


Making it Matter

Thought Experiments for
Meaningful Multilateralism



In cooperation with

G I G A

German  Institute for Global and Area Studies
Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien

“The coronavirus pandemic has dealt, I hope, a real death-blow to so-called ‘business as usual’, which was exacerbating inequalities. COVID-19 is a mirror to all those inequalities, and we cannot go back to that future because it wasn’t bringing us to a safe world.” Mary Robinson

“The multilateral system that we had for the last 75 years emerged from the ashes of two World Wars and was at least aspirationally shaped around a set of common values. The best way to protect our interests is by standing up for those values because they enabled us to have the prosperity, peace and economic development upon which our societies are founded.” Benedetta Berti

“There is a trade-off between a more universal approach to multilateralism that’s very inclusive, and a liberal multilateralism. That’s something we need to be honest with and grapple with.” Thomas Wright

“I want to make sure that in thinking of multilateralism, we are not thinking of it as the same big countries sitting together, aligning their interests, and therefore thinking that this interest is the assemblage of our universal values – it’s not.” Obiageli Ezekwesili

“We built the multilateral governance system wrong! It’s time to break it down and recast it, keeping the ideals of liberalism, pluralism, individual agency, participatory governance, sustainability, climate change concerns, and health for all at the core.” Samir Saran

Editorial



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If there is one word that aptly sums up the state of academic and policy debate on multilateralism, it has got to be “polarization”. Yes, the discussion is also rich, multi-faceted, and lively. But above all, it is deeply divided.

Two almost parallel worlds have emerged. In one world, there are many influential champions of multilateralism. We see the hashtag #MultilateralismMatters reassuringly pop up across multiple social networks. Leading politicians and technocrats repeat variations of the mantra, “global problems need global solutions”. Young activists march across the globe in #FridaysForFuture protests, pushing not only for local and national action, but also for multilateral initiatives on mitigating climate change. In a parallel world, electorates have come to believe that multilateral cooperation has caused them more harm than good. Furthermore, citizens often remain unaware of the impact of multilateral achievements on everyday life. In a 2019 representative survey commissioned by Körber-Stiftung, more than two thirds of German respondents admitted to not being familiar with the term “multilateralism”. If this is the case in a country that largely favours international cooperation, the results are likely to be worse elsewhere.

Making landfall on an already strained system, the devastating coronavirus pandemic has worsened pre-existing fault lines. We have witnessed stark failures of the international community to contain the global spread of the virus. Shortages of medical equipment and drugs, and delays in securing access to desperately needed vaccines, have cost millions of lives. These failings have not only reinforced the sceptics’ view, but also sown doubt even among avid multilateralists, since global cooperation is failing when it is most needed.

Admittedly, levels of support for multilateral rules and institutions have varied across and within countries over time. But previous divisions have likely been considerably exacerbated during the presidency of Donald Trump. With multilateralism facing such an onslaught, especially from the leader of the very country that had served as the founder and guarantor of the system, defensive reactions (and overreactions) ensued. Supporters of multilateralism often ended up advocating either for the status quo or for only minimal changes.

This polarization has been detrimental for any conversation on a meaningful reform of multilateralism. Despite the occasional lack of nuance, not all of the critique coming from the Trump administration was

About the Körber Multilateralism Lab

The Körber Multilateralism Lab is a cooperation of the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and Körber-Stiftung, connecting wide-ranging and in-depth expertise in facilitating international dialogue, independent high-quality research, and two global networks of thought leaders and policy experts. To develop shared solutions that facilitate the rescue of multilateral arrangements in some areas, a fundamental reboot in others, and to unite these approaches into a coherent plan for action, we initiated the Körber Multilateralism Lab.

In three online meetings through 2020, the Lab brought together a small group of influential policy experts, public officials and academics in a confidential setting. With the help of forward-looking and collaborative tools, participants explored new ideas beyond thought barriers and tested impulses to improve international cooperation and the effectiveness of the multilateral system.

[www.koerber-stiftung.de/
koerber-multilateralism-lab](http://www.koerber-stiftung.de/koerber-multilateralism-lab)

“The ‘new multilateralism’ is a mosaic or a network of private actors – foundations, companies, research, academia, civil society – and of course governments. Where is the legitimacy coming from? And how do we reconcile the urge to have solid, stable institutions on the one hand, and work in flexible coalitions wherever necessary on the other?”

Sebastian Groth

unjustified; some of it, in fact, shed a harsh new light on problems of multilateralism (as has also been recognized by the new Biden administration). Some of these problems are longstanding, such as growing inequality worldwide and the marginalization of concerns and voices from the Global South. Others are more recent, or at least have recently become more visible – for instance the “weaponization of interdependence”. Some could be sorted with minor tinkering, while others will require a fundamental rethink on the very purpose of multilateralism. In any case, a serious and frank conversation about reforming multilateralism is long overdue.

To ignite a conversation on these urgent issues, the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) and Körber-Stiftung set up the Körber Multilateralism Lab in the spring of 2020. By joining our two global networks of thought leaders and policy experts, the Lab connected in-depth expertise in facilitating international dialogue and independent high-quality research. We wanted to open a debate beyond the binaries, not to bring about reform for its own sake but to embrace a moment of major geopolitical shifts. In the absence of travel and in-person convening, a small group of influential policy experts, public officials and academics came together in three online sessions during 2020. We are thankful for their commitment to embarking with us on this virtual Lab adventure. Their expertise and diversity of views steered the discussions and yielded the ideas contained in this report. Whereas the exact discussions that took place within the Lab were necessarily confidential, we have included in the report key quotes to illustrate these conversations.

With the help of forward-looking and collaborative tools, together we explored new ideas and tested impulses to improve international cooperation. Working in plenary and breakout sessions, we conducted thought experiments to develop innovative principles towards rescuing the system on the one hand, and rebooting it on the other. The international composition of the group enabled us to examine how different global actors view the function and functioning of multilateral cooperation, and how this spurs or curbs collective action. We further explored the complementarities and overlaps between universal and limited-membership models of multilateralism, and how different approaches could be sustainably reconciled in practice. We also acknowledged the importance of bringing in multiple stakeholders to forge a “new multilateralism”. The group made specific recommendations for the governance of global health, trade, security, and climate change. Technocratic details were recognized as important, but more so was the urgency of developing a convincing narrative that would have to accompany any reform efforts. Meaningful reform will not happen within a bubble of experts and insiders. Multilateralism needs to work for real people, and needs to be seen to be working for real people. Underpinning both the general and the specific recommendations are questions of values, interests, and purpose.

This report summarizes our main takeaways. We do not claim to know all the answers. But we hope that this report asks some of the right questions, and offers the beginnings of a blueprint – a meaningful blueprint that can help build a new and robust multilateralism that is fit for the challenging times we live in.

Key Policy Recommendations

1. ● **Develop a compelling narrative on the purpose of multilateralism that clearly demonstrates its benefits for citizens.**

To secure public support and international commitment, a more accessible narrative is needed. This should clearly distinguish the concept from populist and nationalist depictions of multilateralism as an attack on sovereignty or a tool of elites. This ‘multilateralist story’ should be told by governments, and it should take the concerns of citizens and partners seriously by drawing on a bottom-up process that gives voice to the private sector, civil society, and sub-national entities. It should publicize examples of effective multilateral cooperation serving people around the globe.

2. ● **Strengthen multilateral rules against misuse and ensure the accountability of global actors.**

There have to be consequences for the abusers of the current system. To prevent the instrumentalization of institutions by certain powerful members, strong rules and checks have to be in place. In particular, liberal-democratic caucuses within multilateral institutions should seek such reforms while protecting the system’s formative values. Also, making the global economic and financial system more equitable and just would enable the multilateral system to deliver benefits to all. A meaningful multilateralism has to be able to work for the people by safeguarding the values on which the existing order is based.

3. ● **Invest in reformed organizations and programs.**

For multilateralism to work in a meaningful way, its institutions must deliver according to their mandate. Countries that champion multilateralism should push for reforms aimed at increasing organisational effectiveness. Improving the representation of actors and

perspectives from the Global South is another imperative. At the same time, paying one’s dues on time, and thereby living up to global pledges, is a minimal requirement for the financial resilience of multilateral bodies and programs – and for fulfilling the commitments made 20 years ago with the Millennium (now: Sustainable) Development Goals.

4. ● **Use flexible forums and formats to work out compromises for global public goods.**

Systemic competitors can join forces to establish and maintain global public goods as they engage in formal diplomatic competition on international norms. For boundary-spanning issues such as climate change, biodiversity, ocean health, and pandemics, the imperative of cooperation is self-evident. Like-minded countries should use “overlapping geometries” and flexible forums like the G20 to foster agreement. It would help build an effective overarching structure, when compromises reached there are then implemented through more formal institutions.

5. ● **Bring in different stakeholders for specific challenges such as global health.**

Bringing together governments, businesses, multilateral organizations, and other stakeholders can provide both the know-how and necessary funds to respond swiftly to a global crisis like the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. One idea is to establish secure supply chains preventing the abuse of the system as well as a common pool of “global health goods” such as ventilators, masks, syringes, and other material that can be sent wherever they are needed most. Similarly, a global task force of doctors and nurses – perhaps called “global health keepers” – could assist in places with a temporary scarcity of personnel. Such approaches can clearly convey the purpose of multilateralism.

Dissecting a Multi-faceted Crisis of Multilateralism

The current state of the world order is dire. It is not just the inability of governments around the world to coordinate their actions to limit the spread of COVID-19 that raises concern, but also their insufficient response to the threats of climate change and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Does that mean that the multilateral system is failing, that it needs rescuing or even rebooting? Are particular actors to blame for not playing their part, or indeed misusing the system?

The global balance of power is shifting, and with it the costs and benefits of multilateralism

Since the United Nations was founded in 1945, both demographics and wealth have literally shifted away from the Euro-Atlantic towards the East. As a consequence, there has been increased geopolitical competition over resources and norms, and over the rewriting of the rules that govern them. Sometimes this competition is disguised as a technical exercise, in others it manifests itself in the creation of parallel institutions. Meanwhile, the global order is undermined by growing economic inequality, both between and within states, which is why more and more people around the world are questioning globalization. Particularly in democracies, the social polarization that accompanies rising inequality hampers support for international causes, resulting in a lack of funding for multilateral action.

“If we had followed what the UN system recommended, we would already have an economy that had changed. International organizations are making long-term assessments, and they do come up with answers in the various specialized agencies, but we don’t trust them.”

Alexandra Novosseloff

It’s the member states, stupid!

It could be argued that the fault lies not with multilateralism per se but with the member states of multilateral institutions. States are the main players in the multilateral system. Multinational companies and civil society organizations are important, but secondary, players. Even the UN, the organization that has become near-synonymous with the oft-cited “international community”, is not an autonomous actor but depends on its 193 member states. State actors – large and small – have often failed to respect the international law on which multilateralism is based. The United States has disregarded numerous binding rules for decades, and over the past four years neglected the UN outright. China and Russia stand out as systemic challengers within and outside of the UN system. They are powers with the will or capacity to rewrite the rules of the system.

“The problem is not the system itself but its stakeholders. This crisis is an invitation to look at the underlying causes of the international order’s shortcomings.”

Ernesto Zedillo

It’s 2021 and the world looks different

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has painfully shown that a mid-twentieth-century system cannot effectively deal with twenty-first-century challenges. While reinforcing pre-existing trends such as protectionism and populism, the pandemic has also led to a re-appraisal of global public goods such as health and climate. The new decade has already afforded us a glimpse of the powers of digitization, as the internet no longer merely connects people but has created a digital divide and is becoming splintered by states and corporations.

This bleak picture of both the changes of the past decades and current challenges prompts a two-fold thought experiment – to consider the purpose of multilateralism in today’s world and the role of values therein, and to assess whether the current system should or, indeed, can be rescued, or whether a new beginning, a reboot, is necessary to make multilateralism matter.

Thought Experiment I

The Purpose of Multilateralism?

At the end of the Cold War, John Ruggie produced a seminal definition of multilateralism as “coordinating relations among three or more states in accordance with certain principles”. The purpose of multilateralism is therefore to regulate state behaviour based on certain values and to achieve specific goals. As such, it is not an end in itself, but a mechanism or instrument, for example to tackle challenges that transcend national borders.

While still functioning, the multilateral system has lost some of its meaning to governments and citizens around the world. Seen merely as a tool, multilateralism all of a sudden becomes highly technocratic, with no appeal beyond its ability to broker a compromise. In response, some of its proponents have begun to idealize the concept, portraying multilateralism as something inherently good (because it is global) and state power as something bad (because it is national). That is misleading. Yet, the problem of multilateralism’s loss of appeal remains, making the question of its purpose highly pertinent.

The foundational values of the multilateral system

In its initial conception post-1945, multilateralism was built around a distinct set of – aspirational – values. These consist, at the individual level, of human rights, human dignity and gender equality, and, at the system level, of the sovereign equality of states, self-determination of peoples, and non-aggression between states. These values are underpinned by a liberal economic model based on free trade and a free market. Those values and ideas reflected and strengthened the political systems of the states that created it, and thus also protected their interests.

Despite this direct connection between interests and values, policymakers and pundits alike sometimes see a dichotomy. This leads some to criticize Western democracies for doing business with rich autocracies rather than forging ties with like-minded, but economically less attractive countries. In fact, only if one believes that interests and values can be treated separately can one place one above the other. Instead, the two should be seen as deeply connected; values can over time become interests, so pursuing value-oriented diplomacy is in one’s own interest.

While people around the world appear to share an aspiration for common values based on human dignity, some states have come to cherish

“It’s a failure of imagination if we cannot coordinate and cooperate to ensure that institutions serve their purpose.”

Samir Saran

“There are no consequences for the big powers who do not play by the rules and it is extremely hard to make the current multilateral system powerful enough for these actors to comply.”

Steven Erlanger

sovereignty more. The last US administration’s foreign policy was based on a re-appraisal of national sovereignty that challenged the very foundation of the multilateral system. However, national sovereignty alone cannot deal with the multitude of threats the world is facing, from the containment of communicable diseases to climate change or the prevention of international financial crises; and from organizing an open system of trade to maintaining international peace and security. Moreover, African or Latin American views are hardly heard on these questions of values, which the most powerful nations and blocs – the United States, China, Russia, the UK, EU, India and Japan – appear to be hashing out among themselves.

A crisis of multilateralism, or of Western democracy?

The current crisis of multilateralism can also be seen as an extension of a crisis being experienced among the Western democracies. The international system used to work well for them, but now China, Russia and other authoritarian countries appear to be benefitting more, while the Global South is still largely excluded from the centers of power. So maybe it’s not the system that needs to be changed but Western democracies’ strategies and influence? It is certainly no coincidence that major democratic powers have begun to re-define their role in the world.

The recent return of the United States to the multilateralist camp allows for a set of questions to be asked that were off the table for the past four years. Does the system, built as it is on liberal values, need a core of liberal-minded countries to be meaningful? Would the multilateral system then require a more exclusive, value-based membership? Is this what is needed to revitalize the purpose of multilateralism, to achieve “meaningful multilateralism”?

There are clear trade-offs between today’s universal multilateralism and a value-based small-group multilateralism. It is not clear how we can manage parallel multilateral systems – “multi-multilateralism” – as lines can blur easily between emerging subsets. India, for example, has joined the United States, Japan, and Australia as the “Quad” to defy China in the Indo-Pacific, but partners with Beijing on multilateral development (for instance through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank), while also adopting European data privacy standards in order to act as the ‘back office’ of banks based in the European Union. The latter, in turn, and notwithstanding its commitment to a close partnership with the new US administration, has signed a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with China, while conducting trade negotiations with individual countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

It should be possible to defuse some of the tensions around ‘opposing values’ by fixing a yardstick of like-mindedness as a criterion for increased collaboration. Still, the role of values in the global order leads to a second thought experiment: whether the current operating system of multilateralism can somehow be patched, or whether a new one needs to be developed.

“If we want to keep our societies open and free, we have to keep the rule-based international order based on liberal values.”

Benedetta Bertì

Thought Experiment II

Rescue or Reboot, it's Rules that Count

Rescuing or rebooting multilateralism are, of course, not mutually opposed options. It is possible to embark on one course and end up with the other, for better or worse. Moreover, historical evidence weighs in favour of gradual rather than fundamental change. Whichever model may emerge, it will have to have rules of engagement that bind all members equally. These should include transparency, accountability, the rule of law, and the involvement of relevant stakeholders.

Rescuing multilateralism

The first step towards rescuing the multilateral system is to identify the assets within the current system that should be maintained or even strengthened. A second step is to foster the accountability of various actors, primarily states but also multilateral institutions themselves. Notwithstanding the various shortcomings presented at the outset, the existing international institutions still provide crucial forums for exchange on policy issues as well as learning environments for different political cultures. This includes a network of central banks and institutions such as the G20 that aims to prevent another global financial crisis like 2008 as well as a corps of well-trained and committed international civil servants. Even during the coronavirus pandemic, the multilateral system has shown a certain resilience, given that headquarters of International Organizations as well as their field operations have continued to work.

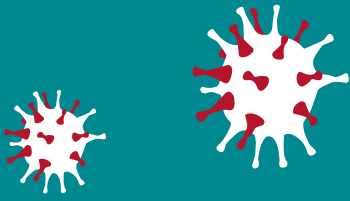
If we consider what needs to be improved, inclusiveness is top of the list. This means giving countries of the Global South better representation in existing institutions, for purposes of justice and equity as well as to harness the wealth of experience with multilateralism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There have been some successful reforms, such as the formation of the UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2005 as a bridge between the exclusive Security Council and the all-inclusive General Assembly. Still, the Security Council itself, the epitome of the old order, defies reform. Outside the UN proper, non-Western countries remain under-represented in the management and group structures of both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The recent appointment of economist and former Nigerian finance minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, as Director-General of the World Trade Organization (WTO) stands out as an exception to this rule.

Global Trade Governance

The multilateral trade system has come under fire across the globe, and not just from nationalists and sovereigntists. While the general benefits of trade are obvious to many, policy-makers and experts have failed to acknowledge its distributional effects, and the need for domestic policies to curb growing inequality. A new agenda would have to think of trade as an instrument to reduce poverty and strengthen the development orientation of the WTO.

When exploring reforms, two issues stand out: the need to redefine the general rules of the game, and a reform of the WTO itself. On competition policy, subsidies, technology transfer, and data protection, government practices have diverged and need to be brought back to common ground. Moreover, there is an urgent need for standard- and norm-setting in the digital area as well as for industrial goods, food safety, and other areas. Lastly, member states need to revise the special and differential treatment clauses of WTO agreements and restore the body's dispute settlement mechanism.





Global Health Governance

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has laid bare some of the insufficiencies of the current multilateral system. This crisis was unprecedented only in its global reach. Many of the lessons from the 2003 SARS epidemic in East Asia were applied in the countries concerned, but not at a global level. The World Health Organization (WHO) in particular has lost credibility due to its perceived closeness to China. In return for an increase in funding and autonomy, the organization needs to enhance its transparency, accountability, and efficiency.

Health policy is one area where public-private partnerships work directly with developing countries, donor governments, and multilateral organizations. To alleviate concerns over legitimacy and accountability, such multi-stakeholder groups should formalize their initiatives through established UN institutions. Finally, both the UN Security Council and intergovernmental forums like the G7 and G20 should include health in their agendas.



Next to inclusivity, flexibility in institutional arrangements could help revitalize multilateralism, both through regional arrangements and topical groups, including not just government officials but also representatives from business and civil society. Precisely because they feel unable to achieve adequate representation in the existing global bodies, countries from the Global South may want to create their own regional institutions. Flexible forums such as the G7 and G20 could prepare compromises on certain issues, which could then be brought into more equitably organized forums. On climate, for example, the G20 complements the formal discussions at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, while certain green financing schemes work through regional arrangements.

Bringing the private sector and philanthropy as well as civil society into multi-stakeholder arrangements may deliver certain benefits while also raising a number of questions. Multinational corporations and foundations provide funds and expertise, including from work on the ground, that governments often lack. Especially in emerging technologies, the private sector plays a crucial role in standard-setting and norm diffusion, albeit often without proper regulation and oversight. Non-governmental organizations, in turn, often bring the energy and ideals needed to tackle long-festered challenges, both within and across countries. They could use these forums to coordinate their plans, programs, and funding sources. While the multilateral system needs such a global layer of activism, these non-state actors – just like states – need to be held accountable for their activities in the “new multilateralism”.

Embarking on this more flexible course challenges the existing system. Indeed, such dispersed and flexible structures can help make the multilateral system shock-proof and less dependent on the undisrupted support of the big powers, especially if they can draw on an overarching idea of shared values, or at least a common understanding of rules. At the same time, they might weaken the fundamental structure of the multilateral system itself, on which they in turn rely to hold them together. It is therefore apt to consider an entirely new approach to replace the current multilateral one.

Rebooting multilateralism

The case for rebooting multilateralism is a very fundamental one, which addresses the different – and sometimes deeply divergent – perspectives that exist among member states. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, and nations simultaneously diverge from one another in multiple ways, it no longer seems possible to apply a 75-year-old universal model of global governance. A rebooted multilateral system would provide a chance to fully integrate all countries that have gained independence since 1945 based on the ideals codified in various UN documents.

In geopolitical terms, it can be argued that the world is entering a new phase following two centuries of Pax Britannica and Pax Americana. As plurilateral governance gains traction, new institutions are created instead of relying on reforming the old ones. China and Russia, in particular, have

set up their own bodies outside the traditional multilateral structures, whether for security or trade. Therefore, bold innovative designs are needed today, and ideally before a new hegemon emerges to impose its own version.

Seen from the perspective of shaping the future rather than holding on to what already exists, the rethinking of multilateralism could be used to also reconstruct the economic sphere. The liberal-capitalist order to which the global system is currently wedded appears to be failing not just humankind but the planet itself. The various global inequalities which the current system has contributed to can only be addressed in a new setting.

Some suggest that the current system has already begun rebooting from within, and in an unexpected manner. By introducing its data privacy rules on the internet, the EU, for instance, laid down a marker, saying ‘if you want to connect with us, these are the rules of engagement’. And while all important trading partners are adopting these rules to pass through the ‘gate’ to the EU’s single market, they also understand that, to remain sovereign, they have to set terms for their own territories. This ‘gated globalization’ among powerful nodes could gradually – and peacefully – supplant the current one-size-fits-all approach that seems about to break apart.

It is in this context that the idea of forming a new ‘Club of Democracies’ has re-emerged. The argument is that authoritarian and illiberal states are hollowing out the multilateral institutions created by the West, while democracy is in retreat globally (Freedom House speaks of “long-term democratic decline” since 2006). The problem, however, begins with equating “the West” with democracy. Since de-colonization and the third wave of democratization, new democratic and liberal concepts have emerged in parts of the Global South, and some of these societies are reclaiming ancient homegrown ideas (such as pluralism). While these non-Western democracies do not yet form a coherent group of countries or practices, excluding them from a like-minded setting would not only be parochial but would go against the very values of liberalism and pluralism that underpin democracy.

To address transnational threats such as climate change or pandemics, or to prevent the next global financial crisis, democracies and non-democracies need to work together. The current democratic backsliding in the United States and Europe, with governments in Hungary and Poland taking an authoritarian turn, has quickly evolved into a credibility problem. There still exists an inherent argument about why democracies should work more closely together. Multilateral cooperation needs to benefit the people. Such thinking rests on the idea that the current inflection point is not so much about the return to a bipolar (China vs. America) or a multi-polar constellation after 30 years of US unipolarity. Instead, a fundamental shift from nearly four centuries of the state-led Westphalian order to a new citizen-driven order may be underway. From this point of view, governments alone cannot redesign the global system; instead, citizens need to be part of building a new multilateralism.



Global Security Governance

In the field of security, the lack of enforcement mechanisms matters most, as there is currently little to deter the great powers from flouting the rules. Both governments and citizens will lose faith in multilateralism if the system cannot implement its basic statutes such as non-aggression. Beyond enforcing existing rules, new procedures are needed to bring in different actors based on a vertical understanding of multilateralism. Inspired by fields as diverse as climate policy, international law, and internet governance, a multi-stakeholder approach involving civil society and the private sector appears warranted also on security questions.

When it comes to regional security, traditional and inclusive groupings such as the African Union are plagued by the same woes as the UN. New groupings like the China-driven Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization are clearly tools of their masters. The EU, in contrast, has an exemplary role to play by building a security and defense structure that could become a model for the international community.

Outlook

Towards Meaningful Multilateralism

These thought experiments on multilateralism, its purpose, and avenues for meaningful reform have highlighted the importance of values within the international order. And while the rescue and reboot approaches have their respective merits, both depend on the multilateral system being able to enforce its own rules, and on its key institutions working for citizens. The following three steps are crucial to establishing a meaningful multilateralism.

“We have to take an affectionate look at what worked, and perhaps still works, but also a cold, hard look at what doesn’t work.”

Amrita Narlikar

Define the key issues and recommit to underlying values

Since multilateralism is not an end in itself, a first step in helping it fulfil its purpose is to define key issues that the world can unite around. Obviously, climate change and global health, including monitoring to mitigate future pandemic threats, are top on the list. Also, migration and the plight of the more than 80 million global refugees can only be dealt with in a multilateral setting. Matters of this magnitude are an opportunity to show that the liberal order can deliver, making sure that the agenda of the less privileged is duly prioritized. A recommitment to multilateralism’s purpose of pursuing equality, prosperity, security, and peace within a rules-based order will be necessary to protect liberal society and its interests. Diplomatic engagement and economic collaboration should therefore be guided by a set of underlying liberal values. International trade is indispensable, but it needs partners willing to uphold shared rules, for example on emerging technologies, tax control, and data protection.

Look beyond the UN and search for like-mindedness

The UN is the core of the multilateral system, and it urgently needs enforceable rules to prevent misuse by powerful members. Meeting this requirement could help bring about a fundamental reboot of the system. Both rescue and reboot options require looking beyond the state-centered approach of many international organizations for meaningful reform efforts. In various policy fields, only multilateral and multi-stakeholder arrangements can deliver global solutions. Democratic governments, accountable companies, civil society and philanthropy should make use of multilateral institutions, rather than creating a parallel system of governance. Coalitions of like-minded states and organizations should coordinate in variable geometries around core interests, with different moving parts allowing for multiple equilibria and preventing a new bipolar confrontation.

Democracy, free markets, and open societies need to be ring-fenced at various levels and with different partners. Working in overlapping circles was one model considered. In the inner circle, like-minded countries strengthen international norms based on liberal values to create internal cohesion. Such a core group can provide impetus for the reform of multilateral institutions, which form the middle circle with diverse and near-global membership. The outer circle would require new and joint approaches to address current failings in the provision of global public goods. Such an approach could help defend value-based multilateralism both from within and without. The Alliance for Multilateralism, for instance, has begun to take this path. To preserve and revitalize the purpose of the multilateral order, its all-round universal design may have to be reconsidered. Its work could be pursued in value-driven constellations. Otherwise, liberal society risks losing what it stands for, exposed to the harsh geo-economic competition and expansionism of systemic rivals.

Develop a narrative to make a difference

Multilateralism is under threat not just from certain global powers, but also from hostile rhetoric within most countries. To counter this effect and promote multilateralism, compelling narratives are needed. Developing such a supportive and productive narrative means more than just better communication. For multilateralism to work in a meaningful way for the people, tough questions must be asked about the underlying economic and financial systems. Who has benefitted most from globalization? Is it possible to become more socially equitable and environmentally sustainable within a capitalist system? How can the world fight a global kleptocracy entrenched by strong political and economic forces? How can liberal values be protected, and rules upheld in a globalized economy of increasing geopolitical competition? A new narrative can also strengthen the accountability of multilateral institutions vis-à-vis the global public that demands to see benefits from the system.

Crafting a narrative does not mean trading in platitudes, nor painting over the cracks in the current system. It can only work in the long term if it is backed up by the effective and meaningful operation of the system it defines. In that sense, it is part and parcel of the serious redesign – whether as rescue or reboot – of the multilateral system.

“We should never forget the importance of making our own public an ally when it comes to strengthening multilateralism. If there is a sense in our own public that multilateralism is just an elitist pet project then we really do have a problem.”

Nora Müller



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