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Reinventing Multilateral Order

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Abstract

The multiple crises of our time result from the breakdown of the multilateral order. Some of these crises may intensify between now and 2030. Multilateral organizations have been eroded to the extent that they are unable to manage catastrophic risk, including a military confrontation between superpowers. The weakening of multilateralism is mirrored in the strengthening of hypernationalism in many countries. It will not be sufficient to mend the multilateral system. It is necessary, instead, to envisage new principles for creating a global governance grid superseding the United Nations Security Council that serves the interests of human civilization and not the nation-states. The new grid can be grounded in the philosophy that the world should be treated as a family. It is utopian to expect the nation-states to accept a multilateral order that does not serve their narrow interests. But the alternative is the annihilation of the human race.

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In November 2002, a new coronavirus was discovered in China. The immediate reaction of the Chinese authorities was to understate the risk and hide data from international agencies. Eventually, however, the SARS virus was brought under control and prevented from ravaging large swathes of humankind. It infected eight thousand people, killing under a thousand of them, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

In November 2019, a new coronavirus was discovered in China. Again, the immediate reaction of the Chinese authorities was to avoid providing a realistic picture to the world. Eventually, the COVID-19 pandemic infected almost two hundred million people, killing more than four million of them across two hundred countries by the summer of 2021. It brought the world economy to a standstill. It forced millions of people to live in isolation, tearing apart the fabric of society.

The factor that made a difference in the outcome of the two pandemics was multilateral cooperation. On the earlier occasion, in 2002, countries worked together to defeat the pandemic in efforts coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO). In the most recent episode, of 2020–2021, multilateral cooperation was absent from the global response. Though WHO declared a global health emergency on January 30, 2020, there was no evidence of world leaders urgently and collectively endeavouring to produce a joint action plan in response to such a calamity. Two weeks later, when senior ministers of several countries gathered in Bayerischer Hof hotel in Munich for a long weekend (February 14–16, 2020), there was no indication of their constructively exploring collaborative solutions to contain the pandemic. A few days later, the same leaders made individual decisions to close their respective national borders. In 2003, in the aftermath of the outbreak of SARS, eleven laboratories from nine countries worked together, daily exchanging vital information on diagnosis and testing. In 2020, the initial spirit of scientific cooperation was eventually replaced by a vicious form of vaccine nationalism.

Triple Crises of 2020

The coronavirus occupied most of the world media space in 2020 and 2021. It was one of the three global mega crises of the period. A more significant crisis with damaging long-term implications for the planet was the unprecedented increase in global warming. The year 2020 was one of the two hottest in recorded history. According to a press release issued by the World Meteorological Organization, floods, wildfires, hurricanes, and extreme heat affected millions of people during the year. The summer of 2021 brought heat waves in North America, a devastating cyclone in Mumbai, and snowfall in Brazil. The ongoing climate crisis is due largely to the weakening of commitments to the multilateral framework for cooperation. In December 2015, almost two hundred countries signed the Paris Climate Agreement, but its implementation has been inadequate. The United States, under the Trump administration, wasted four years by withdrawing from the Paris accord. The Biden administration corrected the mistake immediately after taking office in 2021.

The most dangerous of the triple crises of 2020 was the shifting of the nuclear arms race to a higher gear to incorporate hypersonic nuclear missiles that travel at several times the speed of sound and cannot be detected by radar. Thus, they are able to hit targets with nuclear payload with no possibility that they can be prevented or reversed. The hypersonic missiles can destabilize the nuclear deterrence that has provided a tenuous strategic stability in the past few decades. It is difficult to predict when and how nuclear deterrence will collapse, as it almost did during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and in various accidents since then that, fortunately, were averted. Hypersonic missiles make a nuclear attack swift, stealthy, and unpredictable. Once such a missile is pressed into action, by intent or accident, nuclear deterrence is over. The subsequent developments carry the risk of our species' extinction.

In the third week of March 2020, when the world was entering an economic lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States tested a hypersonic vehicle at a missile facility in Hawaii. The vehicle can travel at five times the speed of sound at a low altitude carrying nuclear bombs.

The United States was trying to catch up with Russia and China. In the last week of December 2019, the Russians added Avangard to their defense forces. It is the world's most sophisticated hypersonic glide vehicle. It travels at twenty-seven times the speed of sound on top of an intercontinental ballistic missile and can carry a two-megaton nuclear payload. Because it determines its own flight path, it cannot be detected by the US missile shield. The Chinese already have a DF-17 hypersonic glide vehicle that travels at five times the speed of sound. And they have a DF-41 missile that has a range of fifteen thousand kilometers and can hit the United States in thirty minutes. It carries ten independently targeted nuclear warheads. India tested an indigenously built hypersonic missile in September 2020. Other countries may soon catch up.

The hypersonic missile race that persists among the United States, Russia, and China proves the absence of a multilateral framework for restraining the spread of deadly weapons. About ten thousand nuclear warheads are ready for the next war. Twenty-five hundred of them are on hair-trigger alert and can be launched in ten to fifteen minutes. Country after country is becoming battle ready. Even Japan and Australia, known for their relatively pacific postures, want to deploy missiles. Azerbaijan used lethal autonomous weapons against Armenia in a war in September 2020, taking the warfare to a level beyond human control. The arms control regime is a relic of the past. The Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty has crashed. The United States under the Trump administration ended the Iran nuclear deal, though there is some hope that the Biden administration will revive it. And though President Joe Biden and President Vladimir Putin decided to renew the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in an agreement, referred to as the New START Treaty, that places restrictions on the number of deployed nuclear warheads and missiles in February 2021, its long-term future is uncertain. Nuclear-armed countries and their allies have refused to sign the Treaty on Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons adopted by the United Nations. All countries that are acquiring killer robots are refusing to negotiate any treaty to ban lethal autonomous weapons.

The absence of an effective multilateral crisis-prevention machinery increases the risk of a collision among the superpowers. A provocative move by one of the superpowers could ignite a conflict that could then explode into a full-scale war. A war could start with an invasion of Taiwan or the East China Sea by China, an attack on one of the Baltic nations by Russia, a provocation by the United States to force Russia or China on a perilous path, or some other act that is impossible to foresee today. The world avoided sliding into a great war when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. But the risk remains that a similar adventure in the 2020s could lead to a deadly confrontation with the potential of annihilating the human race. The current multilateral framework, including the United Nations, does not have the capacity to prevent such a slide.

Hypernationalism

The failure of multilateral institutions is evident in a series of recent developments. Since the G-7 summit in June 2021, this group of nations is being transformed into a club to promote Western hostility toward Russia and China. The League of Arab States, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and the Gulf Cooperation Council are internally divided: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt are on one side; Turkey, Qatar, and Iran are on the other side. The European Union has been weakened by the British exit in 2020. Several UN agencies are involved in noble pursuits, such as social development, managing migration crisis,

rehabilitating refugees, and protecting environment and water. What is missing is an effective multilateral framework for resolving political and security conflicts between the superpowers.

The structural weaknesses of the multilateral order have been accentuated in recent years by a wave of nationalism that extends from the United States to China. Despite Donald Trump's defeat in the 2020 US presidential election, the 75 million popular votes he received suggest that support for his perspective remains. The British electorate chose Boris Johnson's Conservative Party to implement the British exit from the European Union for which they had voted in a referendum in June 2016. The governments led by Vladimir Putin in the Russian Federation and Xi Jinping in China represent strong nationalism. In 2021 Iran elected as its president an extremist religious nationalist who has ruled out dialogue with the US leadership. Nationalist forces that have come to power in Hungary, Brazil, India, and Turkey either reject multilateral organizations or treat them as conduits to assert and negotiate their national interests, without necessarily considering the overarching good of humankind.

Hypernationalism witnessed in many parts of the world mirrors the erasing of lines that divide time and space in the collective mind of certain societies. Since John, Lord Alderdice, explained the deep-rooted causes of violent conflicts in a public lecture at Oxford in 2017, the Centre for the Resolution of Intractable Conflicts at Oxford has researched and discussed the phenomenon.¹ Lord Alderdice argued in his public lecture that a collective sense of humiliation often leads to psychological regression and the erasure of the lines between within and without and between the present and the past. People feel that the past is now and what happened to someone else is happening to them. Thus, the humiliation suffered by the Serbs at the hands of the Ottoman rulers a few centuries ago, for example, is seen as a current problem that needs to be avenged by the massacre of Bosnian Muslims. Or Tunisian and Moroccan youth, feeling a religious bond that transcends geography, see the humiliation of the Syrians and Iraqis as their own humiliation. Such dissolution of the lines dividing time and space in the group and individual minds leads to a willingness to kill and be killed. Once such dissolution occurs, there is no fear of death. When several people from an entire community experience such dissolution, it is not possible to predict who would cross the line from rationality of choice to devotion to the cause of community. It can take years or months, but it can also take a few weeks if some incident triggers a latent feeling of humiliation and disrespect in the subconscious mind.

The spread of terrorism and hypernationalism is rooted in the collective sense of humiliation within a community and of deep unfairness in the way it has been treated. The reasons may be real or imagined, historic or current. The result is the devotion of some members of the community to what they consider their core values, which generates a constant, though erratic flow of young men willing to give up their lives to destroy not only life but also the life system of what they consider "the other." We witness this process among radical Islamist terrorist groups. We also witness it with regard to hypernationalist forces. The main difference is that terrorists are nonstate actors and hypernationalists capture the state apparatus using legitimate processes of elections. Hitler and Milosevic have proven that democracy can be used for securing accession to power and then manipulated to produce violent conflicts and wars. There is at present a growing indication of a partial dissolution of the communities on the far right of the political spectrum, which is creating a divide between "us and them" and blurring the lines between past and present, employing the democratic processes to seize control of the state apparatus in their countries and use it to accentuate conflict within and outside using the garb of nationalism.

United Governments Organization

The present international architecture provides a platform for the nationalist governments of competing nation-states to pursue their narrow agenda. What we call the United Nations

Organization is actually the United Governments Organization. It does not represent the spirit of humanity. It is a bargaining forum for the nation-states, where each nation aims to negotiate and aggrandize its own interests. All other organizations, such as the G-20, G-7, and World Bank, are “inter-state” bodies. As long as these organizations serve as a marketplace for brokering national interests, rather than a creative force to shape the collective destiny of humankind, their moral standing and political efficacy for ensuring global peace is bound to be inadequate.

The present system of global governance is wholly inadequate to address big questions facing humanity. The G-20, the UN Security Council, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other institutions react to crisis in a fragmented way. There is nothing in the world that can anticipate and respond to revolutionary opportunities and catastrophic risks in a holistic manner. In the absence of such a mechanism, we cannot reach consensus on a vast range of issues, including pandemics, climate change, the nuclear arms race, and the misuse of artificial intelligence to develop lethal autonomous weapons. We urgently need a new architecture of global governance.

The discourse on multilateral reform is often aimed at restructuring the UN Security Council. The permanent membership of the Security Council with a veto, comprising the United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, and France, was determined toward the end of the Second World War. Seventy-six years later that structure is archaic. Delegates to the UN General Assembly have made repeated demands to include new permanent members in the Security Council to reflect the changed geopolitical realities. On one hand, the inclusion of Germany, Japan, India, Brazil, Nigeria, and South Africa would restore geopolitical balance. On the other, an increase in the number of veto holders may render the body more inefficient than it is today. The UN Security Council often gets paralyzed because the competing permanent members use their veto power to suit their narrow political interests. The introduction of more veto-holding members could lead to even greater paralysis. Such a reform would make the UN Security Council appear democratic, but it could make its decision-making process grossly dysfunctional.

The international diplomatic community has discussed adding new permanent members without a veto. Such an arrangement offers prestige and the opportunity to intervene but without obstructing decision making by the Security Council. This arrangement would provide three layers of membership.

A radical departure from the present debate would be to abolish the veto system. In the last phase of the Second World War, the Truman administration began to formulate proposals for the United Nations. President Harry S. Truman assigned Leo Pasvolsky, a State Department official, to prepare a blueprint for such an organization. Pasvolsky’s draft proposed equal membership in the United Nations for all member states and did not include veto power for any of the member states. Stalin’s officials, however, supported by Pasvolsky’s rivals in the US State Department, insisted on the veto for the five victors of the war. Thus, the UN Security Council with veto power for all five members, which has made the world body dysfunctional, is essentially a Stalinist vision imposed on the world. At present, all five powers covet this Stalinist project and do not want to give up the veto. But we should not forget that the world came close to founding a fair and democratic institution of global governance in early 1945.

United for Mankind, Not Nations

Another radical proposal would be to establish a global governance grid to supersede the faltering UN Security Council, which has repeatedly failed to prevent genocide and other atrocities because of political squabbling and vetoing by member-states. The grid’s design would make it independent of the influence of individual government by barring government

representatives of any kind from its steering committee. Its charter would mandate that it attend only to humanity's existential threats and not be burdened by the day-to-day conduct of international affairs.

The UN Security Council regularly responds to routine, short-term military confrontations and makes decisions about diplomatic and peacekeeping operations. It is not designed to address structural and long-term challenges such as the global nuclear and post-nuclear arms race, conflict between superpowers, climate emergencies, and pandemics. While there exist a few specialized bodies that address cataclysmic challenges to humanity's survival—such as the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change—there exists no organization that can issue directives that are binding to all nations.

The Global Governance Grid would fill the vacuum created by the inability of the Security Council to address structural issues and limitations experienced by the specialized bodies. It would represent and serve humankind. It would not be a bargaining forum for the nation-states. It could be associated with the United Nations, but its operations should be independent of it. The grid would be made up of three bodies: a steering committee, the Parliament of Humanity, and a conflict resolution forum.

The steering committee would be tasked solely with protecting humanity from cataclysmic warfare, pandemics, disasters related to climate change, the misuse of artificial intelligence, and other existential threats and will not be bogged down with the day-to-day conduct of international affairs. Steering committee members must not be affiliated with, or be representatives of, individual governments, such as the government-nominated UN ambassadors currently seated on the Security Council. They will be elected by the UN General Assembly; their qualification for office will be based on their high moral authority, scientific expertise, and intellect. It would be necessary to create an acceptable methodology for the formation of such a body through worldwide deliberations.

The steering committee will be responsible for delivering an annual report to the UN General Assembly on its progress in safeguarding humanity from catastrophic risks. Its resolutions to eliminate risks to humanity's survival will be independent of UN influence and binding on nation-states. It would name the countries and leaders that prove to be obstacles to the progress and thus are responsible for the potential collapse of our civilization. It would galvanize global public opinion to support its agenda. It would mobilize civil society groups to enhance pressure on national governments to take steps to eliminate the risk to human existence from the threats mentioned earlier: pandemics, climate change, the nuclear arms race, conflict between superpowers, and the misuse of artificial intelligence to develop lethal autonomous weapons.

The second body of the Global Governance Grid, the Parliament of Humanity, will link the Global Governance Grid with the people of the world. It will also replace the current structure by which only governments are represented in the United Nations. It can be made up of representatives of the ruling and opposition parties in each country. Whether there should be two or more representatives of each country, how representational questions with respect to single-party states will be dealt with, and other methodological questions should be debated in worldwide consultations.

The third body of the Global Governance Grid, the conflict resolution forum, will settle conflicts between nation-states through arbitration, negotiation, and dialogue. It should have the competence to take up disputes referred by the Parliament of Humanity or by any affected countries, including affected third parties. It would not function as a judicial body to provide a verdict on the right and wrong of a dispute but as a forum to engage parties in exploring common ground. With this wider mandate, it would differ from the International Court of Justice (ICJ), to which only a state party can bring a dispute. The weakness with this system is

that superpowers refuse to take their disputes to the ICJ, especially those that concern their national pride or core national interests.

At present, no forum exists to resolve conflicts between the superpowers. The UN Security Council, in theory, could provide such a forum, but its power has been paralyzed by the constant use of veto power by the five permanent member states. Thus, a new conflict resolution forum must be embedded in the Global Governance Grid that supersedes the Security Council.

The Global Governance Grid will shed the constraints of nation-state representation, lifting the government-independent body above the grasp of the daily contretemps of political leaders that tie down decision making and position itself to tackle more effectively the most pressing issues facing humanity. Such a supranational organization, however, is not in tune with our mental framework. It may appear utopian in the face of our vanity, greed, and nationalism. It will require that nation-states compromise their sovereignty and surrender their national authority. It will also require that they renounce deadly weapons in keeping with the norms and agenda determined by the Global Governance Grid. The question is why the established superpowers will voluntarily give up their authority, lethal weapons, and the control of global security.

No ideology reigns the world forever. When people discover that nationalism causes more damage than good, they will gradually turn away from it. It may seem a difficult proposition in the 2020s. But a different political paradigm might gain acceptance in twenty-five to thirty years if the world does not end up in a hypersonic nuclear war in the meantime. There is ample empirical evidence of how societies reject the values that they once held dear to them. In the sixteenth century, we saw Europe breaking away from the Roman Catholic vision. In the twentieth century, we saw the German people turning their backs on fascism, the South Africans rejecting racism, the Romanians and Hungarians ending communism, and the British and the Austrians accepting the end of imperialism. Empires and ideologies are not permanent. When people are willing to look at a more enlightened architecture of global governance, we must have a soft infrastructure of ideas ready. Thus, it is necessary to prepare now. Just as the warmongers continually prepare for global war with new types of arms, those concerned about the survival of humanity must continually prepare for global peace with new concepts of global governance.

Philosophical Foundation

The idea of the supranational multilateral organization proposed here is not merely transactional. It is envisaged to have strong philosophical foundation.

Zhao Tingyang, a Chinese philosopher, has proposed that “the world,” rather than the nation-state, be the primary unit of social organization. He rejects an international system that is based on relations between nation-states and advocates a global system. In his philosophical framework, all people on the planet have loyalty to “the world” and participate in its affairs as global citizens, not as representatives of their nations. He derives inspiration from the *tianxia* system in ancient China, meaning “all under heaven co-existing harmoniously.”

Daisaku Ikeda, a Japanese philosopher, advocates the philosophy of *chikyu minzoku shugi*, which means that the world is one nation. Ikeda says that it is imperative to transcend the boundaries of the nation-states to solve the problems of human civilization.

For centuries Indian philosophers have been professing the principle of *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, “The world is one family.” It is engraved on the entrance hall of the Parliament of India.

The one-world philosophy has found many expressions, among them, environmental movements, the world federalist movement, and the nuclear weapons abolition movement.

Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell pleaded in their famous manifesto of 1955: “Remember your humanity. Forget the rest.” The acceptance of such a philosophy would require us to divide our loyalty between the nation and humankind. We often have more than one loyalty, including one to the nation and one or more to our linguistic, religious, provincial, or tribal groups. Rising above the national loyalty to be simultaneously loyal to humankind will pose a great psychological challenge, but in its absence hypernationalism in the nuclear age may lead to what Einstein and Russell called universal death.

If we want to harness the wisdom of treating the world as one nation, we need to conceive a global governance grid. Such a mechanism would address the world’s critical problems from a universal perspective. It would aim to transform the world from a battleground of conflicting interests to a community of shared values. The most urgent challenge of our time is for the world’s thought leaders to come together to provide an operational form for such a mechanism.

We have a rather “lazy habit” of finding solutions to the world’s problems after world wars have ravaged millions of people. The League of Nations was born after the First World War. The United Nations was established after the Second World War. A global governance grid to respond to civilizational risks cannot wait for a third world war because such a war would exterminate humankind and many other life forms on the planet.

With advanced nuclear and post-nuclear weaponry and the warming of the planet due to climate change and as an interconnected society prone to rapid virus transmission, we cannot survive the next cataclysmic event. If the next global war or a pandemic several times more lethal than COVID-19 or an unexpected climate crisis annihilates one billion out of eight billion inhabitants on our planet, we will be forced to begin our journey on the path of building the world as one family. Do we want to wait for such a tragedy to occur?

It is imperative that we ask urgently whether we should wait for the next crisis to occur before adopting a global governance grid that places humanity’s survival above the interests of the nation-states, or whether we should pressure our world leaders today to cede some sovereignty and create an independent body charged with preventing the globe’s final catastrophe.

Note

¹ John Alderdice, “Morality, Complexity, and Relationships,” *Journal of Moral Education* 50, no. 1 (2021): 13–20, DOI: 10.1080/03057240.2020.1781603.