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From International Relations to Translational Relations? Challenges to the Institutional Design of a Communicative Multilateralism

Global problems require global solutions – but practical implementation of this truism of international politics often falls short, even among like-minded actors, because of coordination problems and questions of formats and forums. The conflictual relationship between China and the United States, however, faces an entirely different challenge: although both claim to act in the spirit of an – at least ostensibly shared – multilateralism, there is a fundamental lack of common ground for communication and cooperation. Multilateral institutions capable of facilitating productive cooperation without previous shared experiences are needed to facilitate learning modes of international coexistence for these two "indispensable nations" of global problem-solving.

The evidence of everyday phenomena is prima facie characterized by the fact that they are experienced precisely as obvious events: Things are the way they are because they are the way they are, and they attain their self-evidence as well as unshakableness from precisely their allegedly constant recurrence. Thus, even in a world in which old and new worldviews are increasingly coming into conflict and are thereby irritating each other, these shockwaves have by no means reached basic everyday assumptions about the components of these conflicts.

Even where increasing political polarization in (usually territorially understood) societies is observed as a constant trend, it is often quickly agreed upon along which dividing lines the various camps run. Often there are two of them; sometimes, a third camp is included as a residual category. It is usually clear whether their representatives should subsequently be separated from one another or mediated.

Here it becomes apparent on which supposedly self-evident foundation all social and thus political relations are built: communication. As its basic model, a constellation is often assumed in which, as a rule, it is usually clear what is being talked about. At the most the comprehensibility can be disturbed by a certain noise

- for instance, in the shape of the often quoted "cacophony." As a result, one can ascribe unambiguous positions, can then advise the representatives that they should talk to each other to get to a better understanding or perhaps advise them to quit the attempt because otherwise,, they could understand each other "too well."

The usefulness of such advice cannot be denied, and yet even in differentiated considerations of (political) communication, there is a sore lack of insight into an old dictum: "One cannot not communicate!" (Paul Watzlawick). An insight that may still seem obscure on a purely semantic level but has long since become ubiquitous on a substantive level.

In the age of global networking, where in principle everyone can be reached by everyone else, the flow of communication and thus information is endless – the processes of its interpretation and mediation can never be stopped. It goes on and on, regardless of whether one appreciates this fact. It could be attempted to quit this perpetually running game, though only at the high price of total isolation. What is more, since there is no easy exit from particular world societal formations once one has become involved in them, one cannot completely exit world society as such and will thus always be exposed to its "effects".

"Our language," as Ludwig Wittgenstein described communicative processes, "can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses." Usually, we move around this city naturally like described above. We may discover some renovations and new buildings, but for the most part the surroundings retain their familiar face.

As a newcomer, however, you better get a map of the city. And even then, there is still no one way to enter and explore this city. Once you arrive, it is possible to hedge new parts of the city or transform existing ones. Fellow residents will face all this with appreciation, disapproval, or equanimity.

In the "world city" of international relations, this role of the newcomer seems to be currently played by China. With its recent achievement of economic quasi-parity with the United States and its increasing involvement in development and infrastructure policy, the People's Republic finds itself in a variety of new and, for Chinese decision-makers, unfamiliar situations. Challenges such as dealing with its role as the point of origin of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing pressure for more climate engagement and the growing perception of an "encirclement" by U.S.-led institutions such as AUKUS or the "Quad," require the Chinese leadership to make fundamental and often confrontational decisions. At the same time, Beijing is pursuing a very active expansion policy as well as a form of development policy that likewise brings it into new conflict situations with other actors and established procedures.

China's actions are quite frequently subsumed under the narrative of "rising states," and their supposedly typical behavior: Striving for status, territorial revanchism, aggressive rhetoric, and military rearmament are thus seen as almost inevitable consequences of a new relative balance of power. But even contrary portrayals of China as a sui generis actor that pursues a foreign policy "with Chinese characteristics" – which is thus “naturally” hardly comprehensible to outsiders – entails problems that go beyond the usual flaws of such essentializing or even orientalist views.

Irrespective of the fact that supposedly sympathetic interpretations run the risk of reinforcing a view of China as the "other" that hardly promotes understanding, they also paradoxically benefit a Chinese leadership that publicly denounces "anti-Chinese" resentment using postcolonial rhetoric, but might also secretly welcome the breathing space such criticism involuntarily creates. After all, with the exception of legal systems upholding ignorantia legis non excusat, those who “do not know” the rules of the game, who “cannot” do otherwise, can also not be accused of any intentional wrongdoings. Their transgressions are mere mistakes – or can at least be presented as such by apologists.

China's counterparts thus face a dual difficulty because of their insufficient experience in dealing with China and its newly acquired status: On the one hand, neither China's society nor its political system are transparent enough for decision-makers in foreign ministries, embassies, or international organizations to make reliable assessments of its future actions. On the other hand, in the face of an increasingly "multipolar" world order, they are not experienced in dealing with the interests of multiple major powers in organizing international cooperation beyond a bipolar constellation – and even where such knowledge exists, it does so only in institutionally sedimented memories.

However, the last decades of the Cold War in the aftermath of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 showed – despite all the confrontations that were still to follow – a path that allowed the two powers to mutually recognize, if not the legitimacy of each other's political system and interests, then at least the reality of their position within the global power constellation and their resulting special role compared to other actors, and to accordingly act more or less in the sense of this responsibility. Although central pillars of this order, such as the CFE-Treaty and the Treaty on Open Skies, are currently in an existential crisis, this does not fundamentally affect the supposedly transcendent principles of transparency or peaceful coexistence behind these historically evolved and thus ultimately contingent treaties.

Thus, even in the face of the "resurgent power" Russia, it is evident that fundamentally identical modes of conflict resolution are still embedded in the DNA of US-Russian political relations. Calls for a "new concert of powers" (Charles Kupchan) or a "Helsinki 2.0" (Alexy Gromyko) differ only in their level of detail but not in their thrust for classic conference diplomacy.

Yet, unlike 30 years ago, the dyad of Russia and the United States is no longer the crucial constellation for any negotiation on cooperative international policy. More relevant today are the general expansion of the number of relevant actors beyond nation-states and particularly the rise of China into the circle of "indispensable nations." Here no comparable mode of international coexistence has yet emerged. On the contrary, the US and China not only do not speak with one voice but seem to not even speak the same language. Thus in the sense mentioned above, they do not inhabit the same city, i.e., they obviously do not share the same reality either. Although the experiences from Helsinki prove the fundamental possibility of establishing modes of communication and coexistence, both sides do not seem to be making any efforts to find such a common language or composite perception of reality.

At the same time, a cursory first glance at urgent issues of global cooperation nonetheless seems to suggest a common denominator. Both President Biden and President Xi like to present themselves publicly as "champions of multilateralism:" whereas one holds up the "torch of multilateralism" to show humanity the way forward, the other reassures once alienated allies that with him Trump's interlude of American unilateralism belongs to history.

It would be easy – and perhaps even tempting – to dismiss China's use of the term as mere political rhetoric, authoritarian window-dressing by a state that, according to the usual understanding, acts just as little multilaterally in its foreign policy as it is democratically constituted domestically. This view is certainly more reassuring than the alternative view of a China that uses the term – or worse, its own substantial understanding of multilateralism – as a "Trojan Horse" to turn the institutions of the liberal world order against itself and its initiators. However, even those unwilling to afford China more than the cynical appropriation of a noble principle must inevitably ask themselves: why this term? What makes multilateralism so alluring as a central concept of Chinese foreign policy?

The adoption of a "Western" concept in public speeches of Chinese heads of state and the internal discourse of China's foreign policy elite represents the rule rather than an exception. Contrary to popular images of an almost exclusively self-referential system that sees itself as a unique "Middle Kingdom" and thus maintains special forms of relations with other states along the lines of the tribute systems of past dynasties – with "debt diplomacy" instead of precious-metal transfers – China's conscious self-portrayal as a thoroughly “normal" state is tradition. Mao's attachment to (Western-universalist) Marxism-Leninism, the long-standing identification as just one "developing country" among many, the emphasis on "pluralism," the upholding of sovereignty, and the sole legitimacy of the UN Security Council as the enforcement body for international conflict resolution – all of these central guidelines of Chinese foreign policy represent, in a certain sense, a re-export of adopted concepts and values.

This by no means implies a simple adoption or superficial imitation of imported concepts. On the contrary, China has to actively “translate” terms and consciously perform concept formation, first internally and then in its external relations. On the one hand, the "global game" vocabulary and its "correct" use must be learned. Yet an unreflected application of terms, that have merely been "translated" in a lexical sense, carries the all-too-familiar risk of misunderstandings. In order to prevent these, adopted vocabulary must, on the other hand, also be coupled with one's existing understandings of the world in a way that makes it compatible with them, without distorting the meaning of the term to such an extent that it is no longer recognized in communication with the system it originated from.

However, accusing China of a "wrong" usage of multilateralism – be it a calculated instrumentalization of the term or a genuinely different understanding – falls short. After less than a year cracks are becoming visible in the U.S.' renaissance of multilateralism, suggesting that Biden's understanding of international cooperation not only has more in common with that of his predecessor but also that is has little to do with recent attempts at codifying "value-based, inclusive and effective multilateralism" in the German government's White Paper on Multilateralism. Rather, the U.S., with its less than diplomatic approach around the new AUKUS alliance, its uncoordinated withdrawal from Afghanistan, and its handling of travel restrictions and "vaccination diplomacy," is needlessly exposing itself to Chinese criticism of a "false multilateralism."

Opportunities to lead both sides back to a less conflictual path can be found not in the superficial use of the term "multilateralism" but rather in its substantive content: multilateralism not understood as a code for a multipolar world order or a commitment to already existing institutions, but as a principle that – in the sense of an "empty signifier" (Ernesto Laclau) – enables new spaces for communication even between competitors and opponents. The particular difficulty here, however, is that China does not have access to shared experiences of a modus vivendi comparable to that of the U.S.-Russia dyad, which is largely free of transaction costs because it requires only minor translation services.

Multilateral formats capable of addressing this challenge must engage China in a way that introduces as few cognitive hurdles as possible. This does not mean entering into a completely open dialogue in which no political "red lines" exist or neglecting one's values. All it requires is that formats and modes of action must not constitute additional hurdles on the road to agreement, however small their common denominator may be, that go beyond differences of substance.

Multilateralism thus understood as a genuinely open approach may require using alternative fora that are not "burdened" by strong associations with individual states or institutions, or require creating new ones. Fundamentally, it demands of its practitioners to take their democratic convictions seriously in a procedural sense and apply them consistently – especially vis-à-vis non-democratic actors such as China. The negotiation and coordination processes that are essential for such a "communicative" multilateralism can hardly function without principles such as fundamental openness to all interested actors as well as their equal treatment. Multilateral formats and institutions must be designed to enable the – sometimes even involuntary – adaptive learning required to engage in in ongoing translational processes and thus partially relieve "newcomers" of their “translational” burden owing to their lack of experience.

This relief is by no means to be understood as a disinterested lightening of the workload of states elsewhere confronted as “systemic competitors” but rather serves to reduce transaction costs in the inevitable interactions dictated by shared global challenges. To speak in a shared language about a shared reality and hence to live in the same "world city" is not synonymous with having the same views in discussions about its "urban design" – but it is the prerequisite for recognizing where, admitting all differences, points of contact may still be found.

If one observes multilateralism not primarily as a vision, a value, or a goal, but above all as an emerging success medium of world-political communication processes, it becomes apparent that the term (still) holds sufficient potential to enable an exchange about questions of global order. Many speakers still gather around the banner of multilateralism and contemplate whether order can or should be shaped jointly rather than unilaterally. While this view of multilateralism does not make the world city of international relations appear as an "eternal city", as a jointly designed city guide – with continuously revised editions – such a multilateralism points the way to the many common forums of the countless, heterogeneous city districts. There the possibilities for a constant, translation-enabling and thereby trust-building exchange aimed at peaceful coexistence and perhaps even productive cooperation may still be found.