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The End of Multilateralism

By Zaki Laidi

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The rise of emerging economies worldwide has generated much optimism, not only in terms of economic development, but also of global cooperation. But the shift to a multipolar world order has not bolstered multilateralism. In fact, the opposite is true: The logic of national sovereignty has staged a comeback with major economies undermining cooperation on issues ranging from security to trade to climate change.

Consider the muddle in the United Nations Security Council over Syria's civil war. Just two years ago, the Security Council approved a resolution authorizing a military intervention in Libya — the first resolution to implement the "responsibility to protest," or R2P, principle — which the General Assembly adopted unanimously in 2005.

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But the emerging powers soon came to believe that the West had used the protection of Libya's civilian population as a pretext for regime change. Now, these countries are largely rejecting R2P, viewing it as a device employed by Western governments to legitimize their attempts to infringe upon national sovereignty.

Brazil has attempted to address the issue by crafting a resolution that would decouple the R2P mandate from the use of force, effectively eliminating the possibility that the doctrine could be applied. For their part, Russia and China have blocked three resolutions condemning the Syrian regime, and Russia has worked hard to derail any military intervention in Syria. In this sense, Russia and China now exercise de facto control over the formal legality of the use of force.

To be sure, many countries now believe that the West is going too far in challenging state sovereignty, with most European countries recoiling at the prospect of military confrontation. At the Group of 20 summit in early September, for example, U.S. President Barack Obama struggled to convince 10 states to sign a declaration on Syria that did not even mention the use of force. Only the U.S., Britain and France remain willing to use force if it is deemed necessary.

But viewing intervention in Syria within the paradigm of Western messianism is a mistake. After all, in Syria, as in Libya, the forces challenging the government are not a creature of Western manipulation. They are indigenous, and they are asking the West for help. The legal basis for military intervention may be weak, but Syria is no Iraq either.

Security is not the only area where sovereignty concerns have superseded multilateralism. In 2008, the U.S. abandoned its commitment to the World Trade Organization's Doha Round of global trade negotiations. While the decision followed a technical disagreement with India, it was driven largely by the belief that any agreement would benefit China more than the U.S.

Given that the Doha Round has failed to address the main problems that the U.S. and Europe have encountered in trade relations with China — noncompliance with intellectual-property rules, subsidies for state-owned enterprises, closed government-procurement markets and limits on access to the services market — both sides are now emphasizing bilateral trade agreements. But while the world may be happy to pretend that bilateral cooperation will revitalize multilateralism, nobody should be fooled. The WTO will survive, but its centrality in the trade system is rapidly diminishing.

Even cooperation on climate change is crumbling, with the U.S. and China rejecting the multilateral, top-down approach to policymaking. This implies the end of the Kyoto Protocol model, which is based on a detailed agenda, established according to specific and ambitious targets, with the relevant actors then compelled to negotiate each topic.

Rather than being subject to an internationally agreed standard, the U.S. and China want

the fight against climate change to begin with countries' individual commitments. But this new, bottom-up framework in which states determine the conditions for a multilateral agreement lacks an authority to establish standards.

Multilateralism requires minimal consensus on global rules and norms among all major powers. The greater the number of countries that have the power to block or veto international initiatives, the more difficult multilateralism becomes — and the less motivated dominant countries are to cooperate. In the emerging multipolar world, characterized by sovereignty concerns and strategic competition, progress toward resolving global issues will be more difficult than ever — with potentially devastating consequences.

Zaki Laidi is professor of International Relations at L'Institut d'études politiques de Paris (Sciences Po) and the author of "Limited Achievements: Obama's Foreign Policy." © Project Syndicate

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