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# **International Multilateralism: Opportunities and Constraints**



**Russian International  
Affairs Council**

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Practices and principles that underpin multilateralism are currently facing multiple challenges and major opposition, including one-sided rhetoric employed by leaders across the globe, a grave crisis of many multilateral organizations and regimes, both global and regional. Politicians are shifting the responsibility for the shortcomings of multilateralism onto one another, blaming their opponents for departing from legitimate multilateral procedures and damaging multilateral institutes in general.

This working paper outlines existing interpretations of multilateralism, peculiarities of historical model of multilateralism in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the effectiveness of international institutes and procedures, as well as the link connecting practical multilateralism and globalization.

The views and opinions of authors expressed herein do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Russian International Affairs Council.

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# Introduction

In the modern world, few if any are those politicians who would be ready to openly declare themselves principled opponents of multilateralism in international affairs. The value of multilateralism is equally recognized by the United States and Russia, China and the European Union, among developed and developing nations, by great powers and smaller countries alike. Liberals and conservatives, democrats of the West and autocrats of the Orient are all in support of multilateralism. The precedence of multilateralism is laid down in the founding documents of many international organizations and supranational institutions, such as the European Union and ASEAN, and it is also confirmed in numerous resolutions of the UN General Assembly, statements of the Group of Twenty and the Group of Seven and decisions of other most authoritative international forums. Indeed, who would categorically object to joint discussions of international issues and shared solutions to them agreed on in a democratic and representative format?

Still, international multilateralism of today is rusty. Its habitual practices and principles face numerous challenges, be it the demonstratively one-sided rhetoric emanating from many national leaders in all corners of the world or the deep crisis that has engulfed many multilateral organizations and regimes, both at the global and regional levels of world politics and economy. Naturally, no one in the world is ready to assume responsibility for this. Rather, politicians prefer to shift responsibility for the complications of multilateralism to each other, accusing their opponents of directly or indirectly undermining multilateral institutions and of departing from legitimate multilateral procedures.

The modern world is ridden by a deep distrust—to the currently available practical embodiments of this notion, if not to the idea of multilateralism as such. This distrust extends to the motivations of participants in multilateral negotiations and institutions as it is assumed that the declared concern for the public good often only serves to disguise selfish national or even group interests. The ability of multilateral institutions to effectively perform the functions assigned to them, rationally using the allocated funds and optimally balancing the divergent aspirations of the participants, is another source of distrust. Multilateral institutions come in for criticism for profligate spending, insufficient accountability, excessive bureaucracy, unjustified closeness, unacceptable slowness and many other sins that demonstrate the overarchingly low efficiency of these institutions.

As always amid a crisis, conspiracy theories are gaining ground across the world, presenting multilateralism as a mechanism for behind-the-scenes management of mankind on the part of anonymous and omnipotent cosmopolitan elites. Multilateralism is becoming a convenient target for criticism from right-wing and left-wing populists in both developed and developing countries. There are persistent calls for national governments to reconsider the distribution of the financial burden associated with certain multilateral projects, which sometimes even come down to requests to withdraw memberships altogether.

Along the way, it turns out there is no common understanding of what multilateralism is or should be. Significant differences in interpretations of multilateralism are not limited to mere disagreements between the West and the East, and they are also present within the West.

The typically American vision of multilateralism differs in many ways from the ideas that dominate political thought in Europe. There is seemingly an insurmountable gap between the academic understanding of multilateralism within the framework of modern IR theories and the attempts to analyze hands-on changes in multilateralism in the context of a country's foreign policy. In the interpretations of economists, multilateralism does not always coincide with the way international security conceive it.

This paper seeks to offer a rather brief consideration of the existing interpretations of international multilateralism; features of the historical multilateralism as it formed in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century; configurations that allow multilateral institutions and procedures to be efficient; and the relationship between the practice of multilateralism and the processes of globalization.

All this seems necessary to identify, if in most general terms, a possible model of a new multilateralism—one that meets the realities and needs of the international system of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the author does not directly address the issue of the specific significance that multilateral mechanisms and institutions bear for Russia's foreign policy, many general conclusions seem to be most directly relevant to the tasks Russia faces in relation to multilateral interactions. Moreover, Russia currently displays one of the highest levels of distrust towards multilateral mechanisms and institutions, including the United Nations.<sup>1</sup> Russia's three-decade experience of engaging multilateral formats has clearly highlighted many of the shortcomings of these formats, but it, unfortunately, has not demonstrated their undoubted advantages for our country just as clearly.

In preparing this material, the author relied on his recent works devoted to the analysis of European<sup>2</sup>, American<sup>3</sup> and Chinese<sup>4</sup> approaches to multilateralism, as well as on those exploring the future of multilateralism amid the crisis of globalization<sup>5</sup> in the aftermath of the COVID-19's grave consequences<sup>6</sup> and with account

<sup>1</sup> Kwartalnov A. The UN and Russia: the end of illusions? // RIAC. Publication dated 27.01.2022.  
URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/sandbox/oon-i-rossiya-konets-illyuziy/> (Russian)

<sup>2</sup> Kortunov A. What is Multilateralism in European Terms? // RIAC. Publication dated 28.05.2020.  
URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/what-is-multilateralism-in-european-terms/>

<sup>3</sup> Kortunov A. What is Multilateralism in American Terms? // RIAC. Publication dated 15.03.2021.  
URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/chto-takoe-mnogostoronnost-po-amerikanski/> (Russian)

<sup>4</sup> Huasheng Zh., Kortunov A. The Coming Bipolarity and Its Implications: Views from China and Russia // RIAC. Publication dated 23.11.2020. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/the-coming-bipolarity-and-its-implications-views-from-china-and-russia/>

<sup>5</sup> Kortunov A. Multilateralism Needs Reinventing, Not Resurrecting // RIAC. Publication dated 09.12.2020.  
URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/multilateralism-needs-reinventing-not-resurrecting/>

<sup>6</sup> Kortunov A. Multilateralism after the Pandemic: A View from Brussels // RIAC. Publication dated 26.04.2021.  
URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/mnogostoronnost-posle-pandemii-vzglyad-iz-bryusselya/> (Russian)

to the changing balance of power in the world.<sup>7</sup> In addition, earlier papers on the relationship between multilateralism and multipolarity were useful<sup>8</sup>, as well as the experience in implementing multilateral approaches within the G7 and G8.<sup>9</sup>

One reservation will be timely here: we are only talking about the very first steps in the understanding of multilateralism, a concept that requires a much deeper and more comprehensive study than a compact RIAC working paper could plausibly offer. In recent years, especially after the inauguration of the Biden administration in the U.S., multilateralism has been analyzed in many monographs, articles and academic reports. We are now witnessing the emergence of different schools of multilateralism within the framework of the two core IR paradigms, liberalism and realism.

However, it would be quite premature to talk about the established approaches: while there is a significant number of recent publications, whether situational or practical, the issue of multilateralism receives marginal attention of those who design basic IR theories.

Without a pretence to a comprehensive analysis of international multilateralism in all its complexity, the author still cherishes hope that his work will stimulate public and expert discussions in this area. A broader discussion, coupled with practical recommendations offered to foreign policy decision-makers, seems more than relevant. Reasonably, as the balance of power in the world is shifting, once the current crisis of globalization is overcome, and as long as the burden of common problems becomes ever heavier for all actors in world politics, the importance of multilateral institutions and procedures for Russia will increase, much as the price for the inability or unwillingness to engage multilateral formats in a proactive fashion.

If this is the case, it is critically important for our country not only to master the emerging rules of the game in the gradually emerging multilateral world, but also to play an active role in their formation. Otherwise, we will have to play by the rules defined by others.

<sup>7</sup> Kortunov A. A Multilateral World Order Without Benevolent Hegemon // RIAC. Publication dated 02.02.2021. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/mnogostoronniy-miroponyadok-bez-dobrogo-gegemonal/> (Russian)

<sup>8</sup> Kortunov A. Between Polycentrism and Bipolarity // RIAC. Publication dated 04.09.2019. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/between-polycentrism-and-bipolarity/>

<sup>9</sup> Kortunov A. Why the Seven Never Became the Eight, or Thirty Years of Relations between Moscow and G7 // RIAC. Publication dated 15.07.2019. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/activity/workingpapers/pochemu-semerka-ne-stalavosmerkoy-ili-tridsat-let-otnosheniy-moskvy-i-gruppy-semi/> (Russian)

# International Multilateralism in a Non-Hegemonic World

The term “multilateralism” is not one of the most developed notions in the Russian IR theory. For a long time, this term has remained in the shadow of the much more popular term “multipolarity” (as well as “polycentrism”, a notion gradually terminologically replacing “multipolarity”). Sometimes, it seems that “multilateralism” and “multipolarity” are used in Russian academic and political discourse as synonyms that reflect the long-term processes of democratization of the international system after the end of the era of the “unipolar world” of the beginning of the XXI century.<sup>10</sup>

However, multipolarity is certainly not the same as multilateralism. While the former fixes the presence of pluralism in the distribution of power in an international system, where there are three or more independent decision-making centers, the latter describes one of the options for the interaction of these centers with each other. Without multipolarity (polycentrism) at least in the embryonic state, there can be no meaningful multilateralism, since in a unipolar or bipolar system there are simply not enough actors for a full-fledged multilateral interaction (although, as will be shown below, certain elements of multilateralism were present in both bipolar and unipolar systems of world politics).

But multipolarity, even if it is a “mature” multipolarity, does not necessarily include multilateralism, since relations within a multipolar system can theoretically be reduced to a set of bilateral ties between individual centers of power or, in general, to the predominantly unilateral actions of these centers. Supporters of “political realism” refer to multipolarity, not multilateralism when they compare world politics to a chaotic collision of balls on a billiard table: there can be a lot of balls on that table, but they interact with each other mainly in bilateral and unilateral formats, without creating a stable multilateral system. If the coordination of the actions of individual authors does occur, then it is not horizontal, but vertical in nature—weak international actors follow foreign policy priorities of their stronger patrons. Multilateralism sets much higher standards for international behavior than multipolarity; it puts more emphasis on cooperation between states than on competition.

With some reservations, it is fair to note that multipolarity (polycentrism) reflects a certain objective balance of power between the main participants in world politics, while multilateralism fixes their subjective readiness to interact with each other in a certain regime and according to certain rules. In other words, in the theory of international relations, multipolarity refers to basic foundation, and multilateralism should be attributed to political superstructure. Accordingly, in inter-

<sup>10</sup> In Russian official discourse, the concept of multipolarity was often attributed to characteristics that were rather inherent in multilateralism. “Multipolarity or not—it does not matter what you call it,” wrote Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, “We do not cling to words. The main thing is that it works—the only criterion of truth. In any case, we are talking about a network method of doing business in international relations, which opposes various kinds of hierarchical structures that dominated world politics until recently.” Lavrov, 2009.



national practice, multilateralism looks less stable and more flexible phenomenon than multipolarity. For example, US President Joe Biden, elected in November 2020, is not able to change the general movement of the world towards multipolarity, but he is quite capable of giving an additional impetus to international multilateralism by abandoning the unilateral actions of his predecessor.

It is conceivable to assume that fostering multilateral negotiating practices and institutions, under certain conditions, cannot only go in line with the processes of forming a “mature” multipolarity, but also overtake these processes, reducing the risks associated with the transition of that international system to a polycentric world. Still, a significant lag in multilateral practices from the development of multipolarity will inevitably increase these risks, as well as a variety of transit costs. Consequently, the fundamentally important task of international players—at least in theory—should be to keep the development of multilateralism ahead the transition of the international system to multipolarity, but also not to allow the excessive separation of advanced multilateralism from the still unformed multipolarity.

## Multilateralism: old and new

Today, the once clear horizons of international multilateralism are clouded. Many authors deny any prospects for meaningful multilateralism in the future world order, arguing that this world order will inevitably be based on the traditionally understood balance of power of the great powers. But let's not forget that what we are witnessing today is a crisis of one specific format of multilateralism, namely, the format that historically developed in the middle of the last century and served the very peculiar and unique model of international relations created at that time. More precisely, it sequentially served two models: the bipolar model that existed until the beginning of the 1990s and the model of the unipolar world that replaced it for one or two decades.

Since these two models, with relatively minor modifications, together have existed for three-quarters of a century, it should hardly surprise anyone that today they look somewhat outdated. Moreover, in the conditions of a bipolar and unipolar world, multilateralism inevitably turned out to be seriously deformed and not quite full-fledged. Let us outline some of the features of the old format of multilateralism, which today appear as the most archaic.

First of all, the old multilateralism was based on hegemony and hierarchy. The post-World War II world order was established by a very small group of great powers and reflected primarily their interests and aspirations. The number of active subjects of world politics also remained very small until 1960s, and hierarchical relations that were understandable to all have developed between these subjects and the associated objects of confrontation between the great powers. The United States created North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as a multilateral defense alliance, but it never occurred to anyone to challenge the American leadership in this alliance, insisting on the actual, and not only on the formal equality of the participants. The security interests of the United States and the security interests of its European allies were not represented equally in NATO: it was the territory of Europe, not the United States, that American strategists considered to be the main theater in the event of a military clash between the West and the Soviet Union.

Soviet hegemony in the Warsaw Pact (as well as in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance—Comecon) would have been even more explicit and indisputable, the WP being an even more “pseudo-multilateral” structure than NATO. The asymmetry of military, economic, and other capabilities within the Soviet bloc was even greater than within the US bloc. History has shown that in a full-fledged bipolar system, multilateralism always remains relative and incomplete; it may be more correct to speak of the existence of quasi-multilateralism or embryonic multilateralism in this system, which has only the potential to grow over time into mature multilateralism. It is no coincidence that the first examples of mature multilateralism (European Commission (EC) and Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN)) arose in the economic sphere, where the post-war Soviet-American bipolarity was the first to undergo noticeable erosion.

Moreover, the old multilateralism rested on a rigid institutional framework. It assumed a large number of well-developed organizational structures with multi-level bureaucratic apparatuses, complex decision-making mechanisms, systems of a wide variety of explicit and implicit linkages that allow participants to balance their concessions in some areas with compensation in other areas. Such a device seemed to be an ideal solution in the conditions of a relatively static system of world politics when systemic shifts occurred slowly and had limited influence on the global balance of power as a whole. One can question the effectiveness of the multilateral institutions of the Cold War, but at least they supported the stability of the existing system of world politics. Periodic corrections of the global balance of power took place in the format of local wars (Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan) and did not affect the foundations of the existing system.

The old multilateralism of the second half of the last century appealed to values in one way or another. In a world divided into two opposing blocs, most of the multilateral mechanisms and procedures assumed a unity of values between the members of each of the blocs. In most cases, the picture of the world was built as a confrontation between “us” and “them”, and multilateralism within the groups of “us” (NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the European Union and Comecon) was only in very rare cases complemented by multilateralism between “us” and “them” (the system of United Nations (UN) bodies, multilateral arms control treaties, the Helsinki Final Act).

Even the notion of “global public goods” as such, in a divided world, was spread only to very narrow spheres of international relations. Of course, the main sources and prime guardians of values of opposing systems were the world hegemons—the Soviet Union and the United States. The formation of genuine global multilateralism was postponed for the future, it was considered possible only after the complete and final victory of one system of values over the other.

Since the two socio-economic systems developed in isolation from each other, multilateralism in the bipolar world was reduced mainly to the sphere of security, or rather to attempts to prevent nuclear war, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, a major military conflict using conventional weapons in Europe. To some extent, multilateralism also affected the problems of preventing regional crises outside Europe, although bilateral Soviet-American relations always played a major role here. But in the sphere of development, multilateralism was almost not manifested in any way—the countries of the so-called “Eastern bloc” did not participate in the implementation of Western economic and financial projects; Western and Eastern programs of assistance to the developing world were not mutually complementary, but rather competitive.

In addition, the old multilateralism naturally perceived only sovereign states as full-fledged subjects of world politics. Some non-state actors (primarily Western transnational corporations) from time to time tried to challenge states as monopolists in multilateral arrangements, but with very limited success. Nation-states remained exclusive participants in the most important multilateral institutions and regimes, while non-State actors (the private sector, civil society, educational

institutions, etc.) were content to be observers and/or executors of relevant decisions of “their” state.

After the end of the Cold War, the triumphant West tried to extend “its” Cold War multilateralism to the rest of the world in order to unite humanity under the banner of political liberalism. In some areas, such as international trade, this has almost succeeded: the European Union has made particularly impressive progress under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and, more recently, within the World Trade Organization (WTO).

But already in the financial sphere, internal European multilateralism developed more difficult and contradictory. Some European Union (EU) countries have not entered the “euro area” created by Brussels, thereby significantly weakening the position of the European currency in world financial markets. The EU has also failed to take full advantage of its positions in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), as it has often failed to achieve a consolidated European position even on the most important issues of the functioning of these institutions. The situation was even worse with external multilateralism, that is, with attempts to extend European models of multilateralism to the international system as a whole. For example, numerous attempts by Brussels to create a universal multilateral regime of foreign direct investment were unsuccessful; as a result, the EU had to sign many bilateral agreements with its partners.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, many multilateral institutions and regimes were created in the world, many spheres of public life that were previously under the exclusive jurisdiction of nation-states fell under multilateral control. The practice of multilateral peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the UN has developed greatly, the number of victims of armed conflicts has decreased, and the indicators of human development (Human Development Index) and social equality (Gini Index) have improved on average in the world. However, these positive trends were not typical for all regions of the world; for example, in the post-Soviet space and the Western Balkans, the opposite dynamics were observed.

Moreover, it soon became clear that the multilateralism of the old format was generally ill-suited to the new reality. American hegemony demonstrated its fragility; a historically short “unipolar moment” turned into an imperial overstrain and a subsequent geopolitical retreat of the United States. The “old” multilateral institutions of the West have discovered their geographical and functional limits; both NATO and the European Union face numerous challenges not only to their effectiveness but also to their unity. Political liberalism has not been able to turn into a universal system of values that all international players would like to perceive. From year to year, nation-states have proved to be less and less able to successfully solve global problems without active interaction with a variety of non-state actors in international relations. There was talk of a “crisis of multilateralism” and the inevitability of the international system returning to some variant of the traditional balance of power.

The international legitimacy of the old Western multilateralism has been undermined simultaneously on two sides. The mechanical expansion of the geography and functionality of Western multilateral institutions caused discontent and resistance of those players who remained outside the framework of these institutions and could not influence the decisions made by these institutions. For example, the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in the spring and summer of 1999, carried out without any authorization from the UN Security Council or at least the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) decision, caused disagreement among Russia, China and many other countries. At the same time, there were numerous examples of how Western multilateral institutions—NATO, the EU, the IMF, the IBRD, and others—were unable to effectively solve the tasks that they themselves set for failure. The institutional conservatism of many of these institutions, bureaucratic inertia, and adherence to the principle of the “lowest common denominator” have contributed to the discrediting of old multilateralism in the international community, including in western countries themselves.

On the other hand, in the three decades since the Cold War, humanity has come up with a viable, principled alternative to multilateralism. It seems highly doubtful that in the future it will be possible to reach an acceptable level of global governance, using exclusively unilateral and bilateral instruments of foreign policy. The rejection of multilateralism would make it impossible to agree on universal rules of the game even in those spheres of world politics where the tasks of such coordination are not burdened with the challenges of geopolitical confrontation, relatively stable unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar international systems, but a general disorder characterized by a lack of agreed rules, procedures, and hierarchies (barring the unlikely prospect of a resurgence of traditional empires as essential elements of the new world order).

Such an unmanageable world in an era of resource scarcity, rapid climate change, unprecedented cross-border migration flows and the uncontrolled development of new technologies cannot exist for long. Proponents of a multipolar (polycentric) world cannot fail to take into account that the mere increase in the number of active actors in world politics (multipolarity without multilateralism) does not bring the world any closer to solving common problems. Quite the contrary. Imagine, for example, that tomorrow India, Brazil or Japan will become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In practice, this means that the task of reaching consensus in the Security Council will be even more important, more difficult than today. The same applies to regional organizations. For example, the entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) of India and Pakistan as full members without fundamentally changing the nature of relations between these two countries has given rise to many problems in terms of the effectiveness of this organization.

Without a fundamental change in the nature of relations between the great powers, the multiplication of the number of poles of world politics will inevitably mean a proportional multiplication of the number of political and security risks. In order to avoid a slide into ungovernability and chaos, it is necessary that the expansion of the spectrum and the increase in the number of participants in world politics

and the economy be accompanied by an increase in the density of the existing network of multilateral international agreements, regimes and organizations. It is this network that ultimately creates the regulatory framework, control tools and horizontal connections that prevent world politics from falling into archaicism. Multilateral organizations also largely form what can be conditionally designated as the “political credit history” of individual states (as well as non-state participants in world politics)—the reputation of reliable or unreliable partners and allies. Other mechanisms are less effective at this task.

In principle, most modern politicians and experts in one way or another recognize the main advantage of multilateral diplomacy, namely, its inclusive nature. Only multilateralism makes it possible to form the broad coalitions necessary to solve complex problems affecting the interests of more than two international players. Moreover, multilateralism in many cases enhances the international legitimacy and sustainability of agreements reached.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Reflections on building more inclusive global governance // Chatham House. 15.04.2021. URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/reflections-building-more-inclusive-global-governance/03-ten-insights-reflections-building>

# Legitimacy and multilateralism

The demonstrative rejection of multilateralism in some cases can lead to very serious negative consequences. Recall that in the autumn of 2013, Brussels rejected the proposal of Ukrainian President V. Yanukovich to hold trilateral negotiations between the EU, Ukraine and Russia regarding the possible consequences of the signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and EU for Ukrainian-Russian economic cooperation. After a sharp aggravation of the situation in Ukraine itself and around it, the European Union still had to go to trilateral negotiations, which ended with an agreement to postpone the entry into force of the agreement on the creation of a free trade zone between Ukraine and the EU until December 31, 2015.

Of course, additional legitimacy arises in situations where the formed multilateral coalitions are sufficiently representative, that is, when the positions and interests of all significant players are represented in the work on solving the problem. In that sense, it is interesting to compare multilateral international operations under the auspices of the United States in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). In both cases, the main organizer of the military interventions was Washington. However, there was a broad international consensus on the operation in Afghanistan, which made it possible to adopt a corresponding UN Security Council resolution and ensure the legitimacy of a foreign military presence in this country. In the case of Iraq, a number of leading powers (including Russia, France and Germany) raised serious objections, which prevented the Bush administration from using either the UN Security Council or even NATO to legitimize the operation.

On the other hand, politicians cannot fail to realize that the specific features of multilateral diplomacy are in some cases its weak point. Multilateral negotiations can be difficult to focus the agenda, as each participant has its own priorities. Multilateral negotiations tend to require more time and resources than bilateral negotiations, let alone unilateral actions. Procedural issues in a multilateral format are also much more difficult to agree on than in a bilateral one. In cases where multilateral coalitions are formed by joining members to an unconditional leader or even to a group of leaders, such coalitions are difficult to categorize as full-fledged multilateral structures.<sup>12</sup>

Let us add to this that often the decisions taken as a result of multilateral negotiations turn out to be half-hearted, fuzzy and declarative, since the negotiators have to focus on the search for the lowest common denominator that allows maintaining the support of the maximum number of contracting parties. Sometimes multilateral negotiations can be blocked by any of the participants under any, even the most far-fetched pretext.<sup>13</sup> A textbook example is the discussion in the European Union in September 2020 of the issue of sanctions against Belarus, when the decision was blocked by representatives of Cyprus, who linked sanc-

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

tions against Minsk with sanctions against Ankara and made their agreement on the “Belarusian issue” dependent on measures that would force Turkey to stop exploration and production of gas in the Mediterranean Sea.

In most cases, there is an inversely proportional relationship between legitimacy and efficiency—high legitimacy is achieved through low efficiency and vice versa. The same relationship can usually be traced between the timing of reaching agreements and the sustainability of the latter: agreements concluded in a fire order tend to be less stable and reliable compared to agreements that have resulted from lengthy negotiations.

As a general rule, it can be assumed that multilateral and representative formats have no alternative when it comes to fundamental systemic problems of world politics or economics. However, when it comes to the need to respond quickly to a sudden problem, the actions of small groups of players who are more interested in solving the problem may be more effective. For example, the achievement of an agreement on the cessation of hostilities in the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in November 2020 was reached in the trilateral Russian—Armenian—Azerbaijani format, bypassing the effectively paralyzed OSCE Minsk Group. Of course, there is a part of legitimacy to pay for efficiency and efficiency. The speed and efficiency of closed formats for solving specific problems can turn into difficulties at a time when longer-term or more complex, strategic issues come to replace these tasks.

Multilateralism is associated with many other problems and difficulties. For example, it is not entirely clear how it is “fair” to divide between all participants in multilateral negotiations the areas of responsibility and burden associated with the implementation of the agreements reached—especially when the agreements involve significant costs, and their participants are not comparable in their resource capabilities. How fair are the current levels of states’ contributions to the UN budget or the extent of their participation in international peacekeeping? How sufficient or insufficient is the contribution of the developed North to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in the developing South? To what extent are the commitments of individual states to reduce carbon dioxide emissions under the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement justified? There are no definitive answers to any of these and similar questions; any answer will in one way or another be subjective and vulnerable to criticism.

Nor is it easy to decide what measures should be taken against those who approach multilateral agreements selectively or even sabotage their implementation. Multilateralism à la carte is becoming a serious problem of world politics and the economy, contributing to the growth of instability and the decline in the quality of global governance. Thus, in cases where their serious economic interests are threatened, states that advocate freedom of world trade often switch to positions of outright protectionism, accusing their competitors of dumping, manipulation of exchange rates, etc.

In multilateral negotiations, the problem of the trust of the participants in relation to each other is more acute than in bilateral negotiations, since in the first case



there is always a fear of behind-the-scenes coordination of negotiating positions by separate groups of participants in order for all other participants to face a united front of opponents who consistently and consistently promote their group interests. This problem is particularly acute when a new actor is included in an already established multilateral structure that differs significantly from its other members in one way or another.

Such a problem has arisen, for example, in the work of the NATO–Russia Council, established in May 2002 at the Rome Summit between the member States of the North Atlantic Alliance and Russia. The Russian side proceeded from the premise that the Council would become a full-fledged multilateral organization, where each participant would act in its individual capacity. Western countries have turned the Council into a mechanism for bilateral cooperation between NATO and Russia, de facto abandoning the principle of multilateralism. This feature of the Western approach has played a significant role in reducing Russian interest in this structure.

Approximately the same situation eventually arose within the framework of the “Group of Eight” after the entry of Russia into it. On many fundamentally important issues, Moscow was forced to confront the united coalition of the other seven members of the G8. The transformation of a formally multilateral format into a bilateral one has significantly reduced the effectiveness of this negotiation platform both for Russia and, ultimately, for its Western partners. Later, the Group of Seven faced a similar issue, when its meetings began to be reduced to the confrontation of the United States in the person of the administration of Donald Trump with all other participants.

The list of weaknesses of multilateral formats can be continued. However, in our view, none of them is fatal to the future of these formats. In any case, any proposed alternatives (unilateral and bilateral formats) are burdened with no smaller number of vulnerabilities and imperfections. The question is about the conditions and criteria for effective multilateralism, about those models of multilateralism that could maximize its comparative advantages and minimize its organic shortcomings.

Taking into account the above problems, several preconditions can be formulated, the fulfillment of which allows us to count on the success of multilateral negotiating and institutional formats. These conditions relate mainly to the approaches and expectations of negotiators and relevant multilateral regimes and institutions. Of course, they are of a very general nature and need to be clarified and specified in relation to individual dimensions of international life.

First, multilateral negotiators should be interested in achieving sustainable results (in solving the problem), and not in a diplomatic “victory” over partners in the form of securing certain tactical or strategic advantages. A diplomatic “victory” of this kind can at some stage undermine the agreement and result in a final defeat. Naturally, the benefits of one or another option of “solving the problem” can be distributed differently among the parties to the agreement, but the fundamental interest in the solution should be the main incentive for all participants in multi-

lateral formats. If in bilateral formats negotiations on the principle of a “zero-sum game” are in principle possible, albeit undesirable, then in multilateral formats it is impossible to identify a “zero amount” due to the very fact of the presence of a number of participants exceeding two. The binary negotiating system in a multilateral context does not work, if only the negotiators are not grouped into two opposing coalitions.

Second, the participants should be focused on finding a compromise, including their own concessions. Practice shows that the violation of a reasonable balance between the concessions of the participants inevitably undermines the stability of the agreement, even when such a violation is tactically justified. A certain asymmetry in the scale of concessions between participants is not only possible, but also almost inevitable. The more participants, the greater the asymmetry. But such an asymmetry should be conscious and not perceived as a defeat by those who at the moment gave more than they received. We emphasize that, unlike the classical postulates of “political realism”, multilateralism involves achieving not only a stable balance of power, but a balance of interests of participants belonging to different weight categories in world politics.

Third, negotiators should proceed from the principle of “diffuse reciprocity”, that is, be ready in difficult situations to demonstrate solidarity with partners, if necessary, sacrificing their immediate interests for the sake of a longer-term gain. “Diffusion” (uncertainty) in this case means that, in the exercise of its goodwill, a multilateral negotiator is unable to determine exactly when and in what form it will receive adequate “compensation” from its negotiating partners. Nevertheless, he can be sure that such “compensation” will follow one way or another. Accordingly, multilateral arrangements should be long-term and stable so that the prospects for “compensation” in the future are perceived as sufficiently realistic.

Fourth, negotiators must have “internal legitimacy”—that is, be able to commit themselves on behalf of those they represent. Accordingly, only strong leaders with broad political support in their own countries are able to act as successful negotiators. In both Western liberal and Eastern authoritarian political systems, problems can arise with “internal legitimacy.” In the first case, any shift in the internal political balance of power calls into question the consistency of foreign policy, in the second case, the multilateral agreements reached look like those imposed on society by autocrat leaders. However, “internal legitimacy” is equally necessary for bilateral negotiation formats.

Fifth, from the outset, mechanisms for the enforcement of the agreements reached should be defined. If these mechanisms are not in place, multilateral negotiations will be useless at best and even harmful at worst, serving as a smokescreen masking the unilateral actions of certain players. The problem of enforcement remains one of the most difficult in multilateral agreements. As a rule, the problems of verifying the implementation of concluded agreements in multilateral formats are more difficult to solve than in bilateral ones. In the first case, it is necessary to create special international organizations that have a sig-

nificant degree of autonomy in relation to individual parties to the agreements; in the second case, such a need does not arise.

Suffice it to compare, for example, the multilateral Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the U.S.-Russian New START. To control the activities related to the destruction of chemical weapons, it was necessary to create a special Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), to monitor the implementation of START-3, bilateral mechanisms and procedures were enough. Once established and operational, the OPCW found itself at the center of a bitter political conflict, especially after it was launched in June 2018. at a special session of the Conference of the Participating Countries, a British project was adopted to expand the mandate of the Organization, giving it the right to identify those responsible for chemical attacks.

It is worth noting that the success of multilateral diplomacy paradoxically depends on the willingness of the participants to unilateral and bilateral actions. Practice shows that behind any success of multilateral efforts there is always a leader or a group of leaders who take the initiative in determining the agenda and priority of the issues under consideration, in maintaining the schedules of the negotiation process, acting as a mediator in reaching compromises. The multilateral format does not cancel and does not replace the bilateral format but is a necessary addition or prerequisite of the latter. An example of this combination is the bilateral German-French negotiations on the alliance for multilateralism.

# Multilateralism and globalization

The current crisis of multilateralism is largely a reflection of the broader crisis of globalization. At the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, humanity is going through a painful period of deglobalization, affecting all participants in world politics together, and each of them individually. And this is not limited to the immediate social or economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Alarming failures in the work of the usual mechanisms for the growth of interconnectedness and interdependence of countries and peoples did not begin yesterday, and they will not end tomorrow. We are witnessing a global response to the multiple costs of the model of globalization that took shape in the world in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Accordingly, multilateralism as one of the formats in which global processes are implemented is also under attack.

Theoretically, globalization does not necessarily have to be implemented in a multi-sided format: an increase in the level of connectivity and interdependence of states and societies can go through an increase in the density of the network of bilateral agreements and treaties of various kinds. On the other hand, the multilateralism format does not exist only at the global level. In the context of deglobalization, regional multilateralism is of particular importance. As an illustration of the success of regional multilateralism, we can refer to the agreement signed at the end of 2020 to establish a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in Asia. On the European continent, multilateralism remains the fundamental principle of the European Union institutions.<sup>14</sup>

But the crisis of multilateralism at the global level inevitably has a significant negative impact on many regional multilateral projects, limiting the number of their participants and the depth of cooperation between them. India refused to participate in the RCEP at the last moment, and within the European Union, the principles of multilateralism are disputed by nationalist-minded populist leaders (Poland, Hungary). The aggravation of the geopolitical confrontation between the great powers leads, among other things, to attempts on their part to prevent the success of the integration projects of their competitors—the United States is actively opposing the Chinese project of “one belt and one road”, the European Union is not ready to help the formation and development of the Eurasian Economic Union, etc.

Assuming that multilateralism in today's world is closely linked to globalization, the future of multilateralism depends to a large extent on the future of globalization. One can argue for a long time about the extent to which deglobalization was inevitable and, if not, who exactly is responsible for its arrival. In any case, the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and the post-crisis period of 2010-2013 have shown that the linear, especially the exponential development of globalization, can still be forgotten. After this crisis, some parameters of human connectedness

<sup>14</sup> Cossa R.A. (Italy), Glosseman B. Multilateralism (Still) Matters in/to Asia // Comparative Connections. September-December 2020. URL: <http://cc.pacforum.org/2021/01/multilateralism-still-matters-in-to-asia/>

(international trade, trade, FDIs, migrations and cross-border information flows.<sup>15</sup> In today's world, centrifugal processes have already accumulated enormous inertia, and it would be naïve to expect that one, even if very important, event—say, the coming to power in the United States of the Joe Biden administration—can stop them, and even more so to reverse them. The ongoing deglobalization is serious and long-lasting.

Accordingly, multilateralism will also face great challenges and serious opposition in the coming years. It can be assumed that in the context of deglobalization, multilateral regimes and formats will very often lose out to available unilateral or bilateral alternatives. The increased volatility of world politics and the economy is also in the same direction, hindering long-term investment in multilateral structures and regimes. Figuratively speaking, unilateral steps in the face of increased volatility often look like successful speculation, while multilateral efforts are presented as long-term investments with not always clear prospects. The increase in the level of international tension, the aggravation of the geopolitical confrontation between the great powers makes it extremely difficult to implement the principle of “diffuse reciprocity” both at the global and regional levels, encouraging transactional, situational approaches. The Biden administration's attempts to revive multilateralism against U.S. allies often boil down to restoring the transatlantic pseudo-multilateralism that characterized the Cold War period.

However, as the current crisis of globalization is overcome, the demand for multilateralism is likely to increase again. Albeit slowly stumbling, albeit with stops and even with retreats, but humanity is moving forward along the thorny path to future unity. If we proceed from the experience of the already distant crisis of 2008-2009 and assume that we are approaching the lowest point of the new “deglobalization stage” of the globalization cycle, then we can relatively confidently predict the next change in the vector of world development by the middle of this decade. If we make an additional adjustment for the more complex and complex nature of the world cataclysms of 2020–2021, then the moment of change of vector will have to be shifted, at least for another two to three years into the future, towards the end of the third decade of the twenty-first century that has just begun.

In this direction, the world is pushed by two powerful factors, which over the years are only becoming stronger, no matter what the current triumphant anti-globalists claim. First, the pressure of common problems is growing on everyone in the world—from climate change to the threats of new pandemics, which urgently require combining the efforts of the global society in the interests of common survival. Some of the global challenges—ranging from climate change and a possible environmental catastrophe to the uncontrolled development of new technologies and the threat of global nuclear war—call into question the continued existence of humanity. The instinct of self-preservation of the human population must manifest itself one way or another.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Altman S.A., Bastian C. DHL Global Connectedness Index 2020 // The State of Globalization in a Distancing World. November 2020. URL: <https://www.logistics.dhl.ru/content/dam/dhl/global/dhl-spotlight/documents/pdf/spotlight-g04-global-connectedness-index-2020.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Solana J. Multilateralism or Bust // Project Syndicate. 19.05.2021. URL: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/more-multilateralism-on-climate-change-covid19-cyberspace-by-javier-solana-2021-05>

Many of these challenges place extremely high demands on the quality of global governance, including not only cooperation between states, but also the involvement of non-state actors—private business, international organizations and civil society. Constructive interaction between even such large states as China and the United States will not in itself be sufficient to solve problems. Within the framework of the current predominantly Westphalian international system, it is not possible to ensure a new quality of global governance. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the existence of a broad public demand for reforms not only of global health, but also of global models of socio-economic development.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, technological progress is accelerating, creating new opportunities for remote communications of various kinds from year to year. The physical space and resource potential of the planet are shrinking, the possibilities for geographically distributed models of work, study and socialization are expanding, and Napoleon's old aphorism about geography as destiny is increasingly losing its former axiomaticity. Paradoxically, the COVID-19 pandemic has become an additional catalyst for the unification of humankind by accelerating the development and, especially, the diffusion of new information and communication technologies, which in turn helped to accelerate the movement towards global markets for labor, education, science and entertainment. Recalling Thomas Friedman's famous turn-of-the-century bestseller, the world is emerging from the pandemic as a whole flatter than it was at the entrance to it.

The processes of deglobalization taking place in the world today could not be stopped, and in some ways even accelerated the tendency to diffusion of power in world politics, which will inevitably continue. Consolidation of peace on the basis of the revival of a unipolar or even rigid bipolar system seems unlikely. Nation-states will remain the main players in world politics, with the preservation—at least formal—of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the same time, the number and international activity of non-state actors will continue to grow, undermining the hierarchy in world politics and the economy. With traditional formats of international cooperation are increasingly demonstrating low efficiency, the need for new complex multilateral and multi-level formats will increase. In international relations, many variants of multilateral constructions arise, which even theoretically did not exist throughout the previous history of mankind.

It can be assumed that humanity has five to eight years in reserve, not only to prepare a new historical cycle of globalization, but also to establish new algorithms for multilateral interaction that could underlie the coming globalization cycle. This will require, in particular, a radical renewal of political elites in most countries of the world, learning how to successfully resist the right, and indeed left-wing populists, and prevent a world war, a worldwide environmental catastrophe, a new catastrophic pandemic, or other unfortunate delays during transit to these algorithms.

<sup>17</sup> Kadakia K., Thoumi A. The coronavirus is a siren for the health-related Sustainable Development Goals // Brookings Institution. 13.05.2020. URL: [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/05/13/the-coronavirus-is-a-siren-for-the-health-related-sustainable-development-goals/?mc\\_cid=cc5adcf70&mc\\_eid=6f24f55c06j](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/05/13/the-coronavirus-is-a-siren-for-the-health-related-sustainable-development-goals/?mc_cid=cc5adcf70&mc_eid=6f24f55c06j)

Let us not forget that the main issues of the new agenda will be fundamentally different not only from current issues, but also from the issues of the era of “Globalization 1.0”. For example, if the victorious march of globalization at the beginning of the century was under the sign of the strengthening of the aggregate East and the weakening of the aggregate West<sup>18</sup>, then the fundamental issue of “Globalization 2.0” will be, apparently, the question of a large-scale redistribution of resources between the North and the South in favor of the latter.

If the “old” globalization was associated with an acceleration of economic growth and with an increase in personal and public consumption, then in the course of the “new” globalization, most likely, the main criterion for success will be to ensure a transition to sustainable development models—both at the national and global levels.

If the global processes of the turn of the century reflected the universal public demand for freedom, then in the second quarter of the century we are likely to see a more articulated and more persistent demand for justice.

Apparently, many of the usual algorithms of foreign policy activities will also change. The main international organizations, hopefully, by the end of the 2020s and early 2030s will still be preserved. But a significant part of international activity will be bubbling not around or within rigid bureaucratic institutions, but around specific problems. Political, social, environmental and others. To solve these specific problems, mobile situational coalitions of participants will be formed—and not only from among the nation-states, but also with the involvement of the private sector, civil society institutions, and other participants in international life. The old hierarchies will gradually lose their meaning, the terms “superpower” and even “great power” will increasingly be perceived as archaic and explaining little in modern life.

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<sup>18</sup> Kortunov A. What will Globalization 2.0 look like? // RIAC. 19.03.2021.  
URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/kakoy-budet-globalizatsiya-2-0/> (Russian)

## Toward a new world order

The urgent task of the present moment is not to resurrect the old format of multilateralism of the Cold War era or the period of the unipolar world, but to invent a new format by adapting its general principles to changing reality. First, state leaders must be prepared to promote multilateralism without counting on the leadership of a multilateralist hegemon. It would be wonderful if the United States again became an active supporter of multilateralism under the new administration of Joe Biden. We should all welcome Washington's desire to return to the WHO, the Paris climate agreements, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran, etc. Nevertheless, one of the lessons of the Trump Administration is that we no longer have the right to consider unconditional American support for multilateralism as something once and for all given. A critical attitude toward international multilateralism remains an important part of American political culture, and as such will continue throughout the foreseeable future, meaning that some multilateral structures will have to be built without Washington's active involvement.<sup>19</sup>

Second, diplomats and experts must learn to use multilateral formats in the face of the relative weakness of international organizations and the erosion of international hierarchies. There is a widespread "institutional fatigue" in the world that is unlikely to disappear in the near future. Old unions lose their former cohesion, and new ones often remain unions only on paper. Therefore, the realism of proposals in the revival of multilateralism using formats similar to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in the first half of the 1970s is questionable<sup>20</sup> Flexible multilateral regimes have more promise than rigid multilateral organizations. Voluntary commitments by States may become more practical than traditional legally binding international agreements requiring lengthy harmonization and ratification procedures.

The selective use of multilateralism, with a focus on the least toxic dimensions of international engagement, would facilitate agreements, but at the same time create additional challenges. Given the deep interdependence of individual dimensions of world politics and the economy, it is easy to predict that agreements in one area will inevitably affect the relations of the parties to such agreements in other spheres. For example, any multilateral climate-related agreements will affect global trade regimes in one way or another through the imposition of borderline carbon taxes. In turn, multilateral trade agreements will influence international information transfer regimes through the harmonization of common digital trade standards. It is likely that any future multilateral arrangements relating to international trade will have to automatically include environmental protection, social protection of the labor force, and foreign direct investment. Otherwise, in addition

<sup>19</sup> Kortunov A. What Would Happen to the World Without the United States? // RIAC. 28.07.2021.

URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analitics-and-comments/analitics/what-would-happen-to-the-world-without-the-united-states/>

<sup>20</sup> Gaertner H. What Does Biden's Presidency Mean for Multilateralism? // Defence Horizon Journal, Special Edition I/21 Geopolitics.

URL: [https://ca9d3787-8643-4d85-9af7-d052377ac9b8.filesusr.com/ugd/0d3ede\\_730a5ba77e0c40fb9637da417752d0eb.pdf](https://ca9d3787-8643-4d85-9af7-d052377ac9b8.filesusr.com/ugd/0d3ede_730a5ba77e0c40fb9637da417752d0eb.pdf)



to unilateral taxes, the world will face similar environmental social taxes, which will inevitably become a serious obstacle to the development of world trade.

Linking security and development issues will be even more challenging. At the moment, the two main areas of multilateralism are loosely linked, which reduces the effectiveness of work in both areas. Closer interaction between major multilateral mechanisms, such as the UN Security Council and the G20, is likely to be required to achieve synergies in conflict resolution and in ensuring regional and global stability. Taking into account the mutual influence of different multilateral regimes with different sets of actors is extremely difficult.

Third, a new type of multilateralism should not see common values as a *sine qua non* for reaching agreements. A necessary and sufficient condition is only the coincidence of interests. The old mantra that multilateralism and the liberal world order as a whole are nothing more than derivatives of political liberalism as the dominant ideology of major international players should be rejected as irrelevant and impractical. The multilateralism of the twenty-first century can only become universal if it is suitable for a world of value pluralism.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, multilateralism should become a tool for overcoming the value conflicts that exist in the modern world. In other words, common values should not be the starting point in moving towards multilateralism, but the end point to which multilateralism can eventually lead.

Since the geopolitical confrontation in the world will continue for a very long time, new formats of multilateralism should be based on the principle of “competitive cooperation” or “competitive multilateralism”, when relations of competition and even confrontation between powers, as well as non-state actors of world politics, should not prevent them from working together. Developing specific parameters and adopting the practice of “competitive cooperation” is one of the greatest challenges of the global politics of the future.<sup>22</sup>

Fourth, multilateralism should become as inclusive as possible—not so much in terms of the total number of participants, but in terms of the overall representativeness of multilateral formats. This applies primarily to the representation of States representing particular interest groups that are currently either underestimated or ignored altogether. For example, the current discussions on global Internet governance involve mainly countries with significant technological potential to develop new information and communication technologies (supply side). At the same time, countries that, due to global demographic shifts before our eyes, are becoming the main users of the Internet (demand side), are almost absent from these discussions.

In many cases, multilateral agreements between States are insufficient if they do not involve the private sector, civil society and other private and public actors.

<sup>21</sup> Reforming multilateralism in post-COVID times. For a more regionalised, binding and legitimate United Nations Edited by Mario Tarpaulin // Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Brussels, Belgium. December 2020.  
URL: <https://www.iaei.it/en/publicazioni/reforming-multilateralism-post-covid-times>

<sup>22</sup> Jones B., Malcorra S. It is now time to focus on multilateral order // The Brookings Institution, 19.04.2021.  
URL: [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/19/it-is-now-time-to-focus-on-multilateral-order/?utm\\_source=feedblitz&utm\\_medium=FeedBlitzRss&utm\\_campaign=brookingsrss/programs/foreignpolicy](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/19/it-is-now-time-to-focus-on-multilateral-order/?utm_source=feedblitz&utm_medium=FeedBlitzRss&utm_campaign=brookingsrss/programs/foreignpolicy)

The most important international issues—from the future of arms control to climate change, from managing technological progress to regulating migration—require the creation of broad and flexible coalitions of a wide variety of players to address<sup>23</sup> them. It is no coincidence that Microsoft has opened a separate office in New York to interact with United Nations entities. It is conceivable to assume that most of the new generation of multilateral coalitions will be built on the principle of public-private partnerships (PPPs). Of critical importance in this case is the issue of ensuring procedural clarity and transparency of the process of involving various types of stakeholders in this kind of PPP.

It is clear that the expansion of the circle of active participants in multilateral agreements dramatically complicates the process of negotiation and monitoring of compliance with the agreements reached. After all, non-state actors—whether private companies, municipalities, regional authorities or non-profit organizations—can no longer be seen as convenient tools that states arbitrarily use to achieve their goals. These players form their own interests, priorities and values that differ from those operated by states. And simply imposing the state will on non-state actors in multilateral formats will not be easy especially for liberal democracies.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, if multilateral practices survive in the near future, they will survive primarily in the format of multilateralism ad hoc or project (problem) multilateralism. Project multilateralism will become as common in international relations as the project-based construction of the educational process is common today in leading universities. Examples of multilateralism of this type already exist at the regional level (such as the Arctic Council) and in individual functional areas (such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)). This format of multilateralism has many drawbacks and limitations—they are excessively mobile, unstable, selective and fragile. Nevertheless, it seems to remain the best option for the near future—given the lack of conditions for the implementation of more complex and more advanced formats.

It would be logical to assume that multilateral coalitions with a limited number of participants and a narrow mandate, which have already demonstrated their effectiveness and sustainability, could naturally develop, involving new members and expanding the range of activities. However, existing experience shows that this logic does not always work. The founders of “closed clubs”—be it the UN Security Council, the Group of Seven, the Group of Twenty, etc.—often fear the erosion of the existing formats, the complication of the negotiation process and the loss of part of their influence when expanding this format. The expansion of the mandate is also often a matter of concern, as it can bring new complex and contentious issues to the agenda and even undermine confidence in areas where its existence was not previously questioned.

<sup>23</sup> Reflections on building more inclusive global governance: Ten insights into emerging practice // Chatham House. 15.04.2021. URL: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/04/reflections-building-more-inclusive-global-governance/03-ten-insights-reflections-building>

<sup>24</sup> A very interesting analysis of the possible role of cities in multilateral regimes is contained in: Augustine Fernandez of Losada, Marten Galceran-Vercher (Eds.), *Cities in Global Governance: From multilateralism to multistakeholderism?* // Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), Monographs N 81, 2021. URL: [https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/monographs/monographs/cities\\_in\\_global\\_governance\\_from\\_multilateralism\\_to\\_multistakeholderism](https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/monographs/monographs/cities_in_global_governance_from_multilateralism_to_multistakeholderism)

Another important feature of the new multilateralism should be the general simplification of multilateral mechanisms, overcoming bureaucratic inertia, combating duplication of functions, etc. Most public opinion polls show that there is still broad support for multilateralism in the world, but at the same time there is a growing critical attitude to specific practices of the many. And at the global and regional levels. These organizations are accused of bureaucracy, slowness, duplication of functions of each other, isolation from ordinary people, lack of transparency, excessive administrative costs, etc.<sup>25</sup>

Global multilateralism should focus on a relatively small number of problems and challenges that cannot be addressed at the regional or national levels. Everything else should be delegated to structures and mechanisms that are closer to the problems and tasks to be addressed. Otherwise, global multilateral institutions will be blamed for problems for which others should be held responsible (for example, deepening socio-economic inequalities within individual countries).

It seems unlikely that the leaders in the development of a new format of multilateralism will be great powers—such as the United States, China or Russia. All of these powers are too accustomed to asymmetric interdependence relations with their weaker partners, and therefore they tend to pursue the path of maximizing their comparative advantages in the format of bilateral relations with these partners. Moreover, it is likely that isolationist sentiments will gain strength in these countries in the near future, limiting their involvement in multilateral structures and regimes.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, countries like the members of the European Union or ASEAN have already accumulated a great deal of experience in various multilateral formats.<sup>27</sup> It can be assumed that the role of small and medium-sized countries in promoting multilateralism will increase not only in such relatively new areas as climate, international governance in cyberspace or in the development of biotechnology, but also in traditional security issues, including arms control.<sup>28</sup>

While in many cases multilateral structures have evolved and will continue to emerge on a regional basis, other principles for the formation of multilateral coalitions are likely to become increasingly common. As an example, we can refer to the successful experience of the international Alliance of Small Island States, which plays an active role in determining the global climate agenda.<sup>29</sup> Although the members of the Alliance are scattered around the globe, and their internal

<sup>25</sup> Davis E. Survey: Advanced Countries Favorable of U.N., but 'Doubts Persist' //US News & World Report. 21.09.2020. URL: [https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-09-21/on-75th-anniversary-of-the-un-some-countries-question-its-effectiveness?mc\\_cid=bca2ed9c2e&mc\\_eid=6f24f55c06](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2020-09-21/on-75th-anniversary-of-the-un-some-countries-question-its-effectiveness?mc_cid=bca2ed9c2e&mc_eid=6f24f55c06)

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, the Russian debate on the importance of the OSCE. Kortunov A. To leave or to stay? Seven Russian claims against the OSCE // RIAC 19.05.2021. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/uyti-ili-ostatsya-sem-rossiyskikh-pretenziy-k-obse/> (Russian)

<sup>27</sup> Jones B., Malcorra S. It is now time to focus on multilateral order // The Brookings Institution. 19.04.2021. URL: [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/19/it-is-now-time-to-focus-on-multilateral-order/?utm\\_source=feedblitz&utm\\_medium=FeedBlitzRss&utm\\_campaign=brookingsrss/programs/foreignpolicy](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/04/19/it-is-now-time-to-focus-on-multilateral-order/?utm_source=feedblitz&utm_medium=FeedBlitzRss&utm_campaign=brookingsrss/programs/foreignpolicy)

<sup>28</sup> Meier O. Yes, we can? Europe responds to the crisis of multilateral arms control // ELN Policy Brief. 16.11.2020. URL: <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/policy-brief/yes-we-can-europe-responds-to-the-crisis-of-multilateral-arms-control/>

<sup>29</sup> About AOSIS // Alliance of Small Island States. URL: <http://www.aosis.org/about/>

political systems differ significantly from each other, common interests predetermine the effectiveness of multilateral interaction.

Even more bizarre multilateral coalitions of medium and small countries are forming around specific issues of governance. For example, the 2019 amendments to the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, providing for scarcity measures on plastics (the so-called Basel Plastics Ban), were made possible by concerted action by Norway, Vietnam and Indonesia.<sup>30</sup>

The prospects for multilateral formats largely depend on the formation of a global culture of multilateralism, which at the moment is only in an embryonic state. The task of promoting the norms and values of multilateralism should be solved at different levels—from the introduction of personal practices in diplomatic departments to educational programs in secondary schools. Conditions must be created for the emergence of the currently absent broad public demand for multilateralism, as well as for effective counteraction to the currently popular sentiments of isolationism and unilateralism.

It must be recognized that at present, opponents of multilateral international cooperation very effectively use modern information and communication technologies to promote their positions, while often using the methods of information warfare. It is necessary to find formats of constant dialogue between leading multilateral organizations and owners of the largest social networks acceptable to both sides in order to counter the spread of misinformation and the destructive impact on public consciousness.

<sup>30</sup> Kumar H., Sridhar L. Basel Convention's Plastic Ban Amendment a New Step Against Waste Colonialism // Wire. 21.05.2019. URL: <https://thewire.in/environment/basel-conventions-plastic-ban-amendment-is-a-new-step-against-waste-colonialism>

## Conclusion

Only the very first steps have been taken so far when it comes to exploring multilateralism in its complexity, and the number of questions that arise at the moment far exceeds the number of answers available. The same conclusion can be reached with regard to the experience of the new type of multilateralism political practice accumulated in the first two decades of the twenty-first century—this experience is still clearly insufficient and too contradictory to make reasonable and convincing generalizations.

In any case, it seems clear that multilateralism (as well as, for example, multipolarity or polycentrism) can in no sense be considered a universal mechanism for solving all international problems. The multilateral format, as noted, has many significant drawbacks—it is cumbersome, complex, slow and often leads to disappointing results. Multilateralism cannot and will not replace a two-pronged approach and a willingness to take unilateral foreign policy action, especially when it comes to major powers claiming to preserve their state sovereignty as fully as possible. Nor can multilateralism lead to a balance of interests prevailing in global or regional affairs and the balance of power factor becoming a thing of the past.

Looking into the medium term, multilateralism is just one of several options for the development of the international system, perhaps not the most likely. Today, many are talking about the revival of the bipolar model in the form of a long-term confrontation between the United States and China. Another quite possible option would be to continue the fragmentation of the international system with a tendency to “atomize” world politics and increase isolationism in the leading world powers. An independent alternative is the model of regionalization of the world order, in which the leading powers do not actively abandon foreign policy, but concentrate their resources and efforts on their “natural” spheres of strategic interests: the United States—in the countries of the Western Hemisphere, China in the East Asian region, the European Union—in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean zone, etc. Theoretically, a new rise of the West, led by the United States, is possible, including a return to many traditional quasi-multilateral formats’ characteristic of the period of the unipolar world.

However, multilateralism has its obvious comparative advantages. It would be a mistake to ignore or downplay such features of multilateralism as democracy, representativeness, legitimacy, and the sustainability of the results achieved by the multilateral negotiation process. None of these alternatives to multilateralism offers any hope of progress towards uniting the efforts of humankind to meet the historic challenges they face.

Multilateralism is a chance for relatively weak players to ensure that their voices are heard and their interests taken into account.

Multilateralism is also an opportunity for relatively strong players to make their leadership more civilized, less burdensome and less intrusive for all other participants in international life.

Multilateralism is a format that allows international organizations and regimes to maintain an acceptable level of autonomy from their founders and participants, to pursue an independent course in world politics and the economy.

Multilateralism is a prospect for non-state actors in world politics and the economy to take a direct part in discussing and solving problems on which the future of these players largely depends.

Multilateralism is a mechanism that contributes to the establishment of greater openness and transparency in the practice of international relations, improving the quality of publicly available information on the activities of governments, the private sector and international organizations.

Multilateralism is a means of building trust among a wide variety of participants in international communication, pursuing divergent and sometimes divergent interests.

Multilateralism is, as far as can be judged, the only democratic mechanism to prevent the final collapse of the international system that is collapsing before our eyes and the means of expanding the reproduction of much-needed global public goods. As the pressure of common problems on the participants of world politics increases, the objective prerequisites for the establishment of the practice of many externalities will manifest themselves more and more actively.

Ultimately, however, multilateralism, like any other format of political and diplomatic activity, will always be as effective or ineffective as the players practicing these formats themselves want. So far, most of these players, in their understanding of multilateralism, remain in positions of narrowly understood national interest. Selective multilateralism is becoming increasingly widespread, reflecting the current priorities of certain leaders and power groups. Closed multilateral formats created by some participants in world politics and the economy to confront other players are becoming increasingly popular. Multilateralism, with rare exceptions, is not considered as an independent value, but is used purely utilitarianly and only when it is impossible to do without it.

In order to reverse this negative trend and begin to move towards strategic multilateralism, it is necessary to revise many well-established stereotypes about foreign policy priorities, threats to national security and the content of state sovereignty. Moreover, such a transition will be required not only on the part of the leaders of major powers, but also on the part of the societies represented by these leaders. Today, one can only wonder under what circumstances and in what time frame such a transition is possible. It was to be hoped that the time frame for the transition would be rather short.

## About the author

Andrey Kortunov is Director-General of the Russian International Affairs Council since 2011.

He graduated from Moscow State Institute for International Relations and obtained a post-graduate degree of PhD in History from the Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies under the Academy of Sciences. His previous positions include those in the Institute, including as Director of U.S. Foreign Policy Branch and Deputy Director of the Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies. He taught International Relations in European and U.S. universities. He headed a number of Russian public organizations and foundations in the fields of tertiary education, social sciences and social development.

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Andrey Kortunov is the Director General of RIAC. From 1995 to 1997, Dr. Kortunov was Deputy Director of the Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences.



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