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A New Multilateralism for the Twenty-First Century

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“America First” was successful in achieving its intended purpose. Many of the “libs” its advocates sought to “own” took the bait and helped fuel simplistic arguments, not least over the revival of isolationism in US foreign policy. Though relatively weaker than it once was, the country remains hard-wired by its own design into dense, border-spanning social and economic networks. Repairing the political foundations supporting those networks remains very much in the national interest. Trump’s legacy makes the task both clearer and more difficult.

On the basis of more reasoned and less emotional debate, Americans can again begin helping existing multilateral organizations adapt and adjust in the face of policy challenges that must be met with others. Even with good will, however, limits on their capacity are now more obvious. Rising demands for collective action across diverse policy arenas are increasingly intricate and extensive, but the mandates and instruments of agencies like the IMF, WTO, and WHO are too constrained, not least by the exigencies of electoral politics in the United States. New forms of effective power to address peak global risks seem required, and the deeper challenge is to underpin them with a broader sense of legitimacy. The Trump administration encouraged skepticism in the intergovernmentalist dogma of the mid-twentieth century, but it did so without proposing feasible nationalist solutions to wicked problems like pandemics, the proliferation of massively destructive weapons, or climate change. By insisting on its right to veto collective action, it forced even traditional follower states to consider their options, including the option of building new kinds of institutions. Ironically, the administration gave an impetus to pushing beyond the old multilateralism and experimenting with a new multilateralism that abandons the idea that ‘governance without government’ would ever successfully come to grips with certain global problems.

Ever more undeniably, world society is developing and deepening all around us, albeit in fragile natural and political environments (Albert, 2016). Especially for a set of peak risks facing it, the new multilateralism must confront more directly the question of how the fiscal benefits of integration and the fiscal burdens of adjustment will be allocated. If such an intuition is not blindly denied, trans-boundary and multi-layered political formations aiming in just such directions begin to come into view (McConaughy et al.,

2018). From expanding club gatherings to variously shifting regional fora to more assertive efforts by many states to enhance the extra-territorial application of their laws, new governing experiments are underway. Their sustainability ultimately depends both upon both the marshalling of effective power and the negotiations of new understandings on distributive justice. As new political formations emerge, the struggle for legitimacy always follows (Nagel 2005).

The intergovernmental structures underpinning world order during the decades immediately following the Second World War were relatively easy for Americans to accept. Indeed, as John Ruggie (1993, 8) famously explained, the post-war expansion of certain kinds of multilateral arrangements reflected less “*American hegemony*” than “*American hegemony*.” The norms and practices of institutions like the IMF promoted core US values and interests. They demanded no deep compromise in American governing practices. Indeed, they often deflected pressures for domestic policy adjustment. Alas, that uniquely permissive era ended before the national election of 2016. Eight years earlier, economic catastrophe was avoided by emergency US actions to blunt the global consequences of its own domestic mismanagement. Key allies and economic partners collaborated. But doubts about the replicability of the experience soon grew. The abysmal mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced skeptical views, as did the continuing strength of Trumpism during and after the November 2020 election.

In the debate on the future of world order, memories of the late 1940s restrict political imaginations. For proponents of a new multilateralism, 1789 provides a better starting point. In that seminal year Americans reluctantly but seriously began a long process of experimenting with a new form of political authority. Over the previous decade, they had already done the difficult work of re-imagining the internal dimension of sovereignty. An adequate degree of collective authority, they concluded, could be shared, contested, and left somewhat ambiguous without losing its substance; it could still promise effective policy responses in the face of clear and present dangers. Fundamental federalist compromises never came easily to thirteen former colonies in the late eighteenth century, nor were their adaptations straightforward for their successors in the wake of a bloody civil war. In the face of clear and present systemic dangers today, the obvious question is whether similar if limited adaptations can be forged beyond established territorial limits without the stimulus of actual catastrophe and political violence.

The profound shock of the First World War in fact revived the old idea of federalist experimentation at the global level (Rosenboim, 2017). Alas, the antecedents of Trumpism in the United States and elsewhere, disaster myopia, and a generalized failure of imagination reinterred it. The cataclysm forever linked to the names Auschwitz and Hiroshima then resurrected it a quarter century later. Active participants in subsequent debates were hardly cranks or dreamers, for they had

actually witnessed genocidal nationalism and nuclear terror. The Cold War nevertheless relegated their hardly utopian debates to faculty common rooms, where even realists like Hans Morgenthau came to acknowledge the inevitability of some kind of world government in the nuclear age (Scheuerman, 2009). After the end of the Cold War, a rough consensus did seem to emerge on the prospects of deeper political integration in the long run (Wendt, 2003; Deudney, 2007; Beck, 2008; Archibugi, 2008; Ikenberry, 2020).

As Emily Jackson and her colleagues indicate in their essay below, however, close observers of the international scene now express serious concerns. Confidence in the future has been damaged during the past four years, but perhaps not beyond redemption. A sense of the need for greater burden sharing in the near future is gathering. Along with already well-identified wicked problems, there is mounting awareness that massively mounting public and private indebtedness on a global scale will soon require restructuring. On such pressing matters, the question experts ask ever more explicitly is whether inevitable cross-border and cross-policy responses will occur in an orderly (well-governed) way, or in a chaotic and much more costly manner.

Supporters of a new multilateralism do not have to believe that the adaptation of existing instruments for joint decision-making, where possible, or the establishment of new quasi-federal instruments, where necessary, are wonderful. They need only to be convinced that every feasible alternative will be worse for themselves. The struggle over precisely these kinds of trade-offs in contemporary Europe suggests the profundity of the challenge facing all of us. It also brings no alternative to mind.

Stand back and look at the historical forces driving actual federal arrangements in history, not only in Europe but around the world. Consider how pragmatists shaped them, reflect on how they accommodate without necessarily resolving all conflicts, and remember how far each remains from the perfectionist ideal of fully effective and legitimate multi-level governance (Rector, 2009; Russell, 2017; Fossum and Jachtenfuchs, 2018). The undeniable fact remains, though, that diverse and fractious societies facing the plausible prospect of imminent catastrophe have sometimes been able reluctantly to acquiesce in the notion that their most fundamental rights and responsibilities are complex, ambiguous, and divisible (Grande and Pauly, 2005; Weiss, 2013).

Skepticism about the immediate prospects for experiments that encompass but go well beyond the limits of extant international organizations remains understandable. But humanity is already deeply implicated in an intricately intertwined and dynamic sharing of power, even if variably across its many forms and centers (Zürn, 2018; Adler, 2019). Despite the uncertainty always surrounding our species, we must try to learn from the past as we reimagine legitimate political infrastructure capable of facilitating difficult and continuous policy adjustments in the years immediately ahead.

In that effort, Americans in the post-Trump era cannot be irrelevant, for they remain too powerful. In a less concentrated world, however, their inherited habits and dispositions – racial, sectarian, or ideological – can no longer define the outer limits of the possible (Vucetic 2011; Bell 2020). Unavoidably political work is required inside the United States. Infantilism and simplistic reasoning were modelled and taught during the past four years. Americans must again be persuaded that it is in their own collective interest to bring their traditional federalist inclinations to bear in the adaptation and design of systemic policy instruments fit for a new era. They must be reassured anew that sustainable solutions to inextricably shared problems do not require abandoning political autonomy across the board (Kupchan 2020). Donald Trump set back the cause but ultimately proved the point. He set the stage for wiser leaders and better teachers.

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