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Multilateralism in Disarray: A Reality Check for India

Author

Hemant Krishan Singh

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Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group is among India's oldest independent think tanks with its primary focus on international and strategic issues of critical national interest. Over the past decades, the Delhi Policy Group has established itself in both domestic and international circles, particularly in the area of national security.

In keeping with India's increasing global profile as a leading power and the accompanying dynamism of India's foreign and security policy, the Delhi Policy Group has expanded its focus areas to include India's broader regional and global role; India's initiatives to strengthen its strategic periphery; India's political, security and connectivity challenges and policies across the Indo-Pacific; and the strategic partnerships that advance India's rise. To support these goals, the DPG undertakes research, publishes policy reports and organises conferences on strategic and geo-political, geo-economic, and defence and security issues.

Author

Ambassador Hemant Krishan Singh, Director General, Delhi Policy Group

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(Photographs top to bottom)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the 74th session of the UNGA on September 27, 2019. Source: Ministry of External Affairs, India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi attending the Extraordinary G20 Virtual Leaders' Summit via video conferencing on March 26, 2020 to discuss Covid-19. Source: Twitter/PMO

Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organisation (WHO) cautioned against politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic in a press conference on April 8, 2020 (file photo). Source: UN News

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by

Hemant Krishan Singh

A Deepening Malaise

With the world order already under stress from power flux and disruptive change, the Coronavirus pandemic has thrown all of humanity into turmoil. Global uncertainty has deepened. We could be witnessing the transformational moment of our lifetimes. Globalisation as we have known it over recent decades stands exposed in ways that it might never be the same again. Globalist purpose itself, given its outdated and unreformed vehicle of UN multilateral institutions, has to be entirely reimagined and reshaped to serve the collective interests of the international community more effectively, equitably and with greater legitimacy.



Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organisation (WHO) cautioned against politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic in a press conference on April 8, 2020 (file photo). Source: UN News

We are now also witnessing the glaring deficit of accountability, competence and credibility of a politicised UN bureaucracy. When member-states are asked to condone malfeasance as a human failing, we know that it is time to draw the line. This impression is only reinforced by the fact that the WHO and the UN system have been evasive on the pandemic, short on mitigation strategies and gratuitous in handing out advice to avoid “stigmatisation” in national response. The institutional decay runs deep; business as usual is not an option.

Not surprisingly, an Indian representative in a UN body reportedly stated on April 11, 2020: “A new restructuring of the UN Agencies will be necessary... Most of the UN Bodies have become untenable and unsuitable for the current times... I am confident that the role of UN Agencies shall be seriously and deeply analysed in the post coronavirus world.”¹

India and Multilateralism

So this is perhaps an opportune moment to examine the historical perspective on these important issues. It is also high time that our public discourse and understanding about the nature and purpose of multilateralism moves beyond its doctrinaire and ideological moorings of the past.²

India was a signatory to “The Declaration by the United Nations” on January 1, 1942 which led to the founding of the UN.³ Multilateralism has been a core principle of Indian foreign policy. In fact, India has remained steadfast to its multilateralist commitment despite the great betrayal by the UN Security Council in 1949, when an Indian complaint against foreign aggression was deviously converted by the great powers of the day into a so-called territorial dispute. The consequences of this painful legacy linger to the day, with the UN bureaucracy regularly overstepping its remit and rendering unsought advice to our vibrant democracy of 1.3 billion on how to manage our domestic affairs.

Meanwhile, India has consistently worked to strengthen multilateralism by seeking reform of the UN, the Bretton Woods System and the WTO. It has joined the Paris Accord, assumed a major role and exceeded its targets in mitigating climate change. It has initiated the “Global Solar Alliance” and the “Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure”. It has joined the “Alliance for Multilateralism”. It is a leading and proactive member of the G-20 major economies. In the Indo-Pacific, India pursues rules based architecture to strengthen the forces of cooperative multilateralism.

The question, however, remains whether and to what extent India’s vital interests across the realms of security and development are being taken into account by the UN system. Multilateralism must not be a matter of faith; it must be driven by robust pragmatism and geopolitical realism. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi had observed in his address to the UN General Assembly on

¹ <https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/india-united-nations-niti-aayog-covid-19-coronavirus-stigmatization-6357642/>

² <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/world-health-organisation-coronavirus-crisis-india-delhi-china-un6356921/>

³ <https://www.unmultimedia.org/searchers/yearbook/page.jsp?volume=1946-47&page=36&searchType=advanced>

September 27, 2019, the face of the world is changing and “we will have to give new direction and energy to multilateralism and the United Nations.”⁴



Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the 74th session of the UNGA on September 27, 2019. Source: Ministry of External Affairs, India

So, a reality check and a course correction is required, keeping in mind that India is now an acknowledged major power.

Nation States and Multilateralism

First and foremost, it bears reiteration that nation states remain the mainstay of the world order. In any period of history, major powers have always tended to put self-interest first; they do not as a rule like to outsource their vital interests to international organisations or a multilateralist order. Thus, multilateralism is not a natural condition of global politics that can be taken for granted, or pursued for its own sake.

At the same time, there is ample historical evidence that ever since the Westphalian Order began in 1648, major powers have come together after catastrophic events in the belief that a collective system can help maintain relative peace and moderate power politics. It took two world wars and a half century of unprecedented bloodshed for the US to shape the post-World War II liberal order and its multilateral institutions.

⁴ https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31878/Prime_Ministers_address_to_the_UNGA

That said, nations are not, and are unlikely to become, subsidiaries of some remote, globalist international order. The UN system is not global government. This is all the more so in Asia, where ideological and systemic differences leave little room for post-national presumptions prevalent in the European Union. Asia's nation states do not pool their sovereignty, even as they build cooperative regional mechanisms for collective benefit.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that overarching global issues require global solutions, pursued in a manner that is compatible with the requirements of nation states to protect their sovereign interests. The importance of such multilateralism for global good derives legitimacy from a universally applicable rules based architecture which protects the rights and aspirations of all nations, irrespective of size.

It follows that the success of multilateral institutions ultimately depends on their ability to deliver, more or less equitably, on this premise. The UN System, sadly, has been failing and adrift for long. Its biggest challenge today is a failure to reform, a failure to evolve, a deficit of legitimacy and an inability to address the economic, technological and security imperatives of this century. So, who gains from it? Under-represented Asia, which is emerging as the world's economic engine and is now central to global geopolitics, appears to benefit little.

Failed Promises

It is being argued, with some reason, that the multilateral system is breaking down amidst deepening geopolitical competition between the great powers of the day, the US and China. However, it is instructive to recall that there is nothing new or unusual about great power rivalry, which is a permanent condition. Throughout its initial decades, the UN System made steady progress with the normative framework of international law and rules based order despite the antagonism of an intense Cold War. So what has changed that we are facing a crisis of multilateralism today?

When history was presumed to have ended in 1991 with the triumph of liberal democracy and market economy, it was argued that economic interdependence and globalization would henceforth be the permanent drivers of global peace and prosperity. A world freed from geopolitics would erode sovereign barriers and provide limitless opportunities for business to the multinational corporations of the victorious West. In this flawed argumentation, there was a presumption of the fading relevance of the nation state and redundancy of inter-governmental institutions. Ironically, while recourse to multilateralism has gradually lost ground ever since, discourses of

national sovereignty and economic nationalism have now returned and the outdated, unequal structure of multilateral institutions stands painfully exposed. There is growing progress towards global multipolarity but also weaker multilateralism.

The fact is, the multilateral system cannot deliver without the sustained commitment of major powers to global institutions and a rules based order. Multilateralism is not working today because it is not being allowed to work, except where it serves great power interests. The global financial and economic crisis of 2008 had brought major economies of the G-20 together. But subsequent policies pursued by great powers, particularly their more recent unilateralist and isolationist postures, have further weakened the already creaking structure of multilateralism. More than ever before, it has become difficult to address critical global issues of the day. Meaningful reform of the UN Security Council has become even less likely when it is needed the most.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi attending the Extraordinary G20 Virtual Leaders' Summit via video conferencing on March 26, 2020 to discuss Covid-19.

Source: Twitter/PMO

The reality of the prevailing global order is a virtual standoff in the balance of power between the main protagonists, the US and China. Cohesion among the Western Allies, which has been central to upholding the post-World War II multilateral system, has frayed. China, meanwhile, is aggressively pushing its "Asian Consensus" and the vague notion of a "Community of shared future in

the New Era". Both sides are jockeying for strategic space and using multilateral institutions as means of leverage. Nothing defines this situation better than China and Russia joining hands to stall and stymie debate on COVID-19 at the UN Security Council, belying hopes that that the threat of a raging pandemic with unimaginable consequences for human security can finally trigger some decisive, collective action.

This juncture can prove disastrous for the UN System. Expectations that the UN can ever deliver on the laudable principles of the UN Charter in the service of humanity have receded, even though the UN may survive for want of an alternative.

Conclusions

When the narrow interests of five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council alone determine what constitutes a threat to global security, public health, social progress and economic growth, we have truly reached an impasse. Only a completely reformed UN System, which not only reflects contemporary realities but is also capable of continuous evolution, can help restore the relevance, credibility and legitimacy of UN multilateralism. Meanwhile, a 21st Century agenda for much needed UN rule making remains unattended: digital technologies and the new economy; cyber security and asymmetric threats; radicalism and non-state actors; climate change and global health; peaceful uses of outer space; and revisionist challenges to the global commons, among others.

No progress will be possible unless the great powers can revive a shared commitment to a reformed multilateralism as a global public good. That, alas, does not appear to be on the cards. In the prevailing scenario, India must pursue a realist agenda of enhancing national power and safeguarding its interests without reposing undue faith in an exhausted UN multilateralism, tending only to matters which bear direct relevance to its vital concerns. It must invariably bear in mind that even in the best of times, multilateralism will never be far removed from power politics. These are unusual times.



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