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Cooperation Out of Necessity and Cooperation Out of Choice: Turning Intergovernmental Difference Management into Political Multilateralism

Situational crisis containment and intergovernmental difference management remain essential varieties of multilateralism. Growing global challenges, however, require an equally growing willingness to collaborate with selected partners on a long-term and substantial basis. In doing so, the domestic dimension of multilateral cooperation must be constantly reflected in order to preserve political support. The Federal Government's White Paper “A Multilateralism for the People” carefully embraces such a selective and political multilateralism. Germany’s upcoming G7 presidency in 2022 offers the next government in Berlin the opportunity to further develop this approach.

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Identifying areas of disagreement between states, reconciling, and successfully containing them wherever possible are central functions that protagonists of international politics traditionally attribute to multilateralism. Communicating with each other, exploring different as well as common interests and preferences, and negotiating possibilities for compromise are therefore among the central tasks of diplomacy.

The preferred diplomatic arenas are major international organizations, first and foremost the UN system with its large number of highly specialized agencies that address a wide variety of policy areas. Experienced actors succeed time and again in bringing diverging positions together in robust agreements through skillful coupling across issue areas and institutions. The collective management of intergovernmental differences is the essential purpose of this practical and pragmatic variety of multilateralism.

To avoid misunderstandings: multilateralism as difference management should by no means be underestimated. The major intergovernmental agreements of the past decade, which could be concluded in policy areas as diverse as trade (most recently [RCEP](#)), climate ([Paris Agreement](#)), sustainability ([Agenda 2030](#)), and security ([JCPOA](#)), are to no small amount the result of this form of multilateral diplomacy.

However, there is a risk that multilateralism in the form of difference management will exhaust itself on the lowest common denominator that governments can agree on. In view of the [double challenge](#) posed by ever more pressing global problems on the one hand and growing differences in position between the main actors in international politics on practicable solutions, on the other hand, it is questionable to what extent the traditional understanding of multilateralism can be sustained. Rethinking multilateralism, therefore, requires discussing options for a more political multilateralism that promotes sustained as well as sustainable cooperation and multi-sectoral participation.

What on earth has ruined multilateralism?

That humanity is facing an ominously growing variety of global challenges in the [Anthropocene](#) is by no means a secret. And even if the popular slogan “[global solutions for global problems](#)” inevitably evokes echoes of political folklore, it remains true: Without cooperation, the most severe challenges will hardly be overcome.

Most governments seem to be well aware of this imperative, judging from their statements in the countless multilateral fora and organizations that shape international politics. It could therefore be expected that multilateral cooperation is not only the undisputed political norm for action but also the reality of action. However, the Federal Government's White Paper “[A Multilateralism for the People](#)” reveals doubts that cooperation is growing in line with the challenges. It cannot be due to a lack of global problems that the Federal Government is concerned about the dwindling willingness to act multilaterally and therefore tries to provide counter-impulses, for example through the “[Alliance for Multilateralism](#)”. Rather, the White Paper states that domestic support for multilateral action has declined, not despite but seemingly because of the increasingly visible global challenges – perhaps not in Germany, but certainly among a large number of [important partners](#).

The reasons for this are manifold; two are particularly important in the context of a proposal for a political multilateralism. The first takes up the question of who has primarily benefited from the practice of multilateralism as intergovernmental difference management over the past decades. The findings are clear: First and foremost, the better educated, often well-paid, and mobile functional elites gain from the advantages of economic liberalization and the utilization of territorially and virtually defined spaces. From a global perspective, in addition, parts of the middle classes in emerging economies such as Brazil, China, and India benefited economically. The middle classes in (Western) Europe and North America, on the other hand, suffered at least a relative and often an absolute loss of prosperity.

This has far-reaching material but also cultural-identitary and political consequences. They include the increasing attractiveness of populist policies and movements, which are fed by a loss of confidence in the liberal international order. Which in turn increases the differences between the core member states of this order and accordingly poses additional challenges for difference management. The crisis of multilateralism can thus be interpreted as a kind of collateral damage to the crisis of liberal democracy.

The second relevant factor is based on disappointed expectations of convergence. The project of China's economic integration into the world market, which is necessary from a developmental perspective, has not brought the expected returns in terms of governance, namely a relaxation of oppressive political, economic, and social structures. On the contrary, the dominance of the Chinese ruling elite in domestic affairs has been consolidated. Internationally, Beijing appears increasingly assertive and confidently formulates geopolitical claims to power.

One example is the recent establishment of the “Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations”. In addition to China, this group includes Russia, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, Cuba, and several other countries. Programmatically, it defends the intergovernmental character of the UN as an international organization and is based on the idea of multilateralism maintained by sovereign actors. This can certainly be seen as a counter-proposal to the Alliance for Multilateralism and once again illustrates the diverging ideas in the international society of states on how global challenges should be tackled.

Outlining a Future Political-Participatory Multilateralism

Of course, multilateralism has always been political, both as a practical form of international cooperation but also as a competition between different ideas of cooperation. The following proposal outlines a politically conscious multilateralism insofar as it conceptually differentiates between the intensity and scope of cooperation that various state and non-state partners engage in. This applies, for example, to the extent of economic integration with liberal-democratic and illiberal-authoritarian partners, but also to different degrees of socio-political openness toward them.

Two terms should help to clarify the idea: cooperation out of necessity and cooperation out of choice. Cooperation out of necessity refers to a comparatively weakly integrated variant of international cooperation. It is necessary to cope with critical global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity and environmental protection (including global public goods such as oceans), health care, and the prevention of nuclear proliferation and military conflicts between the great powers and superpowers. The most important instrument for this would remain intergovernmental cooperation, without factual cooperation with non-state actors being excluded.

Cooperation out of choice, on the other hand, would characterize a much closer interlinkage between state and non-state actors, which would form the basis for high intensive economic and socio-political collaboration. Here, vertical and horizontal integration of production and supply chains as well as financial and capital markets would be possible, but also greater freedom of movement for people. Another feature would be institutionalized multi-sectoral cooperation of (organized) economy and society. Ultimately, trans-border and trans-sectoral integration could be the result.

However, thinking this form of multilateral cooperation through to its logical conclusion implies taking safeguards against unilateral tendencies toward revision. At least for the central "anchor powers" of this type of multilateralism that is based on deep interdependence, it would have to be ensured that the fundamental openness to cooperation is maintainable. Otherwise, the necessary "investment security" would be missing - not only for economic but also political, socio-cultural, and military investments. Dependable domestic support for cooperation out of

choice is therefore essential if it is to succeed.

To a certain extent, the EU could serve as a model for such a community of trust, for example, with regard to core standards that governments must reliably adhere to both in their domestic and international behavior. In the foreseeable future, however, it will hardly be possible to implement monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms in governance clubs such as the G7 that are even rudimentarily similar to what the EU has at its disposal. But these examples for institutional and practical prerequisites mark the principal direction that further deliberations about a political multilateralism would have to take.

Will Germany's multilateralism press ahead?

The title of the White Paper expresses the intention of the Federal Government to realign its multilateralism: "A Multilateralism *for* the People" (highlighted by the author). This is reminiscent of conceptual ideas about a "Foreign Policy for the Middle Classes" that are currently being discussed in the US and that serve as a guideline for the Biden administration. According to these considerations, US foreign policy should prioritize the interests of the American middle class in the future – a response to declining domestic support for Washington's international engagement. The most recent G7 and G20 agreements on the minimum taxation of globally active corporations are interpreted as a concrete expression of this policy reorientation.

The Federal Government, too, appears to be open to a political multilateralism that selectively places participatory accents. The outlook section of the White Paper "Looking ahead – multilateralism for the future" states the decisive criteria for further development of the multilateral order: more effectiveness that is to be reconciled with fundamental values such as peace, human rights, democracy, and sustainability. The EU, the US, and NATO are the designated core group of this "active" and "effective" multilateralism. Unfortunately, domestic political developments in some member states raise doubts as to whether they could be reliable partners in the sense of the political multilateralism suggested above. This is especially true for Turkey, but Poland and Hungary are also causing concerns. Perhaps the conditions for cooperation out of choice are more in place among the G7 members. The German G7 presidency in 2022 would provide an obvious opportunity for the next government in Berlin to take a corresponding initiative.