



WIG

The Whitehall & Industry Group
connecting the sectors



'Trade & International Affairs' Series

**Global Britain and multilateralism in a
changing world**

1 September 2021

Expert Insight

This has been a pivotal year for the UK to establish itself as an independent international actor. The Integrated Review set out a vision for 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age', which included "an increased determination to seek multilateral solutions to challenges like climate change". We were delighted to host Professor Ngaire Woods CBE, Dean of the Blavatnik School of Government and Professor of Global Economic Governance at Oxford University for a webinar to discuss what this might look like in a constantly evolving international context.



Some of the key issues Prof Woods highlighted included:

- The old world order has left leaders with habits or mindsets which make it difficult to navigate the new world order; namely the idea that there is one world system under US leadership, backed by common institutions and rules which can be used for expansive goals e.g. SDGs, open market economies, liberal democracy
- The world has now changed, not only due to the rise of China, but significantly as a result of divisive domestic politics fueled by misinformation
- Western governments have not yet managed to catch up and regulate the tech sector
- Mastery and deployment of AI positively as well as defensively will be crucial, and Britain needs to work with likeminded countries to develop capabilities with them while retaining an effective domestic ecosystem
- The integrated review proposes a Britain that will lead in shaping an open international order of the future, however there is a need to address contradictions at the operational level, such as recently seen in Afghanistan

Prof Woods set out a world of three different multilateralisms that are going to coexist:

- 1 International action which will be much more ad hoc coalitions of the willing. Behind that system is the summitry, G7 and G20, which are the most likely areas of coordination
- 2 Re-emergence of alliance multilateralism similar to Cold War era, with US and China working with development banks etc, and seemingly multilateral institutions are being drawn into one alliance or another
- 3 The existing international institutions in which Britain has historically had a leading role. There is a need to consider which of these institutions can be the most nimble in trying to navigate the new kind of multilateralism emerging

Our members' questions

Our members raised some challenging questions, key issues discussed included:

- The role and importance of 'soft power'
- The extent to which 'soft power' actors such as the BBC, universities, and cultural institutions can act independently of the UK government.
- Whether the occurrence of 'ad-hoc' international alliances is as a result of the existing economic institutions not being able to adapt to the changing economic landscape?
- What are the barriers to entry for new players or states engaging with existing international institutions, and should they be further opened up?

WIG members can listen to Prof. Ngaire Woods's presentation [here](#)