

The Outlook for Multilateralism



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SYNOPSIS

Multilateralism today is being seriously challenged by three structural changes in the international system. Amid an environment that is less than conducive to multilateral cooperation, the UN Summit for the Future (SOTF) will be convened next year to advance global governance. With active participation from small and middle powers, the summit and the Pact for the Future that it plans to establish can help prepare the multilateral system for tackling future challenges and weathering future crises.

COMMENTARY

Different people have different views regarding the outlook for multilateralism. To some, multilateralism is simply not functioning. Those who hold this view cite as evidence the rise of protectionism during the COVID-19 pandemic and the global community's inability to prevent Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Others contend, however, that multilateralism is advancing but in a new way, compared with the past.

To better gauge the outlook for multilateralism, one should take into account three major structural factors. The first one is the power distribution between states. Previously, it was the United Nations and Western institutions, namely, the Bretton Woods system, that largely shaped the post-World War II order. Today, power is more diffuse, and great power rivalries, namely the US-China competition, can hinder the development of global governance. China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), which offers clearing services for cross-border renminbi transactions, has partly cushioned Russia from the impact of the Western sanctions imposed following its invasion of Ukraine. Alternatives to the West-centric governance architectures are also gaining traction. The recent expansion of the Group of

20¹ and the BRICS bloc² demonstrates the Global South's growing significance in multilateral collaboration. Emerging markets such as Brazil, China and India have been emboldened into calling for greater representation and voice in international organisations.

The second factor is the power distribution between states and markets. The dynamic differs greatly from the past. Rapid digitalisation and technological advancements not only cause economic disruption but also raise the question of who governs the global system. Take cyberspace as an example. While technologies allow businesses not only to operate beyond borders but in some cases to wield global influence, governments' jurisdictions end at their state borders. Thus, there is a pressing need for multilateralism to address governance gaps. Given the swift pace at which new technologies (e.g., generative artificial intelligence) evolve, governments are grappling with the problem of regulating them for societal benefit. Most governments are playing catch-up as technology advances. Various standards and regulations are being introduced by different countries. These diverse approaches cause disagreement over how to foster multilateral governance and consequently complicate the process of achieving rule harmonisation.

Finally, the future of multilateralism is being shaped by the changing relationship between the economy and security. Unlike the post-Cold War period, which was fuelled by the free-market principles of the Washington Consensus, today, the growing nexus between the economy and security is affecting state policymaking. Geopolitics prevails over market efficiency. Interdependence is viewed more through the geopolitical lens – it is seen as breeding vulnerabilities and having the potential to be weaponised. Unsurprisingly, concepts such as reshoring, near-shoring and “friend-shoring” are not only altering individual countries' policies but also the ways in which they engage other countries.

Against the above backdrop, for small states like Singapore, concerns over the future of multilateralism

loom large. For one thing, contestation between major powers can result in system governance fragmentation. As a result, small and medium powers are eventually forced to choose sides against their will. Also, disagreements over norms and rules to regulate markets and technologies can exacerbate system fragmentation, reducing the opportunities for these nations to prosper and achieve their interests.

But one should not lose hope in this environment that is less than conducive to fostering multilateral cooperation. A silver lining does exist. The United Nations will host a two-day “Summit of the Future: Multilateral Solutions for a Better Tomorrow” (SOTF) in September 2024.³ This meeting will convene UN member states, the various UN entities, academic institutions, civil society players, non-government organisations and youth delegates to jointly cultivate a new global consensus to address the issues of the future. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres regards this effort as a “once-in-a-generation opportunity to reinvigorate global action, recommit to fundamental principles, and further develop the frameworks of multilateralism so they are fit for the future.”⁴ One of the gathering's deliverables will be the “Pact for the Future”. The document will comprise five chapters: (1) sustainable development and financing for development; (2) international peace and security; (3) science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation; (4) youth and future generations; and (5) transforming global governance.⁵ It will also contain actionable policy measures. The pact is expected to be endorsed by all UN members at the summit. A “Global Digital Compact and Declaration on Future Generations” will be annexed to the text.

Accomplishing multilateral governance can be a daunting task, but it is not impossible. History teaches us that it is within the stakeholders' reach. The UN's World Summit in September 2005 is a case in point.⁶ This meeting witnessed activism by UN member states to bolster concrete global cooperation. For example, the leaders attending the summit pledged to provide US\$50 billion annually by 2010 to fight poverty and marshal additional resources to tackle

development and debt sustainability problems in order to realise the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) first outlined in the Millennium Summit of 2000. The World Summit adopted the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle to safeguard populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Moreover, the meeting agreed to create the UN Peacebuilding Commission and UN Human Rights Council as well as to establish a worldwide early warning system for natural hazards.

Preparations for the 2024 SOTF are forging ahead. Contributions from non-major powers are laudable. The UN General Assembly in June 2019 adopted Resolution 73/299, co-facilitated by Singapore and Iceland. This document determined that the theme of the 75th UN Anniversary gathering in September 2020 would be “The Future We Want, the United Nations We Need: Reaffirming our Collective Commitment to Multilateralism”, which defined all UN activities and meetings for that year.⁷ Sweden and Qatar co-chaired the negotiations on the Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations, which was endorsed at the commemorative conference. The document identified 12 commitments to multilateralism, such as leaving no one behind, protecting the planet, promoting peace, upholding international law,

enhancing digital cooperation and upgrading the United Nations.⁸

After intense negotiations, the UN General Assembly on 1 September 2023 endorsed the scope of the SOTF and agreed on the elements that will appear in the Pact for the Future. Two annexes to this document will be co-facilitated by small states — the Global Digital Compact will be co-facilitated by Rwanda and Sweden⁹ and the Declaration on Future Generations by Jamaica and the Netherlands.¹⁰

Active participation from non-major powers is imperative to keep up this positive momentum and effectively steer the SOTF and the Pact for the Future towards managing the global commons. These nations must realise that they have agency to shape the international rules-based order. For one thing, they can play a role in preventing great power contestation from hampering the development of multilateral governance. They can help convince different parties to prioritise the pursuit of shared goals. In addition, they can proactively offer new ways to interpret global norms, decide on global standards and set global rules governing different issue areas. Their roles can be crucial in preparing the multilateral system for tackling future challenges and weathering future crises.

¹ Chido Munyati, “The African Union Has Been Made a Permanent Member of the G20 — What Does It Mean for the Continent?” *World Economic Forum*, 14 September 2023, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/09/african-union-g20-world-leaders/>.

² Carien du Plessis, Anait Miridzhanian, and Bhargav Acharya, “BRICS Welcomes New Members in Push to Reshuffle World Order”, *Reuters*, 25 August 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/brics-poised-invite-new-members-join-bloc-sources-2023-08-24/>.

³ United Nations, “The Summit of the Future in 2024”, <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda/summit-of-the-future>.

⁴ International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), “‘Twin Summits’ to Pave Way for Sustainable, Equitable, Inclusive Future”, 10 August 2022, <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/twin-summits-to-pave-way-for-sustainable-equitable-inclusive-future/>.

⁵ IISD, “UNGA Decides on Elements for ‘A Pact for the Future’”, 6 September 2023, <https://sdg.iisd.org/news/twin-summits-to-pave-way-for-sustainable-equitable-inclusive-future/>.

⁶ United Nations, “World Summit, 14–16 September 2005, New York”, <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/newyork2005>.

⁷ UN General Assembly, Resolution 73/299 — Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the United Nations, Adopted at the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly, 18 June 2019.

⁸ UN General Assembly, Resolution 75/1 — Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the United Nations, Adopted at the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly, 21 September 2020.

⁹ President of the UN General Assembly, Letter to all permanent representatives and permanent observers of the United Nations, 27 October 2022, <https://www.un.org/pgal/77/wp-content/uploads/sites/105/2022/10/Letter-from-the-PGA-OCA-Global-Digital-Compact-Co-facs.pdf>.

¹⁰ President of the UN General Assembly, Letter to all permanent representatives and permanent observers of the United Nations, 7 March 2023, <https://www.un.org/pgal/77/wp-content/uploads/sites/105/2023/03/PGA-Letter-of-Appointment-Jamaica.pdf>.