

A REVIVAL OF MULTILATERALISM, STEERED BY INDIA

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

The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has brought out in sharp relief the compelling reality that has been staring us in the face for the past several years. This reality has two aspects. One, that most challenges confronting the world and likely to confront it in the future, are cross-national in character. They respect no national boundaries and are not amenable to national solutions. Two, these challenges are cross-domain in nature, with strong feedback loops. A disruption in one domain often cascades into parallel disruptions in other domains.

Thus the use of chemical fertilizers and toxic pesticides may promote food security but have injurious health effects, undermining health security. Whether at the domestic or the international level, these inter-domain linkages need to be understood and inform policy interventions. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect this awareness.

From virtual conferencing to real leadership

The intersection of cross-national and cross-domain challenges demand multilateral approaches. They require empowered international institutions of governance. Underlying these must be a spirit of internationalism and solidarity, a sense of belonging to a common humanity. But over the past decade and more, the world has been moving in the reverse direction. There has been an upsurge in narrow nationalism, an assertion of parochial interests over pursuit of shared interests and a fostering of competition among states rather than embracing collaboration. COVID-19 has brought these deepening contradictions into very sharp relief. This is a global challenge which recognises no political boundaries. It is intimately linked to the whole pattern of large-scale and high-density food production and distribution. It is a health crisis but is also spawning an economic crisis through disrupting global value chains and creating a simultaneous demand shock. It is a classic cross-national and cross-domain challenge.

But interventions to deal with the COVID-19 crisis are so far almost entirely at the national level, relying on quarantine and social distancing. There is virtually no coordination at the international level. We are also seeing a blame game erupt between China and the United States which does not augur well for international cooperation and leadership. While this is the present state of play, the long-term impact could follow alternative pathways. One, the more hopeful outcome would be for countries to finally realise that there is no option but to move away from nationalistic urges and embrace the logic of international cooperation through revived and strengthened multilateral institutions and processes.

The other more depressing consequence may be that nationalist trends become more intense, countries begin to build walls around themselves and even existing multilateralism is further weakened. Institutions such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization which are already marginalised may become increasingly irrelevant. There could be a return to autarkic economic and trade policies and an even deeper and more pervasive anti-globalisation sentiment. Unless there is a conscious effort to stem this through a reaffirmation of multilateralism, we are looking at a very depressing decade ahead. This is when the world needs leadership and statesmanship, both in short supply. This is in contrast to the U.S.-led response to the global financial and economic crisis of 2008 when the G-20 summit was born and a coordinated response prevented catastrophic damage to the global economy. Is there a role here for India which is a key G-20 country, the world's fifth largest economy and with a long tradition of international activism and promotion of rule-based multilateralism?

In this context, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remarks at the recent *The Economic Times* Global Business Summit are to be welcomed. While speaking of the COVID-19 crisis, he said, "Like today, the world is facing a huge challenge in the form of Corona Virus. Financial institutions have also considered it a big challenge for the financial world. Today, we all have to face this challenge together. We have to be victorious with the power of our resolution of 'Collaborate to Create'."

Coronavirus | Prime Minister Modi calls for COVID-19 Emergency Fund for SAARC

He went on to observe that while the world today is "inter-connected, inter-related and also interdependent", it has "not been able to come on a single platform or frame a Global Agenda, a global goal of how to overcome world poverty, how to end terrorism, how to handle Climate Change issues."

Mr. Modi lauded his government's policy of seeking friendship with all countries as contrasted from the earlier policy of non-alignment. He seemed to suggest that non-alignment was a defensive policy which advocated "equal distance from every country". Now, he claimed, India was still "neutral" — presumably meaning non-alignment — "but not on the basis of distance but on the basis of friendship".

He cited India's friendship with Iran and Saudi Arabia, and with the U.S. as well as Russia. Elaborating on this, he added, "There was a time when people were neutral by creating equal distance, but we are now neutral by creating equal friendship. Today we are being friends and trying to walk together. This is the very essence of India's foreign policy and the economic policy of India today."

Mr. Modi may wish to distinguish his foreign policy from that of his predecessors, but what he describes as its "essence" is hardly distinguishable from the basic principles of Indian foreign policy since Nehru. India's non-alignment was anything but defensive. The international peace-keeping contribution that the Prime Minister referred to has its origins in Nehru's sense of international responsibility.

India has always professed its desire to have friendly relations with all countries but has been equally firm in safeguarding its interests when these are threatened. India's non-alignment did not prevent it from forging strong and mutually beneficial partnerships with major countries. The India-Soviet partnership from 1960-1990 is an example just as the current strategic partnership with the U.S. is. The foreign policy of his predecessors had been rooted in India's civilisational sense, its evolving place in the international system and its own changing capabilities. Their seminal contributions should be acknowledged and built upon rather than proclaim a significant departure. The Prime Minister's plea for global collaboration to deal with a densely inter-connected world is in line with India's traditional foreign policy. A leadership role in mobilising global collaboration, more specifically in fighting COVID-19 would be in keeping with India's traditional activism on the international stage. The Prime Minister has shown commendable initiative in convening leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation nations for a regional collaborative effort on COVID-19. This should be followed by an international initiative, either through the G-20 or through the U.N.

The Prime Minister made no reference to the role of the U.N., the premier multilateral institution, as a global platform for collaborative initiatives. There may have been irritation over remarks by the UN Secretary General on India's domestic affairs and the activism displayed by the UN Commissioner for Human Rights on the Citizenship (Amendment) Act controversy. This should not influence India's long-standing commitment to the U.N. as the only truly inclusive global platform enjoying international legitimacy despite its failings. If one has to look for a "single

platform” where a Global Voice could be created, as the Prime Minister suggested, surely a reformed and strengthened U.N. should be on India’s agenda.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents India with an opportunity to revive multilateralism, become a strong and credible champion of internationalism and assume a leadership role in a world that is adrift. The inspiration for this should come from reaffirming the well springs of India’s foreign policy since its Independence rather than seeking to break free.

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