The Name and Nature of Minilateral: A Brief Review of the Club Phenomenon in Multilateralism Studies

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Abstract: In recent world politics and international relations, it is evidently popular that a particular club cooperation form has received more attention. This form appears to employ quite distinct strategies, such as reducing the scale of the agenda, bringing together actors who share similar values, and limiting the number of participants, in order to better realize the interests of all parties. There are many words to describe this phenomenon or thing, but not all of them are suitable. Behind the abuse of concepts may be hidden inaccurate cognition of things. It is pressing to backtrack existing literature to examine the usages and step towards a definitive understanding.

Keywords: Minilateral(-ism), Multilateralism studies, Literature Review

"Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt."

——Ludwig Wittgenstein

1. Introduction

It is obviously popular that more attention has been paid to a special club cooperation form in recent world politics and international relations, which seems to employ quite different methods like downsizing agenda scale, gathering like-minded actors and limiting participant numbers in order to realize interests of all parties better. Some think it a necessity when traditional multilateralism and existing multilateral platforms perform weakly in international affairs while others argue this sort of cooperation will give a significant blow to genuine multilateralism due to its thresholds and restrictions. For example, the United States has been always promoting club cooperation of its own style but China has insisted clubs mean fragmentation of the world.

As we can see, diverse descriptions of such a phenomenon occur in relevant news, essays and academic studies. There are minilateral(-ism), plurilateral(-ism), and club(model) in English literatures. As a result, there exist disorders of signs in studies. What's more, the disorder indeed suggests the lack of precise understanding of such a phenomenon if we acknowledge Wittgenstein's insights that language has a close relationship with cognition. This article tries to advance a more definitive understanding of minilateral(temporarily referred to by this word and reasons presented as follow) by clarifying significant and signifié on the basis of existing literature. Various usages are seriously examined and the characteristics of the club phenomenon are sufficiently introduced in the meantime. Some studies also provide insights into the origin of minilaterals and the substance of related controversies. The article also presents knowledge of those. The article finally gives a broad but sufficient definition of the minilateral and a brief reason for choosing minilateral as an appropriate description.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. K-group

James A. Caporaso introduces k-group as a useful model of the individualism route to multilateralism. As he described, the k-group is a solution to the n-person social dilemma that always leads to the defeat option as a dominant individual strategy. This approach limits participant numbers by setting up a mechanism for selecting actors so as to ensure that each participant would be a contributor. Caporaso’s insight should have its origin in analyses by John Orbell, Robyn Dawes and Alphons van de Kragt[1] in 1990, which tried to explain the weak performance of cooperation with a large number of actors by game theory. Generally, Caporaso shows a prominent feature of minilateral that such cooperation places restrictions on the access of participants. Whereas, k-group is just an individualism model to help understand the minilateral instead of the minilateral itself. We can never use k-group as significant.

2.2. Plurilateral(-ism)

Plurilateral(-ism) is also well-known. Philip G. Cerny uses it to describe the shift in the world order from a hierarchy of holistic actors and states, which impose order through power and hegemony, to a more complex and diffuse set of interactive self-regulatory mechanisms or webs of power. There are many excellent articles focusing on specific organizations. For example, Jan Zielonka maintains that plurilateral(-ism) is a more flexible, decentralized and soft modes of governance the European Union can take to deal with the problems that occur in enlargement. The World Trade Organization allows members country to enter into trade agreements on small scales. when a universal agreement cannot be reached. Such agreements are known as plurilateral trade agreements (PTAs). Plurilateral(-ism) seems to share some features with minilateral but it is a much more general concept including other cooperation forms. It is neither significant nor signifié of what we are discussing.

2.3. Club(Model), Minilateral(-ism) and MEC

Miles Kahler[5], in the meantime, discusses the same thing and in many lines referred to it as club-like cooperation. Kahler thinks that club-like cooperation is common and coexists with bilateral and multilateral approaches in international cooperation and global governance after 1945. Contrary to Caporaso’s view treating minilateral cooperation as a solution to the weakening of multilateralism, Kahler points out that the crisis of multilateralism in the 1980s has often been attributed exclusively to the regional, bilateral, or other club-like practice and in fact the system of cooperation with small numbers has been unpopular in 1960s because of voice from developing countries to call for democracy of international relations. Whereas, Kahler never overlooks the merits of the club that from the perspective of neo-liberalism clubs might help cope with large but inefficient administrations and formal contracts. His essay referred to and analyzed UNCTD, GATT the Uruguay Round and Global Environmental Regimes as cases and found great powers’ leadership with consistent willingness and decision system deserves attention. Kahler also reveals that Controversy over clubs comes down to the tension between efficiency and compliance.

Kahler’s club provides more specific content, taking into consideration the conditions of the club’s success and recognizing the club is double-edged, which advances our understanding of such a phenomenon signifié and becomes the basis of minilateral studies. It is worthwhile to mention that Kahler also used minilateral and minimilateralism as significant at the same time, which indicates he equates minilateral(-ism) with the club he described. It is difficult to make clear why Kahler thought so but when backtracking references, it is possible he followed the usage from Oye.

Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr.[6] observe the impact of the domestic political climate on the club model of multilateral cooperation and notes another double-edges. That entails first, the success of “minilaterals” while promoting trade will make the public more sensitive to further compromise; second, there is a growing need for developing countries to participate in decision-making; third, globalization has spawned more NGOs; fourth, the spread of democratic norms has an increasing impact on international interactions. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye support the view that club models are the obstacle to the democratization of international relations and their legitimacy and moral justification are in doubt. The essay enriches the understanding of club’s exclusivity which was often reckoned only as selecting cooperators before. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye surprisingly offer a new opinion that clubs in international negotiations also exclude domestic audience if necessary. The two, like Miles Kahler, mix up minilateral(-ism) with club as significant.

Similar collections of literature address this phenomenon, such as International Cooperation: The Extents and Limits of Multilateralism by I. William Zartman and Saadia Touval. In the introductory chapter, Zartman and Touval[7] mention that multilateralism pays great attention to legitimacy, but at the cost of efficiency. And this collection follows the mixing usage of club and minilateral(-ism) and shows a new significant. Whereas, it still provides us with some insights. In Deconstructing Multilateral Cooperation by Fen Osler Hampson, the universality contradiction of clubs is brought up again. The author points out that the greater the number of actors, the more difficult it is to achieve cooperation because it is difficult to avoid "free riding" and identify common interests. It is worth noting that the essay also regards the decision-making mechanism such as the one-vote veto of the permanent members of the UN Security Council as a minilateral. Saadia Touval[8] mentions in Negotiated
Cooperation and Its Alternatives that attention to functional deficits has given rise to various remedial measures, among which constraining the scale of negotiations, narrowing the scope of issues and controlling the size of forums are the major measures. Actors are accustomed to finding relevant countries to form temporary organizations based on specific issues and emphasize the importance of the coalition of the willing. In the concluding chapter, the editors briefly speculate that small-scale cooperation pays more attention to efficiency, while large-scale cooperation factors such as norms, status and identity. A minimum effective coalition (MEC) on a minimum scale is necessary and inevitable to shape capacity for specific policies.[8] The above collection is a further picturing of minilateral(-ism) but there is still little awareness of a definitive description. Club is too simple to cover all of the features.

In addition to the above-mentioned review literature, there are also many academic papers discussing the phenomenon that is mainly referred to as minilateral(-ism) rather than clubs. Downs, George W., David M. Rocke, and Peter N. Barsoom[10] claim that the multilateral cooperation based on the minilateral will be more in-depth, provided that broader cooperation becomes the common vision at the beginning of the formation of the minilateral. Daniely, Kono[11] proposes that as a sort of minilateral, FTAs (free trade agreements) promote multilateral liberalization when members’ intra- and extra-FTA comparative advantages are similar but impede such liberalization when these comparative advantages are different. Fulvio Attinà[12] states that the emergence of minilateralism is the result of the interaction between regional organizations and actors. Robyn Eckersley[13] investigates the conditions under which minilateral could become stepping stones to broader agreements and the root of the disputes related to minilateralism is the contradiction between substance justice and communicative justice. He also believes inclusive minilateralism can be set up by actors that are most capable, most responsible and most vulnerable to specific issues. Eckersley tries to provide strategies for the dilemma of multilateralism based on minilateralism. Orfeo Fioretos[14] examines three research approaches explaining the emergence of minilateralism and asserts from the view of historical institutionalism, ad hoc meetings bring extra positive feedback, which makes actors strengthen and repeat similar practices under path dependence through positive learning. Matthew D. Stephen and Michal Paržek[15] counter the old view that neglects distribution of preference is a decisive factor and they maintain the minilateral is the avenue to reduce distribution of preference in order to solve the deadlock of multilateralism.

There are also many studies focusing on current politics like the strategic layout of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, among which William T. Tow[16] demonstrates informality and flexibility of minilateral security cooperation and mentions its role of bridge-building existing alliances. The collection Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN provides a rich discussion of the emergence of minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific region and its implications. This collection synthesizes the advantages and disadvantages of minilateralism, and analyzes the impact of many minilateral mechanisms on regional order in the context of great power games. The collection fully accepts minilateral(-ism) as significant and its signifié is relatively clear. Minilateralism here refers to the cooperation mechanism meeting both its quantitative and qualitative qualifications. Quantitatively, a minilatreal mechanism should encompass obviously fewer members (usually involving between three and nine countries) than the multilateral mechanism. Qualitatively, minilateral initiatives are relatively exclusive, flexible and functional in nature and what’s more, they correspond to the description of Eckersley, comprising only countries that are the most relevant to or that are able to make the biggest impact on the issue in question.[17].

3. Brief Discussion and Findings

All of the above literature has only explored individual aspects of the minilatral or investigated what it can bring to world politics. However, it is hard to promote further research without a definitive and comprehensive understanding of it.

3.1 Signifié

The first question the article needs to answer is what the minilateral exactly is. In other words, what is the signifié? Synthesizing the findings of the above literature, this article argues that the minilateral is a cooperative mechanism of exclusivity, smaller-scale and specific agenda. The mechanisms may exist in different fields and show diverse details in some ways. The article concludes three kinds of minilateral. but each of them faces the controversy of legitimacy or democracy.

First, a minilateral can be an ad hoc mechanism that dedicates to facilitating a universal agreement. It works as a driver to promote genuine multilateralism rather than an alternative, such as some small groups in the negotiations of UNCLO III GATT the Uruguay Round and Global Environmental Regimes. Its exclusivity means that cooperation should first gather actors of coalition willing and capability and at the same time limit influence of domestic public opinions. It usually focuses on concrete controversial topics contained in larger agreements.

Second, a minilateral can be a mechanism set up by a smaller number of actors in order to achieve specific strategic goals. Its exclusivity is based on ideology, value system and capability. It does not break away from the original multilateral mechanism but exists as an
accompanying mechanism. A typical example is the QUAD established by U.S., Japan, India and Australia. Hence, it is wrong to consider the series of forums led by ASEAN as minilaterals because they are just in line with the quantity requirement.

Third, this sort is rare. The decision-making mechanism such as the one-vote veto of the permanent members of the UNSC is actually small-scale and only welcomes major actors but it is formal and permanent. There are still few studies focusing on this sort of minilaterals.

All three of the above minilateral types are known for their high efficiency because of their lower transaction cost, which must sacrifice legitimacy or democracy. This is the same as domestic politics.

3.2 Significant

The second problem to be solved in this article is unpacked into two parts. In the beginning, it is necessary to argue that it is a fault to take any word with the suffix -ism. Ruggie[18] has already pointed out that the multilateral form does not equal multilateralism. The latter is known for its indivisibility, diffuse reciprocity and generalized principles of conduct, of which the first two features construct the pursuit of value. The suffix -ism means the doctrine that calls for both specific forms and some ideology promise or the pursuit of what should be. And the pursuit should be in line with the legitimacy expectation. Minilaterals share some characteristics with multilateral mechanisms to a certain extent, and touch upon values and ideologies. However, none of the existing mechanisms and relevant literature indicates that the minilaterals have specific ideals to pursue. Hence, it is not rigorous and responsible to agree with minilateralism as Significant.

The other part is which word is the most appropriate Significant. This article strongly supports minilateral. First, minilateral is most similar to multilateral in word formation, which can reflect the fact that the minilateral cooperation is a derivative thing of multilateral ones. Second, club(model) and similar words are too simple to cover all features and too popular to work as an academic concept. Third, minilateral has been used so widely in academia that it is hard to refute it specially.

4. Conclusion

The article is expected to enrich the knowledge of minilaterals. It backtracks the main literature about minilateral echanisms as a derivative cooperation of multilateral ones, on basis of which the disorders of significant and signifié are calmed down. The article first concludes existing literature and give a relatively comprehensive and definitive understanding of minilateral mechanism. Secondly, the article explains why minilateral is the most appropriate significant to refer to the phenomenon. There are still some research gaps to further bridge in this fields, such as the conditions of minilateral success, the origin of minilaterals ,and so on.

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