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# INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

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# Multilateralism

Is the International Order  
Hanging by a Thread?



# INTERNATIONAL REPORTS

3 | 2020

## Editorial

Dear Readers,

75 years ago, the Charter of the United Nations was signed in San Francisco. It laid the foundation for a new international order based on the ideal of institutionalised cooperation. Cooperation instead of confrontation – that was the lesson learnt from the catastrophes of two world wars. How is international cooperation doing today? Is there any truth in all the gloom, all the voices bemoaning the end of the multilateral world order? Why is it important, despite all difficulties and weaknesses, to continue to defend this policy model?

Security, trade, health, migration, and climate change – all these challenges are global by nature, and solo efforts on the part of individual nations have no place here. Instead, it requires international associations, forums for dialogue, and locations to establish and enforce common rules, as Peter Fischer-Bollin explains. The global order is currently undergoing a far-reaching shift, which puts pressure on rules-based multilateralism. Laura Philipps and Daniela Braun point to three primary trends: growing competition between the great powers, increasing deglobalisation, and new, informal ways of international cooperation.

Tried and tested forums continue to be important in this environment. The 75-year anniversary of the United Nations provides an occasion to reflect on structural deficits and potential approaches to reform. Increasing confrontation between the US and China is one of many factors leading to a “paralysis of UN diplomacy”, as Andrea Ostheimer writes. Another multinational alliance presents mixed results, too. At the moment, NATO needs to overcome a number of elementary challenges. One of these is that the alliance’s fundamental principles are being increasingly called into question, as Philipp Dienstbier explains. That is why Europeans need to play a more active role and increase their own defence spending.

In addition to Western and European forms of multilateralism, there are regional associations. However, the value placed on the principle of multilateral cooperation varies widely. In the Middle East and North Africa, multilateralism has not yet been able to establish itself as a defining model of order, as Michael Bauer and Edmund Ratka relate. Yet, the potential for sub-regional cooperation is definitely present especially in such areas as economy and energy. In Latin America, on the other hand, multilateral cooperation has a long tradition. The importance attached to it varies from

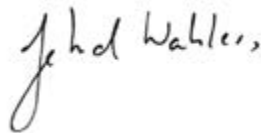
country to country. Domestic economies and individual interests often result in Latin American alliances being fragile and short-lived, as Winfried Weck and Teresa Marten argue. In Asia, on the other hand, ASEAN represents a successful association at the regional level. Nevertheless, China's growing influence is becoming a threat to it, as demonstrated by Daniel Schmücking and Christian Echle.

It is clear that authoritarian regimes have long since learnt how to use multilateral organisations to assert their own interests. The platforms have thus become arenas of system competition, as Olaf Wientzek and Sebastian Enskat describe. In order to combat the disintegration of multilateral forums, the West and, especially, the EU must make attractive offers with respect to security policy and economic cooperation. Different ambitions and ideas of political order are increasingly coming to a head on the internet. Growing restrictions on the digital space imposed by authoritarian states demand support for global efforts to safeguard the original open character of the internet while counteracting the restriction of basic rights, Christina Bellmann writes.

There is no doubt that the challenges facing the multilateral order are great. Yet, there is no reason to write it off. Especially against the background of authoritarian efforts, rules-based order has to be defended self-confidently: preserving world peace and international security, promoting equality among peoples, protecting human rights, and encouraging international cooperation. The ideas that led to the founding of the UN 75 years ago are by no means outdated.

I wish you a stimulating read.

Yours,

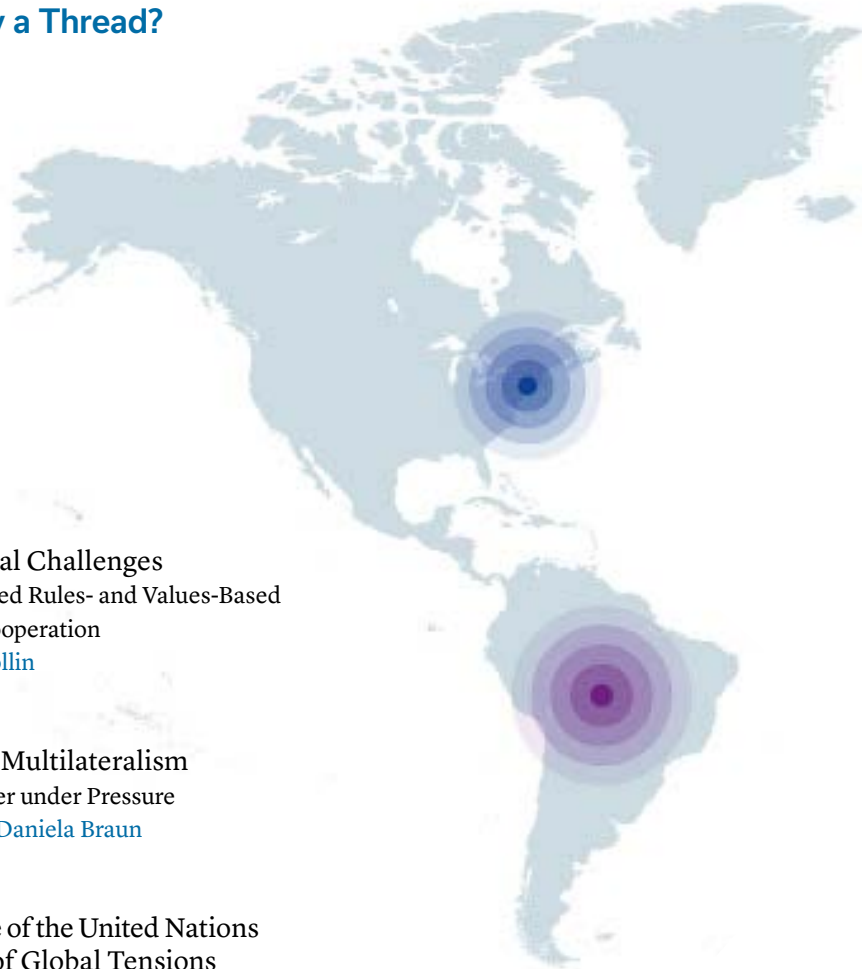
A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerhard Wahlers". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial 'G'.

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# Multilateralism

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[Multilateralism](#)

# Tackling Global Challenges

Why We Still Need Rules- and Values-Based International Cooperation

Peter Fischer-Bollin



We still need international cooperation because global challenges and problems cannot be solved nationally or regionally. Admittedly, issues such as security, finance architecture, free trade, health, and migration must be worked out at the local and national levels, and in the case of climate change also largely implemented at such levels. Nevertheless, comprehensive solutions can be reached only through international cooperation that produces generally accepted processes, e.g. to preserve – or, where necessary, to promote – peace and security.

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First came the 2008 financial crisis, which brought our financial system to the brink of collapse. Only concerted efforts and billions of euros in taxpayer money could stabilise the banks. Then, in 2015, wars and conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa caused massive waves of refugees. Our borders and willingness to accept newcomers were submitted to a challenging stress test. Representative democracy with centre-based political parties is still under severe pressure in Europe. At the same time, the threat to global trade and the World Trade Organization (WTO) grew as a result of protectionist measures on the part of important member states, primarily the US and China. This endangers German prosperity, which is based on exports and trade. And finally, it is becoming increasingly clear that climate change is resulting in drought and storms in Germany and Europe. Despite extensive catalogues of measures, neither Germany nor the EU is on track to meet the climate goals to which they have committed. And now the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 (and possibly succeeding years) can be added to this list of existing challenges.

What do all these issues have in common? They represent problems that threaten our model of society with its liberty, security, and prosperity – now and in the future. Neither Germany nor the European Union can solve any of these problems alone. We need international cooperation with other states. Only a community of states will be able to develop and implement sustainable solutions on the basis of voluntarily accepted rules.

At the same time, it is obvious that more and more political forces and heads of governments all over the world are announcing national solo efforts, with the people often cheering them on. Donald Trump's "America First" policy bears this claim in its very name, but Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has also announced that he would disengage his country from international cooperation during the coronavirus crisis, and has previously announced that his goal with respect to protecting nature and the climate was to defend national sovereignty or, as the slogan during the British Brexit campaign put it, "to take back control". These countries are only interested in joint rules when such rules are to their advantage. In Germany and the EU, parties that offer simple solutions are also enjoying success. They give the impression that they could solve problems alone (in the case of migration, the financial crisis, and trade) or simply ignore them (in the case of climate change or, now, COVID-19).

This is the backdrop against which politicians, the media, and think tanks have recently been discussing the state of multilateralism. However, a 2019 opinion poll by the Körber Foundation showed that two thirds of respondents in Germany did not know what the term "multilateralism" means. We use the term to refer to a form of international cooperation in which states participate voluntarily on the basis of agreements that create rights and responsibilities for all countries involved. Such international cooperation was supported by 57 per cent of the respondents to the Körber Foundation's poll.

## The Right Political Level for Each Problem

Global international cooperation is still needed because many of the challenges and problems we face cannot be solved at the national or regional levels. Issues such as security, finance architecture, free trade, health, and migration must be shaped at the local and national levels, and in the case of climate change also largely implemented at such levels. However, comprehensive solutions can be reached only through international cooperation that produces generally accepted processes, e.g. to preserve – or, where necessary, to promote – peace and security. Fora such as the UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the WTO, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) were founded by states with this goal in mind, some of them decades ago; the 2015 Paris Agreement was also achieved in this manner.

Containing the conflicts in the Middle East, such as those in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya requires influencing the parties involved in the conflict (whose identities are not always entirely clear) as well as cooperating with other states, some of whom have great influence on the conflict (such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Turkey). The US and Israel also have direct influence over the entire region, while China has remained in the background. The only binding forum currently available is the United Nations, which was founded in 1945. This framework allows sustainable solutions for peace and security to be reached – many with direct effects on those of us in Germany. Achieving such solutions is no easy task given the self-interest of important players such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the US. This difficulty is, however, not due to the United Nations, which relies on voluntary participation, and depends on the political will of its member states. Another complicating factor is the veto power which blocks binding Security Council decisions, and which can be exercised by any of the permanent members (the US, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France); indeed, Russia has put this power to use frequently in the case of the

Middle East. Germany can campaign for sustainable solutions for peace and security within the framework of the UN (and in 2019/20, as part of the Security Council), as well as that of the EU, and NATO. By assuming more responsibility and formulating its own interests more clearly, Germany can lend its voice greater weight. Ultimately, Germany needs these multilateral formats to make progress towards its own interests, and that of those affected by the conflicts.

## Germany needs multilateral formats to make progress in the interest of those affected by conflicts.

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The same is true of climate change: Countries and communities must take action to adapt to the changing climate (drought in summer, storms throughout the year, etc.). The German federal government and the EU can support and coordinate these efforts. The major measures for the urgently needed reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and economic adaptation can be decided only at the multinational level. The 2015 Paris Agreement, for instance, laid down national action plans for reducing emissions, preventing and minimising damage, and, as necessary, providing compensation for damage. From a German perspective, an important reason for the agreement was to avoid disadvantages to the German economy in European and global competition, but it was primarily to achieve reduction of greenhouse gases worldwide. For this reason, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals have been agreed within the framework of the UN. As Agenda 2030, these commit all member nations to pursue sustainable policies. Thus, essential principles of an economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable social market economy have been recognised by the community of nations.



National solo efforts: Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has announced that he would disengage his country from international cooperation during the coronavirus crisis. [Source: © Adriano Machado, Reuters.](#)

### **International Cooperation in Our Own Interest – Multilateralism is not an End in Itself**

For such necessary international cooperation, organization such as the UN and the WTO are central fora for dialogue on the various interests of the member states. They are also venues where common rules can be agreed upon and enforced. Their purpose is to contribute to the provision of global public goods, such as: peace and security, a clean, intact environment, and the protection of cultural heritage. Dialogue on these issues can promote a “global common interest”. The danger is in the various understandings of such terms. That is why the principle of subsidiarity, i.e. the allocation of problems to the proper level of responsibility – from the individual to the family to the community to the nation state – is the most effective

guarantee of efficiency and protection against undesirable developments. A world government that controls everything would not allow such allocation.

Multilateral cooperation is thus not a goal in itself but serves to solve specific problems that cannot otherwise be solved. Mandate, objectives, and implementation must be adapted to current developments (such as digitalisation, or the growing importance of artificial intelligence). Its tasks should be tailored precisely to these problems, and its organization should be subject to constant critical scrutiny. If these conditions are met, the utility of such cooperation can be made clear to citizens. This is especially critical if cooperation is to gain legitimacy with member states and their citizens, which is a prerequisite for its functionality.

At the same time, multilateral organization depend on the political will of their members, which can be observed particularly well these days at the WTO and the WHO with the dispute between the US and China, although this is far from being a new phenomenon. It is on the political will of the members, that is to say the states, that the ability to function and make decisions depends, but also the political goals of such multinational cooperation efforts. Our standards here are values such as liberty, democracy, human rights, and social development. We should use these principles to determine whether international cooperation is worth striving for and supporting.

### **An indispensable condition for international cooperation is a willingness to compromise.**

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Cooperation on the part of states in the interest of creating joint rules has been pursued since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (examples include the German Customs Union in 1834, the General Postal Union in 1874, and the League of Nations in 1919). When states join together to address certain questions in ways that violate our system of values, as the European powers did in dividing up Africa among themselves at the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, the result is certainly multilateral, but would be condemned from a modern point of view. Even today, multilateral cooperation in associations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), led by the authoritarian governments of China and Russia – despite India’s accession in 2017 – is viewed differently than cooperation within NATO, which pursues clearly democratic values and goals, even though the current policy of Turkey, a NATO member, raises questions in this respect.

Each nation’s own values and interests are the standard against which they must measure international cooperation. However, it is equally true that an indispensable condition for international cooperation is a willingness to

compromise – because interests vary from state to state, as well as from individual to individual. Although all people and states want to live in peace and security, the variety of interests nevertheless leads time and again to armed conflict and war. Although the vast majority of states have an interest in curbing climate change, such change threatens each country differently, and each has varying means for combatting it, and different responsibilities for the effects of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. For instance, coastal states are more threatened by rising sea levels, and states with agricultural areas are more threatened by drought than land-locked states in temperate climates. Industrialised states have more resources and potential for reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than developing countries do but are more concerned with losing the level of development they have already achieved. Similarly, although the coronavirus is the same everywhere, different governments have implemented different measures. This has now even become a topic of geopolitical disputes.

Thus, no nation should expect to merely impose its own positions in international fora and negotiations. Compromise in democratically organised fora, such as the UN (discounting the Security Council with its veto power for five countries) must be discussed, negotiated, and agreed upon. More majority decisions would be ideal so that clearer decisions could be reached faster. However, it is already becoming apparent in the EU that these decisions can quickly lose legitimacy with politicians and societies, reducing their effectiveness and binding nature, e.g. the distribution of asylum seekers, Dublin Regulation. More leeway could be achieved here by developing trust and reliability. But this would be conditioned upon international cooperation – with its unavoidable compromises – being in the interest of the countries involved in order to achieve a basic public consensus in each country, which is especially important in democratic countries. To this end, deficient structures and procedures of international cooperation, such as veto rights, insufficiently transparent election systems in committees, and insufficient sanction mechanisms for violations must be

addressed openly, and work done to remedy them. An uncritical glorification of multilateral organizations does not serve to improve their legitimacy, and thus harms the cause of solving global problems cooperatively.

Here, the Alliance for Multilateralism that Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas is calling for, primarily with France, is well-intentioned, but grouping friends that otherwise have very different interests cannot replace the hard work of necessary reforms that can be effective and achieve majorities. We need partners and friends, but our primary concern should be identifying common interests if we are to implement reforms effectively.

Influence also involves filling important positions with compatriots who embrace basic German and European attitudes. Especially when contrasted with major powers such as the US and China, but even within Europe, Germany has so far been rather reluctant to use its weight in this regard.

### **On the Basis of Democratic Values**

Democratic (liberal) values, such as the fundamental equality of rank among members, decisions by majority vote, and the rule of law are guiding principles of international cooperation in multilateral organisations such as the UN. There, the essential basic and human rights, and their universal applicability (since 1948) are anchored and accepted by all member states. While this does not result in the unrestricted application of human rights in all countries, it does provide indispensable backing and a basic foundation, especially for individuals and groups who campaign for democracy and the rule of law. The UN Human Rights Council has, however, been repeatedly misused by such members as China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, and Venezuela to promote other values with respect to universal human rights. There is a danger of this happening in other multilateral systems. Such instruments of multilateral cooperation must not be left to the opponents of democracy. If control is to remain in the

hands of democratic countries, close cooperation between them in the UN and within other institutions is extremely important. Germany has increased its efforts to cooperate with countries such as Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and several countries in Latin America and Africa. Yet, even within this group, it is clear that interests do not coincide in all issues. This makes cooperation in fundamental issues of democracy and liberty, which directly affect our prosperity through free trade, the rule of law, and internet governance, all the more important.

### **Scientific Advice for Political Decisions**

The expertise of the scientific and research establishment forms an important foundation for political decision-making. It should continue to be consulted, perhaps even more intensively, through such organisations as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was agreed upon among member states and the UN, and involves scientists, experts, and government representatives for the compilation of all information relevant to climate change. This has given it a high level of recognition and influence over policy, not least because its data has been used in civil society. Scientific advice is extremely important for political decisions but cannot replace them. This is eminently apparent in efforts to manage the COVID-19 crisis, in which scientists have been given a prominent role in many countries. Ideally, political decision-makers must use democratic processes to take into account, balance and integrate the various interests and viewpoints of those within the societies for which they are responsible.

Rendering individual interests or opinions absolute leads to dictatorship, and such an approach must be rejected by champions of democracy. This remains true when the opinions in question are held by many but fail to achieve sufficient majorities in the democratic process. This can be observed in climate issues and groups such as Extinction Rebellion, which have claimed something like emergency powers: they claim that to save the world from destruction, even acts of violence can be justified. To ensure democratic

participation beyond governments, fora that involve parliamentarians and representatives of civil society are to be welcomed. International courts also help to ensure that legitimate interests are heard and upheld.

### **Christian Democracy, International Cooperation, and Multilateralism**

The principle of subsidiarity and distrust of large, centralised bureaucracies characterises Christian democracy, which has therefore traditionally tended to be reserved in the advocacy of multilateral organisations. At the same time, the last few years have shown how global or at least continental challenges are increasingly determining the societal and political reality of Germany and the EU, making international cooperation urgently necessary. It can be assumed that this development will fundamentally continue even after the COVID-19 pandemic, which itself is an example of such a challenge. Thus, Christian democracy – the most important political force in Germany and a relevant force in the EU – must more actively confront the idea of international and multilateral cooperation as an indispensable instrument for managing current and future global challenges and continue to expand its profile in this respect.

### **The increasingly self-confident assertiveness of autocratic countries in international fora makes greater involvement on the part of Germany crucial.**

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It is precisely the Christian democratic perspective, with its concern for the interests of smaller states, that highlights the necessity of rules-based international cooperation. A world order in which democratic values, security, prosperity, and sustainability depend on the ideas of one powerful state, or of a handful of them, harbours many risks and disadvantages, including for Germany. While it may be academically

appealing to consider the advantages a multipolar world order has over a unipolar one, the question of which values inform said world order is more important. Whether such values are those focussed on liberty and openness that the West under the leadership of the US has so far embraced, or authoritarian and nationalist ones represented by such countries as China and Russia – is much more important for the Germany of the Basic Law and the social market economy.

These values must therefore be defended daily in flexible alliances. The increasingly self-confident assertiveness of autocratic countries in international fora, and the retreat of the US, their long-standing guarantor, makes greater involvement on the part of Germany and the EU critical for the future global order from the Christian democratic point of view. A retreat from international fora (as the US is practicing in isolated cases, and threatened to do as regards the WHO, and finally did on 7 July 2020) results only in a strengthening of players such as China and Russia and others, who desire to reframe such organisations' original guiding principles – originally inspired by Western values – to suit their own ends. A passive position will ultimately mean that international rules will, regardless, be established – it will simply happen without our input. The power to define and interpret the formulation of global standards is vital not only in the area of human rights, but also with respect to global rules for data, digital and physical infrastructure, and technical standards. Assuming a passive position in these areas would be disastrous for German competitiveness and, thus, for the prosperity of this and future generations.

Consider the examples of the World Bank and the IMF, in which the US and Europe hesitated for too long to make reforms for greater consideration for rising powers, especially China. It should be no surprise that China not only founded its own development bank for Asia (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, AIIB), but also another with the BRICS countries, the New Development Bank (NDB). It is certainly good that Germany and other European



countries are active in the AIIB, but reforming established institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF in order to give such countries as China, India, and Brazil more say would strengthen rule-based international cooperation more than new parallel structures do.

### What Should Christian Democracy Do?

The following ideas from this article are summarised for application to the debate that will be necessary in the coming months.

Seven Theses for Christian Democratic Policy as it applies to International Cooperation:

1. Each democratic society will need to convince the majority of its public of the necessity of international cooperation. That is why arguments must be made to persuade these societies of the benefits of such cooperation and of the unavoidable compromises its mechanisms demand. The debate about international cooperation must urgently be broadened within political parties.



Places for compromises: No nation should expect to merely impose its own positions in international fora and negotiations. Source: © Yves Herman, Reuters.

2. Effective international cooperation involves taking small countries and their importance into account in such issues as trade, where Germany is a relatively “big” player. In other areas, where Germany is a relatively “small” player, it can assert its influence only through the EU (an association of many states that are, by themselves, fairly small).
3. In the EU, German and EU Christian democrats should model the principles of international cooperation to achieve joint EU positions that will serve to assert German and EU interests and values. Christian democrats should remind one another that joint decisions can be correct, even if they do not completely match the desires of individual countries involved in making those decisions.
4. In deliberations and in public, they should resist the temptation of blaming unpopular decisions on the EU, or upon multilateral organisations such as the UN, when these decisions were made jointly by individual states.
5. Germany and Europe should assume more responsibility during international crises and in international organisations in order to increase their own influence and options for influencing organisations and decisions. This involves setting a forward-looking German and European personnel policy.
6. Necessary reforms should be identified, especially with respect to enhancing the effectiveness of multilateral organisations, and Germany and Europe should invest their own influence and resources to advance these reforms. Influence and resources should be directed towards realistic goals; after twenty years of fruitless efforts, permanent German membership of the UN Security Council does not appear to be one of them.
7. Tasks should be reviewed regularly to ensure that they are being addressed at the right level (Germany, Europe, the global level). There must be a political discussion to define which global public goods should be provided through multilateral efforts. Where disparities between political mandates and actual implementation are discovered, appropriate reforms should be sought, and influential partners won over.

The hope is that the Christian Democratic Union will pay close attention to these issues and challenges in the coming phase of refining the party programme, choosing new leadership, and positioning itself politically for the 2021 German federal elections.

*—translated from German—*

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Multilateralism

# The Future of Multilateralism

The Liberal Order under Pressure

Laura Philipps / Daniela Braun

The multilateral world order is in deep crisis; indeed, some believe it has reached its end. This belief is based on a number of changes in the political West and power shifts in the international system. What does this mean for the future of multilateralism as we know it? This article addresses this question by examining three trends for future multilateral cooperation.

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### **The Crisis of Multilateralism Is on Everyone's Lips**

Are we witnessing the end of the multilateral system? There is growing concern about the fate of this historically reliable system, which was built after the Second World War under US leadership. As a globally connected middle power, Germany has been a major beneficiary of this system. For some years, the erosion of international treaties and regulations – and hence of cooperation at the global level – has been accelerating. The Trump administration has pulled the US out of numerous international agreements, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the Paris Climate Agreement. In tandem, China is expanding its global influence – also with regard to multilateral institutions. Breaches of international law, especially by Moscow and Beijing, are on the rise, along with increased protectionism and isolationism.

Provisional conclusions about multilateralism are equally sobering in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was nation states, not international organisations, that were the key players in managing the crisis during the critical days of the pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) failed, the UN Security Council was silent, and the EU's member states let each other down.<sup>1</sup> It is true that the EU and multilateral institutions have now, at least to some extent, regained their agency, but when the pandemic first arrived in Europe the member states responded by closing their borders and halting exports, and it took long before the UN Security Council made any significant statement about

“the worst crisis since World War II”. It was in July 2020 when the Security Council managed to pass a resolution after a tough battle. What remains of multilateralism if a transnational problem of global proportions, that cannot be tackled in isolation, actually pushes countries apart rather than bringing them together?

Nevertheless, it is premature to announce the end of the multilateral world order. What is obvious, however, is that the international order is in the throes of a profound change that is putting significant pressure on rules-based multilateralism. The COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented impact on the international community both reinforces and accelerates this change.

### **Why Is Multilateralism in Crisis?**

Firstly, the crisis of multilateralism is due to changes in the international system, a new multipolarity, and global power shifts. New centres of power are emerging alongside the political West. They are claiming the right to have a stronger regional or even global influence. The most prominent example of this is China with its efforts to be a global leader that plays by its own rules.<sup>2</sup> To some extent, this is a reaction to the multilateral order and its institutions, which have always been Western in character. We are experiencing a clash between liberal democratic and autocratic positions – with regard to political, social and economic models. Views also differ on the design of the international order. Our familiar view of the world is changing drastically as the United States gradually withdraws from its leadership role on political, economic and moral

issues. Meanwhile, China is trying to fill the vacuum left by the US. The People's Republic is also working doggedly to establish and expand a Chinese form of multilateralism based on its own principles and institutions.

The crisis of multilateralism is also due to the rise of illiberal forces that are hostile towards multilateralism, and the rise of anti-globalisation sentiments. Previous crises – such as the global financial crisis of 2008/09, leading on to the European debt crisis and the introduction of painful austerity programmes – fuelled the flames of anti-globalisation movements and nationalism. These challenges had barely been overcome when the refugee crisis came along in 2015, sparking the subsequent debate about asylum and migration. On top of this comes the realisation that globalisation has produced many losers – also in the West. Whether vague or clearly articulated, anti-globalisation sentiments are growing. As a symbol of globalisation, multilateralism is thus an easy target.

### **A Definition of Multilateralism**

It's unusual to hear a speech on German foreign policy that doesn't include the word "multilateralism". Despite this, there is a great deal of ignorance and different ideas about what it means.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, it can be defined as a form of international cooperation that involves coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states. This is the definition provided by Robert O. Keohane in 1990. In 1993, the scholar in political science John Ruggie described another element of multilateral cooperation when defining that it is based on certain rules and recognised principles.<sup>4</sup> For many years these rules went largely unchallenged. These Western, liberal rules were enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations and related to the establishment and protection of liberal democracies, free trade and the supremacy of the law. The network of norms, principles and institutions that has been enforced almost worldwide since 1990 is what we call the multilateral, liberal order.

Thus, when we speak of multilateralism, we are not merely talking about cooperation between several states, but also about the fact that this cooperation is based on common rules and norms, and is directed towards a particular goal, such as the establishment or maintenance of peace and security, or environmental protection. Multilateral cooperation may be institutionalised – as in the UN system – but it can also be more informal.

### **The Importance of the Multilateral Order for German Foreign Policy**

In addition to the pressure on liberal norms and principles, multilateral cooperation *per se* and the institutions at the heart of this order are increasingly being questioned. The reason for this is the declining ability of various multilateral formats to act, particularly the UN Security Council, and the undermining or infiltration of international institutions by authoritarian states. For example, in Brussels in 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated: "Multilateralism has become viewed as an end unto itself. [...] International bodies must help facilitate cooperation that bolsters the security and values of the free world, or they must be reformed or eliminated."<sup>5</sup>

**Multilateral institutions have to be judged by their results. We need to reflect on how to make multilateralism more effective.**

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Firstly, it is important to have realistic expectations of multilateral processes – after all, the nature of cooperation between several states always involves compromising on differing – often conflicting – interests and extremely complex problems. However, this does not detract from the fact that multilateral institutions have to be judged by their results, and we need to reflect on how to make multilateralism more effective. Potential reforms to international

organisations and cooperation should be based on studies that identify areas and processes where reform is needed to increase their agency. For example, reports and results provided by the Multilateral Organisations Performance Assessment Network (MOPAN) can be used to evaluate the performance of multilateral institutions. Coalitions and alliances with a common goal, which are within the United Nations system, such as the Alliance for Multilateralism, may also provide fresh impetus in this respect. If no progress is being made within the UN system, it should also not be taboo to occasionally remove issues from the UN framework and deal with them under strict conditions in multilateral coalitions. This particularly applies to important but contentious issues, such as those relating to entrenched conflicts, or the environment and climate change. It is in Germany's national interest to uphold and strengthen the liberal, multilateral order – including by means of reforms. More than most other countries, Germany as a globally connected middle power has adapted to this order and reaped the benefits of an international security system, free trade, and access to markets as prescribed by liberal rules and norms, that are implemented and guaranteed by institutions such as NATO, the EU, the UN, and the WTO. Our way of life is based on this order: our liberal democracy; our prosperity as an export-oriented nation; and the functioning of our foreign policy with its cornerstones of transatlantic security guarantees, European integration and the United Nations system.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Germany's history means it has a special responsibility for the international order that was established after 1945.

### **Three Trends for the Future of Multilateralism**

What will multilateralism and international cooperation look like in future? Which forms of cooperation will prevail? Who will determine the rules of global cooperation? This article looks at three trends that are already influencing the international system and considers how they will change multilateralism over the next five years.



## **1. Growing Rivalry between Major Powers and Competitive Multilateralism**

The strategic rivalry between China and the US has been a key paradigm of the international order for many years. Few areas remain untouched, as it impacts trade, security and multilateral cooperation, along with many conflict situations and world regions.<sup>7</sup> For example, in 2017 the USA's security strategy reports said the key challenge was the strategic rivalry with China, replacing the fight against international terrorism.



Mood of crisis? The multilateral order is under pressure. Source: © Leah Millis, Reuters.

This rivalry also plays out in multilateral fora and in some cases brings international cooperation to a standstill. The most recent example of this was the impasse in the UN Security Council on the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a binding resolution being deadlocked for several months.<sup>8</sup> The US withdrawal from the allegedly China-centric WHO is another example of how multilateral institutions are being weakened by rivalries between the great powers.

While the US under the Trump administration is withdrawing from certain multilateral

institutions and agreements in favour of bilateral deal-making, Beijing is taking every opportunity to present itself as a committed multilateralist.<sup>9</sup> The US' waning commitment to multilateralism, coupled with a loss of effectiveness in multilateral fora, has enabled China to expand its influence in order to push its own agenda in the long term. China is asserting its interests through an ambitious, comprehensive, regional and global foreign policy strategy. By 2050, China aims to be a global power that leads and shapes international politics.<sup>10</sup> Beijing has been expanding its influence in international

organisations for many years, particularly within the UN system: from the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

There is no denying that China's desire for leadership is justified in terms of its socio-economic weight. However, the People's Republic is trying to bring its own ideas into these organisations,

some of which run counter to liberal norms and, therefore, undermine the organisations' work. An example of this is the UN Human Rights Council. Although China recognises that human rights are universal, it does not respect individual freedoms – but rather that they are subordinate to the greater good on the basis of economic development and participation. As a result, Beijing refuses to accept the universal auditing standard and views country-specific monitoring as a violation of its sovereignty. When it comes



On its way to global leadership: China is taking every opportunity to present itself as a committed multilateralist, but favours uni- or bilateral deal-making in its foreign policy. Source: © David Gray, Reuters.

to protecting ethnic minorities and the persecution of political dissidents, a major gap in China's understanding of these norms, compared to the West, reveals itself.

## Beijing exploits the COVID-19 crisis in the service of its own strategic power games.

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Alongside its efforts to expand its influence in existing institutions, Beijing is also pursuing competitive multilateralism and establishing its own, parallel institutions. These consist of competing organisations or informal alliances and fora that challenge or undermine the Western-dominated institutions and their order. A shining example of this is the Asian Development and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB), which was set up to play a key role in multilateral development cooperation. 18 EU member states have joined the AIIB since 2014. This has boosted the organisation's international credibility and given Beijing greater confidence to establish rival institutions. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), co-financed by the AIIB, is an illustration of China's desire to build a rival political and economic order worldwide. The BRI aims to consolidate China's influence through economic investment in infrastructure projects – initially through bilateral routes – in order to create economic dependence and advance Beijing's policy of connectivity. The initiative is constantly expanding its geographical scope – from the EU to Latin America and the Arctic. Security considerations are part of this vision, underlining the fact that the BRI serves as a strategic instrument of foreign policy. Beijing's multilateral ambitions benefit from these bilateral agreements, as the AIIB is involved in financing some of these projects, partly with Western capital. Other institutions that reflect this desire to restructure and appropriate the multilateral system include the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (1996), the Boao Forum for Asia (2001), and informal platforms for dialogue such as the 16+1 format involving the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

## *No End in Sight!*

Western-style multilateralism is increasingly being called into question. At a time of systemic competition, it is inevitable that the multilateral order will change. The tensions between major powers will result in deadlocks and diminish multilateral cooperation. This means that international institutions can only deliver weak results, or none at all, and their significance will thus decline. In view of the rise of China and the continuation of its expansionist policies, it is likely the rivalry between Beijing and Washington will only increase. Beijing continues to take aggressive action in the South China Sea and has also passed a controversial “security law” for Hong Kong that severely restricts the autonomy of this special administrative region.

The US' scepticism towards China is based on a broad non-partisan consensus. Looking ahead to the upcoming presidential elections, it can be assumed that a new administration will continue on the current course.

However, strategic rivalries between the US and China alone are not causing multilateral institutions to lose significance. They are also being weakened by the two nations' policies towards these institutions. While a different US administration would probably restore the country's desire to take the lead on global problems and return to multilateral cooperation, four years of President Trump cannot simply be erased. Moreover, even before Trump came to power, the United States had already made it clear that it wanted to bear less of the political and financial burden of guaranteeing the multilateral order. It seems unlikely that this will change in light of the disastrous domestic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For the EU, the challenge of continuing to assert itself as an active player amidst these geopolitical tensions is immense, but this is essential if it does not want to be a mere football for other powers to kick around. The values- and rules-based order stands in contrast to the autocratic model, whose basic principles differ greatly

from the liberal understanding of democracy, protection of human rights and the rule of law. Despite this, it is important to continue integrating China into a rules-based world order. Indeed, the pandemic and its effects have highlighted the impact that China's opaque and authoritarian system can have on the international community. Beijing's initial handling of the pandemic and its subsequent narrative show how the government is exploiting the crisis at the global level in the service of its own strategic power games and how – as so often happens – it likes to exert economic pressure on its critics. When the Australian government requested an investigation on China's handling of the outbreak, China responded with higher import tariffs. The global consequences since the beginning of the pandemic make it essential for the international community to demand greater transparency from China.

**A sense of disillusionment with established parties, the EU, and international institutions in general has fuelled the rise of populist parties.**

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**2. Deglobalisation and Renationalisation: What Are Their Implications for Multilateralism?**

Another growing threat to multilateralism is the rise/return of authoritarian, nationalist and populist politicians and parties and their attitude towards globalisation. The pressure on governments and supply chains caused by the coronavirus pandemic has exposed enormous weaknesses in global connectivity and in the internationally networked economic model. For decades, globalisation has helped to boost trade and growth in the world economy and significantly reduced poverty all over the world. Yet at the same time it has led many countries to experience even greater inequality. People's expectations of politicians



and governments have often grown faster than the ability of the latter to respond. A sense of disillusionment with established parties, the EU, and international institutions in general has fuelled the rise of populist parties.

However, deglobalisation and renationalisation are phenomena that are not restricted to the incumbent US president. Similar unilateral





Globalisation under criticism: The current health crisis could also serve to drive inversion and the partial relocation of economic production. Source: © Toby Melville, Reuters.

and populist tendencies are also embodied by Brazil's President Bolsonaro (e.g. Brazil's withdrawal from the UN migration pact) or – with a dual approach – Turkey's President Erdoğan, who is pursuing a strategy of cherry-picking, particularly with regard to the EU. He wants financial incentives for sharing the burden of taking in Syrian refugees and upgrading

the customs union, yet he rejects the EU's demands for greater democracy and freedom in Turkey.

Many EU member states have seen the rise of populist parties over the years (such as the Front National in France, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany and the Party for Freedom in the

Netherlands). The crises that have beset Europe since 2008 have helped them to build their support. This growing rejection of the European idea, the rule of law and the democratic principles that form the basis of the European project can be seen in the attacks on the justice system in Poland and in Hungary's gagging of civil society and the press.

In democracies, the current health crisis could also serve to drive inversion and the partial relocalisation of economic production. The deglobalisation of the manufacture of medical goods, which has been purely rhetorical in nature to this point, could now actually happen and extend to other areas that governments view as part of their country's critical infrastructure. This trend has already been observed in the battle for 5G market shares and the question to what extent European countries are allowing China access to their critical infrastructure. Governments may seek to anticipate and thus avoid the impact of distant production sites and supply chain disruptions in times of crisis. These approaches are illustrated by France and Germany's announcements that they will be repatriating the production of masks and ventilators within the next year. Globally active companies are also considering how they can protect their operations against the threat of sanctions, border closures and the loss of distant suppliers.

#### *Outlook: The Potential Damage of Deglobalisation*

This kind of deglobalisation or partial repatriation would primarily lead to frustration in the manufacturing countries that have been the "winners" of globalisation (such as China and India). In the short-to-medium term, repatriation will apply to the production of goods deemed critical during the pandemic. As an integrated trading area, the EU will not turn its back on global trade, but it is likely to make a critical assessment of global trade and supply chains and proceed with greater circumspection. However, no one in Europe will allow the collapse of a global system that is also greatly beneficial to Germany and the EU; there would be too much concern about the loss of economic

power. In view of the current fragility of global relations, both a trade war and increased security tensions between the US and China would place a considerable burden on the international community.

### **3. New Forms of International Cooperation**

For many years, we have been observing the emergence of new types of international cooperation alongside the established forms of institutionalised multilateralism. These include temporary partnerships, informal cooperation and coordination mechanisms, such as the G7 and G20 (also known as club governance), as well as alliances geared towards a common goal, such as the Alliance for Multilateralism. The importance of non-state actors such as private foundations, businesses, non-governmental organisations, the media, and transnational networks in international politics is also increasing. Additionally, cities or sub-state entities such as some US states, are also intervening in areas of international politics such as climate change.

**When tackling global challenges, the need to involve all stakeholders has become widely accepted.**

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The best-known forms of club governance are the G7 and G20, which consist of the world's most powerful and economically advanced countries and are based on intergovernmental coordination in specific policy areas. Other loose alliances are the BRICS states and a potential middle power coalition consisting of countries such as Japan, Australia, and India, which are keen to band together to counter China's increasing power in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>11</sup> Another example of new forms of international cooperation is the Alliance for Multilateralism, a loose network launched by Germany and France in 2019, to which Canada, Japan and Mexico, for instance, have now joined. The aim is to

strengthen and maintain multilateralism and international organisations. Although the idea of such an initiative is laudable, the Alliance's working methods remain rather unclear. Apart from making progress on controlling autonomous weapons systems, it has yet to produce tangible results.

Non-state actors have been gaining influence over the years and are increasingly involved in international cooperation. In the health sector, examples include the influential Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Wellcome Trust in the UK, and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), an alliance of governments and private stakeholders that supports the development of vaccines and works to prevent and contain future epidemics. When tackling global challenges, the need to involve all stakeholders has become widely accepted. Many institutions have responded with appropriate formats for cooperation. In the UN Security Council, non-state actors are consulted and involved via the informal Arria formula.

#### *New Forms of Cooperation as an Opportunity for Multilateralism*

It is likely that informal vectors of international cooperation – in contrast or in addition to formal international institutions – will continue to appear more frequently in future. In view of existing institutions' inability to adapt and declining agency, states are likely to continue forming new alliances and groups in order to advance their interests. Under certain conditions, these new forms of cooperation can be a positive development for the existing multilateral order. Namely, if they are not established as rivals to – but instead designed to increase the effectiveness of – existing institutions, or if they are consistent with the underlying norms and rules and do not undermine them. Therefore, the Alliance for Multilateralism should not be seen as a competitor to the UN, but as a coalition for preserving and strengthening it within the existing system. It is also important to address the question of legitimacy with regard to the growing influence of non-state actors in

international politics. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important contribution made by private and civil society actors in handling these crises, so they deserve to have a voice in international cooperation.

#### **Conclusion: Who Sets Tomorrow's Rules?**

The crisis of multilateralism is a real one. In light of the drastic changes occurring in the international system, it is certainly in our interests to be proactive in shaping this change and defending our liberal values. We have to be more resolute in countering any threat to the liberal political, social and economic model posed by undesirable changes in values and norms.

**Proposed reforms to multilateral organisations should ensure that institutions can respond effectively to global problems.**

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The scale of the challenges involved means that Germany and Europe have to be prepared to do more with regard to foreign policy and security in order to uphold and strengthen the rules-based order. In practical terms, “doing more” means working together with international partners – first and foremost European countries, but also beyond them – in order to find the best possible way of filling the economic and security vacuum left by the US. It will be important to make a stronger claim to shape this order by developing stronger strategic capabilities in foreign policy, for example through instruments such as a National and European Security Council. It is in the interests of Germany and Europe to prevent China from filling this vacuum. In the wake of the US' withdrawal from the WHO, Berlin and other European capitals have already announced that they are prepared to shoulder a greater financial burden and make proposals for reform. Any proposed reforms to multilateral organisations should have the aim of ensuring

the institutions are restored to a position where they can respond effectively to global problems. The MOPAN assessments should be taken into account when considering where and how such reforms are needed. Alliances of like-minded states, such as the Alliance for Multilateralism, should also be involved in designing and implementing the reforms. With regard to the UN, and the ever-more-frequent deadlocks in the Security Council caused by the growing rivalry between major powers, consideration should be given to making greater use of mechanisms such as the Uniting for Peace resolution. This allows the General Assembly to take action in situations where there is a threat to international peace and the Security Council is unable to act. However, if no progress is made within the UN system, it should also be considered whether certain contentious issues could temporarily be excluded from the United Nations, under strict conditions, and dealt with by multilateral coalitions. The future of multilateralism will also be characterised by new forms of international cooperation and fresh alliances, and new actors may emerge. This involves not only the state level, but also civil society.

China, as a competitor to the system, must also continue to be integrated into the existing order. It would be prudent to avoid giving the Chinese leadership any greater leeway – especially in the area of human rights – and to oppose the alternative standards espoused by Beijing in a subtle way that will avoid stirring up greater antagonism. In any case, value should be placed on Beijing playing a responsible and constructive role in the international community.

Finally, the strengthening of the multilateral order begins at home, so it is essential to combat populism and its causes. It will be difficult to stop populists instrumentalising the economic crisis triggered by COVID-19. Nevertheless, centrist political parties must find ways of countering this. In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, the EU needs to promote a new narrative to make globalisation more responsible and sustainable at European level. Such an ambition would also help to win back the opponents

of globalisation, whose positions – although differently motivated – often overlap with those of populists. This would help bring them back to the table as partners in creating international policies that promote greater social and economic justice and protect our planet.

*-translated from German-*

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Multilateralism

# The Relevance of the United Nations in a New Era of Global Tensions

Andrea Ellen Ostheimer

The United Nations' effectiveness is being weakened by the gradual erosion of its foundation of liberal democratic values and the increasingly confrontational stance of major states with veto power. In many cases, the conflict between the US and China is paralysing UN diplomacy. Although the importance of the United Nations has once again been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, 75 years after its inception it is now time to ask what global leadership should look like. But first and foremost, it is now to call on member states and their the political will to work together.

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### **The Spirit of San Francisco**

The Charter of the United Nations was signed by its founders in San Francisco on 26 June 1945. After being signed by 50 states, the Charter entered into force on 24 October 1945. Above all, the spirit of San Francisco was driven by an awareness that after two devastating world wars, an architecture of peace became indispensable. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt was one of the driving forces behind the drafting of the Charter. Roosevelt, convinced of the need to move away from zero-sum games in international relations, aimed to build a network of collective security.

The norms established by the Charter not only regulated the interaction of state actors but also created legal certainty and predictability. Institutions were set up to facilitate cooperation between states in order to promote the common good. The basic premise was that countries would meet as equal partners and work together to achieve the goals set out in the preamble to the Charter.<sup>1</sup>

In his address at the closing session of the UN Conference in San Francisco, President Harry S. Truman summarised the conditions for ensuring a functioning multilateralism and a functioning UN:

“We all have to recognize – no matter how great our strength – that we must deny ourselves the license to do always as we please. No one nation,

no regional group, can or should expect any special privilege which harms any other nation. If any nation would keep security for itself, it must be ready and willing to share security with all. That is the price which each nation will have to pay for world peace. Unless we are all willing to pay that price, no organization for world peace can accomplish its purpose. And what a reasonable price that is!”<sup>2</sup>

### **The United Nations in the Context of a New Era of Global Tensions**

The post-war focus on the internationalisation of liberal values as a principle of multilateralism has become increasingly blurred over recent years. One reason for this is the growing influence of China in the UN and the fact that it has managed to find numerous allies in the G77<sup>3</sup> group, particularly when it comes to limiting the human rights agenda. In addition, the US' reduced engagement from the United Nations has created a vacuum that China is about to fill. This phenomenon is evident in the way the US has cut financial contributions to UN peace-keeping missions, withdrawn from the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and, most recently, not only halted funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO) but subsequently begun the process of withdrawal from this specialised UN agency.

The US was instrumental in establishing the United Nations, but the success of a liberal value

system as the foundation of multilateralism also depended on the US' acceptance of this order. The process of erosion began when the US started moving away from these norms – or, as in the case of the International Criminal Court (ICC), refused to submit to them at all.

One does not necessarily need to agree with American political scientist Robert Kagan when he says the liberal international order is a deviation from history. However, he raises a legitimate question: What are we doing to stop the centrifugal forces and dissolution of the liberal order?<sup>4</sup>

Alongside this gradual erosion of the foundation of liberal democratic values, the increasingly confrontational stance of major states with veto power in the Security Council is proving to be one of the main threats to multilateralism. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict between the US and China was about more than just trade. In many cases, this is leading to a paralysis of UN diplomacy. The most recent example is the UN Security Council's failure over months to adopt a resolution in the context of COVID-19 and to support the Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire in order to combat the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

**If merely viewed as a platform for promoting national interests, the UN is not fit to accomplish its original objectives.**

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The ability to address global threats – whether they are pandemics, climate change, international terrorism, organised crime, or nuclear proliferation – is currently being hampered by nationalism, populism, isolationism, and the absence of collective solidarity. Criticism is being levelled above all at the United Nations and Security Council in this respect, as they are accused of failing. However, such failure is primarily down to the attitudes of the member

states and particularly the permanent members of the Security Council, the P5 (permanent five). If the United Nations is viewed merely as a platform for promoting national interests, rather than as a forum for jointly addressing global challenges, then it is indeed not fit for purpose and certainly not fit to accomplish the objectives set by its founding fathers.





## The Objectives and Principles Enshrined in the UN Charter

Seventy-five years on, the UN Charter remains an important cornerstone of the rules-based international order. However, then as now, its effectiveness relies on the member states' voluntary commitment to the principle of *pacta*

*sunt servanda*. While the UN can advise and launch initiatives, the power of political decision-making lies with its members.

One fact about the United Nations is often overlooked: It is more than just a multilateral, inter-governmental institution; the United Nations is an autonomous but not entirely independent



Virtual diplomacy: While the UN can advise and launch initiatives, the power of political decision-making lies with its members. Source: © Michael Kappeler, Reuters.

actor that provides a platform for its members. The United Nations is able to set international norms, provided the political will of the member states is present. However, at the same time, it is often the implementing organisation with an operational mandate.

This hybrid character, and the resultant tensions, all too often compromise the organisation's ability to act, as well as its efficiency. Even when the UN is perceived as an actor in its own right, it remains dependent on the support of the member states and their willingness to take action. For example, any misconduct on the part of blue helmets soldiers during deployment cannot be punished by the United Nations; this must be done by the country that provides the troops.

In view of limited budgets and funding, which is frequently project-based, the scope of development interventions on the part of UN agencies and their sub-structures in their countries of operation largely depends on the priorities of the donors.<sup>6</sup>

*"[...] to Reaffirm Faith in Fundamental Human Rights."<sup>7</sup>*

In 1945, the preamble to the UN Charter laid the foundation for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the corpus of conventions and protocols that were derived from it. Through its institutions, the UN has made a significant contribution to the establishment of the international human rights system, but it is frequently caught up in the tensions arising from Article 2 paragraphs (1) and (7) regarding sovereignty of member states and the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states.

The dynamics of the UNHRC in Geneva reflect how the spheres of power and influence are shifting towards China<sup>8</sup> and the continuing solidarity of the G77 bloc. However, it is also clear that established practices and traditions are in urgent need of reform at a time when liberal values are coming under fire. In last autumn's

UNHRC elections, it was impossible to prevent renewed membership of the Maduro regime in Venezuela, as the Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries (GRULAC) initially followed its tradition of consensus and complied to the wishes of Venezuela and Brazil, thereby nominating these two countries.

Despite the Lima Group's<sup>9</sup> political declarations in favour of the Venezuelan opposition, no one within GRULAC was prepared to question the legitimacy and credibility of the Maduro regime on the issue of human rights. Costa Rica alone decided to run against it, and this only following massive civil society protests about the human rights violations committed by the Maduro regime. But this late candidature left Costa Rica with just one week to lobby before the election, and Venezuela was thus able to renew its membership of the UNHRC.

### **Due to a fear of endangering development projects the UN tends to keep quiet about human rights violations.**

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In 2013, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched the Human Rights up Front initiative (HRuF) to strengthen the UN's human rights focus. The purpose of HRuF is also to break down the silos that exist within the UN administration (i.e. peace and security; human rights; development). So far, its record is somewhat mixed. In terms of the need to balance the interests of the various departments, the main criticism is that the UN tends to keep quiet about human rights violations due to fear of losing access for humanitarian aid or of endangering the willingness of governments to cooperate in development projects.<sup>10</sup>

Ultimately, UN diplomats find themselves in a constant dilemma. Their job is to advocate for human rights all the while maintaining diplomatic dialogue, even with autocratic regimes.



As peacekeeping mission on the ground: Over the years, the protection of human rights has been enshrined in numerous UN peace mission mandates. [Source: © Ali Hashisho, Reuters.](#)

In situations such as the conflicts in Syria and Libya, the UN lacks a political voice to accompany its regular humanitarian appeals. However, were the organisation to possess such a voice, it might well have the unwanted effect of being disqualified as a mediator, and UN actors would immediately be accused of partisanship.

In such a dilemma, the UN can ultimately only lose and weaken its own position, particularly in terms of public perception. Secretary-General Guterres took office at a time when the US administration was beginning to downplay the importance of human rights. In addition, some of his former colleagues have accused him of

being too respectful of countries that flex their muscles and trample on human rights. The former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Raad al-Hussein, is quoted as saying: “I’m sure the secretary-general has convinced himself that he is acting prudently. [...but] I think future historians won’t interpret it as prudence but will interpret it as weakness.”<sup>11</sup>

The nexus of human rights and security is becoming increasingly thorny in light of recent shifts in geopolitical power. Protecting human rights was not initially considered part of the Security Council’s mandate. However, the advent of new kinds of conflicts – which are

primarily domestic in nature, and that often involve or are preceded by human rights violations – means that the topic of human rights has taken on greater importance in the Security Council. Reports by the High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation in places like North Korea, Burundi, and South Sudan are now commonplace. The UN Special Rapporteurs are also an important source of information for the members of the Security Council. However, human rights issues can often only be discussed using the Arria formula, i. e. unofficially.<sup>12</sup>

Attempts to put human rights violations on the agenda have been torpedoed by states such as Russia, particularly now that conflicts like those in Syria, Yemen, and Libya are being waged with external help.<sup>13</sup> Support often comes from states with poor human rights records and/or which regard the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs and state sovereignty as sacrosanct.

Over the years, the protection of human rights has been enshrined in numerous UN peace mission mandates. However, in the current discussions on the design of mandates in both the Security Council and the Fifth Committee (Budget Panel),<sup>14</sup> it can be seen that Russia and China are exerting their influence<sup>15</sup> to either remove human rights monitors or cut funding to such an extent that these components can no longer be implemented effectively.

*“[...] to Maintain International Peace and Security”<sup>16</sup>*

When it was founded, the overriding objective of the United Nations was to maintain peace and security. Article 1 of the Charter and Chapters VI and VII focus on peacekeeping and on the establishment of peace and security. This pronounced focus is also accompanied by the fact that the success and relevance of the United Nations is primarily assessed in this area.

The complexity of the current crises and the limited progress made in overcoming them has led to criticism of the UN’s record. In the past, the UN’s relevance was mainly called

into question due to its failures in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina or following the unilateral action of the US in Iraq in the face of a blocked Security Council. Today, Syria, Yemen, and Libya are the trouble spots where the UN’s peacekeeping capabilities are limited due to the power constellations in the Security Council.

However, critics of the United Nations often overlook the fact that the Security Council was often paralysed during the Cold War, as it is the case today. Nevertheless, the UN managed to prevent regional conflicts from turning into conflagrations. To name but a few examples – peace was achieved in Guatemala, El Salvador, Angola, and Mozambique, and, more recently, peacekeeping operations were brought to a successful close in countries such as Liberia (2003 to 2018), Sierra Leone (1999 to 2006), and Côte d’Ivoire (2004 to 2017).

### **Peacekeeping missions regularly have financing problems as a result of increasingly complex mandates and lax payment practices of member states.**

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The United Nations currently maintains 13 missions and deploys over 110,000 blue helmets. The financing of peace operations is becoming increasingly problematic. It is true that the US – the largest donor to UN peacekeeping missions – has not radically reduced its contributions, as had been announced by President Trump when he first took office. However, due to the 25 per cent cap introduced by the US Congress in 1995, the US has been failing to meet its mandatory contributions since 2017, which the UN sets at 27.89 per cent.<sup>17</sup> The arrears of the US alone have left peace operations with an annual funding gap of 200 million US dollars. Peacekeeping missions regularly have financing problems as a result of increasingly complex mandates and the lax payment practices of member states.

Along with the problem of financing blue helmet missions, questions also arise about the capacities of the troops deployed in light of the increasingly asymmetrical nature of conflicts and the need for anti-terrorist capabilities. Seven peacekeeping missions are deployed in areas threatened by terrorism and violent extremism. However, at the political level in the UN headquarters in New York, there is no strategic approach, nor are there mission-specific concepts for these challenges.<sup>18</sup> The largest area of operations is currently the Sahel, where anti-terrorist operations primarily fall to France's Operation Barkhane and to the US troops currently stationed in the region. Along with trying to protect the civilian population in Mali, the UN's MINUSMA mission mainly provides logistical support to the G5 Sahel regional alliance (supply services and medical evacuation capacities).

The deficits often associated with blue-helmet peacekeeping missions (dependence on government despite a mandate under Chapter VII of the Charter, lack of equipment, changes to the mandate, and the focus on protecting civilians without the necessary adjustments in terms of logistics, funding, and personnel) became particularly apparent in late 2013 in the UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) after a resurgence of hostilities between President Salva Kir and Riek Machar, his challenger, opponent, and vice-president.

### **Although the Security Council has a wide range of instruments at its disposal, their deployment often lacks a strategic aim.**

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Secretary General Guterres launched the Action for Peacekeeping (A4P) reform initiative in March 2018 in order to address these partly structural problems, documented in detail in a report by General Dos Santos Cruz.<sup>19</sup> This sets out eight pillars and also provides for performance assessment and accountability, as well as a code of conduct. The latter focusses not

only on sanctions for misconduct (in the past there have been regular cases of abuses perpetrated by Blue Helmets) but also strengthens the implementation of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy and the Environment Strategy for peacekeeping missions.<sup>20</sup>

Peacekeeping reforms have long been the subject of debate, and the design of mandates is one of the areas in need of reform. Twenty years ago, the Brahimi Report looked at the problems faced by UN peace operations. It stated that peacekeeping missions should contribute to the political resolution of conflicts but should not be seen as an alternative.<sup>21</sup> The subsequent HIPPO Report<sup>22</sup> also stressed the primacy of politics and the importance of political approaches to conflict resolution when designing peace missions. Although the Security Council has a wide range of instruments at its disposal (such as political declarations, visiting missions, direct dialogue with conflicting parties, and the threat or imposition of sanctions), these are not always used sufficiently and they often lack a strategic aim.<sup>23</sup> Instead, political dynamics and the desire for compromise can often lead to mandates becoming overloaded and inconsistent.<sup>24</sup> In cases where there is no clear strategy for political conflict resolution, there is a danger that mandates are formulated in an unclear manner and provide a poor basis for missions to meet expectations, particularly those of local communities.

#### *Political Hurdles in the Security Council*

Despite the political dynamics in the Security Council, in the past it has usually been possible to extend UN peacekeeping missions without major difficulties. However, this too is changing in the face of geopolitical power shifts and tensions. The so-called technical rollovers, where an existing mandate is renewed unchanged for a limited period, are becoming more frequent. Back in March 2019, the mandate of UNAMA, the political mission in Afghanistan, was rolled over because the Security Council was unable to agree on wording about regional cooperation. China had introduced a reference to the Belt and Road Initiative in previous resolutions



and in the UNAMA mandate. The US initially rejected this in March 2019, but a compromise was finally reached in September 2019, when UNAMA's mandate was renewed in negotiations led by Germany.

The work of the Security Council is being hampered or even blocked by the US' declining willingness to compromise, and the way the Trump administration is ignoring issues that had already been agreed and adopted as the norm. A stumbling block for the Security Council's resolution on COVID-19 had been the US' refusal to accept any mention of the role and importance of the World Health Organisation. In recent

months, it was mainly references to the Belt and Road Initiative, which were rejected by the US side, leading to confrontation with China. The US administration also rejects the emphasis on the right to reproductive health in resolutions that are particularly relevant to abused women in conflict regions. This almost caused the failure of a resolution on Women, Peace, and Security during Germany's presidency of the Security Council Presidency in April 2019. Controversial discussions often arise when addressing the nexus of climate change and security, when enshrining the protection of human rights in Security Council resolutions, and on the issue of sanctions.



These positions are gradually hardening, which makes it surprising to see how many areas of conflict can nevertheless be addressed by the Security Council. This is certainly aided by the commitment of the Elected 10 (E10), the non-permanent members who are elected for two years. Their influence has led to a broader range of issues being included in the discussions.

Non-permanent members can have a significant impact on the Security Council's working methods, and it would be desirable for these members to regain the influence they have lost over recent years. In the past, it was the exclusive prerogative of the presidency to set the agenda

In the service of peace and security: It is not possible for the United Nations to resolve every conflict – but there are still opportunities for it to assert its relevance.  
Source: © Eduardo Munoz, Reuters.

for the month, but now P5 members are allowed to intervene.<sup>25</sup> The almost exclusive right of the P3 (US, France, United Kingdom) to claim the leadership (known as the penholdership)<sup>26</sup> on various issues curtails both the E10's scope for shaping the agenda and the effectiveness of the Council.<sup>27</sup>

### *The Secretary-General and General Assembly in the Service of Peace and Security*

It is not possible for the United Nations to resolve every conflict, and the blockages in the Security Council will certainly continue in the medium term. There are still opportunities for it to assert its relevance, but this also requires the Secretary-General to take a proactive approach to the Security Council, as granted in Article 99 of the Charter: “The Secretary-General may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security.”

### **In the past, very few Secretaries-General have seized this opportunity to pursue active crisis management.**

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Article 99 of the Charter enables the Secretary-General to go beyond the role of chief diplomat and to be a political actor. In the past, very few Secretaries-General have seized this opportunity to pursue active crisis management.<sup>28</sup> The recently deceased Javier Pérez de Cuéllar was certainly someone who knew how to make the most of the options that were open to him.<sup>29</sup> He specifically mentioned Article 99 when he put the situation in Lebanon on the agenda of the

Security Council in 1989. His predecessors Dag Hammarskjöld (Congo crisis 1960) and Kurt Waldheim (occupation of the US embassy in Tehran 1979) also made use of Art. 99.<sup>30</sup>

In the wake of the brutal crackdown by the Burmese military on the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army and the flight of over 745,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh, Secretary-General António Guterres officially addressed the Security Council in a letter (S/2017/753) (albeit without making reference to Article 99). The Security Council subsequently addressed the situation for the first time and adopted a presidential statement in November 2017, but it took no further steps due to a lack of political will among the members of the Security Council.<sup>31</sup>

In cases such as Venezuela – where the Maduro regime is not only violently suppressing its opposition but also supporting the Colombian militia ELN in its fight against the Colombian government and backing organised crime in the region – Secretary-General Guterres has so far remained silent, apart from putting out humanitarian appeals regarding the supply situation and the resulting refugee movements.

In order to maintain peace, Article 11 of the UN Charter also assigns the UN General Assembly a role, albeit a subsidiary one in relation to the Security Council. However, this overlooks the fact that the General Assembly has previously tried to find its own avenues for action, such as the “Uniting for Peace”<sup>32</sup> resolution during the Cold War. The General Assembly’s presidents are also increasingly trying to exert an influence that goes beyond their representative function. In 2011, the then President of the General Assembly Nassir Abdulaziz al-Nasser invited the High Commissioner for Human Rights to address the General Assembly for a briefing on the human rights situation in the Syrian civil war. In August 2012, the General Assembly condemned the atrocities committed by the Syrian government in a subsequent resolution. The annexation of the Crimea by Russia and the subsequent referendum were also declared null and void by a General Assembly resolution.<sup>33</sup>

Recently, the General Assembly again made its presence felt, when, as early as the beginning of April, it spoke out about the COVID-19 pandemic, urging member states and parties involved in conflicts to support the ceasefire called for by Secretary General Guterres, and to ensure the global supply of vaccines.<sup>34</sup>

### UN@75 – A Reason to Celebrate?

Due to its rather mixed record over the years, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations in 2020 was not planned to be a celebration filled with eulogies. Instead, Secretary-General Guterres decided to use the anniversary as an opportunity to conduct a global dialogue with citizens on the challenges of the future, and on the role of the United Nations.<sup>35</sup>

In parallel, the member states are debating a resolution that is intended to demonstrate a commitment to multilateralism in these times of crisis.

At first it seemed that the COVID-19 pandemic would pose a further challenge to multilateralism and the United Nations. National interests appeared to predominate and a zero-sum game of international relations also seemed to be gaining a foothold in the area of global public health. However, it has now become clear that global cooperation is and remains indispensable, not only because of the implications for public health policy but also given the socio-economic effects in a world of mutual dependencies.

Although the Security Council lost momentum and time for positioning itself during on the pandemic, the value of multilateral organisations is being demonstrated by the more technical UN institutions – as long as they are not caught in the political crossfire. Support from the WHO, but also from organisations such as UNDP and UNICEF, is essential for developing countries with weak healthcare systems.

However, COVID-19 has served to further accentuate the existing strategic tensions and, above all, the ongoing conflict between the US and



China. Since 2017, the effectiveness of multilateral institutions has been hampered by the US' isolationism, unpredictability, and its limited ability to compromise at the diplomatic level. These institutions benefitted from the global leadership of the US when they were established and, above all, after the end of the Cold War. During the Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2014, the US showed a willingness to take the lead. It initiated a UN Security Council resolution and the first ever UN medical mission. But today, the behaviour of the US in international relations is primarily determined by its domestic political agenda.

In many areas, the vacuum created by the US' withdrawal is being used by China to manifest its new self-confidence and geopolitical ambitions.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the fact that other actors have an important role to play and that now, more than ever before, they should be prepared to take on the mantle of global leadership. The Coronavirus Global Pledging Event organised by the EU Commission on 4 May 2020 proved that Europe is not only being heard but also has the capacity to mobilise. More use should be made of this in foreign policy in order to compensate for the US' absence as a world leader and to establish a balance with China.

However, reflections on strengthening multilateralism in this anniversary year will inevitably also require the UN's member states to consider how to achieve the "re-engagement" of the United States.

*-translated from German-*

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- 4 Robert Kagan uses the analogy of a garden, which, if neglected and untended, would revert to the uncontrollable status of a jungle. "The problem is not that it is growing back because it is inevitable. [...] the problem is we are not resisting the jungle as we did before - that we are not gardening in the way we have for 75 years." International Peace Institute 2019: Robert Kagan: Authoritarianism Imperiling Liberal International Order, 28 Mar 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3en21e7> [22 Jun 2020].
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Multilateralism

# The End of Certainty

The Transatlantic Alliance Faces Great Challenges

Philipp Dienstbier

NATO has multilateralism in its DNA. But the principles of multilateralism are currently under pressure. In this difficult environment, the alliance must confront a number of internal and external challenges, from fairer burden-sharing, to strengthening its European pillar, to organising more effective alliance defence.

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The international community has, for several years now, been experiencing the end of multilateral certainties, especially with regards to the transatlantic security architecture. For over seventy years, NATO has formed the backbone of the peace order in Europe and North America. In doing so, it has built on firm multilateral principles, which are now coming under increasing pressure. Surprisingly, much of this pressure originates from the US, which was the main driving force behind the alliance at the beginning of the Cold War. US President Donald Trump has questioned the fundamental multilateral principles upon which the alliance was founded. For instance, he sows doubt about the indivisibility of the security of NATO member states and misinterprets the principle of reciprocity among allies as transactional compensation. With this rhetoric, Trump has shaken the alliance and triggered a political debate about the future of NATO.

But Trump is less cause than symbol of the US' fundamental reorientation, which has already had far-reaching consequences for the alliance, and which will continue with or without him. Given the greater American focus on the Indo-Pacific region and the escalating competition between the US and China, the US is reducing its involvement in the European theater and therefore expects greater contributions from the European members of NATO to secure peace in Europe and its vicinity. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to further accelerate this fundamental shift within NATO.

In order to master this shift, NATO must tackle a number of challenges. Germany and its European allies should increase their defence contributions and promote the complementarity of

NATO and EU capabilities in order to strengthen the European component of the alliance. As a whole, the alliance must counteract the rise of rivaling great powers, especially Russia, by consolidating key capabilities, including nuclear deterrence, while maintaining the offer of dialogue with Moscow. Moreover, the alliance must maintain its ability to transform itself by meeting future unconventional security threats, such as the effects of pandemics, with targeted support to member states.

### **NATO: A Prime Example of Multilateral Cooperation**

NATO embodies the fundamental values of multilateralism as few other organisations do. The characteristic that makes NATO a special multilateral organisation is that it is organised around joint agreements and defined rules, which are based on the qualitative values of multilateralism, especially the principles of indivisibility and reciprocity.<sup>1</sup>

The principle of indivisibility as a foundation of multilateralism provides for an inclusive order for participating states in which players are treated equally. A collective defence system such as NATO has this basic value written into its very DNA. Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, in which the parties commit to treating an attack on one or more members as an attack on all of them, shows that NATO views peace and security in Europe and North America as indivisible – no member state can be at peace when another is at war.<sup>2</sup>

The alliance is also built upon the principle of reciprocity, which undergirds multilateral

cooperation mechanisms as well. NATO member states pledge other allies their support and enjoy their assistance in return. But the support obligation in Article 5 is not a quid pro quo – that is, it is not based on transactional compensation. Instead, the idea of collective defence is guided by the conviction that, over long periods of time, equal benefits will accrue to all members. These benefits cannot be measured in terms of direct compensation for the defence of allies. Instead, the principle of reciprocity in NATO creates a general added value that ultimately benefits all members of the system of collective defence.

### **The principle of reciprocity in NATO creates a general added value that ultimately benefits all members.**

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Moreover, NATO is not an isolated, random collection of members. It remains, at least for the most part, an alliance of free, democratic states with a clear set of values<sup>3</sup> prescribed in the NATO treaty: democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law. The alliance is also firmly embedded in the rules-based international order. In the preamble to the Washington Treaty, for instance, members “reaffirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations”<sup>4</sup>; in all, the treaty, which is made up of only 14 articles, makes reference to the United Nations six times.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, multilateral organisations such as NATO are not an end in themselves. They are useful wherever they provide global or regional public goods more effectively than individual states can. This is often determined by the fact that answers to challenges of global proportions can only be effectively formulated through international cooperation. This is especially true of the public goods NATO provides: peace and security. It is virtually impossible for small or mid-sized countries such as Germany to unilaterally provide these goods to the same

extent. It becomes possible only through cooperation with like-minded neighbouring states.<sup>6</sup>

### **Trump’s Rhetorical Estrangement from NATO**

NATO and its mission are, thus, a special symbol for the principles of multilateralism. Its current crisis and the fundamental challenges facing the alliance today are, to a certain extent, also due to doubts about these values. These doubts are being voiced especially loudly by the US president with his confrontational rhetoric.

An example of his scepticism about the importance and value of the alliance are Trump’s comments during the 2016 election campaign and the early years of his presidency. Against the backdrop of his early statements that NATO was “obsolete”, he caused particular concern when, during his first NATO summit in Brussels in 2017, he omitted from his speech the expected reaffirmation of the Article 5 assistance obligation.<sup>7</sup> The omission sowed doubts concerning the fundamental principle of indivisibility mentioned above, which is part of the multilateral DNA of the alliance. It appeared as though the US president no longer wished to recognise that an attack on one NATO member was an attack on all of them, and that the security of the alliance was thus indivisible. Instead, he attempted to separate the security of the US from that of Europe and Canada.

Furthermore, Trump repeatedly complained of the costs incurred by the US in defending NATO allies.<sup>8</sup> For instance, he tweeted in 2017 that “[...] the United States must be paid more for the powerful, and very expensive, defense it provides to Germany!”<sup>9</sup> Trump has also criticised other member states for the same reason, although the US president focuses especially on Germany due to trade policy issues. Trump thus revealed his transactional understanding of alliances by immediately demanding a quid pro quo, something in exchange. However, this contradicts the fundamental principle of reciprocity outlined above, which is a component of multilateral cooperation.<sup>10</sup>



Joint exercises: An attack on one or more NATO member states is treated as an attack on all of them.

Source: © Stoyan Nenov, Reuters.

Trump has toned down this critical rhetoric during his term in office, not least thanks to efforts on the part of influential advisers. For instance, he retracted his initial statement that NATO was “obsolete” and later affirmed the American willingness to provide support under Article 5. Nevertheless, according to reports from those positioned near him, the US president has by no means abandoned his fundamental scepticism about the alliance but has instead privately reiterated his desire to leave the alliance, since he does not see its purpose and views it as a burden for the US.<sup>11</sup>

### **American Contributions to NATO**

The US president’s doubts about NATO’s added value have so far been reflected more in his

rhetoric than in concrete US policy. This is because, regardless of Trump, there is a broad foreign policy consensus in Washington D. C. that NATO is valuable and that the US should continue its active participation in the alliance. This consensus includes the Departments of Defense and State and the presidential bureaucracy in the White House, especially the Security Council. The most important American strategic documents, including the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Strategy, also underscore the value of NATO.<sup>12</sup>

This also explains why US financial and military support for European NATO partner countries have remained constant or even increased after Trump’s election. For instance, over the past five

years, funds for support and defence of European partners have been greatly increased from less than one billion US dollars in 2015 to 5.9 billion US dollars in 2020. US troops deployed and stationed in Europe have been largely held constant (70,200 in 2013, 73,000 in 2018). Bringing 6,400 US troops home from Germany as part of a larger withdrawal plan, announced in June 2020, will be at least partially offset by rotating deployments of US troops to Europe. In addition, the US leads one of the four multinational battle groups on the alliance's eastern flank and actively participates in NATO training exercises.<sup>13</sup> A non-partisan majority in Congress also supports this consensus and is trying to maintain US connections to NATO. For instance, the Senate's NATO Observer Group, which serves as a liaison to the alliance, has been reactivated; the two houses of Congress have also introduced a total of three bills to prevent or impede US withdrawal from NATO.<sup>14</sup>

### **In the medium term, the US government will expect Europe to assume greater responsibility.**

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Nevertheless, the US president plays an important role in shaping American foreign and security policy. His fundamental scepticism about the advantages of international agreements has already led to the (announced) US withdrawal from a variety of security policy agreements, such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the INF Treaty, and the Treaty on Open Skies.<sup>15</sup> That the continuing doubts about NATO will, sooner or later, have real consequences remains a risk that must be taken seriously. The President's erratic behaviour makes it even harder to predict when the rhetoric might have irreversible consequences.

Overall, Trump's unwillingness to assume responsibility within NATO and his refusal to accept a leadership role in the alliance are, in any case, not an entirely new phenomena. Trump is the

first US president to ever link a demand for equal distribution of costs to the US promise to provide security to other NATO states. But his statements must be viewed in the context of a partial US abandonment of its role as the unrestricted guarantor of security in Europe, its re-orientation towards the Pacific region, which already began under former President Barack Obama, and its escalating geopolitical competition with China. Despite the fact that US contributions have, to date, remained steady, it is to be expected in the medium term that the US government – be it under Trump or under his Democratic challenger, Joe Biden – will expect its European allies to assume greater responsibility.

The fact that the COVID-19 pandemic hit the US the hardest, resulting in both great human costs and severe economic damage, will reinforce this trend. US defence spending is traditionally not much affected by economic fluctuations, given the high value placed in American policy on its capacity to act in matters of defence policy. Nonetheless, the economic effects of the pandemic will put the US budget under further pressure and thus provide additional arguments to shift some of the burden which has so far been borne by the US to its European NATO allies.

### **Strengthening NATO's European Pillar**

Ultimately, for the European member states of NATO, this means that, while it will remain a transatlantic alliance, the European pillar must be strengthened. Several European heads of state and government have certainly recognised this reality. When German Chancellor Angela Merkel said in 2017 that “the times in which we could completely rely on others [...] are, to a certain extent, over”, she was primarily expressing frustration at Trump's rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, since the 2014 Munich Security Conference, top German politicians have repeatedly emphasised that Germany must act “earlier, more decisively, and more substantially” in international affairs and must assume a greater role in NATO.<sup>17</sup>

French President Emmanuel Macron has also repeatedly argued that Europe must expand its

strategic autonomy. But his unfortunate reference to NATO being “brain dead” in the course of his criticism of inadequate coordination within NATO illustrates the still rather reserved French position on the alliance.<sup>18</sup>

## European allies themselves have strongly diverging positions in the alliance.

Even though European decision-makers clearly recognise the shift in transatlantic relations, the degree of European military autonomy will remain limited in the foreseeable future. Europe remains highly dependent on the US for a number of conventional military capabilities. This is especially true of the core capability of air combat. The United States is the only member of the alliance to have developed its own modern fifth-generation aircraft (the F-22 and F-35 combat aircraft). It is also true of naval capabilities, such as anti-submarine warfare, and of missile defence.<sup>19</sup>

This applies even more strongly in the area of nuclear deterrence. The US is the only member state able to secure deterrence for the entire area of the alliance through its nuclear weapons. France emphasises the “European dimension” of its nuclear deterrence. However, a French nuclear umbrella expanded to cover all of Europe lacks credibility, since France lacks the diverse nuclear options of the US, and has so far pursued a doctrine of minimal deterrence.<sup>20</sup>

Strengthening NATO’s European pillar is also complicated by the fact that the European allies themselves have strongly diverging positions in the alliance, and some do not even agree on whether greater autonomy is even desirable.

Time to act: Germany and its European partners have benefitted greatly from the peace in Europe NATO has secured and the stability of the past seventy years.

Source: © Johanna Geron, Reuters.

Basic differences in threat perceptions can be observed in the question of whether the alliance should focus more on direct alliance defence or on sending military forces to crisis areas. For instance, Eastern European member states, concerned about Russia, are calling for greater efforts to strengthen alliance defences, while France and Turkey, with their focus on the Middle East and North Africa, are more concerned with crisis management, stabilisation, and combatting terrorism.

These divergent priorities have prompted Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania to seek even closer relations to the US.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU





means that one of the most important NATO members is blazing its own path, that its relationship with the rest of Europe remains unclear, and that it is likely to have an interest in maintaining close relations with the US.

To strengthen the European component of NATO in face of these complications, the links between NATO alliance structures and European institutions should first be pragmatically strengthened without forcing fundamental decisions. Following the maxim that EU initiatives should not be in competition with NATO but instead complement it, capabilities in the area of air transport and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance), which both the EU and NATO

need, should be made even more mutually available. NATO also already has excellent administrative and command structures that could, in the interest of avoiding redundant structures, be made accessible to the EU wherever possible.

Such a flexible meshing of NATO and the EU would be an important part of strengthening the European pillar of the alliance. At the same time, such measures would allow member states to decide their contributions in accordance with their own national preferences.<sup>22</sup> The joint areas of cooperation laid down in the 2018 joint declaration by NATO and the EU, such as military mobility and counterterrorism, should be expanded to include those mentioned above.



## More Equitable Burden-Sharing in the Alliance

In order to at least gradually close the gap in European military capability described above, it will be necessary for European member states, especially Germany, to increase their defence spending. These members should invest in strengthening their own military capabilities in order to at least somewhat reduce the de facto dependence on the core competencies of US forces.

At the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, the allies agreed in their joint concluding declaration to increase their defence spending within a decade to two per cent of GDP and, in the same period, to raise the spending for important defence projects and for research and development to 20 per cent of their budgets.<sup>23</sup> However, in 2019, only eight NATO allies, besides the US, had achieved the two per cent goal. Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Turkey – practically all larger member states with the exception of Poland – missed it. In 2019, 15 allies (not counting the US) were above the 20 per cent budget mark, so at least in this point a slight majority of members already met the requirements of the Wales declaration.<sup>24</sup>

NATO allies must be credited with the fact that they have all increased their nominal defence budgets in the past five years. The total increase of 130 billion US dollars for defence spending between 2014 and 2019 was impressive.<sup>25</sup> Large member states such as Germany have increased their proportion even further because of the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on German GDP: The German percentage is expected to rise from 1.36 per cent in 2019 to 1.58 per cent in 2020.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, the agreed-upon goals were not completely achieved. There are many reasons for this. Overall, the political culture in many of the “old” NATO member states in Western Europe has become accustomed to receiving a peace dividend in the form of reduced defence spending since 1990, while at the same time the immediate feeling of threat in these countries has reduced due to NATO’s eastward expansion.

The slow implementation is also due to bureaucratic bottlenecks in military administration, and sluggish procurement processes, in part because of inadequate provision of materials by the European defence industry. Furthermore, in political and expert circles, the purpose of coupling the spending target to GDP, which is subject to economic fluctuations, has been repeatedly called into question.

## Defence spending measures the extent to which member states follow multilateral principles even when it is inconvenient.

However, there is still no alternative to ensure successful implementation, not only because it is an expression of the European pillar of NATO, but because it is a measure of the extent to which Germany and its European allies adhere to multilateral principles even when doing so is inconvenient. Finally, the principle of reciprocity outlined at the beginning of this article demands that rules be complied with not only when compliance brings an immediate advantage, but always, with the assurance that the fulfilment of multilateral obligations will, over time, increase utility for all.

Germany and its European partners have benefited greatly from the peace in Europe NATO has secured and the stability of the past seventy years. NATO created “peace of mind, allowing member states to stop worrying about survival and prosper,” as German Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer recently expressed it, pointing out that it was this security guarantee that made the German post-war economic success possible.<sup>27</sup> Given these great advantages, Germany should be willing to assume greater costs. After all, only those who are willing to fulfil alliance obligations can demand that others also fulfil them.

It is certainly foreseeable that the budgetary situation in Germany will become more difficult

given the economic slump resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that efforts to increase defence spending will also face understandable pressure to justify them. But it should be noted that Germany, so far, appears to have weathered the crisis better than many of its European allies – and better than the US. This makes it difficult to explain to allies why Germany cannot fulfil its obligations and therefore transfers the burden to other allies (who have been harder hit by COVID-19).

### **NATO and Effective Multilateralism**

In addition to the difficulties outlined here with respect to coordination and burden-sharing within the alliance, NATO continues to be faced with the task of demonstrating its effectiveness in dealing with external challenges. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, multilateralism is not an end in itself, but must be measured by its effectiveness at solving concrete problems. In the future, NATO will have to find ways of meeting a number of global challenges if it is to retain its relevance as an effective alliance.

### **NATO countries must further expand their actual fast mobilisation and deployment capabilities.**

The biggest challenge is the rise of rival great powers that are entering into strategic competition with Western democratic states and are therefore attempting to weaken or infiltrate the multilateral, liberal world order and its norms. NATO, not least due to pressure from the US, must define its future role with respect to China and formulate a response to Chinese influence in Europe and its immediate vicinity. But until the middle of this decade at least, Russia will remain the alliance's primary focus.

Russia's revisionist policy marked a break in the European peace order with its annexation of

Crimea in 2014. This required NATO to make a strategic turnaround; after years of sending forces to crisis areas (out-of-area deployments), the alliance had to shift its attention to strengthening the alliance's own defences. Performing this task is currently the greatest external challenge NATO faces.

The fundamental difficulty here is that while NATO has significantly increased in territory after five rounds of eastward expansion since 1999, its conventional capabilities have been spread thin, since the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act does not allow for the stationing of substantial combat forces in new member states.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, following significant Russian investment in technical modernisation and development of new capabilities for its armed forces, the alliance's advantage in weapons technology, especially that of the US military, is not as great as it was in the 2000s.

The alliance retains an overall conventional advantage, albeit one which is shrinking. But military experts warn that Russia would have the upper hand in a regional conflict with NATO in North-Eastern Europe. This is primarily due to the concentrated stationing of Russian troops, materials and equipment, and military infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, and Russia's western military district, which are quantitatively superior to NATO troops and material in adjacent countries.

Russia would also enjoy a qualitative advantage because of its pronounced anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, that is, the prevention of access by NATO forces to the exposed Baltic states, primarily because of modern Russian air and missile defence systems. In order to compensate for this regional advantage, NATO would have to expand its ability to overcome enemy air defences, as well as its capacity for quick mobilisation of reinforcements.<sup>29</sup>

The first of these capabilities will be addressed with the incremental deliveries of F-35 combat aircraft to European NATO states. This aircraft, with its stealth and electronics capabilities, is



View to the east: Military experts warn that Russia would have the upper hand in a regional conflict with NATO in North-Eastern Europe. Source: © Alexander Demianchuk, Reuters.

believed to be capable of overcoming Russian air defences. The US also plans to relocate some own F-35s to Europe starting in 2021.<sup>30</sup>

Improving the alliance's capabilities for rapid deployment and transfer of formation and large units remains a huge challenge. As early as the

2014 Wales summit, the alliance decided to form a NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) made up of 5,000 troops in highest readiness.<sup>31</sup> Following a US initiative, it also set up the NATO Readiness Initiative (NRI) in 2020, which is able to mobilise 30 army battalions, 30 aircraft squadrons, and 30 warships within 30 days.



Despite these steps, NATO countries must further consolidate their actual fast mobilisation and deployment capabilities. For instance, at the beginning of 2020, it was clear that much of the German contingent for the NRI – made up of 7,000 troops, 50 aircraft, and three ships – was neither fully equipped nor ready to deploy.<sup>32</sup> If

an adequate alliance defence is to be ensured, member states' armed forces must also be operatively deployable.

In order to fulfil its mission of containing Russia, NATO must also secure its nuclear deterrence capability. NATO's 2010 strategic concept

explicitly emphasises that it is a “nuclear alliance”.<sup>33</sup> In the intercontinental area, the US nuclear arsenal<sup>34</sup> balances Russia’s thanks to the limits of the New START Treaty, which remains in force until 2021. In the area of medium- and short-range missile systems, however, there is an imbalance in favour of Russia, which has heavily invested in this class of weapons.<sup>35</sup>

That is why a continued, strengthened nuclear deterrence on the part of NATO is necessary.<sup>36</sup> To begin with, Germany and four other European NATO allies<sup>37</sup> should fulfil their nuclear sharing obligation to enhance this nuclear deterrence. Within the framework of nuclear sharing, the US stores 100 to 150 B61-3 and B61-4 gravity bombs in Europe. These bombs can be delivered by allied aircraft – in Germany, this has so far been the Tornado, and in future will likely be the F-18.<sup>38</sup> If war were to break out, the US would approve their use and the countries in which they are stationed would have to agree to deliver them.

The operative utility of nuclear gravity bombs is not without controversy – critics point out that air-launched cruise missiles would more credibly deter Russia because of their greater ability to penetrate air defences. Despite these military considerations, nuclear participation remains an important political expression of solidarity and cooperation within NATO. Withdrawing from such participation, given its unpopularity among the public, has been considered recently in Germany in preparation for the 2021 Bundestag elections. But it would mean ceasing to share nuclear risks and would be seen by Germany’s NATO allies as a weakening of German alliance solidarity.<sup>39</sup> That is why nuclear participation should be continued.

### Challenges on the Horizon

In addition to the central task of securing alliance defence, NATO will face a number of other challenges in the coming years. These include developments in a European neighbourhood marked by conflicts, terrorism, and disintegrating statehood. Another challenge is the foreseeable end

of the most important NATO mission of the last decades, the mission in Afghanistan. In addition to organising an orderly withdrawal, the alliance must also decide the extent to which it will assume responsibility for the stabilisation of the still-volatile country and for the suppression of dangers associated with rising terrorism. In other crisis-ridden countries to Europe’s south, the alliance has come to play a rather subordinate role. NATO members have started engaging in solo efforts: Turkey in Syria, the French-dominated anti-terrorist operations in the Sahel region, in addition to the UN and EU missions there. NATO must therefore develop a better-coordinated strategy for dealing with crises in the Middle East and North Africa.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also shown that even unconventional, non-military challenges require the alliance’s attention. NATO can bring concrete added value, with such capabilities as logistics and air transport as part of the Strategic Airlift International Solutions (SALIS) programme and NATO’s Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre for the support of member state relief efforts.<sup>40</sup> It can also provide protection against efforts to destabilise democratic societies by influencing public opinion via disinformation and propaganda, which have intensified during the COVID-19 crisis in the form of fake news about the origin of the virus, and campaigns to undermine European cohesion. NATO has structures such as the counter-hybrid support teams and a hybrid analysis branch that can be used to support member states in their efforts to defend against hybrid threats and to develop resilience.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusion

NATO is neither “obsolete” nor “brain-dead” – but it does face a number of internal and external challenges. They are not limited to the doubts expressed by the US president with regard to the multilateral principles that still form part of the alliance’s DNA. To maintain its position as an effective multilateral organisation, NATO must also adequately address a number of external problems. NATO’s challenges are therefore, to

a certain extent, an expression of the difficulties currently facing the entire multilateral international order.

At the same time, various problems are due to a fundamental strategic re-orientation on the part of the US, which is likely to intensify in the coming years. This requires NATO to strengthen its European pillar without abandoning its transatlantic connection. In the future, the European component of the alliance will thus have to assume a greater role in the alliance's primary task of providing collective defence. For Germany, in particular, this means that it will have to do more to meet its alliance obligations in terms of defence spending, equipping and providing quick reaction troops for NATO's intervention units, and continuing its nuclear sharing. At the same time, NATO will have to tackle other challenges, such as crisis management and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*–translated from German–*

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Multilateralism

# On the Search for Order in the Middle East and North Africa

Sub-Regional and Sectoral Multilateralism as an Opportunity

Michael Bauer / Edmund Ratka

To date, multilateralism has failed to establish itself as a model in the Middle East and North Africa, yet the major problems that beset the region cannot be solved by one country acting alone. Some forms of multilateral cooperation have emerged at the sub-regional level and in response to specific issues, such as security in the Persian Gulf, economic cooperation in the Maghreb, and natural gas production in the Eastern Mediterranean. Europe should support such initiatives as they have the potential to bridge the region's geopolitical divides.

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In the Middle East and North Africa, the question of the future of the international order comes up against a region that has become particularly unstable in the last decade. Internally, many countries face pressure to reform due to their outdated governmental and economic models, and externally the whole regional order is in disarray. This is currently demonstrated by failing states, by frequently violent conflicts along identity lines, and by the geopolitical manoeuvring on the part of regional powers. Alliance-building, bilateralism, and the pursuit of hegemony dominate this geopolitical shake-up in the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the political, social and economic crises faced by states in the region threaten their very existence, yet they cannot tackle them alone. The enduring conflicts in the region have not only consumed vital resources but, above all, allowed external actors to gain greater influence. Despite this, we should not expect to see the triumph of multilateralism. As a system of order based on principles and norms, multilateralism will not be attainable in the region as a whole in the short-to-medium term. History also teaches us that attempts to establish a comprehensive regional order have ultimately failed. However, the countries concerned could, in their own interest, establish or expand multilateral forms of cooperation in the coming years that focus on specific economic and security concerns and remain confined to smaller geographical areas (such as the Gulf, Maghreb, or Levant).

### **Attempts to Establish a Regional Order and Their Failure**

Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire a century ago, there have been attempts by external actors, states, and political movements in the region to impose their ideas of a new regional order and with it a particular form of multilateral cooperation.

As far back as World War I, France and Great Britain began this process with the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement, which carved up the Middle East into spheres of interest. After independence, attempts to integrate the region's states into the Western camp by co-opting and/or installing compliant rulers and through military alliances, such as the Baghdad Pact, ultimately failed due to the rise of Arab nationalism as a mass movement – a movement that also attracted plenty of supporters in the armies of Arab countries.

Arab nationalism was a unifying ideology that fuelled the independence movements. In the 1950s and 1960s, leaders, such as Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, promoted it in the form of pan-Arabism with political ambitions that extended beyond the nation state. Nasser's pan-Arab project established anti-colonialism and rejected external alliances. It set opposition to Israel and support for the Palestinians as basic norms that most Arab regimes had to recognise along with paying at least lip service to the peaceful resolution of intra-Arab

conflicts under the auspices of the Arab League, which was founded in 1945.<sup>1</sup> However, as an ideology, pan-Arabism proved too weak to realise Nasser's desire for a regional order and to fulfil his political and socioeconomic promises. Saudi Arabia in particular rejected secular, republican, and socialist-inspired ideologies and positioned itself as the leader of the Arab monarchies and a counterweight to Egypt. Even the leaders of states that were ideologically closer to Nasser feared that pan-Arabism was merely a smoke-screen for the ultimate legitimisation of Egyptian hegemony, to which they would also have to submit. Pan-Arab experiments such as the unification of Egypt and Syria (1958 to 1961) came to nothing. Instead of pan-Arab integration, a multipolar state system was consolidated from the 1970s onwards. This was given a basic institutional framework, for instance within the setting of regular Arab League summits and was managed with varying degrees of success.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1970s, political Islam has been gradually strengthened by groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and state actors, such as Saudi Arabia, and has been directed against secular systems of rule.<sup>3</sup> The return of religion has led to further destabilisation at both national and regional levels. After the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, this was further exacerbated by the sectarian conflict between Shiites and Sunnis.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1990s, the European Union initiated the Barcelona Process, an external attempt to create multilateral forms of cooperation in the Mediterranean region. The aim of the initiative was to establish an area of peace, stability, and shared prosperity through political, economic, and civil society partnerships in the Mediterranean region. However, this initiative also fell short of expectations because the Arab rulers refused to accept democratic changes, and economic reforms were only partially implemented or led to social problems. Stalemates and setbacks in the bilateral Middle East peace process between Israel and Palestine also caused the stagnation of the multilateral Barcelona Process and its successor project, the Union for the Mediterranean, which was founded in 2008.<sup>5</sup>

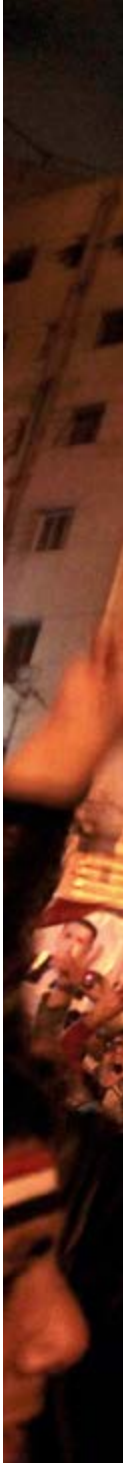
America's ideas for establishing a democratic political order in the region also proved unviable. After the 9/11 attacks, the US policy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran was replaced by a strategy of democratisation through externally imposed regime change. This approach was used in Iraq in 2003 and failed dramatically. The Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was overthrown by a US-led invasion, but the country was not stabilised and remains beset by regional power struggles and jihadist militias.

### **Any hope that democracy would sweep through the region was brought to an abrupt halt by the civil wars in Syria and Libya.**

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In 2011, the mass demonstrations that became known as the Arab Spring and the calls for political and socio-economic reform that were common to many of the protests briefly gave the impression that the Middle East and North Africa were on the verge of a democratic revolution. But any hope that democracy would sweep through the region was brought to an abrupt halt by the civil wars in Syria and Libya. Instead of a new democratic order for the region, a counter-movement developed, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which came to the aid of authoritarian rulers through regional organisations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and bilateral and multilateral initiatives. This allowed them to restore the status quo ante and to develop into authoritarian centres of gravity<sup>6</sup>. However, this did not result in regional stability either.

Whereas grand designs (based on ideology or *realpolitik*) for regional order were not sustainably implemented during the last decades, some "elements of order" persisted and can still play a role in the current and future search for models of cooperation. This includes the effort to push back against external influence (as during the





Full of hope: In 2011, the mass demonstrations that became known as the Arab Spring briefly gave the impression that the Middle East and North Africa were on the verge of a democratic revolution. [Source: © Dylan Martinez, Reuters.](#)

panarabist independence movements) or putting the legitimisation of political power into question (as during the Arab Spring). In the following, we argue that, against the backdrop of the current

upheaval in the region, multilateral cooperation is most promising – and feasible – if geographically constraint, with a limited number of actors involved, and focussing on a specific policy field.

## From Anti-Iranian Alliance to a Regional Security Dialogue in the Gulf?

It was concerns about a common enemy that led to the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981. It was a way for the six Arab Gulf monarchies – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE – to arm themselves against the Iranian regime and its commitment to exporting revolution. In 1984, they set up the 10,000-strong Peninsula Shield Force, but otherwise efforts to coordinate policy in the GCC have been limited, apart from a few economic agreements. Agreement is also rarely seen on

foreign policy issues. And any joint action on the part of the GCC was paralysed in 2017 when Saudi Arabia and the UAE imposed a blockade on Qatar, which is still in place today.

Instead, the GCC states have always relied on an external power to hold Iran in check: the United States. Building on the security partnership with Riyadh that has existed since the end of World War II, Washington has continuously ramped up its military presence in the region since the late 1980s and, above all, in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. This is how Washington and the Gulf monarchies pursued their mutual



Side by side: It was concerns about Iran that led to the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981.

Source: © Bandar Algaloud, Reuters.

interest in containing the two regional powers, Iraq and Iran, and in securing the maritime trading routes that are vital for oil exports. However, it did not lead to a cooperative regional security system. Instead of creating multilateral cooperation, it strengthened bilateral relations between the US and the Arab Gulf States, which bought arms from the US and provided bases for American troops. The views of Washington and its Gulf partners still diverged on key regional issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the 2003 Iraq war, and this rift widened under the Obama administration. Washington's calculations changed when the US began fracking for oil and shifted its strategic orientation to Asia. For their part, the Gulf monarchies regarded Obama's endorsement of the Arab Spring democracy movements in 2011 as an affront and feared that Iran would be strengthened by the nuclear deal agreed in 2015 (JCPOA). European hopes that the internationally negotiated JCPOA would gradually develop into a comprehensive, regional security architecture came to nothing.

### **Countries on both sides of the Persian Gulf are increasing their efforts to scale back tensions and prevent a war.**

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With his unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and his “maximum pressure” campaign, President Donald Trump fundamentally changed US policy on Iran and sought to close ranks with the GCC states. But the US responded with remarkable caution when Iran (and its allied militias) gave a dramatic demonstration of the threat it poses to the Gulf States by attacking tankers and a Saudi oil plant in 2019, leading to Saudi oil production being temporarily halved. The region barely escaped a conflagration at the turn of 2019/20, when the conflict between the US and Iran in Iraq escalated with an attack on the US embassy by Iranian-backed militias and the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani by the US.

Against this backdrop, countries on both sides of the Persian Gulf are increasing their efforts to scale back tensions and prevent a war that nobody wants – neither Iran, which has been ravaged by US economic sanctions, nor the Gulf monarchies, which are preoccupied with their own economic transformation. And, by tying up resources, the coronavirus pandemic could also encourage everyone involved to decide de-escalation is in their best interests. The UAE in particular has made positive noises in this respect and sent medical supplies to Iran to help deal with the pandemic. Even permanent crises that have mutated into proxy wars, such as in Yemen, could ultimately prove too costly for the regional powers. Last year, Abu Dhabi announced that it was withdrawing its troops, and, in April 2020, Riyadh declared a unilateral ceasefire in Yemen due to COVID-19. In the second half of 2019, the UAE and Iran had held several clandestine diplomatic meetings. Saudi Arabia has also put out feelers to Tehran via Pakistani and Iraqi mediators.<sup>7</sup>

In a speech to the United Nations in September 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rohani, for his part, proposed a regional dialogue initiative called the Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE). With the involvement of the United Nations, this requires the Persian Gulf states to agree on common principles, such as respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and to develop mechanisms for the peaceful resolution of disputes. Supported by China, in 2019 Russia also unveiled a proposal for a “Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf”, in which it called for the removal of extra-regional foreign troops from the Gulf – by which it meant the US, which still has 30,000 soldiers stationed in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar alone. Despite their dwindling confidence in US security guarantees, the Arab Gulf states are not prepared to accept such a demand.

It is conceivable, however, that a dialogue between the GCC and Iran could emerge through a range of potentially overlapping regional discussion formats – with international participation. Maritime security is important to

all the countries that border the Gulf in view of oil and gas exports from the Middle East and North Africa (90 per cent of which now go to Asia) and international trading routes. Such a flexible “multilateralisation” involving several global powers as guarantors could reduce the mistrust that exists between Saudi Arabia and Iran and between Washington and Tehran.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the US-led Operation Sentinel (IMSC) launched in November 2019 with the participation of the UK, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, a number of EU states have come together under French leadership to create their own mission, EMASOH, with the political support of Germany. In early 2020, Japan and South Korea sent their own naval forces to the region to protect their merchant fleets. The improved – and possibly institutionalised – coordination of such missions would be a step towards multilateral cooperation in maritime security with maximum inclusivity and could thus serve as a starting point for a regional security dialogue.

### **The Untapped Potential of Economic Cooperation in the Maghreb**

There have long been complaints that the Maghreb, as a geographical and cultural sub-region, is failing to exploit its potential for integration and cooperation, particularly in the economic sphere. Only three to five per cent of the trade of the five Maghreb states (Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) is conducted with one another. And less than one per cent of foreign direct investment in the region is inter-Maghreb. The resulting loss of prosperity for each country is estimated at between one and five per cent of annual growth.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1950s and early 1960s, after their independence from France (or, in the case of Libya, from Italy) these countries developed in very different ways, and early attempts at unification quickly came to nothing. However, economic difficulties in the Maghreb states as a result of falling oil prices and the accession of Spain and Italy to the European single market led to the foundation of the Arab Maghreb Union

(AMU) in 1989.<sup>10</sup> Its charter sets the objective of pursuing a “common policy” in the area of foreign affairs, defence, economy, and culture and “working gradually” towards achieving free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital.<sup>11</sup> However, the initial euphoria was soon shattered by the nation-state orientation of the authoritarian regimes and particularly by political disputes between Algeria and Morocco, whose land border has been closed since 1994. Since then, there have been no summit meetings at the head-of-state level.

### **Major steps are unlikely to be taken towards integration without rapprochement between Algeria and Morocco.**

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Major steps are unlikely to be taken towards integration without rapprochement between Algeria and Morocco and the necessary resolution of the Western Sahara conflict. However, initiatives for multilateral cooperation in areas such as finance and infrastructure have regained at least a degree of momentum over recent years. On the basis of an official AMU resolution in 1991, the Maghreb Bank for Investment and Foreign Trade (BMICE) opened in Tunis in 2017. With an initial capital of 500 million US dollars, its aim is to promote intra-Maghreb trade and invest in regional projects. The AMU secretariat has also recently commissioned a feasibility study for the trans-Maghreb railway line, which has been in the pipeline for many years and is now looking to attract investors.

Growing economic pressure could increase the political will to push forward with such initiatives. Over the last five years, the economic growth of the Maghreb states has averaged less than 2.5 per cent, while youth unemployment stands at 25 per cent.<sup>12</sup> The drop in oil and natural gas prices means that Libya – currently plagued by civil war – and Algeria are facing unforeseen economic difficulties. Economic pressure on the Maghreb states is being intensified still further by the global crisis



triggered by COVID-19. Morocco and Tunisia are being hit particularly hard by the recession in the EU, their largest export market (Morocco exports 60 per cent of its goods to the EU, Tunisia 80 per cent). In addition, hundreds of thousands of people work in the tourism industry, which has been decimated by the pandemic (in both these countries, tourism accounts for around seven per cent of GDP). The COVID-19 pandemic also underlines the importance of regional value chains; these are less vulnerable to global crises and could be created by increasing intra-Maghreb economic cooperation.

The Arab Spring of 2011 and the “Hirak protests” in Morocco (2016 to 2017) and Algeria (2019 to 2020) have clearly shown the countries’ rulers that young societies with poor economic prospects can lead to political instability. Moreover, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who became Algeria’s president in December 2019, is a leader who could lift old foreign policy blockades and who faces an urgent need to present his people with successful economic initiatives.

### **Gas Fields in the Eastern Mediterranean: Regional Cooperation Rather than Geopolitical Confrontation?**

Significant natural gas reserves have been discovered in the eastern Mediterranean over recent years. Huge natural gas fields have been found in the Israeli and Egyptian economic zones and off Cyprus. Smaller natural gas fields have also been discovered off the coast of the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, and it is thought that more deposits exist throughout the region. All the riparian states are hoping to boost their prosperity by securing their own energy supply and exporting natural gas. The deposits also constitute a political opportunity for the region. It is necessary to set up a technical infrastructure for exploiting the fields and exporting the natural gas. It is cheaper and more efficient to build and maintain this infrastructure if all the countries of the region work together. An approach to collaboration based on functional and economic issues could, therefore, also make a positive political contribution to regional relations. In this respect, a number of bilateral and multilateral approaches can be observed.

In geographical terms, Israel’s nearest natural gas customers are Jordan and Egypt. Jordan is dependent on energy imports and receives some of its supplies from Israel via two pipelines. Egypt used to be dependent on gas imports but can now cover its growing domestic consumption thanks to the discovery of deposits off its coast. In recent years, however, the country has built up considerable capacities for liquefying natural gas. It has more capacity than it needs, so it is interested in establishing itself as a regional export hub – including for Israeli gas.<sup>13</sup> Egypt and Jordan are two Arab states to have signed a peace treaty with Israel, albeit a “cold” peace. The situation between Israel and Lebanon is more difficult. The two countries have agreed a ceasefire but do not maintain diplomatic relations. Yet, the natural gas reserves could also stimulate relations between them as both countries still have to define their sea border, but talks on this issue are at early stages.<sup>14</sup>

By establishing the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), Egypt, Israel, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy have also created a multilateral forum to strengthen regional energy cooperation and develop a regional natural gas market and related infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> The objectives of the EMGF transcend coordination and technical issues and include approaches to collaboration that go beyond the conflict lines of the Middle East. By creating economic interdependences, this could also create common interests. There is no shortage of proposals for increasing cooperation, such as the establishment of a virtual energy hub.<sup>16</sup>

However, there are also initiatives that seem to stand in the way of moves towards more cooperation in the Middle East. The EastMed Pipeline is attracting particular attention in this respect. The planned pipeline will export Israeli natural gas to the EU via Cyprus and Greece. It will give Israel direct access to the European market, thus ensuring that the difficult relations with its regional neighbours do not pose problems for its energy exports. However, this would weaken efforts to create a regional natural gas market and reduce the need for energy cooperation

between Israel and Egypt. A further challenge for the growth of regional energy cooperation is the exclusion of Turkey from the EMGF and the associated cooperation initiatives in the energy sector. The fact that the EMGF incorporates security issues has fuelled Turkish perceptions that it is an anti-Turkey initiative. There is, thus, a risk that it could simply exacerbate the region's geopolitical lines of conflict.

**This system of shifting alliances has been unable to lay the foundations for a substantial multilateral order.**

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By sending in naval vessels and drilling off the coast of Cyprus, Turkey is trying to assert its claim to a share of the natural gas reserves. The EU rejects Turkey's demands and has responded by imposing sanctions. France – whose energy company Total is involved in the gas exploration operations – has increased its military presence in the region.<sup>17</sup> If the natural gas deposits are to provide the hoped-for benefits in terms of prosperity and regional cooperation, it is essential to prevent a looming military escalation. On the one hand, Ankara has to stop taking unilateral actions to gain access to natural gas fields in a manner questionable under international law. On the other hand, the question of how Turkey, as an important riparian state and key stakeholder, can be involved must be addressed. There is also particular potential for cooperation with Turkey with regard to creating a regional gas market under the EMGF.<sup>18</sup>

**Conclusion:  
Solving Problems through Multilateralism**

There is no doubt that approaches to multilateralism are present in the Middle East and North Africa – albeit rather in the sense of ad hoc alliances based on a geopolitical calculation that may be fuelled by a specific threat perception or



Poor prospects: The drop in oil and natural gas prices means that Libya – currently plagued by civil war – is facing unforeseen economic difficulties.  
Source: © Esam Omran Al-Fetori, Reuters.

hegemonic ambition.<sup>19</sup> In view of the region's identity conflicts, power struggles, and heterogeneous political systems, this system of shifting alliances has, to date, been unable to lay the foundations for a substantial multilateral order involving agreement on common principles and the confidence that they will be respected. In parallel, the mutually reinforcing political and

socio-economic crises in this region are threatening the very existence of many states and their regimes. Dramatic examples over the last decade include: the transfer of power in Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan; the civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen; and, most recently, the 2019 protests in Iran, Lebanon, Iraq, and Algeria. It is, therefore, in the interests of regional actors



to work together to increase their security and prosperity. Quite simply, the Middle East and North Africa can no longer afford to reject multilateral action in terms of building permanent platforms for cooperation.

The most realistic chance of success for such an undertaking is to focus on specific issues. This kind of multilateralism will be problem-oriented and thus sectoral and sub-regional. Could the functional spillover effects gradually lead to the development of a regional order – similar to the European Coal and Steel Community in post-war Europe? In light of the different political situations in each country, this seems like a distant dream. Yet, going beyond the specific benefits of cooperation, bridges are already being built to span the geopolitical conflict lines that have shaken the region for years and hampered the domestic development of many countries.

There remains a lack of trust, which makes it essential to embed international actors in (ideally overlapping) circles of multilateral cooperation. This could be a great opportunity for the EU. However, Brussels needs the will to boldly implement the commitments that are made and refuse to be drawn into the game of shifting alliances or even end up encouraging it. For there is always a danger that multilateral initiatives will be agreed against certain actors and have a destabilising effect. Moreover, Europe should not revert to a blinkered, regime-centred view of this region. Rather, it should work to ensure that, wherever possible, multilateral initiatives that go beyond state cooperation also promote dialogue between societies.

*–translated from German–*

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[Multilateralism](#)

# Bleak Prospects?

Multilateral Cooperation in Latin America

Winfried Weck/Teresa Marten

All Latin American countries have extensive historical experience with multilateral cooperation, but willingness to engage in regional and international efforts greatly depends on individual governments' policies and the degree of public interest. Although language, religion, and form of government are the same across almost all of these countries, this commonality has thus far contributed little to establishing effective Latin American multilateralism.

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To jump right to an important conclusion of this article: Latin American states have a longstanding tradition of multilateral cooperation stretching back decades and in some cases more than a hundred years. This distinguishes them from other regions outside of Europe that did not enjoy the same early independence (about 200 years ago) from the European colonial powers of Spain and Portugal. Similarly, early Latin American participation in creating the League of Nations<sup>1</sup> and later the United Nations<sup>2</sup> influenced each state's self-confidence and the reputation of Latin American countries within an international community that, 100 years ago, scarcely encompassed 80 countries.

Most Latin American countries' involvement in global institutions for international cooperation is therefore consistent with historical trends. For instance, various Latin American countries have been on the United Nations Security Council, some of them more than once, and provided high-level functionaries for the UN and its sub-organisations. An example is Peruvian Javier Pérez de Cuéllar (1920 to 2020), who headed the United Nations as its Secretary-General between 1982 and 1991. Latin American involvement in peacekeeping missions, on the other hand, is more restrained. In the current list of 121 countries involved in 13 UN missions comprising 81,370 personnel positions<sup>3</sup>, Uruguay is an exception with 1,126 troops deployed (18<sup>th</sup> place among countries involved – for comparison, Ethiopia is placed first with 6,658 troops), followed by El Salvador (45<sup>th</sup> with 291), Argentina (47<sup>th</sup> with 267), Brazil (49<sup>th</sup> with 258), and Peru (52<sup>nd</sup> with 236).<sup>4</sup>

This makes the hesitance of Latin Americans to follow the lead of France and Germany in their initiative to form an Alliance for Multilateralism even more surprising. While Mexico and Chile joined France, Germany, Canada, Ghana, and Singapore among the inviting countries, the only other Latin American countries to attend a first meeting of the new alliance on the periphery of a UN General Assembly in September 2019 were Costa Rica, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic.<sup>5</sup> It was only with the joint declaration of the Alliance for Multilateralism for combatting COVID-19 in April of this year that the group expanded to include Argentina, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.<sup>6</sup> However, only future activities will show whether these countries will play an active role in the Alliance. This is because the Alliance has intentionally dispensed with official membership and sees itself as a loose network of countries whose aim is to enhance the existing rule-based international order and its organisations.

The question of current willingness on the part of Latin American countries to engage in multilateral cooperation is thus at the core of this article. To answer that question, the new Regional Programme Alliances for Democracy and Development with Latin America (ADELA) of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung headquartered in Panama asked experts from selected countries in the region for their assessments.<sup>7</sup> Below, the most important conclusions of these individual reports are summarised to form an overview of current international involvement by Latin American countries.

## What Concepts of Multilateralism Are There in Latin America?

The contributions submitted by the authors reveal how the continent's various countries have diverging concepts of multilateralism. These ideas are often influenced by the government in power in the country in question and its ideological orientation. For instance, Brazil is a country with a long multilateral tradition; the principle is even an instrument legitimising Brazilian foreign policy and anchored in the country's constitution. This traditional anchoring of multilateralism changed when the incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro took office. He is pursuing an explicitly anti-globalisation policy and is more likely to reengage in bilateral cooperation with the US than to place importance on his own country's former role as a multilateral global player.

### The idea of multilateralism prevailing in Peru appears to be based more on macroeconomic preferences than on shared values.

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We can observe a similar influence of ideology on the significance of multilateralism and the associated engagement in regional and global alliances in Argentina, where populist presidents as well as isolationist and anti-globalisation tendencies have repeatedly threatened multilateralism. The government has often failed to communicate effectively to civil society the advantages of multilateral action as a mechanism for solving global problems, and hence a society that is increasingly dissatisfied due to periods of crisis can show little understanding for multilateral compromises.

In turn, other Latin American countries perceive multilateralism as a principle firmly anchored in their foreign policy and take active roles in global institutions such as the UN and the World Trade Organization (WTO), but also in regional

alliances such as the Organization of American States (OAS), MERCOSUR, and the Pacific Alliance. Having said that, it is difficult to determine the importance that a government places on multilateralism merely due to their participation in a multilateral alliance, not least because many of these alliances are themselves in the midst of crisis<sup>8</sup> and the dedication of those countries involved varies depending on the government. For instance, Peru is a member of and host country to many multilateral initiatives. Yet, the idea of multilateralism prevailing in the country appears to be based more on macroeconomic preferences than on shared values. Nevertheless, Peru, unlike Brazil and Argentina, can look back on a foreign policy that has remained stable over a period of three decades.

In particular, during the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012 to 2018), Mexico was especially active in multilateral cooperation and made efforts to distinguish itself as a player with global responsibility. Since as early as 2000, Mexican governments have been particularly committed to establishing the country as a regional heavyweight in multilateral organisations and thus gaining an international reputation.<sup>9</sup> Mexico views multilateralism as its best option for solving collective problems based on common standards, principles, and measures. Central concerns include safeguarding peace, international security, and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).<sup>10</sup>

Civil society's interest in multilateralism is rather modest in all four countries. However, this appears to be due to a general increase in public disenchantment with politics in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru over the past few years. In Peru, a great many scandals have led to a dramatic decline in interest even towards national issues, let alone international policy. In contrast, civic organisations in all four countries are committed to global concerns such as environmental protection, human rights, or health issues and view multilateral institutions as champions of their causes – including efforts to sway their own governments.



All the countries we compare in this article belong to at least one multilateral alliance and in some way can look back on a tradition of multilateral government action that is sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker. This does not necessarily reflect a supportive position by all governments in favour of multilateralism.

Panama is a country that has special historical experience in this respect: back in 1826, when the country was still part of Gran Colombia, the Panama Congress took place. Here, Latin American countries met to lay the foundation for an association of states to integrate the South American continent both economically and politically along the lines of Simón Bolívar's idea<sup>11</sup>. Following its separation from Gran Colombia in 1903, Panama also joined the most important institutions of global governance and, in 1920, became one of the 32 founding members of the League of Nations. To this day, Panama pursues this approach of effective global participation with activities in the Global Governance Group (3G), advancing joint policy design with the G20 nations and the UN. Panama continues to be a member of such organisations as OAS, where it is active in the management of the Panama Canal and helped initiate the Contadora Group (now the Rio Group), which focuses on peace in Central America. Panama has been the venue of various multilateral summits, among them the 1973 meeting of the UN Security Council and the 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama City. The country is the location of many regional offices for international organisations, among them various UN institutions (such as UN Women), for all of Latin America or for Central America and the Caribbean.

Colombia also has a vibrant multilateral tradition even though its governments, unlike Panama's, have not aligned themselves with the models or structures of global governance. Instead, its foreign policy activity has focussed on interests and ideological foundations it shares with other countries. Colombia sets itself apart

for being both donor and recipient of international cooperation, especially through its active development cooperation with a number of Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. In its efforts to end the conflict with FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), Colombia received support from the United Nations that was instrumental in securing a peace treaty in 2016, while other relevant international players such as the EU, Germany, and the US also continue to cooperate with the Colombian government to establish a stable, lasting peace. In all, Colombia contributes funds to nine different multilateral organisations. Colombia's current government demonstrates a growing interest in active involvement in regional and international alliances, with the UN, the OAS, the Andean Community (CAN), and the Pacific Alliance at the centre of its efforts.

**After its reintegration within the community of nations, Chile has dedicated itself to a foreign policy shaped more by pragmatism and less by ideology.**

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Owing to its positive historical experience with multilateral cooperation, Chile has remained faithful to its foreign policy principle of "open regionalism". After its reintegration within the community of nations following a military dictatorship, Chile has dedicated itself to a foreign policy shaped more by pragmatism and less by ideology. The Chilean capital of Santiago has been the headquarters of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL) since 1948. That same year, Chile joined OAS and became one of the initiators of the UN's Declaration of Human Rights. Chile also actively supports the United Nations peace mission. Thus, Chile has so far participated in 23 international peacekeeping missions (including MINUSTAH in Haiti)



Reluctance: The quantity of Latin American involvement in peacekeeping missions is low in international comparison. Source: © Paulo Whitaker, Reuters.

and supported the UN resolution concerning the Libyan civil war and the founding of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague.

Mexico, too, has a long history of dedication to multilateral organisations: for instance Mexican security forces were deployed as part of eight different UN peacekeeping missions in the Western Sahara, Lebanon, Haiti, the Central African Republic, and Mali between March 2015 and June 2018. Moreover, Mexico has served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council on several occasions, expanding its influence in regions of the world where

it previously had little access.<sup>12</sup> In addition to Mexico's involvement in the UN peacekeeping missions, its support of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the formulation of the 2030 Agenda, the struggle against drug trafficking, and the regulation of migration deserve special note. The last two items present Mexico with huge domestic policy challenges.

#### **Latin American Multilateralism – Effective or Prone to Crisis?**

There are many multilateral alliances in Latin America, but they have proven to be more or less unstable and vulnerable to political and economic



upheaval in their member countries. The recent history of these regional alliances begins parallel to consolidating the international community of nations in organisations of multilateral cooperation. In the aftermath of the East-West conflict that had dominated international cooperation until then, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) took place in Brazil in 1992. It was the first UN conference held in the country and marked a radical departure in multilateral cooperation with respect to the issues of environment and biodiversity. Among other things, it led to the ratification of Agenda 21 and several environmental agreements. Especially for Brazil, this was an important milestone in gaining a reputation with the international community as a representative of environmental protection issues. In 2012, Brazil hosted the follow-up conference to UNCED, Rio+20, which laid the foundations for ratifying the SDGs by the UN General Assembly in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda. The relevance of Latin American regional powers such as Brazil went hand in hand with the rise of several former developing countries to become influential on the global stage, making the Latin American region more attractive for multilateral cooperation over the years to come. The group of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) deserves mention here.

### **Latin American multilateralism is currently also weakened by inadequate management of regional crises.**

After the end of the Cold War, Central American states increasingly began to engage in multilateral cooperation. In 1991, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Guatemala founded the Central American Integration System (SICA). Important achievements of this organisation with the support of the EU and the US are the peace processes in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996). In the same year, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela

joined forces to form the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) to advance South American integration.<sup>13</sup> Venezuela's membership has been suspended since 2016 due to blatant restrictions on freedom and the curtailment of democratic rights and thus in violation of the organisation's rules.

Nowadays, more potential is attributed to regional alliances such as the Pacific Alliance and the OAS, including for cooperation with the EU or other regions of the world, than to the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) or MERCOSUR. Founded in 2004, UNASUR has practically ceased to exist following the departure of eight of the nine member states owing to the Venezuelan conflict and disagreement over the election of a new Secretary General<sup>14</sup>. MERCOSUR suffers under the policies of the current governments of Brazil and Argentina and is in danger of drifting into an existential crisis.<sup>15</sup> The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), from which Brazil withdrew at the beginning of January 2020, is equally crisis-ridden. The Pacific Alliance is considered a stable community, whereas domestic social tensions in the member states of Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico have eroded cohesion, and this could in turn make cooperation with the EU more difficult in future. The same is true for the Andean Community (Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru). Overall, it is clear that Latin American multilateralism is currently weakened not only because of frequent changes in government and ideology in recent months, but also because of inadequate management of regional crises (especially in Venezuela).<sup>16</sup>

These examples clearly show that multilateral alliances in Latin America have stagnated or have been in crisis over recent years. Venezuela in particular shows the "ambivalence of multilateral cooperation at the interface between regional stability and political self-interest"<sup>17</sup>. The OAS was the first to denounce the situation in Venezuela, but polarisation driven by ideology and party politics prevented it from imposing sanctions.<sup>18</sup> Mexico, which sharply criticised Venezuela's undemocratic form of government,

faced charges of inconsistency between its domestic and foreign policy. At the time, Mexico itself was under public pressure to investigate the disappearance of 43 students who had allegedly been murdered, and from which it sought assistance from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, CIDH).<sup>19</sup> This balancing act between multilateral policy, which supports the protection of human rights and democracy, and a national policy that often fails to ensure this protection, has been characteristic of Mexico since the early 2000s.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, Latin America has no shortage of multilateral alliances or memberships in international organisations. More importantly, the majority of countries on the subcontinent are democratic, and they have the rules and institutions to deal with relevant policy areas of multilateral cooperation policy. However, the “political, economic, and military elites prevent or thwart the application of these rules”<sup>21</sup>. A central problem here is the endemic corruption that goes unpunished in many places.<sup>22</sup> This may also be the reason why Latin American countries do not consult existing established bodies such as the OAS when they experience internal crises. Rather, internal political and ideological differences that greatly weaken these regional organisations result in ad hoc alliances as solution mechanisms (such as the Lima Group, an international contact group for handling the Venezuelan crisis).<sup>23</sup>

### **Latin American Commitment to the Alliance for Multilateralism**

Although all Latin American countries are members of regional groups (some of them of more than one) and part of the international community of nations, their interest and participation in the Alliance for Multilateralism initiated by France and Germany in 2019 varies

widely. This illustrates what the previous section analysed: in Latin America, multilateral alliances or adherence to corresponding treaties often fall victim to ideological shifts in



Cooperation is key: There are many multilateral alliances in Latin America. Source: © Jorge Adorno, Reuters.

direction on the part of various national governments, corruption and impunity, protectionism, and greater emphasis on bilateral foreign policy.

On the one hand, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic have supported the Alliance for Multilateralism from the outset. Mexico and Chile were even among



the inviting countries when launching the initiative on the periphery of the 2019 UN General Assembly. At the first meeting of foreign ministers, Chile's Minister of Foreign Affairs said that, in view of the global challenges, it was urgently necessary to renew willingness to engage in multilateral action and modernise international organisations that his country wanted to advance. During the current COVID-19 crisis, the Chilean government is calling for joint action on the part of the global community to combat the pandemic, emphasising its position by signing the Alliance's joint declaration in April 2020.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Argentinian government is critical of the Alliance for Multilateralism: Participants have too little say in developing proposals.**

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Costa Rica also actively supports the Alliance. At the last Alliance meeting, the Costa Rican Foreign Minister highlighted that, especially in view of the current threat posed by the coronavirus pandemic, multilateral cooperation is critical since the virus does not respect national borders. Peru, under the government of President Martín Vizcarra, has decided to join the Alliance. However, there was low awareness in Peruvian civil society of the creation of the network in 2019 and the COVID-19 meeting in 2020 due to little to no media coverage as well as to only scant attention in the country's social media. Argentina is also among the signatories to the above-mentioned declaration. The country's participation in the network has been limited to signing selected declarations, though. The Argentinian government is quite critical of the initiative: for one thing, it believes that participating countries do not have much to say in the development of proposals, and for another, it fears that the Alliance can achieve little without participation on the part of the US and China. Moreover, the

Alliance is seen as a European attempt to exert influence – Germany and France in particular are suspected of trying to consolidate moral power in the international system.

These participating Latin American countries contrast with those either ignoring the creation of the Alliance or having demonstrated limited interest in participating. Among the latter are Brazil, Guatemala, and Panama, which this article has already mentioned. Brazil is especially conspicuous, since it has such a long multilateral tradition, whereas under Bolsonaro's government, Brazil's international participation in global organisations has come to a virtual standstill. Coverage in Brazilian media and interest in academic circles on founding the Alliance for Multilateralism in 2019 clearly did not impress the current Brazilian government. Panama's government so far also appears uninterested in active participation in the multilateral alliance; even though its positive experience with international cooperation would seem to demand an active role. In Guatemala in 2019, President Jimmy Morales was embroiled in a dispute with the UN and its Secretary-General António Guterres after his government abolished the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). As a result, no further notice was paid to the Alliance for Multilateralism.

### **Conclusion**

The criticism that the Alliance for Multilateralism has encountered, above all because of the participation of countries such as Mexico and Singapore, is that there are major differences in the quality of democracy and in the political and ethical behaviour of incumbent governments in the participating countries. For instance, the Freedom House Index rates Chile and Ghana as only "partly free", in contrast to the other founder of the network, Canada. For Mexico, this can be traced back to the difficult security and human rights situation. Criticism is also levelled against the fact that the Alliance is an initiative involving cooperation among nations with diverging regulatory and ideological ideas. This prevents it from tackling deep global problems

and instead limits its focus to pragmatic agreements in specific areas where such agreements are relatively easy to reach because they are not particularly binding.<sup>25</sup>

The reasons why, despite years of multilateral traditions, not all Latin American democracies are cooperating in the Alliance for Multilateralism are as follows:

1. As already outlined in the criticism by Argentina's government, the initiative is perceived to be a European attempt to improve its image and manifest its power on the international stage.
2. Both the US and China are influential superpowers on the Latin American continent, especially as sources of economic investment and financial support. It is reasonable to suspect that several countries fear that joining the Alliance will endanger good relations with the US or Chinese governments.
3. Interest in participating in new initiatives such as the Alliance for Multilateralism is suffering from Latin America's crisis of multilateralism, which can be traced back primarily to an inability to solve regional conflicts and the governments' unwillingness to compromise on multilateral issues, alongside protectionist tendencies.
4. The Alliance is a relatively loose network of states with varying ideological ideas in policy areas (security, trade regime, human rights, international law) that are vital for multilateral action, and hence its sphere of influence is limited to the "sideshowes of international politics"<sup>26</sup>. However, these are precisely the core areas of global politics that many Latin American countries consider crucial for their foreign policies. We can therefore assume that not all Latin American democracies will find participation attractive as long as the Alliance continues to focus on the soft issues of international cooperation.

It remains to be seen whether the current global corona crisis will change this willingness to participate, especially since the crisis has moved global health to the top of the Alliance's agenda as a new core area of international politics. After all, among the signatories of the joint declaration for combatting the COVID-19 pandemic are ten Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Colombia, and Uruguay).

*-translated from German-*

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- 1 The 32 founding countries of the League of Nations, consisting of the victorious Allied Powers in the First World War, included the following: Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Honduras, Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama, and Peru. Immediately after the League's founding on 10 Jan 1920, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Venezuela were invited to join.
- 2 Latin America provided 37 per cent of the 51 founding countries of the United Nations, including all 17 continental countries and the island nations of Cuba and the Dominican Republic.
- 3 United Nations Peacekeeping 2020: Data Peace Keeping Operations, 31 Mar 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3gfK1Kh> [20 May 2020].
- 4 UN, Department of Peacekeeping Operations 2020: UNFICYP Fact Sheet, Mar 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2PdRlu0> [20 May 2020]. The other Latin American countries involved are: Guatemala (59/173), Paraguay (81/31), Chile (83/30), Bolivia (87/26), Mexico (96/14), Honduras (98/11), Ecuador (99/10), Dominican Republic (105/7), Colombia (107/4), and Cuba (115/2). For comparison: Germany (34/528).
- 5 Alliance for Multilateralism 2019: Ministerial Meeting: Building the Network and Presenting Results, 26 Sep 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3fkmMgG> [22 May 2020].
- 6 The text of the declaration with a list of signatory states can be found at: Federal Foreign Office 2020: We need strong global cooperation and solidarity to fight COVID-19, 25 May 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3jOYGxo> [4 Sep 2020].
- 7 The contributions of the country experts will be published in a separate study by the ADELA regional programme.
- 8 Nolte, Detlef 2020: Lateinamerika im Krisenmodus. Soziale und politische Unruhen lähmen Regierungshandeln, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, DGAP Policy Brief 3, 6 Feb 2020, pp.1–9, here: pp.5–6, in: <https://bit.ly/3gAjbLW> [27 Aug 2020].
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- 10 Ibid., pp. 648–649.
- 11 Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) was one of the two leaders of the Latin American liberation and independence movement. He fought against the Spanish colonial rulers of Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Panama. Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb): (Post)kolonialismus und Globalgeschichte. Köpfe der Unabhängigkeitsbewegungen (dossier), in: <https://bpb.de/227911> [14 Aug 2020].
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- 14 Nolte 2020, n. 8, p. 8.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Kurtenbach, Sabine 2019: Lateinamerika – Multilateralismus ohne multilaterale Werte, German Institute of Global and Area Studies, GIGA Focus Lateinamerika 7, Dec 2019, p. 1, in: <https://bit.ly/3apBp1m> [14 Aug 2020].
- 18 Ibid., p. 7.
- 19 Covarrubias 2019, n. 9, pp. 656–663.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Kurtenbach 2019, n. 17, p. 5.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., p. 7.
- 24 Federal Foreign Office 2020, n. 6.
- 25 Maull, Hanns W. 2020: Multilateralism: Variants, Potential, Constraints and Conditions for Success, SWP Comment 9, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Mar 2020, p. 6, in: <https://swp-berlin.org/en/publication/multilateralism> [4 Sep 2020].
- 26 Ibid.





## Multilateralism

# The Path into the Community of Destiny with China

Challenges for Multilateralism in Southeast Asia

Daniel Schmücking / Christian Echle

China and the US have both declared war on multilateralism, albeit with different motivations. For regional associations such as ASEAN, this enmity is becoming an existential threat. The coronavirus crisis has given new urgency to the discussion of concepts for pandemic resistance. But the principle of unanimity will have to be jettisoned along the way.

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### **Multilateralism in Times of Great Power Rivalry**

It is almost like watching a sumo wrestling match: two gigantic powers run at each other uncompromisingly and with all their force, again and again, trying to rattle their opponent with taunts, striving to gain space, and to push one another to the edge. Until one is thrown out of the ring.

The adversaries in this case are the two superpowers, the US and China, whose global rivalry has reached a new level since the outbreak of the coronavirus. They have, for years, carried out their disputes in various multilateral bodies, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization (WTO). When the pandemic began, the struggle reached the World Health Organization (WHO). Like every previous arena, this one suffered great damage during the contest.

Even though COVID-19 has shown how vulnerable many of the connections in the globalised world are, it is indisputable that the superpower showdown is being carried out in a different international environment than that of the Cold War. It was precisely the end of the Cold War which provided an unprecedented boost to international cooperation, and to the integration of various world regions. These connections, which have grown over decades, are now being subjected to a particularly intensive stress test in the face of the tensions between Washington and Beijing. The haggling over the question of the participation of Chinese companies in the expansion of 5G networks shows

how difficult it has become to balance national and regional interests in the areas of economy, security, and geopolitics.

The European Union has only had to deal more intensively with this balancing act for a few years. It does not always appear prepared for the complex issues this challenge entails. But a glance at the world – especially at China’s more immediate sphere of influence in Asia – reveals just how aggressively the Middle Kingdom is attempting to weaken multilateral organisations. This is an apparent common ground between the current governments in Washington and Beijing. What often appears impulsive in Donald Trump’s actions, and seems merely a part of the daily news flow, is in the case of China well-prepared and strategically executed. The objectives are different as well: the American administration would like to extricate itself from the role of the world’s policeman and reduce its expenditures on multilateral cooperation. China, meanwhile, would like to expand its international influence, but prefers bilateral negotiations as the tool for doing so. This allows it to employ its impressive economic and security policy weight to better effect.

In contrast to global organisations, such as the UN and the WHO, regional associations, such as the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are, for one thing, more resistant to external hostility – there are generally common, overarching interests, and decisions cannot be blocked by a superpower veto. Nevertheless, the example of ASEAN in particular shows how well China has, in recent years, succeeded in blocking decision-making mechanisms

and slowing regional integration. Below, we will take a closer look at the strategies that China has used with especially great success, outline possible countermeasures, and describe the conclusions the EU should draw from this development.

### **Characteristics of ASEAN**

It is important to begin by taking a brief look at the differences and commonalities between ASEAN and the EU. Both associations were established primarily to promote the economic interests of member states while reducing the risk of regional conflict. It was not until ten years after the Treaties of Rome were concluded in 1957 that Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore joined together to form the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. From the very beginning, the fundamental principles of the ASEAN way have been non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and unanimity in all resolutions – the much-vaunted principle of consensus.

### **There is no doubt that ASEAN has been an overall success for the participating countries.**

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In many ways, Southeast Asia is less homogeneous than Europe. Today, there are ten member states, in five of which the majority religion is Buddhism, in three Islam, while the Philippines is Catholic, and Vietnam atheistic. Economic performance varies widely; while the city-state of Singapore had a GDP of 64,582 US dollars per capita in 2018, Myanmar had only 1,326 US dollars. Political systems differ greatly as well, from a hereditary monarchy in Brunei, to a one-party system in Vietnam, to the heavy military influence on the parliamentary governments in Myanmar and Thailand, to the more consolidated democracies in Malaysia and Indonesia. Overall, there are far fewer national borders within ASEAN than within the EU. Laos is the only land-locked country, and the Philippines is an island nation. These differences have also

given ASEAN the reputation of being a project for the elite, with scant relevance for the majority of the region's 600 million inhabitants. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the association has been an overall success for the participating countries. The region is prospering economically, the number of conflicts is relatively small, and its geostrategic position attracts great interest from other associations of states, as well as from regional and world powers.

### **China's Growing Influence**

Among these powers, of course, is China. The starting gun for the increasing interconnection was the economic cooperation treaty of 2002, which provided for the creation of a free-trade zone encompassing the ASEAN member states and China (ACFTA). Since 2009, China has been the ASEAN states' most important trading partner. In 2018, the total trade volume was 587 billion US dollars.<sup>1</sup> The formal exchange takes place primarily via the ASEAN+3 platform, which includes China, as well as Japan and South Korea.

An important step in the development of relations was the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012. Since then, President Xi Jinping has pursued a much more active form of diplomacy in China's immediate neighbourhood, which from then on he termed "partners with a common destiny".<sup>2</sup> As part of this strategy, China often cites the common interest in progress, improved standard of living, and a harmonious community. But it implies unchallenged Chinese pre-eminence in the region. This is especially true of the South China Sea, where Chinese territorial claims conflict with the claims of almost all ASEAN member states, but especially with those of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. In their paper "ASEAN in China's Grand Strategy"<sup>3</sup>, Zhang Yunling and Wang Yuzhu describe the Chinese expectation that the ASEAN community will work on a solution with China without involving external powers in the process. Only in this way, ASEAN would have the leeway to play a constructive role, China claims. The authors praise the rapid improvement in



Cooperation in times of crisis: ASEAN was primarily established to promote the economic interests of member states while reducing the risk of regional conflict. Source: © Luong Thai Linh, Reuters.

Chinese-Philippine relations after the two countries faced each other in a legal dispute, initiated by the Philippines, before the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague from 2013 to 2016 to resolve territorial claims in the South China Sea. The court denied China's far-reaching claims to the strategic sea-lanes through which more than five trillion US dollars worth of global trade flows each year. Beijing still considers the verdict irrelevant, calling the court's decision a farce.

The diplomacy of the community of destiny is underpinned by special efforts in three areas. The first is development cooperation, especially on the platform of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through which China pumps billions of US dollars into the development of infrastructure in its immediate and wider neighbourhood. The second pillar is the expansion of China's soft power in the region. This includes extensive exchange programmes for students and



academics, as well as the targeted influencing of public opinion – during election campaigns, for instance.<sup>4</sup> The result of these efforts is that, in all ASEAN member states, at least some of the opinion influencers and economic and political elites are extremely China-friendly. This fact was particularly visible during the coronavirus crisis, ever since China began trying to control the narrative concerning the outbreak and the initial errors it made.<sup>5</sup> An opinion piece by the former Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani in the *Economist*, for instance, devotes a half-sentence to the errors that China made immediately after the outbreak of the virus. The remaining two pages of his article are full of praise for the extremely efficient crisis management, which is a model for the world, and will further accelerate China's rise to a leading world power.<sup>6</sup>

The third pillar of Chinese diplomacy in the region is the demonstration of geopolitical and military strength, especially with respect to the South China Sea, where China is creating artificial islands and using them to establish military bases and other infrastructure. It is this area that is the most obvious conflict line between China and the ASEAN states. Nevertheless, it is difficult for ASEAN to speak with one voice about these conflicts. To better understand the dynamics of the situation, it is helpful to take a closer look at the bilateral relationships between China and the individual ASEAN member states, for instance, Cambodia.

### **Cambodia as a Chinese Submarine**

The consensus principle is one of the primary reasons that individual member states are of great importance to the decision-making mechanisms within ASEAN. This becomes a problem when a member state is susceptible to external influence, especially when it is economically weak, has no independent justice system, and therefore lacks transparency in political and economic decision-making, as is the case in Cambodia.<sup>7</sup> The country has been a political football for great powers in the past, a situation that reached its awful climax with the reign of terror under the Khmer Rouge. But its dark past has

not increased its immunity to external influence. Widespread corruption and the lack of checks and balances make Cambodia extremely vulnerable today. This creates a risk for all of ASEAN, since Phnom Penh has increasingly become the focus of the new system competition between Western democracies and China in recent years.

### **Beijing has recently used Cambodia's institutional weakness to undermine ASEAN decisions.**

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Beijing has recently used Cambodia's institutional weakness to undermine ASEAN decisions, especially in the South China Sea. This became very clear when the ASEAN foreign ministers met in July 2016 for the first time since the Court of Arbitration verdict in favour of the Philippines. Manila hoped to join Hanoi in making a joint declaration on the part of the ASEAN foreign ministers referring to the decision, the necessity of compliance with international law, and the importance of a multilateral, rules-based solution. Cambodia rejected the proposed formulation, using the consensus principle to prevent a joint ASEAN declaration. Phnom Penh thus clearly supported Beijing's position, which is that the conflict is a bilateral issue. It was, to date, only the second time in the history of ASEAN that the association was unable to reach a joint declaration. The first, in 2012, also involved Cambodia blocking a declaration concerning the South China Sea.<sup>8</sup> In both 2012 and 2016, Cambodia received a reward from China. The first was a pledge to increase foreign direct investments and interstate trade,<sup>9</sup> and the second was further development credit.<sup>10</sup> The situation is exacerbated by the fact that China currently enjoys considerable economic and political leverage over various ASEAN states, reducing the ability of the group of ten nations to reach joint positions on strategic issues.<sup>11</sup>

Shortly thereafter, in October 2016, China underscored Cambodia's strategic significance for its economic and geopolitical ambitions in

Southeast Asia with a state visit by President Xi Jinping.<sup>12</sup> Since then, Cambodia's relations with China have blossomed. Bilateral trade is growing exponentially, Chinese investments in Cambodian infrastructure are increasing, diplomatic relations are being expanded, and there is mutual support in such matters as the detention of the leader of the Cambodian opposition, Kem Sokha, by the Chinese government, and Cambodian support of Chinese opposition to the democratic movement in Hong Kong.<sup>13</sup>

### **Phnom Penh needs good relations with the EU and the US, also because these are important sales markets and major donors of development aid.**

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China's support no longer takes place behind closed doors. Before the 2018 National Assembly elections, the Chinese ambassador in Phnom Penh even took part in a rally for the governing Cambodian People's Party (CPP). The quality of support has thus changed drastically.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore no surprise that China publicly supports Cambodia against Western criticism. When Western governments loudly criticised the political and human rights situation following the dissolution of the Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), the Chinese ambassador in Phnom Penh said that Western criticism was unnecessary and for "minor issues".<sup>15</sup>

#### **Difficult Balance**

Beijing sees Phnom Penh as a close ally, especially with respect to China's own interests. Cambodia, on the other hand, must balance its interests between China, Vietnam, and ASEAN in order to prevent conflict and avoid endangering the process of regional integration. At the same time, Phnom Penh needs good relations with the EU and the US, which represent important markets for Cambodian products and

provide a great deal of development aid. This balancing act is becoming increasingly complex to achieve. Cambodia, which identifies itself as neutral, has difficulty living up to that identification – especially from the point of view of Western partners. China's economic influence is immense. A symbol of that influence is the city of Sihanoukville, which was, until a few years ago, a sleepy fishing village and has since become a huge construction site for Chinese casinos. Lack of transparency regarding Chinese investments makes it difficult to get a comprehensive picture of the situation. The US has made clear beyond which point it can no longer view Cambodia as a neutral player, however. An article in the Wall Street Journal quoted sources within the US administration saying that there is an agreement between Cambodia and China regarding a planned Chinese military base.<sup>16</sup> The Cambodian government strongly denied the claim, as did the Chinese government, the latter unconvincingly.<sup>17</sup> It was clear, however, that the US and its allies in the region will not accept a Chinese military base in Cambodia, and that such a base would have severe consequences for Cambodia's image in the world and for its international relations. The West would then question a great many cooperative efforts and investments in Cambodia, such as development aid and trade facilitation. Cambodia is thus, without any great need, bringing the new systems conflict between Western democracies and China to ASEAN.<sup>18</sup>

For Cambodia, it is risky both economically and from a security policy point of view to bet everything on China. The stable growth of the last few decades was due primarily to low wages and tariff-free access to the European and American markets. These factors have been exploited primarily by Chinese investors in the textile sector. However, only the end of the production chain has been outsourced. China's slowing growth, the stability crises brought on by the

Of great importance: Over one million jobs are dependent on the volatile textile industry in Cambodia. Source: © Chor Sokunthea, Reuters.



US-China trade war, the outbreak of the coronavirus, the democracy movement in Hong Kong, and the subsequent ratification of the security law could all result in the end point of Chinese production lines moving away from Cambodia. Since Cambodia has invested little in infrastructure and education, it is very dependent on China. Yet, the economic integration of ASEAN could offer Cambodia great potential for diversifying its economy. Currently, only about ten per cent of Cambodian exports go to ASEAN.<sup>19</sup>

From a security policy perspective, a Chinese military base in Cambodia would subject ASEAN to a severe test that would change it permanently. The countries that are already in conflict

with China, and the Southeast Asian countries that are allied with the US, would not be able to accept such a step. If the plan is implemented, ASEAN will have few options left. It is difficult to predict whether ASEAN would impose sanctions following such a decision, and if so, what the nature of those sanctions would be. But such a development would certainly be detrimental to multilateral cooperation in the region.

### **Defensive Multilateralism?**

Many factors will determine whether it comes to that. The central question is the extent to which ASEAN itself can contribute to making its internal decision-making process more resistant



and thus give new strength to the association. If political consultants in the region had their way, the focus would be on two mechanisms: minilaterals and the abandonment of unanimity in favour of ASEAN minus X. The latter concept represents the capability of reaching resolutions that not all ASEAN members agree on. Deviating positions should be made visible, and the various perspectives should be included in the final declaration. The practice is already established in economic cooperation and should be adopted for security-relevant issues – at least where the decision does not affect the sovereignty or territorial borders of a member state, but instead affects the entire region.<sup>20</sup>

## Two powers are mentioned as preferred strategic partners for ASEAN, alternative to China and the US: Japan and the EU.

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Of equal importance for modern, adaptable regional cooperation would be increased recourse to minilaterals in the area of security. Minilaterals are cooperation efforts involving sub-groups of ASEAN members on issues that directly affect only the members of a sub-group. Cambodia and Laos would then be unable to block decisions on the South China Sea issue, for instance, if the sub-group in question included only the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Brunei. For this to work, it would be important that these groups be formed according to a fixed procedure, which also includes official support for the relevant working group by the ASEAN community.

Both concepts have been discussed intensively since Cambodia blocked the declaration regarding the verdict of the International Court of Arbitration. They have so far not been implemented because the relevant ASEAN chairmanships have not given them sufficient priority, and because the numbers involved in the concepts are not clear. Do minilaterals require three, four, or five members? And what should X be if, in future,

resolutions opposed by individual member states can be ratified? The longer these questions go unanswered, the more China will be encouraged to drive the wedge deeper into the Southeast Asian community of nations.

This danger is well-known within ASEAN. In the current The State of Southeast Asia survey<sup>21</sup>, conducted annually with more than 1,000 experts in the region by the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), about 85 per cent of respondents expressed concern about China's political and strategic influence on ASEAN. When asked about which strategic partners could provide an alternative to the competition between China and the US, the survey returned two primary powers: Japan (38.2 per cent) and the EU (31.7 per cent). The study also clearly showed the hurdles the EU would have to clear so as to be a viable partner: among EU-critical respondents, about a third did not think that the EU has the political will to be a global leader, and another third thought that the EU was too concerned with its own problems to be able to assume such leadership.

### It's the EU's Move

This painful appraisal will not go away overnight. But it is important that the EU seizes the opportunity to position itself as a more valuable strategic partner for ASEAN. The example of China shows clearly that this can be achieved by strengthening bilateral ties to ASEAN member states. The EU's free-trade agreements with Singapore and Vietnam, which only recently came into effect after a long delay, are an important step in the right direction.

At the same time, the EU is weakening itself by withdrawing trade preferences that Cambodia had previously enjoyed as part of the EBA (everything but arms) scheme. The EU felt that this step became necessary because of severe, systematic human rights violations on the part of Cambodia. Although this is true, the first EBA withdrawal in the history of the preference scheme remains an unusual step. Of the 49 countries currently benefitting from EBAs, several have human right situations at least as



worrying as that of Cambodia. The economic effect of the withdrawal of trade preferences will be catastrophic for the country. Over one million jobs are dependent on the volatile textile industry, which exports primarily to Europe because of tariff-free access to the single market. On 11 February 2020, the EU Commission announced partial withdrawal of the EBA status from Cambodia. The withdrawal affects about one fifth of Cambodia's annual exports to the EU, or one billion euros. The rhetoric of the EU's press release by High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell was sharp: "The European Union will not stand by and watch as democracy is eroded, human rights curtailed, and free debate silenced."<sup>22</sup> The withdrawal came into force on 12 August 2020.

### **By punishing Cambodia, the EU drove it further into the Chinese camp because it has almost no other alternatives left.**

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With this move, the EU is punishing Cambodia, driving it further into the arms of the Chinese because now, even though the measures are Cambodia's own fault, it has almost no other alternative. Nevertheless, the fight is not yet lost for the West. The EU should promote its convictions and core values without being naive. But a simple "punishment" that is not adapted to cultural practices will harm the reputation and reduce the influence of the West in the long run. Cambodia can still orient itself towards democratic partners in Asia – Japan, South Korea, and India – who are more aggressive in asserting their interests while retaining a good reputation. Their strategy in Cambodia is focussed on containing Chinese influence – and on the geopolitical importance of Cambodia, which should not be underestimated, especially given its central location in the Gulf of Thailand.

The "punishment" by the EU also leads to a closing of ranks of Cambodia's governing CPP, and a silencing of the younger, more progressive,

more Western voices in face of Prime Minister Hun Sen's rhetoric about protecting the country from EU influence.<sup>23</sup> But the party is very much divided with respect to the EU decision. Some are quite interested in continuing negotiations and reaching an agreement with the EU. Hardliners have already written off the EU as a partner. The goal must therefore be to support progressive forces, since if the hardliners get their way, the EU will lose all foreign policy and development policy involvement for the foreseeable future.

The current tensions between Cambodia and the EU also have a negative impact on the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) scheduled to take place in Phnom Penh in mid-2021. The conflict must therefore be resolved before the Asian and European heads of state and government meet in Phnom Penh. This important event provides Cambodia with an opportunity to settle its complicated relations with the EU for the long term.

The case of Cambodia shows how China undermines the rules-based world order. The EU should therefore be wary, but not punitive; instead it should, without betraying its own values, make attractive economic and security policy cooperation offers.

Before the sumo wrestlers move on to the next multilateral arena, the EU should leave the stands and take a more active role in events. Not as a third wrestler, but rather as a referee that monitors compliance with rules – and ensures that other participants are not harmed in the conflict between the two opponents.

*–translated from German–*

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## Multilateralism

# The Trojan Horse of Multilateralism

Why Authoritarian Regimes Favour International  
Cooperation While Simultaneously Undermining It

[Olaf Wientzek/Sebastian Enskat](#)

Everyone today is talking about multilateralism, and politicians of almost every stripe are averring the importance of multilateral organisations. Nevertheless, the liberal world order, of which multilateral cooperation is an important foundation, is in what may be its most severe crisis. This article will address this crisis and illustrate what must be done to revive the commitment to multilateralism.

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“Let us work to foster a secure environment of peace and stability. We need to take it as our aim to safeguard peace and development for all; we need to uphold fairness and justice and promote win-win results; we need to base our efforts on international law and widely recognized norms of international relations; we need to champion and put into practice multilateralism.”

Until a few years ago, such a quote would, without much hesitation, have been attributed to a US president, a position which, for decades, has also been viewed as that of the leader of the free world. But times have changed: Donald Trump, the current holder of that office, is known for breaking with many traditions and cancelling cooperation in a number of multilateral fora, while Chinese President Xi Jinping, from whom the quote actually originates, styles himself a “champion of multilateralism”.<sup>1</sup> How could it come to this?

This article will examine several trends that have contributed to the severe crisis in which the liberal world order currently finds itself. It will clarify why the values that have underpinned this world order for decades are now, more than ever before, in danger; and this albeit – or rather precisely because – authoritarian regimes are expressing support for multilateralism. Finally, it will propose approaches for reversing the trend and shed light on what needs to be done, especially in Europe, to restore the principles and values that lie behind the ambiguous and variously interpreted term “multilateralism”.

### **Prologue: The COVID-19 Crisis as a Catalyst for Existing Trends**

Many view the COVID-19 pandemic as a massive challenge for the global West. They believe that the global health crisis has the potential to shift the international balance of power permanently and could even be a turning point leading to a greater acceptance of autocratic models of government.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that the crisis response in many countries of the global West was often not exemplary. Many countries appeared unprepared; forecasts and instructions required repeated correction. Uncoordinated travel and export restrictions initially led to the assumption that European and Western solidarity left much to be desired. In contrast, several countries with authoritarian governments first seemed to come through the crisis better, not least because many practices necessary for combatting a pandemic (lockdowns, checks, data monitoring, etc.) were much more in the “comfort zone” of autocratic systems.

However, the theory that autocratic countries are superior increasingly lost traction: From the testing density alone, it was too obvious that case numbers were not comparable, and autocratic countries in particular (China, Iran, and Russia) deliberately lacked transparency in the numbers of victims they communicated to the World Health Organization (WHO). Finally, there were indications that success in combatting the pandemic tended to turn on other factors (e.g.

experience with controlling earlier epidemics); moreover, among the group of countries that have since come to be internationally viewed as role models (South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and, to a certain degree, Germany, Greece, Iceland, and several Central European countries) more and more democracies are to be found.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis also raises the question of the future of the West and of the liberal world order. This is not because the pandemic is thought to have changed the fundamental balance of power between autocracies and democracies, but rather because the crisis throws a particularly harsh light on some pre-existing trends, and, in several cases, reinforces them.

### **Trend 1: Western Leadership's Weakness and Disunity**

If more evidence were necessary that the US is no longer willing or able to assume leadership in meeting global challenges, the COVID-19 crisis provided it. It would have been inconceivable a few years ago, but today is not even surprising: The US is not at the forefront of coordination efforts to combat the crisis. While the US has certainly provided funding, its administration has repeatedly thwarted efforts at global cooperation in the relevant international organisations. The peak was reached so far when the US announced its withdrawal from the WHO in the middle of the pandemic – an organisation for which it is the largest donor, as it is for many others. Geopolitical rivalry seems to have permanently displaced the conservation of global goods as the guiding motive for US actions – even though it would of course be naive to assume that the country's actions in multilateral organisations to date has been exclusively altruistic.

Its blocking of the UN Security Council (an action to which China admittedly also contributes) has prevented the former from playing any significant role in combatting the pandemic. The termination of all cooperation with the WHO, and most recently the refusal to recognise a vaccine as a global public good, reinforces

the impression that the US has come to be more of a brake than a motor for multilateral cooperation. A similar situation can be observed in the World Trade Organization (WTO). In addition to blocking appointments to the organisation's Appellate Body, the US has also not been particularly cooperative in the aftermath of the departure of the WTO's director general. This blocking role is not new for the Trump administration and merely continues a trend that could already be observed with regard to the WTO's conflict-resolution process, and efforts to combat climate change.

### **The EU has been unable to completely fill the vacuum left by weak leadership on the part of the US.**

Regrettably, as in other international crises, the EU has so far been unable to completely fill the vacuum left by weak leadership on the part of the US. During the COVID-19 crisis, the EU was initially primarily concerned with itself, and with its internal disputes. This disunity in the West is a further trend that the COVID-19 pandemic is only reinforcing.

This is also true of the fundamental attitude towards multilateral organisations. While it has become a pattern for the US to use the partially justifiable criticism of the inadequacies of multilateral organisations as a pretext to block them (the WTO, the United Nations Climate Change conference) or to withdraw from them completely (WHO, UN Human Rights Council), the reverse reflex can be observed in most other countries of the global West. Despite all the inadequacies, they elevate commitment to multilateral problem-solving to the level of a mantra. In the interests of peace and stagecraft, any criticism of worrisome developments tends to be formulated behind closed doors so that the authority of the organisation is not called into question. This attitude greatly irritates Washington, as could recently be observed

during the debate over the necessity of reforming the WTO. The Alliance for Multilateralism created by Germany and France in 2019 plans laudable initiatives,<sup>3</sup> but has so far avoided the real challenges of international politics or the urgently needed reform of multilateral organisations. For instance, the Alliance has so far submitted no proposal for reforming the WTO, whose work, particularly in the area of conflict resolution, is increasingly paralysed by the tensions between the US and China. Nor has the Alliance as a whole yet taken a position on reforming the UN Security Council, or the WHO.

## **Trend 2: Multilateral Organisations as Arenas for System Competition**

The degree to which US and Chinese actions have come to differ in multilateral contexts can be seen in the most recent World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva, on the COVID-19 crisis. While the US was primarily occupied denouncing Beijing's crisis-management and the WHO, and Trump ignored an invitation to speak, Chinese President Xi used the opportunity to present Beijing as a responsible player that could help shape global institutions, promising billions in aid with a special focus on Africa, and assuring everyone that a vaccine would, of course, be treated as a global common good. This also confirms the trend: Authoritarian regimes have long since learnt to instrumentalise multilateral organisations for their own purposes. These organisations have become arenas in which system competition between liberal democracies, on the one side, and authoritarian regimes, on the other, is increasingly being fought out.

A significant increase in Chinese influence has been observed in various international organisations in recent years. This is not true in all areas, and of course Beijing is light years behind the US, the EU, and other countries of the global West in several organisations in terms of financial and political involvement.<sup>4</sup> However China is systematically trying to increase its influence, particularly in international formats which relate to economic policy (WTO, WIPO, UNECE), digital policy (such as the ITU),

and infrastructure (ISO, ICAO, IRU). At the same time, Beijing has massively increased its involvement in UN peacekeeping missions over the last few years.

In the area of human rights, China and especially Russia are making targeted attempts to undermine the universal applicability of individual freedoms and human rights, curtailing minority rights, and blocking work in relevant committees.<sup>5</sup>

## **Authoritarian regimes have begun to establish parallel structures in the form of new multilateral organisations.**

Formation of autocratic camps is becoming increasingly common. On issues such as the Syrian civil war, the catastrophe in Venezuela, and the Uyghurs' plight in Xinjiang, the "autocratic international" is increasingly closing its ranks in order to influence decisions in its favour, for instance at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva.<sup>6</sup> Such alliances, however, appear so far to be more tactical than strategic in nature. In other words, while there is an autocratic solidarity aimed at blocking unwanted initiatives, constructive alliances of autocracies working proactively to assert certain positions are rarer.

In addition to exerting influence in existing multilateral organisations, authoritarian regimes have also begun to establish parallel structures in the form of new multilateral organisations that they dominate. Examples include China's Silk Road initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – a regional security organisation founded jointly by China and Russia. The hope that China might experience "normative socialisation", or come to appreciate the principles of the Western model, as a result of integration into international organisations has not come to fruition.<sup>7</sup>





Inconceivable a few years ago, not even surprising today: The US is not at the forefront of coordination efforts to combat the coronavirus crisis. [Source: © Leah Millis, Reuters.](#)

### **Approaches for a Trend Reversal**

Liberal, democratic standards and regulatory principles that have shaped most multilateral organisations in recent decades are coming under increasing pressure from the trends outlined above. These same trends could, moreover, be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. So, what is to be done? How can principles and values that form the foundation of the liberal world order return to prominence, and what role can Europe play in bringing that about?

#### *Approach 1: Close the Leadership Gap in the West*

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, it was clear that the US under Donald Trump was no longer

willing to fulfil its traditional role as leading power in the West. But the EU and other countries of the global West have so far been unable to fully close the resultant gap. It is noteworthy, however, that in view of the impasse between the US and China, several countries and actors have recently attempted to reach joint solution via constructive proposals in multilateral fora. For instance, the EU played a decisive role in the unprecedented global initiative, coordinated by the WHO, for accelerating the fight against the pandemic (“ACT Accelerator”),<sup>8</sup> not least by organising a successful international donor conference. Close allies of the global West participated, but the conference was not limited to them. Another example is the constructive role EU countries played in forming a consensus

in the run-up to the WHO's ground-breaking resolution which, among other things, provides for free and equal access to vaccines and medicines. Overall, EU and German political and financial support is considered essential in Geneva for the WHO in the fight against the pandemic.

## **The EU must invest in the necessary resources to be permanently represented as a force shaping global affairs.**

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Meanwhile, countries such as Canada, Switzerland, South Korea, and New Zealand have recently introduced initiatives, supported by a number of other countries, in the WTO to protect food supply chains and medical equipment from export restrictions. Overall, constructive proposals for combatting the crisis and for maintaining a rules-based multilateral system continue to originate from countries of the global West.

These efforts to close the gap left by the increasing withdrawal of the US from responsibility for the global challenges of our time must be intensified. While the West will be strongest if the EU and the US pull together, this will not always be the case, even under a more EU-friendly US administration. It is all the more important, that Europe also articulates the interests of the West and delivers concrete results beyond mere declarations of intent and resolutions.

To establish itself permanently as a global player, the EU must invest in the necessary diplomatic, financial, political, and military resources to be permanently represented as a force shaping global affairs. Initially, this means increasing financial contributions to multilateral organisations. Many organisations may well see their need for finances rise greatly in the near future. One reason for this is that the fight against the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic will require greater global governance, and another is that many countries will reduce their financial

contributions because of the economic effects of the pandemic. Some of these organisations are already struggling with regard to both finances and personnel – all the more so because of the crisis – and therefore will find it difficult to fulfil their tasks. China and other autocratic countries, such as those in the Gulf region, have indicated that they hope to fill this gap, at least in part. A shift in financing for global initiatives could lead to a fundamental shift in influence in these organisations.

Moreover, despite the importance of soft power, it will be crucial to enhance the hard power component, especially in the new context of system competition. In a world in which – in addition to multilateral initiatives and UN resolutions – determining who has the potential to enforce ideas with military might still matters, hard power remains an essential element of global influence. It is, thus, urgently necessary for Europe to invest more in its joint security and defence policy in order to prevent the transatlantic security imbalance from deepening further.

This is equally true for the area of research and development. The fact that the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva announced in April that, for the first time, China had overtaken the US in the number of patents filed is a clear warning signal. It is therefore important for Europe to do its part to preserve the innovation lead that the global West has so far maintained.

This is all easier said than done, especially given the looming consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within Europe, it will predominantly depend upon credible leadership on the part of Germany and France in order to prevent the crisis from causing the precarious situations of some European countries to worsen. The EU's provision of billions of euros for this purpose is important because it will be critical in preventing permanent loss of faith in moderate political forces and increased popularity of populist representatives and the false hopes of dirigisme and statism. Failure to do so would not only



weaken the global attraction of the Western model of order and society, but also make international cooperation within the pro-Western camp more difficult.

### *Approach 2: Forge Alliances*

Neither the US nor Europe will be able to protect the liberal world order and its values and principles unaided. Success depends, rather, on the formation of sufficiently broad alliances. But the first step is to enhance the cohesion and influence of existing alliances, especially the EU and NATO. Fortunately, despite all the differences of opinion, the West is based on a strong community of values and interests that goes far beyond the trivialities of the latest political developments. In addition to the many common values and principles, nations of the global West also have a common interest in a stable international security architecture, and a level playing field for global economic competition.

The alleged dilemma between supposedly hard security and economic interests, on the one hand, and values and principles, on the other is, incidentally, very deceptive. Countless examples (including the recent discussion on the participation of the Chinese company Huawei in the expansion of the German wireless network) show that values and interests can almost never be separated from practical foreign policy, and that the realisation of certain values can, of course, in themselves be a foreign policy interest.<sup>9</sup>

This is another reason why – as the US increasingly withdraws from responsibility for a liberal world order and the EU cannot fill the gap with its member states alone – the search for like-minded nations must include states such as Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, and Ukraine. Existing cooperations can be expanded. Beyond “classical allies”, the search must be pressed to North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and to key players in South-east Asia. All over the world, there are potential allies who share the values of a liberal world order, or at least share a few essential interests on specific issues. Many of these players have

little interest in global legal and technical standards being set by China, or by a China-led alliance in the future.

Forming alliances that acquire “critical mass” is especially important when acting in multilateral organisations. This is true both for liberal Western democracies and for China and its allies. Only countries who succeed in forging tactical alliances with central players or groups ultimately have any chance of asserting themselves successfully. In the past, China has been skilful in using this fact to its advantage.<sup>10</sup> The so-called African group states has long demonstrated that if it shows a united front in multilateral organisations, it can be a decisive power block. Many have taken note of this, including top personnel in central organisations.

**There is much to indicate that classic multilateral solutions will increasingly be the exception in future.**

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Overall, there is much to indicate that classic multilateral solutions that are reached by consensus will increasingly be the exception in future. This does not mean that multilateral organisations will become obsolete. They will remain important and even indispensable fora for international dialogue, even if they are likely to become platforms of plurilateral solutions in the future, i.e. frameworks in which alliances of the willing are created to tackle specific challenges. This will require an even more active role for the countries of the global West in reforming international organisations. The announcement of a German-French initiative for reforming the WHO and its launch in August 2020, is a promising example.

Despite all efforts, however, it will hardly be possible to significantly limit China’s influence, and that of other autocratic countries in multilateral formats. Even if liberal democracies were to succeed in pulling together over an



extended period of time, they are not a majority in the community of nations.<sup>11</sup> This also leads, for instance, to the fact that in the UNHRC the tone is set not only by democracies and hybrid regimes, but by autocracies that are themselves accused of human rights violations. China, in particular, continues to introduce resolutions that would weaken the definitions of human rights (even though it no longer has its own seat

in the UNHRC as of this year<sup>12</sup>). There are good reasons to decry this situation, but there is little to be done about it in the foreseeable future. This is also true of the fact that multilateral organisations continue to elect heads who hail from autocratic countries.

Despite all the rivalry and justified suspicion, it will be important, in several policy fields for which



A responsible partner? A significant increase in Chinese influence has been observed in various international organisations in recent years. Source: © Andy Wong, Reuters.

As long as the US government maintains a fundamentally sceptical stance towards multilateral organisations, this will continue to lead to a situation in which the other countries of the global West, including the EU, find themselves in a boat with China, but without the US, in the search for pragmatic solutions. An example of this is Chinese participation with the EU in the interim appeal arrangement for WTO disputes agreed to by 19 WTO members at the end of April 2020.

### **The EU should develop a common understanding on how a future global order might be organised.**

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There are, however, limits to China's influence in international organisations, this was shown in March 2020 at the occasion of the election of the WIPO leadership in Geneva. In that election, the US, the EU, and other Western countries were able to push through their favoured candidate from Singapore against the perfectly qualified Chinese candidate. However, one reason this worked was that the US was very active in the run-up to the meeting, and the West presented a unified front.

there is no alternative to global solutions, not only to form alliances to *oppose* China and other authoritarian regimes, but also to form alliances *with* them. Reforming the WTO without China is as unthinkable as doing so without the US. The same is true of environmental policy or global health. A policy aimed at completely decoupling from China would involve heavy costs and is therefore not realistic.

This is another example of how important it is for the West to close ranks, all the while forging alliances that go beyond those ranks. Furthermore, it would also be a good idea for at least the EU (preferably with other close allies such as Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Ukraine, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) to develop a common understanding on how a future global order might be organised, and what role international organisations and multilateral formats

would play in it. Indeed, many points of criticism concerning the functioning of international organisations (such as the WTO) are shared, albeit to varying degrees, by the countries of the global West.

### *Approach 3: Exposing the Trojan Horse*

An investigation of why multilateralism is currently in such a deep crisis, although its praises are sung from all sides, leads to the aforementioned reasons, but also to a suspicion that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping might mean something different when they speak of “multilateralism” than Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron do. In fact, Hanns Werner Maull, a political scientist, recently pointed out how incredibly varied ideas can be concealed behind an inflationary use of the term multilateralism. While, for some, multilateralism is merely about three or more players cooperating in some form or other, at least in the West the concept has long been linked to all principles and values that have underpinned the liberal world order for the last seven decades.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, countries of the global West have contributed to the acceptance of such differences in recent years. While the liberal values and principles of the world order after 1945 were still upheld just a few years ago, today – whether by diplomatic representatives, experts, or even within the official discourse of UN institutions – there is talk of a rules-based order and multilateralism as though peace and liberty throughout the world require merely the cooperation of more than two players or the existence of rules *of any type*. The question of what rules and values (!) should underpin our international order has slipped too much into the background. The question of whether multilateralism in itself actually adds value, or whether the question should be more of one’s choice of cooperation partners should also be posed more frequently.

By abandoning these concerns, the countries of the global West have made it easy for authoritarian regimes such as China to use multilateralism as a Trojan horse to expand their influence in

multilateral organisations and thus to undermine the values and principles upon which these organisations were founded from the inside. Power politics and financial instruments definitely play a role in international organisations, but normative argumentation is at least as important. If definitions of such concepts as human rights and sovereignty begin to shift, the basic rules of the game will, too. It is possible that defenders of Western values should have resisted problematic shifts in discourse earlier and more vigorously, for instance regarding such organisations as the UNHRC, and in international humanitarian law.

In order to reassert the principles and values of the liberal world order – human dignity, individualism, freedom, democracy, rule of law, social market economy; in short, the foundations of an open society – the countries of the global West will therefore have to expose this Trojan horse as such in future, and clearly identify where the regulatory concepts of liberal democracies differ from those of authoritarian regimes, instead of continuing to dilute them with the catch-all concept of multilateralism and anyone-can-play initiatives.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The liberal world order is not yet lost. However, the pressure on the West’s model of order and interpretation of sovereignty has increased significantly. In this context, authoritarian regimes pay public lip service to multilateralism primarily to expand their own influence in multilateral organisations, systematically undermining the values and principles upon which these organisations were founded.

If these values and principles are to return to prominence, taking a clear stand on difficult issues will be unavoidable. This can be seen in two current examples that we will address in closing: the unacceptable exclusion of Taiwan from the WHA and China’s treatment of Hong Kong. It was – and remains – the US, together with partners such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and Japan, that expressed criticism in such cases, while Germany and the EU once

again exercised restraint. This unfortunately confirms the tired and certainly exaggerated reputation of Europe as an unreliable softy.

Germany will have to abandon its often important role as an international mediator and bridge-builder more frequently in order to take a firm stand for those values and principles upon which the classic multilateralism of the post-war order is based. The idea that Germany will assume an international leadership role without having to hurt anyone's feelings is naive in any case.

Despite all the difficulties with Washington and the often beguiling, pragmatic-sounding siren song from Beijing, Germany should not succumb to the temptation of pursuing a policy of equidistance between the US and China. Instruments such as the "Alliance for Multilateralism" should also be more than just "flexible networks". It could, after all, also be used to define a clear position based on Western values, especially on difficult, high-profile issues.

Decoupling from China, and from other autocratic countries, is not an option, for a number of reasons. But taking a stand for the values of the global West should not be sacrificed too often for the benefit of economic interests. After all, it is not least the normative attraction and credibility of the West that will continue to determine its fortunes going forward.

*-translated from German-*

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Source: © Jason Lee, Reuters.

Multilateralism

# Multilateral Approaches in Cyberspace

What is the Likelihood of an Internet Governance Regime?

Christina Bellmann

With increasing digitalisation, there is an increased need for internet regulation to protect human rights and democratic principles. Given the growing restrictions on the digital space imposed by authoritarian states, global efforts to protect the original free and open character of the internet, while counter-acting fragmentation and restriction of fundamental rights, must be supported.

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Since the invention of the internet, the digital space has invaded all areas of life and become an integral part of our daily routines. While, on the one hand, the internet has become a vital infrastructure, on the other hand, not enough is known about the political organisation of the internet on the multiple layers of the digital space.

The discussion about the structure and regulation of the internet has therefore shifted fundamentally in recent years: In addition to concerns about technical infrastructure, questions are increasingly arising concerning the rule of law, law enforcement, and the protection of human rights in the digital space. Given the global nature of the internet, these issues cannot be addressed exclusively at the national level but must be addressed globally. Unfortunately, the instruments of international law, which primarily regulate relations between states, are insufficient for the internet. As a decentralised network, the internet does not stop at national borders. The groups of players shaping the internet, such as telecommunications infrastructure providers, platform operators such as Amazon and Alibaba, and device manufacturers, are all much more diverse and heterogeneous than those in other multilateral regulatory regimes.

In order for the internet to remain a space and driver of innovation, exchange, and encounter, there must be increasing coordination and a broadened base of international law in the area of internet governance – i.e. a regime or regulatory system for the internet. The corona pandemic could reinforce this trend if areas

that abruptly took place exclusively in the digital space – such as classroom instruction, large parts of the service sector, and administrative procedures – were to remain there in future. Germany should therefore expand its efforts to strengthen an internet governance regime based on liberal standards and values.

### **A Regime for the Internet**

The last few years have seen numerous cases in which challenges caused by a lack of regulation of the internet were pointed out by whistleblowers. A prominent example was the global surveillance and espionage affair uncovered by Edward Snowden in 2013: The US' National Security Agency (NSA) and other security agencies broadly monitored telecommunications and parts of the internet, globally and irrespective of probable cause.<sup>1</sup> But discussions about the structure, functionalities, and leading players in this “network of networks”<sup>2</sup> still tend to take place in expert circles rather than in the general public.

The complexity of the internet means that conflicts cannot be clearly located on any given ‘solution’ level. These are global challenges that do not stop at national borders. For this reason, it is sensible to turn towards existing conflict resolution mechanisms in international organisations. However, not all relevant decision-makers, who are critical to shaping the internet, are present at the proverbial negotiating table – because most of the important ones are non-government players. Solutions to regulatory questions about the internet therefore

require a broader group of actors than is necessary for other multilateral, global challenges in the analogue world.

A look into science can help to rearrange our thinking about the complicated issue of internet governance: similarly complex problems, such as combatting global climate change and agreeing on fair global trade, are regarded in political science as “interdependence problems of a sectoral nature”<sup>3</sup>. Increasing globalisation has given rise to this analysis of regimes in international relations, a sub-discipline of political science. It explores sectoral interdependence problems and thus assesses “problems and conflicts in certain sub-areas of international relations (policy fields)”<sup>4</sup>. Regimes deal with conflicts between state and non-state actors (such as multinational corporations), as is the case, for instance, with climate change and global trade issues.

Challenges in these areas seem to be growing ever greater – partly due to the enormous complexity and magnitude of the problem fields – so that partial successes often go unnoticed in the media. However, it is difficult to prove post facto that, without agreements as part of a climate or global trade regime, similarly ambitious climate goals would nonetheless have been achieved or comparable economic value created.

This is the backdrop against which the demand arises for conflict resolution mechanisms and institutions as part of an internet governance regime, focussed on sustaining the system with all its advantages, while protecting democratic structures and achievements. A brief overview of the structure and foundations of the internet is thus helpful before delving into the complex question of regulatory options.

### **Structures and Organisation of the Internet – In the Beginning, there was Technical Coordination**

The internet as we know it today was largely developed at the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> The British physicist and computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee is considered to be its inventor. At



the end of the 1980s, while working at CERN in Switzerland, he was looking for a way to exchange information between two independent university networks located in Switzerland and France. His solution to the problem enabled different existing networks to connect, allowing information to be exchanged through a global electronic communications network. The open structure and free access to the internet protocols thus created, enabled the network to grow quickly and to integrate a vast array of networks all over the world.





Controversial voice: The last few years have seen numerous cases in which challenges caused by a lack of regulation of the internet were pointed out by whistleblowers. [Source: © Rafael Marchante, Reuters.](#)

Simply put, the internet consists of different layers, of which the lowest is the physical infrastructure (cables and electromagnetic waves to transfer data).<sup>6</sup> Above that is the middle layer of internet protocols, which ensures data transfer between sender and receiver through interfaces. The top layer is the one the user perceives: applications, web pages, and e-mail programmes.

The first regulatory institutions relevant to the internet were essentially concerned with the lowest layer and with the technical standards

of its functionality. In so doing, they were following the development path laid out by earlier communications technologies, such as radio or telephone; in some cases, they emanated from the same structures or were integrated into them. For instance, one of the earliest special United Nations organisations with a mandate to coordinate global technical standards is the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).<sup>7</sup> Originally founded in 1865 with the aim of connecting existing international telegraph networks, it laid the groundwork for much of the

standardisation in the area of telecommunications and wireless communications that is still used today. Today, it has 193 member states.

One of the first institutions to focus solely on the internet, the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA), founded in 1988, concerned itself, simply put, with assigning IP addresses – i.e. the middle layer.<sup>8</sup> Later, it was integrated into the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), founded in 1998. ICANN has the task of coordinating the central register for assigning unique names and addresses on the internet.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the ITU with its UN member states, ICANN was founded as a private-sector regulatory authority by the US government under the Clinton administration with the participation of executives from leading US information technology corporations of the time, such as IBM and AOL. It was set up with the intent to counteract the international patchwork of national standards and bodies of legislation. From today's perspective, it may seem paradoxical that the leading telecommunications corporations of the 1990s supported an international organisational regime outside of the ITU, but it suited the neoliberalism of the US at the time and its aversion to state and interstate bureaucracy and to the long negotiation processes involved in the UN system.

### **There was state resistance to the ICANN's founding motivated by fear of having no influence on important decisions.**

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ICANN was thus an US-dominated authority that was intended to be completely privatised and made independent within two years. But this step kept being postponed because of US' interests. As long as there were only a few players in the internet and the organisation was functioning, ICANN's position went relatively undisputed, and there was little reason to

change the existing system. In addition to IANA and ICANN, a number of other technical coordination institutions arose, following the approach of a free, open multi-stakeholder internet – an internet that was formed by many different participants – and thus advocated for as little state regulation as possible.<sup>10</sup> This approach – a free, open internet outside of state-dominated institutions such as the UN – contributed to the internet's unprecedented global development. Effective technical coordination underpinned ICANN's long record of success, and its legitimacy was not questioned at first. Most private players had no interest in changing the system as long as telephone numbers and IP addresses were assigned in a manner which worked.

### **From “Free and Open to All” to More State Participation**

From the very beginning, there was state resistance to ICANN's founding: Motivated by the fear of insufficient influence over important ICANN decisions, a number of European governments advocated for the involvement of governments and international institutions. That is why the Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC) was added to the ICANN structure. At the first World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003, China, Brazil, Russia, South Africa, and a number of developing countries, with the support of the ITU, expressed criticism of the current internet governance structure. A conflict arose between two camps: On the one hand, there were states and actors, which criticised US dominance in the current decision-making system and wanted a multi-lateral institution, representatives of the private sector, the US, and other organisations, on the other hand, supported the status quo and dismissed the necessity of governance structures for the internet.

The result of the WSIS was the founding of the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG), which had a variety of tasks, including developing a working definition of internet governance, identifying public policy issues

involving the internet, and listing internet stakeholders and their roles and responsibilities.

The WGIG contributed to the establishment of a broader understanding of internet governance, defining it as “development and application by Governments, the private sector, and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet”.<sup>11</sup>

The Working Group’s primary proposal was the foundation of a new multi-stakeholder forum to tackle internet-related issues.

This gave rise, in 2005, to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), whose participants can be roughly divided into four stakeholder groups: states, private corporations, civil society groups, and the so-called “epistemic community” made up of technical experts.<sup>12</sup>

### **Control of technical hubs and standards can allow authoritarian governments to abuse their power and limit democratic rights.**

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This is where the transition from technocratic cooperation issues to a broad concept of internet governance, with increasingly complex coordination issues, becomes clear. The interests of the “epistemic community” are associated with the interests of businesses<sup>13</sup> whose future profitability depends on future internet standards. Nonetheless, these technical and economic matters should not distract from the fact that conserving standards and laws on the internet, protecting human rights, as well as free access to the network is becoming increasingly important. That is why the two spheres can no longer be viewed independently from one another: limits to technical infrastructure can lead to the formation of monopolies or oligopolies and to

the distortion of opportunities to the detriment of smaller companies and start-ups. Moreover, control of technical hubs and standards, such as the new 5G technology, can lead to abuse of power by authoritarian governments and to restrictions on the democratic rights of societies. All these issues should be discussed within the framework of the Internet Governance Forum so that the widest possible consensus can be reached on the further development of the internet. These are high expectations of a single forum, and critics allege that it is too self-referential and insufficiently output-oriented.

### **New Challenges – E-currencies, IoT, AI, and Corona**

The speed of technological change has had a significant impact on societal life and led to generations of digital natives and digital immigrants living together in a quickly-changing, media-driven world.<sup>14</sup> The internet contributes to the formation of public opinion, influences how policy is made, and how states communicate with one another. Technical disputes about details such as the availability of domains or IP addresses in the current internet protocol or the transition from the IPv4 to the IPv6 system are juxtaposed with questions of data protection and human dignity.

A few examples show how new technologies have the potential to fundamentally change existing governance systems:

#### *E-currencies*

Digital currencies developed by commercial companies challenge the current system, which is based on state actors and central banks. Potential benefits, such as transparency, security, and efficiency due to blockchain technology, are countered by issues of standard setting, system security, and stability.<sup>15</sup> Cryptocurrencies already play a decisive role in the fight against terrorism and organised crime: diverging international standards with regard to the freezing or confiscation of funds to finance illegal activities make regulation difficult. For cryptocurrencies

to be useful, they must be converted into existing currencies. This is the opportunity for prosecution. The increasing opportunities for using cryptocurrencies outside the state-regulated banking system could become a problem for law enforcement and thus a challenge for an important pillar of democratic systems.

### *Autonomous Driving*

Autonomous vehicles are, so to speak, data centres on wheels,<sup>16</sup> with hardware, software, sensors, etc. The advantages of automated vehicles are similarly balanced by the risks of hacker

attacks – which could affect not only street traffic, endangering human lives, but also gain access to car manufacturers' corporate networks using compromised vehicles.

### *Protecting Privacy – Internet of Things (IoT) and AI*

The mass collection of personal data in so-called smart home hubs is not the result of hacking, but rather the *raison d'être* of these systems, enhancing their functionality.<sup>17</sup> Many of these smart household devices communicate not only with their manufacturers, but also



Risk and opportunity at once: The advantages of automated vehicles are similarly balanced by the risks of hacker attacks. Source: © Thomas Peter, Reuters.

with third parties, in some cases without the user's knowledge or consent. Due to the transnational activities of appliance manufacturers, various national legal systems come into play. The national differences in areas such as evidence law make it harder to reach an agreement on how manufacturers and information providers should store data collected from IoT devices.

### **As a result, crucial processes of our democracies are rendered even more vulnerable to direct digital attacks.**

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The corona pandemic has also (at least temporarily) further accelerated this development: social distancing requirements make digital networks even more important than before and internet-based services via platforms such as Amazon and Netflix are growing at an unprecedented rate.<sup>18</sup> Providers of video technology, such as Zoom and Microsoft, are experiencing rapid sales and, in some countries, parts of court proceedings are performed by videoconference.<sup>19</sup> Large parts of national and international parliamentary work was shifted to the internet. For instance, Germany's Bundestag and the European Parliament hold many of their sessions online in order to remain functional while maintaining the social distancing. As a result, crucial processes of our democracies are rendered even more vulnerable to direct digital attacks, from disruptions aimed at impeding work to theft of confidential documents by hackers.

#### **Climate Regime, World Economic Regime, Internet Regime?**

All these examples show that the need for cooperation in the area of internet governance is growing and that much thought must be given to new conflict resolution mechanisms. The integration of various sectors in the area of the internet is further complicated by the large number of actors involved. The history of

multilateral regimes shows that without them, actors, which behave cooperatively, are at risk of being exploited by those that do not. This has been seen in regimes to govern global trade relations – i.e., the global currency regime with the IMF and others, the global trade regime with the GATT and the WTO, or the development regime with the World Bank group – and with the climate regime. The internet will be no different. Put bluntly, if there is no agreement on the further development of the internet, the entire system is at stake.

Previous international regimes were limited in their scope in one manner or other: global trade regimes are currently largely based on decisions made by nation states and central banks. Although the climate regime is viewed globally, it is regulated and implemented at the regional or local level – albeit with a few exceptions, such as emissions trading. The human rights regime is anchored in international law but implemented by national executives. There are no such limits to the internet.

An additional concern with the issue of internet governance is that, as outlined above, we are dealing with a complicated ensemble involving a growing number of policy areas, which must all be taken into consideration. The intricacy of these various policy areas, their level of interconnectedness, and the variety of organisation and personnel involved, not all of whom are organised within the existing regime, make negotiations about internet governance unbelievably difficult. This complexity is well known, which is why the Internet Governance Forum should be adapted and further developed, accordingly.

#### **Multi-Stakeholder Initiatives vs. Internet Multilateralism**

By signing Tim Berners-Lee's "Contract for the Web",<sup>20</sup> presented at the 2019 Internet Governance Forum in Berlin, the German federal government expressed its support for an ambitious initiative that will bring an internet governance regime one step closer. The "Contract



Building trust: platforms such as the Internet Governance Forum promote a free, open, liberal internet.

Source: © Ludovic Marin, Reuters.

for the Web” obligates governments, companies, and civil society to support the basic idea of the internet for the future. Each of the signatory groups in this multi-stakeholder initiative has a different obligation to fulfil. States are to ensure internet access for all, prevent the network from being blocked, and ensure data protection and basic digital rights. Companies are obligated to make the internet affordable and accessible, to respect privacy and human rights, and to develop open technologies that prioritise users over profit. Civil society is to cooperate for the further development of the internet, facilitate strong discourse that supports human dignity, and promote a free, open, liberal internet.

The initiative thus takes up the four-pronged structure that Harald Müller, a political scientist and leading regime theoretician, believes is necessary for establishing a regime: principles, standards, rules, and decision-making procedures.<sup>21</sup> It also integrates all the relevant stakeholder groups identified above into a joint consultation process. It considers both the technical cooperation component and the fundamental rights that people in the analogue world enjoy.

From a theoretical perspective, this seems like a good starting point for the successful establishment of an internet regime. Müller notes that

success requires cooperation, which takes place over a longer period of time, allowing the players to develop the necessary trust in the regime's effectiveness.

The German federal government provides state support within the framework of the Alliance for Multilateralism. This informal alliance was created in April 2019 by countries “united in their conviction that a rules-based multilateral order is the only reliable guarantee for international stability and peace and that our common challenges can only be solved through cooperation”.<sup>22</sup> One of the alliance's initiatives is the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace.<sup>23</sup> Those engaging in such calls for a multilateral internet governance regime, however, must take care not to use the same language as that used for different demands. At the 2014 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, for instance, China and other states called for an internet governance system of “multilateralism, democracy, and transparency” and a “cyberspace of peace, security, openness, and cooperation”.<sup>24</sup> This lip service to multilateral principles must not distract from the fact that states such as Russia and China call for more state sovereignty in the area of the internet in order to become gatekeepers for their populations' access to certain areas of the internet. By separating national networks, they also contribute to the fragmentation of the internet.

### **Opportunities for an Internet Governance Regime**

In light of the many different players and the already existing fragmentation of the internet, it seems naive to call for global initiatives to regulate this complex space. Moreover, despite their long histories, other regimes for enforcing global environmental, trade, or human rights standards have shown only mixed success in tackling complex problems. Nevertheless, given the omnipresence of digital changes, it appears necessary to consider promising initiatives for an internet governance regime. Increasing digitalisation of communications requires protections for freedom of speech, the press, assembly,

and privacy on the internet just as in analogue life. These freedoms are essential to the functioning of democracies and are increasingly under pressure from authoritarian states, which are restricting more and more fundamental rights in the digital space.

Far-reaching effects on our daily lives make it all the more urgent that initiatives such as the Internet Governance Forum be supported and considered in conjunction with all areas of policy. It is important that as broad a consensus as possible is found among like-minded states, corporations, civil society groups, and scientists so as to counteract authoritarian tendencies. Discussions of the supposedly technical issues must not disguise the fact that the further development of the internet involves decisions with far-reaching political implications. Multilateral structures and institutions must take the multi-stakeholder structure of the internet into account if they are to achieve a balance between having a free and open space for innovation and protecting fundamental rights.

*-translated from German-*

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[Other Topics](#)

# Youth Revolution or Identity-Forming Movement?

An Anatomy of Mass Protests in Iraq

[Gregor Jaecke](#) / [David Labude](#) / [Regina Frieser](#)

The emergence of a common Iraqi identity has always been hampered by the great heterogeneity in the population. However, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have united in repeated protests, the largest since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Meanwhile, the elites are attempting to hold on to as much of their power as possible.

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### **Repression and Government Crisis Following Protests**

In a crisis-ridden country such as Iraq, popular protests against the ruling elite are no rarity. In the last few years, protesters have focused primarily on improved state services (especially water, power, and healthcare), but in many parts of the country, corruption has also been an issue. What triggered the unrest that began on 1 October 2019 was the demotion of Iraqi General Abdel-Wahab al-Saedi, a hero of the war against the so-called Islamic State (IS) who was highly respected by the population. For many Iraqis, he is a symbol of the fight against corruption and nepotism. For the majority of Iraqis, state humiliation of a person of integrity such as al-Saedi was emblematic of the country's corrupt ruling elites, which ruthlessly divides resources amongst itself and has long since lost sight of the common good. Moreover, many also suspected that Iran was behind the incident.<sup>1</sup>

Sajad Jiyad, a renowned Iraqi political expert and long-standing cooperation partner of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, describes the beginning of the wave of protests as follows: "The atmosphere was part carnival part defiance, as thousands of young people congregated to call for change. For many that participated it was an opportunity to congregate with like-minded people and feel some power was being retaken from an older, unrepresentative political class that they did not identify with. Protestor demands evolved from those mainly based around economic issues to becoming more maximalist including a complete change in the government."<sup>2</sup> To judge by number of participants (across the country, hundreds of thousands took

to the streets every day) and proliferation, the protests are the largest since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and remain in the tradition of the 2015 and 2018 protest movements.<sup>3</sup>

For months, demonstrators occupied the central squares and transportation arteries. In the heart of Baghdad, at Tahrir Square, they set up a tent city and blocked the bridges over the Tigris. The protesters repeatedly attempted to penetrate the so-called Green Zone, the government district of the capital, and were driven back forcibly by security units. Streets throughout the country saw clashes between demonstrators and police. Tuk-tuks became a symbol of revolt, and their drivers became the secret heroes of the protest movement. They transported material and demonstrators to the thick of the clashes at the hotspots, or helped them to retreat. Pop culture symbols also gained popularity: for instance, the American blockbuster movie "Joker", which was released at the beginning of October 2019, was seen as an analogy for the rebellious Iraqi youth.

Besides the announcement of a few reforms, the state apparatus' reaction was repressive. Security forces attacked participants in the mass demonstrations and used live ammunition as well as tear gas and rubber bullets. Many protesters reported that it was not only Iraqi security forces that were opposing them, but also armed personnel from Iran. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) numbered the dead at 490 and the wounded at 7,783 after a period of eight months.<sup>4</sup> Other reports speak of as many as 600 dead and around 20,000 wounded.<sup>5</sup>

From the point of view of the demonstrators, the protests against the rulers were partially successful. In November 2019, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, who had been in office for only a little more than a year, was forced to announce his resignation. But this step plunged the country into a six-month governmental crisis. Iraqi President Barham Salih tasked three candidates in a row with forming a government. After the first two failed to gain the support of the Iraqi parliament, a majority finally approved Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as the new prime minister in May 2020.

Yet, even after the new government was formed, the protests continued. However, after the COVID-19 pandemic first broke out, and strict movement restrictions were introduced, the protests reduced in size. The effects of the pandemic, falling oil prices, and the disastrous public finances caused the situation in Iraq to worsen further. In the summer of 2020, protests broke out again despite the new government's promise of reforms and continuing fear of the virus.<sup>6</sup>

### **Membership of a certain population group often gives individual citizens certain privileges, which is reflected in the country's political system.**

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This article sheds light on the forces driving the wave of protests and points out the key individuals and groups. Central motivations are poverty, lack of prospects, insufficient governmental services, and corruption. But how relevant is the protest, and how broad is its support? Are these primarily youth protests, or are the demonstrations, which can be observed throughout almost the entire country, the expression of a new Iraqi self-image that could bring about lasting change?

### **The Iraqi Mosaic**

The emergence of a common Iraqi identity has always been impeded by the great heterogeneity of the population. King Faisal, the first ruler of Iraq, said in 1917,

“There is still – and I say this with a heart full of sorrow – no Iraqi people, but unimaginable masses of human beings, devoid of any patriotic idea, imbued with religious traditions [...] connected by no common tie [...] prone to anarchy, and perpetually ready to rise against any government whatsoever.”<sup>7</sup>

The various ethnic and religious identities are of paramount importance in Iraq. Membership of a certain population group often gives individual citizens certain privileges that are reflected in the country's political system.

The majority of Iraqis (about 70 per cent) consider themselves Arabs. Among the minorities are the Kurds (17 per cent) and the Turkmens (three per cent). The differentiation according to religion may be even more significant. The Muslim majority (95 per cent) is split up into Shiites (65 per cent) and Sunnis (35 per cent), and there are other minorities such as Christians and Yezidis. Additionally, large parts of society continue to be organised according to tribal structures.<sup>8</sup> This makes for a complicated mosaic.

#### *Hybrid Identities Made up of Religion, Ethnicity, and Milieu*

Membership of various denominations and ethnicities results in a number of milieus, communities, and hybrid identities.

The terms “religious” and “ethnic” identity do not merely describe the religious or cultural traditions of a population group, but serve primarily to differentiate between that group and others. In the Iraqi context, these categories are often instrumentalised and politicised in the pursuit of political interests.

The milieus are by no means hermetically separated from one another, but have many regional and social overlaps. After all, people come into contact not only in their religious or ethnic communities, but also, always and everywhere, in many other areas of life – be it at work, clubs, trade unions, cafés, and so forth. Nor are religious groups internally homogeneous, for

instance as regards issues of domestic and foreign policy.

### **The Political System, a *Perpetuum Immobile***

Iraq's political system has, since 2005, been based on ethnic and religious proportional representation: According to the constitution,



Right in the middle of it: Tuk-tuks became a symbol of revolt, and their drivers became the secret heroes of the protest movement. Source: © [Thaier al-Sudani, Reuters](#).

political offices are distributed to certain parties and religious groups according to a quota system (*muḥāṣaṣa*). The Iraqi president is always a Kurd, the prime minister a Shiite, and the speaker of the Council of Representatives, a Sunni. One ministerial position is reserved for a Christian and one for a Turkmen. The quota system applies to all levels of public office, from

the top ministry official (Director General) to the lowest functionary in the security apparatus. Membership of a group defined by ethnicity or religion thus forms the basic principle of the political order.<sup>9</sup>

Iraq's political reality differs from a democratic understanding of politics, in which the will of





Mismanagement and political failure: One of the most oil-rich countries in the world is incapable of caring for large sections of its population. Source: © Essam al-Sudani, Reuters.

the voters is represented in parliament, and thus in the system of government. Individual ethnic and religious groups have taken advantage of the denominational system to divide up offices amongst themselves even before the election process. This cements the status quo, prevents competition, and hinders decisions in the interest of the population or a majority thereof. The frustration of the Iraqi population is expressed, for example, in low voter turnout, which was only 44.5 per cent for the parliamentary elections of 2018.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, it is not just the filling of offices and posts that are thus arranged, but also access to resources. Moreover, politicians and government officials circumvent accountability by

appointing relatives or political supporters to positions within the scope of their responsibilities – often regardless of qualifications. Members of a specific group thus attempt to get as much as they can (government services, social safeguards and jobs etc.) from the part of the system allocated to their community instead of contributing to society as a whole. The system's institutionalised divisions favour clientelism, nepotism, and corruption. This pattern also flows into the economy, which is not characterised by a state of free enterprise, either.

The majority of the population suffers, but the members of the political elites and their supporters profit from the omnipresent agreements, which also protect them from legal investigation.



This results in a system that is resistant not only to transparency, but also to long-term reform. Young Iraqis desirous of becoming politically active are usually denied access to important positions. The quota system thus creates a political and societal *perpetuum immobile*.

By its very nature, the ethnic-sectarian system results in great centrifugal forces that decisively impair the formation of a common Iraqi identity. Many Iraqis do not view the state, but above all the leaders of their own communities, as their sovereign.

### Socioeconomic Imbalances

The Iraqi economy is characterised by mismanagement, inefficiency, great income inequality, and a structural inability to innovate. It also suffers from a greatly bloated public sector that requires large government subsidies. In 2019, 47.5 per cent of Iraq's budget went to pay government employees.<sup>11</sup> By comparison, the European Union used just 9.9 per cent of its budget for this purpose in 2017.<sup>12</sup> Because the private sector in Iraq is relatively small (37.5 per cent of gross domestic product), many citizens seek employment and a living in public service. 60 per cent of the Iraqi workforce is employed in this sector.<sup>13</sup> Entrepreneurship is slowed down by high bureaucratic and legal hurdles. In the Ease of Doing Business Index published by two World Bank economists, Iraq ranked 171 out of 190 in 2019.<sup>14</sup>

### Insufficient investment in the power infrastructure has led to frequent power outages and widespread contamination or shortage of drinking water.

In addition to financing the public sector, the Iraqi government spends large sums on paying off the national debt of about 125 billion US dollars (58.5 per cent of GDP).<sup>15</sup> Rampant corruption exacerbates the deficit, since it robs the

state of important income. Additionally, Iraq is extremely dependent on oil, which makes up 85 per cent of government revenue.<sup>16</sup> Yet, instead of diversifying and supporting the private sector, especially construction and services, for example, the government maintains its focus on the oil industry.

Debt and mismanagement lead to an enormous budget deficit: the education and healthcare sectors are underfunded, as are the water and power supplies, which can no longer be adequately guaranteed in large parts of the country. Insufficient investment in the power infrastructure has led to frequent power outages, and in many places drinking water is contaminated or not even available in sufficient quantities.<sup>17</sup>

The official unemployment rate is 12.8 per cent (2019), but estimates put it much higher.<sup>18</sup> What is certain is that 33 per cent of those below 30 were out of work in 2019, although relatively many young Iraqis are well-educated and capable of performing demanding work.<sup>19</sup> But there are not enough employment opportunities for them. This has led to a persistent brain drain and to the erosion of the middle class.<sup>20</sup>

The pressure on the labour market and the education system is increasing because of the enormous population growth – about one million per year. Today, 40.1 million people live in Iraq – 40 per cent of them below the age of 16, which means that they were born after Saddam Hussein's fall. This demographic development exacerbates the scarcity of resources: 22.5 per cent of Iraqis live below the poverty line. One of the most oil-rich countries in the world is thus incapable of caring for large sections of its population.

Members of all ethnic and religious groups suffer from this failure of the state, and this suffering has, in turn, almost become a unifying element in Iraq. Already since the mass protests of 2015, demands for reform were aimed not only at the *zu'ama'* (Arabic for leaders – of certain ethnic or religious groups or parties) of the group in question, but at the entire ruling class and the system.

## The Entire System Is the Problem

The mass protests of 2019/20 have two decisive characteristics: First, especially in Shiite areas and the metropolitan areas of central and southern Iraq, it is a true grassroots movement that has not allowed itself to be co-opted politically by any established group.<sup>21</sup> Second, the involvement of young female demonstrators is significantly high – considering the low levels of female political participation in Iraq.

The demonstrations and actions are organised primarily through social media (Twitter and Facebook), but clubs and trade unions also play an important role in their implementation. Amongst other things, they help with such items as food supply and first aid to the injured.<sup>22</sup>

The demonstrators' demands vary, but can be divided into the following two main categories: security and the political system.

### Security

The brutality of the security forces and pro-Iranian militias surprised the demonstrators. The demands for state inquiry and justice for the dead and wounded have become essential requisites of the insurgency. It will be a significant measure of the new government, since the prime minister's credibility depends on it to a great extent.

Besides economic and political demands, the demonstrators had originally called for a reform of the security apparatus. They were concerned about the government's monopoly on the use of force and the role of the so-called Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF, *al-ḥašd aš-ša'bī* in Arabic).<sup>23</sup> The Iraqi executive does not have complete control of the PMF. During the protests, the pro-Iran units of the PMF acted with particular brutality against the protesters. They mixed with security forces and used live ammunition at times.<sup>24</sup> It has not yet been conclusively determined who is responsible for this – that is, who gave the order. The demonstrators therefore demand that the PMF be subsumed entirely

into the structure of the Iraqi security forces, and thus be placed under formal governmental authority.

### The Political System

As outlined at the beginning of this article, corruption in Iraq is ubiquitous because it is anchored in the system.<sup>25</sup> After the resignation announcement by Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi in November 2019 – a partial success for the demonstrators – they focussed their demands on provincial government reform.<sup>26</sup> The perception of many Iraqis is that regional structures do not counteract the power of the central system in a positive manner, but instead form a further level of mismanagement and corruption.<sup>27</sup>

## Protesters demand that the political and economic influence of the US and Iran will be reduced.

The demonstrators demand a re-organisation of the entire political system. They are calling for quick new elections and a reform of the electoral system so that independent candidates have a better chance of being elected in future. A first step was the Iraqi parliament's compliance with this demand at the end of December 2019. One change is that voters will no longer vote for a list, but for individuals, allowing greater precision in voting for certain candidates. Another is a restructuring of the constituencies. But more than half a year after the parliament's decision, the political parties are still negotiating about the precise number of constituencies, and their borders.<sup>28</sup>

Young and disillusioned: The involvement of young female demonstrators is remarkably large.

Source: © Essam al-Sudani, Reuters.





At the end of July 2020, the prime minister made a public declaration of the date for the preponed elections – 6 June 2021. This puts pressure on the political parties to agree quickly on the points cited above, and to set a date for the parliament to disband. Moreover, an electoral commission must be set up to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections. It will be a long road, since the legal, logistical, technical, and financial framework must be created or clarified beforehand.

Finally, protesters demand that the political and economic influence of the US and Iran be greatly reduced. Their slogan is “an Iraq of Iraqis for Iraqis”.<sup>29</sup>

The severity of the protest waves prompted the implementation of some of their demands. The fulfilment of further demands may well first require overcoming the religious and ethnic proportional representation system, while maintaining pressure in the form of street protests. In other words: the entire system is the problem.

### **A Middle Way in Mesopotamia?**

The ethnic and religious elites naturally oppose such far-reaching changes, for, as described, this could endanger their status, power, and sources of income. The brutal violence used against the demonstrators was likely an expression, on the part of the system representatives,



of their willingness to defend it. This willingness can also be observed in the restrictions on the work of journalists and members of civil society. For instance, the kidnapping of human rights activist Saba al-Mahdawi in November 2019 attracted great attention. Al-Mahdawi was released a few days later, but dozens of protesters were murdered by masked men who may have been members of pro-Iranian militias. The targeted killing of political analyst Hisham al-Hashemi in Baghdad on 6 July 2020 is another indication of the brutality with which these militias seek to silence critical voices.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, especially at the start of the protests, great efforts were made to prevent reporting, as indicated by closure of news and television broadcasters and, at times, internet blackouts throughout the country.<sup>31</sup>

Certain political actors could, however, pursue a long-term strategy that would incrementally open the way to reforms. Iraqi experts emphasise that the events of recent months have undoubtedly shaken the political elites, and that the resilience of the protest movement could change the status quo over the long term.<sup>32</sup>

### **A new flare-up involving more bloodshed can only be prevented if the various sides are prepared to compromise.**

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The influential cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr, head of the Sairoon movement, Iraq's largest political faction, has shown that even representatives of the traditional elites can be ambivalent in their actions: the "blue caps" (Arabic: *al-qubba'āt az-zarqā'*), an unarmed intervention force belonging to his movement, were first deployed at the very front of the protests to protect the demonstrators, but Sadr himself recalled them at the end of January 2020 and called for his followers to leave the protest camps. Some of the "blue caps" then turned on

protesters, while other members of his movement remained with demonstrators, in violation of their instructions. Finally, Sadr ordered the "blue caps" back to support the protest.<sup>33</sup>

#### *The New Prime Minister as Mediator*

Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi himself raised Iraqi citizenship to a new standard at the end of June 2020, emphasising that membership of an ethnic or religious group is a thing of the past.<sup>34</sup> This demonstrated at least verbal solidarity with the protest movement. Whether his words will be followed by deeds is to be seen in the coming months. The new prime minister has also surrounded himself with advisers close to the protest movement, and upon coming to power, his government announced several ambitious projects, especially an inquiry into the excessive use of force against the demonstrators, and the financial compensation to families of the victims. Moreover, many protesters have been released from police custody since May 2020. As a symbolic gesture, Al-Kadhimi also restored the beloved General Abdel-Wahab al-Saedi to his post. To which extent this has helped Al-Kadhimi's reputation within the protest tents cannot yet be determined. Large parts of the movement still consider him part of the ruling elite, and reject his election. Even as a non-partisan head of government, he, like his unsuccessful predecessor, is dependent on the support of political factions.<sup>35</sup>

All of those involved must realise that a new flare-up of mass protests, and in the course of this, further bloodshed, can only be prevented if the various sides are prepared to compromise. Muqtada al-Sadr indicated a middle path in a tweet, in February 2020. Referring to demands of past protests, in which the demonstrators had called for a liberal Iraqi society following the American model, the cleric retorted that Iraq would become "neither a Kandahar nor a Chicago".<sup>36</sup> The elites will attempt to hold on to as much of their power as possible, and may blaze an Iraqi trail between Western liberalism and religious authoritarianism.

## Conclusion: Iraqi Society Is Shifting

There is no doubt that the protests are not a mere youth movement. Although the insistence and despair of the younger generation, which makes up the bulk of the protest movement, are decisive driving forces for its strength and resilience, the majority of all classes, religions, and ethnicities identify with the movement's fundamental demands. Even those who stay away from the protests as they fear reprisals from political leaders, such as loss of jobs or privileges or violence from security forces and pro-Iranian militia, agree in principle with the protesters' goals.

It is true that the predominantly young demonstrators feel alienated from the political elites. However, much broader swathes of the population also no longer feel represented by these elites. A majority is disillusioned and has lost faith in the politicians, their will to reform, and their problem-solving abilities. It can therefore be assumed that this protest movement will be a lasting one. There could be demonstrations until the government's reforms show positive effects, i. e. until people's living conditions are noticeably improved, or at least until credible steps are taken to change the system. Until there is change from which the majority of Iraqis benefit, continued unrest is to be expected.

The protests have already contributed to the implementation of initial reforms and set others in motion. Whether all the demands will be realised also depends on factors that Iraq cannot directly influence: the ongoing economic crisis is currently exacerbated by the drastic drop in the price of oil and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, there is the conflict between the US and Iran, which is largely being carried out on Iraqi soil. The overlapping regional and global crises cannot be viewed in isolation from one another. How these multifaceted problems affect the protest movement and its demands therefore remains to be seen.

The demographic factor, on the other hand, may well be an advantage for the protest movement.

After all, the rebellion is also a youth protest; most young Iraqis identify with the uprising, and are likely to continue to call for the realisation of its objectives in future. The influence of older generations and elites, in contrast, will gradually wane.

There is no doubt that the protests have enhanced a feeling of common national identity, and thus contributed to the development of an Iraqi self-image that strives to overcome ethnic and religious lines of separation. Therefore, these protests are more than a mere youth revolt. Although the majority of protesters on the streets are not yet 30 years old, the demands formulated are likely to change society as a whole in the long-term, across all age groups and ethnic-religious divides. However, this change has only just begun, and the various interests and political players have the power to undo all that has so far been achieved.

Iraq is not yet a truly unified nation, and its national identity is not yet fully developed. The protest movement shows that the sum of the individual demands creates a possible basis for the development of such an identity upon which the nation can build in the future. One thing is certain: Iraqi civil society is at the very beginning of a long and difficult road.

*-translated from German-*

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