

WHAT NEXT FOR MULTILATERALISM?

GLOBALIZATION AND THE REVENGE OF GEOPOLITICS

Børge Brende

MULTILATERALISM is facing new and demanding challenges. A cocktail of continued globalization, geopolitical change, growing instability, and rising populism threatens to unwind important structures of global cooperation. Shortsighted nationalist sentiment increasingly dominates political agendas at the expense of multilateral problem-solving.

Multilateralism is being challenged. Neither governments nor international secretariats have excelled in the task of reforming and adjusting multilateral institutions to a rapidly changing world. A cardinal mistake would be to get caught in yesterday's political agendas and fail to adapt and compete with more informal and flexible institutions. When did, for instance, major international media outlets last report from an ECOSOC meeting on global economic challenges?

Børge Brende is Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Norway. You may follow him on Twitter @BorgeBrende.

THE CASE FOR MULTILATERAL COOPERATION

In the distant past, future-oriented policymakers realized that advances in technology, transport, and trade made multilateral cooperation not only an advantage, but a crucial condition for future progress.

Telecommunications is a case in point. For thousands of years, the quickest method of sending complex messages over long distances was via a courier on horseback. In the early nineteenth century came the electrical revolution, and in 1839, the world's first commercial telegraph service opened in London. Telegraph wires soon linked major towns and cities in various countries. A submarine wire was laid between Britain and France in 1850, and a regular service inaugurated the following year. In 1858, the first transatlantic telegraph cable was laid.



Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway

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But there was a problem: where lines crossed national borders, messages had to be stopped and translated into the particular system of the next jurisdiction. To simplify matters, regional agreements began to be forged. In Europe, representatives of 20 states gathered in Paris at an International Telegraph Conference to find ways to overcome barriers and make services more efficient.

They would go on to create a framework to standardize telegraphy equipment, set uniform operating instructions, and lay down common international tariff and accounting

rules. In May 1865, the first International Telegraph Convention was signed in Paris by its 20 founding members, and the International Telegraph Union (the first incarnation of the ITU) was established to supervise subsequent amendments to the agreement.

The Geneva-based ITU—whose website tells the above story—is a good example of all the functional organizations that were set up long before the establishment of the UN to regulate the constantly growing interaction between commercial and state players made possible by globalization. They provided the architects of the emerging

post-World War II multilateralism with a pre-existing structure.

The post-war aim was to develop a global infrastructure of cooperation that made new global wars unthinkable by nourishing values of freedom, democracy, human rights, and security based on the sovereignty of nations. By binding the world's peoples and nations together in layer upon layer of peaceful cooperation on everything from telecommunication and health, to development, trade, and security.

Few countries benefit more than Norway from the web of regional and global institutions that have been put in place since 1945. Contributing factors are our small country status, an open and outward-oriented economy with a globalized business sector, and a vulnerable geostrategic position.

Norway has benefitted tremendously from an open and well-regulated world economy that has transported and sold our exports globally whilst securing access to affordable imports from the major emerging economies in Asia.

A case in point is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

(UNCLOS). The Convention has been called the “constitution of the oceans.” UNCLOS provides a clear framework for all activities in oceans and seas, thus regulating the rights and duties of various States. It should be used to the fullest extent in decreasing tension, preventing conflict, and finding peaceful solutions.

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The significance to Norway of stable and open markets has grown with the conspicuous development of our country's Government Pension Fund Global into the largest sovereign wealth fund in the world. Growing financial protectionism would hurt all countries, but few as much as Norway.

Effective multilateral cooperation is just as important to Norway in the area of politics and security. The two major human rights conventions that were established 50 years ago are an invaluable bulwark of values holding governments accountable to their citizens. The newly agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) builds consensus around key priorities for the very survival of our planet. And the UN Security Council—its structural deficiencies notwithstanding—forms an essential framework around UN contributions to peace and security, including in the hotspots of today such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan.

MULTILATERALISM CHALLENGED

The UN is now 70 years old. Addressing the assembled delegates at the start of the meeting in San Francisco at which the UN Charter was drafted, America's President Harry Truman said: “you members of this conference are to be the architects of the better world. In your hands rests our future.” And he was right.

A comprehensive web of multilateral cooperation has developed gradually over the last 70 years, with the UN, Bretton Woods, and WTO structures complemented by impressive regional developments—not least with the steady rise of the European Union.

The high point of multilateralism—or at least the perception of it—came in the early 1990s and onwards. Gone was the scourge of Cold War polarization that paralyzed key UN functions—the Security Council, in particular.

Prospects also improved for meaningful global economic cooperation once the world was no longer divided into two opposing ideological blocs, with their starkly contrasting worldviews on basic economic and financial parameters of global governance.

Many forces militate against the full realization of the expected post-Cold War “multilateralism dividend” the current pessimistic mood with regard to further strengthening of global governance.

The unification of Germany opened the way, for the first time since World War II, for realizing the dream of full European unification.

The “golden age of multilateralism” proved to be short-lived, however. A lot was achieved and continues to be achieved, but many forces (mentioned initially) militate against the full realization of the expected post-Cold War “multilateralism dividend” and fuels the current pessimistic mood with regard to further strengthening of global governance.

The picture, however, is not as bleak as it might seem. First of all, many apparent setbacks to multilateralism may be exactly that: apparent and not necessarily real.

In an important sense, expectations of multilateralism are chronically exaggerated. The aim of multilateral cooperation is not to bring us to Heaven, but to avoid us going to Hell. What the UN, among other mechanisms, has achieved over the last 70 years is the avoidance of World War III. It is a fair bet to say that in the absence of the UN, the world would have been less safe, and that we would have seen more wars *between* na-

tions. The core meaning of international law is that might does not trump right; that no nation has the right to challenge any other nation's sovereign boundaries.

We need a balanced and pragmatic perspective on multilateralism. Such a balance implies that we also appreciate the positive—the achievements of multilateral cooperation over time.

Indeed, the history of multilateralism is impressive on many accounts. Seven decades of comprehensive institution building has created a massive web of organizations, conventions, and treaties—at global, regional, and sub-regional levels. My own country is a member of many hundred multilateral entities, which together make up an invaluable addition to our own domestic political tools.

Turning to the present, events and milestones during the global crisis year of 2015 bear witness to the resilience of international cooperative structures. Four examples rise to the mind.

First, the global agreement on financing for development in Addis Ababa committed governments to a set of progressive goals regarding domestic resource mobilization, tax reform, and renewed aid packages.

Second, the clinching of the historic deal on the SDGs encourages and challenges us all to enter into a unique global partnership towards 2030.

Third, the recharging of climate diplomacy through the Paris Climate Treaty is proving to be more convincing to industry in terms of credible market signals than any previous climate agreement.

And fourth, the WTO Accord in Nairobi in December 2015 renewed our trust in continued global frameworks around regional and bilateral trade diplomacy.

All these multilateral deals show a substantial political will to pursue cooperative solutions in times of geopolitical disorder. They also prove the value of continued and patient investment in the cooperative infrastructure that has been erected over the decades since the end of World War II.

Who else but the UN can be called on to engage in the most complex and deadly conflicts of today? From Mali and the Central African Republic, where stability and progress is in sight, to Libya and Syria, where the UN performs both lifesaving support and critical political mediation services.

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This is not true in all cases, of course, and every nation will treat multilateral cooperation as an option among many within overall national interest calculations.

But developments, both in Europe and now globally, demonstrate the urgency of conveying to the public the benefits of multilateral problem-solving across a range of important policy areas.

Second, to be credible towards our Selectorate about the merits of multilateralism, governments must invest wisely in further development of multilateral architectures.

That means, not least of all, that we should send our best people to Brussels, Geneva, New York, and the like, and be uncompromising in our efforts to reform and streamline often static and ineffective multilateral secretariats.

Third, we need a more globally inclusive multilateralism. The misgivings of emerging large powers about their lack of voice and influence in important multilateral fora are understandable and must be addressed. We have to stimulate dialogue on questions of ownership with emerging pow-

Added to this must be the UN's significant, but often underrated, peace-keeping operations, where nations from around the world commit tens of thousands of their best people to undertake patient but often risky efforts to keep fragile agreements around the globe.

A REALIST APPROACH TO RESILIENT MULTILATERALISM

So where do we go from here? Multilateralism is more important than ever. It is also being challenged more fundamentally than ever. This means that we have to be shrewd and smart in the way we shape and develop our response.

The response must reflect the criticism of those who ask the following: multilateralism is the answer, but what is the question?

It must also acknowledge the full range of multilateralism's current structural weaknesses, while at the same time build and capitalize on its strength and victories over the last decades. Hence the following brief points, which do not purport to be a full multilateral reform agenda, but, hopefully, can serve as a useful start of the discussion.

First, a key priority must be to ensure that citizens understand and appreciate the fact that giving away

ers that are currently underrepresented in global governance institutions.

An interesting example is the effort spearheaded by Fatih Birol—the current head of the International Energy Agency (IEA)—to open up the organization to countries such as China, India, Mexico, and Indonesia. The IEA was established in the 1970s as the club for Western energy importer countries in response to OPEC’s provocative cartelization of global oil politics. Much has happened since then, and the original justification for the IEA has less and less merit. Countries such as China and Australia have considered setting up an alternative global energy organization, maybe under the auspices of the G20. But Birol’s effort seems to be bearing fruit—global energy governance discourse is currently focusing on how to change the IEA into a genuinely global energy organization.

Fourth, multilateralism must adapt to the new geopolitical order if it is to succeed. The UN, the Bretton Woods institutions, and the WTO were, most of all, Transatlantic creations. Other parts of the world are now represented in these institutions. But for multilateralism to remain strong, countries in

the Global South must feel a real sense of ownership in these institutions.

The failure to reform the composition of the Security Council, and resistance to deeper reform in the IMF, undermines the notion of truly global multilateralism. The larger countries in these regions have more options than the smaller ones, and unless they feel that they have more of a say, they might turn away from the institutions that mean so much to European countries.

It is in the long term interest of the West that countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa increase their ownership of the multilateral institutions. The challenge of strengthening multilateralism requires more than advocacy; it requires the ability to look beyond the horizon of the next elections. In short, it requires true statesmanship.

Fifth, we need to nurture a conscious awareness of the relations between the structures, functions, and goals of multilateral institutions. Institutions that perform global agenda-setting functions, seek to form a consensus on pressing global issues, and develop general norms and principles, go well with “egalitarian” decisionmaking

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structures based on the ‘one nation one vote’ principle.

Institutions of a more operative nature that manage, regulate, and distribute values and goods will need to reflect the balances of power and influence in the world. If large powers see more costs than benefits from a given multilateral initiative, the temptation will be for them to simply walk away from the multilaterals they feel they do not control. Otherwise, they will remain inside whilst taking a blocking or filibustering position, in order to ensure that decisions to their perceived or real disadvantage are not made.

Sixth, it is important not to overstretch the mandates and functions of multilateral institutions if there is insufficient consensus among governments to move ahead. In many cases, more informal forums are better placed to solve collective action problems than multilateral bodies with formal decisionmaking structures.

The Arctic Council is a case in point. Its success since its inception 20 years ago stems not least from the fact that Arctic nations have avoided pushing the Council into confrontational negotiations in the absence of realistic consensual options.

The Arctic Council remains more of a policy-shaping body than a for-

mal policymaking mechanism. It may move gradually towards more formal decisionmaking, in line with a gradual maturing of the Arctic policy agendas of its various members. But given the fact that Russia, the United States, and Canada are key stakeholders, one should beware of formalizing decisionmaking unless it reflects a robust political consensus on the ground rules of bargaining.

Seventh, a chronically underestimated function of multilateral institutions is that of consensual knowledge production. All too many negotiations are ground to a halt because of conflicts over the very nature of the problems to be solved.

Therefore, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and a range of other, less well-known institutions are crucial elements in our current multilateral architecture. Had it not been for IPCC’s meticulous unbundling of complex scientific knowledge structures, international climate diplomacy would be doomed to fail.

Consensual knowledge production is also a key deliverable of multilateral institutions. The authority of these institutions—the fact that they are listened to in finance ministries and prime minister’s offices around the world—has a lot to do with the quality of their knowledge production and their ability to commu-

nicate best practices in forms that can be acted upon and made subject to constructive negotiations by governments.

Eighth, we need to exploit every opportunity for multilateral reform. Such opportunities often arise with leadership shifts in global organizations.

Norway has initiated UN70: A New Agenda, which advocates global leadership for a rules-based multilateral order and a stronger UN. It is a joint and truly global initiative by Colombia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Indonesia, Jordan, Mexico, New Zealand, and Norway, which is providing reform proposals for the next UN Secretary-General. One of the proposals that I would like to highlight, is to make conflict prevention a key priority for the next Secretary-General, and the UN more generally.

Ninth, for multilateralism to thrive and succeed, we need to constantly nurture the concept of enlightened self-interest. The use of multilateral institutions in the pursuit of national interests is entirely legitimate; and, indeed, it is in many ways multilateralism's most basic lifeline in the geopolitically charged times of today.

Enlightened self-interest echoes the first point I made about realizing the

fact that giving away power to multilateral institutions strengthens nation states rather than weakening them. But *from the perspective of multilateralism*, there is a critical distinction between narrow and enlightened national interest.

If multilateral institutions are judged as extensions of national interest in the more narrow sense, they will not be able to realize their comparative advantage as multilateral providers of common goods. The concept of enlightened national interest presupposes the political will to both invest in, and sustain, multilateral institutions up to a given point—as goals in and of themselves, and not only as vehicles for the maximization of pure national interest.

The distinction between smaller and larger powers is important here. Multilateralism benefits all—but small countries even more than large powers. The UN Charter reflects this dilemma, by providing the permanent members of the Security Council with a special status.

In crafting a multilateralism that reflects today's geopolitical order, we must constantly keep looking for the best balance between multilateralism and "Realpolitik."

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ARCHITECTS OF A BETTER WORLD

Multilateralism should not be seen as a costly burden; it provides win-win solutions for all member states. In this article, I have pointed to some of its challenges, but let me also stress the opportunities.

On the back of a common multilateral effort, our generation can defeat extreme poverty. We can be the generation that breaks the vicious cycle of political crises so often leading to violent conflict and humanitarian suffering.

We are the first generation to experience human-made climate change. Let us be the generation that is putting humanity on the right course in tackling it.

With the current multilateral system as our starting point, we must adapt to address new challenges in our new geopolitical reality. We must use the potential of multilateralism to the fullest extent if we are to confront the threats we are facing today ranging from climate change to terrorism. Through concerted efforts, the states of the world can once again together become, in Truman's words, "the architects of the better world." ●

