

The Future of Multilateralism

Meeting of Directors of Policy Planning

Council of Europe

**Keynote speech by
Ambassador Thomas Greminger, Executive Director, GCSP**

Strasbourg, 30 June 2025



Dear colleagues and friends,
ladies and gentlemen

Good afternoon!

It is an honour for me to address you today on “the future of multilateralism”.

This is a topic that has been close to my heart during my entire career as a diplomat, and one that I spend much of my time thinking about as Director of the Geneva Centre for Security Policy.

For the past 30 years, GCSP has been preparing leaders for the future of multilateralism: through strategic anticipation and foresight; executive education; promoting innovation; and generating policy advice on current and emerging security challenges.

Before looking to the future, allow me to make a few observations about the current state of multilateralism.

A crisis of multilateralism

Let’s face it; with few exceptions, the situation is quite grim. There are few global or even regional initiatives. There is a weak sense of common purpose. And we are witnessing trade wars and violent conflicts that are erecting barriers and destroying lives.

I would argue that some of this is caused by three factors.

A lack of trust.

A lack of consistency.

And a lack of preparedness.

Allow me to elaborate briefly.

Concerning trust, people lack trust in their governments. States lack trust in each other. And people and governments no longer trust the ability of inter-state organizations to deal with a cascading and often inter-linked set of challenges. This is compounded by a lack of trust of the media, and the spread of disinformation.

Concerning consistency, we have seen in the past few decades an undermining of the normative basis that has maintained a degree of international peace and security since the end of the Second World War. Violations of international law and human rights – including by great powers – have led to breaking of rules and accusations of double standards.

Concerning preparedness, politicians tend to focus on short election cycles or even shorter news cycles. They are absorbed by the crises of the day. Little attention and few resources are devoted to looking over the horizon at the potential challenges, and opportunities, of tomorrow. As a result, governments and institutions are usually reactive.



As a consequence of these three factors as well as a distinct lack of political leadership, we face a crisis of multilateralism.

With this in mind, what should we be thinking about and planning for in relation to the future of multilateralism?

Why do we need multilateralism?

It may seem obvious, but I think we first need to answer the question “who cares?”. Why do we even need multilateralism?

As a Swiss I come from a country that sees itself as a champion of multilateralism. I was Secretary General of the OSCE – the world’s biggest regional security organization. And I am from a generation that grew up believing in the United Nations and global institutions designed to enhance security and cooperation.

But not everyone is convinced about the importance of multilateralism – not least some of the leaders of powerful countries that used to defend the world order.

There is a tendency for great powers and populist leaders to not only seek to put their countries first – which is understandable – but to go it alone. In an interdependent world, this won’t get you very far, though.

Think of some of the most salient current and emerging challenges. Migration. Climate change. Pandemics. Organized crime. Access to natural resources such as water and critical minerals. These are issues that transcend borders: what Kofi Annan described as “problems without passports”. Recent experience has shown how even big, powerful countries cannot deal with these issues on their own – even by building walls and closing borders.

And think of some of the challenges to come: such as the rapid growth of AI, a new space race, more extreme weather events, and lethal autonomous weapons systems (to name a few).

States will have to realize – out of self-interest – that there are issues where they need to work together. This is not liberal internationalism – it is realpolitik.

Therefore, we cannot take multilateralism for granted. But it should not be discounted either. It is vital for governments to make the case – to their people and each other – that there are fundamental reasons why countries need to cooperate – including through regional and international organizations.

Let me now address the three points that I raised at the outset and suggest ways that we can improve trust, consistency and preparedness.

Building trust

Trust is the glue that holds together the international system. Without it, as we can see, things fall apart. So how do we build it?

Starting at the state level, there needs to be effective and inclusive processes and institutions. There must also be transparent and accountable checks and balances, not least in relation to preventing and fighting corruption. And a free and responsible media is vital. These are all things that have been championed



by the Council of Europe over the past 75 years. The challenge is to instil such values in countries that are not members of the Council of Europe.

I don't think that countries necessarily need to share the same values in order to cooperate.

They at least need to abide by some shared principles and commitments, and - that is decisive - share common interests.

Respect is another vital factor for building trust. This includes parity of esteem - that countries are treated as sovereign equals, and that their sovereignty is acknowledged and respected.

Sticking to facts is also vital. And having evidence-based policies. Conversely, lies erode trust.

Trust also requires dialogue. Speaking to each other, listening to each other. Having a degree of empathy, even if you don't agree with the other side.

That is why I still believe that a forum like the OSCE can play a useful role. It is one of the few remaining places where Russia, Ukraine, and all countries of Europe and North America can meet and talk to each other. They may not agree on much, but at least they keep open channels of communication.

While enemies may find it hard to trust each other, particularly after violent conflict, there are ways of managing distrust, mitigate risks and move towards more peaceful relations. This is what we are very much focused on at GCSP. How to create the conditions for a durable ceasefire in Ukraine? How to promote restraint and confidence-building measures, both between Russia and Ukraine and Russia and the West? How to reduce the risk of incidents and accidents, for example in the Baltic and Black Sea regions and along the 5000 kilometres long zone of contact between NATO and Russia? I would not necessarily call this trust building, but it can at least install guardrails to prevent the parties from going over the edge.

All of these points might seem self-evident to you and me, but in our crazy, unpredictable world, we need to get back to basics.

This leads me to my second point, namely consistency.

Consistency

Too often, states that are parties to international legal instruments say one thing and do another. This undermines their credibility at home and abroad as well as the international legal framework that has so painstakingly been built up over the past decades to manage international relations in a world without a global policeman.

This is where the *acquis* of the Council of Europe plays a very useful role. The rich collection of conventions already agreed within the context of the Council of Europe, for example against cybercrime, human trafficking, and violence against women, provides a common normative framework, common mechanisms for accountability, and benchmarks for monitoring implementation.



States that do not live up to their commitments or even break them should be called out. Peer review and pressure are key, as is the active engagement of civil society.

We also need to keep pushing ahead with strengthening governance of new frontiers where states have a common interest for regulation – such as the use of outer space and the oceans, as well as against environmental crime. Shared obligations for all states would strengthen a sense of common purpose and shared responsibility.

The Council of Europe can be a key pioneer and catalyst, as it has been on cybercrime or on AI for that matter.

Where possible, we also need to engage the private sector in these processes since companies have a growing impact on our lives and security.

I want to add one caveat here. Consistency does not mean uniformity. Because of the fractured geopolitical environment, it will be hard to build consensus around key objectives. But lack of global consensus should not result in paralysis. For example, regional organizations and coalitions of the willing can push ahead and create a basis for others to join later. If such initiatives can demonstrate the benefits of joint action they will strengthen the credibility of the actors involved, and build trust in the institutions that they work through.

Be prepared

Let me come to my third point: the need to be prepared.

I realize that I am preaching to the converted in a room full of policy planners, but we need more strategic anticipation. The world is in flux. We are dealing with a myriad of challenges – all at once – that are complex. And the pace of change seems to be increasing.

Yet the words “policy” and “planning” are not heard much these days nor given sufficient time and resources. As a result, decisions are often taken quickly and reactively rather than thought-through, and because of a short-term mentality decision-makers are constantly playing catch-up.

To counter-act this trend, it is vital to foster a culture of preparedness.

Preparedness means to foresee and rehearse several plausible options and to be ready to deal with them. This can enhance prevention as well as mitigation strategies. It can also enable quicker and more targeted responses.

I remember when Switzerland was preparing to chair the OSCE in 2014. We had sufficient resources, a good team in place, we had gone through scenarios and carried out contingency planning. We felt that we were ready. But we did not anticipate “little green men” appearing in Crimea and a mix of actors destabilizing the Donbas. Still, because we were generally well prepared, we were able to pivot quickly to deal with the crisis – which included the deployment of a large monitoring mission to Ukraine at short notice. Within 24h of the approval of the mandate by the Permanent Council of the OSCE we had the first observers on the ground.



In the Council of Europe, strategic foresight could help to anticipate threats and challenges such as the potential impacts of technology and foreign interference on the values, principles and interests of member states.

At the global level, the Pact for the Future was a useful attempt to look over the horizon. But it needs the support of the UN and Member States to follow through.

Indeed, what we need is a forward-looking and unifying agenda around a limited set of commonly agreed goals. My critique of the SDGs is that there are too many of them. We need a few core objectives that could be tackled together: like eradicating certain diseases, preventing war, and reducing inequality. The motivation should be something that everyone on our planet understands – like survival of our species.

Inter-governmental organizations need to be equipped to implement the objectives of their members. Therefore, they must be properly prepared. Many of them are celebrating anniversaries this year, such as the UN at 80 and the Golden Jubilee of the OSCE Helsinki Final Act. These organizations need to be fit for purpose.

That means adapting and innovating. Otherwise, they atrophy. And in the process lose their agility and relevance.

They need the right tools for the job at hand.

And there must be a match between mandates and capabilities. I know that resources are tight – unless it comes to defence spending. But organizations can not constantly take on more tasks with less resources. Otherwise, this opens a credibility gap that undermines trust in their ability to deliver.

One final point on preparedness and that is the need to burst the bubble of our cognitive biases. Despite the fact that we have access to information like never before, we tend to stick to operate inside echo chambers of like-minded views. To navigate through a world of complex challenges, we need to think the unthinkable as well.

At GCSP, for example, we use a polymath approach - bringing together experts from very different backgrounds. For example, we aim to break down siloes between science and diplomacy. And we have an innovation lab that seeks to ignite a creative spark of new approaches. As Secretary General of the OSCE, I set up a strategic policy support unit and encouraged engagement with external experts.

If it can be helpful, I put at your disposal GCSP's expertise on strategic foresight and emerging threats: perhaps we can carry out some joint horizon scanning, for example concerning the impact of technology on democracy and human rights or climate change on international security. I sense that policy planners, not least from small to medium-sized countries, have insufficient opportunities to meet and exchange views.

Take-aways for more effective multilateralism

To conclude, in large part the future of multilateralism is what we make of it. Europe cannot afford to stand and watch the world being carved up by hegemons.



Furthermore, in an age of uncertainty, like-minded states have a self-interest to stick together: and to defend the values and principles that maintain some sort of order and predictability in the international system.

In Europe, multilateralism will be defined in large part by the ability of Council of Europe members to stay united. This will mean investing in security. But also maintaining economic prosperity, good governance, and defending common values. After all, peace through strength does not rely only on military capabilities.

At the same time, regardless of the outcome of the war, Russia is not going away. Therefore, while deterrence will be the prevailing narrative for the foreseeable future, the challenge will be to manage risk and seek ways of engaging with Russia.

Let me make six final points:

1. We need to make the case for why multilateralism is important – indeed why multilateralism is realpolitik – today and in the future.

Multilateralism does not come easy: it needs to be negotiated. Therefore, leaders need to invest in diplomacy, not just bombs.

2. In an unpredictable world, we need to strengthen a culture of strategic anticipation, not least among decision-makers.

The focus in particular should be on emerging threats, challenges and opportunities.

Foresight can be enriched by drawing on expertise of specialized institutions, such as GCSP, and using a polymath approach.

3. It is important to engage the private sector as well as the scientific community.

Technology will have a major impact on many aspects of our lives, including multilateralism. We should explore how technology can induce cooperation – and if artificial general intelligence will itself become an actor. What role will AI have in policy planning?

4. Concerning more traditional actors, while great powers may seek regional hegemony in the years ahead, we need to consider the role of middle powers and engage with smaller countries, which, by necessity – have a greater stake in effective multilateralism.

5. Friends of international organizations need to continue to push for reforms and generate the political will and resources needed to make organizations fit for purpose.

6. Furthermore, at a time of cuts and short-term thinking, we need to advocate for policy planning: to think and plan ahead. Leaders and bureaucracies need to be made more aware of the self-interest in being better prepared.



To conclude, multilateralism is a tough sell these days. But in a world of complex threats that transcend borders, what is the alternative? Unilateralism usually ends in isolation or instability. This is not the road that we should go down.

The future of our planet depends on cooperation.

Thank you for attention.