GLOBAL 11.12.2019 | Nils Schmid

# Multilateralism first!

## In a changing world, multilateralism must be progressive, pragmatic and pioneering to be truly effective

*Read this article in German or Russian.*

In our times, even the casual observer can see the tectonic plates of geopolitics shifting. After the twin poles of the Cold War world and the brief period in which, following the fall of the Iron Curtain, the US was the only superpower, we are currently in a phase of transition, in a new world disorder.

There are several reasons for this. The US is turning away from the multilateral institutions it itself played a central role in setting up, and the current president seems happier striking out alone than acting in cohort with his country's allies. This US withdrawal from the world stage leaves a strategic vacuum, which Russia is filling with its aggressive foreign policy that represents a clear and present danger to the European security architecture. Then there is China, which, after a period of unparalleled economic expansion, is becoming ever more confident in asserting its national interests across the globe.

All in all, there is a greater risk now of conflicts between the major powers just as, in many countries, nationalists and populists are on the rise – in the Western hemisphere as much as anywhere else – whose policies could all be summed up as 'pursuing our own national interest regardless of the rest'. The attitudes of Trump, Xi Jinping, Putin, Bolsonaro and all the other 'strongman' heads of government or state do not bode well for multilateral cooperation.

## Social-democratic foreign policy

More than almost any other country, Germany has reaped the benefits of a stable global order. As a successful export economy, we rely strongly on international trade and the respect of global rules; it isn't just the free movement of goods, however, that is crucial to our prosperity, but also worldwide freedom of movement for ideas, knowledge, data and finance.

As a medium-sized country at the centre of Europe, there is no other way for us to make our interests heard on the international stage than in concert with our neighbours.

Moreover, looking at the major challenges facing all nations in the 21st century, from the climate crisis and international terrorism through to the risks and opportunities of migration and the digital transformation, there can be no doubt that only through cross-border cooperation can these challenges be tackled. As such, a rules-based international order and the continued development and strengthening of multilateral cooperation is one of the key tasks for German foreign policy.

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Social-democratic foreign policy is policy for peace. It promotes dialogue and understanding between nations and peoples as peace can only be achieved through cooperation with other countries: you cannot impose peace; you have to work with others to get it. As such, social democracy strives for fair conditions for all in world trade and for sustainable globalisation. Social-democratic policy pushes for disarmament, non-proliferation and arms export controls; across the world, it advocates democracy and human rights.

All of this means that, for us as social democrats, multilateral cooperation is more than a means to an end – it's nothing less than a core strand in our political DNA. That is what puts us in a position to credibly embody efforts to maintain multilateralism, and so it is only logical that, when at the 2018 Conference of Ambassadors our foreign minister Heiko Maas called for an alliance of multilateralists, the SPD was united with many other social-democratic forces worldwide in supporting his position. Furthermore, that is why we are particularly happy to have, in the shape of Josep Borell, another social democrat succeeding Federica Mogherini as High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs.

## A new alliance of multilateralists

The gathering of foreign ministers jointly organised by Germany and France on the sideline of the United Nations General Assembly this September was proof that this initiative for an alliance of multilateralists has come at just the right moment: ministers from around 50 countries took part and agreed on specific action regarding important future global issues such as risks to security from climate change or controls on lethal autonomous weapons systems.

It is important that the initiative does not limit itself to trying to defend existing agreements and protect institutions already in operation, but that it's committed to reforming them – an eminently necessary step in view of the clear need for global bodies such as the UN or the World Trade Organisation to become more efficient and more representative.

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The initiative to strengthen multilateralism has, thus far, been an unquestioned success. For it to remain so, however, we must take a two-pronged approach: pragmatic multilateralism must be paired with progressive multilateralism. The former means recognising that, to solve problems of a global scale, we need the support of as many countries as possible; this entails being willing to work with states who might not share all of our views and values. That is why it was crucial that the initiative did not exclude anyone *ab initio*. For example, a major achievement of multilateralism was the Paris Agreement on climate change, which was also agreed by Russia and China.

## A progressive mutlilateralism

The latter, progressive approach to multilateralism means working in changing constellations of progressive, courageous and like-minded nations such as France and Canada, with whom we should attempt to fill at least some of the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the US from its multilateral obligations. Working with such allies, however, we must also look to become active in new areas requiring international regulation, be it in disarmament or in cyberspace.

Our task is to put up multilateral beacons that are bright enough to attract others; we must start by strengthening existing forums for international cooperation such as the UN and the EU. As an initiator of the alliance of multilateralists, we are pioneers – pioneers being watched closely. Only if we are consistent and coherent in our approach and behaviour will we be credible enough to convince others to join us.

Indeed, driving forward a multilateral alliance is not just a foreign policy issue: we have a lot of work to do in Germany, too. According to a study commissioned by Körber Stiftung, two-thirds of Germans do not actually understand the meaning of the word 'multilateralism', and this should motivate us to explain our foreign policy to people even better than we currently do. The much greater danger, however, is the one posed by

nationalists and populists, who create a lot of noise about 'national interests' and propagate fear of the global challenges facing us. Multilateral cooperation must show that those who advocate it are those with the best ideas for resolving the problems facing our planet, and where there are achievements – such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration or the Paris Agreement – they must be better communicated.

Multilateralism and social democracy are two intertwined success stories, which have come under pressure lately. But what the current global challenges amply demonstrate is that both are needed: multilateral cooperation and pioneers with strong social-democratic convictions as shown by the Social Democrat Willy Brandt, who in 1973, as the first German Chancellor to address the UN General Assembly, spoke as follows: 'In a world in which we are all increasingly dependent on each other, a policy for peace must not stop on our own doorstep. As experience shows us, small steps can take us far [...] Today, no sovereign nation can find security in isolation [...] We need others; we need a broader community in which we can enjoy peace, security, and, as a result, freedom.'

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