

# The Possibilities for ‘Effective Multilateralism’ in the Coming Global Order

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## Multilateralism through the Decades of the Global Order

‘Multilateralism’. International relations (IR) and its many experts, analysts and researchers, describe this concept as though it were either an evident known form or, in contrast, an ‘empty vessel’ which they then proceed to fill with a variety of actors with different aims and goals. The confusion over the meaning of multilateralism and its conduct is evident. Yet the variety of forms for multilateralism is at least somewhat explicable. The international relations system has evolved dramatically since 1945. Multilateralism looks rather different dependent on the particular era and shape of the liberal or global order<sup>1</sup>. The structures, the actors and their behaviors influenced by

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the place to tackle the distinction between the global and liberal order. The liberal order follows, I believe, from the work of G. John Ikenberry. Over several volumes the most recent just released Ikenberry (2020) it becomes clearer what he calls the liberal international order is inclusive of the rule of law, open markets and an element of liberal democracy. Thus, the liberal international order fades with the end of the Cold War and the incorporation illiberal and even authoritarian states. Here, then, is the global order that develops following the end of the Cold War.

governing principles differ in the changing global order. Today's global order differs significantly from the Cold War decades, or the years following the 'Unipolar Moment'<sup>2</sup>, and the era of global governance. Now the global order is again being reshaped with the re-emergence of geopolitical challenges particularly the rising US-China tensions. How multilateralism may look and operate in this new global order context is what this paper looks at acknowledging, however, the different multilateral forms through the decades. Traditional multilateralism that IR scholars have described and redescribed through the decades is examined closely but, in the end, we are intent to understand contemporary multilateralism. The question we end with and attempt to answer is the possibilities for 'effective multilateralism', what is it, and how does it operate in the contemporary global order.

## The Definition

There is a broad definition of multilateralism that has served, possibly poorly, but more often than not as the traditional meaning for the international relations literature. Below we identify this, but we also note that the definition of multilateralism occurs on the 'heels' of the demise of the Cold War. Traditional multilateralism both reflects the decades of the Cold War as well as the rise of the 'Unipolar Moment'. Structurally the liberal order was jolted by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of the United States as the sole superpower. We should keep this in mind: traditional multilateralism is conditioned by the structure, meaning the shape of the global order, the range of actors and their arrangements and their behaviors.

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<sup>2</sup> The term was coined by Charles Krauthammer (1990). Highly insightful this conservative writer captured the transition from bipolarity to a period led by the sole superpower, the United States. It worth reflecting back on the period with Krauthammer (2002).

A number of the most well-known IR scholars of the contemporary period tackled the definition and function of 'multilateralism' at the end of the bipolar period. Robert Keohane (1990, 731) concluded that multilateralism was "the practice of co-ordinating national policies in groups of three or more states.". He was followed relatively shortly thereafter by IR scholar John G Ruggie (1992). For Ruggie the key understanding of multilateralism was less determined by the minimum number of actors as opposed to the normative basis of the arrangement. As Ruggie (1992, 571) wrote: "... multilateralism is an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of "generalized" principles of conduct-that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence." This capture of the normative basis of multilateralism is a key because it suggests that multilateralism may not be governed solely by the power equation of the principal actors - states. This becomes important after decades of US leadership of the liberal order. As, John Ikenberry (2020, 35) the contemporary chronicler of the liberal international order has written very recently, "This is what John Ruggie calls "multilateralism", an "architectural form" of international organization that coordinates relations among a group of states "on the basis of generalized principles of conduct." The rules, and principles they embody, have some impartiality and independent standing. They are not merely the exhortations of a powerful state but norms of conduct to which a group of states adhere, regardless of their specific power or circumstance."

So, we start with a negative proposition - multilateralism can be distinguished in part by the reality that it is not bilateralism – it cannot be established by just two actors. It must be something greater than just two states. And as Ruggie (1992, 569) points out, even two may not constitute bilateralism, if the arrangement is built on a discriminatory basis. So, presumably, is the case of multilateralism. Ruggie underscores the focus of multilateralism on the norms and the arrangements in geoeconomic as well as geopolitical arrangements. As Ruggie describes (1992, 566) "When we speak here of multilateralism in international trade, we know immediately that it refers to trade organized on the basis of certain principles of state conduct-above all, nondiscrimination. Similarly, when we speak here of

multilateralism in security relations, we know that it refers to some expression or other of collective security or collective self-defense. In sum, what is distinctive about multilateralism is not merely that it coordinates national policies in groups of three or more states, which is something that other organizational forms also do, but that it does so on the basis of certain principles of ordering relations among those states.”

Miles Kahler (1992), again in the same post-Cold War period adds another layer of meaning to traditional multilateralism. Kahler examines in part the multilateralism of the Bretton Woods period that is in the period of the emergence of the formal institutions at the end of World War Two – the IMF, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and other international institutions. These Bretton Woods institutions along with the United Nations are notable for their universal or near universal character. As Kahler (1992, 681) notes, “Closely linked to multilateralism's aspiration to universality and welcoming of large numbers of participants was a strong leveling impulse.” These multilateral institutions admitted a large range of states from great powers to more recently decolonized newly independent states.

But as Kahler points out, significant decision-making arrangements other than the universal operated with these institutions - some evident but many more disguised. First below this presumed universalism or near universalism of the formal institutions, other arrangements often actually governed. One such organizational concept ‘minilateralism’ functioned over many decades. As pointed out by Moses Naim (2009) the need for collaboration in international relations soared but multilateralism was unable to deliver. Minilateralism, however, consisted of small subsets of actors and the arrangement was frequently used to solve particular global governance issues. As Kahler (1992, 707) identifies: “The collective action problems posed by multilateral governance were addressed for much of the postwar era by minilateral great power collaboration disguised by multilateral institutions and by derogations from multilateral principles in the form of persistent bilateralism and regionalism.” American leadership combined with other ‘leading states’ frequently provided the governing means to address policy problems and reform. And the institutional forms were subsets or clubs of states.

Additionally, regional institutions arrangements emerged, and bilateralism continued to play a significant governance role as well. These regional institutions were often founded because of discontent by developing countries with the global institutions that were viewed as dominated by the established powers. The institutional setting was far more varied than was often recognized at the time driven in part by the failure to achieve solutions in the context of Bretton Woods multilateralism. As Kahler would acknowledge today, the term 'minilateralism' has given way to the contemporary term 'plurilateralism' and these arrangements are particularly apparent in various trade arrangements throughout the international system<sup>3</sup>. The decision-making rule remained (Kahler 1992, 682) "both minilateral "great power" collaboration within multilateral institutions (to reduce the barriers to cooperation raised by large numbers) and bilateral and regional derogations from multilateralism (as the great powers exerted their bargaining power) were commonplace. What multilateralism consisted of through the Cold War decades and beyond was formalistically near universalism but in reality, frequently minilateralism or today's plurilateralism, organized and led frequently by the United States.

## Formal Institutional versus Informal Institutional Forms

The decision rules, as noted above, were far more varied than appeared in the decades of the dominance of the Bretton Woods institutions and the Cold War. At the same time, however, new institutional forms were appearing in the global order that altered again the forms of multilateralism. The slow fading of formal institutions does not appear to have inhibited multilateralism – in fact it actually may have enhanced it. In this contextualized narrative of multilateralism, we start with the emergence of different classes of international institutions. In what Miles Kahler (2020) has dubbed recently the 'Bretton Woods Moment', a set of formal

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<sup>3</sup> This comes from a personal conversation and a video interview I organized on September 1, 2020 with Miles Kahler for my graduate course, 'Governing with and without the State' at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy, University of Toronto.

international institutions, including both the economic and international security institutions were stood up after World War Two, as we note earlier. But institutional development was not limited to such formal institutions. Newer institutional forms emerge that took their place alongside with the formal institutions. In the 1970s, in fact a new institutional form – the ‘Informals’ emerged. What Alexandroff and Brean (2015) have referred to since as the ‘Rise of the Informals’, the Informals emerge, in part, with the Nixon Administration’s closing of the ‘gold window’ collapsing the fixed exchange rate system of Bretton Woods. These Informals, a classic case being today’s G7, are what Vabulas and Snidal (2013) refer to as IIGOs, or informal intergovernmental organizations that differ significantly from their counterparts – the formal institutions - what these same authors refer to as FIGOs – formal intergovernmental organizations. In contrast to the FIGOs, these IIGOs are established without a binding treaty or other legal foundation, no headquarters and no secretariats, though the members appear to meet on a relatively regular schedule and in some instances transfer leadership organizing the summits by a fixed order of hosting. There were, of course, a number of informal institutions before the 1970s. For instance, in 1962, the G10 emerges. But the rather more unique form that emerges in the 1970s, with the G7 being a classic case, are the set of Informals whose attending participants are the heads of government and in some instances heads of state.<sup>4</sup> These institutions are the contemporary organization of what becomes modern global summitry.<sup>5</sup> The first of these institutions was the G6 in 1975 and it was followed almost immediately by the G7 in 1976 and then in what Cooper and English (2005) refer to as the ‘apex of global summitry’ - the G20. The G20 emerges as a leaders’

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<sup>4</sup> The G10 was made up of Finance Ministers and Central Bankers that agreed to participate in the General Arrangements to Borrow (GAB), an agreement to provide the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with additional funds to increase its lending ability. The ministers and central bankers would meet annually and included the following members: Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, UK, Switzerland, Sweden and the US.

<sup>5</sup> This first Leaders’ Summit, the G6 Leaders’ Summit met in 1975 hosted by France at Rambouillet. Leaders included heads of government and a head of state from France, West Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US. The following year in Puerto Rico, Canada was invited to join and the G6 became the G7.

summit at the time of the global financial crisis after existing as a finance minister and central bankers' forum for a decade.<sup>6</sup> These Gx leader organized Informals (Alexandroff 2010) form the foundation of today's global summitry system. These leaders' gatherings are just the tip of informal summits with additionally a large array of ministerial and working party meetings occurring throughout the year as well as what are referred to as 'engagement groups' civil society organizations<sup>7</sup>. But they represent another multilateral forum of a significant subset of states. It is also with these global summits that forms a contemporary setting, possibly, for effective multilateralism as we discuss below. Moreover, the emergence of the Informal G20 Leaders' Summit promised an equality of the G20 states including established powers, rising and large emerging market powers, traditional middle powers and a few developing states as well. The G20 offered promise of what Stewart Patrick (2010, 358), and others suggested would be a 'shifting coalition of consensus'<sup>8</sup>: "As the G20 matures and expands its agenda, it has the potential to shake up the geopolitical order, introducing greater flexibility into global diplomacy and transcending the stultifying bloc politics that have too often hamstrung cooperation in formal, treaty based institutions (including the United Nations)." Instead of blocs that emerged frequently in formal institutions and settings generated by structure and politics. Of the era, new 'shifting coalitions of consensus' could emerge in this post bipolar world and the coalitions could well vary depending on the issue in this new setting of global governance. The

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<sup>6</sup> The first G20 occurred in late 1999 as a meeting of finance ministers and central bankers. It included nineteen governments plus the EU. Members included: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, the UK and the United States.

<sup>7</sup> A definition of 'engagement groups' is provided by Scheler and Dobson (2020, 4): "It is now institutionalized in the form of "engagement groups," defined as "independent collectives that are led by organizations from the host country [and which] work with other organizations from G20 countries to develop policy recommendations that are formally submitted to G20 leaders for consideration" (G20 n.d.)."

<sup>8</sup> For a further elaboration of the concept of 'shifting coalitions of consensus' see the video segment by Colin Bradford. 2013. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTRGmgPgW4U>

shifting coalitions of consensus were seen as particularly likely to support American efforts to promote collaboration and advance policy making at the global governance level. As Stewart Patrick (2010, 358-9) suggested: “The very size and diversity of the G20 - while not without drawbacks - may inject new dynamism into global governance by facilitating the formation of shifting coalitions of interest. As such, the G20 presents particular strategic advantages for the United States, which will likely remain the indispensable partner for most for most winning coalitions within the new steering group.” What wasn’t anticipated at the time – at the Unipolar Moment’ however - was an ‘America First’ policy that spurned multilateralism and operated largely by transactional and bilateral policy making. And of course, that is exactly what has impacted contemporary multilateralism and is reshaping the global order.

IIGOs expanded rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, favored, it would seem, for their flexibility and lack of binding obligations (Roger 2020). As economic interdependence grew regulatory clashes became more frequent. New actors were drawn into the emerging global governance era. As Kahler (2020, 12) has recently pointed out: “transgovernmental networks became a seemingly favored means for national bureaucracies to negotiate and coordinate in shared domains.” And, these transgovernmental networks highlight the fact that contemporary multilateral forms have been extended beyond just traditional states. This transformation from a purely state system has been underway for some time but analysts have been alert, certainly since the new century to the enhanced role of actors beyond the state.<sup>9</sup> As Kahler (2018, 242) describes it: “Just as the turn of the current century marked a shift toward the new regionalism and new movements calling into question the benefits of global governance, the first decade of the century was also marked by a

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<sup>9</sup> Certainly, a number of analysts signalled the change. Especially noteworthy was the edited volume by Deborah Avant, Martha Finnemore and Susan Sell, eds. (2010), *Who Governs the Globe*. Also, noteworthy is Thomas Weiss et al. (2013). For Weiss and his co-authors, it is evident that enlargement of the types of actors is linked to emergence of global governance challenges in the international system.



significant increase in innovative forms of governance that included nonstate actors as well as subnational governments.” So, in facing global governance challenges such as climate change, global health pandemics, etc., states IGOs and IIGOs were now joined by substate actors, regions, provinces and states, large urban conurbations and non-state actors or NSAs such NGOs, firms, foundations and individuals. The form extends, of course, to ‘bad actors’ as well: criminal gangs, cyber criminals, terrorist organizations, etc. The range of actors in multilateralism has significantly expanded. As Avant et al. (2010,1) suggest: “They are active agents who want new structures and rules (or different rules) to solve problems, change outcomes, and transform international life.” While their authority and influence remain in question, it would be a mistake to not see their involvement in global governance and in contemporary multilateralism. The result of this evolution of multilateralism leaves a number of questions that we try and tackle in the next section.

## The Questions Arising from the Evolution of Multilateralism

Following the elaboration of the classic definition of multilateralism, we have seen new forms of multilateralism that have arisen in the changing global order. This necessitates an inquiry into the leadership, form and generalized principles that today appear in contemporary multilateralism. There are three aspects that we are going to examine in some detail to help clarify what contemporary multilateralism looks like and what may be possible in the context of the current global order. The first two contexts are:

1. Are there certain actors required for contemporary multilateralism to operate successfully in today’s global order? More pointedly will contemporary multilateralism likely only work if organized or accepted by the leading powers – the United States or say possibly the US and China. A further but related question is whether hegemony is required to enable multilateralism and where power provides the organizing glue for multilateralism. Can multilateralism develop without all, or at least some the leading powers? and

2. What actors can be active participants in multilateralism and in particular what do analysts' mean when they reference, as they often do, 'middle powers' in multilateralism?

Multilateralism certainly does take place with great powers. Particularly in the decades of the Cold War, but also in the period after the 'Unipolar Moment', the United States is seen as critical to the construction and the maintenance – and possibly the demise – of the liberal order and its attending multilateral arrangements. Robert Kagan (2018) from Brookings, for instance, has pressed the point that contemporary international governance requires US leadership, or chaos is likely to ensue in the global order. Others have suggested that without the leading states – namely the United States and China – multilateralism will 'sputter and fail'. Without the resources and the commitment of the leading powers contemporary multilateralism will fail. Multilateralism to function requires the inclusion of the leading powers. Such an assertion is not surprising in the face of decades of United States multilateral and alliance action.

## Power and Multilateralism

Certainly, historically, multilateralism does not seem to rely only on the hierarchy that generally accompanies hegemony. Ruggie makes the point that the instances of hegemony differ. As Ruggie (1992, 585-6) reflects: "Thus, all hegemonies are not alike. The most that can be said about a hegemonic power is that it will seek to construct an international order in some form, presumably along lines that are compatible with its own international objectives and domestic structures. But, in the end, that really is not saying much."

There are those, of course, who are committed to the notion that without a hegemon, and more directly, the United States, for example, multilateralism is hollow. This perspective, I believe, is built on structural factors must notably global order relations that rely on power and rely on the United States willingness to bear the costs of collective action. There is however a fair history that suggest multilateralism and the 'generalized principles of conduct' can be effective without a hegemon. The 'Bretton Woods

Moment', the creation of near universal membership seems to provide a mix between governing principles and power. And this is not totally surprising given that the institutions were constructed in part on the basis of universal global order that failed to materialize.

The hegemonic, or at least 'leading powers' thesis seems to me, to be constructed, in part, on traditional IR notions of structural power as the driver of international relations behavior. You can see this debate over power and leadership emerge in the earliest instances of global order, this the European Concert of the post Napoleonic period in Europe. There was a long running debate, among diplomatic historians, mainly, as to whether the underlying dynamic of the Concert in the nineteenth century was a balance of power or not.<sup>10</sup> For those urging power and balance of power, the rules and norms of the Concert – the generalized principles of conduct' were minimized, or barely acknowledged. Power advocates relied on the balance of power dynamic in this generally acknowledged first global order mechanism constructed some two hundred years ago. But there was a 'strand' of analysis that expressed the view that in fact collective action of a select group of powers exercised through norms of great power restraint and a determination to resolve differences through negotiation at collective gatherings operated more or less effectively for decades this early 'global. order' system. So, from this latter perspective it was less power and more generalized principles, rules and norms. The collaborative mechanism appears to have secured international stability through a good part of the nineteenth century. As suggested recently by historian Margaret McMillan (2020): "The Congress of Vienna, on the heels of the Napoleonic Wars, created a settlement that provided Europe with an unprecedented several decades of peace." It did, and according to Ruggie (1992), the concert was constructed by the great powers of the time in the post Napoleonic period

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<sup>10</sup> The debate is intense. Just a few of the 'contestants' include Richard Elrod (1976), Robert Jervis (1985), Kyle Lascurrettes (2020) and Paul W. Schroeder (1994 and 2000). Both Elrod and Schroeder are historians who suggest that norms and rules supplied the foundations principally for multilateral arrangements – in this instance – concert diplomacy. Jervis and very recently Lascurrettes among others see the concert as built on power, balance of power and great power hierarchy.

but operating on a set of principles that had been constructed by these states and agreed to at the Treaty of Paris 1814-1815. As Ruggie (1992, 578) points out with respect to the then emerging Concert diplomacy, relying on Charles and Clifford Kupchan<sup>11</sup> “... the concert version is characterized by the dominance of the great powers, decisions taken by informal negotiations and consensus, and no explicit specification of the mechanisms for implementing collective action.” Leading powers but generalized principles of conduct.

This historical examination seems to suggest that generalized principles of collective action and restraint governed but it leaves it open whether the Concert worked because the major European powers were in Concert though balance of power was not the means to secure collaboration and stability.

### What are Middle Powers?

For many analysts the essential actors in building multilateralism, if not limited to the leading powers, then require the committed efforts of what many describe as middle powers. Robert Keohane (1969, 269) decades ago reviewing several books on ‘small powers’ pointed to these powers and their interest in multilateralism: “middle power is a state whose leaders consider that it cannot act alone effectively but may be able to have a systematic impact in a small group or through an international institution.”<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, suggesting that multilateralism is built on middle powers raises more questions than the term might otherwise resolve. The category creates confusion. Which are middle powers? Which are the middle powers in contemporary multilateralism and the emerging global order? Korea maybe is and there are frequent references to the same. Traditionally

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<sup>11</sup> Ruggie is referring to Charles and Clifford Kupchan (1991).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Keohane quotes here Robert L. Rothstein. *Alliances and Small Powers*. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1968.

identified so-called middle powers such as Canada or Australia might also qualify as middle powers, possibly? But then what of Japan, France, the UK, Germany or Turkey? And what about the large emerging market states such as Indonesia, Brazil and India? All have been identified at one time or another as middle powers in various examinations of contemporary multilateralism. This terminology is, unfortunately, in the end not particularly helpful. It seems that middle power is just about anything that is not a leading or is not using the traditional notion, a great power. Nevertheless, the impact of 'small group' action of a set of actors seems to identify what analysts are looking at, at least in contemporary global governance in the contemporary global order. And, it would appear that these actors need not include the great or leading powers.

What may be helpful is a designation recently proposed by the current French foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian along with the German foreign minister Heiko Maas. In 2019 these foreign ministers launched a new 'Alliance for Multilateralism' tied to the UN<sup>13</sup>. The leaders and the participants are not referred to as middle powers, but the host and co-host countries and the participants are all designated as 'goodwill powers'. That designation emphasizes the collective action purpose of this contemporary multilateralism. There no reference to 'middle powers', or power generally which as we've just pointed out is rather misleading. Thus, 'goodwill powers' may be a useful term. We will come back to the idea of 'goodwill powers' as we explore 'effective multilateralism' in the final section.

Additionally, the Alliance (2020) details their conception of multilateralism: "In the field of foreign policy, multilateralism means that states cooperate with each other in order to promote common objectives and balance and regulate competing interests. They do this because they know that, ultimately, all states reap the greatest gains if they work together and agree on rules. Such cooperation relies on certain principles and values being

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<sup>13</sup> For an examination of this new 'Alliance for Multilateralism' see Patrick (2019). Also view the 'Alliance for Multilateralism' website (2020).

shared by all parties. In the age of globalisation, almost all countries on Earth are interconnected. Conflicts raging thousands of miles away may have a direct impact on people's lives in Europe. Phenomena such as climate change cause problems that do not stop at any borders, which is why multilateral cooperation is more important than ever today.”

The above inquiry suggests that that multilateralism may be constructed on governing principles of conduct with a variety of actors, including it seems in the contemporary global order even actors beyond states. What remains unclear is whether multilateralism can operate effectively without the leading powers. While leading powers - US, China - have organizing power for global governance analysts, as noted above, suggest that these ‘middle powers’ do not alone have lasting organizing force. And to that question we turn to in the final section.

### Pointing to the Possibility of ‘Effective Multilateralism’

Can it follow, then, that multilateralism can be anchored on principles of governance that are not tied to power and may be constructed without the great powers? This is the last but critical question of our examination of multilateralism. In meeting the global governance challenges is it possible that we can marshal collective action without the leading powers. Such collective action would constitute the notion of ‘effective multilateralism’:

3. What is the possible meaning for ‘effectiveness’ in our effort to describe ‘effective multilateralism and does it reflect a multilateralism without the leading powers? Does it currently exist, or is it possible? How would it look and operate?

The Vision20 principals following the ‘trail of G20 summits’ hypothesized the possibility of just such a form of contemporary multilateralism<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, these

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<sup>14</sup> The Vision20 principals – Colin Bradford, senior non-resident fellow at Brookings, Yves Tiberghien professor of political science at the University of British Columbia and the author, the director of the global summitry project at the Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy at the University of Toronto began

Principals (Vision20 2019) have pressed the case for ‘effective multilateralism’ at least in the context of the G20 Leaders’ Summit. The Principals argued that effective multilateralism in the context of the contemporary global order could be seen as (Vision20 2019, 3): “We assess that ‘effective multilateralism’ today resides in those fora and coalitions that are prepared to move forward on policy and act on a collective action basis whether they include all, or not. Formal or informal institutions are not the limiting concern.” Nor do we suggest that effective multilateralism operates only at the state level. In what is referred to as ‘complex governance’ by Kahler (2020), the Vision20 suggested that effective multilateralism operated beyond the state level capturing the wide array of actors in global governance today: “... including foundations and other private and public corporations. These actors engage sub-state actors such as cities, regions, and provinces.” Collectively, this variety of communities increases the number of actors with enhanced resources and in some instances intense commitment to an collective outcome and enables “these actors press for more collective and effective action.”

We start, however, with the disappointing multilateral response to the Covid-19 pandemic. As Stewart Patrick (2020a) points out: “The dismal multilateral response to the pandemic reflects, in part, the decisions of specific leaders, especially Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Donald Trump. Their behavior helps explain in part why the WHO struggled in the initial stages of the outbreak and why forums for multilateral coordination, such as the G-7, the G-20, and the UN Security Council, failed to rise to the occasion.” The failure of the leaders’ Summits in the face of this global pandemic is revealing. The G20 inaction is in sharp contrast to the 2008 global financial crisis. It would seem to reflect the antipathy of the Trump Administration, and the President himself, to multilateral action. ‘America First’ hardly countenances collective action. And the growing tensions

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to use the concept in examining the G20 Leaders’ Summit several years ago (Vision20 2019). The Principals in one way or another have followed, analyzed and written about G20 Leaders’ Summit even before the Leaders’ Summit was created.

between the United States and China under Xi Jinping have seemingly curtailed major G20 multilateral action.<sup>15</sup> So looking to recent actions by the G20 and the G7 and other international institutions reflects failed collective effort. It reinforces the position of some analysts that contemporary multilateralism is unattainable when the leading powers fail to support global governance initiatives. But this is not the complete story of contemporary multilateralism and we chronicle briefly instances that point to the exercise of effective multilateralism.

Germany has periodically pressed effective multilateralism. The most evident instance has been Chancellor Angela Merkel's insistence when she hosted the G20 Leaders' Summit in Hamburg in 2017 that even without US support for the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the Leaders' Declaration would include support for the Paris Agreement by all the G20 members except the United States. This insistence by Merkel was pointed. Prior to the Hamburg G20 Leaders' Summit there was a 'hard-and-fast rule' of consensus over the G20 Leaders' Declaration. If consensus was unattainable the matter was not included in Leaders' G20 statement or declaration.

Another instance. Surprisingly, perhaps, given past leadership roles, Japan under Prime Minister Abe's leadership promoted effective multilateralism as well. As we saw in a brief examination of Japan (Alexandroff 2020) Prime Minister Shinzo Abe chose to 'pick up the pieces' of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) following the Trump Administration decision to withdraw from the Agreement. PM Abe orchestrated continuing negotiations for this significant plurilateral agreement and successfully concluded what became the Comprehensive and Progressive TPP or the TPP11. Let me highlight Japan's unexpected action with the insight from FT's Gideon Rachman (2019): "The way in which Japan moved to save the TPP, after Mr. Trump withdrew the US from it in 2017, demonstrated that medium-sized powers

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<sup>15</sup> There has been the DSSI, the debt service suspension initiative, but the limited credit provision stands in sharp contrast to the major coordination of efforts by the G20 in 2008.



like Japan have a clear interest in preserving international rules—at a time when both the US and China are challenging the multilateral order. Post-Brexit Britain will share that interest and should work with other midsized G20 powers that share its global outlook, including Australia, Canada and South Korea.” The question is whether this break with earlier leadership behavior and the leadership action by the Abe government is limited to this Prime Minister, now retired, or we may see such effective multilateralism behavior under new Japanese leadership?

Let’s return for a moment to the ‘Alliance for Multilateralism’. It appears as yet another effective multilateral effort in the contemporary global order. As already pointed out above, this initiative was launched by the foreign ministers of France and Germany. The initial meeting was held on April 2, 2019 in New York during the German UN Security Council Presidency. It was followed by a meeting on September 26<sup>th</sup>, held during the High-Level Week at the UN General Assembly. The meeting was called by Germany and France and co-hosted by Canada, Mexico, Chile, Singapore and Ghana. Some 48 countries participated in this September gathering.

At its heart the Alliance seeks support for a rules-based order. Here is how the Alliance describes ‘multilateralism’: “In the field of foreign policy, multilateralism means that states cooperate with each other in order to promote common objectives and balance and regulate competing interests. They do this because they know that, ultimately, all states reap the greatest gains if they work together and agree on rules. Such cooperation relies on certain principles and values being shared by all parties. In the age of globalisation, tight interdependence is the nature of many relationships. The Alliance underscores the tight interdependence that still underlines the global order today.

The Alliance (2020) sees their multilateral structure operating in the following way: “The Alliance is not a formal institution, but a network allowing for the constitution of flexible issue-based coalitions formed around specific projects and policy outcomes. Engagement in a specific initiative does not entail automatic participation in other initiatives pursued in the framework of the Alliance. Participation in the Alliance remains open to all who share its vision.” It is a network and encourages but does not insist on states

committing to all issues. It is a loose network of non-leading powers – the so-called goodwill powers. The initiative is organized around three goals according to the Alliance hosts. The Alliance aims to: renew the global commitment to stabilize the rules-based international order, uphold its principles; and adapt it where required. The goals, as declared by the Alliance (2020), are:

- to protect and preserve international norms, agreements and institutions that are under pressure or in peril;
- to pursue a more proactive agenda in policy areas that lack effective governance and where new challenges require collective action; and
- to advance reforms, without compromising on key principles and values, in order to make multilateral institutions and the global political and economic order more inclusive and effective in delivering tangible results to citizens around the world.

The Alliance also makes a point of identifying their outreach to non-state actors as stakeholders and partners for the challenges the Alliance faces. The Alliance has held four meetings since its creation. These gatherings sought to promote, among other things:

- improved governance for the digital world. The Alliance bolstered support for the Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace;
- implementation of international humanitarian law to protect the work of humanitarian workers and space for humanitarian action and support for the fight against impunity, at the opening of the session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on 24 February 2020; and
- support for the central role of the WHO in the management of Covid-19.

These actions are supportive, but the question remains beyond the evident declarative support expressed by the Alliance will participants, the goodwill powers be willing to take concrete collective action to advance the goals that it supports.

These initiatives are noteworthy, but the question remains the level of collective commitment to advancing concrete policy actions and solutions in these areas with support from states and non-state actors. We have seen G20 host countries advance collective efforts. Korea, for instance, has shown the capability to further global governance policy initiatives. One of the most successful G20 Leaders' Summits, the 2010 Seoul Summit underlined Korean leadership. Korea was the first to host by a non-G7 government. The country showed (Bradford and Lim 2010) it has global governance organizing means and commitment. Japan recently offered another instance of successful hosting in a far less collaborative environment. But the case for effective multilateralism remains to be fully proven. Part of the issue, I believe, may well be the painful but necessary desocialization by states from earlier global order behavior. States in the G20 and beyond have been conditioned to expect and accept that the leading states, and most particularly the United States, will step up to organize collective security and global governance action. It is clear from the past Trump presidency years that that path to multilateral action relying on US leadership cannot be assumed or assured. It may also be that the global commons challenges, a number of these existential threats - climate change, protection of the high seas and other looming threats, may encourage effective multilateralism<sup>16</sup>. If not them, then who? Collective action will have to be organized by the 'goodwill powers' if the leading powers are unable to collaborate. It appears to be a lesson still being learned.

And while the Trump administration has done much to undermine the alliances and partnerships of the liberal order, it would seem that the American public is not inclined to see the global order in the same way as the Trump administration. As pointed out by Stewart Patrick (2020b) the American public seems to support the relationships built in the liberal order over 70 years: "Fortunately, we now have better insight into public attitudes, thanks to three surveys recently released by the Pew Research

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<sup>16</sup> This point was made in personal communications with my Brookings' colleague Homi Kharas.

Center, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and the Better World Campaign, an advocacy arm of the U.N. Foundation. They show robust global and U.S. support for international cooperation and the United Nations. At the same time, they reveal stark partisan differences in public attitudes in the U.S, where Democrats and Republicans seem to be living on different planets.”

We leave with two strands of optimism. First American public attitudes may encourage, at least with a new Administration, greater support for global governance collaboration. It might well lead to US efforts to reenergize US alliance efforts, recommit to multilateral efforts on climate change and collaborative efforts to head off future pandemics. The US may also be more accepting of effective multilateral actions that are led by others permitting so-called “shifting coalitions of consensus” to be reinterpreted to advance effective multilateralism in the evolving global order. \*

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