

IASS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

Why International Cooperation is Failing – And Why It Can Still Work

Part 1: Steps towards a transdisciplinary understanding of conflicts and cooperation

Everyone agrees that overcoming the climate crisis hinges on countries working together. Yet international cooperation repeatedly fails. The war in Ukraine has made us painfully aware of just how fragile our international system is. And the COP negotiations taking place in Egypt in November are a source of concern for many. Following on from 26 earlier rounds of negotiations focussed on targets, contractual frameworks, and tools, this summit is described by the Egyptian presidency as the “implementation COP”. Indeed, the COP will have to get down to business to finally deliver on its many promises. Meanwhile, the negotiating parties are moving further and further apart. The long-standing conflict between the Global North as the main contributor to climate change and the Global South as the main victim is now augmented by the increasing alienation between “the West”, China and Russia.

Explanations, not one single explanation

Unfortunately, analyses of the causes of international conflicts often fall short. We always tend to know more about our own country than about other countries and the relationships between them. This often makes it easy for simple, highly personalized explanations to spread. These are the explanations in which Putin starts a war, Trump exits climate agreements, and international speculators cause financial crises. But also very general theories that see the anarchic and conflict-ridden status of international relations as the “natural” state of things shed little light on the concrete origins of international conflicts. While none of these puzzle pieces are fundamentally out of place here, they are still just a small part of the explanation – not the explanation.

Global political economy as a transdisciplinary approach within international relations
I believe that international crises and conflicts can be better understood from a transdisciplinary perspective. At a minimum, this involves connecting the global, national and local levels, and the interplay between economic and social forces. The key issue is about establishing how these global conflicts can be traced back to very specific domestic causes. In the 1950s, for instance, the “realist” US political scientist Kenneth Waltz argued that democratic deficits within states were the cause of wars between them. In doing so, he followed Immanuel Kant by placing hopes on a “perpetual peace” as the result of a spread of democracy. At the other end of the political spectrum, Lenin believed that imperialism and the resulting international conflicts were caused by the global

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expansionism of financial capital that had reached its national limits. These kinds of transdisciplinary approaches – the connection of political and economic interactions at the international, national and transnational levels – can be called global political economy.

Why international cooperation is failing: how the clash of capitalisms undermines the regulation of finance

In my book (*now available in paperback*), Why International Cooperation is Failing: How the Clash of Capitalisms Undermines the Regulation of Finance, I attempt to illustrate the merits of this kind of global approach using the example of the global financial and economic crisis and its management since 2008. To put it in a very simplified nutshell, I explain the global financial crisis and its management through conflicts between various versions of capitalism in the United States, Europe and East Asia. Globalisation, after all, does not mean convergence – an “Americanisation”, for instance – but rather the path dependency of a variety of capitalisms in mutual dependency. The export-reliant economies in East Asia are just as dependent on US markets as the US financial centres are on globally “recycling” (for a fee) East Asian as well as German export surpluses.

So how can international cooperation work?

When problems within international relations are not caused by some sort of natural state and at least not primarily by the malevolence or incompetence of political leaders, but rather by very specific features of their specific model of capitalism, then the solution is – in theory – easy. For instance, economic imbalances and trade wars between the United States and East Asia could be resolved if wages and therefore consumption rose in East Asia and more US citizens were able to save. In terms of the climate crisis, international negotiations such as the upcoming COP27 in Egypt could be productive if they enable and support local and national efforts – particularly in the Global South. Purely technocratic solutions – based on the simple formula of technical innovation multiplied by mobilization of funds – are doomed to failure. The problem does not lie in the global lack of technology and capital, but rather in the inability to harness the plentiful global resources for local and national development pathways. In my current research at the IASS, I focus on the Green Climate Fund, an international organisation that I believe can play an important role in productively connecting global, national and local levels. I’ll be writing more about that in my second COP27 post in November.