



Rethinking Multilateralism in times of Crisis—Its Value

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Abstract

This article presents a snapshot of the state of affairs in multilateral relations with a historical perspective. At a time when international institutions are under attack for not meeting their objective, enlightened individuals, non-governmental organizations and other non-state actors should actively work with governments and local leaders in revitalizing an effective multilateral system and tackle unprecedented challenges to the promotion of peace, security and wellbeing of humanity. Solidarity, cooperation and the search for collective solutions are the keywords that must be kept in mind.

1. Introduction

On the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the United Nations (UN) Charter, which was signed on 26 June 1954 at the end of the San Francisco Conference about the definition of a new post-World War II global order, the UN Secretary-General (SG), Antonio Guterres, pointed out the urgent need to reflect on the future of multilateralism.

Today more than ever, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that took place within an already complicated and compromised international framework, the need to rethink multilateralism and work on the development of new global governance seems crucial. It is a key priority, a mandatory step to address the major challenges of the current international landscape and reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, launched by the UN General Assembly in 2005. The general purpose of this essay is to discuss the future of multilateralism and analyse how it should be reformed in times of crisis.

The first section will briefly retrace the fundamental historical stages of its development, firstly through the establishment of the League of Nations (LON) and then with the creation of the United Nations Organization, considered the beating heart of multilateralism.

The second paragraph will take into account the difficulties between governments in terms of organisation and coordination, highlighting the weakness of international cooperation and the need to work on building a new multilateral system.

2. The League of Nations and the Development of Contemporary Multilateral Diplomacy

Inaugurated at the Congress of Vienna in 1814, multilateral diplomacy took a significant step forward at the end of the First World War with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles

in 1919. It formally declared the end of the conflict and established the League of Nations, which is considered today the forerunner of the United Nations.

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Due to the planetary dimensions of the conflict and the massive deprivation and violations of human rights perpetrated against the civilian population, no one desired for such a war to be repeated throughout history. For this reason, in the aftermath of the Great War, the idea of creating a political-legal system that is able to prevent international conflicts, maintain peace around the world and develop cooperation in the economic and social field, began to take shape. As a project strongly promoted by the then President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, the establishment of the LON was a crucial moment for the institutionalization and development of modern multilateralism.

The newly formed organization aimed at designing a new global and multilateral order was promoted, and under the sovereign equality of the Member States, cooperation and dialogue between small and large states, and common and coordinated policies aimed at addressing the main challenges of the time were adopted. Issues that required a collective effort were for example human trafficking, protection of children, fight against hunger, containment of epidemics, peaceful resolution of disputes and maintenance of peace.

In general terms, the experience of the LON is considered a failure for two main reasons. Firstly, it was unable to create an effective multilateral system because of the lack of membership by several states, first and foremost the United States. Secondly, following the rise of right-wing totalitarianism during the 1930s, it was not able to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War and therefore ensure order and peace according to its primary function. Despite its failures, it must be borne in mind that the LON was a historical event of considerable importance that had the merit of introducing a new era in the development of international relations. It laid the foundations of what it would become, since the Second World War, the multilateral organization par excellence: The United Nations. The following section will take into account the multilateral dimension of the UN and how international cooperation can be strengthened in order to solve the most crucial global problems.

3. The UN as a Multilateral Institution: Problems and Perspectives

The United Nations is indisputably considered the heir to the League of Nations and expression of that internationalism that strongly inspired the creation of the LON. Unlike the

limited composition of the latter, the UN has now 193 member states representing the main universal intergovernmental organisation.

Following the devastation that the two world conflicts had caused, the founding fathers of the United Nations understood that, in order to prevent other wars from jeopardising the entire humanity and guarantee international peace and security in the long term, it was necessary to set up an organisation. An organisation that would collect various states, resolve global disputes without resorting to the use of weapons and facilitate cooperation at the economic, health, social, cultural and humanitarian level.

In the latest report on the work of the UN, the Secretary-General Antonio Guterres states that “The world continues to face grave global challenges that no single Member State or organization can address alone.” From this viewpoint, as nowadays we live in an increasingly globalised and profound interconnected world, global challenges can only be solved through dialogue and joint action. In this context, the UN certainly plays a vital role. However, its functioning is seriously undermined by structural problems, first of all the antiquated and elitist composition of the Security Council (SC). Its activity is indeed often blocked by the five permanent members and victorious powers of the Second World War, i.e. China, France, the United Kingdom, the United States and Russia. By using the right of veto, they end up protecting their national interests and hindering, *de facto*, the management of the major international crises, leading to a paralysis of both the entire decision-making process of the body and the functionality of the UN system. Moreover, the economic and geopolitical tensions between China and the United States, together with the rise of populism and nationalists, are weakening the action of the UN and the future of multilateralism.

Due to this reason, in order to resolve the most critical international issues, it is urgent to relaunch international cooperation and rethink a new type of multilateralism. Indeed, to address the ongoing global crises effectively, such as the fight against climate change, the reduction of poverty and armed conflict, the growth of hunger and food insecurity, the management of migration flows and health crises, it is necessary to invest in a more inclusive and, therefore, constructive multilateralism. For ensuring the realisation of a safer and more prosperous world, it is essential to adopt an integrated and multi-stakeholder approach. This means that the UN and the multiple specialized agencies that form the organisation, together with the regional international organisations, the private sector, the civil society, the scientific and academic world and the new generations, are called to unite and collaborate to overcome together the numerous crisis that society is facing.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has not stopped yet and continues to cause deaths and new infections, poses a threat, although unconventional, to international peace and security. As a health emergency that later turned into a social and economic crisis, the pandemic has put a strain on multilateralism that was already in trouble, and it has macroscopically brought out a return to national interests and a lack of shared guidelines and strategies necessary to deal with this emergency.

As a result of the critical state of multilateralism, solidarity, cooperation and the search for collective solutions are the keywords that must be kept in mind, because it would be

a fantasy to believe that phenomena that transcend national borders can be solved with a national key. Global challenges require global solutions and, only through a “coalitions of the willing” of states and an integrated and coordinated management between actors at the local, regional and global level, it will be possible to achieve meaningful progress in the development of Agenda 2030 and the fight against coronavirus. About the latter, the alliance created by states for the development of a vaccine is, for example, a clear and effective demonstration of multilateralism.

The tough historical moment that we are experiencing shows us how states are incredibly interconnected and vulnerable, and it is teaching us how important it is to ensure international cooperation for solving the major world challenges. We need to build a cooperative global order, where multiple actors are involved and can offer shared and effective answers through their specific skills and resources. Encouraging international cooperation is one of the goals promoted by Article 1 of the United Nations Charter. Even today it is a document of fundamental importance for the construction of a fair, just, peaceful, supportive and democratic international order. Winston Churchill once said: “Never waste a good crisis.” In addition to reaffirming our commitment to advance the values that inspired the adoption of the Statute of the UN 75 years ago, today, when the world is in turmoil, we must also look at the great crises of our century as an opportunity for change and improvement.

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