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Minilateralism matters more? Exploring opportunities to end climate negotiations gridlock

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Multilateral negotiations to reach a universal, binding international agreement on measures that curb greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions have repeatedly failed since a scientific consensus on global warming formed in the late 1970s. The 1997 Kyoto Protocol was famously never ratified by the United States, the biggest emitter, and the 2009 Copenhagen conference only produced a narrow deal between the USA, China, India, Brazil and South Africa. Numerous attempts to involve international financial institutions or the G7/G8 have also been unsuccessful. Given the present crisis of multilateralism it can be argued that the time is ripe to engage fully in *minilateral* climate diplomacy, conferring ownership of the process to the main stakeholders. An informally orchestrated, minilateral diplomacy based on rationalist insights from conventional game and negotiation theory would then sway polluters to press ahead with measures that mitigate and adapt to the anticipated repercussions of climate change. Only after a political deal has been struck between major stakeholders may opportunities arise for *ex post* authorization and agenda control mechanisms involving the wider international community.

Keywords: climate negotiations; diplomacy; minilateralism; multilateralism; UNFCCC

Indirect estimates show that 1983 to 2012 was probably the warmest 30-year period in more than 800 years. (The Royal Society & the US National Academy of Sciences, 2013, p. 3)

[...] risks are high to very high with global mean temperature increase of 4°C [and] include severe and widespread impacts on unique and threatened systems, substantial species extinction, large risks to global and regional food security, and the combination of high temperature and humidity compromising normal human activities, including growing food or working outdoors in some areas for parts of the year (*high confidence*). (IPCC, 2014, p. 13)

This research is based on the assumptions that (1) the majority of climate scientists are correct when they say that greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions generated by human activity are inducing global warming and that (2) the accelerating severity of the problem warrants prompt and coordinated action by governments, corporations and citizens across the world. After roughly half a century of research on this matter, I accept that the scientific community with specialized knowledge relevant to the issue of climate change has formed a mature opinion that can be used as the basis of policy making (IPCC, 2014; Whorf & Keeling, 1998).

As Patrick Regan (2014) has pointed out, climate scientists may nevertheless not be best equipped to figure out how to incentivize individual governments, agencies, local public officials

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and private businesses to adopt policies that mitigate, and adapt to, climate change. To the extent that we are facing a collective action problem pertaining to a global common/public good, that is, political scientists would appear to have a more relevant set of skills and theoretical insights. The collective action problem inherent to the climate change issue is particularly daunting because the principals of contemporary decision makers, the electorate and the general public, in most countries do not share the high level of concern expressed by climate scientists. As a result, the debate about the distribution of responsibilities and costs for addressing climate change has progressed slowly over the years.

In the meantime, political scientists and economists have been working to refine three main options for addressing the problem. One relies on a universal and binding agreement to reduce GHG emissions through quotas – modelled on the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) regime established through the 1987 Montréal Protocol. This approach led to the signing by most countries of the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, an agreement that went into force in 2005. A second option is market-oriented, introducing a price or tax on carbon released in the atmosphere (Nordhaus, 2008). If universally implemented, the carbon tax has the advantage of altering the behaviour of consumers as well as producers. A third option is a hybrid scheme, combining Kyoto-style quotas with emissions trading that reshape the incentives of market actors.

In the following, I will almost exclusively pay attention to how climate negotiations might be organized with a view of safeguarding the global public good, and less to substantive proposals. As far as I am concerned the problem is widely recognized and solutions are available. The idea is to improve the chances of solutions being adopted as widely as possible, and as soon as possible, so that they are implemented and slow the development of climate change. According to the reports and assessments released by the Royal Society, the US National Academy of Science and the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2013–2014, as indicated by the quotes above, the world community has so far at best mitigated *the acceleration* of greenhouse gas emissions.

There are four parts to the argument. First I distinguish between multilateralism and minilateralism. Then I briefly discuss the experiences of the UN-based system of international organization, associated with a multilateral approach. As a third step climate change is conceptualized as a conventional collective action problem, one in which not only the incentive structure presents a challenge but also the sequence in which major GHG polluters commit to a set of rules. The fourth step addresses negotiating sequences and forms of delegation based on rationalist theory advanced in the early 1990s, suggesting that resourceful countries and major emitters have significant opportunities to forge a robust regime that begins to have a significant effect on climate change.

The limits of multilateralism

Theories of multilateralism are surprisingly weakly developed in international relations. One of the major contributions appeared as late as in the early 1990s, in a volume edited by John Ruggie. Ruggie (1993) defined multilateralism as an institutional form with one key characteristic and two ancillary features, in that it:

coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of *generalized principles of conduct*: that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard for the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence. [...] Two corollaries follow [...], namely] an *indivisibility* among the members of a collectivity with respect to the range of behavior in question [...] and] expectations of *diffuse reciprocity*. (p. 11, emphases added)

An ostensibly marginal objection to this definition is that it is overly generous as to the number of participants sufficient to warrant the use of the term multilateralism. Three participants

seem unlikely to develop a sense of “indivisibility” and “diffuse reciprocity” towards one another, which would imply that actions taken within such a context not necessarily qualify as “generalized principles of conduct”. By the same token, actors belonging to three-way multilateralism cannot realistically be expected to generate an affinity towards a joint endeavour, let alone “indivisibility” among its members, needed to bring long-term stability to this institutional form. By assuming that “three states a multilateralism make”, in other words, Ruggie dilutes the notion by including virtually all transnational coordination beyond bilateralism.

This objection is not as innocuous as it first may appear. The question is whether multilateralism is as ubiquitous as Ruggie’s definition would lead us to believe. In fact, multilateralism is in many institutional contexts understood as universal in ambition, extending the applicability of “generalized principles of conduct” to recognized nation-states. Multilateralism in this demanding sense thereby enhances its appeal by each added participant, which is precisely why the 1987 Montréal Protocol with its 197 signatories is celebrated as the archetypal multilateral achievement in the environmental sector. On this view multilateralism squarely places the burden of proof on those who seek to restrict the membership so that no recognized nation-state government can be left outside a multilateral arrangement without a convincing, specific justification.

A different objection to Ruggie’s conceptualization of multilateralism is that it downplays the social and temporal dimension of the concept as well as the significance of legitimacy (Daalder & Lindsay, 2007, pp. 51–53). Whereas legitimacy typically accrues in the relation between actors and institutions, the perception of that relation is internalized by actors and therefore shapes the way interests are viewed, pursued and represented (Hurd, 2007, ch. 1). As a result, legitimacy both constrains and enables political action, in international relations and in other contexts where stakeholders are bound by procedures yet seek to protect certain national and collective interests.

But a rationalist conception of multilateralism, as defined by Ruggie, is nonetheless sufficiently flexible to generate a fruitful framework for analysing the politics of climate change. Specifically, in the 1993 volume featuring Ruggie’s definition chapters by Miles Kahler and Lisa Martin qualified multilateralism in ways that point towards a dynamic understanding of the concept, oscillating between exclusiveness and inclusiveness. Whereas Kahler elaborated the implications of multilateralism “in small and large numbers”, Martin (1993) introduced a distinction between respecting multilateral principles (1) in broad and sincere preparatory consultations prior to forging new institutional arrangements, (2) in “the stage of arriving at decisions” and (3) when employing such decisions in oversight and enforcement structures (p. 93). Martin (1993) thus asserted that groups can “overcome the difficulties of multilateral decision making by delegating urgent issues to a smaller set of actors or allowing such a subset to exercise agenda control under certain conditions” (p. 99).

We will return to Martin’s three-fold distinction below but begin by emphasizing the idea that urgent issues can be delegated “to a smaller set of actors or [by] allowing such a subset to exercise agenda control”. In many ways this notion of delegation resembles the multilateralism at the lower end of the spectrum, theoretically involving as few as three member states, which Ruggie used as his starting point. Kenneth Oye (1986), writing before Kahler in the mid-1980s, had already deployed the term “minilateralism” to describe a “multilateralism of small numbers” (p. 21). Oye theorized that a multilateralism of smaller numbers would negatively affect legitimacy though on the other hand facilitate agreement.

In 2009 the term “minilateralism” resurfaced, brought back to life by Moisés Naim, who in a two-page article concisely defined minilateralism thus: “to bring to the table the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem” (Naim, 2009). Naim’s relaunch of the term coincided with the spawning practice of serial summits gathering the heads of state of government of the world’s most resourceful countries. The G7 had been created as an informal, consultative institution in the 1970s, followed by the politically

oriented G8 in the late 1990s. In the aftermath of the devastating financial crisis of 2008, the recurring meeting of finance ministers of 20 major economies and regional “leaders”, referred to as the G20, was elevated to a summit and the “premier economic forum of global economic coordination”.

But Naím also noted the waning of longstanding efforts to forge multilateral agreements on trade and environmental matters, which had become rare in the new millennium. In his book *Minilateralism: How trade alliances, soft law and financial engineering are redefining economic statecraft* Chris Brummer (2014) went even further, arguing that:

multilateralism [...] has been supplanted by an array of more modest and seemingly less ambitious joint ventures – from regional clubs like the (shaky) European Union and (rising) Association of Southeast Asian Nations to more geographically diverse and less understood initiatives like the G-20, Basel Committee on Banking Supervision and Financial Stability Board. [...] More modest in size, formality, and even inclusiveness, they play small ball on the court of international affairs and embrace what can be described as distinctively *minilateral* strategies of economic statecraft. (pp. 1–2, emphasis in original)

It is easy to agree with Brummer that the 2008 breakdown of the Doha Round, negotiating under the auspices of the World Trade Organization (WTO), strongly suggests that multilateralism is underperforming. The G77 countries, in the past backed by India and China in climate negotiations as well as on trade, at that point opposed a deal offered by the United States, Canada, Japan and the European Union (EU). The negotiations were unblocked in late 2013 yet little progress has since then been registered on industrial tariffs, non-tariff barriers to trade, trade remedies, agriculture and services.

Notwithstanding the stagnation of WTO talks, the global free trade system already in place does not appear to be collapsing, even if a senior WTO official intimated in mid-2014 that “creeping protectionism” is visible in some sectors of the world economy (Donnan, 2014).

That being said, the most spectacular failure of multilateral negotiations in recent decades is arguably that geared towards achieving a universal and binding agreement to reduce GHG emissions. Considering that negotiations on this matter have been ongoing without interruption since the late 1970s, the history of climate change negotiations represents a particularly sobering footnote to the achievements of multilateralism (Gupta, 2014). Some believe this is because of the entrenched technologies and business interests of the fossil fuel-based economy, while others say multilateral negotiations organized on the basis of the consensus rule ultimately represent an unrealistic notion (Hale, Held, & Young, 2013).

Notably, the realization that climate change negotiations constitute a particularly vexing collective action problem has long held sway with scholars. In the Ruggie volume already cited, Kahler (1993) briefly compared the agreement to stem CFC emissions to the broader challenge of finding a formula that would offset the uncertainty inherent to the scientific climate data available in the early 1990s, as well as the widespread externalities for corporations as well as governments in the latter case:

The construction of a regime to reduce the emission of gases that produce global warming is likely to be much more difficult than the creation of the CFC control regime was, since the scientific data on global warming are more uncertain and the range of economic activities affected is potentially far greater. (1993, p. 316)

The Kyoto Protocol signed in December 1997 had one similarity with the free trade norm which Ruggie famously described as “embedded” in the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944, in that it relieved developing states from mandatory targets and limited the impact on developed states to a first commitment period of five years after enactment (Ruggie, 1982).

Since international ratification was drawn out in time after the US Senate blocked American participation, other developed countries had ample time to prepare and deliberate on the advantages and disadvantages. The majority of western countries beyond the United States also had more opportunities to sway developing countries, with no obligations to live up to under the Kyoto Protocol, to join the agreement.

At the end of the day, the Kyoto Protocol was signed by more than 170 countries, which is one of the highest numbers for an ambitious environmental agreement. Yet the major emitters of GHG either did not ratify the agreement, such as the United States, or were given a free pass on the account of being “developing nations”, including China. When the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol commenced in 2008 the United States and China together produced roughly 45% of total GHG emissions, thereby highlighting the incompleteness of the deal. In late 2011, Canada, another large emitter, withdrew from the protocol under the threat of paying high penalties for failing to live up to its reduction targets.

2009: fairy tale city does not deliver

Multilateralism received a particularly serious blow at the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference both as a general approach to global governance, and when it comes to the climate issue proper. The challenges of achieving multilateral agreements on non-economic public goods, such as the environment, are well described in the literature, but the major players had in this case made far-reaching political commitments towards reaching an agreement. One example was the 2007 G8 chair’s summary calling for “at least halving of global emissions by 2050” (G8, 2007). A second illustration was the unambiguous language used at the L’Aquila Major Economies Forum merely months prior to the Copenhagen conference:

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time. As leaders [...] we intend to respond vigorously to this challenge, being convinced that *climate change poses a clear danger requiring an extraordinary global response* [...] We reaffirm the objective, provisions and principles of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change [... and] *we resolve to spare no effort to reach agreement in Copenhagen*, with each other and with other Parties, to further implementation of the Convention. (L’Aquila Major Economies Forum, 2009, emphases added)

In fact, analogous statements had been issued at virtually every meeting of leading countries, not least in the G7, G8 and G20 context, in the two years leading up to the Copenhagen conference. This is why the general public, but also many environmental groups and government experts, were bewildered by the outcome.

Alluding to the Danish children’s author Hans Christian Andersen, a senior Chinese delegate said there had been “no fairy tales in the capital of fairy tales”, meaning that no formal, visionary agreement came out of the 2009 Copenhagen conference. Instead there was a hastily drafted text agreed among five key countries, namely the USA, China, India, Brazil and South Africa, vaguely committing to GHG reductions. After the fact another 114 countries “took note” of the agreement, giving it a slightly higher status as a product of the summit. A widespread sentiment was that a backroom deal between a few political leaders became elevated to the “Copenhagen Accord” (Bodansky, 2010; Dimitrov, 2010).

Numerous policymakers and environmental NGOs were especially disappointed with the vagueness of the document and the opaqueness of the negotiating process that produced it. The Copenhagen Accord contained no binding targets or dates for implementation. Furthermore, the commitment was merely to “nationally appropriate mitigation actions”, open to interpretations as to what both “mitigation actions” and “nationally appropriate” might mean in practice. In terms

of the political dynamics that sustained momentum in UN-based negotiations, many activists pointed out that the four non-western signatories, Brazil, India, China and South Africa, had now succeeded to “peel off the USA from the EU”. Few were surprised when the attention paid to climate change in 2010–2011 significantly receded compared to 2008–2009.

In hindsight, some commentators came to view the diplomatic debacle as a “reality check”. It was pointed out that the United States actually had managed to “peel off” China from the G77, a feat not to be underestimated. This is because the G77 remains heavily invested in the historical injustice of ex-colonies being subject to the same type of restrictions on GHG emissions as already industrialized countries, several of which are former colonial powers. Others were upset with the G77 countries for not standing up to India and China and their new-found desire to sit at the table with the United States, or with the so-called BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) for refusing to accept binding targets. Yet others were annoyed with EU leaders for being upstaged by the five signatories, or with the Danish hosts for arguably losing control over the negotiating process (Fisher, 2010).

Only a couple of commentators were appreciative of the outcome, sensing it could unleash creative thinking about solutions. The latter category emphasized two significant advantages to the agreement struck among Copenhagen Five, the first being that the BASIC countries for the first time now had made an explicit commitment to the reduction of GHG emissions, albeit one conspicuously non-specific on methods. Second of all, the agreement opened the door to an approach beyond the largely quantity-oriented arrangements on emission quotas through Kyoto and “cap-and-trade” in the US context, providing more space for bilateral, regional and local innovation (Doelle, 2010).

From a diplomatic vantage point, however, the Copenhagen Accord undercut the formal, multilateral process and introduced informal governance bargaining into the climate negotiations process as a “second track” (Stone, 2011). Back in 1993 Martin (1993) had envisaged that “egalitarian processes will become cumbersome when a group confronts major decisions” (p. 99). For this type of situation she had proposed “delegating urgent issues to a smaller set of actors or allowing such a subset to exercise agenda control under certain conditions” (Martin, 1993, p. 99). Using the terminology of Oye and Naim one could argue that Martin’s “minilateralism” allows a limited number of resourceful states (1) to take decisions on behalf of others, or (2) provisionally to shape the agenda so as to enhance the prospects for action, courses of action that may be justified on an urgent matter of common/public good.

Both types of minilateral delegation and their significance for the politics of contemporary climate negotiations will be examined below. Yet first I want to revisit the notion of collective action in the rational choice tradition, briefly drawing on well-established game and negotiation theory, to illustrate the structure of the conflict of interests at play in climate change politics. This is not to ignore the deeper complexities of information uncertainties and challenges of technological innovation associated with the issue, but to illuminate the history of climate negotiations and help us clearly discern, at least *ex post*, the incentive structure of key stakeholders in the process that so far has shaped the negotiations.

Still a collective action problem

Overlooked by the Europeans in particular was that the overarching incentive structure of international climate politics became additionally skewed by the Kyoto Protocol, opening opportunities for big emitters and developing countries to free-ride. Arguably, climate negotiations post-Kyoto can in aggregate terms be described as a classical “Suasion game” (Figure 1) with asymmetric gains, as outlined in rationalist theorizing already in the early 1980s (Stein, 1983).

Actor A	Actor B		
		<i>Cooperate</i>	<i>Defect</i>
	<i>Cooperate</i>	4,3	3,4
	<i>Defect</i>	2,2	1,1

Figure 1. Suasion game.

The dominant strategy of actor A is clearly to cooperate, and that of actor B is to defect (leading to the right upper cell).

The EU, having signed up to the Kyoto Protocol, resembles Actor A in trying to persuade the United States and large emitters among developing countries (Actor B) to cooperate. The latter, however, could during the first commitment period “have (much of) their cake and eat it” by letting others reduce their emissions while pursuing economic growth themselves. (The lower left cell would be the equivalent of the United States cutting emissions, and the EU dropping out of the Kyoto Protocol.)

More recently, though, it has been increasingly difficult to get countries outside Europe to sign up to the second commitment period, 2013–2020. Fewer than 40 countries eventually did, and today they account for around 14% of annual global emissions. Even if the second round were to be fully implemented the climate problem would only be marginally affected. As a solution to the global problem of climate change, the Kyoto Protocol is today strikingly ineffective not only as a regime, but as an incentive structure with the potential to entice more countries to sign on.

This brings us to a second dimension of the problem that appears to be substantially more important today than during the multilateral negotiations in the mid-1990s, namely the growing rivalry between the United States and China. A 2013 issue of *Climate Policy* is entirely devoted to this previously understudied geopolitical dimension of climate negotiations, with Sino-US relations described as “the key underlying dynamic of the troubled climate change regime” (Terhalle & Depledge, 2013, p. 573). Drawing on the most classic of games in the rational choice tradition, that of a “Prisoners’ dilemma”, the conflict of interest can be laid bare; and, it can only be resolved (left upper cell) through mutual adjustment away from the dominant strategies that lead to a suboptimal outcome (Figure 2, right lower cell).

Now if we accept that (1) the “Suasion game” that the EU was playing between 1997 and 2012, against strong odds, is rapidly becoming irrelevant, and that (2) a “Coordination game” with the same incentive structure as a “Prisoners’ dilemma” corresponds to Sino-US relations of today (while actors C–Z are only peripherally engaged), then none of the standard auxiliary methods for reaching a common good is going to be sufficient (Cooper, 1998). Procedures and mechanisms that “lengthen the shadow of the future”, create “iterated games” and increase the number of actors are all integral to multilateralism, but will in this case be undermined by a combination of contrasting preferences and temporal shifts in incentive structures (Axelrod, 1984; Martin, 1993).

Actor A	Actor B		
		<i>Cooperate</i>	<i>Defect</i>
	<i>Cooperate</i>	3,3	1,4
	<i>Defect</i>	4,1	2,2

Figure 2. Coordination game (same incentive structure as in Prisoners’ Dilemma).

But in a move that temporarily suspends rather than rejects multilateral institutions to advance a greater, urgent purpose, Martin’s unilateralism prescribes action that prepares for, decides on or manages arrangements “in small numbers”. Some games, Martin wrote in 1993, need to allow for “specific reciprocity and exclusion” (p. 98). “Specific reciprocity” between the United States and China – representing almost half of the world’s GHG emissions and in China’s case more than half of the increase 2009–2014 – may then be understood as a tentative agreement in a sequence of deals (Sebenius, 1991). A bilateral agreement between the two overwhelmingly important emitter countries, which view each other as the two main rivals for geopolitical supremacy in the twenty-first century, would thus cater to key concerns of policymakers in Washington and Beijing.

By itself this would not be sufficient to resolve the collective action problem posed by climate change, since there are several tiers of actors involved in the overall negotiating process. Even if Chinese and American decision makers above all may be eyeing each other, they are not insensitive to the prospects of other major countries eventually assuming less extensive commitments. A bilateral US-Sino agreement would therefore need to be supplemented, as soon as possible, by a broader unilateral deal. That deal can be described as an “Assurance game” (Figure 3) played between the USA and China on one side, and other major countries on the other. The upper left cell represents an equitable climate negotiations outcome, and the lower right cell the suboptimal outcome of universal defection and accumulating GHG emissions. The lower left and upper right cells correspond to outcomes in which one actor cuts GHG emissions, but has to live with the free-riding behaviour of the other actor.

This second intermediate arrangement would in other words be equally critical for rendering the prospects of a universal agreement feasible. It would be very difficult to anchor a bilateral agreement between China and the United States in a multilateral accord without an intermediary, analogous deal at the level of major countries denying others the opportunity to free-ride.

Eventually, though, the signatories to such unilateral deals are more likely to heed their commitments if a binding multilateral agreement with universal application eventually is ratified by most UN member states. International legal obligations generally enhance the prospects of successful implementation of agreements and reaffirm the commitment of the wider community of states to respect international agreements, including small UN members. As prescribed by Martin, the outcome of unilateral consultations will most likely be upheld if carried over into new institutional arrangements after a formal opportunity to add input has been offered to all.

Actor A	Actor B		
		<i>Cooperate</i>	<i>Defect</i>
	<i>Cooperate</i>	4,4	1,3
	<i>Defect</i>	3,1	2,2

Figure 3. Assurance game.

Moreover, broader leadership deliberations allow for leadership education intertwined with interest bargaining and the creation of disciplining deadlines (Berridge, 2010, p. 168).

A sequencing approach

For the above reasons and in the interest of time (which climate scientists say is quickly running out), there is a strong case to be made that the second game in this coalition-building sequence – following a Sino-US agreement – ought to be geared towards unilateral “exclusion” rather than multilateral inclusion of actors (Sebenius, 1996). As we saw at the outset, exclusion is a central feature of unilateralism and “the smallest possible number of countries needed to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem” should therefore encompass both the major emitters and the economically most resourceful countries. Given that roughly half of the industrial processes associated with GHG emissions take place in the energy sector, countries that play a major role in this sector must also be taken into account.

An obvious, instrumentally justifiable choice of venue for such bargaining would be the Major Economies Forum, comprised of the 17 largest economies including the EU (van Schaik, 2014, p. 34). This encompasses the world’s most resourceful countries and is therefore a logical choice of arena “beneath” the USA and China, the two largest economies, yet “above” the full UN membership. But the problem is that this forum is no longer very active at a high level and does not include all the major energy producing and energy consuming countries. The G20, which adds Argentina, Turkey and Saudi Arabia to the mix, may therefore be a better “fit” (Keohane & Victor, 2011, pp. 10–11). Saudi Arabia, with its extraordinarily vast fossil fuel deposits and its significance in the Islamic world, is an important addition here.

An overarching agreement that translates into specific commitments that can be continuously evaluated is also required to ensure near-universal participation and rein in “abatement-cost penalties” (Nordhaus, 2008, p. 19). The latter agreement can only come out of a process seen to generate an equitable outcome. As smaller countries would lack direct access to the unilateral deliberations, the interests of some of the resourceful ones can be safeguarded by the EU, whose smaller member states have an incentive structure similar to that of other developed small countries (for instance Singapore and Switzerland). Such representation would nevertheless not be extended to less resourceful, small developing countries, many of which are the most immediately affected by a radically aggravated climate situation.

More than anything the distribution of responsibilities and costs at the centre of an international climate arrangement, including a categorization of fuels that will be phased out (in case it is a quota-based system) or priced/taxed higher (if it is a scheme based on prices/taxes/trading emissions), has to be equitable in the short and long term. The regime must also fulfil expectations about transparency and robustness. Recalling Martin's (1993) idea of "delegating urgent issues to a smaller set of actors or allowing such a subset to exercise agenda control under certain conditions" (p. 99), there seem to be two ways forward. One would mean that the unilateral arrangement in terms of a specific content is "authorized", or "rendered legitimate", *ex post*. The other implies that the wider international community is brought in at the oversight and implementation stage, equivalent to what Martin called "agenda control".

An obvious opportunity for *ex post* authorization is provided by the annual conferences of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). But the UNFCCC framework, with critical input data provided from the IPCC, can also be seen as guaranteeing a measure of "agenda control". There is clearly much to be gained in terms of legitimacy as well as time by borrowing the parameters of an ambitious climate regime directly from the framework of the UNFCCC, not least the 2% Celsius (3.6% Fahrenheit) target adopted by the 2010 Cancun climate conference. Preserving the IPCC as a key component of any future framework would similarly help sustain continuity in terms of oversight. Finally, in terms of ensuring implementation along the lines painstakingly elaborated through multilateral negotiations, a new international agreement could integrate the Green Climate Fund and the Adaptation Fund which already are making serious contributions to a range of initiatives in the developing world, increasingly operating in direct contact with organizations that execute the projects (Luomi, 2015).

Conclusion

It follows from the preceding analysis that multilateralism by itself is highly unlikely to produce a decision that can be implemented within a short time frame. The history of climate negotiations and the collective action literature suggest that a sequence of unilateral agreements is more feasible than most one-off alternatives. A precondition for progress, therefore, is an understanding between China and the United States on the basic parameters of an institutional arrangement, followed by a wider understanding. It would appear that the November 2014 US-China joint announcement constitutes a promising development along these lines, but that the June 2015 pledge by G7 countries to avert a two degrees Celsius rise above pre-industrial levels failed to move the process further.

At any rate, the US-Sino deal on the basic parameters might still help pave the way for an institutional arrangement (on content) agreed among the major economies and GHG emitters. What is more, it may affect countries whose energy production or energy consumption due to their size or significance shape the global economy. Such an arrangement, if respectful of multilateral UNFCCC and IPCC preparations/decisions of the past, is likely to be widely embraced. Clearly unilateralism cannot wholly replace the legitimizing role multilateralism has played in the post-1945 world of international institutions. If the global climate regime is to be perceived as legitimate, that is, it requires the formal authorization of a multilateral body such as the UNFCCC.

The 2015 UNFCCC conference in Paris is undoubtedly a highly consequential and symbolically significant opportunity to affirm multilateral principles, the success of which nevertheless remains elusive without the negotiating sequence that needs to precede it. Were this opportunity to be missed, rationalist theory suggests, there are in the short term few options left to advocates of climate change mitigation and adaptation except national, suboptimal ones.

Notes on contributor

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