

# The role of multilateralism under the shadow of the Ukraine war

## Interview with Mayu Watanabe



Mayu Watanabe, President of the Japan Forum on International relations, received a M.A. In Education from the Graduate School of the University of Tokyo in 1997. She joined the Japan Forum on International Relations (JFIR) in 2000 and was appointed Senior Research Fellow in 2007, during which period she specialized in epistemic communities and soft power diplomacy. She served as Director in 2011, Executive Director in 2017, Vice President in 2018, and President in 2019. She was concurrently serving as President of the Global Forum of Japan and President of the Council on East Asian Community.

### Question 1: Is the Ukraine war a final threat to multilateralism?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has destroyed the free and open international order based on multilateralism and the fundamental values of liberal democracies, human rights and the rule of law, which brought peace, stability and prosperity to the world after the Cold War. It has dealt a blow that will draw a line in world history. Although the invasion is a clear violation of international law – a violation of national sovereignty and territorial integrity through the inhumane use of military force and the threat of nuclear weapons –, we are faced with the reality that it is not possible to stop this war through international law or international systems. In other words, multilateralism is facing an unprecedented test.

In response, the G7, the EU, NATO and others have united in criticizing Russia and imposing high-level economic sanctions while accepting the backlash (in the form of economic pain) on their own citizens. In addition, the United Nations (UN), which both symbolizes multilateralism and represents the international public opinion, also faces the dilemma of being unable to stop military action by a permanent member of its Security Council. Nevertheless, the UN has played a role to some extent, as 141 member states voted to condemn Russia at an emergency special session of the UN General Assembly in March 2022 – an overwhelming majority.

On the other hand, it is important to note that 40 countries opposed or abstained from this vote. Among the 35 countries that abstained were G20 members China, India and South Africa. The vote exposed discrepancies in countries' attitudes toward Russia and highlighted the presence of emerging and developing countries that do not agree with the current order.

That is to say, even before the tragedy of the war, the voices of forces that prioritize the individual interests of each country over the common interests of the international community were making it difficult to reach multilateral consensus. There is even reason to speak of a stalemate in multilateralism. This is a challenge that multilateralism has been shouldering for some time, through the withdrawal from multilateral frameworks that resulted from President Trump's policy of putting his own country first and Brexit.

Even more serious is the threat that this poses to the current order, as economic powerhouse China enters into these tremors of multilateralism, advocating "true multilateralism" while winning over emerging and developing countries, thus accelerating "China's characteristic" multilateralism<sup>1</sup>. China has declared that it seeks to change the international order based on the UN international system with "true multilateralism". The fact is that Chinese nationals holding important positions in international organizations are a conspicuous presence. Moreover, "China's characteristic" multilateralism will grow with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and other Chinese initiatives. In addition, to complement the "Belt and Road Initiative", which has been seen as problematic because it is a "debt trap", China has also come up with the appealing concept of the "Global Development Initiative" (GDI), in which it works with the UN to implement development cooperation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in developing countries.

These challenges by China and Russia are exacerbating the contested multilateralism, exposing free and open multilateralism based on fundamental values to a crisis of division.

The background to this accelerating rift is a struggle for dominance between the United States and China over the standardization and interconnection of high technology resulting from the emergence of a fourth industrial society. Even the post-Cold War deepening of economic interdependence has become a "weapon". Geographical space has expanded into space and cyberspace, and the sphere of security has expanded into the economy, climate change, and other areas. We are literally in transition to a new era of multilateralism. What

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<sup>1</sup> Kunio Takahashi, "[China's Characteristic Multilateralism](#)", Institute for International Strategy, *Monthly Report on China Situation*, n° 2021-02, 28 May 2021.

is needed above all is wisdom that does not create divisions in a free and open multilateralism based on fundamental values. The key to this is an approach that reaches out to all countries in the Global South, including emerging and developing countries, so that they choose to support multilateralism.

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## **Question 2: What is Japan’s approach to multilateralism?**

Japan renounced multilateralism when it withdrew from the League of Nations in 1933, ushering in the catastrophe of a world war. Following the war, Japan, after deep reflection, has always respected free and open multilateralism based on fundamental values and has pursued the path of a peaceful nation that coexists and cooperates with Asia and with the world. Japan joined the United Nations in 1956 and returned to the international community by advocating UN-centered diplomacy, cooperation with liberal nations, and maintaining Japan’s position as a member of Asia as the three principles of Japanese foreign policy. To this day, Japan has positioned “Proactive Contribution to Peace”, a concept used in its Security Strategy based on the principle of international cooperation as a fundamental policy centered on the UN and on the Japan-U.S. alliance. As such, Japan has fulfilled its role as a responsible member of the international community by developing bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and participating in building and maintaining the international order as a member of the G7. In addition, as a part of Asia and in consideration of its pre-war history of advocating the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” and colonizing Asia, it has promoted official development assistance (ODA) that is sympathetic to Asia and contributes to restoring mutual trust, as well as cooperation and exchanges that are exclusively bilateral. After the Cold War, Asia achieved economic development, becoming a “world economic center” with Japan at the forefront. *De facto* integration has developed in Asia, which is not a system like the European Union (EU) and is not led by ideals but by the market.

ASEAN-centered multilateral frameworks, in which ASEAN is given the role of promoting regional integration, have emerged at various levels, beginning with APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) and including the ARF (Asean Regional Forum), the ASEM (Asia Europe Meeting), the APT (ASEAN Plus Three), the EAS (East Asia Summit), and the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership). As a result of Asia’s rich diversity of political structures, religions, races, and economic conditions, it has adopted the moderate ASEAN way of respecting sovereignty, non-interference, consensus decision-making, and informal diplomacy as a principle. Japan has always respected this “moderate multilateralism”<sup>2</sup> and has nestled close to Asia. Moreover, in developing countries, Japan has

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<sup>2</sup> Katsuyuki Yakushiji, “[The Age of Moderate Multilateralism](#)”, *Diplomacy*, Vol. 74, July/August 2022.

promoted development cooperation on the basis of “human security”, regardless of the political systems of the countries, etc., and has striven to be a nation that is respected and favorably regarded in the world.

In this way, Japan’s multilateralism adopts free and open multilateralism based on fundamental values as a basic principle and is also characterized by being close to the countries of the Global South by adopting a “human security” and “moderate” approach.

### **Question 3: Does Europe have a role in the multilateral organizations of the Asia-Pacific region?**

Last year, Japan formulated a National Security Strategy (NSS) for the first time since 2013. Based on the above-mentioned perception of the times, the main purpose of this document is to form an order of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP)<sup>3</sup> based on the rule of law in order to respond to the unprecedented threat posed by Russia, China, and North Korea’s repeated attempts to unilaterally change the *status quo*. As one of its principles, the NSS states that Japan will attach importance to coexistence and co-prosperity with other countries, cooperation with like-minded countries, and multilateral cooperation. Cooperation with Europe will be essential in terms of shared values and goals, as well as the experience and wisdom of multilateralism in dealing with neighboring great powers that pose a threat.

There are organizations of like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific. They include the ASEAN-centered multilateral organizations mentioned above, as well as IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework) and the Quad, and they welcome cooperation with Europe (the EU and NATO). In addition to Europe’s endorsement of the FOIP concept, good signs include NATO’s proposal to strengthen cooperation with the Indo-Pacific in a strategy document it revised last year, and the ASEAN-EU summit held last year. Taken together, all this cooperation will also act as a deterrent to China. Most importantly, given that there are emerging and developing countries in the Indo-Pacific that do not necessarily agree with the existing order, it will lead to a search for a third way that avoids divisions in multilateralism. Even as countries compete, they face regional challenges that threaten humanity, such as climate change and infectious diseases. Working with Europe, which is a leader in this area, will surely contribute to the peace, stability, and prosperity of the Indo-Pacific and, by extension, the world.

Finally, in the NSS, Japan expressed its determination to make full use of resilient and “comprehensive national power, including diplomatic, defense, economic, technological, and intelligence capabilities”. Japan has scarce natural resources, so multilateralism is a

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<sup>3</sup> The FOIP (see [here](#)) was proposed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2016, and currently Europe (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, the EU and Visegrad 4, the United States, Canada, Australia, Singapore, India, South Korea, Africa, the Pacific Island nations, ASEAN and the Quad share the same values and cooperate on the “Indo-Pacific” vision in their policy documents.

necessity. Japan has enjoyed the benefits of the current order, and for this very reason, conveying to the world the magnificence of free and open multilateralism based on fundamental values and demonstrating a “coordination capacity” that builds bridges with various countries will be components of Japan’s making full use of its comprehensive national power.

**March 2023**

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