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Reframing Multilateralism in a New Era

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CONTEXT: MULTILATERALISM UNDER ATTACK

Today, multilateralism faces its most severe crisis since the end of the Second World War.

Despite significant multilateral successes in 2015 – the Iran nuclear agreement and the Paris climate accords – a rising political tide of right-wing populism opposed on principle to multilateralism washed over both sides of the Atlantic. By the end of the following year, illiberal governments held power in Poland and Hungary, the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, and Donald Trump won the presidency of the United States. Right-wing nationalist parties surged in Germany, France, and Scandinavia, and though they failed to win power they firmly established themselves as major political forces in these countries.

The political victories and successes of these often-authoritarian right-wing populist parties and movements over the last several years have deepened the underlying crisis of multilateralism that emerged in the wake of the 2008 global financial crash. Even before the crash, however, multilateral institutions like the European Union, World Bank, and United Nations found themselves facing stresses and strains that stretched their core capacities. Since the crash, multilateral institutions have found themselves overwhelmed by the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, massive civil wars in the Middle East that have produced or facilitated substantial migration flows, social media tools that give demagogues a direct line to citizens, and the rise of illiberal great powers like China and Russia opposed to traditional trans-Atlantic values of democracy and human rights.

The rise of right-wing populism on both sides of the Atlantic (as well as the Pacific) threatens to make the crisis of multilateralism all the more acute. Under President Trump, the United States no longer makes human rights, democracy, and liberal values priorities in its approach to the world. Instead, President Trump instinctively embraces dictators like Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, and Muhammad bin Salman rather than America's traditional democratic allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. Though the Trump administration has become the major driving force behind the current crisis of multilateralism, it's not the only one. Campaigners for the UK's departure from the European Union, right-wing populists in France and Germany, and illiberal governments in Poland and Hungary all threaten in one way or another to help Trump unravel the threads of trans-Atlantic cooperation carefully woven together by North Americans and Europeans alike since the Second World War. In recent weeks alone, Italy's new coalition government of the far left and right has pulled out of the Global Compact on Migration and Brazil's new right-wing government has reneged on its offer to host 2019 UN climate talks.

Developments aggravated since the global financial crash in 2008 increasing the pressure on global multilateral institutions.

Multilateralism is multi-faceted and not restricted to the US.

European anti-multilateralism offshoots are on the rise.

As bleak as the current moment may be, it also offers multilateralists an opportunity to reflect on nature and role of multilateral institutions going forward. These institutions do not exist for their own sake, but rather came into existence for contingent reasons as means to solve or address pressing problems. Indeed, today's world confronts large-scale problems ranging from climate change to the threat of pandemic disease. Despite poor prospects in the present, multilateralists can begin to lay the groundwork for action to address these pressing issues when politics and policy align once again.

To defend multilateral institutions against the predations of populists and dictators alike and reinvent and reinvigorate them in the future, it is important to understand why these institutions are the way they are and what problems they were intended to address.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Today's multilateral institutions are the result of three waves of institution building that occurred during the Second World War, the early Cold War, and in the wake of the Cold War. These institutions were all designed to solve or address the leading problems and challenges of their day, and many have proven remarkably successful and resilient in the face of a constantly evolving global order. As the world faces another era of significant geopolitical and economic shifts, it's worth examining the reasons why our existing multilateral institutions exist and probing what problems they were meant to address

Post-World War II Institutions

As the Second World War came to a close in Europe and Asia, the victorious Allies – the United States, Soviet Union, and Great Britain – began to lay the foundations for international institutions that were intended to maintain international peace and promote global prosperity. Even before the United States entered the war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill laid out “certain common principles in the national policies of their respective countries on which they base their hopes for a better future for the world” in the aftermath of the fight against Nazi Germany – a declaration that would become known as the Atlantic Charter.¹

Roosevelt in particular was determined to avoid the mistakes his predecessor, Woodrow Wilson, had made in forging the peace that followed the First World War. Wilson, in whose administration Roosevelt served as assistant secretary of the navy, put forward an expansive and idealistic vision of a world governed by a League of Nations.² But Wilson failed to secure domestic political support for his vision, leading to a postwar international order in which the world's most powerful nations failed to take responsibilities commensurate with their global standing. During the postwar period, Franklin D. Roosevelt's thinking was guided less by detailed plans for international institutions than by the hard lessons of Wilson's failure and the principles enunciated in the Atlantic Charter and other statements delineating Allied war aims.

Crisis allows for anew reflection on role and purpose of multilateralism.

Three waves of multilateral institution building: post WWII, Cold War and post-Cold War institutions.

Multilateral groundwork focused on peacekeeping, elevation of global prosperity and a world order in balance.

'Atlantic Charter' principles root in today's major multilateral institutions and agreements.

Roosevelt's ultimate formula for postwar peace and prosperity would rest on a pragmatic synthesis of Wilsonian idealism and the enduring realities of great power politics.³ The end result of this synthesis was the suite of multilateral institutions and agreements we know today: The United Nations, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

This synthesis can be seen in the makeup of these institutions themselves. It's easy to draw a straight line, for example, between Roosevelt's notion that the "Four Policemen" – the wartime alliance of the United States, Great Britain, Soviet Union, and Nationalist China – would provide security in the postwar world and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Likewise, the dominant role of the United States in the postwar international financial institutions reflected the dominant global position of the American economy at war's end. But they also reflected the idea that each nation could and should be able to manage its own economy to maintain full employment and provide economic security for its citizens.⁴

Equally if not more important were the statements of principle issued by the Allies during and after the war, starting with the Atlantic Charter in August 1941 and culminating with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. These documents provided the scaffolding within which new multilateral institutions could be built with a wider mission than simply managing the competing interests of the great powers. Taken together, the post-World War II institutions and declarations of principle aimed to prevent the recurrence of both the worst economic catastrophe of the industrial era and the two most devastating wars in human history. Or as the Preamble to the United Nations Charter put it, the fundamental purpose of the new international organization was "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind."⁵

Preservation of peace and rebuilding a world economy devastated by war may have been the primary functions of the new United Nations and the trio of new international economic institutions, but the victorious Allies established a suite of multilateral institutions aimed at development and humanitarian relief as well. The World Health Organization and Food and Agriculture Organization, for instance, were established in the years immediately following the war to promote "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health" and "raising levels of nutrition and standards of living of the peoples" in order to ensure "humanity's freedom from hunger."⁶

Cold War Institutions

Despite the best intentions of their architects, the United Nations and other postwar international institutions quickly ran aground on the shoals of the dawning ideological and geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. For the United States and its partners in Western Europe and East Asia, this new Cold War required a different set of multilateral institutions less ambitious in nature and more focused on the emerging imperatives of the global strategic rivalry between Washington and Moscow.

Post-WWII composite mirrors former power distribution with US' dominant role in financial institutions.

Multilateral synthesis as notion for strong national economies, full employment and economic securities.

Major purpose set out in UN Charter as to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Increasing competition and conflicts between US and USSR required different set of multilateral institutions.

By the end of the 1940s, these new institutions – most notably the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Recovery Program, better known as the Marshall Plan – were up and running.

These new security and economic institutions arose not out of any grand scheme to create what came to be called the “rules-based liberal international order.” When they put together the Marshall Plan and NATO, President Harry Truman and his foreign policy advisors largely improvised in response to conditions on the ground in Western Europe, Soviet belligerence, and American domestic politics.⁷ Indeed, both NATO and the Marshall Plan were intended to address the immediate threat of expanding Soviet power and influence in Europe – not to serve as the foundation for a postwar global order. However, over time, they facilitated the construction of other, intra-European multilateral institutions like the European Steel and Coal Community – which eventually evolved into the common market and customs union of the European Economic Community in 1957.⁸

Post-Cold War Institutions

The initial post-World War II attempt to create multilateral institutions were intended to solve or address two main international problems: the recurrence of a global economic depression and a third catastrophic round of great power war. When the emerging Cold War pared back initial ambitions for these global institutions, the United States and its European partners forged new, geographically-limited security and economic institutions to facilitate postwar rebuilding and contain Soviet expansion. With the Soviet Union’s demise in 1991, a new wave of multilateral institution building took place – but this wave would be characterized by solutions in search of problems rather than the other way around.

The EU and WTO – created in 1993 and 1995, respectively – promoted deep economic integration and “hyper-globalization” for their own sake. While the EU provided practical benefits such as freedom of movement and the ideal of a European community whole, free, and at peace, the precise problems or issues that ever-deepening economic integration was intended to solve or address has remained unclear, leaving these new multilateral economic institutions with a clear shared mission – further global economic integration – but unclear underlying purposes.

What’s more, these new multilateral institutions suffer from legitimacy problems distinct from and often deeper than those of their predecessors. The European Union in particular went full-steam ahead with a common currency – and hence a common monetary policy – without any comparable move toward political integration, thereby divorcing economic governance from basic democratic political legitimacy.⁹ Even before the 2008 global financial crisis, it had become apparent that these new post-Cold War multilateral economic institutions had overextended themselves: the Doha Round of WTO talks, for instance, dragged on for over a decade before sputtering out in 2015.¹⁰ Meanwhile, public skepticism of the European Union persisted, with French and Dutch voters rejecting a proposed European constitution in 2005.¹¹

Birth of NATO and Marshall Plan facilitated further intra-European multilateral institutions.

US and Europe forged new geographically-limited security and economic institutions to facilitate postwar rebuilding and contain Soviet expansion.

Establishment of EU as one of largest multi-lateral entity failed to propose overarching mission and purpose.

To date, EU and WTO experience persisting legitimacy issues and public skepticism.

TOWARD A NEW MULTILATERALISM?

The global financial crash of 2008 created a crisis that continues to consume post-Cold War multilateral institutions like the EU. But the post-2008 string of crises overshadowed the gradual emergence of a new multilateralism that encompassed not just traditional security and economic institutions but new challenges like climate change and new actors like businesses and non-governmental organizations as well. National governments and international institutions like the United Nations remained the driving forces behind this incipient evolution of multilateralism. However, these governments and institutions worked closely with philanthropic foundations and civil society groups as well as the private sector to address pressing problems like climate change, pandemic disease, and poverty.

Rather than binding governments to rules governed by international institutions like the EU or WTO, the multilateralism that emerged in the mid-2010s took a flexible and aspirational approach to resolving pressing global problems. Indeed, by 2015 it appeared as if this new approach to multilateralism was in full bloom: The United Nations announced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Iran nuclear agreement was concluded (JCPOA), and the Paris climate accord negotiated. Moreover, the response to the 2014 Ebola pandemic offered a model for the reform of global health institutions that would help them better cope with future outbreaks. Despite the setbacks of recent years, the successes achieved by the flexible multilateralism of the mid-2010s can serve as a roadmap for multilateralism when the current storm of authoritarian populism passes.

Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals, for instance, were the produce of three years of intensive consultations between international institutions, national governments, and civil society organizations around the world. Dubbed the “Global Conversation” by the UN, the effort to craft the SDGs built on the structure already provided by the Millennium Development Goals agreed to in 2000. These goals, described by the UN as “clear, concise and measurable development objectives,”¹² served as a framework for the activities of civil society organizations, philanthropic foundations, national governments, and the UN itself as the world sought to reduce poverty and enhance development by the year 2015.

When it came time to formulate the SDGs in 2011, the UN established an Open Working Group composed of a rotating cast of thirty national governments and informed by civil society groups and other major stakeholders. As one evaluation of the SDG process put it, “the consultations adopted a level of participation that set a new norm for inclusiveness in multilateral negotiations.”¹³ These consultations included national governments, civil society organizations, academia, and the private sector, and focused on eleven thematic areas ranging from conflict, violence, and disaster to food security and nutrition. “Never before” the UN later boasted, “has so broad and inclusive a consultation been undertaken on so many matters of global concern.”

Multilateralism started exploring new dimensions encompassing global challenges and actors.

2010, it seemed in full bloom with the passing of the SDGs, JCPOA, the Paris Agreement and others.

The SDGs as one example of new multilateralism.

SDG framework adopted new level of participation and norm for inclusiveness in multilateral negotiations.

As critical as it was to formulating global development goals for the next decade and a half, the SDG process also aimed to forge working relationships between national governments, international institutions, civil society organizations like the United Nations Foundation, and other relevant actors who would have the responsibility to implement its objectives. Indeed, civil society groups would call the SDG process a “breakthrough” when it came to their participation in such a wide-ranging global project.¹⁵ Moreover, the convening power of the SDG process allowed various civil society and non-governmental organizations to forge new relationships that may not have been possible otherwise.¹⁶

Moreover, SDGs process included all UN members – not just wealthy and powerful donor nations, but recipient countries as well. Governments of developing nations worked with UN institutions and developed country governments to sponsor thematic consultations during the formulation of the SDGs. Botswana and Sweden, for instance, backed the health thematic consultation with UNICEF and WHO, while Bangladesh and Switzerland led the population dynamics group alongside the International Organization for Migration, the United Nations Population Fund, and other UN agencies.¹⁷ By the end of the SDG process, almost 100 national-level consultations had also taken place around the world in addition to thematic and global consultation processes.¹⁸ As a result, the SDGs serve as a universal yardstick by which all countries – rich and poor alike – can measure their progress.

It forged unprecedented working relationships between national governments, international institutions, civil society and others.

Global initiatives like the SDG process draw their power in part from the fact that they are not regular occurrences, creating the sense that they represent unique opportunities to significantly influence the course of global development for the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, the SDG process provides a glimpse of what can happen when national governments and international institutions include and work together with civil society groups and others on a common program. At the same time, the SDG process makes clear that, as influential as non-governmental organizations can be, national governments and international institutions still set and shape the wider multilateral agenda.

SDG processes showcase the power of many, but also that national governments and international institutions remain crucial.

Climate Change – We Are Still In

But the SDGs weren't the only example of a new multilateralism that emerged in 2015. The Iran nuclear deal addressed an outstanding global security problem through flexible multilateral diplomacy within and outside the United Nations system, adding Germany to the five permanent members of the UN Security Council to create a “P5+1” grouping. Perhaps more important, however, was the negotiation of the Framework Convention on Climate Change – also known as the Paris climate agreement or accord – in December 2015. This agreement, crafted to work around political constraints in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere, embodied the flexible nature of the incipient multilateralism. In place of rigid, fixed commitments, it laid out global goals and built a framework for action while giving national governments the ability to determine their own policies that will help achieve these objectives.¹⁹ Civil society organizations played a key role in the Paris climate talks as well, effectively supporting diplomatic efforts to find a way to constructively address climate change on a global level.²⁰

SDGs embody new multilateral dimension through flexibility, frameworks for action, and national decision-making in implementation processes.

Civil society antagonizes US' withdrawal from Paris Agreement through "We Are Still In"-campaign.

In fact, civil society plays key role in potential re-entry into the Paris Agreement after 2020.

Global Health Initiatives as examples of successful multilateral collaboration.

The success of global health institutions and initiatives like Gavi or the Global Fund rely on the power of international engagement.

Despite the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, that accord still provides a good framework for multilateral efforts to address climate change moving forward. Under the aegis of the "We Are Still In"-campaign, civil society in the United States has begun weaving together commitments to take action against climate change in accordance with the Paris agreement from state and local governments as well as private businesses and philanthropic foundations.²¹ Participants include state governments of California and New York, as well as big tech corporations like Microsoft, Facebook, and Apple. Given that President Trump can only actually remove United States from the Paris accords a day after the 2020 presidential election,²² foundations and civil society groups could play a critical role in building and sustaining public and elite support for re-entry into the agreement should President Trump serve just one term. Efforts like "We Are Still In" point to the value of redundancy within multilateral structures for cooperation to weather the current political volatility in the White House and other erstwhile pillars of international cooperation.

Global Health Initiatives

Likewise, several multilateral global health initiatives put in place in the early 2000s have played a key role in reducing the incidence of devastating diseases in developing nations. Two initiatives in particular stand out: The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, also known as Gavi and created in 2000, and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, created in 2002.²³ These two initiatives demonstrate how national governments, international institutions, and private philanthropic donors can work together to address international problems that know no borders.

Seeded with a five-year pledge of USD 750 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2000, Gavi is run by a board comprised of both donor and recipient national governments, international institutions like the World Bank, World Health Organization, and UNICEF, and various civil society organizations, technical and industry representatives, and independent individuals.²⁴ Governments, private corporations, and foundations donated some USD 2.7 billion to Gavi in 2016, with the Gates Foundation and United Kingdom government the two largest single donors at USD 318.6 million and USD 310.9 million respectively.²⁵ Since its inception at the turn of the millennium, Gavi estimates its efforts have vaccinated more than 690 million children and saved more than 10 million lives over the long run worldwide.²⁶

Likewise, the United States provided the founding contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria in 2001 and has donated USD 13.5 billion – nearly a third of all donations – to the Fund since its creation.²⁷ For its part, the private sector (including philanthropic foundations) has chipped in USD 2.2 billion over the same time period.²⁸ The Global Fund is itself a foundation based in Switzerland, and like Gavi receives donations from governments, the private sector, and philanthropic foundations. Like Gavi, the Global Fund's board membership is comprised of national government officials, NGO representatives, and private foundation members.²⁹ In 2017 alone, money from the Global Fund helped treat 5 million people for tuberculosis and provided antiretroviral HIV therapy for 17.5 million.³⁰

While Gavi and the Global Fund have done enormous good halting the long-term spread of diseases like AIDS since their inception, the ultimately successful response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa shows more work will be needed for effective responses to global health crises. When WHO and other existing global health institutions proved unable to handle the epidemic, the United States sent 3,000 military personnel and 10,000 civilian government workers to West Africa to combat the disease. These deficiencies led the Obama administration's "Ebola czar" Ronald Klain to call for WHO reform to be a priority for the United States.³¹

In sum, an incipient new form of multilateralism emerged in 2015, more flexible and less rigid than the multilateral institutions and rules established in the immediate wake of the Cold War. This multilateralism focused on agreed goals and frameworks for action rather than formal legal obligations to achieve specific ends. However, the promise of this new form of multilateralism was derailed by the seismic political shifts that occurred in 2016.

Despite successful multilateral approaches, 2016 marked a turning point that undermined past efforts.

REBUILDING MULTILATERALISM AFTER POPULISM

To start, multilateralists should become familiar with the incipient new form of multilateralism that emerged at the end of the Obama administration – namely, the SDGs, the Iran nuclear agreement, and the Paris climate accord alongside global health partnerships like Gavi and the Global Fund. These deals used strong multilateral cooperation, particularly between the United States and its long-standing democratic allies in Europe, to solve specific problems like Iran's nuclear program and address pressing issues like climate change. Civil society organizations and private foundations played a critical role in formulating and funding these initiatives as well. They focused less on creating formal, rigid institutional structures for their own sake and more on flexible, cooperative responses to circumvent obstacles and take pragmatic action against outstanding international problems.³²

SDGs, JCPOA, Paris Agreement, Gavi and Global Fund remain flagships for multilateralism.

In all likelihood, this sort of flexible approach designed to resolve particular issues will prove to be the future of multilateralism more than formal agreements or treaties establishing international institutions and organizations or creating legal obligations. The political barriers are simply too high. However, it remains an open question whether multilateralists will recognize this shift amid their political contests with Trump and other populist political forces. Moreover, multilateralists should show a keen appreciation that the very strengths of this approach – its flexibility and informality – also constitute its biggest weaknesses. It's no coincidence that President Trump could withdraw the United States from the Iran nuclear agreement and the Paris climate accord, the two most important multilateral successes achieved by the Obama administration.

New, flexible multilateralism will outperform commonly known formal agreements in the future.

Despite these setbacks, non-governmental organizations and philanthropic foundations have a critical role to play in supporting and developing this new approach to multilateralism. Civil society organizations already played a key role in the Paris climate talks, effectively supporting diplomatic efforts to find a way to constructively address climate change on a global level.

NGOs and civil society will remain crucial backbone of new multilateralism approach.

But in an era of ascendant right-wing populism, foundations and NGOs can play a critical role in mapping out the opportunities post-populist leaders will have to promote the new multilateralism that emerged with the Paris climate agreement and Iran nuclear deal in 2015.

In part, this effort will require the identification of areas where practical forward movement will be possible in the coming years. Though questions of efficacy loom large, these areas need not fully or immediately resolve the problems in question. They should, however, be able to point to progress to sustain their own legitimacy. Two areas in particular stand out in this regard: climate change and global health challenges. Fortunately, much of the multilateral groundwork has already been laid on these issues through the Paris climate agreement and existing global health partnerships like Gavi and the Global Fund.

But foundations and NGOs can play an important role in making the public aware of successes involved in multilateral initiatives. Of course, multilateral initiatives must prove successful in the first place. But if and when they do, multilateralists should not shy away from touting their benefits. The Obama administration, for instance, received little public credit for the successful multilateral response to Ebola despite the highly-publicized outbreak of the pandemic.³⁴ It isn't enough for multilateralism to be successful in policy terms; multilateralism must be seen as successful if it is to retain public support and legitimacy.

Foundations and NGOs serve as public mouthpiece to increase awareness of successful multilateral projects.

Finally, civil society organizations and philanthropic foundations need to rediscover the importance of building ties across national boundaries in support of human rights, democracy, and liberal values. Right-wing populists have already networked across borders, creating a self-styled "nationalist international," and those opposing them must do the same.³⁵ It will be important for ties between civil society groups to remain predominantly national in focus, with different national groups reaching out to build ties and share lessons with one another. Though international civil society organizations and foundations retain an important role here, national civil society groups should focus on building multilateral ties between themselves from the ground up.

In other words, the next wave of multilateralism should focus on addressing pertinent global problems through a flexible and adaptive approach. Multilateralists should also recognize the importance and impact of national-level domestic politics as they proceed to make the case for cooperation between states and societies across national borders. Part of that recognition is the humility of the forewarned. Where possible, effective multilateral ventures should seek to create structures for cooperation that are resilient and redundant enough to withstand future political shocks and afterwards to welcome post-populist countries back into the multilateral fold.

Similarly to right-wing populists, civil society organizations and philanthropic foundations require to join forces cross-border.

CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENTS

As they work to support multilateralism in an era of right-wing populism, philanthropic foundations and civil society organizations should take into account the challenges inherent in this enterprise. They should also recognize the wider changes in international politics that have occurred since the end of the Cold War, such as the increasing power and influence of nations like China and India. These challenges and developments are not insurmountable if foundations and NGOs remain cognizant of them as they move forward.

First and foremost, any effort by foundations and civil society groups to promote multilateralism and multilateral initiatives will likely be met by opposition from right-wing populist politicians and political movements – especially if the issues they work on touch a populist nerve. Anti-Semitic attacks against billionaire philanthropist George Soros have become commonplace from illiberal strongman Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary and Donald Trump's Republican Party in the United States, for instance, as result of the support of Soros and his Open Society Foundation for democratic and liberal values.³⁶ Irrational and scurrilous as these attacks may be, they will likely recur when foundations and civil society groups attempt to promote multilateral policies and programs that cross national boundaries, receive international backing, and/or run against the views of right-wing authoritarian populists.

A more serious and rational line of criticism focuses on the agenda-setting power wielded by philanthropic foundations in particular. With their ability to distribute significant sums of money with little if any public accountability, these foundations are able to determine which policy areas receive attention and which particular policy options will be implemented. For all the very good it does around the world, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has received justifiable scrutiny for the enormous influence it exercises over the shape and nature of global health priorities.³⁷ Philanthropic financial power deserves skepticism and scrutiny, especially in liberal and democratic societies.³⁸ Foundations must remain aware of the power they wield, all the more so because they aim to do good for societies and the world as a whole. It is an issue they must address constructively in one way, shape, or form, particularly amidst the current populist surge.

Similarly, foundations and civil society groups alike should consider the broader role they intend to play in a global political environment dominated by right-wing populists. Early in the Cold War, the Ford Foundation and other philanthropic foundations acted as consulting firms for developing countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. They also funded and organized exchange programs for academics and policymakers, both across the Iron Curtain and between members of the Atlantic Alliance – often with the support of the U.S. government.³⁹ Today, however, foundations and civil society groups supporting multilateralism face right-wing populist governments and political movements diametrically opposed to their efforts in place of governments that traditionally worked with them. How they adjust to these new circumstances will determine how effective they will be in the near future.

NGOs and civil society organizations must recognize large global political shifts and impacts as part of their work.

Philanthropic institutions must be aware of their influence and agenda-setting power and use it with great deliberation.

Foundations and civil society groups must reconsider broader role and dimension of partnerships with third-parties.

Moreover, shifts in global power and influence have created more opportunities for multilateralism beyond its historical trans-Atlantic core. Potential for connections between national civil society groups now goes beyond Europe, North America, and East Asia. Similar individuals and organizations of varying strength and influence exist in around the world. Facing problems much closer to home, however, multilateralists will need to make tough decisions about where they can best focus their energies.

Ultimately, multilateralists will likely be required to trim their sails for the foreseeable future. Their primary task will include ensuring their own societies do not slide further down the road of authoritarian populism while keeping the flame of multilateralism alive as it confronts its most severe crisis in decades. When the populist tide subsides, multilateralists should be able to put forward a new, flexible form of multilateralism that aims to solve the pressing problems faced by their societies.

CONCLUSION

Times look bleak for multilateralism. Right-wing authoritarian populists like Donald Trump in the United States and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil openly deride what they and their supporters call "soulless globalism."⁴⁰ Even venerable multilateral security institutions like NATO have come under fire, with President Trump treating it as protection racket rather than a collective defense pact.

It would be a mistake for multilateralists to succumb to despair or defeatism. However, they must shed whatever illusions they may have had about the inevitability of global governance. The world's most durable multilateral institutions arose out of a need to solve pressing international problems, whether the preservation of peace and prosperity following the Second World War or the need to contain the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Though multilateral institutions created after the end of the Cold War do much good – in 2017, for instance, EU institutions donated more than USD 2.2 billion in humanitarian assistance worldwide – they lacked the same sort of practical purposes that drove their predecessors.

The present crisis, however, offers multilateralists an opportunity to regain their footing and build on the flexible multilateralism that surfaced in the multilateral agreements of 2015. Global problems like climate change and acute health crises loom large, demanding and requiring concerted multilateral action to properly address them. Just as the enduring multilateral institutions of previous decades provided the solution to the pressing problems of their times, the next generation of multilateralism will be founded on the need to solve the pressing problems of our times.

Adapting objectives to challenges arising from populists and nationalists remains vital.

Opponents of multilateralism stop at nothing, not even NATO.

Doing good without a tangible purpose will remain without impact.

Multilateralists should rebuild momentum from 2015.

New multilateralism approach remains only choice for tackling global challenges.

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