agreement on investment in the WTO, which seeks free access and national treatment for investors with provision to commitments and obligations to foreign investors, provides the most obvious example. Surely these rights of foreign investors must be matched by some obligations. He concludes by advocating the need to make the rules symmetrical across spheres and uniformly applicable to all states.

Though Nayyar's call for uniformity echoes Ruggie's emphasis on 'generalized' principles of conduct, the applicability of Nayyar's idea of uniformity is much wider as it is not just limited to multiplicity of states but also embraces plural spheres of interaction amongst states. Moreover, Nayyar's demand for introducing new multilateral rules and institutions questions the perpetuity of existing multilateral rules and institutions on the one hand, and reflects impatience towards the idea of 'diffuse reciprocity' on the other. A profound mistrust towards the efficacy of diffuse reciprocity in serving collective purposes is reflected in the views of Achin Vanaik who writes: 'Multilateralism is essentially a neutral rather than definitionally positive term as it is so often used for bad ends'<sup>31</sup>

While J.N. Dixit and Shashi Tharoor largely associate the concept of multilateralism with the regulatory problems of multiple co-existing states as members of universal multilateral

---

<sup>30</sup> Nayyar, Deepak, (ed.) 2002. *Governing Globalization*. Oxford.

<sup>31</sup> In an e-mail conversation with the author.

institutions like the UN<sup>32</sup>, B.S. Prakash warns that the changes in multilateralism are not limited to the UN system as ‘sub-regionalism’ or ‘pan-regionalism’ has evolved as another multilateral reality that challenges the universal character of traditional multilateralism.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the Western scholars, who suggest that regional organizations like the EU have multilateralism in their DNA<sup>34</sup>, and who sense continuity rather than contradiction between the forces of regionalism and multilateralism, the Indian scholars consider regionalism as an obstacle in the move towards multilateralism. The majority of Western scholars - Hudgins, Either, Mansfield and Reinhardt, Sampson and Woolcock, Wei and Frankel, Menno - assert that regionalism is not blocking multilateralism but is facilitating its development, whereas the majority of Indian scholars like Jagdish Bhagwati<sup>35</sup>, Nipun Agarwal<sup>36</sup> and Sayantan Gupta<sup>37</sup> argue that regionalism might not be

---

<sup>32</sup> Dixit, J.N., 2005. India’s Approach to Multilateralism. In C. Uday Bhaskar et.al (eds.) *United Nations: Multilateralism and International Security*. IDSA-Shipra; Tharoor, Shashi, Sep/Oct 2003. Why America Still Needs the United Nations?. *Foreign Affairs*. Available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/59184/shashi-tharoor/why-america-still-needs-the-united-nations>. [Accessed 4 April, 2010]

<sup>33</sup> Prakash, B.S., 2005. Strengthening and Restructuring Multilateral Institutions: A Perspective. In C. Uday Bhaskar et.al (eds.), *United Nations: Multilateralism and International Security*. IDSA-Shipra.

<sup>34</sup> See Barroso, Jose Manuel, January 24, 2010. Asian Giants can Imbibe Europe’s Values. *The Times of India*, p. 14. Available at [http://epaper.timesofindia.com/Repository/getFiles.asp?Style=OliveXLib:LowLevelEntityToPrint\\_TOI&Type=text/html&Locale=english-skin-custom&Path=TOIBG/2010/01/24&ID=Ar01400](http://epaper.timesofindia.com/Repository/getFiles.asp?Style=OliveXLib:LowLevelEntityToPrint_TOI&Type=text/html&Locale=english-skin-custom&Path=TOIBG/2010/01/24&ID=Ar01400). [Accessed 28 July, 2010]; Groom, A.J.R., 2009. Multilateralism as a Way of Life in Europe. In Edward Newman, Ramesh Thakur and John Tirman (eds.) *Multilateralism under Challenge? Power, International Order and Structural Change*. United Nations University Press; Zadek, Simon, 2007. Collaborative Governance: The New multilateralism for the 21st Century. Available at <http://www.zadek.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Collaborative-Governance-Brookings-October-2007.pdf>. [Accessed 4 April, 2010]

<sup>35</sup> Bhagwati, Jagdish, 1992. Regionalism Versus Multilateralism. *The World Economy*, 15(15), pp.535-556; Bhagwati, Jagdish, 1996. Preferential Trading Areas and Multilateralism: Strategies, Friends or Foes?. In Jagdish Bhagwati (ed.) *The Economics of Preferential Trade Agreements*. AEI Press.

<sup>36</sup> Agarwal, Nipun, 2007. Why Multilateralism Can’t Exist: Is The WTO Mandate Wrong?. Available at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=957765](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=957765). [Accessed July 28, 2010]

a building block or a stepping stone but rather a stumbling block in the path of multilateralism.<sup>38</sup> They argue that the ‘economic rents’ produced through multilateral trade diversion adversely affect the politico-economic interests of many regional special-interest-lobby groups. Consequently, these groups push the governments to stop moving further in the direction of multilateralism. The governments face a ‘multi-objective’ decision-making scenario wherein they need to maximize cultural, environmental, economic, social and many other factors rather than just one factor – the economic factor – as stressed by Adam Smith and David Ricardo. The complexity of multi-objective decision-making causes governments to make decisions that are not always compatible with the goal of multilateralism.

Noticing the fragmentation in the universal character of multilateralism due to growing regional tilt in multilateral practice, B. S. Prakash observes: ‘As one surveys the changing face of multilateralism today, we see mutation and multiplication. The underlying reality is that the

---

<sup>37</sup> Gupta, Bhabani Sen, 1997. India in the Twenty First Century. *International Affairs*, 73(2), p. 297-314

<sup>38</sup> There are a few exceptions in both the Western and Indian line of thinking. While the Western thinkers like Winters (1996) and Orneals (2005) view regionalism as a stumbling block, the Indian scholars like Manoj Pant and Amit Sadhukaran as well as Indian practitioners like Kamal Nath argue that regionalism is not a hurdle to multilateralism as often feared by the Indians. See Winters, L. Alan 1996 Regionalism versus Multilateralism. Policy Research Working Paper 1687. World Bank. Washington, D.C.; Ornelas, E. 2005 Trade Creating Free Trade Areas and the Undermining of Multilateralism. *European Economic Review*, Vol. 49, No. 7, pp.1717–1735; Manoj Pant and Amit Sadhukaran “Does Regionalism Hinder Multilateralism: A Case Study of India”, 2008, *Discussion Paper 09-03*, Centre for International Trade and Development, SIS, JNU; Kamal Nath “No Contradiction between RTAs and Multilateralism”, 2006, Available at [http://commerce.nic.in/PressRelease/pressrelease\\_detail.asp?id=368](http://commerce.nic.in/PressRelease/pressrelease_detail.asp?id=368) [Accessed March 22, 2013]. Besides, there are scholars who take a neutral position on the issue of regionalism versus multilateralism. For instance, Andriamananjara (2003) and Aghion et. al (2004) hold that regionalism, as reflected in the practice of RTAs, support multilateralism; though multilateralism could have eventuated even if regionalism did not happen. See Andriamananjara, Soamiely 2003 On the Relationship Between Preferential Trading Agreements and the Multilateral Trading System. *Pacific Economic Cooperation Council*. Available at [http://www.pecc.org/publications/papers/trade-papers/1\\_SII/6-andriamananjara.PDF](http://www.pecc.org/publications/papers/trade-papers/1_SII/6-andriamananjara.PDF) [Accessed March 22, 2013]; Aghion, P., P. Antras and E. Helpman 2004. ‘Negotiating Free Trade’, NBER Working Paper 10721.

world is multipolar and with more poles, you tend to have more constellations'.<sup>39</sup> He asks, how does one understand the 'many-lateralism' of multilateralism? Though the Indian scholarship admits some degree of overlap between the divided landscapes of regionalism and multilateralism, it underlines the possibility of clash between regional and universal multilateral interests, thereby challenging the notion of 'divisibility' that is so central to Ruggie's understanding of multilateralism.

As the theoretical discourse on multilateralism acquires a reflectivist attitude, the actors and arenas of multilateralism expand. The criticism of rationalist emphasis on perpetuity and universality paves way for reflective thinking on transformation and regionalism. The operation of institutions and rules are analyzed in the light of underlying norms. The activities of states are scrutinized in the context of civil society. The Western reflectivist theorising on multilateralism is arguably best exemplified in the writings of Cox and Rosenau. Cox's 'Historical Dialectic' approach studies multilateralism as a historical problem in the making of a new world order. Thus multilateralism becomes an arena of conflict between the endeavour to buttress the freedom of movement of powerful homogenizing economic forces, and efforts to build a new structure of regulation protecting diversity and the less powerful.<sup>40</sup> Cox aims at exploring the prospects for creating 'new multilateralism' built from the bottom up on the foundations of a broadly participative global society.<sup>41</sup> In line with Cox's idea of new multilateralism that encompasses a tussle between diverse social forces often transcending the boundaries of state, Rosenau perceives the formation of multilateralism through historical dialectic between 'globalizing' and 'localizing' forces.<sup>42</sup> He argues that both sets of forces challenge the authority of the nation-state

---

<sup>39</sup> Prakash, B.S., 2010. Looking for Meaning in Multilateralism. Available at <http://newsrediff.com/column/2010/feb/23/looking-for-meaning-in-multilateralism.htm> [Accessed 25 June, 2010]

<sup>40</sup> Cox, Robert W., 1996. Multilateralism and World Order. In Robert W. Cox and Timothy Sinclair (eds.) *Approaches to World Order*. Cambridge, pp.494-523.

<sup>41</sup> Cox, Robert W., (ed.) 1997. *The New Realism: Perspectives on Multilateralism and World Order*. St. Martin's Press/ United Nations University Press.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenau, James N., 1997. The Person, the Household, the Community and the Globe: Notes for a Theory of Multilateralism in a Turbulent World. In Robert W. Cox (ed.) *The New Realism:*

in favour of some sort of alternative ‘imagined community’, whether sub-national, supranational or transnational in scope. For him, the problem of multilateralism is connected to the issue of multiple levels of associations including ethnic, religious and familial affiliations. Two features sum up the Western reflectivist proposition on multilateralism: (1) historically transformable trajectory; (2) dialectically linked social forces. Though the Indian reflectivist thinking on multilateralism takes account of the transformative thrust of diverse social forces, it has a distinctive appeal in two respects. First, it employs not just historical but also ‘sociological’ tools for explaining the process of transformation in multilateralism. Second, it suggests that the dialectical interaction between diverse social forces in the process of shaping multilateralism is not always mutually conflictive but also ‘mutually constitutive’.

Sharing Cox’s dynamic and historical vision, Ramesh Thakur states that multilateralism, like any social construction, is destined to evolve as a function of changing environmental dynamics.<sup>43</sup> The multilateral norms that underpin multilateral institutions are products of historically specific demands and power configurations. Since the demands and underlying power configurations evolve and change with the passage of time, there is little reason to believe that multilateral norms or institutions could or should remain static in form and nature. Amitav Acharya<sup>44</sup> endorses Kratochwil’s conviction to further explain that the dynamics of multilateralism is more a function of norms than institutions.<sup>45</sup> Multilateralism institutionalizes a world order by ‘embedding’ new norms into it. However when the existing norms become dysfunctional at a particular temporal juncture, multilateralism ‘redefines’ or ‘displaces’ them, thereby transforming the very world order that it once helped to institutionalize. Therefore the

---

*Perspectives on Multilateralism and World Order.* St. Martin’s Press/ United Nations University Press.

<sup>43</sup> Thakur, Ramesh, et.al (eds.), 2009. *Multilateralism Under Challenge? Power, International Order and Structural Change*. United Nations University Press.

<sup>44</sup> Amitav, 2009. Multilateralism, Sovereignty and Normative Change in World Politics. In Ramesh Thakur et.al. (eds.) *Multilateralism Under Challenge?*. United Nations University Press, pp 95-118.

<sup>45</sup> Kratochwil, Friedrich, 1993. Norms Versus Numbers: Multilateralism and the Rationalist and Reflexivist Approaches to Institutions. In John Gerard Ruggie (ed.) *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form*. Columbia University Press, pp.443-474.

changes in the institutional dimensions of multilateralism can be grasped by comprehending the related normative shifts in time.

However, the normative shifts in multilateral practice are not just temporally but also spatially contingent. Acharya argues that the norms of multilateralism vary and undergo adaptation in different regional contexts, something Ruggie's general definition of multilateralism does not demonstrate. Though Ruggie's definition acknowledges the normative elements of multilateralism and Cox's account admits the importance of regional contexts, they do not explore how the transnational norms of multilateralism acquire regional specificity and meaning through 'socialization'. In his attempt to fill the gaps in Ruggie's and Cox's understanding of multilateralism, Acharya uses the sociological framework of norm localization to explain how external/foreign multilateral norms are constructively diffused into regional/local contexts.<sup>46</sup> He describes 'norm localization' as the active construction of locally applicable multilateral norms by local actors through discourse, framing, grafting and cultural selection of foreign ideas. The norm localization helps in achieving congruence between foreign and local beliefs as well as practices, thereby uniquely determining the diverse practices of multilateralism at various regional levels.

Though Acharya espouses Cox's and Rosenau's concept of 'dialectics' by admitting that the central feature of norm dynamic is the contestation between pre-existing regional and emerging global normative orders, he penetrates deeper into the nature of contestation between regional and global forces to reveal that the regional and global normative orders are not in a thoroughly oppositional but in a mutually constitutive relationship. He further elaborates that the resulting behavior of the recipient can be understood more in terms of the former than the latter, although it can be fully understood in terms of both. Acharya's notion of 'new multilateralism' involves a mix of three types of actors: (1) counter hegemonic coalitions; (2) cosmopolitan moral movements; (3) knowledge-based epistemic communities.<sup>47</sup> Though Acharya borrows the

<sup>46</sup> Acharya, Amitav, 2004. How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism. *International Organization*, 58(2), pp.239-275.

<sup>47</sup> Acharya borrows the concept of counter-hegemonic coalitions from Cox and the notion of epistemic communities from Haas and Adler. See Amitav Acharya, "Multilateralism, Sovereignty and Normative Change in World Politics" in Ramesh Thakur et.al. (eds.) *Multilateralism Under Challenge?*, 2009, United Nations University Press, pp 95-118.

concept of ‘counter-hegemonic coalitions’ from Cox and ‘epistemic communities’ from Adler and Haas, the manner in which he utilizes these concepts for explaining the role of ‘leadership’ in new multilateralism makes his contribution more than a mere application of existing Western ideas to non-Western contexts. Unlike the Western practice of acknowledging the hegemonic leadership of US in creating post-war multilateral order, Acharya argues that the actors of new multilateralism provide a leadership that goes beyond the ‘structural leadership’ of the global hegemon. He demonstrates that some of the most creative contributions of new multilateralism – such as the report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty – are neither American-led nor produced by a formal governmental organization. The sociological bent of Acharya’s reading of multilateralism opens greater space for ‘entrepreneurial’ leadership.

The distinctive Indian understanding of multilateralism has following key tenets: (i) Multilateralism is based not on static but on potentially dynamic institutions and rules. (ii) Multilateralism is more a function of norms than institutions and the normative shifts in multilateralism can be captured through the sociological process of norm localization which implies the melding of global norms in accordance with the regional culture. (iii) Norm localization is shaped more effectively by regional than global forces. (iv) The leadership provided by the actors of new multilateralism goes beyond the structural leadership offered by the global hegemon. These tenets are relatively ignored in the Western discourse on multilateralism. As the West struggles to operationalize the process of ‘effective multilateralism’, it needs to develop a theoretical clarity on the subject. The incorporation of the insights provided by the Indian scholarship on multilateralism can create an isomorphic space that can benefit both Indian and Western IR studies.

## Conclusion

In the asymmetrically interdependent character of the contemporary world, wherein no state can fulfill its aspiration unilaterally, the question of how a nation-state perceives the nature of its collaboration with other regional and global powers in the pursuit of its aspiration is central to the theory and practice of multilateralism. Though multilateralism as a joint venture of various nation-states for accomplishing certain well-defined common aspirations is not a new

---

phenomenon, the nature of its practice has transformed over time with the parallel change in the world order and its influential actors. While the world order has become more multipolar with the rise of many ‘emerging powers’, the influential actors are not just sovereign nation-states that are labeled as major powers or emerging powers, but also various sub- and supra-national forces that have recently cropped up as new actors of multilateralism. Consequently the concept of multilateralism has been redefined. Robert B. Zoellick in his article entitled ‘Redefining Multilateralism’ (2008) comments: ‘Today's globalization and markets reflect huge changes in information and communications technology, financial and trade flows, mobility of labor, and vast new competitive forces. New economic powers are on the rise, making them stakeholders in the global system. But the developed world's financial systems, especially in the US, have revealed glaring weaknesses. The international architecture designed to deal with such circumstances is creaking. The new multilateralism will need to be a flexible network. It must maximize the strengths of interconnecting institutions, public and private. It must build a sense of shared responsibility for the health of the global political economy and must involve those with a major stake in that economy. We must redefine economic multilateralism more broadly, beyond the traditional focus on finance and trade. Today, energy, climate change, and stabilizing fragile and post-conflict states are economic issues. They are already part of the international security and environmental dialogue. They must be the concern of economic multilateralism as well’. As multilateralism acquires varied faces in diverse regional contexts, its appropriate theoretical comprehension and effective practical implementation become far more challenging. As the West increasingly realizes that a new set of widely shared rules is necessary to foster a cohesive multilateral framework for sustaining global governance, and as it strives to play a leading role in accomplishing this goal, the need to grasp the attitude and preferences of emerging powers becomes critically essential. The greater sensitivity towards the temporal and spatial dimensions of multilateral practice in the works of Indian scholars, establishes multilateralism as a more regional, normative and dynamic concept. The creative employment of sociological conceptual tools like ‘norm localization’ by the Indian theorists, aids in developing an improved understanding of the complex interface between the regional and global dynamics of multilateralism over time.



