The COVID-19 crisis has sharpened the debate between China and the United States over future leadership of the global order that has been dominated by the US since the end of the Second World War. Global Asia looks at China’s vision for a world order that could displace that of the US.
Reform Multilateralism Now: A Chinese Perspective
By Qin Yaqing

Covid-19 has exposed the deep fault lines that exist between the ideals of globalization and the realities of global governance, as well as between the traditional ‘inter-state society’ and the emerging global society. Instead of co-operation and a global search for a way forward amid the pandemic, nation states have defaulted to a go-it-alone response.

The result is more disappointment with global governance that is already failing the world on climate governance, as well as between fault lines that exist between governance and feeling perplexed by the uncertainties of the future.

The past decade has already witnessed a wave of anti-globalization and anti-multilateralism together with a strong comeback of populism and realpolitik. Despite this, globalization is a reality and will continue; a world order based on multilateralism is and will continue to be the most relevant and reasonable form of global governance. At the same time, failures in global governance are conspicuous. This most serious public-health disaster has again shown the whole world that profound reforms are urgently needed for the security of humankind. The hope lies in a new multilateralism that values pluralism, participation and partnership.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE FAILURE
Immediately after the end of the Cold War, the American international-relations scholar John Mearsheimer predicted that Europe would go “back to the future,” drawing a miserable picture of renewed struggle among major powers in a Hobbesian jungle. The bleak vision has been extended by some to the whole world, where multilateralism would collapse, the struggle for power become the dominant theme of inter-state politics, and the “Thucydides trap” seem to be the iron law of international relations. Recent evidence seems to prop up the prophecy. Brexit, “withdrawal” from multilateral institutions and, on top of it all, the spread of Covid-19, together with hate speech and rampant disinformation, mark the world we live in.

“Pop-realpolitik” is the term I use to describe the combination of radical nationalism and hard realism that is haunting the world. This is marked by a narcissistic devotion to egotistical interests and a passionate worship of material power. It is represented by the revival of power politics, state-centrism and extreme nationalism: a new trinity of world politics that places the state as the exclusive authority in international affairs and radical nationalism as the way to motivate citizens against alien “others.” The rise of pop-realpolitik goes against globalization, multilateralism and co-operation for global governance. Of course, many factors work together to cause the rise of pop-realpolitik, but global governance failure constitutes a main driver. Numerous seemingly absurd phenomena in recent years are responses to huge deficits in global governance on crucial issues. So far, little substantial and sustainable progress has been made on climate change, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, pandemics and economic and financial crises. The world-wide outbreak of coronavirus is a telling example. At a time when co-ordination and co-operation are most urgently needed, we have seen nations going their own way, seemingly indifferent to thousands of deaths. Instead of coming together to face a common challenge, we see rhetorical attacks and abuses against “others.” Indeed, more than three decades since globalization began in earnest, none of the pressing threatening issues for humankind have been dealt with effectively. The deficits of global governance are stunning.

In the era of globalization, when transnational threats have become a serious challenge, an obvious discrepancy has appeared: On the one hand, there is exceptionally high demand for transnational governance and joint action for the global commons; on the other hand, the supply of such governance is terribly inadequate, leaving existing problems unsolved while new ones quickly accumulate, both in quantity and seriousness.

Almost from the very beginning, governance under globalization has been a much-discussed topic. Against the post-Cold War backdrop, a general consensus formed on institutional multilateralism as a way to govern global and transnational issues. With the United States as the leading supporter, hegemonic institutionalism has been practiced through multilateral arrangements. The world was for a time infused with optimism, believing that the international system with a liberal institutional order would be able not only to solve problems brought about by globalization, but also to integrate emerging powers peacefully into the US-led international order.

Despite the promising rhetoric and enormous efforts, expectations have not been met. The huge gap between the demand and supply of global governance has been widening and transnational problems have continued to accumulate. More seriously, there is a concurrent loss of confidence in multilateralism. Governance failure is, therefore, a direct cause of the rise of pop-realpolitik and constitutes an important condition for the return to unilateralism, state-centrism and power politics.

ONE WORLD, TWO SOCIETIES
Global governance has been sustained by multilateralism, which is still the most reasonable way to address transnational problems. Multilateralism as a principle and a mechanism is not to blame for the failure of governance. Rather, it is the changed reality of a world to which multilateralism has yet to adjust adequately.

One conspicuous new reality in the post-Cold War world is the coexistence of two soci-
One is the interstate society, where the 200-odd nation states live, each enjoying and insisting on national sovereignty; the other is global society, where various state and non-state actors interact, dealing more with issues across national boundaries and with problems arising in the global commons.

Interstate society is a Westphalian legacy. Up to the end of the Cold War, interstate society stood alone as the dominant force in international affairs. While over many years non-governmental organizations grew in quantity and quality, the dominant multilateral organizations were intergovernmental in nature. The \textit{de jure} sovereign, equal status of all nation states—though some were more equal than others—made this society largely a realist space, despite its norms, rules and social ties. The main theme of interstate society was the survival of the nation state. Accordingly, the struggle for power was natural and the national interest was the highest goal of any state. In this reality, threats to state security largely came from other states and perceived threats were taken as the most reasonable excuse for increasing one’s own material capabilities, resulting in an endless security dilemma. In such a society, where the struggle for survival dominated, realism seemed the most appropriate paradigm to describe international life, leaving little space for morality, trust and friendship.

Following the end of the Cold War, globalization began to sweep the world. Dazzling flows of capital, information, ideas and people moved across national borders and helped create something of a dreamland for the future. A new society, the global one, has emerged, that goes beyond the borders of nation states and moves deep into the commons of the world. It is populated by a multiplicity of actors, including nation states, non-state actors, individuals and other elements of global civil society. Sovereignty, national interest and inter-state security dilemmas—these high-profile terms are no longer catchwords in the global society. Rather, common goals, joint interests, shared future and threats to humankind have become the language of this emerging society.

The global society has problems that differ from those of the interstate society. The most succinct word is perhaps “transnational.” The threats are no longer principally between or among nation states but threats to humankind. Terrorist attacks, climate change and pandemic diseases know no national boundaries. They menace everyone. No country, no matter how powerful, can deal with such threats alone. The logic of the global society is the search for global solutions when threats arise.

The simultaneous existence of the interstate society and the global society has become a characteristic feature of our times. On the one hand, the interstate society continues to show most of its defining features—security anxiety, power struggles, conflicts of interest and state-to-state threats. On the other hand, global society is an increasingly indispensable factor in the world order. Transnational threats require mutual help, joint action and genuine solidarity.

If this new reality is taken into consideration, the major obstacle to successful global governance arises from the tension between these two societies, the interstate and the global. In a dialectical sense, this tension constitutes the core contradiction in the process of globalization and global governance. The interstate society applies its rules and norms, following basically the principle of territorial sovereignty and seeking egoist national interest. It creates a centrifugal force that tends to pull the state back to its self-enclosed stronghold. The global society, however, has irreversibly evolved as a parallel and equally significant factor in world affairs, with goals incongruent with those of the interstate society. Quite often, national interest should be compromised for the sake of the global good in order to avoid the tragedy of the commons. The emergence of the global society creates a centripetal force that pushes states to move toward the global and into an open process of globalization.

The tension between the centrifugal and centripetal forces has thus become the core contradiction for global governance. In the interstate society, states behave like sovereign equals and pursuit of national interest is the unalterable truth. Even a Machiavellian beggar-thy-neighbor policy is welcome if justifiable in the name of the state. In the global society, the state should behave like a good global citizen. It stands together with various other actors and
should sacrifice its self-interest, if necessary, for the sake of the global commons.

As globalization has advanced, problems have emerged one after another, unavoidably involving and traversing both societies. Once the national and the global do not agree and the interests of the state and the global commons are at odds, which is quite often, the tension becomes conspicuously high. And more often than not, interstate society wins out. The spread of the coronavirus illustrates most vividly this contradiction: while the logic of the global society should be followed, the logic of the interstate society dominates.

**FIXING MULTILATERALISM**

Multilateralism must continue to be the pillar if global problems are to be dealt with effectively, especially compared with empire, hegemony and balance-of-power politics. For better governance and a sustainable world order, it is imperative for the world to uphold multilateralism while also solving the problems of governance failure. Reform is urgently needed to bridge the gap between the two societies.

There are at least three aspects of current multilateralism that point to the need for profound reform. First, multilateral institutions were established to manage problems arising from state-to-state relations. By design, this meant that nation states were the exclusive members of these institutions. Inadequate participation has become particularly apparent as more and different actors play important roles in world affairs in the process of globalization. Second, the shadow of hegemony haunts the current practice of multilateralism. Hegemonic capabilities are often taken as a necessary condition for establishing multilateral institutions. Moreover, it entails elements of hegemony in the Gramscian sense. “Many governing ideas and institutions of the post-war global order, despite originating from a specific European and American milieu, are assumed to have a universal quality, in the sense of applying to all.”

This arrangement inadequately reflects the reality of the emerging global society with plurality as its most distinct feature. Third, current multilateralism in practice rests largely on the assumption of individual rationality. Due to this assumption, multilateral institutions are deemed as another means to pursue self-interest by member states. This tends to sharpen the tension between the interstate and global societies.

To relax the tension between the two societies and make global governance more effective, it is necessary to reform existing multilateralism, which is too hegemony-centric, state-centric and ego-centric. I would like to put forward in a heuristic way some ideas summarized as pluralism, participation and partnership:

**Pluralism** recognizes a distinct fact in today’s world. It contains three interrelated aspects: plurality, diversity and complementarity. It draws our attention to a world composed of multiple actors with no single power able to take responsibility for global governance. It also places great emphasis on diversity, realizing that no one model of global governance can claim to be universal and we need to draw on different approaches for practical wisdom. Furthermore, it values inclusivity and respects different ways of life in a plural world, recognizing that these various approaches are complementary rather than confrontational.

**Participation** makes everyone a positive agent. Multilateralism requires comprehensive participation. New actors, such as emerging powers and social movements, need particular attention. Without their participation, multilateralism would lose much of its legitimacy. It also requires active participation. Only teaching new actors or socializing them into existing multilateral institutions is inadequate at best and insulting at worst. Active participation by new actors as positive agents in rule-designing, making and implementation is crucial to a new and more relevant multilateralism. Participation, in particular, should encourage communication and complementation of the two societies. Since they have different goals and principles, it is of paramount importance for them to reach mutuality through empathy and sympathy.

**Partnership** values friendship. It is a redefinition of the relationship among the multiple actors and agents in global governance. Different from competition for self-interest, partnership is based on unity and trust, seeking harmony in human relations. In self-other relations, it follows the principle of “Confucian improvement,” meaning “establish if and only if let established,” and in individual-community relations it keeps to the value of “Mencian optimality,” holding that “self-advancement is best achieved if and only if the community is harmonious.” It pays adequate attention to self-interest, but, as partnership implies, it stresses that only in a harmonious community can an individual member fare best. It is particularly relevant in today’s world where the “economic man” assumption is a principle of multilateralism and fragmented individualism leads to an inhumane indifference to the global commons.

With these principles, for example, we may consider a “G20+1” approach to bridge the two societies and enhance effective global governance. It requires the G20 to take responsibility and provide the political leadership for major global decision-making. The competent special agency of the UN, such as the World Health Organization, must work as the consultant and implementer. This is a combination of political will, necessary resources and effective decisions on the one hand, and professional support and action plans on the other. Such a mechanism should apply to the global society as a whole and adhere to the principle of partnership.

**CONCLUSION**

Our world is again at a crossroads. The post-Covid-19 world could be a fragmented space marked by confrontation and power struggles or a humane space for progress and prosperity. Which vision prevails will hinge very much on reform of the existing multilateral system. To reform it is not to overthrow it. As represented by the UN system, the achievements of multilateralism since the end of the Second World War are remarkable in maintaining peace and promoting prosperity. However, globalization has made the coexistence of interstate and global societies a new reality and governance failure occurs when the tension between them becomes too sharp. To relax and resolve the tension, reforms must be carried out while the principles and valuable practices of multilateralism are firmly adhered to. A new multilateralism, with pluralism, participation and partnership in the lead, will provide meaningful hope for bridging the two societies and bringing forth more effective and legitimate governance in our world.

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