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Interview with Amb. Francisca Elizabeth Méndez Escobar,¹ Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations in Geneva, on current challenges facing multilateralism

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Question: As Permanent Representative of Mexico to the United Nations in Geneva, you are familiar with and actively participate in the issues discussed and analyzed there every day. What is your assessment of the present and future of multilateralism?

Answer: Multilateralism is unquestionably going through a period of questioning, tension and political strain, but not of irrelevance. Public attention often focuses on political disagreements or on the difficulties involved in reaching consensus on certain issues, particularly matters of international peace and security. From Geneva, however, we see a much broader reality.

Geneva is home to more than forty specialized agencies, technical bodies and secretariats of international treaties that constitute an essential part of the global governance architecture. Some institutions, such as the International Labour Organization and the

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International Telecommunication Union, even predate the United Nations itself. This reminds us that multilateralism is much more than the political debates we see in the news.

Another major strength of the United Nations system is that it rests on a fundamental principle that remains extraordinarily relevant: the sovereign and juridical equality of States. In an international system marked by profound asymmetries of power, size and economic capacity, the United Nations remains a forum in which all States have a voice, participate in global debates and contribute to the development of international norms on the basis of that principle of juridical equality.

Here in Geneva, standards are adopted every day, international responses are coordinated, technical norms are developed and opportunities for cooperation are created in fields as diverse as health, telecommunications, trade, intellectual property, human rights, labor, humanitarian assistance, migration, the international protection of refugees, disarmament and the environment. Much of that work goes unnoticed precisely because it works and has an impact on the lives of countries and peoples. When the international postal system works, when an aircraft lands safely or when a vaccine reaches someone who needs it, we rarely think about the web of international cooperation that makes it possible.

Moreover, we live in an increasingly interdependent world. The challenges we face as an international community are becoming ever more complex and certainly do not stop at national borders. Artificial intelligence, quantum technologies, pandemics, cybersecurity, climate change and biodiversity loss are challenges that are global in nature and whose solutions require international cooperation.

Question: Multilateralism can and will therefore have to evolve, but it is unlikely to disappear. Indeed, the more complex and transnational the challenges we face become, the more necessary multilateral cooperation will be to manage them. Today, many politicians and government leaders do not believe in multilateralism, place conditions on it or seek to shape a form of multilateralism that serves their interests, to the detriment of traditional multilateralism, such as that represented by the United Nations. Do you believe that this new version of limited or conditional multilateralism has a future?

Answer: Initiatives involving smaller groups are not new. They have existed for decades and can play a useful role within the international system. In certain contexts, they make it possible to move forward more quickly, build initial consensus or generate political momentum around specific issues.

The G20, of which Mexico is a member, is perhaps one of the clearest examples: it made it possible to coordinate responses during the 2008 financial crisis and remains a relevant forum for global economic governance.

Similarly, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in which we also participate, has served for decades as a forum for developing standards and good practices in areas such as taxation, public governance, education and the fight against corruption.

In the field of non-proliferation, the Nuclear Suppliers Group, of which we are likewise a member, has helped coordinate policies and export controls among States with specific capabilities and interests concerning materials, equipment and technology for the peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that those mechanisms can replace universal multilateralism. Their strength lies precisely in the fact that they are more flexible and specialized forums. The strength of the United Nations, by contrast, lies in its universality, its legitimacy and its capacity to bring together virtually the entire international community around common rules and objectives.

For that very reason, I do not believe that we should frame this discussion as a choice between one model and the other. The real challenge is to ensure that both coexist and complement each other. Smaller forums can serve to generate ideas, build convergence or advance particular agendas; universal multilateral institutions can give those efforts legitimacy, reach and sustainability.

We must also be careful with the narrative of a permanent crisis of multilateralism. There is a risk that this diagnosis could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Processes that encounter deadlock are often highlighted, while less attention is paid to the many areas in which international cooperation continues to function and produce concrete results, as happens every day here in Geneva.

As I have already indicated, one need only look at sectors such as telecommunications, health, civil aviation, intellectual property, postal systems or international trade to see that a robust institutional framework continues to operate on a daily basis, is constantly being renewed and optimized —not without difficulty— and has a direct impact on our daily lives.

Question: If traditional multilateralism is losing relevance and the United Nations is unable to resolve conflicts because of the evident influence of the major Powers on its decisions, what, in your view, are the possible solutions for modernizing the Organization and making it more efficient, bearing in mind that the influence of those countries will always exist?

Answer: I believe that the starting point must be to recognize that the global governance system we have today was designed more than eighty years ago to respond to a world very

different from the one we live in now.

Since then, the world has changed profoundly. We could almost say that it has become larger, and certainly more complex. There are more States, more people, more trade, more technology and far greater interdependence among our societies. Challenges have also emerged that the founders of the United Nations could scarcely have anticipated, ranging from climate change and pandemics to artificial intelligence and cybersecurity.

Added to this are the consolidation and emergence of new actors in the multilateral arena, such as civil society organizations, the private sector and academia itself, as well as new forms of international interaction. It would not be realistic to expect an architecture designed in 1945 to respond in the same way to the challenges of 2026. Modernizing the system does not mean questioning its value; it means ensuring that it remains capable of fulfilling its function while responding to these profound changes.

Modernizing the system is not an option; it is a necessity. It is a task that we have postponed for far too long and that the international community must take seriously. Institutions that endure are those capable of adapting to the changes of their time.

Of course, an important part of that discussion concerns the functioning of the Security Council and the constraints created by the exercise of the veto. Together with France and other partners, Mexico has promoted initiatives aimed at strengthening accountability and limiting the use of the veto in situations involving mass atrocities.

Modernization, however, entails much deeper, more concrete and operational changes, such as reviewing the mandates that we assign to secretariats throughout the system. It also entails reducing duplication, strengthening coordination among bodies, making better use of new technologies and using available resources more efficiently.

We must also strengthen tools such as preventive diplomacy, international and regional mediation, and mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes. Given the difficulty of achieving far-reaching structural reforms in the short term, these instruments can make a significant contribution to preventing and managing conflicts.

Ultimately, the objective must be to ensure that the system remains capable of responding effectively to the challenges we face collectively.

Question: Following on from the previous question, is there a future for multilateralism as we know it today, or will we have to adapt to whatever solutions the major Powers put forward?

Answer: I am convinced that multilateralism has a future because it responds to an objective and genuine need of the international community.

We live in a system of sovereign States that need to coordinate in order to manage problems that no country can solve on its own. That reality will not disappear. On the contrary, as we have already noted, growing economic, technological, environmental and social interdependence will make international cooperation increasingly necessary.

That said, multilateralism will have to evolve and adapt. We must accept that the world has changed and continues to change. The capacity to adapt will be one of the conditions for the system's survival and relevance.

Adaptation, however, does not mean abandoning its fundamental principles. The values that inspired the creation of the United Nations and were enshrined in its Charter—dialogue, international cooperation, the sovereign equality of States, the peaceful settlement of disputes and respect for international law—are as relevant today as they were eight decades ago. Indeed, in a context of growing polarization and interdependence, their importance is even greater.

These principles, incidentally, and as you know, are also part of Mexico's diplomatic DNA. Our foreign policy has historically been built on the conviction that differences must be resolved through dialogue, that international rules matter and that global challenges require collective solutions. Accordingly, when we speak of modernizing multilateralism, we are not speaking of replacing its founding principles, but of ensuring that they continue to guide a system capable of responding to the challenges of the present and the future.

With regard to the role of the major Powers, history shows that many of the most important advances in multilateralism have been driven by broad coalitions of States and by countries willing to build bridges between divergent positions. Medium-sized and small countries have made decisive contributions to the development of international law, multilateral institutions and collective solutions to common challenges.

In an environment marked by growing geopolitical fragmentation, consensus-building will become increasingly valuable. The true test for multilateralism is not whether it can survive, but whether it can continue to deliver concrete results for people and provide effective responses to problems that no State can solve on its own. That will be the central challenge of the coming decades.

Question: Finally, what is, or what should be, Mexico's role in shaping a new multilateralism, should circumstances so require, bearing in mind that our country has historically maintained a firm commitment to and active participation in almost all the initiatives that have emerged, and continue to emerge, in international organizations since the League of Nations?

Answer: Mexico has a long-standing tradition of commitment to multilateralism and

to building collective solutions to international challenges. That tradition remains fully relevant, and today we embrace it with greater strength and conviction than ever.

In an increasingly complex and fragmented international context, Mexico will continue to perform one of the roles it has exercised most effectively throughout its diplomatic history: that of a consensus-builder in support, always, of causes that transcend borders and directly affect the well-being of our own society.

Growing international polarization is making it increasingly difficult to reach agreements. In that context, countries capable of bridging different positions, facilitating dialogue and building convergence acquire particular strategic value for the international system.

Mexico already plays that role in numerous multilateral processes. In Geneva, we see it every day in areas as diverse as negotiations on biodiversity, pollution, global health and human rights. Our country has sought to act as a constructive interlocutor, capable of engaging with different regions and negotiating groups in order to identify areas of convergence and contribute to consensus-building.

This vocation is also reflected in our active participation in the Human Rights Council, in multilateral environmental processes and in debates on reform of the international system. We also lead initiatives such as UN80 Global, aimed at strengthening the effectiveness and responsiveness of the United Nations in support of the reform process led by Secretary-General António Guterres.

Furthermore, any serious reflection on the future of multilateralism must recognize the fundamental contribution of women to diplomacy, consensus-building and international governance. The full, equal and meaningful participation of women is not merely a matter of representation; it is a necessary condition for building institutions that are more legitimate, inclusive and capable of responding to the diverse challenges facing the international community. In this area, Mexico has consistently pursued a feminist foreign policy and promoted greater participation by women in international decision-making forums.

Beyond specific initiatives, Mexico's principal contribution will continue to be the ability and willingness of our diplomats, women and men alike, to build understanding where others see differences, identify areas of convergence where there appear to be only disagreements, and recall that, in the face of increasingly complex and interdependent challenges, international cooperation is not an idealistic aspiration but a practical necessity. That has been a constant of our foreign policy and, I am convinced, will continue to be one of Mexico's most valuable contributions to building an international order that is more peaceful, more just, and better equipped and more agile in responding to the challenges of our time. 🌿

Geneva, Switzerland, 10 June 2026.