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# THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE CRISIS OF MULTILATERALISM

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*Antonio Zanardi Landi*

**T**ODAY'S geostrategic situation is changing rapidly and in unforeseen ways. The pandemic in 2020-2022 accelerated societal shifts already present at both national and international levels. These included the deepening of globalization and the seemingly endless advances in digital and information technology. It has been exacerbated by growing disparities in wealth and power among individuals in countries, among states within regions, and at the global level. The lack of sufficient coordination among China, the United States, Europe, and the developing world in tackling COVID-19 highlighted the dangers of ineffective international cooperation. This lacuna came at a time when everyone felt they were at risk. The absence of sufficient solidarity, transparency, generosity, and a common strategy in facing a great challenge was glaring.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing war further accelerated the geopolitical shifts that had been detectable for years. The magnitude of changes brought on by the war was unforeseen. As cruel and bloody as the war in Ukraine is, it is important to note that it is being fought in just one country and with limited conventional forces. The Russian forces amassed at the border with Ukraine at the end of 2021 amounted to between 180,000 and 200,000 soldiers, a comparatively very small expeditionary force if one considers that Ukraine is bigger than France. Just to provide an example, the Red Army and the German Wehrmacht that fought in the "Bulge of Kiev" battle in 1941 numbered in the millions. The Red Army alone suffered one million casualties and more than 600,000 Soviet soldiers were captured by the Germans.

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Photo: Guliver Image

*Minilateralism emerging: the leaders of Australia, the U.S., and the UK at a 2023 AUKUS meeting*

From a geographical point of view, the present war, in which Ukrainians are bravely fighting with much support from the United States, some European countries and NATO, is what could be considered a “local” conflict. But there is no doubt that it is also a “global” war. One need only to consider the widespread repercussions it is having on countries very far from the two belligerents. The result has been a world increasingly divided into opposing blocs. Five years ago, Pope Francis was probably the first to detect what was happening, speaking of a “piecemeal” World War III already in motion.

The consequences of a local-cum-global conflict in a European country are having a profound impact on the world’s equilibrium, on the United Nations, and on all multilateral institutions. In the second part of the twentieth century these same institutions enjoyed a prominent role in global governance and, with some exceptions, in keeping the peace. Today, we can observe a shifting balance of power and growing uncertainty, serving up some opportunities, but mostly challenges for countries. A macroscopic phenomenon has become strikingly evident, namely a deep crisis in the type of multilateralism that we have known for the last 75 years.

The UN system is often blocked by profound disagreements among permanent members of the Security Council, causing a ripple effect of great repercussions on all the other institutions and agencies in the UN galaxy. Moreover, almost all international organizations are experiencing a period of crisis that is causing various degrees of paralysis, affecting their ability to carry out their mission. This is also examined more closely in the paragraphs that follow.

**TROUBLED  
MULTILATERALISM**

Today's poor state of multilateral cooperation is a result of many factors, the main one being that the composition of governing bodies of major international organizations no longer reflects the equilibrium that existed at the end of World War II. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council are no longer the great powers that defeated the Nazi and Fascist dictatorships, and which paid the highest price in terms of loss of human lives and enormous financial cost. At the time, they were naturally entitled to the most relevant positions in the UN system. Today, Britain no longer has an empire. France has lost its colonies and is rapidly losing influence in Africa.

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The Soviet Union as we knew it is gone. Only the United States has been able to preserve its post-World War II position as the strongest and most effective of the world's great powers. Meanwhile, China has made enormous progress, becoming the first trading partner of

many countries. After World War II, the Permanent Five, as they are called, were the only countries which had nuclear capabilities. The subsequent addition of India, Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea has greatly complicated the nuclear balance. Global wealth distribution has been changing and the West's share of GDP and world trade has been

shrinking significantly compared to the rapid growth of China and the Far East.

The UN Security Council already had experienced periods of forced inaction stemming from disagreements among its permanent members, but today its internal divisions hamper the main UN governance body from tackling the very task for which it was created: the preservation of global peace and the thwarting of another world war. The Russian Federation has been vetoing all Security Council resolutions on the Ukrainian crisis, which, as we have stated, contains "in nuce" the seeds of a real, and "hot" world

war. At the same time, the United States has been vetoing resolutions concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this being the most likely regional conflict that could have heavy consequences.

The paralysis of the Security Council patently shows that the spirit of the Yalta Conference and the post-World War II equilibrium no longer exist, and this has debilitated the functioning of the UN's highest body, the General Assembly. While the General Assembly has been able to adopt resolutions condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it

*Countries representing more than half of the global population have not voted against the Russian aggression in Ukraine.*

is, in a way "frozen" by deep divisions in the international community. On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022, the General Assembly voted on a resolution demanding that the Russian Federation immediately end illegal use of force in Ukraine and withdraw all troops. The vote was 141 in favor, 5 against, and 35 abstentions. After several votes along the same lines, the February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023 vote calling for an end to the war and an immediate Russian withdrawal in line with the UN Charter produced a comparable outcome: 141 in favor, 7 against, 32 abstentions, and 13 countries choosing not to be present for the vote. This demonstrated that not one state changed its position despite one year of war that caused hundreds of thousands of casualties, the displacement of about 12 million

people, enormous damage to Ukrainian infrastructure and private property, and incalculable human suffering. Countries representing more than half of the global population have not voted against the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

What has been happening at the UN General Assembly is not a victory for the West. While people in some national capitals have held big demonstrations to condemn Russian aggression, these campaigns have not succeeded in swaying their governments, which continue to abstain in UN votes de-

spite persuasion attempts by the United States, the UK, and Poland, among others. On the contrary, it shows that, apart from the two blocs (Ukraine and the West on one side, and Russia on the other side, more or less supported by China), a new group of countries is emerging among governments that refuse to take sides or are, in substance, amicably attentive to the Russian and Chinese narrative that the war in Ukraine is not a fight between Moscow and Kiev, but one between Washington, Brussels, Warsaw, and others on one side and the Russian Federation on the other.

The most vocal, or visible actor in the group of so-called neutrals is perhaps India. Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar has strongly

defended the right of his country to buy oil at the best possible price and to base political decisions only on the national interest of his country. As a result, Indian purchases of Russian oil have increased 22-fold in 2022. Jaishankar's mantra of "It is not our war!" has become a powerful signal to the West and has been adopted by many countries belonging to the Global South. This is a rather different concept from the one held by the old Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), founded in 1961 and chaired today by the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev. For decades, the NAM embodied a political entity with a program and some form of ideology, while the Global South is emerging today as a third huge area of the world refusing to take sides in favor of one of the two blocs. It is advocating the right of emerging countries to take decisions based purely on their own national interest while resisting pressure from the great powers. The Global South today lacks the "political glue" that would be needed for it to become truly relevant.

Other international organizations have not been immune to the crisis. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has been struggling to fulfil its mandate. This is due to the lack of consensus among member states and the limited authority

of the organization, which has rendered responding to emerging challenges difficult. One example is the apparent lack of satisfactory results of seven years of monitoring by some 700 observers of the political and humanitarian crisis in Donetsk and Lugansk, of which both regions broke from Ukraine and self-proclaimed themselves republics. This has led to strong criticism of the OSCE for its perceived inability to hold member states accountable and has contributed to the growing sense of frustration and skepticism about the OSCE's relevance and effectiveness.

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The World Trade Organization (WTO) also has had to confront disillusionment and frustration. Member states have questioned its ability to address the pressing challenges facing the global trading system, due also to difficulties the WTO has in enforcing its rules and resolving disputes between member states. This has hurt the organization's attempts to maintain its relevance and effectiveness as a global trade body. For years, Washington has been blocking the functioning of the WTO appellate body, abstaining from appointing one of the judges. An organization created to govern free trade and globalization is out of time in an era of "re-shoring," "near-shoring," and "friend-shoring" and the move by

some countries to adopt new industrial policies governed in accordance with geopolitical strategies.

Another brewing controversy concerns the two “formats” concept created to make international cooperation within the United Nations more effective while not openly competing with it. The G8, representing 12.5 percent of the world’s population and 64 percent of its wealth, became the G7 after expelling the Russian Federation. The G7 represents a cohesive group capable of adopting common and clear-cut positions on the main political issues. But despite this, the G7 also presents a serious weakness in that its membership embodies the most industrially and financially advanced countries. As such, it is not seen as representing the “good conscience” of the planet or the shared interest of the international community. The idea of transforming the G7 format into a full international organization—which apparently has been brought forward by U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan—would be an appealing one for countries already in it, Italy included. But it would crystallize the “rich and the powerful of the world” with an inevitable ensuing contraposition between them and the “others,” particularly the Global South.

The G20, which today represents 61.5 percent of the world’s population and 86 percent of global wealth,

has in its membership several countries of the Global South as well as China and the Russian Federation. While this provides ample representativity it also prevents the body from taking unanimous and effective decisions. The performance of the G20 in Bali was an example of the great difficulties facing the global governance system. These difficulties have been confirmed and heightened under the Indian presidency. On a more general level, one notices a very significant fact: the marked differentiation of the debate within the G20 compared to the dynamics of the G7. During the last meetings under the Indian presidency, many members of the G20 avoided labelling the war in Ukraine as an “aggression.” Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, and South Africa have not spared criticism of the West, accusing it of adopting double standards in similar situations, where its primary strategic interests are not at stake.

The EU, which is obviously not an international organization, is also going through a period of uncertainty. The war in Ukraine has given a much more prominent role to Poland, the Baltics, and the former Warsaw Pact countries of Eastern Europe. These, arguably, are increasingly becoming “Central European” countries from a political point of view due to the shift of the European axis. Almost daily, we see the emergence of a profound divergence in visions of Europe’s future. Old Europe

favors a federal development, with a stronger and deeper EU, while Poland, Hungary, and others in “New Europe” prefer a return to a sort of confederation, composed of fully sovereign states. The consequences of the choice could be momentous and radically change the future of Europe. Adding to the mix, a debate on European strategic autonomy is showing greatly diverging opinions among member states, with a wide gap in positions that will be almost impossible to bridge.

### INTRODUCING MINILATERALISM

One of the most striking features of this new landscape is the emergence of medium powers as key players in the international system. India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, South Africa, and others today play a much bigger role than they did just 10 or 15 years ago. Furthermore, the development of alternative forms of international cooperation such as “minilateralism” is becoming increasingly important in a world where traditional multilateral institutions face mounting challenges.

Put simply, we are witnessing, or taking part in, a momentous confrontation where on the one hand the United States is trying to preserve a unipolar world in which Washington leads several democracies and on the other hand where China, Russia, and some non-aligned countries would like to

preserve, or recreate, a new, multipolar world. This confrontation has brought to a standstill the multilateral galaxy that offered guidelines and avoided global wars in the last 75 years.

All human institutions have a birth, a more-or-less long life, and an inevitable death. It has been so with every great organization, ranging from the Roman Empire, which encompassed nearly all the known world at the time, to the Communist International. Only Christian Churches, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, have survived for the last 2,000 years and the faithful believe the Churches will last until the end of time. In a certain sense, it is normal to see institutions suffer, become inefficient, lose their purpose, decline and, eventually be replaced by something different. The last 100 years or so have shown that the international order can change and be effectively and rationally modified only after a major war—something we all clearly want to avoid for our own future and that of our children. Right now, we have no other way to preserve peace, order, and prosperity in the world but with the present institutions, even though the profound difficulties they are going through are clear for all to see.

While global multilateralism is in crisis and a growing sense of danger is spreading in the world, a so-called “minilateralism” is thriving. Minilateralism is a phenomenon



which allows states that were until now excluded from the most important decisionmaking processes to create and exploit new and alternative spaces to make their voices heard through the assembly of like-minded countries joining together to protect common interests and act as a counterweight to global powers. Even before the war in Ukraine, the effects of globalization and the tendency to divide the world into politically compatible macro-regions foreshadowed the crisis of large international organizations and other forms of cooperation between states.

The year 2022 marked a critical juncture in international relations, as leaders expressed growing concerns over rising tensions between major global powers. Many countries have expressed a desire to avoid being constricted into taking sides in the conflict in Ukraine or forced into a binary choice between two opposing superpowers, namely the United States and China, which are currently engaged in a global struggle for influence and dominance. The Economist Intelligence Unit says countries can be divided into three distinct groupings, based on statistics related to voting habits in the UN General Assembly, trade, and

purchases of weapons. The report says 52 countries, representing 15 percent of the global population, condemn Russia and back sanctions, 12 support Russia and 127 countries are determined to remain neutral. Leaders from a diverse range of countries and regions have expressed a strong desire to avoid being caught in

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the middle of this great power struggle. Many of these leaders have stressed the importance of maintaining an independent foreign policy in order not to become overly dependent on any one country or alliance. In this scenario, these states have created space for their own autonomous action inside the international arena, paving the way for them to become essential interlocutors in the future.

By avoiding potentially permanent and rigid alignments, these states have been able to maintain their independence and flexibility, while also building strong relationships with a range of other actors in the international system. Grouped in minilateral groups, sometimes geographically incongruous but united by common goals and encouraged by the fragmentation of the world order, some mid-sized powers have acquired more prominence and clout.

At the same time, the rise of these new actors has created fresh challenges and opportunities for global governance.

Examples of the numerous initiatives that have emerged include BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a rumored new Middle Eastern military alliance, the United 24 Rapid Intervention Force proposed by Kyiv, the I2U2 between India, Israel, UAE, and the United States, the Lithium association of Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Mexico and the Chip 4 Alliance between the United States, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan.

In the defense sector, QUAD and AUKUS have become prominent actors, with the purpose of containing China's expansion in the Pacific. These are all part of a proliferation of multiple new collaborations, made up of a reduced number of members and aimed at overcoming the paralysis of larger international organizations. BRICS is probably the format that shows the greater potential in terms of political action and the capacity to attract new members. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, and Argentina already have applied to be admitted or are actively showing interest. In fact, BRICS could grow so much that it could become a dangerous competitor of the G20.

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Minilateralism appears to be a favored tool of emerging powers, because, unlike multilateralism, it facilitates political and economic cooperation, while most of the international multilateral institutions are currently blocked by clashing interests of mem-

ber states and a lack of extended consensus that often stymies difficult but pressing choices. Minilateralism allows like-minded countries to work together in areas that are hindered by multilaterals or larger groups of nations. Many countries involved in minilateral alliances are large or medium-sized emerging powers, often

wanting to assert themselves within their own regions. India, for example, has become a leading advocate for minilateralism as a cornerstone of its quest for multi-polarity. Indian minilateralism involves a growing range of partnerships that allow the country to maintain its policy of strategic autonomy, not allying itself with any major power while carrying forward international cooperation initiatives parallel to its own political-strategic interests. In Latin America, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Mexico have grouped together to ensure that other countries do not exploit their resources. Argentina is considering deepening the grouping's significance

and clout through a regional association for lithium inspired by the structure of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

All things considered, we are going through very dynamic processes around the world, spurred at first by globalization and information technology, and more recently by the war in Ukraine. The speed and the rather disorderly way of “dumping” the more structured multilateral institutions and the creation of new entities are a real challenge for the world because they stem from security concerns and a desire to be shielded from the fallout of competition between great powers. This stance is emerging as a main feature in the global landscape.

**POSSIBLE, ALBEIT DIFFICULT, SOLUTIONS**

We are comfortable with the consensus that we are all frightened by and opposed to the perspective of a new global war and that such a conflict could entail the end of our civilization. But what kind of solution can be envisaged if we want to repair the unfortunate state of international cooperation we have been describing?

Probably no one has an answer, as so many aspects of the present crisis stem

from completely irrational factors. Irrationality is the most dangerous element of human nature because it is, by definition, unpredictable. In summation:

We don’t have a recipe envisaging a political system better than democracy, imperfect as it may be.

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While we have a United Nations system which is far from optimal, we cannot change it *ex abrupto*, but only by trying to improve it day by day.

The world’s most powerful country, the United States, has

been significantly increasing its military and logistical strength in past decades and its internal politics are cause for worry. Extreme polarization of the political debate has pushed the incumbent president, Joe Biden, to be as radical, abrupt, and assertive in foreign policy as his main antagonist, Donald Trump. The concern over Chinese growth and influence has become the most important, and perhaps the only, major unifying theme in U.S. domestic politics. We can only hope that the United States will soon revert to political normalcy and to a less polarized internal political debate.

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The only thing we *do* know is that Russia has already been politically and economically defeated, whatever the outcome of the war. NATO has been extending its membership around Russia. Russia's economy is suffering permanent damage and the Russian Federation is rapidly becoming exactly what it was trying to avoid—a “junior partner” to China.

An implosion of the Russian Federation, which some have openly discussed, is not to be entirely ruled out. But for neighboring countries and Europe as a whole, that could be an unmitigated nightmare. The world needs sufficiently robust multilateral institutions if it is to confront a crisis of such magnitude.

Europe is going to be among the “losers,” not so much for having lost a very important source of reasonably cheap energy, but for reasons concerning its security, which has decreased consistently. European integration has lost momentum as the war in Ukraine shed light on deep differences in what a European trajectory will look like in future decades. As we said earlier, the so-called New Europe envisages a “confederal process” that could give back sovereignty

to member states, while some countries of Old Europe still have in mind a “federal process” of increasing and deepening the EU's competences and areas of operation.

China is, and will continue to be, a very difficult customer. We will have

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to compete in the fields of technology, research, industry, and culture. We could do it only if we are able to get the Global South on our side. While this will be extremely difficult, it nonetheless needs to be done to counterbalance China's growing presence and action.

Information technology has enabled the proliferation of news and opinion from a variety of sources, leading to a highly polarized public debate. Social media platforms and other online forums allow people to consume news and instantly interact with others who share similar views, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and ideologies. The ease with which information can be disseminated and amplified has resulted in the rapid spread of misinformation and fake news, further polarizing public opinion. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to find common ground and have productive and civil discussions across political and ideological divides.

The polarization of public debate has had significant effects on international politics, leading to a growing sense of distrust between nations, with each one seeking to protect its own interests and setting its own narratives. This has only served to generate a more fragmented global landscape, with countries becoming increasingly divided along ideological lines. It also has made it harder to achieve consensus and cooperation on pressing global issues such as climate change, economic inequality, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

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International institutions, which, although not in perfect health, can be cured of their ailments and see their significance and strength flourish again. Those that have become obsolete and obnoxious can be discarded. The UN Security Council’s reform is long overdue and perhaps has become the most urgent task confronting the International Community. It appears clear enough that the Security Council should be enlarged to be more representative and that the veto system should be overhauled in a larger Security Council so

Perhaps the only possible way to get out of today’s rather horrible mess is to return to basics, to strive to see reality as it is and not as we would like it to be, to have an enormous degree of patience, and to try to preserve the positive aspects of what we have.

that a veto is valid only if it is backed by several other members.

Democracy should be promoted with enthusiasm and strength, but without imposing it on countries which are at a divergent stage of development.

Above all, let’s make consistent and unfailing recourse to some of the most undervalued qualities that humans can possess, like good will, patience, an undeniable awareness that we are all in the same boat, and perhaps most of all, decency.

Growing scientific discoveries could help feed the growing world population and make life healthier and last longer.

While this recipe might sound overly simplistic, unpalatable, and dangerously slow in producing the desired effect, it is much better than the prospect of a thermo-nuclear war. ●