

New Zealand's Multilateralism and the Challenge of an International System in Transition

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Since the end of the Second World War, New Zealand has been a firm supporter of multilateralism and what is known as the liberal international order. Multilateralism can be defined as a diplomatic arrangement whereby three or more states act in concert to advance a mutual interest or objective.¹ The liberal international order can be understood as an open and rules-based system of international relations that is “enshrined in institutions such as the United Nations and norms such as multilateralism.”² Thus, the norm of multilateralism and the concept of a liberal international order are closely linked. Multilateralism is the preferred diplomatic instrument of a liberal order, but in practice authoritarian states and, to a lesser extent, liberal democratic states have qualified their support for this approach. However, for middle range and relatively small states, like New Zealand, multilateralism offers the prospect of a voice and influence on international issues that would not otherwise be possible in a self-help state system based largely on power.

THE POST-1945 EVOLUTION OF NEW ZEALAND'S MULTILATERALISM

Almost immediately after the Second World War, New Zealand became a committed multilateralist state. In 1945, it played a role in the formative discussions about the United Nations (UN); it was a founding member that actively opposed the veto rights of the five permanent members (something it

¹ G. Evans and J. Newnham, *The Dictionary of World Politics: A Reference Guide to Concepts, Ideas and Institutions* (Harvester Wheatsheaf Hemel Hempstead, 1992), 205.

² G. J. Ikenberry, “The Future of the Liberal World Order,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2011): 56.

continues to advocate), was instrumental in having human rights provisions included in the UN Charter, and along with Australia, played a significant role in the formation of the Trusteeship Council and including trusteeship issues in the UN's mandate. To be sure, New Zealand did not have a perfect record of supporting UN action. For example, it did not support six UN resolutions calling for Indonesia to withdraw after it invaded East Timor in 1976. However, such actions were the exception rather than the rule. New Zealand has signed virtually all the major UN treaties and ratified nearly every UN convention.³ It also has contributed troops and personnel to UN peacekeeping operations since they began in 1948.

However, multilateralism only had limited international support during the first four decades after 1945. As John Ikenberry has shown, the post-war international order was actually a fusion of two distinct order-building projects. One was the modern state system, a project dating back to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, and the other was the international liberal order, a project closely associated with the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), which was boosted in the 20th century by the establishment of additional liberal democratic states.⁴ It should be noted, for instance, that the United Nations Charter was based largely on Westphalian principles, centring on the supremacy of the sovereign state, rather than liberal principles advocated by the US and other Western states. At the same time, the outbreak of the Cold War in 1947 and the rise of rival superpower-led alliances served to limit the scope for multilateral cooperation in the international arena by New Zealand and other states.

Eventually, the process of globalization—a term popularized during the early 1980s to describe revolutionary scientific changes in information and communications technology—and the end of the Cold War helped to facilitate new links between societies, institutions, cultures and individuals on a worldwide basis.⁵ These developments prompted some observers to anticipate a new world order based on Western values of liberal democracy,

³ R. G. Patman, "New Zealand's place in the World," in *New Zealand Government and Politics*, ed. R. Miller (Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 2006), 92.

⁴ G. J. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1-2.

⁵ G. Ionescu, *Leadership in an Interdependent World: The Statesmanship of Adenauer, De Gaulle, Thatcher, Reagan and Gorbachev* (Harlow: Longman, 1991), 11-12.

market capitalism, and international cooperation.⁶ Certainly, the Westphalian conception of absolute state sovereignty seemed to be amended in significant ways in the first decade and a half of the post-Cold War era. Amongst other things, predominantly Western states advanced the concept of humanitarian intervention, drove the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC)—although the United States did not join it—and developed the ideas of a “responsibility to protect.”⁷

NEW ZEALAND'S MULTILATERAL APPROACH IN POST-COLD WAR ERA

For New Zealand, a geographically remote but developed state, the new international landscape provided a chance to intensify the country's commitment to multilateralism. As well as continuing to support UN peacekeeping missions in Korea, and the Sinai Peninsula, Wellington contributed peacekeepers to UN peace support operations in places such as Bougainville (1990-2003), Afghanistan (2001-13), Solomon Islands (2003-2013) and Timor-Leste (1999-2012). More recent New Zealand contributions to UN peacekeeping missions in Iraq, Korea, South Sudan and the Middle East have been more modest, typically involving “military observers sent in ones or twos.”⁸ Still, New Zealand's contributions reflect both a desire to be seen as a good international citizen, and a conviction that the use of force in international relations should whenever possible be authorised by the UN. In March 2003, when the Bush administration and a number of Western allies bypassed the UN Security Council (UNSC) and invaded Iraq, the Clark-led New Zealand government publicly opposed the invasion on the grounds that it had not been sanctioned by the UNSC.⁹ Then Minister of Foreign Affairs Phil Goff expressed the gov-

⁶ F. Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest*, No. 16 (Summer 1989): 16.

⁷ H. Kundnani, “What is the Liberal International Order?,” Policy Essay, *GMF* (The German Marshall Fund of the United States, no. 17 (2017): 3.

⁸ B. Greener, “Peacekeeper contributor profile: New Zealand. Providing for Peacekeeping,” 3 April 2014, accessed 22 June 2017, <http://www.providingforpeacekeeping.org/2014/04/03/contributor-profile-new-zealand/>.

⁹ J. Patterson, “NZ govt made ‘right judgment’ over Iraq,” RadioNZ, 7 July 2016, accessed 30 June 2017, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/political/308164/nz-made-%27right-judgment%27-over-iraq>.

ernment's clear preference for the enforcement of resolution 1441¹⁰ through multilateralism as opposed to unilateral action, and stated, "At the end of the day, the United Nations must be able to sanction the use of force, otherwise compliance with its resolutions could not be secured, and it could never achieve the purpose for which it was established."¹¹

Despite its small size, New Zealand is a country with global economic interests. In the 1980s, New Zealand began to liberalize and reform its economy. New Zealand was one of the chief beneficiaries of the 1994 Uruguay General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) round which began to liberalize trade in agriculture. It has also been an enthusiastic supporter of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), a multilateral agency that succeeded GATT in 1995 as the guardian of international trade rules. The WTO has since developed comprehensive rules for regulating trade. The WTO also hosts an unprecedented trade dispute settlement procedure, which is binding upon all parties involved and therefore has the potential to override the state sovereignty of one or more of the actors that are party to the dispute. Since the mid-1990s, New Zealand has successfully used the machinery of the WTO to resolve disputes with a number of important trade partners. The partners included the US, the EU, Australia, Canada, and India.¹² In each case, New Zealand has successfully resolved the dispute in its favour without significantly damaging relations with any of the parties involved. Far from weakening New Zealand's national sovereignty, the WTO's rules-based approach to trade has actually enhanced it by levelling the playing field for small, less powerful trading nations.

At the same time, New Zealand has secured a number of high-profile diplomatic positions during the post-Cold War period. In 1993, New Zealand acceded to one of the non-permanent seats on the UNSC; Don McKinnon, former New Zealand foreign minister, was subsequently appointed to the

¹⁰ UNSC Resolution 1441, adopted unanimously in 2002, declared Iraq to be in material breach of the ceasefire terms presented under the terms of Resolution 687, and served as a platform for action to be taken under Chapter VII of the Charter, such as determining appropriate action to take against the existence of a threat to peace or act of aggression.

¹¹ P. Goff, "Debate on Prime Minister's statement—Iraq," *Beehive.govt.nz*, 11 February 2003, accessed 18 June 2017, from: <http://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/debate-prime-minister039s-statement-iraq>.

¹² R. G. Patman and C. Rudd, *Sovereignty under Siege? Globalization and New Zealand* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 10.

position of Secretary General of the Commonwealth; former New Zealand Prime Minister Mike Moore won a three-year “split term” as Director General of the WTO; and another former Prime Minister, Helen Clark, served as the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) from 2009 to 2017.

It should be added that in October 2014, New Zealand—competing with Spain and Turkey for two seats on the United Nations Security Council—resoundingly won a seat in the first ballot in New York. This was the second time in the post-Cold War era that New Zealand had been elected to the Security Council, and went some way to substantiating the claim in the 2016 Defence White Paper that “New Zealand actively supports the rules-based international order through its support for institutions and arrangements that reinforce global stability, including the United Nations.”¹³ Despite New Zealand’s strong commitment to multilateral ideals, its performance in the area of development aid seems to be at odds with these aspirations. In 2014, New Zealand spent just 0.27 per cent of gross national income (GNI)¹⁴—a figure well below the target level of 0.7 per cent of GNI set by the United Nations in 1970. The New Zealand aid programme falls below that offered by most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, including Australia.

Nevertheless, New Zealand’s focus on multilateralism has probably been most evident in the Pacific. New Zealand was one of the founding members of the Pacific Community,¹⁵ formerly the South Pacific Commission, in 1947, which is the oldest, largest and most inclusive of the regional organizations. The Pacific Community did not engage in political issues, which bred frustration among Pacific island countries, particularly those undergoing decolonizing between the 1950s and 1960s. This led to the formation of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), formerly the South Pacific Forum. During the planning stages for the PIF, New Zealand was not included. However, after petitioning, together with Australia, for membership it was eventually

¹³ New Zealand Defence White Paper, 2016, 40.

¹⁴ New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.

¹⁵ The other founding members were Australia, Britain, France, Netherlands, and the United States. The Netherlands withdrew in 1962, after the transfer of West Papua to Indonesia, and the Pacific island countries were included much later.

included as a founding member,¹⁶ in 1971,¹⁷ and the first meeting was held in Wellington. Through the PIF and other regional organizations, New Zealand has played an important role in the Pacific. One of the PIF's first major resolutions was the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA), under which New Zealand, along with Australia, agreed to progressively provide duty free and unrestricted access to their markets from Pacific island countries.¹⁸

Another was the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone (SPNFZ), which passed in 1985; the PIF pursued this in response to a 1975 proposal by the Rowling-led Labour government, which called for the establishment of a nuclear-weapon-free zone (NWFZ) in the region. In 2003, then New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark proposed a review of the PIF.¹⁹ This eventually led to the adoption, in 2005, of the Pacific Plan, arguably the PIF's most comprehensive reform agenda for the region;²⁰ it has been described as "the master strategy for strengthening regional cooperation and integration in the Pacific."²¹ More recently, New Zealand, along with Australia, spearheaded The Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER-plus), which is a region-wide free trade agreement, signed in Tonga on 16 June 2017. According to the Pacific Cooperation Foundation, PACER-plus ushers in a "new era of closer economic relations."²² New Zealand has played an integral role in multilateral action in the Pacific, perhaps more so than elsewhere.

In many ways, New Zealand's "can do" approach towards multilateralism has enabled this country to establish an international profile that is out of pro-

¹⁶ K. Graham, *Models of Regional Governance for the Pacific: Sovereignty and the Future Architecture of Regionalism* (Christchurch: Canterbury University Press, 2008), 27.

¹⁷ The others were Cook Islands, Fiji, Nauru, Samoa, Tonga, and Australia.

¹⁸ South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement (SPARTECA), Tarawa, Kiribati, 14 July 1980, accessed 4 August 2017, www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/SPARTECA%20text1.pdf.

¹⁹ E. Huffer, "The Pacific Plan: A Political and Cultural Critique," in *Redefining the Pacific? Regionalism Past, Present and Future*, eds. J. Bryant-Tokalau and I. Frazer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 160.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ C. Slatter, "The New Framework for Pacific Regionalism: Old Kava in a New Tanoa?," in *The New Pacific Diplomacy*, eds. G. Fry and S. Tarte (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), 49.

²² Pacific Cooperation Foundation, "PACER Plus signed in Nuku'alofa," accessed 21 June 2017, <http://pcf.org.nz/news/2017-06-15/pacer-plus-signed-in-nuku-alofa>.

portion to the modest spectrum of national economic, military and diplomatic capabilities at its disposal. The New Zealand approach to multilateralism can be distinguished from that of old allies like Britain and Australia which at times have tended to behave as if the post-Cold War international system was unipolar and that close relations with Washington ultimately took priority over broader concerns like maintaining a rules-based international order.

MULTILATERALISM AND ITS ADVERSARIES

Francis Fukuyama and other Western observers were right at the end of the Cold War to envisage a new stage in the evolution of the liberal system, but it did not turn out to be quite the order they expected. Since the late 1980s, the world has experienced a turbulent and prolonged transition to a new international system.

This transition is characterized by an uneasy co-existence between the opposing forces of integration and fragmentation. On the one hand, globalization has been associated with startling advances in communication, the establishment of a genuinely global economic system, a global information infrastructure, increased trade and foreign investment and the steady growth in the number of countries embracing democracy in some shape or form.

On the other hand, globalization has had a dark side. The compression of time and space through technology has unleashed new perils or exacerbated existing problems. Examples include the advent of transnational terrorism, the proliferation of intra-state war, drug and human trafficking, international organized crime, global pandemics, weakening financial accountability, relentless environmental decline, and growing inequalities.

Moreover, the world's only superpower, the US, has had few reservations about putting its own national interests above the security requirements of an open, rules-based multilateral system. It refused to sign the 1997 Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines and was one of the few developed states that did not join the International Criminal Court (ICC) following its establishment in 1998.²³ The US also flouted the rules when it invaded Iraq in March in clear defiance of the UNSC.

At the same time, economic liberalization, de-regulation of markets, and vastly increased foreign trade and investment have had decidedly mixed

²³ R. G. Patman, *Universal Human Rights?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 11.

results. The global financial crisis of 2008-9 undermined the argument for sustaining neo-liberalism and certainly weakened confidence in the stability of the liberal order in its current economic guise.²⁴ While there has been an economic recovery since the financial crisis of 2008-9, that event has continued to cast a long shadow.

It is in this context that a globalizing liberal order has faced serious resistance. First, authoritarian states like Russia and, to a lesser degree, China, have engaged in hybrid warfare. This employs a combination of military and non-military means to achieve traditional military goals like territorial conquest. Hybrid warfare has been used by Russia in the Ukraine to redraw boundaries in Europe and by China in the South China Sea to create new artificial islands. In both cases, Russia and China have acted unilaterally with apparent indifference to existing international law.

There has also been resistance to multilateralism from nationalist-populist forces within the US and UK, two states that have traditionally championed the liberal order. Britain voted narrowly in a June 2016 referendum to leave the community of liberal democracies that comprise the European Union (EU) and in November 2016, Donald Trump—a flamboyant economic and political nationalist—won the race to the White House.

Moreover, the liberal international order is facing what might be called an internal-external threat nexus in the digital age. Possible Russian involvement in the Brexit referendum vote through fake Twitter accounts has been the subject of investigations by a UK Parliamentary Committee and the UK Electoral Commission.²⁵

²⁴ Kundnani, “What is the Liberal International Order?,” 5.

²⁵ M. Burgess, “Where the UK’s investigations into Russia’s Brexit meddling stand,” *Wired*, 30 January 2018, <http://www.wired.co.uk/article/russia-brexite-influence-uk-twitter-facebook-google>.

Meanwhile, Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election has already generated a number of indictments. Those indicted include Paul Manafort, former Trump campaign chairman; Rick Gates, Trump's one-time deputy campaign deputy; George Papadopoulos, a former Trump campaign adviser; General Michael Flynn, Trump's former national security adviser; and thirteen Russian nationals and three Russian companies.²⁶

NEW ZEALAND AND THE STRENGTHENING OF THE LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The recent assertiveness of authoritarian powers like Russia, the rise of nationalist-populist forces in the US and the UK, and the possible convergence of interests between these actors raise the basic question of whether the liberal international order and its norm of multilateralism are in decline. Certainly, these developments present a direct challenge to a New Zealand worldview, based on support for the UN system and a rules-based order, that sees participation in global fora and international networks as an important way of building support for key national goals.

However, the threat to the multilateral system from authoritarian and nationalist-populist politicians should not be exaggerated. Their promises to reverse globalization and "take back control" of national sovereignty look distinctly utopian in an increasingly interconnected world. Globalization is not a project that can simply be put "back in the box" by political leaders. After all, globalization is a major structural change driven by revolutionary changes in information and communications technology that has redefined state sovereignty. Today, all states are confronted by security, economic and environmental challenges that do not respect territorial borders.

²⁶ B. Weiss, "Here's who has been charged so far in Mueller's probe," *Business Insider Australia*, 2 December 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/who-has-been-charged-in-russia-investigation-mueller-trump-2017-12?r=US&IR=T>.

To be sure, the reluctance of certain great powers to actively support a liberal order, like Trump's America turning its back on multilateral agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord and embracing a semi-protectionist approach to trade, is potentially a big problem for New Zealand and many other states. But that problem has to be weighed against the increasing tide of evidence that great powers cannot go it alone in fixing the world's problems. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Russia's incursion into Ukraine in 2014 have both highlighted the inability of superpowers and regional actors respectively to impose their own solutions to perceived problems. Unilateralism has a poor track record in the post-Cold War era.

So New Zealand should have no reservations about defending the rules-based multilateral system against its adversaries. But New Zealand and other supporters of the liberal order must do more than that. The focus must be on identifying elements of the liberal order that need to be reformed and strengthened. Two sets of reforms could strengthen the liberal order.

First, the global security situation is not realistically going to improve until the P-5 group loses the privilege of being able to veto any Council resolution they do not like. The brutal seven-year civil war in Syria is a sad reminder that the use of the veto has made the UNSC incapable of delivering either stability or justice to places that are in desperate need of both. The veto power of the P-5 group should be abolished or severely circumscribed.²⁷

Second, it is time for a serious international debate on how the liberal economic system can be made to work better for more people. While there may be little consensus about what a reformed liberal economic order would look like, the current situation where 85 billionaires have almost as much wealth as half the world's population is not morally acceptable or politically sustainable.²⁸

²⁷ L. S. Davis and R. G. Patman, "New Day or False Dawn," in *Science Diplomacy: New Day or False Dawn*, eds. L. S. Davis and R. G. Patman (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 271-272.

²⁸ G. Wearden, "Oxfam: 85 richest people as wealthy as poorest half of the world," *The Guardian*, 20 January 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/jan/20/oxfam-85-richest-people-half-of-the-world>.

Without such reforms, the liberal international order will remain susceptible to the forces of authoritarianism, populism and demagoguery. It is high time that New Zealand and other states promoted the reform and strengthening of the liberal international order so that it can advance the interests of the many rather than the few. To meet this challenge, New Zealand and other like-minded states will have to move from a form of multilateralism where a superpower like America is always expected to set the agenda to a more bottom-up, strategic form of multilateralism that is capable of independently mobilizing international support for long overdue institutional reforms.

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