



The Upgrade of the EU in the UN and the Changing Nature of Multilateralism

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Article discusses the implication of the 'upgrade' of the EU within the UN General Assembly

Two major developments are currently transforming the multilateral system. The first is the trend towards multipolarity as expressed by the raising number of states that act as key players. There have been times where only a few or even one player dominated the geopolitical game. But today several states seem to become dominant players as global or regional actors. The (voting-) behaviour of the BRICS in the UN and their presence in the G20 illustrates this trend. The second development is that meanwhile new types of actors are changing the nature of the playing multilateral field. Regions with statehood properties are increasingly present in the area of international relations. The EU for instance has been since 1974 an observer in the UN General Assembly. But on 3 May 2011, the UNGA upgraded the EU's status by giving it speaking rights. And that same resolution opens the door for other regional organisations to request the same speaking rights. Undoubtedly, this is what will happen in the near future. But as stated by some UN members in the discussion to this resolution, this could unbalance the 'one state, one vote' rule within the UN. On the other hand, this opening towards regional organisations brings with it new opportunities. Together these two developments illustrate that multilateralism is no longer only a play between states: regions of all sorts as well as other actors are present and are profoundly changing the multilateral game (Van Langenhove, 2011).

But thinking about multilateralism is still very much based upon the centrality of states: they are regarded as the constitutive elements of the multilateral system and it is their interrelations that determine form and content of multilateralism. This implies that international politics is regarded as a *closed* system in at least two ways: it spans the whole world and there are huge barriers to enter the system. Many authors have pointed to all kinds of dys-functions such as the complexity of the UN system with its decentralized and overlapping array of councils and agencies or to the divides between developed and developing countries. The emergence of truly global problems such as climate change, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and many others have indeed led to an increasing paradox of governance: *"The policy authority for tackling global problems still belong to the states, while the sources of the problems and potential solutions are situated at transnational, regional or global level"* (Thakur and Van Langenhove 2006: 233). As such the building blocks of multilateralism, the states, seem to be less and less capable of dealing with the challenges of globalization. But because the multilateral world order is so dependent on the input of states, multilateralism itself is not functioning well.

One way to capture the above-mentioned developments is to use the metaphor of 'multilateralism mode 2.0' (Van Langenhove, 2010) in order to stress how the playing field and the players in multilateralism are changing. The essence of the Web 2.0' metaphor is that it stresses the emergence of network thinking and practices in international relations as well as the transformation of multilateralism from a closed to an open system. In multilateralism 1.0 the principle actors in the inter-state space of international relations are states. National governments are the 'star players'. Intergovernmental organizations are only dependent agents whose degrees of freedom only go as far as the states allow them to go. The primacy of sovereignty is the ultimate principle of international relations. In contrast, in multilateralism 2.0, there are other players than sovereign states that play a role and some of these players challenge the notion of sovereignty. Regions are one such type of actor. Conceived by states within, above and across themselves they can have statehood properties and as such aim to be an actor in the multilateral system. Especially regional organizations are willing and able to play such a role. But sub-national regions as well have increasingly multilateral ambitions as demonstrated by their efforts towards para-diplomacy. As a result 'international relations' is becoming much more than just inter-state relations. Regions are claiming their place as well. This has major consequences for how international relations are developing and institutionalized as well as for how international studies ought to be studied.

What was once an exclusive playing ground for states now becomes a space that states have to share with others. It is a fascinating phenomenon: both supra- and sub-national governance entities are largely built by states and can therefore be regarded as 'dependent agencies' of those states. However, once created these entities start to have a life of their own and are not always totally controllable by their founding fathers. This includes knocking on the door of the multilateral system because the sub- and supra-entities have a tendency to behave 'as if' they were states. This actorness gives them at least in principle the possibility to position them against other actors, including their founding fathers! All of this has weakened the Westphalian relation between state and sovereignty.

Organizing multilateralism in a state-centric way was only possible if all states are treated as equal. This means that irrespective of the differences in territorial size, the size of their population, their military power or economic strength, all states have the same legal personality. Or in other words, the Westphalian principle of sovereign equality means working with the principle of 'one state, one vote', although everybody knows that this principle does not correspond to the reality. In multilateralism 2.0 this could be balanced by a more flexible system that compares actors along certain dimensions (such as economic power) regardless of the type of actors they are. In

other words, one can for instance compare big states with regions or small states with sub-national regions. This allows not only a more flexible form of multilateralism. It could perhaps also lead to a more just system with a more equal balance of powers.

Within the present multilateral system, the UN occupies a major position. But, in order to adapt to the emerging 'mode 2.0' of multilateralism, the UN needs to open up to regions. This is a problem, as the UN is a global organization with sovereign states as members. Indeed, the way the UN is organized testifies that states are the star players as only sovereign states can be a full member (see article four of the UN Charter). So the EU was granted speaking rights, but not voting rights. But Chapter VIII of the Charter also mentions the possibility of cooperation with regional organizations and right from its conception there have been attempts to go beyond a state-centric approach. For many years now, the UN has struggled with the question of what place supra-national regional organizations should and could take in achieving the UN goals. On one end of the extreme there is the position that regionalism blocks the necessary global and universal approach needed to solve the problems of today. At the other end there is the position that regionalism can serve the overall UN goals. Obviously, the question is not only philosophic. It is also about power of institutions. Are regional organizations weakening the UN or can they be considered as allies of the UN in dealing with supra-national problems?

The key issue in any institutional reform aimed at reinforcing multilateralism is that it has to find a way to create a balance of power among UN members and a balance of responsibilities and representation of the people of our planet. Such a complex set of balances cannot be found if reform propositions continue to be based upon states as the sole building blocks of multilateralism. A radical rethinking is needed, which recognizes that, next to states, world regions based upon integration processes between states have to play a role in establishing an effective multilateralism.

Today's reality is that, next to states, world regions are becoming increasingly important tools of global governance. It needs, however, a lot of creative and innovative thinking based upon careful analysis of the regional dimensions of ongoing conflicts and of existing cooperation between the UN and regional organizations. The upgrading of the EU's status in the UN is an important step forward. But it is not enough, other regional organisations such as the African Union, Asean or the League of Arab States should follow. And next to speaking rights, collaboration between the UN and regional organisations needs to be further developed. This is the only way to increase regional ownership of what the UN and its Security Council decide. As a matter of fact, this what recently happened with the UNSC resolution 1973 regarding Libya: explicit reference is made to the African Union, the League of Arab States and the Organization of Islamic Conference. Moreover, the League of Arab States' members are requested to act in the spirit of Chapter VIII in implementing the resolution. Reviving Chapter VIII seems to be a promising way to combine global concerns with local (regional) legitimacy and capacity to act.

The challenge is that in line with the complexity of the emerging new world order, any proposal to rethink multilateralism in such a way that it incorporates regionalism needs to be flexible. A simplistic system of regional representations that replace the national representations will not work. And not only the UN, also the regional organisations need to adjust to the multilateralism 2.0 reality. In this respect it remains to be seen to what extent the EU Member States will allow the EU to speak with one vision. And above all, in order to become politically feasible, the idea of a multi-regional world order needs to be supported and promoted by civil society. As long as this is not the case, old habits and organizational structures will not change, and the world will not become a more secure place to live in.

References

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