

**Closed Session**

The Decline of Collective  
Action in International Politics

The End of  
Multilateralism?

*Dr. Tarek Cherkaoui*





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The TRT World Forum 2019, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 21st- 22nd at the Istanbul Congress Center with over one thousand esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of nine keynote speeches and exclusive talks, 12 public sessions, and 15 closed sessions this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the rise of far-right terrorism, populism and nationalism, environmental issues, the future of the Middle East, trade wars, the future of the European Union and cooperation of emerging powers. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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## Background

On Monday, October 21, 2019, TRT World Research Centre held a roundtable meeting entitled 'The Decline of Collective Action in International Politics: The End of Multilateralism?' The session aimed to discuss one of the most vital questions in international relations: How should states act? Unilaterally or multilaterally? Multilateralism requires states to follow international norms and pay respect to international institutions, whereas unilateralism suggests that states can act alone and shape the international order. In our globalised world, issues require collective action. Climate change, the worldwide refugee crisis, transnational terrorism, human security and development are just a few examples that require states to act multilaterally.

Five speakers shared their expertise on this subject and addressed the following themes:

- Are we heading toward the end of multilateralism?
- Is multilateralism a silver bullet for every problem we have?
- What could be the consequences of the continuation of unilateral policies in today's world?
- How can international institutions be reinforced at this point in time?
- How can the shared interests of international society be addressed so that collective actions might be upheld?

## Introduction

The first speaker examined the contours of multilateral action. He argued that in our globalized world, issues require collective action. Climate change, the worldwide refugee crisis, transnational terrorism, human security and development are just a few examples that dictate multilateral state action. However, today's trend is unilateralism. US President Donald Trump's policies toward multilateral agreements and established international institutions have raised questions of whether we have reached the 'end

of multilateralism' in international relations. A significant example of the US tendency to undermine multilateralism under the Trump administration is withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, an issue which inherently requires multilateral action to achieve a solution. As such, this creates a dilemma for others, whether to follow the US path or keep up with multilateralism and maintain international institutions.

Unilateralism can be defined as 'any doctrine or agenda that supports one-sided action' (Taylan, 2017, p.202). This involves a country upending

cooperative norms to 'go it alone' (Fonseca, 2003, p.323), consequently reordering the world's power structure in pursuit of maximum national self-interest. On the other hand, multilateralism involves cooperation and can be defined as 'an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct' (Ruggie, 1993, p.11). According to one of the speakers, there has been a steady increase in unilateralist

action, with countries prioritising their national values and practices at the expense of the more diplomatically intensive, consensus-based approach of multilateralism. In a globalised world, solutions to current issues like climate change, the worldwide refugee crisis, and transnational terrorism require collective action now more than ever.

## The Decline in Collective Action

The second speaker addressed the causes behind the decline in collective action. Multilateralism has been the prevalent trend post-World War II. Globalism reigned supreme, leading to the current era with 'rapid global connectivity and economic integration, the development of a rule-based international order supported by the rise of the global and regional multilateral institutions' (Linn, 2018, p.87). Prominent examples of cooperative accomplishments range from the establishment of the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), to the Addis Agenda and the Paris Agreement of COP21 in 2015. However, 'from Italy to the Philippines to Hungary and now Brazil, a generation of leaders is rising that harbours an active distaste for the United Nations and other parts of the global architecture' (Bosco, 2018, para.2). According to the speaker, the decline in collective action has been steadily crystallising with various factors playing a role. These include a combination of rising populism and scepticism towards expansive multilateral institutions.

Rising populism has been a significant component in the decline of multilateralism. Populism can essential-

ly be 'characterised by emotionally-charged political appeals to addressing crises through neonationalism, masculinism, othering, bordering, xenophobia, racism, phantasmatic ethnic golden-ageism, and a disregard for liberal democratic norms' (Gagnon et al, 2018, p.6). With populist parties tripling their vote in Europe over the past 20 years, and in governments of 11 European countries (Rooduijn, 2018), there is an ostensible anti-establishment trend in international politics. For example, the Brexit vote of 2016 saw the British public vote in a referendum to leave the European Union (EU), a result that shows an upending of the usual strengthening of global and regional institutions towards a more self-centred view. The EU, comprised of 28 countries, was the first-of-its-kind political and economic union with an internal single market and standardised laws, and it is held as a beacon of multilateralism and cooperation. The United Kingdom voting to leave was, therefore, a surprise and a blow for multilateralism, with Theresa May, the Prime Minister who triggered the article of withdrawal, framing it as a 'vote to restore, as we see it, our national self-determination' (Bennet, 2017).

An expression of nationalism, Brexit exhibits that even in a hyper-connected world, people can feel betrayed by the established global order and diverge on issues like immigration and free trade. The realisation of Brexit for 'Brexiters' meant Britain would be 'liberated from the excessive bureaucratic, economic, and legal regulations of the E.U., and that it would be able to act unilaterally in foreign trade and investment policies' (Taylan, 2017, p.210). Disillusionment with multilateral institutions made a majority of the British public believe going it alone would help them 'take their country back', a populist conception predicated on a unilateralist approach and tribal notions of identity. Populist positions opposed to globalisation also claim that it is the source of inequality, arguing that potential changes to people's jobs, well-being and culture can be reversed with attacks on multilateral institutions. According to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, 'multilateralism is...under pressure from the growth in populist and nationalist voices' (Guterres, 2019, para.16). With populism a threat toward collective action and potentially 'undermining global diplomacy' (Lagat, 2017, para.8), it is now also relatively widespread with populist leaders, including 'U.S. President Donald Trump, President Andrzej Duda of Poland and Premier Giuseppe Conte of Italy along with the foreign ministers of Hungary and Austria' (Lederer, 2018, para.7).

Moreover, the belief that expansive multilateral institutions overreach their authority has also contributed to the decline of collective action; it is contended that these institutions limit sovereignty. For example, the election of Donald Trump in the United States was an unexpected but pivotal moment in the escalation of unilateralism. The Trump perspective sees 'multilateral treaties as straitjackets, sees institutions as traps, sees allies as free-riders, and proclaims that a doctrine of America First will make America Great Again' (Russel, 2019, para.6). Trump believes that the US should disregard rules established by multilateral agreements in everything from trade to climate. His dislike for multilateralism can be clearly exhibited by the US withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord, where mul-

tilateral action was required by signatories. With 195 countries signing that universal, legally binding climate pact, the US is the only country in the world that will not participate after their unilateral exit. This is in addition to the US withdrawing from UNESCO, the Human Rights Council, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, as well as subverting the International Criminal Court (ICC) and cutting funding for UNRWA (Macaron, 2018). There is also the belief held by many populist leaders that these institutions are unaccountable, and that these supranational officials are 'not responsible to electorates, the public at large, or powerful domestic interests' (Bosco, 2018, para.6). Trump's regular undermining of international cooperation has set up a future where the pursuit of a country's self-interest is prioritised, with other countries taking note. China, India, and Russia also 'pursue principally transactional approaches' (Linn, 2018, p.88), with even Germany in effect pursuing 'an implicit "Germany First" policy in regard to imposing its conservative fiscal stance on its E.U. partners' (Linn, 2018, p.88). Powerful states can attempt to achieve their geopolitical ambitions and policy goals without international support, even though this can come with political costs like erosion of their soft power (Thompson, 2009). The decline of collective action is putting unilateralism at the forefront, with expansive multilateral institutions at risk of renegade nations flouting the rules and institutions that govern global security and economic activity.

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## The Search for Common Ground

The third speaker examined how the international community could create and preserve common platforms. For him, the search for common ground is crucial to ensure that the benefits of multilateralism are recognised and actualised by important global actors. International society benefits when consensus is reached, as it ensures cooperation is put before self-interest. The shared interest of international society can be addressed by facilitating collective action through two key factors that dovetail: reducing populism and reducing gridlock.

The speaker offered two primary ways for doing so. Firstly, addressing the frustrations that some citizens have due to feeling left behind can be a boon to reversing the tide of populism. The collective angst felt as a result of increased inequality, unemployment rates, social welfare cuts, and automation, among other changes, has been influential to people voting for populist parties that deride multilateralism. The election of Donald Trump relied on 'Americans who felt overlooked by the establishment' (Zurcher, 2016, para.4)

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and his common refrain was 'drain the Swamp', which suggested the government was out of touch with the struggles of the working class. If the underlying issues fuelling populism and unilateralism are tackled, the global institutions that 'have a proven track record of saving lives, generating economic and social progress and preventing war' (UN, 2019, para.2) may be back in favour. For example, macroeconomic and industrial policies can be revised to ensure people have a safety net, preventing situations that require them to frequent food banks, even while they are employed (Coughlan, 2017). Decreasing inequality and making citizenry feel valued, and not like 'losers [because] of structural and technological changes' (Aiginger, 2019, para.3), can help increase their faith in multilateral institutions. Increased education can also play a role here as the benefits of multilateralism are clear, and education 'emphasises equality, tolerance, and critical thinking' (Norloff, 2019, para.2). Education can also allow some segments of society become aware of the phenomenon of fake news, and it could help them recognise that populist leaders sometimes foment a distrust of experts. To encourage collective action and achieve common ground, the situation could be addressed where the world's richest 1% controls twice as much wealth as the poorest 50% (Barolini, 2017), and many feel neglected due to systemic policies.

Secondly, reducing gridlock by improving effectiveness in multilateral institutions would be a positive step toward upholding collective action. International cooperation is currently limited in the global political system as a result of factors including 'the increase in the number of states who have the power to play a role at the global level...and the inability of international institutions to act' (Bernabo, 2017, para.1). These factors currently hinder effectual multilateralism, and it's often in the most pressing issues that consensus can't be reached. Increasingly, 'in areas such as nuclear proliferation, the explosion of small arms sales, terrorism, global economic imbalances, global poverty and inequality, multilateral and transnational cooperation is now ineffective or threadbare' (Held, 2016,



para.3). For example, in the UN Security Council, the veto mechanism has all but ensured that the five permanent members reject any resolution that is ill-fitting with their policy goals, as opposed to a necessary and unwavering commitment to maintain international peace and security. In the Israel/Palestine conflict, the former can rely on the veto of the United States, and in the Syrian conflict, the Syrian regime has relied on Russia's support. The gridlock on many critical disputes requires reform. Many additional obstacles exist in the Security Council, including its anachronistic composition, term lengths and sizable agenda (Martin, 2018). It is in the shared interest of international society that cooperation is prioritised, and there are notable instances that show common ground can be

reached. The 2015 Paris Agreement is paradigmatic of how governments have recognised the gravity of an issue and pushed to cooperate for a solution. Additionally, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) dispute settlement mechanism 'maintains its authority and centrality since it has the ability to generate new rules in order to adapt to new issues the WTO is faced with' (Bernabo, 2017, para.3). An increase in collective action can ensure that bedrock principles of multilateralism and a rule-based international order remain intact, and reducing gridlock can be helpful in enabling constructive international engagement.

## The Need to Reform the International System

The fourth speaker provided his perspective on the need to reform the international system and its decision-making process. At a time when 'the threats of not only intra-state but inter-state conflicts are higher than at any other time since the worst of the Cold War' (Martin, 2018, para.1), cooperation and collective action are valuable to manage and reduce shared global challenges. There are various consequences of the continued unilateral policies in today's world, and these include less legitimacy and the adoption of aggressive approaches. Multilateralism means that countries contribute to the global good, and international institutions in the Trump era should be reinforced and reformed to prevent further destabilisation of international society.

From the speaker's vantage point, the first consequence of continued unilateral policies is a crisis of legitimacy. Going at it alone undermines the legitimacy of the state carrying out the policy. Consequently, the state's role in the international order becomes questionable as it acted without seeking outside support. For example, when Trump withdrew from the Paris

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Climate Accord, his 'unilateral decision put one of the world's largest emitters of greenhouse gases outside of the global commitment' (Gibson, 2019, para.2). As the only country to do so, the United States undermined its legitimacy as a global player in an issue which inherently requires multilateral action for a solution. The US status as a hegemon makes that move especially unusual. The fact that 'a hegemon needs legitimacy is undeniable' (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2005, p.517). If established rules and practices are ignored, it serves as a boon to countries who want to carry out unpopular, unilateral action in an increasingly multi-polar world. Global governance requires collective action, and legitimacy is sustained by countries collaborating for issues like climate change and conflict resolution.

Another consequence of continued unilateral policies in today's world is, in the speaker's view, that states are emboldened to adopt aggressive approaches lacking consensus to achieve self-serving goals. 'Third-party mediation and constructive dialogue are sidelined' (Griffiths, O'Callaghan & Roach, 2008, p.322) for approaches rooted in unilateralism, and with the US withdrawing from widely popular treaties and institutions, other nations like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and China have taken note to increase their backing for one-sided action. For example, in Israel, the curtailing of Palestinian rights has continued with the knowledge that the 'Trump administration will erect no speedbumps to slow down Israeli unilateralism' (Hassan, 2019, para.18). The Israeli government also unilaterally withdrew from UNESCO, having been emboldened by the US withdrawal, following claims of its 'anti-Israel' (Cohen, 2019) bias. Another example is Saudi Arabia, which was emboldened by the Trump administration and their support for a 'unilateral adventurist foreign policy' (Wintour, 2018, para.11). Self-serving and unilateral policies like the blockade on Qatar and the war in Yemen have been detrimental, and they were carried out without the consensus of the international community. Multilateralism, conversely, ensures that diplomacy and cooperation are emphasised to better facilitate the rule-based order of international politics.

The speaker also asserted that international institutions in the Trump era are vulnerable, providing no serious deterrence to unilateral action. These can be reformed and reinforced in a plethora of ways to ensure maximum effectiveness. For example, the 'United Nations remains powerless to resolve the world's most pressing security issues, due to weak enforcement mechanisms and an outdated governance structure' (Painter, 2015, para.4). This is a critical issue, as collective action is prevented even after countries have come together to reach a resolution. Solutions include 'establishing some limitations on veto power, such as a supermajority override provision...or a UN rapid reaction force that could swiftly deploy to halt humanitarian crises' (Painter, 2015, para.8). This would be a meaningful start, as the challenges of the 21st century require collective action to be resolved. The Trump era has exhibited that these international institutions can, and should, operate more effectively and be reinforced, which would increase the success of multilateralism in the process. Other examples are international financial institutions, which can also be reformed due to 'the changing balance of economic power in the world' (Coffey & Riley, 2006). This can be done by making the World Bank less reliant on the United States, loosening the ideologically-driven policies of the IMF, and reforming the WTO to offer better representation for developing countries and to adapt to China's ascent. Modernising multilateral institutions will improve global peace and stability; countries cooperating in all areas, be it finance or security, ensures that common rules are applied and collective action in international politics is maximised.

## Concluding Remarks

The last speaker provided a synthesis of the interventions. For him, the proceedings dovetail and reveal that while there has been a rise in unilateralist policies, multilateralism remains valuable for a rule-based international order which espouses global peace and security.

Firstly, the decline in collective action was addressed. There are many prominent examples of cooperative accomplishments in the international arena, like the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation. These have been threatened, however, by rising populism and scepticism towards expansive multilateral institutions. Brexit and growing populist voices in European governments have supported more self-centred approaches and an undermining of the usual strengthening of global and regional institutions. Moreover, sceptics who worry that international institutions limit sovereignty were pleased to see the perspective of US President Donald Trump, the election of whom intensified unilateralist policies. Trump does not believe in the rule-based international order and withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord, UNESCO, the Human Rights Council, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal.

Secondly, the search for common ground is crucial to reverse the decline in collective action. International society benefits when consensus is reached, as it ensures cooperation is put before self-interest. The addressing of the frustrations that some citizens have due to feeling left behind can be a boon to reversing the tide of populism. Citizens need to feel valued, and increased education and awareness against fake news can also play a role. Reducing gridlock in multilateral institutions to improve effectiveness would likewise aid collective action. Gridlock hinders fruitful multilateralism, and it is often in the most pressing issues that consensus cannot be reached.

Finally, there are consequences of continued unilateral policies in today's world, and there exists a strong

need for reform to the international system and its decision-making process. Two consequences include less legitimacy and the increased adoption of aggressive approaches. Going at it alone and without outside support undermines the legitimacy of the state carrying out the policy, and consequently the state's role in the international order. States are also now emboldened to adopt aggressive approaches which lack consensus to achieve self-serving goals. Several states, which include the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and China, have all taken note to increase their backing for one-sided action.

Furthermore, international institutions in the Trump era are vulnerable, with no serious deterrence to unilateral action. Institutions like the United Nations need to be modernised with better enforcement mechanisms and governance structure. Solutions could potentially include a supermajority override provision on the veto or a rapid reaction force. International financial institutions can also be reformed, and this can be done by making the World Bank less reliant on the United States, loosening the ideologically-driven policies of the IMF, and reforming the WTO to offer better representation for developing countries and to adapt to China's ascent. The challenges of the 21st century require collective action to be addressed, and the reform of international institutions can ensure maximum effectiveness.

The last speaker ended the discussion by asserting that while there has been a decline in collective action in international politics, the latter is not irreversible, and multilateralism still has a substantial role to play moving forward. Some of the world's most pressing issues necessitate cooperation, and reinforcing the international system is a constructive step in the right direction.

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