

MULTILATERALISM POST COVID-19

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: UNO and its various Agencies

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Change is often touted as being the only constant. However, in the hard-nosed world of multilateral diplomacy, seasoned practitioners often say that only babies with wet nappies delightfully accept change. The rest, they say, usually display differing degrees of tepid enthusiasm for any type of change.

Even at the best of times, when there was great power cooperation rather than great power rivalry like now, multilateralism has belied the ability to update swiftly. For example, Resolution 50/52 adopted unanimously during the 50th session, “to initiate the procedure set out in Article 108 of the Charter of the United Nations to amend the Charter, with prospective effect, by the deletion of the ‘enemy State’ clauses from Articles 53, 77 and 107 at its earliest appropriate future session” awaits action, nearly 25 years later.

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The COVID-19 outbreak has placed all international institutions under a magnifying glass. By any measure, most have performed below par. Such is the caution espoused that multilateralism today seems to have reverted to its version 0.1. The General Assembly now passes resolutions through no objection procedure. The Security Council has been found wanting in no small measure. The 75th session’s ‘leaders week’ runs the risk of being reduced to a video playback session.

It is true that functioning of multilateral institutions, like much else, requires reform. They need to adapt to new realities, just as their headquarters staff have quickly adopted the new normal of ‘work from home’. However, the pursuit of change by threatening to leave multilateral institutions is a phenomenon we witnessed only during the period of the League of Nations. One state followed another in bidding goodbye, until the League’s final demise.

The post Second World War multilateral institutions have survived such departures. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in Paris and the Human Rights Council in Geneva have survived the departure of the U.S. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) in Vienna continues despite the withdrawal of the U.S. and many others. The World Health Organization (WHO), notwithstanding its visible shortcomings, will survive U.S. threats. The reasons are simple. Multilateral organisations serve desperately felt global needs of the vast membership. The pandemic has reinforced the desire for greater global cooperation amongst most states.

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So, as the current multilateral order is unlikely to capsize, will it fall prey to the ‘wolf warriors’ of China posing as the new defenders of the established order? It is true that Chinese nationals head four multilateral organisations. It is also true that Chinese nationals have failed in campaigns to head UNESCO and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO).

Despite contributing nearly 10% of the UN’s budget, Chinese nationals are not exactly overrepresented in terms of staff positions, unlike many other countries whose personnel occupy more than half of the percentage of their financial contribution. Take the Chinese language

interpreters out and there is a further decline. If the head count of senior staff from UN regular and peacekeeping budgets is taken together, that percentage falls dramatically, although China contributes 14% of the peacekeeping budget. Of course, Chinese announcements of voluntary contributions made at international organisations need to be taken with a pinch of salt. They usually encompass all contributions — bilateral, plurilateral and multilateral — on a specific theme. By those indices, many contribute much more.

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China has certainly risen up the multilateral pantheon and is able to better promote its interests. It has warded off attacks against it in multilateral fora, at times with the aid of the heads of these organisations. However, it is yet to display an ability to set the multilateral agenda and dominate the discourse on an array of issues, in the manner that the U.S. once indispensably did. China’s flagship venture, the Belt and Road Initiative, remains only on the fringes of multilateral fora. Neither in monetary terms nor in substantive inputs are there portents of a ‘Chinese takeover’.

Amidst this, multilateral bodies are populated by a plethora of small and middle states quietly working to restore equilibrium, when the balance tends to shift. Capture of the existing multilateral order by a new hegemon is antithetical to the ethos of multilateralism. Multilateralism thrives on the notion of the Lilliputians tying up Gulliver — old or new.

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The choices for the evolving multilateral order are not binary, as portrayed sometimes. Between collapse and capture there are other pathways. Multilateral architecture places premium on structures over functions, processes over substance. It slows down change of any sort. The same processes that have stalled change in the past will militate against a takeover in the future.

Does that mean that multilateralism will meander meaninglessly? Meander it perhaps will; meaninglessly perhaps not. The ‘pluri-laterals’ and the emerging ‘mini-laterals’ each have their place in terms of international agenda setting, but global norm-setting requires an inclusivity that they lack.

Being able to shape the discourse at an incipient stage is a good perch to be on. Issue-specific ‘coalitions of the willing’ are catalysts. As a growing power, India needs to avail of such avenues. However, by themselves, these will not do justice to the depth and variety of India’s interests and our stakes in global cooperation. Also, they are not holistic solutions in ensuring global acceptance of norms.

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Responses of states during the COVID-19 crisis point to more emphasis on sovereign decision making than before. The imprimatur for acting on behalf of the global community is not going to be available easily. On myriad issues, from sustainable development to the environment, from climate change to pandemics and cyberspace to outer space, the demands for ‘nothing about us without us’ are likely to increase. Since stakeholders perceive that their stakes have risen, they will call for enhanced engagement. Convening such stakeholders in pursuit of global goals is the essence of multilateralism.

Neither permitting the capsizing of the multilateral order nor allowing it to be captured is in our interest. Since we visualise the world as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, support for multilateralism will have to remain a primary pursuit. Unlike in other realms where quantum leaps are common, in multilateral diplomacy, incrementalism pays dividends. To unseat a permanent member from

the International Court of Justice took us seven decades. To get Masood Azhar designated as a terrorist took us a decade. We need to patiently promote reforms while building partnerships to avail opportunities which may arise for more fundamental change. We need to bide our time without hiding our intent.

Syed Akbaruddin has served as India's Permanent Representative at the U.N.

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