

“Never give up on forging trust and alliances”

Opening speech by former Federal President Horst Köhler
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As the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed with unprecedented clarity in more simultaneous ways than ever before, all human beings share a common biosphere, and neither walls nor weapons can protect against the consequences of pandemics, climatic shifts or collapsing ecosystems.

Our world is interconnected, and global cooperation is not an option, it is a necessity for survival. Yet the world is at risk of going down the wrong path. The phrase “new Cold War” is making the rounds. Indeed we are witnessing a resurgence of narrowly defined national interests alongside a rivalry of great powers; of all times, this is taking place at a moment when joint action is more crucial than ever – and not only because of the global pandemic.

“Sleepwalking” must not make history again – and we can all do our part to help prevent that. I would therefore like to thank all of the organisers for convening this incredibly timely Policy Dialogue on such a burning issue: “multilateralism that delivers”. I would particularly like to express my gratitude to Danilo Türk and the World Leadership Alliance - Club de Madrid as well as to the Bertelsmann Foundation and all other partners. Finally, thank you to all my colleagues at the Club de Madrid, who are confronting the greatest current challenge: our capacity for international cooperation. As a member, I know well that in recent months, the World Leadership Alliance, in dialogue with sitting heads of state and government, has – both publicly and behind the scenes – put forward many ideas for decisive multilateral action. And it is a good thing that over the next few days, at its initiative, so many smart people will now be discussing how global cooperation can achieve renewed effectiveness.

The good news is: the political framework for global cooperation and its objectives exists – it exists with the United Nations. Like no other global organisation, it holds legitimacy and convening power. It has set global norms and standards, arranged dialogue between nations and saved human lives. And just a month ago, at the 75th General Assembly, the 193 member states unanimously defined a working programme for the future: “The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is our roadmap and its implementation is a necessity for our survival.” The United Nations’ 2030 Agenda conceives the world as a community of shared responsibility and lays the foundation for a new global outlook characterised by solidarity. In other words, we know what needs to be done and we have the tools for achieving the goals that have been set. Let us take our heads of state and government at their word, and look to the history of the United Nations for inspiration. Indeed, its establishment after a devastating world war was

anything but a foregone conclusion. It was the outcome of political will, a clear vision, and pragmatic Realpolitik. All three are just as crucial today as they were back then.

I would like to start with the last one. For me, Realpolitik means not allowing reckless interest-driven policies or the politics of power to discourage us. On the contrary, it means not giving up cooperating in open and flexible coalitions. That is how I see the Alliance for Multilateralism, a Franco-German initiative in which more than 60 nations are already working together on distinct issues. Such a pragmatic multilateralism should draw on all organisations in the United Nations family and their specialist expertise. And it would greatly benefit from forging new alliances with the research community and civil society, private enterprises and foundations, municipalities and regions – thus drawing on their collective intelligence, tenacity and creativity. A current example of inclusive multilateralism, as UN Secretary-General António Guterres calls it (and he deserves all our support), is the global platform Access to COVID-19 Tools Accelerator (ACT). Making a future vaccine available to all humanity as a “global public good” is a crucial test for “multilateralism that delivers”.

But multilateralism does not solely consist of ad-hoc alliances with like-minded partners and clear objectives. That leads me to my second point. Multilateralism is more than a means to an end. It is a principle. Its vision is one of global dialogue, even with reluctant players and across all different interests, values or systems, in order to build trust and thus lay the most important foundation for cooperation. The United Nations remains the centre for this.

Multilateralism, by this definition, requires a willingness, as Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel once phrased it, “also to consider the interests of the other side instead of exclusively focusing on one’s own”. One could also view this as applying the Golden Rule – that appeal, so simple-sounding but so demanding, not to inflict anything on someone else that you would not wish to undergo yourself. This rule, by the way, is one shared by every world religion in some similar, familiar form. It could, for example, give industrialised countries a reason to consider the externalized costs of their lifestyle and thereby also reflect on their share in the causes of global crises in the Anthropocene. They are first called upon to give credible answers about what needs to change in their own countries so as to shape globalisation in a way that leaves no one behind. This is perhaps the most important contribution we can make to preventing crises, isolationism and national backsliding.

Crises can prompt new solutions, provided there is the political will and the required leadership – my third and final point. This leadership was present at the founding of the United Nations, it was present in the project of European integration – both taking place after the horrors of the Second World War. It was also present for the creation of the African Union about two decades ago. Now, once again, in this crisis that has roots far deeper than the virus, leadership can set the world on a new path; a path that will end the assault that is plundering all our lives’ foundations and threatening the most vulnerable among us. The challenges may seem unparalleled, but so are our opportunities. More than ever, we need leaders who seize the opportunities – and who see themselves as acting and learning together. I set great store by the World Leadership Alliance’s capacity to articulate the cooperation needed for a Great Transformation as an inspiring story of hope. And that requests never to give up on forging trust and alliances!