The Elusive Consensus

*Many states agree on the global issues that need tackling, and broadly on what needs to be done. But national agendas and the dynamics of multilateral negotiations often impede progress. What other ways might there be to break the deadlock?*

There is a contradiction at the core of international affairs. Tackling the world’s most pressing challenges – including climate change, terrorism, nuclear proliferation and international economic instability – would broadly serve the interests of the majority of peoples and states. However, on many crucial issues international cooperation is stalled, sporadic or deficient. Rising interdependence has not yet led to a comparable surge in effective international governance, which is still conducted through an incomplete patchwork of institutions and agreements and hostage to sovereignty, short-termism and zero-sum politics. As many have observed, there is an imbalance between the ‘demand’ for global governance and the supply of it.

The past 12 months have offered few reasons to be optimistic about the prospects for better global cooperation. The international community has singularly failed to stop the Syrian civil war or prevent the humanitarian crisis there. The Ukraine conflict showed what limited levers are available to confront a great power willing to disregard international norms. The global response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was sluggish. In the face of such events, the logic that common interests should lead to common solutions can seem glib, even naive.

How can we account for the international gridlock? The impediments to cooperation are legion. Common interests may be clear at a high level of generality, but lofty goals – international security, global prosperity – obscure divergences in the detail of states’ agendas. Sometimes this is because an issue is a higher or lower priority from one country to another. For example, while the whole of the European Union may share an aspiration to constrain Russia’s destabilizing actions in Ukraine, some EU states share a border with Russia or depend on imported Russian gas. Each EU state approaches the Ukraine challenge with a different degree of vulnerability. Another obstacle to cooperation is that in many cases the consequences of inaction on a given issue are unequal. Climate change is a clear example: many of the countries likely to be most adversely affected by global warming produce few of the greenhouse gases responsible for climate change.

The pursuit of public goods creates opportunities for ‘free-riding’. States often have incentives to let others bear the costs of furnishing a public good, particularly if those other states attach more importance to that good or regard threats to it as more severe. The low level of defence spending among many European NATO members illustrates this tendency. Most European states do not meet the target of spending 2 per cent of GDP on defence that they agreed upon as NATO members; but they still benefit from higher spending by other NATO members, particularly the United States.
Sometimes the problem is one of collective action: a state may not be willing to bear the cost of an action unless all others, or a sufficient number of them, are willing to contribute too. All may agree that acting is necessary, but none may be willing to do so alone. One reason for this is that the unilateral pursuit of policies that serve the collective good may bring 'first-mover disadvantages'; for example, a state that tightened regulatory requirements for a given economic sector could suffer a loss of competitiveness in that sector, at least in the short term.

The processes of domestic political decision-making complicate matters further. Elected leaders have strong disincentives to commit to policies that incur short-term costs for long-term gains, particularly when the timescale of prospective benefits stretches far beyond the term of a president or the life of a parliament. Leaders also vary considerably in their capacity to implement commitments, and face a variety of domestic constraints to doing so.

In recent years, things seem to have got even more difficult. While the concept of 'complex interdependence' is not a new feature of the international system, changes in the distribution of global economic and political power have increased the number of states needed to make major agreements work. This redistribution of power also allows more states to play a disruptive role. Arguably, international issues have themselves become more complex, reflecting both the number of parties involved and the details to be negotiated.

Given these structural impediments to achieving global consensus even where interests overlap, how might progress be made?

The first thing is to avoid undue pessimism. Over the past 70 years a broad range of international organizations and agencies has evolved to facilitate and enhance global cooperation across numerous fields, such as trade (the WTO), finance (the Financial Stability Board), energy (the International Energy Agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency) and arms control (the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons). International law has becoming increasingly codified and developed, from trade to international criminal law. The WTO dispute resolution mechanism is a successful example of an institutionalized form of supranational dispute settlement, in which national governments from across the world give primacy to decisions taken outside their sovereign jurisdiction.

Second, as noted in the third essay, above, strengthening regional organizations may be a route to finding common solutions to shared challenges. Despite its flaws, the European Union, the most developed form of regional integration in the world, has shown the capacity of states to pool sovereignty and create binding rules in the service of common economic and political interests. Although born from unique historical and geopolitical circumstances, the EU demonstrates that the habit of institutionalized negotiation and cooperation among states can build the trust necessary to achieve difficult compromises.

Third, it may also be sensible to try to tackle some global challenges without hoping to build universal multilateral agreements from the outset. Essential global pacts can be captive to the agendas of individual players, to which multilateral, consensus-driven systems give disproportionate influence. In some instances, smaller ‘minilateral’ groupings of states may make more sense, especially as these can still be broad in their reach. The G20 stands out as a prime example, accounting for around 85 per cent of the world’s economy and two-thirds of its population, offering a good balance between coverage and efficiency on those issues where it can achieve consensus to act. Similarly, there is evidence that regional trade agreements
have done more to liberalize trade than global ones have done. And the US–China deal on climate change in late 2014 may help unblock negotiations on a wider deal in Paris in December 2015.

Decision-makers must now be forward-thinking and determine what new areas of policy would benefit from common solutions, such as the regulation of outer space and governance of the internet, and strive to create new institutions where necessary. Building cooperation between major powers in less politically divisive areas, such as global health, may also help to create the relationships and trust needed to tackle harder negotiations later.

There is no single route forward to improving global cooperation. It will take a great deal of pragmatism, patience and diplomatic ingenuity to make progress. But, given the realities of economic and political interdependence, there is no more urgent agenda.