The Political Language of Multilateralism in the United Nations

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1 Introduction

Politics and Language of Multilateralism

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1 Introduction

Politics and Language of Multilateralism

1.1 Politics of Multilateralism

The starting point of this volume is this research question: what kind of political language of multilateralism takes place in the selected UN bodies, and what this tells us about multilateralism and its nuances to better understand the current state of multilateralism? In the UN Security Council meeting in February 2022, Permanent Representative of Kenya Martin Kimani, in his remarks in the context of Russian invasion of Ukraine, argued: "Multilateralism lies on its deathbed tonight. It has been assaulted today as it has been by other powerful states in the recent past" (S/PV.8970, 9). Another description of the current state of multilateralism can be found in the UN documentation concerning the UN agreement "Pact for the Future," stating:

> Today, our multilateral system, constructed in the aftermath of Second World War, is under unprecedented strain. . . . Without fundamental changes to our multilateral institutions, a recognition of the need for greater international cooperation, and an unwavering commitment to the Charter and international law, global challenges could overwhelm and threaten all of humanity.
>
> (UN 2024)

The citations illustrate some of the nuances related to the theme, but the topic is more complex, especially if multilateralism is perceived as an institution or even an actor of some kind, as the representative of Kenya was implying, or as a process that produces results, as the latter citation was implying. How should we perceive – and indeed understand multilateralism? For instance, the UN conference on the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in Riyadh in December 2024, clearly a multilateral event, concluded without reaching a resolution. In the unofficial resolution the participants, however, agreed to continue negotiations. Does this mean that international multilateral cooperation failed due to a lack of outcome, or did it succeed, because the conference took place and the ongoing process of dialogue between states on a common political project illustrated a consensus on the need to continue the dialogue? The answer to this can vary based on whether you primarily understand multilateralism as a norm describing a practice, as a process defining international politics in the context of a specific political

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issue and decision-making, or as an outcome of negotiations that the relevant parties are committed to, which can take the form of a resolution or a treaty.

Multilateralism, like the whole United Nations system, takes place in the context of international politics. The war in Ukraine, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, the situation in Libya, the return of great power politics, the shifting stance of the United States (US) under Donald J. Trump towards its commitments to international organizations and treaties, and the growing complexity of crises are just a few issues that have defined or continue to define international politics in recent years. These, along with other developments, indicate that multilateral cooperation is either missing or struggling, especially in terms of maintaining peace and security, highlighted by the use of veto by three permanent members of the United Nations' (henceforth UN) Security Council (henceforth UNSC), namely China, Russia, and the United States, not only regarding the recent events in the Middle East and Ukraine but also previously regarding Syria. The UNSC has been seen as incapable of acting when the five permanent (henceforth P5) members perceive action as threatening their interests, thus provoking the use of vetoes towards resolutions and hindering UNSC action. At the same time, the world is facing a climate crisis, experiencing biodiversity loss, and witnessing a deterioration in the commitment to the human rights system and human rights, indicating a situation that has also been called a polycrisis (see, e.g., Lawrence et al. 2024).

Simultaneously, growing tides of authoritarianism, crisis of liberal or rules-based international order, and increased contestation towards international cooperation and organizations affect how multilateralism is perceived in terms of its capability to solve global problems and the existential threats the world is facing, as well as how states are committed to multilateralism. Strategic competition has intensified, having various impacts on multilateralism in both normative and practical terms (Jokela et al. 2023). Increasingly, countries do not necessarily agree on norms, rules, and procedures, and the rise of international organizations' (henceforth IO) political authority has been considered to also underline their contestation (Schuette 2024).

In a similar manner, previous literature has addressed IO's "survival politics" amid the crisis of multilateralism (e.g., Schuette 2024). The Summit for the Future, proposed by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres and initiated by the UN General Assembly (henceforth UNGA), gathered relevant parties to discuss "multilateral solutions for a better tomorrow" in September 2024. The core idea was that multilateralism should keep pace with the changing world and the overall complexity of the issues. Discussions over multilateralism and its status are connected to the discussion of IOs and the UN, and here is the field our volume offers a contribution. In the context of multilateralism as an older idea and a concept than the United Nations as an organization, and the crisis of multilateralism taking place not only in relation to the UN but more broadly, the United Nations is nevertheless a highly relevant case as an institution serving as a mirror of broader discussion related to the theme. This is partly related to what the UN is and what it does, and what political basis it is able to operate on. The UN draws much legitimacy for its activities through its role at the center of the multilateral system of sovereign states.

The UN Charter is an instrument of international law and an international treaty, and it brings together its member states and enables the basis for an organization that can then be used to harbor other international treaties and foster cooperation between states.

Basically, the question is about multilateralism as an ongoing affair, a process taking place in a particular institutionalized framework that the UN represents, thus highlighting the two-way relationship between multilateralism and the UN. According to Hanns Maull (2020), it is not so much about multilateralism as "a diplomatic process" but about what kind of values and principles and what kind of institutions should define the international order and thus outline international politics. Not only what (diplomacy) but also how (what kinds of values – or norms and rules – are attached). Multilateralism can thus be seen as the "right and appropriate" answer to a specific question (see Maull 2020, 9). Secretary-General Guterres, in his remarks at the Human Rights Council in 2024, spoke about how the era of stable power relations is over, and the move is towards multipolarity. He further stated how "multipolarity without strong multilateral institutions is a recipe for chaos" (Guterres 2024). The Secretary-General's remarks pinpoint that the new division of powers does not rule out multilateral institutions or structures but rather it assumes them. Multipolarity could also be seen through the lens of opportunity for a more inclusive multilateralism, including multi-stakeholders (Jarnecki and Mott 2025). Certainly, there are potential or emerging trends taking place, such as states drifting more apart into more informal blocks, but when the role of the UN is concerned, the presence of such trends shaping multilateralism is important only if they are acknowledged – and politically engaged with – in the UN by sovereign states and the representatives of the UN. Therefore, what happens in the UN in the context of multilateralism reflects the state of international politics and the stances of sovereign states towards what themes and why they are important for international politics now and in the future.

Our volume serves as an attempt to take the scholarly discussion a bit further from the discussion of crisis and explore the institutional issues related to it. As one recent example of such an approach, in 2024 a special issue was published in *Global Governance*, and in the introduction, the editors aptly pointed out multilateralism in times of crisis rather than being in crisis. However, the problem seems to arise indeed from the current incapability of a multilateral system to face these challenges (Romaniuk et al. 2024). In fact, the challenges to multilateralism are by no means completely new. Amitav Acharya wrote in 2018 that "the traditional conception of multilateralism that underpinned the United Nations at its birth is under serious challenge, which comes from a global shift in power and ideas" (Acharya 2018, 781). In an article, Gro Harlem Brundtland (2020, 2) also noted how we are living in a period "when the multilateral system finds itself under an unprecedented state of attack."

According to the Multilateralism Index Report (International Peace Institute and Institute for Economics and Peace 2022), there are, however, differences among the policy areas, and in some areas, multilateralism has increased or strengthened in the specific timeline of 2010–2020. Similarly, Stimson Center's the Global

Governance Survey 2023 (Charney 2023), exploring public attitudes to global governance, conflict, pandemic, and climate issues in the G7 and BRICS countries, illustrated that the public in both country groups would like to have multilateral leadership to find solutions regarding major global challenges. Contrary to some claims, multilateralism seems not to be dying but it is increasingly being politicized, and that has both advantages and disadvantages.

1.1.1 Conceptual Dimension of Multilateralism

The United Nations has key benefits as a source of study. It offers a whole system that has provided a forum for intergovernmental engagement for decades – also for discussion concerning the premises and content of multilateralism. Indeed, the core questions are what multilateralism means and how the usage of the term – or concept – reflects the state of international relations in particular contexts. Caroline Bouchard et al. (2014, 1) write that "while a large body of research exists on multilateralism as a concept, it continues to be ill-defined and poorly understood." The core dimensions and characteristics are still obscure and disputed. For Bouchard et al. (2014, 1), multilateralism is not a key concept in IR studies (similarly to anarchy), and they aimed to change that. We will follow a similar path and strive to reflect multilateralism as a context-bound concept that sheds light on the state of the world and the international order where we live. In this volume, our assumption is not to discuss the concept's status in IR studies but to examine multilateralism as a concept in political language with the assumption that it is continuously contested and reflects key political thought related to what multilateralism means for contemporaries and what its meanings perhaps should be in the future to enable a more strengthened international order, even a form of global governance that the United Nations itself represents.

Using concepts is "an exercise of selectivity" whether intentionally or accidentally and thus not an exercise in producing the entirety of meaning. Disagreement of social and political concepts' connotations is inherent because indeterminacy over their meaning is not an exception but a norm (Steinmetz and Freeden 2017, 25). In this conceptual framework, the UN does not constitute an exception, on the contrary. As is the case with other forums of engagement between political actors and representatives, language also plays a crucial role in the UN context. Through discursive action, norms are established, maintained, and sometimes contested, sanctions are given, resolutions are passed, and rights are promoted and protected. Multilateralism could also be seen as a rhetorical commonplace or topos, involving specific norms but which could also be used as a reference point for different actors' strategies either to seek political support, to authorize policies or legitimatize issues to other states, to mention a few.

Multilateralism as a concept can be traced historically to the post-1815 Concert of Europe, which has been considered the first multilateral system of global governance (Ikenberry 2015). Teló (2023) uses the time of Renaissance and the city-states as a starting point of his investigation of multilateral treaties and arrangements. The contemporary form of multilateralism is commonly attached to the birth of

the multilateral system with relevant institutions, including the UN, in the post–Second World War period, and the liberal international world order (e.g., Acharya and Plesch 2020). This timeline coincides with an era that Ikenberry (2015) considered the "golden era" of multilateralism. However, the Locarno agreement system in 1925 included both bilateral and multilateral peace agreements (Wallin 2005), and the League of Nations had a similar idea of international cooperation regulated by specific principles.

Though we do not aim to write the history of the concept of multilateralism, it is useful to have some idea of its origins. The first mention of multilateralism in the US Congress takes place in 1906, but it does not refer to the topic of interest here. However, it becomes more common in 1919 in the context of the Versailles Peace Treaty (especially Article 282 on multilateral treaties) and the League of Nations. In newspaper articles, it is used, for example, to refer to the Kellog-Briand Pact and other treaties in the following years. The *New York Times*, for example, mentions "multilateral" and "multilateralism" in April 1944 when discussing Secretary of State Gordon Hulls' views on the statement of British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the possible obstacles to an Anglo-American economic agreement (*New York Times*, April 26, 1944).

While there is no single mutually agreed conception of multilateralism, it has become a symbol of international cooperation and a certain buzzword, the background of which we will go through in the latter part of this introduction. Two principles of multilateralism have been seen as especially relevant: (1) That the cooperation is done by more than three states; and (2) it is done by following certain principles, as well-knowingly identified by John Ruggie (1992), highlighting multilateralism as a form of cooperation that takes place in a particular context of existing rules and institutional features. In the UN context, this means that it is an *intergovernmental* organization in which member states are committed to its Charter as a foundational set of principles for state behavior, thus acknowledging the legitimate authority of the UN in relevant fields. Often, multilateralism simply refers to collective and cooperative actions among states (and non-state actors) to solve common problems and challenges when these are best managed collectively at the international level (see Newman et al. 2006), therefore constituting political projects on the international stage.

Multilateralism is commonly seen in a positive light among scholars and diplomats (Rüland 2018). If intergovernmentalism relates to the process of negotiation between governments to cooperate while retaining their sovereignty, multilateralism is a different form of cooperation, centered on shared political projects in a way that might bypass the national governments – such as the UNSC has a right to do in questions of maintaining international peace and security – but such a form of cooperation is not supranational per se.

Nevertheless, certain principles of multilateralism can also be considered to restrict opportunities for international cooperation when the pursued values and norms, or the expectations for the cooperation, are not similarly shared by all the relevant actors (see Creutz 2022). This could lead to more informal alternative groupings of like-minded countries and a more minimalistic form of

multilateralism. Evan J. Criddle and Evan Fox-Decent (2019) have pointed out, in relation to the challenges to multilateralism, that it is not only about a backlash of institutions but also about norms. Increasingly, there seems to be a question of whether multilateral cooperation should be based on liberal values or whether there is or could be an emerging form of authoritarian multilateralism (see Raymond and Sherman 2023 on the global cyber regime), raising the prospect of a form of global governance that emphasizes the role of powerful states. Indeed, one of the key themes associated with multilateralism is whether there should always be some value-related attribute defining multilateralism. Or is there a possibility (and even a requirement) for multilateralism that could rise above different values or forms of domestic power – something that is simply shared by everyone and could act as the lowest common denominator. In an article by Daniëlle Flonk and Maria J. Debre (2025), "hollow multilateralism" is used to describe how autocracies support multilateralism that serves their purposes. A common statement in support of the UN system and international cooperation has been to support a "rules-based international order," mostly based on the idea of post–Second World War political and economic rules.

1.1.2 Demand for Multilateralism in International Relations

Considering the central role of the UN in international order, it is possible to argue that if there is a crisis of multilateralism, there is also a crisis regarding the United Nations and its role in international politics. Increased nationalist and populist tones tend to favor the possibility of fragmented responses to global challenges, which are increasingly interconnected, also indicating the overlap of the three UN pillars of peace and security, human rights, and development. However, the UN should always be regarded as a reflection of state approaches to international relations in general. "To understand the UN, is to understand comparative state foreign policies" (Weiss et al. 2019, 499), indicating the common statement that the UN is what the states make of it. The collective system is based on the UN Charter, but the idea of UN's political authority is constantly developing depending on the enacted norms, policies, or precedents. The UN's political authority is closely related to the question of the UN's legitimacy and how it is experienced. Whether and how, for example, the UN member states consider the tension between their sovereign rights and the UN in specific policy issues. Human rights are one of the issues in which states tend to refer to their sovereignty and see possible UN action or policies interfering with their sovereignty.

The UN, at the heart of the multilateral system, has faced a legitimacy deficit related to its functions and structure, based on the power relations and world views of the post–Second World War era. Increasingly, more matters are proceeding through informal institutions, such as G-groups, in which the countries of the Global South seek opportunities for leadership. One example is Indonesia, which held the chairmanships of both G-20 in 2022 and ASEAN in 2023. States may also have their initiatives among like-minded countries, including the United States' climate and democracy summits during the presidency of Joe Biden. States also

tend to think strategically when they act either bilaterally, unilaterally, or through a multilateral framework, and these are not necessarily considered mutually exclusive. Samuel B. H. Faure (2019) defines this approach as *flexilateralism*. Acharya (2023), in his essay, also speaks about "hybrid arrangements" among states and non-state actors as a part of global governance in a "multiplex world" together with the emergence of more plurilateral and regional institutions. While we acknowledge the emerging features of multilateralism, we chose to focus on the UN and related discussions because the UN continues to play a significant role in international multilateral cooperation, despite the challenges it currently faces. So far, member states have not completely withdrawn, and some are increasingly using the UN as a platform to advance their own interests and issues.

Previously, *minilateralism* has been suggested as a solution to solve global problems, highlighting agile and quicker solutions (Naím 2009). Multilateralism has also been seen as mandatory – international law "mandates multilateralism" to confirm that states' practices and laws are in accordance with sovereignty of states and common stewardship (Criddle and Fox-Decent 2019). In the report of the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, decision-making is effective if it is flexible and networked but also future-oriented (HLAB 2023, 21). As such, the United Nations is an organization that enables, supports, and leads multilateralism, but it is also an organization that often gives way to a more "mosaic" version of multilateralism, with other institutions taking a leading role with the UN approval, thus paving the way for an even more dynamic and complex multilateral framework in the future.

This volume suggests that instead of speaking of crises of multilateralism and its alternatives, we should also concentrate on the usage of language regarding multilateralism and how it is used politically. The conceptual politics of multilateralism in the United Nations in different key themes illustrate the lack of a commonly agreed understanding of multilateralism, but also that there are different national interests to promote alternatives and new definitions of what multilateral should or could be. In an article, Ruggie (1992, 584) described the evolution of multilateralism and pointed out that "multipurpose, universal organization[s]," such as the UN, involve themselves in areas where normative consensus does not exist. Other developments, mentioned by Ruggie (1992, 584), are related to multilateral institutions sharing in states' convening power and agenda setting, and that multilateral diplomacy has become a procedural norm of its own right.

An extensive amount of literature on multilateralism has been published over the years. Our contribution is to provide an empirical perspective by looking at how multilateralism as a concept is employed in the discussions within the UN's work on peace and security, human rights, and development, following the UN's three-pillar structure.

1.1.3 The Contribution of the Book

Multilateralism continues to be a topic that attracts scholarly attention (see, e.g., Teló 2023). Speaking about politics and multilateralism in the UN context is,

however, "surprisingly novel," as pointed out by Katie Laatikainen and Karen Smith (2020), with a few exceptions (e.g., Louis and Maertens 2021; Schechter 1999). Commonly, literature has focused on the UN and its pillars (e.g., Weiss 2009; Weiss and Daws 2018b), the theoretical and institutional foundations on which the UN is based (e.g., Mingst et al. 2022), in addition to global policymaking in the UN (Pouliot and Thérien 2023) or the UN and the future (Hosli et al. 2021). Further, we could mention textbooks (e.g., Weiss and Daws 2018a eds.), general introductions to the UN and its work (e.g., Hanhimäki 2008), or how the UN should be reformed (e.g., Trent and Schnurr 2018). Some studies have also focused on country-specific cases (e.g., Lyon 2016) and how domestic contexts affect countries' views towards global governance.

The UN has interested practitioners, academics, and politicians alike and has been the focus of numerous studies, journals, and policy briefs since its foundation. The aim of this volume, however, is to pay attention to the discursive and conceptual approach to studying multilateralism and thus provide a novel approach to studying the UN. Following John Austin's (1962) well-known idea of words as deeds, debates in this book are understood as a form of political action. They can be about policy or different directions, in addition to the structure and regime of polity (Wiesner et al. 2017, 1). In the UN context, debates are also about norms (or their contestation) and are part of common political agendas or common political projects that often create the substance of multilateralism. We are specifically interested in how the idea of multilateralism is employed in these discussions. While the number of international organizations has substantially grown, in addition to examples of multilateral organizations par excellence – the European Union – this book focuses on the UN because our aim is to better understand specifically the conceptual dynamics within the UN context, which has been mostly neglected in previous research. The timeframe of the analysis is from the 1990s onwards. The end of the Cold War is often considered to be the golden era of international cooperation, coinciding with greater multilateralization of world politics. While the UN, its procedures, and policies clearly change over the years, the selected timeframe of analysis allows us to reflect on multilateralism not in the context of current or recently experienced crises but how it has been discussed or conceptualized. We hope that such an investigation will provide ideas on how to foster further research and eventually strengthen the UN to be able to cope with any challenges the future might entail.

1.2 Research Approach

More and more actors are involved in international politics, yet multilateralism and multilateral institutions are still very state-led, and sovereignty-based. While the UN is promoting universal norms and equally giving one voice and vote for all member countries in UNGA, the UN is by no means separate from politics and political interests (Weiss 2009; Acharya 2018). This provides the starting point for the research approach to this book. The UN Security Council is perhaps the most obvious platform for great power politics, highlighted by the Charter's

description of the body's functions and the veto power. Similarly, however, even smaller states are interested in their sovereignty and pursuing issues close to their interests. According to the UN voting data, during the 76th UNGA, 235 resolutions were adopted without a vote, whereas 80 resolutions were voted upon, reflecting UN decision-making and different points of view among the member countries.[1] Most of the time, the UNGA works in a consensus-oriented manner, which means that most of the member states can accept the resolutions or norms, but they are not necessarily that ambitious and are based on the least common denominator. Some of the policy questions are more controversial and attract the use of votes.

State centrism is evident in the UN's practices and procedures, as the UN Charter envisions. For example, voting in the UN is not about the UN delegations' views but rather about the views of member states' governments through their delegations. The votes in the General Assembly are counted, but they are not weighted like in the Security Council, where the permanent members have a veto right, in contrast to the elected members. Nevertheless, states have also clearly offered ideas on how to create resolutions and engage with topics. Debates, procedures, vocabulary, and even to some extent rhetorical strategies follow the parliamentary model in the UN with the "parliamentary procedure" to ensure "the orderly conduct of public debates" in the General Assembly (Peterson 2018, 120). The UN General Assembly is the main forum for debate and disagreements between the member states. Resolutions passed by the UNGA are significant in defining policies and norms that are internationally accepted and agreed upon. While the assembly itself does not legislate, many of the norms, agreements, and policies are turned into action through legislative or other measures by the national parliaments and legislatures, including the Paris Climate Accord and the Sustainable Development Goals. Simply put, the UN acts as a political nexus of international negotiations and discussions.

Although the UN and multilateralism have been studied from different perspectives over the years, so far there has not been an in-depth analysis of the conceptual and rhetorical aspects of focusing on the political language of multilateralism. Risto Wallin (2005, 9) has written about how the UN established a new kind of rhetoric and vocabulary for international relations. Similarly, we are interested in approaching the conception of multilateralism and how it has been defined in the UN context in the specific timeline of the 1990s onwards, after the end of the Cold War. This specific period was called by then the Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali as "A new chapter in the history of the United Nations" (quoted in Mazower 2019, 1).

Research on multilateralism gained momentum at the end of the Cold War (Rüland 2018, 2). In IR literature, multilateralism has been seen either as a value itself or as a means of international cooperation (e.g., Pouliot 2011). Multilateralism is often attributed with adjectives of effective and inclusive, stressing its two sides. According to Robert Keohane (1990, 731), when the concept of multilateralism is mentioned, it "is not clear what phenomena are to be described and explained," and in IR it has been used more to describe the practice than as an analytical concept in research. The concept of multilateralism has been considered to consist of

"collectively agreed norms, rules, and principles that guide and govern interstate behavior" (Hampson and Heinbecker 2011, 300). Multilateralism has been seen as principled (Ruggie 1992), or nowadays more contested (Morse and Keohane 2014), or even diminished (Rüland 2018, 2012). In the early 2000s, Richard N. Haass introduced a conception of "multilateralism à la carte" when explaining US actions during the George W. Bush administration and in particular the country's decision not to accept the International Criminal Courts' (ICC) authority or other international treaties. According to Haass (2008), the US approach was not unilateral but "choosy," indicating an approach that has been later also called *flexilateralism* (see Faure 2019) to indicate different options.

When discussing international politics and the United Nations, one cannot avoid the topic of international law. As pointed out by Christian Reus-Smit (2004, 38), states also participate in formal modes of legislation, one of the most common being multilateralism. While we are interested in looking at multilateralism as a norm, process, or outcome, we do not refer to the international law perspective or terminology per se. The research approach of this book is interdisciplinary, combining approaches from political science, contemporary history, and IR. We aim to provide conceptual, rhetorical, and sometimes historical observations about the politics of multilateralism in the context of leading fields of the UN activity, that is, maintaining international peace and security, promoting human rights and strengthening development. Our work has been inspired by two intellectual currents in the studies of politics and history in recent decades. The first is "conceptual history" or "conceptual approach to study of political thought," as developed by Quentin Skinner (2002), Reinhart Koselleck (1985), or Pierre Rosanvallon (2006), and continued today in various enterprises around History of Concepts Group. The second perspective consists of some versions of parliamentary studies focusing on concepts, debates, and rhetoric (see Ihalainen et al. eds. 2016; Benoît and Rozenberg eds. 2020), which could be extended to the study of plenary and committee debates in the United Nations. While these approaches have been applied to cross-national comparisons and supranational institutions, particularly the European Union (see Wiesner ed. 2021; Haapala and Oleart eds. 2022), they have not been utilized in the study of the United Nations and its sub regional organizations, albeit with some exceptions.

Kirsten Haack (2011) and Marie Christine Boilard (2019) have explored the conceptual dynamics within the UN context to understand the role given to democracy and human rights in the politics of the different bodies and agenda of the United Nations. These contributions have been framed as contributions in conceptual history and have thus opened avenues for new scholarly contributions, as has Wiseman (2011) with his work on conceptualization of multilateralism in diplomatic studies.

Talking about multilateral cooperation can relate to different themes, from finding case-specific solutions and promoting practical cooperation between states to interpreting and describing the claimed state of crisis in cooperation. Our intention is to analyze the language of multilateralism employed when the United Nations handles cases of transnational challenges and seeks to establish an international

response. It pays attention to all UN pillars, thus having a holistic view of studying multilateralism. While conducting this, we will offer an argument that the conceptual politics of multilateralism taking place in the United Nations concerning key contemporary challenges illustrate a lack of shared understanding of multilateralism, but also a broad interest in promoting alternatives for multilateral cooperation as an activity. We suggest that the United Nations is and should be an organization that both enables multilateralism and above all leads to the formulation of multilateralism. Furthermore, we suggest that the UN does not need to have a prerogative over how to conduct multilateral cooperation in practice, thus paving the way for a more dynamic and mosaic multilateral framework of the future, under the auspices of the UN. The volume contributes to knowledge of multilateralism and UN politics through analysis of how multilateralism is conceptualized and discursively construed within relevant UN forums and debates. By approaching multilateralism as a concept that is dynamically shaped, differently understood, and contested, the book provides a new angle to the study of political aspects of multilateralism specifically, and UN research more broadly.

To find answers to our research question, we focus on the politics that have occurred in the UN context and emphasize a perspective combining elements of contemporary history to political research, highlighting a premise that the events taking place in the international politics of the post–Cold War period help to shed light on multilateralism as a dynamic, potentially changing and above all a phenomenon that reflects stances and approaches of states. The book is thematically arranged around the three UN pillars that help to organize the work done in the UN and related debates on multilateralism. It relies on the wide use of empirical sources that we have analyzed using a qualitative method of contextualized textual analysis, which has been mainly neglected in previous studies on the UN and multilateralism.

We start our investigation from the dawn of a new era of hopes and dreams concerning what the United Nations could achieve when the ideological conflict and the bipolarized relations of the Cold War had waned. The rationale for this approach is also a discursive one: in the early 1990s, discussions about multilateralism began to gain new attention while the world was in a dynamic phase and the great powers were repositioning themselves. At the same time, major challenges were either already present or gradually emerging. War, the "scourge of war" as described in the Preamble of the Charter, had been present throughout the history of the United Nations. From the 1990s onwards, it was accompanied by renewed attention to human rights and the prospect of climate change as a new and major worldwide threat. These challenges have continued to be part of the United Nations' agenda.

The idea is to examine the discursive use of multilateralism by first recognizing the relevant cases regarding how multilateralism has been directly or indirectly referred to within the UN and then situating them in their relevant political context to help explain positions towards multilateralism. We hypothesize that there are differences in policy areas as indicated, for example, in the *Multilateralism Index Report*. We are also interested in seeing how multilateralism is seen as a norm, process, and outcome, and how this affects the conception and language of

multilateralism. We aim to understand how concepts and ideas are operationalized in different contexts and what kind of controversies exist, thus providing a novel understanding of multilateralism for those who try to make sense of it. The state of the art and our framework of research are explained in detail in Chapter 2. While the common theme of each chapter is to look at the discursive use of multilateralism, there are also different nuances in each. Chapter 3 deals mostly with UNSC meeting records and builds a narrative of how the conception of multilateralism appeared in terms of peace and security from the 1990s onwards. The chapter "Multilateralism of Security and Peace" relies on case studies from the Gulf War to Iraq War and finally to Russia's invasion to Ukraine. Chapter 4, "Multilateralism of Human Rights as a Political Question," is an institution-based study on Human Rights Council (henceforth HRC) since its establishment to the present day. It examines how and what kind of multilateralism is taking place in the human rights context and explores the related debates or alternatives for multilateral cooperation. The chapter relies on HRC meeting records and other relevant materials. Chapter 5, "From Development to Sustainability: Addressing Climate Crisis in Multilateral Manner," studies multilateralism from the perspective of treaties such as the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement, and the establishment of MDGS and later SDGs. The chapter illustrates the connection between the UN development pillar and action on climate crisis, emphasizing how the language of negations is central. It also provides a view on multilateralism from Southeast Asia, particularly Indonesia, to illustrate a reference point for multilateralism. Chapter 6 proposes a parliamentary style of multilateralism, emphasizing the need for debates instead of consensus in the UNGA. So far, the rhetoric in the UN seems to be one of negotiation rather than deliberation, where diplomatic ideal is based on the representatives of states who negotiate between the parties in order to reach a compromise (Palonen 2019). Our proposal emphasizes having more deliberative rhetoric, where proposals and related resolutions are considered in terms of their strength and weaknesses and then opposed or supported. This would also mean a move from mere intergovernmentalism to multilateralism, which will be further elaborated in Chapter 6. Short concluding remarks are provided in Chapter 7.

Microsoft Copilot has been used to check the volume for US grammar and to get general writing feedback. The work was conducted through an institutional account where enterprise data protection was applied. The information is not used for AI development. Furthermore, to support examination of existing literature, Jenni.ai tool was utilized in Chapter 3 and Scite.ai in Chapter 6. The resulting separate pieces of text are, however, written by the authors themselves.

1.3 The Historical Origins of the UN as a Venue for Multilateralism

To construct our argument in this volume, we first need to place the UN as a venue for multilateralism in its historical context. While the UN plays a key role in promoting international cooperation, it has also been a venue for struggles: firstly, regarding the direction in which multilateralism is proceeding, and

secondly, regarding what kinds of means and rules should be applied in different old or emerging events and situations. We are interested, above all, in key players and ideas influencing the United Nations as a venue for multilateral cooperation. Among these key players, the role of great powers emerges. What the UN could do, when it could, and where it could have done is a theme associated with the opinions of the great powers, and those opinions have occasionally been in a somewhat dynamic phase throughout history, fueling the language on multilateralism. Why this is the case will be explained here by discussing the contemporary political history of the United Nations from the perspective of language but also political dynamics of multilateral cooperation.

If we start our historical discussion from the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, we could raise two key issues: (1) the UN is an organization the Allied established during the Second World War to support in waging of war and (2) the UN is built to support a world order in which great powers have more possibilities to dictate what happens than smaller states have. On the other hand, as is the case with smaller states, the great powers also need to find compromises to get things done in the UN. As for the combination of the UN as an instrument in waging war and the role of the great powers, the UN and above all its Security Council are at the core of international efforts to maintain peace and security. Scholar Ian Hurd argued in 2002 that a key portion of the actual power of the Security Council is symbolic, as the organ had social capital that it was able to use to guide the member states to act under the Security Council's decisions. The same idea of symbolism reflected the UN as a whole and constituted a key source of the legitimacy of it and its different organs were enjoying (Hurd 2002, 35–39).

Whether a portion of actual power is symbolic, there are still other forms of power available. The permanent members of the Security Council have the right to veto, and historical statistics reveal that they indeed have used this right whenever they have felt it to be in their interests. Such moments of interest include situations in which these member states have defended their national interests, promoted single issues considered important, and upheld the orientation of their foreign policy. Indeed, the Soviet Union utilized the veto especially during the first decades of the UN, until the US became the most prominent user of veto during the 1970s and 1980s. After that, the use of the veto has been slightly more balanced, and minor compared to previous decades (Security Council Monitor 2024; UN 2023). The use of power in decision-making reflects a major impact on the work done in the United Nations, and such moments of power use represent one aspect of UN politics.

1.3.1 History of the UN in Context and the Dawn of Multilateral Organizations

It is useful to point out that questions related to power and the use of power provide a way to place the UN and the activity of its key organs in their contemporary political contexts, but such an approach represents only a part of the history of the UN as a venue for multilateralism. The study of political history is usually interested

in different manifestations and uses of power, where the focus often falls on actors (individuals, groups, and even institutions), ideologies, structures, and events within the context of a nation-state. The historical study of the United Nations has produced many studies in which the UN and its actions have been explored from a historical perspective. Often, the history of the UN as an institution (e.g., Shapiro and Lampert 2014; Meisler 2011; Bourantonis 2005; Kennedy 2006), its creation (e.g., Luard 1982; Weiss et al. 2015; Mathews-Schultz 2020), or prominently its function in preserving international peace has dominated the scholarly field. For instance, in his works on the history of the UN until the 1960s, Evan Luard (1982) focused particularly on the UN's work in maintaining peace and security. The UN has often represented a focal point or a part of a wider fabric and development of international cooperation (e.g., Jackson and O'Malley 2018). As an example of the latter, Bob Reinalda's (2009) extensive work on the history of international organizations provides a comprehensive, yet naturally concise study of how international organizations have developed from the early nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. Additionally, Rebecca Adami and Daniel Plesch (2022) have recently explored the UN from the perspective of the women's movement. Furthermore, the UN serves as a point of reflection for key actors, such as diplomats (e.g., Sciora 2018a, 2018b), or events, such as military conflicts and other tensions between states (e.g., Malone 2006). In recent decades, there has been more attention to new approaches in history where scholars have explored more international and transnational themes, with the United Nations acting as a nexus of study focusing not only on relations between states but on the role of movements, individuals, and non-governmental organizations that have helped to shape the everyday politics of the United Nations. This has given rise to attempts to link diplomatic history to transnational as well as cultural dimensions of the past and to explore UN-based international cooperation in depth (see Amrith and Sluga 2008, 251–274; Sayward 2017). The scholarship on the history of the UN organization has also started to gain attention in terms of the use of concepts and conceptual history (Haack 2011; Boilard 2019).

What the scholarly community seems to lack is an understanding of the conceptual history of multilateralism in the UN context or elsewhere. Therefore, questions such as when the concept of multilateralism first emerged and how its usage reflected political processes and decisions have remained unanswered so far. Understanding the history of the United Nations as a venue for politics benefits from an understanding of the history of discourse on multilateralism in the UN. From the perspective of language, multilateralism has been an evolving concept. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word was first used in the English language in the 1920s. On the other hand, the world "multilateral" was first used in English in 1858 with a political meaning to describe something taking place between several governments (Oxford English Dictionary 2023), thus setting a starting point for understanding the UN as a venue for politics. The concept first appears in *Hansard*, the official report of debates of the British Parliament, in 1924 to indicate multilateral treaties and later in 1935 to indicate multilateralism in the context of speech by Labour Party politician George Hall discussing the Admiralty Office, which at the time was part of the government

overseeing the Royal Navy. Although he specifically mentions that it is not his "wording" – "What has this 'multilateralism,' which is not my word, cost Europe?" UN News (18 February 2025) – when discussing multilateralism, he traced its origins in geometry, where the meaning of multilateral has referred to many sides.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023), the first mentions of the concept can be traced back to the seventeenth century, but it became more common in political and juridical language from the 1850s onwards. Indeed, as Geoffrey Wiseman (2011, 13) argues, multilateral diplomacy joined bilateral diplomacy as a central norm of diplomacy during the twentieth century and experienced an expansion of themes from peace and security towards international economic development and sociocultural issues. From the perspective of this book, it is interesting that the concept is becoming more used in the context of international cooperation and community and the establishment of the League of Nations institutionalized the idea of multilateralism.

The use of language reflects the surrounding context, and it is clear that in the nineteenth century, the nature of states interacting with each other started to change from what it had been earlier. As an idea of international cooperation between more than two countries, multilateral cooperation has been present in international relations since the nineteenth century in a systematic form that has paved the way for understanding how the venue helps to facilitate cooperation between states by pointing attention to permanent structures and institutions created to support interaction and even cooperation between sovereign states. The Concert of Europe, established as a result of the Congress of Vienna in 1814–1815 and the defeat of the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, is often mentioned as the first effort to establish structures to facilitate continuing cooperation between states. It was, according to contemporaries, an invention and would exist until the outbreak of the First World War. In his seminal work, historian Mark Mazower (2013, 3–12) explores the intellectual history of governing the world and describes the Concert of Europe as a conservative restoration of order across the continent. However, in the end, the Concert of Europe became a symbol of problems associated with the idea of an international government and an effort to maintain order between states: "autocratic leadership, bellicosity, an incomprehension of the value of freedom and the power of social change." Later, internationalism would try to provide new solutions to those problems. What has been important from the early nineteenth century onwards is the need to have a venue that meets regularly, and in practice, both socialize and institutionalize sovereign states to international cooperation while maintaining the sovereignty of participating states. Both the idea of structures (and the institutions and formality they might bring), the role of national sovereignty, and the idea of cooperation impacted discourses surrounding international cooperation. The so-called international turn at the end of the nineteenth and the turn of the twentieth century was a period of narratives and different forms of initiatives to promote international cooperation in various fields. What is especially important is that it acted as a key intellectual basis behind later forms of international cooperation and paved the way for the idea of international and even supranational political decision-making (Sluga 2013, 11–44). Indeed, in the introduction by historians

Antero Holmila and Pasi Ihalainen (2022) in a volume on the European conceptual history of internationalisms, it is clear that internationalism acted as an important intellectual movement that supported the mindset of strengthening cooperation between states, recycled old political ideas, and also enabled the political language of cooperation in different fields.

In light of Mazower's argument, it is useful to see the importance of the Concert of Europe in strengthening the role of great powers in Europe, and subsequently the League of Nations as an effort to create more viable structures after it had become clear that the Concert of Europe was not working anymore after the period of colonialization and the rise of Germany (see Pakenham 1991). As Ruth Henig and Alan Sharp remind us, the political machinery of the League of Nations became a rather bypassed element before the Second World War, but the social and economic activities of the League continued to expand. The administrative and legal precedents set by the League of Nations had an impact on the United Nations, and some bodies of the League were transferred to operate under the United Nations practically without changes. The League of Nations had certainly failed to have a global and lasting reach, and in the aftermath of the Second World War, this would change in a significant and enduring way (Henig and Sharp 2010, 174–184. See also Cottrell 2018).

1.3.2 The UN: Something New, Something Old

The United Nations was the next and more ambitious step in the process of trying to come up with a solution to maintain an international order after the devastating experiences of the Second World War. It was driven by an imperative desire to maintain peace and establish an international order, fueled not only by human suffering and destruction but also by the rise of atomic weapons and the prominence of the US and the Soviet Union in the international order. The origins and later history of the UN are well documented in the works by Evan Luard (1982, 1989) and other scholars (see Berg 2006). The Atlantic Charter of 1941 and the Declaration by the United Nations in 1942 were about mobilizing resources and pledging to avoid making a separate peace with the Axis powers. Following meetings in Canada in 1943 and San Francisco in 1945, the basis for a new international organization was created. In the Charter or the Declaration, there was no conceptualization of multilateralism but a set of aims and visions that underlined the rationale for nations working together. The San Francisco Conference continued this path and paid particular attention to the need to continue cooperation in an organized and institutionalized manner, meaning an organization that would be the legitimate source of authority to maintain peace and security and exercise other cooperation in other important fields. President Harry S. Truman of the United States stated in his opening remarks, which echoed his earlier message to the US Congress: "Nothing is more essential to the future peace of the world than the continued cooperation of the nations which had to muster the force necessary to defeat the conspiracy of the Axis powers to dominate the world" (Truman 1945, 3).

This idea of cooperation between nations was a dominating idea repeated throughout the conference. From the point of multilateralism as a concept, the meaning attached to the concept by the contemporaries seemed to be in treaties and conventions between two or more states, with multilateral treaties representing a significant form of a formal relationship between two or more states to handle a dispute. This was conceptually different from broader and thus more flexible meanings, such as "wide," a theme that was present in the meeting of the Coordination Committee on June 13, 1945. During this meeting, the Committee discussed the content of the draft Charter and, in particular, its Article 60 (Article 57 in the accepted Charter) (UNCIO 1945a, 108–109). As a result of the discussion, the final version of the United Nations Charter included the phrase "[t]he various specialized agencies, established by intergovernmental agreement and having wide international responsibilities" (UN n.d. (b) Charter, Article 57), in which the word "wide" had meant multilateral for some representatives in the Coordination Committee, thus reflecting the potentially dynamic nature of the concept and the role of discourse in formulating the Charter. Indeed, treaties were and continue to be important for states to maintain international order and uphold international law. From a conceptual point of view, the utilization of multilateral cooperation, multilateralism, or other variances as terms in discourse was important, especially if it started to be more flexible and enabled different variations of meanings, even enabling forms of politicization for countries both small and large to try to assert their positions (see Fairclough 2001 about relations of language and social power).

In the United Nations, both fields – the role of treaties and the use of language outside the treaty-making sphere – were relevant for the conceptual dynamics of the Cold War-era United Nations and the current-day United Nations. This applies well to the role of the great powers in the history of the UN and to the role of relations between states during an era of polarized international relations. During the Cold War period, the US and the Soviet Union provided leadership in polarized world relations and created the UN as a forum for political competition. Indeed, Mazower (2013, 191–213; see also Russell and Muther 1958) shows that the creation of the United Nations was the first effort to govern the world in an American way, as the US participated in the creation of the United Nations and became an instrumental part of the UN, a role it has maintained since then. What the UN continued was the key role of great powers, signifying the same principle that had dominated the Concert of Europe since 1815, and that led to the failure of the League of Nations in the 1930s, where every member of the League Council had the power of veto. When the UN was created, the American contribution was strongly present, and the organization itself was a result of the political aim to keep the wartime coalition of great powers together. In this context, the smaller states were able to participate but were anxious to see whether the new organization would become nothing more than a manifestation of the desire to maintain the prominent role of the great powers in the future, in a way that would reflect the outcome of the war.

The language of the San Francisco Conference had been one of promoting cooperation, and the final version of the Charter was a document calling for equality of people, small and large, and thus the language itself had a strong sense of social

power to support cooperation between states. However, in the post–Second World War political context, the language was not enough, as there was pressure to form linkages between states based on treaties and thus form alliances. Historian Cornelia Navari has pointed out that after the Second World War, the role of seeking alliances played a major role. Many states scrambled to make both multilateral and bilateral treaties, with the US being a prime example of a pursuit to create cooperation around the world. Alliance systems were often multilateral or at least tried to gain multilateral cover to conceal rather bilateral arrangements, and featured cooperation also in political and economic fields. The key purpose behind such forms of international cooperation was to strengthen security (Navari 2000, 315–322).

Nevertheless, the role of cooperation between member states was broadly acknowledged and enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, thus creating a basis for multilateral cooperation in the UN system and constituting a major vision for the entire organization. The Charter did not refer to the concept of multilateralism, but the impact of cooperation between states was otherwise present and formulated in the text of the Charter that lies at the core of the UN organization. Under maintaining international peace and security, the Charter calls for "effective collective measures"; under "solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion," the Charter thus calls for increasing international cooperation. In its strongest sense, multilateralism seemed to be a manifestation of collective cooperation and focusing on measures to maintain peace, but as a whole, the Charter reflected a positive and broad approach to multilateralism. However, while the sense of need to promote and strengthen international cooperation was present and had a new organization to be based on, as a venue of multilateralism, the UN had to grow and bring in new states. The UN started in 1945 with 50 founding members and continued to expand its membership from there. While the membership in the UN was controlled by the Security Council, the organization was able to grow gradually. At the time of the creation of the organization, around 750 million people lived in territories that were dependent on colonial powers (UN n.d (a)). The activities in the UN were strongly influenced by the ideological conflict between the Communist East and the West and the distrust between the two opposing sides. During the first decade of the organization, the West, led by the United States, was able to dominate the decision-making in the UN and thus represent a form of majority opinion of world affairs. In practice, this was, as Evan Luard (1982, 378–379) suggested, an abuse of power. The UN was able to "be a justification, quantified in voting figures, for their policies. It was a loudspeaker for sending a message to the world." This was, however, poised to change, and it would affect the nature of international cooperation.

The major step in becoming a true venue of multilateralism was the period of decolonization that began in 1960 with the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, issued by the General Assembly, paving the ground for the decolonial phase in the history of the United Nations. The declaration stated, among other things, that "the process of liberation is irresistible

and irreversible and that, in order to avoid serious crises, an end must be put to colonialism and all practices of segregation and discrimination associated therewith" (General Assembly 1960). As territories that had previously been dependent on colonial powers gradually gained their independence, they sought to join the United Nations. As the membership of the organization grew, it also transformed the political dynamics within the organization. The organization, previously dominated by the United States, started to become a hostile place for the US, or at least as a venue where the US and the West in general needed to be more cautious, as the General Assembly might no longer provide the desired voting outcome (Luard 1989, 514–521).

In fact, for the public, both the Security Council and the General Assembly appeared as venues of conflict where only occasionally, whenever ideological positions enabled, a more objective approach was possible. The role of publicity played a great role here, as political actors acted as political campaigners in front of the global public. From the point of view of multilateralism, the United Nations remained as "an assemblage of individual national states," without a sense of "collective consciousness of identity." The Security Council could make binding decisions, but the General Assembly was able to supplement by providing voices in international relations that might engage with the Security Council. There were groups, however, that wanted to gain power on the world stage. If in the 1940s and 1950s, it had been the West that was ready to antagonize its opponents in a way that risked the future of the organization by alienating a minority of the states, similar dynamics continued after the UN had grown as a result of many new members joining the organization – a majority group dominating the decision-making in a way that jeopardized the alienation of minority of states (Luard 1989, 544–548). On the other hand, from a historical point of view, groups such as the Group of 77 (since 1964) (see The Group of 77 at the UN n.d. (a)) have enabled policies in the UN that support their aims, especially in the field of development and in relation to economic question (Puchala et al. 2007, 102–103).

Multilateralism does not require a sense of collective or shared identity, but multilateral cooperation does benefit from having a venue in which cooperation can be discussed, implemented, and tested from the point of view of international collectivism. Indeed, the United Nations provided a way for the member states to act as a collective voice, and thus the organization acted as an "important aggregator of opinion and a source of pressure" – at least as far as the member states were giving their consent to the United Nations' decision-making. The UN as an organization still had some inherent challenges, such as the lack of non-binding decision-making powers of the General Assembly and the lack of accountability and the prospects for politicization in different agencies (Navari 2000, 306–310). While global representation in the General Assembly started to improve as a result of decolonization and expanding membership, in time it would also help the body lose some of its political power in the process – it had become, in the words of Mark Mazower, "nothing more than a talking shop," a venue for politics of "more about symbols and ever less about substance" (Mazower 2013, 272).

However, the UN probably needed both the symbols and substance – and above all forums of increasing participation and possibilities to discuss and debate current-day themes on a variety of issues. As a result of changed membership composition, the UN started to divert more resources to the development of Africa, especially due to decolonization and the wave of new member states. From a symbolic perspective, the UN was not intended as a globally representative organization, but it certainly was intended as an organization that would help to strengthen international cooperation in the fields listed in its Charter. From the perspective of ideas, the UN provided from its onset an organization to promote four ideas: firstly, peace and negotiation; secondly, national sovereignty instead of colonial status; thirdly, human rights; and fourthly, economic, and social development. Newly independent states needed attention from the UN, and it was within the UN that many ideas related to "guiding principles for governance" were created or advocated. The idea of governance on a global scale became more eminent in the post-Cold War atmosphere of the 1990s, when both Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and later the Commission on Global Governance offered their interpretations concerning the world. Their message was that the UN Charter and the UN itself needed renewal, in the face of more interdependent nations and the shift from states to people. In the 1995 report of the Commission, tighter international norms and the strengthening of democracy were called for, as was the solid base of shared values that would constitute the foundations for cooperation. The Commission did not call for the creation of a global government, but it did make a powerful call for strengthening international cooperation and thus paving the way for deepening multilateralism (Emmerij et al. 2001, 183–204; General Assembly 1995, 3). Calls and demands to reform and revitalize multilateral institutions were diverse and created expectations regarding the future. In their editorial note of the first issue of the newly established *Global Governance* journal in 1995, Roger A. Coate and Craig N. Murphy (1995, 1) wondered whether "such a renaissance" of revitalized multilateral institutions to create cooperative responses to global problems was even possible. The response to this would be negative, as the visions of multilateralism and resources available to achieve different and often ambitious visions would not always meet, especially during the 1990s (see Gardiner 2007). Donald Puchala et al. (2007) suggested that even though discussions regarding multilateralism were in the mid-1990s in a state of disillusionment, intellectual leadership emanating from the UN survived and even thrived. As evidence, they highlight the role of special commissions and regular summits that have focused on particular global concerns, such as human rights, the environment, and sustainable development, which have been focal points of such intellectual leadership. Here, Secretary-Generals have played a significant role in establishing special commissions which have first explored particular global challenges and then produced findings that were addressed by the global community and global conferences. During his tenure, Secretary-General Kofi Annan provided attention to the reconsideration of sovereignty, specifically on the question of rights and responsibilities concerning interventions, thus introducing a new kind of discourse (Puchala et al. 2007, 112). This highlights the role of the Secretary-General in influencing discussions and debates within the UN on key issues.

1.3.3 The Discourse of Multilateralism in the UN

Calls to pay more attention to the state of multilateralism were not new in the early 1990s. A selective look at the Digital Library of the United Nations indicates that between 1945 and 1989, "multilateral" and "multilateralism" were frequently raised, often as alternatives to bilateral or regional solutions and usually cited as the better alternative compared to other options that were less broad in their significance and often aligned according to polarized international relations. Multilateral conventions were, as the International Law Commission stated in 1973, "the main instrument for international legislation" (A/C.6/SR. 1400, 23). Focusing on international conventions, that is, international treaties between more than two participants, underlined the developing nature of international law, but it also indicated the role of the United Nations in treaty-making since the end of the Second World War. International treaties were often concluded under the auspices of the United Nations or its specialized agencies, establishing the UN, and particularly its Secretary-General's office, as the key depository of international treaties, some of which originated from the League of Nations. For instance, by the end of 1968, the UN had a list of 157 international conventions that had been concluded under the auspices of the UN or its specialized agencies and deposited by the Secretary-General. Some of these conventions, protocols, or treaties had supplementary documents. The topics of the conventions were broad, ranging from trade, transport, and human rights to security and crime (UN 1969, v–xiv).

The role of multilateralism in the discourse of the United Nations is also evident in the annually published *Yearbook of the United Nations.* An analysis of yearbooks published between 1950 and 2010 indicates that multilateralism has been frequently present in themes such as disarmament, international trade, development policies, and, above all, international treaties. Attention to the topic has increased throughout the history of the United Nations. Multilateralism tended to refer to "commitments," "agreements," "arrangements," or "conventions," as it did, for instance, in 1974, thus highlighting the institutionalized and somewhat formal nature of multilateralism as a historical and political phenomenon, regardless of whether it was discussed in the UN context under the theme of economic and social questions or international law (e.g., UN 1977, 400, 491).

Additionally, "institutions" and "agencies," as well as negotiation and discussion, were linked to the concept of multilateral, often concerning treaties, demonstrating an institutional and even formal but simultaneously potentially dynamic meaning of the concept in the UN context (e.g., UN 1975, 289; UN 1981, 53).

The yearbooks, based on official UN documents, illustrate the wide usage of the concept of multilateralism and multilateral cooperation in the activities of the UN organization, especially its key bodies, the Security Council, the General Assembly, and the Secretariat. The existence of discourse on multilateralism is, however, partly a biased view on the topic – the organizations have produced official documents in which multilateralism is raised as an issue that should be promoted as a goal and a process, especially in the field of disarmament and non-proliferation,

thus underlining the political interest in promoting multilateral cooperation (e.g., UN 2005, 605).

Nevertheless, UN decision-making occasionally clashes with the more national-oriented interests of the member states. The UN, however, has also protected the national interests of its member states. In accounts by the former Under-Secretary-General Brian Urquhart and scholar Thomas G. Weiss, the United Nations has been served either the last bastion of national sovereignty or at least one of the foremost in this regard, illustrating the significant role of national sovereignty in UN decision-making (Puchala et al. 2007, 64–65). Indeed, the discussion would continue from there, as would the political context in which the exercise of politics considered multilateral has been constantly evolving, thus creating a context in which the use of discourse on multilateralism may struggle to be visible in the implementation of potential decisions and resolutions of different key UN organs.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the world faced various forms of crises, related to either peace and security or other themes, to which there have been calls for the UN to act. In the 1990s, the UN played a pivotal role in authorizing the Gulf War in 1991, worked to end conflicts in Angola and El Salvador, and organized the first Earth Summit in 1992 to create a plan of action for sustainable development. There was major attention to social equality on a global scale, and the adoption of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 was a major effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There have been five Secretaries-General from the 1990s onwards: Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Kofi Annan, Ban Ki-moon, and António Guterres, all of whom left their mark in the office as the promotion of multilateralism has often focused on the discourse of the incumbent Secretary-General. At the turn of the new millennium and the Millennium Summit of 2000, Secretary-General Annan argued in his Millennium Report (UN 2000, 4–8) that "we must put people at the center of everything we do" and called for better international governance and reform of the United Nations to enable greater participation and accountability, also by representatives of the private sector and civil society. Furthermore, the UN provided formal institutional arrangements, but the report called for forming "loose and temporary global policy networks that cut across national, institutional and disciplinary lines," while the United Nations would be able to "nurture such informal 'coalitions of change,'" practically regardless of their form. Thus, it was an acknowledgment that the world was rapidly changing, new issues would emerge, and the UN could only do little to handle them all. However, it could nurture other forms of effort, such as new forms of organization to tackle them. The United Nations, as a venue of multilateralism, was opening a discursive path for different kinds of approaches to carry out international cooperation between several states. This was an effort not to create new binding forms of use of power but to enable more diverse participation of states and other members of the global community in international, and even global, governance. In 2000, the General Assembly adopted the Millennium Declaration, an ambitious plan to set targets and help form a focus for UN actions. It stated in its first section about values and principles:

> Responsibility for managing worldwide economic and social development, as well as threats to international peace and security, must be shared among

> the nations of the world and should be exercised multilaterally. As the most universal and most representative organization in the world, the United Nations must play the central role.
>
> (A/RES/55/2, 2)

This call for a central role would be maintained. The UN system was perceived and would be at the core of discussions concerning the future of multilateral cooperation. As argued by Louis Emmerij et al. (2001, 203–206), the UN has had and would continue to have "a special role, albeit hardly a monopoly, in exerting leadership for global governance." What the UN had been able to often, but not always, do is to act ahead of the curve related to new ideas taking place in the world. In the UN's case, peace and security, national sovereignty, human rights, and development have been such ideas that have been highly relevant since 1945. In the context of the new millennium, the same need to understand the potential of new ideas would continue to be a significant theme as it had been earlier.

From the point of view of multilateral cooperation, the idea itself has been a commonly accepted and even cultivated form of international behavior, but it has suffered from an occasional lack of shared understanding of how states should indeed behave while they seem to be committed to multilateralism as a phenomenon. The issues related to peace and security are probably among the most pressing concerns when it comes to rules and principles to guide international behavior. While the United Nations and in particular its Security Council has been at the core of international activities to maintain international peace and security, the history of the UN to act in the case of the invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the 1990s conflicts in the Balkans, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the US-led coalition, the UN has provided a venue in which the Security Council can be utilized to authorize the use of military force. We will return to this theme in the empirical chapters, but we acknowledge the impact of international conflicts both on the reality of international order and on more public perceptions of whether the UN can act efficiently and with the support of the Security Council. Maintaining multilateral cooperation as well as promoting it is present in different themes the UN engages with, and the three UN pillars provide key frameworks to achieve this.

No wonder then that multilateralism has been linked to different fields of activity. For instance, the history of the UN's work to tackle environment-related challenges can be viewed as a history of "environmental multilateralism," as the work has promoted a multilateral approach in responding to challenges. Therefore, the use of the concept of multilateralism in connection to a theme such as the environment can be retrospectively described as a particular form of multilateralism (UNEP 2022; e.g., A/CONF.48/14/Rev.1). This again highlights the dynamic nature of the concept to describe multilateral cooperation as a general principle that can be evident both in the discourse on multilateralism in different situations and in implementing multilateral cooperation in practice.

The contemporary history of the United Nations illustrates not only the symbolic importance of state behavior but also the role of trends and trendsetting of multilateralism. It highlights the ways and means to meet the potential expectations placed by the discourse on multilateralism. In the 1990s, the trend was about a new era

of multilateralism in which the US held a prominent position. This trend emerged from the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet-led political structure, which had participated in the UN system alongside the US-led Western bloc and its liberal as well as economic policies. Additionally, the US was the only superpower with the resources to meet at least some of the visions of United Nations with a longer and stronger reach to handle various ongoing regional or global challenges. This trend followed political momentum that gained support from many political actors around the globe. It was a trend of rising globalization, a liberal economic mindset, the dawn of democracy, and a new effort to maintain peace and security in a united fashion – at least that was the vision. By the end of the 1990s, that vision had partially failed, as there had been a trend of increasing complex crises in fragile states and growing assertiveness from Russia throughout the decade. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US in 2001, the trend has shifted to fighting terrorism, supplemented by increasing calls for different approaches instead of a single approach. The heightened attention to terrorism was a result of the role of the United States, but it also reflected the needs of many other countries. The trend towards different approaches to multilateralism is, however, a result of member states' foreign policies and national goals.

For many countries, US hegemony in international relations is not the only alternative, as they prefer to see more competition between great powers. Great powers such as the US, Russia, and China have promoted their views regarding the rules-based international order. In this context, the UN system, together with the UN Charter, provides powerful political instruments, and according to the terms of the Charter, it has the necessary tools. As stated in the second article: "The Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members" (UN n.d. (b) Charter). The era of the US-led international order and the sense of unipolarity have not aligned well with the Charter, which was drafted in a very different political context during the Second World War. Both Russia and China have been able to utilize their understanding of the Charter to provide competing conceptualizations of multilateralism. When necessary, the UN has had little to offer in terms of binding decisions regarding great powers. From the perspective of competing conceptualizations of multilateralism, when any state, especially a member of the P5, does such a thing, they try to create and circulate new visions of the future they treat as new, emerging, or even already existing trends to which other states need to react.

To sum up, the history of multilateralism in the UN context since the early 1990s illustrates the role and impact of national interests in both promoting multilateral cooperation as a general and global idea and shaping the multilateral institutions and structures to portray their vision of global order. The use of language has played an intermediate role, while the states and the UN bodies have continued to develop the UN as an organization for multilateral cooperation in different fields and to secure its central position.

In retrospect, the United Nations has been a venue for multilateralism due to its inherent commitment to multilateralism as a value and as a process. However, post-Cold War history should perhaps be described more as a period of P5 crisis: different approaches to multilateralism in the UN context have been, above all,

related to various and often competing great power politics. This reminds the world of the importance of those powers that have the resources and will to play a major role in international politics, including the treatment of multilateral organizations. At the same time, it has been clear that different states accept and support the idea of multilateralism in general. Cooperation between states provides benefits and enables common responses to crises beyond the capabilities of individual states, often even the great powers. The rules and norms behind cooperation provide the framework for any venue in which multilateralism is conducted, and the United Nations is a prime example of this.

1.4 Overview of the Book

Discussing empirical chapters, we will provide an overall view on whether the conceptualization of multilateralism has taken place in its direct form, meaning whether contemporaries have talked about "multilateralism," and whether there have been thematic events in which representatives of the states, or the Secretariat, have explored the topic. After that, we will focus on a close reading of sources to explore potential conceptualization related to multilateralism. We will employ categorization in which we perceive multilateralism as a norm, as a process, and as an outcome.

Chapter 2 creates the basis for the rest of the book by introducing the research design, focusing on the study of concepts in the context of the United Nations and what it means to have a conceptual history-inspired approach to study the political language of an international organization, particularly the concept of multilateralism and multilateral and international cooperation. The chapter will also provide a detailed outlook on how the book is situated within the existing research literature on multilateralism and justify why there is still a gap in research regarding multilateralism within the UN context and how this book aims to fill that gap.

In Chapter 3, we explore themes related to maintaining peace and security. As one of the pillars of the United Nations, it constitutes a major theme under which activities associated with multilateralism often take place. The chapter will analyze selected cases in which maintaining international peace and security has been challenging from the 1990s until the early 2020s to demonstrate the role of conceptual struggle and the search for potential competing meanings for multilateralism, as well as competing or supporting structures for Security Council-dominated multilateral cooperation.

Chapter 4 focuses on human rights as a multilateral political question. While human rights are seen through the lens of universalism, they are first and foremost political questions in which states play a central role in protecting and promoting human rights. The chapter relies on examining the meeting records of the sessions and the annual high-level panel discussions concerning multilateralism or international cooperation that are available online. The examples in the chapter are chosen on the basis of their "illustrativeness" of the argument rather than systematically going through specific countries or groups or categorizing statements thematically.

In Chapter 5, the discussion focuses on key events of development in the UN debates. The chapter shows the evolution of multilateralism through landmark resolutions and agreements, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Climate Agreement. An example from Southeast Asia and ASEAN, notably from Indonesia, is also covered to examine how regional multilateralism is discussed from the perspective of the Global South. Thus, the chapter shows how multilateralism is practiced, particularly from the perspective of non-Western, middle-income countries.

Chapter 6, provides a reflection of the specific challenges of multilateralism highlighted in the previous empirical chapters, as well as the current debates related to multilateralism. Studying the language and concepts used by politicians and representatives, as seen in UN documents, provides valuable material for understanding the politics of these global, even transnational, challenges of peace and security, human rights, and development. This also enriches our understanding of the institutional reality of the UN, combined with the crises (war, climate) that we face today and the possible imaginaries that could emerge. In this chapter, we propose "a parliamentary style of multilateralism" applied in the General Assembly, which would provide a framework for discussing norms and values related to multilateralism rather than seeing it only as a relationship.

The final chapter of this book, Chapter 7, will provide short concluding remarks on how multilateralism, as examined in this book as discursive action, reflects the status and ongoing debates on multilateralism within the UN context.

Note

1 See https://www.un.org/en/library/page/voting-information.

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Materials

All UN materials used as empirical sources in the chapters have been retrieved from the UN Digital Library (https://digitallibrary.un.org/). Necessary information, including both resolution and page numbers, has been included to specify the references in the text.