

## Covid-19 and the Multilateral System: What Role for the EU?

by Roberto Baccharini

Covid-19 represents a critical juncture for the European Union. The crisis catalysed the weakening of the post-Cold War international order and the emergence of a multipolar world, presenting Europe with significant, even existential challenges.

### *The crisis of the unipolar world*

With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, the US took over as the global leader, triggering the so-called “unipolar moment”. In this system, the US “possesses an overwhelming dominance of political power” and therefore “has the ability to shape the international legal system” in profound ways.<sup>1</sup>

This dominance, however, did not preclude the US from structuring the

<sup>1</sup> Sean Butler, “Gemeinschaft as the Lynchpin of Multilateralism: World Order and the Challenge of Multipolarity”, in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 29 (2018), p. 17-34, <http://hdl.handle.net/10468/7979>.

international system in a multilateral way, albeit being careful to avoid being excessively restrained by it.<sup>2</sup> The US saw multilateralism as a means to project power and influence, securing a form of “liberal hegemony”,<sup>3</sup> meaning that the multilateral order it established was built to suit its own ideology: liberal democracy as a form of government and neoliberalism (in different forms) as the predominant economic theory.<sup>4</sup>

With multilateralism, we refer to what Keohane defined as “persistent sets of rules that constrain activity, shape expectations, and prescribe roles”.<sup>5</sup> Multilateralism is a form of

<sup>2</sup> For instance by its decision to not ratify international treaties for bodies like the League of Nations and the International Criminal Court.

<sup>3</sup> Sean Butler, “Gemeinschaft as the Lynchpin of Multilateralism”, cit.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.; and Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It*, Rome, IAI, February 2021, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12819>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert O. Keohane, “International Institutions: Two Approaches”, in *International Studies*

*Roberto Baccharini is a MPhil/PhD student in European Politics at the University of Exeter. This is a winning article (1st place) submitted to the 2021 edition of the IAI Prize contest and presented at a public debate organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome on 27 October 2021.*

structured cooperation between states through institutions and international organisations.

Since 2001, this multilateral system has been increasingly challenged, as has the US's influence over it.<sup>6</sup> The 9/11 attacks acted as a watershed between the unipolar moment and the two decades of crises and increased confrontation that followed in its wake. The attacks ignited a 20-year militarised response from the US in the form of a "Global War on Terror", which culminated with the recent and humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan. In these two decades, the US's unilateralism exposed the limits of multilateralism.

Then came the 2008 economic crisis, which started in the US and later arrived to Europe and the rest of the world. This represented a profound crisis of the economic pillar of the US-led world order: neoliberalism, free-trade and economic globalisation were all challenged as never before.<sup>7</sup>

The 2016 election of Donald Trump landed a critical blow to the US's image globally and with it multilateralism was further eroded. During the Trump presidency, the US retired from the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris Climate Accords, the World Health Organization (WHO) and many more international

*Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (1988), p. 379-396 at p. 384.

<sup>6</sup> Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy*, cit., p. 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Nathalie Tocci, "The Demise of the International Liberal Order and the Future of the European Project", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 18|63 (November 2018), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/9708>.

organisations. The US also effectively crippled the World Trade Organization (WTO) by undermining the court of appeals and damaged another pillar of the unipolar world order – liberal democracy –, as the attempt to override the results of the 2020 presidential election clearly showed.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, through its stance towards Europe, which included the use of extraterritorial sanctions and tariffs and a more general lack of coordination, the US weakened the transatlantic alliance, another fundamental pillar of the multilateral system.

This weakening of the US's influence was matched by an increasing role of potential competitors. China, with the Belt and Road Initiative and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, and Russia, with its support for Donbas's separatists, the annexation of Crimea and the interventions in Libya and Syria, demonstrated – to varying degrees – the rise of multipolarism. While the US still retains global primacy in economic, military and political terms, global and regional competitors are challenging Washington in unprecedented ways.

<sup>8</sup> Susan Corke, "COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery: If the US and Europe Find the Will, Multilateralism Is the Way", in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|41 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12428>; Paul J.J. Welfrens, "Trump's Trade Policy, BREXIT, Corona Dynamics, EU Crisis and Declining Multilateralism", in *International Economics and Economic Policy*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (July 2020), p. 563-634, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10368-020-00479-x>; and Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy*, cit.

### *The Covid-19 pandemic*

The Covid-19 pandemic, and the related crises generated by it, came as a “perfect storm” for the weakened multilateral order.<sup>9</sup> These crises revealed the weaknesses and limits of an international economic system based on globalisation, free trade and global value chains. When the crisis struck, the system crashed, with more and more countries resorting to protectionist measures that severely damaged international commerce and multilateral responses to the pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic also affected liberal democracy and its core values. The faith in the merits of liberal democracy was challenged, at least in the first months of the pandemic, by comparing the successful containment efforts of illiberal and non-democratic countries with the shortcomings of liberal democratic states in handling the pandemic.

The pandemic also damaged the US’s reputation. Since WWII, the advent of Covid-19 was probably the first time the US refused to take the lead in a global crisis. Under the Trump presidency, the US effectively abdicated its leadership role, refusing to organise

and coordinate the global fight against the pandemic in the international arena and at home. Multilateralism was severely damaged as a result.

As proof of this, it is worth remembering how certain European states – and the US – refused to send masks and protective equipment to struggling states in the first months of the pandemic, or the increasing tensions and conflicts concerning vaccines procurement and distribution and the failures of the WHO and the WTO to foster genuine international cooperation to tackle the pandemic.

### *The emergent multipolar world*

The Covid-19 crisis acted as an accelerator of already existing challenges and developments. The pandemic bolstered the crisis of the post-Cold War international order, which started long before Covid-19 struck, accelerating the emergence of a unipolar world.<sup>10</sup>

A “multipolar world” refers to “a configuration in which power is divided relatively equally between more than two major actors” and “that a small number of actors (the ‘poles’) have disproportionate power relative to other actors in the system”.<sup>11</sup> This situation poses significant challenges to a crucial component of this order: multilateralism.

<sup>9</sup> For a general overview, see Alessandro Colombo and Paolo Magri (eds), *The World and the Pandemic. Europe’s Hour?*, Milan, Ledizioni, March 2021, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/node/29455>; Claudia Schmucker, “The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on US and European Commitment to the Multilateral Economic Order”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 20|39 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12403>; and David L. Levy, “COVID-19 and Global Governance”, in *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (March 2021), p. 562-566, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12654>.

<sup>10</sup> Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy*, cit.

<sup>11</sup> Lisa ten Brinke and Benjamin Martill, “Coping with Multipolarity: EU Values and the Stability of International Order”, in *Dahrendorf Working Papers*, No. 11 (20 August 2019), p. 8, <https://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu/?p=6163>.

In a multipolar world, the role of multilateralism is paradoxical. On the one hand, the absence of a hegemon and competition between poles will make multilateralism more challenging to realise. On the other, a functioning multilateral system will be fundamental for the whole system's stability and viability. In a nutshell, multilateralism will be of even greater importance but more difficult to achieve in a multipolar world.<sup>12</sup>

### *The EU's dilemma*

The European Union was one of the most famous products of the international liberal order promoted and sustained by the US. Multilateralism is the essential feature of the EU's action, both internally and externally. Multilateralism characterised the process of evolution of the Union and was the main instrument to project European values and influence across the world.<sup>13</sup> Global challenges require global solutions, and multilateralism is what could make cooperation between the actors possible.

In an age of increasing confrontation among the "poles", multilateralism is more important than ever. It is fundamental to secure the EU's existence as well as the Union's ability to protect its values, act on the global stage and promote responses to global challenges like climate change (which is fast approaching the point of no return), migration flows or pandemics,

<sup>12</sup> Sean Butler, "Gemeinschaft as the Lynchpin of Multilateralism", cit.

<sup>13</sup> Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy*, cit.

like Covid-19.

In this context, the EU finds itself between the rock of the emerging multipolar order and the hard place of increasing global crises. As Machiavelli remarked: "I believe also that he will be successful who directs his actions according to the spirit of the times, and that he whose actions do not accord with the times will not be successful".<sup>14</sup>

Times have changed and the EU now has a choice: either it evolves to match the new circumstances, or it continues to remain stuck in an unsustainable status quo. To adapt to the changing international context, the Union should strive to become a pole itself and use its acquired role and influence to promote and defend multilateralism in an increasingly multipolar world.

To achieve this goal, the Union should labour to acquire strategic autonomy in its foreign and security policy. To be autonomous, the EU should possess the "ability of the self – autos – to live by its laws – nomos".<sup>15</sup> Becoming autonomous for the EU means actively pursuing multilateralism but also being able to act alone if needed. To become strategic, this autonomy should be oriented to achieve the Union's goals and values.

There is no pre-determined path to achieve strategic autonomy. That said, the recent crises facing the Union could

<sup>14</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by W.K. Marriot, London/Toronto, Dent & New York, Dutton, 1908, p. 205, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Prince\\_\(Marriott\)/Chapter\\_25](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Prince_(Marriott)/Chapter_25).

<sup>15</sup> Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy*, cit., p. 3.





provide some clues and pointers as to what to prioritise first.

As demonstrated by the dramatic NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, the EU was utterly unable to act in tangible ways to influence the outcome. With regards to Afghanistan, the US called the shots, forcing EU states to follow Washington's decisions, within minimal coordination. This fact again highlights the need for a common EU foreign and security policy, an important precondition to achieve strategic autonomy and increase Europe's ability to pursue its interests both at home and abroad.

Concerning economic crises, the 2008 financial meltdown and the current pandemic have again underscored the need to complete the EU's fiscal union. To be autonomous, one needs to possess enough resources. An important first step in this direction, the unveiling of the Next Generation EU stimulus package, has been made, but it is still early to say that a complete fiscal union has been achieved. This will be fundamental to increase the EU's ability to tackle unexpected socio-economic disruptions that originate beyond its borders.

Finally, all these recent crises showed how the unanimity rule constrains the ability of the Union to react in an efficient and timely manner. Thus, to achieve strategic autonomy, the unanimity rule should be revised, leading to decision-making by qualified double majority in the council (majority of states and majority of people).

Caught between the rock of an emerging multipolar order and the hard place of increasing global challenges and crises, strategic autonomy provides one pathway to re-invigorate the Union and improve its ability to act in the future.

Only by doing so, the Union will have a chance to become a pole in this emerging multipolar order and promote multilateralism to manage this new situation. Recalling Machiavelli's warning that "if times and affairs change, he is ruined if he does not change his course of action",<sup>16</sup> the EU should understand that to keep pace with these changing times it must itself embrace changes and reforms, enhancing its strategic autonomy and promoting multilateralism as the best means to protect its values and interests, both at home and abroad.

7 October 2021

<sup>16</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, cit., p. 205.

### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì ([a.dessi@iai.it](mailto:a.dessi@iai.it))

- 21 | 48 Roberto Baccharini, *Covid-19 and the Multilateral System: What Role for the EU?*
- 21 | 47 Chiara Andreazza, *Europe and Covid-19: Never Waste a Good Crisis*
- 21 | 46 Irene Paviotti, *Covid-19 and the International Liberal Order: Goodbye "Global", Hello "Regional"?*
- 21 | 45 Sonia Bianconi, *The World After the Pandemic: European Unity and the Challenge of Reviving Multilateralism*
- 21 | 44 Nicola Bilotta, *An International Digital Yuan: (Vane) Ambitions, (Excessive) Alarmism and (Pragmatic) Expectations*
- 21 | 43 Riccardo Alcaro, *Twenty Years Later: Why 9/11 Has Not Been a Second Pearl Harbor*
- 21 | 42 Riccardo Perissich, *US Credibility and the Afghanistan Withdrawal*
- 21 | 41 Jesse Colzani, *If you Can't Beat Them, Join Them: Should States Embrace Bitcoin?*
- 21 | 40 Smita Srinivas, *Industrial Policies for Health: The G20 Must Act Now*
- 21 | 39 Lorenzo Kamel, *Decolonising Knowledge: A Euro-Mediterranean Perspective*