



[Looking West](#)

Denier of the Liberal World Order?

Trump's Unilateralism and Its Implications

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With Trump's entry into the White House and the US's gradual withdrawal from the multilateral context of the United Nations, the zero-sum game in international relations seems to have become acceptable again. This entails an increased threat of violent conflicts breaking out. The value-based world order is eroding and the US's retreat into foreign, security, and development policies geared purely to national interests is finding its imitators.

Introduction

In the past, there have already been regular phases in US foreign policy where the US administration's involvement in multilateral organisations and thematic fields can be described as cautious or ambivalent. Illustrations of this include the Bush administration's withdrawal from the Rome Statute, which had previously been signed by President Clinton, and the US's refusal to join the International Criminal Court or contribute to its funding. President Obama was publicly committed to multilateralism and initiated multilateral fora, such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum. But even during his term, there were doubts in some quarters about whether US policy truly had a multilateral orientation.¹ With the election of President Trump, however, it became clear from the outset that US foreign policy would in future be guided by national interests and the "America first" paradigm. However, it was only possible to a limited extent to predict the extent of the impact of such a policy upon the world order, the scale of the instability it unleashed, and the challenges posed to established structures and standards. Particularly during the first few months of his presidency, when key posts were being filled at a snail's pace, there was still hope that President Trump would focus primarily on domestic issues and would leave foreign policy to key players in his administration. However, the first 24 months of his term have seen the termination of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the withdrawal

from the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, the unilateral termination of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, and harsh criticism of NATO partners – all of which demonstrate that the president's foreign policy is guided purely by national interests and geared towards fulfilling his campaign promises in the short term. US policy is now guided by a cost-benefit approach whose impulses come primarily from the president's inner circle. The high turnover of staff on his foreign and security team is one illustration of this. The US's political positioning within the United Nations – an organisation that is the embodiment of multilateralism – is another: seen for instance through US withdrawal from both the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO, as well as its cessation of support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The common ground between the US and its transatlantic partners is shrinking. The question remains, in which areas and multilateral initiatives it will still be possible to work together in the future, and to what extent Germany and Europe will be able to compensate for the withdrawal of the US. At present, nationalist and populist governments are already preventing Europe from acting together to solve global problems, as in the case of migration management. As a defender of democracy and human rights and a guarantor of multilateralism, Europe now has to look for new partners and, above all, put its money where its mouth is.

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration

The imitator-effect of Trump's policies is problematic. At a time when populist governments within the EU are also hoping for short-term political success, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the EU to present itself as a united bloc in a multilateral context.

The first example of this has already emerged in the context of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. This compact is the first intergovernmental agreement negotiated under the auspices of the United Nations to take a comprehensive approach to the many and varied dimensions of international migration management. The document as such is not legally binding, but, like other multilateral initiatives, it has a symbolic value that underlines the fact that current problems, due to their global dimension and complexity, can only be solved in a multinational context and through joint solidarity. The Global Compact on Migration addresses the challenges of migration for countries of origin, transit, and destination, while still emphasising the concepts of state sovereignty, shared responsibility, non-discrimination, and respect for human rights.² In December 2017, the US withdrew from the agreement just a few months after the start of negotiations, arguing that such an agreement would undermine national sovereignty and border protection, as well as challenge migration legislation.³

If the largest immigration country in the world (around 46.6 million of its 327.16 inhabitants were not born in the US) rejects an agreement with such a global character, repercussions are inevitable. Just one week after the UN General Assembly agreed on a final version of the compact, Hungary announced that it would not sign the document that was presented to the signatory states at the Intergovernmental Conference in Marrakech, in December 2018. The Hungarian Foreign Minister stated that the compact was contrary to common sense and endangered the restoration of European security.⁴

The right-wing populist FPÖ that forms part of Austria's coalition government rejected the compact on grounds that it also guaranteed the protection of migrants' human rights. For Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, the agreement does not adequately distinguish between legal and illegal migration.⁵ Such arguments can easily be refuted in a written exegesis, but they are joining rank of Trump's line of argument.

The Global Compact on Migration has caused deep division in Europe.

In the voting debate held in the UN General Assembly on 19 December 2018, many countries justified their support for the agreement by referring to the need for international cooperation in this area, and for a multilateralist attitude. However, Europe proved to be very divided, with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joining Israel and the US to expressly vote against the agreement. Some EU member states, such as Bulgaria, Italy, and Latvia abstained from voting, while others remained completely absent from the vote in the General Assembly. In Belgium, support for the agreement led to a political crisis and the withdrawal of coalition partner N-VA from the government.

At present, Europe's differences are nowhere more pronounced than on the topic of how it should adequately respond to the complex issue of migration. The instrumentalisation of questions of national identity and state sovereignty, along with their positioning and weighting in a multilateral context, are often the actual causes that hinder the emergence of a strong, united Europe, and impede a guarantor of a multilateral world order to step forward. Instead of reaffirming the European Union's multilateralist foundations, Romania abstained from voting on the Global Compact on Migration in the General Assembly on 19 December, saying: "[...] in the context of a variety of views among European

Union member States and as a future President of the European Union Council, Romania considers it important to maintain a balanced approach.”⁶

United Nations Human Rights Council

70 years after US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt paved the way for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Trump administration withdrew from the UN Human Rights Council in June 2018. It justified this step by citing the council’s bias against Israel, and its failure to condemn human rights abuses as a result of its composition.⁷ The Human Rights Council has repeatedly been criticised for need of reform by the US in the past, but there was no majority in favour of this at the UN General Assembly. Although the criticism of the UN Human Rights Council is justified, and the autocratic regimes represented there often ensure that their own violations are not addressed, the Council is nonetheless the only global body for discussing human rights violations. If the Trump administration thought that the US’s withdrawal from the Council would improve the situation, then it has done a disservice to the work of protecting human rights. The vacuum created by the absence of a global stakeholder and advocate of democracy and human rights has now primarily been filled by non-democratic actors. Iceland succeeded the US in the UN Human Rights Council, but it hardly has the geopolitical weight to fill its shoes. Members such as Russia and China will now be able to use the vacuum which has arisen to further their own interests. China in particular has developed a new confidence under the presidency of Xi Jinping. In the past, it mainly concerned itself with blocking criticism of its own human rights violations and backing states with a similarly poor record. Yet, today, the Chinese government is primarily attempting to influence the interpretation of international norms and accountability mechanisms. These include universal periodic reviews (UPR), along with civil society participation mechanisms, and their independent monitoring. It is noticeable that there has been a return to the orthodox interpretation of national sovereignty and

non-interference at the expense of human rights and good governance.⁸ Maintaining the previous set of standards would have required the US to stay in the game with its strong voice. EU member states, such as Germany and the UK, have expressed their regret about the US’s withdrawal. However, the EU will not be in a position to fill the vacuum, as the extent of China’s influence over EU member states such as Hungary and Greece – and their voting behaviour – is already becoming clear at the European level. In June 2017, Greece, which has benefited from Chinese investment in the port of Piraeus to the tune of 51 million US dollars, blocked the submission of an EU declaration to the UN Human Rights Council that would have condemned, *inter alia*, the actions of Xi Jinping’s government against opposition movements and civil society organisations.⁹ The EU is not a member of the UN as such, so it has no legal power to act, but the international community nevertheless regards it as a key pillar in the protection of human rights. Within the framework of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the EU took up the cause of coherently advocating respect for human rights. The EU has long financed the cost of running the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) as well as that of concrete projects (7.4 million euros in 2016–2017) by means of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).¹⁰ If the cohesion of the European Union is now increasingly being challenged in the area of human rights, then its political influence and ability to be recognised as a norm-setting actor in this area will also dwindle.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): A Prime Example of a Multilateral Development System

Agenda 2030 and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals it contains represent a prime example of a multilateral development system with universal aspirations. The goals and monitoring mechanisms apply to all states, regardless of their individual level of development. The 17 development goals ensure that only a comprehensive approach covering all sectors

(peace and security, development, environment, humanitarian aid) can lead to success. In addition, Agenda 2030 can no longer be a purely governmental undertaking; achieving its goals also requires mobilising the resources of both the private sector and civil society.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals provide a framework for international cooperation and set out goals for the EU member states.

UNGA (United Nations General Assembly) Resolution 72/279 paved the way for the reform process of the UN development system and its repositioning in the context of Agenda 2030. For Germany and the EU, the SDGs not only provide a framework for international development cooperation, but they also set out goals for the EU member states.

But can the SDGs survive in a world where the Trump administration is renouncing multilateralism and promoting a policy that is not just “America first” but “America only”?

The SDGs have not yet been targeted by the presidential Twitter attacks. The US administration’s current stance on the matter can best be described as one of indifference. Interestingly, it is precisely these problem areas that brought Trump to the presidency that the SDGs are trying to address: growing social inequality, with sections of society feeling they have been marginalised and left behind. The SDG’s leitmotif “leaving no one behind” and goals such as Decent Work and Economic Growth (Goal 8) and Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (Goal 9) are perfectly in line with what Trump promised his voters. However, it will be difficult to politically market the SDGs under a label of multilateralism in the current climate in the US. So far, the US has made only limited progress towards achieving the goals. In the SDG Index

2017,¹¹ the US ranked 30th among the 35 OECD countries with the highest income levels. This is mainly due to the fact that although the US is an economic powerhouse, it still has pronounced differences based on income, gender, race, and education. The government provides few incentives for the economy to operate in a more sustainable fashion. However, the private sector





MAGA: Under the slogan "Make America Great Again" Trump operates a policy of "America Only".
Source: © Chris Bergin, Reuters.

is increasingly recognising the opportunities offered by a sustainable economy. According to a study by the Business & Sustainable Development Commission, achieving the SDGs on agriculture and nutrition, urban development, and health and energy could create new markets worth twelve trillion US dollars.¹² Although the US government has shown little interest in the

SDGs to date, new partners could primarily be found in the private sector and American civil society.

Some of Trump's criticism of the inefficiencies of the multilateral development system and its largely fragmented and project-based approach is comprehensible. The various UN

development agencies run 1,400 offices around the world so far. These will now be merged within the framework of the reforms set in motion by UN Secretary-General António Guterres. A new system of Resident Coordinators at the country level will, it is hoped, achieve improved coordination and complementarity in the UN development system. The need for reform has been recognised, but the restructuring process launched at the end of 2018 will require time and, above all, the support of member states. The involvement of the private sector and a greater propensity for thinking outside the box are required in order to improve the effectiveness of development cooperation.

Irrespective of the financial support required for the UN development system, the consequences of reduced US funding for development cooperation and its political reorientation are already having a serious impact.

The announcement of the cessation of full support for UNRWA, 25 per cent of whose budget was financed by the US (around 350 million US dollars per year),¹³ has already prompted solidarity among EU member states. At a meeting at the end of September 2018, Germany increased its UNRWA contribution and, together with the EU, Sweden, Japan, Jordan, and Turkey, sought further donor support. In the long term, however, the donor community will be unable to compensate for the withdrawal of the US from development cooperation, and this will have a lasting impact on achieving the SDGs.

Currently, projects in the Middle East are particularly affected. At the end of August, in addition to the suspension of UNRWA support, a further 200 million US dollars, intended for development projects in the West Bank and Gaza, were withheld. The US also cancelled the 230 million US dollars that had already been approved by Congress to help stabilise Syria. The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) current budget for bilateral programmes is 16.8 billion US dollars.¹⁴ Under the Obama administration it stood at 25.6 billion US dollars.¹⁵

According to the New York Times, a total of three billion US dollars will be cut from the development budget in the current fiscal year.¹⁶

In his speech to the UN General Assembly, it became clear that, for Trump, development assistance has a transactional character, and that the interests of the US must take priority: "The United States is the world's largest giver in the world, by far, of foreign aid. But few give anything to us. We will examine [...] whether the countries who receive our dollars and our protection also have our interests at heart."¹⁷

Peace and Security in a Multilateral Context

For the international community, UN Peacekeeping missions are an important multilateral instrument for stabilising states and minimising violence in increasingly complex, hybrid conflicts. These missions are, however, unable to resolve the underlying conflicts themselves. This must be done through political negotiations with all parties to the conflict, including those who benefit from it. President Trump had already expressed his opinion on the United Nations during the 2016 election campaign: "When do you see the United Nations solving problems? They don't. They cause problems."¹⁸

Cuts in US contributions to peace missions should motivate other countries to step up.

It was, therefore, hardly surprising that, upon taking office, President Trump demanded an annual reduction in the US contribution to peace missions of one billion US dollars (equivalent to 45 per cent). Until then, the US had provided more than 28 per cent of the total budget for UN peace missions. For 2018/2019, UN Secretary-General Guterres had to slash the budget for peace missions from 7.9 billion to 6.8 billion US dollars, but at least he could count on an American contribution of 25 per cent.

When President Trump addressed the General Assembly in 2018, he expressed his hope that US cuts would motivate other countries “to step up, get involved, and also share in this very large burden”. However, this seems an unrealistic objective. Of the 51 Americans in peace missions, only eight are not UN personnel (five police officers, three military observers).¹⁹ States such as Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bangladesh, and India are the largest troop contributors and also suffer the highest number of casualties in UN operations.

A report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office to Congress reveals that to the US, the costs of UN peacekeeping activities are far lower than those of comparable unilateral operations.²⁰

The Trump administration’s insistence that other countries should contribute to peace and security, and particularly to their own security, calls into question the principle of collective security in the case of NATO. In the case of UN peace missions, it allows China to move into the emerging gap.

Meanwhile, China has increased its contribution to the financing of peacekeeping operations to 10.25 per cent and pledged one billion US dollars a year for the next five years. China has trained more than 8,000 soldiers of its People’s Liberation Army to serve in UN peacekeeping operations.²¹ With 2,517 soldiers already deployed, China currently ranks among the ten largest providers of UN troops. China’s increased commitment to peacekeeping will certainly have to be taken into account when filling senior positions within the UN’s Department of Peacekeeping Operations in the near future. When it comes to defining mandates for peace missions, China and Russia are already calling for the abolition of peace mission positions dedicated to the protection of human rights. During the budget negotiations held in June 2018, Russia demanded cuts of 50 per cent in this area. In the past, China has simply tried to prevent the creation of new positions, but now it is pursuing the same course as Russia. Given the changing nature of peace missions in complex and asymmetrical conflicts,

with mandates to protect the civilian population, this course represents a deep cut that is detrimental to the objective.

In recent years, Germany has significantly increased both its voluntary contributions and its involvement in peacekeeping. At present, 589 Germans are deployed in UN peacekeeping missions.²² However, this still lags behind expectations, which will only intensify from January 2019, when Germany takes its non-permanent seat on the Security Council. Currently, the Bundestag has a mandate to support the UN mission in Mali with up to 1,100 soldiers. However, UN statistics from October 2018 reveal that only 436 soldiers (including UN personnel and police officers) are currently involved in the mission. It is important to have a local presence in order to be able to participate effectively in UN processes, and also to assess the form of the mandate. China recognised this and is making the most of the leeway provided both by the US withdrawal and by Europe’s restrained positioning in the area of peace and security.

Conclusion

When Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement on climate change were adopted in 2015, multilateral regimes emerged whose function and success were based on the establishment of a normative framework and associated reporting mechanisms. They were based on nation states committing themselves to the goals, and on governments and societies taking responsibility for their actions. They were also based on a global consensus that the challenges faced by humankind can only be addressed collectively and that isolated actions by individual countries tend to be counterproductive.²³

Trump and his administration may deny this, but they have not disproved it. With Trump’s entry into the White House and the US’s gradual withdrawal from the multilateral context of the United Nations, the zero-sum game in international relations seems to have become acceptable again. This entails an increased threat of violent conflicts breaking out.

The value-based world order created after the Second World War is eroding and the US's retreat into foreign, security, and development policies geared purely to national interests is finding its imitators. In the process, facts become secondary and discourse is dominated by truncated arguments that are often taken out of context but that appeal to emotions. In value-based policy areas that were regarded as irreversible, especially after the end of the Cold War, the US's withdrawal has left a vacuum that is quickly being filled by autocratic regimes with their own interpretations of sovereignty, participation, and non-interference. In the search for new partners and like-minded associates, Germany and those EU member states that still uphold the EU's compendium of values will have to detach themselves from a purely inter-governmental approach. It is particularly important to involve representatives of civil society and the private sector more closely in the dialogue and new partners need to be identified worldwide. He who pays calls the shots – at the moment it is mainly Europe that is paying the price and compensates for the absence of the US in many areas of multilateral cooperation. However, it often seems to lack the will and the concepts for shaping, and it remains reactive in its political responses.

–translated from German–

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