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Global Reorganization and the Crisis of Multilateralism

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International Politics **Reorientation of
Multilateralism**

This policy paper reflects discussions of the CEBRI-KAS Project on the future directions of multilateralism.



Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic brought numerous social, economic, political and institutional challenges along with the health crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) was at the center of the turmoil receiving criticism for being unable to act to control the pandemic, for being a bureaucratic body with a slow response capacity, for its financial deficiencies and for disagreements between the political team and the technical staff. Regarding the latter, the criticism was really about the organization's effectiveness.

On the other hand, a political and diplomatic aspect of the conflict of narratives between the USA and China became evident. For the US, the WHO was acting in favor of China by not holding the country responsible for the virus' origin. In this way, the WHO synthesized the broader multilateral crisis, marked by the loss of legitimacy of the post-World War II liberal order, by the unilateralism practiced by the Trump administration and by the emergence of China, which practices forms of international action that do not fit the Western standard that is embedded in post-war organizations.

We start from the premise that the origin of the numerous disputes suffered by multilateral organizations is related to the lack of legitimacy derived from the inadequacy of the post-World War II liberal-western institutional framework to a new world, with new poles of power and greater identity and ideological diversity. In order to advance this argument, our analysis has four stages.

Firstly, we present some theoretical contributions that deal with the disjuncture between order and power. In the present situation, we live in a context of power transition in which the *status quo* no longer corresponds to the current correlation of forces. In a second stage, the emphasis is on possible diagnoses for the multilateralism crisis, through factors endogenous and exogenous to the institutions. Thirdly, we introduce regional experiences that point out different strategies for collective action. Their performance leads us to conclude that the crisis is particularly applicable to a universal multilateralism based on liberalism, which coexists with successful regional organizations in process of reinforcement. Finally, we present some possible scenarios and future challenges for the process of global reorganization.



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1 Order and Power in International Politics

For certain theoretical matrices, institutions are redundant to power since they reflect the asymmetries of the international system. So, why do international powers create institutions? What motivations lead them to invest material and symbolic resources in organizations? From an opposite perspective, another explanation emphasizes the roles that organizations play, whether ensuring international governance and stability, or solving collective action problems, reducing transaction costs in the interaction between states.

A third analytical path starts from the premise that institutions can be seen as the concentration, in a given space and time, of two relatively antithetical dimensions: order and power. In fact, this is the central dilemma of politics, which, for Weber, would be resolved by transforming factual power into legitimate authority, within a territorially delimited state. In a system of states, the question of legitimacy is much more complex as there is no sovereign power above the rest.

Along this rationale, it is possible to think about the question of the legitimacy of multilateral institutions in two different ways: one endogenous to their functioning, and the other exogenous. The first is suggested by Gelson Fonseca Jr. (2008, p.74), for whom legitimacy can be seen as a consequence of an adjusted functioning of the “basic rule of multilateralism, which determines that each participant, big or small, must accept general constraints that are universally valid”. The multilateral mechanism itself is based on the premise of equality between states as a central point of legitimacy. In line with the classic contributions of authors like Hedley Bull (2002), in an anarchic society it is necessary to have basic rules for international interaction.

Rules and norms increase the legitimacy of sovereigns and/or increase the costs of unilateral

action by the powerful. Legitimacy associates individual interests to collective will. However, the more states accept the strength of the rules, the stronger the rules become. This convergence between the private interest and the rule is where the *multilateralizable interest* is defined (FONSECA JR., 2008). In the long run, in a process of increasing returns, the aggregation of interests generates a “multilateral volition” that becomes its main institutional legacy, contributing to change the international culture itself. However, the tension between the pole of interest and the pole of norms is permanent, but varies in intensity and in some contexts more than in others, when the very legitimacy of the rules is questioned.

In our view, the interruption of the process of increasing returns, the consequent decrease in multilateral volition and the increase in intensity of the tension between interest and rule result from the unilateral action of one of the powers that seeks to modify the cost-benefit equation of cooperation for others. Imbued with the vision that it has enough power to dispense the cooperation of others,¹ the power defies collective norms and rules systematically disobeying them to the extent that its private interests are accepted by others as the “new” collective rules. Ultimately, in face of resistance to reform institutions that are no longer satisfactory, it simply abandons them. In this sense, as an extension of Gelson Fonseca

1. In the current literature on International Relations, this type of behavior characterizes those countries for which the cost of opportunity of non-cooperation is lower than that of the others, called *go-it-alone power*. See Lloyd Gruber, *Ruling the World: Power Politics and the Rise of Supranational Institutions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Jr.'s argument, the crisis of legitimacy can be interpreted as endogenous to the functioning of the multilateral system.

On the other hand, the exogenous model for the multilateralism crisis can be exemplified by G. John Ikenberry's (2001) institutional theory of the creation of the international order. His contribution presents analytical arguments that aim to explain why the powers create institutions, and why the weaker countries adhere to the institutions created by the stronger ones. The model starts from the analogy of a hypothetical negotiation between the power that created the institution and the other countries. Also in his model, multilateral institutions condense the two antithetical dimensions of order and power.

Order is presented by the set of norms and principles, voluntarily agreed upon, that configure rules for collective behavior and that minimize, or even restrict, the impact of the factual power of the strongest participants on the weakest. In this sense, the latter tend to give preference to negotiations and agreements on international issues carried out at the multilateral level than those made in the bilateral format, in which they are subject to the immediate effects of the most powerful actors.

Box 1 below summarizes how the concept of multilateralism intrinsically carries the dimensions of inclusion and participation essential to counterbalance the tendency for domination of the great powers.

Box 1: The Concept of Multilateralism

Starting from a minimalist definition, the etymology of the term "multilateralism" has a quantitative root, which consists of political coordination between three or more states (Keohane, 1990). However, authors like Ruggie (1992) question the purely numerical definition and point out that it is necessary to include a qualitative dimension to the multilateral practice. As it is an instrument that seeks to expand the possibilities of insertion of countries that are not included in oligarchic decision-making circles, multilateralism brings with it the normative notions of reciprocity and participation. The definition based only on the number of parties hides the fact that arrangements formed by multiple parties can, in practice, be commanded by one or a few members, distorting the purpose of collective decision.

Thus, in addition to the number of members, multilateralism would be characterized by ele-

ments such as interaction, institutionalization of deliberative spaces, reduction of transaction costs, transparency, diversity of opinions and identities, and the legitimacy to consolidate norms and values essential to the international society (Milani, 2012).

The search for participation and reciprocity would ultimately aim at having the process of making relations between states more democratic, in the sense that multilateral institutions based on general principles and operating norms would establish mechanisms that would neutralize the prevalence of the policy of dominance of the great powers. For this reason, multilateral mechanisms have emerged as a priority strategy for intermediate countries such as Brazil. This conviction gained strength after World War II, a period in which multilateral institutions emerged as potential mediators and as a support for the new order.

On the other hand, any normative framework at the multilateral level reflects the correlation of forces at the time of its creation. In this way, the set of rules, norms and principles established at the founding moment of the institution, which will regulate the behavior of its members in the future, reflects the stratification of power of that concrete historical situation; it is therefore skewed in favor of the most powerful participants.² Once created, these rules acquire resilience and tend to become permanent. This is the main reason why, at the end of a hegemonic war, when new international institutions are created, the winners accept to be regulated by rules that may restrict their performance in the present, but that, due to their institutional resilience, make their power last into the future. The creation of the United Nations (UN) illustrates this argument wonderfully: if, on the one hand, the principle of sovereign equality is consolidated, on the other, the creation of the category of permanent members in the Security Council perpetuates the *status quo* of 1945; A favorable trade off for world powers.

On the other side, other countries, fearing the future domination by a new hegemonic player at the global level, voluntarily accept the rules offered as a way of protecting themselves from eventual domination projects. For Ikenberry (2001, p. 18), all the hegemonic orders that established the operating conditions in the new international system also created institutional strategies to establish *“strategic restraint and overcome fears of domination and abandonment”*.

To the interpretation that institutions are difficult to change and tend to last over time, even though power configurations can be dynamic and subject to changing positions in global power stratification, the institutional argument suggests that the stability and legitimacy of multilateral organizations depend on the degree of convergence between the dimensions of order and power. As the inevitable discrepancy between order and power widens, the legitimacy of multilateral rules decreases, these are situations that realistic theorists, such as Robert Gilpin (1981), identify as transition of power. It is in this sense that for institutionalist-realist theorists, the crisis of legitimacy faced by multilateralism is exogenous to its functioning.

Based on the above suggestions about the endogenous or exogenous origin of multilateralism’s crisis of legitimacy, we analyze how these two factors manifest today, focusing on the destabilizing role of the United States and the emergence of China at the global level. Although these are independent processes, both manifest themselves more sharply in the post-Cold War period and, in a sense, reinforced each other, contributing to multilateralism’s current legitimacy crisis.



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2. The theories formulated in the periphery have always been very sensitive in this respect and critical of the premise, implicit or explicit, of a supposed neutrality of multilateral organizations. A similar argument was developed by Araújo Castro when he coined the expression “freezing of world power”, regarding the joint presentation by the USA and the Soviet Union of the Nuclear Weapons Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in the 1960s. According to the Brazilian Ambassador, the NPT hurt the principle of sovereign equality of nations by imposing differentiated obligations on states.

2 Interpretations on the Crisis of Multilateralism

THE ENDOGENOUS DIMENSION: PRIMACY AND UNILATERALISM

In a simple view, it is possible to suggest that the United States did not follow the institutionalist roadmap of a victorious country at the end of the Cold War. We do not intend to analyze in depth why this happened, but to describe briefly how the country moved away from the roadmap for the creation of a new order after the end of a global competition which had been guiding world politics for more than forty years. The United States did not create supranational institutions, nor did it reform international ones. In fact, it did not repeat what had been its role in the post-World War II era. On the contrary, the end of the Cold War was interpreted by the American elites as the “unipolar moment”, and the United States as the “indispensable nation” in the new liberal order, which was expected to spread across the globe, closely following the territorial expansion of capitalism, economic globalization and the expansion of international civil society, without observing the disappearance of national states.

It is not possible to assert to what extent the 9/11 terrorist attack contributed to increasing American unilateralism and promoting the vision of the *lonely superpower*. In a counterfactual argument, even if the attack had not taken place, the *go-it-alone power* model, mentioned earlier, would become the main conceptual lens with which the country would begin to perceive potential allies and opponents. Its corollary was to put the concept of preventive war into practice. In this context, the unilateral action of the George W. Bush administration in the Middle East, with the removal of Saddam Hussein, reveals the USA’s unilateral disposition. It is worth mentioning the following excerpt, by Gelson Fonseca Jr. (2008, p. 108), regarding the breakdown of diffuse reciprocity, one of the pillars of the multilateral system:

“When the United States changes the direction of its stakes and clearly seeks to remove Saddam as a platform for a new political geography in the Middle East, it also changes the multilateral game (...). The clarity of the North American project’s unilateral nature eliminates the possibility of operation of the diffuse reciprocity mechanism. Giving in to the USA in the invasion of Iraq would, for the P5s, with the exception of Great Britain, hand over the command of the Council to the USA. It would be impossible to imagine an American retribution in the future in the form of unrestricted support for some kind of Russian action in Chechnya”.

A major problem is that unilateralism is not restricted to the great power. As Ambassador Rubens Ricupero (2020) noted, if one power breaks the rule unilaterally (as in the case of the invasion of Iraq), the others tend to follow suit (such as the annexation of Crimea and a new security law in Hong Kong), and end up inducing the middle powers to behave in the same way in violating the UN Charter, (as in the interventions of Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Turkey in Syria and Israel’s positions in the occupied Palestinian territories).

The foreign policy of the Republican governments of Bush and Donald Trump fits the definition of primacy, which does not identify limits to power. Its logic is realistic in the best contemporary translation of this theory. Its objective is to preserve and increase absolute and relative power and, at the same time, prevent the increase of power of its “peer competitors” (MEARSHEIMER, 2001). The result is the belief that the international norms do not operate in favor of the USA. Donald Trump embodies the current version of the primacy policy, further accentuated since China has gone from being a potential competitor to becoming a *de facto* competitor.

Several analysts agree that American unilateralism is part of its foreign policy and the result of the combination of structural power and the isolationist tradition that dates back to the 19th century. The refusal to join the League of Nations in the post-World War I era is a clear example of such position, even though the organization was proposed by the Democratic President Woodrow Wilson. In 1945, the country created the post-World War II multilateral framework, but introduced exceptional clauses to guarantee its interests. According to Sebastião Velasco e Cruz (2020):

“They were not greatly harmed by this, due to their structural power: actors indispensable for the viability of international regimes (...), its partners accepted, willingly or unwillingly, the exceptional condition in which the United States saw itself. With the erosion of this power and the reduction of its relative influence in several international organizations, the original ambiguity becomes a declining interest, often accompanied by clear manifestations of non-conformity. In this context, the United States begins to seek solutions to collective problems outside the organizations dedicated to them.”

The end of the Cold War seems to have further strengthened the United States’ position of primacy. The collapse of the Soviet Union created overnight a unipolar order at no cost to the United States. For complex reasons, which have to do with the reconfiguration of domestic politics, the unilateral option entered the Republican Party’s agenda. Trump only named it: *America First*. The list is long and well summarized below by Tullo Vigevani (2020):

“The denunciation of security agreements, including strategic ones, such as the one related to the ballistic balance with Russia, signed in 1987, and the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) in August 2019, without opening an alternative negotiation process, suggests, as they say in Washington, a messy policy. But of potential danger. The so-called anti-Wilsonian tradition of not ratifying agreements, [like] Kyoto, TPI, is reinforced in the light of negationism. The renounce of the Paris agreement in June 2017, formalized in November 2019. The list goes on, accelerating the paralysis of the WTO’s Dispute Settlement Body, accentuating the weakening of UNESCO, WHO. At the hemispheric level, of direct interest of Brazil, centralization in US hands of the IDB, weakening of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.”

THE EXOGENOUS DIMENSION OF THE LEGITIMACY CRISIS: THE EMERGENCE OF CHINA

As noted above, there is also an exogenous dimension to the crisis of multilateralism, which manifests in the disconnection between order and power. The correlation of systemic forces changes, while the institutional architecture of rules and norms remains the same. China starts to play the role of *peer competitor*, mentioned by the realistic authors. But why is it happening now, during the Trump administration, and not in past governments, since it is a process that has been in gestation for some time now?

Firstly, a cursory review of articles published in US magazines suggests that US elites’ perception of China’s emergence as a major rival is recent. On the other hand, this emergence was discreet and, only as of the Trump administration did China raise the stakes and become more assertive in

its foreign policy. Finally, the Democratic Party’s strategy was not exactly to contain China, but to convert it. They believed that the more profoundly China was inserted into the capitalist system, the greater the likelihood of it opening up its political system. That did not happen, and with Donald Trump’s coming to power, competition with China became one of his main foreign policy goals.

This competition is spreading to global multilateral organizations, with the decision of paralyzing collective security instances, such as the UN Security Council, with the absence of an efficient multilateral management of the pandemic, and with the suspension of US funds and the country’s withdrawal from WHO. We can also add the attempt to hinder Chinese access to areas of traditional US influence, such as Latin America. The Covid-19 pandemic only made the ongoing process

of power transition more visible with the rise of China and the lack of international leadership by the United States in the current situation.

In this context, criticism to the lack of representativity of multilateral organizations and their refusal to incorporate values different than those of liberal Western normativity tend to become more evident, often identifying these organizations as incapable of harboring the diversity and cultural plurality of today's world. For political scientist Guilherme Casarões (2020), in addition to a new balance of power, there is also a "new normative correlation of forces". For Casarões, "for the first time in modern history, we are facing a world whose political and economic gravitational center (in addition to the demographic center, of course) is shifting from the West, notably towards China and India". The challenges are immense because a post-Western order, even though it may include interests and values dear to the countries of the Global South, "can also put at risk the liberal foundations that gave 20th century multilateralism its global reach and its universalist ambitions".

Monica Hirst (2020) wonders about the future of multilateralism based on legal and liberal norms, in the absence of an American hegemonic leadership, but without discarding its articulation with a liberal peace project. In this case, the political scientist asks whether it would be possible to have "an expansion of the European Union's projection as a driver and legitimizer of a reconfigured multilateralism".

In recent discussions, it has been outlined that the crisis of legitimacy of multilateral organizations may have different causes for Westerners and Easterners. In what can be called a friendly Asian view towards the West, there is a prevalence of criticism regarding an excessively Western perspective in multilateral normativity and the need to incorporate diversity of values and to, strategically, treat China as an equal partner. A European view is based on a different perspective and the diagnosis is centered on today's problem of collective action. With the increase in the number of countries participating in universal multilateral organizations and the unwillingness of the USA to assume the role of a benevolent leader willing to generate global public goods, it would be fitting to fragment the decision-making spaces as in plurilateral institutions and, preferably with *like-minded countries*.³



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3. See "Reordenamento Global, Crise do Multilateralismo e Implicações para o Brasil" by Maria Regina Soares de Lima and Marianna Albuquerque, available at: <https://www.cebri.org/portal/publicacoes/cebri-artigos/reordenamento-global-crise-do-multilateralismo-e-implicacoes-para-o-brasil>.

THE PANDEMIC AND THE DEEPENING OF THE CRISIS

In general, there is a convergence among experts that the crisis of multilateralism predates the pandemic, and that the health crisis only put it under the spotlight. One of the problems pointed out for such an emphasis is the lack of coordination between the multilateral organizations themselves. Along these lines, Guilherme Casarões (2020) argues that:

“The absence of coordinated responses coupled with little international coverage of the work of specific bodies (apart from the WHO, in this case), may have generated the impression of fragility or ineffectiveness of ‘multilateralism’, in a general sense, when dealing with the pandemic. One way out of this crossroads is to work better on the communication of multilateral organizations in partnership with states, civil society and the press; another, non-excluding way, would be to strengthen the leadership of the UN Secretary General in organizing and coordinating the work of the various bodies of multilateralism with a universal dimension”.

Also consensual among analysts is the particular nature of the pandemic as a global threat. For Deisy Ventura (2020), “the pandemic demonstrated the tangible interdependence of states in several aspects, among which the issue of access to the vaccine is gaining more evidence everyday - considering that the discovery is just one step in a highly complex process, involving national capabilities for production and distribution, the rules on intellectual property and the scope of immunization programs in each country etc.”

For this very reason, according to Ambassador Rubens Ricupero (2020), “problems such as pandemics, migration or climate change are not suitable for unilateral solutions and require a level of reconciliation of interests, sharing of costs and coordination of efforts that have not yet been reached by the main players”. Perhaps that is where one of today’s main dilemmas lies: the global transnational threats that are accentuated by the increase in interaction and interconnectivity between people and countries and can only be properly addressed in the multilateral space just at the time when it is in crisis.

The transformation of issues such as health and the environment from a condition of “low politics” to that of “high politics” reflects, from the perspective of Dawisson Belém Lopes (2020), their growing centrality, “starting to be treated, in an unprecedented way, as global concerns. The reason is simple and straightforward: if these issues were distant from our daily lives before, now they have literally become questions of life and death insofar as they directly affect our prospects for well-being and survival.”

Due to the current context, such a transformation is at serious risk and suggests a new dilemma in contemporary times. If the centrality of threats increases the possibility of their securitization, the risk that they will be dealt with in multilateral oligarchic spaces, such as the UN’s Security Council, also increases. It is the case of the suggestion that has been circulating among international experts to include, as was done with terrorist threats, health within the scope of Chapter VII of the UN’s Charter which deals with the use of force in certain situations. Due to the prerogative that the agency deals only with matters of peace and security, it would be necessary to “securitize” the issue and define health as a matter of security, as happened specifically with AIDS in the 1980s.

Such a measure would empty out the WHO’s relevant role in the field of health. For Ambassador Rubens Ricupero (2020), it is necessary to think of alternatives that strengthen the WHO even though they are not viable in the current international context.

“The pandemic highlighted the need to take a step forward in advancing global governance in terms of epidemic threats. This would require giving the WHO or an eventual new organization (as some suggest) a specific mandate to detect future epidemics and suppress them early on, with inspection powers like those of the International Atomic Agency. It would also be necessary to substantially increase non-earmarked funds, as has been the recent trend in donations to the WHO, largely from non-governmental actors such as the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation.”

3 The Way Out Through Regionalism: the Asian and European examples

Regardless of prospects and interpretations of the crisis, we can say that the multilateralism on which the 1945 order was constructed is no longer fully applicable to the international system's current configuration. In the post-World War II context, the situation favored the consolidation of mechanisms centered on Western powers and the liberal values they carry. Since then, new experiences, especially at the regional level, have shown that North Atlantic multilateralism is not the only possible format - and not necessarily the most successful either. In the Americas, there are several variations on the focus of integration and the level of commitment by States; in Africa, the African Union also introduces a different perspective, in which the social well-being and unity of peoples is the core of the institution.

Without disregarding the importance and regional diversity, we would like to deepen how Asia and Europe are adapting their regional collective practices in order to deal with the challenges arising from increased international competition, technological advances and post-pandemic recovery. Both regions emerge as paradigmatic cases, as they have particular multilateral projects, based on their self-perceptions, historical experiences and different worldviews.

Regarding multilateralism in Asia, we start from the argument made by Erik Ribeiro (2020), that the starting point for understanding regionalism there is to analyze the Asian notion of sovereignty. The construction of the state itself went through a process different from that experienced in the West and based on liberal individualism. According to the researcher, the region does not adopt the Westphalian state model based on sovereign equality and, due to deep asymmetries, recognizes that there are different interests and responsibilities in the construction of the international order.

In addition, the colonial past led Asian states to consolidate around the importance of strategic autonomy and non-intervention, as demonstrated by the principles that inspired the Bandung Conference in 1955 in the midst of the Cold War. Thereby, unlike the European

experience, which to a certain extent eases sovereignty, Asian regionalism was designed in order to strengthen the autonomy of states and protect them from interference by extra-regional powers. As a result, collective instruments in the region adopt high levels of informality and aversion to rigid and imperative obligations. Due to their late development and to decades of Western domination, Ribeiro (2020) states that Asian countries are aware of their domestic social challenges, which also contribute to this reaffirmation of their concepts of sovereignty and non-interference.

Professor Leticia Simões (2020) used this argument to illustrate the differences between Asian and European integration. If, in Europe, countries chose a model of high institutionality and supranationality, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) operates based on the "ASEAN way", which is the name given to an "informal set of rules that is reflected throughout the association - mainly in its diplomatic and security culture - and shows a basic characteristic of the entity, which is a cooperative, consultative but not supranational organization".

Marco Cepik (2020) presents other examples of Asian multilateral organizations that are often not studied in Brazil. Due to their colonial past and the constant search for development, the approximation between neighbors has a strong

commercial character. Cepik (2020) highlights the proximity between the Indian Ocean states through the creation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The researcher also highlights the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2002, which incorporated Central Asia into the integration processes. The SCO, formed by Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan, has four nuclear powers, and its aim is to promote cooperation in the areas of drug trafficking, border security and terrorism.

In the current situation, when thinking about Asia, it is essential that we think about the role of China, not only as a rising world power, but also as a great regional power. Simões (2020) also pointed out that China's geopolitical location itself already places the region as strategic for its international insertion, since it has both land and sea borders with several countries and deep commercial and cooperation ties with its neighbors. Not surprisingly, the *Belt and Road Initiative* has the Chinese strategic surroundings as its first priority perimeter.

However, Beijing's leadership position is not unequivocal, as attested by the conflicts in which the country is involved in the South China Sea and in the straits. For Simões (2020), a circumstantial factor can be decisive for the future of relations: "The Chinese regional response to COVID-19 can be a great divider for the positioning of the state as a regional leadership: how the country recovers from the post-COVID crisis and if it provides conditions for stability and growth for regional economies could strengthen or weaken the Chinese role as a regional leader." Similarly, according to Carlos Milani (2012), when compared to the USA, "China has stood out for its very distinct multilateral behavior, providing political support, new financing and, when necessary in the light of its interests, innovating institutionally."

Europe, in turn, seeks to deepen multilateral instruments, even in face of recent challenges such as Brexit, the increase in nationalist movements and the strengthening of extreme right parties. The pandemic served as a milestone for the European Union to put collective management tools into practice through the elaboration of the EU Next Generation economic recovery plan and the advancement of the European Green Deal to deal with environmental challenges.

Zaki Laïdi, in the webinar "The Reorientation of Multilateral Politics: a European Perspective",⁴ argued that Europe is an example of normative power and that the European defense of multilateralism is based on the fact that the organization was built in reaction to the policy of power. At the same event, Roland Freudenstein stated that the EU went further than the UN itself, because the UN does not have supranational bodies and has bodies that still persist in the policy of power logic.

Based on this, we realize that the diagnosis of the crisis of a universalist multilateralism, like the UN and the WTO, cannot be automatically replicated to assess regional scenarios, which present different interpretations of multilateralism and collective action. On one hand, we see Europe pursuing the intensification of ties, while in Asia we identify a multilateralism of a sovereign nature. Regardless of the path chosen, there are a variety of possible scenarios, as will be discussed in the next section.

4. CEBRI event in partnership with KAS, held September 16, 2020. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZqTFwSizAA>.

4 Challenges for Multilateralism and Possible Scenarios: by way of conclusion

Given the inputs above, our conclusions are based on three premises. Firstly, the initial premise is that the expression “crisis of multilateralism” does not apply to all forms and arrangements of this nature, especially since they are quite different from each other. We showed that those of a regional character, such as the Asian and European cases, for example, are not only different from each other but have been more successful than universal multilateralism. The term “crisis” applies to the latter and not to the former, suggesting that contextual factors, specific models for regional political economic formations and particular trajectories may explain the success stories and some of the relative failures.

A good case for comparison is Latin American and South American regionalism, which have gone through cyclical phases of deepening and distancing. At the moment, South American regionalism is in a deep crisis, with the dismantling of Unasur, which had regional governance institutions in health and could be collaborating for collective responses to the pandemic. Regional integration processes follow their own logic, which vary both according to the characteristics of the global order and the relationship between states in the region. After the convergence of center-left governments in the past decade, new elected leaders moved away from the process of building a regional identity. Likewise, a new political cycle can reintroduce Latin America and South America into countries, including Brazil.

If regionalism is a possible solution, could regional experiences be replicated at the global level? It does not seem viable to us. Both Zaki Laïdi and Roland Freudenstein stated that the European model is not replicable due to the numerous peculiarities. For example, the more restricted model of *like-minded countries*, applied to political institutions of peace and security, would, in the end, lead to the formation of military alliances among countries with common strategic interests. Applied to the UN, it would exclude well over half of the countries in the world, and it would certainly also exclude most of the countries in the Global South. Furthermore, it would not be

efficient in guaranteeing peace, because the only institutional format capable of promoting some international stability must include the most powerful countries, those that, in fact, can threaten peace.

The UN’s realist wisdom is in its format that concentrates power in the Security Council and its five permanent members (P5), whereas the General Assembly has a more symbolic and mobilizing power on the respective national civil societies. In the context of the reorganization of global power, the trend is that the concentration of power in the P5 continues, as in the current *status quo*, with at most the possibility of creation of some intermediate sphere to house the well-known aspirants, such as Germany, Japan and India, but without the right to veto. The inclusion of any additional country to the P5 would break the current balance of power and would be vetoed by any of its permanent members. Therefore, it is common to find analyses that consider the Security Council to be, in practice, an oligarchic body within a multilateral organization, (ALBUQUERQUE, 2020).

Plurilateral models, gathering a smaller number of somewhat similar countries, could be successful in the financial and commercial fields. This is already happening nowadays since the logic of access is different and depends on the degree of adherence to liberal principles in the economy. Greater restrictions on access are measures that

aim to standardize participants in an “exclusive club” modality. China, for example, created financial institutions with different standards from those of Bretton Woods, which widened the range of choices for countries in the South, outside the global power’s circle. Given that objection to the hegemony of liberal values is part of emerging China’s demand, this process of fragmentation and differentiation could be accentuated in these areas, taking as parameters, with respect to the definition of the scope limits, the structural dynamics of capitalism and the negative externalities stemming from a fragmented and deficient global economic governance - illustrated by the interruption of negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the resignation of Director-General Roberto Azevêdo.

The second premise is of a theoretical nature and introduces a more optimistic bias regarding the crisis of legitimacy of universal institutions. Institutions are not exactly agents, given that national representatives are the ones who operate. The former provide rules and principles of operation that can guarantee the functioning of the multilateral process, in which the golden rule is that everyone, weak and strong, is subject to the general normative framework, even though rules of exception are provided for. For particular reasons, some states may decide that the benefits of unilateral action outweigh the costs of cooperation. When this occurs, the tendency is for this behavior to be followed by the other powers, configuring a crisis of legitimacy of the institution itself, which is no longer effective in the management of international stability.

This is exactly what is currently happening with the UN, accused of being silent in several crises that have dragged on for decades, such as in Palestine or the conflict in Syria. The problem is not necessarily in the UN normative framework, but in the agent’s action, particularly in a context of polarization and power transition. In this context, reforms are practically impossible. However, stability ultimately depends on the action of agents, not institutions, and agents can change their behavior, as occurred during the transition from George W. Bush to Barack Obama’s administration in the United States. However, an unfortunate contingency was the succession of Obama by Donald Trump, who reinforced Bush’s unilateralism. When domestic policy impacts the foreign policy orientation of the greatest global military power, as is the case

today, uncertainty about international stability reinforces the institutional *status quo*, reducing the space for reforms. In democracies, rulers do not last as long as institutions do and new international leaders with a strategic vision can emerge as a result of lessons from the crisis.

The third and final premise has to do with the degree of adherence of the current powers to the multilateral system of peace and security. Institutions are difficult to reform and are resilient and tend to last over time, unless they are abandoned by their participants, especially those who can most threaten international peace. For those who are familiar with the practice of institutions like the UN, like Ambassador Ricupero (2020), neither the United States nor China are “revolutionary” powers, in the sense of having the destruction of the system as an objective. On the contrary, China is engaged because the institutions allow its peaceful rise, ensuring the title of “champion of multilateralism”, in the expression of Dawisson Belém Lopes (2020), by joining dozens of regional and global organizations. For the United States, the interest remains mainly in those capable of guaranteeing its status as a great power, even if the material and subjective conditions are no longer the same as 75 years ago. The most likely scenario for these two specialists is the continuation of the permanent tension between common challenges and unilateral acts, inspired by the strategic competition between the United States and China, with the European Union acting as the main force for strengthening multilateral solutions.

The most important challenge today, magnified by the Covid-19 pandemic, comes from the future of regulating issues framed as global transnational threats. For topics of this nature, due to their novelty taking into account a longer historical plan, there are no specialized universal organizations, as is the case of the environment; or those that exist are only normative, where common rules do not have mandatory power over national interests, such as the WHO. These are two areas in which, for governance to be effective, coordination has to be collective. In the case of the WHO, we witnessed the abandonment by the United States at the moment when the Trump administration reinforced the narrative that the organization was acting in favor of the Chinese government, mitigating the country’s accountability for the origin of the pandemic. In relation to the environment, the United States

also abandoned the Paris Agreement, which is the main regulatory framework on countries' levels of emissions, and whose retaliation for non-compliance depends exclusively on bilateral actions by other states, and not on a collective instrument with the capacity to impose sanctions.

The risk of securitization, by including these topics as a separate theme in Chapter VII of the UN's Charter, is directly proportional to the escalation of the US-China strategic competition. The environment and climate change are already on this path, as suggested by the increase in discussions on the subject in the Security Council. With regards to health, the moment is one of paralysis and lack of agreement on securitization, mainly due to disagreements about the role of the WHO in crisis management. Again, the historical contingency, represented by Joe Biden's victory in the United States presidential election, may prove to be decisive in defining the direction of the formation of an eventual "multilateral volition" in these two areas.

We argue in this document that the expression "crisis of multilateralism" can be fallacious, since it does not consider that the multilateral format and regulation allow for various institutional designs, whether in terms of the number of participating countries, or with regard to the constitutive norms and principles. In a more precise view, what is in crisis is the model of universal multilateralism, within the format of the UN and related organizations. This crisis manifests, for example, in the Security Council's inaction on regional security and humanitarian crisis issues, in its operational inefficiency and in the current criticism of its lack of representation and greater cultural diversity, given the emergence of new centers of power. Without delving into its specificities, we can include all these deficiencies under the label of crisis of legitimacy.

We also draw attention to two aspects of the institutions. Firstly, they are not specifically actors, but they enable or induce the action of the agents, who are ultimately, responsible for the successes and institutional crises, as we argued when considering the role of endogenous and exogenous factors responsible for the current

crisis. On the other hand, one of the main characteristics of institutions is their permanence, which makes it difficult to reform them, but guarantees their perpetuation over time.

Current literature on institutional change works with the idea of critical situations, contingent events external to the institution, which can change its trajectory. Except for a post-hegemonic war situation, the tendency is that a universal institution, such as the UN, does not disappear due to the abandonment by its members. We emphasize that for both the United States and China, such an organization is functional to its objectives. It is enough to carry out a counterfactual exercise to realize that, for both powers, a UN in crisis is better than no organization at all. In areas other than peace and security, it is likely that factors of attraction and exclusion will continue to generate plurilateral formats, aimed at regulating specific topics.

Finally, the different temporalities between institutional trajectories, on the one hand, and those of democratic national governments, on the other, increase the chances for the latter to learn and for leaders with a greater degree of global responsibility than those of the present to emerge. Currently, however, the construction of global governance to deal with transnational global threats, such as pandemics and climate change, is the greatest challenge of the 21st century.



Currently, however, the construction of global governance to deal with transnational global threats, such as pandemics and climate change, is the greatest challenge of the 21st century.



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