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"Inclusive and Effective or Exclusive and Democratic?"

Some Reflections on the German Debate on Multilateralism

The plurality of contributions to the debate accompanying the upcoming publication of the German government's "White Paper on Multilateralism" showcases some of the difficulties and apparent trade-offs for a German foreign policy aimed at strengthening the multilateral order - not least among them the emerging divide between "exclusive" and "inclusive" interpretations of multilateralism regarding its relationship to democratic values.

The German government and the Federal Foreign Office in particular take great pride in their role as prominent advocates of multilateralism, not just since the 2019 founding of the "Alliance for Multilateralism" as part of a Franco-German initiative – occasionally even risking confrontation with partners on both sides of the Atlantic who prefer to go at it alone. Now a "White Paper on Multilateralism" is set to be published to further highlight German contributions to the multilateral order and serve as a theoretical-programmatic counterpart to the political-practical "alliance." It aims to shed light on the German understanding of multilateralism as a "comprehensive approach" (Annen) for German foreign policy as well as to offer a concrete agenda for multilateral action, especially within the framework of the "alliance". Prior to the upcoming publication of this white paper, a lively debate on the future of multilateralism in general and the necessary priorities of the white paper for a "German" multilateralism in particular developed under the auspices of the Federal Foreign Office among German, European, and international experts – a debate that revealed some possible pitfalls and inherent incongruencies within the various official and academic conceptions of multilateralism.

In his concluding remarks, Sebastian Groth – head of the planning staff at the German Federal Foreign Office and a leading figure in the preparation of the white paper – seeks to draw a consensual conclusion of the debate. He identifies two intertwined assumptions confirmed by the "vast majority" of contributions that also underly the White Paper itself: that the multilateral system forms a "basic condition

for peace, security, prosperity, and economic success" for Germany and "many" (though, curiously, not *all*) other parts of the world, and that multilateralism, even though in its apparent crisis appears "challenged as rarely before", is nonetheless at the same time also "necessary as rarely before." Although this summary and the postulation of an all-around positive assessment of multilateralism certainly do justice to the tenor of the debate, Groth's conclusion also glosses over some of the explicitly encouraged diversity of contributions – and more importantly also over the fundamental problem of ambiguity concerning the central concept of "multilateralism" that manifests itself in the debate. It is telling that Groth – wary perhaps of polling pointing persistent unfamiliarity among the (German) public with both the term and principle of multilateralism (Körper-Stiftung) – often does not speak of "multilateralism" but instead of "multilateral rules and institutions", "multilateral coordination and cooperation", and the "multilateral system", concepts much easier to imagine for less "multilaterally sensitive" readers. For what exactly is at the core of "necessary" multilateralism – Germany's foreign policy "life insurance" (Maas) – remains open even after the debate around the upcoming white paper.

Running parallel to the concrete proposals and suggestions of the various authors for different regional priorities, policy initiatives, or preferred forums and means of multilateral action to be included in the white paper, a more fundamental divergence can be observed regarding contradicting readings of multilateralism and opposing goals for its future development. A crystallizing point of these tensions is how "multilateralists" should deal with (potential) non-democratic partners – in other words, the relationship between multilateralism and democracy, two central normative pillars of Germany's "value-driven" foreign policy. Here the question to what degree increased cooperation with China – as the paradigmatic case of a "rising" authoritarian power – is possible or desirable can often serve as a shibboleth, showcasing *exclusive* and *inclusive* conceptions of multilateralism.

Proponents of *exclusive* multilateralism(s) see realistic opportunities for trust-based cooperation with the expectation of diffuse reciprocity only in relationships with democratic partner nations. Only those actors who not only share a basic understanding of multilateralism as a value-driven form of cooperation but whose specific values are also compatible with the other normative pillars of German foreign policy such as democracy, pluralism, or human rights can be considered as

building blocks of a multilateral world order that is sustainable in the long run. Such "limited membership multilateralism" ([Narlikar](#)) based on shared values avoids the danger of exposing oneself to "weaponized interdependence" in a world that is increasingly interconnected: Trust in partner nations not to abuse economic ties for "geostrategic purposes" represents the basic condition for acceptance into a club of "ideal value partners" ([Maas](#)). In short: "multilateralism needs democracy" ([Benner](#)).

Some authors arguing for "exclusivity" also go against the grain of a debate often seeming to frame multilateralism as an intrinsically "good" and universally applicable approach to international problem-solving. [Gotkowska](#) and [Tocci](#) point out that multilateralism – at least as currently practiced by the German government and by extension also the European Union – is in certain cases not only *not* the most suitable approach, but can also be a liability, especially when it comes to engaging authoritarian states: "pushing for multilateral solutions in security and defense vis-à-vis Russia has become counterproductive. ([Gotkowska](#)). Multilateralism can thus be understood as exclusive not only in terms of its membership but also in terms of its scope: not every problem can be solved multilaterally.

Opposed to these "exclusivists" are those who see precisely this kind of normative "overloading" of multilateralism as one of the leading causes for the current crisis of the multilateral order. Instead of rigid demarcations and club formation, they argue for more flexibility and a problem- and result-oriented, *inclusive* multilateralism. Without placing similar normative and identity demands on the concept of multilateralism, they see opportunities in overcoming perceived limitations of "outdated" forms of multilateral institutions such as the UN or expanding cooperation beyond a small circle of "serious democracies" ([Albright](#)). Working together on the basis of shared interests instead of shared values is seen as a chance to improve strained relations: "work towards a common climate agenda" also offers an "opportunity to build bridges [...] considering the increase in climate-related ambition in China" ([Bausch](#)). Hopes are not limited to more effective responses to concrete global challenges such as climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic – more visible successes of such a renewed multilateralism could also make up for lost trust in the multilateral system through increased output legitimacy, especially among increasingly inward-looking populations of democratic states. "For a

multilateralism that delivers" ([Scheler](#)), Germany should be "more open to new forms of multilateralism such as like-minded groups, contact groups, and coalitions of the willing" ([Masala](#)) and, in doing so, should not lose sight of the fact that multilateralism is still a "means to an end, not an end in itself" ([Tocci, Welsh](#)).

The difficulty of squaring these different points of view, charting a unified course for German foreign policy and, taking a clear position on issues of "systemic competition" finds its expression in official language: as [Ulrich Lechte](#) points out, when it comes to the "Alliance for Multilateralism" ambiguities are apparent in the alternating use of "alliance," "club," and "network", leading to his call to "resolve confusions around the Alliance for Multilateralism," which is presented on one occasion as an "alliance of liberal democracies" and on another as an "informal network" – a network, that will "fit well" ([Maas](#)) with President Biden´s proposed "network of democracies" while ostensibly being open to all willing "multilateralists". The difficult balancing act of drawing the line between partner and competitor/adversary is also evident when [Maas](#) speaks of "countering Russia, China, or other countries whenever they threaten our security and prosperity, democracy, human rights, and international law," while at the same time rejecting complete disengagement ("decoupling") against the backdrop of shared global challenges and declaring that "diplomacy means dealing with difficult actors as well." Equally careful hedging is evident in [Merkel's announcement](#) that Germany should "try to use what we have [...] in terms of experience in multilateralism to also include a country like China and at least treat it as an equal."

As if this was not challenge enough for any future German policy on multilateralism, yet another dispute about the necessary inclusiveness of a future multilateralism can be observed among the contributions. Far from being easily mapped onto the two sides of "inclusive" or "exclusive" multilateralism, it is not about *which* states or types of states should cooperation focus on but about the more fundamental question of whether states should still be seen as the only or most important actors shaping the multilateral order in the first place. Repeated calls for an "inclusive, networked multilateralism" ([UN Secretary-General Guterres](#)) or a "project-based multilateralism [...] inclusive to non-state actors" in contrast to "state-based old multilateralism" ([Kortunov](#)) are expressions of hopes that increased integration of civil society initiatives, non-governmental organizations, and companies will enable the "building

of coalitions beyond the state-centered world" ([Dingwerth](#)). Undeterred by deadlocked discussions in the established forums of "state-centered" multilateralism, these initiatives – often based on multi-stakeholder approaches – are intended to enable more effective and problem-oriented multilateral action. The two debates about the in/exclusiveness of multilateralism are by no means isolated from each other. Obstacles to cooperation are presumably lowest in a multilateralism that is maximally inclusive in both dimensions – in a "project-based multilateralism" ([Kortunov](#)), for example, where shared values are now seen as a goal, not a prerequisite for joint multilateral action. But the decision as to which if any non-state actors should be included in new and already established multilateral formats takes on significance beyond the question of increased effectiveness: a "democratization" of multilateralism understood as greater participation by civil society or the private sector could also lead to a "de-democratization", in the sense that the most important partners are no longer found among a small circle of (predominantly) democratic states, but a disproportionately larger circle of state and non-state actors who may also be much more diverse in their attitude towards democratic values.

It thus becomes apparent just how important it is not merely to "reinvent" multilateralism by prefixing it with positively connotated adjectives based on zeitgeist or problems of the day as "multilateralism + X," but also to be clear about what is actually understood by the term "multilateralism" *itself* in any specific context. The distinction outlined here between "inclusive" and "exclusive" multilateralists is by no means a conclusive or authoritative reading of the debate surrounding the upcoming white paper on multilateralism. It nonetheless points to some looming problems for all proponents of multilateralism: despite all the integrative powers multilateralism is undoubtedly capable of and for which it is rightly promoted and praised for by many, it still cannot itself be an all-inclusive concept. Any attempt to unite conflicting demands for the defence of democracy on the one hand and a "pragmatic" open-door policy for all on the other seems bound to failure if it only consists in the application of the label "multilateralism" to the respectively preferred course of action.