

The Role of International Security Institutions in The Emerging International Order: The United States and China as Vital Stakeholders

Rafaela Elmir Fioreze¹

Marco Aurélio Chaves Cepik²

Abstract: The contemporary security multilateral institutional framework is characterized by varied functional and geographical configurations, regimes, alliances, and dialogue fora. Recent events and trends, such as the demise of the US-Russia arms control regime and the growing incapacity of multilateral organisms such as the United Nations Security Council, suggest that this framework is in crisis. This article aims to explain the current crisis in peace and security multilateralism and the roles of the United States and China in this context. We conclude that the Global South actors need to exert their collective agency demanding more inclusive and cohesive security multilateral institutions to help manage great power rivalry in a way that better suits the collective aims of peace and development on a global scale.

Keywords: Security Multilateralism; United States; China.

O Papel das Instituições Internacionais de Segurança na Ordem Internacional Emergente: Estados Unidos e China como Atores Vitais

Resumo: A estrutura institucional e multilateral de segurança contemporânea se caracteriza por diferentes configurações funcionais e geográficas, regimes, alianças e fóruns de diálogo. Alguns eventos e tendências recentes, como o desmonte do regime de controle de armas russo-estadunidense e a crescente incapacidade de organismos multilaterais como o Conselho de Segurança da ONU, sugerem, entretanto, que essa estrutura está em crise. Este artigo busca explicar a atual crise no âmbito do multilateralismo de paz e segurança e os papéis dos Estados Unidos e da China nesse contexto. Conclui-se que os atores do Sul Global devem exercer seu poder de agência coletivo na demanda por instituições multilaterais de segurança mais inclusivas e coesas para ajudar a administrar a rivalidade entre as grandes potências em consonância com os objetivos coletivos de paz e desenvolvimento em escala global.

Palavras-chave: Multilateralismo de Segurança; Estados Unidos; China.

El Rol de las Instituciones Internacionales de Seguridad en el Orden Internacional Emergente: Estados Unidos y China como Actores Vitales

Resumen: La estructura institucional multilateral de seguridad contemporánea se caracteriza por una variedad de configuraciones funcionales y geográficas, regímenes, alianzas y foros de diálogo. Algunos eventos y tendencias recientes, como la desintegración del régimen de control de armamentos entre Estados Unidos y Rusia y la creciente incapacidad de organismos multilaterales como el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU, sugieren, sin embargo, que esta estructura está en crisis. Este artículo busca explicar la actual crisis en el ámbito del multilateralismo de la paz y la seguridad y el rol de Estados Unidos y China en este contexto. Se concluye que los actores del Sur Global deben ejercer su poder de agencia colectivo en la demanda por instituciones multilaterales de seguridad más inclusivas y cohesionadas que ayuden a manejar la rivalidad entre las grandes potencias en línea con los objetivos colectivos de paz y desarrollo en nivel mundial.

Palabras-clave: Multilateralismo de Seguridad; Estados Unidos; China.

¹ Mestranda no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Relações Internacionais San Tiago Dantas (UNESP, UNICAMP, PUC-SP).

² Professor Titular de Relações Internacionais e Política Comparada na Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). Doutor em Ciência Política (IUPERJ-UCAM).

Introduction

International orders are formed by structures (political, economic, and social) and agents (with varied objectives and unequal capacities) in mutually constitutive interactions within contexts (environmental and social). Interaction mechanisms at multiple levels over time are the main causes explaining the dynamic features of the international system (CEPIK; BRANCHER, 2017).

Multilateral institutions (MIs) are important components of the international order because they are, at the same time, actors (when we think about them as international organizations) and political structures (when we look at them as formal and informal rules). MIs perform a relevant role in governing political interactions through such dual nature. States create international organizations (IO). However, they are actors of their own, and it is well established in the Social Sciences that they have the varied legal and material capacity to act in the international system (WEISS; WILKINSON, 2014). This power of agency, however limited, is what makes IOs a distinct part of the international political order. As part of the international order, IOs function as "rules" (institutionalists), "tools" (Realists/Marxists), and "schools" (constructivists), helping actors to meet common goals (DUFFIELD, 2006).

This article seeks to explain the current crisis in the realm of peace and security multilateralism and the role played by two of its most important stakeholders – the United States and China – in this scenario. We start by providing a critical assessment of the so-called liberal international order – which, as the prevailing global order, encompasses institutions that are now found to be in crisis – and its current trends. In the following section, we examine how the crisis in multilateralism is taking shape and its main causes. Then, in the last two sections, we analyze the roles of the United States and China in this context, attempting to understand how they respond to this setback in institutional multilateralism. We conclude with a normative note about the importance of US-China cooperation to develop a new international security institutional framework. Otherwise, considering the risks of a global nuclear war and the certainty of global impacts of climate change, the emerging international order will be "bound to fail", as John Mearsheimer (2019) so pessimistically called it.

1. From Cold War to Global Order: multilateral institutions

The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union engendered an asymmetrical international order that was not only bipolar but also institutionally divided between the West and the Soviet camp. The emancipation of the former European colonies and the development of Asia since the late 1970s have caused a still ongoing change in the system.

The United Nations (UN) and Bretton Woods organizational system was a crucial innovation for the governance of the international order resulting from World War II. Despite finding its roots in the 1940s and 1950s, such an order reached its apex by the end of the Cold War. Although correctly criticized by Marxists and other critical theorists, the idea of a “liberal international order” (LIO) is frequently used to refer to this international framework that emerged as an outcome of U.S. hegemony and its endeavor to shape the world to its image.

Underpinned by a commitment to an open, capitalist, world economy, international institutions, and a focus on relations between Western democracies, the U.S. hegemonic position made room for the establishment of a “loosely rules-based and progressively oriented” international order (IKENBERRY, 2018, p. 9). The so-called international liberal order encompasses informal (balance of power) and formal institutions. The main role of such a complex mix of rules and organizations is to govern interactions between its members, impose limits, and determine acceptable and unacceptable behavior patterns (MEARSHEIMER, 2019).

Such characterization is a well-structured narrative that often fails to critically assess some inconsistencies within the LIO. Accordingly, at the same time as positioning itself as democratic, it is an order that struggles to meet the demands of the Global South countries for greater participation in traditional international institutions – the barely addressed pressures for reform in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are an example. Moreover, it is an order whose rules are ignored and easily surpassed when incompatible with the dominant powers’ interests (BACEVICH, 2018; MEARSHEIMER, 2019)³.

³ The promotion of *coups d'état* (Cuba, Nicaragua, Chile), the support for non-democratic governments (Brazil, Iran, Egypt) and the disregard for decisions taken in international fora (the 2003 unsanctioned invasion of Iraq) are some examples of how the US has misused the order it created (BACEVICH, 2018).

Irrespective of these incoherencies, the Cold War ended, and the U.S. emerged as the sole great power in a reconfigured, unipolar international system, fostering the ideological belief surrounding the LIO concept. Fukuyama (1989, p. 4) went as far as to suggest that most countries would become liberal democracies, leading to the “end of history”. At present, however, that does not seem to be the case. Two recent trends have contributed to the dismissal of this view: first, the rise of China as an increasingly important economic, political, and military actor; second, the implementation of President Trump’s foreign policy agenda, which ultimately suggested that the US is perhaps no longer willing to carry the burden of sustaining the liberal international order (CHAN et al., 2018; JERVIS, 2018).

These events have raised many questions within the academic community about Sino-American relations in what seems to be a context of power transition and about the future of the LIO. A first, more optimistic perspective about China’s emergence, supported mostly by liberals, contended that the country’s rise would not necessarily be disruptive. It argued that while the current international order cannot prevent China from rising, it may be able to shape its actions and help define its behavior. In other words, because China benefits from the LIO, it will not feel prone to overthrow it (IKENBERRY, 2008). According to this view, China will be a status-quo power if it can take advantage of this order to advance its interests (CHAN et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, a different outlook stands out on the other side of the spectrum. Sustained primarily by the realist and power transition theories, this second perspective stresses that China’s rise cannot be peaceful, given that a rising state is intrinsically revisionist (LEMKE; TAMMEN, 2003; MEARSHEIMER, 2001). In this sense, a revisionist power is understood as a state that, dissatisfied with the prevailing international order, seeks to overturn it by, for instance, altering its rules (CHAN et al., 2018; FENG; HE, 2017)⁴.

⁴ While this view is, to a certain extent, a byproduct of the power transition theory, it appears to misunderstand the theoretical framework from which it stems. According to this theory, two elements contribute to explain the incidence of war between great powers: first, changes in power distribution among states; second, whether the rising power is revisionist (ORGANSKI; KUGLER, 1980). Because the ideas of “international order” and “balance of power” are often confused or used interchangeably, it may appear that a state that challenges the structure of power challenges, by definition, the prevailing order. However, a rising power will not necessarily be revisionist. The other way around is also true: not all the hegemon actions aim to preserve or strengthen the international order (CHAN et al., 2018).

This discussion aside, during and especially after the end of the Cold War, two complementary and contradictory trends have been observed in multilateral institutionalism within the scope of the liberal international order.

First, the evolution of a network of increasingly plural and dense multilateral organizations and institutions, including varied functional and geographical configurations, regimes, alliances, and dialogue *fora*. Just to mention a few diverse examples in the field of security, remember the UNSC, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU), the Committee on Hemispheric Security of the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), or the Outer Space Treaty (SCHECHTER, 2010).

Second, liberal and functionalist predictions about the effects of globalization failed to materialize. There has been no radical dispersion of power in the system since 1991. Instead, in both socioeconomic and political-military terms, "oligarchic" inequality in the international order remains rigid until today, although new actors, technologies, institutions, and ethical contents have emerged (ARRIGHI, 1997; LIMA, 1996).

2. Explaining the Fall: Multilateralism and power divergence

Determining when or at which point the crisis in multilateralism started is not a trivial task. However, there seems to be a consensus among IR scholars that, since the election of Donald Trump and the beginning of his mandate in 2017, multilateralism (at least as supported by the LIO's main stakeholder) is increasingly weakened.

Adopting an inward-looking discourse sustained by the "America First" slogan, the hitherto president of the United States played a distinct role in undermining multilateral institutions. During his term, Trump withdrew the United States from organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and treaties such as the Paris Agreement, the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and the Open Skies (GÖTZ, 2021; QINGMING, 2020). His lead was followed by many

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politicians abroad, and even longstanding organizations considered a landmark of multilateralism have been affected – as Brexit well illustrates.

This situation was further aggravated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which ultimately exacerbated inequality between different countries, increased distrust among nations, and accelerated the hollowing out of international institutions (IKENBERRY, 2020; PRATO; ADAMS, 2021). Competition for resources to fight the recently discovered virus halted cooperation, and the World Health Organization (WHO) soon became a locus for dispute between China and the United States. Alleging that the organization had a pro-China posture, in 2020, Trump made public his decision first to cut funding and then withdraw from the WHO – which was later reversed by President Biden. This kind of rivalry between the two great powers also spilled over other traditionally solid organizations, such as the InterAmerican Development Bank (IADB), the World Bank (WB), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) (WOODS, 2023).

President Biden was elected promising to reverse his predecessor's stance against multilateralism. Nevertheless, he kept the national security strategy goal of comprehensively containing China (changing previous liberal stances regarding China). In various arenas and institutions, these two goals tend to collide. It remains unclear whether he will succeed and, more importantly, where he is willing to go. New challenges recurrently emerge in the international scenario, of which the War in Ukraine is the most remarkable example. Much like the COVID pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine intensified great power competition and paralyzed international institutions. Even the international body with the greatest action capacity (the UNSC) finds itself deadlocked (WOODS, 2023).

There are three main causes of the current crisis of multilateralism. The first is the contextual change resulting from transitions on a global scale (climate change, demographic transition, energy matrix, and digitization). Such ongoing changes require much higher levels of cooperation, resources, and readiness than international institutions are currently able to offer (HARDT, 2014; RAUBER; FIOREZE, 2018). Encompassed by this is also the reconfiguration of the state-capital and labor-capital nexuses in the globalization hegemonized by financial capital. Popular sovereignty and national sovereignty are two sides of the same coin under

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speculative attack by the holders of a fictitious wealth (stock-market capital, other securities, credit to the private non-financial sector, and public debt), which represents an average of more than 350% of GDP in countries with higher per capita income (OVERBEEK, 2012).

The second cause is the struggle for the democratization of the institutional framework of the international order after World War II. The democratizing pressure became strong during Third World decolonization. In effect, according to Sinclair (2017, p. 15), “the phenomenon of IO expansion can be best understood today in light of its critical role in the production of different modes of governing in the decolonized world.” For instance, its current normative content is expressed by the concept of post-hegemonic multilateralism (ACHARYA, 2015; RIGGIROZZI; TUSSIE, 2012).

The third cause is the current power transition to an unbalanced multipolarity, in which the role of great power is occupied simultaneously (but not equally) by the US, China, and Russia. In addition to these three acknowledged great powers, one can also observe the rise of India, increasingly closer to filling all the prerequisites for being considered a great power⁵.

Such a scenario of growing polarization renders cooperation even more difficult to achieve. Unbalanced multipolarity incentivizes the asymmetrically powerful states to develop their own set of competitive multilateral institutions. Each great power struggles to organize its spheres of regional influence, either geographically or functionally. For example, in the realm of outer space cooperation, we have the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO), the European Space Agency (ESA), and the bilateral cooperation between Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA).

In sum, the great powers, especially the US, resist democratization and respond to it, sometimes emptying ISIs that were once useful to them and sometimes constructing others more suited to their contemporary purposes.

⁵ A contemporary great power has three necessary and sufficient characteristics that distinguish it from regional powers and other states in the international states: it possesses second credible retaliatory nuclear capabilities, exercises command in outer space, and is impregnable to conventional military conquest by another great power. Logistical support and the evolution of these capacities over time constitute the main element of security competition between the great powers (CEPIK, 2013).

3. The United States and security institutions: reduced to NATO?

Since 1989, the US grand strategy has been driven by building a unipolar (politically and militarily), globalized (economically and institutionally) international order. The idea of a truly worldwide *Pax Americana* and the specific means to reach it have changed over time. It is possible to distinguish three periods (1991-2001, 2002-2012, and 2012-2018) (WALT, 2018).

In the first period, the expansion of mandates and composition of the multilateral security institutions created during the Cold War was predominant. Two examples are the establishment of OSCE in 1995 and the open-ended expansion of NATO since the signing of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 1990. The second period was marked by the dismantling of the previous nuclear equilibrium regime between the US and Russia and the subordination of multilateral security relationships to the US global counterterrorism strategy. Two landmarks are the withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 2002 and the highly controversial implementation of UNSC Resolution 1973 to intervene in Libya in 2011. The third period is defined by the consequences of the global economic crisis initiated in 2008, including the increased polarization within and between countries, threatening the pillars of the *Pax Americana* as global order. Two examples of this stage are the changing fates of the "Pivot to East Asia" regional strategy (2012) and the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (MEARSHEIMER, 2018).

In regional terms, one may notice that, in the Middle East and Europe, the US grand strategy was reluctantly supported by some of its most relevant allies, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Either way, it has contributed decisively to undermining the multilateral institutions of both regions (historically fragile in the first case, more resilient in the case of the European Union).⁶ In Africa and Latin America, with lesser regional priorities for the US, regional multilateralism evolved significantly after 2001. It was a slower process in the case of Africa but more persistent there than in Latin America. Especially in light of the current crisis of initiatives such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), the Pacific Alliance, or even the Community of Latin American and

⁶ Russia was the main intended target. The construction of Russia as an existential threat to Europe or American interests in the Middle East is contentious. See ZYSK (2018).

Caribbean States (CELAC) (SUAREZ; VILLA; WEIFFEN, 2017; HERZ, 2014). In Asia, the US grand strategy clashed more directly against China's rapid and consistent ascension.

In addition, foreign policy differences between Republican and Democratic governments have been primarily ideological (neoconservatives *versus* neoliberal internationalists) and instrumental (unilateral *versus* multilateral) (POSEN, 2014), not substantial. All four presidents (George H. W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, and even Obama) kept the basic goal of a fundamentally revisionist grand strategy, which was to alter the *status quo ante* (1972-1990) based on nuclear equilibrium and peaceful coexistence between spheres of influence with different economic systems.

In this sense, the Trump government was part of a deeper trend, not the sole cause of the current crisis of multilateral institutions (LAYNE, 2018). This is not to minimize or exempt Trump from the dismal state of multilateral institutions (JERVIS, 2018).⁷ On the contrary, decisions such as the withdrawal of the US from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (the Paris Agreement), from the JCPOA, or even the threat to desert "from all international agreements may still expose the United States to purported binding jurisdiction, like dispute resolution in the International Court of Justice," indicate a dangerously regressive move (ZHANG, 2018).

To a lesser extent, these decisions still resonate in Biden's government. Though less vocally critical of determinate institutions, the current US president gives continuity to this enduring movement of, on the one hand, emptying international organizations no longer deemed relevant to the country's strategy (such as the UN) and, on the other hand, strengthening alliances to contain China. In this regard, two fronts stand out: first, the reinforcement of NATO⁸; second, the further development of regional initiatives in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), composed by the United States, Australia, India, and Japan, and "revived by the Trump administration as a mini-NATO" (ZHAO, 2021, p. 3. Thus, US multilateral actions suggest that the country is already conducting a new Cold War,

⁷ For a radical critique of the neo-fascist features of Trump's presidency, see FOSTER (2018).

⁸ In February 2021, during the Munich Security Conference, Biden urged NATO countries to prepare, alongside the United States, for strategic competition with China in the long run (CEPIK; BRANCHER, 2021).

as it operationalizes ISIs mainly to prevent China and its strategic partners from advancing (CEPIK; BRANCHER, 2021; GRANO; HUANG, 2023; ZHAO, 2021).

4. China and the security institutions: from regional to global reach?

As for the People's Republic of China (PRC), its grand strategy since 1979 aims to consolidate internal self-strengthening reforms, establish an area of Chinese influence in the region of Asia Pacific, and achieve national development without clashing with the US (FRIEDBERG, 2018; IRVINE, 2017). There are four periods in the Chinese case, following the rule of successive leaders: Deng (1979-1989); Jiang (1990-2002); Hu (2002-2012); and Xi (2013-2018).

The Communist Party of China (CPC) led by Xi Jinping faces the challenge of crafting the PRC's grand strategy in a very different context. While Chinese national power is stronger than ever, the international environment is more complicated and less beneficial to the PRC's goals. There are two central debates regarding China's current situation. First, in Yan Xuetong's (2014) terms, "striving for achievements" (Xi) is indeed superior to the previous "keeping a low profile" (Deng) approach. The second debate concerns the consistency between the military and the economic components – that is, whether China's growing interests in all relevant global value chains will continue to allow for a limited and less costly military strategy, especially if the US further securitizes its economic and technological competition with PRC.

Linking and enabling the military and economic dimensions, China's long-term diplomatic approach is steered by the signature concept of forging a "community of shared destiny." Evolving from its original regional reach, its normative content under Xi Jinping's leadership encompasses the whole of humankind. To pursue this moving target, the party and the central government have adopted 2007 a synthetic orientation: "Big powers are key; China's periphery is the priority; developing countries are the foundation; multilateral platforms are the stage" (专访秦亚青, 2018; POH; LI, 2017).

China has actively built regional multilateral organizations and trade agreements in Asia. Sufficient to recall the SCO, the APSCO, the ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), or the comparatively newer Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Besides active participation in the established multilateral

system around the UN and Bretton Woods institutions, China's multilateral networking can be as diverse as the examples provided by its commitment to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC), the BRICS Forum, the Group of Twenty (G20), or the multidimensional initiatives within and around the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). New multilateral platforms include the so-called 1+N arrangements. Prominent examples are the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the China and Portuguese-Speaking Countries Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation (MACAO), the China and Central and Eastern European Countries Initiative (CEEC 16+1), the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), and the China-CELAC Forum (CCF) (DIAN; MENEGAZZI, 2018).

Besides, since its official launch in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become more than a colossal connectivity and infrastructure investment project. In 2017, the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRFIC 2017) held in Beijing attracted 29 foreign heads of state and government and other representatives from more than 130 countries and 70 international organizations (ZHANG; ALON; LATTEMANN, 2018). In its second edition, held in April 2019, the BRFIC gathered 37 heads of state, not to mention five thousand other representatives (ZHAO, 2023). Although a third BRFIC is yet to occur due to the COVID-19 pandemic and China's strict measures, Xi Jinping is considering hosting the event in 2023 (REUTERS, 2022).

At the same time as promoting the creation of new regional organizations and fostering the establishment of trade agreements with its neighbors, China has also been keen to uphold the UN's role, especially in security matters. Its most remarkable effort in this regard has probably been its increasing contribution to the UN peace operations. Besides being the second largest financial contributor to the organization's peacekeeping (only staying behind the US), China is the tenth overall troop provider and the first among the UNSC permanent members (UNITED NATIONS, 2023)⁹.

⁹ As of December 2022, China's contributions in terms of troops accounted for approximately 3% of the total UN peacekeeping military and police personnel. For the US, that number corresponds to 0,04% (UNITED NATIONS, 2023).

Despite what might seem to be a focus on security issues, China's contributions to the UN go well beyond this scope. Since 2019, China has appeared as the second-largest contributor to the UN's overall budget (CFR, 2023). In addition, the country has also been playing a proactive role in the organization as important Chinese figures lead many of the UN agencies. Currently, China heads the secretariat of four of the fifteen UN specialized agencies: the FAO, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the Industrial Development Organization (CHENG-CHIA; YANG, 2020; WOODS, 2023).

Indeed, whereas the United States gradually ascribes a secondary role to the UN in its strategy and deprioritizes its participation, China seems to be well aware of the organization's role and, as such, embraces the responsibility of guaranteeing its proper functioning. As a result, when comparing the degree of commitment of both countries towards the UN, the US, rather than China, appears to be sustaining a revisionist position. However, China's commitment to the UN should not be interpreted as unreserved and exclusive. China concomitantly fosters a Chinese-led multilateral environment by institutionalizing evolving partnerships worldwide and attracting new members to the organizations it sponsors. One example is the SCO, which now finds Saudi Arabia (one of the US' most important Middle Eastern allies) among its dialogue partners (REUTERS, 2023). A two-pronged institutional strategy that expresses China's national interest but also entails additional opportunity costs for the Global South countries not directly involved in the US-China rivalry.

Conclusion

By upholding its commitments to the existing multilateral institutional framework, at the same time it strives to build alternative and complementary organizations and dialogue spaces, China is currently challenging the US moral leadership in the world. Pending on how their bilateral economic and military relations evolve, will China succeed in becoming the new global leader?

Such a question is not for this text to answer. However, it should remind us of the first cause of the current crisis of multilateral governance, located at the economic core of the global capitalist system. Social and political interests, opinions,

and values divide the contemporary world inside and outside nation-states. What Arrighi and Silver (1999, p. 289) wrote twenty years ago still applies:

This leadership must be willing and able to rise up to the task of providing system-level solutions to the system-level problems left behind by US hegemony. The most severe among these problems is the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the life chances of a small minority of the world population (between 10 and 20 percent) and the vast majority. (...) US adjustment and accommodation to the rising economic power of the East Asian region is an essential condition for a non-catastrophic transition to a new world order.

Impending global issues such as climate change, pandemics, and extreme poverty are not constrained by national borders, let alone state interests. However, their causes and consequences affect humans and nature increasingly unequally. For this reason, they cannot be properly addressed in a polarized and divided world. Instead, they require a unified and cohesive (not to speak of democratic) set of multilateral security institutions that transcends great power rivalry and help us to find common ground on peace and development. As the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine made clear, the existing set of security institutions has proved flawed.

Therefore, as the current main stakeholders of the international order, it is fundamental that the US and China cooperate in developing and sustaining an effective multilateral framework. Otherwise, emerging challenges may render the old liberal order purposeless, leading to systemic war and an even less desirable order.

Regional powers in different parts of the Global South may contribute, even by pressuring great powers and their allies to avoid what Graham Allison (2017) calls a contemporary “Thucydides’ Trap”. However, as semi-peripheral and increasingly divided societies, any prospective winning coalitions in favor of peace and development face the toughest political battles of this century under the new global context. Their task is to reverse the drive toward death and self-destruction (*Todestrieb*) so aggressively thrust by the neo-fascist coalitions in various parts of the world. To advance a progressive global agenda, the contemporary ‘minimal’ program revolves around the UN Sustainable Development Goals and rebuilding the UN General Assembly and Security Council legitimacy to discuss, decide and implement unbiased collective peace and security initiatives.

It is not feasible for regional powers to ignore great power politics. Therefore, realism should guide any claims for multilateral institutional reform or capacity-building efforts. Due to scarce resources and fierce opposition, any given Global South progressive government needs to choose no more than a handful of dialogue platforms and regional organizations to complement their UN system participation and support.

In the case of Brazil, for instance, those priorities should be the bilateral relations with China, Argentina, Mexico, and (maybe) the United States, plus the multilateral platforms BRICS, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CELAC, and UNASUR (HIRST; LIMA, 2015; VILLA, 2017; ALSINA, 2017; VAZ, 2018; MARCONDES; BARBOSA, 2018). This is not a concession to “peripheral realism.” Rather, it is a call to Brazil to engage in very selective and deepening “hard bilateralism,” complemented by a tactical adoption of “soft multilateralism” to rebuild regional integration (TOW; TAYLOR, 2013). Easier said than done, but we must discuss the alternatives unreservedly to imagine a better future.

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