

## The New “New Multilateralism”: Minilateral Cooperation, but at What Cost?

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A defining feature of twenty-first century multilateralism is growing reliance on informal, non-binding, purpose-built partnerships and coalitions of the interested, willing, and capable. The rise of minilateral cooperation reflects the failure of formal international organizations to adapt to complex global challenges, dramatic power shifts, and growing normative divergences in world politics. Such ad hoc, disaggregated approaches to international cooperation bring certain advantages, including speed, flexibility, modularity, and possibilities for experimentation. But the new multilateralism also presents dangers, among these encouraging rampant forum-shopping, undermining critical international organizations, and reducing accountability in global governance.

On April 23, 2007, Barack Obama delivered his first major foreign policy address as a presidential candidate, at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. The junior senator from Illinois excoriated the disastrous unilateralism of the administration of George W. Bush, which he claimed had alienated friends and allies, violated cherished U.S. values, and tarnished America's once-sterling reputation. The time had come to “open a new chapter in American leadership”. Just as the Truman administration had “built the system of international institutions that carried us through the Cold War”, the United States must now revitalize multilateral cooperation to fit twenty-first century realities. “Real reform will come because we convince others that they too have a stake in change — that such reforms will make their world, and not just ours, more secure” (Obama 2007).

This vision of a multilateral renaissance was premised on the conviction that a new global age had dawned. The core purpose of statecraft was no longer restraining geopolitical rivalry but managing shared dilemmas of interdependence. As the President declared in his first National Security Strategy, “... power, in an interconnected world, is no longer a zero-sum game” (White House 2010). This broad congruence of interest created unprecedented opportunities for cooperation. But success was not preordained. It required a new international bargain: established powers would grant emerging ones a place at the global head table, and rising powers would accept greater responsibilities for advancing the common good. The administration assumed the United States could engineer global institutional reform on this basis.

That confidence proved unfounded. The Obama years show just how resistant formal international organizations are to fundamental change. Two of the most obvious cases are the UN Security Council, whose permanent membership still reflects the world of 1945, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has failed to implement governance reforms that

members painstakingly negotiated in 2010. The sources of these logjams are legion. Three of the most important are clashing big power preferences, generic institutional inertia, and inconsistent U.S. leadership (Stein 2008).

If one focuses solely on formal international organizations, these blockages are grounds for despair. But that pessimistic view obscures a more complicated and promising picture of multilateral cooperation. For what sets the current global era apart is not the absence of international institutions but their astonishing diversity. Faced with resistance to sweeping, transformational change within more encompassing global bodies, U.S. and foreign policy-makers have generated and then exploited a messier form of multilateralism (Haass 2010).

A hallmark of twenty-first century multilateralism (Ruggie 1993) is the rising prominence of alternative forms of collective action as complements to—and often substitutes for—traditional intergovernmental cooperation. Formal organizations persist, but governments increasingly participate in a bewildering array of flexible networks whose membership varies based on situational interests, shared values, or relevant capabilities. States may continue to negotiate and collaborate within conventional bodies like the United Nations or the Bretton Woods institutions. But extensive policy coordination also occurs within parallel frameworks that are ad hoc and temporary rather than formal and permanent.



These institutions are often “minilateral” (Kahler 1992) rather than universal; voluntary rather than legally binding; disaggregated rather than comprehensive; trans-governmental rather than just intergovernmental; regional rather than global; multi-level and multi-stakeholder rather than state-centric; and “bottom-up” rather than “top-down.”

To be fair, not all of the “new” multilateralism” is new (Diebold and Camps 1983). The antecedents of the current Group of 7, for instance, date back decades, to the first major summit of Western market democracies in Rambouillet, France, in 1975. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), likewise, was created back in 1989 to combat money laundering and (later) terrorist financing. Within academia, the international political economist, Miles Kahler coined the term “minilateralism” back in 1992, and the term was subsequently popularized by the journalist Moises Naim (Naim 2009; Hampson 2010). What is new, however, is the dramatic proliferation of such informal arrangements—and their growing importance in contemporary global governance.

By now, numerous analysts have documented the diverse institutional forms that multilateralism now takes (Fukuyama 2006; Abbott, Green, and Keohane 2014; Morse and Keohane 2014). But few have asked whether this patchwork quilt of international cooperation is, on balance, a good thing. At first glance, such “variable geometry” presents exciting opportunities for countries seeking to manage the global economy, to respond to new security threats, or to stabilize the global commons. Rather than relying on tired organizations, countries can adapt nimbly, by creating novel frameworks that are fit for purpose. The new multilateralism holds particular appeal for the United States, a still-dominant power experiencing gradual (albeit relative) decline. By picking and choosing among diverse international structures, the United States can expand its diplomatic and policy options, and, in principle, cement its centrality in the global order.

The “new multilateralism” seems destined to become an increasingly prominent feature of international politics, including U.S. foreign policy. And this, on balance, is a good thing. But its benefits should not be exaggerated—nor should its risks be ignored. Indeed, there are empirical, prudential, and ethical grounds for caution. To begin with, there is little concrete evidence yet that ad hoc frameworks are more effective than formal multilateral bodies at delivering results. The new multilateralism also presents dangers, among these encouraging rampant forum shopping, undermining critical international organizations, and reducing accountability in global governance. Finally, although purely ad hoc approaches to international cooperation may discourage free riding, they are also morally problematic, since they threaten to replace the provision of international public goods with club goods benefiting a narrower range of countries, while marginalizing formal international institutions (Keohane and Nye 2001; Rosecrance and Stein 2001; Paris 2015). Given these potential drawbacks, policy-makers must balance their reliance on flexible frameworks with rededication to improving the functioning of formal organizations whose legitimacy and capabilities the world needs over the long haul.

### The Past is Not Prologue: Obstacles to Institutional Reform

In retrospect, the U.S. institution builders of the 1940s were lucky. They operated in a time of crisis, faced a blank institutional slate, dealt with less intrusive problems, negotiated with few foreign players, and operated at the height of U.S. primacy. None of these factors obtains today.

Significant change within international institutions is rare. It is not impossible, of course—in 1995, the World Trade Organization replaced the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) as the motor of global trade liberalization. Changes of such magnitude are uncommon, however, given the force of institutional inertia and the vested interests of those who wield current power under current arrangements. Accordingly, major institutional change most commonly follows major policy failure, which loosens attachment to reigning orthodoxies, opens eyes to new ideas, and generates political will to transform existing structures (Legro 2005). Thus, the major institutional innovations of Dumbarton Oaks and Bretton Woods occurred in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II, respectively (Patrick 2010a).

Today’s statesmen and women—fortunately—have not experienced such catastrophes. But the very absence of crisis tends to favor gradual, incremental adaptation at the margins rather than sudden, discontinuous change analogous to the biological model of “punctuated equilibria”. The old evolutionary logic of *natura non facit saltum*—nature does not make a jump, applies: typically, human institutions do not make leaps, any more than nature does (Gould and Eldredge 1977).

It should be no surprise, then, that the biggest recent advance in global economic governance occurred after the “Great Recession” began in 2007, with the global credit crunch. Suddenly, thrust into one lifeboat, world leaders rowed in the same direction, embracing innovations in multilateral cooperation. They elevated the Group of Twenty (G20) to the leaders’ level, created a Financial Stability Board to improve regulation of systemically important financial institutions, agreed on new Basel 3 capital account

requirements for major banks, and committed to the recapitalization of the IMF. The system may have “worked,” as Dan Drezner argues (Drezner 2014), but it was collective panic that encouraged reforms. As an uneven global recovery took hold, interests diverged, pulling G20 members in different directions and undercutting momentum for further restructuring.

The “wise men” of the 1940s also had the luxury of being—as Dean Acheson put it in his memoirs—“present at the creation” (Acheson 1969; Isaacson and Thomas 1986). The League of Nations had essentially collapsed, and the world was a *tabula rasa* upon which they could construct an entirely new architecture of international cooperation (Drezner 2008). Pity today’s would-be world order builders, who confront encrusted organizations that resist alterations to their mandates, membership, management, and financing, thanks to the vested interests of current power wielders—and, at times, the divergent priorities of entrenched bureaucrats (Johnson 2014). A prime example is the UN Security Council, three of whose five permanent members either adamantly oppose (Russia and China) or are lukewarm toward (the United States) an increase in the number of permanent seats. Another is the outdated International Energy Agency, where membership remains limited to OECD Member States and voting weight is still pegged to 1974 levels of oil consumption, even as it excludes from membership China and India, whose energy demand has expanded ten- and eight-fold, respectively. In sum, retrofitting existing institutions has proven even more daunting than creating them in the first place.

Not only is the slate crowded, the problems are also harder. The architects of post-1945 order could capture early and easy gains from cooperation. The initial GATT rounds of trade negotiations, for example, focused on removing tariffs and reducing subsidies. Today’s negotiators increasingly bargain over regulatory, tax, and other domestic rules, including those governing health and safety standards, investment, or public procurement. The monitoring and verification provisions of arms control agreements have similarly become more intrusive, requiring parties to the Chemical and Biological Weapons Conventions, for instance, to open private sector as well as government facilities to external scrutiny. The growing complexity of contemporary cooperation is most evident in responding to climate change, the most complicated collective action problem humanity has ever faced—and one that will require nothing less than a total transformation of the domestic and global economy. Little wonder there is such nostalgia for earlier eras such as the Truman years.

The changing “demography” (Barnett 2014) of the interstate system poses additional hurdles to institutional reform. Since 1945, the number of UN Member States has surged from 50 to 194, making the world body more heterogeneous and (from Washington’s perspective) intractable. Initially, the United States could count on solid majorities in UN settings. Those days vanished as decolonization accelerated in the 1960s, forcing the United States into a far more defensive stance. By 1978, Daniel Patrick Moynihan would title the memoir of his tenure as U.S. ambassador to the UN, *A Dangerous Place* (Moynihan 1978). Three decades later, President Obama would use his first speech to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to bemoan the persistence of outdated bloc mentalities, which pervade not only UNGA but also other large-membership multilateral bodies like the Conference on Disarmament (Obama 2009).



More recently, the most dramatic reallocation of global economic power in world history has ended the era of uncontested U.S. (and broader Western) hegemony, exacerbated geopolitical rivalry, and sharpened debates between established and emerging powers over both prerogatives and burden-sharing within formal global institutions. In 1990, the advanced market democracies that constitute the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) produced 62% of global GDP. Today, despite the addition of a dozen new members, including The Republic of Korea and Mexico, that figure is 47% and declining (Patrick and Egel 2015). Meanwhile, the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which generated only 8 percent of global output in 2000, today account for almost 25 percent (Harding, Leahy, and Hornby 2014). By some estimates, China’s economy has surpassed that of the United States—for example, in terms of purchasing power parity (Bird 2014). Although one can exaggerate relative U.S. decline, the contemporary United States possesses neither the scale of economic dominance nor the appetite for global leadership apparently that it did during the early postwar decades. The sheen of its “soft” power has also dimmed, thanks to the global financial crisis, which started on Wall Street itself, and the Snowden affair, which exposed the global reach of U.S. surveillance. Beyond the United States itself, prolonged economic stagnation and international retrenchment in Europe and Japan have weakened the vitality and solidarity of the Western bloc.

Complicating matters, a worrisome normative divergence seems to accompany this diffusion of power. The Cold War was, of course, defined by dramatic ideological differences between East and West, as well as North and South. But the core of the world economy was Western, and like-minded. Today’s big economic engines include emerging as well as established players, and they frequently collide over values. Major points of contention include the appropriate boundaries of national sovereignty, the proper criteria for humanitarian intervention, the right role for the state in the market, and the correct balance between security and human rights. Nor does a common commitment to democratic governance guarantee smooth cooperation, as the often-fractious relations between Western states and large emerging market nations like Brazil, India, Turkey, or South Africa attest.

All rising powers—democratic and authoritarian alike—seek greater voice and prerogatives within established multilateral institutions. But they are also tempted to free ride rather than assume greater burdens within international institutions, in part because of their status—as they continually remind Western diplomats—as “poor” countries facing extraordinary development challenges and rising demands from citizens (Patrick 2010b). Such dynamics help explain why the Obama administration, which had entered office open to UN Security Council expansion—launching an interagency review of the topic and endorsing permanent membership for India—ultimately shelved any such plans (McDonald and Patrick 2010). Beyond worrying that a UN Charter amendment would be impossible to engineer, the administration judged the most likely aspirants—including India, Brazil, and South Africa—to be unreliable partners, both in terms of the positions they were likely to advance and their willingness to contribute to international peace and security (as defined by Washington). As evidence, the administration could point to the tenure of all three countries as elected members of the UN Security Council during 2011. What the United States

had witnessed, said America's then UN ambassador, Susan Rice, was "not . . . frankly, encouraging" (Kelemen 2011). The tendency of emerging power governments to engage in ideological cross-dressing depending on the multilateral venue (the G20 vs. the UN General Assembly, for instance) only increased U.S. skepticism. In the end, the Obama administration concluded that the devil they knew was preferable to the one they did not.

As international power diffuses and global values diverge, the United States has a reduced incentive to invest in formal international organizations, and a greater motivation to pick and choose among frameworks that increase its freedom of action and policy autonomy and more closely approximate its values. Indeed, there has been surprising continuity between the *à la carte* approach to international cooperation advocated by the George W. Bush administration (Shanker 2001) and the orientation of his successor (Patrick 2009a). Both have pursued minilateral fora where the United States can shape the goals consistent with its preferences and minimize constraints on its freedom of action. For the Bush administration, the archetype was the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which the United States launched with a handful of likeminded countries in 2003 to interdict trade in weapons of mass destruction. PSI was consciously designed as an arrangement open to other countries—provided, they endorsed norms and priorities the United States and its affinity group had established. One advantage of this approach, from the founders' perspective, is in increasing the likelihood that the mandate of a coalition will survive the gradual enlargement of its membership (Downs, Rocke, and Barsoom 1998). The Obama administration may have arrived in office committed to reforming formal multilateral institutions. But in practice, it endorsed, and expanded upon, the use of ad hoc arrangements (Steinberg 2010). The result has been a paradoxical combination, institutionally speaking, of "drought and abundance": even as the world's most important formal organizations struggle to adapt, an entire ecosystem of alternative frameworks sprouts around them.

In the absence of transformational change in the architecture of international cooperation, U.S. and international policy-makers are increasingly adopting a messier form of multilateralism (Haass 2010). This approach has four distinctive aspects. One is growing reliance on flexible, often purpose-built groupings of the interested, capable, or like-minded. A second is a preference for voluntary codes of conduct over binding conventions. The third is the search for piecemeal rather than comprehensive approaches to global challenges. The fourth is the shift from purely intergovernmental models of cooperation to new frameworks that are transnational, multi-stakeholder, or multi-level.

## The New "New Multilateralism:" The Rise of Messy Multilateralism

For the past several years, pundits have debated whether we live in a G20, G8/7, G2, or even "G Zero" world. In truth, ours is a "Gx" world in which the identity and number of parties at the head table varies by issue area and situation (Alexandroff 2010). In November 2008, the leaders of the world's major economies met in Washington. By the time of the G20 Leaders Summit in Pittsburgh in 2009, these leaders agreed to designate the new G20 as the world's premier forum for macroeconomic coordination.

And yet, contrary to expectations, the presumably obsolete G7/8 did not wither away. It gradually gained a renewed lease on life, thanks to U.S. disillusionment with the unwieldy G20, whose very diversity tended to generate weak, lowest-common-denominator coordination. If anything, the suspension of Russia from the G8 following its seizure of Crimea last year has deepened the importance that the United States attaches to the newly re-emergent G7. While the G20 remains a valuable forum, the G7 offers a narrower grouping whose members share broadly similar values, strategic interests, and major policy preferences, as well as assets to deploy in the service of these convictions.

Rather than relying on standing organizations, or exploiting a single informal framework, the United States and other governments are adopting (as the old British idiom recommends) a “horses for courses” approach. To combat climate change, for instance, the United States participates in the Major Economies Forum (MEF), which unites the seventeen largest emitters of greenhouse gases. To prevent nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of non-state actors, meanwhile, the Obama administration has sponsored the biennial Nuclear Security Summit (NSS), a gathering at the leaders’ level of the fifty odd countries possessing nuclear weapons and/or fissile material. To contain and ultimately destroy the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, meanwhile, the United States has formed Operation Inherent Resolve, a loose (and non-UN authorized) coalition of the willing composed of approximately sixty nations (albeit with varying levels of commitment). Such informal groupings may result in strange bedfellows. For example, the multinational armada created to combat Somali piracy in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden included vessels not only from the United States and traditional U.S. treaty allies (including members of NATO, as well as Japan and South Korea), but also from countries with which the United States has more complicated relations, including China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen (Jones 2011).

Minilateralism is also increasingly prevalent in international economic cooperation. As of January 2015, the World Trade Organization (WTO) had received 604 notifications of preferential trade agreements (with 398 in force) (WTO 2015). The two most ambitious free trade agreements (FTAs) now under discussion are U.S.-promoted mega-regional trade deals, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Transpacific Trade Partnership (TPP). And not all of these new economic frameworks include the United States. The BRICS, for example, are pursuing both a development bank and a contingency fund, intended to provide borrowers with alternatives to the World Bank and IMF.

## Voluntary Codes of Conduct

A second recurrent feature of the new multilateralism is a preference for voluntary commitments over binding conventions. Multilateral treaties are still sometimes negotiated, but states often find it easier to approach global (as well as regional) challenges through non-binding agreements. These can be “pledge and review” arrangements, involving separate national commitments that are subsequently submitted to assessment by their peers. For instance, parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreed at the December 2014 COP-20 in Lima to submit national

action plans to overcome the decade-long struggle to come up with a “binding” successor to the Kyoto Protocol (UNFCCC 2014). These “intended nationally determined contributions” are to be published online, allowing scientists to assess their impact on curbing emissions—and presumably name and shame laggards. The G20 has an analogous peer review system. Its Mutual Assessment Process (MAP) commits members to explain how they intend to meet common growth targets and prevent negative “spillovers” from these policy choices (IMF 2014). In a similar manner, the participants in each successive Nuclear Security Summit have been expected to arrive with voluntary “gift baskets”, or pledges enumerating their separate national commitments to advance the common goal of global nuclear security.

Rather than striving for unreachable binding treaties, governments have turned to codes of conduct more and more. This pattern has become widespread in governance of the global commons—including outer space, maritime space, and cyberspace—as these domains become increasingly congested, competitive, and contested (Patrick 2015a). In recent years, the United States has deliberated how best to integrate new “space-faring nations” into a common set of rules to mitigate space debris, reduce risks of collision, and discourage militarization of the heavens. Given the difficulty of updating the Outer Space Treaty, the United States has endorsed internationalizing the non-binding European Code of Conduct for Outer Space Activities to establish parameters for responsible behavior. Similarly, in the maritime commons, the United States and several members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) favor a code of conduct to manage competing territorial and maritime claims in the South China Sea, in the face of expansive Chinese claims. (The failure of the U.S. Senate to consent to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea increases the attraction of this informal route for U.S. diplomats.) Likewise in the Arctic, the United States rebuffed calls for a comprehensive multilateral treaty to reconcile rival sovereignty claims, facilitate collective energy development, and address environmental concerns. Instead, it worked with Arctic Council partners to draft the Ilulissat Declaration, a set of general principles of behavior (Ilulissat 2008).

Voluntary codes are likely to guide future norms to limit state-supported attacks in cyberspace. One possibility would be for a cohort of major countries to foreswear certain practices (such as attacking root servers), gradually incorporating outliers into this framework. A potential precedent from another sphere is the FATF, an early experiment in minilateralism, which now includes thirty-six Member States. The FATF’s standard-setting power arises from its ability to distinguish “cooperating” from “non-cooperating” jurisdictions and to name and shame the latter (FATF 2015). One could envision a similar arrangement for cyberspace, starting with a core of like-minded countries committed to basic standards, which could give other jurisdictions their collective seal of approval (Knake 2010).

## Disaggregated Multilateralism

Third, besides turning to voluntary arrangements, national governments are increasingly pursuing “global governance in pieces” (Patrick 2014a). This is the third main feature of the new “new multilateralism”. Rather than

chase elusive, comprehensive multilateral solutions to multifaceted puzzles like mitigating climate change or stemming the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), governments are instead pragmatically breaking down these problems into different dimensions. Such a disaggregated, piecemeal approach to international cooperation results not in a single institution or treaty but in a cluster of complementary activities that political scientists term a “regime complex.” The one for climate change, for example, includes dozens of initiatives, ranging from minilateral partnerships to advance “green” technology to a UN program to Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) (Keohane and Victor 2010; Michonski and Levi 2010). International efforts to advance global public health are similarly fragmented (Fidler 2010). The notional core of this system is the WHO, which maintains a Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) and nominal authority over its members through the legally binding International Health Regulations (IHRs). In reality, WHO shares space with other bodies and initiatives, including the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations (GAVI), UNAIDS, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Given the moribund Doha Round, future breakthroughs in trade liberalization will likely also be disaggregated, taking the form of so-called “plurilateral” agreements—or sector-specific accords among a subset of WTO members on issues like public procurement or investment rules. This is not entirely unprecedented, of course: previous rounds of GATT and WTO negotiations were in part plurilateral in character (Steinberg 2002; Gilligan 2004). What is different today is the growing expectation that comprehensive agreements are impossible at the WTO and thus that “variable geometry”—whereby some parties opt into and others opt out of specific commitments—is inevitable. The December 2013 WTO ministerial conference in Bali, which resulted in a modest agreement on trade facilitation, may be the wave of the future. Negotiators are likely to take a similar stance on cyberspace, given the difficulties of negotiating a single treaty covering multiple issues, such as the debate over multi-stakeholder versus intergovernmental models; competing technical standards; cybercrime norms; intellectual property protections; appropriate limits to government surveillance; and balancing security objectives with human rights and civil liberties (Nye 2014).

## Multi-stakeholder Multilateralism

A fourth salient feature of the new “new multilateralism” is a shift away from traditional intergovernmental diplomacy—or cooperation among foreign ministries—and toward novel patterns of cooperation that can be labeled “transgovernmental”, “multi-level”, and “multistakeholder”. Let us take each in turn.

Trans-governmental cooperation refers to the fact that international cooperation increasingly takes place outside the confines of foreign ministries, in the form of transnational networks of government officials, as the scholar Anne-Marie Slaughter (2004) has noted. As sovereign states become increasingly disaggregated, regulators, technical experts, judges, and even parliamentarians have begun to engage one another across national boundaries, on an ongoing basis, on matters big and small. The “real” world order,



Slaughter argues, is this latticework of functional cooperation that emerges as states seek to confront and tame globalization (Slaughter 2004). A recent example is the effort by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to work with its counterparts abroad to create an informal “global coalition of medicines regulators.” This grouping is designed to help national regulators meet a common goal: ensure the safety of medicine and medical products in an age of segmented supply chains and uneven pharmacovigilance, particularly in emerging economies like China and India, where a majority of active pharmaceutical ingredients are now produced (Patrick and Wright 2014). In this trans-governmental effort, it is the technical agencies rather than the diplomats who are in charge.

In addition, the new “new multilateralism” is increasingly multi-level, involving political units that are above the state—in the form of regional and sub-regional organizations—and below it—most notably in the growing activism within the world’s cities. Although Chapter 8 of the UN Charter envisioned a role for regional bodies, the diplomats at Dumbarton Oaks in 1944 could scarcely have anticipated the remarkable proliferation of regional and sub-regional entities, which today number in the hundreds. To be sure, the aspirations, mandates and activities of regional organizations vary, as a quick comparison of the African Union (AU), the Arab League, ASEAN, the European Union, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) would attest. But their influence and role is growing, particularly when it comes to managing violent conflict. In Africa, for instance, peace operations increasingly take a hybrid form, with variable contributions and leadership provided by the United Nations, African Union, and the continent’s several Regional Economic Communities, as well as from external powers such as France (Patrick 2014c).

Finally, global governance is no longer the exclusive preserve of states meeting in multilateral forums. Cities, for example, are forming networks that cross state frontiers to address transnational problems. The most prominent case to date is the C-40 confederation, which emerged in 2012 at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, where Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York and counterparts from Moscow to Sao Paulo announced a collective commitment to greener cities. To be sure, one should not get carried away: no modern-day Hanseatic League likely will solve global challenges. Still, emerging patterns of “glocality” suggest that as humanity urbanizes, cities will produce some of the greatest innovations in governance, global as well as local (Barber 2013). A case in point is the Lima COP-20, where parties agreed to a Global Protocol for Community-Scale Greenhouse Emission Inventories (GPC), a standardized reporting mechanism for subnational structures like cities, provinces, and regions of states.

National governments, then, are not the only actors with a role in managing globalization. Indeed, the new “new multilateralism” is increasingly multi-stakeholder, seeking to integrate and leverage the capabilities and interests of private actors, including both corporations and NGOs. Consider regulatory and standard-setting bodies, such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) or the Kimberley Process for conflict diamonds. Their effectiveness depends on incentivizing private corporations to behave responsibly and mobilizing civil society groups to demand accountability from both governments and companies (Abbott and Snidal 2009; Wright

2014). Multi-stakeholder arrangements and public-private partnerships are now widespread in global public health, too. The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunizations, for instance, brings public officials together with private companies to help ensure an adequate supply of life-saving vaccines, at affordable costs, in developing countries. The Global Fund for AIDS, TB, and Malaria, meanwhile, includes the private Gates Foundation as a full member of its Board. It also insists that nations that receive its aid establish coordinating mechanisms that include members of civil society.

The global humanitarian system similarly includes tight linkages among the United Nations, national donor agencies, and humanitarian service providers, including charities like World Vision. The leading umbrella organization of U.S.-based humanitarian NGOs—Interaction—has its own seat on the Interagency Standing Committee (IASC) chaired by the UN’s Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as does the private International Committee of the Red Cross. But perhaps the most well known multi-stakeholder global governance arrangement is one for cyberspace, notably the role played by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), an independent, non-profit entity that operates under license from the U.S. Department of Commerce. To be sure, not all governments are equally comfortable with this “bottom up” approach. The most vocal debates over Internet governance during 2012–2014 pitted Western government that advocated the preservation of the multi-stakeholder model against developing country and (particularly) authoritarian governments that called for a more intergovernmental approach accentuating sovereign control over cyberspace (Patrick 2014b).

## Policy Quandaries and Conundrums

In sum, the new “new multilateralism” is an “ungodly mess.” It is a bit like Paris’ Pompidou Center, with all the improvised plumbing, wiring, and load-bearing pillars nakedly revealed. But is all this complexity a good or a bad thing?

The new “new multilateralism,” it turns out, is a mixed bag. On the positive side, the proliferation of diverse frameworks of informal cooperation has several advantages. At the head of the list are speed and flexibility. Rather than engaging in painstaking, drawn-out negotiations within formal, binding, universal (or large-membership) organizations, governments can move with dispatch, designing nimble coalitions of the relevant, interested, and capable. A third clear benefit is modularity. Instead of trying to digest an entire complex global problem, like mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, governments can bite off manageable chunks, such as reforestation or controls on methane. A fourth advantage is discrimination: Purpose-built frameworks may help governments—and especially great powers—“compartmentalize” their bilateral relationships, so that even geopolitical rivals may cooperate in a given forum to advance common security, economic or ecological or other interests (Patrick and Bennett 2014). A fifth value of informal institutions, particularly multi-stakeholder forums, is leverage—specifically, access to the capacities, expertise, and other resources of private actors, including both corporations and non-governmental organizations. Finally, diverse forms of collective action could, in principle, allow governments to experiment with and glean lessons from alternative design

solutions to cooperation problems, much as it was assumed the fifty U.S. states provide distinct “laboratories of democracy,” in the famous words of the U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis.

At first blush, a world of à la carte options would also seem tailor-made for the United States, allowing it to maximize its freedom of action and domestic policy autonomy by picking and choosing among diverse international institutions, as its situational interests warrant. The Gx world rewards those nations that are well positioned to play simultaneously on different chessboards and in different groupings, thanks to their military, economic, diplomatic, and technological weight, as well as the vitality of their private sector, civil society, and universities. On all these criteria, the United States reigns supreme. It has unmatched capacity to “pivot”, not only among different regions but among diverse frameworks of international cooperation, allowing it (for instance) to simultaneously be a member of the G20 and deepen its links with Western allies within the G7 (to say nothing of NATO). The world may be more fluid, but the United States appears to remain an identified player in many if not most minilateral coalitions.

Still, the advantages of the new “new multilateralism” should not be exaggerated, nor should its possible downside be ignored. The first question is an empirical one. Namely, do the institutional workarounds identified above actually deliver, in terms of achieving results? Are these new instruments having a more positive impact on the relevant challenges—say, climate change or trade liberalization—than an approach reliant on traditional international organizations like the UN might have? Are the goods being provided under these innovative arrangements truly collective, in the sense of benefiting all, or are their benefits restricted to a narrow set of countries? Although in-depth case studies and comparative analyses are clearly needed, anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some of these new frameworks have performed no better than the universal alternative (which of course may have been found wanting, too).

Take the regime complex for climate change. Many anticipated that the MEF would break logjams within the UNFCCC, allowing the countries that really “mattered” to hammer out preliminary agreement among themselves before bringing these commitments to the more encompassing UN process (Patrick 2010c). To date, the actual achievements of the MEF as a body have been negligible. Largely, the group merely releases “chair summaries” with a synopsis of conversations and little mention of agreement on concrete steps. The jury is also still out on the whether the process of voluntary, national pledges [UNFCCC member endorsed at the December 2014 COP-20 in Lima](#) will amount to much. The rationale behind this pledge and review approach was that non-binding promises, tailored to national circumstances and capabilities, would actually have a greater collective impact on climate mitigation than the pursuit of uniform, legal commitments, which, if agreed at all, would likely be extremely modest.

The lingering final question, of course, is whether informal commitments lacking any enforcement mechanism to ensure their implementation should be treated as credible. More profoundly, any conceivable pledges, even if fully implemented, would still almost certainly fall well short of the scope of international effort required to stave off the dangers identified by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). One can rearrange deck chairs at either the national or international level, it appears, and it

will still not amount to much. To date, the most promising climate change agreement has been neither multilateral *nor* “minilateral” but a November 2014 bilateral accord between China and the United States that commits each to meet ambitious national emissions reduction targets ([White House 2014](#)).

A similar problem arises within the G20’s Mutual Assessment Process (MAP). That voluntary arrangement commits G20 governments to submit to one another and the IMF a summary of their national economic plans, including potential negative impacts of these choices on other countries. In principle, the MAP offers a robust system of peer review that can hold G20 government’s feet to the fire. In practice, it has been toothless, as G20 members have limited the Fund’s ability to play a robust, independent surveillance and monitoring function. Neither the Fund nor individual members have been willing to call out G20 governments that have fallen short ([English et al. 2012](#)).

More generally, it seems dubious whether flexible minilateralism can resolve tough cooperation problems. No doubt, in the absence of standing institutions, informal frameworks can facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty, improving communication, and providing focal points to coordinate policies. It is less clear that they can be any more successful than other diplomatic forums in promoting mutual policy adjustment when states strongly disagree over policy preferences—such as whether (in the G20 policy context) to pursue policies of fiscal austerity or stimulus or whether (in the context of the MEF) to accept legally binding mitigation commitments. And no amount of “multi-multilateralism” will compensate for a major clash of big power interest, such as the collision between the West and Russia over the latter’s actions in Crimea.

Indeed, while the new multilateralism may help the United States and other countries compartmentalize, so that they can play different games on multiple chessboards simultaneously, it may also complicate the negotiation of “grand bargains”. One advantage of large-member, general interest organizations, like the United Nations, is to permit diplomats to horse-trade across different issue areas, such as between development cooperation and counterterrorism efforts, say. Such issue linkage is harder to pursue when a different network exists for each sphere of interaction—particularly if these institutions are insulated from one another.

The second worry is that ad hoc-ism, if carried too far, could undermine formal institutions whose legitimacy, resources, and technical capacity are needed over the long haul and cannot be easily replaced. The hope, of course, is that the opposite will be true. A decade ago international law scholar Ruth Wedgwood argued that it was “time to give the UN a little competition”. Experimenting with alternative forms of collective action, she implied, might incentivize the UN to raise its game ([Wedgwood 2005](#)). Proponents of FTAs likewise argue that preferential trade arrangements could actually spur the WTO to make greater progress on liberalization. But skeptics warn just as vigorously that the proliferation of minilateral arrangements will create a fragmented system of redundant institutions that are stumbling blocks (rather than building blocks) to global cooperation, as well as undercut the capabilities, credibility, and legitimacy of standing, universal membership international organizations ([Bhagwati 2008](#)). Thomas Weiss of the City University of New York likens enthusiasts of ad hoc multilateralism to members of a “Global Tea Party” that criticizes formal international



organizations but fails to acknowledge the dangers of marginalizing formal institutions (Weiss 2014).

The evidence then seems rather mixed for the new “new multilateralism”. At times, informal multilateral frameworks have served to reinvigorate formal institutions, including helping them to adapt to new conditions. A case in point is the G20 during its first two activist years. From 2008 to 2010, the consultative body engineered the replacement of the Financial Stability Forum with a Financial Stability Board (FSB), intended, in the words of U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Timothy Geithner, to serve as the “fourth pillar” of Bretton Woods (White House 2009). It also revitalized the IMF and the World Bank, by expanding their mandates, augmenting their resources, and endorsing (though not implementing) alterations to their governance structure. The G20’s success in strengthening the Bank and the Fund reflected in part the close overlap between its own membership and the composition of their executive boards. FATF provides another example. Created out of frustration with the failure of existing institutions to address money laundering, FATF has since succeeded in having its standards incorporated within the IMF, as well as in UN Security Council resolutions.

At other times, however, the rise of alternative institutions has reflected less a desire for partnership than antagonism: specifically, the conscious decision by a coalition of dissatisfied states (and sometimes other actors) to challenge the mandates, rules, and practices of established international institutions. Such “contested multilateralism”, as the political scientists Julia C. Morse and Robert O. Keohane term it, can take one of two forms. The more moderate is when states unhappy with the status quo try to shift the setting for multilateral deliberation and policymaking to an alternative, existing institution whose mandate and decision rules they find more congenial (Morse and Keohane 2014). The more radical strategy is to try to create an entirely new arrangement, as occurred in 2010–2011 when some thirty countries in the Western Hemisphere launched a new multilateral bloc—the Community of Latin American States (CELAC) that consciously excluded the United States and Canada, and whose more left-leaning members hoped might eventually rival the OAS (Saltalamachia 2015).

This brings us to the third potential downside. A world of new “new multilateralism” lends itself to rampant forum shopping (Jupile and Snidal 2005; Busch 2007)—and not just by the United States. For too long, the United States has reassured itself that it is best positioned to play the game of contested multilateralism, picking and choosing among flexible frameworks as the situation demands.

And the United States does retain an unmatched ability to pivot among institutions—for now. As power diffuses to other states, however, they will surely avail themselves of similar opportunities. Indeed, they are already doing so, as the examples of the BRICS New Development Bank and Contingency Fund, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and more recently, the Beijing-led Asia Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) attest. As major non-Western players learn to play the game of flexible multilateralism, the risk increases that the world could fragment into competing blocs, resulting (for instance) in the de facto division of the G20 between G7 members and partners, on the one hand, and rising powers, on the other.

For the United States, the creation of the AIIB in March 2015 offered an object lesson in the possible downside to “contested multilateralism”. The Obama administration expended enormous diplomatic capital in a



misguided and ultimately futile effort to persuade its four closest European allies—the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Italy—not to become founding members. The U.S. defeat was rich in symbolism, suggesting how quickly the center of gravity of international economic cooperation could shift. China has become a formative regional player, while the Western dominance built on Japan and the United States that has underpinned security in littoral East Asia since the Cold War is fraying (Patrick 2015b).

More generally, the AIIB episode signaled what might be called the limits of American “exemptionalism”. Particularly, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has adopted an ambivalent and selective attitude toward formal multilateral commitments, particularly treaty obligations (Patrick 2009b). Indeed, it has become virtually impossible to get a multilateral treaty ratified by the U.S. Senate, with the Obama administration’s record stacking up poorly compared to its several immediate predecessors (Bellinger 2012). These U.S. constitutional limitations have been one of the main driving forces behind the trend toward minilateral cooperation. While this stance has brought some external freedom of action and domestic policy autonomy, the United States is increasingly discovering that it is not the only nation capable of cherry-picking among international commitments. If the United States is unwilling and unable to revitalize the institutions it founded to accommodate new players, other countries will build new ones in their place.

Finally, the new “new multilateralism” raises normative dilemmas, including concerns about legitimacy, equity, and accountability. To begin with, the rise of “the Informals” (Alexandroff 2014) implies increased reliance on exclusive coalitions, rather than public international institutions, to provide international public goods. Minilateralism is wonderful if your country is in the green room, but less so when it is on the outside peering in. Since its creation in 2008, the G20 has been criticized for behaving as a global directorate, making decisions with global implications as the rest of humanity—the “G174,” if you will—looks on. Successive G20 chairs have tried to ameliorate these concerns with elaborate outreach efforts to non-Member States. But the inherent tension between effectiveness, which implies a group of modest size, and legitimacy, which implies broad representation, persists. Ultimately, this raises an ethical dilemma that the founders of the United Nations sought to address in 1945: poorer countries are excluded from decision-making processes that impact them greatly, and smaller nations have little means to hold bigger countries accountable.

Equity and justice are thus casualties of the new “new multilateralism.” The more that cooperation occurs through informal coalitions rather than formal organizations grounded in international law, the more likely it is to reflect the narrow interests of the dominant players, state and non-state alike. Power, of course, always shapes the design of institutions, as well as their dynamics. But large-member, treaty-based organizations typically possess some internal checks and balances, as well as provide broad “voice” opportunities, which serve to dampen the naked exercise of power, while fostering bargaining and consensus building. They also generally possess independent secretariats staffed by professional international civil servants and technocrats, creating an institutional identity distinct from their Member States. For these reasons formal multilateral bodies—for all their imperfections—may be better placed than narrower groupings to advance the agenda and interests of the otherwise powerless. For example, to secure

the participation of many non-nuclear weapon states—particularly those with little interest in such weapons—to prevent proliferation, nuclear weapon states agreed to promote and facilitate access to nuclear energy for peaceful uses. This bargain has become institutionalized: in addition to its role in safeguarding nuclear material, the IAEA uses nuclear technologies to improve soil and water management, enhance livestock production, and treat cancer.

Last, there is the problem of accountability. As hard as it is can be to hold formal multilateral bodies accountable, the challenges can be even harder when it comes to alternative multilateral structures. One of the biggest frustrations with the G20 remains the lack of a robust mechanism to determine whether its members are fulfilling pledges made at successive summits (G20 Research Group 2015). By contrast, standing intergovernmental organizations like the World Bank have come under increased pressure from NGOs and civil society groups to embrace transparency—and have made positive steps in the direction of accountability as a result. The problem of accountability is especially acute when it comes to transnational networks of government officials. While they may offer a practical solution to the complex challenges of interdependence, they also frequently operate below the radar screen, without adequate legislative oversight from participating governments, contributing to the democratic deficit in contemporary global governance. Meanwhile, multi-stakeholder approaches create their own accountability challenges, in the form of principal-agent dilemmas and the risk of “regulatory capture.” In subcontracting important roles to private actors, including NGOs, governments may unwittingly empower actors more interested in their own agendas, including securing reliable revenue streams. Likewise, regulatory and standard-setting bodies face the dilemma of how to utilize capacities and influence behavior of private firms without allowing themselves to become captive to the interests of those corporations.

Minilateral cooperation is here to stay. The flexibility and short-term gains it provides are simply too tempting to imagine it would disappear. But it would be a mistake for the Obama administration—which arrived with such high hopes of reforming the multilateral system—and its successors to view minilateralism as a cost-free alternative. Unless used deftly and judiciously, minilateralism risks undermining the legitimacy and effectiveness of indispensable international organizations and even accelerating the world’s coalescence into rival coalitions. Purely ad hoc solutions are unlikely to deliver global goods and advance the common interest. If a rule-bound international order is to persist, it must rest not only on flexible coalitions of the moment but also on formal international bodies, grounded in international law.

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