"Principled Multilateralism" versus "Diminished Multilateralism:" Some General Reflections

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INTRODUCTION

For the majority of international relations (IR) scholars and diplomats, multilateralism—often also used synonymously with global governance—is a concept that carries an essentially positive connotation. It signals that at a time when nation states are increasingly confronted with a plethora of cross-border problems such as climate change, irregular migration, transnational organized crime, international terrorism, pandemics, piracy, and food and energy shortages, governments have become acutely aware that they lack the capacities to master these "pathologies of globalization" on their own. Multilateralism thus entails the message that interdependence must be managed collectively. Yet multilateralism also denotes the fact that international cooperation and national sovereignty do not exclude each other. This is imperative for most states of the Global South, which achieved national independence only a few decades ago and are only reluctantly, if at all, prepared to sacrifice sovereignty for the sake of international cooperation. Multilateralism is hence a decidedly intergovernmental concept, closely aligned with the United Nations (UN) Charter's sovereignty norm. While sovereign equality, self-reliance and non-interference are part and parcel of the concept of multilateralism, the concept, apart from inter-state cooperation, also heralds other virtues that governments are keen to project in their quest of building a positive international image. Multilateralism is often equated with the notion of political activism and responsiveness to the problems that haunt humanity. Countries engaging in multilateralism are thus actors that portray themselves as caring members of the international community; members that value the spirit of solidarity,

relegate national egotisms to the backseat, provide public goods, and hence cultivate the role conception of a "good global citizen."[1] Yet, despite this widely positive connotation, multilateral cooperation is currently in a state of crisis. How IR scholarship theorized this seeming decline of multilateralism, why multilateralism contracted in the last 15 or 20 years and how this affected forms of multilateral cooperation will be discussed in this article.

THEORIZING MULTILATERALISM

With the end of the Cold War, research on multilateralism received a boost. Studies on multilateralism—and global governance—mushroomed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This interest in multilateralism went hand in hand with a paradigm shift in IR scholarship. The collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to pave the way for a more peaceful world. With the anticipated "peace dividend" many scholars believed that global problems such as endemic poverty and glaring wealth disparities could henceforth be tackled much more effectively than hitherto. In their view, the key to a more liveable world was intensified international cooperation that was no longer conditioned by super power rivalries.

Subsequently, at least in the West, which dominates IR theorizing despite more recent attempts to develop non-Western or global IR theories,[2] mainstream realist approaches lost their appeal among IR scholars. Liberal and neo-institutionalist approaches increasingly replaced them. While realism emphasized power and anarchy as the constitutive elements of international order, liberal and neo-institutionalist approaches posited that cooperation, and as a corollary, welfare and peace are attainable despite anarchy.[3] Although Francis Fukuyama's bold prediction of "the end of history" sparked controversy,[4] many contemporaries—including many in the IR com-

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[1] P. Nguitragool and J. Rüland, *ASEAN and its Cohesion as an Actor in International Forums—Reality, Potential and Constraints* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[2] A. B. Tickner, "Seeing IR Differently: Notes from the Third World," *Millennium* 32(2) (2003): 295-324; P. Bilgin, "Thinking Past Western IR," *Third World Quarterly* 29(1) (2008): 5-23; A. Acharya, "Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds," *International Studies Quarterly* 58(4) (2014): 647-659.

[3] R. O. Keohane and J. S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989).

[4] F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

munity—nevertheless took the book's message for granted. With Fukuyama they believed that the demise of the Soviet Union, the eastern bloc and its brand of socialism had ushered in the ultimate triumph of liberalism. Hence, inadvertently or not, they transferred the tenets of liberalism to the domain of international politics. This entailed an essentially optimistic worldview, in which the belief prevailed that international politics can be civilized.[5] "Civilian powers"[6] and "normative powers"[7] were accorded a leadership role in a process in which inter-state politics would be gradually transformed into a domain which through legalization, contractualization and constitutionalization increasingly resembles domestic politics. In such a context military power would become obsolete and political decision-making inevitably tilt to institutions and become "rule-based." That "institutions do matter"[8] henceforth became a firmly established belief. Institutions were regarded as superior to conventional diplomacy as they create channels for communication, increase information and transparency, improve actor predictability, limit free-riding, reduce transaction costs and provide normative standards for right and wrong. Moreover, in an international order guided by liberal norms, states are no longer regarded as the main actors in international relations. International organizations, and transnational and private actors have also become important players.[9] Transnational civil society networks, for instance, were regarded as crucial norm entrepreneurs in the process of diffusing liberal-cosmopolitan norms and values to world regions which have so far evaded them.[10]

Liberal scholarship also addressed the vexing problem of the democratization of international organizations which were seen as producing decisions that are increasingly distant from the electorally legitimated national bodies

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[5]   D. Senghaas, *Konfliktformationen im internationalen System* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988).

[6]   H. W. Maull, "Germany and Japan. The New Civilian Power," *Foreign Affairs* 69(5) (1990/1991): 91-106.

[7]   I. Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40(2) (2002): 235-258.

[8]   J. G. March and J. Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics* (New York and London: The Free Press, 1989).

[9]   E. O. Czempiel, *Weltpolitik im Umbruch. Das internationale System nach dem Ende des Ost-West-Konflikts* (München: Beck'sche Reihe, 1992).

[10]   M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52(4) (1998): 887-917; T. Risse, S. C. Ropp and K. Sikkink, eds. *Norms and Domestic Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

of policy-making such as parliaments.[11] Hence, in the typical Western-centric perspective, proposals for democratic reforms of international relations and global governance focused on the parliamentarization of international fora and the creation of space for civil society participation.[12] Yet for non-Western countries this was a subordinate concern. For them, the priority was an urgent reform of the institutional asymmetries of the prevailing executive multilateralism and a more level playing field through greater equality in organizations such as the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)—later the World Trade Organization (WTO)—, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. For former Indonesian President Suharto it would have been "a denial of the basic tenets of democracy if its values were to be strictly observed within nations while they are being ignored among nations."[13] That liberals ignored this view and that Western powers did little tangible to rebalance global institutional asymmetries were blatant blunders which had dire consequences for the multilateral order in the years to come.

The constructivist approaches emerging in the 1990s markedly differ in their epistemological premises from liberal theorizing, but inadvertently adopted the latter's ontological assumptions. Constructivism, too, relegated power as an analytical category to the backseat, and also envisaged a world order in which cooperative relationships grow due to deepening identities and shared norms transcending the nation state. In sum, legalization, contractualization, constitutionalization and new cooperative identities were seen as the glue for a more coherent global order, giving rise to what has become known as "principled multilateralism." Gerard Ruggie's famous definition succinctly summarized what "principled multilateralism" means. For Ruggie multilateralism

> is an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct—that is, prin-

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[11] R. O. Keohane, S. Macedo and A. Moravcsik, "Democracy-Enhancing Multilateralism" (New York: Institute for International Law and Justice, International Law and Justice Working Papers, 2007).

[12] E. O. Czempiel, *Die Reform der UNO. Möglichkeiten und Missverständnisse* (München: Beck'sche Reihe, 1994); F. O. Hampson and P. Heinbecker, "The 'New' Multilateralism of the Twenty-First Century," *Global Governance* 17(3) (2011): 299-310.

[13] UNGA, A/47/PV.10, p. 21. For a similar comment, see Hampson and Heinbecker, "'New' Mulilateralism," 302.

ciples which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence.[14]

This definition stressed the need for universally acknowledged and, in coincidence with the logic of appropriateness, legitimate and hence principled behavioural standards to be followed by states and other actors in international relations. Such behaviour is clearly dissociated from unprincipled realpolitik and political pragmatism, as the definition explicitly qualifies "particularistic interests" and "strategic exigencies" as obstacles to a cooperative international order.

THE DECLINE OF "PRINCIPLED MULTILATERALISM"

Initially, the post-Cold War optimism regarding a fundamental cultural change in international relations seemed to be warranted. In the 1980s and 1990s, the number of international institutions grew exponentially. Regional organizations mushroomed, giving rise to a second wave of region building (after a first one in the 1950s and 1960s) which in the literature became known as "new regionalism."[15] Existing regional organizations such as the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) deepened or enlarged. The growth of regionalism also facilitated the emergence of new layers in an increasingly vertically and horizontally differentiated multi-layered global governance system. Cases in point are the formation of interregional fora such as the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Organization (IORA). Another layer included sub-regional cooperation such as the Euroregions, growth tri- and quadrangles in Asia, and trans-border schemes in Africa and

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[14]   J. G. Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," *International Organization* 46(3) (1992): 561-598.

[15]   L. Fawcett and A. Hurrell, eds. *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organization and Regional Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

North America. These layers developed a plethora of subsidiary institutions, which spurred the institutional densification of international politics.[16]

Even more promising for a multilateral global future was that international organizations appeared to have gained in strength after the end of the Cold War. The UN were no longer paralyzed by super power vetoes and made great progress in their foremost task, the maintenance of world peace. While UN peace missions increased from twelve before 1989 to seventy-two in 2017, UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali's "Agenda for Peace" (1992) and the Brahimi Report of 2000 advanced peace keeping conceptually and technically. Moreover, with the conclusion of the Uruguay Round and the formation of the World Trade Organization (1995) and the Kyoto Protocol (1997) international cooperation also progressed in other pivotal policy areas.

Unfortunately, however, the transformation of international relations towards a more cooperative and peaceful order was not sustainable. In the second half of the 1990s, indications multiplied that the legalization and institutionalization of the international order did not only stagnate, but even recede. The victory of the Republicans in the 1994 United States (US) congressional elections markedly weakened the Clinton administration's "assertive multilateralism" and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks US President Bush pursued a foreign policy agenda that firmly stood on the ideational fundament of political realism.[17] Already in his election campaign, Bush did not conceal his disdain for international organizations. Soon after assuming office, he refused to sign the statute of the International Criminal Court, rejected the Kyoto Protocol and withdrew from the (bilateral) Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Developments outside the US also weakened multilateral institutions.[18] One was the rapid rise of revisionist powers, most of which were deeply dissatisfied with a world order based on liberal-cosmopolitan norms. Revisionist

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[16]   J. Rüland, "Balancers, Multilateral Utilities or Identity Builders? International Relations and the Study of Interregionalism," *Journal of European Public Policy* 17(8) (2010): 1268-1280; J. Rüland, "Interregionalism and International Relations: Reanimating an Obsolescent Research Agenda?" in *Intersecting Interregionalism. Regions, Global Governance and the EU*, eds. F. Baert, T. Scaramagli and F. Söderbaum (Heidelberg: Springer, 2014), 15-36.

[17]   J. Rüland, "Conclusion and Perspectives: U.S. Policy Toward the Global South After September 11, 2001," in *U.S. Foreign Policy Toward the Third World. A Post-Cold War Assessment*, eds. J. Rüland, T. Hanf and E. Manske (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe), 231-254.

[18]   The following two sections draw on J. Rüland, "The Rise of 'Diminished Multilateralism': East Asian and European Forum Shopping in Global Governance," *Asia Europe Journal* 9(2-4) (2012).

frontrunners were the BRICS states consisting of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Most of them had liberalized their economy, which triggered rapid economic growth. This growth made them, albeit to varying degrees, winners of globalization and markedly augmented their material resources of power. The BRICS countries viewed an international order designed by liberal-cosmopolitan norms as a Western ploy to cement dominance in international institutions at a time when the global power distribution was changing in favour of non-Western powers and tilting from unipolarity to multipolarity. In particular, albeit again to varying degrees, they rejected norms with behind-the-border effects such as liberal democracy and individual civic and political human rights, which they regarded as legitimizing sanctions and interventions when states fail to comply with these norms.

BRICS states and many other countries in the Global South regarded the existing institutional order as illegitimate, because it had been created largely without their participation and hence deprives them of legitimate rights, denies them recognition as major powers and impedes their continued rise. Revisionist powers thus fervently rejected as a myth the argument of Western status quo powers that the institutions created and dominated by them produce positive sum games. They argued that status quo powers resort to a relative gains orientation whenever they suspect that the benefits they obtain from the existing political order are jeopardized by presumed challengers. The liberal narrative deprives them of the chances to level the international order's asymmetries, creating a relationship which is shaped by "structural power" and perpetuates their dependency. The objective of revisionists is thus the creation of an institutional order which is more amenable to their aspirations and in which their role as "rule takers" is transformed to one of "rule challengers" and ultimately "rule makers."

More concretely, revisionist powers criticized that important international organizations such as the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions were discriminatory in terms of access or membership, decision-making rules and normative underpinnings.[19] A few examples to illustrate this may suffice. In the UN Security Council, the Permanent Five (P5) have veto power. While Russia and China are among the P5, other aspiring southern powers such as India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia and Nigeria are not represented in the club. In the IMF, voting rights are tied to financial contributions and in the

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[19]   For a very recent statement in this respect, see former Indian diplomat K.C. Singh in *The Hindu*, 2 December 2016. See also the US Council of Foreign Relations, 17 March 2015.

WTO it is Western-dominated minilateralism which was considered as discriminating by many revisionist powers and southern countries. Also, in the G7/8, the globe's major body coordinating monetary and financial policies, BRICS states were not represented. While at least in the IMF and the WTO and with the formation of the G20 in 2008 some of these inequities have in the meantime been mitigated, many southern countries regard this as a case of too little and too late and a marginalization of small countries.[20]

In the new millennium, US unilateralism, the increasing economic and rhetorical clout of newly emerging powers in combination with glaring institutional inequities, the growing complexity of policy matters and the increasing diversity of member interests have facilitated major changes in institutional politics. From the late 1990s onwards, many international organizations faced gridlock. Examples are the WTO, the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the climate change negotiations. While the severity and number of cross-border problems was constantly rising, multilateral meetings no longer produced agreements to tackle them. Instead of negotiating effective policies to manage cross-border problems, global institutions became arenas for power struggles. At stake were the rules for membership and decision-making as well as the norms guiding international cooperation. In other words, the tenets of political realism (re-)entered institutions. Solutions for policy issues were markedly aggravated where the contending actors had major disagreements over the rules of the game. The results are long-winded negotiations, often lasting years, a phenomenon which also undermines the "output legitimacy"[21] of multilateral fora.

FROM "PRINCIPLED MULTILATERALISM" TO "DIMINISHED MULTILATERALISM"

International relations scholars responded to these changes. Barnett and Duvall, for instance, warned that "institutions are not the antidotes of power."[22] The critique of a global governance concept in which power had no place triggered theoretical realignments. While conceding that due to

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[20]   See, for instance, the critique of the Global Governance Group (3G) members.

[21]   F. Scharpf, *Regieren in Europa: effektiv und demokratisch?* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1999).

[22]   M. Barnett and R. Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization* 59(1) (2005): 39-77.

the absolute dominance of the United States in the military domain, power or military balancing would be futile,[23] new concepts sought to capture the fact that political decision-making in international relations is increasingly taking place in institutions, but that institutions have also been hijacked for power contests. This ambiguity of institutions is expressed by concepts such as "soft balancing" or "hedging."[24] Both concepts refer to the fact that international actors use institutions to balance power disequilibria elsewhere. Novel approaches such as "institutionalist realism"[25] and Thomas Pederson's "ideational-institutionalist realism" thus seek to respond to these changes of multilateral politics. Pedersen's concept of "cooperative hegemony," for instance, theorizes the behaviour of old and new great powers to maintain or to establish zones of influence by institutional politics.[26]

With the structural changes described in the previous sections, the new millennium witnessed a progressive erosion of "principled multilateralism." The latter was increasingly replaced by what Keohane and Morse regard as "contested multilateralism"[27] or what I have called elsewhere "diminished multilateralism."[28] Multilateral politics do not entirely disappear, but are hollowed out by institutional power struggles between status quo and revisionist powers. This "diminished multilateralism" can be characterized by the following six major trends.

"Diminished multilateralism" is, first, characterized by the fact that international actors increasingly bypass multilateral institutions. Cases in point are the US-led interventions in Kosovo (1999) and Iraq (2003). When Russia and China vetoed a UN-mandated mission in the Security Council, the US

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[23] R. A. Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security* 30(1) (2005): 7-45.

[24] E. Goh, "Understanding Hedging in Asia-Pacific Security," PacNet 43, 31 August 2006, available at http://www. stratad.net/downloads/PacNet%2043.pdf, accessed 6 February 2011; C. C. Kuik, "The Essence of Hedging: Malaysia and Singapore's Response to a Rising China," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30(2) (2008): 159-185.

[25] K. He, "Does ASEAN Matter? International Relations Theories, Institutional Realism, and ASEAN," *Asian Security* 2(3) (2006): 189-214; K. He and H. Feng, "If not Soft Balancing, then what? Reconsidering Soft Balancing and U.S. Policy toward China," *Security Studies* 17(2) (2008): 363-395.

[26] T. Pedersen, "Cooperative Hegemony: Power, Ideas and Institutions in Regional Integration," *Review of International Studies* 28(4) (2002): 677-696.

[27] J. C. Morse and R. O. Keohane, "Contested Multilateralism," *Review of International Organizations* 9 (2014): 385-412.

[28] Rüland, "Rise of 'Diminished Multilateralism'," 255-270.

resorted to unilateral action and intervened without a UN mandate. However, such interventions—though represented as a form of collective security under the condition of a paralyzed UN Security Council—constitute only nominally a form of multilateralism. They do not comply with at least two major features of principled multilateralism. They do not rest on "generalized principles of conduct" and they may be manifestations of the particularistic interests of major powers and "strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence."[29] Another form of bypassing international institutions is the resurgence of bilateralism in the form of "strategic partnerships" and free-trade bilateralism—a pragmatic response to the stasis of paralyzed multilateral fora.

A second characteristic is the shallowness of institutions, their contingency and flexibility and the advance of "low-intensity" cooperation. When institutional behaviour is conditioned by frequently changing power disequilibria, the incentive for governments to invest in the governance costs associated with sustainable international institution-building is low. In the absence of "thick institutions" based on "hard law," governments confine themselves to non-binding and, hence, non-enforceable agreements guided by the lowest common denominator. This frequently results in declaratory and symbolic policies and an erosion of cooperative substance. Revisionist powers, in particular, have an interest in flexible and contingent institutions because they enhance their opportunities for limiting the power asymmetries emanating from the institutional and structural power of status quo powers.

Closely related to the contingency of multilateral fora is, third, a progressive loss of functional specificity which facilitates the emergence of broadband or multi-purpose forums. Rather than working towards binding agreements, multilateral meetings become loose platforms for policy coordination or even only the contingent exchange of views on a great variety of issues. This process is aided by the unprecedented way globalization increases the number and interdependence of policy issues. Their indivisibility necessitates a broader view on many of the currently debated global problems, but at the same time also tremendously increases the tactical choices for status quo as well as revisionist powers to pursue their objectives by creating a plethora of issue linkages. Fora such as the G7, APEC and the WTO are cases in point.

"Diminished multilateralism" has, fourth, as already stated, increasingly become a device for "soft balancing" and "hedging." Where new power

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[29] Ruggie, "Multilateralism," 571.

disequilibria emerge, international actors tend to establish new institutions, or recycle or restructure existing ones. The cascade of interregional fora formed in the late 1980s and 1990s—APEC, ASEM, the Transatlantic Agenda, IORA, FEALAC and others—illustrate such institutional balancing moves.

In many cases, the formation of a new institution occurs, fifth, without concern for "nesting"[30] and "subsidiarity."[31] This rampant institution building has a three-fold effect. It produces institutional redundancy which spurs further erosion of the legitimacy of international institutions and facilitates processes of "forum shopping."

Sixth, and last, an immediate consequence of this unbridled institution building is "forum shopping." The latter is a strategy by which actors "pick and choose among the mechanisms that best fit their individual political agenda."[32] The formation of new development banks by the BRICS states, the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) launched by China or the Japanese idea of an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) are among a plethora of examples. Institution building without "nesting" and forum shopping may facilitate a progressive fragmentation of the international institutional architecture, which is competitive[33] and not the result of social differentiation and an institutional division of labor.[34]

CONCLUSION

The article has shown that post-Cold War principled multilateralism was short-lived and subsided in the late 1990s. Several reasons enabled this

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[30] V. K. Aggarwal, "Analyzing Institutional Transformation in the Asia-Pacific," in *Asia Pacific Crossroads: Regime Creation and the Future of APEC*, eds. V. K. Aggarwal and C. E. Morrison (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 23-64.

[31] G. Segal, "Thinking Strategically about ASEM: The Subsidiarity Question," *The Pacific Review* 10(1) (1997): 124-134.

[32] S. Forman and D. Segaar, "New Coalition for Global Governance: the Changing Dynamics of Multilateralism," *Global Governance* 12 (2006): 205-225.

[33] F. Biermann, P. Pattberg, H. Van Asselt and F. Zelli, "The Fragmentation of Global Governance Architectures: A Framework of Analysis," *Global Environmental Politics* 9(4) (2009): 14-40.

[34] M. Zürn and B. Faude, "On Fragmentation, Differentiation, and Coordination," *Global Environmental Politics* 13(3) (2013): 119-130; T. Gehring and B. Faude, "A Theory of Emerging Order Within Institutional Complexes: How Composition among Regulatory International Institutions Leads to Institutional Adaptation and Division of Labor," *Review of International Organizations* 9 (2014): 471-498.

trajectory: The rise of Republicans in the US Congress, the subsequent replacement of "assertive multilateralism" by "assertive unilateralism" under the Bush administration, the failure to reform international institutions in line with a shifting distribution of global power and the rise of new revisionist powers resenting the existing international two-class institutional order. As revisionist powers work towards major changes of this order, institutions became arenas for power struggles. As a corollary, institutional problem-solving capacities declined, thus reducing the cooperative substance of institutions. In the process, multilateralism underwent profound changes, giving rise to what in the article has been called "diminished multilateralism." Properties of the latter are the bypassing of multilateral institutions, shallow institutions and low-intensity cooperation, the emergence of broadband institutions, institutional redundancy and forum shopping.

This "diminished multilateralism" and the ambiguity of institutions will last. Yet even this version of "thin" multilateralism is currently increasingly jeopardized by the global rise of myopic right-wing populists. The forceful emergence of a generation of politicians who think in parochial nationalist dimensions, in terms of zero sum games and beggar-thy-neighbour categories is a serious danger for the future of multilateralism. Their simplistic slogans and incompetence in the wake of ever more complex global problems, their notorious distortion of facts and blatant lies, often neo-fascist rhetoric and racist attitudes do not bode well for multilateral policies which seek to manage interdependent diversity and hence depend on trust and what Keohane had once termed "diffuse reciprocity."[35]

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[35] R. O. Keohane, "Reciprocity in International Relations," *International Organization* 40(1) (1986): 1-27.