

BOOK REVIEW

Multilateralism: Quo Vadis?**by Marcelo de Almeida Medeiros¹**<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8385-0358>

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This review essay focuses on a recent publication edited in 2023 by Auriane Guilbaud, Franck Petiteville, and Frédéric Ramel: ‘Crisis of Multilateralism? Challenges and Resilience’. Their work was developed in collaboration with various authors from the research group on multilateralism — GRAM, an international Francophone network of researchers specializing in the study of multilateralism, headquartered at Sciences Po Paris. The book’s primary aim is to analyze the current challenges faced by multilateralism, as well as its transformations, within a conceptual framework that gives a privileged place to the notion of crisis. The collection consists of twelve chapters, evenly distributed across three major complementary thematic axes: ‘Multilateralism Under Pressure’, ‘Power Shifts in Multilateralism’, and ‘New Dynamics’. Ultimately, the book demonstrates that multilateralism, when confronted with crises, is capable of mobilizing various resources and reinventing itself to avoid perishing. Endowed with certain intrinsic qualities — adaptive capacities, openness to non-state actors, bureaucratic creativity, among others—multilateralism is able to adjust to new international balances and the constant transformations of diplomatic coalitions.

‘Hoc non perebo habebō fortior me’. The famous proverb “what does not kill me makes me stronger”, which celebrates Stoicism, has long been used in a variety of circumstances to describe situations in which almost certain setbacks become

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unexpected successes¹. The hiatus that precedes the crossroads that defines the path of death or the path of strengthening is usually called a crisis. It is at this point that reaction and resilience abilities will be put to the test and define the outcome: dire or fortunate.

In the field of politics, more particularly, crisis analysis greatly contributes to the understanding of numerous outcomes: the fall (or not) of regimes, the extinction (or not) of parties, the outbreak (or not) of conflicts, and others. In the field of international relations, multilateral experiences have been challenging in times of crisis, sometimes giving rise to unexpected reinvigorations — as is the case of the European Union (EU) —, sometimes lapsing into inertia — as in the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) —, or even leading to disintegration — as in the case of the Union of South American Nations (USAN). The situation is no different in broader arrangements such as the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Health Organization (WHO), or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

It is in this context that the French researchers Auriane Guilbaud, Franck Petiteville, and Frédéric Ramel (2023) have organized the book ‘Crisis of Multilateralism? Challenges and Resilience’. The work drew from a collaboration between several authors with the research group on multilateralism — GRAM (Groupe de Recherche sur l’Action Multilatérale), a French-language international network of researchers working in the area of political science and international relations, mostly from Europe — France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada, and Mexico —, specialized in the study of multilateral issues. Its headquarters are located in the ‘Centre de Recherches Internationales’/CERI-Sciences Po Paris².

The purpose of the book is established right in its first few lines, which is essentially to look into the current challenges multilateralism faces and the shifts it has been through. And, it does so within a conceptual framework in which the notion of crisis has a privileged position. The book is a collection of twelve chapters equitably organized into three major thematic pillars that complement each other: ‘Multilateralism Under Pressure’, ‘Power Shifts in Multilateralism’, and ‘New Dynamics’.

¹The origin of the Latin expression is not clearly established. Despite some informal attributions, there is no consensus on who originally said or wrote it.

²There is a remarkable absence of French-speaking Swiss researchers especially investigating international organizations based in Geneva.

These chapters are preceded by an Introduction that situates the crisis phenomenon as the analytical matrix of the multilateralism approach. Guilbaud, Petiteville, and Ramel (2023) argue that, while the seasonality of international diplomatic arrangements over the course of history is the basis for the future perpetuation of multilateral negotiations via permanent institutions, these institutions have been marked by oscillations between successes and fiascos that seem, at times, to compromise their own existence. They stress that multilateralism has more recently seemed to be particularly threatened by global democratic backsliding, arguing that it is best defended and served by liberal democracies.

In this sense, the Trump administration has led the United States (US) to present, in four years, a systematic and unprecedented challenge to multilateralism. By practicing what has become known as 'withdrawal diplomacy', Washington left the Paris Agreement, the Vienna Agreement on Iran's nuclear program, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UN Human Rights Council, and the WHO. Moreover, these unilateral gestures were also accompanied by a persistent rhetoric that often belittles international organizations (IOs). Looking beyond Trump's populist experience, the authors also mention the way Putin's Russia violated the UN Charter when it invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and later violated the Geneva Conventions to conduct its military operations. They also consider that North Korea's dictatorial regime is not expected to rejoin to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, as are the tyrannical regimes of Iran and Myanmar not expected to respect international human rights treaties.

Ultimately, they come to the realization that multilateralism is under pressure in many areas of international cooperation. Guilbaud, Petiteville, and Ramel (2023) write in the Introduction that the WTO Doha Agenda, created in 2001 and initially focused on the needs of developing countries, is often considered defunct. Regarding global health governance, the chaos caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates centrifugal trends in the realm of multilateralism. States reaffirm their 'sanitary sovereignty' by unilaterally imposing lockdowns and obstruction of borders, thus weakening global health cooperation and the WHO's mandate. Still, in the environmental sphere, the fast pace of events including global warming, the destruction of biodiversity, and the pollution of the oceans is so alarming that it raises questions about whether international agreements negotiated to contain them (the 2015 Paris Agreement, the

2022 Montreal Agreement on Biodiversity, and the 2023 High Seas Treaty) are timely or effective. Finally, the collective security and conflict resolution regime built within the United Nations system is also being seriously undermined. The UN was not able to prevent the conflict in Syria, which began as political unrest during the 2011 'Arab Springs', from turning into a devastating, internationalized civil war that has killed half a million people in one decade. In Europe, the invasion of Ukraine has triggered a conventional conflict of such magnitude that had not been seen since 1945, resulting in the paralysis of the UN Security Council due to the actions of the very invader, Russia, which exercises its veto power as a permanent member.

The editors conclude the Introduction arguing that, despite its recent failures, multilateralism remains a matter of interest in the discipline of international relations (IR). However, it has been mainly investigated through historical, theoretical, or prospective approaches. Within this literature, only a limited number of academics are willing to face the task of discussing the current 'crisis' of multilateralism. In this category, some are mentioned: Morse and Keohane (2014), who forge the expression 'contested multilateralism' to address situations in which states invest in IOs that strictly serve their national interests, play one organization against the other, and make them compete with each other in a counterproductive way. Patrick (2015), who points to the profusion of minilateralisms, when states prefer to engage in informal, non-binding, and purpose-specific groupings (such as the BRICS), to the detriment of universal, formal, and rule-based multilateral organizations. Haass (2010), who suggests the emergence of a 'messy multilateralism' from a proliferation of 'ad hoc', overlapping, and multilateral agreements. Bull and McNeill (2007) who, drawing from Haass (2010), show that, amid this confusing mesh, there are agreements that operate based on principles of 'market multilateralism'. And, finally, Kruck and Rittberger (2018), who expose the dysfunctional aspects of the 'exclusive executive multilateralism' model characterized by negotiations and bargains between national government representatives only, which make them little transparent.

In short, Guilbaud, Petiteville, and Ramel (2023) deduce that, from either of these four analytical perspectives, as states give priority to domestic and short-term interests, they circumvent and undermine historical international organizations, compromise multilateralism in its fundamental values, and erode its legitimacy as a universal form of cooperation. However, while the editors consider that multilateralism is currently under strong pressure, they stress that IOs, which constitute the core of institutionalized

multilateralism, are more resilient, more reactive, and more effective than commonly thought. And to demonstrate this, the chapters that follow the Introduction open the black boxes of these organizations, document their decision-making processes, and track their most crucial decisions regarding recent global challenges.

The first part, 'Multilateralism Under Pressure', explores the main expressions of the current crises multilateral organizations face. The analyses cover several areas to demonstrate the nature of the challenges within each specific context. The first of the twelve chapters that make up the book addresses military and strategic issues by using the example of the war in Syria. Its authors say that tensions between the permanent members of the Security Council explain the paralysis of the UN in the face of behaviors that violate not only the rule of law during armed conflicts, but also demean the San Francisco Charter. They argue that the veto power stands as one of the main obstacles to international security, revealing both the obsolescence of the institutional model inherited from 1945 and the erosion of the credibility that the Council still aspires to maintain as the main body responsible for international security. On the other hand, Tannous, Petiteville, and Tordjman (2023) highlight the normative vitality and the role of other bodies, including the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council.

In the third chapter, Guilbaud (2023) notes that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has exposed the shortcomings of multilateral cooperation in the field of global health care. Drawing from Kalevi Holsti's terminology (2004) to understand the particularities of multilateralism, she shows that this pandemic can be understood as a 'great event', that is, an abrupt interruption of a typical pattern and, at the same time, as a result of cumulative trends, that is, a combination of successive small actions. Nevertheless, multilateralism in global health is resilient, the author argues, because it had been long subjected to permanent dynamics of change. Moreover, Guilbaud (2023) argues that these transformations, reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, are driving conversations about the renewal of governance structures, both at the institutional and normative levels.

In the fourth chapter, Julien Pomarède (2023) focuses on reviewing NATO's crisis management since the early 2000s, particularly the cases of Afghanistan and Ukraine. While each intergovernmental organization builds its own path based on the diverse interests of its members, the author argues that NATO, 'a fortiori', handles the inherent ambivalence underlying cooperative behavior. The two cases he analyzed, he writes, refer to two very different situations. While Afghanistan is a high-intensity war with the death

of numerous soldiers, in Ukraine, there is a strategic response to the aggression against a third-party state on the border of the Alliance. But, the management of these two strategic events, which profoundly shape the perception of warfare in the new century, allows us to see how ambiguity is at the heart of any multilateral operation.

The last chapter of the first part aims to provide a general diagnosis of the current crises of multilateralism. While it is important to distinguish between the specific frameworks through which these crises manifest — depending on the organization, they show different natures —, a general wave of growth seems to be emerging. For Balzacq and Ramel (2023), crises are not only institutional or functional in nature. They also have, above all, a normative nature to them. The multilateral style of negotiation, which is closely associated with the assessment of issues and the ways of responding to them, has been the subject of a new wave of discussions. In other words, the normative capabilities to produce regulations that drive international interactions are clearly under attack. And the authors point to the strong division between Western and non-Western actors and the fragility of democracies as the main vectors of these criticisms. In fact, they propose a new reading, returning to the notion of trust and the logic of ‘relationality’ to understand and also go beyond the current normative tensions that mark multilateral configurations.

Chapter six opens the second part of the book: ‘Power Shifts in Multilateralism’. It actually addresses a more traditional question to describe the origins of multilateral crises — that is, the role of states in general and of the most powerful states in particular. Charillon (2023) describes how the United States helped shape multilateralism after World War I and World War II, and how the UN's re-emergence in the early post-Cold War era owed much to Washington's efforts. He states that, today, the repercussions of Trumpism — reflecting more than just a disdain for multilateralism — are felt beyond US borders. A cleavage has thus become crystallized and expanded the spectrum of the positions and doctrines of the United States in relation to international organizations: from the promotion of a liberal order, to selective multilateralism, and, finally, reaching the expression of an open and unambiguous opposition. Charillon (2023) explores this internal US tension and shows how the Biden administration seems hostage to the robustness of this critical movement toward multilateralism.

In the same direction, that is, trying to understand the influence of the dynamics of state power on multilateralism, the seventh chapter is dedicated to investigating

Beijing's involvement in multilateral practices. Brugier (2023) states that the Chinese authorities adopt a strategic approach that follows a fine line that simultaneously denounces the liberal international order and uses the mechanisms inherited from 1945 to guarantee positions of responsibility within the specialized institutions of the UN. She concludes that China does not necessarily advocate an alternative multilateral system, but strongly aspires, despite the nature of its regime, to be regarded as a potential legitimate first world power in the world order.

Amid this new emerging bipolarity between China and the United States, the European Union is wondering how to approach multilateralism. Deschaux-Dutard (2023) argues that the consequences of Brexit are not limited to the promotion of a global United Kingdom, but especially lead to a continental re-anchoring of Brussels, where the idea of strategic autonomy vis-à-vis Washington — which has notoriously had a longstanding loyalty to London — gains prominence. This autonomy includes not only military components but also the energy dimension, especially in light of the Russia-Ukraine war. But what is the depth and scope of this autonomy of the Common Foreign and Security Policy? Chapter eight reviews the classic debate around the EU as a global actor, reflecting on the nature of its power and its capacity to manage multilateral relations.

The changes in the views and practices of multilateralism are not restricted, however, to hegemonic actors including the US, China, or the European Union, regarded as 'norm shapers' of international regimes. Allès and Brun (2023) recall that the contribution of actors from the Global South — usually deemed 'norm takers' — to multilateral institutions have remarkably changed since they started to organize, in the early 1960s, their demands for greater representation in IOs. By emphasizing the plurality of this Global South, chapter nine looks into how the states in Latin America, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia have a different relationship with multilateralism and diversify their involvement in multilateral forums. The authors argue that the issue of unbalanced representation and structural inequality leads Southern states to effectively adapt, as it happens in examples of 'ad hoc' formulas, institutional adjustments, or minilateral initiatives. However, they deduce that the global effect of this greater practical and ideational inclusion is quite complex and can fuel apparently contradictory dynamics of political integration and institutional fragmentation.

The third part of the book, 'New Dynamics', focuses on the potential for renewal of multilateralism. International organizations not only develop resilience mechanisms,

but also demonstrate adaptive capacities, especially through the design and implementation of institutional reforms. These metamorphoses of multilateralism follow the theoretical challenge of formulating new concepts and adapting existing ones to understand new dynamics. Chapter ten opens this third and final part, in which Abbas and Duchesne (2023) look into the resilience of trade multilateralism, despite the numerous setbacks experienced by the World Trade Organization since its creation in 1995, 'exempli gratia': the impasse in the Doha Round negotiations, the US-China trade wars, the paralysis of the WTO Appellate Body, and others. The authors challenge the crisis narrative of the World Trade Organization to show that it is actually going through a phase characterized by conflicting multilateral cooperation. This conflict, however, is constructive and, far from stopping the vitality of market multilateralism, highlights the WTO's ability to change and adapt to the new balances of wealth and power, as well as to respond to the systemic challenges that affect the global economy. According to Abbas and Duchesne (2023), therefore, the World Trade Organization is involved in a process of 'learning by doing', and a reform agenda for the organization is actually already being implemented.

Considering that an institutional reform can also be an assertive political process that takes minorities into account, Saiget and Tordjman (2023) explore, in chapter eleven, the case of 'UN Women', the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Created in 2010 as an institutional reform action to replace its predecessor, the 'United Nations Development Fund for Women' (UNIFEM), 'UN Women' aims to strengthen the UN's overall institutional coherence regarding gender equality and women's rights. The authors affirm that the entity faces many challenges in fulfilling its mandate: limited resources, a competitive environment, different points of view on the regulatory or operational role of the agency, and others. They point out, however, that 'UN Women' adapts to these hardships, stressing, nevertheless, that the reform is not limited to mere institutional innovations, as it only becomes effective when it is actually carried out by UN officials, activists, or diplomats. Finally, Saiget and Tordjman (2023) conclude that the processes of incremental change and the practices of actors are crucial for the persistence and renewal of multilateral organizations.

Following the same reasoning, chapter twelve is devoted to examining the extent to which the secretariats of international organizations are agents of multilateral renewal. Reinalda (2023) highlights two important moments in which such agents were able to

react to particularly intense pressure situations, namely, the early 1970s and 1990s. He notes that, since the end of the Cold War, the landscape of IOs has been more dynamic than expected, with a high rate of dissolution and the creation of new multilateral structures. However, the investigation demonstrates that dissolving international organizations continues to be a difficult endeavor, mainly thanks to the activism of their secretariats. Reinalda (2023) emphasizes that, in order to adapt to the fluctuating nature of multilateral cooperation, these bodies very skillfully engage in organizational resilience and fight for survival using different strategies, including expanding the mandate or creating new structures based on inter-IO relationships, joint ventures, and networks. More specifically, he investigates two cases: the WHO bureaucracy and the UN Secretariat in the context of the US-China competition.

At the end of the book, considering that several institutions have developed norms and rules on the same topic, without clear hierarchical relationships between them, Orsini (2023) looks into how the concept of ‘regime complexes’ can contribute to the understanding of multilateral governance. After situating this concept in the theoretical framework of international regimes, she highlights its specific character and its value by identifying key peculiarities of environmental governance, including actors' strategies or power patterns. The author then reflects on how this analytical matrix contributes to the study of other fields of multilateral cooperation (trade, intellectual property rights, and, to some extent, security). Chapter thirteen concludes that the concept of ‘regime complexes’ can offer a renewed perspective on multilateralism if it is applied more consistently to all domains of global cooperation.

The book, as a whole, ultimately shows the academic world and political decision-makers that, when confronted with crises, multilateralism is capable of mobilizing different resources and reinventing itself so as not to perish. Having some intrinsic singularities to it — adaptive capacities, openness to non-state actors, bureaucratic creativity, and others —, multilateralism is able to adapt to new international balances and the constant changes in diplomatic coalitions.

In short, the book innovates in the fields of political science and international relations by arguing that the crisis phenomenon is not contrary to multilateralism. On the contrary, such a phenomenon is a constitutive — and enduring, not episodic — part of the multilateral arena. The crucial point here lies in the expressive resilience of international institutions and actors that act to protect negotiation channels that

reinforce predictability and, therefore, advocate for their respective interests. For Latin American and, more particularly, Brazilian political scientists, the challenge is to explore, in the light of the conception of crisis forged by Guilbaud, Petiteville, and Ramel (2023), the stagnation of the multilateral processes of regionalism in South America.

Drawing from the Stoic saying — ‘Hoc non pereo habebō fortior me’ —, would multilateralism be a Lernaean Hydra, who can regenerate itself and become even stronger after being hit by political, economic, and social blows?

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