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The fairytale of re-nationalisation

In today's increasingly complex world, multilateralism is more crucial than ever — the G20 should take the lead in driving it forward

Promising to solve domestic political problems by restoring national sovereignty is a strategy Donald Trump, Boris Johnson ('We will take back control') and other national populists all have in common. Although it has already been proven many times that such a repatriation of powers is neither particularly effective nor capable of bringing about the desired increases in prosperity, this populist demand remains a recurring theme of national election campaigns — and even of regional elections, despite the fact that regional administrations have almost no influence on globalisation processes. The 'take back control' mantra seems to be more appealing than the hard fact that nations can't guarantee their internal or external security on their own, and have little hope of controlling migration flows via local measures alone. The same can be said for ensuring energy security, looking after people's health, combatting climate change, increasing wealth and delivering key goods and services.

As the mainstream starts leaning towards nationalism in many countries, we have to keep pointing out the deception involved when polemicists champion repatriation as a way to solve problems. It calls to mind the unclothed ruler in the early 19th-century Danish fairytale *The Emperor's New Clothes*, in which everyone can see the truth, but only an innocent child dares to say it out loud. The reality is that the repatriation of powers tends to increase problems rather than solve them. Anyone who thinks cutting themselves off from a whole world of knowledge and culture, from international labour markets and from global commerce is the way forward probably also believes that closing your eyes is the best way to go unseen when playing hide-and-seek.

Multilateralism and international cooperation make for win-win outcomes, while turning

That this is not just a theoretical argument is clearly evident in the UK, where Brexit has done anything but bring greater independence and prosperity. Instead, the country's economy has been severely impacted, with negative

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consequences for jobs, purchasing power, the arts and ultimately the domestic political situation. Contrary to all the promises made during the Brexit campaign, the National Health Service has been hard hit by this repatriation of powers. As we can also see from a cursory glance at the German health system, there are countless people from immigrant backgrounds working in hospitals, nursing homes and care facilities; without them, it's highly unlikely that the demand for staff could be met.

You just have to consider that a car consists of more than 10 000 individual components manufactured in various different countries, or that a modern economy is dependent on people and knowledge from around the world, to realise that Brexit's negative impact is hardly surprising and was, indeed, entirely predictable. Multilateralism and international cooperation make for win-win outcomes, while turning back to nationalism is a zero-sum game, sovereignty-wise, and can even lead to societal regression.

From an analytical point of view, global interdependence is, as it was in the second half of the 20th century, at the core of sovereignty, or of what you might call 'reciprocal sovereignty'. Election campaigns should be honest about this fact — and institutional consequences should flow from it. After all, the reality is that, while the 21st century's big challenges frequently have severe national and regional impacts, their root causes are often global. That's why we need to strengthen those parts of multilateral structures where key players come together to solve global problems.

Every honest election campaign should admit that nations have limited capacity to solve problems on their own and argue for the more ambitious multilateral route, or rather explain the underlying intention to solve problems internationally. Clearly, 'me first' is not a viable strategy — it doesn't even work within small social groups where there's no threat of tyranny.

Strengthening the G20 system

Despite often facing unjustified levels of criticism, the existing UN system does important work in a lot of areas every single day. Nonetheless, strengthening the complementary G20 system could enhance the global common good by effectively accelerating the fights against poverty and climate change, improving digital regulation,

facilitating fair trade and helping to control migration. The G20 has, in recent years, done much to increase its acceptance around the world, including developing considered proposals. The 'Group of 20' may, following the integration of the African Union, still only comprise 21 members and thus be a long way from achieving the kind of almost universal representation offered by the United Nations, but then the UN's own most important body, the Security Council, remains totally anachronistic and highly unrepresentative in its composition.

Via its member states, the G20 represents almost two thirds of the global population, four fifths of the world's gross national income and all five continents. It even has civil society representation via its engagement groups, which involve world-leading think-tanks, unions, women's and youth organisations, business leaders and municipalities. In addition, the G20 can still function effectively, is well coordinated and often comes up with innovative political proposals.

It's not just in its general institutional structure that the G20 impresses however. It has also developed a plethora of well thought-out recommendations on subjects such as improving national budget financing, controlling international migration and digital regulation and fighting climate change, all of which leaves you wishing national governments, parliaments and media would pay more heed to its interesting, problem-centred proposals. For these to achieve greater cut-through with national politicians and domestic audiences, however, certain aspects of the G20 require reform.

The G20 needs to become a decision-making body rather than just an advisory one.

There are at least three areas where the need for reform is self-evident: firstly, the G20 needs to become a decision-making body rather than just an advisory one. For now, it remains an informal organisation that's unable to take legally binding decisions. In many of the challenges facing the world, however, time is of the essence, and it's therefore hard to justify the twists and turns required before an approach agreed among G20 members leads to legally binding rules. In practice, that means the G20 needs to be transformed into a fully-fledged international organisation — much as the CSCE was transformed into the OSCE in the 1990s.

Secondly, the G20's representativeness needs to be further improved. While it has already taken significant steps towards becoming more

representative, bringing in new members and regularly inviting guests, the G20 could still do more. Membership for the states most vulnerable to climate change, for instance, would send a clear message that those responsible for a crisis should work with those affected in order to find solutions. It's also important for engagement with civil society groups to be codified and their participation set on firmer footing. This could have financial implications. National parliaments and the European Parliament will have to decide whether they are prepared to provide institutional assistance. The parliamentary assemblies of other intergovernmental organisations, which provide them with substantive support and enhance their representativeness, could serve as a blueprint.

Thirdly, the G20 organisation needs to be consolidated and professionalised. Hitherto it has been up to the country holding the rotating G20 presidency to define the priorities for their year-long term and prepare the relevant sessions. Countries with a functioning administration and a vibrant civil society can deliver a competent and goal-driven G20 presidency. This, though, is not guaranteed, which is why there should be a permanent secretariat capable of preparing the countless G20 sessions, i.e. of defining priorities, drawing up draft resolutions and agendas, monitoring the implementation of resolutions and ensuring ongoing civil society engagement.

Next week, the G20 summit will take place in Rio de Janeiro, with Brazil holding the presidency. It's time to give multilateralism, and thus global governance, a shot in the arm. In the face of increasingly stark global divisions, strengthening the G20 could provide much-needed impetus.



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