

## Values and Multilateralism in World Politics

In this article, we reflect on the nature and role of values in multilateral cooperation. In the post-Cold War world, multilateralism has played a crucial role in foreign policy and international affairs, aiding efforts by governments, the international civil service, and non-state actors to manage “a broad array of regional and global changes” (Ruggie, 1992: 561). However, in recent years, both scholars and policymakers have argued that multilateralism is “in a state of crisis” (Zürn, 2020), failing to deliver on major policy challenges such as security, trade, migration, and climate change (Newman, 2007; Smith, 2018). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the war in Gaza following October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023 have, of course, been recent and exacting sources of tension within international bodies. After Russia’s February invasion of Ukraine the UN ambassador from Kenya put it starkly, warning the UN Security Council (UNSC) that “multilateralism lies on its deathbed tonight” (Gowan 2022). Long-term challenges also persist, such as the influence of nationalist and illiberal movements, whereby countries seek policy solutions at a domestic level (Lake, Martin, and Risse, 2021). And as the distribution of international power shifts, fractures may appear in the existing multilateral system as rising powers, including China, Brazil, and India seek to “renegotiate their role in the global order” (Ikenberry, 2015: 399). Amid the transition to a multipolar world, many herald a return to “great power politics as foreign policy currency in contemporary world affairs” (D’Alessandra, 2024). It is against this backdrop that UN-Secretary General Antonio Guterres announced the 2024 Summit for the Future, with the stated aim “to bring multilateralism back from the brink” (United Nations 2024). According to Guterres, this task requires “deep” institutional reforms that reflect core UN values and the “fundamental principles of multilateralism” (ibid.).

Debate on the future of multilateralism has prompted analysts to revisit the core features of the doctrine, including the values which underpin it. This forms part of a wider and resurgent discussion on the role of morals and values in foreign policy (Nye, 2020; Rathburn et al., 2016). Although a “persistent conventional wisdom suggests ethics are marginal to international relations” (Hoover, 2015: 1), in its first twenty-five years the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* has housed lively debate on the role of values in international relations, reprising the centrality of such questions in the first half century of the discipline’s history (McElroy, 2014). In British politics this has included, for instance, examination of the shift to – and legacy of – ethical framing of foreign policy under Tony Blair and Robin Cook in New Labour (Dixon, and Williams, 2001; Mumford, and Selck, 2010; Atkins, 2013; Gilmore, 2015). Analysis has also extended to the nature and importance of values in international affairs more generally, including the dilemmas faced by decision-makers when balancing values and interests when enacting foreign policy (Chandler, 2003; Gaskarth, 2013).

Looking toward the next twenty-five years, we face several interwoven global issues. At their heart is perhaps the shift from “unipolarity” to “multipolarity,” and the further geopolitical realignment indicated by the “no limits” partnership between Beijing and Moscow on political, economic and military affairs (Maizland, 2022). This development may see an “entrenching [of] geostrategic competition” with the US across multiple issue domains, opening the door to an era of foreign policy characterized by power dynamics (D’Alessandra, 2024). A related implication may be “hedging” strategies on the part of emerging countries in the global majority<sup>1</sup> who seek to navigate new geopolitical realities (Chivvis and Geaghan-Breiner, 2024). In coming years, great power rivalry is likely to shape our capacity to deal with a host of policy challenges, including political violence, climate change, and inequality, among

others, which can only be adequately addressed through international cooperation. Given renewed scholarly interest in the role of ethics in foreign policy, as well as intense debate on the future of multilateral institutions and the global order, now is an opportune moment to reflect on the relationship between values and multilateral cooperation.

Below, we examine the role of values in foreign policy, with a specific focus on multilateralism. We develop a number of arguments that contribute to ongoing debates in the literature on values in international relations while raising issues we believe to be of import for future work in this area. Drawing on insights from constructivism, our central proposition is that multilateralism possesses core, non-instrumental values that distinguish it from other forms of international cooperation. And further, that these normative foundations may underpin multilateralism's continued relevance in addressing major policy issues in contemporary world politics. We suggest these values could be particularly significant in fostering trust and cooperation among actors with contrasting preferences, offering a framework for navigating challenges posed by rising illiberalism, great power competition, and an increasingly multipolar world. By embedding its key, non-instrumental values within institutional frameworks and practices, multilateralism could help to facilitate cooperation between diverse sets of actors. In terms of scope, it is important to recognize that the mechanics of multilateralism go beyond government representatives and the state. In practice, international civil service members and non-state actors, for instance, are integral to the functioning of multilateral cooperation, while also developing and giving expression to multilateral values. Though we recognize the critical role of non-state actors and officials, this paper is primarily delimited to interactions among governments.

The article will proceed as follows. First, we discuss conceptualizations of multilateralism, both minimal and expansive, before focusing on those which speak to the *kind of relations* that exist between participant actors. We claim that, while for most policy-makers multilateralism quite clearly possesses normative qualities, the precise nature of these qualities is often diffuse and underspecified.

Second, we define what we mean by “values” and comment on the putative distinction between values and interests. We argue that the motivational goals often ordained as interests by scholars and policymakers are themselves predicated on values, reflect ideas about what actors’ “interests” are or should be, and thus may not be as conceptually distinct from values as sometimes understood, particularly in the policy world. We suggest that re-examining the relationship between values and interests, and exploring implications for multilateralism, may yield benefits in future inquiry.

Third, we discuss the core values of multilateralism and posit the importance of those which are non-instrumental in character. For many advocates, the key to multilateralism lies in its instrumental value. It is seen as a tool to tackle regional and global problems more effectively. French President Emmanuel Macron exemplified this perspective ahead of a G7 meeting: “the key is multilateralism that produces results” (Khalaf et al., 2021). According to this “functionalist” view, multilateral arrangements are desirable “only insofar as they [...] produce tangible and immediate results in fighting global harms” (Pouliot, 2011: 18). We certainly agree that multilateralism has instrumental value. However, in contrast to the functionalist view we argue that, while multilateralism can manifest institutionally in myriad ways, it may have a set of important unifying and non-instrumental values. In fact, solely judging multilateralism by its ability to generate desirable policy results may explain much of the pessimism surrounding it. Building on John Ruggie’s conceptualization, we identify and

discuss three non-instrumental values associated with multilateralism, which speak to the potential of the doctrine to deal with contemporary challenges of global governance: a spirit of collectivity, inclusivity over exclusivity, and negotiated governance (Ruggie, 1992).

Fourth, in our discussion of values, we posit the analytical utility of distinguishing between variants of multilateralism, namely its formal, superficial, and substantive forms. In his work, Ruggie cites a distinction between “nominal” versus “qualitative” multilateralism (Ruggie, 1992). We build on this categorization, suggesting three variants. We determine that it is fruitful to look beyond the number of participants in multilateral arrangements, as well as the formal relations that are instituted among them, to examine the *nature* of engagement exhibited by participants. The article concludes with a brief discussion of implications for future scholarship in this research domain. It also reflects on the contemporary and future role of multilateralism in world politics, with a particular focus on how multilateralism may be well-positioned to help global actors to confront the interwoven policy challenges we face in the coming decades.

### **Multilateralism: Anatomy of a Concept**

Multilateralism can be defined as “the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states” (Keohane, 1990: 731).<sup>1</sup> It typically refers to the political, legal, and economic arrangements that inform regional and international order (Ikenberry, 2003), being “both a method of cooperation and a form of organization of the international system” (United Nations 2024b). Beyond this minimal definition, multilateralism may exhibit qualitative features that distinguish it from international cooperation generally, denoting mutually agreed “norms, rules, and principles that guide and govern interstate behaviour” (Hampson, and Heinbecker, 2011: 300). In his influential work, Ruggie posits that multilateralism encompasses three main characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of international alliance: (1) indivisibility of the whole, as illustrated, *inter alia*, by collective security arrangements; (2) non-discrimination in treatment of participants; and (3) diffuse reciprocity, that is, expectations of mutual and comparable benefits of cooperation over time (Ruggie 1992).

This perspective goes beyond the number of cooperating states to describe the *kind of relations* between them. It also appears to accord with use of the term among world leaders and policymakers, who frequently couch their discussions of multilateralism in normative language. For instance, the 2019 Alliance for Multilateralism initiated by France and Germany has been explicit in its basis in shared values (Greve 2021). Similarly, in December 2021 US President Biden extolled the virtues of multilateralism at his “Summit for Democracy”, while that same month Chinese President Xi Jinping offered an enthusiastic endorsement of multilateralism’s “core values” (McCarthy and Wang 2021). Similarly, former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has couched the alliance’s multilateralism in explicitly moral terms, whereas at the UN Secretary-General Guterres has routinely invoked the value-laden nature of multilateralism (Rettmann, 2022). This normative dimension is perhaps most clearly exemplified by the International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace, launched by the UN in 2018 to advance “the values of multilateralism” (United Nations 2022).

Of course, the motives and rules behind certain multilateral arrangements vary, with implications for their normative ethos. One might differentiate, for instance, between “open” and “closed” multilateral bodies. The UN is perhaps the archetypal “open” global diplomatic institution, with membership available to all sovereign states. We might also point to treaty-

based institutions with “universalist” ambitions such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). For others, membership is dependent on meeting more singular criteria, with accession connected with the size of a state’s economy, mode of governance, regional location, or sense of shared interests. For examples of closed entities, one might consider the European Union, NATO, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), intergovernmental fora such as the G7, the G20, G77, and BRICS, among others. We may also point to gradations between these categories, where institutions are nominally open but differ in the stringency of their rules. In the context of values, these distinctions may be important because open institutions may speak to broad values – such as universality and inclusion – in a way more exclusive bodies cannot.

We may rightfully ask, then, what are the characteristic values of multilateralism? Before engaging this question directly, it is useful to briefly dwell on the nature of values and their relation to interests. This is an important prior, not least because some authors distinguish between a multilateralism that is “value-based” or “based on interests” (Derviş, 2021).

### **Values and Interests**

Values can be defined as “cognitive representations of basic goals” which “serve as guiding principles in people’s lives” (Sagiv and Schwartz, 2022).<sup>2</sup> Unlike adjacent concepts, such as underlying motives or needs, values are — as cognitive representations — available to conscious thinking, whereby actors may decide to act on or disregard them.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, values do not have to be “other-regarding” — that is, concerned with the welfare of those beyond the self or outside of one’s community (Lucarelli, and Manners, 2006). While it is common in political analysis to treat forms of self-regarding action as reflective of interests, it is plausible to consider concerns such as the protection of one’s security and well-being — whether at the level of the individual or the domestic state — as much emblematic of values as a cosmopolitan concern for the well-being of foreign citizens.<sup>4</sup> To take a practical example: several governments forming an alliance on intelligence sharing (multilateralism) to preserve the safety of their citizens (a value) may well be considered a step toward the fulfilment of a value-based policy (Williams, 2023).

It is commonplace for analysts and policymakers to treat values and interests as discrete notions. This familiar distinction was exemplified by former US President Barack Obama in a 2011 speech on the NATO-led intervention in Libya, where he avowed the responsibility of the US to take action abroad “when our interests *and* values are at stake” (The White House, 2011: emphasis added). While articles and policy papers ruminate over the need to balance both concerns, some debate persists on the contours of each concept and the true extent of differentiation. Sceptical of the difference, Joseph Nye has argued that “moral values are simply intangible interests” (Nye, 1999). Other scholars suggest “it is inadequate simply to define values as another category of interests,” because the motives, logics of action, and political strategies of value or interest-led actors differ (Abbott, and Snyder, 2002: S142). The daylight between both positions may be partially explained by the latter camp’s concern for the utility of theoretical models, and the potential explanatory power gained from preserving the distinction – even if conceding it is a theoretical abstraction (ibid).

For our purposes, we wish to raise a third possibility, which holds that interests are merely a description of particular kinds of values held by actors, typically self-regarding at the individual or group level. According to this perspective, if we concede that motives, logics of action, or political strategies differ, this does not demonstrate a conceptual distinction between

the ends which are pursued, as these may just as well be embraced in service of different *kinds* of values. This position builds on seminal work by constructivists, suggesting that interests are often rooted in underlying normative values, rather than being fixed or purely material (see: Wendt 1999).

As such, when acting on the international stage, whether states prioritize issues such as national security or economic prosperity – aims ordinarily categorized as tangible goals reflecting states’ interests – or, say, the global state of democracy and human rights, they may simply be acting based on alternative sets of values. What are typically ordained as interests may themselves be predicated on values, reflecting ideas about what “interests” are or should be (Finnemore, 1992). To date, much of the scholarship on values and multilateralism tends – though not exclusively – to assume a clear demarcation between values and interests. However, presuming this dichotomy may oversimplify areas of overlap or complex interplay between both concepts. We believe future research may benefit from critically reassessing this division so as to elucidate the boundaries and genuine points of divergence and convergence between values and interests. By scrutinizing the intersections and potential overlaps between these constructs, scholars can deepen our understanding of their respective influence on multilateral cooperation, and on foreign affairs more generally.

Moreover, revisiting the nature of values and interests – and pointing to a shared idealist anchoring – has implications for the central thesis of the article, namely that the normative basis of multilateralism can underpin its relevance in meeting policy challenges in contemporary world politics. Following Wendt (1999: 128), a key task of decision-makers is one of selection, to figure out which values (or interests) to pursue, and what those are in the first instance (on selection challenges see: Gildea 2024). The process of acquiring preferences – in part determined by perceptions of what actions or means are available – is informed by social learning and practices, including in the diplomatic sphere and through participation in international fora. As such, the idealist dimension of preference formation – and, we might say, the identification of values or interests – may be shaped by values embedded in multilateral practices. To the extent that preferences emerge through social learning and practice, multilateralism may provide a distinct, normative context in which governments define and pursue them. Of course, this being said, it is plausible that these normative principles may not resonate with all governments, or that they will be interpreted differently among states. State leaders may also demonstrate buy-in within certain issue domains and not others, depending on the relative salience of issues. As we note below, governments may use multilateral engagement as a means of pursuing an obstructionist agenda, working against fellow members or the ethos of an institution. While recognising these possibilities and caveats, it is to the characteristic values of multilateralism that we will now turn.

## **Values and Multilateralism**

Multilateralism can have many faces, varying in institutional make-up and issue domain. The precise rules and principles which guide multilateral cooperation vary with the purpose and nature of the arrangement. At the UN General Assembly, for instance, each member state is afforded a single vote, irrespective of the size of its military, economy, or population. Conversely, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is a “quota-based institution” where members’ voting shares reflect financial contributions (IMF 2022). The relative role of civil servants – at times key players in the practical workings of multilateralism – can also vary. Despite the multitude of ways in which multilateralism may manifest, on an ad-hoc basis or institutionally, the doctrine may have certain unifying non-instrumental values. Here, we

suggest three potentially distinct but related values of genuine multilateralism, which go beyond its efficacy as an approach to satisfying the policy goals of participating states. These are: (i) a spirit of collectivity; (ii) inclusivity over exclusivity; and (iii) negotiated global governance.

### *Spirit of Collectivity*

Building on Ruggie's insights on multilateralism's core features, which include indivisibility, non-discrimination, and diffuse reciprocity, we contend that a potentially unifying value of the approach is participants' commitment to a *spirit of collectivity*. By this, we mean that multilateralism requires states to exhibit an ethos of partnership and collaboration to address areas of policy concern. It entails members having "buy-in" to the arrangement and to engage with its purposes in good faith,<sup>5</sup> embracing mutual consultation, burden-sharing, and solidarity (Baccarini, 2021). Its rules and norms should therefore be generally devised to promote respect and a "principled form of dialogue" among participating states (Pouliot, 2011: 18). There is a difference between being a *member* of a multilateral arrangement and *acting* multilaterally. Here, it is helpful to conceptually distinguish between *formal*, *superficial*, and *substantive* forms of multilateralism (Ruggie 1992). Formal multilateralism may refer to an arrangement involving multiple states whereby participants successfully meet the technical requirements for membership or involvement. The superficial variant is characterized by minimal commitment, where participation may be more about projecting engagement than achieving outcomes through meaningful participation. Substantive multilateralism, on the other hand, denotes a situation where states are not merely party to such an arrangement, but espouse the spirit of collectivity required of genuine multilateral engagement. Supporting this line of reasoning, at the UN Summit for the Future world leaders directly connected genuine multilateral cooperation to a spirit of collectivity, at least at a declarative level. A key vision and proposed outcome of the Summit was a renewed commitment to genuine, collective buy-in to the work of multilateral bodies, along with practical reforms to overcome mistrust or disengagement among member states and stakeholders (United Nations 2024c).

The US-led coalition during the 2003 Iraq War is an instructive case to illustrate the distinct forms of multilateralism. In public statements the US government noted that it had assembled a "coalition of the willing" of over 40 countries, covering a population of 1.23 billion. However, the coalition attracted criticism due to the decidedly uneven weighting of contributions, where "the United States took on almost the entire burden" of the war (Kreps, 2011: 48). A White House spokesperson outlined the cursory standard of entry, merely requiring a country's assent to be listed in the coalition (US Department of State 2003). Many members were reluctant to commit resources and troops (CFR 2003). NATO member Turkey was listed in the coalition "even though it has still to agree to cooperate" (MacAskill 2003).

The Iraq war coalition was multilateral in a *formal* sense. A large number of states had signed up to endorse the US-led war effort, with many offering comparatively small contributions. However, because the coalition lacked a spirit of collectivity based on genuine partnership, mutual dialogue, and a reasonable degree of burden-sharing, it may not have satisfied the requirements of *substantive* multilateralism. The uneven nature of the arrangement led analysts to consider action in Iraq as a – particularly on the part of states like Turkey – *superficial* form of multilateralism which was – given the dominant role of the US and bypassing of the UN – de facto unilateral in character (Kreps 2011: 137). If we consider examples such as Turkey's participation in the coalition under the rubric of "superficial multilateralism", it is helpful to

further differentiate between sub-categories of this form engagement. Turkey's role in the coalition was largely benign, in that its participation was not designed to hinder key objectives. Conversely, we may see examples of formal or superficial multilateral engagement which are obstructive. Illustrating the latter, we can point to the Russian Federation's extensive track record of vetoes on the UN Security Council since 2011, aimed to block any action in response to the atrocities unfolding in the Syrian civil war, as well as responses to its own military conduct in Ukraine (D'Alessandra, 2024).

Viewing a spirit of collectivity as a central value of multilateralism, and differentiating between formal, superficial, and substantive variations, offers important analytical benefits. It not only allows us to parse and categorize contrasting modes of multilateralism, such as those which are meaningful or largely nominal,<sup>6</sup> it also permits us to evaluate changes within institutions and alliances – including the behaviour of individual states – over time. French engagement with NATO, including its “creeping reintegration” within the alliance, demonstrates the utility of this approach. At various junctures, such as its withdrawal from NATO military command under de Gaulle in the 1960s, as well as its preference for a “diminished role” for NATO in the early 1990s, France lessened its engagement with – and commitment to – the alliance. Under Presidents Mitterand and Chirac this approach was gradually reversed. In 2008, President Sarkozy signalled a renewed commitment to NATO by announcing an “initiative to return France to NATO's integrated military command” (Ghez and Larrabee, 2009: 77). These events illustrate the analytical value of differentiating between formal, superficial, and substantive multilateralism. It is apparent that while France exhibited formal continuity in its membership for decades, its substantive commitment to the alliance varied significantly over time, at times leaning towards more superficial engagement. Looking beyond official or technical participation to the substance of state behaviour, including the degree to which a spirit of collectivity and shared purpose is evident, can shed light on the realities of multilateralism.

We can also relate this point to the distinction between multilateralism in its (non-)institutional variants. Consider a state X, which has obtained membership of a multilateral regulatory body but is a passive member whose policy behaviour is incongruent with the organization. Alternatively, envisage a state Y that, while falling outside of official membership, works constructively with the body and voluntarily harmonizes its policies with its rules (as seen with policy harmonization among states prior to EU accession). Here, we may reach the – perhaps counterintuitive – conclusion that the state outside of the multilateral body — state Y — is acting in a multilateral fashion, while the official member state is not. Multilateralism does not necessitate institutional expression and can entail “informal adjustments among states” (Ikenberry, 200: 534. Thinking in terms of a spirit of collectivity, and how this connects to formal, superficial, and substantive multilateralism, provides us with a conceptual vocabulary to describe and examine scenarios of this kind.

It is important to note that the spirit of collectivity that may arise with more substantive forms of multilateralism is not inherent but must be cultivated and learned through repeated practices of cooperation, dialogue, and negotiation. These practices facilitate a process of socialization by which states may internalize norms of partnership, mutual consultation, and burden-sharing, transforming collective action from a transactional exercise into a shared commitment to global governance. Through such engagement, states may develop trust and a genuine ethos of collaboration. A spirit of collectivity is therefore predicated on the routinization of particular practices, embedded within multilateral bodies.

*Inclusivity Over Exclusivity*

International politics is replete with pecking orders and diplomatic hierarchies, where the voices of some state representatives are weighed more heavily than others (Pouliot, 2016). Prominent institutions, such as the G7, have been criticized for being “minilateral” and insufficiently inclusive toward small states and emerging powers. A wider disconnect has also been identified, on account of its state centrism, between multilateralism and the global citizens it is ostensibly meant to serve (Hampson and Heinbecker, 2011). Building on these critiques, we posit that these proposed deficiencies could contradict a characteristic value of multilateralism: that it is a collective endeavour orientated towards inclusivity over exclusivity. The contrasting ethos of “minilateralism” provides a useful window into why inclusivity might be considered a core value of multilateralism. As an approach, minilateralism “bring[s] to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem” (Naím, 2009: 136). Advocates defend this selective approach to participation for reasons of efficacy. And the logic of its supporters may not be without merit. Decision-making within broad and inclusive bodies may become slow and unwieldy, hindering proactive approaches to policy issues of crucial importance. There may be a trade-off to be made between a commitment to inclusivity and efficacy, notably in areas where effective action is time-sensitive. However, given that minilateralism does involve cooperation among several states, why is it viewed in contrast to multilateralism? Perhaps it is because, by focusing on the views and influence of a limited number of states, minilateralism becomes exclusionary, even when it is institutionally sanctioned, as in the case of the UNSC (ibid).

The proponents of minilateralism show a “willingness to allow important decision making...to be devolved to a small group of key state actors” (McGee, 2011: 1). It is here that the central difference with multilateralism arises (Eckersley, 2012). For many, multilateralism is not simply an instrumental tool for policy delivery. It seeks to include states in diplomatic conversations on topics which affect them, even if their inclusion is not essential for achieving policy results. Again, this idea was recently exemplified in the UN Pact for the Future, an outcome document of the recent UN Summit for the Future. In the Pact, member states expressed their commitment that key UN bodies should widen their base of participating actors and prize “inclusivity,” notably in future reforms to the UNSC. Action 38 of the Pact specified the need to ensure multilateralism is “just, democratic, equitable and representative” (United Nations 2024c). In fact, it is precisely this tendency toward including governments and non-state actors who wish to have a seat at the table that frustrates advocates of minilateralism, who view it as a source of stasis and stagnation (Naím, 2009). In this vein, the UN advocates for an “inclusive” multilateralism that “shares power more broadly and fairly”, and which does more to include civil society and local and regional actors (See: United Nations 2021). This push towards further inclusivity not only reflects, in our view, a potential value of multilateralism in general, but also two realities of contemporary international politics. First, many of the key challenges facing policymakers — e.g. climate change, pandemics, migration, trade, terrorism — are global in scope, defy territorial boundaries, and speak to the interdependent futures of states. Second, in recent decades a more “complex multilateralism” has emerged, whereby sectors of global civil society increasingly interact with governments and international institutions (O'Brien et al., 2000).

As multilateral bodies vary in their scope, purpose, and importance, we might speak of multilateralism’s “tendency” or “orientation” toward inclusivity, rather than in an absolute sense. An inclusive approach does not mean all multilateral bodies must include all willing states. It might – in general – make little sense for a regional organisation, expressly organized to deal with policy issues specific to that region, to expand its membership globally, absent a

revision of its scope or perception of relevant actors. Additionally, removal from a multilateral body may not be ruled out as a means of sanctioning governments, as with Russia's 2014 suspension from the G8. This said, as the UN has suggested (United Nations 2021), inclusivity may be regarded as a key value for multilateralism which could serve as a ballast for international engagement. It is also worth noting that it is far from certain that a minilateral approach results in better outcomes, particularly in the long term. Although we believe this outcome is not necessarily pre-determined, experts have argued that exclusionary practices may well be "politically and practically short-sighted" by engendering a culture of mistrust among governments that could ultimately undermine cooperation and desired outcomes (Ní Aoláin, 2022). The shortcomings of the UNSC in adequately responding to a variety of security problems which have unfolded over the last decade – and the frustration this has created throughout the UN system, among many member states – are perhaps illustrative of this critique of minilateral arrangements.

Extending this point, rather than between discrete positions, in practice we can highlight a certain "tension" between inclusivity and exclusivity with multilateral institutions. This tension may exist within the structures of an institution – for example, division between the UNSC and the General Assembly – or through the evolution of a multilateral body, as with recent steps by the OECD to become more inclusive, while remaining, overall, a selective entity. These cases underscore how our current institutions may balance broader participation with selectivity.

We might then ask, how formal, superficial and substantive multilateralism connect to issues of inclusivity and exclusivity in institutional practices. These three categories intersect with the inclusivity-exclusivity spectrum in their description of how participation is structured within multilateral institutions. Formal multilateralism, while procedurally or technically inclusive, may mask underlying exclusion when decision-making power or burden-sharing are, in actual fact, concentrated among a few actors. Superficial multilateralism can present the illusion of inclusivity, with actors engaging nominally without genuine commitment to collective goals. In contrast, substantive multilateralism aligns more closely with true inclusivity, fostering genuine engagement and equitable participation, where actors collectively contribute to shared outcomes. These intersections reveal how the quality of multilateralism influences the extent to which its inclusivity is meaningful or not.

### *Negotiated Global Governance*

As we have noted, many adopt a "functional" view of multilateralism where it is viewed as a means to an end. Multilateral alliances are deemed desirable "insofar as they allow actors to...produce tangible and immediate results in fighting global harms" (Pouliot 2011: 18). Entering into agreement on disarmament or environmental regulations, for example, allows states to avoid the competitive disadvantages that could arise should they take unilateral action. However, this functional view may neglect a primary attribute of multilateralism, that it possesses non-instrumental value independent of its output. Specifically, a key value of multilateralism may be its commitment to negotiated global governance, irrespective of whether particular decisional outcomes prove normatively desirable (see: Pouliot, 2011). By negotiated global governance, we refer to scenarios where multiple states, rather than leveraging coercive power to satisfy their preferences, voluntarily enter into collective arrangements to cooperate, build consensus, or reach compromise in contested policy areas.

An analogy to the non-instrumental merits of democracy is instructive. It is certainly not axiomatic that democratic elections will produce good leaders or representative policies. In recent decades, democratic voting has resulted in governments that are “routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms” (Zakaria, 1997: 22). The success of illiberal movements at the ballot box has meant democracy facilitating the corrosion of institutional checks and balances many find desirable. And yet, despite uncertainty in the outcomes it will produce, the voting procedure retains a strong sense of value both among democratic theorists and in the public mind. Theorists have argued that democracy has inherent value because it confers an equal say to citizens and affords them the freedom to choose their political fate (Shapiro 2009). Conversely, an autocratic regime whose policies align with the public will would lack this legitimating value, because the *process* by which leaders are chosen represents important value in itself (Ziliotti, 2020). Similarly, there is no guarantee, especially given the contrasting preferences of states globally, that multilateral relations will produce positive outcomes. The Arab League, for instance, a multilateral body originally founded in 1945, has long been populated by dictatorships and roundly criticized for failures on domestic human rights abuses and regional conflicts (Masters, and Sergie, 2020).

Moreover, serious question marks remain over the continued justification of key multilateral bodies and mechanisms, such as the veto power at the UN Security Council, as well as their efficacy in fulfilling crucial goals, such as resolving global security disputes (CFR 2022). Some have gone as far as to say that, due to the scale of failures, the global architectures of multilateralism are in crisis (Zürn 2022). We contend that, much like democracy, a key value of multilateralism may lie in its approach to governance. Multilateralism, by its nature, confers a form of equality and mutual recognition on participating states, the primary constituent elements of the international system. Because it approaches potential conflict through “principled and inclusive dialogue” multilateralism could be considered — due to its imparting of a more just decisional process — “an end in itself” irrespective of specific outcomes (Pouliot, 2011). Multilateralism offers a pragmatic roadmap of development for global governance, in that it recognizes the enduring importance of states as international actors, while being open to the inclusion of non-state transnational entities and reflective of the key role of international civil servants.<sup>7</sup> Not only this, but as an expression of negotiated global governance, it offers a framework for actors with diverse preferences to interact as equals, offering a processual good perhaps analogous to that of democracy at a domestic state level.

This said, one must try to reconcile the multilateral tendency for equality and mutual recognition with the realities of the pecking orders of international politics. One way of doing so is by appeal to the concept of polysemous compromise. According to this idea, agreements in international relations can accommodate multiple, overlapping interpretations to satisfy diverse actors with differing interests or perspectives. Instead of striving for a singular, unambiguous resolution, polysemous compromise allows for flexibility and ambiguity, enabling actors to align with the same agreement while interpreting its meaning in ways that align with their own preferences or values (see: Pouliot and Thérien 2023).

## **Conclusion**

Over the past quarter century, the influence of values in foreign policy has been met with broad scepticism among analysts. In this time, the British Journal of Politics and International Relations has, to its credit, published a wide range of scholarship examining the effects and legacies of values in world politics. Given the renewed attention the field is now paying to

values, as well as discussions surrounding the normative foundations and future prospects of multilateralism, we view it as a particularly auspicious moment to reflect on the connection between values and multilateralism. The 2024 UN Summit of the Future, which appealed to values as the basis for reinvigorating multilateralism and bring about institutional reform, provides useful backdrop for this analysis.

As we look to the next twenty-five years of IR scholarship, this article has developed a number of arguments that aim to provide fertile pathways for future inquiry. First, we posit the potential benefits of analytically refocusing on the relationship between values and interests, raising the possibility that interests may be understood as particular – typically self-regarding – kinds of values held by actors. What are typically ordained as interests may themselves be predicated on values, reflecting ideas about what “interests” are or should be. By scrutinizing the intersections and potential overlaps between these constructs, scholars can deepen our understanding of their respective role both in multilateral cooperation and foreign policy more generally.

In addition, we posit the analytical utility of distinguishing between formal, superficial and substantive forms of multilateralism. Using the US-led coalition in the 2003 Iraq War and the changing dynamics of French engagement with NATO as illustrative examples, we suggest this method of categorisation not only allows us to parse and classify contrasting modes of multilateralism, such as those which are meaningful or largely nominal, but also permits us to evaluate behavioural changes within institutions and alliances over time. We further highlight the importance of moving beyond “functionalist” understandings of multilateralism, to take account of its non-instrumental values. This may involve specification of the values which are distinct to multilateralism itself. These values have often been alluded to by world leaders and policymakers in a diffuse and underspecified way. As such, we discuss three potentially non-instrumental values that may be associated with multilateralism: a spirit of collectivity, inclusivity over exclusivity, and negotiated governance.

Finally, given these values, here we conclude by briefly reflecting on implications for the future of multilateralism. Despite facing formidable challenges in recent years, we believe multilateralism remains a potent framework for navigating conflicting preferences among global actors and tackling major policy issues. This is particularly so given its normative underpinnings and values. The spirit of collectivity that characterizes substantive forms of multilateral engagement can foster collaboration and collective problem-solving among diverse actors on the global stage. Its orientation toward inclusivity, prioritizing the involvement of stakeholders over exclusive arrangements, can ensure broader participation and legitimacy in decision-making processes. Additionally, its emphasis on negotiated governance could provide a structured platform for reconciling divergent perspectives through consensus-building and compromise. By affirming its normative foundations and values, multilateralism may prove to be a resilient and valuable doctrine for navigating the multifaceted global challenges we will face in the coming twenty-five years.

## Notes

- 1. We use the term “global majority” to reflect the fact 80% of the world’s population resides outside the regional body defined by the UN as the “Western**

- European and Others Group”, also comprising North America, New Zealand, and Australia (United Nations 2024d).
2. Although we recognize the increasing role of non-state actors in transnational relations, including multilateralism, our focus remains on intergovernmental relations.
  3. A “value-based” multilateralism has also been contrasted to an “all-inclusive” form (Grieve, 2021).
  4. When an actor becomes conscious of their motives (e.g. vengeance) or needs (e.g. acquiring sustenance), they can be transformed into values (Sagiv and Schwartz, 2022).
  5. For instance, in their systematic review and discussion of the nature of values, Sagiv and Schwartz identify concern for security as a value.
  6. For example, states should not join a multilateral arrangement in a merely nominal manner or seek to use its membership to subvert it.
  7. Of course, in practice, a multilateral arrangement may not fit neatly within a single category and encompass elements of both.
  8. Critics, including proponents of global democracy, may argue that multilateralism does not go far enough to reflect democratic values (Koenig-Archibugi, 2011).

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