

The EU in the multilateral system



Check against delivery!

Thank you professor [of International Relations] Telò, thank you caro Mario.

In fact, to give an answer in ten minutes to all this array of issues that you have presented here and in your book is an impossible mission, but I will try to do my best.

I am very happy to be here with all of you on the eve of this United Nations General Assembly. Congratulations for your book. Let us try to answer in quite a telegraphic and structured way, if I can.

First, why is multilateralism still an answer to the problems that require collective action?

Second, why is it in crisis? Well, it has always been in crisis, but today is, maybe, a different crisis, and it is not just the responsibility of the actions of Mr [Donald] Trump [President of the United States]. There is something more than that.

Third and foremost, which are – from the European Union's point of view – the things that we have to do, as you are questioning, to renew this multilateralism, since we cannot longer continue doing things that were imagined 20 years ago.

Well, the world has been presenting enormous challenges to all of us. The role of Europe in the world has changed, other countries share the most important part of the world's economy. Interdependency brings a sense of vulnerability, but also immense opportunities. There is war and aggression at our borders and our democratic rules and order are being challenged.

But despite all of that, I do not think the world we live in is in a more threatening situation or that the relations are more complex than in the past. Remember the times of MAD [Mutually Assured Destruction].

But things are completely different, and in spite of being different, the

role of multilateralism is still the same: to establish a level playing field between states regardless of their position in the international system. The most important interest of multilateralism is to set up stable norms and standards, applicable to all actors.

Secondly, multilateralism is needed to guarantee protection of global public goods, against the risk of pure market-driven or national approaches. The coronavirus is a good occasion to test the international solidarity and the capacity to act in a multilateral way. And we, Europeans, have done a lot from the point of view of avoiding vaccine nationalism and to consider the vaccine as a public good that can only be provided through a multilateral approach.

Thirdly, you were questioning which are the structural causes of this crisis. Well, clearly one is the emergence of a multipolar world. More and more players and less and less consensus among them.

It is what is called multipolarity without multilateralism. Many players, less consensus. Several actors willing to be hegemonic, naturally they tend to disagree and they have the temptation to get free from multilateral disciplines and look for bilateral deals in which they have more leverage. That is why the United States is leaving the multilateralism approach and trying to do it alone, one by one. Because then its power is bigger.

This deep crisis is reflected in many ways. First, blocking multilateral decisions in very important fora. Second, unilateral withdrawal from institutions and agreements – such as the Americans withdrawing from the Paris Accord, the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], the Open Skies Agreement, and the World Health Organisation. Third, refusing to accept international arbitration – China and the South China Sea or Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean. Fourth, practicing selective multilateralism – China defends the World Trade Organization, but on human rights it seeks on the contrary to change the body language of United Nations institutions. And fifth, to go to bilateralism when it is good for them – China and American trade agreement poses a problem for Europeans, because it excludes us from the benefits of the agreement.

There is a second structural source of a retreat from multilateralism is the return of empires. The return of the political sovereignism advocated by a growing number of states – the United States, but also China, Russia and Turkey. They want to revise the multilateral system in one way or another but retreating from the liberal vision of the world as it developed after the Second World War. This is the expression of populism and it is clear that all populist leaders are anti multilateralists.

The third structural factor is the increasing complexity of problems, making universal solutions more difficult, even illusory. It is no longer possible to negotiate among 140 states on complex issues to try to get an agreement by unanimity. This is one of the lessons of the failure of the Doha Round.

In this framework, what is the European answer? We, Europeans – well, the

European Union, more than Europeans – we are multilateral by essence. We are naturally favourable to multilateralism. We have always considered multilateralism as a way of tempering power politics. In fact, the European Union was based on the refusal of the very idea of power. And our financial contribution to the multilateral system is considerable. Maybe we punch below our weight but in terms of multilateral engagement, we finance above our might.

In my opinion, we Europeans need to work at three levels of action.

First, we have to continue with the affirmation of universal principles and rules. We must continue defending them in the face of the rise of cultural or political relativism. It is obvious that there is today an attempt by a good number of countries to re-establish a relativism of rights under the excuse of respect for diversity. This is why we need to invest politically in all fora related to human rights, including when these rights are challenged through new technologies, and you know what I am talking about.

The second level of action of the European Union must be to put together like-minded states, those who share common interests and preferences in the way to organise the international system. But we cannot bring together everyone for everything, so we have to start bringing together those who, on the geostrategic level, are today worried about the Sino-American rivalry and the risk it poses to third countries and especially to us. It is important that we join forces and formulate common proposals in all sectors where there is no solid multilateral agreement: artificial intelligence, cyber, disinformation, or Internet data. In all these areas of the future, whether it be cyber or artificial intelligence, there is a regulatory vacuum and this vacuum has to be filled; otherwise, everyone will defend its narrow interests, imposing its standards.

Let us take the example of data. There are three competing visions in the world today: an American vision that is basically in favour of regulation by the market, so it will push for international regulation to be as light as possible – ‘Let the market do it.’ A Chinese vision that wants regulation by the State. China will push for global regulation where everyone remains in control at home, and we know how dangerous it can be. And, finally, a European vision that wants data to be protected for the benefit of citizens in Europe and around the world. This brings us to a battle of standards that has only just begun. Multilateralism is a good instrument to protect our humanist and liberal vision. We, Europeans, we have been norm setters because we have been technological leaders. If we lose the leadership of technologies, we will not be able to continue being the norm setters.

Finally, the third level of action to rehabilitate multilateralism consists in organising global regulation subject by subject. In all relevant issues it is necessary to create ad hoc coalitions on a basis that is not multilateral but plurilateral. It is the case today in the framework of the World Trade Organization. And it is clear that these new modalities of multilateralism presuppose political commitment and good faith, which is not always the case.

We, Europeans, we have to work in two tracks. We have to develop our

leadership, developing new partnerships and at the same time to increase our strategic autonomy. To project the most effective role in the world we need to promote multilateralism and at the same time to strengthen our strategic autonomy. These are the two sides of the same coin. We have to be in a cooperative approach, the best guarantee for a peaceful and safe future for all, but at the same time we have to assess a good understanding of what is our interest, which does not always coincide with the US' interest. We share with them the same political system, the same economic system, but in the big confrontation that is coming between the US and China we have to look for our own way.

There is a French-German initiative, Alliance for Multilateralism. It is an important step in the right direction. I am committed to continue working on that and by the end of the year or next spring I hope we will be able to present a communication on how the European Union can strengthen the multilateral system, and to deliver more for the people who need it most. If it is not the case, multilateralism will lose legitimacy because unilateralism and power politics will win the game. We have always been a major driving force for multilateralism but now we must pursue this objective with a greater sense of urgency, greater unity and greater ambition

I am sure that for this communication and for this endeavour, your book and your work will be of most help.

Thank you.

Link to the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZPDZiqZURA>