

# Commentary



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

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### Introduction

Global 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

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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.



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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 organiza-



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tions 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.

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 is 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).



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

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.

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).

*constructive* *important* *forward-thinking*  
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