3 Multilateralism: What policy options to strengthen international cooperation?

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The issue

In the era of COVID-19, we've all heard statements about how "the virus respects no borders" and "we are all in this together". True enough, all countries and peoples have been affected in terms of the medical and economic toll. Such references to the global nature of the crisis are usually followed by calls to strengthen international cooperation. The sheer scale of the current catastrophe and the threat of other catastrophic risks—such as the effects of climate change or epidemiologists' predictions of an even worse pandemic—lend credence to internationalist calls. But given the recent record of weakened multilateralism and growing great power rivalry, is it possible to imagine a post-COVID future of strengthened multilateral cooperation?[1]

The question of "Why cooperate?"[2] is often answered by pointing to two concrete benefits of international cooperation: 1) the gains of minimizing the negative (or maximizing the positive) spillover effects the actions of some countries have on others, and 2) the gains from the provision of global public goods. The pragmatic "utilitarian" or "realist" rationale focuses on the benefits of cooperative solutions to specific coordination problems.[3] While this essay's topic is global multilateralism, the principles of utilitarian cooperation also apply to sub-global contexts.

Many appeals to international cooperation in addition include references to certain values, such as the

intrinsic equal value of human life: Ethical considerations are added to self-interest as a rationale for cooperation. A recent example is the COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) proposal, which argues *both*: That every country can benefit from an equitable global vaccine deployment to help protect from "imported" outbreaks, *and* that there is a "moral imperative of ensuring that people are not cut off from lifesaving drugs."[4]

How best to imagine a global system of cooperation for the future that is grounded both in a purely utilitarian dimension (managing spillovers and providing global public goods) *and* in an idealistic dimension that builds on shared values and ethical goals?[5]

> *While there may be a great diversity in the specific constitutional arrangements characterizing a democracy, liberal democratic values reflect universal human aspirations and are relevant to a discussion of international cooperation.*

The ideas

Utilitarian cooperation can and has been achieved among countries with differing histories, political regimes, and cultures. The pandemic has exposed weaknesses of cooperation in the health domain, but many other domains are facing serious problems because developments in geopolitics and technology have changed the way cooperation can work. The response demanded by the pandemic and ensuing economic contraction has enhanced the role of the nation-state. Coupled with the resulting desire for protection from dependence on others (especially in global supply chains), this is likely to lead to some deglobalization; some see this retreat as potentially strong and lasting.[6]

But such a retreat from a relatively laissez-faire globalization could actually increase the benefits from cooperation. Compared to a world of limited state intervention, a world of more active industrial policies, however much these may be justified from the perspective of a particular country, increases the likelihood of *retaliatory cycles* if there are significant spillover effects, with everyone ending up worse off in the process. Before the pandemic hit, most countries already practiced some form of industrial policy. The post-pandemic situation is likely to be one of a more activist state everywhere. This tendency is reinforced by new technologies characterized by inherently anti-

competitive economies of scale and hub-and-spoke type networks, where controlling the "hubs" confers much power. Moreover, these technologies lend themselves to "weaponization", further increasing the incentives for states to intervene in domains such as cyberspace, data management and artificial intelligence.[7] This is not an argument against industrial policies to accelerate innovation or channel it to the creation of good jobs, but an argument in favor of rules to minimize negative spillovers and reduce the danger of "technological wars."[8]

The rules to reduce negative (or increase positive) spillover effects can themselves be understood as public goods, merging the two rationales for utilitarian multilateral cooperation. One difference that remains is that agreement on rules per se does not require any material resources (although their implementation and monitoring will require some) while the provision of a global public good such as climate change mitigation will typically require substantial resources and agreement on burden sharing. Pandemic prevention (including prevention of bio-error or bio-terror) and limiting climate change are usually mentioned as two important global public goods.[9] Rules to prevent nuclear proliferation and usage, including due to the miscalculation of an opponent's intentions, remain of the same order of importance, to which we will have to add rules in the domain of cyberwarfare, biotechnology and artificial intelligence.[10] All these global public goods have in common that their provision can be justified by the well-understood self-interest of nation-states. Cooperation in many domains has been possible between countries with very different types of governments, ranging from liberal democracies to authoritarian regimes of various persuasions.

While self-interest drives much of multilateral cooperation, the vision of a desirable world order that one finds in the Charter of the United Nations, as well as more recently in the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (now Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs) and in the Paris Agreement on climate change, also contain strong appeals to common *values*.[11] The 17 SDGs, for example, such as SDG 1 on ending poverty and SDG 2 on ending hunger, reflect ethical imperatives that the signatories agreed on. A values-driven legitimation of cooperation, besides having its own intrinsic ethical justification, also helps make utilitarian rules easier to achieve. An agreement is often harder to reach without some "sacrifice" consented thanks to ethical considerations. If all behavior were to be governed only by pure material cost-benefit analyses, compromises would be very difficult to arrive at. With analogy to national communities, "a sense of civics is part of the cement that holds a community together."[12] An ethos of global community and global civics can complement the utilitarian dimension to make international agreements easier to achieve and more stable.

The way forward

Can a values-based cooperation complement the already challenging global public goods provision in the future? Is a post-COVID strengthening of global civics too much to expect? Ongoing support for the SDGs (and the associated targets and indicators), as well as climate activism, allows some hope. While enlightened self-interest is embedded in the SDGs, there is also a strong global civics component that explains the momentum achieved by the 2030 Agenda. The same is true of the growing support for climate change mitigation and adaptation. In both cases, visible support from civil society can make it easier for government negotiators to reach agreements. Moreover, agreements with altruistic concessions have more support when there is burden-sharing, a major point for multilateralism. In a recent survey in the U.S., a majority of respondents favored increasing foreign aid by $101 billion a year to help achieve some of the SDGs provided other donor countries made similar efforts.[13]

What has allowed a values-based *universal* adoption of the SDGs has been what one could call their "non-political" nature. The SDGs omit fundamental features of liberal democracy such as freedom of expression and free competitive elections. But while they do not refer to freedom from *political constraints*, they do reflect values of "enabling freedoms"—giving people the ability to achieve economic and social goals. Isiah Berlin's distinction between negative and positive liberty is relevant here; as he argued, too often liberals refer only to the former.[14] As Berlin also argued, neither concept should be taken to extremes.[15] Notwithstanding the SDGs mostly aspirational nature and the additional difficulties COVID-19 has created for their achievement, the universal adoption of the 2030 Agenda and support for the positive liberties it includes has been a substantial step forward for international cooperation.

Should our vision of a desirable international system stop there and give up on liberal democratic values as universally compelling? Are liberal values a reflection of western culture only and no longer relevant in a world where the traditional "West" will no longer be dominant? Has the COVID-19 crisis illustrated the benefits of a controlling state where the individual has much less freedom than in a liberal democracy? This essay stands by the belief that while there may be a great diversity in the specific constitutional arrangements characterizing a democracy, liberal democratic values reflect universal human aspirations and are relevant to a discussion of international cooperation.[16]

One can imagine a dual approach that focuses on global public goods and the positive freedoms embodied in the SDGs on the one hand, and on liberal democratic values on the other. But how to implement such an approach?

Creating a club of democratic countries had been the objective of the "Community of Democracies" conceived by Madeleine Albright and Bronislaw Geremek, personalities with impeccable liberal democratic credentials.[17] The organization, however, now has Hungary, whose prime minister derides liberal democracy, on its Governing Council.[18] This telling example underlines the difficulty of building a "circle of democracies". Membership criteria may initially be agreed on by a small group of founding countries and could be inspired by the EU's Copenhagen Criteria.[19] But their interpretation would always be subject to intense political pressures and overriding foreign policy considerations. Moreover, as the experience of the EU itself demonstrates—again with Hungary as the most obvious example—not only governments but regimes change, and credibility requires the ability and resolve to suspend or expel noncompliant members.

In imagining multilateralism for the future, these lessons should induce caution. Coalitions of like-minded countries of various types will certainly always exist and be useful to solve particular problems But the universal U.N. membership and its adoption of the SDGs is uniquely valuable in allowing countries with different political regimes to cooperate, provide global public goods and achieve important economic and social goals on which they can all agree. Such cooperation, say on climate, will involve regimes far from liberal democracy, but may be unavoidable if the goal is to be reached.

This need not be incompatible with a belief in the universal validity of liberal democratic values and should not stop civil society from lending support to these values around the globe. Institutionalizing an elusive circle of democratic *countries* is unlikely to be of much help. Instead, a growing *community of people and civil society organizations* promoting liberal and democratic values and cooperating across borders and continents will be more effective in the years ahead.

> *The response demanded by the pandemic and ensuing economic contraction has enhanced the role of the nation-state.*

Endnotes

1. Kemal Derviş and Sebastian Strauss, "What COVID-19 Means for International Cooperation," Project Syndicate, March 6, 2020, **https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/global-cooperation-can-prevent-next-pandemic-by-kemal-Derviş-and-sebasti-n-strauss-2020-03**

2. Incidentally, this question is also the title of Scott Barrett's 2007 book "Why Cooperate? The Incentive to Supply Global Public Goods" (Oxford University Press). For another classic on the subject, see Todd Sadler, Global Collective Action (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

3. For a concise summary see Jean Pisani-Ferry, "Collective Action in a Fragmented World," Bruegel, September 11, 2019, https://www.bruegel.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Bruegel_Policy_Brief-2019_05_1.pdf. More recently Dani Rodrik and Stephen Walt offer their comprehensive "realist" vision of what a future global order in which the US and China play a dominant role should look like, **https://drodrik.scholar.harvard.edu/publications/constructing-new-global-order-project-framing-document**

4. Seth Berkley, Richard Hatchett and Soumya Swaminathan, "The Fastest Way Out of the Pandemic," Project Syndicate, July 15, 2020, **https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/covid-19-vaccine-cooperation-covax-by-seth-berkley-et-al-2020-07**

5. A particular version of such a vision was provided by Joseph Nye "After the Liberal International Order," Project Syndicate, July 6, 2020, **https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/biden-must-replace-liberal-international-order-by-joseph-s-nye-2020-07**

6. According to Nathan Gardels: "We will see a patchwork of industrial policies aimed at strengthening national resilience instead of global integration." Nathan Gardels, "From Globalization to a Planetary Mindset," Noema Magazine, August 7, 2020, **https://www.noemamag.com/from-globalization-to-a-planetary-mindset/. Also see Carmen Reinhart speaking in interview, May 21, 2020, Bloomberg News, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2020-05-21/reinhart-says-covid-19-is-the-last-nail-in-the-coffin-of-globalization-video**

7. Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," International Security 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 42-79.

8. There are good arguments in favor of using industrial policy to achieve social and economic goals, notably by Dani Rodrik and Daron Acemoglu. Dani Rodrik and Stephen Walt use a narrow definition of beggar-thy-neighbor policies as policies that "create domestic gains only to the extent that other nations lose". This essay uses a broader definition of such policies as those having significant negative spillover effects.

9. Martin Rees, "The Biomedicine Threat," Project Syndicate, September 6, 2020, **https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/biomedicine-future-threats-ethical-dilemmas-by-martin-rees-2019-09**

10. William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, The Button: The New Nuclear Arms Race and Presidential Power from Truman to Trump (Dallas: Ben Bella Books, 2020).

11. The Preamble of the UN Charter states that "We the peoples of the United Nations [are] determined... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small." Article 55, Chapter IX of the Charter committed all member states to promote "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion."

12. Kemal Derviş, Foreword to Global Civics: Responsibilities and Rights in an Interdependent World, ed. Hakan Altinay (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), vii-x.

13. **https://www.publicconsultation.org/energy/americans-favor-major-increases-in-us-aid-toward-sustainable-development-goals-if-other-countries-do-their-part-as-well/**

14. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," Four Essays On Liberty (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118-172. There is a vast philosophical debate on these concepts going back to Kant.

15. Too often social goals interpreted as positive liberties have been imposed by small authoritarian minorities; on the other hand, a person having liberty from political constraints cannot really be free if hungry and without shelter.

16. Different histories and cultures may imply different evaluations and perceptions of desirable degrees of individualism and social cohesion. This need not negate the universal appeal of what is most fundamental for a democracy. The claims by many authoritarians that their nation's histories or cultures reflect non-democratic and illiberal values are not credible in the face of the repression needed to sustain their regimes.

17. **https://community-democracies.org/values/**

18. 'Hungarians welcomed illiberal democracy. The fact that in English it means something else is not my problem. In the Hungarian context, the word liberal has become negative. Liberal democracy has no or very little support in Hungary. What I want to say is that it's not true that a democracy can only be liberal. There's democracy in Hungary period, it doesn't need any modifiers." Viktor Orban, December 14, 2014, speaking in interview with Bloomberg News, **http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-12-15/hungary-on-path-to-shed-junk-grade-and-shield-forint-orban-says.html**

19. **https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/accession_criteria_copenhague.html**