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Opinion – Multilateralism's Collapse Under Trump and the Call for Global South Pluriverse

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SHOUTAO WU, JUL 23 2025

Multilateralism, in brief, refers to multiple countries working together to achieve a common goal through diverse membership in international institutions. As Charvet and Mota argue, multilateralism and international cooperation exist, as no nation can be shielded from global threats, regardless of the framing of altruism or geopolitical interests. They require reconciling short-term national interests with long-term global prosperity for mankind. Such reconciliation, however, is at odds with the sweeping “America First” agenda, as multilateralism takes time, compromises self-interests, and requires subsidies from wealthier and more powerful states. Donald Trump and his administration do not want that.

Although the retreat from globalization, multilateralism, and global governance has been perceptible over the past decade, the Trump administration is taking it to a whole new level. Both his first and second presidencies were marked by withdrawals, or announcements of withdrawals from significant international organizations, treaties, and agreements. These withdrawals, funding cuts, and denunciations of international institutions, spanning critical sectors such as trade and finance, climate change, geopolitical security, foreign aid, human rights, and public health, reflect a unifying theme: a fundamental shift toward unilateralism, protectionism, and anti-globalism under the “America First” foreign policy. This political orientation prioritizes U.S. interests above all else, disregarding the far-reaching consequences of wars, conflicts, climate collapse, pandemics, and other global crises on regions, countries, and communities beyond U.S. borders.

Beyond multilateral institutions, the Trump administration also poses a serious threat to the rule-based international order. Biersteker outlined the contours of classic liberal institutionalism: In the global society, the equal dignity and sovereign integrity of different states are supported with rules of law that are maintained through the articulation and enforcement of norms, as well as constitutional checks in the form of interventions by the UN Security Council that are intended to maintain international peace and security.

These are the foundations of the rule-based international order, which is under dire threat as “liberal institutionalism” is being replaced by “illiberal nationalism” under the current authoritarian regime. In the past months, the administration threatened the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Canada, Denmark, and Panama for the imperial claim of the “51st state,” Greenland, and the Panama Canal. Trump proposed the mass relocation plan for two million Palestinians to neighboring nations, not allowing them to return, while the U.S. would take over the Gaza Strip. The U.S. shifted its position on the Russia-Ukraine war to downplay the forcible territory annexation and military violence, while claiming mineral benefits in exchange for defense support. The U.S. joined Israel to bomb nuclear sites in Iran to “prevent Tehran from developing nukes”, adding to the military chaos, conflicts, and deaths in the Middle East.

What we are witnessing is not merely the United States disengaging from global governance and multilateralism, but a deeper, more unsettling breakaway from the post-WWII Western alliance and its professed political philosophy, one that has long emphasized democracy, law, human rights, free trade, territorial sovereignty, and international institutions, even though how those ideologies were historically built and offered is contested. This retreat signals a turn toward a political orientation increasingly marked by colonial entanglements, imperial ambition, militarization, dictatorship, and the normalization of totalitarian tendencies.

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To move beyond the disintegration of multilateralism and the retreat into authoritarian nationalism, we need to shift from critique to creation, from identifying what is collapsing to envisioning what can emerge. It is increasingly clear that the world is no longer willing to play by U.S.-defined rules of global order. As Biersteker outlines, three major trajectories are reshaping the geopolitical landscape: First, de-dollarization: Countries will insulate themselves from the weaponization of the U.S. Dollar with more diverse reserve holdings, increase currency swap arrangements, and create alternatives to SWIFT to seek financial stability. Second, alternative global leadership: With the U.S. withdrawals from international organizations, other countries may fill in the leadership vacuum, drive institutional reform, and create new transnational entities for more inclusive and equitable global cooperation. Third, and finally, regional and sub-regional governance: As global collaboration becomes increasingly fragmented, regions, sub-regions, and communities are emerging as key sites of rulemaking in areas like climate policy, public health, and trade.

These trends present a historical opportunity to rethink the current global governance landscape and to challenge the structural asymmetry in who gets to define what counts as governance, knowledge, and development. At this critical juncture, it is not just timely but essential to foreground the alternative governance models, epistemologies, and leadership emerging from the “Global South”, for which we need more lucid conceptualization.

Sebastian Haug made it clear that “Global South” refers not just to landmasses and waters south of the equator. Instead, the term has been a general rubric for decolonized nations roughly south of the old colonial centers of power. Pivoting the interests of repossession by the dispossessed, Matthew Sparke metaphorically defines “Global South” as an accountable, embodied, and heterogeneous concept that is positioned against neoliberal capitalism, colonial structures, and hegemonic engagement that can exist anywhere, beyond the country-based perspective. Arturo Escobar moves further, pointing out that “Global South” is not simply a geopolitical counterbalance to the North, but a constellation of histories, struggles, resistance, and alternative epistemologies and imageries. It incubates what he calls the “pluriverse,” a world where any world fits.

Thus, by emphasizing Global South governance, I am not referring to any specific models from southern states or institutions. Rather, I am pointing to governance philosophies that can 1) challenge the social, political, and economic norms long shaped by Westerners, and 2) advocate for pluralistic paths that foreground critical contribution, leadership, and knowledge systems in the Global South.

Mass withdrawals from multilateral institutions and relentless breaches of international order in Trump's America epitomize the classic Western definition of success, underpinning unilateral progress, economic growth, and state-centric authority, security, and interests. Governance models in the Global South, however, often defy such Western logic. Rooted in relational ontologies and collective ways of being, these models center reciprocity, care, and environmental kinship.

We see such resistance in the Indigenous Andean philosophy of “Sumak Kawsay”, or “Buen Vivir” in Spanish, that emphasizes the coexistence and harmony of nature and human society, while rejecting market-dominant capitalism and extractive practices. We see this in Indigenous federations across the Amazon who took the initiative to safeguard the Yavari-Tapiche Territorial Corridor, their ancestral forests, despite abandonment by the states. And we see this in Afro-descendant communities organizing under pan-Africanist traditions that reject neoliberalism and imperialism, calling for principles of solidarity, love, respect, recognition, sovereignty, independence, and dignity. These are not simply “cultural” or “local” variations—they are legitimate epistemic and political frameworks for rethinking global governance.

If multilateral governance and international cooperation are to survive the onslaught of “America First” anti-globalism, they must be radically reconfigured. This requires the inclusion of unrecognized and untapped governance models, experiences, and philosophies from the Global South, scaling across regions, countries, and communities. It demands epistemic parity and procedural empowerment that allow these alternative approaches to shape institutions in practice, not just in discourse. Above all, it calls for a fundamental shift in perspective: the recognition that the Global South is neither a site for political or economic extraction, nor the reactive bloc responding to Western failures. Rather, it is a generative, reparative, and collective archive of pluriversal futures.

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Shoutao Wu is a climate governance researcher at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. His work bridges environmental governance, decolonial theories, and epistemological pluralism to critically examine carbon markets and carbon offsetting mechanisms as instruments of neocolonial power. Though grounded in climate justice, his research engages broader global governance questions, particularly how contemporary institutions reproduce imperial, extractive, and settler-colonial logics. Informed by Indigenous studies, ecofeminism, and Global South scholarship, he explores relational, embodied, and place-based climate knowledge systems as pathways toward pluriversal governance.