

# Revitalizing Multilateralism in a Multiplex World: A Pragmatic Paradigm Shift

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*Abstract:* The discourse surrounding the crisis of multilateralism often neglects empirical evidence suggesting its continued prevalence. Multilateralism is currently at a junction where functional cooperation could aid Western countries in overcoming their apprehensions about the waning liberal narrative. This paper introduces the notion of multiplexity as a comprehensive framework for understanding existing global dynamics and argues for a conceptual shift away from competing geopolitical narratives. The main conclusion drawn is the need for enhanced functional cooperation and transactional diplomacy, shedding light on novel forms of cooperation commonly observed at the regional level. Based on this transactional approach to diplomacy, the paper proposes the establishment of a dedicated forum to address global challenges. It also examines the European Union's focus on governance methods, particularly through initiatives like the Open Method of Coordination, as a pertinent case study for invigorating the international order.

*Keywords:* Multiplexity, polarity, transactional diplomacy, hegemony, interaction capacity, liberal narrative, global governance, Open Method of Coordination, European Union.

## Introduction

To imagine multilateralism in the 21st century is to engage in a philosophical and political reflection on the post-war international order, which is gradually losing its legitimacy in a world evolving at an accelerated pace. The complexity of today's challenges calls for a conceptual framework suited to our times. Western democracies seem to be entering a remarkable shift in their liberal philosophical foundations. This transition, a kind of interregnum in

Gramscian terms,<sup>1</sup> extends through institutional channels, reaching into the broader international system. A decline stems from a significant dissonance between experience and expectation, leading to a perceived deficit of legitimacy. This historical moment reflects a changing pattern of global cooperation and world order.

The aim of this paper is to propose a reflection on multilateralism, presenting an alternative framework that transcends the confines of competing geopolitical

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narratives. The language of polarity<sup>2</sup> (unipolar, bipolar, but also multipolar) is inadequate for the new formats of state cooperation. Multipolarity can be useful for studying the evolution of geopolitics vis-à-vis superpowers and hegemonic power, but it fails to comprehend the nuances of reality, such as ideas, norms and patterns of interaction. Contemporary world politics are defined by a myriad of interactions that do not obey the laws of opposing poles repelling each other. To overcome the limitations associated with the concept of polarity, we may observe the world through the lens of multiplexity, a term coined by Amitav Acharya, in an attempt to grasp the plethora of dynamics unfolding internationally, regionally and nationally.

Multiplexity describes a more decentralised and diverse world where influence may be achieved by formal and informal forms of interaction on multi-issue questions. This conceptual framework aims to encompass three main trends: first, the fatigue of the liberal narrative in confronting both internal political movements (communitarian, radical and civilizational ideas) and competing geopolitical narratives; second, the interaction capacity of a multitude of actors (not only great powers, but also regional powers and non-state actors, especially non-Western ones); and third, the plurality of cooperation formats, with the great prominence of bilateral, plurilateral and regional arrangements.

Within this framework, the paper will reflect on the role of the European

Union (EU) as a case of an international organisation in the ongoing transition of the international order. Instead of exclusively engaging in power politics and learning the language of power (Borrell, 2020), the EU can also demonstrate its maturity by focusing on common interests—and not only on values—and offering experience through the dissemination of best governance practices. Initiatives such as the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), which will be further explained in this paper, exemplify this approach when applied to specific policy areas. By sharing its governance methods, the EU can play a constructive role in maintaining multilateral cooperation and averting geopolitical tensions.

## **A Crisis of Liberalism, Not of Multilateralism**

The quest for a new conceptual framework is influenced by philosophical reflections on the “fatigue of the West” (Vallespín, 2024), where the liberal narrative appears to have lost its appeal amidst the surge of nationalism and wokism. This fatigue, partly caused by a stagnation of liberalism in offering a vision of progress, encourages the exploration of alternative paradigms.

Mindful of this, the concept of multiplex order stands in stark contrast to the existing hegemony. Contrary to the Western assertion regarding the crisis of multilateralism, empirical evidence suggests that multilateral cooperation continues to prevail (Acharya, 2023). This does not signify a paradox, but rather a biased view in light of the

increasing diversity of cooperation types within a multiplexity that indicates the waning hegemony of the present order. While Western perspectives may be inclined to interpret global geopolitical changes as a “multipolar crisis” or a “crisis of multilateralism”, it may be more accurately characterised as a decline of the West in global governance rather than a systemic crisis. The fatigue of the West seems to correspond to a decline in the liberal hegemony that underpins the international order and, by extension, the international organisations established in the post-war or Cold War context.

This erosion of the liberal hegemony is further compounded by competing narratives that respond to domestic concerns. The fatigue of the West is partly fuelled by liberalism’s struggle to address internal challenges within liberal democracies. Concurrently, this erosion of the liberal foundation, rooted in the transformation of liberal democracies, sees the gradual replacement of the individual with a more tribal, communal and nationalist dynamic. Thus, the notion of progress that has permeated European intellectual history since the Enlightenment appears to be stagnating within a liberalism that lacks optimism for the future.

This scenario is shaped by several combined factors, most of which have been in place for some time and are now being reinforced by an acceleration of intra-generational change, namely:

- The unequal redistribution of wealth, both within and between regions, is exacerbated by systemic risks and successive crises (financial, climatic, health, migration), leading to a significant decline in the purchasing power of middle-class citizens in OECD countries.
- The declining hegemony of the US, requires a nuanced distinction between hegemony and primacy. Forecasts suggest that the US is likely to maintain its military and economic primacy in the coming decades, despite the changing global landscape.
- The presence of nationalist tendencies that reinforce the role of the nation-states, occasionally leading to actions that undermine multilateral commitments.

This scenario unfolds within a multiplex structure with challenges posed by shifting power dynamics. There is a compelling case for intensifying efforts to reform the existing architecture of global institutions, thereby making them more democratic and responsive to the aspirations of emerging actors.

## **A Multiplex World Defined by Interaction-Capacity**

Amid the ongoing battle of geopolitical narratives, diplomatic relations are becoming increasingly polarised, leading to a heightened fragmentation into opposing blocs seemingly engaged in a struggle for survival. This geopolitical perspective fails to recognise that diplomacy functions

primarily as a transactional negotiation between rival powers, often without a shared commitment to common goals. Diplomacy is a transactional process, serving as a bridge between international legal frameworks, financial systems and multilateral organisations. It plays a crucial role in shaping the parameters of trade, conflict resolution, peacekeeping efforts and cultural exchange. This transactional negotiation is heavily influenced by the “interaction capacity” of actors, which is measured by their organisational capabilities within the system.<sup>3</sup> This interaction capacity plays a central role in shaping multilateralism and promoting forms of cooperation that are not necessarily dominated by Western powers. There is a growing number of diverse cooperation formats such as minilateralism,<sup>4</sup> which has gained popularity in regional cooperation. An example of this trend is the trilateral agreement signed last year between the UAE, France and India to promote cooperation projects in the energy sector, with a particular focus on solar and nuclear energy, as well as efforts to combat climate change. Another notable example is the Australia-UK-US Security Pact (AUKUS).

Multilateralism is, above all, a governance tool. Detaching multilateralism from a values-based character, as understood by the EU, can promote functional and transactional political relations. This means considering pragmatic tools for managing common interests and adapting them to the

circumstances of our time. Governance based on public policies should exist as a distinct system separate from the geopolitical battle of narratives. This governance should be conceived as an instrument for crisis management and potentially for building bridges of cooperation between seemingly irreconcilable geopolitical positions of major and middle powers.

Within this multiplex order, the assessment of power is intricately linked to the interaction capacity of actors operating in the international arena. In this regard, it should be noted that the US continues to hold dominance in absolute terms concerning the total number of treaties signed since 1945. However, it is imperative to juxtapose this with the increasing influence of other nations and regional clusters that have become more cooperative over time in various policy areas. To the extent that the treaty-based interaction capacity is one of the key sources of US global power, its relative erosion cannot be overlooked when considering the transformation of the world order.

Simply put, global cooperation has gradually shifted away from a hegemonic or US-centric framework. In this evolving landscape, a growing number of nations are engaged in cooperative efforts to produce public and private goods, and an increasing proportion of these states are non-great powers. Despite the continued dominance of the US in the global system in terms of aggregate power, other

nations are actively developing their own capacities, at times in partnership with the US and at other times independently.

Over the past decade, sector-based cooperation has increased significantly, contributing to the rise of non-Western powers. Nations such as Germany, China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Japan and South Korea have demonstrated considerable interaction capacity in these functional areas. As a result, rather than witnessing the decline of the US, what we are observing is the rise of other global actors reshaping the dynamics of the international order (Zakaria, 2008).

In geopolitical terms, it is worth noting several examples of emerging cooperation frameworks. For example, the BRICS<sup>5</sup> have expanded upon existing mechanisms for development and financial cooperation, notably through the establishment of institutions such as the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement. Another example worth noting is the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as the second-largest intergovernmental organisation after the United Nations, with a membership spanning four continents.

Economically, the Asia-Pacific region is witnessing a competition of agreements between the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP, 2018), mainly led by Japan, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

(RCEP, 2020), mainly led by China. These agreements reflect a broader trend towards more flexible governance arrangements. While the CPTPP is more ambitious in its liberalisation efforts, RCEP notably lacks provisions on support for state-owned enterprises, labour standards and environmental protection. However, its flexible rules of origin provide incentives to promote deeper integration of supply chains across the region.

Other examples include the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which includes China, India, and Pakistan among its members, despite their political differences. On the US side, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) and AUKUS are also worth mentioning.

## **Transactional Diplomacy and Functionalist Governance**

The deficit of trust between states, sometimes caused by the unilateral blending of international law, is not insurmountable. In this complex landscape, the EU could not only embrace the allure of geopolitical power dynamics but transcend them, positioning itself as a beacon of successful regional governance. Rather than succumbing to the narrative of power politics, the EU can chart a course towards an alternative to the prevailing currents of geopolitical confrontation. By leveraging its distinctive position, the EU can work for more effective governance and the restoration of mutual trust among nations. This is illustrated by its

commitment to policies based on soft law, which provides added value in the international arena.

This proposal is oriented towards a more pragmatic approach, diverging from dominant narratives and deliberately seeking to avoid the pitfalls of fragmentation into opposing factions. It also embodies a spirit of political innovation, driven by the search for pragmatic solutions to complex global issues. In doing so, it serves to counter the prevailing multilateral pessimism, especially among those who view the world through intellectually sterile lenses such as “polycrisis”.

As the most sophisticated regional organisation in terms of governance, the EU has a responsibility to spur accompanying reforms of the multilateral order. It has the capacity and expertise to become a benchmark for international cooperation reform. To do so, it must see the reform of the international order not only as a matter of values but also in terms of its added value as a regional organisation. The EU’s success lies in its governance methods and political will that have facilitated its evolution from functionalism to ever-deeper political integration.

A governance model consistent with the conceptual framework of multiplexity could be disseminated through the creation of a permanent forum dedicated to addressing regional and global challenges. This forum would serve as a multidisciplinary platform, facilitated

by high-level expert groups and active engagement with regional organisations. Emphasising the involvement of local experts is crucial, as country missions tasked with monitoring action plans tend to deliver better results when there is cultural affinity and geographical expertise.

On this vein, several proposals for improving international governance include the use of soft law, the exchange of best practices, and the adoption of the “Open Method of Coordination” (OMC), which go beyond intergovernmental cooperation without fully embracing the EU’s communitarian approach. The OMC is structured around five phases that can serve as a guiding framework:

1. Drafting global guidelines in the field of public policy, subject to peer review, and based on a consensus selection of best practices determined by the central body of the international organisations.
2. Developing national plans with management methods and objectives at both local and national levels.
3. Planning expert missions established by the international organisation and monitoring by national governments, with annual reporting.
4. Exchanging annual reports and providing clear recommendations in case of implementation deficiencies.
5. Implementing sanctions or, if not permitted, the practice of naming and shaming, along with dissemination of information to the public (including parliamentarians, media, NGOs).

Another successful example of this approach can be found in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has drawn inspiration from the EU and has developed innovative consensus-based decision-making mechanisms. Certain bodies within the United Nations system, as well as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), have also successfully adapted elements of the OMC to address global issues. Looking forward, the main challenge will be to expand regional soft law provisions to the international level.

This endeavour necessitates a multifaceted approach, including bolstering representation and accountability. Both variables are indispensable prerequisites for enhancing the legitimacy of cooperation, both externally (in terms of efficiency) and internally (promoting participatory citizenship and gender equality). Embracing a multitude of actors, such as civil society organisations and women in peace processes, is paramount.

The preceding considerations offer a pathway towards revitalising multilateralism as a tool to accomplish global goals, rather than as a value. Conversely, without such efforts, the proliferation of blocs and the ideological manipulation of cooperation, notably through like-minded coalitions, risk amplifying the clash of narratives and geopolitical tensions, leading to a deeper misunderstanding of each other's perspectives. Diplomacy constitutes a vital channel for reconciling divergent positions, with the EU positioned

to serve as a beacon of international norms and expertise. However, this necessitates transcending the current dynamics of confrontational geopolitics and embracing a vision for a multiplex order.

## Conclusions

While the international order may be undergoing a period of transition, the practice of multilateral cooperation remains essential for addressing global challenges. The current landscape of global governance suggests that while multilateralism itself is not in crisis, the liberal values underpinning it face significant challenges. The fatigue of the West, which is characterised by the erosion of the liberal narrative and the rise of nationalist sentiments, highlights the need for a paradigm shift in the approach to multilateralism. It is essential to move away from a narrative-driven perspective and toward a more functionalist governance model to navigate the complexities of current challenges. This involves prioritising transactional diplomacy over ideological battles and promoting cooperation based on shared interests, not only on geopolitical narratives.

The concept of multiplexity offers a nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics of global cooperation, emphasising the importance of interaction capacity among diverse actors, including non-Western powers and regional organisations. Rather than adhering to traditional notions of polarity, a multiplex approach acknowledges the diverse array

of interactions shaping contemporary world politics.

Considering this framework, the EU can be a potential case for governance reform on the international stage. By reconceptualising the international order, the EU can help shape the future of global cooperation, leveraging its governance methods to their fullest potential. The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) exemplifies a pragmatic approach to governance reform, emphasising peer review, consensus-building and accountability mechanisms.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci described the interregnum as “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”
- <sup>2</sup> Polarity refers to the distribution of material capacity among global powers. It is commonly classified into three main types: i) multipolar, characterised by a roughly equal distribution of material capacity among great powers; ii) bipolar, involving power distribution between two predominant powers; and iii) unipolar, signifying a scenario where one hegemonic power holds predominant influence.
- <sup>3</sup> Interaction capacity refers to “the physical and organisational capability of a system to move ideas, goods, people, money and armed forces across the system” (Buzan, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Minilateralism consists of forging agreements within small clusters of

countries that share common goals on certain sectoral issues.

- <sup>5</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

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