

# *The Theoretical Study on Bilateralism and Multilateralism of National Security Approach*

**Yao Qian**

*Shandong Jianzhu University Marxism College, Jinan, Shandong 25010, China*

**Keywords:** Bilateralism, Multilateralism, Security policy, International relation

**Abstract:** The paper is written with the purpose of researching bilateral and multilateral national security approaches through digging in the theory of international relation. The contents would be related to some bilateral and multilateral national security policies states usually fashioned, and engaging in providing a theoretical platform for understanding some states' behaviors in the international community.

## **1. Introduction**

The security policy of any country is to secure its sovereignty. In order to achieve security policy goals, states follow unilateralism, bilateralism or multilateralism depending on their interests and capabilities in the given geo-political situation. Unilateralism can be understood as a tendency of states to act alone in addressing a particular global or regional challenge rather than choosing to participate in collective action, because they do not wish to subject themselves to the generalized principles of conduct being negotiated or enforced, or they may find such principles inimical to their national interests. Bilateralism can be understood as a cooperation “between two states” who come together to conduct its affairs on such matters such as trade, security, diplomacy, and defense.[1] Multilateralism can be understood as a doctrine “where three or more states” conduct their state of affairs in cooperation and coordination with their respective partners.[2] The scope of this paper would only focus on the bilateralism or multilateralism. The contents would confine to some bilateral and multilateral national security policies states usually fashioned, hoping to provide a theoretical platform for understanding some states' behaviors in the international community.

## **2. Definitions of Bilateralism and Multilateralism**

The term bilateralism owes its extensive usage in international relations, albeit occasional association to other academic and policy discussions. The term can simply be understood by tracing its generic connotation. According to T.J. Pempel, bilateralism means that two countries cede particular privileges to one another that they do not give to other countries involving the normative belief among policymakers from both countries that dealings between them on most issues should be primarily dealt with through one-to-one governmental links.[3] In the realm of international relations, bilateralism means a common policy agreed by two states to conduct its affairs on such matters such as in trade, security, diplomacy and defense. Bilateralism is a broad term which involves bilateral diplomacy, bilateral security alliance as well as bilateral relationship.

In terms of security in international relations, bilateral security is mostly studied under the concept of alliances formation. William T Tow and Amitav Acharya have explained the term “bilateralism” as a one-on-one security cooperation with dyadic characteristics – largely contained to two actors with sufficient collaborative interests to be labeled ‘allies’ (if a treaty commitment is involved) or ‘coalition partners’ (more informally).[4]

Similar to bilateralism, multilateralism as a political concept derives its roots from the process of engagement involving multiple parties or actors-typically the actors involved would exceed two. Historically, the first documented use of the term “multilateral” to describe an international arrangement dates back to 1858.[5] The noun form of the word – “multilateralism” – on the other hand, only came into use in 1928, in the aftermath of the First World War.[6] Caporaso surmises his view of the concept as follows: “the institution of multilateralism is distinguished from other forms by three properties: indivisibility, generalized principles of conduct, and diffuse reciprocity. These three properties should be treated as a coherent ensemble which is itself indivisible, rather than as additive, detachable indicators of multilateralism. Indivisibility can be thought of as the scope (both geographic and functional) over which costs and benefits are spread, given an action initiated in or among components units. Generalized principles of conduct usually come in the form of norms exhorting general if not universal modes of relating to other states, rather than differentiating relations case-by-case on the basis of individual preferences, situational exigencies, or a priori particularistic grounds. Diffuse reciprocity adjusts the utilitarian lenses for a long view, emphasizing that actors expect to benefit in the long run and over many issues, rather than every time on the issues.”[7]

### **3. Theoretical Approach to Bilateral Security**

From the theoretical perspective of international relations, realism basically underpins the notion of alliance arrangements and partnerships along common interests. At its height, the twentieth century was widely regarded as the dispensation of a bilaterally inspired realist arrangement from which arose NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The flip-side of such arrangements in the twenty-first century is the so-called “coalition of the willing.”[8] Bilateral relations for realists though expressed and defined broadly, its conspicuous impact was felt within the security discourse, particularly at the epochal moment of enormous ideological animosities arising from East-West strife. Realist sentiments further fed into this thinking, which entertained the fear that an enlarged multilateral structure does not offer a good disposition to gauge the actions and even rhetoric that comes from relationships between nation states. Crucially, a bilateral alliance was also often built on an imbalanced state-power relations platform: partnership not often between equal powers but a weak and strong power, where the strong offers protective cover to the weak or vulnerable nation in exchange for political patronage.

### **4. Theoretical Approach to Multilateral Security**

Liberals who are championing the promotion of peace and prosperity are often found at the forefront in backing idea of multilateralism. Liberals argue that even though states have their own self-interests they can cooperate as liberals seek to argue for a society based on democratic institutions promoting peace and prosperity in society. Immanuel Kant, a luminary scholar of the liberal school of thought gave the idea of pacific federation which could be likened to a permanent peace treaty, rather than a “super actor” or world government.[9]The formation of the League of Nations could be cited in that direction though it also drew sharp criticism at its failure to arrest the emergence of the Second World War which ultimately put the coffin on the League of Nations.

Scholars of liberal institutionalism assume that multilateralism bring stability, peace and

cooperation which are necessary for all the states living in this anarchic world where they face common dangers and vulnerabilities and are interdependent especially in this globalized world. As Newman points out that, even the most powerful states cannot achieve security, environmental safety, and economic prosperity in isolation or unilaterally, and so the international system rests upon a network of regimes, treaties and international organizations.[10]

## 5. Conclusion

During the Cold War, a realpolitik worldview permeated international community of the nature of international politics, seeing it as an intensively competitive struggle to acquire relative gains. Such a view is associated with a keen sensitivity to relative capabilities, for it is vital to keep a state's territorial integrity, preserve the domestic political order, and either to deter challenges to the preferred regional or global status quo or try and change the status quo so as to strengthen the security and capability of the state. Realpolitik actors usually prefer bilateral alliance approach.

In the post-Cold War era, non-traditional security threats have surpassed traditional security threats and become a problem demanding a prompt solution. So, generally, states begin to seek multilateral cooperation approach to try to solve some security problems because one specific country is not able to solve these problems. Multilateral security cooperation also addresses traditional security threats. The United Nations is an example of multilateral security cooperation in which member states are bound to observe principles of collective security to earn benefits.

## Acknowledgment

University-level project *The Theoretical Study of Change of China's Security Perspective*, project number: XNBS20115.

## References

- [1] John Ravenhill, "Bilateralism," in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*. Available at < <http://knowledge.sagepub.com/view/intlpoliticalscience/n39.xml>> (Online accessed 20 November 2020).
- [2] Robert O. Keohane "Multilateralism: An Agenda for Research," *International Journal*, 45 (Autumn 1990), p. 731-746.
- [3] T.J. Pempel, "Challenges to Bilateralism: Changing Foes, Capital Flows, and Complex Forums," *Beyond Bilateralism: US-Japan Relations in the New Asia Pacific* (Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 5
- [4] William T Tow and Amitav Acharya, "Obstinate or obsolete? The US Alliance Structure in the Asia-Pacific," *Australian National University Working Papers*, December 2020, p. 4.
- [5] Lindsay Powell, "In defense of Multilateralism," available at < <http://www.yale.edu/gegdialogue/docs/dialogue/oct03/papers/Powell.pdf> > (accessed on 14 August 2020).
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] James A. Caporaso, "International relation theory and multilateralism: the search for foundations," *International Organization*, 46-3 (Summer 1992), p. 603.
- [8] David H. Capie and Paul Evans, *The Asia-Pacific Security Lexicon* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), p.37.
- [9] Tim Dunne, *The Globalization of World Politics: An introduction to international relations*, 3rd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 189.
- [10] Edward Newman, *A Crisis of Global Institutions? Multilateralism and International Security*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 10.