Multilateralism

The Trojan Horse of Multilateralism

Why Authoritarian Regimes Favour International
Cooperation While Simultaneously Undermining It

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Everyone today is talking about multilateralism, and politicians of almost every stripe are averring the importance of multilateral organisations. Nevertheless, the liberal world order, of which multilateral cooperation is an important foundation, is in what may be its most severe crisis. This article will address this crisis and illustrate what must be done to revive the commitment to multilateralism.

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"Let us work to foster a secure environment of peace and stability. We need to take it as our aim to safeguard peace and development for all; we need to uphold fairness and justice and promote win-win results; we need to base our efforts on international law and widely recognized norms of international relations; we need to champion and put into practice multilateralism."

Until a few years ago, such a quote would, without much hesitation, have been attributed to a US president, a position which, for decades, has also been viewed as that of the leader of the free world. But times have changed: Donald Trump, the current holder of that office, is known for breaking with many traditions and cancelling cooperation in a number of multilateral fora, while Chinese President Xi Jinping, from whom the quote actually originates, styles himself a "champion of multilateralism".[1] How could it come to this?

This article will examine several trends that have contributed to the severe crisis in which the liberal world order currently finds itself. It will clarify why the values that have underpinned this world order for decades are now, more than ever before, in danger; and this albeit – or rather precisely because – authoritarian regimes are expressing support for multilateralism. Finally, it will propose approaches for reversing the trend and shed light on what needs to be done, especially in Europe, to restore the principles and values that lie behind the ambiguous and variously interpreted term "multilateralism".

Prologue: The COVID-19 Crisis as a Catalyst for Existing Trends

Many view the COVID-19 pandemic as a massive challenge for the global West. They believe that the global health crisis has the potential to shift the international balance of power permanently and could even be a turning point leading to a greater acceptance of autocratic models of government.[2]

It is true that the crisis response in many countries of the global West was often not exemplary. Many countries appeared unprepared; forecasts and instructions required repeated correction. Uncoordinated travel and export restrictions initially led to the assumption that European and Western solidarity left much to be desired. In contrast, several countries with authoritarian governments first seemed to come through the crisis better, not least because many practices necessary for combatting a pandemic (lockdowns, checks, data monitoring, etc.) were much more in the "comfort zone" of autocratic systems.

However, the theory that autocratic countries are superior increasingly lost traction: From the testing density alone, it was too obvious that case numbers were not comparable, and autocratic countries in particular (China, Iran, and Russia) deliberately lacked transparency in the numbers of victims they communicated to the World Health Organization (WHO). Finally, there were indications that success in combatting the pandemic tended to turn on other factors (e.g.

experience with controlling earlier epidemics); moreover, among the group of countries that have since come to be internationally viewed as role models (South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and, to a certain degree, Germany, Greece, Iceland, and several Central European countries) more and more democracies are to be found.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 crisis also raises the question of the future of the West and of the liberal world order. This is not because the pandemic is thought to have changed the fundamental balance of power between autocracies and democracies, but rather because the crisis throws a particularly harsh light on some pre-existing trends, and, in several cases, reinforces them.

Trend 1: Western Leadership's Weakness and Disunity

If more evidence were necessary that the US is no longer willing or able to assume leadership in meeting global challenges, the COVID-19 crisis provided it. It would have been inconceivable a few years ago, but today is not even surprising: The US is not at the forefront of coordination efforts to combat the crisis. While the US has certainly provided funding, its administration has repeatedly thwarted efforts at global cooperation in the relevant international organisations. The peak was reached so far when the US announced its withdrawal from the WHO in the middle of the pandemic – an organisation for which it is the largest donor, as it is for many others. Geopolitical rivalry seems to have permanently displaced the conservation of global goods as the guiding motive for US actions – even though it would of course be naive to assume that the country's actions in multilateral organisations to date has been exclusively altruistic.

Its blocking of the UN Security Council (an action to which China admittedly also contributes) has prevented the former from playing any significant role in combatting the pandemic. The termination of all cooperation with the WHO, and most recently the refusal to recognise a vaccine as a global public good, reinforces

the impression that the US has come to be more of a brake than a motor for multilateral cooperation. A similar situation can be observed in the World Trade Organization (WTO). In addition to blocking appointments to the organisation's Appellate Body, the US has also not been particularly cooperative in the aftermath of the departure of the WTO's director general. This blocking role is not new for the Trump administration and merely continues a trend that could already be observed with regard to the WTO's conflict-resolution process, and efforts to combat climate change.

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Regrettably, as in other international crises, the EU has so far been unable to completely fill the vacuum left by weak leadership on the part of the US. During the COVID-19 crisis, the EU was initially primarily concerned with itself, and with its internal disputes. This disunity in the West is a further trend that the COVID-19 pandemic is only reinforcing.

This is also true of the fundamental attitude towards multilateral organisations. While it has become a pattern for the US to use the partially justifiable criticism of the inadequacies of multilateral organisations as a pretext to block them (the WTO, the United Nations Climate Change conference) or to withdraw from them completely (WHO, UN Human Rights Council), the reverse reflex can be observed in most other countries of the global West. Despite all the inadequacies, they elevate commitment to multilateral problem-solving to the level of a mantra. In the interests of peace and statecraft, any criticism of worrisome developments tends to be formulated behind closed doors so that the authority of the organisation is not called into question. This attitude greatly irritates Washington, as could recently be observed

during the debate over the necessity of reforming the WTO. The Alliance for Multilateralism created by Germany and France in 2019 plans laudable initiatives,[3] but has so far avoided the real challenges of international politics or the urgently needed reform of multilateral organisations. For instance, the Alliance has so far submitted no proposal for reforming the WTO, whose work, particularly in the area of conflict resolution, is increasingly paralysed by the tensions between the US and China. Nor has the Alliance as a whole yet taken a position on reforming the UN Security Council, or the WHO.

Trend 2: Multilateral Organisations as Arenas for System Competition

The degree to which US and Chinese actions have come to differ in multilateral contexts can be seen in the most recent World Health Assembly (WHA) in Geneva, on the COVID-19 crisis. While the US was primarily occupied denouncing Beijing's crisis-management and the WHO, and Trump ignored an invitation to speak, Chinese President Xi used the opportunity to present Beijing as a responsible player that could help shape global institutions, promising billions in aid with a special focus on Africa, and assuring everyone that a vaccine would, of course, be treated as a global common good. This also confirms the trend: Authoritarian regimes have long since learnt to instrumentalise multilateral organisations for their own purposes. These organisations have become arenas in which system competition between liberal democracies, on the one side, and authoritarian regimes, on the other, is increasingly being fought out.

A significant increase in Chinese influence has been observed in various international organisations in recent years. This is not true in all areas, and of course Beijing is light years behind the US, the EU, and other countries of the global West in several organisations in terms of financial and political involvement.[4] However China is systematically trying to increase its influence, particularly in international formats which relate to economic policy (WTO, WIPO, UNECE), digital policy (such as the ITU),

and infrastructure (ISO, ICAO, IRU). At the same time, Beijing has massively increased its involvement in UN peacekeeping missions over the last few years.

In the area of human rights, China and especially Russia are making targeted attempts to undermine the universal applicability of individual freedoms and human rights, curtailing minority rights, and blocking work in relevant committees.[5]

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Formation of autocratic camps is becoming increasingly common. On issues such as the Syrian civil war, the catastrophe in Venezuela, and the Uyghurs' plight in Xinjiang, the "autocratic international" is increasingly closing its ranks in order to influence decisions in its favour, for instance at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva.[6] Such alliances, however, appear so far to be more tactical than strategic in nature. In other words, while there is an autocratic solidarity aimed at blocking unwanted initiatives, constructive alliances of autocracies working proactively to assert certain positions are rarer.

In addition to exerting influence in existing multilateral organisations, authoritarian regimes have also begun to establish parallel structures in the form of new multilateral organisations that they dominate. Examples include China's Silk Road initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – a regional security organisation founded jointly by China and Russia. The hope that China might experience "normative socialisation", or come to appreciate the principles of the Western model, as a result of integration into international organisations has not come to fruition.[7]

Inconceivable a few years ago, not even surprising today: The US is not at the forefront of coordination efforts to combat the coronavirus crisis. Source: © Leah Millis, Reuters.

Approaches for a Trend Reversal

Liberal, democratic standards and regulatory principles that have shaped most multilateral organisations in recent decades are coming under increasing pressure from the trends outlined above. These same trends could, moreover, be exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. So, what is to be done? How can principles and values that form the foundation of the liberal world order return to prominence, and what role can Europe play in bringing that about?

Approach 1: Close the Leadership Gap in the West

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, it was clear that the US under Donald Trump was no longer willing to fulfil its traditional role as leading power in the West. But the EU and other countries of the global West have so far been unable to fully close the resultant gap. It is noteworthy, however, that in view of the impasse between the US and China, several countries and actors have recently attempted to reach joint solution via constructive proposals in multilateral fora. For instance, the EU played a decisive role in the unprecedented global initiative, coordinated by the WHO, for accelerating the fight against the pandemic ("ACT Accelerator"),[8] not least by organising a successful international donor conference. Close allies of the global West participated, but the conference was not limited to them. Another example is the constructive role EU countries played in forming a consensus

in the run-up to the WHO's ground-breaking resolution which, among other things, provides for free and equal access to vaccines and medicines. Overall, EU and German political and financial support is considered essential in Geneva for the WHO in the fight against the pandemic.

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Meanwhile, countries such as Canada, Switzerland, South Korea, and New Zealand have recently introduced initiatives, supported by a number of other countries, in the WTO to protect food supply chains and medical equipment from export restrictions. Overall, constructive proposals for combatting the crisis and for maintaining a rules-based multilateral system continue to originate from countries of the global West.

These efforts to close the gap left by the increasing withdrawal of the US from responsibility for the global challenges of our time must be intensified. While the West will be strongest if the EU and the US pull together, this will not always be the case, even under a more EU-friendly US administration. It is all the more important, that Europe also articulates the interests of the West and delivers concrete results beyond mere declarations of intent and resolutions.

To establish itself permanently as a global player, the EU must invest in the necessary diplomatic, financial, political, and military resources to be permanently represented as a force shaping global affairs. Initially, this means increasing financial contributions to multilateral organisations. Many organisations may well see their need for finances rise greatly in the near future. One reason for this is that the fight against the multifaceted consequences of the pandemic will require greater global governance, and another is that many countries will reduce their financial

contributions because of the economic effects of the pandemic. Some of these organisations are already struggling with regard to both finances and personnel – all the more so because of the crisis – and therefore will find it difficult to fulfil their tasks. China and other autocratic countries, such as those in the Gulf region, have indicated that they hope to fill this gap, at least in part. A shift in financing for global initiatives could lead to a fundamental shift in influence in these organisations.

Moreover, despite the importance of soft power, it will be crucial to enhance the hard power component, especially in the new context of system competition. In a world in which – in addition to multilateral initiatives and UN resolutions – determining who has the potential to enforce ideas with military might still matters, hard power remains an essential element of global influence. It is, thus, urgently necessary for Europe to invest more in its joint security and defence policy in order to prevent the transatlantic security imbalance from deepening further.

This is equally true for the area of research and development. The fact that the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva announced in April that, for the first time, China had overtaken the US in the number of patents filed is a clear warning signal. It is therefore important for Europe to do its part to preserve the innovation lead that the global West has so far maintained.

This is all easier said than done, especially given the looming consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within Europe, it will predominantly depend upon credible leadership on the part of Germany and France in order to prevent the crisis from causing the precarious situations of some European countries to worsen. The EU's provision of billions of euros for this purpose is important because it will be critical in preventing permanent loss of faith in moderate political forces and increased popularity of populist representatives and the false hopes of dirigisme and statism. Failure to do so would not only

weaken the global attraction of the Western model of order and society, but also make international cooperation within the pro-Western camp more difficult.

Approach 2: Forge Alliances

Neither the US nor Europe will be able to protect the liberal world order and its values and principles unaided. Success depends, rather, on the formation of sufficiently broad alliances. But the first step is to enhance the cohesion and influence of existing alliances, especially the EU and NATO. Fortunately, despite all the differences of opinion, the West is based on a strong community of values and interests that goes far beyond the trivialities of the latest political developments. In addition to the many common values and principles, nations of the global West also have a common interest in a stable international security architecture, and a level playing field for global economic competition.

The alleged dilemma between supposedly hard security and economic interests, on the one hand, and values and principles, on the other is, incidentally, very deceptive. Countless examples (including the recent discussion on the participation of the Chinese company Huawei in the expansion of the German wireless network) show that values and interests can almost never be separated from practical foreign policy, and that the realisation of certain values can, of course, in themselves be a foreign policy interest.[9]

This is another reason why – as the US increasingly withdraws from responsibility for a liberal world order and the EU cannot fill the gap with its member states alone – the search for like-minded nations must include states such as Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea, and Ukraine. Existing cooperations can be expanded. Beyond "classical allies", the search must be pressed to North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and to key players in Southeast Asia. All over the world, there are potential allies who share the values of a liberal world order, or at least share a few essential interests on specific issues. Many of these players have

little interest in global legal and technical standards being set by China, or by a China-led alliance in the future.

Forming alliances that acquire "critical mass" is especially important when acting in multilateral organisations. This is true both for liberal Western democracies and for China and its allies. Only countries who succeed in forging tactical alliances with central players or groups ultimately have any chance of asserting themselves successfully. In the past, China has been skilful in using this fact to its advantage.[10] The so-called African group states has long demonstrated that if it shows a united front in multilateral organisations, it can be a decisive power block. Many have taken note of this, including top personnel in central organisations.

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Overall, there is much to indicate that classic multilateral solutions that are reached by consensus will increasingly be the exception in future. This does not mean that multilateral organisations will become obsolete. They will remain important and even indispensable fora for international dialogue, even if they are likely to become platforms of plurilateral solutions in the future, i.e. frameworks in which alliances of the willing are created to tackle specific challenges. This will require an even more active role for the countries of the global West in reforming international organisations. The announcement of a German-French initiative for reforming the WHO and its launch in August 2020, is a promising example.

Despite all efforts, however, it will hardly be possible to significantly limit China's influence, and that of other autocratic countries in multilateral formats. Even if liberal democracies were to succeed in pulling together over an
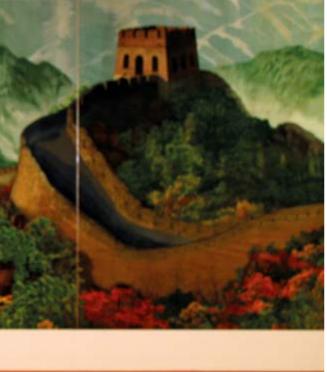
extended period of time, they are not a majority it the community of nations.[11] This also leads, for instance, to the fact that in the UNHRC the tone is set not only by democracies and hybrid regimes, but by autocracies that are themselves accused of human rights violations. China, in particular, continues to introduce resolutions that would weaken the definitions of human rights (even though it no longer has its own seat in the UNHRC as of this year[12]). There are good reasons to decry this situation, but there is little to be done about it in the foreseeable future. This is also true of the fact that multilateral organisations continue to elect heads who hail from autocratic countries.

Despite all the rivalry and justified suspicion, it will be important, in several policy fields for which

A responsible partner? A significant increase in Chinese influence has been observed in various international organisations in recent years. Source: © Andy Wong, Reuters.

As long as the US government maintains a fundamentally sceptical stance towards multilateral organisations, this will continue to lead to a situation in which the other countries of the global West, including the EU, find themselves in a boat with China, but without the US, in the search for pragmatic solutions. An example of this is Chinese participation with the EU in the interim appeal arrangement for WTO disputes agreed to by 19 WTO members at the end of April 2020.

> **The EU should develop a common understanding on how a future global order might be organised.**
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There are, however, limits to China's influence in international organisations, this was shown in March 2020 at the occasion of the election of the WIPO leadership in Geneva. In that election, the US, the EU, and other Western countries were able to push through their favoured candidate from Singapore against the perfectly qualified Chinese candidate. However, one reason this worked was that the US was very active in the run-up to the meeting, and the West presented a unified front.

This is another example of how important it is for the West to close ranks, all the while forging alliances that go beyond those ranks. Furthermore, it would also be a good idea for at least the EU (preferably with other close allies such as Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, Ukraine, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada) to develop a common understanding on how a future global order might be organised, and what role international organisations and multilateral formats

there is no alternative to global solutions, not only to form alliances to *oppose* China and other authoritarian regimes, but also to form alliances *with* them. Reforming the WTO without China is as unthinkable as doing so without the US. The same is true of environmental policy or global health. A policy aimed at completely decoupling from China would involve heavy costs and is therefore not realistic.

would play in it. Indeed, many points of criticism concerning the functioning of international organisations (such as the WTO) are shared, albeit to varying degrees, by the countries of the global West.

Approach 3: Exposing the Trojan Horse

An investigation of why multilateralism is currently in such a deep crisis, although its praises are sung from all sides, leads to the aforementioned reasons, but also to a suspicion that Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping might mean something different when they speak of "multilateralism" than Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron do. In fact, Hanns Werner Maull, a political scientist, recently pointed out how incredibly varied ideas can be concealed behind an inflationary use of the term multilateralism. While, for some, multilateralism is merely about three or more players cooperating in some form or other, at least in the West the concept has long been linked to all principles and values that have underpinned the liberal world order for the last seven decades.[13]

Unfortunately, countries of the global West have contributed to the acceptance of such differences in recent years. While the liberal values and principles of the world order after 1945 were still upheld just a few years ago, today – whether by diplomatic representatives, experts, or even within the official discourse of UN institutions – there is talk of a rules-based order and multilateralism as though peace and liberty throughout the world require merely the cooperation of more than two players or the existence of rules *of any type*. The question of what rules and values (!) should underpin our international order has slipped too much into the background. The question of whether multilateralism in itself actually adds value, or whether the question should be more of one's choice of cooperation partners should also be posed more frequently.

By abandoning these concerns, the countries of the global West have made it easy for authoritarian regimes such as China to use multilateralism as a Trojan horse to expand their influence in multilateral organisations and thus to undermine the values and principles upon which these organisations were founded from the inside. Power politics and financial instruments definitely play a role in international organisations, but normative argumentation is at least as important. If definitions of such concepts as human rights and sovereignty begin to shift, the basic rules of the game will, too. It is possible that defenders of Western values should have resisted problematic shifts in discourse earlier and more vigorously, for instance regarding such organisations as the UNHRC, and in international humanitarian law.

In order to reassert the principles and values of the liberal world order – human dignity, individualism, freedom, democracy, rule of law, social market economy; in short, the foundations of an open society – the countries of the global West will therefore have to expose this Trojan horse as such in future, and clearly identify where the regulatory concepts of liberal democracies differ from those of authoritarian regimes, instead of continuing to dilute them with the catch-all concept of multilateralism and anyone-can-play initiatives.

Concluding Remarks

The liberal world order is not yet lost. However, the pressure on the West's model of order and interpretation of sovereignty has increased significantly. In this context, authoritarian regimes pay public lip service to multilateralism primarily to expand their own influence in multilateral organisations, systematically undermining the values and principles upon which these organisations were founded.

If these values and principles are to return to prominence, taking a clear stand on difficult issues will be unavoidable. This can be seen in two current examples that we will address in closing: the inacceptable exclusion of Taiwan from the WHA and China's treatment of Hong Kong. It was – and remains – the US, together with partners such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and Japan, that expressed criticism in such cases, while Germany and the EU once

again exercised restraint. This unfortunately confirms the tired and certainly exaggerated reputation of Europe as an unreliable softy.

Germany will have to abandon its often important role as an international mediator and bridge-builder more frequently in order to take a firm stand for those values and principles upon which the classic multilateralism of the post-war order is based. The idea that Germany will assume an international leadership role without having to hurt anyone's feelings is naive in any case.

Despite all the difficulties with Washington and the often beguiling, pragmatic-sounding siren song from Beijing, Germany should not succumb to the temptation of pursuing a policy of equidistance between the US and China. Instruments such as the "Alliance for Multilateralism" should also be more than just "flexible networks". It could, after all, also be used to define a clear position based on Western values, especially on difficult, high-profile issues.

Decoupling from China, and from other autocratic countries, is not an option, for a number of reasons. But taking a stand for the values of the global West should not be sacrificed too often for the benefit of economic interests. After all, it is not least the normative attraction and credibility of the West that will continue to determine its fortunes going forward.

– translated from German –

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2   Dempsey, Judy 2020: The Coronavirus Is a Test for the West, Carnegie Europe, 17 Mar 2020, in: https://bit.ly/314dwcU [17 Aug 2020].

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