

THE EU, THE US AND THE CRISIS OF CONTEMPORARY
MULTILATERALISM

Mike Smith

In this article, the author analyses how transatlantic relations between the European Union and the United States influence the current multilateral system since its establishment. This is relevant because it translates in influence over other actors' behaviours and in the shaping of institutions and norms as well, therefore the necessity for negotiation processes. Three particular elements connected to multilateralism – institutions, norms and negotiation – are being challenged in the present time, respectively by varying levels of commitment from international actors, different perceptions of multilateralism and its actual efficacy, and abandonment of multilateral negotiations in favour of bilateralism and unilateralism. Concretely, when multilateral agreements can be reached, they often encounter difficulties in ratification and implementation, accordingly to the non-fixed domestic and international state of politics.

The EU is defined here as a *compulsive multilateralist*, able to both exert its influence and affirm itself as an international actor, committed to practices and principles of multilateralism. Internally, however, the Union is often slowed down by its own internal negotiation processes, and this reflects in international arenas, where more dominant member States try to influence decision-making. This phenomenon has been observed through years in the debates over the 2008 Sovereign Debt Crisis or the on-going migration issues; meanwhile BREXIT raised the prospect of further fragmentation. European multilateralism should then be analysed in four different aspects: creation of effective collective action (internal dimension), the perception of its role in the global scenario (external dimension), its contribution to IOs (institutional dimension), and the effectiveness of organizations in which the Union is engaged.

The US are defined here as a *selective multilateralist*, an attitude permitted by its power and position in the global scenario, now seen as uncertain and unpredictable. From an outside perspective, it could be said that the US represent a model to other nations, a condition that could easily be exploited more with multilateralism; the country, however, decided to focus on its internal domestic situation, in accordance to the sovereigntist view of international engagement and cooperation of the latest years of administration. As a consequence, its commitment has been limited and multilateral institutionalism is seen as unauthorized intervention in those identifies as domestic “sovereign concerns”. Example of this change in attitude has been individuated during the Trump administration, with the withdrawal from UNESCO and the 2015 Paris Climate Change Agreement, as well as the stop in pursuing Trans-Pacific Partnership, and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

Current Transatlantic relations can also be viewed in relation to three different core processes: *special relationships* that the US may develop with individual European countries; *transatlantic governance* through institutions managing transactions and disputes between the two actors; and the different approaches to the *world order*, in regard to the use of force in conflict prevention for example. As previously seen, both entities present some limitations caused by internal divisions, resulting in the questioning of their effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy, and are dependent by international developments. The EU-US system is then always changing and evolving, reflecting both short-term political preferences and long-term contrasts between their different policies.