

Genuine Multilateralism and Diplomacy vs the “Rules-Based Order”

Sergei V. Lavrov

Sergei V. Lavrov

Russian Foreign Minister since 2004

DOI: 10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-3-104-113

As is traditional, the month of May in Russia is marked by the broad celebrations commemorating the anniversary of the Great Victory. The defeat of Nazi Germany—an achievement to which our country made a decisive contribution, with the support from our Allies—paved the way for the post-war international order, with the UN Charter as its legal framework. The United Nations Organization, an embodiment of true multilateralism, took on a central coordinating role in global politics.

For almost 80 years since its inception, the UN has carried out the most important mission entrusted to it by its founders. The shared understanding among the five permanent members of the Security Council regarding the supremacy of the purposes and principles of the UN Charter has guaranteed global security for decades, thus creating the necessary conditions for truly multilateral cooperation, which are regulated by universally recognized norms of international law.

Now the UN-centric system is undergoing a deep crisis, the root cause of which was brought on by the decision of certain UN members to replace international law and the UN Charter with some “rules-based international order.” These mysterious “rules” have never been the subject of transparent international consultations, nor have they

been laid out for everybody’s attention. It is obvious that they are being made up on the move and used to counteract the natural processes of forming and strengthening new independent centers of development, which are an actual manifestation of multilateralism.

Moreover, we are seeing attempts to contain the new world centers by means of illegitimate unilateral measures, such as blocking access to modern technologies and financial services, forcing out of supply chains, confiscating property, destroying competitors’ critical infrastructure, and manipulating universally agreed norms and procedures. These actions have led to the fragmentation of global trade and the collapse of market mechanisms. They have paralyzed the WTO and finally transformed the IMF, without a hint of disguise, into a tool for achieving the goals of the United States and its allies, including military goals.

In a desperate attempt to assert its dominance by punishing anyone who disobeys, the United States tried to derail globalization—a process that had been extolled as the highest virtue for humanity, serving the multilateral global economic system for years.

Washington and other Western capitals subordinate to the U.S. are applying their “rules” whenever they need to justify their illegitimate steps against countries that draft their policies in accordance with international law and refuse to service the selfish interests of the “golden billion.” They blacklist any dissenters, regarding whoever is not with them as acting against them.

Our Western colleagues have long since become uncomfortable with holding talks in universal formats, such as the UN. To provide an ideological basis for their policy of undermining multilateralism, the theme of united “democracies” countering “autocracies” has been put into circulation. In addition to “summits for democracy”, the members of which are designated by the self-proclaimed hegemon, other “clubs of the chosen ones” are being created that operate in circumvention of the UN.

Summits for Democracy, the Alliance for Multilateralism, the Global Partnership for Artificial Intelligence, the Global Media Freedom Coalition, and the Paris Call for Trust and Security in

Cyberspace—these and other non-inclusive projects have been designed to undermine talks on relevant issues held under the UN auspices, and to impose non-consensual concepts and decisions that benefit the collective West. First, they agree on something secretly as a small group and then present their agreements as “the position of the international community.”

Let’s face it: no one has authorized the Western minority to speak on behalf of all humankind. They must behave decently and respect all members of the international community without exception.

By imposing a “rules-based order,” its masterminds haughtily reject the key principle underlying the UN Charter, which is the sovereign equality of states. The “proud” statement by the head of EU diplomacy, Josep Borrell, that Europe is a “garden” and the rest of the world is a “jungle” personifies their worldview of being exceptional. I will also quote the NATO-EU Joint Statement of January 10, 2023 which states: “The united West will use all the economic, financial, political, and military tools available to NATO and the EU to ensure the interests of our one billion.”

The collective West has set out to reshape the processes of multilateralism at the regional level to suit its needs. Recently, the United States called for reviving the Monroe Doctrine and wanted Latin American countries to scale back their ties with the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China. However, this faced pushback from the countries of this region, which instead resolved to strengthen their own multilateral structures, primarily the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), while upholding their legitimate right to establish themselves as a pillar of the multipolar world. Russia fully supports just aspirations of this kind.

The United States and its allies have deployed significant forces to undermine multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific Region where an ASEAN-centered, successful, and open economic and security cooperation system has been taking shape for decades. This system helped them develop consensus approaches that suited the 10 ASEAN members and their dialogue partners, including Russia, China, the United States, India, Japan, Australia, and the Republic of Korea, thus ensuring genuine

inclusive multilateralism. Washington then advanced its Indo-Pacific Strategy in an effort to break up this established architecture.

At last year’s summit in Madrid, NATO, which never tires of convincing everyone of its “love of peace” and the exclusively defensive nature of its defense programs, put out a statement about its global responsibility and indivisible security in the Euro-Atlantic region, as well as in the so-called Indo-Pacific region. This means NATO’s boundaries as a defensive organization are being moved towards the western coastal regions of the Pacific. This bloc-oriented policy, which is eroding ASEAN-centered multilateralism, manifests itself in the creation of the AUKUS military alliance, with Tokyo, Seoul, and several ASEAN countries being drawn into it. The United States is leading the effort to develop mechanisms to interfere in maritime security in a move to ensure the unilateral interests of the West in the South China Sea region. Josep Borrell, whom I referred to earlier, promised to send EU naval forces to that region. No one is hiding the fact that this Indo-Pacific strategy seeks to contain China and to isolate Russia. This is how our Western colleagues interpret the concept of “effective multilateralism” in the Asia-Pacific Region.

As soon as the Warsaw Treaty Organization was dissolved and the Soviet Union vanished from the political arena, many entertained the hope that the principle of genuine multilateralism, void of dividing lines across the Euro-Atlantic area, could be brought to life. However, instead of tapping the OSCE’s potential on an equal, collective basis, Western countries not only preserved NATO but, despite their firm pledges to the contrary, also pursued a brazen policy of bringing neighboring areas under their control, including those that have always been and will be of vital interest to Russia. As then U.S. Secretary of State James Baker said while talking to President George H.W. Bush: the OSCE is the main threat to NATO.

One is left with the impression that today both the UN and the provisions of the UN Charter pose a threat to Washington’s global ambitions.

Russia patiently tried to reach mutually-beneficial multilateral agreements based on the principle of indivisible security, which was

solemnly declared at the highest level, that is, in the documents of OSCE summits in 1999 and 2010. They are formulated in the clearest possible terms—openly and unambiguously—that no nation shall strengthen its security at the expense of the security of others and that no country, or group of countries, or organization shall be vested with the pre-eminent responsibility of maintaining peace in the OSCE region, or treat any part of the OSCE region as its sphere of influence.

NATO cared little about the commitments that were assumed by the presidents and prime ministers of its member countries and started to act precisely in contradiction with its promises by announcing its “right” to behave in any manner it saw fit. The most glaring example of this was the illegitimate bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, including with depleted uranium shells, which later led to a surge of patients with oncological conditions, both among Serbs and NATO service members. Joe Biden was a senator at the time and went on record as saying, with some pride, that he had personally insisted on bombing Belgrade and destroying all bridges across the Drina River. Today, U.S. Ambassador to Serbia Christopher Hill has used mass media to call on the Serbs to turn the page and “forget their grievances.”

As for “forgetting their grievances,” the United States has vast experience under its belt. Japan has long since been ashamedly reticent about who in fact bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. School textbooks make no mention of it. Speaking at a recent G7 meeting, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken demonstratively grieved over the suffering of the victims of those bombings, however, he kept silent about who was behind them.

Such are the “rules.” And nobody is allowed to argue with them.

Since World War II, Washington has pulled off dozens of reckless criminal military operations without even trying to secure multilateral legitimacy. Why bother when your “rules” are unbeknownst to everyone.

The disgraceful invasion of Iraq by the U.S.-led coalition in 2003 was carried out in violation of the UN Charter, just like the aggression against Libya in 2011. Both led to the destruction of each country’s statehood, hundreds of thousands of lost lives, and rampant terrorism.

The U.S.’s intervention in the domestic affairs of post-Soviet countries is nothing short of a flagrant violation of the UN Charter. “Color revolutions” were concocted in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, and a bloody coup was staged in Kiev in February 2014. Attempts to seize power by force in Belarus in 2020 were part and parcel of this approach.

The Anglo-Saxons at the helm of the West not only justify these lawless adventures, but also parade them as a policy for “promoting democracy,” while also doing so according to their own set of rules, such as recognizing Kosovo’s independence without a referendum, but refusing to recognize Crimea’s independence, even though a referendum there was in fact held. According to British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, the Falklands/Malvinas are not an issue because a referendum was held there. That’s amusing.

In order to avoid double standards, we call on everyone to follow the consensus agreements that were reached as part of the 1970 UN Declaration on Principles of International Law, which remains in force today.

It clearly declares the need to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states that conduct “themselves in compliance with the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples as described above and thus possessed of a government representing the whole people belonging to the territory.” Any unbiased observer can clearly see that the Nazi Kiev regime can in no way be considered a government representing the residents of the territories who refused to accept the results of the bloody February 2014 coup, against whom the putschists unleashed their war. It is just as clear that Pristina cannot claim to represent the interests of the Kosovo Serbs, to whom the EU promised autonomy, in the same manner as Berlin and Paris promised a special status for Donbass. We are well aware of how these promises played out in the end.

In his message to the second Summit for Democracy on March 29, 2023, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the following: “Democracy flows from the United Nations Charter. Its opening invocation of ‘We, the Peoples’ reflects the fundamental source of legitimate authority: the consent of the governed.” I will emphasize the word “consent” once again.

Multilateral efforts were made to stop the outbreak of war in the east of Ukraine as a result of the government coup. These efforts towards peaceful settlement were embodied in UN Security Council Resolution 2202 that unanimously approved the Minsk agreements. Kiev and its Western handlers trampled all over these agreements. They even cynically admitted with a tinge of pride that they had never planned to fulfill them, but rather merely wanted to gain time to flood Ukraine with weapons to use against Russia. In doing so, they publicly announced the violation of a multilateral commitment by UN members as per the UN Charter, which requires all member countries to comply with Security Council resolutions.

Our consistent efforts to prevent this confrontation, including proposals made by President Vladimir Putin in December 2021 to reach an agreement on multilateral mutual security guarantees, were haughtily rejected. We were told that nobody can prevent NATO from “embracing” Ukraine.

In the years following the coup, and despite our strong demands, nobody from among Kiev’s Western overseers reined in Pyotr Poroshenko, Vladimir Zelensky, or Ukraine’s Verkhovna Rada when the Russian language, education, media and, in general, Russian cultural and religious traditions were being consistently destroyed by legislation. This was done in direct violation of the Constitution of Ukraine and universal conventions on the rights of ethnic minorities. In parallel, the Kiev regime was introducing the theory and practice of Nazism in everyday life and adopting related laws. The Kiev regime shamelessly staged flashy torchlight processions under the banners of SS divisions in the center of the capital and other cities. The West kept silent and rubbed its hands with satisfaction. These developments fully fit into the U.S. plans to put to use Kiev’s openly racist regime, which Washington had created in the hope of weakening Russia across the board. It was part of the U.S.’s strategic course towards removing its rivals and undermining any scenario that implied the assertion of fair multilateralism in global affairs.

Everyone is aware of it, even though not everyone is talking about it openly: the real issue is not about Ukraine, but rather about the

future of international relations. Will they be forged on a sustainable consensus, one based on the balance of interests? Or will they be reduced to an aggressive and explosive advancement of hegemony?

The Ukraine issue cannot be considered outside its geopolitical context. To reiterate, multilateralism implies respect for the UN Charter and all of its interconnected principles. Russia has clearly elaborated the goals of its special military operation, which are to remove threats to its security that have been instigated by NATO for a number of years and right on Russia’s borders, and to protect the people who were stripped of their rights set forth in multilateral conventions. Russia wants to protect them from Kiev’s public and outright threats to annihilate and banish them from the land where their ancestors had lived for centuries. We have been forthright about what and for whom we are fighting.

Amid the U.S.- and EU-fueled hysteria, I am tempted to ask them in retort: What did Washington and NATO do in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya? Were there any threats to their security, culture, religion, or languages? What multilateral regulations were they guided by when they declared Kosovo’s independence in violation of OCSE principles or when they were destroying stable and economically wealthy Iraq and Libya, countries located 10,000 miles away from U.S. coasts?

Western countries’ brazen attempts to bring the Secretariats of the UN and other international organizations under their control are a threat to the multilateral system. The West has always enjoyed a quantitative advantage in terms of personnel, but until recently the UN Secretariat tried to remain neutral. Today, this imbalance has become chronic while Secretariat employees increasingly allow themselves politically-driven behavior that is unbecoming of international office holders. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres must ensure that his staff meets impartiality standards in keeping with Article 100 of the UN Charter. We also call on the Secretariat’s senior officials to be guided by the need to help member countries find ways to reach consensus and a balance of interests, rather than playing into the hands of neoliberal concepts. Otherwise, instead of a multilateral agenda, we will see a widening gap between the “golden billion” countries and the Global Majority.

Speaking of multilateralism, we cannot limit ourselves to the international context. By the same token, we cannot ignore the international context when we speak about democracy. There should be no double standards. Multilateralism and democracy should enjoy respect both within the member countries and in their relations with one another. Everyone is aware that while imposing its understanding of democracy on other nations, the West opposes the democratization of international relations based on respect for the sovereign equality of states. Today, along with its efforts to promote its “rules” in the international arena, the West is also putting a choke hold on multilateralism and democracy at home as it uses increasingly repressive tools to crack down on dissent, much the same way as the criminal Kiev regime is doing with the support of its teachers—the United States and its allies.

Just like in the Cold War years, humanity has approached a once-dangerous, and perhaps even more dangerous now, line in the sand. The situation is further aggravated by loss of faith in multilateralism, while the financial and economic aggression of the West is destroying the benefits of globalization, and while Washington and its allies are dropping diplomacy and demanding that things be sorted out “on the battlefield.” All of this is taking place within the walls of the UN, a body that was created to prevent the horrors of war. The voices of responsible and sensible forces, and calls for showing political wisdom and reviving the culture of dialogue, are drowned out by those who set out to undermine the fundamental principles of communication between countries. We must all return to our roots and comply with the UN Charter’s purposes and principles in all their diversity and interconnectedness.

At this juncture, genuine multilateralism requires that the UN adapt to objective developments in the process of forming a multipolar architecture of international relations. It is imperative to expedite Security Council reform by expanding the representation of countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The inordinate over-representation of the West in the UN’s main body undermines the principle of multilateralism.

Venezuela spearheaded the creation of the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations. We call on all countries that respect the Charter to join in. It is also important to use the constructive potential provided by BRICS and the SCO. The EAEU, the CIS, and the CSTO are all willing to contribute. We stand for using the potential of the regional associations of the Global South. The G20 can also be instrumental in maintaining multilateralism if its Western participants stop distracting their colleagues from priority items on its agenda in the hope of downplaying their responsibility for the crises piling up in the global economy.

It is our common duty to preserve the United Nations as the hard-won epitome of multilateralism and coordination of international politics. The key to success lies in working together, renouncing claims on exceptionalism and—I reiterate—showing respect for the sovereign equality of states. This is what we all signed up for when we ratified the UN Charter.

In 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested convening a summit of the UN Security Council permanent members. The leaders of China and France supported this initiative, but, unfortunately, it has not been brought to fruition. This issue is directly related to multilateralism—not because the five powers have certain privileges over the rest, but precisely because of their special responsibility under the UN Charter to preserve international peace and security. This is exactly what the imperatives of the UN-centric system, which is crumbling before our eyes as a result of the actions of the West, call for.

Concern about this situation can be increasingly heard in multiple initiatives and ideas from the Global South countries, ranging from East and Southeast Asia, the Arab and the Muslim world in its entirety, all the way to Africa and Latin America. We appreciate their sincere desire to ensure the settlement of current problems through honest collective work aimed at agreeing on a balance of interests based on the sovereign equality of states and indivisible security. We will continue to forge productive cooperation with them in the name of improving the international situation, while advancing communication between countries based on the principles of true multilateralism, international law, truth, and justice.