

Back to Cooperation

An Urgent Global Need

Opinion piece

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During last year, the trend away from seeking cooperation between the main actors of the international system has mostly continued, although there were some welcome signs of seeking to reduce confrontation.

The choice of the last years for antagonism instead of paths to cooperation has been taking its toll not only on those major countries directly engaged in the deepening of these differences, but also on their allies and, worse still, on those members of the international community that are not interested in these confrontational ways which negatively affect development, trade, protection of the global commons and the environment and the well-being of peoples around the world.

This trend started around 2010 had been accelerating. Although there are talks or contacts between the main actors to create avenues for understanding and dialogue, negativity had been deepening overall and pushing for a segmentation of the world into silos or blocks of countries undoing to a large extent the globalization process that emerged after the end of the Cold War. This new integrated world for trade, investment, communications, and a lower level of risk of military confrontation between the most powerful countries, although with inequality, and uneven distribution of income both between and within countries, had created prosperity, facilitated freedom of communications, receded the risk of a global war and strengthened opportunities for engaging with the rest of the World.

This trend of confrontation was compounded since 2022 by actual war in Europe and violent conflict elsewhere. One of the main actors of the international sys-

»**Multilateral organizations can play a role in finding common ground rather than divergence.**«

tem and permanent member of the United Nations Security Council is at war with one of its neighbors, having invaded it in violation of the UN Charter rules which, as a privileged member of the organization has a special duty to uphold. That war is already more than two years into its deadly development and reactions as to how to deal with it indicate that further escalation is on the cards for the near future. There are no signals of will to search for a solution based on respect for the sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine as well as the legitimate security concerns of all parties involved. That war at the heart of Europe is having ripple effects on the functioning, or rather the lack thereof, of the multilateral security system foreseen in the UN Charter, as well as on other bodies of the UN itself and of other organizations and mechanisms created for managing international relations in all areas beyond international peace and security.

That war has been followed by the violent conflict happening in Gaza as a consequence of the massacre and hostage-taking carried out by Hamas on civilians in Israel. That conflict is producing a huge number of civilian casualties, and making it even more difficult to achieve the goal of having Israel and a Palestinian State

living side by side in peace and with its people enjoying well-being, justice, and development.

These two conflicts have made a difficult global situation arising from increased confrontation between the main actors significantly worse. They are also a call of attention that political will to find solutions and more engagement of all actors of the international community is needed, particularly from those who can promote and engage in actions to find compromises that produce solutions for overcoming their differences and a renewed increase in cooperation in all fields for the benefit of the whole international community.

»A varied geometry of international relations should be the rule, not the exception.«

Groups of countries will always have their shared values, systemic affinities, historical commonalities, and other elements that will draw them closer than others. That should not impede maintaining fruitful and peaceful exchanges with countries with different values and interests. That is fundamental for having a world in peace.

Cooperation is the key concept to allowing exchanges that can be beneficial for all and facilitate development, equality, peace, and well-being. A varied geometry of international relations should be the rule, not the exception and that should

lead to more inclusive and effective regional and international cooperation, as well as better global security.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR SOLUTIONS

Confrontational trends, except those to protect universal values, are harmful to all and therefore concern us all.

Countries with global interests and presence should play an active role in helping find ways to foster better dialogue which should include all the main actors and pushing for compromises that would benefit all. We should all strengthen multilateral organizations and mechanisms that allow those who think differently to work together for the common good. Those multilateral organizations, both of a universal nature like the UN and its specialized agencies or regional or subregional ones can play a crucial role in this process of finding common ground rather than new paths for divergence.

Global international organizations need to be reformed to be more effective. The UN should continue being the preeminent body in everything related to international peace and security and strengthened, respected, and provided with the means to achieve its purposes and principles laid down in the Charter. The UN needs to better adapt to today's world, including the Security Council with its crucial role in maintaining international peace and security. It needs to be made more efficient and empowered to act swiftly in cases of crisis. Its reform should seek a better systemic functioning that could really defuse conflicts, rather than just look at adding new permanent members.

The IMF and World Bank should significantly change to better reflect today's

economic realities and actual needs in real figures and to increase legitimacy and effectiveness, including its quotas system. WTO should incorporate digital trade into its rules and make its dispute resolution system effective again, limiting the right of powerful States to block their functioning. The need for reforming WTO to improve its functioning agreed upon at the G20 Summit Declaration of Buenos Aires in December 2018 has not yet been acted upon.

G20, G7, BRICS AND BEYOND

Informal mechanisms created to solve global issues not dealing with military and strategic matters such as G20, G7, and BRICS could and should also play a key role in creating conditions where difficult matters can be addressed.

Members of these mechanisms are key actors in the international arena and the very nature of their meetings allows for dialogue and agreements at the highest level. These mechanisms with thematic meetings involving high officials in each area, including ministerial meetings, converge in Summits where the leaders meet, discuss, and decide on the most important matters.

G7 is the most homogeneous as its members are all part of the most advanced Western economies and share values, ideas, and systems of governance, as well as strategic and military commitments, thus it focuses mainly on their objectives and interests.

BRICS gather the most important emerging economies, some already truly and fully "emerged", but do not necessarily share systemic commonalities in terms of the form of government, values, and ideas as to how their societies should

be nor on how the world at large should be organized, but they share the challenges and opportunities of emerging economies and the rightful objective of playing a more significant role in the organization of the international community and the development of its rules. BRICS members have all had a tradition of independence from all centers of power and it is therefore not clear that they will just be doing the bid of any of the other members if that runs counter to their perceived national interests. It is also important to underline that BRICS members are not in a strategic or military alliance with other members of the group and that represents a big difference with G7. The objective of BRICS is to coordinate macroeconomic policies to represent the interests and positions of these new major international actors. However, although BRICS and G7 represent different visions those need not be antagonistic with each other and dialogue exists and compromises should be sought.

G20 is an informal mechanism that includes key relevant actors of the international community that have different

»Today we have the instruments and institutions to peacefully deal with the challenge created by the emergence of new actors.«

views and levels of development. It seeks to find common approaches to solve financial and economic problems affecting the whole system, irrespective of their different views, and, since elevated to the Summit level, extends those objectives to addressing some key global political, social, and systemic issues, in search of common solutions.

Until recently, all G7 and BRICS members were also members of the G20. Now there will be a few new members of BRICS who are not G20 members.

»A global strategic dispute would break the international system.«

Its objective and composition make the G20 an excellent tool for facing the current confrontation between the main economic actors. Strengthening its 2008 goal of setting a dialogue at the highest level amongst the leaders is still its best asset. If used well it could and should be the most relevant instrument and efficient tool for addressing tensions and returning the world to sustainable and equitable growth. Even if it is not evident that those are still the goals of some of the main actors of the system, the rest of the membership – all representing significant economic and political weight in the international arena – could play a key role in promoting dialogue and reasonable outcomes which could benefit the global economy and also advance a common agenda in crucial mat-

ters dealing with financial stability, climate change, protection of the environment, energy transitions, trade, infrastructure, education, the future of work, global health issues, sustainable food production, etc., all critical to the whole world. Strategic and international security issues should be better left to the UN, although contacts at the leaders' level at the G20 meetings could help find agreements also there.

The key drivers at the critical moment at which G20 was created were cooperation, multilateral credit institutions reform, and political goodwill. The current confrontation between the system's largest actors suggests that we are back at a point where those key drivers are again essential to avert the present antagonism leading the world into a crisis that could go beyond financial and economic disputes and drift into a global strategic dispute which could break the international system and cause severe damage to trade, investment and cooperation flows and lead to the formation of blocks which will disrupt links between countries not belonging to either one or another.

A WAY FORWARD

A cooperative path forward should be promoted instead of moving towards a deeper and continuous confrontation and the creation of blocks of nations. We had those during the Cold War and that was not good. We should refocus on a virtuous cycle rather than digging into differences that do not benefit the global system or peace or prosperity. A silo mentality where countries would be able to trade, relate or develop new technologies, achieve scientific breakthroughs in every field only or mostly with those who think similarly or are close

by, geographically or ideologically, would be disadvantageous for the world at large. Most likely such an outcome would represent a big setback for all, particularly to developing countries.

Previous G20 presidencies have endeavored to build bridges to avoid further confrontation. The current Brazilian Presidency in 2024 and that of South Africa in 2025 offer a good opportunity to promote dialogue that could recreate the conditions for this common search for solutions to the array of problems, some of them existential, that the international community faces. Being ambitiously optimistic, the fact that the US will have the G20 Presidency following Brazil and South Africa could lead to substantial agreements for returning the mechanism to its goal of finding workable consensus worked out in the next two years, hammered them down by 2026 and a new era of cooperation emerging.

At the same time, these agreements could also have the effect of revitalizing international organizations, including the UN and its whole system, as well as the specialized agencies, strengthening true multilateralism and allowing for the effective participation of all members of the international community, as the UN Charter foresees. In this context it must be noted that both the UN and most of the agencies of the system, including the IMF and the World Bank, regularly participate in the work of the G20 and its heads do so at G20 Summits.

All this will require political will by the main actors of the system not to go further in the deepening of their systemic rivalries which can lead to strategic conflict, as well as to other actors that do not want to fol-

low that negative path actively engaging in promoting a change of course by the main actors and demanding from them to respond to the need of creating the conditions for peace, stability and international cooperation worldwide. UN rules should be respected and UN objectives pursued in trying to solve geopolitical and strategic rivalries.

These goals could seem utopian in a world where national interests are the top priority for each country, but precisely because of that it should be clear that this road to increased confrontation runs counter to the national interest of the so-called Global South and therefore its members should actively promote a change towards peace, stability and renewed cooperation.

The growth new actors have had over centuries led to conflict with the established powers. But in the past, we did not have the instruments and institutions to peacefully deal with the challenge created by the emergence of new actors as we have today. Managing those competing aims in a way that could be beneficial not only for those actors in competition but also for the rest of the international community is today an obligation and a responsibility of all countries, allowing for growth to be better shared and by the creation of a peaceful climate of prosperity which could lift all boats.

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