

John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture



The UN @75

The Future of Partnership and Multilateralism

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1 Introduction

This year's UN Charter Day marks the 75th anniversary of the birth of the UN system, providing an important opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the United Nations, and to look ahead at the future of multilateralism. This is also a moment when the principles of multilateralism have never been more important and more in need of support.

The world is currently in a state of profound crisis, and the multilateral system in particular faces its gravest threat since 1945. The response to COVID-19 and the challenges of ensuring a rapid, equitable, and sustainable economic recovery from the pandemic is straining the limits of international solidarity, and has brought into question the interconnected global systems of trade and international travel that have been taken for granted in recent decades.

In recent weeks, we have also seen the worldwide protests following the murder by American police of George Floyd, the reverberations from which have painfully exposed the extent to which systemic racial discrimination continues to significantly blight the lives of minority populations around the world.

In addition to these immediate crises, we continue to face the longer-term existential threats to human existence posed by climate change and nuclear weapons, both of which are headed in an increasingly dangerous and unpredictable direction, due to neglect—or in some cases, willful destructiveness—of certain national leaders.

2 Attacks on the Multilateral System

The current barrage of threats and crises would be an extremely challenging set of problems for the international community to tackle in the best circumstances. It is therefore particularly alarming that this is taking place at a moment when the multilateral system finds itself under an unprecedented state of attack.

It is an especially sad irony that this assault on multilateralism is being led by the country that played the single biggest role in the establishment and maintenance of the multilateral system after 1945.

To my deep regret, the current US administration has done deep and lasting damage to the UN system and the broader principles of multilateralism since 2017. From withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, to blocking the appointment of judges on the World Trade Organization's Appellate Court, to pulling out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and Open Skies Treaties, the US government has sought to undermine and dismantle some of the crowning achievements of multilateralism.

President Donald Trump's latest decision to withdraw the United States from participation in the World Health Organization (WHO)—announced even as the world remains in the midst of tackling a global pandemic—is perhaps the most astonishingly and transparently counterproductive of these moves.

The United States has certainly not been the sole bad actor undermining multilateralism. The Permanent Five (P5) as a whole, and China and Russia in particular, share significant responsibility for the UN Security Council's failures to prevent conflict and mass atrocities in recent years. Equally, while the lack of US leadership on COVID-19 has undoubtedly contributed to the weak multilateral response to the pandemic, national leaders have also mostly turned inward in response to the crisis and not prioritized multilateral coordination.

It is alarming that some populist leaders have used the crisis as a means of subverting democracy and accountability, from the Brazilian government's complicity in the destruction of the Amazon rain forest, to actions to undermine democratic safeguards and human rights in countries as diverse as Hungary, Israel, and the Philippines.

In this extremely challenging context it has, however, been particularly disappointing that even those world leaders who are most sympathetic to multilateralism have rarely spoken out forcefully against the US-led assault on the UN and broader multilateral system.

While it is understandable that world leaders may feel that it is more prudent in the short term to seek to avoid open confrontation with the United States, there is also a serious risk that the Trump administration's critiques of

multilateralism will appear to be validated if the misleading and flawed arguments often put forward are not vigorously challenged. Leaders of multilateral institutions in particular must not shy away from publicly defending their own organisations, and need to be supported in doing so by national leaders.

It is more crucial than ever at the current time that leaders make the case for multilateral cooperation as the only effective means of solving the world's most pressing challenges. This is why The Elders—the group of independent global leaders founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007, of which I am a member—have produced a new report on the nature of contemporary multilateralism,¹ and how it can be defended and strengthened both in today's challenging climate and in the years and decades ahead.

At the heart of this report is the recognition that multilateralism and respect for a global rules-based system has underpinned peace, security, health, and prosperity across large swathes of the world for the past seventy-five years.

The UN embodies these principles and remains an indispensable actor in facing contemporary existential threats from pandemics to climate change and nuclear proliferation.

The value of the multilateral system has too often been taken for granted. To take one example, the impressive public health gains that have been made in eradicating smallpox and nearly eradicating polio in recent decades, as well as progress in the fight against HIV/AIDS, were not an inevitable part of human development. These successes would have been extremely difficult to achieve without international coordination through the World Health Organization in particular.

Effective multilateral cooperation is fundamentally in the national interest of all countries, regardless of size or strength. This is clearly in the interests of smaller states, who benefit from having agreed international rules and institutions where their voices can be heard. It is also in the interests of powerful countries, enabling them to influence the international order in less costly and more reliable ways than would be required by the use of unilateral force.

Destructive attacks on the multilateral system are therefore particularly myopic and self-harming. A regression from a rules-based system into power-based strategies will not result in a safer, more predictable or propitious environment for any country.

1 The Elders 2020.

3 The Pandemic

There is no issue on which the case for multilateral cooperation is clearer or more essential than in the tackling of pandemic disease. Preventing the emergence and spread of infectious disease is the preeminent example of a “global public good,” and merits unprecedented international cooperation by governments and policy-makers. In containing a pandemic, we are only as strong as the weakest link in our human chain. Nobody is safe until everybody is safe.

COVID-19 is leaving a devastating cost, first and foremost in human lives, but also in terms of economic growth, political momentum, and social inequality.

It has also laid bare the interconnected nature of global risks, and the extent to which even well-resourced health systems can be rapidly overwhelmed when crises hit. This is why multilateral cooperation on prevention is always preferable to attempting to contain the impact of catastrophic crises after they have emerged.

A global crisis demands a global response. Yet the virus has struck at a time when the preexisting crisis of multilateralism has made it significantly more difficult for leaders and institutions to respond effectively and save lives.

I served as the director-general of the World Health Organization during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis in 2002–2003. I am therefore very conscious of the challenges that multilateral institutions face in persuading Member States to respond in the global interest to such threats.

It is essential that countries support the WHO and provide it with the necessary funding to carry out its work, including through implementing the recommendations of the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, of which I am a co-chair.

The WHO must be enabled to work on behalf of all humanity, acting solely on the best available scientific and medical evidence. It is self-evidently deeply unhelpful and counterproductive for the WHO to become a forum for political point scoring by Member States in the pursuit of narrow national interests.

The virus will not be overcome unless all states work together, pooling resources and expertise to strengthen health systems, develop and distribute an effective vaccine, protect health workers, and provide the necessary care to all who need it in society. This must particularly include vulnerable groups such as refugees, migrants, and the elderly and infirm.

Priority must also be given to efforts to support fragile and poorer states, which have weaker health systems and lack the capacity to provide social safety nets to limit the immediate economic and humanitarian impact of the pandemic. It is essential, once an effective vaccine is developed, that it is made accessible and affordable for all countries. Regardless of any moral obligations

to support vulnerable populations, it is in the clear self-interest of the richest countries to provide this support if they wish to fully bring the pandemic under control.

4 The Climate Crisis

As the world recovers from COVID-19, it is also critical that we do not lose focus on the underlying existential threats to the future of humanity. The negative impacts of the climate crisis will become ever more visible and devastating in the coming decades. While there has been increasing rhetorical commitment by many governments to tackling climate change, the policy changes that would be necessary to turn these commitments into reality have largely not materialized.

Many governments are failing to fulfill even the modest, voluntary commitments they have made under the Paris Agreement to reduce net carbon emissions. The economic recovery from COVID-19 risks worsening the situation if countries do not publicly commit now to a resilient and climate-conscious recovery and instead pursue short-term economic gains through environmental deregulation and continued investment in fossil fuel energy production.

5 A New Arms Race

Similar attention must also be paid to the threat of a new arms race developing between the nuclear powers, which has increased the risks of nuclear conflict—whether by accident, miscalculation, or design—to levels not seen since the height of the Cold War.

Unlike during the Cold War—when the main risk of nuclear conflict was between the Soviet Union and the United States—the threat of nuclear weapons has become more complex and diverse, evidenced in the disturbing military escalation between India and Pakistan witnessed in early 2019.

The United States has done significant damage since 2017 to the carefully constructed arms control and nonproliferation architecture, through withdrawing from the INF Treaty with Russia, the Iran nuclear agreement, and most recently the Open Skies Treaty. Recent reports have suggested that the United States is even considering conducting a nuclear weapons test. If it follows through on this, it would risk fatally undermining the globally recognized and broadly respected normative taboo against nuclear testing.

While the United States has been the most actively destructive force in undermining nuclear disarmament efforts, these actions form part of a broader pattern in which nuclear states have been making decisions to modernize and expand their nuclear capabilities. These developments are particularly egregious in the case of the P5 states, being directly in contradiction with the spirit of their legal obligations under Article 6 of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to pursue good faith negotiations toward disarmament.

The year 2020 should have been the occasion for the NPT Review Conference, which had to be postponed due to COVID-19. The NPT is critical in both preventing nuclear proliferation and moving toward the ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons.

All parties to the treaty should use the opportunity provided by the postponement to take concrete steps to meet their obligations on nonproliferation and disarmament. The first of these steps should be for the United States and Russia to agree to a five-year extension of New START, the final remaining bilateral treaty between the two nuclear superpowers.

The common thread running through all of these global threats is that the best insurance policy for containing these dangers is to have a strong, rules-based multilateral system that is sufficiently empowered to address these issues.

This is not to say that the network of international covenants and institutions agreed and constructed since 1945 is perfect. The postwar multilateral system was undoubtedly originally founded to serve the interests of the most powerful countries first and foremost, at a time when much of the world's population lived under the oppression of colonial rule. The composition of the permanent membership of the UN Security Council continues to provide disproportionate political influence to European states in particular at the expense of the rest of the world.

6 Gender Equality

Equally, despite the commitment of the United Nations to the principle of gender equality, in reality the international system remains some distance short of providing equitable gender representation in its decision-making processes.

7 Conclusions

Yet despite these flaws, there is little doubt that the multilateral system has decisively helped promote and protect peace, prosperity, and security around the world over the past seventy-five years.

The year 2020 was always going to be important for those of us who are committed to the values and institutions of multilateralism, marking not only the creation of the United Nations, but also the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II and of the detonation of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

These interconnected anniversaries highlight the need for sustained vigilance to protect global peace, in the knowledge of the devastating consequences of tyranny, war, and weapons of mass destruction.

In marking these anniversaries, it is important not to forget that the principle of multilateralism does not merely consist of the multilateral institutions that coordinate international cooperation. Multilateralism is also fundamentally about the promotion of global human solidarity. The opening declaration of the UN Charter on behalf of “we the peoples” reflects this higher purpose.

In this sense, perhaps the biggest opportunity that may come from the current crisis is the way that the pandemic has made more visible our mutual vulnerability and our common humanity. While COVID-19 has further exacerbated social, gender, and racial inequalities, it has also had a common profound impact on everyone’s lives, regardless of wealth, social status, or position.

It is therefore essential that a diverse range of civil society actors and citizens are enabled to participate in and engage with the debates around the 75th anniversary of the United Nations and the future of the multilateral system. I have been encouraged to see the proliferation of ideas for strengthening the UN system that have been emerging from civil society collaborations, including the Together First campaign and the Stimson Center’s new *UN 2.0*² report, which is also being released and promoted at the annual conference of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS).

While we see severe divisions between Member States undermining multilateral cooperation, from the Security Council Chamber to the WHO, we also have an opportunity for civil society to help fill this leadership gap. There is also, of course, a vital role for the academic community represented by ACUNS to play.

Together, we can help put forward a bold vision for a stronger multilateral system to meet the challenges of the coming decades.

² Stimson Center 2020.

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