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## Is Multilateralism a Success?

**With a multitude of international challenges ahead and great power conflict, once again looming narratives of a multilateralism in crisis abound. But what about, asks Ambassador Stéphane Dion of Canada, the undeniable successes of the multilateral system since 1945? And what can countries like Canada and Germany do to further contribute to overcoming global challenges and furthering human progress?**

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Before taking stock of the past and examining the future of multilateralism, let's start with a definition of this concept, to be sure that we are talking about the same thing when it comes to multilateralism. Multilateralism is cooperation among States in accordance with international standards – this is the definition I would propose.

These standards may be either regional or global in scope. They are codified in legal documents (charters, agreements, treaties, etc.) and institutionalized through a wide range of international organizations, with the United Nations at the centre.

Multilateralism exists because there is no world government. We are never called upon to elect a global government, and that will probably never happen, at least not in several generations. In the absence of a global government, multilateralism, as it has developed since the mid-twentieth century, attempts to forestall the law of the jungle among sovereign States, fostering their peaceful cooperation toward common goals.

I would say that multilateralism is inherently a difficult system, since it seeks to establish conformity with international standards in a system that remains fundamentally based on the sovereignty of States. To varying degrees, States have always been inclined to follow the international rules that benefit them while ignoring or bending those they do not like. In a world fundamentally governed by State

sovereignty, multilateralism will continue to be a system that cannot be taken for granted, one that requires constant attention.

This difficulty inherent in multilateralism explains why one often has the impression that it is in decline. In every era, we have heard that multilateralism is less successful than in the past. It's like in the world of education: I am a teacher by profession and I have always heard or read many teachers claim that the level of the students is constantly dropping – but then one wonders how our societies managed to reduce illiteracy and advance scientific and technological knowledge!

The next time a politician or diplomat says that multilateralism is in decline or, more emphatically, that “the world has never been so uncertain,” perhaps suggest that he or she show more respect for the seriousness of the difficulties his or her predecessors had to overcome. The fact is that there has never been a golden age when the practice of multilateralism has not faced challenges.

One thing is certain: the institutional apparatus of multilateralism is constantly developing. Every year, new standards, new forums and new agreements are added, to the point that one may say that today, multilateralism covers all areas of human activity: peace and security, human rights, development, trade and finance, health, the environment, fisheries, transportation and communication channels, education, science and technology, and so on.

It would be difficult to find a document that better illustrates the exponential development of multilateralism than the very recent German Federal Government's White Paper on Multilateralism. In this fascinating document, the German government tells us that "Germany is a member or observer of over 80 international organizations and a party to several hundred multilateral agreements," including of course the Alliance for Multilateralism. If Canada were to do such a count for itself, it would surely come up with a similar number.

Page after page, throughout this white paper, the German government shows to what extent it pursues its objectives by relying on international standards or by proposing to forge new ones, through the operation of numerous international organizations.

To take just one example, consider the pages that the White Paper devotes to: "Multilateralism that serves peace and security". The German government explains

that not only does it intervene in partnership with the UN, the EU, NATO, the OSCE, the OECD or the World Bank, but that each of these major institutions oversees several missions, organizations or funds in which Germany plays a role.

In particular, the white paper describes the efforts made by Germany to: bring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran back into full force; strengthen The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); rescue the Open Skies Treaty despite the withdrawal of the USA; renew a nuclear disarmament dynamic within the framework of the Stockholm Initiative; promote risk reduction and security in Europe in founding the "Structured Dialogue" involving all OSCE participating States; fight against proliferation financing in being actively involved in the international Financial Action Task Force (FATF); improve the efficiency of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW); promote the establishment of a scientific advisory mechanism under the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) and support the UN Secretary-General's Mechanism for Investigation of Suspected Use of Biological and Chemical Weapons; support the Ottawa Convention on Anti-Personnel Mines and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, while chairing the Mine Action Support Group and co-hosting the UN Mine Action Conference; deal with the risks of new missile technologies in participating to the Missile Dialogue Initiative...

These examples illustrate perfectly what multilateralism concretely is: institutionalized mechanisms which set in motion an immense number of political figures, diplomats, experts, negotiators, scientists, with a view to establishing cooperation between sovereign States and private organisations in all fields.

Needless to say, if one were to describe Canada's interventions in this same area of global security, the enumeration would be as long and quite similar, with nuances of course. To give just one example, we would describe Canada's efforts to initiate negotiations for a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty.

We can do the same exercise by reading together the Communiqué of the last G7 summit, or from the last Canada-European Union summit: it will be about the International Monetary Fund, the World Health Organization, COVAX, the Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator, the Global Health Summit, UNICEF, the Trade and Health Initiative at the World Trade Organization, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the World Organization for Animal Health, the United National

Environment Program, the United Nation Climate Change Conference, the UN Biodiversity Conference, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, etc.

Besides, these summits often result in the addition of new multilateral initiatives. For example, the European Union and Canada were pleased to announce the creation of a new Strategic Partnership on Raw Materials essential for the clean energy transition.

Let us now ask ourselves the question of the assessment that can be made of this immense international cooperation effort linked to multilateralism. Because if multilateralism does not work, the German government must be warned that all the measures it describes in its White Paper are useless!

For my part, I think that since 1945, the multilateral system has served humanity well, even though States were far from having always respected it. There is hardly any war between States anymore and the one that ended between Azerbaijan and Armenia is a deplorable exception, which must remain an isolated case. While the number of active intrastate conflicts has increased in recent years, mainly due to the activities of violent jihadist groups, the number of victims of such conflicts continues to decline.

Since 1945, there are far fewer barriers to trade, universal rights enjoy much more respect, decolonization has taken place, education has seen spectacular growth. Between 1970 and 2020, humanity doubled its population and multiplied its wealth by five. During this period, the global average life expectancy increased from 56 to 72 years. The proportion of people living in extreme poverty (on less than \$2 a day) has fallen from one in two (48%) in 1970 to less than one in ten in 2020, according to the World Bank. In 1990, nearly one in three people did not have access to electricity, which has been reduced to one in ten today. Spectacular progress, which can be attributed to many causes, but it would not have been possible had States not adopted a set of common goals, legal rules, international organizations and other collective instruments that are part and parcel of multilateralism.

Likewise, our ability to control pandemics has improved dramatically. Our impatience with vaccine nationalism and the pace of global coronavirus immunization is justified, but here again it is by improving our multilateral tools that we will achieve our goals. It is in large part through these multilateral institutions that humanity has made

tremendous progress in medical knowledge, health practices, health systems and scientific cooperation. Weren't we surprised to be able to produce vaccines in less than a year? The freer science is from border barriers, the faster the pace of essential innovations.

In the future, we will have to continue to make progress in our international cooperation, because all of our main challenges are global. This includes preventing epidemics and better containing them when they occur, taking action against the terrible impacts of climate change and the collapse of biodiversity, feeding what will soon be nine billion human beings without exhausting our ecosystems, ensuring that access to freshwater does not become a source of conflict, not reigniting the cold war and the nuclear arms race, protecting populations from international terrorism and cyberattacks, halting wide- scale tax avoidance, reduce wealth inequalities between and within countries, humanely managing migration flows and addressing their causes. Clearly, one of the conditions for achieving all of this will be multilateralism; not necessarily increasingly extensive multilateralism, but certainly one that is ever more effective. These are global issues, and they require substantial cooperation to find solutions, supported by effective multilateral organizations.

We are recovering from the trauma of having had for four years an American president who openly declared himself hostile to multilateralism. With the United States having played a leading role in the development of the current multilateral system since 1945, it was understandable that serious concerns were raised. However, the new American president is determined to play a positive role and that is great news.

Since its inception, multilateralism has been deployed in a context of tension between great powers, each suspecting the others of wanting to use multilateral institutions to extend their areas of influence. This great power rivalry will continue, especially between the United States and China. However, there is a growing dimension to this rivalry that I would like to highlight in closing.

Indeed, if I had to describe the main area of tension that the multilateral system will face over the next years, I would say that it is the clash between two conceptions: the one that is increasingly developing in democratic States, and the one that still persists in authoritarian regimes.

The populations of democratic States are more directly exposed – in particular by the new channels of information – to the horrors of the world: massacres and repression. Our people react very badly to these injustices and demand that their governments put pressure on these oppressive regimes, including through trade and personal sanctions.

The consequence is that democratic States are increasingly developing a universal conception of multilateralism which places it, in all its facets, at the service of the promotion of democracy and universal rights. Authoritarian regimes, China and Russia being particularly virulent, of course reject this approach to human rights, which they denounce as Westernized under the guise of universalism. They want to stick to a Westphalian conception of multilateralism, where States cooperate without interfering in each other's internal affairs.

It is in this context that multilateralism will evolve in the years to come. Obviously, achieving all of our goals will require close cooperation between two democratic States as similar as Germany and the country that a [recent sample of eleven North-American and European countries identified as the most reliable partner](#): Canada.

To this end, the German Federal Government's White Paper on Multilateralism will undoubtedly remain a useful reference document for Canada as well as for all states interested in collaboration on global challenges and human progress.

*This blog contribution is based on a speech delivered at the Roundtable on Germany's new White Paper on Multilateralism, which can be viewed [here](#).*