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Multilateralism in the 75 years of the United Nations

More cooperation and more multilateralism

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In 75 years, the United Nations (UN) has accomplished a fundamental task: to prevent war between the world's major powers. In doing so, it has significantly strengthened the founding values of peace and security. In these more than 7 decades, the UN has achieved basic stability in the international political system and has managed to promote and defend human dignity. Starting in 1948, when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was established and adopted, norms that defend the lives of individuals and communities have been established. Today, the United Nations protects against oppression and infringement of the dignity of people. International cooperation emerged as a decisive element in the formation of the UN. The Organization provides the conditions for prosperity in the world. Since its foundation, it has sought to reduce hunger and poverty, which is currently the great task in the framework of sustainable development.

During these 75 years, the UN has deployed the blue helmets to avoid confrontations, separate forces in conflict, prevent the escalation of disputes and, essentially, protect the life of the civilian population, of the weakest. At present, some 100,000 people participate in 14 ongoing operations, including observers, soldiers, police and civilian personnel. Since 1948, 71 operations have been deployed around the world and 3,868 people have lost their lives protecting the most vulnerable.

The UN was established in the aftermath of World War II, with 51 States that were part of the new institutionalism and that today there are 193 States, plus the Vatican, which serves as an observer State. The UN made an essential contribution to the decolonization process, increasing its membership in the late 1960s and 1970s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of Yugoslavia and then the Soviet Union, in the 1990s, about twenty new states were incorporated. The last to enter was South Sudan.

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Nine general secretaries have guided the destinies of the United Nations. Each one of them was responsible for directing the institution in a context of instability of the international system and making proposals to materialize the promise of the United Nations Charter to “preserve future generations from the scourge of war” as a central value opposed to the horror of two world wars, with millions of deaths and great destruction, in addition to the use, for the first time, of the atomic bomb. The general secretaries also tried to specify a second essential value: “To reaffirm faith in the fundamental rights of man, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.”.

The context in which the UN has developed in these 75 years has radically changed. Its central structure is no longer adequate to face neither the old nor the new challenges, nuclear tensions, economic crises, or the containment of climate change. Power relations have changed in the international system, but this is not reflected or collected in the institutional structure of the United Nations system.

The world today faces a crisis with the Covid-19 pandemic unprecedented in a century, an unforeseen situation that is wreaking havoc. The negative effects are first expressed in the field of health, but they have also upset daily life, social and economic life, production, education and politics, and have disrupted the entire international system. “It is the greatest debacle since World War II [...] one of the most dangerous challenges that this world has faced in our lifetime, a crisis for all humanity with serious health and socio-economic consequences,” said Secretary General Guterres during his speech on the pandemic delivered on April 8, 2020 in New York.

The environment generated by the covid-19 is overlap on the global strategic restructuring underway, which is characterized by insecurities, perplexity, hesitations and erratic courses of the main players. In the new power relations, a new balance has not yet been reached. This situation began with the great changes brought about by the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet Union. In the struggle for power in the international system, the differences are expressed in different types of litigation: economic, technological, political, ideological and even military of the main actors, particularly the major powers, among which today stands out China.

One of the results of these transformations is the great difficulties of the international system to resolve differences in institutional form and joint consensus. The consequence is a major crisis in multilateral systems. In the struggle for new power relations, effecting organic changes in international institutions is practically impossible. The general institutional framework of the United Nations has changed little. Since the end of the Cold War, the reforms proposed to adapt the United Nations Security Council and the forms of leadership and representation in other international organizations have not advanced. In the midst of the pandemic, there is a paralysis of the Security Council, which makes it impossible to offer adequate responses to face the major transnational problems and to ease the tensions between the five countries with the right to veto.

The only real change was the creation of the G-20. The countries that compose it, although they cannot be assigned the representation of all the States that make up the United Nations, represent 66% of the world's population and about 85% of GDP. In the current context, it would have to play a more active role, capable of contributing to the global demands to face the serious, wide and multiple consequences of the pandemic, as well as the different areas in which it is involved.

Given this situation, Secretary-General Guterres expressed on June 26, 2020, in an interview with the Alliance of Leading Newspapers in Europe published in *El País*: "The international community is unable to find a common response to the pandemic. [...] The main reason is the dysfunctional relationship between the great powers. We need global leadership, or else we won't be able to respond well to challenges like those of a pandemic. But, unfortunately, where there is power, there is no leadership, and where there is leadership, there is no power". As if that were not enough, "continued Guterres," the multilateral organizations (such as the Security Council) have little force, and the little they do have, they do not want to exercise it.

A DEEP CRISIS OF MULTILATERALISM

Current trends show that multilateralism has lost its vigor. At the time of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, many transformations have occurred. A significant one is that the borders have been reestablished and the sovereign spheres of the national state are once again expressing themselves with intensity. It seems that sovereignty seeks to recover from the changes produced by interdependence, now in the context of the pandemic. Sovereignty and nativism have increased their weight to the detriment of the associative action of multilateralism. Its manifestations are more than mere commercial disputes, since conflict situations go beyond this sphere and include finance, research and development, technologies, artificial intelligence, transport, communications and competition in military spending.

Tensions are expressed more generally in strategic political relations, in such a way that imbalances and uncertainties are fostered in the international system, particularly in its institutional frameworks, which increase the difficulties in anticipating future trends. At present, when the greatest cooperation, solidarity and understanding are required, the United Nations Security Council is paralyzed by differences and lack of basic agreements among the five permanent members, by vetoes and cross differences. Their separatist policies have deepened and cannot overcome the differences.

It seems impossible to set in motion effective international institutional actions. Furthermore, the differences are transferred to other multilateral bodies, such as the G-20. If the leaders of this body, which aspires to overcome the difficulties of world parliamentary multilateralism, do not succeed, what follows will be dangerous and disappointing: multilateralism devalues their capacities and the international order weakens. A fundamental consequence is the significant setback in international cooperation.

These situations and processes reveal that no state or international actor has the capacities or conditions to face old and new global challenges on their own. No State alone can stop the advance of climate change and its consequences of desertification, storms and others. No state has neither the skills nor the resources - political, financial, human and material - nor the capacities to confront transnational organized crime.

Prevention policies require cooperation and partnership. Multilateral action is essential to face international challenges and combat the covid-19 pandemic and climate change as the two greatest threats to humanity.

International organizations can work together to better defend basic human rights and the protection of individuals. But they will only achieve this if a basic consensus is reached to coordinate policies generated by parliamentary multilateralism, in which all actors participate.

Moreover, international partnerships and cooperation are essential to reduce and slow down the relentless consequences of climate change, as well as to mitigate and act effectively in health crises and pandemics. In fact, the Secretary General has drawn attention to the possibility of a virus that spreads as quickly as Covid-19 and is as deadly as Ebola. To find ways of cooperation in these situations, the UN was created. Among its purposes it stands out “to serve as a center that harmonizes the efforts of nations to achieve these common purposes”.

Without agreements, without coordination, it will be impossible to contain the advance of transnational crime and the violence it produces. Without multilateral cooperation, there are no opportunities for diplomacy to counteract rigidities and tensions between the actors that are immersed in these global processes.

Global problems must be solved globally. Transnational challenges, risks and threats need transnational solutions. There are no effective national responses to meet international challenges. Establishing multilateral courses of action presupposes trust between the actors, since without it, progress is zero or very limited. That is why it is essential to cultivate mutual trust between international actors and between their agents. Reaching limited operational agreements and then moving on to greater coordination is part of efforts to increase mutual trust. On these bases it will be possible to open the way to deeper consensus and more stable and comprehensive agreements. Cooperation, international understanding, solidarity among the planet's inhabitants and caring for the environment will make it possible to overcome this deep and serious crisis that affects the world without differentiating regions or countries, or between rich and poor, between privileged and vulnerable populations.

DIFFICULTIES TO COMPLY WITH THE 2030 AGENDA

The goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acquire greater importance in the context of the pandemic and its consequences in the immediate future.

Being able to fulfill them will require a great intellectual effort to respond to the new challenges and find paradigms for new relationships with the planet and among human beings.

Reaching these goals will not be an easy task, both due to the consequences of the health emergency and due to previous lags. Indeed, in the 2019 Report on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Secretary General highlights that the environment is deteriorating at an alarming rate. In parallel, it is highlighted that hunger is increasing in the world, as are violent conflicts. The challenges highlighted in the report are very serious, especially climate change and inequality. The world is not on track to eliminate poverty by 2030, and more than a billion people are hungry. Furthermore, the world is far from achieving peaceful, just and inclusive societies. Chances of compliance have drifted away with the pandemic. There will be more poverty, more hunger, damage to health (not only due to the coronavirus) and deterioration in educational levels. Those most affected will be women and vulnerable people.

The worst human and economic crisis of our time emerged from the health crisis caused by the coronavirus, according to the report published at the end of April 2020 by the Economic and Social Council on progress towards achieving the SDGs.

The document emphasizes that "solidarity and international cooperation are needed more than ever. "Reaching the goals of the 2030 Agenda will be even more complex in the "other reality" that we must create in partnership given global interdependence. The priority task today is universal health; Tomorrow, the recovery from the serious social and economic effects of the great global recession and, in all these processes, concern and care for the environment to avoid an even greater catastrophe due to the irreversibility of climate change.

In meeting these goals of the 2030 Agenda, the importance of cooperation and solidarity is evident. They are the essential values that will allow the fulfillment of these goals and the protection of the essential pillars of multilateralism, represented for 75 years by and in the United Nations.

WHAT UNITED NATIONS WILL THERE BE IN 2045

Today's international context is complex and without convergences. Even the tensions between the powers are increasing. It is necessary to find ways to regain the capacity for action and prevent the escalation of tensions. This will be possible with more and better multilateralism, a multilateralism that incorporates more actors and generates more capacities for partnership and cooperation. It will not be an easy task at a time of serious crisis of multilateralism.

The next 25 years of the international system will be marked by profound changes in power relations, from which they are already evident, in which important actors want to reaffirm a narrow nationalism together with protectionism and limit international institutionalism when it is most needed. . It is essential to learn from the lessons of the past. Nationalism produced the fracture and disappearance of the League of Nations.

Multilateralism did not have the strength or the leadership to stop World War II. The task of achieving permanent peace is still unfinished. As stated by the mission of the University for Peace, established 40 years ago by the United Nations General Assembly, in its Resolution 35/55 of 1980: "If you want peace, work for peace".

On the 75th anniversary of the United Nations and on the 40th anniversary of the University for Peace, a primary task is to train generations of future leaders for sustainable development, peacebuilding and the promotion of human rights. To achieve this, education for prevention and confidence building, as well as negotiation, are essential. Tolerance, inclusion, diversity and participation are some of the characteristics of the training offered by the University for Peace.

Promoting and generating new questions and new analysis frameworks, and developing new paradigms about the new realities are part of the intellectual challenges of a context plagued with false news and “alternative truths”. It is essential to learn to look, educate yourself to listen, review the figures. It is imperative to apprehend the new global contexts in their socio-political, economic, technological and cultural dimensions. To face the changing world, we need more and better knowledge.

The foreseeable changes are announced as very significant. In 2045, the ratio of the world's population will be very different. The most populous countries will be India, China, Nigeria and the United States, followed by Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ethiopia. The demographic weight of Asia will be the greatest. And Nigeria will surpass the United States in population. In the economic sphere, the projections are that China and India will be the largest economies, and in general all of Asia. The two current powers, the United States and China, will be joined by India.

These forecasts impose dissipating the threat of climate change. If it is not resolved, it will be the end for a significant part of humanity. For this reason, the future passes through today's actions aimed at protecting the planet, biodiversity and natural resources.

The world demands new leaderships that are capable of facing the great transnational changes that affect the context of today but much more that of the next 2 and a half decades. It will be even more complex times to reinforce current public goods and delineate future public goods that allow putting people at the center, protecting the planet and generating progress based on cooperation, as defined in the 2030 Agenda. Even in a scenario of high unpredictability and great complexity in the international system, it is essential to persist and advance in this direction. Compliance with the SDGs will augur a greater capacity for cooperation and renewal of the convergence of all the actors in the international system. With this vision, the central role of the United Nations of the centenary will be to continue with its essential task: to promote peace and stability, to foster respect for human rights and to achieve sustainable development. 