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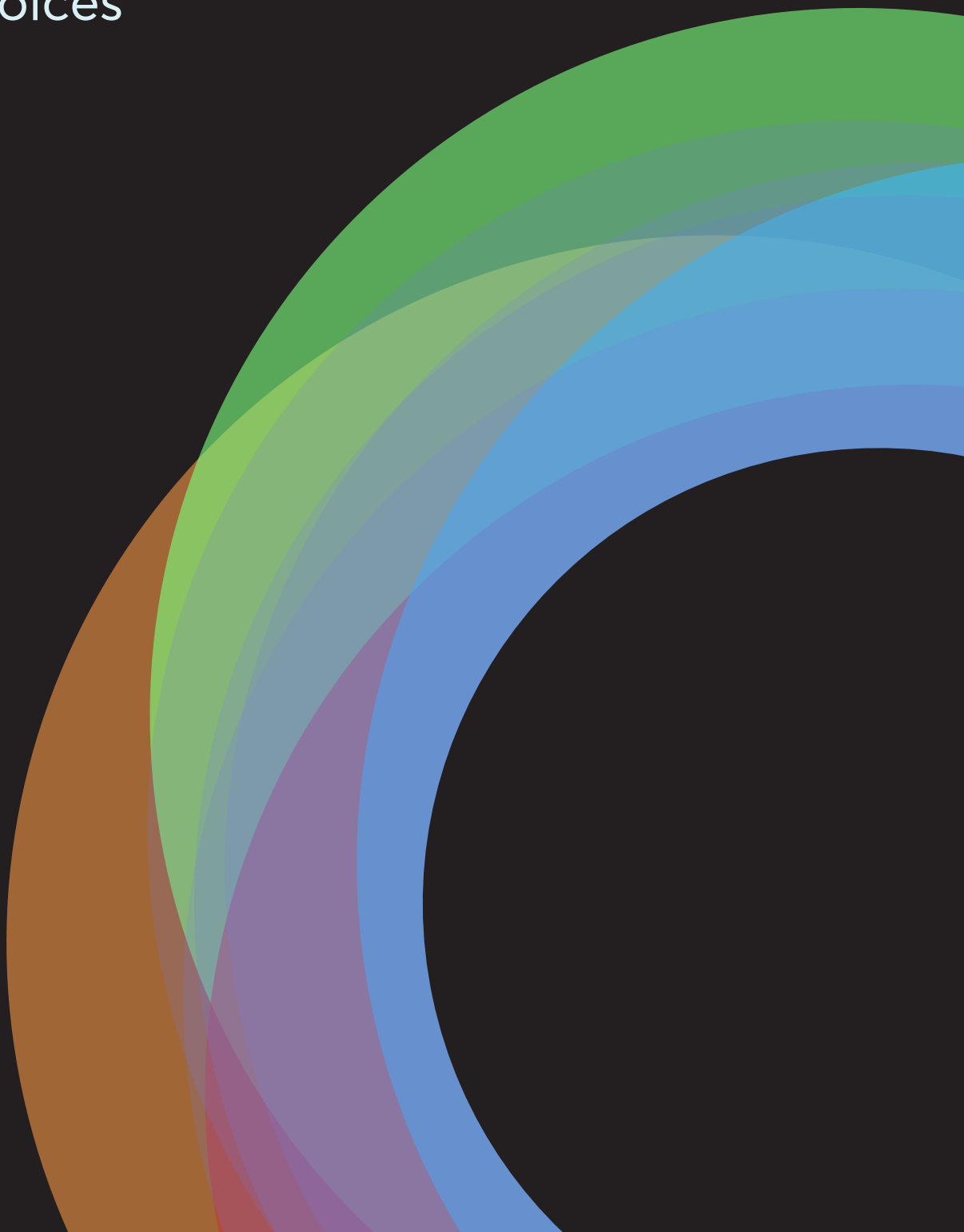
# The Multilateral Order Post-Covid:

## Expert Voices



IIEA Expert Voices brings together expert insights from around the world to provide concise, digestible answers to key questions in EU and global politics.

In this first publication, foreign policy experts provide short perspectives on the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact different aspects of the rules-based multilateral order.

Edited by IIEA Foreign Policy Chair Pádraig Murphy, and compiled by Researcher Sophie Andrews-McCarroll, this publication was developed to provide a breadth of expert views on the existing crisis of multilateralism, which has been thrown into sharp relief by the pandemic.

# Acknowledgements

The IIEA would like to thank the authors for their generosity in contributing to this publication:

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*Anne-Marie Slaughter*

*Stefan Lehne*

*Sven Biscop*

*Rana Mitter*

*Nathalie Tocci*

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# Introduction: The Coronavirus Pandemic and World Order


## Pádraig Murphy

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The beginning of every year sees a rash of projections of what the next twelve months have in store for us all. It is of course necessary that we provide ourselves with a model for the purposes of rational planning. But the year 2020 had not far advanced before all these projections were waste paper. So the first lesson to be learned from the cataclysm that has hit the world in the past six months is the need for humility – a need pointed out to us recently by the Foreign Minister of Sweden and the WHO's Special Envoy for COVID-19. Humility, because we are not after all complete masters of the future, and we have greatly underestimated the radical uncertainty that is attendant on managing it. President Macron himself was brought to acknowledge that "We already had the feeling that the established mode of globalisation (meaning the consumer/financial mode) was coming to the end of its life". The vulnerabilities of citizens and states under the model that has prevailed for the past thirty-five years have become too apparent. The question we must deal with is what will take its place. This is the question that we posed to a number of our friends and partners around the world – as will be seen, none of them affects to be able to foretell exactly what the outcome will be.

Some broad conclusions are incontrovertible. Many foresee the need for greater strategic autonomy, and this is understandable in view of what happened some vital supplies during the crisis. But how far can we afford to go in fragmenting the global economy? Can the objective be autarky for all? Clearly not. For countries like Ireland, and there are many of these, the answer is clear: the open world economy is vital for us. It is no less necessary for the many developing countries which depend on world trade. Not only that, the importance of international cooperation has been highlighted by the crisis. Even more, it has become clear that human beings everywhere share a fate. Equally, narrowly economic efficiency targets are now seen to be inadequate in planning for pandemic or disaster scenarios. The global interest has been inadequately provided for hitherto, whether in relation to public health or, as is increasingly evident, climate change. The GATT/WTO model of managing world trade privileged inordinately large corporations, financial markets and highly qualified professionals. What are now seen as front-line workers in the crisis figures nowhere in it, nor did the many millions of providers of basic services, sometimes as part of what is called the gig economy.

The crisis has also made it clear that two other items of world business have not lost their urgency: the threat to the world's climate calls for international action no less strongly than does the COVID-19 crisis. And it will become ever-clearer that the developing world is even more vulnerable to pandemics than the developed world is, and is looking to international solidarity in dealing with the pandemic and its consequences.

Then there is the question of the geopolitical balance that will result from the crisis. This balance was already changing before the pandemic: the US was increasingly withdrawing from its place in the centre of the international order. China's rise was becoming ever more inexorable. The

characteristics of what would replace the multilateral order that has been put in place since World War II were being debated. This process has now accelerated. The US has withdrawn from the WHO, the only international body under UN auspices tasked with the organisation of the world's response to the crisis. Some hope reposed on China as committed to international cooperation in such circumstances. But there have been some disturbing indications – *wolf warrior diplomacy* – that Beijing's approach might not necessarily be what the new situation calls for.

All this raises for us in Europe the question of the place of the EU in the multilateral order. It is left as the only major international actor which promotes the kind of rules-based order which it itself represents. After a somewhat shaky start, it has, by putting forward recovery packages unprecedented in their size and nature, risen to the challenge internally. Externally, it remains the determined champion of a rules-based multilateral system. The challenges for it in this will be to avoid becoming ground between the millstones of the parties – the US and China – which will be competing for world pre-eminence in the aftermath of this, and, as underlined by **Almut Möller**, to overcome any tendency on the part of its member states and societies to become more inward-looking.

**Anne-Marie Slaughter** makes the point that multilateral fora are not missing in order to deal with the crisis – what is missing is political will. Further, she points out that states alone are not enough: in sum, a multilateral order, rather than one exclusively reliant on states, will be needed. **Stefan Lehne** and **Sven Biscop** underline the need for concomitant action in the fields of climate change and development aid, in view of the fact that the crisis has demonstrated incontrovertibly that humanity is indeed one. **Rana Mitter**, **Nathalie Tocci** and **Karinne Lisbonne-de Vergeron** take up the point of the apparently vacant position in the world order with de Vergeron explicitly prompting Europe to fill the gap. **Dmitri Trenin** considers that the multilateral order is a second-tier order, and that nationalism is much more firmly based in our public opinions which are the support of government action. Time will tell whether this, as he calls it, *Realpolitik*, will be the decisive factor. As mentioned, for small countries like Ireland, there can be no querying the essential nature of a coordinated international response. Indeed, as **Ryosuke Hanada** makes clear, this applies not only to small states, it is a felt need of Japan, one of the major world economies. As he also mentions, the EU and its member states are also committed to a rules-based multilateral order, and not only because this is the basis on which they themselves have determined to organise themselves.

## "What is missing is not multilateral fora and processes, but political will."

### Anne Marie Slaughter

*Anne Marie Slaughter is an American international lawyer, foreign policy analyst, political scientist and public commentator. She received her D.Phil. in international relations from Oxford in 1992. She has taught at Princeton University, the University of Chicago, and Harvard University. She also served as the Director of Policy Planning for the U.S. State Department from January 2009 until February 2011 under U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.*

The current crisis simultaneously highlights the world's tremendous need for an international system that can actually exercise collective problem-solving authority and the deep flaws of the actual system we have. But no system, no matter how well designed or structured, can overcome the unwillingness of the nations within that system to work together, or

indeed to block and provoke one another. Had the leaders of the world's top 20 or 30 nations wanted to use the UN system, including the World Health Organization, as a forum for a cooperative global response to the pandemic, they could have. Alternatively, as in the response to the 2008 financial crisis, they could have used the G-20. What is missing is not multilateral fora and processes, but political will.

But the world cannot wait for the right leaders to be elected in the right countries. We face genuinely existential crises that will render large parts of the earth as we know it uninhabitable, creating massive flows of migrants on a scale the world has never seen. Thus the only way forward is a global order that no longer depends only on the world's governments, but that instead allows a mixture of political, business, and civic leaders to come together in many different configurations to get the job done.

We cannot stand on ceremony, kowtowing to the endless protocols of formal diplomacy. We must instead take action at whatever level proves effective. In matters of emissions, cities can dictate the behavior of nearly 60% of the world's people, putting mayors on the front lines of fighting climate change. In matters of global health, mixed governmental, philanthropic, business, and civic groups can mobilize to vaccinate hundreds of millions of children through the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization.

Millions of NGOs already exist in the world. But an effective global order cannot be brought about only on the civic side. What must emerge is a system in which some combination of national governments – perhaps from small and medium-sized states – governors, mayors, and international officials can come together with philanthropy, business, and civic leaders of many different kinds, including from universities and faith organisations. The origins are less important than the goal: to find, implement, and spread solutions that work – measurably and identifiably. Any group can catalyse an issue-focused summit; any coalition can decide to take action.

The picture may look disorganised, even chaotic. But too much activity, even if redundant or contradictory, is better than too little. What is critical is to be able to create multiple pathways around the paralysis of much of the existing system. Where an international organisation, whether regional or global, is working effectively, great. Where it is not, the world need not wait.

**"The current handling of the pandemic crisis thus indicates how difficult it will be to combat climate change effectively."**

## Stefan Lehne

*Stefan Lehne is a visiting scholar at Carnegie Europe in Brussels, where he researches the post–Lisbon Treaty development of the European Union's foreign policy. He has also served as Director General for political affairs at the Austrian Ministry for European and International Affairs, and as the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union as director for the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. Previously, he was head of the Task Force for Western Balkans and Central Europe.*

The COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis have a lot in common. Both affect every person on the planet though in different ways and to different degrees. Both are challenges arising from a globalised world, which require determined international action. And in both cases warnings have long been ignored, as the threats were seen as abstract and far away. Considering these parallels, the initial response to COVID-19 is profoundly worrying. Rather than launching

a concerted international effort to defeat the virus, the world fragmented along national lines.

National governments closed borders shutting out much of the external world. Naked national egotism drove the scramble for medical supplies on international markets boosting protectionism and, in some places, xenophobia. In Europe, assistance to the most affected countries was slow to arrive, resulting in widespread feelings of bitterness and anger. And on the global level, the Corona-related blame game drove US-Chinese relations to a new level of hostility and in the process also damaged the World Health Organization, the key institution charged with coordinating multilateral crisis management.

It is natural that our horizons shrink in an emergency and that we prioritise what is close and familiar over more distant concerns. This will probably also be true of the climate crisis. People will experience it not as a global challenge but as a series of droughts, storms and floods, each of which will have to be dealt with primarily on a national level.

The current handling of the pandemic crisis thus indicates how difficult it will be to combat climate change effectively. As long as a threat is not perceived as imminent, the political will to act is lacking. But once the storm has begun in earnest, the logic of "everyone for himself" is likely to take over again and impede international cooperation. It would be disastrous, therefore, to use the current economic slump as an excuse to postpone climate action. The real lesson from the current crisis is that we have no time to lose in tackling the next much more dangerous threat. Sadly, there is no vaccine against global warming.

## "For multilateralism to work, there must be consensus on what it is supposed to do, and can realistically achieve."

### Sven Biscop

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The coronavirus hits everybody: because it is a symmetric crisis, there will be no clear winners or losers. The four main global players (the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union) will all emerge internally shaken and economically weakened, but will manage to recover. The poor and the weak, however – people and states – will probably end up even poorer and weaker. Yet, rather than causing major change, the corona crisis seems more likely to accelerate existing trends – negative trends, unfortunately.

Tensions between the "big four" will rise further. That power struggle will continue to play out within the multilateral institutions as well, where China is seeking to increase its influence. The US will persist in its transactional approach to multilateralism, and might even withdraw from parts of the system. Consequently, it will become increasingly difficult to forge a compromise between the inevitable accommodation of China (for there can be no effective multilateralism without it) and the need to uphold the basic rules: peace (don't make war), openness (don't fence off spheres of influence), and reciprocity (abide yourself by the rules that you want others to respect).
Meanwhile, COVID-19 will interact with the climate crisis to further weaken fragile states

and to intensify the competition for scarce resources, leading to more tensions and conflicts. The trend to simplify supply chains and to become more independent from outside suppliers in key sectors will continue as well, though at heart the "big four" will remain deeply economically interdependent.

For multilateralism to work, there must be consensus on what it is supposed to do, and can realistically achieve. Not to change the political system within states, but to maintain the basic rules for relations between states. Could the US and the EU accept the former, and China and Russia the latter?

**"At a time when US leadership has become patchy, there is space in principle for another strong, credible leading state in global order. China has the opportunity to take up that role."**

**Rana Mitter**

*Rana Mitter is Professor of the History and Politics of Modern China and Director of the University of Oxford China Centre. He is a Fellow of St Cross College Oxford.*

By late 2019, China had managed to gain a foothold in the Global South with its BRI project, promoting investment and infrastructure development, as well as achieving a certain amount of success in improving its image in areas such as southern Europe.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has seen China's public diplomacy sustain severe damage. Responsibility for the outbreak of the disease has become part of a wider spat between the US and China, but the world has put the eccentricity of the American response down to Trump specifically, whereas it's China's system of authoritarian government as a whole that has made the world more reluctant to accept its good faith as a partner against the virus. This hasn't been helped by a spate of "wolf warrior" diplomacy in which Chinese foreign ministry spokespeople and ambassadors in various western countries have breathed fire at any suggestion that China's actions were less than perfect. This has led to a backlash in countries such as Nigeria which had previously been rather favourable to Chinese influence.

The response appears to be to find new ways to regain control in the existing international order. China has pledged that if it finds a vaccine, it will distribute it as a public good to the world. Yet at the same time, it has imposed sudden restrictions on the import of Australian barley, after Australia supported a call for a fully independent inquiry. Acts like this will give countries thinking of increasing their economic exposure to China serious pause for thought.

At a time when US leadership has become patchy, there is space in principle for another strong, credible leading state in global order. China has the opportunity to take up that role. It's been its own choice, not America's, that so far, it has fallen short.

**"COVID-19 could be the final nail in the coffin of a rules-based international order. But it could also give birth to a new phoenix rising from its ashes."**

**Nathalie Tocci**

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*As Special Advisor to HRVP Federica Mogherini she wrote the European Global Strategy and worked on its implementation.*

COVID-19 will likely become a defining feature of our age. This is not simply because this global pandemic will likely have political, economic, and social repercussions reverberating across all world regions for years to come. It is mainly because these consequences may well accelerate the dynamics if not tip outright the balance from one international order to the next.

As the US-China rivalry has deepened, the major victim could be the rules-based multilateral system, already debilitated by nationalism, trade protectionism and the move towards a decoupling of the US and Chinese economies. This crisis could fuel demands for economic autarky across different world regions, driving scepticism for interdependence, cooperation and openness. And without the incentive to protect the shared gains from global economic integration, the 20th century architecture of global economic governance could quickly atrophy. Nowhere in this clearer than in the controversy surrounding the World Health Organization. Regardless of the merits, limits and mistakes of the WHO, one thing is clear: for the US to withhold funding to it at the peak of the pandemic is utterly irresponsible. Above all, it shows the drama of a global confrontation between the US and China which is already trumping the global necessity to cooperate to overcome a virus which can only be defeated together.

COVID-19 could be the final nail in the coffin of a rules-based international order. But it could also give birth to a new phoenix rising from its ashes. Globally, COVID-19 has laid bare the limits of a governance architecture that merely monitors and suggests, rather than enforces. The current crisis reveals the inadequacy of the current order, pointing to the need for more global coordination and cooperation. The onus is now on multilateral platforms and institutions, to prove their worth, not only in containing and ultimately defeating the virus and sustaining the global economy, but also by learning the positive long-term lessons from this crisis, beginning with the quest for sustainable development.

## "The world at large has rediscovered realpolitik"

### Dmitri Trenin

*Dmitri Trenin is the Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center. He also chairs the research council and the Foreign and Security Policy Program. He served in the Soviet and Russian armed forces from 1972 to 1993, including experience working as a liaison officer in the external relations branch of the Group of Soviet Forces (stationed in Potsdam) and as a staff member of the delegation to the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms talks in Geneva from 1985 to 1991. He also taught at the War Studies Department of the Military Institute from 1986 to 1993.*

Multilateral order is a second-tier order. It is based on the actual distribution of power and influence within the international system, which I call first-tier order. Thus, the examples of multilateralism embedded in the United Nations and the UN system, from the IMF and the World Bank to the WTO and the WHO; and the European Union with its institutions are all based on the three layers of power realities created by World War II, the Cold War, and its aftermath. The end of the Cold War ushered in global dominance by a single power – the United States: an unprecedented phenomenon in world history. This produced a vision of one world, based on a set of rules and norms, governed by multilateral institutions, and inspired by liberal and democratic principles. Any deviations from the norms would be spotted, perpetrators would be named and shamed, and sanctioned, including by the use of military force by the world's hegemon, the United States. Such was, in essence, the world of *Pax Americana*.

Nations, however, rise and decline unevenly, and nationalism has a much broader social base in all countries than various forms of internationalism. History demonstrates that the underlying world order based on power relations is subject to change from time to time. The rise of non-Western nations, above all China, but also India, has challenged the power and global position of the United States. China has a different vision of international relations than America or Europe. Its version of multilateralism is based on sovereignty and economic power. As for the United States, in order to compete more effectively, it has had to refocus away from the system it had created and supported for a long time and turn to itself, and its domestic, sometimes selfish needs. This is where we are now. Elements of multilateralism, as a technique, will survive globally, but multilateralism as a second-tier order will continue to exist more or less intact within the European Union; to a much reduced degree, in transatlantic relations and among the so-called like-minded nations. The world at large has rediscovered realpolitik.

**"[...] one major concern for the future of the multilateral order deals with the cohesion and future strength of the European Union."**

**Almut Möller**

*Almut Möller is State Secretary and Plenipotentiary to the Federation, the European and for Foreign Affairs at the Senate (Government) of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg, one of Germany's 16 federal states. Previously she headed the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in Berlin, and the Europe programme of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).*

Among the many consequences of the coronavirus that both analysts and policymakers are trying to understand right now, one major concern for the future of the multilateral order deals with the cohesion and future strength of the European Union. Within only a few weeks, COVID-19 exacerbated already existing differences between EU Member States in economic and social terms, as well as with regard to the state of their health services.

It will be a politically challenging task to keep the Union together in the coming years, as leaders across Europe will have to engineer a recovery that addresses these growing asymmetries. The pandemic further exposed an already existing problem. Initial reactions to address it, such as the Franco-German initiative for European recovery, are promising signs that Member States have understood that overcoming this crisis will take a much bolder response than any previous policies.

Having said that, as the impact of the crisis on European economies and on the life of our citizens will further unfold in the coming months and years, it could become more difficult for national and regional leaders to argue for collective European action. With a trend of inward-looking countries and societies, Europe would no doubt struggle to find its way to collective recovery.

For example, as a city and metropole region firmly embedded in the European Union, and that has benefitted tremendously from European integration and cooperation over the years, any scenario of fragmentation of the Union would be bad news for Hamburg. In a positive twist, witnessing how quickly major achievements of the European Union can be threatened – such as the free movement of goods and people over the past months – has perhaps also meant a healthy wake up call. Stakes have risen not only for EU capitals, but for cities and regions across the EU and Europe, to keep the Union afloat. And no doubt, they will

have an important role in bringing about that sense of togetherness of citizens across Europe that will be needed to grow stronger as a Union in the years ahead.

## "A Turning Point for the Free Open and Rules-Based Order in the Indo-Pacific"

### Ryosuke Hanada

*Ryosuke Hanada is a Research Fellow at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, researching Japan's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region, including Southeast Asia, Oceania and South Asia. He is also in charge of the Council of Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Japan.*

The Indo-Pacific region, the epicentre of the global economy in the 21st century, is at a critical juncture. Although the economic logic of cooperation has largely mitigated the risks posed by political and military rivalry in the region until the mid-2010s, the political zero-sum logic has emerged as an equivalent counterforce, due to the increasingly assertive behaviour of rising powers, especially China. As such, many states in the Indo-Pacific have embraced cooperation in order to protect the free, open, rules-based regional order and as a means to avoid taking a binary choice between the U.S. and China.

Unfortunately, the pandemic – obviously a common challenge for humanity – promotes divides. It has taken away the momentum from this economic logic and even cast doubt on the resilience of democracy. China has acted assertively in the South and East China Seas during this crisis and apparently insists on threatening the status of Hong Kong as a separate system, while the U.S. stance towards China has tilted towards the confrontational. At societal level, sectionalism, and even racism, reveal non-liberal elements lurking beneath the surface of liberal societies. In response to the public health crisis, many democratic governments have expanded their role in the public welfare space, at the cost of individual liberty. Though those measures might be legitimate and necessary, it nonetheless poses old and timely questions to liberal democracies as to the extent to which governments should possess and wield authority.

Despite all this dismal news, a free, open and rules-based order should not yet be behind us. What is most helpful now is not to dwell on past normalities, but to explore realistic options for moving forward in this new world, while maintaining the key foundations of the old: power, economy and rules. Defeatism and realism are different.

In the Indo-Pacific, U.S.-led alliances remain a cornerstone of that order, in particular with regard to regional security. But no state can afford any longer to be a free rider. Thus, responsibility and burden-sharing for the security of vitally important sea lanes of communication in the Indo-Pacific should be redesigned to reflect this. The prosperity derived from a free and open economic system should reinject an economic logic into the cost-benefit calculus of foreign policy. Coalition-building is one effective measure. During this pandemic, Japan, ASEAN, Australia and the EU have, for example, issued a statement in support of cooperation for sustaining multilateral economic systems and creating resilient supply chains.

Ultimately, the fate of the international order relies on legitimate rules and effective enforcement mechanisms. The current rules-based order may not be the only way to achieve equality between states small and large, and so intellectual efforts for creating better rules, with the same universal values, which nonetheless reflect changing power distributions and developments in technology are indispensable to underpin the new order.

## "[...] Europe has a unique role to play in seeking to foster multilateral and regional cooperation."

### Karine Lisbonne-de Vergeron

*Karine Lisbonne-de Vergeron is Associate Director & Head of GPI Europe Programme at the Global Policy Institute in London.*

The current crisis has shown at least one important lesson for Europe: solidarity is not a given and it takes will to fight for what one stands for. The level of cooperation between EU Member States was indeed uncoordinated and far too limited at the beginning of the crisis though followed by a range of actions in medical assistance and recovery funds. But much more will be needed in the short run for European economies to come out of the current situation.

It also has a significant external component: A the multilateral global order has been repeatedly put into question over the past weeks, particularly by President Trump across the Atlantic and beyond, Europe has a unique role to play in seeking to foster multilateral and regional cooperation.

One of the major consequences of the COVID-19 ongoing pandemic will be to put a knock to globalisation as we knew it and favour in the mid-term regional economic trade, integration and geopolitical focus. This is true not just in the Americas, Asia or East Asia. Whilst a possible shutdown in trade with China is to be further expected as countries and regions may well turn on themselves to balance the effects of the crisis and as global companies will shorten value-chains by relocating activities at regional level, it will be crucial for the EU to act audaciously and promote not only its place, economic and geopolitical weight globally, but also reassert its industrial sovereignty and Single Market through much more European cooperation in strategic industries, banking, pharmaceuticals, key technologies, telecoms, strategic raw material processing, environment or defence.

The current crisis and need for solidarity show us that unity is what makes us stronger and that it is the only longstanding cornerstone on which Europe stands a chance to remain one of the three strategic global powers with China and the United States over the next century.

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The IIEA acknowledges the support of the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union.

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