

True Multilateralism: The Path to Peace and Development

Opinion Piece

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The world is facing multifaceted challenges: climate change and energy transitions; a pandemic that brought global paralysis and the danger that a similar event may happen again soon; growing inequality, the concentration of wealth in a reduced number of countries and, even in those countries, growing disparities; human rights abuses; displacement of peoples; religious and ethnic conflict; the list goes on.

These challenges must be addressed globally with the cooperation and political will of all, and particularly of the most powerful and richer members of the international community. Effective multilateralism is the key to agreeing on and implementing such a global cooperation, be it in the political sphere or in the specific and technical aspects that each of those challenges present. However, instead of a common global response to tackle these challenges, the main actors (some of whom enjoy privileges of special voting rights in matters of international peace and security) seem more inclined to engage in strategic competition between themselves than in truly multilateral action for solutions.

Something is wrong when the most powerful countries, instead of engaging in the quest for those common solutions that our planet needs as a matter of urgency, devote their energies, resources and creativity to competing amongst themselves and to deepening strategic and security-related rivalries that could put all of us at risk.

Multilateralism is not a mere plurality of likeminded countries and peoples bent on advancing their shared goals, valuable as they may be, but rather an association in which everyone respecting basic principles of human decency could work to-

gether in peace for the betterment of all, despite important differences in politics, ideology or levels of development.

»**Multilateralism is not any mere plurality of likeminded countries.**«

Several international organizations and groupings fulfill these criteria, with the United Nations being preeminent among them. The World Trade Organization (WTO), World Health Organization, Food and Agriculture Organization, UNESCO, World Bank, regional organizations such as the Organization of American States, the African Union or groups like G20 or Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, are examples of those which are and could be effective in contributing to the common search for peace and development.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Global cooperation is essential to tackle climate change, as was agreed in the Paris Agreement in 2015. With 194 signatories, all the major countries of the world committed to achieving the goals on climate change and pledged to make their own Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). However, the very promoters of the Agreement are in practice demanding that access to their markets should be granted only to those who comply with their own NDC. This could constitute a new barrier

»“Common but differentiated responsibilities” is not just a slogan but an international law.«

to trade not agreed by the WTO and a potential misuse of the Paris Agreement for an unintended purpose.

The principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” present in all relevant international instruments since 1992 as a binding commitment, should not be eroded or considered as just a slogan. This principle is a rule of international environmental law and has been included in all relevant documents since the Stockholm Conference in 1972, such as the Montreal and Kyoto Protocols, and in the Paris Agreement (third preambular, articles 2.2, 4.3 and 4.19).¹ It should now produce concrete actions, effective policies and the availability of resources to help developing countries achieve the energy transition needed to stop global warming, reduce emissions and build a sustainable economy for all. The fight against climate change should be a common global goal and thus decided upon by all. Agreed and fair criteria, and real common ground amongst all developed and developing countries, should be found. Without investment, financial assistance and new technologies, the energy transition may not happen in many developing countries and the gap between rich and poor will increase globally.

All countries must make a huge effort to combat climate change and advance in energy transitions. However, the special responsibility of those who are polluting the most and for much longer, should not be minimized or diluted. It is their duty to ensure that this special responsibility is reflected in more and deeper commitments and in contributing more resources toward solving the global climate change problem.

ENERGY TRANSITIONS

Energy transitions and switching to renewable and cleaner sources of energy are pivotal for reducing emissions, decarbonizing globally and contributing to a fairer world with sustainable development and well-being for all.

To achieve the Paris Agreement goals, an energy transition is indispensable and huge resources are needed to succeed globally. This will enable developing countries to reach their NDCs under the Paris Agreement and to decarbonize globally by 2050. However, the goal of mobilizing USD 100 billion per year for climate action in developing countries, to help them with adaptation and mitigation measures, is yet to be fulfilled. Deploying renewable energies is expensive and demands advanced technologies which are mostly in the hands of developed countries. Allowing developing countries to access these technologies, and develop and deploy energy sources like photovoltaic, wind, seawater, geothermal, hydrogen, etc. at a reasonable cost, should be a goal for all.

In this context, advanced technologies for renewable energies should be made available to developing countries at a reasonable cost and in accordance with their respective capabilities, in the light of different national circumstances.

The capital necessary to utilize the natural resources needed for new sources of energy (lithium, hydrogen and others) should also be made available for their development and deployment.

An energy transition would require guaranteeing investment, research, development, etc. It should not be seen only as a means for the most advanced countries to make money through new technologies, but also as a tool for a cleaner planet, which will benefit people everywhere. This process should not be a zero-sum game but a game where all win through decarbonizing the planet and overcoming the energy deprivation in which billions of people find themselves, particularly in the developing world.

HEALTH AS A NEW GLOBAL THREAT

The COVID-19 pandemic created a new scenario that compounded the tendency in the last years toward diminishing the flow of people through borders, particularly from developing countries to the most advanced, be it for seeking work, refuge or simply a better life. Barriers to stop or to further complicate those movements grew even before the pandemic struck. Because of the virus, all movement stopped at the beginning of 2020.

Today there are vaccines, and the virus can be controlled to a large extent, but the normalization of even legal movement between countries never returned to normal and possibly never will.

The sharing of the vaccines underlined the differences between rich and poor countries. Despite the global nature of the pandemic, sharing was not the rule and people in developing countries were much less capable of getting vaccines because

their countries did not have the capacity to develop them.

Even today, global access to vaccines is not guaranteed to all countries and communities and one may only wonder what the response would be if an even more lethal pandemic were to break out.

DUMPING GLOBALIZATION

The world is going through a dangerous process of increasing strategic and systemic rivalries among the most powerful countries.

Negative consequences will follow, not only for the main actors directly involved in this confrontation, but also for the rest of the world. The last few years have witnessed the emergence of new barriers to trade along with difficulties in the smooth

»A new silo mentality with blocks of countries will be a big setback for all.«

functioning of the WTO and its dispute settlement mechanism. Concepts of nearshoring, friendshoring or onshoring are emptying the hard-won victories of establishing rules for free and global trade instituted through multilateral cooperation. Open markets and fair trade, the undisputed global creed since the beginning of the 1990s, promoted by the most developed countries as the path to global prosperity and development, is today a distant memory.

Trade and investment between the most economically developed countries

and gigantic emerging economies led to a huge increase in the commerce of goods and services. This was reflected in economic growth, intertwined production systems, efficiencies in global production and supply chains, cost reduction and better prices for consumers almost everywhere.

It could be argued that the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, which originated in the developed West, did not lead to the global collapse of the world economy because of the performance of some of the larger emerging economies. These became crucial members of the new integrated global economic structure. This kept the global economy functioning and an economic and financial recovery of sorts was possible within a few years, albeit with a negative redistribution of wealth. However, at that moment, there was also an authentic multilateral decision among the most advanced economies to cooperate to find solutions which could overcome the crisis and benefit all in the context of a globalized economic framework. The G20 was to give political clout to those commitments necessary for a global return to growth. It was then clear that major economies from different regions and outlooks should participate and cooperate in order to succeed in attaining the goal of overcoming the global crisis. The aim was not only to allow those main economies, developed or emerging, to come out of the crisis but also to facilitate the whole world to do so. This was not an altruist objective but a dire need to save the global economy after disastrous financial decisions were made. The practices adopted in the most developed countries had put the whole global economic and financial system on the verge of collapse.

Some key actors in this process became economically much more powerful. For more than half of the countries of the world, trade with those key actors became the key component for commerce. This led to the increased importance of those new key actors, and with their emergence, tensions began to rise not only in the economic sphere but also in the strategic and security fields. The specter of conflict between big powers raised its head once again. The notion that systemic differences should inevitably lead to groupings of those who shared their respective political and systemic outlooks led to the scenario that there would come a point at which countries would have to choose to which group they wished to belong. Such a new silo mentality, whereby countries would only or mostly be able to trade, develop new technologies, and achieve scientific breakthroughs in every field with those who think similarly or are geographically or ideologically close by, would represent a big setback for all. It looks as though we are getting deeper into that juncture, as if we were going back decades to the end of the 1980s where the world stood divided into blocs.

Multilateralism was the answer that the world imagined, after the scourge of World War II, would avoid further wars. The principles and objectives of the UN Charter, enshrined particularly in articles 1 and 2,² are still valid and mandatory today and, in the context of new tensions and open conflicts, are more important than ever. The UN was intended as a means of providing a legal, moral and political frame to allow countries and societies with different values, beliefs, histories, political structures or ideas to coexist peacefully

and, if possible, contribute to growth with freedom and well-being for all. This vision is still relevant and indeed essential in contemporary times and so too are organizations which contribute to these goals.

Amongst those multilateral mechanisms mentioned above, the G20 was also conceived to find solutions to big systemic challenges through cooperation instead of confrontation. It includes the most relevant developed and emerging global actors. It has played a positive role for the best part of a decade. Now, in times of growing confrontation amongst the biggest states, it could and should again be an important tool to seek agreements. Here, political will is needed.

THE DRUMS OF WAR

In addition to these tensions and problems, we now have a war crisis in Europe. The brutal invasion of a sovereign country is already more than a year old.

The most fundamental principle of international law enshrined in the UN Charter is the nonuse of “force against the territorial integrity and political independence of a State.”³ This has once again been breached by one of the powers that are the main guarantors of the UN system.

It has been argued that such an aggression is based on alleged breaches of security agreements in decades past and that a space in Europe which is not conducive to military conflicts should be created,

but this should be achieved through negotiations, not aggression.

This war is having dramatic consequences not only for Ukraine and its people but also for the whole of Europe and beyond. Seeing Europe in a major war belongs to another century, for example the nineteenth, or even the first half of the twentieth, but not to the peace-striving twenty-first century we live in today.

Peace is essential and all actors, especially those most powerful, must find the way toward negotiations which can bring about a just and durable settlement that can deliver security to all.

This war must not be allowed to escalate, go nuclear or spread, nor used to deepen rivalries and create a division of the world into blocs, pushing countries to take sides or subscribe to one particular agenda. We must return to a global world where every country can live in peace, grow, and choose to cooperate with as many other countries and peoples as possible.

This war is putting all other aspects of the global agenda that need to be addressed in jeopardy. It is worsening the existing problems that must be solved.

We could be at the brink of great danger for international peace and security. We must all step back.

The opinions expressed in this article correspond to its author and are his sole responsibility.

¹ Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Dec. 12, 2015, T.I.A.S. No. 16-1104.

² United Nations. [1945]. Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice. New York: United Nations, Office of Public Information.

³ Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice, article 2 paragraph 4. Available at <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>