

Multilateralism in international climate politics: between crisis and renewal

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The argument

1. **Multilateralism in international politics:** need to distinguish procedural and substantive dimensions; great power prerogatives essential.
2. **Procedural climate multilateralism:** growing discontent, but Durban COP has confirmed the centrality of UNFCCC process.
3. **Substantive climate multilateralism:** challenge to rules-based multilateralism and strong version of differential treatment; weakening of current, but emergence of new, multilateral model.
4. **Key challenges:** how to recognise power asymmetries and power shifts in regime design? How to introduce power prerogatives?

Multilateralism in international relations

Multilateralism's success as an institutional form after 1945

- **Utility:** US interest in international institution-building; weaker states seek to tie hegemon into rule-governed system.
- **Legitimacy:** Multilateralism reflects liberal values of US and Western alliance; legitimizes US hegemony; assumes quality of 'fundamental institution'.

Two dimensions of multilateralism:

- **Formal/process-oriented**
 - 'coordination of national policies in groups of three or more states' (Keohane); not unilateralism, bilateralism.
- **Substantive/normative**
 - preference for dialogue and negotiation in resolving conflicts
 - Rule-governed international behaviour; legalization
 - Diffuse reciprocity

Multilateralism in international relations (2)

Multilateralism and power – two perspectives:

- ‘multilateralism taming power’: emphasis on rules and reciprocity
- ‘power enabling/disabling multilateralism’: hegemonic leadership, norm contestation

Great power prerogatives in multilateral orders:

- Enhanced position in decision-making (e.g. weighted votes in Bretton Woods institutions)
- Veto power (e.g. permanent members in UN Security Council)
- Hierarchy in universal bargaining (e.g. ‘green room’ in trade negotiations)

Multilateralism in climate politics

- Formal/procedural dimension:
 - Strong version of multilateralism
 - Universal participation in negotiations, from INC in early 1990s to UNFCCC COPs
 - Consensus principle; not formally adopted, but common practice; occasional exceptions (Saudi Arabia 1997, Bolivia 2011)
- Substantive/normative dimension
 - Strong, and in some ways unusual, normative foundations
 - Core climate norm aims at rule-based international mitigation strategy; convention-protocol route towards legal regime
 - Strong differential treatment; dominant interpretation of CBDR leads to lack of reciprocity and unequal burden-sharing

Challenges to climate multilateralism

- Formal/procedural dimension:
 - Concerns about the effectiveness of the UNFCCC process: inclusive but cumbersome; large number of veto powers
 - But: forum shifting has failed so far (e.g. APP, MEF, G20)
 - Durban 2011: renewed commitment to UNFCCC process
- Substantive/normative dimension
 - Principle of rule-based mitigation policy weakened; Copenhagen Accord & ‘pledge and review’ process as alternative model; decline of Kyoto Protocol model
 - Differential treatment weakened; Kyoto ‘firewall’ no longer sustainable; move towards greater symmetry, reciprocity
 - Overall: shift in multilateral norm away from rule-based policy and strong differential treatment

Outlook and conclusions

- Climate multilateralism is in crisis, but renewal under way
- Procedural dimensions largely intact, despite experimentation with unilateral forums.
- Substantial dimensions weakened, being re-defined
- A new multilateral bargain needed to define the key parameters of future process:
 - This will be a trial-and-error process
 - Key challenge: how to accommodate power asymmetries and power shifts in multilateral model