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Multilateralism: Navigating
Global, Continental, and
Regional Challenges and
Opportunities



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The Future of Multilateralism: Navigating Global, Continental, and Regional Challenges and Opportunities

Introduction

Multilateralism provides a structured framework for coordinating global policy, enabling states to align their actions in pursuit of shared goals. Its origins stretch back to post-Renaissance Europe, when treaties emerged as mechanisms to stabilize relations after devastating wars—most notably the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. Grounded in principles such as the indivisibility of collective interests, diffuse reciprocity, and adherence to rules-based governance, multilateralism has long promoted cooperation and collective problem-solving. Smaller nations have often embraced it as a means to amplify their voices. At the same time, stronger states have recognized their stabilizing role in maintaining international order.

In the modern era, multilateralism has been institutionalized through bodies such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO. Its successes are notable: the eradication of smallpox through WHO-led campaigns, the Montreal Protocol's phase-out of ozone-depleting substances, and UN peacekeeping missions that have helped societies transition from conflict to stability. Yet, these gains coexist with persistent shortcomings—human rights violators sitting on the UN Human Rights Council, chronic funding shortages, and frequent paralysis in decision-making.

From the Cold War to the Asian financial crisis of 1997, from the Korean and Vietnam wars to the oil shocks of the 1970s, multilateralism has repeatedly been tested. The rise of non-state actors, alongside African decolonization, diversified voices within the system, forcing adaptation. Still, recent decades suggest a troubling shift: momentum for broad collaboration and resource pooling to address shared challenges has waned, even as the world becomes more interdependent.

Emerging Challenges and Shifting Dynamics

The global order is being reshaped by new players who question the institutional and normative structures forged after World War II. The ascent of China, India, and other emerging powers has challenged the Western-led system, generating demands for reform. These states bring new perspectives and priorities that often clash with existing frameworks. Intensifying the U.S.–China–Russia rivalry, for example, has eroded trust in existing multilateral institutions and stalled decision-making in critical bodies such as the UN Security Council. Conflicts in the Middle East exemplify how geopolitics determines whether global actors seek cooperation or exploit crises at great human cost.

Compounding this, global security threats, rising populism, and eroding trust in global and regional institutions have deepened skepticism about multilateralism's relevance. Many perceive these institutions as inefficient, inequitable, or biased toward powerful states. Concerning trust in existing multilateral institutions such as the WTO and IMF, the core challenge lies not only in their pro-Western orientation but also in their refusal—or inability—to undergo meaningful reform. While these institutions were originally designed to consolidate Western leadership in the postwar order, their present crisis stems largely from the deficiency of Western governments themselves. Having long enjoyed the upper hand, Western powers increasingly doubt that these institutions can continue to safeguard their supremacy in a rapidly shifting global landscape. As a result, instead of strengthening and adapting them to the new situation, the West has at times further undermined their effectiveness. The structural veto points built into these institutions make reform exceedingly difficult, and Western governments, wary of redistributing power, have resisted changes that might promote greater global equity. Consequently, the very actors that once relied on these institutions to uphold their dominance now

erode their legitimacy, leaving them vulnerable not only to external criticism but also to internal stagnation.

Yet, rather than signaling collapse, these tensions may represent a phase of transformation. Contemporary global governance is increasingly dynamic, interconnected, and multilayered—marked by overlapping regimes, networks, and coalitions. No longer the sole domain of states, it now involves corporations, civil society organizations, and advocacy coalitions that influence agendas and norms across diverse platforms.

The Case for Renewal

Critics argue that multilateralism cannot “solve” geopolitics or revive the optimism of the post-Cold War moment. Yet, it can evolve into a more inclusive system that empowers smaller states, broadens participation, and fosters collective responsibility. Initiatives such as the Paris Climate Accord and the imperfect but coordinated global response to COVID-19 illustrate that unilateral or fragmented approaches are inadequate to meet today’s transnational challenges. What is needed is not abandonment, but renewal—anchored in inclusivity, human-centered principles, and recognition of shared vulnerabilities.

Globalization has deepened economic interdependence even as rivalries among great powers intensify. Smaller states, meanwhile, see renewed multilateralism as essential to safeguard their economic and security interests while amplifying their voices. Their engagement not only legitimizes the system but also enhances global stability—a benefit to larger states as well.

Transformation, Not Demise

What we are witnessing is less the end of global governance than the decline of a specific form of it—namely, Western liberal multilateralism shaped in the aftermath of World War II. In its place, new forms of cooperation are emerging. Minilateral and plurilateral frameworks, though narrower in scope, often prove more flexible and effective in

addressing urgent issues. They are reshaping global governance by redistributing influence and testing alternative mechanisms. Importantly, their emergence is also a response to the rigidity of existing institutions. The refusal of established bodies to adapt has pushed states and other actors to create new collaborative arrangements—sometimes to pressure traditional institutions toward reform, sometimes to provide temporary solutions to specific threats, and at other times to advance interests directly at odds with existing mechanisms.

The trajectory, however, is uncertain. Some observers see in this shift the promise of a more inclusive and responsive order. Others warn of further fragmentation, weakened legitimacy, and a leadership vacuum that could erode hard-won progress. The outcome will depend on whether new frameworks reinforce universal norms and gradually broaden participation, or retreat into exclusivity and rivalry.

The crisis of multilateralism is not only one of growing irrelevance but of transformation. The system faces serious strains, but also opportunities to reinvent itself for the 21st century. Global, continental, and regional cooperation—whether through reformed institutions or innovative minilateral mechanisms—remains indispensable for managing shared challenges. Ultimately, the continued relevance of multilateralism lies in its capacity to adapt, to uphold universal norms, and to balance the interests of both major powers and smaller states. In a fragmented and uncertain world, revitalized multilateralism remains humanity’s best hope for advancing peace, stability, and shared prosperity as well as manage the change in the balance of power between major powers, particularly that between the U.S. and China.

Why Is Multilateralism in Flux Today?

Multilateralism is in flux today because of profound structural changes in global power, the rise of nationalism in its various forms, declining trust in international institutions, and mounting financial pressures.

First, the relative decline of Western hegemony and

the rise of emerging powers—particularly China, India, and others—have called into question the legitimacy of institutions designed in the mid-20th century. At the core of this crisis lies the reluctance of existing multilateral governance frameworks to adapt to shifting economic realities. This rigidity has eroded trust, as many states view the institutions as unrepresentative, slow, and increasingly irrelevant. Scholars point out that the erosion of multilateral commitment reflects the unilateral behavior of powerful states that seek to rewrite the rules of cooperation to favor their interests. Such states often bypass collective mechanisms, defy agreed norms, and impose their private interests as “new standards.” When reform is resisted, these powers may simply abandon institutions altogether. Examples include the paralysis of the WTO’s Doha Round, the failure to expand permanent seats on the UN Security Council, and wavering commitments to climate agreements.

These dynamics reveal deep structural flaws within multilateralism itself. Efforts such as the Bridgetown Initiative reflect growing demands for reform, yet contradictions remain—especially as emerging and developing economies (EMDEs) refuse to abandon their insistence on “special and differentiated responsibilities” in trade and climate negotiations. This dual resistance—from established powers unwilling to share authority and EMDEs reluctant to compromise advantages—further accelerates the system’s crisis.

Second, the uneven benefits of globalization have fueled populist backlashes across many countries, weakening domestic support for international cooperation. The United States—once the chief architect of the liberal order—has, at times, turned inward or acted unilaterally. The Trump administration’s withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord epitomized this retreat. At the same time, intensifying great power rivalry, especially between the U.S. and China, has fragmented the multilateral landscape. States are increasingly pressured to align with competing blocs, undermining the universal character of global institutions. Moreover, pressing transnational

challenges—climate change, pandemics, digital governance, and migration—have exposed the limits of existing multilateral mechanisms to respond swiftly, equitably, and effectively. This inadequacy has eroded public trust and intensified calls for comprehensive reform of the UN system and Bretton Woods institutions, which many now see as outdated for the complexities of the 21st century.

Third, financial constraints exacerbate the fragility of the multilateral system. The U.S., traditionally the largest contributor to UN budgets, has accumulated significant arrears, creating a severe liquidity crisis that undermines the UN’s capacity to operate. Chronic underfunding weakens global organizations’ ability to address urgent issues—from peacekeeping to humanitarian crises—at precisely the moment when collective action is most needed.

Despite these challenges, multilateral institutions retain critical relevance. The UN and other global bodies remain indispensable for addressing humanity’s most pressing problems: conflict resolution, climate change, public health, and sustainable development. Many argue that even without robust U.S. leadership, the international community must preserve and strengthen the global rules-based order. The world today is no longer unipolar; power is increasingly distributed among rising states, regional blocs, and non-state actors. This diffusion of power, while complicating governance, also creates opportunities to sustain multilateralism through new coalitions and regional initiatives.

However, this belief, while normatively appealing, borders on wishful thinking. The reality is that the United States remains the structural cornerstone of most of the world’s major international institutions. Its financial contributions, political influence, technological capabilities, and normative leadership continue to be indispensable to their functioning. Whether it is funding peacekeeping operations, underwriting development finance, or shaping normative frameworks around trade, human rights, and security, the U.S. plays a role that no other single power—or group of powers—has yet been able to replicate or replace. While the success or failure of the UN hinges on the leadership and cooperation of

its member states, attempts to bypass or sideline the U.S. within these frameworks often lead to institutional stagnation, fragmentation, or a drift toward increasing ineffectiveness. In this context, analysts emphasize the importance of understanding the motivations behind shifts in U.S. foreign policy strategies concerning multilateral institutions. Experts suggest that the U.S. departure from its traditional role in global multilateralism may stem from a perception of declining relative power, particularly in light of the rising influence of nations like China and the emergence of new power blocs challenging traditional Western dominance. This strategic shift appears aimed at reclaiming control over economic policies and trade relationships through tailored bilateral agreements that better align with U.S. national interests. By prioritizing such negotiations, the U.S. can sidestep the compromises often required in multilateral settings, potentially securing more favorable terms.

Moreover, the reduction of financial contributions to multilateral institutions signals a shift toward a more transactional approach to international relations. This approach tends to prioritize immediate returns over long-term cooperative goals, reflecting a broader skepticism toward global governance structures perceived as inefficient or misaligned with U.S. interests. By focusing on bilateral strategies, the U.S. can leverage its remaining strengths—such as economic size and military power—while also addressing domestic political sentiments favoring nationalism and populism. Ultimately, this shift may result in a more fragmented international landscape, where direct bilateral relationships redefine power dynamics. Additionally, this transformation raises critical questions about the future of international cooperation and the identity of the new multilateralism, particularly as fewer actors are available to step into the void left by Washington.

While it is true that the world has become more multipolar, this diffusion of power has not translated into a coherent or unified alternative capable of sustaining the legitimacy, enforcement,

and operational capacity of the global multilateral system. In short, the hope that global institutions can thrive without the active engagement and support of the United States is not grounded in geopolitical or institutional reality. Any durable renewal of multilateralism will, therefore, require U.S. participation—not necessarily as a hegemon, but as a committed stakeholder in a more inclusive and responsive global order. Ultimately, the crisis of multilateralism reflects both the limits of outdated structures and the pressures of a rapidly changing world. Its survival and renewal depend on whether states—large and small—can reconcile competing interests, share authority more equitably, and invest politically and financially in institutions designed to serve collective rather than narrow national goals.

Multilateralism During Great Power Rivalry

While great power rivalry tends to strain multilateralism, it does not preclude its existence. History shows that even at the height of geopolitical competition, cooperation has remained possible in areas of mutual interest or existential threat. During the Cold War, for example, the United States and the Soviet Union negotiated arms control treaties, collaborated on eradicating smallpox, and even found common ground in supporting UN peacekeeping missions. These experiences illustrate that rivalry does not erase the need—or the possibility—of cooperation.

Today, however, the resurgence of great power competition and the shifting interests of multiple actors have hobbled the multilateral system. With each emerging crisis, the framework has become more intricate, congested, and fragmented. Calls for systemic reform have intensified, yet change remains slow and uneven. In response, new regional and minilateral arrangements are increasingly emerging as pragmatic alternatives, designed to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles of large multilateral structures. These coalitions of the willing—such as the G20, BRICS, the Quad, or even continental groupings like the African Union—provide flexible platforms for cooperation, allowing like-minded nations to pursue shared priorities when global consensus proves elusive. Their effectiveness, however, depends on inclusivity, adaptability, and the ability to reconcile

diverse interests. Only under such conditions can these coalitions generate outcomes scalable enough to recalibrate multilateralism at the global level.

Some observers describe this as the rise of a new form of *competitive multilateralism*, where rival powers simultaneously use international forums to compete for influence and to negotiate, regulate, and coordinate on pressing issues. The central question is whether such temporary and issue-based alliances can remain sustainable amid resurgent power politics, rising nationalism, and intensifying trade wars. If they can, what appears as fragmentation today may, in fact, represent the gradual emergence of a new, more pluralistic multilateral order.

In this contested environment, multilateralism is increasingly defined by a complex interplay of cooperation, rivalry, and strategic pragmatism. Global institutions continue to serve as indispensable platforms for collective action, but they are also arenas where rivalries are projected and amplified. This dual character makes multilateralism both vital and fraught.

Despite mounting tensions, cooperation on transnational challenges has not disappeared. The Paris Agreement on climate change illustrates how states recognized that no single country can manage the existential threat of global warming alone. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization provided a forum for sharing information, coordinating responses, and distributing vaccines—even as vaccine nationalism, export restrictions, and competing narratives undermined solidarity. These examples highlight the enduring truth that certain global challenges simply cannot be addressed without some measure of collective action.

Yet the spirit of cooperation often collides with great power rivalry. The United Nations Security Council epitomizes this paradox: rather than acting as a neutral arbiter, it is frequently paralyzed when permanent members wield vetoes to shield allies or block actions against their interests. The Council's inability to respond decisively to crises in the Middle East and Ukraine

demonstrates how rivalry between the United States, Russia, and, increasingly, China can cripple multilateral institutions at their core mandate.

Pragmatism has thus become a defining feature of multilateralism in this era. States increasingly form issue-specific coalitions to pursue targeted cooperation while hedging against competitors. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—linking the U.S., India, Japan, and Australia—illustrates this trend in the Indo-Pacific, where members balance shared concerns with distinct national priorities. Meanwhile, it might be possible for regional organizations such as ASEAN and the African Union to gain influence, as localized solutions often appear more legitimate and effective than broad global frameworks dominated by outside powers.

Another dimension of this pragmatic turn is the rise of bilateral and minilateral arrangements that complement—or at times bypass—traditional institutions. These tailored partnerships allow states to pursue specific objectives without the delays and compromises of consensus-building in larger forums. At the same time, contestation over global norms adds another layer of rivalry. China's Belt and Road Initiative, for instance, is not just an infrastructure project but also an attempt to redefine global standards of connectivity and economic governance, perceived to be directly challenging the Western-led liberal order.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal the paradox of multilateralism under great power rivalry. On the one hand, it remains indispensable for addressing challenges that no state can solve alone. On the other hand, it is fragmented, instrumentalized, and fiercely contested, reflecting the strategic calculations of powerful states. Multilateralism today persists less as a unifying framework than as a contested arena where cooperation and competition coexist uneasily—an essential but contentious feature of contemporary global governance.

Why Did Multilateralism Thrive After the Second World War?

Multilateralism, as both a principle and a practice, emerged from the wreckage of war and thrived under a relatively stable balance of power and shared

interests. Today, it faces unprecedented tests from shifting geopolitical alignments, nationalist populism, institutional fatigue, and global fragmentation. Yet the very nature of 21st-century challenges makes multilateralism not just desirable but necessary. While great power rivalry complicates its functioning, it does not render it impossible. The future of multilateralism will depend on our collective ability to reimagine and reinvigorate cooperative mechanisms that are inclusive, equitable, and fit for purpose in an era of uncertainty.

Multilateralism thrived in the post-Second World War period primarily because the United States successfully shaped the architecture of global governance. It was the principal architect and underwriter of a rules-based international order, designing institutions such as the United Nations, the Bretton Woods system, and the GATT, which reflected both liberal ideals and U.S. strategic interests. Crucially, most countries accepted these rules—either out of genuine alignment, strategic necessity, or lack of alternatives. However, the current crisis of multilateralism stems from the gradual withdrawal of the United States from this leadership role, compounded by the rise of new centers of power that challenge the legitimacy, fairness, and effectiveness of the existing system. What once worked in favor of U.S. interests—leveraging multilateral frameworks to reinforce its global influence—is no longer easily attainable in a multipolar world.

Today, intensifying geopolitical rivalry makes both the creation of new global rules and the reform of existing institutions highly contentious. Veto points, power asymmetries, and competing worldviews block meaningful consensus. Moreover, the broader normative ambition that once underpinned multilateralism—namely, the shared aspiration to advance human progress and global public goods—is increasingly being eroded. Even cooperation on issues that were once seen as common threats—such as terrorism, drug and arms trafficking, and transnational organized crime—has become politicized. These threats are now often instrumentalized within the context of rivalry, with each side suspecting the other of

using them to undermine its position or legitimacy. This weaponization of global challenges undermines the possibility of collective action and corrodes the foundations of trust that multilateralism requires. This is the core of the current crisis: the collapse of a shared framework for global cooperation, even in the face of threats that no state can manage alone.

The Paradoxes and Imperatives of Multilateral Reform

One of the most significant dilemmas in today's global order is how to reform multilateralism when the very structures needing reform contain the obstacles to change. Similarly, it is important to recognize that the United States cannot unilaterally reform global institutions, even if it retains significant power. The architecture of the current multilateral system—particularly in bodies like the United Nations, the IMF, and the World Bank—is embedded with institutional veto points that prevent decisive action or structural change. These veto powers were designed in a different era to reflect a specific geopolitical balance, but today they often act as barriers to adaptation. As a result, even if the U.S. is willing to lead reform, it cannot do so alone.

The first necessary step, therefore, is a collective political readiness—especially from major powers—to acknowledge the shifting global reality and the need for a new multilateral framework that is more inclusive, representative, and responsive to contemporary challenges. This would require political will, mutual concessions, and a shared vision for global cooperation beyond narrow national interests.

Alternatively, one more radical but increasingly plausible path is for a coalition of major actors—such as the U.S., the EU, China, Russia, India, Brazil, and others—to come together outside the constraints of the current institutional system and design a new, inclusive framework from scratch. This new architecture could then be opened to the broader international community, allowing countries to opt in based on shared principles and common goals. Such an approach would bypass the structural vetoes of legacy institutions and offer a fresh start—though it would also risk creating parallel orders and further fragmentation if not handled with care.

In either case, the imperative is the same: global governance cannot remain static while power dynamics shift and global challenges intensify. The choice is not between reform and stasis, but between intentional, inclusive restructuring and reactive, fragmented disorder.

The question often raised is whether U.S. leadership in shaping post-World War II multilateralism was motivated solely by self-interest. In reality, the American role was both normative and strategic. The postwar order was not merely an idealistic vision of global cooperation—it was a carefully crafted system designed and led by the United States. Institutions such as the United Nations, the IMF, the World Bank, and GATT/WTO were never neutral platforms. They embedded liberal norms—open markets, democracy, the rule of law—that aligned with, and advanced, U.S. geopolitical and economic interests. Many states “agreed to abide by the rules” not out of pure convergence of values, but because of shared interests in stability, postwar reconstruction, and, in many cases, dependence on American power and resources. The system’s durability rested on U.S. leadership and its capacity to set and enforce the global agenda.

Today, the future of multilateralism is being questioned. The rules were largely set by a dominant Western power, and new actors—while willing to participate—seek to renegotiate the terms. The crisis facing multilateralism is not only one of dysfunction or a leadership vacuum; it is also a crisis of legitimacy and authority. The United States is no longer the uncontested leader. The rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the assertiveness of regional powers such as India, Turkey, the Gulf States, and Brazil have fractured the geopolitical landscape into overlapping and competing spheres of influence.

These emerging and middle powers are not merely dissatisfied with the *outcomes* of multilateralism—they challenge its *foundations*: who sets the rules, who enforces them, and whose interests the system ultimately serves. In this contested environment, multilateralism is

shifting from a U.S.-anchored monopoly to a competitive, multipolar arena where the very norms of global governance are up for negotiation.

Rivalry institutionalizes gridlock. In the UN Security Council, for instance, P5 rivalry often neutralizes any meaningful consensus on pressing global issues—Syria, Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan, etc. The WTO’s appellate body is dysfunctional due to U.S. obstruction. Reform of the Bretton Woods institutions has stalled for years due to power asymmetries. Even in global health governance (e.g., WHO), responses to COVID-19 revealed how strategic mistrust overrides technical cooperation. This leads to a legitimacy crisis: multilateral institutions are expected to deliver, but are structurally incapable of doing so under the weight of rivalry.

There are those who maintain that the original rationale for the creation of the United Nations and other multilateral frameworks remains valid. Global challenges such as terrorism, pandemics, climate change, cybersecurity, and transnational crime are by nature borderless. They demand collective solutions and sustained international cooperation. From this perspective, multilateralism is not an outdated ideal but a practical necessity for managing shared risks and ensuring global stability. However, the difficulty lies in the fact that these very threats—precisely because of their global importance—are increasingly politicized and weaponized within the context of geopolitical rivalries. In theory, transnational challenges should compel states to work together. In practice, they are often instrumentalized as tools in the pursuit of strategic advantage. Trust is eroded, and the cooperative spirit underpinning multilateralism gives way to suspicion and zero-sum calculations.

The examples are numerous. In the case of terrorism, accusations of “harboring terrorists” or “sponsoring terrorism” have been deployed to delegitimize governments, impose sanctions, or justify military interventions. During the COVID-19 pandemic, even the exchange of health data and the equitable distribution of vaccines were caught up in strategic competition, with access to lifesaving resources influenced by geopolitical alignments. In cybersecurity, rather than converging on common

norms for a safe and open digital space, states engage in cyber espionage and promote rival models of internet governance. Climate change—ostensibly the quintessential collective problem—has likewise become entangled in great power competition, as the race for green technologies and critical minerals unfolds more as an arena of rivalry than one of solidarity.

In such an environment, trust collapses, and multilateral institutions risk becoming arenas for confrontation rather than cooperation. The very platforms designed to facilitate joint problem-solving are repurposed as stages for projecting influence, scoring diplomatic points, and obstructing adversaries. The result is a dangerous paradox: the more urgent the need for collective action, the less politically feasible it becomes. This dynamic not only weakens the effectiveness of global governance but also leaves the world less prepared to address the crises that no single state can resolve alone.

Perhaps the most concerning trend in contemporary international relations is the erosion of the moral consensus that once—however imperfectly—animated the spirit of multilateralism. During the Cold War, the world was at least organized around two competing ideological visions of global progress, each claiming to serve humanity's future. This rivalry, though dangerous, provided a kind of coherence to global affairs and encouraged the creation of shared rules, norms, and institutions. Today, that unifying narrative has dissolved. There is no widely accepted vision of a common global good, no overarching ethical framework capable of commanding broad commitment. Realism has returned in full force, but unlike in earlier periods, it is not tempered by a rules-based consensus or a sense of moral responsibility that transcends national borders. Even the Sustainable Development Goals—once heralded as a universal compact for human development—are losing momentum in the face of economic nationalism, intensifying geopolitical rivalry, and a cascade of local and regional crises.

This decline in normative consensus does not

necessarily herald the end of multilateralism, but it does suggest a profound transformation in its form and function. Instead of a universal, rules-based order, we are likely to see multilateralism mutate into more fragmented, interest-driven, and regionally bounded arrangements. The emerging trend points toward “competitive plurilateralism,” where rival coalitions—such as BRICS+, the Quad, AUKUS, or the Belt and Road Initiative—construct parallel institutions, standards, and strategic frameworks to advance their own priorities. In this environment, universal multilateral platforms like the United Nations may persist as symbolic venues for dialogue, but the locus of real decision-making and cooperation will shift to unilateral, issue-specific, and often exclusionary blocs.

Even in the face of global threats—climate change, pandemics, food insecurity, or cyber conflict—the prevailing approach will be shaped less by a shared sense of responsibility and more by calculations of strategic utility. Cooperation will occur, but largely where it serves immediate national or bloc-specific interests, rather than in pursuit of an enduring common good. The result is a more transactional and fragmented multilateral landscape—one in which the limits of trust constrain the promise of collective action, the primacy of competition, and the absence of a shared vision for humanity's future.

No Return Without Rebuilding Trust and Balance

To return to robust, inclusive multilateralism would require restoring a degree of trust, legitimacy, and institutional balance. That likely won't happen under the current architecture, which too many emerging powers view as rigged. Reform—both of institutions and norms—is essential. But so too is reframing global cooperation not just as a moral imperative, but as a strategic necessity—something even rivals can accept in areas where mutual destruction is the alternative (e.g., nuclear non-proliferation, climate collapse). So, there is a need to be skeptical about the revival of multilateralism under the shadow of rivalry. The real challenge is whether one can adapt multilateralism to an era without a hegemon, where order must emerge from negotiation, not imposition.

Emerging Minilateralisms and Plurilateralisms in the Face of Weakening Multilateralism

In the face of growing challenges to global multilateralism, minilateralism and plurilateralism have emerged as frameworks of cooperation among selected countries to address shared challenges and threats. While some argue that these frameworks undermine multilateralism—pointing to instances where countries used smaller and selective coalitions to bypass or weaken broader mechanisms that they believed undercut their interests—such examples are not universally applicable and should not be seen as the norm. Minilateralism as well as plurilateralism, far from undermining multilateralism, can strengthen it by offering flexible, issue-specific, and results-oriented frameworks that break deadlocks, build trust among key actors, and generate momentum for broader global cooperation. When designed as a complement—rather than a substitute—to universal multilateral institutions, these arrangements can serve as laboratories for innovation, coalitions for action, and bridges to broader consensus.

Critics often point to cases like the “coalition of the willing” in the 2003 Iraq War as evidence that minilateralism can undermine multilateral legitimacy. While such examples highlight real risks, they also show a misuse of minilateralism rather than its inevitable failure. There are also strong counterexamples where minilateral frameworks have helped advance rather than hinder multilateral goals. For instance, the G-20 played a crucial role in coordinating a swift global response to the 2008 financial crisis, stabilizing markets faster than slower-moving multilateral organizations. Likewise, the High Ambition Coalition during the Paris Agreement negotiations showed how focused, cross-regional groups could break political deadlocks and build broad international support. When based on transparency, inclusivity, and alignment with global norms, minilateralism can serve as a catalyst—energizing and strengthening the multilateral system instead of competing with it.

Multilateralism today faces two interconnected challenges: practical inefficiency and the paralysis of universalism. The core weakness of the post-Second World War frameworks lies in their inability to adapt quickly to the complexities of an increasingly multipolar world. Institutions such as the UN and the WTO often become gridlocked by their universal membership and strict consensus requirements. Veto powers, divergent interests, and entrenched bureaucratic inertia frequently stall collective action. In contrast, minilateral groupings—such as the G7, G20, BRICS, the Quad, or “coalitions of the willing” around initiatives like the Paris Climate Accord—enable like-minded or capable actors to move forward without being constrained by the need for global unanimity. These more focused platforms can deliver faster results, experiment with new approaches, and eventually feed successful initiatives into the broader multilateral system. In this sense, minilateralism functions as a first-mover mechanism, breaking inertia and creating proof-of-concept models for wider adoption. Yet critics argue that exclusive clubs like the G7 were designed by great powers to preserve influence, often undermining universal institutions in the process. By sidelining key global actors, these selective groupings risk fragmenting international cooperation and weakening trust in truly global frameworks.

Minilateralism can build trust among key actors. In an era of strategic rivalry and deep mistrust among major powers, it is difficult to reach a consensus in broad multilateral settings. Minilateralism allows key stakeholders to engage in confidence-building, informal dialogue, and pragmatic cooperation on shared interests—climate, pandemics, cybersecurity, maritime security, etc.—in smaller, more manageable settings.

Minilateralism offers a diplomatic backchannel that can rebuild the trust and coordination needed to make multilateralism functional again towards norm incubation and policy innovation. Minilateral platforms can serve as incubators of new norms, standards, and governance models. For example, digital governance norms developed by the OECD or climate finance instruments pioneered by the G-20 can later be institutionalized within UN frameworks. Just as regional trade agreements once paved the

way for global liberalization under the WTO, unilateral initiatives can shape and accelerate rule-making in areas where multilateral bodies are stuck.

Unilateralism is often issue-specific rather than ideological. States may disagree on global governance models but can still cooperate in unilateral groups on shared problems like arms control, migration, food security, or anti-piracy. This allows for functional cooperation even in an era of strategic divergence. As important as the presence and adherence to norms and rules-based international order is to promote predictable and effective global governance, so is the pursuit of an inclusive and effective multilateral framework balancing pragmatic outcomes with ideological commitments.

Yet experts have warned that the real peril lies in the absence of a common normative foundation for collaboration and collective action that transcends mere pragmatic alliances. Without this, global governance may regress into a neo-Hobbesian state of nature, marked by a volatile mix of confrontational politics, zero-sum dynamics, and the neoliberal concentration of power among a select few. In such a scenario, the interests of smaller and medium-sized powers, as well as those of civil society, would ultimately be sacrificed. As a result, the potential of unilateral and plurilateral arrangements to foster equitable multilateralism should not be overshadowed by rigid ideological loyalty. Emphasizing practical solutions can enhance collaboration and address the complex challenges facing the international community today.

Unilateralism as well as plurilateralism might help preserve the spirit of multilateralism—collective problem-solving—even when multilateralism as a formal institution is under stress, although critics argue that these frameworks rather weaken multilateralism by bypassing universal frameworks. But this assumes a zero-sum relationship. In reality, unilateralism and multilateralism can coexist and work in tandem through complementarity and not-substitution. The key is to design unilateral and plurilateral

initiatives to reinforce broader norms and include pathways to broaden participation over time.

Unilateralism should be seen not as a retreat from multilateralism but as a pragmatic pathway to renew and extend it. In a world where global consensus is elusive but global challenges are intensifying, multilateralism needs reinforcement—not abandonment. Unilateralism, when aligned with inclusive principles and broader systemic goals, can offer the agility, experimentation, and coalition-building necessary to revitalize global cooperation. It is not the enemy of multilateralism—it may be its most necessary ally in a fractured world. This perspective offers a viable pathway by considering the drivers, interests, and objectives of states pursuing both plurilateral and unilateral arrangements to advance their collective and national goals. If these initiatives are designed with open accession and scalable frameworks, they can later be integrated into the multilateral system, contributing to the revitalization of institutions like the WTO and enhancing the overall architecture of global cooperation, rather than undermining it.

Multilateralism in the Context of the Horn and the African Context

Multilateralism is ebbing at the global level, and that erosion is mirrored—often more sharply—in the Horn of Africa. Although the catalysts differ from those in other regions, the weakening of cooperative frameworks in the Horn has arrived at a particularly inopportune moment. The region now confronts a confluence of political instability, protracted conflicts, climate shocks, humanitarian needs, and complex cross-border threats that demand coordinated responses. At such a juncture, a functional multilateral architecture would normally offer mechanisms for joint threat assessment, conflict mediation, burden-sharing for refugees and humanitarian relief, and regional economic planning. The absence or atrophy of such mechanisms therefore amplifies fragility and raises the risk that local crises will escalate and spill across borders.

Several factors explain why regional multilateralism in the Horn is under strain. Domestic political polarization and elite competition within member

states have reduced the political bandwidth available for cooperative action. Regional bodies such as IGAD have been weakened by contested mandates, limited institutional capacity, donor dependence, and the very interstate rivalries they are meant to manage. At the same time, the Horn's strategic position on the Red Sea and the wider Indian Ocean has attracted intensified interest from external actors—Gulf states, Turkey, and other regional and global powers—whose bilateral, transactional engagements sometimes substitute for collective approaches. These external involvements, when pursued without regional coordination, create overlapping security arrangements and competitive investments that further complicate consensus-building.

The practical consequences are tangible. Ad-hoc bilateral deals, port and corridor agreements, and security partnerships—often negotiated outside regional frameworks—have become more common, eroding a shared rules-based approach to maritime, trade, and security governance. The result is a patchwork of competing interests rather than a unified regional strategy. In some instances regional institutions that might have provided neutral mediation or an authoritative regional voice have been sidelined. For example, recent bilateral arrangements that bypassed regional consultative processes illustrate how states may pursue immediate national advantages at the expense of long-term regional coherence. This pattern undermines collective policy responses to trafficking, piracy, forced displacement, and food insecurity, and it reduces the region's bargaining power in engagements with extra-regional powers.

Rebuilding effective multilateralism in the Horn of Africa will require not only institutional reform but also a genuine commitment of political will from member states. The foundations of any credible regional order must rest on capable, trusted, and politically neutral institutions. This means depoliticizing and professionalizing regional organizations—strengthening their secretariats with skilled technical staff, insulating them from domestic political rivalries, improving early-warning and conflict-prevention systems, and

securing sustainable, predictable financing that is not hostage to short-term political calculations or external donor whims.

Equally critical is the need for member states to reaffirm—publicly and concretely—the primacy of regional dispute-settlement and mediation mechanisms. These mechanisms should not be sidelined by ad hoc, personality-driven interventions or external power-brokerage. Instead, they must be revitalized with clear mandates and operational independence, while the African Union provides the overarching legitimacy, normative framework, and strategic direction needed to anchor local actions in a continental vision.

However, given the urgency of certain transboundary challenges—maritime security, cross-border health emergencies, migration governance, and climate adaptation—pragmatic “minilateral” initiatives (coalitions of the willing) can play a catalytic role in jump-starting cooperation. These arrangements should be designed with the explicit purpose of feeding their results back into broader, more inclusive multilateral structures. If properly coordinated, minilateralisms can act as pilot projects, demonstrating proof of concept before scaling solutions region-wide.

Yet the Horn's experience warns against the fragmentation and rivalries that can arise when minilateralisms evolve into exclusionary political blocs. Past alignments—such as the Ethiopia–Somalia–Eritrea axis—show how rapidly minilateral cooperation can be undermined by shifts in national politics (as in Ethiopia) or by instability in member states (as in Sudan). For minilateralisms to strengthen rather than erode multilateralism, they must be anchored in transparency, mutual benefit, and an explicit commitment to the regional good.

The region must be alert to external actors seeking to exploit internal divisions through selective partnerships. When Horn states enter minilateral arrangements with powers whose agendas run counter to regional stability, they risk importing geopolitical rivalries into already fragile regional structures. While motivations for these engagements often involve power consolidation, counterbalancing regional rivals, and strategic positioning—further

complicated by state vulnerabilities and asymmetries—the resulting gains are likely to be short-lived and counterproductive for collective security and cooperation among regional states. Vigilance, coordination, and a shared commitment to the Horn’s collective security and prosperity are essential to ensuring that both multilateral and minilateral cooperation serve as building blocks—rather than stumbling blocks—for a stable and integrated region.

Finally, the region must assert agency rather than be a passive arena for competing external agendas. That means investing in shared infrastructure and trade linkages that create mutual economic interdependence, building joint coast-guard and port governance mechanisms, and strengthening regional approaches to humanitarian response and climate resilience. It also means cultivating inclusive diplomacy that brings local authorities, civil society, and affected communities into regional decision-making. The stakes are high: with global multilateralism under strain, the Horn’s best safeguard is a revitalized, adaptive, and locally led multilateralism—one capable of translating regional interests into collective action and of defending the region’s strategic autonomy in a volatile international environment.

The African Union and Continental Multilateralism

The African Union (AU) remains, for now, the continent’s principal vehicle for collective action and continental multilateralism. Even as regional economic communities (RECs) such as ECOWAS, IGAD, and others face acute stresses—ECOWAS, for example, has been strained by recent regime changes in parts of West Africa—the AU continues to function as a central forum for diplomatic coordination, norm-setting, and continental problem-solving. That resilience matters: in a world where global multilateralism is itself under pressure, a functioning continental organization is Africa’s best instrument for preserving agency, defending continental interests, and shaping Africa’s strategic responses to external pressures and opportunities.

The AU’s importance lies in what it uniquely offers: legitimacy as a pan-African voice, a normative framework for governance and sovereignty, and institutional mechanisms that can, in principle, coordinate peace and security responses, economic integration, and diplomatic strategy. Instruments such as the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and the AfCFTA (African Continental Free Trade Area) are examples of continental initiatives meant to translate shared norms into action—preventing conflict, enabling trade and industrialization, and increasing bargaining power in global fora. At a time when external powers compete for influence across the continent, a cohesive AU can negotiate from strength, harmonize external engagements, and prevent predatory or destabilizing deals that privilege narrow interests over continental priorities.

However, the AU’s capacity is uneven, and its authority is sometimes limited. Member states often prioritize short-term national interests that conflict with broader continental goals, and the implementation of AU decisions remains inconsistent. Institutional weaknesses—such as limited budgets, dependence on external donors, a lack of rapid-deployment capabilities, and a small technical secretariat—hamper the AU’s ability to turn decisions into effective on-the-ground actions. Additionally, the presence of multiple RECs, overlapping mandates, and unclear divisions of labor with the AU often lead to duplication, competition, and institutional paralysis during urgent, coordinated responses. In short, while legitimacy and ambition are present at the continental level, they are not yet supported by sufficient resources, enforceable mechanisms, or the necessary political will.

The implications of global fragmentation make these internal constraints all the more consequential. As great powers expand bilateral ties—military basing, infrastructure financing, or security partnerships—African states risk being selectively engaged and divided. Without a united continental posture, Africa’s ability to shape global rules, secure favorable terms for investment, protect strategic assets, and insulate itself from destabilizing external interventions will be diminished. A weak or fragmented continental multilateralism, therefore,

increases the chances that external competition becomes a source of instability rather than development.

Strengthening continental multilateralism requires both institutional reforms and renewed political commitments. First, the AU needs predictable and sustainable financing to reduce donor dependence and to support core capacities—early warning, mediation, peace operations, and programmatic implementation. Second, clearer and more functional coordination with RECs is essential: a division of labor that respects subsidiarity but prevents fragmentation, with operational protocols for rapid response and joint planning. Third, the AU must sharpen mechanisms for enforcing continental norms—measures that combine incentives for compliance with credible, graduated responses to constitutional coups, human-rights abuses, and cross-border aggression.

Equally important are strategic policy axes that build resilience and autonomy: accelerate economic integration and value addition through AfCFTA implementation (industrial policy, cross-border logistics, and harmonized standards); develop continental instruments for debt management, pooled procurement (health, vaccines, critical inputs), and climate adaptation financing; and create transparent, standardized procedures to review and approve major foreign investments and security agreements so they align with continental priorities. Finally, the AU should deepen inclusive diplomacy by engaging civil society, private sector actors, youth, and women in continental policy-making—enhancing legitimacy and widening the social base for continental initiatives.

In conclusion, the AU's continued cohesion and institutional strengthening are indispensable in an era of global flux. The continent cannot rely on external actors to safeguard African interests or to provide stable multilateral governance. By investing in its institutions, clarifying AU-REC roles, securing sustainable financing, and pursuing strategic integration and transparent external engagement rules, Africa can defend its

agency and craft a pragmatic, continent-led response to the challenges of a multipolar world.

Conclusion

Multilateralism stands at a hinge moment. Geopolitical rivalry, resurgent nationalism, and institutional inertia are straining the post-1945 global architecture precisely when coordinated action is most needed. The result is a legitimacy and performance gap: institutions struggle to represent today's distribution of power and to deliver solutions to problems—such as war, climate change, migration, debt, food security, health, and digital governance—that no state can solve alone.

What's at stake

The crisis of the liberal international order has arrived alongside the intensification of systemic risks. Without credible avenues for joint threat assessment, burden sharing, and rule enforcement, conflict externalities spread, climate and debt shocks cascade, and humanitarian needs surge. Regions like the Horn of Africa—where political instability, displacement, and climate stress intersect—bear disproportionate costs when global coordination falters and ad-hoc unilateralism substitutes for collective security and resilience.

Where to act: three levels, one strategy

Global: Reform should prioritize representation, responsiveness, and resources. This involves modernizing voting systems and financial institutions' voices, establishing quicker crisis management processes and fairer debt resolutions, creating enforceable safeguards for cyber, AI, and biosecurity, and integrating climate and fragility considerations into macroeconomic decisions. Transparency and accountability are crucial to rebuild trust, especially among smaller and medium-sized nations that see the system as benefiting only a select few.

Continental (Africa): Strengthening Platforms to Aggregate Voice and Deliver

Implementation: For Africa to play a decisive role in shaping the global order, strengthening continental institutions remains essential. The African Union (AU) must have predictable and sustainable funding to effectively coordinate diplomacy, crisis response, and

economic policy. This requires a clear division of responsibilities with Regional Economic Communities (RECs), ensuring complementary efforts rather than duplication. Equally important is integrating Africa's peace and security infrastructure (APSA) with governance frameworks under the African Governance Architecture (AGA) and with key economic initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), along with Africa fully financing its institutions—so Africa's agency is preserved and respected. Connecting these priorities—security, trade routes, food systems, energy transitions, self-financing, and climate adaptation—helps markets and resilience grow together, reducing the gap between peacebuilding and economic progress. Legitimacy and implementation capacity can be strengthened by institutionalizing inclusive diplomacy, which involves establishing structured roles for cities, the private sector, labor unions, universities, and civil society, thus expanding ownership of continental strategies and anchoring them in African societies.

Regional (Horn of Africa): Turning Vulnerability into Collective Capacity: At the sub-regional level, the Horn of Africa offers a testing ground for practical, mission-driven cooperation. Despite persistent fragilities, the region can transform vulnerability into collective strength through targeted initiatives. The pursuit of access to the sea has emerged as one of the most critical and contentious issues shaping regional dynamics. For landlocked states, the sea represents both a lifeline for trade and a symbol of sovereignty, while for coastal states it constitutes a source of leverage and strategic advantage. Left unmanaged, this competition risks fueling mistrust, rivalry, and even conflict. Yet, with foresight and political dexterity, this challenge could be transformed into an opportunity for cooperation. Maritime access does not have to be a zero-sum game; rather, it can serve as the basis for shared prosperity and deeper regional integration.

The countries of the Horn possess vast and diverse resources—agricultural potential, energy reserves, minerals, fisheries, and youthful

populations—that are largely complementary. If pooled together, these resources could underpin collaborative development and structural transformation, turning the region into a hub of trade and investment rather than instability. This requires states to move beyond narrow competition and adopt policies that are visionary and outward-looking. Transformative policies cannot take root if leaders remain limited in imagination and constrained by short-term calculations. What is needed instead is a mentality of abundance: the recognition that collective gains are possible, and that the wealth of one country does not diminish but rather reinforces the prosperity of its neighbors. Such a shift in mindset is the foundation for a cooperative future in the Horn of Africa.

Maritime security and Red Sea governance and access should be prioritized through long-term vision and understanding achieved via honest discussions, information sharing, joint patrols, anti-piracy efforts, and environmental protection measures. Climate adaptation agreements, meanwhile, can promote regional cooperation by connecting drought forecasting, water basin collaboration, climate-resilient infrastructure, and early warning and response systems. Likewise, mobility and livelihoods can be protected through safe movement protocols, cross-border markets, and health surveillance systems that handle both human and animal diseases. De-escalation and confidence-building efforts remain essential, with these initiatives anchored in IGAD and supported by the AU and the United Nations. Such mission-focused cooperation could deliver real benefits to citizens, strengthen trust in regional frameworks, and decrease incentives for unilateral or small-group actions.

Use Minilateralism without Breaking Multilateralism

While multilateralism remains the cornerstone of global governance, minilateral and plurilateral frameworks can serve as useful tools for unblocking gridlock. To succeed, however, they must complement rather than cannibalize universal institutions. Five guardrails are essential. First, an open architecture is needed, with clear pathways for accession and interoperability with UN and WTO norms. Second, transparency by default should

govern their operations, requiring agendas, commitments, and monitoring metrics to be publicly available. Third, sunset and step-up clauses—that prevent laws or agreements from continuing indefinitely without review, ensuring policymakers revisit their relevance, and increase obligations, payments, or commitments over time—can ensure that successful pilots are folded into universal regimes rather than remaining exclusive. Fourth, a do-no-harm pledge must prevent forum shopping or the deliberate undercutting of higher standards. Finally, an equity test should assess the distributional effects on the least developed and fragile states before adoption. When approached in this way, targeted coalitions on issues such as finance, health, climate, or maritime security can act as first-movers, de-risking innovation while providing scalable models that strengthen the multilateral core rather than fragmenting it.

Institutional Fixes that Matter Now

Global governance cannot be revitalized without a serious investment in institutional capacity. The priority is to finance what institutions are asked to do, with multi-year, predictable core funding for peace operations, humanitarian response, and climate adaptation. Concessional resources should also be rechanneled toward fragility and prevention. Second, the creation of fairer debt and shock facilities—including time-bound restructurings, climate-disaster clauses, and rapid-disbursement windows—would ensure that low-capacity states are not left behind in crises. Third, a more representative voice within institutions is vital, with periodic quota adjustments and independent review panels to keep governance structures aligned with shifts in the real economy. Fourth, data and foresight capacity must be enhanced through integrated risk platforms that track conflict, climate, food, health, and cyber threats, feeding into standing crisis cells at global, continental, and regional levels. Finally, accountability mechanisms should focus on measurable outcomes—lives saved, emissions avoided, megawatts installed, corridors opened, and jobs created—with annual public scorecards to track progress.

What the AU and IGAD Need to Succeed

For both the African Union and IGAD to fulfill their mandates, three critical enablers must be secured. First, sustainable financing is essential. This requires expanding assessed contributions, operationalizing pooled funds for peace, mediation, and climate resilience, and attracting private and diaspora investments for infrastructure and adaptation efforts. Second, sharper mandates and coordination must be established, avoiding mandate overlaps and aligning AU, REC, and member-state roles through joint planning cycles and shared monitoring and evaluation. Third, inclusive diplomacy is needed to translate continental and regional strategies into community-level impact. Structured engagement with civil society, local authorities, and grassroots organizations ensures that policies are not only legitimate but also implementable, thereby bridging the gap between strategy and delivery.

The bottom line

Revitalization will require political will and mutual concessions: major powers sharing authority, emerging economies accepting fairer burden-sharing, and all parties investing in institutions that serve collective rather than narrow national goals. A reimagined multilateralism—equitable in representation, transparent in practice, and accountable for results—remains the best instrument one could have to manage interdependence.

Absent a renewed normative core and practical pathways from pilot coalitions to universal rules, global governance risks sliding toward a neo-Hobbesian landscape: confrontational politics, zero-sum bargains, and the concentration of economic and coercive power in ever fewer hands. That trajectory would ultimately harm smaller and medium-sized states and civil society alike. The alternative is within reach: align multilateral energy with multilateral purpose, empower continental and regional institutions to deliver, and measure success by protection of people, stability of regions, and resilience of humanity and the planet.