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# WHO you gonna call?

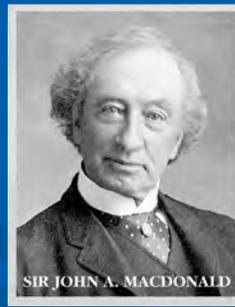
*Why there's something  
strange about global institutions*



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Canadian public policy



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## Introduction

The world is not experiencing a failure of health systems or economic fundamentals, but rather a failure of governance and leadership. The World Health Organization's initial refusal to alert the world to the true danger of the pandemic, due to its deference to China, is a symptom of a wide-ranging failure of the UN and other organizations to reject the influence of regimes that seek to undermine Western values, from human rights bodies to free trade. The UN begs for relevance. The G20 is floundering. The World Trade Organization is ineffective.

Meanwhile, countries like China are not only increasingly dominating these existing multilateral institutions, but also creating China-centric ones, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. In some of its most ambitious global projects, like its vaunted Belt and Road Initiative, it has eschewed western-style institutions altogether, preferring a global network of largely bilateral ties with China at its centre. These institutions and initiatives led by Beijing often lack transparency and are fuelled by geopolitical ambition, rather than providing international public goods.

In this report, *WHO you gonna call? Why there's something strange about international institutions*, three distinguished experts offer their thoughts on the failure of global institutions to defend security, health, freedom and prosperity in the world, and how Canada and its allies should reform existing institutions and/or adopt new and more effective ones.

The first essay, titled "Never give in: How the West could reclaim global institutions," states that the response of the West cannot be abandonment; we must instead work hard to fix global institutions. Authored by Olaf Wientzek, the essay outlines both the problems facing global institutions and the actions that countries like Canada ought to take to provide remedies.

"In this already difficult context for multilateralism, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted two somewhat paradoxical trends," explains Wientzek. "On the one hand, it has shown the faults and limitations of several multilateral bodies, on the other hand the crisis has underlined their enormous (potential)

importance.”

According to Wientzek, global institutions like the WHO have largely been restricted by their member states in terms of how they can respond to problems like the COVID-19 pandemic. He notes that this is most clear with China’s actions to restrict WHO access and block Taiwan’s participation.

However, Wientzek highlights the need for greater Western involvement to solve these problems, not less. The Western retrenchment on the global stage, led by the US, has created a power vacuum that countries like China have readily exploited, thereby further eroding international institutions.

The second essay, titled “Expanding the toolkit: How minilateralism can help fill the void left by failing international institutions,” breaks down the challenges facing multilateralism in the world today. As authors Balkan Devlen and Jonathan Berkshire Miller note, “The current global multilateral institutions are no longer sufficient in protecting the interests of liberal democratic states, such as Canada.”

Among the key challenges that they identify include subversion by authoritarian actors like Russia and China, an inward-facing superpower in the United States, a general dysfunction among institutions that the COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated, and lastly, a growing emphasis – especially by countries like Canada – on multilateralism as an end of itself.

As part of an overall rethink on multilateralism, Devlen and Miller recommend a layered and nuanced approach to international institutions – one that embraces a more targeted and focused form of *minilateralism*.

“A minilateralist approach argues that we should focus on developing a more limited set of international organizations that are not universal in their membership,” write Devlen and Miller. “[W]e have to focus our attention and energies to working with like-minded states and allies, rather than trying to accommodate and engage those states that do not share our values or interests.”

Both essays were first published as individual commentaries. But, for ease of reference, we have collected them here in this report. The Macdonald-Laurier Institute would also like to thank its partner in this project, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, for their generous support.

# Never give in: How the West could reclaim global institutions

Olaf Wientzek

The solemn celebratory declarations at the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UN may suggest otherwise but multilateral organizations have probably seen better days. Aside from the traditional problems – lacking efficiency, overblown bureaucracy, failure to impact bigger autocratic states – multilateral organizations are increasingly blocked due to fundamental disagreements among their membership.

In this already difficult context for multilateralism, the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted two somewhat paradoxical trends: On the one hand, it has shown the faults and limitations of several multilateral bodies, on the other hand the crisis has underlined their enormous (potential) importance. Much has been said and written about the World Health Organization (WHO) and its failure to openly address China's mistakes, particularly during the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis. However, this can at least partly be attributed to the WHO's limited mandate, resources and its utter dependance on the goodwill of particularly large member states. The WHO's often unfortunate interaction with Taiwan – a country which is probably one of the few successful examples in dealing with the crisis – has been another reminder of the limited political room of maneuver the organization has in an increasingly toxic geopolitical environment. Bearing all these limitations in mind, the WHO has proven to play a key role in the crisis by providing fact-based recommendations, advising many member states, providing material support and both initiating and

coordinating efforts for research, development and efforts to ensure an equitable distribution of a vaccine.

Similarly, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has proven – despite the current crisis of its dispute settlement and its negotiation function – to be an important platform to reveal hidden protectionist measures by its members and to resist against a spiral of protectionism. Other UN bodies, such as the International Labour Organization, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), or the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs have provided important guidance on how to respond to various pandemic-related challenges in their respective fields of expertise or by providing concrete material assistance. However, many of their initiatives, recommendations and calls have received limited or no resonance among the member states.

## **Autocratic takeover of multilateral organizations?**

Another trend highlighted by the crisis is that multilateralism is not politically neutral. In principle, multilateralism describes nothing more than a modus operandi and not the norms or values by which it is or should be driven (Maull 2020). While “multilateralism” is in vogue in the public discourse, different states associate very different norms and functions with it. For countries like Canada, the US or Germany, the term is strongly linked to values such as individual dignity and freedom, democracy, transparency and the rule of law, but this is different for authoritarian regimes. These past years one can observe an increasing assertiveness among autocratic actors – in their attempt to not only strongly engage in multilateral fora but also to try to shape the discourse in multilateral institutions.

Clearly, this can be seen in the context of the UN Human Rights Council, where China, Russia, Venezuela, Cuba, Eritrea and other countries regularly block or try to block resolutions criticizing human rights deficits not only in their own territory but also in fellow authoritarian regimes. With (often successful) resolutions on “mutually beneficial cooperation,”<sup>1</sup> they argue for a “dog don’t eat dog” approach among states when it comes to their human rights record. At the same time these resolution attempt to change the interpretation of human rights, away from individual towards collective rights – thus increasingly undermining the so far prevalent liberal-democratic definition. The strong support China receives on Xinjiang or Hong Kong by other autocratic and semi-autocratic regimes demonstrates that a defensive “Autocratic International” is ready to shield China from public opprobrium in multilateral fora. China gladly returns the favour when countries such as Saudi-Arabia, Venezuela, Eritrea or the Philippines are in the spotlight.

In particular, China’s influence in multilateral Geneva has increased substantially these past years. China verbally embraces multilateralism and likes to

style itself as benevolent provider of global solutions. In reality, however, China's support of multilateralism is a selective one: China often exercises strong conditionality and leverages economic and political influence. Expectations of China being "socialized" following its inclusion to the WTO have not been fulfilled. Rather, it has demonstrated that the organization's rules were not ready to address certain malpractices in the country. In other organizations, one can even witness reverse socialization (i.e., China and other autocratic players pushing norms and narratives).

China's engagement is particularly strong in organizations responsible for setting technical norms and standards such as the International Telecommunication Union, the International Organization for Standardization and the International Road Transport Union. These bodies receive little public attention, but are of crucial importance in the establishment of global standards in (digital and physical) infrastructure and communication. In effect, these organizations set the course for the economy of the future. This is accompanied by strategic personnel policy: China currently heads four out of 15 DG (director general) posts in UN specialized agencies and conducts a proactive personnel policy in mid-level and junior levels.

In addition, multilateral fora are used to accumulate international reputation and public international affirmation for one's policies. The repeated exclusion of Taiwan from the World Health Assembly (WHA) is one example. The speech by Xi Jinping (2020) during the most recent WHA is another one: The Chinese president portrayed his country as a benevolent partner in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and offered solidarity to particularly vulnerable countries.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Pakistan or Turkey attempted to use the Global Refugee Forum 2019 in Geneva as a platform to acquire international acknowledgement for their engagement in accepting refugees while at the same time lashing out against international opponents. Finally, international fora are eagerly used by authoritarian regimes to publicly shame countries belonging to the global West on their (sometimes alleged, sometimes exaggerated mistakes).

## **The West punching below its weight**

The West has to rise to this challenge. The US retreat from the UN Human Rights Council has made the fight against the "alternative human rights narrative" more difficult; numerous observers confirm that this step has further emboldened China in its assertiveness. A similar effect could be the consequence of a retreat from the WHO if this step, which was initiated by the Trump administration in July 2020, is indeed followed through. The fact that the US president refused to intervene at the above-mentioned World Health Assembly gave the Chinese president an even more prominent role.

Admittedly, the US position is more complex than its frequent public depic-

tion that has focused on its retreat from some organizations and bodies (UN Human Rights Council, WHO) or their blockage (WTO). For instance, the US continues to play a key role both as an agenda-setter as well as a financier in other organizations (IOM, UNHCR). Nonetheless, its clout has suffered not least in the context of the COVID-19 crisis during which Washington has so far not provided global leadership. Even more so, America's soft power credibility has suffered due to the absence of US leadership in responding to the COVID crisis.<sup>3</sup>

The EU demonstrated a mixed picture: Internal coordination efforts take a long time which sometimes leads to a frustration of non-EU allies. In other organizations the EU finds itself between a rock and a hard place. On the issue of WTO reform, many EU member states share at least some of the US's concerns, however they refrain from the radical approach of the US administration. In several cases, the Western camp has either been divided or failed to gather a sufficient number of allies on time. But even when like-minded liberal-democratic countries stand together, this will often not be enough to form a majority.

Despite these developments (or rather because of them), retreat from global, multilateral organizations cannot be an option. Like it or not, most countries view these organizations as legitimate and without alternative. The fact that the US has decided to leave the UN Human Rights Council has not been followed by subsequent withdrawals of major players. The same is to be expected if the US maintains its initiated withdrawal from the WHO. The organization will continue to work but without an important player from the West. Disengagement is therefore no option.

Instead, countries that support liberal democracy and a rules-based international order should attempt to counter these developments with four strategies:

### *1. Closing the leadership gap in the West*

One key challenge will be to close the vacuum caused by the retreat of the United States from some multilateral organizations – at least to a certain extent. At the same time, other liberal-democratic countries have only partly managed to fill the void left by the US. The EU has taken its time, but eventually it played a key role in some of the key COVID-19 crisis response mechanisms such as the ACT (Access to COVID-19 Tools) Accelerator and in the financial support of the WHO and the COVAX facility. In the framework of the WTO, mid-sized democracies, such as Canada, Switzerland, Australia and the Republic of Korea as well as some of the Latin American countries, have pushed against increasing protectionism. The promising efforts shown during the crisis are not sufficient, however. In organizations such as the WHO, the WTO and the Human Rights Council, quicker coordination among liberal democracies and more engagement are crucial.

This also means increasing financial contributions in order to reduce the gap left by US disengagement. It is likely that many countries will reduce their financial contributions due to the expected budget crunch at home. Some of these organizations are already struggling with regard to both finances and personnel and therefore will find it even more difficult to fulfill their tasks. China as well as some of the Gulf countries have indicated their willingness to step in, at least to a certain extent. Such a shift in financing for global fora and global initiatives could lead to a fundamental shift in influence in these organizations. If past experiences are any indication, additional support particularly from authoritarian countries often comes with a very heavy price-tag, be it in policy-terms or personnel-wise.

Given the multitude of international fora, it is hardly possible for any single Western country – aside from the US – to follow all debates and decisions. This is particularly true in more technical standard-setting organizations. Therefore, it will be crucial to adopt a strategy of division of labour among Western countries that have a similar understanding of standards, data protection and privacy. One precondition for the success of such coordination efforts would be preliminary compromise among Western countries on these issues. Standards on data protection and privacy may vary on both sides of the Atlantic but they remain closer to each other than the ideas of authoritarian players. Once common positions are established, they will carry considerable weight on a global level. Global rules on crucial issues such as e-commerce are then more likely to conform to such a joint position.

## *2. Forge alliances – while leaving an open door to Washington*

Success in multilateral organizations depends on the ability to forge alliances. Neither the EU, nor Canada and their like-minded countries alone are enough to ensure a critical mass in many organizations. Success will thus depend on the ability to form sufficiently large alliances beyond the “converted.” This will in a first step require a coordination of those like-minded such as the EU, Canada, Iceland, Norway, Ukraine, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Beyond these “usual suspects,” further allies are necessary. On many questions, particularly in the area of human rights, most of the Latin American countries (aside from deeply authoritarian states such as Venezuela or Cuba) tend to have similar positions. Other allies can be identified among democracies or at least hybrid regimes in North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and key players in Southeast Asia. All over the world, there are potential allies who share a similar perspective on a liberal world order, or at least share a few essential interests on specific issues. Many of these countries have little interest in global legal and technical standards being set by China, or by a China-led alliance in the future.

In many Geneva-based organizations, the African Group is of key importance – quite often it demonstrates strong internal cohesion and plays a pivotal role in disputed dossiers. Alliances do not come without cost and will make it necessary to engage in quid pro quos on personnel questions but also on policy questions. Canada, the EU and other Western countries should identify issues that may not be of crucial importance for themselves, but are pivotal for potential partners.

Aside from issue-related alliances, it would be crucial to build a more sustainable network of like-minded countries that not only supports multilateralism as such, but also subscribes to a rules- and value-based multilateralism. A recent initiative, such as the Franco-German initiative “Alliance for Multilateralism,” could potentially be made into such an instrument.

At the same time, it will remain crucial to get the US on board whenever possible. On any issue and in any organization, the US still carries considerable weight and a united West has a better chance to make a difference. One recent example was the race for succession for the position of the Director General at the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). The successful prevention of a Chinese success in that race was largely due to strong US engagement on that matter and the timely organization of a broad alliance. The West is still able to organize majorities if it presents a united front early-on in the process.

### *3. Pushing back against “alternative multilateralism”*

Narratives matter. It is therefore crucial that the West actively contradicts any attempt to redefine multilateralism and the values as they were originally understood. This is particularly important in the UN Human Rights Council. The fight about texts of resolutions may be tedious and appear trivial. However, if the West does not actively counter these attempts, a different consensus over human rights may become established. The West has not insisted enough on this question in the past. This made it easy for authoritarian regimes to undermine the values and principles upon which these organizations are based. Much of it has been made possible through financial incentives or political pressure, but also by the fact that the West has not emphasized the normative argumentation enough.

If definitions of such concepts as human rights and sovereignty change, this will erode what is globally defined as appropriate, legitimate and acceptable. Defenders of Western values should have resisted problematic shifts in discourse earlier and more vigorously. In order to reassert the principles and values of the liberal world order – human dignity, individualism, freedom, democracy, rule of law, social market economy – like-minded countries will have to call out misbehaviour more courageously.

While there may be no chance to gather the necessary votes in the Human Rights Council for an ambitious resolution directed at the larger authoritarian countries, statements can still be valuable instruments of public shaming. The UK-initiated statements on Xinjiang and Hong Kong have been an encouraging example. The fact that China organized two counter-statements via two of its proxies (Cuba and Belarus) demonstrates that public opprobrium remains an important instrument.<sup>4</sup> Even autocracies want to avoid public shaming in international fora due to non-compliance with norms. If the very understanding of norms changes on a global scale, this instrument will lose its effectiveness.

#### *4. 'Tough love' towards multilateral organizations - develop a common reform agenda*

The West needs (functioning) multilateral organizations. First, they can potentially play an important role as norm promoters. Second, on many issues such as climate change but also trade and global health, dialogue with all sides – including China – remains without alternative. Third, due to the strong economic interdependence, the costs of complete “decoupling” from China would be too high. Thus, Western countries will continue to need a global platform to interact. Despite all its dysfunctionalities, an organization such as the WTO has demonstrated its added value during the crisis.

The West therefore should not retreat from multilateral organizations but rather strengthen them and resist their takeover by authoritarian countries. However, this support should come with a price-tag – specifically, the demand for fundamental reform. This is true also for the WHO and the WTO. In most organizations liberal democracies still provide the majority of funding. If like-minded countries coordinate their reform ideas and efforts, the likelihood for meaningful reform increases. For this, the West needs to at least attempt to include the US's concerns. Strong public support for multilateral organizations does not exclude a strong push for reforms.

Such reforms should strengthen the mandate of these organizations in order to make them less dependent on the goodwill of member states, to allow them to speak out when necessary towards democracies and autocracies alike. After all, one of the main reasons for the WHO's silence towards China was its complete dependence on goodwill from Beijing to acquire the necessary information. Strengthening its mandate, its oversight and its financial basis will make it a bit less dependent on the whims and pressure of bigger players.

## **Conclusion**

Given that multilateral organizations are (and for the time being will remain) largely member-state driven, they will to a certain extent mirror the global political situation. If authoritarianism is on the rise globally, it should not be

a surprise that multilateral organizations do not always reflect the norms and values in the spirit of which they were created. It is therefore crucial for the West to actively engage in these organizations and to contain the undermining of their underlying norms and values.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Resolution adopted at the 43rd session of the UN Human Rights Council on mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/43/L.31/Rev.1>, sponsored *inter alia* by China, Belarus, Russia, Syria, Cuba, Venezuela, Pakistan, Myanmar.
- 2 The full speech can be found at Xinhua (2020).
- 3 While the US had provided help to other countries by participating in the Global Humanitarian Response Plan, it has been absent from some of the key initiatives. For example, it did not play a leading role in the ACT Accelerator, an key instrument to promote research on a vaccine and distribution of medicine. As one of the few countries (another big one being Russia) it has not joined the COVAX facility which aims to promote equal access and distribution of a possible vaccine. On top of this, the Trump administration initiated the exit of the WHO, a step that was not imitated even by the countries most critical of the WHO.
- 4 An overview of countries that supported the UK's statement and those who supported the pro-Beijing counter-statements (KAS Map of the month 07/2020) can be found here: <https://www.kas.de/en/web/multilateraler-dialog-genf/map-of-the-month/detail/-/content/criticism-and-support-for-china-in-the-human-rights-council>.

# Expanding the toolkit: How minilateralism can help fill the void left by failing international institutions

Balkan Devlen and Jonathan Berkshire Miller

## Introduction

**G**lobal multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are either paralysed, irrelevant, or have been exposed as dysfunctional in recent years. Climate change negotiations are going nowhere. The WTO is paralyzed. The head of WHO is more concerned about placating one of its largest members, China, than protecting global public health. The UN Human Rights Council is the epitome of this dysfunction with Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, and China as current or recent members – ironically as stewards of the international human rights agenda.

Authoritarian regimes like the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are busy reshaping international institutions to serve their interests while the United States appears to be adrift and disenchanted with many of the international institutions it once helped to establish. The ongoing global pandemic makes

these shortcomings of international institutions even more stark. If global multilateral institutions are failing to defend our security, freedom, wellbeing, and prosperity then what is to be done?

In this paper we argue that in addition to pushing back against this authoritarian subversion of international institutions and taking back control (Wientzek 2020), liberal democracies, the “Global West” if you will, need to rethink multilateralism. After briefly laying out four reasons why global multilateral institutions are in trouble today, we suggest a nuanced and layered strategy of minilateralism for Canada and other liberal democracies – one that should be pursued in tandem with the efforts to save global institutions. We conclude with a brief discussion of three examples of what such a minilateralism could look like: formalizing a “community of democracies” by expanding the G7 into a D10 or even D20, institutionalizing cooperation between like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific, and revitalizing the transatlantic alliance with a renewed focus on the political dimension of NATO.

## What is wrong with multilateralism today?

What is wrong with multilateralism today? When we look at the international system, we can identify the following issues why we need to rethink multilateralism.

First is the subversion of international organizations by authoritarian states to serve their own interests. Principal examples of this are Russia and China, but there are other examples of this manipulation from less powerful actors such as Iran and Pakistan. In the past decade especially, these states used their influence in international organizations such as the UN to undermine the rules-based international order and suppress dissent against their international policies. Their primary concern, as Balkan Devlen argued elsewhere (Devlen 2020), is the protection of their authoritarian regimes at home and they do perceive the rules-based international order as a threat to their rule.

They use several methods to subvert these multilateral organizations (Wientzek 2020). For instance, China uses a targeted personnel policy to place key figures at the helm of many international organizations that are then beholden to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The starkest example of China’s influence over the fate of these international bureaucrats is perhaps the disappearance of the head of the Interpol, Meng Hongwei in 2018 after a visit to China (BBC News 2020). The fact that the head of a major international organization can be made to disappear and only to resurface after a “resignation in absentia” and put on trial for corruption without any country objecting to this treatment is a staggering example of the sway the CCP holds over the Chinese nationals heading multilateral organizations. This is something that is not thinkable in liberal democratic countries. It also raises the question as to what extent those who were put in place by China can act independently

from the CCP regime.

Another example is the use of multilateral organizations by China to punish those who oppose the CCP, such as Taiwan, even if that means undermining the safety and security of the international community. China's insistence to exclude Taiwan from International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), for example, or the WHO during the COVID-19 pandemic are only the most recent and egregious examples of such behavior (Cole 2020; Chen and Cohen 2020; Laliberté 2020).

The UN Human Rights Council is another stark example, whose members in the recent years included the worst human rights abusers, such as China, Cuba, Iran, Venezuela, etc. Their presence in the Council made a mockery of the whole international human rights regime as these countries repeatedly blocked declarations and policies criticizing the human rights abuses of their fellow authoritarian regimes.

“ *Authoritarian regimes, particularly China, use their heft and power in global multilateral institutions.* ”

In short, authoritarian regimes, particularly China, use their heft and power in global multilateral institutions, such as the UN, to stifle dissent and objection to their policies, punish those who stand up to them, and to rewrite “the very principles that have underpinned the global body since its creation following the turmoil of World War II” (Cole 2020). This hollowing out of global multilateral organizations undermines the safety and prosperity of not only the West but also democratic countries worldwide.

The second challenge to global multilateralism today is an increasingly inward-looking United States that is less willing to take a leadership role in the maintenance of the rules-based international order. Although the policies under the tenure of President Donald Trump were perhaps the clearest examples of this inward-looking trend, it is unlikely that the incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden will radically “bring back” the United States into the international stage as it was in the 1990s. This is a response to an American public that is skeptical about the American global leadership as exemplified by the “America First” rhetoric of President Trump and the populist wave that brought him to power in 2016. A Gallup poll in 2019 found that only 23 percent of the American public think the US should play a leading role in the world for instance.<sup>1</sup>

There will be an increasing pressure on the incoming Biden administration to focus rebuilding at home rather than leading abroad, especially in the aftermath of a highly polarized election and a devastating pandemic. The trend in the United States of gradually withdrawing from a leadership role in the world and turning inwards with a focus on domestic social and economic policy, which had started under President Obama, will likely continue under the Biden administration.

Indeed, there is a leadership gap in the global multilateral institutions which is unlikely to be filled by a major liberal democratic state in the near future, a gap that is left by an increasingly inward-looking United States. In other words, without the US hegemony that had maintained global public goods and the rules-based international order since the end of the Second World War, it is unlikely that any of the remaining democratic powers will by themselves confront authoritarian states, such as China and Russia, that are trying to reshape the international order to their liking. This requires a concerted effort among the democratic states to compensate for the leadership deficit left by the US, as discussed below.

Third, the COVID-19 crisis further reveals the dysfunction of many international organizations, such as WHO and ICAO stemming from the first two reasons highlighted above – namely, the authoritarian subversion of existing international organizations, as well as the abdication of leadership by the United States. In the case of the WHO, for example, their dismal record in dealing with the pandemic and deference to the CCP have undermined the trust of these institutions globally. The patchwork of responses to the global pandemic and the lack of leadership from any of the multilateral organizations that were supposed to provide global public health goods or to coordinate economic recovery in the face of the pandemic revealed the weaknesses of the existing multilateral organizations to the broad public.

“ Over the years, especially in Canada, multilateralism became an end in itself.

Lastly, over the years, especially in Canada, multilateralism became an end in itself rather than a means to promote and protect our values and interests. Multilateralism for multilateralism's sake is not in our interest. Assuming that every multilateral initiative is good and is in the service of Canadian interests is highly misguided. Our adversaries do not attach the same normative value to multilateralism and cooperation that we do. The idea that continuing engagement and attempts to find common ground with authoritarian regimes regardless of their behavior is necessary to preserve international peace and

security is naive at best. It must be our interests, informed by our values, that should determine the level and the content of engagement with other countries in international politics, not a blindly repeated mantra of multilateralism.

Therefore, we argue that the existing multilateral organizations, while necessary to some extent, are no longer sufficient to protect Canadian interests and values and indeed the values and interests of other democratic states. This doesn't mean that they should be abandoned (Wientzek 2020). There is much to be said about how Canada and its allies could push back against authoritarian regimes in those global multilateral institutions, as Olaf Wientzek (2020) convincingly argues. However, we also need to develop a more nuanced and long-term approach to multilateralism and global institutions if we would like to protect and defend our interests and values and support a rules-based international order that served Canadians well in the past several decades. So, what are we to do?

## **What has to be done?**

The current global multilateral institutions are no longer sufficient in protecting the interests of liberal democratic states, such as Canada. And therefore, we have to start rethinking our approach to multilateralism.

In response, we need a layered and nuanced approach to international institutions. The existing global multilateralism and global institutions provide a very thin international society based on very few common principles, such as sovereignty. It is possible to develop a thicker international society with select partners on specific issue areas based on common values and interests. In other words, if you think of international society as a sheet that is relatively smooth and thin, it is possible to have bumps/clumps on the particular regions of the sheet that represent deeper commitments and more shared norms and values among a certain group of countries.

What would such a nuanced approach look like? We have to try to take back the global institutions and resist the authoritarian subversion in them, as Olaf Weintzek (2020) recently argued. But that itself is not sufficient to protect and promote our values and interests. In this paper, we argue that this concerted global effort by democratic countries against the authoritarian takeover of global institutions should be coupled with a focused effort of minilateralism.

A minilateralist approach argues that we should focus on developing a more limited set of international organizations that are not universal in their membership. This does not mean that they will be exclusionary, based on some random criteria. Instead, we have to focus our attention and energies to working with like-minded states and allies, rather than trying to accommodate and engage those states that do not share our values or interests. Minilateralism refers to engagement with a small number of countries based on a common

shared understanding of norms, values, and interests. They could be limited in scope both geographically and topically, or they could be global in their ambition. The idea is to have a sufficiently cohesive group that can have an outsized impact on the issues that they are dealing with, be it climate change, free trade, defence against authoritarian encroachment, or something else. However, multilateralism and unilateralism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible to build upon a thin international society and develop a thicker international society on some parts of it.

Unilateralism is not about building high, impenetrable walls around the West, for instance, but it is about creating permeable barriers that will be open to other countries as long as they agree and share the same values and pursue similar interests. In other words, this is not a call for the creation of a walled garden in which most of the world will be left outside. On the contrary, it will be based on a core set of democratic allies as discussed below, but it'll be open to others who are willing to join in this club based on common values, norms and understandings, and pursue their interests based upon the same set of rules. It will not be open to authoritarian regimes that try to undermine liberal democratic values, that do not respect human rights, and that will try to subvert our own societies and threaten the societal cohesion of our countries.



*Unilateralism is not about building high, impenetrable walls around the West.*

There is nothing novel about creating such unilateral understandings and engaging in a deeper cooperation and integration, if necessary, with like-minded states. Existing institutions such as G7 or NATO are examples of successful unilateralism. What does such unilateralism look like in practice?

We would like to suggest three initiatives that are representative of this particular approach. The first one is the creation of the community of democracies around the world. This idea is variously named as “concert of democracies” (Ikenberry and Slaughter 2006; Lindsay 2009), “community of democracies,”<sup>2</sup> “alliance of democracies” (an initiative spearheaded by Anders Fogh Rasmussen), Democracies - 10 (D10) (Gordon and Jain 2013; Kroenig and Jain 2019), and most recently “democracy summit” by the US President-elect Joe Biden (Folkes 2020). The name and sometimes the countries involved might differ but the basic idea remains the same. It is the creation of a semi-formal grouping of democracies to coordinate their international policy on global issues.

Increasingly, concerns about authoritarian major powers, namely China and Russia, also play an important role in this call for the creation of a community of democracies. One particularly promising approach is the creation of D10 mentioned above, by expanding the G7 to include countries like South Korea, India, and Australia, or even to turn it into a D20 and bring other democracies around the world based on the commitment to liberal democracy, rule of law, human rights, and free markets.

It could be a semi-formal forum that coordinates policy such as the G7, and can focus on specific policy coordination on global issues or issues that are relevant for the member states, such as climate change, economic cooperation, resisting authoritarian subversion, and promoting democratic values. The membership to this group would be based not on where you're located or the size of your economy, but rather whether you subscribe to the common set of democratic norms, rule of law, respect for human rights, and economic freedom.

The second minilateral arrangement can focus on the Indo-Pacific region to increase cooperation and coordination with like-minded partners such as Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Such an engagement should also look to engage with member states within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and key European partners that are also increasingly looking at the evolving geo-strategic stakes in this region.

Even with this convergence of interests in a stable and rules-based region, Canada seems late in clearly and thoroughly articulating its rationale to invest in the Indo-Pacific region compared with other middle powers. Japan, India and Australia have already espoused strong approaches to the region. Increasingly the same has been true for European powers. A good example is Germany's Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific, which was released on September 1, 2020. This is the second European country after France to release a guidance or strategy on the Indo-Pacific. Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas stressed Germany's "strong interest in promoting multilateral approaches in the region and, above all, in strengthening ASEAN – with a view to consolidating a multipolar region embedded within a multilateral, rules-based system" (Miller and Nagy 2020).

France's strategy goes even further. Their 2019 report, *French Strategy in the Indo-Pacific* "For an Inclusive Indo-Pacific," stresses "strengthening our partnerships with the major regional players with whom we share the same values and interests, such as Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore and South Korea, while deepening our relationship with China, an essential partner we need to work with, including in a European Union framework, in order to develop cooperation that takes into account the need for reciprocity" (Republic of France 2019).

Both the German and French Indo-Pacific visions, in addition to a recent Indo-Pacific outlooks from the Netherlands and the UK, use the word “inclusivity” and the importance of engagement with China while at the same time stressing that no country should impose their hegemony on the region. As such, they resonate deeply with the concept of a “Free” and “Open” Indo-Pacific and with Canada’s enduring interests in buttressing a rules-based approach to international institutions.

Despite a long history of engagement, the consistency of Canada’s role often appears unmoored and not fully aligned with our interests and stakes in the significant geopolitical shifts taking place in the region. A frequent critique from stakeholders and officials in the region is that Canada must make a more consistent and comprehensive approach that demonstrates an investment of time and capital that goes beyond merely trade and investment. Specifically, there is a need and desire – at least from most states – for a strong Canadian voice on political-security developments in the region, be it on maritime security, nuclear non-proliferation or the plethora of non-traditional security challenges facing the region. This is where the tenets, rules and values that form the basis of the emerging growth of Indo-Pacific frameworks will help Canada better serve its interests and promote its role.



*Canada can work with like-minded partners and allies in a minilateral setting.*

Lastly, strengthening the political dimension of the transatlantic community and revitalizing the importance of defending democratic values for the Alliance is another way in which Canada can work with like-minded partners and allies in a minilateral setting, rather than at a global multilateral setting, such as the UN. NATO is a military alliance, but it is also a political alliance and the preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty highlights the commitment to rule of law, democracy and free market for the allies. Such refocusing on the political dimension would include some uncomfortable conversations with some of the NATO allies, such as Turkey and Hungary, that show increasingly authoritarian tendencies. But such conversations are essential if the transatlantic alliance is to confront the authoritarian subversion of the rules-based international order.

Revitalizing the transatlantic alliance should also include a greater role and responsibility for Canada and European allies, particularly Germany, in strengthening the transatlantic bond between allies. The last several years

showed that we can no longer assume that the United States will always play a leading role and shoulder the burden of defending the transatlantic space alone. Canada and its European allies need to step up and take on a leadership role going forward. In the words of a recently released report by the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) and Harvard Kennedy School, “The United States, Europe and Canada must work together toward one ambition in 2021 – to renew, revitalize and retool for the decade ahead the most powerful democratic community in modern history” (Schwarzer et al. 2020).

## Conclusion

Global institutions are failing us and proving insufficient to meet the challenges to the international system. We need to find a better way to move forward in protecting and promoting our interests and values. Old ways of relying on global multilateralism and a benevolent hegemon just south of the border are no longer sufficient. Canada, together with its allies and like-minded partners across the globe, have to play a bigger and more active role in the world stage. We have to develop a more nuanced and layered approach to multilateralism. Such an approach should include not only a concerted effort with allies and partners in defending global multilateral institutions and the rules-based international order from authoritarian subversion but also must include a more tailored approach to international cooperation with select allies and like-minded partners in minilateral settings to advance our interests and ensure our security.

Canada can and should play a role both at the global level in leading a community of democracies in the post-pandemic world as well as in the two crucial geographies – transatlantic and the Indo-Pacific – that it has vested interests. What we need is a more nuanced, tailored, and interest-oriented approach to multilateralism that privileges engagement and cooperation with fellow democracies across the world instead of multilateralism for multilateralism’s sake. Sometimes less is indeed more.

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## Endnotes

- 1 This polling information can be found here: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx>.
- 2 See the Community of Democracies coalition at [www.community-democracies.org](http://www.community-democracies.org).

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