

Time to renew multilateralism

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The new challenges humankind is called to face, the new dynamics of an increasingly complex global context characterised by a new range of state and non-state actors, and the recent pandemic which has acted as a magnifier of existing trends, all open up a new set of scenarios. The European Union will have to adjust and find answers to these possible scenarios, if it wishes to assert itself on the global scene while remaining true to its values. Such answers can only be found in a new, fair and inclusive multilateralism.

Human history is now reaching a new phase as humankind is confronted with new common global challenges that are vital – human health, living conditions, survival on this planet. Global governance needs to be re-invented to cope with this new situation.

Furthermore, the range and dynamics of the relevant global actors are now very different because they include many new countries that joined the UN system after decolonisation, as well as new great powers, regional organisations, multinational corporations, civil society organisations and global citizenship.

These new challenges and new actors have generated a large set of global initiatives that create a very complex landscape of global governance: plurilateral platforms (such as the G20), comprehensive bilateral agreements (notably in trade), regional political organisations (such as the European Union and the African Union) and multi-actor coalitions focusing on particular issues (such as the environment).

Competition between the great powers is also evolving. After the long bipolar period with the US and the USSR as major centres of power, and the US-unipolar phase after the fall of the Berlin Wall, American hegemony now seems to be in decline due to both American retrenchment and the emergence of new great powers, notably China. More recently, this multipolar world and this new great-power game seem to be reaching the level of systemic competition between different potential global orders.

Furthermore, and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic is now acting as a catalyst and a magnifier of all these challenges and tensions. The response to this crisis is unfolding

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in different phases: health emergency and lockdown, the re-opening and re-launch of human activity with several setbacks, countering a big recession, preparing recovery with transformation of our economies and societies. This is a make-or-break moment for international cooperation, and it will probably be a turning point in shaping the emerging new global order. Several scenarios are being considered.

First of all, a Western revival, particularly due the replacement of US President Donald Trump by Joe Biden – a huge relief for the entire world! This might not fully change the American attitude to trade but will certainly bring a new American attitude regarding climate or human-rights standards, as well as an American re-engagement in the UN system, and, more fundamentally, democracy and the rule of law.

- Nevertheless, we have a new world now, and the scenario most likely to materialise is the ongoing fragmentation of the current global order and the emergence of a polycentric structure with zones of influence, including China's new zones of influence. These different poles and zones of influence can also become more inward-looking and use a weakened multilateral system selectively for their particular needs.
- In order to prevent this last scenario, renewing international cooperation with a multilateralism for the 21st century should be the way to go. The chances for such a scenario depend on the establishment of a large coalition of forces involving willing states,

regional organisations, civil society entities of different kinds, and also willing citizens wherever they are in the world, even under authoritarian and anti-multilateral political regimes. This would be a global coalition of progressive forces, which could count on a core of strongly committed forces as well as on a variable geometry according to the different objectives.

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The European Union is now on the path to developing stronger instruments of European sovereignty in the budgetary, economic, social, and environmental fields, and it should aim at asserting itself as a fully-fledged political entity with a vital interest in defending and updating a multilateral system at world level, and in building up a global coalition of allies.

First of all, the objectives of multilateralism should be updated. Even if the main objectives of peace and security, human rights and development remain central, they should be understood through a new conceptual lens:

- peace and security must include the new dimensions of outer space and cyberspace, to prevent their weaponisation, their tendency to cause new social divides and the risk that authoritarians use them for their goals;
- human rights must be asserted radically against all kinds of discrimination and incorporate full gender equality, as this concerns half of humankind;
- development is not only for countries catching up. It is for all countries because all countries need to change their development model towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Furthermore, new objectives with a global dimension should be explicitly added for a renewed multilateral system:

- the provision of global public goods, such as vaccines, health services and education;
- the common but differentiated responsibilities for global commons such as climate, natural resources and cyberspace;
- the governance of global exchanges and interdependence in different fields – finance, trade, investment, technologies, intellectual property rights and human mobility.

Some principles of renewal should drive the transformation of the current multilateral system to:

- focus on well-being for all and on a new relationship with the planet and nature, according to the One Health principle;
- focus on reducing social inequalities inside countries, between countries and between generations;
- be inclusive of all human beings, assuming the same fundamental rights for all;
- promote upward convergence towards the achievement of the common goals, beyond the variety of cultural and political preferences;
- deepen democratic ownership at all levels: local, national, regional and international;
- develop a knowledge-intensive governance using consultation, participation, cooperation, joint learning and artificial intelligence to promote all these principles.

It is high time to develop a new multilateralism for the 21st century. We need a new, inclusive and fair multilateralism!