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Challenges for Multilateralism in a Pre-Post-COVID World

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Abstract

Multilateralism today faces numerous challenges. This article offers some reflections on those challenges—what they are and how they originated—and how multilateralism can be reinvigorated. It argues that though multilateralism is not a panacea, many of the critical challenges that confront humanity today—biodiversity, cybersecurity, global warming, mass migration, arms proliferation, and the regulation of outer space, as well as the spread of infectious diseases—can be met only with states and peoples cooperating more closely.

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In what follows I offer some errant reflections on challenges for multilateralism in a pre-post-COVID world. I need not remind readers that even before COVID-19, we were living in challenging times for the multilateral system. In the United Kingdom, where I work and reside, the agony of Brexit—the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union—posed, and continues to pose, its own set of challenges for multilateralism, in Europe and more widely.¹ In Brazil, historically a strong proponent of multilateralism among emerging powers, multilateralism under Jair Bolsonaro has taken a backseat to a “Brazil First” policy, which has abandoned any pretense of global responsibility for the protection of the Amazon.² In Russia, under Vladimir Putin, support for multilateralism has often been used as a vehicle for advancing narrow national interests over broader organizational goals and purposes.³ And everywhere in the world, the assault on the multilateral system by the US government under the presidency of Donald Trump was dramatic and, in some respects, unprecedented. I could go on: My examples are meant only to be illustrative; sadly, they are not exhaustive.

It is important to distinguish the assault on multilateralism from other adverse trends that we have been witnessing, in particular the rise in authoritarianism, which has been occurring at the same time. The year 2019 marked the fourteenth consecutive year of decline in global freedoms, according to Freedom House.⁴ Similarly, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EIU) *Democracy Index* for 2019 reveals that democratic rights around the globe are at their lowest point since the survey was first launched in 2006.⁵ Of the 165 countries that the EIU surveyed, only 22 are “full democracies,” while more than a third live under authoritarianism.

It is important to distinguish authoritarianism from challenges to multilateralism because authoritarianism is not necessarily incompatible with multilateralism. Take Russia, an authoritarian state under Putin. As Alexander Gabuev and Elena Chernenko, two analysts with the Carnegie Moscow Center, observe, “Russia does not actually want to see the rules-based multilateral order erode.”⁶ When Putin and other senior Russian officials express their support for the central role of the United Nations, they are not just paying lip service to multilateralism. The United Nations is an important forum for Russia. “As a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council—and as a formidable military power—Russia exercises a lot of influence there,” Gabuev and Chernenko point out. Russia may not exercise that influence in support of democratic freedoms and human rights but neither does it seek a world in which there are no institutional constraints on power—*other* states’ power, that is—however weak those constraints may be.

Another caveat: Though I am talking about the challenges for multilateralism as a matter of concern, we need to remember that multilateralism is not necessarily, in all cases, a good thing. The 1956 invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel—the Suez Crisis—was an act of multilateralism and it was not a good thing (and not because it failed). The 2003 invasion of Iraq led by the United States, Britain, Australia, and Poland was also an act of multilateralism and it too was not a good thing. Sometimes multilateralism is just a cover for great powers to do not-so-great things that they would find awkward to do entirely on their own. That’s because multilateralism confers varying degrees of legitimacy even if that legitimacy is sometimes only paper thin.⁷

Let us also not forget that international cooperation, the underpinning of multilateralism, does not eliminate or override international competition. We have seen evidence of that in the efforts to fight the COVID pandemic. At the same time that scientists of all nationalities were working together to produce a vaccine, states were vying with each other to be the first in line to obtain these vaccines for their own populations—what has been described as “vaccine nationalism.” The multilateral organization that should have been coordinating international efforts to produce a vaccine, the World Health Organization (WHO), was forced to redesign its global COVID-19 vaccine procurement facility, known as Covax, because rich and powerful states were favoring bilateral deals over support for the facility, which was created to ensure

an equitable distribution of vaccines worldwide.⁸ This, by the way, is the same organization that the Trump administration announced, in July 2020, that the United States would be withdrawing from, thus threatening to deprive it of vital funding—some 22 percent of its core budget—at a time when the world was facing one of the most serious health crises in the organization’s history. This announcement followed earlier decisions by the Trump administration to withdraw the United States from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Paris Agreement on climate change, and the Open Skies treaty on overflight reconnaissance, among other multilateral accords.

It is important to bear in mind also that the challenges to multilateralism have not all originated from without. Multilateralism, as it has been practiced, has sometimes carried within it its own seeds of decay. In a recent book, Vivien Schmidt dissects the European Union’s “crisis of legitimacy,” pinpointing the European Union’s preoccupation with rules rather than with the welfare of its member states to explain why the Eurozone crisis from 2009 so seriously tarnished the European Union’s reputation and weakened support for the organization.⁹ Others have decried the European Union’s democratic deficit, the fact that many European citizens do not feel that they are adequately represented in European decision making and that the European Union is insufficiently accountable. In a survey of ten European countries in 2018 by the Pew Research Center, an average of 62 percent of those surveyed said that the European Union “does not understand the needs of its citizens.”¹⁰ That’s not a pretty picture.

It could be argued, however, that some of the disruptions that we are witnessing are only momentary—that with the passing of the Trump administration, for instance, we can now expect to see a partial reversal of the US retreat from multilateralism. That has proved to be true. With the election of Joe Biden as US president, his administration has taken a less unilateralist approach to international relations. In one of his first acts as president, Biden retracted Trump’s decision to withdraw from WHO. But the problem is that some of the damage to multilateralism has already been done and will not be easy to reverse. Take arms control. Having dismantled some of the pillars of the international architecture that has kept the nuclear peace, regionally and globally, the United States is not finding it easy to put those pillars back in place. For instance, the United States is seeking to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) that the Obama-Biden administration negotiated and that Trump repudiated—the deal that arguably helped to restrain the development of an Iranian nuclear arsenal. But it may be too late: It is not clear that Iran wishes to reaffirm its commitment to an arrangement that is predicated on the goodwill of its signatories after the United States failed to honor its commitments.¹¹ Similarly, the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), which for three decades has constrained the United States and Russia from deploying short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles, represents another fatal blow to a critical component of the nuclear arms control regime. It may not be easy, or possible at all, to reverse the damage done to this regime.

Just to round out the picture, in the age of COVID-19, at the same time that we are witnessing assaults on the multilateral system we are also witnessing stepped-up support for multilateralism. Israel and Palestine provided an encouraging example in the early stages of the pandemic. As a forthcoming study by the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies reports:

[The pandemic] underscored the mutually dependent relations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority [PA]. Realizing that the collapse of the PA could have a dire impact on its own security, Israel expended unusual and significant efforts to help the PA face the coronavirus threat. During the first wave of the pandemic both sides jointly implemented practical measures to keep the situation under control at home and next door. These measures included co-ordination between the Ministries of Health of the PA and Israel. Joint training sessions for medical personnel were organized and

information and medical supplies were distributed to the Palestinian public by Israel; extra funds were released by Israel to the Palestinian Authority and in joint coordination, tens of thousands of Palestinian workers were permitted to remain in Israel to continue working under certain conditions.¹²

The report concludes: “The Covid-19 pandemic is a clarion call for environment-based threats requiring coordination across jurisdictions to mitigate threats to national health, prosperity and security.” Sadly, these same insights were not applied by the Israeli authorities at the vaccination stage, when Palestinians in the Occupied Territories were excluded from the campaign.¹³

It is evident, then, that if the challenges to multilateralism are real, so, too, are the prospects for meeting those challenges, even among adversaries. What can be done to strengthen multilateralism? One of the curious things is that despite what some national leaders may be saying against multilateral efforts and against multilateral institutions, public opinion in support of multilateralism and the UN system in particular is high and has been consistently so for many years—well before Trump was elected and throughout his time in office. According to the Pew Research Center, “Across 32 countries surveyed in 2019, an average of 61 percent expressed a positive view of the United Nations while an average of just 26 percent expressed a negative view.”¹⁴ That’s a significant level of support. In the United States specifically, nearly 60 percent of those surveyed expressed a favorable opinion of the United Nations.¹⁵ A separate poll conducted on behalf of the Better World Campaign in September 2020 found that a whopping 85 percent of Americans surveyed expressed the view that the United Nations is either “very important” or “somewhat important,” with 73 percent maintaining that it is an organization that is still needed today.¹⁶ Similarly, when surveyed in 2019 about the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 77 percent, or nearly eight in ten Americans, said that being a member of NATO is good for the United States.¹⁷ These votes of confidence in multilateralism are not just a recent phenomenon; this has been the pattern for many years.

What these figures tell us is that the assault on multilateralism is often not driven by or in response to popular demand. The public, on the whole, is not hostile to multilateralism. To the contrary, there is popular support for multilateralism. Part of the problem is that, whether viewed favorably or not, the work of international organizations—especially their achievements—is not always well known or well enough understood. Multilateral organizations often do a bad job of communicating to the general public what they do. And the media do not give them much attention either or, when they do, they give these multilateral organizations a disproportionate amount of bad press. Another problem is that while the general public may be favorably disposed toward multilateralism, increasingly it is a partisan issue: In the United States, for instance, Democrats tend to have a more positive view of the United Nations than Republicans do, and that partisan gap has been growing.¹⁸ The partisan divide makes public opinion more susceptible to manipulation. Perhaps this explains the lack of public appreciation for the work of WHO, which Trump railed against, during the pandemic. According to the Pew Research Center, the US public gave lower marks to WHO for its pandemic response than it did its own national health authorities. When polled in April/May 2020, 72 percent of US adults surveyed said national public health officials such as those at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were doing a good job in dealing with the pandemic, whereas just 46 percent of Americans gave WHO positive marks.¹⁹ Does this reflect a lack of understanding of what WHO does? Or was it evidence of Trump’s negative messaging getting through? Or both?

If the problem, in part, is a lack of understanding, one thing that can be done to address the problem is to develop ways of increasing public awareness of the work of the United Nations, the European Union, and other multilateral institutions. I appreciate that that is no easy task. If only the answer were to produce more academic studies on the multilateral system,

we academics could look forward to getting a much better return on our grant applications. On a more serious note, maybe this is where our primary and secondary schools could be doing a better job. Target 4.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) calls for the mainstreaming of what it calls “global citizenship education” in national education policies, curricula, teacher education, and student assessment. Focusing more attention on the work of international organizations in our schools is an ambition that is certainly consistent with this target.

Another idea that is gaining traction is the notion of “inclusive multilateralism.” UN Secretary-General António Guterres used the term in his address to the General Assembly in 2019. If multilateral institutions seem remote and out of touch with the public, he stated, then more should be done to include the public in the work of these organizations. That means “closer contacts with businesses, civil society, and other stakeholders.”²⁰ How might this be achieved? Digital technologies today offer unprecedented opportunities for various constituencies to weigh in on a whole host of issues, as the pandemic has made clear.²¹ But to be effective these constituencies need to feel that their voices genuinely matter. The difficulty is that states are often reluctant to yield space to nonstate actors. Formal participation in intergovernmental organizations, however, is not the only way to influence the work of these organizations. We’ve seen a flourishing of joined-up civic action across the globe in recent years—against racism, against climate change, against sexual violence—and many of these efforts have had considerable effect on multilateral efforts.

My last thought, but not the last word, on reinvigorating multilateralism is the importance of leadership. It is a hackneyed term, I realize, but if you contrast how national leaders welcomed the advent of multilateralism following World War II with the disdain or even just the disregard with which many leaders treat those same institutions today, the difference is striking. It would be naïve to think that the early optimism at the end of World War II could have been sustained indefinitely. But leaders set the tone for how their publics view the international institutions of which their states are members. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali once quipped that the letters “SG” in his title stood not for “Secretary-General” but for “scapegoat.” And, indeed, it has become very convenient for national leaders to scapegoat the United Nations and other multilateral organizations for their own failings as heads of state, thus facilitating the retreat from multilateralism that we have been observing. Again, look at Trump’s rubbishing of WHO. But there are also lots of examples of positive leadership in this regard. The question is how to promote these good practices. These are hard problems with no easy answers.

To conclude, multilateralism is not a panacea and multilateral organizations are not without their weaknesses, some of them very serious. But it is an illusion to think that many of the advances that humanity has made—the eradication of smallpox and polio, the dramatic reduction of the ozone hole, the lifting of millions of people out of poverty, the elimination of entire classes of lethal weapons, and many others—could have been achieved by states acting on their own. And it is an illusion to think that many of the critical challenges that lie ahead—biodiversity, cybersecurity, global warming, mass migration, arms proliferation, and the regulation of outer space, as well as the spread of infectious diseases, among others—can be met without states and peoples cooperating more closely.

Notes

¹ For a contrary view, see Thorsten Benner, “Kindred Spirits: How a post-Brexit Britain and the EU Can Work Together to Strengthen Multilateralism,” Foreign Policy Centre, December 16, 2020, <https://fpc.org.uk/kindred-spirits-how-a-post-brexit-britain-and-the-eu-can-work-together-to-strengthen-multilateralism>.

² Guilherme Casarões and Daniel Flesmes, “Brazil First, Climate Last: Bolsonaro’s Foreign Policy,” GIGA Focus | Latin America, no. 5 (September 2019), https://pure.giga-hamburg.de/ws/files/21579927/gf_lateinamerik_1905_en.pdf.

³ Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky, “Multipolarity in Practice: Understanding Russia’s Engagement with Regional Institutions,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 8, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/01/08/multipolarity-in-practice-understanding-russia-s-engagement-with-regional-institutions-pub-80717>.

⁴ *Freedom in the World 2020*, Freedom House, accessed September 24, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2020/leaderless-struggle-democracy>.

⁵ *Democracy Index 2019*, Economist Intelligence Unit, accessed September 24, 2021, <http://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>.

⁶ Alexander Gabuev and Elena Chernenko, “What Russia Thinks about Multilateralism,” Carnegie Moscow Center, August 20, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/2019/08/20/what-russia-thinks-about-multilateralism-pub-79709>.

⁷ Carol M. Glen, “Multilateralism in a Unipolar World: The UN Security Council and Iraq,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 6, no. 2 (2006): 307–323.

⁸ “‘Vaccine Nationalism’ Delays WHO’s Struggling Covax Scheme,” *Financial Times*, September 2, 1990.

⁹ Vivien A. Schmidt, *Europe’s Crisis of Legitimacy: Governing by Rules and Ruling by Numbers in the Eurozone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, and Moira Fagan, “Europeans Credit EU with Promoting Peace and Prosperity, but Say Brussels Is Out of Touch with Its Citizens,” Pew Research Center, March 19, 2019.

¹¹ The Iran nuclear deal is known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It is an agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus the European Union.

¹² Deborah Sandler, Michael Herzog, and Ghaith al-Omari, *Integrating Regional Climate Change Risks into Israel’s National Security Agenda: Time for a Paradigm Shift*, Institute for National Security Studies Special Volume on Climate and Conflict (in press).

¹³ See Mustafa Barghouti, “Israel’s Vaccination Drive Is Going Great, but We’re Being Sidelined,” *New York Times*, January 13, 2021.

¹⁴ Moira Fagan and Christine Huang, “United Nations Get Mostly Positive Marks from People around the World,” Pew Research Center, September 23, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/23/united-nations-gets-mostly-positive-marks-from-people-around-the-world>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Poll: American Support for UN Remains Strong amidst Pandemic, Politics,” Better World Campaign, September 18, 2020, <https://betterworldcampaign.org/news-room/press-releases/poll-american-support-un-pandemic>.

¹⁷ “Large Majorities in Both Parties Say NATO is Good for the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, April 2, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/04/02/large-majorities-in-both-parties-say-nato-is-good-for-the-u-s>.

¹⁸ Fagan and Huang, “United Nations Get Mostly Positive Marks.”

¹⁹ J. J. Moncus and Aidan Connaughton, “Americans’ Views on World Health Organization Split along Partisan Lines as Trump Calls for U.S. to Withdraw,” Pew Research Center, June 11, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/11/americans-views-on-world-health-organization-split-along-partisan-lines-as-trump-calls-for-u-s-to-withdraw>.

²⁰ United Nations, “Networked, Inclusive Multilateralism Can Help Overcome Challenges of Era, Says Secretary-General, Opening General Assembly Session,” Press Release SG/SM/19746-GA/12179, September 17, 2019.

²¹ See *The Age of Digital Interdependence: Report of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation*, June 2019, available at <https://www.un.org/en/pdfs/DigitalCooperation-report-for%20web.pdf>.