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Multilateral Diplomacy in the 21st Century: Theories, Institutions, and Practice

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Abstract

Multilateral diplomacy is at the heart of transboundary issues like climate change, pandemics, trade disputes and peacekeeping crises. But its effectiveness is becoming increasingly constrained by power imbalances, resource interdependencies, institutional fragmentation, and new disruptions of the digital age. This paper reviews how multilateral institutions are changing to fit the changing geopolitical and technological environments. Using a qualitative, comparative case study methodology, the research focuses on four examples of diverse operations: the Paris Climate Agreement, the COVAX vaccine facility, the WTO Dispute Settlement Body and the MINUSMA peacekeeping mission in Mali. Primary documents, institutional reports, and peer reviewed literature were analysed from a liberal institutionalist, realist, and constructivist perspective. Cross case synthesis identified design elements that affect the performance of institutions. This research shows that institutional innovations can enhance inclusivity and operational reach, but from hybrid legal regimes to integrated peacekeeping are not yet sufficiently resilient to sovereignty sensibilities, legitimacy crises, and funding volatility. Crisis situations, such as vaccine nationalism, political unrest and deadlocks in trade governance, show the limits of multilateral solidarity. Effectiveness is also affected by digital risk, power relations, consent, and regime complexity, and donor dominance of agendas is reinforced by resource scarcity. Multilateralism will be effective only if it is supported by governance models that balance flexibility and enforceability, ensure predictable and unearmarked funding, and improve coordination among global and regional actors. Reform priorities include addressing representation deficits, diversifying financing, and developing inclusive norms of digital governance. Multilateral institutions risk continued loss of power and capacity in a further fragmented global order without structural adaptation.

Keywords: Diplomacy; multilateral; international organizations; global governance; institutional theory; international cooperation; diplomatic processes.

1. Introduction

Multilateralism is a foundational principle in international relations that extends beyond the confines of diplomatic establishments into the broader architecture of global governance. The term, originally denoting a geometric concept of "many-sidedness," now refers to a system of cooperation among multiple states and international actors who seek negotiated solutions to shared problems. Unlike bilateral diplomacy, which operates between two parties, multilateral diplomacy requires the participation of three or more actors working collectively to address complex, transnational challenges.

The increasing pace of globalization, coupled with rising interdependence among states, has intensified the importance of multilateral engagement in the 21st century. Contemporary global problems ranging from climate change and pandemics to international terrorism, cyber insecurity, and economic instability are issues no single state can resolve alone. Consequently, multilateral diplomacy has become indispensable in

forging collective responses, whether through international organizations, global summits, or issue-specific coalitions.

This paper is guided by the central research question: How has multilateral diplomacy evolved historically, and to what extent does it remain an effective mechanism for addressing the global challenges in the 21st century? In pursuing this question, the paper traces the historical evolution of multilateral diplomacy, analyses its theoretical underpinnings, maps its institutional architecture, details its operational processes, and critically evaluates its limitations and prospects.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to clarifying both the utility and constraints of multilateral diplomacy at a time when global cooperation is simultaneously more necessary and more contested. By synthesizing theoretical and empirical perspectives, the paper argues that understanding the dynamics of multilateral diplomacy is germaine not only for scholars of international relations but also for policymakers seeking more effective strategies of collective action in an era of fragmented global order.

2. Methods and Techniques

2.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative multi-method approach combining historical analysis, theoretical evaluation, and comparative case study analysis to integrate diplomatic history, international relations theory, and contemporary practice. The research design enables systematic examination of multilateral diplomacy's evolution, theoretical foundations, and operational challenges across diverse institutional contexts.

2.2 Case Selection and Theoretical Framework

Four cases were selected using maximum variation sampling to ensure sectoral diversity and theoretical representativeness: the Paris Climate Agreement (environmental governance), COVAX (global health), WTO Dispute Settlement (international economics), and MINUSMA (international security). These cases span different institutional designs (hybrid legal frameworks, public-private partnerships, legalized adjudication, robust peacekeeping), temporal periods (2013-2023), and theoretical paradigms, enabling comparative analysis of multilateral effectiveness across varying contexts.

Three dominant IR theories of liberal institutionalism, realism, and constructivism were selected for their established explanatory power in multilateral cooperation analysis, following Keohane and Martin's (1995) framework for institutional analysis. While critical theory, Marxist, and postcolonial approaches offer valuable perspectives on Global South experiences, this study focuses on mainstream theories to engage with core debates in multilateral governance literature. Each theory's explanatory power is evaluated using four criteria: predictive accuracy regarding state behaviour, explanatory coherence for institutional outcomes, analytical scope across issue areas, and empirical support from case evidence.

2.3 Data sources, analysis and historical coverage

Data sources mixes the use of primary documentary material and secondary literature. The main documentary sources are the text of treaties, official institutional reports, records of meetings and public statements (e.g. UN resolutions, WHO/WTO/COP documents, COVAX operational reports, MINUSMA mandate texts). The secondary sources are all scholarly peer-reviewed, policy reports and commentary by experts. Archival sources and diplomatic correspondence in digital archives (UN Digital Library, WTO Documents Online, WHO archives, national foreign ministry digital repositories) were consulted where possible. The historical coverage of the longue duree of multilateral diplomacy (since Westphalia) and an empirical emphasis on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially 1945 to the present, is due to the fact that this is the period of institutional forms and contemporary cases that are studied in depth.

Theoretical evaluation applies each paradigm systematically to all four cases, assessing explanatory fit through process tracing and comparative analysis. Case studies examine institutional design features, implementation challenges, and outcomes using structured comparison across dependent variables: effectiveness, legitimacy, adaptability, and inclusiveness.

2.4 Limitations

Several limitations constrain this analysis. Reliance on secondary literature for historical periods limits access to classified diplomatic communications that might reveal informal bargaining processes. Language

constraints restrict analysis primarily to English-language sources, potentially biasing toward Western perspectives on multilateral processes. The focus on formal institutional arrangements may underemphasize informal diplomatic networks and track-two processes that influence multilateral outcomes. Additionally, the emphasis on mainstream IR theories, while enabling engagement with core literature, may overlook critical or postcolonial insights particularly relevant to Global South experiences in multilateral diplomacy.

3. Theoretical Framework Analysis

3.1 Theoretical Frameworks

3.1.1 Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalism offers a foundational theoretical framework for understanding multilateral diplomacy, emphasizing the vital role of international institutions in enabling cooperation among states, even in an anarchic international system. Scholars such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye argue that institutions help initiate and sustain cooperation by reducing transaction costs, providing reliable information, establishing clear rules, and creating mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985). This approach suggests that, in the absence of a global government, states voluntarily establish institutions to manage shared interests and coordinate behaviour, thereby mitigating the inherent uncertainties of international relations. Liberal institutionalists drawing on the ideas of early proponents like Woodrow Wilson and Jawaharlal Nehru have long held that institutions can transform an unpredictable international 'rainforest' into a more orderly, rule-based 'zoo', metaphorically capturing how structure can emerge from anarchy.

This theory finds practical expression in numerous ways. For instance, institutions like the United Nations play a central role in rule-making by producing charters, treaties, and resolutions that outline expected behaviours among states. Similarly, bodies such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) provide dispute settlement mechanisms that enforce trade rules and reduce the fear of cheating by making decisions public and binding (Koremenos, Lipson, & Snidal, 2001). Regular diplomatic forums such as the annual UN General Assembly which facilitated repeated interactions, which help build trust and reduce the likelihood that today's partner will become tomorrow's adversary. A helpful analogy often used is that of two neighbours who benefit from sharing a fence: by creating a small "fence-sharing club" with rules for maintenance and conflict resolution, they gain the confidence to invest in shared infrastructure. In global politics, institutions like the WTO serve a similar function, making international cooperation more stable and predictable (Keohane & Martin, 1995).

Despite its strengths, liberal institutionalism is not without its critiques. One major limitation lies in its underlying assumption that all states have equal ability to influence institutions and benefit from their outcomes. In practice, power imbalances persist. Richer and more influential states often hold positions of dominance in bargaining and influence institutional norms to their benefit (Voeten, 2019). In addition, high-visibility incidents such as the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003, the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States, the occupation of Israel forces in the Gaza strip of Palestine, the unjust and provoked invasion of Russia into Ukraine sovereignty in recent times have illustrated the vulnerability of institutional structures. This kind of behaviour undermines multilateral cooperation, breeds suspicion and creates international environments where rival states are most likely to behave bilaterally or refuse cooperation on peace and security matters. These challenges portray a central contradiction in liberal institutionalism: institutions can facilitate cooperation and order more likely, but they can become susceptible to power politics and strategic interests of hegemonic actors.

3.1.2 Realism

Realism offers a sceptical and critical view of multilateral diplomacy informed by the perception that power and self-interest remain the chief motivators of international affairs. According to realist intellectuals, instead of being founded upon common norms or principles of cooperation, multilateral arrangements and institutions mostly reflect the true distribution of power. With this view, nations engage in multilateral diplomacy neither because they commit to global cooperation, but because they want to pursue each nation's self-interest, and amassing relative strength payoffs increases (Mearsheimer, 1994). Institutions are

regarded not as having autonomous agency or as game-moulders but rather as tools the great powers utilize strategically, applying them if they are expedient and dispensing with them when they impede.

This perception is illustrated in the critiques of such authors as Mizati (2016) that diplomacy, in its multilateral roles, has had little success in achieving lasting world peace because it remains trapped in a backward, ego-centred realist mindset. On this view, the egoistic nature of human conduct which is defined by ambition, insecurity, and competition for supremacy continues to be the source of aggressiveness, intolerance, and ruthless conduct in international affairs, thereby undermining genuine cooperation. Realist critique thus dismantles liberal institutionalist hope through an emphasis on the enduring reality of power politics: multilateral forums may be used instrumentally by hegemonic powers to maintain power, but the same powers will pull out or act unilaterally if their sovereignty is imperilled.

This realist view is reinforced by evidence from contemporary diplomacy. In the United Nations Security Council, the five permanent members (P5) comprising of the United States, China, Russia, France, and the United Kingdom with each have veto power, which they can exercise to veto any resolution that is not in the interests of their country. This institutional feature reflects not equality or consensus, but the entrenched military and economic hegemony of a few states. Similarly, realists point to instances in which great powers opportunistically participate in multilateral frameworks, such as the United States withdrawing from various UN agreements and treaties, indicating that strategic calculation generally comes before institutional loyalty. An English-literally literal example is provided to summarize such reasoning: when a powerful clan in a village excavates a well for a community, it may employ the act to seek influence, ensure favour, or exert domination; states do likewise when they lend assistance to global institutions only when doing so would benefit them.

But realism has its limits as well. It is not easily able to account for instances where states follow institutional rules even when they appear to go against their short-term self-interest. This means that other factors such as reputations, legal commitments, or economic interdependence may sometimes explain a state's behaviour in addition to brute power. However, the realism offers a critical theoretical solution to the debate on multilateral diplomacy to caution us on the long-term effects of power imbalances, interests, and competitive rivalries on the international system.

3.1.3 Constructivism

Constructivist explanations of multilateral diplomacy identifies the hegemony of ideas, identities, and norms in international cooperation. Contrary to the realism or liberal institutionalism where material interests or strategic calculation are in the limelight, constructivism recognizes multilateralism as deeply embedded in normative commitments and intersubjective interpretations of what is considered appropriate in the international system (Wendt, 1992; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). In this sense, the multilateral institutions are not merely venues of pursuing self-interest, but also the arenas where social interaction may reconstitute state preferences and identities over time. As noted in the literature, institutions serve as sites for the development and diffusion of norms, encouraging states to internalize certain values and practices that go beyond immediate material gains. For instance, norm entrepreneurs within the United Nations have played a significant role in turning humanitarian intervention into the globally recognized Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine (Bellamy, 2005). Similarly, regional organizations like the African Union contribute to constructing a shared “African” identity, which in turn shapes how member states engage in multilateral diplomacy and position themselves in global negotiations.

A plain-English analogy helps illustrate this process: just as traffic norms such as driving on the left or right side of the road, emerged from shared practice and eventually became formalized through law, diplomatic norms often begin as informal patterns of behaviour that, over time, are codified and widely accepted. Climate summits and UN committees, for example, frequently act as incubators for such norm-building, gradually shaping what is seen as legitimate or expected behaviour in international affairs. This emphasis on the social and normative dimensions of diplomacy allows constructivism to explain aspects of multilateral cooperation that cannot be fully captured by calculations of power or interest alone.

However, constructivism is not without its limitations. It often struggles to measure precisely how and to what extent norms influence state behaviour in comparison to material incentives. Moreover, it may underappreciate the persistent role of power imbalances in determining which norms gain traction and which are marginalized. While constructivists remain optimistic about the potential for normative evolution

and identity transformation through multilateral engagement, the enduring influence of power politics in many international forums continues to present a significant challenge.

3.2 Results

3.2.1 Historical Evolution of Diplomacy

Multilateral diplomacy has changed significantly over the centuries and what began initially as meetings to discuss some of the differences, has grown to institutional structures to ensure the dialogue and co-operation continues. Multilateral diplomacy can be traced back to the 17th century when European powers began to make treaties multilaterally as opposed to bilaterally. The history of multilateral diplomacy has become increasingly institutionalised and has developed through the structures of early multilateral treaty-making to become the multi-actor systems of governance that are dominant today. This evolutionary process shows that every major stage has embodied varying balances between institutional design, enforcement capacity and normative change-patterns that reflect three major theoretical perspectives in international relations: realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism. The analysis of these historical stages that follows shows how each of them could be traced to certain theoretical expectations and give information about the different levels of effectiveness that were realised in different periods of multilateral involvement.

3.2.2 Westphalian System and Early Congress Diplomacy (1648; Congress of Vienna 1814–1815)

The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 represents a foundational moment in multilateral diplomacy, ending the Thirty Years War and establishing the principle of sovereign equality among nations. This treaty system created the normative foundation upon which later multilateral structures would be built. The Congress of Vienna represents the first systematic attempt to resolve European security and territorial disputes through a single, multilateral conference. Convened from September 1814 to June 1815, it brought together plenipotentiaries from Austria, Britain, Prussia, Russia, France, and other states to negotiate the post-Napoleonic settlement. Under the leadership of Austria's Klemens von Metternich, the delegates sought to restore a balance of power that would deter future hegemony. Key outcomes included the reduction of France to its 1789 borders and the reorganization of German territories into a loose German Confederation under Austrian influence. While the "Concert of Europe" that followed fostered periodic consultation among the great powers, its reliance on consensus and great-power consent presaged enduring trade-offs between legitimacy (universal input) and efficiency (swift decision-making). By the early 19th century, the Congress of Vienna (1815) exemplified a more sophisticated approach to multilateral engagement, establishing a concert of powers system to maintain equilibrium in European international relations.

These developments illustrate realist dynamics (sovereignty, balance of power) while also providing the background conditions under which liberal institutional mechanisms (regular consultation, rules) could later emerge. Westphalian norms effectively stabilized European interstate relations by clarifying sovereignty, but the Concert's reliance on great-power consensus limited inclusion and institutional durability (effective for elite equilibrium; weak on broader legitimacy).

3.2.3 League of Nations Experiments (1919–1946)

Emerging from the ashes and the aftermath of World War I, witnessed the first attempt to create a permanent multilateral institution with the establishment of the League of Nations (1919-1946) with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The purpose of the League of Nations was to institutionalize collective security and prevent another global conflagration. Its Covenant created a Permanent Assembly of all members, an executive Council dominated by major powers, and a Secretariat to administer mandates and disputes. Despite early successes in settling minor disputes and administering mandates, the League suffered from critical enforcement gaps: the United States never joined, and unanimous Council approval was required to impose sanctions (Britannica, n.d). By the late 1930s, aggressor states ignored their resolutions, demonstrating that institutional design without credible coercive capacity can rapidly erode diplomatic efficacy. From a theoretical standpoint, the League is a classic liberal-institutionalist experiment as it created formal procedures, a secretariat, and regular diplomacy but realist constraints (great-power non-engagement and enforcement limits) undermined the effectiveness. Constructivist readings note its normative innovations (regularised collective security discourse). Modest success on dispute mediation and

administrative tasks; failed as a deterrent to major aggression due to enforcement gaps (limited long-term effectiveness).

3.2.4 The formation of the United Nations (1945 – Present)

The catastrophic failure of the League of Nations to prevent World War II led to creation of the United Nations in October 1945, fifty nations ratified the United Nations Charter in San Francisco, inaugurating a global organization with six principal organs: the General Assembly (universal deliberation), the Security Council (five permanent veto-holders plus rotating members), the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council, the International Court of Justice, and the Secretariat (Britannica, 2025). The United Nations remains the cornerstone of the contemporary multilateral system. The UN Charter combined liberal institutionalist optimism (expectations that norms and collective decision making would curb anarchy), with realist safeguards, notably the veto power for major powers to secure their participation (Weiss, 2014). Over succeeding decades, the UN's remit expanded to peacekeeping, decolonization, human rights, and sustainable development.

Likewise, the UN Charter established a more robust institutional framework with enhanced enforcement mechanisms, particularly through the Security Council's authority to authorize collective action. However, the Security Council veto remains a flashpoint: critics argue that it both stabilizes great power cooperation and entrenches privileged status that can deadlock urgent action (Von Einsiedel, Malone & Ugarte, 2015). The UN reflects a hybrid logic: liberal institutionalism (rule-based mechanisms, routinised diplomacy) tempered by realist safeguards (Security Council veto) and sustained by constructivist norm entrepreneurship (human rights, development. Strong as a universal deliberative forum and rule-setting body; effective in many technical and norm diffusion functions but constrained in coercive action where P5 interests diverge (partial effectiveness; high normative reach but variable enforcement).

3.2.5 Cold War and Post-Cold War Extensions (1945–1991; 1991–present)

The Cold War brought about a new dimension in diplomatic relations, with the order of the day revolving around nuclear warfare. This brought about the proliferation of multilateral forums often aligned with competing ideological blocs, i.e. West and Eastern blocs or the new multilateral forums for non-aligned states. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) emerged as an alternative multilateral platform for states seeking to navigate between the two superpowers, founded at Belgrade in 1961 under Tito, Nasser, and Nehru, and sought an independent path outside U.S.–Soviet rivalry, eventually encompassing over 100 countries (Britannica, 2025). Simultaneously, functional multilateral organizations addressing specific issue areas, economically, the Bretton Woods institutions, IMF (1944) and World Bank (1944) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT, 1947), later succeeded by the WTO (1995) to supervise and liberalize world trade, illustrate issue specific regimes designed for stability and growth.

Aftermath of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union left an opening for significant expansion of multilateral diplomacy through regional organizations like the European Economic Community (EEC, 1957) evolved into the European Union (EU) by the 1993 Maastricht Treaty to deepen economic and political integration (Britannica, 2025) Encyclopaedia Britannica. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN was formed in 1967 to promote economic growth and security cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand (Britannica, n.d.). On the African continent, the African Union replaced the OAU in 2002, aiming to accelerate continental unity and development (Britannica, n.d.). Each expansion addressed new policy domains and membership scales yet introduced complexity in coordination and potential mandate overlap.

Table 1: Timeline Development and Theoretical Implication

Period / Year	Key development	Primary theoretical implication
1648	Peace of Westphalia — sovereignty norm	Realist foundation: state sovereignty
1814–1815	Congress of Vienna / Concert of Europe	Realist balance-of-power; early institutional consultation
1919–1946	League of Nations	Liberal institutional experiment; enforcement limits (realist constraint)
1944–1945	Bretton Woods (IMF/World Bank); UN (1945)	Institutionalisation of economic and political multilateralism
1947 / 1995	GATT (1947) → WTO (1995)	Legalised trade governance; dispute settlement (liberal institutionalism)
1961	NAM founded	Identity politics / constructivist expression of Global South agency
1967	ASEAN founded	Regional institution building; consensus norms
1991–present	Post-Cold War regional & functional expansion; AU (2002)	Institutional pluralism; multi-level governance

Source: Authors' compilation (2025)

3.3 Institutions of Multilateral Diplomacy

3.3.1 The United Nations

The United Nations (UN) system stands as the most comprehensive institutional framework for multilateral diplomacy, encompassing six principal organs, most notably the General Assembly (UNGA), the Security Council (UNSC), and the Secretariat alongside numerous specialized agencies. "Modern multilateral diplomacy begins with the co-founding of international organizations, especially the UN," highlighting its foundational role in global cooperation. The UN provides both universal forum functions through the UNGA and more specialized governance mechanisms through the UNSC and functional bodies. The UNGA operates on the principle of sovereign equality, granting each member state one vote regardless of its power or population size. This arrangement theoretically represents democratic multilateralism; however, as Weiss (2014) argues, the Assembly's resolutions are non-binding and often reflect the lowest-common-denominator consensus. Empirical research supports this scepticism, showing that voting patterns frequently align with geopolitical blocs, casting doubt on the Assembly's capacity to level the diplomatic playing field (Bailey, Strezhnev, & Voeten, 2017).

The Security Council, by contrast, wields binding authority under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, enabling it to authorize military interventions, sanctions, and other enforcement measures. Yet its structure particularly the veto power held by the five permanent members (P5: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) institutionalizes a hierarchy in global politics. Realists interpret this design as a pragmatic recognition of power realities within the international system (Tharoor, 2011). Nonetheless, the Council's frequent deadlock in responding to major crises, such as those in Syria and Ukraine, has intensified global calls for reform, revealing the inherent contradiction between its collective security mandate and the national interests of veto-wielding powers (Luck, 2006). This tension between sovereign equality and entrenched power asymmetries complicates the practice of multilateral diplomacy, particularly in the realm of international peace and security.

Despite these structural and political constraints, the UN system has shown remarkable adaptability over time. Its agenda has expanded well beyond traditional security issues to include sustainable development, human rights, environmental protection, and other emerging global priorities. Giallombardo notes that the UN is an international example of multilateralism in practice, which has not lost institutional continuity and legitimacy through fundamental geopolitical transformation and continues to be successful today. Despite all this it remains the foundation of multilateral diplomacy; a clumsy, imperfect but essential arena in which to address the shared problems of the world.

3.3.2 Specialized Agencies

Another significant aspect of the global governance system is the multilateral diplomatic system of the specialized agencies that regulate functional spheres such as trade, health, finance and labour. Some examples of such a system of global governance that is functionally differentiated include the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank as well as the World Health Organization (WHO). The technical cooperation opportunities that these organizations present makes sure that advancements are achieved regardless of geopolitical tensions which under other conditions would block more general political bargaining. The literature has revealed that technical competence has become a requirement in the management of the contemporary global issues due to the increasing role that the fields of science and technology play in such institutions.

Institutional variation and authority capture different governance logics. The World Trade Organization (WTO), for instance, is among the most legalized international relations institutions with its binding dispute settlement system that provides smaller or weaker countries the legal platform to challenge the trade actions of more powerful nations (Alter, 2008). However, structural hierarchies are still apparent; research by Shaffer, Elsig, and Puig (2016) shows that richer countries continue to dominate agenda control and key institutional appointments, thus demonstrating persisting inequalities amidst formally neutral bureaucratic structures.

In contrast, the WHO possesses significantly less coercive power, instead utilizing soft law, technical recommendations, and moral persuasion to coordinate global health action. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed underlying vulnerabilities in this system, most notably, its underfinancing, voluntary state compliance, and absence of an enforcement mechanism (Burci & Eccleston-Turner, 2021). These are manifestations of a broader institutional conflict between state sovereignty and the need for supranational regulation in managing transnational health crises.

Similarly, the role of the IMF in macroeconomic governance remains controversial. Although the Fund has been enthusiastic about rhetoric around "inclusive growth" and "social spending floors," some argue that its operational core condition lending practices still reflect the strategic interests of major donor states (Grabel, 2018). These trends justify the impression that even specialized agencies are not beyond common power relations, and the need for institutional reform as well as deeper normative analysis of equity and representation in global governance.

3.3.3 Regional Bodies

Regional organizations are the key players in the wider multilateral architecture, providing context-specific platforms for cooperation and governance. Organizations like the European Union (EU), African Union (AU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Organization of American States (OAS) are representative, though with considerable divergence in their levels of institutionalization, normative coherence, and effectiveness. While these institutions operate at the sub-global level, they are playing increasingly profound roles in shaping diplomatic customs and international norms.

The European Union is the most advanced example of regional integration as a quasi-supranational organization with a legal personality and a unified foreign policy mechanism. Its capacity to negotiate as one in international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and UN climate conferences demonstrates how regionalism can optimize diplomatic cohesion and negotiating power (Laatikainen & Smith, 2006). The institutional maturity level of the EU, not only its internal norm harmonization, but also enables what political scientists have described as "normative power Europe"—that ability to project democracy, human rights, and the rule of law outside of EU membership (Manners, 2002).

In contrast, organizations like the AU and OAS operate primarily on an intergovernmental basis, reflecting the sovereignty sensitivities of their member states (Engel & Porto, 2010). Although less institutionalized, these bodies still contribute meaningfully to regional stability and governance. For instance, the AU's Peace and Security Council has authorized interventions in crisis-affected states such as Mali and the Central African Republic, demonstrating growing assertiveness in regional conflict management albeit within constraints posed by limited financial and logistical resources (Williams, 2007).

Regional mechanisms can therefore be said to have a dual role, they supplement global institutions as they can take care of regional issues and priorities, and they also offer alternative avenues of action when global consensus is not forthcoming. Although this multi-level governance has the potential to generate synergies, there are concerns of fragmentation especially when regional institutions have different standards or enforcement practices that are not in line with the global norms. This controversy that is yet to die down shows how difficult it is to coordinate regional and global multilateral efforts in a more pluralist international system.

3.3.4 Non-State Actors

The contemporary multilateral diplomacy is not only a sphere which is the monopoly of state capitals. There has been significant growth in non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multinational corporations (MNCs), coalitions of civil societies and epistemic communities which influence foreign policy agendas through policy knowledge and leverage. According to Giallombardo (2016), multilateralism should be redefined to take into consideration the growing role of non-governmental organisations. Non-governmental organizations provide a necessary service in the area of human rights advocacy and also environmental governance and humanitarian aid programs. By having consultative status with United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), NGOs are allowed to report and lobby on different matters and also participate in additional meetings. The so-called boomerang model developed by Keck and Sikkink (2014) demonstrates that transnational NGO networks can influence the resistant states by attracting external support of allies and international organizations on the local initiatives.

At times when technical guidance is required, multilateral frameworks rely strongly on expert groups that possess causal understandings and pertinent policy knowledge. According to Haas (1992), expert communities were described as key players in the development of international regime on climate change, non-proliferation and global health. The power of these communities is founded on their epistemic legitimacy and not coercive abilities because they determine the frames of issues and put forth credible solutions in the intergovernmental negotiations.

A new complexity is brought in by multinational corporations. The companies like Google, Meta, and Amazon have enormous diplomatic power due to their supply chains that span the globe and their control of essential infrastructures like digital platforms and data networks. The role of such actors in norm development in new areas like digital trade and information security is considerable and they are more likely to resist regulation. Their lobbying in the multilateral institutions is evidence of the growing entanglement of business interests and development in international norms and raises difficult questions regarding transparency, accountability and democratic integrity.

The rise of multilateral engagement is indicative of a shift towards what is commonly referred to by most researchers as Multilateralism 2.0, where the involvement has shifted out of state-centred involvement into a greater perspective of multilateral governance that encompasses a variety of actors (Global Science Diplomacy for Multilateralism 2.0, 2023). The science and technology (S&T) community is emblematic of this shift in its ability to respond to urgent problems as well as the creation of new forms of governance. Scientific and technological community has the capacity to facilitate the creation of multilateral systems that are more appropriate to deal with global complexities.

Institutional pluralism is however a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it provides a number of participation channels, encourages integrative solutions that transcend the boundaries between different problems, and allows making so-called variable geometry arrangements that shape cooperation to efficiently deal with a specific problem. On the other hand, institutional pluralism may also lead to fragmentation, coordination failures, and "forum shopping," where actors choose and join institutions selectively based on specific issues on a case-by-case basis. These concerns raise fundamental questions about institutional design: how is power distributed across global, regional, and functional institutions? What is an optimal level of participation by state and non-state actors? In addition, how can multilateral diplomacy manage to maintain its effectiveness and legitimacy within an expanding and complicated governance landscape?

3.4 Processes & Mechanisms: How Multilateral Diplomacy Functions

3.4.1 Conference Diplomacy

Conference diplomacy that is commonly considered to be the *theatre* of multilateral interaction is one of the cornerstone mechanisms by which the international community can solve global issues. It encompasses the high-level summits, treaty negotiations, thematic conferences and institutional meetings in which both the state and non-state actors meet to deliberate, negotiate and make decisions. The history of multilateral diplomacy has been largely marked by the growth of such diplomacy through congresses and conferences, which highlights the importance of these two platforms to diplomacy.

These forums play many overlapping roles: agenda-setting, in which priorities are framed and contestation begins; information sharing, to create common factual baselines; coalition-building as states and actors converge around interests or values; and norm development, which progressively shapes acceptable international behaviour. Whether it is the process of making a proposal or reaching a consensus, all these processes demand different diplomatic skills that include persuasive communication and strategic compromise.

Contemporary conference diplomacy is very procedural, usually guided by formal rules of order, chaired leadership and structured negotiating formats. These are plenary sessions to deliberate in general, working groups to discuss technical matters, contact groups to formulate compromise and informal consultations to overcome deadlocks. Such procedural innovations are part of a continuing process of trying to strike the balance between efficiency, inclusiveness and legitimacy in multilateral forums. However, as Tallberg (2006) and Hamilton & Langhorne (2011) point out, a lot of the negotiations of the contents occur outside the official environment, mainly in informal meetings, what is known as the green rooms and corridor diplomacy. Although the formal processes offer a sense of legitimacy and transparency, informal dealings offer a level of flexibility which is usually required when making a successful deal. This ambivalence is characteristic of the comprehension of the functioning of conference diplomacy. However, the informal processes tend to favour the powerful. Behind the scenes deals may exclude smaller delegations, non-state actors and weaker states, and cast doubt on procedural justice and questions of legitimacy. An example of this is the UNFCCC climate negotiation. Although all states are technically members of the Conference of the Parties (COP), the actual power tends to reside in the blocs such as the G77, EU, and Umbrella Group. According to Depledge (2013), major breakthroughs are likely to occur during backroom negotiations among few powerful negotiators, therefore, leaving out those who are not in the inner circles of the best diplomacy.

Overall, the evolution of conference diplomacy is both an indication of the continuity of the most pertinent problems, and the creativity of the adjustments used in the pursuit of multilateral relations. It testifies to the precarious equilibrium of openness and efficiency, representation and influence; an equilibrium which continues to determine the effectiveness and legitimacy of international cooperation.

3.4.2 Decision-Making Rules: Consensus vs Majority Voting

Multilateral diplomacy involves decision-making processes that are significant to outcomes, legitimacy and power relations in issue areas and institutions. Such procedures, which range between formal voting rules and consensus schemes, are not only a matter of institutional design, but also a matter of more fundamental normative choices in favour of inclusion, efficiency, and equity.

As Gould (2017) points out, multilateral negotiating procedures typically follow a series of steps, resulting in consensus-building processes. Even though formal voting systems continue to be the foundation for most institutions e.g., majority voting in the UN General Assembly or qualified majority voting in some regional institutions, many multilateral forums put high emphasis on consensus-based approaches. Bodies like the World Trade Organization (WTO) and UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) actively favour consensus in a bid to enhance the legitimacy and robustness of agreements.

Consensus models attempt to establish broad support or at least toleration of decisions by all member states. This broad membership lends legitimacy but can also facilitate blocking action, allowing even a single actor or small coalition to bring development to a halt. Steinberg (2002) identifies how such pressures can undermine cooperation, particularly where distributive consequences are at stake, e.g., in climate finance, trade liberalization, or migration policy deals. Majority rules, on the other hand, boost the efficacy of the

procedure at the expense of dubious legitimacy results to the dissident states. Voeten (2000) and Gruber (2000) demonstrate that strong states prefer consensus when they might be outvoted but prefer majoritarian rules when they can assure themselves that they can be guaranteed of a coalition. Political calculation behind this proposes what procedural design ensues.

Multilateral diplomacy requires the full set of sophisticated diplomatic techniques: informal conversation, simulation negotiations, text drafting that is ambiguous yet subtly persuasive and individual incentives that will facilitate compromise. Such techniques are a reflection of the complex task of reconciling the various interests in a heterogeneous international community that requires technical and political skills as much as political sophistication at the highest level.

Finally, equity versus efficiency of decision-making is a constant dilemma. It is the informal procedures of consensus-making which, in the end, may determine the success or failure of global agreements: the less noticeable negotiations which take place in corridors and behind closed doors.

3.4.3 Track-Two Diplomacy: Informal and Backchannel Dialogues

Besides the formal multilateral negotiations, track-two diplomacy and informal interactions have become a more important element in the development of solutions to complex international problems. Such informal or semi-formal processes complement institutional processes because they provide flexible and cost-effective forums where parties can negotiate the extent of compromise options, experiment with proposals and establish trust beyond the institutional limits of mandates. During the negotiation process, states are prone to bilateral meetings and informal consultations. The main functions of these parallel exchanges are to break deadlocks, clarify interests and negotiate pre-agreements especially in instances where official negotiations have failed due to political sensitivities or protocols.

Track-two diplomacy, in particular, refers to unofficial, non-governmental dialogue involving academics, retired officials, civil society actors, and sometimes business leaders. It has gained increased relevance as formal multilateral processes face growing politicization and deadlock (Jones, 2015; Jeffrey, 2005). A classic example is the Oslo Accords, where backchannel talks between Israeli and Palestinian representatives created the foundations for a breakthrough at a time when official channels were blocked (Nohra, 2022). The advantage of these mechanisms is that they are deniable and informal, and therefore the participants are free to pursue creative solutions without making a binding commitment or risking reputation. Informal spaces thus offer a useful normative and strategic flexibility that actors can use to avoid entrenched national positions and testing of politically charged ideas. However, informal and track-two diplomacy is not without critics. This may be due to their unaccountability, lack of transparency and representativeness, which may compromise legitimacy of results. When such processes are used to replace, as opposed to complement, formal negotiations, they run the risk of avoiding the democratic control and sidelining weaker stakeholders. This brings about normative concerns of effectiveness-legitimacy trade-off of global governance.

Finally, the interplay of both formal and informal channels is characteristic of the modern multilateral diplomacy. The good use of both spaces is turning out to be a success secret, to understand when to employ formal structures to earn legitimacy and when to retreat to informal surroundings to think breakthroughs.

3.4.4 Secretariat Administration

An important and usually overlooked aspect of multilateral diplomacy is the presence of permanent secretariats, the administrative, bureaucratic machinery that ensures continuity, expertise and coordination in multilateral forums. Through such institutions, diplomacy can be made more than episodic summits and can be long-term cooperation. There are numerous functions of secretariats:

- **Technical analysis** to inform negotiation positions
- **Institutional memory** provides historical continuity
- **Logistical support** for organizing meetings and consultations
- **Mediation and facilitation** between conflicting actors
- **Agenda-setting and policy development**, especially on technically complex issues.

In areas such as science diplomacy, these support structures are indispensable for delivering specialized advice and maintaining international scientific cooperation (Namdeo & Zhang, 2024). This reflects a broader trend where technical expertise and bureaucratic infrastructure are increasingly central to global problem-solving.

Far from being mere facilitators, secretariats can exercise substantial agency. Barnett and Finnemore (2012) argue that international secretariats function as autonomous bureaucracies with normative and discursive power. Their influence is evident in the WHO's authority to define public health emergencies, or the WTO's role in interpreting trade rules—decisions that often carry profound political consequences under the guise of technical neutrality. Nonetheless, the objectivity of secretariats cannot be ensured. They are often captured by bureaucracy especially by financial dependability and political appointment by strong member states. Parzek (2017) shows how the powerful players in organizations such as the WTO and IMF influence staffing and budgeting in institutions, which shapes their agenda setting and policy implementation internally. These dynamics may also support structural hierarchies, which are contrary to the equal standing multilateral diplomacy is meant to represent. Finally, the functioning of secretariats indicates some of the most serious tensions at the core of multilateralism:

- In between neutral facilitation and bureaucratic agency
- Among the technical and political power
- Efficiency vs. equity

The way to deal with these challenges is by having institutional designs that maintain the professional integrity and operational autonomy of secretariats, and at the same time make them accountable and representative. Effective and trusted secretariats are needed now more than ever in a multilateral system that is more technical and increasingly political in nature.

4.0 Discussion

4.1 Examining Multilateral Diplomacy through Four Contemporary Applications

Multilateral diplomacy is an ongoing institutional response to the transboundary problems that are widespread in today's international relations. The following discussion is based on four examples of cases that reflect both the theoretical dimensions of multilateral systems of governance and its empirical limitations. Each of the case studies reveal distinctive aspects of institutional design, norm development, and implementation dilemmas that characterise collective diplomatic action in the 21st century. Together they provide evidence that can be used to identify the conditions under which multilateral solutions cannot solve global problems or do not work.

4.1.1 The Paris Climate Agreement: Normative Innovation and Compliance Challenges

The Paris Agreement of 2015 represents a high point of environmental multilateralism, in that it no longer seeks binding targets as in the Kyoto Protocol, but instead flexible nationally determined contributions (NDCs). Such an institutional design strikes a balance between the sensitivities of sovereignty and the expectations of normative climate (Bodansky 2016), fusing voluntary commitments and mandatory procedures to create what Rajamani (2016) calls a 'hybrid legal character'. The Agreement's transparency regime is a model for the use of reputational rather than coercive tools in multilateral agreements. It establishes what Keohane and Victor (2016) term 'orchestrated accountability' through periodic reporting, expert review and quinquennial stocktakes, which creates a sense of implementation pressure without undermining sovereignty. The outcome of this design aligns with the constructivist view of norm internalisation in international regimes (Falkner 2019).

Nevertheless, there are still some serious theoretical contradictions. A plausible commitment problem (in which states make non-enforced commitments (non-compliance costs)) is another plausible objection to neorealist critics. To a certain extent, this can be attributed to the evidence provided after 2015: NDC ambition does not meet the temperature targets and implementation gaps do not close yet (UNEP, 2022) revealing tensions between diplomatic feasibility and environmental necessity, a situation named as the "institutional effectiveness dilemma."

4.1.2 COVAX Vaccine Facility: Public Health Multilateralism Under Stress

The COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility **(**COVAX) is the first of its kind and an unprecedented global health governance undertaking. It is an amalgamation of the World Health Organization's

governance power, the Gates Foundations's global public private health partnerships through Gavi and CEPI, and multilateral public private partnerships. It aims to ensure COVAX's equitable vaccine distribution across income levels COVAX procured, delivered and financed to granted operational global health solidarity (Sharma, Kawa & Gomber 2022). COVAX's design rests on the institutionalist liberal conjectures of cooperation and international organizations designed to mitigate market failure. COVAX attempted to alleviate the "commons tragedy" during and after global pandemics through the cooperative purchasing and supply of distribution systems on private resources and scalable partnerships (Bernstein, 2021). The COVAX facility's success demonstrates the GOARN's potential to organize multilateral action during health emergencies, surpassing geopolitical concerns. Delivering the first and over 1 billion doses by mid 2022 exhibited unprecedented performance on allocated international resources.

However operational challenges COVAX had to face reinforced the CNN paradigm. Security crises prompted the "vaccine nationalism" response. It involved dominant bilateral contracting powers Congress to prioritize domestic health needs, unbundling global, cooperative frameworks (Zhou, 2022; Gostin, Moon & Meier, 2020). This behaviour aligns with offensive realism's proposition that states gain competitive advantages during periods of strategic ambiguity (Mearsheimer, 2001). The primary contribution to the global governance frameworks came from the states with heavy political pressures to act unilaterally through global comitments (Katz et al, 2021).

4.1.3 WTO Dispute Settlement: Institutional Legitimacy Under Contestation

The Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has been a poster child of legalised multilateralism, with binding authority, binding adjudication and independent appellate review, a model of "legalisation" in international affairs, (Goldstein, et al., 2000). It has settled 600 disputes between 1995 and 2018, it has made the rules-based governance of trade effective, and constraining unilateralism (Davey 2022).

Built on functionalist logic of institutional delegation in an effort to encourage credible commitment and to reduce transaction costs in sophisticated trade relations (Abbott and Snidal 1998), the DSB provided smaller economies with credible enforcement powers that partially compensate for trade relations power asymmetries. Its competence to regulate an array of issues from intellectual property rights to environmental regulation is a perfect example of what could be called "issue linkage" of multilateral governance (Davis 2012).

Since December 2019, the Appellate Body has been paralyzed by U.S. opposition to judicial appointments, which speaks to both tensions over sovereignty delegation and diminished norm diffusion among key members. This is in line with the concepts of "contested multilateralism" (Stephen and Zurtn 2019) and the "institutional paradox" of trade governance (Bown 2022) according to which successful binding of hegemonic states can result in legitimacy crises. Ultimately, reforms have proved elusive, and a return to bilateral and plurilateral dispute settlement has been followed by a trend that threatens to fragment the system. Capacity building of resource-poor (under-resourced) members will be needed to ensure fair participation, but process reforms to allay fears of judicial overreach will also be needed to restore legitimacy.

4.1.4 MINUSMA in Mali: Peacekeeping Efforts in Contested Spaces

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) created in 2013, for instance, represents the evolution of multilateral peacekeeping towards so-called robust operations in difficult security environments (Williams 2018). As a hybrid actor of counterterrorism, state building and humanitarian protection, MINUSMA embodies the dilemmas of state building between external intervention and local legitimacy in fragile states (Paris and Sisk 2009). The integrated military, police and civilian structure of MINUSMA is one example of UN organisational learning from the failure of previous peacekeeping missions (Howard 2019). A further extension of this is their multi-dimensional mandate which spans across civilian protection, mediation, security-sector reform and human rights monitoring, a demonstration of an inter-relationship between security, governance and development (Coleman 2017).

However, the mission has a long history of operational problems. The military coup and call for the withdrawal of UN troops in 2020 reflect the so-called consent dilemma (Johnstone, 2017), and like the ECOWAS and France's attempts to create competing security governance in the Sahel (Tardy, 2019). In

addition to the sovereignty tensions, gaps in resource complementarity and inconsistency in operational tempos of global and regional actors have been barriers to coordination. From this case, it presents a research gap on the role played by global regional security interfaces in determining mission effectiveness. While the capacity of the regions is assessed in the literature (Moller, 2005; Cimiotta, 2017), less is understood about the institutional interaction that is responsible for policy coherence and legitimacy (Howard and Dayal, 2018). Finally, in order to ensure coherence and efficiency as a common operational tool, future hybrid peacekeeping needs to create institutionalized joint planning structures, integrate resource mobilization timelines and incorporate local knowledge systems.

Table 2: Institutional Design and Theoretical Frameworks

Dimension	**Paris Climate Agreement (2015)**	**COVAX Vaccine Facility (2020-2022)**	**WTO Dispute Settlement Body (1995-2019)**	**MINUSMA in Mali (2013-present)**
Primary Domain	Environmental governance	Global health governance	Trade governance	Security governance
Institutional Structure	Hybrid legal framework with voluntary NDCs + mandatory procedures	Public-private partnership (WHO, Gates Foundation, Gavi, CEPI)	Legalized adjudication with binding authority	Multidimensional integrated mission (military, police, civilian)
Governance Mechanism	"Orchestrated accountability" through transparency systems	Pooled procurement and equitable distribution	Third-party arbitration with appellate review	Robust peacekeeping with multifaceted mandate
Theoretical Framework	Constructivist (norm internalization) + Liberal institutionalist	Liberal institutionalist (mutual gains, market failure correction)	Functionalist (institutional delegation) + Legal formalism	Liberal peace-building + Organizational learning theory
Innovation Type	Normative (hybrid legal character)	Operational (global procurement coordination)	Procedural (binding dispute resolution)	Structural (integrated multidimensional approach)

Source: Authors' compilation (2025)

Table 3: Implementation Challenges and Realist Critiques

Dimension	Paris Climate Agreement	COVAX Vaccine Facility	WTO Dispute Settlement Body	MINUSMA in Mali
Primary Challenge	Credible commitment problem	Vaccine nationalism and supply constraints	Institutional legitimacy crisis	Consent dilemma and competing governance
Sovereignty Tension	"Sovereignty paradox" - restrictions needed but sovereignty-respecting solutions often fail	Domestic priorities override global commitments	Judicial overreach vs. delegation concerns	External intervention vs. indigenous legitimacy
Realist Critique	States make grand promises without compliance costs (Barrett & Dannenberg, 2016)	Offensive realism: states maximize advantages during uncertainty (Mearsheimer, 2001)	Contested multilateralism: powerful states withdraw when constrained (Stephen & Zürn, 2019)	Security dilemmas in fragile states with competing regional actors
Power Dynamics	Implementation gaps reveal diplomatic-environmental necessity tension	"Structural power" and "geopolitics of scarcity" (Barnett & Duvall, 2005)	"Institutional paradox" - effectiveness triggers legitimacy challenges	Regional-global security interface creates coordination gaps
Empirical Evidence of Failure	NDC ambition below temperature goals (UNEP, 2022)	Bilateral contracts circumvented collective mechanisms	US blocking of appellate appointments since 2019	2020 military coup and UN withdrawal demands

Source: Authors' compilation (2025)

Table 4: Outcomes and Lessons for Multilateral Effectiveness

Dimension	Paris Climate Agreement	COVAX Vaccine Facility	WTO Dispute Settlement Body	MINUSMA in Mali
Measurable Success	Global framework adoption, transparency mechanisms established	1+ billion doses delivered by mid-2022	~600 disputes resolved (1995-2018)	Organizational learning integration achieved
Systemic Impact	Reputational pressure model for environmental agreements	Demonstrated potential for health emergency coordination	Promoted rules-based trade governance	Evolved peacekeeping toward robust operations
Current Status	Ongoing but with persistent ambition-implementation gap	Mixed results with structural limitations exposed	Effectively paralyzed since December 2019	Operational but facing legitimacy challenges
Key Lesson	Balance between flexibility and effectiveness remains elusive	Public-private multilateralism limited during acute distributional conflicts	Institutional effectiveness can trigger legitimacy backlash from powerful states	Global-regional security coordination requires better integration
Theoretical Contribution	Reveals sovereignty-collective action trade-offs	Confirms realist predictions during security crises	Illustrates "contested multilateralism" dynamics	Highlights research gap in multilevel security governance

Source: Authors' compilation (2025)

Comparing these four cases reveals three critical conditions that determine multilateral diplomatic effectiveness. First, institutional flexibility makes it more successful and more vulnerable: the hybrid legal framework of the Paris Agreement and the model of adaptive partnership embodied by COVAX enabled the inclusion of many more actors, but it also created gaps in enforcement, and the legalisation of the WTO had the effect of initial compliance followed by a backlash of legitimacy when powerful states were compelled to comply. Second, crisis contexts reveal the limits of multilateral solidarity: the vaccine nationalism of COVAX, the operational difficulties of MINUSMA during political instability in Mali, and the implementation gaps of the Paris Agreement during economic pressures all illustrate how acute crises trigger realist state behaviour that corrodes collective structures. Third, power allocation and consent dynamics are fundamentally related to institutional sustainability: WTO paralysis by U.S. obstruction, MINUSMA withdrawal demands after Mali coup, COVAX evasion through bilateral contracts, Paris Agreement voluntary compliance all show that multilateral effectiveness hinges on whether key actors see continued engagement as serving their strategic interests. Together, these cases suggest that successful multilateralism requires institutions that are flexible enough to accommodate issues of sovereignty, strong enough to operate during times of crisis, and adaptive enough to deal with changing power dynamics and withdrawal of consent.

5.0 Contemporary Challenges in achieving Multilateral Diplomacy

The collapse of climate governance and vaccine nationalism, failure to resolve trade conflicts, and the crisis of consent in peacekeeping are examples of the common tensions in the modern practise of multilateralism as seen in the above case studies. These empirical trends reflect structural forces that are systematically questioning multilateral diplomacy in the modern world. Multilateral diplomacy is facing a row of intertwined issues that challenge the validity, fairness and efficiency of joint decision-making in sectors. This section examines their underlying structural drivers.

5.1 Legitimacy and Representation

The legitimacy of multilateral institutions is fundamentally anchored in equitable representation and fair rule-making. Persistent North–South cleavages challenge the authority of institutions structured around Global North dominance. Emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and the African Union member states have pressed for permanent Security Council membership, arguing that the 1945 P5 configuration no longer mirrors today's geopolitical realities (Thakur, 2010). Thakur underscores that while Southern states advocate greater representation, reform efforts often falter in the face of competing regional rivalries (e.g. among African contenders like Nigerian vs. South Africa) and opposition from veto-holding members, perpetuating a legitimacy deficit rooted in representational imbalance (Thakur, 2010; Thakur, 2020). This North–South divide extends beyond the Security Council to specialized agencies, where developing countries frequently contend that agenda-setting and leadership posts are disproportionately occupied by officials from wealthy states, thereby constraining the normative authority of multilateralism.

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Leadership selection disputes in specialized agencies mirror the broader North–South divide in multilateral governance. In the 2017 World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General election, African Union member states unanimously backed Ethiopian candidate Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus over the United Kingdom’s David Nabarro, framing his victory as overdue African leadership in global health given the continent’s disproportionate disease burden (Wise, 2017). At the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Managing Director position has, since the institution’s founding, been held exclusively by Europeans, an informal arrangement paired with U.S. leadership of the World Bank. This pattern exemplifies what Malone (2004) terms “hegemonic institutionalism,” whereby powerful states preserve control over key posts, constraining the perceived legitimacy of multilateral institutions among emerging economies.

5.2 Power Asymmetries

Closely related to representation is the asymmetry of power embedded in the institutional design of the United Nations, most notably exemplified in the veto privilege of the Security Council's permanent members. This mechanism permits any of the P5 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) to unilaterally block substantive resolutions, even in the face of overwhelming international consensus. Historical episodes like the 2003 Iraq War—where France and Russia's threatened vetoes led the U.S. and U.K. to circumvent the Security Council entirely (Cockayne & Malone, 2008)—demonstrate this dynamic, while more recent events underscore its persistence. Russia's systematic vetoing of Ukraine-related resolutions since 2022, including humanitarian aid access and ceasefire proposals supported by the vast majority of UN members, exemplifies how veto power continues to paralyze multilateral responses to contemporary crises (Peter, 2023).

These patterns reveal deeper theoretical tensions within multilateral governance. Hegemonic stability theory suggests that dominant powers create international institutions to manage global order while preserving their privileged position (Gilpin, 1981), making meaningful reform structurally unlikely as long as existing hegemonies persist. Conversely, power transition theory posits that institutional change becomes possible only during periods of declining hegemonic dominance, when rising powers can challenge established arrangements (Tammen, Kugler & Lemke, 2017). As scholars such as Luck (2006) and Malone (2007) observe, powerful states not only use vetoes but strategically manipulate procedural norms to shape outcomes, often sidelining broader General Assembly sentiment and eroding multilateral legitimacy.

Similarly, in bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, voting shares tied to financial contributions grant the United States and European powers disproportionate sway over lending conditions, reflecting what institutional theorists term "weighted multilateralism" rather than sovereign equality (Weiss, 2013). Although realism predicts such power politics, their persistence within institutions ostensibly committed to sovereign equality raises fundamental questions about whether multilateral diplomacy can transcend power hierarchies or merely institutionalizes them under the guise of collective governance.

5.3 Fragmentation and Forum-Shopping

As states seek venues that best serve their interests, the multilateral system becomes increasingly fragmented. Busch (2007) coined the term *forum-shopping* to describe how actors bypass slow or adverse negotiations in one forum by shifting to another. Trade policy offers a clear illustration: frustrated by stalemates in the World Trade Organization, major economies advanced plurilateral agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Similar dynamics are evident in climate governance, where states dissatisfied with the slow pace of the UNFCCC process have turned to smaller “climate clubs” or bilateral carbon arrangements, and in human rights, where some governments circumvent the UN Human Rights Council by relying on regional charters or selective alliances. While forum-shopping can inject momentum into stalled negotiations, it also risks undermining the coherence and authority of universal bodies. When coalitions of the willing negotiate side-agreements, weaker states are unable to join exclusive clubs, then face exclusion and diminished bargaining power.

This pattern reflects the dynamics of regime complexity (Alter & Raustiala, 2018), where overlapping and sometimes competing institutions provide both opportunities for innovation and risks of fragmentation. From a realist perspective, forum-shopping highlights how powerful states leverage institutional choice to entrench their strategic interests and marginalize weaker actors. Liberal institutionalists, by contrast, see it as a pragmatic adaptation to institutional gridlock, enabling cooperation through flexible, issue-specific arrangements. Constructivists emphasise how shifting venues also reshapes normative expectations and collective identities. For example, the rise of climate clubs alters the meaning of leadership and responsibility in global environmental politics. Taken together, forum-shopping illustrates how fragmentation both reflects and deepens power asymmetries, challenging the assumption that a single institutional framework can adequately govern complex global issues.

5.4 Resource Constraints

Multilateral diplomacy depends on stable funding and human resources. Yet most international organizations face recurrent budget shortfalls, creating systemic vulnerabilities. Weiss (2013) notes that the UN Secretariat and specialized agencies have been chronically underfunded, relying heavily on voluntary

contributions earmarked for specific projects rather than core functions. This structure reduces flexibility and strategic capacity, shifting agendas toward donor preferences instead of collectively agreed priorities.

The World Health Organization exemplifies these dynamics: between 2010 and 2021, 75–88% of its budget came from voluntary contributions, the majority earmarked for high-visibility areas such as epidemic response, leaving insufficient resources for health systems strengthening (Iwunna, Kennedy, & Harmer, 2023). Similarly, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) receives over 95% of its funding through voluntary contributions, creating what Loescher, Betts, and Milner (2012) term *funding fragmentation*, where humanitarian responses become contingent on donor political priorities rather than assessed needs. The World Food Programme (WFP) faces comparable constraints: Barrett and Maxwell (2005) documented how irregular funding cycles forced programme suspensions despite persistent hunger. This remains true today, for instance in 2023, WFP received only USD 8.3 billion against operational requirements of USD 22.8 billion, the largest recorded shortfall in its history, forcing scale-downs in five of its ten largest operations despite record global hunger.

These resource constraints interact directly with the power asymmetries identified earlier, creating what might be termed *financial dependency multilateralism*. When organizations rely overwhelmingly on voluntary contributions, donor states acquire disproportionate agenda-setting power that bypasses formal governance structures (Graham, 2017). Major contributors typically wealthy Northern states can effectively direct institutional priorities through targeted funding, while recipient states and Global South priorities receive marginal attention. This dynamic perpetuates institutional inequality beyond formal voting arrangements, as resource scarcity forces organizations to prioritise donor preferences over member-state consensus, fundamentally compromising multilateral decision-making (Ege & Bauer, 2017; Terzi & Fall, 2014).

5.5 Digital-Era Disruptions

The rapid evolution of digital technology presents novel cyber threats, data-driven diplomacy tools, and a normative void surrounding online behaviour. Manor (2016) observes that while digital platforms can enhance transparency for example, through live-streaming plenary sessions or crowdsourcing stakeholder feedback. They also facilitate misinformation, covert influence operations, and unequal access to advanced data analytics.

Recent events illustrate these risks. During the COVID-19 pandemic, WHO briefings were targeted by coordinated disinformation campaigns spreading false vaccine information across social media, undermining public health messaging (Zarocostas, 2020). Cyberattacks on UN systems have also intensified; in 2021, a breach compromised internal networks and potentially sensitive diplomatic communications, underscoring institutional vulnerability to both state and non-state cyber operations.

These incidents highlight what Bjola and Pamment (2016) describe as a *normative vacuum* in areas such as cyber-espionage, online coercion, and algorithmic bias in automated decision-making. Efforts to fill this gap have been halting. The UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on cyberspace, active since 2004, failed in 2017 to reach consensus on binding cyber norms due to disagreements among the United States, Russia, and China over issues including critical infrastructure protection (Tikk & Kerttunen, 2018). The more inclusive Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on cybersecurity has sought broader participation but faces similar deadlocks, with some states resisting transparency measures and others opposing content regulation proposals (Maurer, 2021).

This creates a paradox: digital tools have the potential to democratise multilateral deliberation, yet the absence of effective regulation fosters insecurity, opacity, and mistrust. Beneath these challenges lies a recurring efficiency–inclusiveness trade-off. Consensus-based decision-making and broad membership enhance legitimacy but slow responses, a liability in crises such as pandemics or financial shocks. Smaller, like-minded coalitions can act more quickly but risk perceptions of exclusivity and reduced ownership (Weiss & Wilkinson, 2014). As multilateral diplomacy adapts to the digital era, balancing speed with inclusiveness or experimenting with hybrid procedural arrangements remains a central challenge for practitioners.

6.0 Recommendations towards Prospects for Reform & the Future

6.1 The "Pact for the Future" (UNGA 2024)

In September 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted the 42-page Pact for the Future, a forward-looking accord that seeks to revitalize multilateralism across thematic clusters in areas of peace and security; sustainable development; climate action; and new domains such as digital cooperation and AI governance (AP News, Sept 22, 2024). Annexed to the Pact is the Global Digital Compact, which commits member states to: (a) connect all schools and hospitals globally to the Internet; (b) anchor digital policies in human rights and international law; and (c) develop inclusive financing mechanisms for digital infrastructure in least-developed countries (UN Vienna, June 2024).

The Pact's financing chapter proposes a Global Financing Pact, calling for scaled-up contributions to the UN's core budget, new Special Drawing Rights allocations via the IMF, and a "multilateral debt swap" mechanism to redirect savings toward SDG investments (ODI, 2024). By bundling digital cooperation with sustainable finance, the Pact seeks to overcome the sectoral silos that have long constrained reform. Yet its non-binding nature and lack of enforcement modalities echo the limitations of previous soft-law accords, raising questions about its capacity to effect real change.

6.2 Security Council Reform: G4 & L.69 vs. P5 Resistance

Reform of the UN Security Council (UNSC) remains the most contested institutional agenda. The G4 coalition (Brazil, Germany, India, Japan) proposes adding six new permanent seats (Africa, Asia, Latin America) and three additional non-permanent seats, with the veto privilege extended to new permanent members (Wiley, 2020). Parallelly, the L.69 Group; a bloc of 32 developing states that advocates for equitable regional representation, including two African permanent seats, and four new non-permanent seats assigned by region (PassBlue, Feb 2023).

However, all such proposals founder on P5 resistance. The United Kingdom and France fear dilution of Western influence; China and the United States view enlargement as a potential threat to veto dominance (Carnegie Endowment, Jun 2023). Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) since 2009 have repeatedly produced "elements of convergence", but no consensus text (UNGA IGN, Jul 2016). While notable momentum in UNGA votes such as support exceeding the two-thirds threshold for recommendation demonstrates a broad appetite for change, the Security Council itself remains untouched, illustrating a classic power-legitimacy conundrum in multilateral reform.

6.3 Digital Diplomacy: E-Negotiations & Data-Driven Norm-Setting

Digital tools are reshaping multilateral processes. E-negotiations such as remote treaty drafting via secure platforms have become widespread since the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing costs and expanding participation (Vadrot & Ruiz Rodríguez, 2022; Hone, 2020). Digital plenary sessions (e.g., WHO Assembly virtual meetings) have enabled mid-size states to speak more often, partially mitigating traditional "bracket-clubbing" by major powers.

Moreover, data analytics now inform norm-setting: automated text-mining of negotiation transcripts reveals word-use patterns, helping mediators identify impasses early (Eggeling & Adler-Nissen, 2024). AI-driven stakeholder analysis can map alliance formations in real time, enabling dynamic coalition management. Yet, governance of these digital tools is still nascent. The Global Digital Compact calls for common standards on data ethics and AI transparency, but substantive rule-making is pending.

6.4 Norm Entrepreneurship: Coalitions of the Willing

When universal venues stall, smaller "coalitions of the willing" (composed of states and sometimes non-state actors) act as norm entrepreneurs, experimenting with governance solutions that may later inform global standards. The COVAX facility, coordinated by CEPI, Gavi, and WHO, exemplifies such an initiative in vaccine equity, testing voluntary solidarity models at speed (Pushkaran, Chattu & Narayanan, 2023; Eccleston-Turner & Upton, 2021). Likewise, the investment in a Climate Club which pioneered through G7 leadership and inspired by Nordhaus's theoretical model has trialled carbon border mechanisms and conditional cooperation to boost NDC ambition, ahead of broader multilateral consensus (Nordhaus, 2015).

Although these mini-coalitions can catalyse innovation, critics argue that they risk undermining the normative authority and coherence of the multilateral system. Rather than reinforcing global institutions, they may fragment international governance by creating overlapping or competing rules that favour powerful actors (Pauwelyn, Wessel & Wouters, 2014). Scholars caution that such "exclusive clubs" often marginalise less-resourced states, deepening structural inequalities and reducing the legitimacy of emerging norms (Keohane & Nye, 2017; Zürn, 2018). These coalitions may prioritise speed and efficacy, but at the cost of inclusivity and accountability. The danger lies in a bifurcated order, where norm-setting occurs in privileged circles while universal venues become hollowed out.

Yet defenders counter that coalitions serve as norm laboratories allowing proof-of-concept and momentum-building where UN or WTO processes gridlock. The central challenge is balancing agility in norm formation with inclusive, coherent global governance that respects the normative authority of universal institutions.

7. Conclusion

Multilateral diplomacy has emerged as essential architecture for managing complex and interdependent global challenges. This study has traced its evolution from early diplomatic congresses to contemporary institutional networks, examined theoretical frameworks explaining its dynamics, analysed operational mechanisms, and assessed the growing role of informal processes and non-state actors. Across these dimensions, multilateral diplomacy reveals itself as both product of and response to persistent tensions between power and principle, sovereignty and interdependence, formality and adaptability.

The case studies examined from climate governance failures and vaccine nationalism to trade dispute paralysis and peacekeeping consent crises demonstrate three critical findings. First, institutional design innovations (hybrid legal frameworks, public-private partnerships, legalized dispute resolution) can enhance multilateral capacity but remain vulnerable to power asymmetries and resource dependencies. Second, effectiveness depends less on formal institutional features than on managing resource scarcity, legitimacy crises, and adaptive capacity during external shocks. Third, contemporary challenges such as representational deficits, forum-shopping dynamics, funding vulnerabilities, and digital disruptions reveal systematic structural problems rather than isolated institutional failures.

Theoretically, this analysis confirms the limitations of single-paradigm approaches. Liberal institutionalism explains cooperation potential but underestimates power preservation instincts. Realism predicts great power resistance but cannot account for norm diffusion processes. Constructivism illuminates socialization dynamics but struggles with material constraint analysis. Integrative approaches that examine co-evolution of norms, power, and institutions particularly regime complexity theory and principal-agent frameworks could offer more comprehensive explanatory power for contemporary multilateral governance.

Looking forward, three reform priorities are identified from this analysis for the future. Institutionally, multilateral organisations need adaptive governance mechanisms that are operationally effective while being responsive to power shifts and claims for legitimacy. This suggests compliance regimes, multiple institutional pathways and flexible mandate regimes that can be altered without complete renegotiation. Politically, Security Council reform, rotation of leadership of specialised agencies, and improved mechanisms for South-South cooperation could help to redress representational deficits and restore multilateral legitimacy among emerging powers. Operationally, if the institution is digitally integrated, it could be efficient and accountable in its operations and have well-defined transparency processes, while also being better financially independent due to diversified ways of funding it.

Multilateral diplomacy is at a critical time. Increasing nationalistic sentiments, geopolitical tensions and institutional inertia threaten its capacity to provide legitimate solutions in a timely fashion. But new global challenges such as climate change, pandemics and cyber governance are imposing functional imperatives on broader forms of cooperation that go beyond traditional boundaries of sovereignty. This transition can only be successful if it is based on a dual commitment: structural reforms that correct power imbalances and resource dependencies, and enshrine the principles of trust, transparency, solidarity, and collective responsibility that enable multilateral cooperation.

The future of multilateral diplomacy lies not merely in preservation but in transformation. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical lessons, promoting institutional innovation while maintaining historical

continuity, the international community can develop resilient, inclusive, and adaptive multilateral systems capable of addressing twenty-first century challenges and future uncertainties.

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