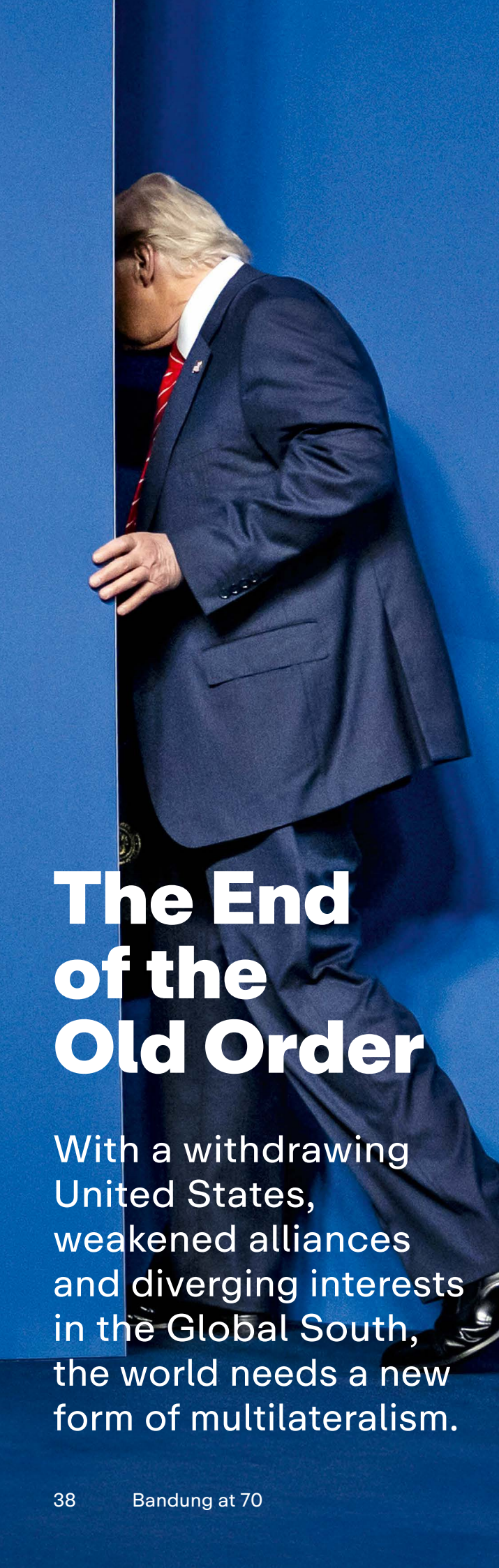




# The End of the Old Order

With a withdrawing United States, weakened alliances and diverging interests in the Global South, the world needs a new form of multilateralism.

In the next years, the global system will continue to undergo tectonic changes. After an era of economic volatility and with the intensifying effects of climate change and the strain on the multilateral system, the United States' swift, unprecedented retreat from the world it created in 1948 has led to massive financial, institutional and political gaps. The transition will irreversibly alter the multilateral system, reduce the dominance of the West and reconfigure relationships in the Global South.

Alliances created over three-quarters of a century are severely weakened. The United States, formerly an anchor of global stability (often with limited liability), will find itself without allies for a generation or longer. Some European countries seem willing to fill the void left by its withdrawal, but whether Europe will be able to meaningfully shape the 21st century remains to be seen. So far, the emerging heavyweights in the Global South have shown little interest in overcoming their narrowly defined notions of their national interests for the greater good. But even if they would, a weakening of the normative framework of international law and a rules-based order would be the likely result. Hence, the world will live through an era of fragmented multilateralism for the foreseeable future. The questions arise: How can global challenges still be addressed under fragmented multilateralism? And what consequences will this development have for international cooperation?

It is instructive to look back 70 years to the 1955 Bandung Conference where emerging states tried to capture what seemed a historic opportunity, only for divergence and the changes of the following decade to undermine the project. A similar fate might be in store for BRICS, also a product of geopolitical change in times of rapid economic globalisation. Bandung took place at a pivotal moment in global history. Colonial empires finally lost control and decolonisation movements took different political forms, from nationalism to revolution. Meanwhile, the incipient Cold War began to influence many, if not all, of the independence movements.

The alliance envisioned in Bandung was established in an era of enormous political and social change, and it would not last. Five years later, political differences between communist and non-aligned countries began to undermine the notion of solidarity among developing nations in the Global South. Non-aligned states organised rival conferences, and the bipolar world order forced most governments to affiliate with either the West or the Soviet Union and its satellites.

The Bandung Conference was a product of a historical interim period, established on a legitimate aversion to a global system in which Western states and alliances set many legal, political and economic parameters. However, participants could not agree on a joint vision for a global order that posited itself within the dual traditions of democratic

enlightenment and self-determination – as in the recently expanded BRICS.

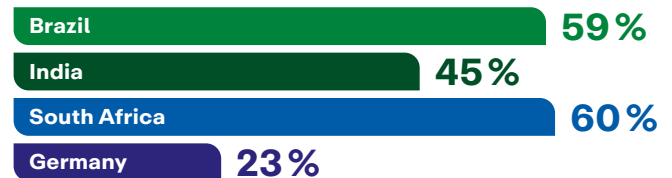
In times of turmoil, disorientation and disorder, such a unifying vision has material value. Without one, the dilemma is clear: multilateral institutions, agreements and alliances face their most serious crisis since the Second World War. Despite notable achievements as recently as 2015, including the Iran nuclear agreement and the Paris Climate Agreement, traditional multilateralism is facing pressure from all sides. The international order has fundamentally altered since the end of the Cold War due to the rise of new regional powers and the growing influence of emerging economies, including China, India, Brazil, Turkey and Indonesia. By primarily pursuing narrowly defined national interests in their international politics, they contribute to the fragmentation of the global order. Additionally, anti-Western sentiment and attempts to overthrow the global arrangements of past decades have gained support in unexpected places. In the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy and France, isolationist movements have gained the backing of large segments of the middle classes.

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To fully appreciate the disintegration of the global system, it is important to recognise that the existing multilateral institutions resulted from three phases of development: the Second World War, the early Cold War, and the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Multilateral institutions and agreements have typically emerged in the aftermath of devastating crises, representing an attempt to address or contain problems that overwhelm national and bilateral capacities. The current ones have proven remarkably successful and resilient in the face of a constantly changing global order.

The most significant turning point was the Second World War. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill issued the Atlantic Charter in 1941. This led to a series of multilateral institutions and agreements, including the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. In the highly criticised hegemonic setup of the UN Security Council, the wartime allies – the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, China and France – would provide security and stability to the world as permanent members with veto power. The newly established multilateral economic structures primarily reflected the United States’ dominant commercial weight after the war. The victorious allies also established several multilateral institutions aimed at development and humanitarian aid. In the years immediately following the

The influence of the United States is evaluated negatively by experts in ...



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war, the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization were founded.

The evolving US-Soviet ideological and geopolitical competition quickly led to new Western multilateral institutions with more modest ambitions and a greater focus on the emerging demands of strategic rivalry with Moscow, such as NATO and the Marshall Plan. While participants at the Bandung Conference were discussing an alternative path toward modernisation and global governance, the transatlantic alliance established more complex intra-European multilateral institutions, such as the European Coal and Steel Community, which developed into the European Economic Community’s common market and customs union in 1957.

Given the bipolar Cold War order, meaningful new multilateral entities could only develop following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Founded in 1993 and 1995 respectively, the European Union and the World Trade Organization (WTO) promoted economic integration on an unprecedented scale. They established a framework for commercial globalisation that increasingly separated economic integration from democratic legitimacy.

The year 2008 was another turning point that highlighted the importance of multilateral institutions. The global financial crisis put a lot of pressure on institutions such as the EU, but it also showed how important they are during times of crisis. However, the crises that occurred after 2008 overshadowed the emergence of a new form of multilateralism encompassing traditional security and economic institutions as well as new challenges like climate change and new actors like companies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Rather than binding governments to the rules of institutions like the EU or WTO, this new multilateralism took a flexible, pragmatic approach to solving global problems. It seemed quite successful until 2015, when the United Nations announced the Sustainable Development Goals, the Iran nuclear deal was agreed upon and the Paris Climate Agreement was negotiated. The response to the 2014 Ebola pandemic also provided a model for reforming global health institutions.

Despite its initial success, this new multilateralism could not endure in a world where the old global compact was fading. Until then, the post-Cold War order implicitly guaranteed substantial privileges to the United States as the dominant economic power and the world's primary financial hub. Washington held de facto veto power in many multilateral institutions and was responsible for managing the global system and providing stability. However, after 2008, it became increasingly obvious that the United States would not uphold its end of the bargain. In 2017, the first Trump administration weaponised trade for the first time, disregarding long-established rules. In 2020, the Biden administration did nothing when it was time to share vaccines globally. Between 2008 and 2020, the end of the old order was cemented, and the re-election of Donald Trump only accelerated the process.

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Given a heterogeneous world, an unclear distribution of power and many new actors, the experiences of pragmatic multilateralism over the past 20 years provide a point of reference for the future. Promising new initiatives must focus less on creating rigid institutional structures and more on flexible, cooperative ways to circumvent institutional and political obstacles and solve international problems pragmatically.

Today, it is important to consider flexible approaches to pressing issues and develop coalitions. In the future, formal agreements and treaties will be less important for establishing international institutions or creating legal obligations. The political barriers are simply too high for the foreseeable future. This is why NGOs and philanthropic foundations must play a crucial role in supporting and developing new approaches. Civil society actors played a key role in the Paris climate negotiations, effectively supporting diplomatic efforts. In times of growing right-wing populism and continuous attacks on the international system, NGOs and philanthropic foundations must take on more responsibility. They must rediscover the importance of international cooperation in support of human rights, democracy and liberal values. They must also bring important issues into the public debate. Right-wing populists have formed a nationalist international. Therefore, it is important that relations between civil society actors not be limited to the national level. Democracy, human rights and multilateral initiatives require uncompromising international philanthropy.

The new areas of engagement are more complex than previous questions of economic stability, peacebuilding or the post-war integration of former rogue states. The challenges of the 21st century are multi-dimensional and transnational. A new multilateralism will have to tackle many of them. For example, food security and the use of food systems as a weapon of war will be key topics in global security. According to UN estimates, over 730 million people worldwide are starving, including about one-fifth of Africa's population. Meanwhile, 2.8 billion people cannot afford healthy food. This year's Global Hunger Index lists 36 states where the threat is acute. Furthermore, food is being weaponised in various ways, including the manipulation of food access (Gaza), the use of food insecurity as a recruitment and retention tool (Somalia, South Sudan, Nigeria), and the targeting of agricultural infrastructure and supply chains. Russia has perfected the latter in its invasion of Ukraine. The geopolitical implications of its use of hunger as a weapon are vast. In effect, Russia is taking hostages by starving people thousands of miles away from the actual battlefield, from East Africa to Asia. Because of this, new forms of deterrence are needed – besides the need to categorically outlaw the weaponisation of food, they include strengthening of global food systems, addressing climate change, and creating much more resilient supply chains.

Ideally, a new multilateralism that addresses this and other challenges, such as climate and energy security or migration and demography, would lead to a meaningful debate on an expanded concept of national and military security appropriate to the complex crises of the 21st century. This would require national and multilateral institutions to discourage siloed thinking and overlapping programming. A new multilateralism based on such a foundation would rely more heavily on support from the Global South, while incorporating the normative and universalist ambitions of the late 1940s. ◀

*Parts of this article are based on a previous analysis for the Global Perspectives Initiative.*



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