

# THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM

CONFERENCE REPORT • Helsinki, June 10–11, 2008





# THE FUTURE OF **MULTILATERALISM**

COVER PHOTO: JAKARTA; Acehese and Indonesian activists release a bird for peace in Jakarta, 15 May 2003, in asking the government not to send Indonesian troops into the troubled province of Aceh. Indonesia has given the separatist rebels of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) a new deadline of 17 May to hold talks to avert a major military operation in the province, a report said 15 May. LEHTIKUVA / AFP PHOTO / Bay ISMOYO

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# Foreword

Dear Reader,

At one of its first international conferences held in June 2008 in Helsinki, the European Liberal Forum addressed, with the support of its Finnish member organisation Think Tank e2, a topic of global importance: The future of multilateralism.

During the two-day conference, government and academia representatives as well as other experts from Finland and Germany discussed the perspectives of multilateralism and the challenges multilateral organisations are facing at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Despite newly emerging actors such as China, Russia, India and Brazil, the United States and the European Union are still the ones to determine whether any cooperation is multilateral or not. Whereas the concept of "efficient multilateralism" has been the central stance of the EU's approach to international politics, Europe focuses on multilateral approaches as such, while the United States emphasize on the efficiency of cooperation.

The difference in orientation, however, has been softened since Barack Obama took office in January 2009. Indeed, the 44<sup>th</sup> American President expressed the willingness of the American people to join forces with other nations to address global challenges.

The global financial and economic crisis that unfolded in the fall of 2008 with the failure of the investment bank Lehman Brothers, underlined once more the importance of efficient international cooperation when it comes to global challenges.

At the Pittsburgh summit in September 2009, the G20 heads of State and Government agreed on a multilateral approach to consoli-

date the global economic system and avoid another financial crisis of this magnitude.

The upcoming UN Climate Change Conference to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009 will reveal whether world leaders are able to decisively deal with climate change.

The UN is the largest international organisation which aims at facilitating multilateral cooperation. Though on the agenda for years, the necessary reforms of its structures are still pending. It seems, however, that the issue of UN reform is now back on the international agenda – indeed due to a shift in the US attitude towards international cooperation and multilateralism.

This publication includes the major contributions taken from the speeches given at the conference. It will provide the reader a more in-depth understanding of the importance of multilateralism in the wake of increasing globalisation.

I sincerely hope that these documents contribute to future discussions at the European and international levels.

On behalf of the European Liberal Forum I would like to thank those who have contributed to this publication and to Think Tank e2 for its support in publishing these documents.

Brussels, October 2009

**Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, MEP**

*President of the European Liberal Forum asbl*

Professor Tuomas Forsberg, University of Tampere<sup>1</sup>

## The Concept of Multilateralism and the Changing International Environment

**M**ultilateralism is a concept that is often used in politics but frequently misunderstood. Politicians talking about multilateralism often talk past one another. This is why the concept should be analysed and clarified. The word ‘multilateral’ is readily understood as referring to cooperation among many parties, or, in international politics, among several states. The word originates in Latin, but this should not make it any more difficult to understand its content. The opposites of ‘multilateral’ are unilateral, one-sided action and bilateral cooperation among two states.

Multilateralism, however, is easier to misconceive. While it refers to a doctrine that favours multilateral cooperation, multilateral cooperation as such does not yet prove that the cooperation is guided by multilateralism as an ideology. Also, multilateralism as an ideology can prevail even when multilateral cooperation fails.

Another tricky aspect of multilateralism is that it is often confused with the concept of ‘multipolarity’. This relates to the number of power centres: if there are more than two centres of power, the system

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**1** **Tuomas Forsberg** is Professor of International Relations at the University of Tampere. He received his PhD from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1998. His research has dealt primarily with European security issues, focusing on the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), Russia and Northern Europe.

is said to be ‘multipolar’; with two power centres, it is bipolar; and if there is a hegemony within a system, it is known as ‘unipolar’. There is a tendency to think that a multipolar system is geared toward multilateral cooperation, that bipolar systems organise themselves bilaterally and that unilateralism prevails in unipolar systems.

The linkage between the number of power centres and the nature of international cooperation is, however, much more complex. Historically, multilateralism gained strength during the multipolar European system of the post-Napoleonic age, but the multipolar systems predating this era and the multipolar system before the First World War were not particularly multilateral.

By contrast, after the Second World War the United States (US) was in a hegemonic position in the West, and the Cold War international system was resolutely bipolar, but the US decided to organise international cooperation multilaterally. A hegemony can act unilaterally – an option not afforded to small states – but how international cooperation is organised is a matter of political choice, not a structural necessity. Not all hegemonies are alike in this regard. The international system may have become unipolar through US hegemony after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and while this makes unilateral US policies more understandable from a structural point of view, it does not yet explain the change in US thinking.

Furthermore, ‘multilateralism’ is a misleading concept if it denotes only the number of countries cooperating. We should not measure the level of multilateralism by simply counting the participating countries.

There are two things more important than the number of parties. First, multilateralism should be defined in relation to the issue around which states cooperate. If seven countries, for example, should decide multilaterally to divide Antarctica, the decision could be seen as multilateral in the organisation of the cooperation but hardly multilateral in view of the nature of the issue: if Antarctica is

seen as part of the common heritage of mankind, multilateral cooperation requires more parties at the decision-making table.

This is why we often distinguish between regional and multilateral forms. Although based on the principle of multilateralism, European integration is still a regional organisation. Often implicit in 'multilateralism' is a global dimension, although technically, regional cooperation among many is also multilateral.

Second, multilateral cooperation represents multilateralism only if it is guided by multilateral thinking. There are certain principles for multilateralism, such as inclusiveness and shared principles for decision-making. Multilateralism as a doctrine means that one prefers multilateral cooperation over bilateralism and unilateralism; multilateral cooperation is tried first, and one is ready to listen to the others and formulate policies together. If they exist, multilateral fora should not be by-passed. If multilateral cooperation is achieved by dictates or passive adaptation by weaker parties, it does not represent genuine multilateralism.

In other words, not every country needs to be part of an arrangement that is multilateral. And even more importantly, it is not the case that everybody needs to agree on multilateral solutions if multilateralism is based on open and transparent principles.

### **Multilateralism and legitimacy**

Multilateralism is in today's world a normatively loaded concept. It is seen as a good thing, and unilateralism, by contrast, as bad. The underlying normative rule is not simply 'the more the merrier', but that a greater number participating in policy formulation and its execution increases legitimacy.

This connection between multilateralism and legitimacy has led to a situation where multilateralism is often defined through legitimacy and not vice versa. When we say that somebody is behaving

unilaterally, we mean non-legitimate behaviour. If somebody is defending his or her legitimate rights unilaterally, we say that he or she is doing so alone and not 'unilaterally'.

While legitimacy is important, it does not mean that multilateralism is always normatively better than bilateralism or unilateralism. Of course there are also costs or drawbacks with multilateralism. The most often voiced criticism is that multilateralism is ineffective and that multilateral cooperation may dilute values. But such is the importance of international legitimacy that while such arguments are often heard in internal debates affecting policy formulation, states often want to make their unilateral policies appear multilateral.

The European Union, for its part, has adopted the term 'effective multilateralism', which in a typical Euro-language manner hints that real dilemmas can be solved by combining opposite terms.

Multilateralism has been seen as a quintessentially liberal way of organising international politics. This is partly because multilateral institutions have typically promoted liberal values, but also because it is a liberal invention to create international regimes that domesticate world politics. Not all domestically liberal states or liberal governments promote multilateralism, but it is much more unlikely that non-liberal states could do it.

### **Multilateralism in the real world**

The trend toward growing multilateralism in international politics is clear yet not linear. The concert system in nineteenth-century Europe was a historical innovation. The most important factor in spreading multilateralism was US policy in creation of post-WWII institutions.

Multilateralism has also triumphed because the world has become more complex. This complexity has increased the volume of multilateralism but complexity is also partly a result of multilateralism, which has encouraged complexity.

## ELF Conference, Helsinki, Finland: The Future of Multilateralism

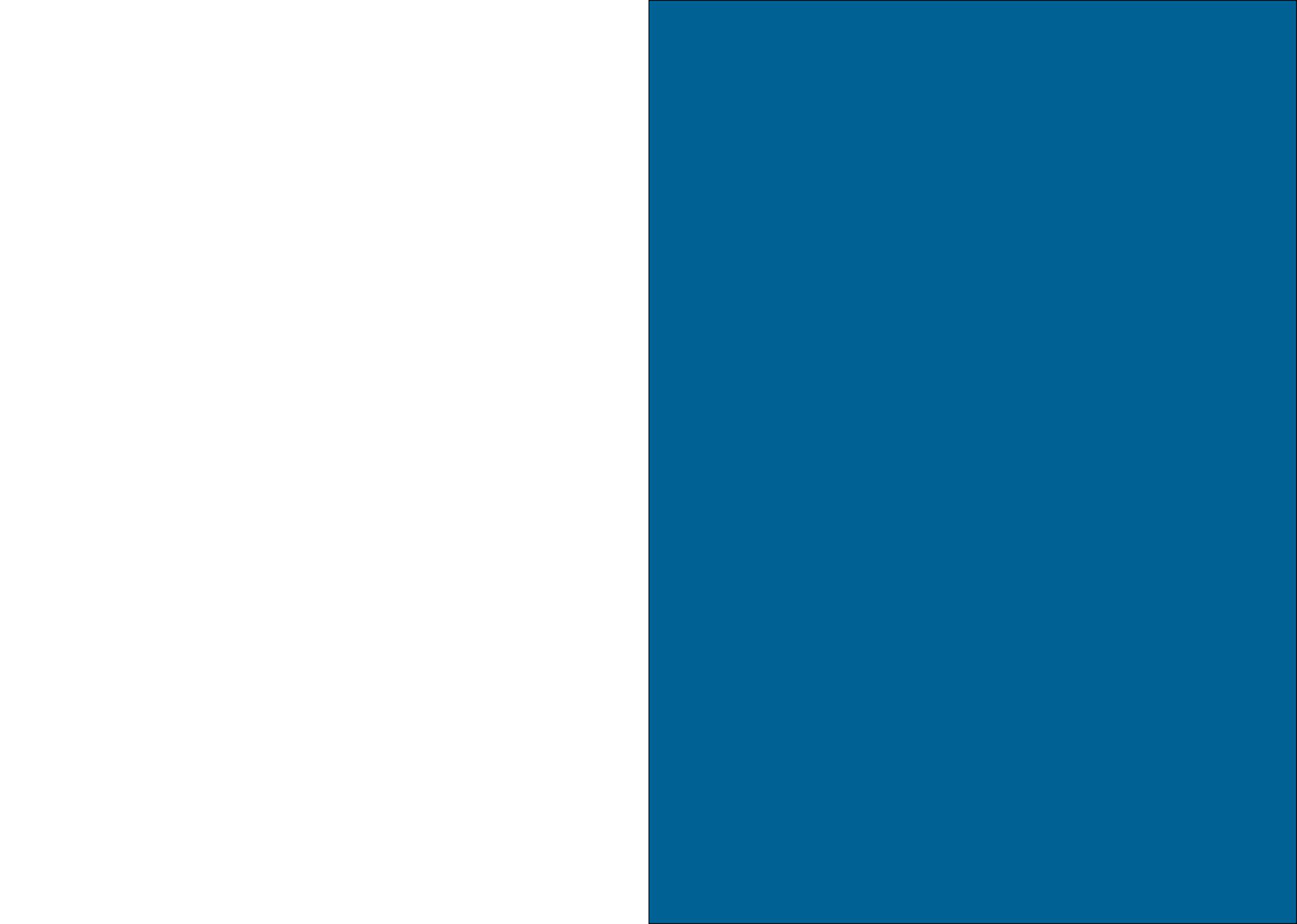
Restaurant Pääposti, Mannerheiminaukio 1 B, (room B5–6)

### Tuesday 10 June 2008

- 14.00–14.20 Welcome to the conference / **Alexander Lambsdorff**, President, ELF; **Karina Jutila**, director, Think tank e2
- 14.20–14.40 The concept of multilateralism and the changing international environment / Professor **Tuomas Forsberg**, University of Helsinki
- 14.40–15.00 The crisis of multilateral organisations at the start of 21<sup>st</sup> century / Professor **Joachim Krause**, University of Kiel
- 15.00–15.20 Challenges for the UN as a guarantor for the international security and development / **Kai Sauer**, Head of Unit, Ministry for Foreign Affairs
- 15.20–15.30 Questions
- 15.30–15.40 Break
- 15.40–16.00 Changing Nato / **Antti Sierla**, Ambassador, Ministry for Foreign Affairs
- 16.00–17.00 Discussion
- 18.30– Dinner hosted by Minister of the Environment, Mrs. **Paula Lehtomäki**

### Wednesday 11 June 2008

- 9.00–9.30 Future challenges of the peace making processes / Executive Director **Kalle Liesinen**, CMI
- 9.30–9.50 Crisis management, Finland and EU / Minister of Defence **Jyri Häkämies**
- 9.50–10.00 Questions
- 10.00–10.20 Effective multilateralism in the future / **Alexander Lambsdorff**
- 10.30–10.40 Questions
- 10.40–11.00 Break
- 11.00–12.15 Discussions in small groups and conclusion
- 12.15–13 Break (the General Assembly of the European Liberal Forum)
- 13.00–15.00 Lunch in the restaurant Loiste
- 15.00–16.00 Opportunity to visit the parliament (Eduskunta, which is at the distance of 200 metres from the restaurant)





This publication includes the major contributions taken from the speeches given at *The Future of Multilateralism* conference in June 2008 in Helsinki. It will provide the reader a more in-depth understanding of the importance of multilateralism and the challenges multilateral organisations are facing at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.