



## **Report - EIAS Book Launch: Opening to Omnilateralism**

*In-person event, Brussels*

*30 November 2021*

On 30 November 2021, the European Institute for Asian Studies (EIAS) hosted a book launch in collaboration with **Dr. Wolfgang Pape** to present his book 'Opening to Omnilateralism'. The discussion was moderated by **EIAS Senior Associate Erik Famaey**, who opened the event by sharing his analysis of the book, assessing the concept of omnilateralism. He continued by introducing the first panelist, **Professor Raymond Yamamoto** from Aarhus University, PhD holder in Japanese Studies and an expert in contemporary Japanese politics and foreign policy. The next panelist introduced was **Dr. Yuan Feng**, a Scientific Collaborator at the Institute for European Studies of the Université Libre de Bruxelles' (ULB). Lastly, Mr Famaey offered an introduction to the book's author, Dr Wolfgang Pape, a former European Commission Policy Officer and current Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) since his retirement as an EU Official. After working as a researcher at Kyoto University, Dr Pape served as an EU diplomat in Japan, where he stayed for several years, delivering lectures at universities and writing articles for Japanese publications.

His book, 'Opening to Omnilateralism', can be summarized as a critique of western-led multilateralism. He believes the current world order has served its purpose by lifting millions out of poverty through Globalisation. However, "politicians continue to hold on to the individualist notion of the Westphalian nation-state", which Pape considers "outdated and an impediment to genuine, direct democracy". Only 'Omnilateralism' refers to a type of democracy that is able to adapt to local, national, regional, and global levels of government, and that involves all relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process. Pape stressed that only Omnilateralism is able to achieve such direct democracy. This hybrid event took place both as an in-person and live-streamed format, was held in compliance with the latest Covid-19 regulations and was subject to a valid Covid Safe Pass.

Dr Wolfgang Pape presented his book by opening with a compelling illustration of the potential benefits of and need for Omnilateralism. As the Greek origin of the term pan-demos (pan = "all," demos = "people") indicates, the present Covid-19 pandemic is a crisis that affects us all. The prefix 'Omni' derives from the Latin word 'Omnibus', which means "for all". Immanuel Kant coined the term Omnilateralism as "for everyone and beyond the country". In order to better explain the limitations of the current multilateral system, Pape provided the example of the delayed communication on the spread of the Covid-19 infections. There was a significant time

gap between the first reported case of the Covid-19 virus and the World Health Organisation's (WHO) first awareness of it. Millions of lives and billions of euros in damages were lost as a result of the delay. Such a dramatic outcome might have been avoided if the WHO had accepted alarms from stakeholders other than nation-states, such as civil society or the scientific community.

Local governments determine how Covid-19 vaccinations are delivered. However, the EU is responsible for purchasing vaccines for all of its 27 member states. With this example, Pape demonstrated that, even in a territory (such as the EU) that adheres to the concept of "sovereign country," ultimate sovereignty of the nation does not exist, and governance is always multilayered. Covid-19, according to the author, has demonstrated how to overcome a hurdle by organizing and delegating the many levels involved.

Dr Pape then proceeded to explain the differences between the Western and Eastern interpretations of the concept of the "nation-state". Westerners tend to equate government with the nation, as evidenced by the United States' mistake of overlooking Afghanistan's hundreds of multicultural fiefdoms and instead viewing it as a homogeneous nation. Pape emphasized how the usage of written characters in East Asia (namely in China and Japan) provides for a far more visual and immediate explanation of ideas like the 'nation-state'. These characters, however, are frequently mistranslated, resulting in unbalanced understandings of some concepts and, as a result, poor communication across cultures and locations. The author pointed out the irrationality behind the UN, the multilateral organization 'par excellence'. He is appalled by the fact that China's decision-making weight is equal to that of any other member state, despite it having over 17% of the world's population. Intergovernmentalism is exemplified by the United Nations and other multilateral accords (ASEAN, RCEP, CPTPP, etc.) in which individual governments interact with other self-interested countries.

He ended his presentation on a more positive note by examining two situations that appear to point to a shift towards an Omnilateralist orientation. The first is the EU, which is the only organization that goes beyond intergovernmentalism. It is the first time in history that there is a supranational authority that can ostensibly rule over national interests. As a result, the EU acts as a stepping stone toward an omnilateral understanding of global governance that transcends the traditional concept of nation. Second, COP21 and COP26 demonstrate that such a universal concern is still being debated in a genuinely intergovernmental and international arena. Pape mentioned the 12,000 civil society voices who gathered outside the COP26 venue, the Scottish Event Centre (SEC) in Glasgow, for the two-week conference. These voices were made up of non-state organizations and stakeholders with specialized environmental expertise, currently gaining more influence and authority. In an omnilateral order, legitimate stakeholders would be chosen by the people through accreditation based on good governance standards

(accountability, transparency, science-based competence, etc.), laying the groundwork for a "monitory Democracy" managed by civil society. Pape envisions a world system that is borderless and nation-less, based on non-western-centric principles, and that includes broader participation by and for all legitimate stakeholders, moving from "votes" to "voices," from the individual to the omnibus.

Professor Yamamoto was the first to provide feedback on the book. He compared the book's depiction of the rise and fall of the nation-state to the Buendia family in Garcia Marquez's "One Hundred Years of Solitude." While Omnilateralism is a fascinating thought experiment, it is also hopeful and unrealistic. The book's biggest flaw, according to Yamamoto is the lack of specifics on who would be involved in the selection of legitimate stakeholders. He also noted that, when it comes to environmental considerations, the speed of decision-making and action implementation are critical. The shift to an omnilateral system would most certainly take years, which we cannot afford to lose. He applauded the author's writing style for making a complex issue entertaining and enjoyable to read.

Next, Dr Yuan Feng added on to the author's analysis of Chinese and Japanese concept visualization through written characters. In Mandarin there are four distinct ways to refer to "country", each depicting a different image and conveying a unique tone. In contrast, the English language has limited use and

understanding of the same term, which invariably leads to translation errors and communication asymmetry. She stated three points of critique for the book, beginning by questioning who would provide public goods in an omnilateral order. Despite being a decentralized initiative, she emphasized that China's Belt and Road Initiative is still heavily sponsored (in part) by government funds. Her main concern regarding Omnilateralism was whose values the new order would be based on. Who would agree on them, and who would act as the judge to ensure the quality of governance of the so-called "legitimate stakeholders"? According to Dr Pape this would be a task for the world community, acknowledging both the challenging and idealistic nature of Omnilateralism.

The floor was then opened to the audience for an interactive Q&A session. A question was raised on whether the author's remarks about the EU being a stepping stone to an omnilateral order meant that European ideals are the foundation for his ideal omnilateral world. In response to this, Pape stated that the EU's principles and soft power are a good source of ideas, but that other unions, such as ASEAN (which often engages non-state players in decision-making), can also be utilized as referents for good omnilateral-like practices and goals.

Another question addressed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and how the West should respond to it. Dr Wolfgang Pape expressed that he was favorable to the BRI, despite criticisms of 'debt-trap diplomacy', because it is an effort that delivers much-needed infrastructure in

underdeveloped nations that have been overlooked by the West. Yamamoto also dismissed claims of the BRI as being some sort of scheme devised by China's Communist Party (CCP) to develop and acquire strategic pieces of infrastructure such as the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, as such a strategy would not play in the country's soft power favour. The Professor emphasized Xi Jinping's efforts to address China's manufacturing overcapacity problem, as well as the need to be perceived favorably by countries in the global south. Omnilateralism invites people to think beyond states, a reality in which cultural and religious disputes would be replaced by a much more communitarian sense of togetherness in the face of real difficulties that humanity is confronted with (i.e. climate concerns). After a round of final remarks by the moderator and the three panelists, the event was concluded with a networking session.