

Is Global Governance on the Rocks – with Colin Bradford

Moderated by Andrew Fenton Cooper & Eric Tanguay

On November 24, 2020, Colin Bradford – Co-chair of VISION20 (V20) – spoke to Balsillie School moderators on the future of global governance. Bradford questions the conditions that might allow governments to cooperate, as well as how geopolitical interests and ambitions of leaders impacts the likelihood for cooperation. Bradford offers a unique suggestion for the future of global governance – a plurilateral approach that allows for the necessary flexibility, maneuverability, and governability required to offer timely and effective solutions to global governance problems while addressing the increasingly divergent perspective of China. Increasingly divergent ideological perspectives, however, cannot constrain global actors from delivering sustainable social outcomes and therefore requires a rethinking of consensus-based partnership and an increasing emphasis on pragmatic partnerships.

Global Governance under Trump

For four years, the United States has been controlled by republican leader Donald Trump, whose rule created several unique conditions to understand the current system of global governance. Firstly, The Trump administration behaved in contravention to the values set forth in the international system – notably, mutual trust, governmental engagement, and a general sense of responsibility for global outcomes. In fact, Donald Trump and his cabinet were often observed discussing issues related to global governance with the perceived intentions of transforming the very nature of governance. In addition, the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite its perceived status as an emergency, garnered little international cooperation from the Trump administration. Trump’s war on science in combination with isolationist COVID-19 policies raised questions as to the efficacy of international collaboration on global health governance. Additionally, throughout the 45 year history of the G7 (previously G5 and G8) conferences, there has never been a skipped year; however, leaders [chose not to attend the 2020 G7 Summit](#) in the US, in part due to the relative US inaction on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some questioned the real possibility that other world leaders were less than enthused by the prospect of meeting with Trump. The [Trump administration also reintroduced populist politics](#), that hold their own challenges to sustainably delivering social outcomes. Domestically, the Trump base offers accepted the Trump administration’s tendency to rely on unilateral decision-making; however, internationally, such [behaviors often receive push back](#) from other states. For example, the United Kingdom, following a similar populist ideological rise, is predicted to be neglected from global conversations given the long-term inadequacy of unilateralism to address increasing global problems.

Global Governance under Biden

Dr. Bradford’s view of global governance does not remain grim, however, following the election of Joseph R. Biden. There are some obvious pivots following Biden’s inauguration, including: re-signing the Paris Agreement; rejoining the World Health Organization; strengthening the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); and attempting to resuscitate the Iran nuclear deal. In addition, the progressive Italian president, Sergio Mattarella, will host the 2021 G7

Summit. Considering Mattarella's stated [support of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative](#), his presence sets a distinct tone for the next summit – Italy can and should work with China if possible.

Additionally, there is growing consensus that the West – especially the United States – is forcing a bi-polar competitive arena on the world stage with the increasing resistance to work with China on global issues. Bradford argues that the slow acceptance of Chinese economic infrastructure and practices is indicative of a contradiction between values, rather than a recognition of the pragmatic necessity to include influential leaders to negotiations. On the one hand, Biden hopes to re-emphasize the importance of multilateralism through an alliance or league of democracies. Cooperation on the basis of shared interests demonstrates a return to a traditional framework for international cooperation; however, the rise of China – whose autonomy remains as important as their upward economic mobility – requires a more pragmatic approach. Gatekeeping non-democratic nations unfortunately cannot ensure sustainable delivery of social outcomes when a country of major influence such as China is not afforded the opportunity to cooperate. Further, the consensus-based cooperation framework that Biden aims to implement has the potential to force China further into an isolationist posture.

In response to this new issue that plagues the international system, Bradford offers a shift to a plurilateral approach to global governance, which requires a disaggregation of multilateral negotiations and decision-making where various groupings of leaders and stakeholders can cooperate on issues like financial stability, climate change, global health, and technology. Traditional manifestations of trilateral governance – often consisting of the European Union, China and the United States as partners– are becoming increasingly inadequate to meet global challenges due to the diverging ideological perspectives of the (remaining) European Union members and the US from China. Bradford argues that the increased complexity of the multilateral network would allow China, and others, more maneuverability and ultimately creates a much more attractive conceptualization of the future of global governance networks. Rather than limiting multilateral networks to the major superpowers in a trilateral relationship (which creates only six channels of communication), Bradford suggests increasing the network by only two members, which offers up to 20 channels of communication. With that said, opening up the network to too many stakeholders holds the increased risk of limiting governability – referring to the capacity of a system, institution, or government to deliver social outcomes that are politically sustainable. Ultimately, maintaining the delicate balance between maneuverability and governability requires a level of tolerance that the [Biden's alliance of democracies](#) doesn't necessarily address. Ideological battles have historically constrained the efficacy of the global governance system, which threatens to do further damage to transatlantic relations.

Q: What are the intrinsic qualities of leadership in global governance? Charisma, technocratic expertise, a hybrid of both?

When asked about the intrinsic qualities of good leadership, Bradford spoke about two distinct qualities. Firstly, leaders must become more adept at communicating agendas, messages and solutions to the public following their attendance at global summits. Bradford notes an “astonishing lack of connectivity” between leaders and their constituents. Part of the issue lies in the lack of press invited to report on the summit meeting, which speaks to a lack of preparedness on the part of leadership in relaying information back to the public. Or worse, it speaks to an untapped resource with which to communicate with constituents. Leaders hold an integral role in relaying the public's concerns to other global leaders and subsequently reporting to the public on

decisions made to address those concerns. A lack of reporting on summit discussions might also reflect that these conferences focus on issues that remain on the margins of concerns from the public. Bradford encourages not only the incorporation of press into summit planning of leaders, but also increased sensitivity to the political concerns of diverse constituents from G20 leaders. Therefore, charisma may remain important for electability; however, communication skills and political sensitivity are intrinsically good qualities for leadership with respect for global governance.

Q: During the 2008 Financial Crisis, technocratic knowledge was essential to the solution. Given the rise of populism – and if we view populism as a challenge – how can we use institutions (including informal ones) to counter the push of populism and ensure effective communication and governability?

Bradford argues that one must include informal institutions (i.e., norm-building, setting standards, laws) as well as the formal groupings that, despite their own dynamics and challenges, are integral to addressing global problems. There is an increasingly wide-reaching and constraining issue of an institutional crisis. Notably, there are very few groupings of parliamentarians that are involved at the international level of multilateral cooperation. Given the realities of partisan politics, parliamentarians tend to remain fractious, which only further constrains the ability of leaders at the highest levels to actualize the decisions agreed upon at summit conferences. Global responses to populism therefore cannot be guaranteed at the leadership level considering the bureaucratic red tape that parliamentarians (including populist elected officials) are likely to create.

Due to the bureaucratic nature of institutions and governments, informal groups, such as the various emerging engagement groups, play a distinct and increasingly important role in the global governance system at the national level. Across industries, simply holding technocratic knowledge remains inadequate to deal with the increasingly global issues that require both sophisticated knowledge as well as political finesse. Rather, Bradford argues that ‘technopoles’ – referring to those technocrats with heightened political sensitivity in diverse industries – will succeed and eventually dominate the national and international stand against populism. Ultimately, connectivity and acknowledgment of the diverse concerns that matter to constituents is increasingly important to citizens; however, formal institutions cannot succeed alone.

Q: In 2008, you couldn’t get away from the realities of the financial crisis and getting deliverables that would address the issue was a priority shared by everyone in governance. Comparatively, during the COVID crisis, despite the international community having done work on pandemic response previously, the same sense of crisis doesn’t seem to have galvanized the same global emergency or crisis mentality. What are your thoughts?

While Bradford acknowledges the potential for his response to be dismissed due to his liberal political leanings or simply due to perceptions of American exceptionalism, he argues that the Biden administration is well-equipped to address Trump’s inadequate domestic and international action on the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, [Biden offers the necessary urgency](#) to the global COVID pandemic, as well as the appropriate temperament with regards to the national response. During the Trump administration, European partners like Angela Merkel in Germany maintained the status quo with respect to encouraging international cooperation and maintaining friendly relations among the G7. However, Merkel’s attention to global problems remains limited

given a relative lack of investment in China and the rest of Asia. Additionally, Emmanuel Macron in France offers another option for cooperation on issues like climate change and the strengthening of US— Europe relationships. However, Macron's governability is often limited due to his inability to maintain public favourability. As well, it's perceived that Italian, Japanese and Canadian leadership would also support a coordinated COVID-19 global response. This is perhaps one arena where Bradford's plurilateral argument would be most immediately successfully considering the six global partners likely available to coordinate a COVID response.

Conclusion: Is Global Governance on the rocks?

Dr. Colin Bradford offers a rather optimistic view of the future of global governance, which he argues is likely to improve given the selection of Joe Biden for the office of President of the United States. The emergence of China as a dominant, and ideologically contrarian, global superpower creates a unique challenge to the future of global governance. The challenge of China's rise is only compounded by the rise of populism and the Trump administration's choice to engage in unilateral and bilateral problem-solving. With that said, Bradford's plurilateral approach to global governance demonstrates the necessary sensitivity to diversity and tolerance that was missing during the Trump administration. One thing remains clear, while a strategy to strengthen transatlantic relations that were damaged under Trump is necessary, ignoring or attempting to force relations with the Chinese may be just as unhelpful as Trump's bilateral fumbling.