

Commentary



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Never give in: How the West could reclaim global institutions

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Introduction

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 dependence 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,”¹ 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.² 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 conse-

quence 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 depiction 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.³

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 democra-

cies 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.⁴ 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 dysfunctions, 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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About the author



Olaf Wientzek has been the director of the Geneva Office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) since May 2019. His office closely follows the work of the various Geneva-based multilateral organizations and he is regularly requested as an expert on developments in Geneva by the media. Previously, he worked as EU expert for KAS in Brussels and Berlin.

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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>.

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