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KING'S College LONDON

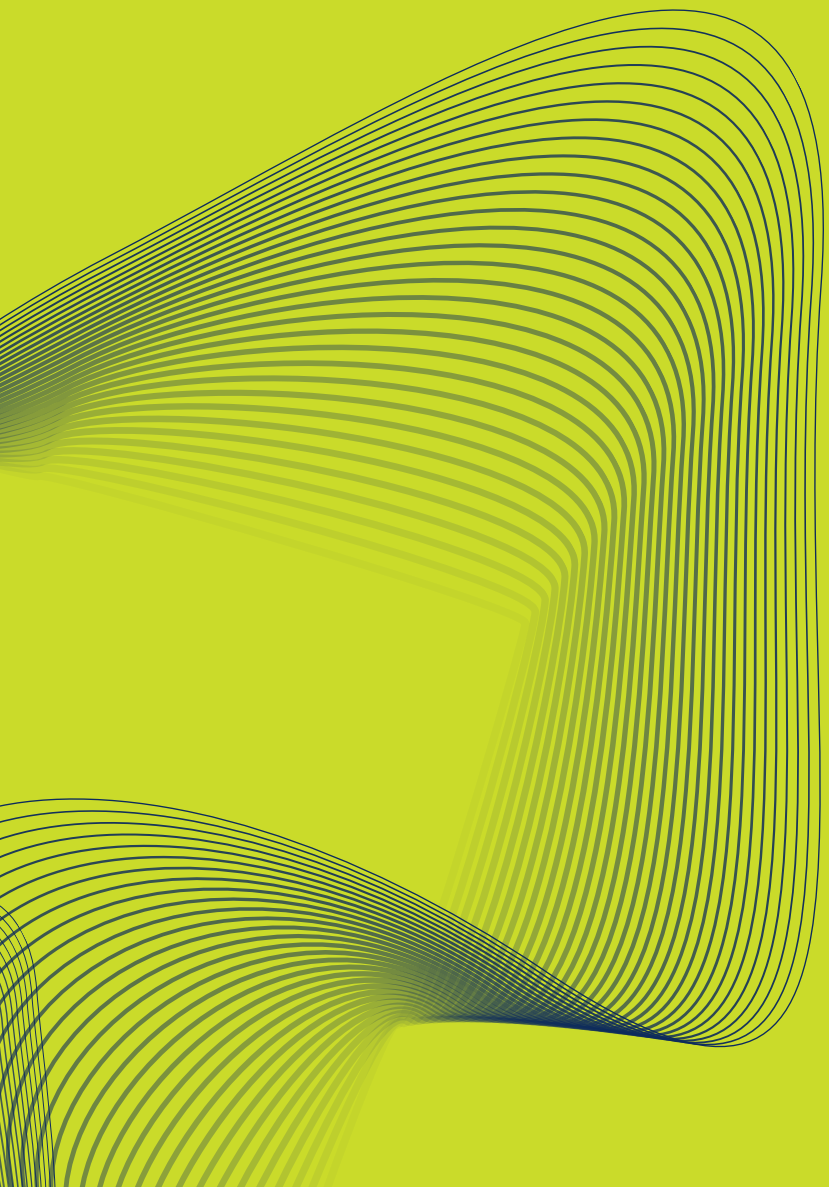
Special purpose international collaboration

Oliver Letwin

September 2023

About the author

Sir Oliver Letwin is a Visiting Professor at the Policy Institute, King's College London, and chair of the Project for Peaceful Competition.



Special purpose international collaboration

Current events in Ukraine have served to highlight the fact that we live in an age of great power rivalry. What is less clear how this rivalry can be managed and contained in the interests of humanity.

The "international rules-based system" that was built in the aftermath of the Second World War had the avowed aim of preventing states from going to war with one another. But an uneasy peace between great powers is a fragile commodity, and no guarantee of stability.

This instability has become clearer recently. With a system based on containing power struggles and conflict, those states intent on struggling for power are naturally tempted to regard the international rules as constraints that are binding for others rather than for themselves. The more powerful the states in question become, the more inclined they are to disregard constraints that do not suit them. In the past few years, we have seen the emergence of a nationalist and populist US president who declared the international system broken and against American interests; Beijing has exhibited a dubious attitude towards UNCLOS and the WTO, which the Chinese leadership regard as being tilted against them; as I write, Russia's invasion of Ukraine continues. All three are permanent members of the UN Security Council.

This increasing willingness to flout the rules is intensified by a second problem: the fact that *the international system as a whole is now outdated, and rarely provides the value added that was intended*. The world has moved on since the end of the Second World War, in ways that the post-War settlement could not have been expected to anticipate. The preventative international order that we have inherited from the 1940s is not adequate to the task of handling the most pressing challenges that humanity faces today in the face of today's geoeconomic and geopolitical rivalries. The world is just now emerging from a global pandemic, during which our international architecture became the scene of a gladiatorial contest between Trump and Xi, rather than providing either effective containment of the disease

or rapid supply of vaccines to the populations of the Global South.

As the history of the pandemic amply illustrates, some of the biggest risks of triggering inter-state strife today arise from common dangers for humanity rather than from ideological conflict. Climate change, pandemics, radical shifts in the energy economy, the depletion of natural resources, risks to food production, the growth of unregulated artificial intelligence, global crime, acts of terrorism by non-state actors — the list goes on and on. Not one of these issues can be resolved within national boundaries. All require serious international cooperation.

In theory, the UN should provide the forum within which such international cooperation can be forged. But it is widely acknowledged that the UN is not well positioned to do this against the background of the geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions of the 21st century. Its structure reflects the very different balance of economic and political power of the mid-20th century; its Security Council is heavily impeded by the conflicting exercise of the veto by its two permanent Eastern members and its three permanent Western members; and it now presents a terrain for international debate about what Weiss and Wilkinson call "the often-contested structures of global authority".[1] As Professor Luck hilariously but sadly describes, this all too frequently leads to a grand announcement by the Secretary General that fundamental reform "no less decisive than 1945 itself" is required, followed by a cascade of meetings in which the representatives of the member states "mouth rhetoric about sweeping change and historic opportunities" but end by settling "for modest measures capable of attracting consensus".[2]

It is clear that a new international system, underpinned by new principles, is needed if we are to respond to these current global challenges.

Of course, any world order needs to be realistic enough to acknowledge the persistent fact that states are autonomous, that they are the primary actors in international affairs, and that they inevitably seek to protect themselves. It also needs to be realistic enough to acknowledge the increasing influences of non-state actors such as NGOs and multinational companies. But acknowledging the persistence of

1 Weiss, T. G. and Wilkinson, R. (2002) *Global Governance Futures*, (Routledge), p. 7.
2 Luck, E. (2005) "How Not to Reform the United Nations", *Global Governance*, 11 (2005), pp. 407-414.

the nation state and the increasing significance of non-state actors does not in any way entail proposing or accepting a continuation of business as usual. Nor does it imply that we should restrict ourselves to tinkering with the current structure of the international order. On the contrary, what is required to give the world a serious chance of tackling the greatest common challenges facing humanity is a paradigm shift. In place of a fragile, uneasy peace, we need positive cooperation.

This paradigm shift from a fragile, uneasy peace to positive cooperation cannot be forced upon the world by a single hegemonic power, or even by two powers vying for hegemony. Any serious attempt to construct genuine global cooperation to address common challenges must, in its origins and structures, arise as a voluntary global association — a new cooperative international order built from the bottom up.

Moreover, for any architecture of cooperation to be viable, it must recognise the fact that, in addition to having divergent national interests, states are founded upon divergent national political cultures and identities. The rules and structures of any new cooperative international order must therefore enshrine the obligation to cooperate within genuinely neutral settings, uninfluenced by any particular political culture or assumptions.

It is important to note that this approach to global cooperation does not depend upon the leaders of nation states naively seeking to prioritise the advantage of humanity as a whole over the advantage of their own citizens. Any such naïve form of globalism will be unsustainable in any country. Nor does the paradigm shift to a system rooted in cooperation by any means require national leaders to lay aside competition between nation states. It requires them only to recognise that competition and cooperation are compatible with one another. It requires them, in other words, to accept that, just as within a single state it is possible to reconcile (through appropriate governance) the existence of competition between economic actors with the existence of cooperative national endeavour, so within a new international system it is in principle possible to maintain a framework that aims at promoting peaceful inter-state competition whilst nevertheless providing a stable platform for global cooperation to meet common challenges.

Of course, this is not an easy paradigm shift to achieve: it is difficult to abandon the power struggle view of the world in favour of peaceful competition and joint action to solve common problems; and it

is difficult to deal with the fact of competing values.

The idea of states trapped in continuous struggles for power has a long history. From the oft-quoted phrase in Thucydides's Melian Dialogue that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must", through Hobbes's formulations of international relations as a state of nature with no governing laws or authority, to the political application of the Darwinian struggle for existence, there is a long tradition of thought that has characterised, and been embedded in, our understanding of the relationship between states.

Unfortunately, this same understanding of international relations has frequently governed practice: in possession of a quarter of a globe, the British Empire did what it pleased with the resources of other countries; the US (often assisted by Europe) has been able to dictate the rules of the IMF and the World Bank, ignoring the wishes of the countries that are recipients of its funds; and now China flexes its muscles by either buying off or bullying its smaller neighbours. It is difficult to discard a deeply embedded intellectual tradition when it is reinforced consistently by the actions of modern states.

Related to, although separate from, the view of international relations as a power struggle is the problem of competing values. Written into the foundational documents of the current international order is a set of principles that purport and intend not only to govern relations between states, but also to govern the relationship between governments and the people whom they govern. The current system is not only a system for preventing inter-state conflict, but also a set of universal standards that can plausibly be regarded as an attempt to impose modern Western liberalism on the whole world. To varying degrees and in varying ways, this aspect of the current international order is repugnant to the leaders of some states. If, and to the extent that the international system is designed and structured to prevent abuses by the state of what the UN Declaration or the ECHR define as human rights, or to prevent state aids that the WTO defines as distortions of competition, or to guarantee the ability of citizens as a whole to participate in free and fair elections contested by competing political parties, it cannot be an international system that attracts the full-hearted participation of those world leaders whose domestic arrangements are not built on these same modern Western liberal "free market" principles.

This poses a serious problem, because we modern Western liberals regard the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights as meaning what it says; we see the rights laid out in it as genuinely universal. Hence, we demand that these rights be respected by all states, regardless of the views of particular governments or the cultures of particular societies. True, some of the specific requirements that have emerged during the evolution of the current international system (for example, the limitations on the role of government in the market that are now enshrined within the WTO) are contested even by some liberals in the West. True also, some of the rights of individual actors have in practice been breached by some recent Western governments through actions such as the process of extraordinary rendition and the establishment of the extra-territorial, extra-legal prison at Guantanamo Bay. But the core idea of modern Western liberalism — that each individual human being, regardless of where they were born, is in possession of certain rights — remains at least theoretically uncontested within modern Western liberalism.

This is at the heart of the problem facing a new cooperative internationalism, because the Dworkinian idea of rights as "trumps" or the Rawlsian idea of the right as prior to the good is in fact contested in some cultures. Nor is this just a disagreement at the theoretical level. It is a disagreement that has practical consequences — because there are many states which particularly contest any suggestion that the international community should have the power to enforce these individual rights against the wishes of any individual sovereign state. China, Russia and other illiberal regimes have been clear on this point; but even the world's largest democracy, India, while enshrining fundamental rights in its constitution and monitoring compliance through a National Human Rights Commission, still views the promotion of individual human rights as something for which each individual state should be responsible, without being subject to intervention from a foreign power.

Hence, any modern Western liberal seeking to foster genuine productive internationalism has to answer a fundamental question: on which of our liberal values are we willing to compromise to obtain genuine cooperation?

We cannot answer this question by abandoning wholesale the current international architecture, in order to remove any reference to Western liberal values. However much this might facilitate the active participation of illiberal authoritarian regimes in cooperative

internationalism, it is to many of us simply abhorrent.

An equally unsatisfactory way of attempting to circumvent the issue of competing values would be to construct some kind of minimalist universalism, one that distinguishes between illiberal authoritarian regimes and rogue regimes, as a means of achieving genuine cooperation. Any such minimalist universalism would be unworkable in practice: first, because of the obvious difficulty of drawing a clear line between illiberal authoritarian regimes and rogue regimes; and second, because within many illiberal authoritarian regimes (even if clearly not rogue), there are likely to be persecuted persons (whether ethnic or religious minorities or political opponents) who are regarded by any Western liberal as deserving some protection from their own state.

In short, there is no trade-off between universal rights and international cooperation that would ever be accepted by Western liberals who subscribe to the principles of the current international order. To say this is not defeatist. It is merely to recognise the fact that those of us who believe all human beings are in possession of certain rights can never be satisfied with a compromise which removes our ability to offer some sort of defence to those whose rights are compromised elsewhere in the world.

Does this mean that the very attempt to foster real international cooperation is doomed to failure, and that we should therefore abandon the idea of establishing a genuine collaborative internationalism, aiming instead at "making do" — in other words, reducing our ambitions to the point where we seek merely to "mend" the present rules-based international order through slight incremental adjustments, rather than trying to achieve a paradigm shift?

Tempting as such a retreat might seem in the face of the monumental theoretical and practical obstacles, succeeding generations have an interest in the achievement (despite the difficulties) of change on a scale that is commensurate with the scale of the challenges now faced by humanity, and of a kind that may enable the powers of the world to work together to address those challenges.

But how is this to be achieved, given that the existing institutions of rules-based internationalism are impregnated with contested values that some will not accept and that others will not relinquish?

The answer must surely lie in abandoning strategies of "either/or"

and adopting instead a strategy of "both/and".

In other words, the basis for moving forward is to leave intact the institutions that already exist to prevent conflict between states (albeit with such reforms as are possible to achieve), and to seek to establish alongside them a new set of Special Purpose International Collaborations (SPICs). These SPICs would have a specific and different purpose — namely, to provide a framework for joint action in tackling common challenges.

The SPICs would resemble the special-purpose cooperation recommended by the functionalist and neo-functionalist theories of international relations proposed fifty years ago by David Mitrany[3] and Ernst Haas.[4] There is, however, no reason for modern proponents of special purpose internationalism to accept the proposition of Mitrany and Haas that specific collaborations should be seen as paving the way towards greater integration, or towards the transfer of sovereignty. There are, on the contrary, good reasons for modern special purpose collaborations explicitly to eschew any such suggestions. In the first place, the history of the last half century has shown that loyalties are not easily transferred upwards from the nation state; ties to a particular nation or culture are deep and real. In the second place, any suggestion of seeking to undermine the authority of states will tend to reduce the appetite of those states for special purpose cooperation.

Nevertheless, without seeing SPICs as a pathway to increased integration, it is possible to share the hope expressed by Mitrany that such specific collaborations may gradually have general effects beyond their original purposes, because they may lead to a shift in the general attitude towards international cooperation. If the nation-states of the world begin to build a portfolio of collaborations in specific domains, the general journey of establishing that degree of cooperation may turn out to be as important as the arrival at any specific resolutions of specific common problems.

The twentieth century functionalists have two further lessons for twenty-first century special purpose collaboration.

3 Mitrany, D. (1975) *The Functional Theory of Politics*, London School of Economics and Political Science: London, p. 184.

4 Haas, E. B. (2004) *The Uniting of Europe: Political, social and economic forces 1950-1957*, University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame.

The first is that the purpose of international cooperation should not be merely to prevent war, but also to address the causes of war. Assuredly, humanity's social and economic condition is not the only cause of warfare; other, less rational drivers such as national pride are at least equally dangerous to peace. But it remains the fact that common challenges such as water shortages or movements of people brought about by climate change, shortage of resources, the management of interconnected networks, big data and artificial intelligence are all too likely to generate conflict in the current century. Rather than focussing solely on the direct prevention of war through the organisms of the existing official international rules-based system, a significant contribution to the maintenance of global peace can be made by special purpose collaboration if it helps humanity deal more effectively with these potential causes of conflict.

The second critical lesson of functionalism for our current century is that humanity has much to gain from establishing a form of pro-active diplomacy in which the participants engage in the creative global act of solving common problems, rather than restricting themselves merely to the reactive form of diplomacy that seeks exclusively to manage conflicting national interests.[5] This further paradigm shift from the concept of diplomacy as management to the concept of diplomacy as leadership could be a fruitful and important source of advantage for humanity.

The seeds of both of these shifts are of course contained within the existing international order — the World Health Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, UNESCO, and the UN Development Programme are all examples of pro-active efforts on the part of the global community and of its diplomats to defeat the enemies of human progress. In short, special purpose internationalism in the twenty-first century is an evolution from what exists, rather than a revolution overturning what exists — but it is an evolution with revolutionary features.

So then, what does my conception of special purpose collaboration imply in practice?

In the first place, it implies the construction of specific, challenge-based cooperative endeavours that are formed outside the UN and

5 Claude, I. (1987) *Swords into Ploughshares: The problems and progress of international organisation*, Anupama Publications, Delhi, p. 380.

outside the constraints of all existing international structures.

Second, it implies that these new forms of international cooperation should be, from the start, wholly flexible, and hence radically multi-polar. Because the population of every country in the world has an interest in meeting the common challenges of humanity, every country in the world has a potential role in the new cooperative ventures established with the special purpose of meeting those challenges. Which nation states are involved in a particular special purpose collaboration is a matter of what Unger calls "the consensual, voluntary initiatives of states entering into collaborative arrangements of their own invention".[6]

Third, it implies that the formation of the new collaborative initiatives should not depend upon the agreement of any one state or any small set of states acceding to them. If the rival hegemons of today — the United States and China — opt not to join a particular cooperative endeavour in the first instance, that is a price worth paying for the ability to organise the new special purpose collaborations on a genuinely multi-polar basis.

Fourth, it implies that the entire apparatus of the current, rules-based international system should be left in place (including the elements of the current rules-based system that are loved by modern Western liberals and contested by some states with different value systems).

Fifth, it implies that the nation states involved in each new (purely additional) special purpose collaboration should avoid "mission creep". They are most likely to succeed in achieving the special purpose for which they have come together if they concentrate their cooperative efforts on meeting the specific challenge that they have come together to meet.

Sixth, this form of collaboration requires neither adherence to any particular domestic value system by the participating states, nor any general adherence to particular ways of dealing with other states. The sole requirement is adherence to those specific principles of action that are strictly necessary for the effective cooperative solution of the specific challenge with which the special purpose collaboration is designed to deal. Hence, SPICs may operate successfully even where the collaborating states have markedly different domestic values and

6 Mangabeira Unger, R. (2022) *Governing the World without World Government*, Verso, p. 33.

markedly incompatible general views about geopolitics or geoeconomics.

There are, of course, plenty of objections that can be raised against these propositions. But each of these objections disintegrates upon further inspection.

It can be argued that there is no need to create new special purpose collaborations outside the UN, since such cooperation already takes place under the aegis of the UN — as in the case of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. But, in the face of a global emergency, the slow and uneven pace of the IPCC and of the Conferences of Parties emerging from it to reach viable, global solutions that reconcile reductions of carbon emissions with fast development in emerging markets does not speak well for the value of its positioning at least partly under the umbrella of the UN. And there is plenty of evidence that other organisations with special purposes that are more definitely contained within the UN structures — for example, the World Health Organisation, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, UNESCO, and the UN Development Programme — have been massively impeded by their clunky UN-style and UN-induced structures. As soon as a new special purpose organisation is conceived within the UN, it becomes part of an elaborate cat's cradle of traditional diplomacy-as-management and of international bureaucratic battles, with the result that the original clarity of purpose and cooperative intent is put at risk. For this reason, highly targeted joint action by collaborating nation states, unencumbered by the politics of the UN, may well be an easier means of meeting a particular purpose.

Another more pressing challenge is the idea that given their multi-polar nature, these special purpose collaborations will never attract the rival hegemons to join them. It is, of course, not possible to prove in advance that Beijing and Washington would in due course, if not immediately, agree to participate in a particular special purpose cooperative venture undertaken by states other than themselves. But there is every reason to hope that if such special purpose collaborations began to form serious and coherent programmes for tackling some of the major challenges currently facing humanity, and if the rest of the world made clear that these were the fora within which these matters would be discussed, the US and China would ultimately find that it was in the interests of their own populations to seek to participate. And even if these high-minded considerations did not prove to be sufficient incentives for participation, it is more than plausible that the governments of each of the

rival hegemons would conclude that there were geopolitical reasons for participation — not least to prevent each other from being able to exercise undue influence as a result of entering into a given special purpose collaboration alone (ie without the other hegemon).

It is equally implausible to allege that the world cannot generate genuine cooperation in the cause of achieving a particular purpose, even where this requires collaboration between states which are otherwise fundamentally antagonistic towards another. Counterexamples abound. India and Pakistan, which are about as antagonistic towards one another as any two states on earth, cooperate together in a range of Asian regional organisations, including security alliances such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. China and India, which are almost equally antagonistic in some respects, also both participate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and in an impressive array of cooperative regional institutions outside the official international rules-based system. And, in any case, almost the whole world participates in the UN itself, notwithstanding the antagonisms that exist within it, and notwithstanding the extent to which the real meaning of some of its foundational documents is contested amongst the participating states. It is therefore entirely plausible that states, despite their antagonisms towards each other, may be willing to lay aside those antagonisms in order to participate in highly targeted cooperative endeavours with the aim of achieving particular joint purposes.

It is of course true that there will always be a danger in any special purpose collaboration that geopolitical manoeuvring may get in the way of genuine efforts to solve common problems. This danger will vary with time and topic. In some cases, it may be slight; in others, severe. But these facts are not a rational basis for despair. At present, we have many international gatherings in which geopolitical wrangling is predominant, and few in which cooperation to solve common challenges is to the fore. At least the creation of a range of new special purpose collaboration outside the UN umbrella will initially tend to direct the attention of the participating states outwards towards the achievement of common aims and will thereby tend to reduce the risk of them and their diplomats focussing solely on inter-state jockeying. Moreover, it should be possible to start the process of establishing such new special purpose cooperations in domains where the cooperation is easiest to engender and the inter-state wrangling least endemic, before building gradually outwards into more

contested terrains. The experience of the climate change process (albeit painfully and perhaps tragically slow) has given the world an example of what can be done, notwithstanding the inter-state rivalries — and the world could, if it chose, apply this experience by moving towards more widespread use of special purpose collaborations.

Meanwhile, the accusation that cooperative endeavours taking place outside the walls of the current, rules-based international system will be powerless arises from a misunderstanding of the nature of the power exercised by the existing international institutions. To the extent that the existing official international institutions can be said to wield power, this depends almost entirely upon the willingness of the states that participate in them to enforce their edicts — as witness, the fact that (for example) the International Criminal Court, though ostensibly created with a universal remit by the UN, can in fact investigate and prosecute only crimes committed within the states that allow it to do so (which ironically do not include either the US or China). This same restriction will clearly apply to the power of the states involved in new special purpose collaborations; but there is no reason to suppose that it will be a greater restraint on their power than on the power of the existing, official international institutions.

None of this, of course, in itself demonstrates that new special purpose collaborations would do better than the existing international institutions in addressing challenges that face the whole of humanity. But there are other reasons for supposing that they might do so.

A new portfolio of special purpose collaborations would have various advantages. Each could have an individual structure designed to maximise the chance of meeting the specific challenge in question. Each could adopt principles for inclusion and methods of decision-making that are specific to the challenge in question. Each could call upon the mutual self-interest of all the participating states in meeting the specific challenge which that special purpose collaboration had been created to meet — without compelling those participants to abandon or modify their commitment to the principles of, or their standing within, any organisation that already exists under the umbrella of the official, rules-based international system.

Could this work? Who knows? The uncertainties are vast, the terrain largely uncharted. But we can at least be certain that any attempt

to create a portfolio of new special purpose collaborations which is based on the presumption that the entire existing international system will be left intact, is a form of additive change that would minimise the risk of doing harm. At the same time, new international collaborations with clear purposes, with structures relevant only to those purposes, and with the emerging multi-polarity of the world fully acknowledged within them from the start, might stand some chance of doing some good.

There are, after all, already examples of special purpose collaboration between states outside the framework of the UN that have proved effective in addressing specific challenges. The Combined Maritime Forces were established in 2001 to counter the threat of international terrorism, beginning with 12 countries, and expanding to 34 by 2021. A coalition of the willing, the CMF does not prescribe a specific level of participation from any member nation, and no nation is bound by either a fixed political or military mandate. International contact groups — *ad hoc* informal collaborations — have been created with the purpose of coordinating international action in response to a crisis in a state or region; they have enabled those states involved to meet regularly to coordinate responses to a situation. One such group was the Contact Group established for the Balkans in the 1990s, composed of the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy and Russia.

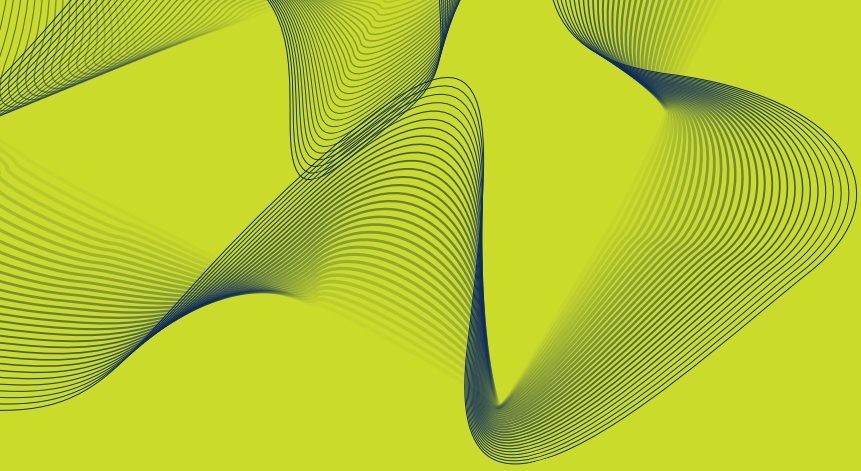
There are, however, also some challenges common to humanity that have so far proved intractable, where there is no sign of the UN machinery being able to come up within a solution, and where there is currently a dire lack of *ad hoc* special purpose collaboration. A pressing case is the need for an international protocol governing Artificial Intelligence.

There can be little doubt that the governance of AI is a major present challenge for the whole of humanity; that it is not covered by any satisfactory, existing international treaty; that progress towards improved governance is being hampered by lack of international collaboration within the framework of the established, official multi-lateral organisations; and that at least some progress could be made by the production of a determinate product (eg a protocol or treaty), perhaps as a precursor to further protocols or treaties.

These, surely, are sufficient grounds for those states which share a desire to see the governance of AI improved to form now a special purpose collaboration, with a view to producing a first protocol or treaty that might gradually garner support

from a wide range of nation states — and which might eventually be adopted by the rival great powers.

If my call for special purpose international collaboration were to have no outcome other than this one step forward, that alone would justify the proposition.



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