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Revising the vows: post-pandemic multilateralism

EVENT REPORT



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During a debate hosted by Friends of Europe on 24 February entitled 'Revising the vows: post-pandemic multilateralism', speakers agreed that there is no other alternative to the multilateral system.

Taking place on the very day when Russia invaded Ukraine, the event was originally conceived with primarily COVID-19 in mind and planned to discuss how the pandemic had tested the concept of multilateralism.

Moderator and Senior Fellow at Friends of Europe, **Jamie Shea** noted that the event was happening "under the shadow of Russia's invasion of Ukraine", which is "not only testing European security arrangements, but the whole architecture of the UN and the entire international order".

He asked whether the invasion represented "yet another failure of multilateralism to deliver on its promises" and whether it was a "test for multilateralism to make the aggressor play a high price for that aggression".

Shea outlined that the purpose of the debate was to examine the health of the multilateral system today and see where it is working and not working. "We clearly need multilateralism more than ever," he continued, "particularly when it comes to tackling global warming."

"I still think multilateralism works, and if it doesn't, we need to make it work," said **Christina Kokkinakis**, Director for Values and Multilateral Relations and Deputy Managing Director Global at the European External Action Service (EEAS).

She said the word that sums up the current situation is "helplessness". "The international community could not prevent a crisis, and we were not able to prevent the point of no return," she lamented, adding that this played into the narrative of failure at the multilateral level.

She said she envisaged possible violations of international law because there is now a state of war.

"When we talk about violations of human rights, we talk about violations of law," she explained. "They apply to everyone, everywhere, without any distinction between countries. There is no justification for degrading or exploiting human beings. Human rights are not about right or left; it's about right or wrong."

The value of these words, she added, has become more important "during these dramatic days".

"The EU cannot do multilateralism alone; you need two to tango," she emphasised. "We can only promote human rights and multilateralism together with others, such as the African Union and the Arab League."

Kokkinakis also highlighted the importance of supporting human rights defenders and the "huge space for cooperation" at the United Nations. Even though the UN Security Council is increasingly blocked, multilateralism is about looking for topics where interests intersect and where we can cooperate with other regions and countries.

"Solutions to challenges can be found multilaterally and be the result of common and collective action," she insisted.

“A number of people were blaming the UN Security Council for being useless and toothless,” said **Mohamed Zeeshan**, Editor-in-Chief of Freedom Gazette and Author of “Flying Blind: India’s Quest for Global Leadership”, “but this is the fault of the member states. If they can’t come to a consensus, they can’t act. That’s the nature of multilateralism.”

He went on to describe how there is a debate today over global norms and laws, as well as a battle for values in international politics, which could undermine the future of multilateralism and the effectiveness of institutions.

He explained how this is an “important phase of history”, where the West is no longer all powerful.

He described this as being a “multi-polar era” in which Russia and China are “reinstating the order of anarchy or ‘might is right’” and challenging the sovereignty of states in eastern Europe and the South China Sea.

“These countries are going back on their commitments in international law and rewriting what it looks like,” he insisted.

With the West now not the force it used to be when it comes to multilateralism, the need to “build a global consensus has become more pressing”, he said.

“India is a dark horse,” concluded Zeeshan. “It used to be a voice for multilateralism under [former prime minister Jawaharlal] Nehru. It became an active member and helped mediate conflicts, but then it started taking a backseat.”

“What drives the failure of multilateralism is not recognising the interests that drive multilateralism,” stated **Rosebell Kagumire**, a pan-African feminist writer, media specialist and Editor of African Feminism.

She said how “competing empires” are often present in countries in Africa and that this brings to mind colonialism, adding that francophone countries in Africa are still paying “to maintain a colonial power”.

Kagumire also highlighted how foreign powers are “amassing military power” in the Horn of Africa and this is “not in the interests of local people”.

“Young people wonder: what’s the purpose of an election if a candidate is being backed by different interests?” she said. “It doesn’t matter if it’s from the United States or China, at the end of the day, does it serve our aspiration to be self-determining? That’s what matters.”

“Multilateralism is a classic interest-driven activity wrapped in a democratic cloak,” said Colonel **Michael Ryan**, former deputy assistant secretary of defence for European and NATO policy at the United States Department of Defense.

“We have multilateral approaches when our own elements of power are insufficient,” he explained. Multilateral organisations allow participants to combine power for shared purposes and reduce the options of others.

He added that the US prefers to work through multilateral organisations because it is in its interest to do so, but this is not true for everyone. The problem comes when

heads of state and government are influenced by domestic concerns, allied to the fact that nations still pursue national interests in multilateral organisations.

He also mentioned the difficulties of “achieving consensus below the collective interest”.

“Autocrats can marshal resources quicker than democratically elected governments, and consensus takes time,” he said.

Colonel Ryan went on to criticise the “failure of imagination and suspension of belief” within multilateral organisations and said they should become more forward-looking and future-proofed.

“The necessary primacy of the collective interest should be sold to our people, and this exceeds our national interests,” he continued.

“If we don’t achieve our collective interests, our national interests will be forfeit,” he said and advocated for strengthening the core of free and market-oriented nations across the world.

He ended by calling for a focus on shared resilience “across our community” in order to combat disinformation and uphold human rights.

The panellists then fielded a series of questions from members of the Debating Europe citizens’ platform, which covered climate change, multipolarity, gender equality, and the role of the private sector and civil society.

In response, Kokkinakis mentioned how last year the EU was “the first to make a plea of recognition for a safe and healthy environment”.

“This is important, and we will continue to work on this,” she said, adding that this shows the importance of pinning down an issue and elevating it to the next level.

Zeeshan explained how although the West had perceived India’s commitments during COP26 in Glasgow as being insufficient, Indians were surprised that the country had made commitments in the first place.

“The developed world has got to carry a larger burden on this, and they haven’t made the efforts as yet,” he said, adding that the promise of US\$100bn for climate finance never materialised.

“The developing world has more to lose from climate change because India is a tropical country and is heavily dependent on agriculture,” he continued. The climate is already erratic, characterised by droughts and floods. “It is justified to expect the developed world to do more than it’s doing so far,” he concluded.

One of the challenges posed by multipolarity is that it breaks down the collective interest into regional dynamics, said Ryan.

“Our reality is bipolar – democratic and authoritarian – and we see this in the response to the Ukraine conflict,” he said. “This bipolarity offers us an opportunity to bring a geostrategic perspective to regional conversations. Any of the latter that doesn’t take account of global reality is not going to be effective.”

Kagumire explained that there are good examples of advancing gender equality at the multilateral level, but that the acceptance of sexual minorities lags behind. “Countries have rejected resolutions on this,” she said.

Ryan argued that foreign direct investment (FDI) could have more influence than trade per se, saying that FDI that is targeted towards women in South Africa allows communities to deal with their security and environmental challenges.

“This is how we integrate these economies into the global economy,” he said, adding that civil society is also critical “because you can have better discussions in think tanks than in governments”.

“Challenges are global, but solutions are local,” concluded Kokkinakis, echoing her earlier statement that it “is our common task, shared globally and universally, to make multilateralism work”.

