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Dispensing With the Indispensable Nation? *Multilateralism minus One in the Trump Era*

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Abstract

Since entering office, US president Trump has reversed key multilateral achievements of his predecessors, initiating a new US retreat from multilateral cooperation. For other governments wishing to preserve and deepen existing global agreements, this has posed the question of whether and how multilateral cooperation can work without the leadership and support of the dominant global power. International relations scholars have already debated the possibility of “nonhegemonic cooperation” in earlier periods marked by US unilateralism. This article draws on these previous analyses to evaluate the current prospects and limits of a “multilateralism minus one” in three key global policy areas: nuclear arms control, climate change, and trade.

Keywords

multilateralism – unilateralism – US foreign policy – Trump administration – nonhegemonic cooperation – international organizations – nuclear weapons – arms control – climate change – trade

1 Introduction

US president Donald Trump has repeatedly characterized his approach to the world as “America first.” What this means for the multilateral global order was already apparent in his nomination speech at the Republican National Convention in July 2016: “Americanism, not globalism, will be our credo. As long as we are led by politicians who will not put America first, then we can be assured that other nations will not treat America with the respect that we deserve.”¹ In his 2017 and 2018 speeches at the UN General Assembly, he vowed to “defend America’s interests above all else”² and “choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control, and domination.”³ His repeated warnings that the United States would “no longer be taken advantage of”⁴ illustrate that Trump perceives international politics in narrow “transactional” terms,⁵ governed by a zero-sum logic. One country’s gain comes at the loss of another country, with few possibilities of mutual benefit. This sentiment runs counter to the logic of multilateral institutions, which are intended to foster cooperation by providing benefits to all participants.

Two years into Trump’s presidency, it is evident that he has sought to put his rhetoric into practice by reversing key multilateral achievements of his predecessors. Under Trump, the United States has withdrawn from climate and trade agreements, multilateral arms control initiatives and UN bodies such as the Human Rights Council and the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); it has cut down funding for UN peacekeeping and UN agencies dealing with Palestinian refugees, population control, and global warming; and it has threatened key multilateral organizations including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the International Criminal Court (ICC). During his first year in office, Trump made foreign policy headlines with declarations of intent, but did not always follow up on his unilateral statements with actual policies. However, since John Bolton was appointed as national security adviser, the pace of treaty withdrawals has picked up and the unilateral direction of the administration is no longer in doubt. For the rest of the world, this has posed increasingly difficult problems.⁶ US hegemony and support for multilateral institutions used to be a

1 Bump and Blake 2016.

2 White House 2017.

3 White House 2018.

4 White House 2017; see also the near-identical formulation in White House 2018.

5 Zenko and Lissner 2018.

6 Jentleson 2017; Lake 2018; Stokes 2018.

cornerstone of the international order. As the most influential country retreats from or even undermines global institutions, other governments that have an interest in maintaining and advancing the multilateral agenda have been facing hard questions: What, if anything, can and should be done to accommodate Washington's concerns and keep it engaged in multilateral fora? Failing a compromise, how effective are global institutions without US participation? What are the political costs of cooperating without or even against the United States? Who can fill the leadership vacuum left by the United States?

In this article, we analyze the prospects and limitations of advancing global governance in the Trump era through a “multilateralism minus one.”⁷ To assess the effectiveness and political feasibility of this approach, we compare the present situation to earlier periods of US opposition to multilateral cooperation. Despite Trump's unusual presidency, US governments questioning multilateral institutions are nothing new—and neither are doubts about the United States' ability to exert effective leadership in the face of global power shifts. International relations (IR) scholars have debated the possibility of “nonhegemonic cooperation” since the 1980s. This literature provides some clues about the circumstances under which a multilateralism minus one can be successful.

In Section 2, we therefore review earlier research on nonhegemonic cooperation, situating the scholarly debate in the historical context of repeated ups and downs in the US commitment to the multilateral order. Rather than subjecting the propositions in this literature to a new test, we use its findings to derive key factors that have helped or hindered nonhegemonic cooperation in past instances. In Section 3, we use these factors as analytical guidance in evaluating both the political feasibility and the likely effectiveness of ongoing and potential nonhegemonic cooperation initiatives in the Trump era, compared to earlier historical periods. We focus on three key issue areas of global governance where the Trump administration's challenge to multilateral frameworks has been particularly critical: arms control, climate change, and trade.

Our analysis suggests that, despite some variation across policy areas, the prospects for “cooperating without America”⁸ have generally improved. New actors such as emerging powers from the BRICS club and China in particular,⁹ as well as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), have acquired stakes and influence in multilateral negotiations. At the same time, many countries are

7 The term is adopted from Krause 2004, 43–59, especially 53. We understand it as referring to the attempt to build new multilateral institutions or to maintain the functionality of existing ones without the participation or leadership of the United States.

8 Brem and Stiles 2009.

9 The BRICS include Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

turning to minilateral, informal, and ad hoc arrangements, which are increasingly replacing universal, formal, legally binding commitments. Both developments are heightening flexibility among participants and enabling new constellations of like-minded actors to cooperate on global issues. And yet, the task of managing the resulting fragmentation of the global order and the fluidity of new coalitions are increasing the demands on political leadership, suggesting that nonhegemonic cooperation will be neither easy to orchestrate nor necessarily successful.

2 IR Theory and the Question of Nonhegemonic Cooperation

2.1 *The Debate in Historical Context*

The US relationship with the global multilateral order has long been ambivalent.¹⁰ After World War II, the United States took the leadership in setting up the institutional pillars of the present multilateral order: the United Nations, the Bretton Woods regime, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and (within its sphere of influence) NATO.¹¹ Following this phase of hegemonic institution building, global power shifts and repeated phases of US disengagement cast doubt on the United States' willingness and ability to exert multilateral leadership—and prompted IR scholars to discuss under what conditions states might cooperate in the absence of an order-creating hegemon.

Reflecting the postwar experience, scholarly thinking was initially dominated by “hegemonic stability theory,” which attributed the creation and maintenance of a liberal (economic) order to US hegemony.¹² This changed when, in the 1970s, contemporaries began to observe signs of US economic decline while postwar economic regimes remained relatively stable. IR scholars now argued that institutionalized cooperation could outlast the decline of a hegemon, and that coalitions of middle powers might even create new institutions.¹³ In this period, arguably the greatest disruption of the postwar multilateral system came in the field of monetary governance with President Richard Nixon's 1971 decision to give up on the US dollar's convertibility to gold. The decision was taken after the US role of guaranteeing the Bretton Woods system of fixed

¹⁰ Luck 1999.

¹¹ Patrick 2009.

¹² Kindleberger 1976.

¹³ Keohane [1984] 2005; Snidal 1985.

exchange rates came increasingly under strain due to falling US shares of global economic output and growing US budget and balance of payments deficits.¹⁴

It thus was the perceived US weakness in the 1970s, rather than the unilateralist turn of US foreign policy that would follow under President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, which triggered the first IR discussion of nonhegemonic cooperation. Reagan engaged in unilateral interventions, questioned multilateral arms control, withheld US dues to the UN, and withdrew from UNESCO.¹⁵ Yet he also accepted new multilateral commitments such as the UN Convention against Torture.

The early debate about nonhegemonic cooperation ended with the United States' economic and military resurgence late in the Cold War, which exposed the "myth of lost hegemony"¹⁶ and led to the proclamation of a "unipolar moment" after the Cold War had ended.¹⁷ Both President George H.W. Bush and his successor Bill Clinton used the new US preponderance to reinvigorate the United States' commitment to existing multilateral institutions and to contribute to a new wave of institution building that produced, inter alia, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the WTO. This new multilateral turn led IR scholars to draw comparisons between US hegemony in the postwar and post-Cold War periods.¹⁸ The analogy turned out to be short-lived, however.

Under pressure from bureaucratic infighting and a unilateralist Congress, the Clinton administration became reluctant to enter ambitious new agreements, most notably the ICC and the Ottawa Convention on antipersonnel landmines.¹⁹ When both treaties were concluded over US objections, observers heralded the beginning of a "non-hegemonic diplomacy."²⁰ The successive embrace of aggressive unilateralism under George W. Bush intensified the debate. Agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol continued without US support whereas others, such as the proposed verification protocol to the Biological Weapons Convention, were dropped in the face of US opposition. These developments prompted fresh analyses of the conditions under which non-hegemonic cooperation is feasible and effective.²¹ Thus, the second IR debate

14 As Keohane notes, however, despite the disintegration of explicit regime rules there was a "continuity in regime principles" that testified to the potential for continued cooperation in the face of hegemonic decline, see Keohane [1984] 2005, 187.

15 Johansen 1986.

16 Strange 1987.

17 Krauthammer 1990.

18 Ikenberry 2001.

19 Thimm 2016, 51–97, 143–183.

20 Cooper 2002, 1–18, especially 1.

21 Bower 2017; Brem and Stiles 2009; Cooper 2002; Fehl 2012.

about nonhegemonic cooperation evolved against the background of a unilateral United States that appeared to be bursting in strength rather than declining.

President Barack Obama reembraced multilateralism, although strong domestic opposition denied him some achievements. He led his country into the Paris Agreement on climate change, but at the price of making the latter less binding. While his administration cooperated with the ICC, the prospect of the United States formally joining the court remained as elusive as Obama's aim of ratifying the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). He concluded the bilateral New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia, but could only persuade Congress to ratify it by promising a modernization of US nuclear weapons that deepened divisions within the multilateral arms control regime.

Despite these limitations, most observers during Obama's presidency saw the greater challenge to the multilateral order in a new global power shift, which became particularly visible in the global financial crisis. Echoing the 1980s debate, scholars now pondered whether and in what shape US- and Western-built institutions would survive the rise of China and other new powers.²² Mounting reform pressure on the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and deadlock at the WTO, as well as rising powers' initiatives to set up new institutions, such as the BRICS Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), all indicated challenges to established, Western-dominated multilateral institutions.²³

2.2 *Lessons Learned*

President Trump has inherited these challenges to US and Western dominance. At the same time, he and key figures in his administration do not share President Obama's instinct to compensate for the loss of US power by locking US policy preferences into multilateral rules. Thus, for the first time in post-war history, US unilateralism coincides with declining US power, making both the first and the second debate about nonhegemonic cooperation relevant to the present situation. Contributions to both debates highlight a range of factors that make cooperation without the United States effective and politically achievable. These factors can be used as points of reference to assess the prospects and limitations of this approach in the Trump era.

²² Ikenberry 2011.

²³ Stephen 2017.

The first group of factors, highlighted in the more recent debate about US unilateralism and nonhegemonic cooperation, concerns current and future *US policies* and their likely impact. To judge the effectiveness of a multilateralism minus one approach in a given policy area, other governments must take into account the relevance of the United States to the specific problem at stake and to its multilateral solution and weigh the cost of losing US support—as well as any cost that the United States could impose on them to block their initiatives—against the potential alternative: Is it feasible to accommodate US objections to keep it on board, what would be the *cost of such a compromise*, and would it be honored by the US government?²⁴ In addition, they must consider the likelihood of future US administrations reversing current US policies.

A second group of variables central to both debates about nonhegemonic cooperation concerns potential *alternative leaders*. Are other key players in the policy area interested in preserving or advancing existing multilateral institutions, or do they prefer unilateral action or alternative institutions that could challenge or undermine existing fora?²⁵ Are they willing to challenge US hegemonic leadership? And if so, are they able to form a coalition that is large and stable enough to fill the leadership vacuum left by the former hegemon?²⁶

A third cluster of factors, highlighted particularly in the second debate, concerns the role of *private actors* in facilitating or obstructing nonhegemonic cooperation. In the 1990s and 2000s, transnational civil society organizations successfully pushed for the new nonhegemonic diplomacy. Domestic industry representatives, worried about their competitiveness, opposed many multilateral commitments without US participation.²⁷

In the next section, we apply these theoretical insights to understand the challenge of nonhegemonic cooperation in the evolving Trump era, and to compare the effectiveness and political feasibility of a multilateralism minus one across policy areas and historical experiences. We use the above list of factors as a heuristic tool for our analysis, yet remain open to identifying additional relevant factors that have not featured prominently in past discussions of nonhegemonic cooperation.

24 Stiles 2009; Fehl 2012, 3–27.

25 Morse and Keohane 2014.

26 Snidal 1985; Brem 2009; Vabulas and Snidal 2014.

27 Cooper 2002; Anderson 2000.

3 Nonhegemonic Cooperation in the Trump Era

3.1 *Nuclear Arms Control*

As both the most powerful nuclear-weapon state and a historical leader on nonproliferation and disarmament, the United States has been pivotal to the nuclear arms control regime. The regime's core treaty, the NPT, restricts the possession of nuclear weapons to five official nuclear weapon states, while also committing them to pursuing "negotiations in good faith" on their eventual disarmament (Article VI). President Obama initially declared his support for nuclear disarmament, but agreed to the modernization of US nuclear weapons in exchange for Senate ratification of the New START treaty. Progress therefore was already limited; nonetheless, Trump has begun to undermine even Obama's hard-won successes.

3.1.1 US Policy and Impact

In October 2018, the Trump administration announced that it would withdraw from the bilateral Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which prohibits the United States and Russia from developing and deploying ground-launched midrange nuclear (and conventional) missiles. While the US intelligence community has long accused Russia of violating the treaty, Trump's plans to abandon it and develop new midrange missiles risk triggering a new nuclear arms race. The administration has also turned down Russian offers to renew New START, which limits the number of US and Russian deployed strategic nuclear weapons, after its expiry in 2021.²⁸ Both steps could soon leave the world's largest nuclear arsenals without any legal constraints. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) further aggravates the situation by upgrading the role of nuclear weapons in US strategy and envisaging new "low-yield options."²⁹ All of these policies not only will endanger bilateral strategic stability, but also will further weaken the NPT's crumbling disarmament pillar. Ultimately, this will also undermine the treaty's nonproliferation pillar, which is politically tied to disarmament in a "grand bargain."

More immediately, global nonproliferation efforts have been set back by Trump's attempts to undo the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a seven-party agreement designed to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. After announcing the US withdrawal from the pact in May 2018, Trump not only has reinstated previous US sanctions on Iran, but also has threatened aggressive secondary sanctions against foreign companies doing

²⁸ Reif 2018.

²⁹ Mount 2018.

business with Iran.³⁰ Should this pressure push Iran to revive its nuclear program or take hostile counteractions, a new regional arms race or even a US-Iranian war could follow.³¹

3.1.2 Feasibility and Cost of Compromise

While the cost of losing US support for nuclear arms controls is consequently high, there are few indications that Trump is—or would have been—open to compromises on any of the disputed issues. With regard to Iran, his declared aim of obtaining a “better deal” is neither realistic nor earnest. The maximalist demands raised by his administration are unacceptable not just to Iranian hard-liners.³² Even European efforts to increase pressure on Iran and negotiate possible side agreements to the JCPOA could not sway the president—although State Department diplomats were close to agreeing on a strategy with their European counterparts.³³

On the greater cause of preventing the next nuclear arms race, much depends on the United States’ rivals China and Russia. But if New START is any indication, Trump is less interested in substantive proposals for compromise than in broader great-power relations.

Despite Trump’s extreme attitude, obstacles to effective arms control go beyond his administration. Congress has been a driving force behind plans for new missiles and the INF crisis,³⁴ and Trump’s confrontational Iran policy has solid support among congressional Republicans (and some Democrats). Given this state of affairs, it seems unlikely that a future administration will champion nuclear disarmament and arms control beyond the status quo before Trump. Unlike in other policy areas, arms control advocates cannot hope that any ambitious new initiatives will be embraced by the United States in the not too distant future.

3.1.3 Private Actors

This does not bode well for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons that was concluded in 2017 at the United Nations. While NGOs generally play a lesser role in nuclear arms control than in other policy fields, the initiative for the ban treaty goes back to civil society activists frustrated about the lack of progress on nuclear disarmament in the NPT framework. Inspired by the suc-

³⁰ Geranmayeh 2018.

³¹ On a possible US attack on Iran, see Cirincione 2018.

³² Kahl 2017.

³³ Borger 2018.

³⁴ Stowe-Thurston 2018.

cess of the antipersonnel landmines ban, NGOs coalesced with like-minded states to push for the negotiation of a new disarmament treaty outside of established fora, preventing nuclear powers from exercising a veto. The idea, which won the 2017 Nobel peace prize for the NGO campaign, is to shame nuclear powers into action. In the landmines case, this “new diplomacy” was successful in setting a moral standard that even states who refused to join have followed: with the exception of the Korean peninsula, the United States has complied with the treaty’s prohibition of mines even as a non-member of the mine ban treaty. However, it is improbable that this success can be repeated with strategically more important (nuclear) weapons. Even modest moves toward disarmament are unlikely as long as the ban treaty lacks support from the most influential states.

3.1.4 Alternative Leaders

Prospects for nonhegemonic cooperation vary across the different issues discussed above. Other countries are only bystanders to the US-Russian New START and INF discussions. The nuclear weapons ban is opposed by all (official and unofficial) nuclear powers; Europe has been deeply split about this new treaty, with small countries like Austria leading the pro-ban coalition and NATO members opposing it. Yet the policy of ignoring the prohibition agreement altogether—all NATO members except the Netherlands abstained from the negotiations—risks making future efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation more difficult. At the least, Europeans should acknowledge the legitimacy of the effort and engage with its supporters to prevent the rift in the nuclear arms control regime from getting wider.

Prospects for nonhegemonic leadership are best regarding the JCPOA. The European Union (EU) in particular has been working hard to save the deal, which it perceives as its most important diplomatic success to date. The regional bloc not only revived its older Blocking Statute to counter potential US sanctions on European companies, but it also is taking the unprecedented step of directly undercutting US sanctions by setting up a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV), designed to enable continued Iranian exports. While it remains unclear at the time of this writing what goods the SPV will cover and who will have access to it, it is unlikely to substantially soften the blow of US sanctions on Iran’s economy.³⁵ Still, the European initiative sends an important political signal that Europe is willing to spend political capital on rescuing the JCPOA.³⁶

35 Geranmayeh and Batmanghelidj 2018.

36 Irish and Emmott 2018.

This signal could help Iran's moderates to defend the deal against hard-liners perhaps long enough for a more conciliatory US president to win office.

3.2 *Climate Change*

On climate policy, tensions between the United States and multilateral regimes long preceded Trump. At first sight, Trump's announcement on 1 June 2017 to pull out of the Paris Agreement on climate change mirrors George W. Bush's decision to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC sixteen years earlier. As in 2001, the US withdrawal threatens the regime's effectiveness and raises the issue of how to advance efforts to fight global warming without US participation and leadership. And yet on close examination, the differences between the two episodes are more instructive than the similarities.³⁷

3.2.1 US Policy and Impact

In 2001, the United States was the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, accounting for 39 percent of global emissions. By 2013, it had been surpassed by China, which now accounted for 26 percent of global emissions (with the United States ranking second at 14 percent).³⁸ The fact that China has no commitments under the Kyoto Protocol, but is a key participant in the Paris Agreement, makes clear that the US contribution to the problem of climate change is relatively less significant today. Many state-level and local emissions reduction initiatives in the United States are continuing even without federal support. The US withdrawal from the global regime is still painful, but not as detrimental as it was in 2001.³⁹

Despite the shrinking US share of global emissions, its nonparticipation could endanger the effectiveness of the Paris Agreement by weakening others' implementation of the agreement. This risk relates to a broader global trend toward softer multilateral governance, which has also affected climate negotiations.⁴⁰ While both Kyoto and Paris are legally binding treaties, targets, time tables, and measures are voluntary under the Paris approach, in contrast to Kyoto's binding regime of commitments enforced by sanctions. This softening up of the climate regime helped to bring the United States on board—but it also means that to develop a “compliance pull” comparable to that of hard international law, the Paris Agreement must rely on “naming and shaming”

37 Pickering et al. 2018.

38 World Resources Institute 2014.

39 Urpelainen and Van de Graaf 2018 argue that US emissions are likely to decline in spite of Trump's lenient climate policies.

40 Vabulas and Snidal 2013.

and on financial incentives.⁴¹ For both mechanisms US participation would have been a major advantage. In the Pledge and Review Process through which voluntary commitments are monitored under the Paris Agreement, the United States could have led by example in setting a high standard of implementation, increasing the moral pressure on others.⁴² Washington also would have paid for about one-third of the \$10 billion Green Climate Fund (GCF) until 2020, and would have contributed even more to the \$100 billion per year that developed countries have vowed to mobilize to help developing countries reduce emissions and adjust to climate change.⁴³

3.2.2 Feasibility and Cost of Compromise

In light of the nonbinding nature of the Paris Agreement, Trump's repeated offers to renegotiate its terms appear as empty rhetoric. Although the accord does not allow states to unilaterally weaken their nationally determined contributions (NDCs), noncompliance remains unsanctioned, which implies that changes in the Paris deal would not benefit the United States in substance. Symbolic concessions could help if the Trump administration actually *wanted* to remain inside Paris, but this seems doubtful.⁴⁴

However, there are reasons to hope that the United States may reverse its decision to shun the Paris Agreement even without further compromises at this stage—under a new president. In 2001, a key reason for Kyoto supporters to move ahead was the hope that a future US administration would reengage in global climate negotiations. With President Obama taking the leadership on the Paris Agreement, their calculus payed off. Today's domestic opposition to Trump's climate policy—business leaders, Democrats, states, and cities—is even more vocal than back then, providing even more grounds for optimism regarding a future US policy shift.

3.2.3 Alternative Leaders

In 2001, there was a real danger that other major emitters would follow the US decision to leave Kyoto in a “domino effect.” To save the protocol, European diplomats had to engage in extensive shuttle diplomacy.⁴⁵ In contrast, the global reaction to the Paris withdrawal was much prompter and more unani-

41 Bodansky 2015, 155–165, especially 161.

42 Victor 2017.

43 Urpelainen and Van de Graaf 2018 see the loss of the US contribution to climate finance as the most problematic consequence of the US withdrawal.

44 Wirth 2017.

45 Vogler and Bretherton 2006.

mous. Again, European governments took the lead in declaring that Paris was “irreversible,”⁴⁶ but other key players also quickly signaled their determination to stick with the agreement. Media attention has focused on China’s forceful reaffirmation of its commitment to the climate regime, but the continued support of Brazil, India, and South Africa is equally important. Since 2009, these emerging economies have formed an alliance with China, the so-called BASIC bloc, which has become increasingly influential in UN climate negotiations.⁴⁷ This established coalition could facilitate the task of building a new nonhegemonic leadership group. Already, the EU, Canada, and China have convened a new Ministerial on Climate Action attended by thirty-four governments to replace the US-led Major Economies Forum—an informal grouping that had played a key role in preparing the Paris Agreement.⁴⁸

The striking difference in reactions to the 2001 and 2017 US withdrawals is partly explained by the more advanced institutional stage of today’s climate regime. The Paris Agreement has been in force since November 2016 and, at the earliest, allows parties to exit the treaty four years after that date—a procedure that even the Trump administration has vowed to respect. The Kyoto Protocol had not reached that stage when George W. Bush withdrew in 2001.

More importantly, unlike in 2001, the EU and other key players such as China have a vested interest in battling climate change and advancing green energy. In addition, emerging economies are eager to preserve the climate finance system established as part of the Paris Agreement, from which they stand to benefit as major recipients.⁴⁹

And yet all of these key players will need to do more to make Paris not only lasting, but also effective. A key question is whether they will be able to lead by example under the Pledge and Review Process. Currently, neither the EU nor BASIC members are on track to meet their Paris commitments. The one exception is India, which has made strides toward its renewable energy goals.⁵⁰ However, sustaining progress in the developing world will hinge on developed nations keeping their financial promises—including by shouldering the financial commitments shed by Washington. At the time of writing, it was still uncertain whether the rest of the developed world will collectively step up to this task. After Trump’s withdrawal, Germany’s environment minister declared that “no country that refuses joint international solidarity can

46 Stefanini and Oroschakoff 2017.

47 Hochstetler and Milkoreit 2015.

48 Chemnick 2018.

49 Seetharaman 2017.

50 Erickson 2018.

expect that others just step in to fill the gap.”⁵¹ Yet filling the gap is exactly the kind of leadership that would be required to overcome conflicts over climate finance, which have proved a major stumbling block at the 2018 Bonn and Bangkok climate meetings.⁵² While Germany itself recently announced its intention to increase its contribution to the GCF, others such as Australia have followed Trump’s lead in ruling out any further donations.⁵³

3.2.4 Private Actors

A bolder approach by European and other Paris supporters would also unlikely receive the same kind of private sector opposition that Europeans faced in 2001. After George W. Bush’s Kyoto withdrawal, energy lobbyists (and policy-makers) in Europe and elsewhere feared that their adherence to the climate accord would provide an advantage to US competitors. In 2017, the few voices expressing this sentiment—for instance within the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party—were met with public condemnation.⁵⁴ In stark contrast to 2001, even in the United States leading energy companies urged Trump to remain in the Paris Agreement, reflecting the massive green energy investments by the private sector despite US nonparticipation in Kyoto.⁵⁵

3.3 *Trade*

The most radical departure from traditional US foreign policy under Trump has happened on trade. The criticism that the liberal trade order and past US support for it had not served US interests well is central to Trump’s international agenda. Since entering office, he has reversed his predecessor’s decision to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), threatened to leave the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the WTO, and undermined the multilateral trade order by pressuring countries into bilateral negotiations and by imposing tariffs against allies and rivals alike. Because of the traditional US commitment to free trade, there was little need for nonhegemonic cooperation in the past. Now that this is changing, nonhegemonic cooperation could help to mitigate the effect of US protectionist measures on others.

51 Yeo 2017.

52 Carr 2018.

53 “Germany to Double Donation for UN Climate Change Fund” 2018; Karp 2018.

54 “Berliner Kreis erntet Kritik” 2017.

55 Raphelson 2017.

3.3.1 US Policy and Impact

It is still not clear if Trump wants to reform WTO rules or do away with the organization altogether. The administration has used various provisions under US law to impose a range of tariffs on imports, ostensibly not to disrupt free trade but to protect US security and to counter others' "unfair" trade practices.⁵⁶ In January 2018, Trump announced antidumping measures against foreign solar panels and washing machines. In March, his administration implemented tariffs of 10 percent on steel and 25 percent on aluminum imports based on a national security exemption to WTO rules. After a temporary suspension of these tariffs with respect to some allies expired, Canada and the EU implemented countervailing measures, as did China. In June, based on charges of unfair practices relating to technology transfer, intellectual property, and innovation, Washington imposed tariffs on a long list of Chinese imports. China responded in kind, prompting two more rounds of additional US tariffs and Chinese retaliations.

While technically the United States is not in violation of WTO regulations as long as no ruling by the organization's dispute settlement body has been issued, its justifications for protectionist measures—especially the exemptions claimed on national security grounds—are questionable.⁵⁷ Furthermore, even as the United States is filing complaints against others' retaliating measures, it is blocking the appointment of judges to the WTO's appellate body. US representatives claim that they are using the veto to force WTO reform, but have shown little interest in Canadian and European proposals to that effect. The administration's real goal thus seems to be to undermine the multilateral trade regime's system of centralized dispute settlement—arguably *the* central function of the WTO at a time when new global trade rounds are out of reach anyway. If the seats remain unfilled, the number of appellate judges will fall below three in 2019, in which case the panel would no longer meet the quorum for dispute resolution decisions.⁵⁸ The measures already implemented and the uncertainty about the future are depressing global economic growth.⁵⁹

3.3.2 Feasibility and Cost of Compromise

Because Washington's ultimate goals are unclear, identifying potential compromises remains elusive. This problem is most pronounced in the escalating tit-for-tat application of protectionist measures between the United States and

56 Brown and Kolb 2018.

57 Lawrence 2018.

58 "America Holds the World Trade Organization Hostage" 2017.

59 Freund et al. 2018.

China. Despite the many legitimate grievances about China's trade practices—foremost the lack of transparency about connections between state and private enterprises with all its implications—the specific accusations from the United States keep shifting.⁶⁰ Add to this the fact that trade issues are mixed with security issues concerning the long-term strategic rivalry between the two countries, and it becomes unclear what concessions would bring the United States to scale back tariffs. The criticisms leveled against others, like Trump's economically misguided focus on bilateral trade deficits, are just as confusing. This represents a challenge: on the one hand, Washington's protectionist measures outside the WTO should be met with unified resistance, as they would undermine the multilateral trade system at a fundamental level; on the other hand, where US criticisms are justified, countries in the crosshairs would do well to take a conciliatory approach. For instance, although Germany's current account surplus is arguably more to the disadvantage of its European neighbors than the United States, taking measures to address it may be a way to signal willingness to compromise.⁶¹

3.3.3 Private Actors

Despite some opportunistic support for specific protectionist measures, the private sector in the United States generally advocates against tariffs.⁶² Protectionism hurts companies with international supply chains and the retail sector. The United States has a trade surplus in the services, not least because of the global dominance of internet giants such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple. Their importance to the global economy presents its own challenges for regulators, but their business model is the antithesis to protectionism. Furthermore, the globally active US service industry—even beyond the tech giants—wants to avoid becoming a target of countermeasures. In some instances, the private sector has been able to exert a moderating influence; for example, by averting plans for a border adjustment tax or preventing the president from exiting NAFTA without a replacement. Yet Trump's willingness to take risks and his disregard for the consequences of his decisions limit the influence of the private sector while he is in office.

3.3.4 Alternative Leaders

Power relations between the main actors are more balanced on trade than on other issues: the EU's single market is comparable in size to the US econ-

60 Frankel 2018.

61 Coricelli 2017.

62 Higgins 2018.

omy and European investment in the United States is strong. China is becoming more assertive, illustrated by the fact that it launches its own initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, sometimes viewed as a TPP competitor. The countermeasures of those targeted by US tariffs—whether China, Canada, or the EU—attest to this new confidence.

In addition, the emergence of alternative leaders is aided by the rise of bilateral, regional, and megaregional trade agreements. The United States itself has championed these formats, valued for their flexibility and ability to circumvent veto players from blocking progress in the WTO's long-stalled Doha Round. Now, this very flexibility could enable others to circumvent a protectionist United States. For instance, the EU is concluding bilateral agreements with Japan, Canada, Mexico, and others. TPP participants are moving ahead without the United States under the leadership of Japan. These efforts promise to mitigate the fallout from protectionist disruptions to international trade and indicate a potential for nonhegemonic cooperation. At the same time, they highlight the challenge for free traders in coordinating an increasingly fragmented global trading system while pushing back against US protectionism. In particular, it has proven difficult to resist US pressure to negotiate bilateral deals to avoid punitive measures. Mexico struck a deal on a successor agreement to NAFTA, leaving Canada scrambling to be included. Under this deal, the United States was granted benefits that it would have enjoyed under TPP while imposing restrictions on a future Canadian-Chinese trade agreement. The EU has thus far managed to hold off tariffs against European car imports by reportedly agreeing to buy more US agricultural products. Within the WTO, one concrete measure to signal continued support for the multilateral trading system in the face of US pressure, and thereby cooperating without the hegemon, would be to approve new appellate judges by majority vote if Washington continues to hold their appointments hostage to its demands.

4 Conclusion

For the first time in postwar history, a period of US unilateralism is coinciding with increasing challenges by other powers—most notably China and other BRICS states—to US dominance. The relative decline of the United States across various issue areas is turning cooperation without its leadership or even participation into a more realistic prospect. This trend has resulted not only from the shifting balance of power in the state system, but also from the rising importance of new nongovernmental actors in global governance. Transna-

tional civil society networks often advocate “leaving America behind.” While some business actors can gain from the fragmentation of regulatory regimes that results from US unilateralism, for many the benefits of harmonization through multilateral means outweigh the costs.

Although these factors work together to improve the prospects for nonhegemonic cooperation, concrete initiatives have remained limited to date. There is no single country or region that can replace US leadership. The EU, with its experience with supranational governance and its professed commitment to advancing the multilateral order, would be one important piece to the puzzle, but it keeps punching below its weight. The selective engagement of China and its (also selective) willingness to accept more responsibilities on the international stage open up possibilities for new coalitions, as does the increasingly prominent role of nongovernmental actors in multilateral diplomacy. However, alliances among these very different players will be easier to create and sustain in areas such as climate change than in policy fields such as human rights or Internet governance, where China opposes the liberal agenda of global institutions, or nuclear disarmament, where China sides with the United States and other nuclear powers while the EU is split. Political linkages across these issue areas could further complicate the task of assembling multilateralist coalitions. The increasing diversity of multilateral formats—including minilateral, informal, and ad hoc arrangements—enhances flexibility among potential coalition partners and can thus facilitate nonhegemonic cooperation. And yet this development is not without risks. The shift from global to regional and bilateral trade agreements threatens to fragment the global trading system and disadvantage those too weak to defend their interests. Softer forms of global governance—for instance, in climate policy—mean that agreements are no longer self-executing and require sustained political leadership to be effective.

In addition to both general trends and issue-specific configurations of contemporary global governance, the case for nonhegemonic cooperation is strengthened by the Trump administration’s unwillingness to compromise, which is on display across all issue areas. One consequence is that supporters of multilateral regulation do not have to ponder the difficult question of how much substance they are willing to sacrifice to keep the United States on board—a dilemma they repeatedly faced with the Clinton and Obama administrations. Another possibility is that the Trump administration’s bullying tactics, while paying off in the short run, will work to unify other countries and generate a policy backlash further down the line. Indications of such a development—which was already visible to some extent under the George W. Bush administration—can be seen not only in public opinion surveys, but

also in recent voting patterns at the United Nations⁶³ and in calls for challenging the dominance of the US dollar as international currency.⁶⁴

This opens a window of opportunity to make global governance less dependent on US leadership and more resilient against attempts to undermine it. Contemporary political decision-makers could draw inspiration from the proposal made by Swedish foreign minister Olof Palme in 1985 to cap national contributions at 10 to 12 percent of the total UN budget so as to reduce the organization's dependence on its biggest donor countries. At the time, President Reagan's secretary of state George Schultz opposed the proposal for fear of losing US influence. Today, Trump actively calls for the rest of the world to shoulder a greater share of the burdens of multilateralism, opening a window of opportunity to make institutions less susceptible to US blackmail.

The challenges of nonhegemonic coalition building sketched above make plain that the task will not be an easy one. Although today's global governance landscape offers more options for circumventing the "reluctant hegemon" United States,⁶⁵ realizing them and achieving effective outcomes will require sustained political commitment by supporters of the global multilateral order, in Europe and beyond.

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63 Lynch 2018.

64 Khan and Brunsden 2018.

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