



Institutionalizing Dialogue: A Strategic Imperative In Multipolar World

“We are moving towards a multipolar world. Multipolarity is creating new opportunities for different countries to lead on the global stage. But history teaches that multipolarity without strong multilateral institutions creates serious risks. It could result in even greater geostrategic tensions, chaotic competition and further fragmentation.”¹ (Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General)

Summary: in light of the evolving multipolar world and the proliferation of identity-based conflicts, dialogue is a tool for fostering peaceful coexistence across diverse ideologies. The current ad hoc use of dialogue is not sufficient to maintain social peace and cohesion. Institutionalization of dialogue, i.e. its strategic integration into decision-making mechanisms, is imperative, through two approaches: a. strengthening dialogue within the decision-making processes of multilateral institutions; b. creating dedicated 'dialogue forums' at government and municipal levels. It is also essential to integrate dialogue into formal education curricula in order to develop dialogue awareness and skills.

In recent decades, the West's political influence has been weakened by the decline in its global economic and commercial supremacy and the narrowing gap in economic and technological development and military potential between emerging powers, especially China and India, and the United States and its Western allies. At the same time, the voice and influence of rivals and the 'Global South' have grown stronger.

The tendency is associated with the rise to the fore of identity-based conflicts featured by ethnic, national and religious clashes ranging from Myanmar, China, India, Yemen, Syria, Iraq to South Sudan, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Nigeria and Mali to mention but few and accompanied by migration and refugee crises.

All that has served as breeding soil for advancement of nationalism and populism, intensification of debates on immigration, multiculturalism, globalization and amplification of anti-establishment rhetoric across the globe.

Putting the above phenomena in a broader perspective, the trends show the rise of conservative, so-called "traditionalist" forces that cling to tradition and favor "order", and the decline of

¹ <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sgsm21956.doc.htm>

liberal, so-called "modernist" forces that advocate individual freedom and autonomy despite the risk of "disorder". Although an optimum balance between these opposing world views can never be achieved, with one of the two camps always feeling at a disadvantage, one of the fundamental conditions for peace and stability in any society is the establishment of an equilibrium, or something close to it, between the two ideologies being historically opposed.

Such trends foment social divisions, tensions, hatred and militant behaviour, increasing the risk of instability both in inter-state relations and within societies. In recent years, they have led to the spread of authoritarianism and the emergence of a hybrid of autocracy and democracy, the so-called "anocracy"². In this context, it should be stressed that autocrats and populists, claiming to represent the "demos", misuse their power in everyday practice to despotism and tyranny, to oppress the "other".

Insecurity is exacerbated by the fact that the world's leading power, the champion of liberal democracy, the United States, is also experiencing similar trends: conservative forces are "trumping"; the number of Trump supporters is gradually increasing, a course that is set to continue regardless of his possible re-election next year. The situation could become particularly critical in the light of several statements made by Trump in which he envisaged revenge³ if he is re-elected. The rise of the so-called "Christian nationalists"⁴ is further complicating the global landscape. Despite the checks and balances in the US political system, the risk of the emergence of a regime with authoritarian features and the rise of extremism and violence may not be overlooked. A significant number of US citizens do not rule out the possibility of a civil war either.⁵

Similar trends and phenomena, including the strengthening and gradual rise of the so-called "far right" and its rise to power, can also be observed in the other pillar of the Western alliance, the institutions and member states of the European Union. Unfortunately, in the latter, these phenomena and trends have already caused global tragedies in history.

When looking at these trends through the lens of radicalization and extremism, we must also recall that "no society is immune to mass atrocities"⁶. It would therefore be a serious mistake to underestimate the socio-political significance of these risks at national level and their international implications. Continuing these trends or failing to respond to the challenges would have far-reaching consequences for global peace and stability and the multipolar world order.

Ensuring peace and stability must remain an objective in a changing environment, both internationally and nationally. What is at the root of the problem?

² https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/43553-two-in-five-americans-civil-war-somewhat-likely?redirect_from=%2Ftopics%2Fpolitics%2Farticles-reports%2F2022%2F08%2F26%2Ftwo-in-five-americans-civil-war-somewhat-likely

³ <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/03/25/donald-trump-waco-rally-retribution-justice/>

⁴ <https://religiondispatches.org/section/christian-nationalism/>

⁵ https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/43553-two-in-five-americans-civil-war-somewhat-likely?redirect_from=%2Ftopics%2Fpolitics%2Farticles-reports%2F2022%2F08%2F26%2Ftwo-in-five-americans-civil-war-somewhat-likely

⁶ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/08/1070402>

The starting point for our analysis is the basic premise that there is not only “one truth”⁷. At the same time, parties with different identities trumpet and fight for “their own truth” and remain deaf or reject “out of hand” the truth of the “other” and the arguments and concerns that support it. To resolve contradictions and hostility, we must strive to hear and understand the truth of the “other” without prejudice and labelling. Only by uncovering as many “truths” as possible, and thereby interpreting the facts as broadly as possible, will we be able to make a comprehensive analysis of the objective core of conflicts, which can help us to develop scenarios that lead to peaceful coexistence between the parties in conflict.

The method is called dialogue. Its key elements are: active and unprejudiced listening to the truth of the “other”, building empathy for the “other” and developing the perspective of peaceful coexistence with the “other” despite the persistence of opposing ideologies and values.

Dialogue and dialogue facilitation are not aimed at bringing the parties in conflict to an agreement. The primary aim of dialogue is to mitigate and address the animosity that has arisen in human relations, which does not imply an obligation to accept the views of the “other” nor to compromise with the views of the “other”! Yet, in many cases, the establishment of dialogue is in itself a step towards easing hostility and reconciling human relations. A better understanding of the “other’s” world of ideas and concerns will, in the longer term, create the conditions for finding solutions.

Dialogue is not to be confused with polite communication, negotiation or debate: while in dialogue participants focus their efforts on understanding each other better with a cooperative attitude, in debates and negotiations participants are confrontational, focusing on counter-arguments and proofs to be right, and aiming to win.

Similarly, “dialogue facilitation” should not be confused with “mediation”, despite the many similarities between the two types of peace-building and the importance of both. “Dialogue facilitators” channel communication between conflicting parties to help them understand conflicting and hostile views and to promote a climate of trust. “Mediators” guide and influence communication to broker and enforce agreements. For example, “mediation” activities aimed at establishing and maintaining a ceasefire and “dialogue facilitation” aimed at reconciliation after ethnic cleansing are activities that require different tools and methods.

In the shaping world order, states and people with different or even conflicting values must learn to live together peacefully despite diversity of values and identities. Dialogue can make a significant contribution to this. But it must be used systematically rather than its current ad hoc and sporadic application. In other words, dialogue needs to be “institutionalized”, i.e. integrated in the decision-making mechanisms of both multilateral institutions and national governance.

In international relations, diplomatic channels and diplomats are the main factors for managing and preventing conflicts. Diplomats, however, must act in accordance with their mandate as defined by their governments and represent their country’s geostrategic interests forcefully in

⁷ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/354553-there-is-no-one-truth-there-s-only-what-happened-based>

official fora. However, their efforts to assert national interests and convince partners of their "own right" limit their efforts to explore and better understand the values and motivations behind the "other's" position. This not infrequently leads to international agreements that are not respected by the parties in the long run because of superficial compromises that often leave intact or pay insufficient attention to the contradictory values lurking deep down, and therefore inevitably come to the surface over time.

In order to find sustainable solutions, it is essential to complement and enrich the existing toolbox of multilateral diplomatic negotiations, often - and wrongly - described as dialogue, with the systematic, institutionalized use of dialogue. Some options:

- For complex issues where different civilizations and values are of undisputable importance, an "entry hall" or "back-door" dialogue as part of the decision-making process would be needed for experts with different and conflicting values and civilizations to scrutinize the challenges and make proposals for addressing them, without a governmental mandate. The outcome of the dialogue would be presented to official decision-makers, who could finalize and synchronize their positions in the light of the "elements identified" and recommendations. Such "exploratory" dialogues could take place, for example, to address the issues raised in the UN's "Our Common Agenda"⁸ (climate change, development policy, migration, nuclear proliferation, space weapons, artificial intelligence, cyber security, human rights, etc.).

- Dialogue in the decision-making mechanisms of the UN Security Council and the relevant regional organizations can also play an exceptionally important role in the prevention of extreme crimes (genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, crimes against humanity) based on identity conflicts and falling under the principle of "responsibility to protect". Experts representing different identities, but without an organizational mandate, could use dialogue to explore the background and motivations behind the hostile behavior of the parties to a conflict. A better understanding of the root causes would greatly help not only to stop the crisis process quickly and prevent it from deepening, but also to respond more effectively to long-term, systemic and structural challenges, including better linking of local and international action, which, if not done, is the source of many future conflicts.

- The UN Security Council and regional organizations could also include in their agenda launching, either jointly or independently, dialogue directly between the parties to a conflict, or appointing dialogue facilitators, in a planned manner to help address identified situations at risk.

However, dialogue can also be a useful tool for building social cohesion at national level. Indeed, even in liberal democracies that respect pluralism, it is essential to create, as an integral part of decision-making systems, autonomous "dialogue forums" to which actors considered "radical" or "extremist" by mainstream politicians are invited and where they can express their views without being labeled, in the face of complex social challenges (climate change, health reform, migration, multiculturalism, etc.). However, "dialogue forums" could also be used to allow mainstream parties and "extremists" to exchange views on a regular basis, particularly on issues where the approach of "extremist and radical" activists differs significantly from the views and

⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda>

ideas of the mainstream parties. These possibilities for dialogue should not be discarded, even if the dialogue that is established does not lead to concrete agreements and the exchange of views appears to be a "vomit on the wall". Regular and structured communication - with the help of professional dialogue facilitators - can in itself create a political climate and environment that prevents conflict from escalating and allows the parties to live together in peace despite their contradictory attitudes. The counter-argument that such a regular dialogue could be used to legitimize certain so-called "banned" groups is true! However, the "pouting" politicians should consider whether the risk of legitimization or the risk of extremism is the greater threat to social peace and cohesion!

But it is not enough to set up and run institutions for dialogue. Systematically familiarizing citizens with the culture and daily practice of "dialogue" is key to its effectiveness. To this end, it is essential that skills and attitudes for dialogue are integrated into the formal education curriculum, as the current ad hoc, sporadic and isolated efforts to develop national capacities have virtually negligible societal impact. Particular attention should be paid to developing the dialogue capabilities of political activists and, of course, those involved in education and social work, and to enabling them to put the concept of dialogue into practice in their daily work.

Many organizations and experts around the world are promoting the culture of dialogue, facilitating dialogue in practice and improving relevant capacities and skills. However, they operate in a fragmented and isolated way. Their voice and influence are therefore less than desirable. In view of the new and complex security and socio-political challenges facing humanity, it would be essential to amplify the voice of the dialogue community, to improve the sharing of their experience and expertise and to ensure a coordinated representation. An international "Alliance for Dialogue" could become a representative of the dialogue community and, at the same time, a driving force for the institutionalization of dialogue and the integration of dialogue-related issues, including it in national curricula.

Unfortunately, many crises today, such as the Gaza conflict, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict or the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, require the institutional use of dialogue. Similarly, it is becoming increasingly urgent to establish the institution of dialogue in all social formations, including liberal democracies.

Dialogue is not a panacea. It does not and cannot provide a solution to everything. Yet the institutionalization of dialogue could prevent much suffering and tragedy. It could make the world a more peaceful place.