DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 31.10.2022 | Markus Engels

Will multilateralism become a victim of de-globalisation?

Humanity today once again faces multiple existential crises — the most urgent of these can only be tackled through global cooperation

During the darkest days of the Cold War in the late 1960s, archenemies United States and the Soviet Union joined forces to present their draft of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As its preamble noted, 'Considering the devastation that would be visited upon all mankind by a nuclear war and the consequent need to make every effort to avert the danger of such a war and to take measures to safeguard the security of peoples.'

Staving off the apocalypse, the treaty succeeded not only in heavily restricting the use of nuclear weapons, but also temporarily put a stop to ideological warfare in favour of international law and order. A historic achievement, it strengthened the multilateral order and rule of international law that arose after World War II with the founding of the United Nations.

Major multilateral treaties were, of course, not just a product of the first half of the twentieth century: In 2015, the global community came to near universal consensus with the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). On a symbolic level, the landmark achievement recognises that the most urgent challenges of the twenty-first century can only be tackled through global cooperation.

Just as we saw with the nuclear arms race, humanity today once again faces multiple existential crises – including, to name just a few, climate change, the biodiversity crisis, the threat of pandemics, rising geopolitical tensions, and an uneven distribution of wealth. Compounding these challenges, the increasingly dominant narrative sees an entrenched rivalry between democracy and authoritarianism, a story now being told by governments, scholars and journalists. Currently, many observers are busy arming themselves for intellectual battle. This mode of thinking

finds its way into declarations and strategy papers such as the West's so-called ‘strategic rivalry’ with China. In 2021 U.S. President Biden hosted an over-the-top democracy summit, and even the ‘all-encompassing strategic partnership’ between China and Russia is an alliance to fend off supposed Western interventions. This trend will continue because many governments and institutions around the world are now at work on strategies for dealing with their respective rivals.

Does de-globalisation mean the end of multilateralism?

Against the backdrop of challenges like the Corona crisis and the invasion of Ukraine, many state actors are now striving to boost strategic independence and investing efforts into de-globalisation. Indeed, the last two years have shone the spotlight on issues like the fragility of supply chains and the dependence on strategically important components and resources, issues severe enough to not justify a return to turbo-globalisation.

This leads to our main question: does the shift towards de-globalisation necessarily spell the end of multilateralism, a system characterised by stable international institutions and a rule-based order? Recent developments – from the inflationary use of the buzzword ‘plurilateralism,’ to the shift towards ad-hoc alliances and the increasingly common rejection of the Western-dominated international institutional order – create the impression that yes, de-globalisation could indeed spell the end of multilateralism.

The status quo is marked by two contradictory impulses: on the one hand, a rule-based multilateralism with its international institutions is now under threat, yet at the same time meetings such as the COP27 climate conference in Sharm Al-Sheik and the G20 summit in Bali will still take place as planned. This leads to our next question: Will the notion of a competing world order undergird the next phase in foreign policy? Currently, observers focusing on rival systems often overlook key facts:

We cannot forget that the democratisation of international institutions is long-overdue. While many of these post-war organisations support democracy in their own national structures (as seen among G7 members for example), they have been less successful on an institutional level. In refusing to implement these reforms, however, these institutions massively damage their credibility when they call for democracy, leaving themselves vulnerable to accusations of hypocrisy. These accusations gain

strength the more the so-called West stylises issues – such as democracy, human rights, the primacy of international law, and the condemnation of wars – to be a kind of moral compass guiding foreign policy, especially when war and breaches of international law have always been within the purview of actors worldwide. As German President Gustav Heinemann famously noted, 'Whoever points at others with one finger points at himself with three.'

The notion that democracy, women's rights and freedom of the press are only in line with Western values is baseless. Anyone making this claim is cynical.

Democracies such as the United States and some members of the European Union are also in danger, as shown by the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021, as well as the unwavering support for Donald Trump among a significant segment of the American population. Added to this are tendencies toward 'illiberal democracy,' openly praised by figures such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who considers this a model for Hungary.

At the same time, critics of a Western order must not overlook the fact that post-war multilateralism at the very least helped prevent nuclear disaster and also led to the rise of some countries from the Global South.

The notion that democracy, women's rights and freedom of the press are only in line with Western values is baseless. Anyone making this claim is either cynical, wants to secure their own power by any means, or has never spoken to people fighting for these rights around the world.

The importance of international formats

To avoid any misunderstandings: In this essay, I do not aim to relativize democracy and human rights, or to equate functioning democracies with authoritarian states. Instead, I want to warn against all-encompassing moral posturing in foreign policy, which ultimately sets up every state for failure and accusations of hypocrisy and, moreover, can even hinder progress towards finding solutions to major global crises; in the worst case, it can even trigger them. In short, the Global South and Global North need each other, urgently. Justified mistrust reigns, along with the living memory of historical guilt and the ongoing daily experience of injustice; international talks could be conducted with much more empathy and less finger wagging if we took these realities seriously. And this is not just a suggestion, but a matter of life and death: All of us – every nation, culture and society – need to take action for the common good if we want to survive!

This does not, however, imply that issues like human rights and standards for the environment and society should be divorced from negotiations on international trade agreements, nor does it preclude an outside show of support for democratic movements. Furthermore, this stance does not preclude sanctions; indeed, the past few years have seen the rise of some kinds of sanctions in civil society as well.

The upcoming G20 presidencies present a major opportunity for progress, since the Indonesian presidency will be followed by India, Brazil and South Africa, thus shifting the focus of the G20 to the Global South.

Against this backdrop, now is the time to use existing international formats for swift, bold dialogue to come up with powerful initiatives to save the planet. At the G20 summit in Bali in mid-November, for example, it would be a watershed moment if the Global South could be rallied to support a climate initiative that triggers more action on decarbonisation. This could add increased momentum to the COP27 meeting in Sharm El-Sheik, which takes place on the heels of the G20 summit. In the best-case scenario, this momentum could unleash a new dynamism in the sequence of summits hosted by the UN, the G20 and regional organisations.

After all, the laudable effort of this year's German G7 presidency to advance the Paris climate agreement through a 'climate club' will only have an effect if China, India and other major CO2 emitters join. The upcoming G20 presidencies present a major opportunity for progress, since the Indonesian presidency will be followed by India, Brazil and South Africa, thus shifting the focus of the G20 to the Global South.

If these nations decide to join the climate club as proposed by the German government, it does not imply that the Global South nations are joining a G7 initiative they did not initiate themselves. Rather, in expanding the climate club, the countries most severely affected by climate change could support this new initiative motivated by their own self-interest, and in turn breathe new life into international efforts to combat climate change. The climate club, which was conceived as an open enterprise (even if the term 'club' frustratingly suggests otherwise), could significantly boost its power by integrating social movements (such as Fridays For Future) and speaking on equal terms with the many decarbonisation initiatives from the business community.

Securing biodiversity, overcoming poverty within and between societies, and

Climate change is, of course, just one issue that calls out for international action: In the case of pandemics, it is evident that they can only be only be fought on a global scale. This requires

arms control are challenges with a planetary dimension that will shape the contours of our future.

establishing health care and prevention as a global public good, which in certain cases can result in limited patent protection and also necessitate boosting production capacities for vaccines and other medicines, for example in Africa. The rule of thumb for pandemics is simple: no one is safe until everyone is safe.

The list of topics goes on: Securing biodiversity, overcoming poverty within and between societies, and arms control are challenges with a planetary dimension that will shape the contours of our future. And this generation will also need to find a rules-based approach to the digital age if digital disruption is not to completely undermine our coexistence, our security, our societies, our economic and trade relations and our values.

This text was written in the spirit of yesterday's arms control agreements; on the eve of the G20 summit and COP27 it calls for innovative and fair multilateralism and the creative use of existing international institutions.



Markus Engels
Berlin

Dr Markus Engels is the Secretary-General of the Global Solutions Initiative (GSI), an international think tank network that advocates for a reorientation towards more sustainability, social solidarity and individual empowerment. The GSI is independent and formulates recommendations for the G20, among others.