Is Multilaterlism Back?

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In a world of great power competition, France is stubbornly promoting multilateralism at all costs. In a world marked by fragility and uncertainty, with a deep security crisis on the European continent and a new war in the Middle East, talking about peace can seem profane or at least a matter of inadequacy. Those who question peace at any cost are quickly branded as naive, inconsistent, partisans of the other side or traitors in the so-called race of democracy against autocracy. On this patchwork of (in)opportuni-

ties, France is grafting a new tradition of rethinking multilateralism based on a project- and result-oriented agenda rather than endless speeches.

The Paris Peace Forum was founded in 2018 for precisely this reason, to bring together state and opinion leaders, civil society and business representatives, investors and entrepreneurs, social innovators and diplomats. In terms of consistency and high-level participation, the Paris Peace Forum is to global governance what the Munich Security Conference is to security and the Davos Forum is to the global economic landscape. For two days at the Palais Brongniart, political, diplomatic, social and economic leaders gathered to debate key issues on the global agenda, focusing on sustainable development, digital innovation, global health and space. The conference was opened by President Macron, who was joined by, among others, the President of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo, the Prime Minister of Belgium, Alexander De Croo, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, the President of Senegal, Macky Sall, the Director of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, the Secretary-General of the OECD, Mathias Cormann, the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Amor Mottle, and the President of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Jin Liqun. Preparing for COP28, assessing the implementation of the Paris Pact for People and the Planet and accelerating the transition to a green economy were the main topics discussed. The need to fully address vulnerabilities and capitalize on economic opportunities was echoed in the speeches of officials.

Although the Middle East dominated the Forum's agenda in density, it is noteworthy that the President of Ukraine also intervened, via videoconference, to endorse his own peace plan and to reiterate the need for the democratic West to put its money where its mouth is, i.e., to continue to support Ukraine in protecting, in effect, the rules-based international order.

The theme of the Sixth Paris Peace Forum in this format was Seek Common Ground in a World of Rivalry, referring again to France's espoused belief that a third way – of effective multilateralism and responsible engagement without polarization – outside the strategic competition between the US and China must also be supported. French reticence towards the Americans is historical, but we cannot overlook the fact that Paris is nowadays more a biased than an objective and unbiased authority. The disproportionality of the panels, where representatives of the Chinese delegations were more numerous, and the lack of visibility on the part of the Americans, bear witness to this. I am equally sceptical about the bilateral meeting between President Macron and the CEO of TikTok in the margins of the Forum, even more so given that this platform, banned by the European Commission on the phones of civil servants, has become a veritable weapon and propaganda outlet, a fertile ground for spreading disinformation. TikTok was one of the partner companies of the Paris Peace Forum this year.

A few questions remain unanswered after this festival of multilateralism. Beyond motivational speeches, what are the viable solutions to the gover-

nance challenges of the 21st century when national interest conflicts with collective interest? How can we defend the rules-based international order without further distancing ourselves along political lines? Under what conditions can we make the partnership with the so-called global south more consistent without making too many concessions when it comes to security? How can we find a common definition of peace, when peace can mean as many things as the diversities of our societies, and how do we prevent the slide into salvationist rhetoric and populism? These are issues that give us food for thought as the Forum draws to a close.