



Is There a Future for Multilateralism?

The Challenges of Global Governance in the 21st Century

Webinar 2 – The Geopolitics of Multilateralism

18 November 2020 – 4 to 5:30 pm

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On 18 November 2020, the UNESCO Chair on Human Rights at the University of Luxembourg welcomed 28 participants – mostly students and academics from the University of Luxembourg and the University of Trier – to its webinar dealing with ‘The Geopolitics of Multilateralism’. A worthy and enriching conclusion to an inspiring series dealing with multilateralism and the challenges of global governance in the 21st Century organized on the occasion of the 75th birthday of the UN, the session focused on the roles of the US, China, and the EU. The session was moderated by the holder of the UNESCO Chair, Prof. Robert Harmsen, who hosted the speakers Prof. Josip Glaurdić (Head of the Institute of Political Science at the University of Luxembourg), Prof. Sebastian Heilmann (Professor for the Government and Political Economy of China at the University of Trier) and Dr. Sergiu Vintila (Policy Analyst at the European Parliament and Visiting Fellow in the Institute of Political Science at the University of Luxembourg).

In his introductory remarks, **Professor Harmsen** recalled the key conclusions and definitions unearthed during the previous session and outlined their relevance for the present discussion, aiming to investigate the geopolitical realities of classic interstate relations and how their patterns may or may not facilitate a widening or deepening of the multilateral structure. Drawing on the recent work of John Ikenberry, Harmsen noted the different senses in which one might understand the goals of US and Western foreign policy as ‘making the world safe for democracy’, in more activist or more limited, pragmatic terms. Harmsen further raised the point that over the past two decades alone there have been multiple projects for structuring, restructuring, or renewing cooperation either among democratic or multilateralist states, such as, for example, the League of Democracies, the D10, and the Alliance for Multilateralism. Harmsen concluded his remarks by providing a set of guiding, discussion-inducing questions relative to the prospects of US leadership under the Biden administration, the Chinese dual circulation model of engagement and non-engagement with the world, and the EU's strategic autonomy and actorness (or rather lack thereof) in foreign policy beyond trade.

The first speaker, **Professor Glaurdić**, presented an overview of US foreign policy. Drawing on three episodes in his life where Americans shook up his preconceived notions about how they perceive their

country and its role in the world, Glaurdić argued that Trump is the perfect embodiment of nationalism and isolationism present in different guises across the American political spectrum. Trump's (failed) foreign policy and world view are framed by the (not necessarily incorrect) recognition that the unipolar moment was no more, that globalization failed in the sense of not serving the American working class, and that international institutions were weak and inefficient in helping America remedy these dynamics. The perception of international relations as a zero-sum game with a finite amount of resources found its equivalent in a transactional approach to foreign policy, where America could be a partner, but only if it served its economic interests. Glaurdić expects the Biden administration to assure the world of its commitment to a liberal world order, rejoin the Paris accords, renew talks with Iran, and stall trade negotiations with the UK. Trump's foreign policy for the middle class will, however, remain – albeit in a repackaged and differently marketed form – and will be characterized by a tough line on China and on international trade. The speaker concluded that even though Europe can be relieved, Trump's defeat does not mark the end of deep-seated problems, and while Europe should lend a hand in rebuilding international structures, it should do so mindful of America's limitations and without projecting its ideas (of what America is and should be) on a country that clearly cannot meet these expectations.

The second speaker, **Professor Heilmann**, provided expert insight into the Chinese approach to multilateralism, driven by the strategic objective 'to make the world safe for the Chinese communist party', with a great revival of the Chinese nation in mind. In that sense, the speaker pointed out that the result of the US election is not of high relevance to China, which believes that time is on its side and that the US are in historical decay, a symptom of the latter being its internal polarization. Heilmann noted an increasingly activist Chinese foreign policy. Analyzing US-China relations, Heilmann found that several layers of escalation may already be identified and that the forces at work are pointing towards a continuation of such escalation. When dealing with the Chinese approach to multilateralism, one should understand that the latter is very strategic and instrumental, able to pursue common objectives where it serves Chinese interests, but with an emphasis on maintaining national sovereignty in the implementation of targets. This approach, while rule-based, is framed by a systemic incompatibility with Western values and assumptions. Heilmann further drew attention to the sustained growth of Chinese influence in the UN system, strategically seeking to reshape the system so as to accommodate its political and economic interests. The success of this strategy is evidenced by the fact that Chinese nationals are currently at the head of four major UN agencies, as well as by China's successful mobilization of support for its positions in the UN Human Rights Council.

The third speaker, **Dr. Vintila**, analyzed the EU's approach to multilateralism and where the Union situates itself between the two mastodons that are the US and China. Vintila introduced his presentation by reminding the audience of the European historical, normative, and pragmatic arguments in favor of multilateralism. Underlining how much being a multilateralist organization is ingrained in the EU's DNA, the speaker evidenced his statement with quotes by multiple high-ranked officials (Barroso, Mogherini, and Solana) and evidence from EU treaties (Art. 21 TEU), painting a picture of multilateralism and the EU as being inextricably linked. The EU, born and grown as a deeply multilateral peace project, has built its identity as a foreign policy actor around addressing issues through multilateralism. Within the EU, the term multilateralism is thus often invested with a wider set of values and normative resonance, which is not necessarily the case for China and the US. Pragmatically, multilateralism allows the EU and its member states to address global challenges that they would have difficulties addressing by themselves. Responding to a previously raised question by the moderator, Vintila gave a spirited defense of the 'actorness' of the EU and argued that the idea of

strategic autonomy is not empty but has to be seen in the context of the EU's multilateralist approach, notable successes being the JCPOA and the EU's important role in negotiating Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. Vintila further described global tendencies for what he called 'multilateralism minus one' (moving on without the US) such as the Paris agreement or the recently agreed-upon RCEP bringing together 15 Asian-Pacific nations. Vintila concluded that the world of international relations is still a world of anarchy and competition, and that the EU must adapt to different views and interests on multilateralism and cooperation.

The ensuing discussion tackled multiple issue areas such as how the serial bilateralism of China undermines a coherent European response and affects the relationship with the US, what role (if any) the UN has in terms of developing the multilateral order, and how an American re-engagement will play out in the short and in the long term. The moderator concluded this rich two-part series by noting that 'the academic lesson to take away is the need to unpack the idea of multilateralism – not only analytically, in terms of various IR approaches and understandings – but also how these are differentially constructed in the different national and geopolitical cultures. For those of us who come from certain systems, not least in the context of Europe, we invest multilateralism with a normative value which it might not have elsewhere – by unpacking it, we can understand its different dimensions and how we can go forward with it'.