

Philippe MOREAU DEFARGES*

Multilateralism and the End of History

Translated by Gregory Elliott

Is multilateralism a vehicle for the 'end of History' ? According to this view, perpetual peace is within humanity's grasp thanks to the convergence of expanding trade, the spread of democracy, and the institutionalization of international relations. By means of 'contracts' (such as United Nations treaties), multilateralism – the application of democratic principles to relations between states – precisely aims to create a society of states. However, multilateralism runs up against two fundamental difficulties. Firstly, state realities themselves – the inequalities between states – mean that, whatever its egalitarian dynamic, multilateralism cannot erase the very core of states and, in the first instance, their desire to retain control of legitimate force – especially military force. Secondly, multilateralism aims to be universal and yet, in seeking to integrate all states into the same rationality, it is Western. For the foreseeable future, multilateralism, while helping to discipline and civilize states, will not and cannot constitute perpetual peace.

*Philippe Moreau Defarges, minister plenipotentiary and a researcher at Ifri, teaches at l'Institut d'études politiques (IEP) in Paris.

Like so many other ideas, multilateralism is in crisis. The United Nations Organization (UNO), the core of planetary multilateralism, did not prevent the United States from committing its soldiers to Iraq unilaterally. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), another pillar of multilateralism, is allegedly ultimately nothing but a tool used by the established powers to bind the countries of the South hand and foot economically. As for the World Trade Organization (WTO), it supposedly dogmatically promotes free trade, without taking account of the enormous real inequalities between states. Ubiquitous today, multilateralism slipped into history through the back door.¹ After the Second World War, it was identified with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and, more specifically, with the famous 'most favoured nation' clause,

¹ See, for example, the article 'Multilatéralisme', in M.-C. Smouts, D. Battistela and P. Vennesson (eds),

Dictionnaire des relations internationales, Dalloz, Paris 2003, pp. 333-5.

which made the system's dynamic possible. According to this clause, when two states belonging to GATT granted one another a mutual concession (for example, a reduction in customs duties), it was automatically extended to all other member states. Any advantage negotiated bilaterally became multilateral and likewise benefited all those participating in the system. Gradually, multilateralism went beyond this 'technical' arena, assuming a much broader meaning: *multilateralism comprises any system associating several states which are united by equal and mutual obligations, by common rules.* In this regard, the whole UN constellation – the UNO itself and specialist institutions – is governed by multilateralism. But where does multilateralism come from? What are its basic ingredients? Is it the vehicle for an international order radically different from the inter-state jungle that has ruled the world for centuries? Before tackling these questions, we must offer a flexible definition of multilateralism: *multilateralism is the application of democratic principles to international relations.*

Multilateralism, Child of the Enlightenment and the United States

Identifying the origins of an idea is both necessary and risky. Every idea is the unstable product of complex, often hidden developments. As regards multilateralism, the first seeds were sown in the 17th and 18th centuries, with Europe's entry into modernity. Grotius, Hobbes, Rousseau and Kant examined the *society of states*, as well as the means for ensuring peace between them. This 'pre-history' says it all: states form a society and the law of peoples aims to lock them into networks of mutual obligations. If it is to be 'perpetual' (Kant, 1795), peace requires a treaty between states, fixing their rights and duties and establishing mechanisms for resolving differences between them. What would later be called multilateralism was in gestation in this rational and reasonable approach to inter-state relations. For these philosophers engaged in rethinking the foundations of societies, the question of the social contract could not be restricted to the political organization of a particular human group (the British, the French, etc.), but led to a discussion of the ties between states and, over and above them, between all human beings.

In the wake of this, liberal thought (such as that of Benjamin Constant, for whom trade was destined to replace war²) likewise reflected on the conditions of a peace that was something more than a respite between two wars, but established on an enduring basis. For classical liberalism, trade and industry were vectors of peace, leading men to realize that once they had attained a certain level of wealth and civilization, they would live better by expanding trade than by plundering one another. Liberal internationalism achieved its political breakthrough with President Wilson's celebrated Fourteen Points (speech of 8 January 1918).³ The fourteenth point proposed that : 'A general association of nations must be formed ... for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.' Without using the word, this text defines multilateralism : an agreement – if possible – between all states, 'ensuring the same rights and obligations for all'. Here we can detect the roots of multilateralism: the search for a moral international order, a quasi-messianic conviction that it is possible to build a genuine community or civilization of states, a confidence in law and institutions. Wilson, religiously minded and somewhat inflexible, was a professor of law. 'His' League of Nations would bring real peace to the world. It was through the United States, through its presidents (Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt et Harry Truman), that this liberal internationalism became a political project. From the outset, US diplomacy revolved around a key question : how was the survival of the American republic to be guaranteed ? What was to be done to ensure that this experiment, unique in its time, was not destroyed by the appetites of others and, in particular, the European monarchies ? In his *Testament*, George Washington advocated isolationism: equipped with natural protective barriers (the Atlantic and Pacific oceans), the United States could and must do everything to preserve its insularity and remain aloof from an unruly world. But the world and, in the first instance, Europe with its rivalries could not be ignored. The United States became a very considerable trading power, which could not survive by itself. Accordingly, the only option was to transform the planet and construct a new international order in accordance with democratic values. Multilateralism was characterized

² 'We have arrived at the age of trade, an age that must necessarily replace that of war, just as the age of war had necessarily to precede it', wrote Constant in 1813 in *De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation dans leurs rapports avec la civilisation européenne* (Gallimard, 'La Pléiade', Paris 1964, p. 959).

³ See P. Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles*, Penguin, London 2003, especially pp. 367-410.

by a contradiction from the outset. Conceived as ‘non-geographical’ and universal, it was indissociable from a political design : the security of the American island by winning over the planet to the democratic values generated at the heart of this island by the United States. While the Second World War was still underway, Roosevelt and then Truman mobilized their political capital for the construction of the UNO.⁴ It was a question, at any price, of not repeating the errors of the inter-war period : the non-participation of the United States in the League of Nations and the latter’s impotence in the face of the fascist powers. American democracy would only be safe if surrounded by states sharing the same principles, respect for which was guaranteed by a global organization. For the United States of the late 1940s, poised between world wars and Cold War, multilateralism remained the ideal – the Good. At the dawn of the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, George H.W. Bush returned to the argument of his predecessors, Wilson and Roosevelt : the new world order was to be based on democracy, the market economy, and strong international organizations.

Thus multilateralism derived from a complex genesis that is still underway. Its forms are highly diverse. It is embodied in structures that are global as well as regional, technical as well as political. A ‘hard’ multilateralism exists, based on strict rules (for example, European institutions), as does a ‘soft’ or flexible multilateralism, which prioritizes behaviour (for example, the Association of South-East Asian Nations [ASEAN]).

The Key Elements of Multilateralism

Multilateralist experiments are now sufficiently numerous and diverse for us to identify the four key elements of this practice :

– *Any multilateral construct starts from a social treaty.* Multilateralism reformulates for states the question posed by the philosophers for individuals : how is the transition from the state of

⁴ S.C. Schlesinger, *Act of Creation. The Founding of the United Nations: A Story of Super Powers, Secret Agents, Wartime Allies and Enemies and Their Quest for a Peaceful World*, Westview Press, Boulder (CO) 2003.

nature, from the jungle, to the state of culture, to society, to be made ? The first step is precisely the conclusion of an agreement, a contract between the parties. With this explicit, written law, the parties furnish themselves with an objective basis which they can all invoke. Instinctive, unwritten, natural law cannot go beyond relations of force : the strong command and the weak obey. Treaties give rise to an order governed by texts. Such was the ambition of both the League of Nations and the United Nations : to create a space of rules and procedures, which everyone could and must know. Multilateralism is and must be *inclusive*. It can only function properly if it leaves no-one (in this instance, no state) *outside*. The aim of multilateralism is to integrate every state into a single community of rules. Those that remain outside cast doubt on the system's legitimacy. The system regards them as deviants and delinquents who must be attracted by a mixture of rewards and sanctions. However, for these rebels (in 2004, North Korea, Iran and Cuba in particular), the system is illegitimate and unjust ; it is an instrument in the service of the established powers ; it must therefore be destroyed.

– *The multilateral treaty is egalitarian, conferring on the contracting parties the same rights and obligations.* The democratic character of multilateralism translates, in particular, into an equality of rights and obligations for states. Multilateralism requires civilized states that have internalized its principles : respect for the territorial integrity of other states ; non-recourse to force in the event of a dispute ; respect for the right of peoples to self-determination. If necessary, it can accommodate undemocratic states (each population being in principle free to rule itself as it sees fit), but can only operate with predictable states that have fully accepted the rules of the game and which apply them in good faith. Mutual confidence must be established – something that can only take root if no-one is advantaged and everyone has the same obligations. In practice, every multilateral system contains an inegalitarian aspect. It is impossible to negate the reality of the international system and, more specifically, the unequal weight of states. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) illustrates this ambiguity : five states, the official nuclear powers as of 1 January 1967, are more equal than the others ; they have the right to retain their nuclear arsenals, while all the other states adhering to the treaty are equal on an 'inferior' footing, through their renunciation of nuclear weapons and their acceptance of inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) based in Vienna.

-The democratic treaty has to provide for the eventuality of disputes between its members as well as possible violations – hence mechanisms for resolving differences or restoring order.

Multilateralism rests on good will and confidence, but cannot exclude bad faith, cheating, and infringement of the rules. Multilateral treaties (UNO, WTO, etc.) establish a range of instruments to overcome or settle disputes between the members : negotiation, mediation, arbitration. However, it is necessary to anticipate the worst case : the impossibility of finding a compromise between states in dispute or blatant breaches. A policeman is indispensable to watch over observance of the system's principles. Such is the mission of the UN Security Council : responsible for maintaining the peace, it must intervene to separate states that come to blows (to put it plainly, wage war).

*– Finally, multilateralism requires that any pole of power (and hence states) is under control. As Kant asks in his *Project for a Perpetual Peace*, is a treaty between states sufficient to discipline them? States can be tempted to use treaties as a blocking mechanism in the service of their existing advantages, with the inter-state association enabling them mutually to guarantee their power over their peoples. In the years 1815-30, was not the Holy Alliance a peace treaty between European monarchies uniting to block the spread of revolutionary ideas among populations? It is therefore important that, over and above the member states, the multilateral treaty should establish mechanisms independent of their control which can call them to account. Europe remains the original laboratory of this aspect of multilateralism, with the instances of recourse against states represented, in particular, by the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice.*

Multilateralism and Insurmountable States

The historical ambition of multilateralism is to transform the inter-state jungle into a society of states. The proliferation of inter-state organizations for every purpose, at all levels, and the parallel development of innumerable private movements, seem to prove the remarkable success of the process. However, the reality of states persists. De facto inequalities (size, population, resources, military capacity, etc.) continue to impose themselves with all their weight. The acceptance of multilateralism varies in the first instance according to the particular states. Thus, the leading power in the world, the United States, submits to multilateral rules in the commercial

sphere, conscious that it cannot ask other states (particularly emerging countries) to observe international trade disciplines if it does not itself play the game. But as soon as the core of American sovereignty and power are in question, the United States declines to sign up (non-participation in the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights, rejection of the International Criminal Court [ICC]). Similarly, Russia and China reject the ICC, as does Israel which, still at war, knows that various of its actions could provoke recourse to it. Some domains are more amenable to multilateralism than others. At one extreme, trade is readily organized in a multilateral framework. At the other, that which pertains to war is recalcitrant to multilateralism, the quasi-totality of states not being disposed to renounce their supreme right to decide on war. The UN claims to subject all its members to the same obligations under international law. Yet article 51 of the Charter stipulates that 'Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence'. This, however hedged about, reintroduces the jungle into the society of states, with none of them, especially the most powerful, being ready to renounce the use of force. Multilateral mechanisms create inter-state societies, but they do not abolish the jungle : they are superimposed on it. Democratic principles were born, and developed, in states (the United States, France, etc.), the state machine being sufficiently effective to contain or reduce inequalities. The two democratic moments humanity has known (the cities of Antiquity and nation-states since the end of the 18th century) link democratic development to the existence of political communities with strong institutions : equality is accepted in the name of possession of a common citizenship. Multilateralism, however, is democracy without the formidable apparatus for homogenizing, for reducing inequalities, constituted by the state. The UNO constellation rests on the equal right of states, but has neither the legitimacy nor the capacity to level inequalities between states. For example, from time to time the idea of a global tax is raised, but the UNO does not possess the legislative power authorizing it to institute such a tax. The only possible way to do so would be by a treaty between states, which would only apply to the states that had signed and ratified it. Multilateralism is condemned to materialize in imperfect makeshift forms. According to Max Weber's formula, the state possesses a monopoly on legitimate violence (police and army). Pushed to its furthest point, multilateralism transfers this monopoly to a world policeman. In the spirit of the UN Charter, war becomes a breach that the Security Council must prevent or punish. But states are very far from being ready to undertake such a big leap. The Security Council has

the will to keep the peace only if its members reach agreement. As for the UN army foreseen by articles 45-47 of the Charter, it has never seen the light of day, the great powers in the first instance being resolved to retain control over military resources.

Multilateralism and Multipolarity

The clash between state realities and the egalitarian logic of multilateralism re-emerges in the complex relations between multipolarity and multilateralism. The two terms are often presented as inter-changeable. On the contrary, however, they derive from two different philosophies of international order. Multipolarity is simply one possible way of organizing the inter-state jungle. Multipolarity comprises any order resting on several poles of power that more or less balance one another. Take the example of classical Europe governed by the interaction between the great European monarchies : as soon as one of them tried to dominate the others, the latter coalesced to quell such hegemonic ambition. The bipolar East-West order (United States/Soviet Union), and then tripolar order (United States/Soviet Union/China), was likewise multipolar, governed by balances, and their variations, between the system's two and then three poles. Multipolarity does not require any permanent treaty between parties : like the wildcats of the jungle, they can coexist, sometimes ignoring and sometimes confronting one another. For its part, multilateralism does not exist without an inaugural treaty. The law is no longer natural and instinctive, identical with the balance of forces ; it is external, constructive, objectified. Multipolarity is aristocratic : power in it belongs to great feudal lords. Multilateralism is democratic. In reality, multipolarity and multilateralism can very well be conjoined in a variety of combinations. The proliferation of interdependencies, the development of international law and international institutions, mean that any multipolar system is tinged with multilateralism. The East-West order generated a multilateral dimension (for example, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe [CSCE]). Similarly, there is scarcely an instance of multilateralism that does not contain multipolar components. The UNO, which is multilateral, contains a multipolar authority at its heart – the five permanent members of the Security Council being the five leading world powers, responsible for maintaining peace.

Multilateralism is not the End of History

Multilateralism is one of many Western principles with a universal vocation. Equality of actors, promotion of written norms, peaceful settlement of differences – all this is conceived as universalizable. At the same time, a number of multilateral organizations are condemned as tools in the service of the established powers. At the UN, the truly multilateral arena – the General Assembly where all members are equal – only issues recommendations. It is the oligarchical instance – the Security Council – that possesses legally constraining power, with Chapter VII of the Charter. As regards the IMF, its supposedly universal principles do nothing more than express a monetary and financial orthodoxy : the famous ‘Washington consensus’. As for the WTO, it obliges every member state to submit to liberal trade rules and ignores inequalities of condition, with all countries – developed and developing alike – being regarded as equal. Equality is only a cover that helps to legitimate the pre-eminence of the Western countries. In addition, all these multilateral structures produce bureaucracies that claim to speak for the general interests of humanity, but which in fact impose *their* norms on the planet. At the same time, these multilateral structures exercise a strong power of attraction. They constitute a more or less large club that it is better to belong to. States outside the club invariably knock at its door. For a state, to be on the inside is to be a little less solitary, to be able to invoke the club’s rules in relations with other states, to enjoy a protective barrier. The WTO already encompasses three-quarters of states (147 members as of 22 April 2004). Those who do not yet belong to it (Russia, several Arab countries) are queuing up to join, in the knowledge that they will only be regarded as respectable trading partners once they are in the Organization. Similarly, the European Union is not short of candidates for membership. To belong to the Union is to benefit from both a trading space and protection against those who do not belong. Accordingly, multilateralism is still rapidly expanding. Its spread is prompted by the proliferation of interdependency and the need for institutionalization. If there is a crisis of multilateralism, it derives from its appropriation by both non-Western states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Post-war multilateralism flourished within clubs of Western states (GATT or the European Community). Today, it exceeds these restricted zones. Both the countries of the South and the NGOs want to appropriate it and remodel it so that their demands receive fuller consideration. These processes are necessarily redefining multilateralism. Non-Western states, having left behind their Third Worldist illusions, are gradually seeking a balance between their demand for autonomy and acceptance of international disciplines. NGOs demand more transparent modes of

decision-making, but they too must refine their arguments and be more realistic about what is and what is not possible.

Child of the Kantian or Wilsonian dream of perpetual peace, multilateralism is simply an instrument for strengthening and consolidating the society of states. It might seem to promise the 'end of history', the abolition of war, the advent of a humanity freed from its millennial violence. But the reality of states, inequality between states, the control of force remain weighty realities. What history suggests is that each step towards more order and more regulation is accompanied by reaction, resistance, and unforeseen events. Every effort to devise peace better – including multilateralism – provokes new kinds of violence. And no institutional edifice is proof against catastrophe : economic crisis, war, and so on. We should not ask of multilateralism more than it can offer.

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Traducteurs:

Anglais: Gregory Elliott
Arabe: Béchir El-Sibaie
Chinois: Chen Lichun
Espagnol: Roberto Rueda Monreal
Russe: Serge Ryndine

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