



Multilateralism: Its Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

The narrative 'sweeps through' history, starting with the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648, on to the Congress of Vienna of 1814-15, to the current terminology of 'modern multilateralism' with its lineage from the Versailles Treaty of 1919 and the League of Nations, to the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference at Bretton Woods in 1944, the European Coal and Steel Community of 1950, to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1970 and concluding the sweep with the Helsinki Process culminating in 1975. The objective of the 'sweep through history' and its main thrust is to analyze how at different times, the world powers of the day turned to multilateralism only after some prolonged, devastating conflict that they had had either blundered, or charged into, left them with no choice, but to sit down and talk, negotiate and take into account a balance of the interests of all parties. All these build up to a point where the narrative explores today's challenges and 'attacks' on multilateralism and the seeming inability of the international community to reengage and work together, to stem, in the words of the United Nations Secretary-General "the wind of madness sweeping the globe." The article makes the case, essentially, for the obvious: we are on the verge of blundering into something far more devastating than the world has experienced before for a variety of reasons, not least among them, unusually deteriorated relations among the most heavily armed and powerful States, a climate catastrophe that is already at our doorstep, the dark side of the unprecedented, quantum leaps in technological development, the deficit of trust among peoples, countries, communities and societies. Add to that the 'game-changing' COVID-19 pandemic and what the world has before it, is a stage set for planetary calamity. We should pull back from the precipice in time. Multilateralism, modern multilateralism, which marks its 100th anniversary this year, is the only way to do this.

In the middle of the seventeenth century, there was no such thing as the International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace, which the international community now celebrates every April. However, diplomacy for peace through multilateralism was precisely what the 109 delegations from all over the tattered European continent were engaging in in 1648, in the cities of Osnabrück and Münster. They had no choice but to come together and talk, albeit without once mentioning the word 'multilateralism,' which had not been coined yet. Through their own folly, unbridled egos, avarice, religious and national intolerance and total disregard for any, other than their own economic and political interests, the various states, royal houses, fiefdoms, religious heavyweights and lesser bishoprics of the day, had bled dry their countries and territories and the peoples of the entire European continent as a

result of a combined 110 years of war and devastation. The resulting set of treaties known as the Peace of Westphalia—without going into their enduring importance for international and interstate relations—set the precedent of peace established by means of diplomatic congress. Even though history remembers many other instances of multilateral negotiations when peace, or any other parleys were held by more than two parties, the Peace of Westphalia is considered the prototype and ancestor of modern multilateralism.

With the need to diffuse the effects of the French and American Revolutions and bring order and stability back to their unsettled world following the upheaval of the Napoleonic Wars, the major powers of the day again turned to the multilateral tool at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the context of what has remained in history as the Congress of Vienna. With over double the number of parties considered to have taken part in the Congress, compared to Westphalia,—from formal diplomats of established empires, to those of lesser crowned heads of different shapes and sizes, to representatives of what in today’s terminology would be referred to as civil society—the Congress of Vienna established major ground rules for the interaction of the Great Powers in Europe, at the same time as they carved up and re-carved the map of the continent. Multilateralism had again proved its worth and would contribute to keeping the peace in Europe for practically a century, until the time when shots rang out in downtown Sarajevo in the summer of 1914.

The blueprint of the Congress of Vienna and the multilateralism tool were dusted off a century later, after the world realized that it had to tend to the wounds it had inflicted on itself by sleepwalking into the tragedy and carnage of a world war. The Paris Conference and the resulting Versailles Treaty of 1919 have the distinction of marking the birth of modern multilateralism, the hundredth anniversary of which we are currently commemorating. The embodiment of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteenth Point, the League of Nations, which tragically for the League, the United States itself chose not to join, has enduring importance not only as the prototype, but in many areas, the precursor to the United Nations. However, due to a multitude of unresolved problems, hurt national feelings, race-based aggressive ideologies born out of economic and political instability and resentment on the part of the vanquished, an altogether dysfunctional financial and monetary system left behind by the collapse of the gold standard in 1914 and myopic, self-centred policies of some major players of the day, not unlike those on the current international landscape, resulted in that world not lasting even a full twenty years and deteriorating into the second, this time, bloodiest conflict in the history of humankind.

Determined not to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors, the leaders of the great powers, leading the nations united by war, worked with foresight, wisdom and determination to create the ultimate multilateral tool, a universal world organization, the United Nations, “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war” and build a peaceful future for the world. This major undertaking succeeded in achieving this overarching aim for the past 75 years, at least. But the leaders of the day realized that no political organization of the countries of the world could be firm and last if the financial and monetary policies were not redressed in step. In fact, forty-four nations came together already in July 1944 at the United

Nations Monetary and Financial Conference at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in order to not only design an entirely new set of monetary rules, but to also ensure that twentieth century multilateralism could endure and work. This cleared the way for the creation of the United Nations itself the following year. This was also a welcome signal that this time, the United States of America was not going to abandon its newborn.

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Europe, devastated by the war and determined that the age-old enmity between France and Germany should not lead to another conflagration on the continent, took multilateralism to a new, supranational level, through the creation in 1950 of the European Coal and Steel Community. Through a variety of transformations, it has grown from the original six signatories to the most unique and unprecedented concept and reality that is the European Union today.

When the folly of the darkest years of the unregulated arms race of the Cold War culminated in the world coming to the brink of nuclear war between the nuclear superpowers over a small island in the Caribbean Sea in 1962, it was a sobering wake-up call. It made the main adversaries, their respective camps and the entire world turn to multilateral solutions, the most important being the 1970 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The bedrock of the Treaty, intended to prevent the international community from ever finding itself on the nuclear precipice again, is threefold: to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology by securing it within the ‘club’ of established nuclear states; to help induce non-nuclear states to renounce seeking nuclear technology by sharing with them the benefits of the peaceful uses of nuclear energy; and, as the overall ultimate goal, furthering nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament.

Multilateralism was not only resorted to when the world found itself in dire straits. Coming on the heels of the successful settlement of the issue of a divided Berlin through the 1971 four-way agreement on Berlin, the multifaceted Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe signed by 35 European countries and the United States and Canada in Helsinki on 1 August 1975, was conceived as an effort to further reduce tension between the Soviet and Western blocs by securing their common acceptance of the post-World War II status quo in Europe. Regarded at the time by the West as a success for the Soviet Union in solidifying its hold on Eastern Europe, its third main substantive area or ‘basket’ ensured that human rights issues would legally no longer be something that the USSR could refer to as “its domestic affair” and in so doing had a far-reaching effect on U.S.-Soviet relations and the outcome of the Cold War.

Why this jaunt through history, one may well ask.

Primarily because, in the face of today's challenges and 'attacks' on multilateralism and the seeming inability of the international community to reengage and work together, to stem, in the words of the United Nations Secretary-General "the wind of madness sweeping the globe," we need to look back and learn, how our forefathers dealt with critical situations they had gotten themselves into in past centuries.

Last year marked the hundredth anniversary of modern multilateralism, dating from the Versailles Treaty of 1919 which established the League of Nations. And this year marks the 75th birth anniversary of the United Nations. These two important anniversaries, coupled with the very disturbing situation in every aspect of life today, require us to take a step back and reflect on how multilateral diplomacy has developed over the past 100 years from the League's initial steps to the complex and comprehensive work of the United Nations today.

The First World War marked a watershed in many ways, and one of them was the demise of the old idea that balance-of-power politics could be a sustainable and long-term guarantor of peace. An alternative international order was needed and so emerged multilateralism, finding expression in the League of Nations in Geneva and later, in the establishment of the United Nations in 1945. And thus, in the multilateralism of the 20th century, violence and unbridled nationalism were replaced with the rule of law, and conflict with cooperation as the basis for global governance.

There is reason to look back with satisfaction. Extraordinary advancements have been made in peace, rights and well-being over the past century, from conflicts prevented or defused by quiet UN mediation, to the elimination of deadly diseases like smallpox; from the provision of safe drinking water and emergency supplies, to the preservation of historic, cultural, and natural sites the world over.

However, two decades into the twenty-first century, we find ourselves facing increasingly complex challenges: a climate crisis wreaking havoc around the world, armed conflicts threatening millions, dire poverty in large parts of the world, refugee flows at record levels, rampant inequality both between and within countries, escalating disputes over trade, sky-high debt, threats to the rule of law, the methodical and deliberate dismantling of disarmament commitments, attacks on the media and civil society, and much more.

These ills affect people everywhere and they are all connected: climate disasters entrench poverty; poverty breeds conflict; conflict triggers refugee flows, and so on. Together, these threats are deeply corrosive. They generate anxiety and breed mistrust. They polarize societies—politically and socially.

To further complicate this, we no longer live in a bipolar or unipolar world; and not yet in a multipolar one, but, rather, in an unsettled world with multiple actors of different calibre with clashing interests and often isolationist politics of fear and resentment. Much to the detriment of the overall world situation, the crucial relationship between the America-China-Russia triangle has rarely been this dysfunctional. None of them has balanced realistic policies towards each other, just reactions rooted in past instincts and old comfort zones. The overall world security

situation is the worst in decades, maybe ever; the past rigid security standoff of the Cold War had its structure and rules. Today, with no rules, those who are called upon to provide ‘adult supervision’ are themselves in need of it. This sets a bad example for the rest of the world, particularly with respect to the utility of nuclear weapons. The international community is losing one pillar after another of the international disarmament and arms control architecture with no proposition of viable alternatives, and increasing reliance is emphasized on the very nuclear weapons that the established nuclear powers are urging others not to acquire.

Instead of seeing the need for that elusive common purpose in working out a *modus vivendi* among them, the nuclear superpowers still operate with terms such as ‘pushback’, ‘like-minded countries’, ‘hegemon’, “zero-sum game,” etc., perpetuating 20th century failed concepts well into the 21st.

In a worrisome related development, medium-sized powers are increasingly acting autonomously from the major powers and are using force without accountability to any of the bigger players. It is impossible to look at Syria, Libya, or Yemen, for example, and not recognize the role of regional powers outside. And the same is true for other conflicts around the world. Security Council resolutions are being ignored.

We are also seeing increasingly militaristic rhetoric and activities, growth in nationalist and isolationist politics of fear and resentment, and the burgeoning role of technology and the private sector—including social media—in international relations.

Power relations are becoming unclear. Multipolarity without strong and accepted multilateral instruments is inherently unstable, volatile, and dangerous. There is a feeling of growing instability and hair-trigger tensions, which makes everything far more unpredictable and uncontrollable, with a heightened risk of miscalculation. What we have is a world of great asymmetries and fragmentation at all levels—political, economic and social.

To say that the world is in transition, would be a gross understatement. What we are living today is not a routine changing environment. Rather, we are transitioning to a different era, something that only occurs maybe every other century. A new social and economic paradigm is emerging, and we all need to join forces to ensure that these changes have positive impact on all. The dramatic and fast-evolving human, social and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic only further strengthens this point.

At the start of 2020, who could have imagined that a disease outbreak could turn the world upside down in such a short time and in such a dramatic way: hundreds of thousands of lives lost all over the world, nationwide lockdowns, economic activity at a standstill in most parts of the world, reintroduced border controls within the Schengen Area and many other unprecedented measures.

The human toll of the pandemic continues to grow by the day, devastating entire families and communities. Its impact on societies and economies is also yet to be fully assessed. The “Global Lockdown” will cost the international economy dearly in the months and years to come and will have devastating consequences on labor markets, affecting to some degree more than 80% of the world’s workforce. The world is about to plunge into a global recession

of record dimensions, far worse than the one that followed the global financial crisis of 2008-2009. Moreover, the pandemic will likely exacerbate extreme poverty and hunger rates in the developing countries for years to come.

The ongoing pandemic is one of the most acute challenges to international cooperation since the end of World War II. We are now facing multiple crises—an ongoing global health emergency, a financial crisis, and a collapse in commodity prices, which compound the existing global threat of climate change, conflicts and poverty, none of which recognize borders, as COVID-19 does not.

Given the magnitude of the unfolding crisis, the already profound mistrust in global governance institutions has deepened further. The past weeks have seen a spate of opinions proclaiming the end of globalization and blaming international institutions for the lack of coordinated and effective response.

Global challenges of such magnitude require concerted, collective responses. Yet, at this very moment, multilateralism itself is being put into question and increasingly ignored as a tool and concept. As Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently observed, “Multilateralism is under fire, precisely when we need it most!” In this moment of geopolitical flux, against the backdrop of a spike in the number and complexity of global problems, what we are seeing is a decrease in will for common action and no common purpose anymore.

2020 is a watershed moment for humankind. More than ever, the international community needs a working system of common rules and shared foundational principles. Multilateralism is one of the best known and most universally recognized principles of international relations. What we need today is the development of a more modern multilateralism, one that is more inclusive and collaborative.

Similarly, leadership must come from all quarters and all levels; gone is the time for a handful of leaders and small groups of countries. Conveniently, there are no such leaders around, anyway!

Multilateralism is no longer just about states, either. In today’s interconnected and interdependent world, governments and intergovernmental organizations alone cannot effectively address complex global challenges such as climate change, conflicts, development and migration. These challenges require our collective response. It will require efforts from everyone: from the United Nations and governments, to the private sector, civil society, academia and, most importantly, youth. The increasing engagement of youth is essential, given the state of our planet. In the words of Secretary-General António Guterres, “it is not enough to proclaim the virtue of multilateralism; we must prove its added value.” This is the new multilateralism. Countries do not have a monopoly on commitment and good ideas. Global challenges require us all to work together for global solutions. International relations do not have to be a “zero sum game”.

Global challenges are also global opportunities: and they can only be addressed collectively. This reality is reflected in the policy frameworks of 2015. Ironically, the same governments that are drawing further and further apart on the vital security, economic and

social issues today, found it possible to come together in 2015 to reach agreements of truly historic proportions: the Paris Accords, Financing for Development and the 2030 Agenda. This gives a unique chance to shape a new governance landscape and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is our common roadmap.

The United Nations remains the only truly global, truly neutral, truly legitimate table around which all stakeholders can come together to find solutions. Contrary to those who speak about the crisis or the decline of multilateralism, the reality is that there is no alternative to multilateralism, especially now. However, a myriad of national governments, international organizations, NGOs and humanitarian actors can only be effective if they act in a coordinated manner.

In this fast-changing environment, new diplomatic policies and practices based on the principles of solidarity and inclusiveness are urgently needed, bringing together all relevant actors, from civil society, think tanks, academia to regional development banks. The collective response has an uneven record, with tensions often undermining the effectiveness of multilateral decision-making processes. But the world needs to be optimistic and hopeful.

We are on the verge of blundering into something far more devastating than the world has experienced before for a variety of reasons, not least among them, severely disrupted relations among the most heavily armed and powerful states, a climate catastrophe that is already at our doorstep, the dark side of the unprecedented, quantum leaps in technological development, the deficit of trust among peoples, countries, communities and societies. Add to that the ‘game-changing’ COVID-19 pandemic and what the world has before it is a stage set for planetary calamity.

We should pull back from the precipice before it is too late.

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