

The Importance of Multilateral Dialogue in the 21st Century

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Abstract

“Multilateralism in crisis“, “The failures of multilateralism“, “The collapse of multilateralism“: headlines like this could be found in many media over the last few years. Growing populism, nationalism and frustration with globalization and not least Russia’s aggression against Ukraine have raised doubts in many people whether multilateralism is still the right answer to solve the problems of mankind. The article traces the history of multilateralism since its inception to the present day. Disappointed expectations and failures are as well described as successes. The question is raised whether multilateralism can be replaced by bilateral agreements and treaties between states and organizations or yet by unilateralism. Examples are used to show that the corresponding paths are not very promising. Global problems like climate change demand global answers, they can only be solved when all countries work together. Complex problems require complex solutions which can best be achieved through international cooperation. NATO and EU are flagships of multilateralism, they must keep proving to be fair partners for well-intentioned other countries. The accusation of arrogance that is repeatedly raised against the West in this context must be taken seriously, any paternalistic behaviour contradicts the spirit of multilateralism. NATO and EU must defend the values of peace, freedom, democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights but they will only be successful if they also find answers to problems like poverty and inequality among nations. Ultimately, there is no alternative to multilateralism, it remains the key to solving global problems.

Keywords



1. Introduction

Multilateralism is in a crisis; Russia is a member of numerous international organizations and has signed legally binding treaties that make its assault on Ukraine illegal. However, this did not stop Russia from starting a war against Ukraine, and yet the United Nations seem unable to stop it. After years of globalization protectionist measures, such as trade barriers and tariffs have been imposed again by many countries, the proliferation of nuclear arms has not been stopped by international agreements; states have become more reluctant to fund international organizations; and during the COVID crisis the WHO showed its limits and shortcomings, to give just a few examples. Is multilateralism collapsing and will, in the future, more and more states try to assert their national interests aggressively and unilaterally or by striking bilateral deals? Or will the insight prevail that global challenges can only be met by global answers based on multilateral cooperation and an international legal order that is respected by all nations? A look at the history of multilateralism, its achievements but also at alternatives to it could help us to answer this question.

There is no legal definition for multilateralism. In simple words, multilateralism is when multiple countries work together to pursue a common goal, to resolve common problems or to prevent (not only) military conflicts. Multilateral Cooperation serves global peace, at the same time it serves the own interests of the countries involved.

2. How and when multilateral cooperation started

The origins of multilateralism can be traced back to post-Renaissance Europe when states started to regulate international relations through the conclusion of treaties¹, often at the end of conflicts which had costs many lives and immense damage and which could have been avoided by peaceful settlement of conflicts before military action started. The 1848 Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty-Year War was the first pan-European peace settlement and can be seen as its origin. In the 19th century, world politics was dominated by a few powerful nations which pursued their national interests but also tried to maintain balance between themselves to prevent broad conflict.

¹ www.europarl.europa.eu

From 1815 (after the Congress of Vienna) to 1914 the “Concert of Europe” - a period of evolving multilateralism - was instituted by regular conferences and congresses, with the objective to prevent or solve conflicts by agreeing on principles and rules. It worked (fairly) well until the early 1860s, when nationalism prevailed again. The Austro-Prussian war and the Franco- Prussian war were harbingers of the First World War, during which 17 million people lost their lives.

During the 19th century the first international organizations were founded. In 1815, some German states, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland founded the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine to increase their prosperity by guaranteeing a high level of security in navigation. A milestone was the constitution of the Permanent International Committee of the Red Cross in 1863. The development of the telegraph at the beginning of the 19th century changed communication, and after a few decades it had become clear that a framework which would standardize telegraphy equipment, set uniform operating instructions and lay down common tariff and accounting rules could not be created by bilateral or regional cooperation but that a comprehensive agreement was needed. In 1865 the French government hosted delegations from 20 European countries at the first International Telegraph Conference, which led to the foundation of the International Telegraph Union – the first international standards organization. In 1889 the Inter-Parliamentary Union was founded – the first international forum for multilateral dialogue and negotiations. Its main initial purpose was the arbitration of conflicts, therefore it played an important part in the setting up of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague in 1899.

3. The failure of multilateral cooperation after the Great War

The First World War, with its millions of victims, led to the conviction that an intergovernmental organization was needed to maintain world peace. This idea had in fact already been proposed by Immanuel Kant in 1795 in his book “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch”. In June 1919, the Covenant of the League of Nations was signed as Part 1 of the Treaty of Versailles, with the Covenant’s main goals to prevent wars by collective security and disarmament and settle international disputes through negotiation and arbitration. It was founded by 42 states and had 58 members at its greatest

extent from September 1934 to February 1935. But the United States never joined it, Germany - which had been admitted in 1926 - left it in 1933 after Hitler came to power, and was followed by Italy, Japan, and Spain. But while the League of Nations had some successes in settling conflicts, especially in the twenties, it had already failed to achieve its main mission to maintain global peace when Germany started the Second World War in September 1939, and the Soviet Union was expelled from the organization in December 1939 after having invaded Finland. The League of Nations had effectively ceased functioning.

4. The lesson of World War II: Building an architecture for multilateral cooperation

Towards the end of 1942 at the latest, it became apparent that Germany would lose the war and the conviction started to prevail that after the end of World War II there could have been a stable global economic order as a condition to maintain peace in the future. It was only achievable by multilateral economic cooperation. In July 1944 delegates from all 44 Allied Nations gathered in Bretton Woods for a conference known as the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference. Agreements were signed that led to the establishment of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (the IBRD and its concessional lending arm, the International Development Association are collectively, known as the World Bank). Its initial mission was to finance the reconstruction of European countries devastated by World War II, later it was extended to advance worldwide economic development and eradicate poverty. Another agreement was signed leading to the establishment of the International Monetary Fund with the mission “to foster global monetary cooperation, secure financial stability, facilitate international trade, promote high employment and sustainable economic growth and reduce world poverty”. The USSR was an active participant in the conference and signed its Final Act, but never ratified its Articles of Agreement. A future East-West conflict loomed.

However, with so many countries in ruins, the world wanted peace. Already in the period between 1942 and 1945 47 national governments had signed the “Declaration by United Nations”. From April to June 1945, the representatives of fifty countries gathered in San Francisco and drafted the United Nations Charter - this created a new international

organization which, it was hoped, would be able to facilitate the peaceful settlement of conflicts. From its beginning it was a two-class society, as five countries, (the US, the USSR, the UK, France and the Republic of China (on Taiwan), replaced by the People's Republic of China in 1971) were granted a permanent seat in the UN Security Council with the right to veto. With equal representation of all member countries in the General Assembly, however, it was a step in the direction of multilateralism. In order to achieve the principal objectives of the UN – solve economic, social, cultural and humanitarian problems through international cooperation - specialized agencies of the UN were either founded or if they had existed before were put under the roof of the UN: the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (CAC), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (FAC), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Telecommunication Union, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNDC), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the World Bank Group (WBG), the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WHC), the World Meteorological Organization (WMC) and the World Tourism Organization (UNWTC) – an architecture of and for multilateralism.

This was not without consequences. Until May 27, 2016, 306 multilateral treaties were deposited with the UN Secretary-General, only 17 of them signed before 1945. Besides the founding statutes of the United Nations, they relate to the following topics: Pacific Settlements of International Disputes, Privileges and Immunities, Diplomatic and Consular Relations, Human Rights, Refugees and Stateless Persons, Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, Traffic in Persons, Obscene Publications, Health, International Trade and Development, Transport and Communications, Road Traffic, Transport by Rail, Water Transport, Multimodal Transport, Navigation, Economic Statistics, Educational and Cultural Matters, Declaration of Death of Missing Persons, Status of Women, Freedom of Information, Penal Matters, Commodities, Maintenance Obligations, Law of the Sea, Commercial Arbitration, Law of Treaties, Outer Space, Telecommunications, Disarmament, Environment, Fiscal Matters. It needs no mention that not all of these treaties and conventions were properly implemented by

all signatory states, but it is also a fact that an innumerable number of books would have to be written to list the positive and beneficial consequences of them for all mankind.

5. The East-West Conflict

However, the end of World War II was also the beginning of an East-West conflict which should last for more than four decades. It was marked by completely diverging views how an economy and a society should be organized as a whole. With the help of the Soviet Union, in all the East European countries in which there were Soviet troops, communist parties came to power; a socialist planned economy was introduced; the communist party had a power monopoly the societies were regimented; there were no free media; no freedom of speech; and any form of opposition was (sometimes brutally) suppressed. In the West, the national economies were organized as market economies, there were multi-party systems, governments were democratically elected, the rule of law was respected, human rights were guaranteed and the principle of pluralism permitted a multiplicity of ways of life.

Both power blocs organized multinational organizations. In 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was founded - an alliance for collective defence - with the United States, Belgium, Denmark, France, the UK, Iceland, Italy, Canada, Luxemburg, the Netherlands, Norway and Portugal as initial members. NATO's decision making process was multilateral from the beginning, in its main body – the North Atlantic Council - there is no voting, but consultations take place until a consensus is reached. However, depending on each nation's economic and military power, its member countries have greater or lesser influence. In 1957, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg founded the European Economic Community, designed to create a common market among its members through the elimination of most trade barriers and the establishment of a common external trade policy. Most decisions in its bodies required unanimity – a truly multilateral form of decision-making.

In the East the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Albania, Bulgaria and East Germany founded the Warsaw Pact in 1955 - a military alliance which was theoretically a multilateral organization, but in practice was

completely dominated by the Soviet Union. The same was true for the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), a socialist economic organization, founded in 1949.

In 1961 the Non-Aligned Movement was founded to give countries a forum which were not formally aligned to either of the aforementioned power blocs with the objective to counterbalance the bi-polarized world during the Cold War. It was formally established in 1961 (based on the principles agreed on during the Bandung Conference in 1955) in Belgrade through an initiative of Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito, Indian Prime Minister Jawarhalal Nehru, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah, and Indonesian President Sukarno. It has always served as a forum for political dialogue and coordination and achieved major successes in the early 1960s in decolonization and opposition to racism, but later due to its heterogeneity (it currently has 120 member countries) it always had internal conflicts, and could therefore not become a strong political actor of its own. The same is true for the Commonwealth of Nations (originally created as the British Commonwealth of Nations at the 1926 Imperial Conference) which was constituted in 1949 by the London Declaration and currently consists of 56 member countries, the UK itself and former British colonies and territories.

Notwithstanding, multilateral dialogue did not only take place within these alliances. It was impossible “to solve” the East-West conflict, in which two antagonistic systems based on different ideologies faced each other, both with the military capacity to destroy the earth. This capability served as a deterrent, and despite conflicting interests, which were not only accompanied by harsh rhetoric but also resulted in severe clashes (Suez Crisis 1956, U-2 incident May 1960, Berlin Crisis 1961, Cuba Missile Crisis 1962) and even wars (Korea 1950-1953, Vietnam 1955-1975), the dialogue between the two sides did not break off. Multilateral dialogue and cooperation continued but it must not be overlooked that the world had become a bi-polar one, with the US and the USSR as antipodes and key-players. In July 1955 the Big Four Geneva Summit took place, with US President Eisenhower, the Prime Ministers of the USSR, the UK and France all participating. In September 1959, Soviet leader Nikolay Khrushchev visited the US for thirteen days; in May 1960, Eisenhower, Khrushchev, French President de Gaulle and British Prime Minister MacMillan met for a summit in Paris; US President Kennedy and Khrushchev met in Vienna in June 1961; in June 1963 the US and the USSR agreed to

establish a direct communications link, or “hotline” between the two governments for use in a crisis; and US President Johnson and Soviet Premier Kosygin met in 1967. The US, the USSR and other countries also concluded international agreements: in 1959, the Antarctic Treaty internationalized and demilitarized the Antarctic continent; in 1963 the Limited Test Ban Treaty outlawed nuclear tests in the atmosphere, in outer space and underwater; in 1967, the Treaty on Peaceful uses of Outer Spaces; in 1967, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) started between the US and the USSR; and in 1968, the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty was signed by sixty-two nations.

6. The Era of Détente

These negotiations and further (partially bi-lateral) agreements laid the ground for an “era of détente”, which lasted until the end of the 1970s. Both blocs were facing large economic impacts, due to the military spending and arms race, and wanted to ease geopolitical relations. In 1970, the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany signed the Treaty of Moscow, in which both sides expressed their ambition for a normalisation of their relations; renounced the use of force and recognized the post-war borders; and in the same year the Federal Republic of Germany and Poland committed themselves to nonviolence and accepted the existing borders in the Treaty of Warsaw. In 1971, sixty-three nations signed the Nuclear Weapons Ban on Seabed; the US, the USSR, the UK and France signed the Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin; and the US and the USSR signed an Agreement to Reduce the Risk of Nuclear War. In 1972, the two German States normalized their relations in a “Basic Treaty”, and the US normalized their relations with the People’s Republic of China. In the same and the following two years, US President Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev met several times and signed numerous treaties and agreements: the Agreement to Reduce Risk of Nuclear War, the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, and the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty (SALT) interim agreement as the most important. In summer 1975, after two years of negotiations, 33 European States, the US and Canada signed the Helsinki Final Act: a comprehensive agreement aimed at guaranteeing the peaceful resolution of conflicts, as well as closer cooperation. This was controversial in the US, where some of its provisions were seen as a recognition of some of the USSR’s territorial gains after World War II. However, it

widely welcomed in Europe because it reduced tensions, opened new lines of communication, improved the conditions of journalists and opened opportunities for family reunions and travel. However, in March 1976, the USSR started deploying SS 20 missiles with a range of 5,000 km, able to hit any point in Western Europe. The Cold War was back, and in 1983 the US started to deploy similar intermediate-range missiles in Europe - negotiations between the two blocs did not resume until 1985.

7. The Collapse of Socialism

The collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON in 1991. Liberal Democracy seemed to have prevailed forever and many thought that peace had become eternal. NATO immediately stretched out its hands to former adversaries and built up new multilateral structures. In 1994, NATO launched the Partnership for Peace Program aiming at creating trust and intensifying cooperation, joined by the Russian Federation and other Post-Soviet States. In 1995, the World Trade Organisation was founded, aiming at increasing global prosperity through free trade based on internationally accepted rules. The West, especially the US, gave Russia massive financial support to stabilize its economy. The Baltic countries, which had been occupied by the USSR for decades, and the other East European countries, which had been under Soviet control, pushed for EU and NATO membership. However, both the EU and NATO wanted to ensure that this would not lead to a new East-West conflict, hence the process was slowed down. Multilateral cooperation, through a new security partnership between NATO and Russia, was the goal. After months of negotiations, in 1997, the NATO-Russia Founding act was signed - a commitment to build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area by cooperation and consultation. For the same reason, in 1998, Russia was admitted to the G7 Group (which then became the G8), an intergovernmental forum consisting of the US, the UK, France, Japan, Germany, Canada, Italy and (as a “non-enumerated member”) the EU, for discussing and coordinating solutions to major global problems. The following year, the G 20 group was founded - a forum with the same objective, composed of 19 countries with strong economies ((Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa,

South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Spain being a permanent guest) and the European Union.

8. The Decline of Multilateralism

Strengthening multilateralism was the objective, but while the new venues at least partially served their purpose, the next decade would also be one full of tensions, wars, and a decline of multilateralism.

In 1999 the Russian Federation invaded Chechnya, thus breaking the Russia-Chechnya Peace Treaty signed in 1997 - in which both sides had agreed to “forever reject” the use of threat or force in resolving disputed issues.

In the US, after the al-Qaida terrorist attack on September 11 2001, the Bush administration made clear that under certain circumstances, the US would act unilaterally: “While the US will constantly strive to enlist the support of the international community, we will not hesitate to act alone if necessary to exercise our right of self-defence by acting perceptively against such terrorists, to prevent them from doing harm against our people and our country” (US Security Strategy 2002).

In March 2003, the US started an invasion of Iraq. Formally it was a “United-States led Coalition” consisting of the US, the UK, Australia and Poland, Italy and Spain, based on a unilateral decision taken by the United States. On 28th July 2002, the British Prime Minister, in a letter to the US President, had issued a blank check to the US, assuring them of the UK’s support. The US administration was convinced that Iraq was behind the al-Qaeda attack on September 11, 2001, which was not substantiated by any facts. Saddam Hussein was probably one of the most brutal dictators the world has ever seen but the allegations that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and therefore posed a risk to the US and its allies, was wrong. This led to severe tensions within NATO as Germany and France explicitly opposed the war that would follow and lead to the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, NATO had no role in the decision to invade Iraq or to conduct the campaign.

In April 2008 Russia launched a full-scale land, air and sea invasion of Georgia, on false allegations that it was committing a “genocide”, when in fact the conflict had been provoked by Russian-backed separatists. In February 2014, Russia invaded and later annexed Crimea, violently flagrating Article 2 of the UN Convention, the Helsinki Final Act and the Budapest memorandum. In September 2015, after multilateral negotiations between Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Germany and France, the Minsk Agreement achieved a ceasefire. It only lasted for a couple of years, as on 22nd February 2022, Russia assaulted Ukraine.

Not only military conflicts led to the deterioration of multilateralism. The 2008 financial crisis led to frustration with globalization and the 2015 migration crisis gave populists (and their parties) in Europe, but also in the US, a boost as they claimed that only national governments would be able to “win back control” of the situation.

On 23rd June 2016, a referendum was held in the UK asking the people whether the country should remain in the European Union or leave it: 51.89% of the votes were cast in favour of a “BREXIT”, which took place on 31st January 2020.

On 20th January 2017, Donald Trump was sworn in as the 58th President of the United States. His predecessor, Barack Obama, had launched two multilateral initiatives: the Open Government Initiative and the Global Counterterrorism Forum. Trump promised “to reinforce old alliances and form new ones”, but he also spoke about a “new vision, ..., it’s going to be only America first”. Trump withdrew the US from the Paris Climate Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, from UNESCO (funding had already been stopped by the Obama administration in 2011), the nuclear accord with Iran, and the UN Human Rights Council.

9. Can and will Multilateralism prevail?

These are just some examples for the decline of multilateralism. So, is the era of multilateralism irrevocably over? Or will multilateralism prevail?

A few facts and assessments:

The architecture of multilateralism which was built up after World War II is still intact, its most important pillar being the United Nations. The self-assessment of its work is not without self-criticism: “The United Nations had had its moments of disappointment. Our

world is not yet the world that our founders envisaged 75 years ago. It is plagued by growing inequality, poverty, hunger, armed conflicts, terrorism, insecurity, climate change and pandemics. People in different corners of the world are forced to make dangerous journey in search of refuge and safety. The least developed countries are falling behind, and we still have not achieved complete decolonization.” (Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly 21 September 2020).

But it is also proud of its achievements: “Even in times of great global challenges and tensions, our Organization has catalysed decolonization, promoted freedom, shaped norms for international development and worked to eradicate disease. The United Nations has helped to mitigate dozens of conflicts, saved hundreds of thousands of lives through humanitarian action and provided millions of children with the education that every child deserves. It has worked to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, including the equal rights of women and men.” (same document)

The UN member countries do not only debate and discuss but also agree on common objectives and on strategies to achieve them.

One of the most important examples for the beneficial work of the United Nations is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change which was adopted in 1992 and started a global process to mitigate climate change. Without this global approach the world would probably have maneuvered itself into a catastrophic situation. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 sets clear goals and targets in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet: 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets. The Paris Agreement on Climate Change adopted by 196 parties the same year is in force. Its central aim is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping, within this century, a global temperature rise well below 2°C (above pre-industrial levels) and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 °C. The implementation of the Agreement is lagging behind but for this the United Nations cannot be blamed. A new milestone to protect marine biodiversity and tackle the climate emergency is the UN Treaty on Oceans adopted in June 2023.

It is self-explaining that it is impossible to address a global problem like climate change unilaterally or by bilateral agreements. In this context the United States' new commitment to multilateralism cannot be overestimated. In January 2021 the US officially rejoined the

Paris agreement. In October 2021 the US also rejoined the UN Human Rights Council and in 2023 UNESCO.

In a Declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the UN, adopted by its General Assembly, the member countries agreed on a “Common Agenda” built on 12 commitments: Leave no one behind, protect our Planet, Promote Peace & Prevent Conflicts, Abide by International Law & Ensure Justice, Place Women and Girls at the Centre, Build Trust, Improve Digital Cooperation, Upgrade the United Nations, Ensure Sustainable Financing, Boost partnerships, Listen to & Work with Youth, Be Prepared (for future Challenges and Crises). These challenges are interconnected and can only be addressed by reinvigorated multilateralism.

It is true that the United Nations could not stop Russia from assaulting Ukraine. But it is also a fact that the vast majority of UN member countries does not accept violations of the UN Charter and other binding international law. On 2nd March 2022, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution deploring Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, demanding a full withdrawal of Russian troops and a reversal of its decision to recognise the self-declared “People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk”. 141 countries voted in favour, 5 against, 35 abstained. On 7th April, the UN General Assembly suspended Russia’s membership of the UN Human Rights Council. On 12th October 2022, the UN General Assembly demanded that Russia “immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw” from Ukraine “as it is violating its territorial integrity and sovereignty”. 143 countries voted for, 5 against, 35 abstained. Russia ignored these resolutions. But these resolutions show that the vast majority of the international community defends international law.

Was BREXIT a success? One key argument of the Brexiteers during the campaign was that the UK would be able to strike better trade deals with other countries than the EU did. Since BREXIT, the UK has signed trade deals with Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland. The UK-Japan FTA entered into force in February 2019, and the UK Government’s impact assessment was very optimistic. The reality, however, is that trade between the two countries has been in decline since 2019. The UK-Australia trade agreement has not yet been brought into force. The UK government’s

impact assessment of the UK-Australia and the UK-NZ FTA show that they will have a relatively small impact on the British economy. With regard to the UK-Norway- Iceland-Liechtenstein FTA, a UK government impact analysis estimates that, based on 2017-2019 trade flows, under the new agreement duty free access on UK exports to Norway could increase to 97.6 from 96.4 %, while duty free access on UK imports from Norway could increase to 99.7 % from 99.5%. A big deal. The UK has also signed “rollover” trade agreements with other countries (copy-pasted from agreements that the EU has with these countries) which bring no additional benefit to the UK. The most important trade agreement, however, is the one signed by the EU and the UK. A study published by the Economic & Social Research comes to the following assessment: “Research released today (19 October 2022) by the ESRI shows reductions in UK to EU goods trade by 16 % and trade from the EU to UK by 20 % relative to the scenario in which Brexit had not occurred.” Another “key argument” for Brexit was that the UK should transfer 350 million pounds to its National Health Service, rather than to the EU. This money never arrived there, instead the NHS is shorter of staff and money than before.

It is therefore not a big surprise that according to a recent opinion poll 55 % of the British now think it was wrong to leave the European Union, only 33 % think it was right. Currently all British parties are reluctant to embrace the issue but that could change after the next general election. The EU is well-advised to prepare respective negotiations. The UK is not only a partner but an indispensable member of the European Union.

10. The is no alternative to multilateralism

Unilateralism does not work. Bilateralism cannot solve global problems. Multilateralism is complex but can solve problems. But paying lip service to multilateralism is not enough.

The G20 must remain a viable instrument to mitigate conflicts and agree on common objectives. Under President Trump, the United States clashed with most other members of the group on trade, climate, and a series of other issues. President Biden promised a return to multilateral cooperation but Russia’s aggression against Ukraine makes it increasingly difficult to agree on common solutions. At the most recent G 20 summit in India in September 2023 it was still possible to agree on a final declaration but only

because Western countries made substantial concessions to Russia. However, as the accession of the African Union shows the G20 forum did not lose its attractiveness and importance as an important global network.

The Group of Seven (G7) is an intergovernmental forum consisting of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States, the European Union being a non-enumerated member. It originates from an ad hoc gathering of finance ministers in 1973, had its first summit in 1975 (as a Group of Five, Canada joined it in 1976) and became the Group of Eight in 1997 when Russia joined it. After the annexation of Crimea Russia has been indefinitely suspended and since then the group shares values of pluralism, democracy and the respect for and of human rights. However, during the Trump presidency the United States clashed with the other members countries on many issues and it was no longer possible to find common answers for many common (global) challenges. Again the Biden administration adopts a more constructive attitude. And this is a condition if the G7 countries and the European Union want to compete with other powers successfully.

In this context of course China plays the most important role. China calls itself a “champion of multilateralism”. It has built up a framework of multinational institutions, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Boao Forum for Asia, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures, to give a few examples. In all these organizations, it is by far the strongest economic power and while they are formally multilateral, they are in fact CHINA-centred. For the West China is a systemic rival but not only because of massive economic interdependencies and global challenges like climate change that cannot be met without a permanent dialogue with China and sometimes partnership with China must never stop.

China is also a founding member of the BRICS Forum, Russia, India, Brazil and South Africa currently being the other members. It had its first summit in 2009 (then called BRIC because South Africa was only admitted in 2010). But the China-India border conflict and the fact that Brazil condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine show that this is not a homogeneous group. However, for many countries the association has developed some attractiveness and they have expressed interest in joining it. On 1st

January 2024 Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates will become members upon invitation of the current ones. This will increase the heterogeneity of this association. Being by far the strongest and most powerful member, China, is ambitious to develop the network into an alliance but further enlargement will make it even more heterogeneous. The idea of a common currency does (currently) not seem to be realistic due to the heterogeneity of the group. It must also not be overlooked that countries like Indonesia which once showed interest in the group have become reluctant to join it while the economic benefits are not clear and apparent and the country (a leading NAM member) presumably does not want its good economic and political cooperation with the West.

The Belt and Road Initiative and the China-CCEC Cooperation (14+1, before Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia left 17+1) are, however no multinational projects. China negotiates and signs bi-lateral treaties and agreements with the respective member countries.

All these initiatives show that China does not only have long-term global ambitions but has already set up and is developing the instruments deemed necessary to be successful.

Russia has a much smaller population, its economy is much weaker, it has much less to offer to third countries but it is a nuclear power, it tries to win allies not only in its vicinity but also on other continents but it has also never hesitated to act unilaterally and will continue to do so.

In the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Russia is by far the strongest and only nuclear power. But tensions within the CSTO have recently grown as Russia did not clearly side with Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan. And Russia's aggression against Ukraine has also led to tensions with Kazakhstan.

Russia is also the by far biggest member country of the Eurasian Economic Union, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia being the others. But this does not mean only advantages for the latter ones, since it prevents them from agreeing on trade agreements with third countries or the European Union. This is one of the reasons why countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are reluctant to join it.

11. The consequences for NATO and EU

What are the consequences for NATO and EU? First of all, both stand for the same values: freedom, democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights. They are natural allies and they face common challenges. Therefore, on 8 July 2016, the EU and NATO signed a Joint Declaration with a view to giving new impetus and substance for the EU-NATO strategic partnership. Since then, further agreements have been signed to deepen this partnership. The key guiding principles of their cooperation are openness, transparency, inclusiveness, and reciprocity, in full respect of the decision-making autonomy and procedures of both organisations.

The EU and NATO must be attractive partners for third countries, they must be the true champions of multilateralism. Their internal decision-making process is multilateral. The European Union is a success story, it has secured peace in Europe and generated prosperity for its member countries. It has grown from 6 to 28 countries (27 after Brexit) and several countries are in the waiting line for accession. It also has numerous association and trade agreements with third countries. NATO has grown from 12 to 30 member countries, not including Sweden and Finland which applied for membership after Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Both countries have been admitted. In the NATO treaty signed in 1949, its member countries committed to the peaceful settlement of disputes and emphasized that NATO will refrain from "the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations". NATO is a defensive security alliance, this has been affirmed again and again, last in NATO's Strategic Concept 2022. In this document NATO also states that authoritarian actors are "at the forefront of a deliberate effort to undermine multilateral norms and institutions".

In contrast NATO has sustained its commitment to multinational cooperation by various instruments. For decades NATO has used its Defence Institution and Capacity Building infrastructure to foster peace and security by making partners more capable, more secure and better prepared to respond to crisis at home and abroad and has continuously developed its doctrines, concepts and policies in this context. At its summit in Wales in September 2014 NATO adopted the Defence and Security Capacity Building (DCB) Initiative which reinforces its commitment to partners and helps protect stability by providing support to

countries requesting assistance from NATO. DCB helps partners improve their defence and related security capacities, as well as their resilience. Types of support include strategic advice on defence and security sector reform and institution building, advice in specialised areas such as logistics or cyber defence and/or development of local forces through education and training.² In its Strategic Concept 2022 NATO affirms its commitment to Security Capacity Building: “We will increase our efforts to anticipate and prevent crises and conflicts. Prevention is a sustainable way to contribute to stability and Allied security. We will enhance support for our partners, including to help build their capacity to counter terrorism and address shared security challenges. We will scale up the size and scope of our security and capacity-building assistance to vulnerable partners in our neighbourhood and beyond, to strengthen their preparedness and resilience and boost their capabilities to counter malign interference, prevent destabilisation and counter aggression“ (Paragraph 38)³.

NATO also remains committed to providing Security Force Assistance (SFA) to partner countries that require it in order to make them more secure and resilient. SFA is defined as „unified action to generate, employ, and sustain local, host nation, or regional security forces of a legitimate authority:“ It involves organizing, training, equipping, and advising the security forces of partner countries. This requires political decision based on sound analysis and assessment. And it requires profound expertise. Therefore following a proposal of the Italian Minister of Defence in 2016 NATO started to set up the NATO Security Force Assistance Centre of Excellence, a multinational entity with Italy, Albania and Slovenia as Sponsoring Nations, and Austria as contributing participant. It aims at promoting stability and reconstruction efforts for any crisis scenario and becoming a SFA focal point for the Alliance. But not only NATO provides Security Force Assistance, also the European Union does within the framework of its Common Security and Defence Policy.

The European Union has started with six member countries but because it safeguarded peace and generated economic growth and prosperity it became more and more attractive and grew to 28 members. The UK left it but several countries are in the waiting line, not only in the Western Balkans, and the EU has association and free trade agreements with

² www.nato.int | NATO - Topic: Partnership tools

³ www.act.nato.in

numerous countries. It must remain a reliable and trustworthy partner for third countries all over the world.

Western countries have often been frustrated with the United Nations and its special organizations because they were not able to build majorities. But the overwhelming condemnation of Russia's aggression against the Ukraine shows that this is possible. Western countries must ask themselves whether they have always struck the right note when negotiating with third countries. Western countries are often accused of arrogance born out of colonial and imperial history. Such accusations must be taken seriously. The West has an interest in working multilateral structures. They will only work by partnership at eye-level. Close relations between the US and EU and its member countries at eye-level are a precondition for that. In this context the next presidential election in the US will be crucial.

Russia has accused the West of trying to replace effective multilateralism by a „rules based“ international order in which the rules have not been agreed on by the international community but been invented by „the West“. That is mere propaganda. The rules the international order is based on consists of agreements that have been negotiated and ratified not only by Western countries. Of course they are legally binding for the signatory states. That includes the UN Charter, treaties and conventions, UN Security Council resolutions, international humanitarian law, and the rules and standards agreed to under the auspices of the World Trade Organization and numerous international standard-setting organizations.

Multilateralism will not always be successful, if a big country is determined to violate the international order it is difficult to stop it.

But only multilateralism can prevent wars and secure peace. If we also want it to lead to more democracy and freedom, more respect for the rule of law and human rights we must also fight poverty and inequality among nations.

And we need more joint efforts to mitigate climate change and not less, more joint efforts for sustainable developments and not less. We need more multilateral cooperation and dialogue.