



[Multilateralism](#)

Tackling Global Challenges

Why We Still Need Rules- and Values-Based
International Cooperation

[Peter Fischer-Bollin](#)

We still need international cooperation because global challenges and problems cannot be solved nationally or regionally. Admittedly, issues such as security, finance architecture, free trade, health, and migration must be worked out at the local and national levels, and in the case of climate change also largely implemented at such levels. Nevertheless, comprehensive solutions can be reached only through international cooperation that produces generally accepted processes, e.g. to preserve – or, where necessary, to promote – peace and security.

First came the 2008 financial crisis, which brought our financial system to the brink of collapse. Only concerted efforts and billions of euros in taxpayer money could stabilise the banks. Then, in 2015, wars and conflicts in the Middle East, North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa caused massive waves of refugees. Our borders and willingness to accept newcomers were submitted to a challenging stress test. Representative democracy with centre-based political parties is still under severe pressure in Europe. At the same time, the threat to global trade and the World Trade Organization (WTO) grew as a result of protectionist measures on the part of important member states, primarily the US and China. This endangers German prosperity, which is based on exports and trade. And finally, it is becoming increasingly clear that climate change is resulting in drought and storms in Germany and Europe. Despite extensive catalogues of measures, neither Germany nor the EU is on track to meet the climate goals to which they have committed. And now the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 (and possibly succeeding years) can be added to this list of existing challenges.

What do all these issues have in common? They represent problems that threaten our model of society with its liberty, security, and prosperity – now and in the future. Neither Germany nor the European Union can solve any of these problems alone. We need international cooperation with other states. Only a community of states will be able to develop and implement sustainable solutions on the basis of voluntarily accepted rules.

At the same time, it is obvious that more and more political forces and heads of governments all over the world are announcing national solo efforts, with the people often cheering them on. Donald Trump's "America First" policy bears this claim in its very name, but Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has also announced that he would disengage his country from international cooperation during the coronavirus crisis, and has previously announced that his goal with respect to protecting nature and the climate was to defend national sovereignty or, as the slogan during the British Brexit campaign put it, "to take back control". These countries are only interested in joint rules when such rules are to their advantage. In Germany and the EU, parties that offer simple solutions are also enjoying success. They give the impression that they could solve problems alone (in the case of migration, the financial crisis, and trade) or simply ignore them (in the case of climate change or, now, COVID-19).

This is the backdrop against which politicians, the media, and think tanks have recently been discussing the state of multilateralism. However, a 2019 opinion poll by the Körber Foundation showed that two thirds of respondents in Germany did not know what the term "multilateralism" means. We use the term to refer to a form of international cooperation in which states participate voluntarily on the basis of agreements that create rights and responsibilities for all countries involved. Such international cooperation was supported by 57 per cent of the respondents to the Körber Foundation's poll.

The Right Political Level for Each Problem

Global international cooperation is still needed because many of the challenges and problems we face cannot be solved at the national or regional levels. Issues such as security, finance architecture, free trade, health, and migration must be shaped at the local and national levels, and in the case of climate change also largely implemented at such levels. However, comprehensive solutions can be reached only through international cooperation that produces generally accepted processes, e.g. to preserve – or, where necessary, to promote – peace and security. Fora such as the UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the WTO, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) were founded by states with this goal in mind, some of them decades ago; the 2015 Paris Agreement was also achieved in this manner.

Containing the conflicts in the Middle East, such as those in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya requires influencing the parties involved in the conflict (whose identities are not always entirely clear) as well as cooperating with other states, some of whom have great influence on the conflict (such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Turkey). The US and Israel also have direct influence over the entire region, while China has remained in the background. The only binding forum currently available is the United Nations, which was founded in 1945. This framework allows sustainable solutions for peace and security to be reached – many with direct effects on those of us in Germany. Achieving such solutions is no easy task given the self-interest of important players such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the US. This difficulty is, however, not due to the United Nations, which relies on voluntary participation, and depends on the political will of its member states. Another complicating factor is the veto power which blocks binding Security Council decisions, and which can be exercised by any of the permanent members (the US, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France); indeed, Russia has put this power to use frequently in the case of the

Middle East. Germany can campaign for sustainable solutions for peace and security within the framework of the UN (and in 2019/20, as part of the Security Council), as well as that of the EU, and NATO. By assuming more responsibility and formulating its own interests more clearly, Germany can lend its voice greater weight. Ultimately, Germany needs these multilateral formats to make progress towards its own interests, and that of those affected by the conflicts.

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The same is true of climate change: Countries and communities must take action to adapt to the changing climate (drought in summer, storms throughout the year, etc.). The German federal government and the EU can support and coordinate these efforts. The major measures for the urgently needed reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and economic adaptation can be decided only at the multinational level. The 2015 Paris Agreement, for instance, laid down national action plans for reducing emissions, preventing and minimising damage, and, as necessary, providing compensation for damage. From a German perspective, an important reason for the agreement was to avoid disadvantages to the German economy in European and global competition, but it was primarily to achieve reduction of greenhouse gases worldwide. For this reason, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals have been agreed within the framework of the UN. As Agenda 2030, these commit all member nations to pursue sustainable policies. Thus, essential principles of an economically, ecologically, and socially sustainable social market economy have been recognised by the community of nations.



National solo efforts: Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has announced that he would disengage his country from international cooperation during the coronavirus crisis. [Source: © Adriano Machado, Reuters.](#)

International Cooperation in Our Own Interest – Multilateralism is not an End in Itself

For such necessary international cooperation, organization such as the UN and the WTO are central fora for dialogue on the various interests of the member states. They are also venues where common rules can be agreed upon and enforced. Their purpose is to contribute to the provision of global public goods, such as: peace and security, a clean, intact environment, and the protection of cultural heritage. Dialogue on these issues can promote a “global common interest”. The danger is in the various understandings of such terms. That is why the principle of subsidiarity, i.e. the allocation of problems to the proper level of responsibility – from the individual to the family to the community to the nation state – is the most effective

guarantee of efficiency and protection against undesirable developments. A world government that controls everything would not allow such allocation.

Multilateral cooperation is thus not a goal in itself but serves to solve specific problems that cannot otherwise be solved. Mandate, objectives, and implementation must be adapted to current developments (such as digitalisation, or the growing importance of artificial intelligence). Its tasks should be tailored precisely to these problems, and its organization should be subject to constant critical scrutiny. If these conditions are met, the utility of such cooperation can be made clear to citizens. This is especially critical if cooperation is to gain legitimacy with member states and their citizens, which is a prerequisite for its functionality.

At the same time, multilateral organization depend on the political will of their members, which can be observed particularly well these days at the WTO and the WHO with the dispute between the US and China, although this is far from being a new phenomenon. It is on the political will of the members, that is to say the states, that the ability to function and make decisions depends, but also the political goals of such multinational cooperation efforts. Our standards here are values such as liberty, democracy, human rights, and social development. We should use these principles to determine whether international cooperation is worth striving for and supporting.

An indispensable condition for international cooperation is a willingness to compromise.

Cooperation on the part of states in the interest of creating joint rules has been pursued since the 19th century (examples include the German Customs Union in 1834, the General Postal Union in 1874, and the League of Nations in 1919). When states join together to address certain questions in ways that violate our system of values, as the European powers did in dividing up Africa among themselves at the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, the result is certainly multilateral, but would be condemned from a modern point of view. Even today, multilateral cooperation in associations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), led by the authoritarian governments of China and Russia – despite India’s accession in 2017 – is viewed differently than cooperation within NATO, which pursues clearly democratic values and goals, even though the current policy of Turkey, a NATO member, raises questions in this respect.

Each nation’s own values and interests are the standard against which they must measure international cooperation. However, it is equally true that an indispensable condition for international cooperation is a willingness to

compromise – because interests vary from state to state, as well as from individual to individual. Although all people and states want to live in peace and security, the variety of interests nevertheless leads time and again to armed conflict and war. Although the vast majority of states have an interest in curbing climate change, such change threatens each country differently, and each has varying means for combatting it, and different responsibilities for the effects of CO₂ emissions. For instance, coastal states are more threatened by rising sea levels, and states with agricultural areas are more threatened by drought than land-locked states in temperate climates. Industrialised states have more resources and potential for reducing CO₂ emissions than developing countries do but are more concerned with losing the level of development they have already achieved. Similarly, although the coronavirus is the same everywhere, different governments have implemented different measures. This has now even become a topic of geopolitical disputes.

Thus, no nation should expect to merely impose its own positions in international fora and negotiations. Compromise in democratically organised fora, such as the UN (discounting the Security Council with its veto power for five countries) must be discussed, negotiated, and agreed upon. More majority decisions would be ideal so that clearer decisions could be reached faster. However, it is already becoming apparent in the EU that these decisions can quickly lose legitimacy with politicians and societies, reducing their effectiveness and binding nature, e.g. the distribution of asylum seekers, Dublin Regulation. More leeway could be achieved here by developing trust and reliability. But this would be conditioned upon international cooperation – with its unavoidable compromises – being in the interest of the countries involved in order to achieve a basic public consensus in each country, which is especially important in democratic countries. To this end, deficient structures and procedures of international cooperation, such as veto rights, insufficiently transparent election systems in committees, and insufficient sanction mechanisms for violations must be

addressed openly, and work done to remedy them. An uncritical glorification of multilateral organizations does not serve to improve their legitimacy, and thus harms the cause of solving global problems cooperatively.

Here, the Alliance for Multilateralism that Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas is calling for, primarily with France, is well-intentioned, but grouping friends that otherwise have very different interests cannot replace the hard work of necessary reforms that can be effective and achieve majorities. We need partners and friends, but our primary concern should be identifying common interests if we are to implement reforms effectively.

Influence also involves filling important positions with compatriots who embrace basic German and European attitudes. Especially when contrasted with major powers such as the US and China, but even within Europe, Germany has so far been rather reluctant to use its weight in this regard.

On the Basis of Democratic Values

Democratic (liberal) values, such as the fundamental equality of rank among members, decisions by majority vote, and the rule of law are guiding principles of international cooperation in multilateral organisations such as the UN. There, the essential basic and human rights, and their universal applicability (since 1948) are anchored and accepted by all member states. While this does not result in the unrestricted application of human rights in all countries, it does provide indispensable backing and a basic foundation, especially for individuals and groups who campaign for democracy and the rule of law. The UN Human Rights Council has, however, been repeatedly misused by such members as China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, and Venezuela to promote other values with respect to universal human rights. There is a danger of this happening in other multilateral systems. Such instruments of multilateral cooperation must not be left to the opponents of democracy. If control is to remain in the

hands of democratic countries, close cooperation between them in the UN and within other institutions is extremely important. Germany has increased its efforts to cooperate with countries such as Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and several countries in Latin America and Africa. Yet, even within this group, it is clear that interests do not coincide in all issues. This makes cooperation in fundamental issues of democracy and liberty, which directly affect our prosperity through free trade, the rule of law, and internet governance, all the more important.

Scientific Advice for Political Decisions

The expertise of the scientific and research establishment forms an important foundation for political decision-making. It should continue to be consulted, perhaps even more intensively, through such organisations as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which was agreed upon among member states and the UN, and involves scientists, experts, and government representatives for the compilation of all information relevant to climate change. This has given it a high level of recognition and influence over policy, not least because its data has been used in civil society. Scientific advice is extremely important for political decisions but cannot replace them. This is eminently apparent in efforts to manage the COVID-19 crisis, in which scientists have been given a prominent role in many countries. Ideally, political decision-makers must use democratic processes to take into account, balance and integrate the various interests and viewpoints of those within the societies for which they are responsible.

Rendering individual interests or opinions absolute leads to dictatorship, and such an approach must be rejected by champions of democracy. This remains true when the opinions in question are held by many but fail to achieve sufficient majorities in the democratic process. This can be observed in climate issues and groups such as Extinction Rebellion, which have claimed something like emergency powers: they claim that to save the world from destruction, even acts of violence can be justified. To ensure democratic

participation beyond governments, fora that involve parliamentarians and representatives of civil society are to be welcomed. International courts also help to ensure that legitimate interests are heard and upheld.

Christian Democracy, International Cooperation, and Multilateralism

The principle of subsidiarity and distrust of large, centralised bureaucracies characterises Christian democracy, which has therefore traditionally tended to be reserved in the advocacy of multilateral organisations. At the same time, the last few years have shown how global or at least continental challenges are increasingly determining the societal and political reality of Germany and the EU, making international cooperation urgently necessary. It can be assumed that this development will fundamentally continue even after the COVID-19 pandemic, which itself is an example of such a challenge. Thus, Christian democracy – the most important political force in Germany and a relevant force in the EU – must more actively confront the idea of international and multilateral cooperation as an indispensable instrument for managing current and future global challenges and continue to expand its profile in this respect.

The increasingly self-confident assertiveness of autocratic countries in international fora makes greater involvement on the part of Germany crucial.

It is precisely the Christian democratic perspective, with its concern for the interests of smaller states, that highlights the necessity of rules-based international cooperation. A world order in which democratic values, security, prosperity, and sustainability depend on the ideas of one powerful state, or of a handful of them, harbours many risks and disadvantages, including for Germany. While it may be academically

appealing to consider the advantages a multipolar world order has over a unipolar one, the question of which values inform said world order is more important. Whether such values are those focussed on liberty and openness that the West under the leadership of the US has so far embraced, or authoritarian and nationalist ones represented by such countries as China and Russia – is much more important for the Germany of the Basic Law and the social market economy.

These values must therefore be defended daily in flexible alliances. The increasingly self-confident assertiveness of autocratic countries in international fora, and the retreat of the US, their long-standing guarantor, makes greater involvement on the part of Germany and the EU critical for the future global order from the Christian democratic point of view. A retreat from international fora (as the US is practicing in isolated cases, and threatened to do as regards the WHO, and finally did on 7 July 2020) results only in a strengthening of players such as China and Russia and others, who desire to reframe such organisations' original guiding principles – originally inspired by Western values – to suit their own ends. A passive position will ultimately mean that international rules will, regardless, be established – it will simply happen without our input. The power to define and interpret the formulation of global standards is vital not only in the area of human rights, but also with respect to global rules for data, digital and physical infrastructure, and technical standards. Assuming a passive position in these areas would be disastrous for German competitiveness and, thus, for the prosperity of this and future generations.

Consider the examples of the World Bank and the IMF, in which the US and Europe hesitated for too long to make reforms for greater consideration for rising powers, especially China. It should be no surprise that China not only founded its own development bank for Asia (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, AIIB), but also another with the BRICS countries, the New Development Bank (NDB). It is certainly good that Germany and other European



countries are active in the AIIB, but reforming established institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF in order to give such countries as China, India, and Brazil more say would strengthen rule-based international cooperation more than new parallel structures do.

What Should Christian Democracy Do?

The following ideas from this article are summarised for application to the debate that will be necessary in the coming months.

Seven Theses for Christian Democratic Policy as it applies to International Cooperation:

1. Each democratic society will need to convince the majority of its public of the necessity of international cooperation. That is why arguments must be made to persuade these societies of the benefits of such cooperation and of the unavoidable compromises its mechanisms demand. The debate about international cooperation must urgently be broadened within political parties.



Places for compromises: No nation should expect to merely impose its own positions in international fora and negotiations. Source: © Yves Herman, Reuters.

2. Effective international cooperation involves taking small countries and their importance into account in such issues as trade, where Germany is a relatively “big” player. In other areas, where Germany is a relatively “small” player, it can assert its influence only through the EU (an association of many states that are, by themselves, fairly small).
3. In the EU, German and EU Christian democrats should model the principles of international cooperation to achieve joint EU positions that will serve to assert German and EU interests and values. Christian democrats should remind one another that joint decisions can be correct, even if they do not completely match the desires of individual countries involved in making those decisions.
4. In deliberations and in public, they should resist the temptation of blaming unpopular decisions on the EU, or upon multilateral organisations such as the UN, when these decisions were made jointly by individual states.
5. Germany and Europe should assume more responsibility during international crises and in international organisations in order to increase their own influence and options for influencing organisations and decisions. This involves setting a forward-looking German and European personnel policy.
6. Necessary reforms should be identified, especially with respect to enhancing the effectiveness of multilateral organisations, and Germany and Europe should invest their own influence and resources to advance these reforms. Influence and resources should be directed towards realistic goals; after twenty years of fruitless efforts, permanent German membership of the UN Security Council does not appear to be one of them.
7. Tasks should be reviewed regularly to ensure that they are being addressed at the right level (Germany, Europe, the global level). There must be a political discussion to define which global public goods should be provided through multilateral efforts. Where disparities between political mandates and actual implementation are discovered, appropriate reforms should be sought, and influential partners won over.

The hope is that the Christian Democratic Union will pay close attention to these issues and challenges in the coming phase of refining the party programme, choosing new leadership, and positioning itself politically for the 2021 German federal elections.

—translated from German—

Dr. Peter Fischer-Bollin is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s Analysis and Consulting Division.