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The Crisis of Multilateralism between Hegemony and Multipolarity

Hints from History – and some for the EU

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Executive summary

- Definitions and Distinctions: Multilateralism refers to cooperative efforts among states to achieve common goals through shared rules and institutions, while multipolarity describes a world order with multiple great powers competing for influence.
- Historical Origins: Modern multilateralism (still imbued by some “realist” principles) emerged from Bretton Woods (1944) as a response to WWII devastation, creating institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and WTO to stabilize the global order.
- Fragility and Cyclicality: Multilateralism, however, even with different characteristics, has appeared and collapsed repeatedly in history (e.g., the Concert of Europe, the League of Nations), often undermined by rising powers and the lack of hegemonic enforcement.
- Conditions for Success: Five key factors sustain multilateralism:
  a) Aftermath of major conflict
  b) The presence of a hegemon
  c) Clear evidence of hegemony
  d) Willingness of the hegemon to lead (which is currently one of the main problems, made even more explicit by the publication of the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy
  e) The acceptance of the hegemon by others.
- Current Crisis: Today, at least three conditions (c, d, e) are eroding: U.S. reluctance to act as a global guarantor, declining acceptance of its leadership, and rising revisionist powers (China, Russia) challenging the system.
- Impact of Multipolarity: Multipolar competition fosters instability, weakens cooperation, poses a threat to globalization and undermines multilateral institutions (e.g., WTO), as states prioritize strategic advantage over common goods. Historical and current evidence shows that geopolitical ambitions and power struggles often override multilateral commitments, especially in periods of hegemonic decline.
- Europe’s Vulnerability: The EU, a product of multilateral principles, faces existential risks in a multipolar world. Scenarios range from fragmentation to deeper integration or adopting more assertive geopolitical strategies which, however, may imply the erosion of some of the principles on which the Union itself is built, even under conditions of political urgency.
- Outlook: The “Golden Age” of multilateralism is ending. Without renewed hegemonic commitment and systemic acceptance, the world risks sliding into unstable multipolarism, transactional politics, and potential hegemonic conflicts.

1. Multilateralism. Nature and structure

Multilateralism and multipolarity are, today, two terms perhaps even overused in international relations writings and even in day-to-day political analysis. In common, however, they have only the "prefix" (multi), both however conveying very different concepts and attitudes in the field of international relations and geopolitics.

As widely known in the field of IR studies, multilateralism rhymes with some other concepts describing the behavior among powers (generally many) imprinted to deploy cooperative efforts in order to achieve common goals, in general oriented to the provision of common goods – maybe a better environment or scientific progress, or even peace.

"Common goals" sounds like a rather generic term; yet very concretely it involves freedom of trade beyond protectionist stances, the struggle against climate change, international aid, the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment. The way in which these common goals are achieved has historically been delegated to some collective bodies such as the UN, the World Bank, or the WTO. To be honest, these institutions of global governance are sometimes highly unequal in terms of representativeness. Yet, they provide an arena for international collaboration, provided, however, that the common goals are perceived by all the participants as really common goals.

Multilateralism, therefore, resonates with principles and goals which should be common among both developed and developing countries, and, in principle, regardless of their relative power, attributes, capabilities and might. The basis of all this should be the commitment to draft, respect and defend a system based on common rules and principles.

Putting it quite "philosophically", multilateralism can be to a certain extent considered as a synonym of international cooperation based on liberal principles (principles that long predated the end of the Cold War) rooted in a great deal of mutual respect and trust, in order to achieve, in the end, the benefit of the each actor through collective advantage. This can be roughly taken as the definition of liberal multilateralism, which in its most "pure" and theoretical version emphasizes the cooperation among national entities independently from their relative power for the attainment of a common goal and/or good.

2. The Realist Origins of Modern Multilateralism

A good way to understand better this attitude is to maybe go back several decades, in a moment in which the end of the last (so far) hegemonic conflict was approaching, and at Bretton Woods, in July 1944, delegates of the Allied nations met, with the specific task of redesigning a set of internationally respected rules and institutions aiming at regulating the relationships among nations – and agreeing about a shared system of global governance.

In the end, the only alternative possible after a dramatic conflict which, already at the time of the conference, was evidently the deadliest in the history of mankind (and would have culminated in an amount of civilian and military deaths close to 70 million).

But, apart from the horrendous toll in human lives, the conflict had destroyed the concept itself of interstate peaceful cooperation in conflict resolution, reintroduced the concept of territorial conquest by force (the essence of classic geopolitics), as well as ethnic cleansing and, in the end, of the crudest version of the motto “might is right”.

The closing address to the Conference delegates was given by the U.S. Treasury Secretary in-charge, Henry Morgenthau, Jr. The (remarkably short) address was mainly focusing on the institutions of global governance designed at the conference, aiming at the reconstruction of the world economy after the conflict, particularly from the point of view of trade and development.

However, in Morgenthau’s words, one can find probably the most effective synthesis of what multilateralism really meant in a world which had been poisoned for decades by nationalist self-interest.

Differently from his quasi-homonymous Hans, Henry Morgenthau was not a political scientist. With Hans, however, he shared a truly realist view of international relations. And had very clearly in mind how multilateralism could effectively coexist with this realist vision prioritizing the national interest. In his words (emphasis added):

> There is a curious notion that the protection of national interests and the development of international cooperation are conflicting philosophies — that somehow or other men of different nations cannot work together without sacrificing the interests of their particular nations […]
> I am perfectly certain that no delegation to this Conference has lost sight for a moment of the particular national interests it was sent here to represent. […]
> Yet none of us has found any incompatibility between devotion to our own countries and joint action.
> Indeed, *we have found on the contrary that the only genuine safeguard for our national interests lies in international cooperation. We have come to recognize that the wisest and most effective way to protect our national interests is through international cooperation* — that is to say, through united effort for the attainment of common goals.
> This has been the great lesson taught by the war and is, I think, the great lesson of contemporary life — that the peoples of the earth are inseparably linked to one another by a deep, underlying community of purpose [emphasis added].

Morgenthau and the delegates at the Conference which, indeed, famously ended designing a handful of institutions which in fact made possible the economic recovery of the global economy (or better, the economies and societies of the nations in the “Western Hemisphere”) in a peaceful framework for decades until and after the end of the Cold War, promoted therefore a “realist” vision of international cooperation in which the national interest was fulfilled through a multilateral vision of international order.

This included, by the way, among the rest economic, financial, and also technical and scientific cooperation, and, as well known, was open to include former enemy nations, such as Germany, Japan and Italy. It also laid the foundations for other ambitious projects of supranational multilateral

bodies, including the antecedents of the European Union. For the sake of simplification, we can call this vision as “realist multilateralism”.

Differently from the above-mentioned concept of liberal multilateralism, realist multilateralism– according to the spirit of the Bretton Woods times – emphasizes a key concept. The behavior of states is fundamentally selfish or at least driven by national interest. But what makes this approach less realist and more multilateralist is the awareness that the mean through which national interest is achieved, indeed, is not through an anarchic behavior where “might is right” but through forms of international cooperation in which a primary role is held by institutions of global governance.

3. The long (and tormented) history of multilateralism

Bretton Woods’ institutions were probably the most effective expression of the modern version of multilateralism emerging from an appalling tragedy as the Second World War.

Historians, however, know that multilateralism – albeit in very different forms and shapes – has surfaced in history several times before July 22, 1944.

If the notion of national interest could be generically traced back to the birth of the modern State (in the West) in Westphalia and Osnabrueck in the mid-seventeenth century, so too did the idea of preserving that national interest through various forms of multilateral cooperation almost immediately followed, surfacing and resurfacing over time, for instance during the nineteenth century with the two Concerts of Europe, or just after the end of the first hegemonic global conflict at Versailles, in 1919.

Multilateralism as an idea alternative to the systematic clash of powers emerged and re-emerged; yet it also frequently revealed its intrinsic fragility.

Historically, in sum, multilateral attitudes, and some forms of cooperation aiming at reaching common goals emerged here and there, sometimes stronger, sometimes much more fragile, as in the case, for instance, of the League of Nations.

Since historians are often fascinated by cyclical visions of history, it is worth understanding if there is some kind of regularity in this endless rise and fall of multilateral visions.

As well known, political scientists do include, among the different possible scenarios, a slightly different vision than that proposed by Morgenthau at Bretton Woods concerning interstate relationships. If realist multilateralism (see above) emphasizes the idea of cooperation for a common goal in the pursuit of national interest, the structural (I prefer here the word “radical”) realist approach instead insists on concepts emphasizing pure competition for geopolitical leadership – achieved through the conquest of territories or the solid control of vital material and immaterial assets –, on the Spencerian/Darwinian idea of the survival of the fittest, and the purely formal role of international institutions, whose existence is justified only by convenience.

Structural/Radical realism is based, in sum, on the idea of a zero-sum game, while realist multilateralism recognizes that there are some potential win-win situation in cooperation for achieving common goals.

According to many observers, multilateralism seems to be alive and in good health, when in fact it is far from being so. As noted by Jo Inge Bekkenvold in an article recently published in Foreign Policy

("The Golden Age of Multilateralism is Over", September 12, 2025), there is at present the paradox of an increasing and healthy "multilateralism index" (which measures the propensity of States to join multilateral agreements), coupled with a sharp decline in the real commitment to meaningful participation and with an acceleration in selfish behavior.

For instance, the U.S. is a primary member of the WTO and of the UN; the quality of this involvement, witnessed by the recent decisions in trade policies and by the sharp critiques towards the United Nations as a parasite, useless and ineffective body, as repeatedly remarked in the recent (March 2025) speech at the UN General Assembly by the sitting U.S. President, is however highly questionable.

While realist multilateralism, in sum, still sees institutions of global governance as essential components of the joint effort for a common good, the hardline version of realism considers institutions as a function of relative power (the contrary of the principle of equality).

They are, at best, indeed, not essential components of the pursuit of common goods, but instruments for the achievement of national self-interest, particularly by great powers.

Back again to the recent case of Mr. Trump's speech at the UN General Assembly, it is interesting to note how the address can be divided roughly into two parts: the first an unconditional praise of the absolute superiority of the U.S. over other nations, the second a critique of the way in which the international community is addressing those, so far, considered as the main threats, or common goals, including international migrations, climate change, and peace.

Quite the opposite of a multilaterally-oriented problem-solving attitude. An example of radical/structural realism opposed to liberal, or even realist, multilateralism, in essence.

4. Multilateralism, Globalization and Geopolitics

As anticipated above, in sum, multilateralism is not simply the product of the post-WW2 decades, even if one must admit that this version has been more efficient, articulated and resilient than the previous ones, including the already mentioned two Concerts of Europe and the post-Great War attempts to consolidate the so-called Wilsonian principles. Multilateralism, both in its realist and more "liberal" perspective tends to generate significant "externalities".

One is, for instance, the relationship between the presence of some form of multilateralism based on recognized institutions agreed and supported by countries, and waves of global integration.

The phase following the Napoleonic turmoil was, true, a phase of restoration of absolutist power in Europe and of great power politics. Yet, the Concert of Europe for decades supported a growing integration of trade and exchanges among European nations, interrupted by the First World War.

A much shorter phase of integration and growth followed until the drama of the Great Crash of 1929, but also in this case some even if mostly fragile forms of multilateral agreements were in place.

The rebound of global economic integration, before in the Western hemisphere restarted with Morgenthau's realist multilateralism, until its definitive affirmation in the post-1989 decades.

Globalization and multilateralism, as famously suggested by Martin Wolf in a Financial Times article published in November 2022 ("Geopolitics is the Bigger Threat to Globalization"), go together.

Particularly, the most effective version of multilateralism following Bretton Woods was responsible for the re-globalization trend in the years after the war, the globalization phase of the Economic Miracles, of the de-colonization phase and of the rise of East Asian countries, and of the hyperglobalization trend following the conclusion of the Cold War.

Multilateralism, like globalization, fluctuates as waves in the Ocean of international politics.

Can history help us to understand better, and disentangle, the complex relationships among multilateralism, radical realism, globalization and (last but not least) geopolitics?

At this point, in order to better understand this relationship, it is worth clarifying some additional concepts anticipated earlier in this paper. One is multipolarity.

Multipolarity is basically a concept of world order based upon the existence of many great powers (whichever the definition of great power is), which struggle among themselves in order to maintain their position in the great powers ranking, which in its turn determines the structure of world order itself.

A subcategory of multipolarity is a world order architecture based on the pre-eminence of two superpowers, similar in terms of strength and attributes, very similar to the situation characterizing the Cold War.

But it may be also the image of the World's order which Karl Haushofer, one of the founders of the Nazi Geopolitical school, had in mind in the 1930s, that is a world divided into pan-regions, or spheres of influence, each one dominated by a regional hegemon – the U.S.

In the Americas, Germany in Eurafrica, the Soviet Union in Central Asia, Japan in the Indo-Pacific. What resulted in terms of disruption, is well known.

The second relevant concept to be introduced here is that of hegemony, a quite intuitive idea indicating the presence of a polity whose attributes are so relevant as to grant it an an overwhelmingly dominant position over all other powers. In other words, the power asymmetry between the hegemon and the other powers is so wide that it grants the hegemon a stable dominance over the global governance structure.

International relations scholars constantly debate about the advantages and disadvantages of each of the above-mentioned forms of power distribution (hegemony, bipolarity, multipolarity), particularly considering their impact on the stability of the world order architecture.

Particularly today, however, while there is a quite intense debate about the advantages of bipolar balancing versus unipolar hegemony, multipolarity is unanimously considered as a synonym of instability, particularly when power asymmetries are relatively small.

Instability derives from the fact that the presence of powers similar in might and attributes gives origin to an anarchic structure, with all the players in the game tending to behave aggressively in order to avoid conceding any possible advantage to competitors.

This dramatically reduces the incentives to cooperate for the achievement of common objectives and reduces the effectiveness of institutions of global governance generated by multilateral attitudes. The first (and not the sole) victim of the China-US struggle for geopolitical dominance, for instance, is the WTO and its rules about multilateral trade.

Multipolarism (much more than bipolarism) in sum ignites competitiveness and weakens cooperative efforts, particularly when cooperative efforts may advantage one of the “competitors”.

A telling example is the changing attitude towards electric vehicles as component of the green transition in the U.S. and Europe, once the Chinese dominance in the field of a key component, batteries, has become evident.

As Martin Wolf stressed in the above-mentioned article, multilateralism is easily defeated by geopolitics. Just a couple of examples. First: the above cited Concerts of Europe were systematically undermined by the German quest for hegemonic leadership at the expense of the other Great Powers of the time, above all Great Britain.

The German challenge brought to an end the nineteenth version of multilateralism, which had actually “produced” common goods as almost nine decades of peace on the continent and a growth in trade and manufacturing output never seen since then.

The Great War was, indeed, a conflict aiming at achieving hegemonic power, no matter if Germany went to war against its main trading partners, France and Great Britain.

In other words, in this case, multilateralism fell because of the combined geopolitical ambitions of one rising power (Germany) and because of the rampant weakness of the hegemon, Great Britain.

The second example is provided by the controversial story of the League of Nations. When founded in 1919, the League, in principle, had all the characteristics of a multilateral institution of global governance, to which an increasing number of nations committed starting from 1920.

According to the available evidence, the League worked reasonably well for some time after its inception but, at a certain point and in coincidence with the global financial crisis, the institution started to face difficulties in its purpose of keeping a sort of order in the international political framework.

The problems that the organization faced have been analyzed in detail by historians, who focus (of course, largely disagreeing) on two sets of motivations. The first: the presence of a multipolar power structure, which accelerated in its intensity after the end of the crisis and during the second half of the 1930s, in coincidence with an intensification of the rearmament policies undertaken by major powers – all more or less motivated by countercyclical behavior supported by nationalist and populist governments.

Second, and probably even more important, the League's effectiveness was heavily undermined by the lack of a hegemonic power able to simultaneously grant the functioning of the institution, as a sort of "ultimate policeman".

The Great War had brought about the undisputed hegemonic status of the United States (whose sitting President, by the way, was among the main supporters of the League).

On another side, the internal, complicated vicissitudes of the new continental Empire, the Soviet Union (starting with Stalin's planned acceleration in the country's industrialization) were potentially creating the premises for the emergence of a second hegemon, focusing on the Eurasian landmass.

However, both the U.S., that is the real hegemon and the USSR (the "wannabe" hegemon), had both very little, or close to zero willingness to take over the role of the guarantors of the multilateral equilibrium. Differently from the first case, however, the problem here was that anarchy emerged not from the challenge to a declining hegemon (the standard situation characterizing what Graham Allison defines "the Thucydides' Trap), but the presence of hegemons unwilling to play that role.

These two examples highlight quite well why the golden age of multilateralism started only after the second hegemonic conflict, when (back to Morgenthau's address) it became clear that, in order to bring back stability, multilateralism based on the awareness of mutual convenience was the only way, and that this was to be enforced by the presence of a (this time willing) hegemonic power, at least in the Western hemisphere.

Hegemony became thus an essential condition for preserving multilateralism.

It is debatable, even if still a fascinating topic, if the positive relationship between multilateralism and hegemony persisted in some way during the Cold War bipolar equilibrium.

For instance, apart for their frequent geopolitical clashes over the control of geographic spheres of influence, the two superpowers collaborated in several areas - from nuclear proliferation to space legislation – enforcing the role of multilateral institutions as the UN.

5. What history tells us about the nature of multilateralism (and its fragility)

“Realist multilateralism” as defined above, thus, has several determinants, and historical analysis helps us to find some regularities among them.

First, there is a recurrent positive relationship between the supply of multilateral institutions and the devastating consequences of hegemonic conflicts.

Second, what allows multilateral institutions to last, and work, granting the provision of common goods regardless of the relative power of the participants, is some kind of hegemony, without which dangerous anarchy tends to prevail.

Historically this happened several times in the past as discussed above and worked also in the presence of bipolar systems with two hegemonic powers (the Cold War) apparently close in terms of power attributes.

A third element, is that hegemony does not imply, of course, egalitarianism – a hierarchy of powers is always in place. Minor powers are however eagerly willing to align themselves with the principles of the hegemon, principles which are mostly of ideological nature.

For instance, after the Cold War it was the Pax Americana – the result of the triumph of an overwhelming power – which underpinned the (sometimes too unregulated) diffusion of liberal principles under the label of the Washington Consensus, strengthening the role of multilateral institutions as the UN, the World Bank, the IMF and, last but not least, the WTO.

Of course, in this phase the hegemon, the US (and by logic extension, the West), tended to equal their own interests with the interests of the whole international community, but this also resulted in a growing provision of common goods for the same international community, not least generating the conditions for an increasingly integrated world economy.

A fourth element concerns the “quality” of hegemony, that is the willingness ok the hegemon to exert its role as the guarantor of the system, as was clearly the case of the U.S. after the Second World War. This has to do, evidently, with a political orientation which has to be supported by internal political consensus, without which the political orientation of the hegemon towards the necessity of multilateralism may change radically.

Fifth, multilateralism requires another condition, in part linked to the previous two, that is the acceptance of the role of the hegemon particularly by middle/lesser powers, and their willingness to make the system work stably.

The decline in this acceptance puts at risk the power of the hegemon and, subsequently, its capability to monitor sustain institutions.

In order to grant an efficient, long-lasting multilateral system, these conditions must work together. If one, or more fail or disappear, multilateral institutions may suffer a deadly blow, as happened in the past.

6. The (fragile) present of multilateralism

Thus, what is happening to multilateralism today?

Let's start from the last point: acceptance of the hegemon by other powers.

The hyperglobalization phase following the fall of the Berlin Wall gave second-rank powers (China first, and Russia too) the opportunity to rise, strengthen and finally ask for a revision of the established order, challenging the hegemon – a situation similar to the German challenge to the Concert of European Powers at the end of the nineteenth century.

"Revisionist" (in the words of Donald Trump) powers started either to question the multilateral Western-led order, making increasingly use of multilateral institutions aiming at the achievement of common goals in order to strengthen their own relative strength.

One telling example is the Chinese strategy of achieving dominance in the extraction and refining of rare earth, functional to the green transition in many industries, which is increasingly turning into a formidable weapon for strengthening its hard-power capabilities. Emerging powers have frequently violated international norms in their own interest – culminating in the first territorial invasion of a sovereign country perpetrated by Russia in 2022. The third and fifth premises of multilateralism (see above) are therefore severely challenged.

This trend is coinciding with the declining willingness of the former hegemon to support multilateralism, as already remarked above, which is the fourth premise for the well-being of multilateral institutions.

While writing this paper, the new US National Security Strategy has been published, which openly declares the Trump administration's unwillingness to play in the near (and maybe distant) future the role of global policeman emphasizing instead the return to a modernized version of the Monroe Doctrine – by some dubbed as "Donroe" – much more inward looking, largely focused on a sort of "hemispheric control" of the continent, from the South to the North Pole.

As widely explored by political scientists, the U.S. fading support for hegemony and multilateralism has at least two (partially interacting) motivations.

The first is connected to the fourth point above, that is internal political consensus towards internationalism by the average U.S. citizen, in its turn fueling the isolationist and transactional approach of the current administration.

The second has to do with the increasingly rooted perception that the respect and the protection of multilateral institutions by the hegemon is, contrary to what Morgenthau stressed in his closing address, not favoring, but instead damaging the national interest.

Take for instance the WTO and its commitment to increase free trade progressively eliminating tariffs and other obstacles, and the opposite attitude of the hegemon's administration which is seeing increasingly the current status of free trade as a fundamental damage to the domestic economy, as well as an outstanding advantage provided to the dangerous challenging power, that is China.

7. The Destiny of Europe – some alternative futures

Coming to Europe, the Union is beyond any doubt the most eminent victim of the demise of multilateralism, at least for two reasons.

The first, quite obvious, is that in the previous multilateral world the European Union has prospered, enjoying the benefits of global cooperation and extracting advantages from the common goods – basically, peace and trade integration - provided by the Bretton Woods institutions which regulated the coexistence of nations for about eight decades after the tragedy of the Second World War.

The second reason for which Europe leads the list of casualties in the changing geopolitical framework is that the Union is by its very nature the concrete creation of the principles of multilateralism, that is collaboration and cooperation based on the principles of equality and mutual respect.

The origins of the European project ultimately lay in the same general architecture designed eight decades ago in the imperfect, yet ambitious, effort of rebuilding, on new bases and principles, a global, peaceful and integrated World.

Differently from many institutions of global governance, as for instance the WTO, the European Union is a much more sophisticated product of multilateralism, which has been able to evolve into a political subject, becoming a centripetal force for its economic strength but also for its liberal democratic values, which may be considered another “common good” alongside a period of peace never experienced before on the Continent, the creation of a prosperous common market of hundreds of millions of producers and consumers, and the defense – at least on paper – of the principles of the UN Charter.

The price of all this has been a Europe which, after hundreds of years of fratricide slaughtering culminated in two World Wars started on the Continent, simply – and differently from what Ms. Von Der Leyen thought some time ago when she expressed the intention to lead a “geopolitical Commission” – the EU is not able, and not used, to speak the jargon of modern geopolitics based on multipolar aggressiveness, assertive behavior and transactional attitudes.

As recently rightly put by Gideon Rachman, one of the most acute critics of European identity, “Brussels is a bureaucracy. It is good at process and law. But it is incapable of acting quickly and ruthlessly like the European great powers of the past, or like the U.S. and China today” (“The scramble for Europe is just beginning”, Financial Times, November 17, 2025).

The outcome of Europe’s incapability of ruthless action is today so evident that it is not even necessary to mention its effects. More constructive would be to identify some “alternative future scenarios” for the Continent. They can be many – here I will focus on three of them, all both realistic and provoking.

A) A first catastrophic scenario would be the dissolution of seven decades of this multilateral construction in the name of the pursuit of the national interests of the single members of the former Union, which would of course result in a devastating fragmentation of power in front of emerging empires of continental, in some cases “hemispheric” dimensions, as in the case

of the U.S., China, and a maybe embattled Russian Federation. The perspective itself of such a scenario in which not only the geopolitical but also the geoeconomic force of Europe would be close to zero should be a clarion call loud enough to convince the members of the Union to opt for one of the two remaining alternatives.

B) Go on managing the current situation of a multilateral construction, taking all the possible initiatives to reinforce the idea of a common identity beyond the sphere of economy and trade, and convincing the current European leaders, particularly those of the populist right, that alternative A) is maybe an attractive electoral message but would leave the whole Continent, and its former members, divided and, to some extent, back in a situation that is, in substance, not very different from the fragmentation of Europe during the Cold War.

C) If option B sounds largely utopian, a third, possible yet hazardous scenario would be that based on giving up some principles of multilateralism in favor of a more efficient (ruthless) management of European international relations and approaches to modern geopolitics. Given the practical impossibility of looking for an emerging hegemonic power inside the EU (which does not mean that some members indeed look eager to put themselves forward), at least to come very quickly to terms with the principle of unanimity in sensitive foreign policy areas concerning the security of the Union's members, particularly those which are (or will be) more exposed to external threats of pure geopolitical nature. The problem with this third alternative is, again, basically philosophical and goes to the roots of the architecture itself of the Union. Being, as emphasized above, in itself the outcome of multilateralist principles, the demise of some of them under the pressure of urgency and necessity may pose a relevant threat (even if less dangerous than that envisaged under option A), to the foundations themselves of the European Union.

8. Summing up

The post-Second World War version of multilateralism, the one that emerged at Bretton Woods from the smoking ashes of a devastating conflict, showed a remarkable resilience.
With different levels of efficiency, the institutions of global governance that it generated have been able to grant an enduring prosperity and, not least, increasing levels of prosperity and opportunity also for marginal and developing economies, as noted recently by Branko Milanovic ("The Great Convergence. Global Equality and Its Discontents", Foreign Affairs, July/August 2023).
This "Golden Age" of multilateralism is apparently over, or very close to ending. This is a worrying message, but not a surprise for historians. Multilateralism in its various versions has failed several times in the past (the good news, is that it also resurrected). In this paper, I tried to address the nature of multilateralism and its relevance, showing its alternate fortunes across recent history. Also, on the basis of historical analysis, I proposed and discussed a series (five) of conditions supporting and facilitating the emergence of multilateralism and multilateral institutions: a) the aftermath of a devastating conflict b) the presence of a hegemon c) evidence of hegemony d) willingness to act as hegemon e) acceptance of hegemony.

Each one of these conditions are necessary, but not sufficient. Their failure results in the crisis of the system, which tends towards unstable multipolarism, anarchy or, at best, transactional attitudes based on the use of any kind of force.
At present, of the five conditions mentioned above, at least three (c, d and e) are severely under discussion. Still, probably, condition b) holds, being the U.S. still the main, even if aggressively challenged, superpower.
The good news, for the moment, is that condition a) still holds true. Unfortunately, however, history shows that hegemonic conflicts of whatever nature do erupt when the other conditions supporting multilateralism leave room to multipolar instability, which, unfortunately, seems to be the risk we are running at present.

As a final message, it may be noted that from a European perspective, the five conditions mentioned above could in principle hold true. The idea of Europe as a multilateral creation was the consequence of a devastating conflict. What is probably now needed to break the gridlock in which the geopolitical identity of the Union is stuck, is to think seriously over the concepts of hegemony and its voluntary acceptance inside Europe.
A concept which is relatively easy to theorize, but dramatically difficult to put into practice.

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