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The Comeback of Concert Diplomacy in Crisis-Management
and the Role of the EU

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Abstract

The multilateral order is facing its biggest crisis since the Second World War. This paper attempts to shed light upon one diplomatic option worth exploring in order to breathe new life into it: this option is Contemporary Concert Diplomacy. More specifically, it will focus on the efficiency of Contemporary Concert Diplomacy in the realms of conflict prevention and crisis management. It takes a novel angle by investigating the role and the contribution that the European Union could make in such renewed contemporary concerts of powers. The relevance of the research problem stems from the need to engage in a proper systematization of the phenomenon in the face of the recent resurgence of mini-lateral frameworks of cooperation outside traditional institutional fora. The work posits that Concert Diplomacy, while historically used in contexts which bear little resemblance to our current globalized society based on the rule of law, proves to be a feasible and useful way to counter the potential downfall of the multilateral order. In operationalising Concert Diplomacy, the EU can make a decisive contribution in Contemporary Concerts of Powers as a coalition builder.

The overall structure is articulated as follows: after providing a conceptualisation of Contemporary Concert Diplomacy and an analysis of its features, a more theoretical perspective is adopted, placing Contemporary Concert Diplomacy in the middle of the long-standing theoretical debate between Realist and Institutionalist accounts of international relations. Finally, a brief empirical analysis of four case studies is made for an appraisal of the impact of the European Union in Contemporary Concert Diplomacy. The cases chosen are; the Middle East Quartet, the EU3+3 talks with Iran which led to the adoption of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the International Contact Group for Venezuela, and the project for a contemporary Westphalian Concert of Powers for Syria and the wider Middle East.

Keywords: European Union, Concert Diplomacy, Concert of Europe, United Nations, Multilateralism, Informal Cooperation, Contact Group, Westphalia.

List of abbreviations

EU- European Union

UN- United Nations

UNSC- United Nations Security Council

NPT- Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

OPT- Occupied Palestinian Territories

JCPOA- Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

ICG- International Contact Group

IAEA- International Atomic Energy Agency

HR/VP- High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice President of the European Commission

IS- Islamic State

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“Membership in International Organizations since founding”. (Taken from Kahler, Miles, “Multilateralism with small and large numbers”, *International Organization*, Vol.46, n. 3, 1992, p. 692).

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1. Introduction

The multilateral order appears to be entering a period of crisis. In academic journals and newspapers one repeatedly hears of the troubles that the international community is facing. Authoritarian regimes are re-emerging and becoming more and more assertive; so-called “revisionist” powers like China are on the rise and increasingly demand their fair share of power and influence, if not outright dominance; with regards to the United States, its relationship with the concerted approach of the United Nations, which it was so instrumental in forging in the aftermath of World War II, has always been turbulent. Now, the former architect seems resolute in its consideration of the UN-system more as a straitjacket rather than an asset to help promote its international agenda. In this milieu, the EU struggles to find its way, torn as it is between internal challenges and contradictions (read Brexit, migratory flows, and disagreements over approaches to boost its sluggish economic growth) and the need to speak with one voice in its foreign policy conduct. Yet, on the other side of the spectrum, the biggest challenges that affect our time, from disruptive artificial intelligence to the climate emergency, from the pernicious spread of nuclear weapons to the recrudescence of regional conflicts, all require effective and timely cooperation to be tackled. Starting from the acknowledgement of the hurdles facing the current international system, this working paper aims to shed light upon one option worth exploring in order to breathe new life into multilateralism: this option is Concert Diplomacy.

Concert Diplomacy is not, in truth, a newcomer in the management of international affairs; on the contrary, it is commonly associated with the past. Indeed, from the Peace of Westphalia (1648) to the Congress of Vienna (1815) and the Paris Peace Conference (1919), great powers have more than once employed this methodology to restore the international order after periods of turmoil. These events and gatherings have been widely examined and been the subject of several, important scholarly works by academics and practitioners alike (see, for instance, Kissinger 1957). More recently, several publications have outlined the possibility of restoring a 21st-century concert of powers or to applying the practices of concert diplomacy to bring about a durable peace in the troubled areas of the world (Muller, Rauch 2018).

The focus of this paper is on the efficiency of contemporary concert diplomacy in conflict prevention and crisis management. More specifically, it investigates the role and the contribution that the European Union could make in these renewed contemporary concerts of powers. To this end, it is this work’s ambition to answer two main research questions: 1) To what extent could Concert Diplomacy be an effective means to revive today’s multilateral system? 2) To what extent could the EU make a meaningful contribution to contemporary Concert Diplomacy in crisis management? In doing so, the paper concludes by asserting that Contemporary Concert Diplomacy is a viable, informal, less hierarchical format which allows for engagement to occur in a more timely and effective manner in conflict prevention and crisis management.

Adapted to the needs and values of the 21st century, Concert Diplomacy would have to involve regional actors as well as major powers to ensure the highest rate of inclusivity and legitimacy (PRIF 2014, p. 46). With regards to the role of the EU, this work will posit that the time is ripe for prompt and assertive action to revive multilateralism: to this end, despite not being a state in the Westphalian sense of the term, the EU could make a decisive contribution in Contemporary Concerts of Powers as a coalition builder, which fosters dialogue and mutual understanding among relevant stakeholders (Jung 2016, p.77). To be clear, Contemporary Concert Diplomacy is not conceived here as a substitute for the existing multilateral fora that constitute the foundations of the current multilateral architecture. On the contrary, it is suggested that the EU could make use of it to complement the ongoing work of the UN, the G-20 and other regional organizations (PRIF 2014, p.10).

2. The promise of Contemporary Concert Diplomacy

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Charles and Clifford Kupchan concluded in their informative essay, pledging for the creation of a new system of collective security, by saying that “Because the world is at a unique historical juncture, it is necessary to rely on the past to think creatively about the future, and to take the initiative in forging a new European order”(Kupchan, Kupchan 1991, p. 161). Today, the international order, and especially contemporary multilateralism, is again at a critical juncture: at a time when, in the words of Szewczik, “the liberal order is fraying”, the following proposals to revive it are also rooted in historical precedent (Szewczik 2019, p.31).

2.1. The crisis of Multilateralism: ineffective by design?

Robert Keohane generally defines multilateralism as “the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states” (Keohane 1990, p.731). Alternatively, multilateralism can be defined as “a system of interaction combining rules, institutionalised cooperation and inclusiveness” (Bouchard et al. 2014, p. 4). The European Union has even made multilateralism a substantial part of its external action, vowing to uphold *effective multilateralism* in its external action (European Council 2012, p. 10).

This mode of governance, however, has come increasingly under strain during the past few decades; perhaps somewhat unfairly, some commentators have noted that “formal multilateral institutions continue to muddle along, holding their meetings and issuing their reports and taking some minor stabs at improving transnational problems at the margins” (Patrick 2014, p 5). One of the underlying causes of the current multilateral stalemate is their considerable number of participants, which has steadily increased over time. To give an example, *Figure 2* shows the UN membership evolution from its foundation in 1945 to the present day.

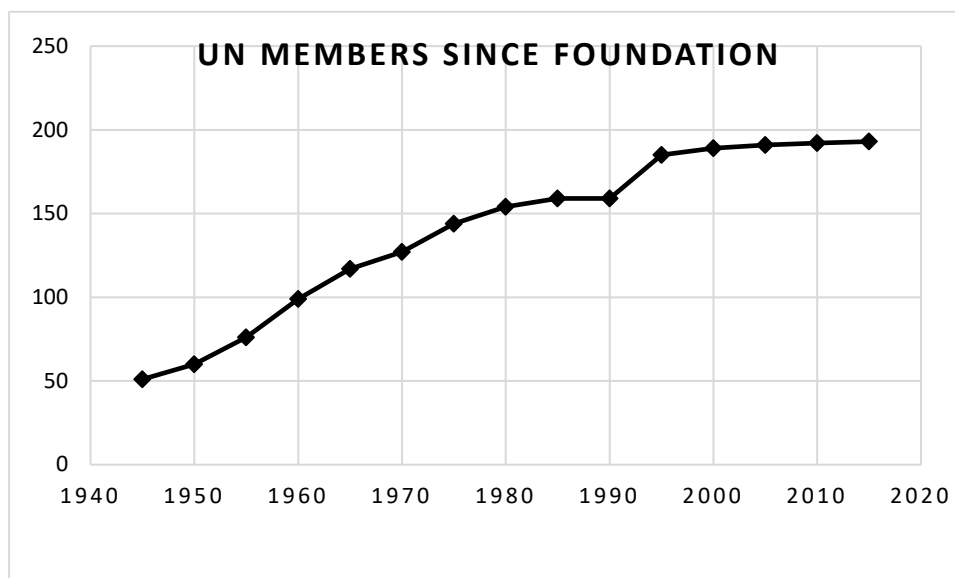


Figure 1. Membership of the UN since founding

Source: United Nations, "Growth in United Nations membership, 1945-present", <https://www.un.org/en/sections/member-states/growth-united-nations-membership-1945-present/index.html>. Retrieved 4 May 2019.

This has rendered it more and more difficult to reach a consensus on the solutions to adopt, exposing institutions to gridlocks and bottlenecks (Kahler 1992, pp. 691-692). In this sense, neoliberalism in particular fuels scepticism regarding multilateral approaches and highlights the difficulty of achieving a fruitful cooperation when dealing with a large grouping of states. Indeed, some neoliberals argue that "when it comes to multilateralism, bigger is rarely better" (Patrick 2014, p.3). Others even claim that multilateral cooperation is becoming an unreasonable obsession when it comes to decision-making (Drezner 2009).

Without resorting to hurried and definitive judgements, it is nevertheless true that some critics have a point when they say that the current multilateral system is experiencing some difficulties: indeed, the last significant multilateral trade agreement dates back to 1994 (which led to the WTO); the last significant agreement on nuclear non-proliferation dates back to 1995; and the last widely accepted agreement to curb climate change was the Kyoto protocol in 1997.¹

With this in mind, some experts have noted that the complexity of the post-Cold War international environment calls for stronger international institutions on the one hand, and alternative forms of governance on the other (Prantl 2012, p.41). This statement reflects the reality that the world is living today in a period of "situational multipolarity" (Jung 2016, p.60). This means that, nowadays, it is

¹ Even in that case, as it is known, the US walked out of the agreement and frustrated all previous diplomatic efforts. See M. Naim, "Minilateralism. The magic number to get real international action", *Foreign Policy*, Vol. 173, 2009, p. 136. The Paris agreement, signed in 2016, was also hampered by the US' announcement to withdraw from it.

unthinkable even for the unrivalled superpower, the United States, to go it alone and avoid cooperation altogether; rather, it must always secure support from other actors, be they middle or regional powers. If outright unilateralism cannot bear fruit, however, the traditional universal approach of the post-World War II multilateral system is not applicable anymore either, since it is bound to often incur paralyses and gridlocks: what is needed is a system of “overlapping clubs”, whereby groups of states with stakes in a given region, conflict or crisis come together to coordinate informally and reach decisions (Rosecrance et al. 2001, p. 230).

The main drawback of the current multilateral system is that, as noted by Erica Moret, the frameworks and agreements concluded under its aegis tend to lack adaptability (Moret 2016, p.1). That is why, according to Moret, “a characteristic of 21st century international governance is the rising importance of alternative types of collective cooperation” (Moret 2016). The consequence of the rise of these parallel frameworks and arrangements is a difficulty in radically reforming the international multilateral system: as Gstöhl points out, “far-reaching reforms of global institutions would require broad support to meet the usually high constitutional hurdles for change, and they are likely to open a Pandora’s box of requests” (Gstohl 2011, 189). Thus, rather than aiming to change the multilateral system, it is more feasible to flank it with forms of governance which are characterized by less hierarchic features and a higher degree of informality (see Thiollet 2012, 15). These might indeed be embodied by Concert Diplomacy.

2.2. Contemporary Concert Diplomacy and its features

Robert Jervis broadly defines a Concert as a “nascent collective security system” (Jervis 1985, 78). This is further confirmed by Kupchan, who considers that Concerts constitute collective security insofar as “they operate in a regulated, norm-governed environment and are predicated on the logic of all against one, not each for his own” (Kupchan 1995, 53). More specifically, Concert Diplomacy can be defined as “context-specific coalitions for diplomatic crisis management by a self-selected group of major actors through informal policy coordination” (Jung 2016, 34). In practice, Contemporary Concerts encourage a functional approach to multilateralism². In this perspective, their novelty lies in the fact that they are smaller and more constrained than the 19th century European Concert (they don’t aim to establish a new world order) or other formats such as the G7/G8; they are limited by the “situational” interests and capabilities of participating countries.

These concerts are even more effective when it comes to crisis management, where swift and practical decision-making is required (Jung 2016, 28). That is why Contemporary Concerts boast three main features: limited scope, limited membership and limited institutionalization. Contemporary Concerts are usually limited in scope, meaning they are confined to one issue or conflict (Jung 2016). This precludes

² For an analysis of the functional approach, see Mitrany 1948, 350-363.

the possibility of issue-linkages and package deals³. Equally, they emphasise more the procedure, that is the steps to be taken to end the crisis, than the substance, that is the specific content of the agreement to agree upon (Rasmussen 2001, 206).

Contemporary Concerts are also limited in membership, since it has been proven that a restrained number of participants manages to better reach a given outcome (Olson 1971, 73). This paper does not go so far as to support the proposal, made by Kupchan, that Concerts should comprise only major powers, but does support the reflection that “small membership facilitates timely joint decision making” (Kupchan 1991, 140). In this sense, Contemporary Concerts should be characterized by a certain degree of exclusiveness, and their organization might resemble that of the flexibility present in the EU informal division of labour in crisis management: here, participation has been described as *open* and *evolving*, with the possibility for institutions such as the Commission and the EEAS to join subgroups of states in their cooperative efforts (Delreux, Keukeleire 2017, 1482).

Finally, Contemporary Concerts have limited institutionalization, meaning they are based upon the preference for more informal arrangements (Jung 2016, 79-80). Indeed, as argued by Wallander and Keohane, a high degree of institutionalization is more likely to be present in multilateral fora which deal with a great number of issues. Conversely, contemporary concerts would come to the fore when dealing with crisis management, where one main issue is discussed and informality is preferred (Wallander, Keohane 1999, 31). Considering the above, Concert Diplomacy can be more satisfactorily defined as “context-specific coalitions for diplomatic crisis management (=limited scope), by a self-selected group of major actors (=limited membership), through informal policy coordination (=limited institutionalisation)” (Jung 2016, 69).

While formal institutions, such as the UN or the WTO, clearly retain a pivotal role in global governance because of their legitimacy, it would be reductive not to take into consideration the possibility that informal gatherings such as Concerts could also successfully flank such institutions (Prantl 2012, 45). That these informal arrangements allow for “innovation, compartmentalisation and speed” (Moret 2016, 3) compounds this argument. It is important to acknowledge, in this respect, that such types of cooperation do not contradict themselves, but rather exist on a continuum. Towards the more formal end of the spectrum there are traditional International Organizations, while at the more informal end there are Contemporary Concerts or Contact Groups (Prantl 2012, 46).

Contemporary Concerts, however, shall not be equated to Coalitions of the Willing: indeed, the latter are interest-based, focused on a preferred military strategy and led by a coalition leader, like in the case of the Iraq War of 2003 (Prantl 2012). Concerts, on the other hand, emerge when there is no clear

³ For an account on the dynamics of issue-linkages and package deals in international negotiations, see Putnam 1988.

leadership among relevant stakeholders, thus an informal mechanism of cooperation is needed in order to reach consensus on the steps to take. In a certain sense therefore, they are the “diplomatic counterparts” of Coalitions of the Willing (Prantl 2012).

The features of Concert Diplomacy are in line with what Giovanni Grevi calls interolarity. Indeed, like Concert Diplomacy, “interolarity is interest-based (as it builds on the convergence of the interests of major international actors), problem driven (as it focuses on the challenges requiring cooperative solutions) and process-oriented” (Grevi 2009, 5). Moreover, argues Grevi, the European Union, due to its sheer size and impact on the world around it, must aim at being part of this interolar order as a central and coordinating pole (Grevi 2009, 7). As it will be outlined later in the paper, there is no reason why one should not envisage an analogous role for the European Union in a diffused system of overlapping clubs of states that reunite in “Concerts” whenever a crisis arises.

2.3. Minilateralism: windows of opportunity and shortcomings

Concert Diplomacy amply resonates with the notion of “minilateralism”, which can be defined as “the diplomatic process of a small group of interested parties working together to supplement or complement the activities of international organisations in tackling subjects deemed too complicated to be addressed appropriately at the multilateral level” (Moret 2016, 2). The notion came to prominence in the international relations’ debate after the end of the Cold War as a substitute for the uncontested hegemony of the US (Snidal 1985, 612). The history of minilateralism, however, is much deeper. Already in the aftermath of the Second World War, the new multilateral architecture backed by the U.S was complemented with more informal arrangements among nations (Kahler 1992, 686). This was evident, for instance, during the negotiations carried out in the second round of the GATT, called the Kennedy Round. Here, agreements were hammered out initially among a restricted group of countries, and then extended to the others through the principle of the most-favoured-nation clause (Kahler 1992). As Winham points out, “what was a multilateral negotiation in name became a large, complicated series of bilateral (or plurilateral) negotiations in fact. The main action of the negotiation often occurred away from the multilateral chambers” (Winham 1986, 34).

The fact that minilateral cooperation has been somehow embedded in multilateral negotiations since the very beginning has pushed some experts to state: “let’s forget about trying to get the planet’s nearly 200 countries to agree” (Dreznev 2009). Moreover - as the argument goes - minilateralism and multilateralism should not be considered as mutually exclusive. On the contrary, minilateralism could help to grease the current multilateral apparatus by bringing a smaller group of actors to the table to informally tackle issues, which could then be uploaded at the level of official multilateral fora in order for global action to be taken (Dreznev 2009).

Clearly, minilateral cooperation does not come without its shortcomings, raising a series of normative concerns in terms of legitimacy, equity and accountability (Naim 2009; Weiss 2014; Schulz 2018, 39; Keohane 2001). This is exacerbated by the fact that these club configurations seem to be problematic because of their tendency to replace global goods with “club” goods which benefit a more limited number of actors (See Keohane 2001). Yet minilateralism, by the same token, has undeniable advantages in terms of speed, flexibility, modularity and leverage, characteristics which have proven to be effective when it comes to dealing with transnational challenges such as climate change (Haas 2010). What should be done, therefore, is to devise a hybrid approach which contemplates resorting to both traditional international institutions and more flexible solutions such as Concerts which, thanks to their degree of informality, could serve as a forum for policy coordination among its participants (Kupchan 1991, 144).

3. Concert Diplomacy between Realism and Institutionalism

This section seeks to give a theoretical explanation of Concert Diplomacy. Because of its defining characteristics, Concert Diplomacy presents features of both Realism and Institutionalism, and can be understood by integrating both frameworks. Indeed, while Realism stresses the primacy of the state in international relations and Institutionalism exalts the possibility to enhance cooperation through institutions, Concerts seat uneasily in between these two accounts. Consequently, to make sense of Concert Diplomacy it is interesting to look at the debate between Realists and Institutionalists on collective security.

Institutionalists such as Charles and Clifford Kupchan contend that Concert Diplomacy is a form of collective security since it promotes better balancing under anarchy and enhances cooperative behaviours (Kupchan 1995, 52). Moreover, Concerts are part of collective security since they work on the logic of one against all. Contrary to Realists, authors like the Kupchans consider institutions as entities established by states to better pursue their own self-interest, which then acquire a life of their own and influence cooperation. Therefore, they are able to persist and prosper even if the initial causes for their establishment have ceased to exist (Krasner 1982). A proof of that, according to Keohane and Wallander, would be the persistence of NATO, an institution that was designed after the end of the Second World War to counter the Communist threat but that survived and prospered after the Soviet demise (Wallander, Keohane 1999, 22). Authors like Jervis have seen Concerts as security regimes and argue that, for instance, the Concert of Europe was created to counter the revival of the hegemonic power embodied by Napoleonic France, but then came to have “a force in its own right” (Jervis 1982, 365-367). Elrod is in accordance with Jervis in that he also emphasises the importance of the norms and rules implicitly embedded in the Concert configuration (Elrod 1976, 163).

John Mearsheimer challenges the institutionalist narrative by contending that Concerts are more consistent with the Realist notion of balance of power than with collective security (Mearsheimer 1994, 35). A variation of Mearsheimer's interpretation is that of Defensive Realism, which is a synthesis of both Realist and non-Realist paradigms (Legro, Moravcsik 1999). It holds that states partaking in Concert Diplomacy followed the balance of power logic, but were also moderated by "their leaders and domestic regimes" (Rendall 2006, 524). Essentially, while Defensive Realism acknowledges that the structure of the international order influences and shapes state's behaviour, it hints at the fact that domestic factors also play an influential role.

Also in line with Mearsheimer's reasoning is an original and insightful study by Korina Kagan, which applies realist and institutionalist theories to Concert Diplomacy tailoring them to the specific reality of the Concert of Europe (1815-1848). In her account the author posits that, while concert configurations have traditionally been held as examples of successful institutionalist cooperation frameworks in the field of security, the Concert was in fact a perfect example of realist cooperation where balance-of-power considerations were greatly prevalent (Kagan 2007, 3). According to Institutionalists, the principles on which Concert Diplomacy in the past was premised were; self-restraint; mutual respect and consideration for the other parties; containment through persuasion and dialogue; and avoidance of force. Yet the author - taking as case studies the Greek war of independence (1821-1833), the first Muhammad Ali crisis (1831-33) and the second Muhammad Ali crisis (1839-41) - proceeds in the paper to dismantle these institutionalist assumptions and to show that the Concert Diplomacy of Europe in the period 1815-1821 truly adhered to realist logics (Kagan 2007, 19-25). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, in refusing the feasibility of a contemporary Great Power Concert, the author quotes the British historian W.N Medlicott, who observed:

"The Concert was something which existed when the great powers sat around a conference table, or found it expedient or convenient to join in collective action; there was a Concert of Europe when the action of the great powers was concerted, and when it was not there was not; any more formal arrangement seemed to be neither expedient nor practicable" (Medlicott 1956, 18).

These observations seem to confirm the thesis that Contemporary Concert Diplomacy need not be forcibly institutionalized to produce tangible results; rather, it is worth attempting to establish it as an informal system of governance and to flank it alongside formal existing international institutions.

4. The contribution of the EU to Contemporary Concert Diplomacy

While the participation of a hybrid polity such as the EU, which is neither a state nor a traditional International Organization, in a Concert might seem counterintuitive at first, it has been very valuable in the past. Indeed, the EU can make a meaningful contribution thanks to its considerable economic and financial means, as well as its technical expertise (Jung 2016, 724). The EU can, in itself, be seen as a form of Concert, albeit a peculiar one being an exclusive club of states with codified rules and political and economic incentives (Williams 2001, 159). Moreover, even in the cases in which informal talks and cooperation were started by the major member states, the EU was later able to step in to present the unanimous position of all its 28 member states.

This section focuses on four cases in which contemporary concerts of powers have been (or are being) applied to successfully engage in crisis management or conflict prevention. These are: The Middle East Quartet, The Iran talks leading to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the recently established International Contact Group (ICG) for Venezuela and the project of a Concert of Powers for Syria and the Middle East. In all of them, the European Union has played, is playing, or could potentially play a decisive role as initiator and coordinator.

4.1. The Middle East Quartet

The Middle East Quartet is an informal grouping of states and international organizations conceived to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Al Jazeera 2007). It was established on 10th April 2002 during a meeting of foreign ministers in Madrid, and involved US Secretary of State Colin Powell, the High Representative for the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, Russia and the UN (Musu 2011, 124).

The Quartet can be defined as a case of “crystallizing multilateralism”, that is a series of multilateral initiatives which are being increasingly implemented but are “still not fully established” (Bouchard, Peterson 2010, 20). Moreover, because of its peculiar features, the Quartet has all the qualities for it to be considered a form of concerted endeavour. As Nathalie Tocci notes, “unlike international organizations, the Quartet has remained deliberately un-institutionalized and flexible” (Tocci 2014, 267).

While initially the mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was run unilaterally by the United States, since 2000, following the first Intifada, the situation became conducive for a more assertive mediation action by the EU and for the establishment of the Quartet (Tocci 2014, 264). The Bush administration was seeking to disengage from the conflict and to pursue a strategy of more selective engagement in

the Middle East region as a whole (Musu 2011, 125), leaving the EU as the principal donor of aid to the Palestinians (Tocci 2014, 266).

The goal of the Quartet was to uphold a two-state solution to respect declaration 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) of the UNSC. However, the Quartet's expectations were rather optimistic when it came to the time frame, since it expected to achieve a "final Israeli-Palestinian settlement" in 3 years from its establishment and it aimed to do so through a three-phase diplomatic Road Map (United Nations 2004, 1).

Looking back at the evolution of the initiative, it is fair to say that it was littered with serious diplomatic mistakes: for instance, the decision of the European Union to suspend dialogue with the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) after its electoral victory in 2006 was met with vociferous criticism by the UN envoy Alvaro de Soto, who defined it "at best extremely short-sighted" and labelled the Middle East Quartet a "side-show" (Mc Carthy, Williams 2007). The European Union has consistently been the most active participant in the Quartet, together with the US. However, the EU failed to exercise a substantive leverage to counter US unilateralism (Musu 2011, 127). Indeed, the EU often limited its initiatives to the implementation of the US' agenda, and the Quartet failed to transpose its initiatives to the multilateral level (Tocci 2014, 272). In this sense, the EU did not manage to moderate the influence of the US on the Quartet, and that is why, since 2006, the format has lost momentum.

Overall, the Quartet has failed to deliver, and its efforts have been essentially reduced to "virtually" discussing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process (Patten 2005, 194). Nevertheless, this bleak evaluation should not lead one to dismiss its utility too hurriedly. In fact, the current failure of the Quartet might be explained in terms of failing to understand its true logic. While The Quartet may not constitute a breakthrough as a multilateral initiative, it could still be very effective as a Contact Group. As Nathalie Tocci observes:

[The Quartet] could act as a forum to establish a renewed international consensus regarding the way forward in the Arab-Israeli conflict, a laboratory to test international positions that could ultimately find expression through the United Nations (Tocci 2014, 278).

In order to foster ownership and to build legitimacy, such a concerted effort should not underestimate the criterion of regional balance (PRIF 2014, 37). In this sense, continues the author, "one could also see the value of extending the Quartet to others, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, which have played a role in the peace process" (Tocci 2014, 279). This last proposal corroborates the idea that when formal and institutionalised ways of multilateral cooperation lose their momentum and seem unable to find effective solutions to long-standing conflicts, informal and more flexible formats in the form of concerts of relevant actors might enter the picture and help foster consensus.

4.2. The EU 3+3 and the JCPOA

The EU3+3 talks are one of the emblematic examples of the rise of minilateral cooperation in security affairs (Harnisch 2007, 1). The case of the 3+3 Talks established by France, Germany and the UK and then steered by the EU to discuss the issue of the incipient nuclearization of Iran probably most resembles in style the shadowy practices of the XIX century Concert Diplomacy. Indeed, talks were held in Vienna among diplomats and the foreign ministers of France, Germany, the EU, the US, Iran, Russia and China in an atmosphere of informality and utmost secrecy (Jung 2016, 64). Until the Trump administration withdrew the US, the agreement represented one of the biggest diplomatic successes of the international community, to the point that it was labelled “one of the most epic diplomatic marathons of modern times” (Borger 2015).

The process began in 2002, when the Iranian government was accused of developing nuclear facilities within its territories with a view to acquiring military nuclear capabilities (Dupont 2009, 100). This was clearly intolerable for the international community, and even more so since Iran is formally a part of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which obligates non-nuclear signatory countries to not pursue the development of military nuclear capabilities (Sauer 2019,1). In 2003, the three European states of France, the UK and Germany coalesced in an informal diplomatic forum which convinced Iran to suspend its enrichment activities in exchange for significant EU concessions (BBC 2003, Cronberg 2017, 246). These negotiations resulted in the Tehran Declaration (Jung 2016, 74). However, it was immediately clear that the agreement’s future legitimacy and durability relied on including other major global stakeholders, particularly the US. A second agreement was reached in Paris in 2004 between the EU-3 and Iran which envisaged a suspension of uranium enrichment in exchange for some economic concessions from the EU (Bozorgmehr and 2004). Yet there was a widespread impression among Iranians that, without the US, the deal was a waste of time; therefore, they pulled out (Sauer 2019, 9).

After the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as President of Iran in 2006, the country returned to a policy of nuclear enrichment. In response, the format of negotiations was enlarged to include the US, China, Russia and EU to become the P5+1 (permanent members of UNSC + Germany) (Guardian 2013). In this phase, the role of the Concert was to act as a coordinator of the actors’ positions in order to build consensus: this role was taken up by the High representative of the European Union, Javier Solana, who made sure that none of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) would use their veto power to block the informal negotiations (Cronberg 2017, 249). This model ensured the legitimacy of the concert was assured by aligning its membership with the established hierarchy of the UNSC, while at the same time greater effectiveness was achieved by pursuing the negotiations informally, at a distance from UN system.

In 2013, with the election of the more moderate President Mohamed Rouhani, an interim agreement, the Joint Plan of Action (JPA), was reached between the US and Iran: it foresaw the slowing down of the Iranian nuclear programme in exchange for the lifting of the economic sanctions previously imposed by the EU and the US in 2012 (Sauer 2019, 13). It is important to underline that these remarkable diplomatic results were made possible by the flexibility and speed allowed for by the Concert of the EU3+3. Moreover, the praise that the HR/VP Catherine Ashton received for reaching the JPA is proof of the crucial role played by the European Union in moving the US from their initial strategic intransigence to sit at the negotiation table (Jung 2016, 76).

On 14th July 2015, a final deal leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was reached (Guardian 2013). In line with the assertion, made in the previous chapter, of the possibility to upload the agreements reached in Concert Diplomacy to the formal institutional level, the UNSC formally endorsed the agreement and invited all relevant international actors to implement its provisions, with a formal mandate to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (UNSC 2015). Moreover, in this specific case the minilateral framework (or Concert) that led to the JCPOA helped to circumvent the existing rivalries between formal institutions such as the UNSC and the IAEA Board of Governors (Harnisch 2007, 19). The deal officially entered into force in January 2016 (ICG 2019, 4).

Recently, the successful initiative led by France, Germany and the UK and subsequently steered and coordinated by the High Representative Mogherini, has come under increasing strain. Indeed, in May 2018 US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the US from the agreement (BBC 2018). President Trump also decided to reinstall the sanctions previously lifted under the JCPOA (Al Jazeera 2018). Yet, even though an increasingly isolationist US has turned its back on the final agreement, the concerted diplomatic labour that led to it remains an undeniable success of informal governance, not least because it provided two main advantages; 1) less bureaucracy and more flexibility for the states and 2) more celerity (Sauer 2019, 3). If the talks had been held in the traditional open, institutionalized and unwieldy multilateral institutions, the negotiations would not have yielded the same results, and the stalemate would not have been broken.

4.3. The International Contact Group on Venezuela

Since July 2017, Venezuela, which has one of the world's largest oil reserves, has been crippled by a crisis that is tearing the country apart. The election, in March 2017, of a constitutional assembly that considerably concentrated power in the hands of President Nicolás Maduro, who succeeded revolutionary socialist president Hugo Chavez, has provoked civil unrest and tensions in the region and at the wider international level (Cohen 2019, 1). On 23rd January 2019, the Venezuelan National Assembly declared its president, opposition member Juan Guaidó, as the legitimate interim President of the country (Daniels 2019). The Trump administration uses strong rhetoric aimed at provoking regime change in the country (Sabatini 2019).

Since the current Venezuelan regime explicitly excludes any form of external intervention, the EU instead took the lead in January 2019 in establishing an informal Contact Group comprised of EU and Latin American countries, whose first meeting was held on 7th February 2019 in Montevideo (EEAS 2019). The Contact Group set for itself a timeframe of 90 days from its establishment to reach its objective, namely to “promote a common understanding and a more concerted approach among key international actors on the situation in Venezuela aiming at a peaceful and democratic solution to the current crisis” (EEAS 2019). The mandate of the Contact Group is three-pronged; 1) to get a better understanding of the situation 2) to involve all the relevant stakeholders and find a compromise and 3) to steer towards a peaceful democratic transition (Rios 2019). With regards to the membership, the International Contact Group is made up of 10-12 members, a mix of both intergovernmental organizations and states that include Ecuador, Costa Rica, Uruguay and Bolivia on the Latin American side (EEAS 2019). This configuration is in line with the assertion, according to experts, that contemporary concerts of powers could include between 10 and 17 members, regionally balanced (PRIF 2014).

As noted in the previous examples, the works of the Contact Group are not meant to avoid or circumvent the action of formal institutional bodies. On the contrary, as was said in an EEAS joint statement, “the work of the UN has the full support of the members of the ICG” (EEAS 2019a). At the same time, however, the Contact Group is intended to be a more agile forum for discussion, where the typical posturing in which leaders engage in formal institutions is avoidable and timely decisions can be taken. Indeed, as Hall Gardner argues, “the Contact Group process represents one way to work toward the resolution of disputes that does not involve excessive international bureaucratic procedures’ and also - he continues - “by bringing all sides into dialogue, multilateral Contact Groups can attempt to prevent interstate or intra-societal conflict from escalating and spreading and can limit the need to engage in military interventions, thereby mitigating tendencies toward radical disaccord”(Gardner 2019, 110-111).

So far, the Contact Group has succeeded in isolating autocratic president Maduro and building an increasing the international pressure on him to cooperate (Malamud, Nuñez 2019). Yet if it is said that one of the purposes of an informal grouping of powers and regional actors is to foster a common and unitary position among its members, the concerted effort to bring peace in Venezuela might already appear to be suffering from a “Contact Group *fatigue*”. In fact, there is no common position among EU member states over the recognition of Juan Guaidó as legitimate president of Venezuela (Herszenhorn 2019, Zerka 2019). In particular, Italy’s veto has jeopardized any such possibility (Reuters 2019). This lack of unity is an impediment to efficiency, especially with respect to enforcing credible sanctions, which are the main tool the EU can use to put pressure on Maduro (Zerka 2019). In addition, the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Borrell⁴, whose country is closely following the works of the Contact

⁴ Josep Borrell will take up the post of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in November 2019.

Group in view of its historical ties with Venezuela, has lamented the excessive slowness of the Group's work, given the seriousness of the ongoing humanitarian situation in Venezuela (El País 2019).

Although its efforts so far might seem fraught with obstacles, the use of this informal framework for coordination in crisis management is further proof of the utility of contemporary concerts to build a shared understanding of crises with a view to devise common and rapid solutions. Yet if there is one thing that the experience of the ICG for Venezuela has already taught the EU, it is that contemporary concerts can only work when they bring in the crucial players in the region. In this sense, the EU will have to increase its efforts to bring in the US and move it away from a policy of enforced regime change, which would ultimately be disastrous for Venezuela and the US alike (Mora 2019).

4.4. A Westphalia for the Middle East? The case of Syria

In 2011, Syria plummeted into a civil war that has torn the country apart, transforming it into a chessboard where a proxy war among the great powers and regional rivals in the Middle East is being played out. Lately, a group of historians from Cambridge- Patrick Milton, Michael Axworthy and Brendan Simms- supported by the German government, have been researching and investigating the possibility of establishing a contemporary Concert of Powers designed specifically to stabilize not only Syria, but potentially the entire Middle East region (Daragahi 2018, 1). This project has already been endorsed by high-level political figures in the European landscape, such as Angela Merkel (Kaaki 2018).

The project takes its inspiration from historical analogy indeed, the Syrian war today is often compared to the situation in Europe during the Thirty Years War, when the Germanic states was plagued by a conflict that involved many players with diverging interests.⁵ The proponents of the Concert have identified a series of structural parallels between the Syrian and Middle East conflict on the one hand, and the Thirty Years War on the other. First, the existence of multiple types of conflict (the contemporary Middle East and XVII century Europe both feature symmetrical and asymmetrical conflicts with a great variety of actors); second, contested sovereignty; third, an escalation in the conflict that starts as an internal rebellion and soon becomes a conflict with external stakeholders (Denmark, Sweden, France and Spain intervened in the Thirty Years War just as the US, Russia, Turkey and the Saudis are doing so today in Syria); great power rivalry (France and the Habsburg Empire in XVII century Europe, Iran and Saudi Arabia now); attempts at state-building during the war (the Bohemian state and the Islamic State); and finally, the absence of official declarations of war (Milton, Axworthy, Simms 2018, 89-100).

To be effective, a contemporary concert should bring in all relevant stakeholders, namely the United States, the European Union, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, delegates from the Syrian

⁵ Peace was ultimately achieved through a grand bargaining process involving great and regional powers alike, and this might well be the most suitable solution for Syria too (Glass 2016, XI).

regime and opposition and maybe also Yemeni and Kurdish representatives. While some of these parties do not talk to each other, the proponents of the “Concert approach” are confident that this hurdle could be overcome through intermediaries (Daragahi 2018, 3). As already observed in the Quartet, in this renewed Concert of powers the role of the EU could well be that of the facilitator and coordinator, which brings the parties to the table.

Critics of these proposals point to the fact that the historical parallel is not tailored to the Middle East whatsoever, and that “such explanations say more about Europe than about the Middle East” (Kamel 2016, 1). Yet, according to experts, a “Concert approach” could be suitable to manage power transitions (Muller, Rauch 2018, 244). Thus, one can expect it to be equally suitable to manage a democratic transition in Syria, with the participation of both international and regional powers interacting with the Syrian regime and its opposition. Also, according to pundits, this informal, Concert-like version of crisis management in Syria is appreciated even by revisionist powers like Russia, whose primary strategic concern is to lose its status as an international pariah. Indeed, Putin likes this “latter-day version of the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe [...] [where] several major powers came together to do a deal, but no single one was in the ascendant” (Baunov 2015).

Clearly, two situations are never the same, yet this historical analogy shows that, procedurally at least, an informal gathering of great powers and regional players who take advantage of informal, secretive meetings to build a common understanding of a conflict can be an extremely valuable instrument to complement the twenty-first century multilateral architecture. Even though a contemporary concert for the Middle East is not a reality yet, the need to create a framework in which otherwise incompatible parties can indirectly negotiate is being increasingly pondered by the international community. In this sense, while informal gatherings are by no means a panacea, they surely play an important role in increasing understanding among actors, as well as being a powerful format to use when more formal institutional fora struggle to attain results.

5. Conclusion: Order through diffusion

Twenty-first century global governance is becoming more and more networked (Slaughter 2004). Diffusion, rather than concentration, seems to be the characteristic trait of this period. This evolution has not come without pessimistic reflections. Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini, for instance, have argued that an incipient diffusion of power will render global governance chaotic, unpredictable, and ultimately impossible (Bremmer, Roubini 2011). However, if one looks to past events, it becomes clearer that human history is not characterised by the prevalence of vertical, hierarchical institutions at the expense of horizontal networks and organisations, but rather by a combination of the two. This realisation prompts

the discussion as to whether clubs of powers dealing with issues in which they have concrete stakes might be a more effective model than a centralized security system revolving around one single institution.

In addition to the crisis of the rigid, hierarchical multilateral system of the post-war period there is an increasing lack of commitment by the most powerful and principal architect of the current multilateral order, namely the United States, to uphold it. As Richard Youngs observes, “US president Donald Trump’s erratic and disruptive foreign policy is putting more pressure on the EU to uphold the international liberal order” (Youngs 2018). In this sense, the diffused nature of global governance might represent a concrete opportunity for the European Union to uphold informal means of cooperation with a view to counter the demise of multilateralism and the retrenchment of the US.

Against this background, this work has sought to shed light on the rise of Contemporary Concert Diplomacy in crisis management and conflict resolution and on the role of the European Union in such an informal form of cooperation. It argues that Concert Diplomacy could present a feasible and useful way to counteract the potential demise of the current multilateral order. Concert Diplomacy could be pursued through a network of more diffused, informal and flexible gatherings of key states, organisations and regional actors which would have the purpose of solving crises and conflicts.

Regarding the role of the European Union, while not being a national entity in the Westphalian sense of the term, it could effectively contribute to the success of contemporary concerts by serving as a facilitator and coordinator of the participants’ different positions. Whilst a rigorous analysis of Contemporary Concert Diplomacy cannot overlook the fact that such informal forms of cooperation, often surrounded by secrecy, can pose concerns related to democratic legitimacy due to their lack of transparency (Christiansen, Piattoni 2003, 22-34), these shortcomings can be addressed and effectively adapted to the needs of the 21st century in order to help deal with the deadlocks and quagmires in which international negotiations nowadays often fall into. Afterall, unilateralism is no longer “the new kid on the block”. It is a governance reality, and it is already being trialled in other emerging fields of international relations, such as cybersecurity (Pawlak 2017).

Ultimately, the world order is going through a phase of reshuffling: new equilibriums are emerging, traditional leadership cannot be taken for granted anymore, and emerging powers are repositioning themselves in the new power landscape. This also reverberates in global governance: the UN-system has been met with growing criticism for its apparent ineffectiveness in curbing regional conflicts. Yet this does not necessarily mean the end of multilateralism as we know it. Informal cooperation in the guise of Concert Diplomacy can help to grease the gears of a multilateral order under pressure. Only time will tell as to whether jingoistic and self-referential impulses will prevail, yet a minimum degree of collaboration will always be required, and informal modes of cooperation will prove instrumental in facilitating this.

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