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Zombie multilateralism

The world must urgently chart a new path for multilateralism — or forfeit its chance at rebirth

The future of multilateralism is a hot topic these days. Even before January 2025, when Donald Trump began his second stint in the White House, there was already a very lively debate about the crisis in international relations and about scenarios for a new global order. A case in point is the much-heeded view put forward in January 2026 at the World Economic Forum in Davos by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney, who argued that middle powers are not entirely impotent in the face of superpower rivalry as long as they cooperate — though critics pointed out that, while middle powers are often idealised as inherently collaborative, their actual roles in their own regions have often been anything but constructive.

Before Trump's second term, there was a relatively cohesive alliance of Western states that had a fundamental interest in ensuring that key aspects of the post-World War II global order would survive. This order, however, was never some ideal state in which international politics was fair and provided equal opportunity for participation. It's easy enough to find numerous examples of double standards from that time — take the US's policies towards Latin America and the Caribbean, for instance. It's therefore not surprising that many Global South countries have shown only limited willingness to defend a global order they regarded as unjust or insufficiently representative. They note how European states are especially quick to flag contraventions of international law or call for the defence of the global order when their own interests are directly at stake, as with Trump's repeated threats to annex Greenland, for instance.

These days, the Trump administration no longer makes even a superficial attempt to lend its international actions – be they towards Iran, Venezuela or Cuba – a cloak of legitimacy under international law. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine was another watershed moment for the fundamental principles of the global order and of international law. That old global order has essentially ceased to exist. The question is what kind of structures might replace or augment the previously established forms of international cooperation.

Potential reform scenarios

The reality is that this crisis in international politics consists of multiple parts: the legitimacy crisis facing international institutions and their decisions, the increasing fragmentation of international cooperation mechanisms and the limited capacity for reform within various international organisations. In many cases, these problems are not new, but they have significantly worsened in recent years. And while Europe may see them as a crisis for the global order, other states see this as an opportunity to fundamentally reform existing structures of global governance.

Much thought is already being devoted to potential scenarios. One factor is that China, on the back of its enhanced economic might, now has the confidence to assert its right to help shape global structures. One example of this is the Global Governance Initiativefrom September 2025, in which President Xi Jinping articulated his ideas about what the future of international politics might look like.

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Another aspect is the numerous conceptual innovations emerging from the academic world, some of which feature amusingly creative labels. The political scientist Amitav Acharya from the American University in Washington, D.C., is among the prominent commentators who have been analysing international politics from a more Global South-focused perspective. In an essay published in *Foreign Policy* in early 2026, he argued that international cooperation could still survive even if the US were to partially withdraw from existing multilateral institutions. Acharya describes this scenario as a World-Minus-One moment: international cooperation could thus survive Trumpism, even undergo reform and thus emerge strengthened, making it attractive for the US to return to the fold at a later date. The Paris climate agreement, from which the US withdrew for a second time in January this year, is an example of how this could work. Though the US withdrawal does, of course, limit what is possible under the agreement, the US's involvement was only ever one factor in whether the agreement would be successful or not.

The US foreign policy expert Suzanne Nossel, Senior Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, takes a more sceptical view. 'The World Minus One Will Be a Mess', she says. In other words, without American hegemony, the international system will be more chaotic, more fragmented and less effective. The stabilising role played by the US cannot be replicated by China, which lacks legitimacy and dependability, or by Europe, which is not geopolitically or militarily strong enough.

Nossel's reasoning as to why the global system cannot function reliably without the US is plausible. On the other hand, when envisaging scenarios in international politics, we have to consider the fact that Trump's policies are accelerating the US's loss of relevance on the world stage. Given the likely changes in domestic politics in the US, Nossel has put forward the notion of 'zombie multilateralism'. For international relations, zombie multilateralism would, like the undead from horror movies, be a highly unedifying prospect. In this scenario, the shell of multilateralism would still exist, in the form of international organisations and platforms, but these would be hollowed out. National representatives would still come together, but they would no longer have the ability to shape international politics — or no longer see it as in their interest to do so. In some aspects of international relations, this phenomenon can already be observed, as witnessed by the UN Security Council vetoes over Sudan or Gaza, for example.

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Such a gradual hollowing out of multilateralism could be one of the greatest dangers for international politics. Even if states officially remain members of international organisations, they could increasingly undermine their meaning and their fundamental norms. This is less about states' formal withdrawals from international organisations, and the negative consequences this would have for their budgets and for the validity of decisions and agreements, and more about a silent erosion of values and purposes. In other words, it's the continued participation of certain states in international bodies and forums for debate that permits such a destructive approach. The agendas imposed on international organisations by Trump offer less and less space for issues such as civil and political human rights or for discussions of Agenda 2030 and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

It's certainly hard to imagine relevant agreements being reached that could, in the foreseeable future, bring substantive progress in international relations. Alliances of like-minded states could conceivably coalesce around individual issues, but these mechanisms need to become significantly more professional if they are to operate effectively at the margins of international politics ('pockets of effectiveness').

Europe and other proponents of multilateral cooperation need to urgently ask themselves what the essence of a new multilateralism might be. The ongoing UN80 reform process focuses on efficiency enhancements and institutional reforms. These are certainly necessary, but if reforms are not guided by a clear normative compass, there is a risk that the political substance of international cooperation could be further diluted.



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