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Multilateralism without the United States: Is an Alternative Leadership Possible?

Interview with Tim Heinkelmann-Wild

by Marieke Louis

By scapegoating international organisations, Trump's attacks are undermining multilateralism and the liberal order that emerged in 1945. This American disengagement is reopening the debate on a possible alternative leadership role for the EU.

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Books and Ideas: **The United States has always had an ambivalent relationship with multilateralism, withdrawing from a number of international organisations in the past to challenge their dysfunction (ILO, UNESCO, UNIDO,**

etc.) before reintegrating them. Are we witnessing more of a continuity or rupture in that regard?

Tim Heinkelmann-Wild: It is certainly a general pattern in US foreign policy. A systematic assessment of US (dis-) engagement in international institutions shows that it frequently rescinded support from international organizations and agreements in the past. Also, before Trump the US terminated its support for international institutions. For instance, the US left the International Labour Organization (ILO) under Jimmy Carter, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) under Ronald Reagan, and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) under Bill Clinton. Moreover, George W. Bush refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

A key reason for this pattern is the US power predominance since the end of the Second World War that allows it to more freely chose to pursue its foreign policy rogue there with other states in multilateral institutions or not. Weaker states have less of a choice and must band together to make a difference on the international stage.

The ebbs and flows of US engagement in international institutions are then driven by different factors, including domestic scepticism of international cooperation, the intrusiveness of international institutions, and the rise of rival powers. At the moment, all three factors point towards disengagement: Firstly, there have never been so many and so intrusive international institutions, which limit the room for manoeuvre of even the US and thus become targets of contestation. Secondly, domestic political polarisation in the USA is also increasing over international politics, which makes foreign policy decisions in Congress more difficult. Finally, the USA are declining relative to rising powers, such as China, and are confronted with increasingly influential blocks of revisionist and illiberal states, such as Russia.

It is telling that also Joe Biden was subject to these internal and external forces and only selectively followed through on his promise that "America is back". Under Biden, the US has indeed resumed support for some multilateral institutions. Examples include the Paris Agreement, UNESCO, the UN Human Rights Council, and the World Health Organisation. However, Biden never returned to other institutions, such as the "Iran deal", the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), or the Treaty on Open Skies. And the gaps in climate financing were also not completely filled under Biden. We have even seen new protectionist policies under Biden that violate WTO free-trade rules, such as the Inflation Reduction Act. Instead of engaging or even

creating new multilateral institutions, the US under Biden has pursued its foreign policy through selective minilateral clubs with selected partners.

While Trump can thus at least partially be considered as an expression of deeper trends, it is important to note that he is special in several ways. As regards the quantity of cases in which the US abandoned international institutions, Trump 1.0 reached one of the highest scores since 1945. Trump 2.0 might beat his own record as he has already ordered a complete review of US contributions to and participation in all international organizations and treaties. But it is especially in the quality of his attacks where Trump stands out. While other US presidents typically sought to hold up – at least in their rhetoric – their commitment to the post-war Liberal International Order the US helped to create, Trump is openly rejecting political and economic liberalism as well as the multilateral and inclusive procedures that underpin this order.

Books and Ideas: **Why are international organisations easy culprits for governments? Could you elaborate on different blaming strategies identified in your work and shat is specific in Trump's blaming strategy?**

Tim Heinkelmann-Wild: International institutions, and especially major IOs, are often considered perfect scapegoats for their member state governments. Their policies and procedures are often very complex and the public lacks sufficient information about them. While this incentivizes also mainstream governments to abuse for instance the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the European Union (EU) as scapegoats especially in times of economic hardship, IOs are particularly attractive targets for populist governments.

First of all, IOs perfectly fit into populists' anti-elite narratives about technocratic bureaucrats and foreign powers that take advantage of the good people. Moreover, their cosmopolitan nature and liberal values clearly contrast with nationalist visions. Criticizing IOs thus promises populists to mobilize their constituencies. For example, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) constituted such a perfect target for a proactive blaming strategy by the Trump Administration: By (falsely) accusing the organization of supporting forced abortion in China, the Trump Administration could combine the topic of abortion and China with an attack on the UN bureaucracy.

Moreover, blaming IOs also comes in handy when populists in government realize that they cannot deliver on their simple promises. In these situations, scapegoating IOs is reactive and aims at avoiding blame for the government in the face

of domestic pressures by shifting it onto IOs. For instance, Trump's public attacks against the World Health Organization (WHO) were clearly driven by his incapacity to effectively respond to COVID-19 at home in an election year. He thus presented the UN organization as incapable and colluding with China to distract from his government's failures.

Books and Ideas: **Your research focuses on the effects of leadership in international organisations: does the US have a monopoly on this? Is it possible to think of an alternative to US leadership? In what form?**

Tim Heinkelmann-Wild: The US has no monopoly for leadership on international leadership, but it is in the pool position due of its predominant power resources. The US still enjoys primacy in its hard power from military over finance to trade. Moreover, the US enjoys vast (albeit now rapidly eroding) soft power due to the attractiveness of its society and culture. In the past, the US has frequently used its power predominance to set up and maintain international institutions together with its Western partners. The flip side of US power predominance is that, when it rescinds its support from international institutions again, they face severe challenges. When their most powerful member turns its back to them, it questions the validity of international institutions and their rules. Moreover, US withdrawal also deprives institutions from huge contributions and thus undermines their capacity to effectively address global problems.

But other governments and even IO bureaucracies can step up as alternative leaders and help remaining member states to overcome the challenges of US withdrawal. They can defend institutions' continued value and fill the gap left by the US. However, alternative leaders' success is not unconditional but requires persuasiveness and the mobilisation of sufficient contributions from other member states. After all, no single actor can compensate for the loss of the US as the hegemonic power. Alternative leaders thus need soft power to convince others of the continued value of the institution and their plan to sustain. And alternative leaders also need to enlist sufficient hard power to address global problems without the US.

The EU is very well positioned to provide alternative leadership due to its soft power and its often already substantial hard power. In response to Trump 1.0, the EU and its members stepped in. In the case of the Paris Agreement, the EU took on an important leadership role. They not only defended the agreement but also acted as a role model by increasing their own efforts to combat climate change. They also included China as the most important emitter in their response strategy to the US

withdrawal. The EU even used its position of economic power to bind Brazil to the agreement under Jair Bolsonaro, who threatened to follow Trump's example. As a result, the Paris Agreement remained resilient as other member states stuck to their commitments and even increased their emissions targets. In the case of the WHO, European member states, in close cooperation with the WHO Secretariat, also succeeded in defending the organisation against Trump's criticism and combating the COVID-19 pandemic without the US.

To respond to Trump 2.0 and maintain the LIO, Europe must be prepared to take the lead and fill the gap after US withdrawal. The EU and the most powerful European states such as France, Germany, and the UK should, firstly, continue to champion multilateral institutions and abide by their rules to maintain their reputation as supporters of liberal principles. This will help their soft power, which they can use to win partners for their coalitions. European governments will have to rely more on non-Western partners who can support multilateralism.

Second, to effectively and efficiently increase their autonomous capabilities, Europeans should pool their hard power resources from defence to finance. Only together do Europeans have enough capacities to make a difference on the international stage when it comes to problems ranging from the environment and development aid to free trade and security policy. This can be done at the EU level or in additional cooperation agreements with the UK. It is also important to realise our own dependencies and reduce them.

Finally, European governments and the EU should strengthen IO bureaucracies. They are not only highly motivated to fight for their organizational survival but are typically committed to its values. European governments and the EU should therefore, for example, provide them with greater financial resources and increase their independence from individual member states.

Books and Ideas: **You sound rather optimistic in assuming that European powers will provide alternative leadership, but the EU seems pretty divided now: do you see signs of willingness to assume a renewed role in multilateral institution?**

Tim Heinkelmann-Wild: Europe indeed faces multiple challenges today that spur internal tensions and have the potential to constrain an effective response to US withdrawal today: First, Trump's re-election and his government's open support for authoritarian populists emboldens those forces in Europe that contest its commitment to the rules-based, multilateral order from within. Second, Russia's military threat

increased Europe's dependency on US security guarantees. This makes Europeans, especially those at its Eastern flank, particularly vulnerable to US retaliation for acting against Trump's will. Third, and relatedly, Europeans are thus faced with strong imperatives to build-up their own defence capacities. This general shift in focus threatens to undermine their commitment to multilateral institutions and development aid. Finally, even if European governments and the EU generally agree to sustain multilateralism, the sheer speed and simultaneity of Trump 2.0's attacks against numerous multilateral institutions is likely overwhelming and spurring conflicts about which to prioritize.

While EU officials and Europeans governments have condemned the latest US withdrawals from multilateral institutions, we have still to see whether this is backed up by deeds. Despite the described challenges, there are also good reasons to expect them to follow suit. Europe and its economy continue to profit immensely from the LIO. European policymakers in power should thus generally be willing to ensure these benefits by stepping up for multilateral institutions. Moreover, the response to Trump's attacks can typically build on a past consensus among European leaders. For instance, previous agreement among the EU's membership helped the Commission and the External Action Service to defend institutions such as the Paris Agreement or the UNFPA despite of sceptic member state governments. The centralization of decision-making power in the EU further facilitates a united response. For instance, due to its authority over the Common Market, the Commission could define and implement a swift response to the US blockade of the WTO's Appellate Body. In the domain of development aid, the Commission also has considerable leeway when it comes to the implementation of the budget. The EU's ability to promote leadership at international stage can thus be further facilitated by expanding majority voting or delegating tasks to the Commission. Finally, Europe's dependence on partners beyond the West to effectively address global problems has also increased in the last decades, especially with the US becoming less reliable under Trump. The EU and European governments thus also face strong imperatives to support multilateral institutions to cater their soft power and enlist non-Western partners.

Books and Ideas: **And what about China, who has been constantly increasing its contributions to the budget? Could China be in the position to provide such alternative leadership?**

Tim Heinkelmann-Wild: It is indeed a widespread expectation that revisionist powers, such as China or Russia, will fill the power vacuum left by the US in

multilateral institutions. They are assumed to seize control of institutions after US withdrawal and restructure them according to their own ideas. And it is safe to say that opportunistic and revisionist powers are benefiting from US disengagement from multilateral institutions. Trump, for example, allowed China to present itself, by contrast, on the international stage as a champion of free trade and global climate protection. In addition, the US provided revisionist states with welcome pretexts to also turn away from unpopular institutions. Russia used the US withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty under Trump 1.0 to justify its own exit from the agreement, China rejected criticism in the UN Human Rights Council by pointing to the West's double standards, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro threatened to abandon the Paris Agreement and, most recently, Argentina under Milei followed Trump in withdrawing from the WHO.

But there have been few attempts by non-Western, revisionist powers to take a leading role in the institutions abandoned by the US and to restructure them for illiberal purposes. The power vacuum left by the US has been filled predominantly by Western powers in the past. This is because the success of alternative leading powers requires persuasiveness and the mobilization of sufficient contributions from other member states to compensate for the absence of the US. Compared to many non-Western, illiberal, or even revisionist states, Western powers generally enjoy significantly greater credibility when it comes to maintaining multilateral institutions. European powers and especially the EU can use their superior soft power to defend multilateral institutions against criticism from the US, forge new partnerships with other relevant states, and enlist the hard power needed to fill the gaps left by the US. The example of the US blockade of the WTO is telling here. In the response to the first Trump Administration's blockade of the Appellate Body, China deliberately took the backseat and let the EU take the lead because its government understood the Europe wielded superior soft power and would thus be more successful.

This said, when other Western powers failed to step up as alternative leaders after US withdrawal, they provide an opportunity for revisionist powers to indeed gain soft power and eventually take over institutions. A case in point is the UNIDO. After US withdrawal from the organization, many other Western powers also seized contributions or even terminated their participation in the 1990s. As China stepped up its contributions significantly over time, it gradually won sway within the UN organization and then used it to "blue wash" its Belt and Road Initiative. Only recently, Chinese influence was pushed back by the organization's new German leadership. The threat of a Chinese takeover is very present in the domain of

multilateral development aid after Trump 2.0's has abolished contributions by USAID (United States Agency for International Development). When Europe also prioritizes defence spending over development aid, China is very likely to gain more ground in this area.

This brings me back to the importance of the continued European engagement for the liberal international order: It allows Europeans to prevent that other, potentially illiberal and revisionist powers, seize the opportunity to transform multilateral institutions. Upholding their commitment to the liberal international order also allows Europeans and especially the EU to maintain their soft power in a time in which the soft power of the US deteriorates and rising powers struggle to build it up. While it is important to invest in hard power capacities, Europe should not forget this unique strength it can leverage in international politics to address global challenges!

Books and Ideas: **You suggest that strengthening the international bureaucracy would make it possible to resist the attacks of the Trump administration and to make IO more resilient: but isn't there a risk of reinforcing the criticism that IOs are technocratic that Trump mobilizes in a populist manner?**

Tim Heinkelmann-Wild: Empowering IOs at this time might appear counterintuitive. It is of course true that more powerful IO bureaucracies will attract criticism from populist governments, such as the Trump Administration. But IO bureaucracies also have the great potential to mobilize member states for a shared purpose, work out compromises with dissatisfied member states behind the scenes, and act as neutral steward between great powers in times of geopolitical rivalry. When it comes to saving their institutions against attacks, IO bureaucracies are not only highly motivated to defend their organizations, but they might even have a soft power advantage over Western powers due to their institutional position as neutral brokers and stewards of the common good.

Strengthening the independent capacities of IO bureaucracies could even help to constrain opportunities for scapegoating rather than increasing them. Stronger independent communication capacities can help IO bureaucracies to address citizens' information deficit about their organizations. Moreover, by strengthening IO bureaucracies' ability to independently decide over policies or their budget allocations, responsibilities might become clearer (in contrast to shared responsibilities of multiple IO and member state bodies). This means that governments (and IO bureaucracies) can no longer hide behind complex configurations of shared

responsibilities. Strengthening the independence of the bureaucracies of IOs might thus not only increase their resilience but also accountability in international politics.

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