

Multilateralism in the Era of Post-Globalisation

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Executive Summary

- Multilateralism is far from being in decline. It is rather about to undergo the most significant transformation since its inception, driven by the transition of our system to a new era of post-globalisation. Most part of our reality has already transitioned to a new era that carries great opportunities as well as the risks typical of fundamental change. Multilateralism is one fundamental feature of global governance. Its current version has taken us through the longest period of peace in millennia and served as a regulating mechanism during the race to globalisation. But things have changed and as much as the discussion on the future of multilateralism is philosophically nutritious, the discussion we had better have now is: which multilateralism do we need for the future..

- *This speech was delivered at a conference with the same title held at the University of Geneva on 26 September 2019.*

In 2019 I had the privilege of giving the graduation speech of the Master of Advanced Studies in European and International Governance (MEIG Programme) of the University of Geneva, attended mostly by young professionals in diplomacy and international affairs. It was encouraging to see women and men who decided to invest their talents in multilateralism and global governance. I told them why multilateralism is far from being in decline. Rather, it is about to undergo the most significant transformation since its inception, driven by the transition of our system to a new era of post-globalisation. My point was that in reality we have already transitioned to a new era of post-globalisation and that this carries tremendous opportunities for our species and the planet, while it poses the grave risks typical of fundamental change: loss of direction and systemic failure. For example, attempts to overextend the current global governance based on the promise of endless growth may cause us to adapt to the new era with costly delay. Young leaders are the force who may keep us on track at this critical juncture.

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Here is why. When we look upon our history, the uninterrupted flow of change is a constant. Why is it then that so many observers, writers and public figures these days make the same point of mentioning “our rapidly changing world”, as if change were a novelty of our times? It is because change is occurring at unprecedented speed so that time has become a compressing factor in our lives. The same goes for international relations. In one hundred years from now, scholars will probably look back at our time as the beginning of Post-Globalisation, a time when humankind had to begin facing the consequences of



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over two centuries of accelerated globalisation driven by ruthless economic growth.

Looking at the big picture,

one could say that we are at the highest point of our civilization. We have reached unprecedented levels of knowledge, science, technology, health, all without becoming wise enough to understand in which areas we are at the peak and which ones have peaked, therefore going through inevitable decline. The cumulative cost of centuries of accelerating globalisation is today glaringly evident. The globalisation process that has enabled our spectacular economic growth generated global challenges, perceived by the system as exogenous factors. Some of these challenges, such as climate change and inequalities, are systemic threats whose solution will not arise from the system itself. Trapped in a vicious circle, we blame global governance for its inability to solve the problems we now begin to see. But global governance is designed to sustain and even promote globalisation, not to absorb the cost it generates. And what we stubbornly call externalities of global economic growth are in fact its direct consequences.

When a new era begins, usually the previous one has ran its course. Transitions are not the specialty of international governance. As a system, international governance is designed to maintain the status quo, allowing only for just enough change to ensure adjustment to surrounding conditions with the objective of maintaining the overall situation as is. This is typical of many complex systems, of course, but global governance in addition lacks agility and is not famous for its learning skills, so when change happens the system perceives it as an exogenous factor and tends to resist it and even deny it.

Perhaps the first example of the willing to break away from the status quo is the creation of the League of Nations and the United Nations, global organizations born from the horrors of global conflicts to lead change in international relations generating consensus around basic values and using multilateralism as a method to guide decisions towards a better future for all. This last point is not often highlighted: multilateralism can be a proactive force of change.

Let's take a closer look at it.

Multilateralism can be defined in several ways because it has several functions: it is a functional element of the global governance system, but also a behavioural principle for the international community

as well as a set of values and standards. For some, multilateralism is a decision-making methodology involving more than two state actors, for others it means just membership in international institutions. In simpler term, it can be viewed as the immune system of the international community: strong multilateralism means less risk of conflict and other inflammatory diseases.

Recently, multilateralism is the subject of much speculation, between those who think it is under attack and those who defend it as an ageless pillar of global governance. Much of the criticism directed to multilateralism derives either from basic misunderstanding and misplaced expectations, or from intentional undermining linked to unilateral strategies. There is also confusion caused by attributing to multilateralism of the shortcomings of the global governance system. For example, multilateralism is frequently the scapegoat accused of being unable to fix what breaks due to power-based international relations.

Clarifications

The following clarifications about multilateralism may be of some help at this point:

1. Multilateralism is more than a diplomatic practice. It implies a commitment to values and to the practice of dialogue and collaboration, as well as respect for the rules of the game;
2. It is not a recipe for harmony. It is a conscious choice to articulate different and often conflicting interests;
3. Multilateralism is not synonym of consensus. The way consensus is used in the discussion determines whether the welfare of the most prevails on the profit of the few;
4. It is not a method to achieve quick results but rather a moral discipline for international actors that enables complex systems to achieve long-term stability;
5. It is not perfect, but it is the obvious choice when looking for collective responses to global issues that are unsolvable for individual states.

Today the values and principles of multilateralism are enshrined in the UN Charter and whatever may be said about the UN Organization, its Charter is the only universal statement of principles recognised as having constitutional value at global level. Every caution should be used when criticising this instrument, without which the international community would become orphaned of common ground rules.



Why is multilateralism not delivering in-time solutions despite being the obvious choice is a question we must face rapidly and honestly, lest the next generation of leaders may feel the pull of other, less cooperative and less efficient systems.

The quick answer is: because the version we are using is designed for the globalisation race and does not support the shift in priorities that comes with the transition to post-globalisation. In this new phase, societies are forced to absorb the unevenly distributed cost of the globalisation race. This poses new, bigger problems that we are unable to solve with models developed for bipolar, growth-based scenarios. Reality has shifted: the distribution of power has become polycentric, with multiple players interacting simultaneously in several dimensions. This requires a new multilateral formula, which needs to be broader and more deeply rooted in society and become everyone's business, instead of the exclusive game of the diplomatic scene.

Faced with this challenge, we go back to inherited habits and resort to what we do best in times of doubt: sitting very still and negotiate change at geological speed. But here lies the catch of our century: time has become the compressing factor of decision making. The accelerating consequences of choices we made in the past are paralysing our decisions in critical areas such as climate change, migration, arms control. Time plays against our indifference: the cost of sitting still exceeds the cost of sustainable solutions acceptable by most, with some degree of loss for some. Our inaction does worse still: it transfers the cost to future generations, creating debts for people who aren't yet born.

The wakeup call arising from science and civil society and the widespread discomfort of our time are typical of big transitions. We have been here before, less the technology and the acceleration. Most calls are directed to governments and decision makers who sit at the top of the global governance system. While the responses are evasive at best, with some governments becoming defensive and even isolationist, a new type of global citizenry is emerging, which tends to expect less from institutions and believes that the type of change we need is a matter of individual behaviour as much as it is about policy making.

The multilateralism of the future

Civil society's growing engagement and the massive participation of young people are both reasons for optimism and indeed there is renewed hope for the future in many quarters of society. Carried by the same hope is also the emerging discussion about a new

multilateralism capable of connecting with civil society and doing more than mediating conflicting national interests and protecting economic growth. Timid references to a more inclusive and participatory multilateral model in the early 2000s have led to explicit calls for a reform of the entire system. More recently, observers have pointed fingers at large diplomatic conferences becoming removed from reality and detached from scientific evidence, with the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties, or COP, frequently occupying the place of number one example.

The time has come to switch the discussion from the future of multilateralism to the multilateralism of the future. During the race to globalisation, the old multilateral model has served us well. We can build on its components and experience to build a better model. How will this model look? How will it work? The answer depends on many factors of which at least two are unpredictable: technological development and the consequences of political decisions we are making now combined with the cost of the decisions we are not taking. But at least some features of the future Multilateralism 2.0 are easy to imagine:

1. It will be more connected to real life and less entrenched in political reality— we can no longer rely on a world order resulting simply from power dynamics. The polyilateral dynamics of our times imply complexities that require more than just hard and soft power. We need greater stability to manage new forces at play beside the global economy, beginning with nature and the climate.
2. Any new model will have to be people-centered, inclusive and participatory. Supported by technology and connectivity, virtually everyone can participate in multilateralism and be part of large networks combining and recombining around global issues, driven by the shared interest for solutions rather than political advantage. This may mean that problem-solving processes will involve humans along with algorithms as well as horizontal or general AI.
3. International diplomacy has never been a bastion of technology, but it would be wrong to assume that diplomacy will be made redundant by technological advancement. Conversely, diplomacy will have to stop being impermeable to technology to become connected and experimental if it wants to avoid being overtaken by problems that travels faster than annual negotiation rounds. Another risk is being marginalised in global dialogues happening mainly on the web. But above all, diplomacy will have to evolve fast enough to ensure it has a role to play in system thinking Instead of just power dynamics.
4. Any new multilateral model will have to be born in the service of a collective vision of the future and



endowed with a new type of legitimacy recognised by state actors and individuals alike. This shared vision could emerge rather soon from the climate crisis and could be articulated as a global pact with the planet, a sort of new deal that people across frontiers would consider worth striving for if the burden is shared equitably and governments are seen as doing their share.

This scenario may seem too futuristic to many, but the future it describes is already here. It began in 2015 with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 2030 Agenda marks a fundamental shift from previous global governance habits because it sets ambitious goals and places responsibility on all. It also sets a precedent that cannot be ignored in any foreseeable scenario: that of inclusive, participatory and transformative action.

The Agenda and its Global Goals signal that the journey to new multilateralism has already begun. The enthusiasm and fears provoked by its adoption are unmistakable signs of change in the making. The road is not so much long as it is arduous: we have all the knowledge and the means required to travel much faster on this journey, motivated by will rather than reacting to a chain of emergencies.

Here are the main speedbumps and accelerators that affect our travel. The most important speedbumps are:

1. **INEQUALITIES**, because they lead to conflict;
2. **DIVORCE FROM NATURE**, because we are at the losing end if we do;
3. **DENYING THE COST OF GLOBALISATION**, because it leads to complacency;
4. **FEAR OF RESHAPING GLOBAL**

GOVERNANCE, because it paralyses the system.

The most powerful accelerators are already manifest in the international relations discourse:

1. **TOGETHERNESS**. The sense of being together in the face of global challenges can reconnect global governance to the real meaning of consensus, which is not agreeing on the lowest common engagement but rather committing to act together in the interest of all.
2. **TECHNOLOGY**. We are beginning to see a critical mass of technologies that combined with human knowledge could generate a new form of wisdom. By shifting our attention from market-led innovation to system thinking focused on protecting our only planet, the next generation of change-makers could use technology to accelerate change beyond what we imagine today.
3. **PURPOSE**. Purpose is found beyond vision, where individuals agree on the general direction of travel. Purpose is about progress and it involves moral advancement as a species. This accelerator is dependent on value-based leadership at global level, which is as important as it is hard to find.

Given the nature and size of issues we brought upon ourselves in just over two centuries of industrialisation, multilateralism is the wise choice forward if we want to solve global problems. Applied to the right governance system, multilateralism will still be the best option probably for centuries. But time is pressing, and millions of young people are increasingly worried that the current system is not delivering solutions fast enough.

In one hundred years from now, scholars will probably look back at our time as the beginning of Post-Globalisation. We still have some time to write the rest of the story ourselves.



Further reading

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About the author

Francesco Pisano is an expert in international affairs with a professional background in humanitarian affairs, risk management, and research on knowledge systems. He has an academic background in international relations with a specialisation in diplomatic studies and conflict resolution, and law with a focus on public international law.

He joined the United Nations in 1993 where he took positions of increasing responsibility with the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs, its Division for Disaster Mitigation, then with OCHA as Senior Officer. He served as Director of Research, Technology Applications and Knowledge Systems at the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) where he was also the Manager of UNOSAT (the Operational Satellite Applications Programme) from 2007 to 2012. Since 2016 he directs the UN Library Geneva, a centre for research and knowledge exchange established in 1919, and the Cultural Activity Programme of UNOG, a space dedicated to cultural diplomacy and international outreach.

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Francesco PISANO, *Multilateralism in the Era of Post-Globalisation*, Geneva Global Policy Brief No 1/2020, pp. 1-5.

Publications in the Series should be cited as:

AUTHOR, TITLE, Geneva Global Policy Brief No ./YEAR [URL]

ISSN 2624-8603



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Multilateralism in the Era of Post-Globalisation
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GGPB N°1/2020