

IMPERATIVE OF RESURRECTING MULTILATERALISM



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In his address to a recently held meeting of the ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks, Indian Foreign Minister, Dr S Jaishankar remarked that "multilateralism has failed the test as the world lives through an unprecedented challenge in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic which has thrown up 'trust' as the most valued commodity in international relations today".

"Just when multilateralism was most in demand, it did not rise to the occasion. If we saw little leadership, it was not just due to the admittedly anachronistic nature of key international organisations. Equally, it reflected the intensely competitive nature of current international politics," he added.

This sums up the current state of the world, and there is a remarkable similarity between the world that we are witnessing today and that about a century ago - during the inter-war years, which resulted in the demise of the League of Nations.

While at that time a rising power refused to join the international comity of nations, this time another rising (and expansionist) power is doing everything that goes against 'trust'. It in this context we need to understand the implications and aftermath of a number of disruptions that the world has witnessed recently.

Starting with an expansionist approach in the South China Sea and in the Himalayas, and followed by Sino-American trade and technology war and the COVID-19 pandemic, there is complete disregard to a rules-based multilateral system of governance on the part of a regime which, ironically, benefitted most from it in the sphere of trade, connectivity and poverty reduction.

Therefore, what is needed is 'trust-building' among the nations for the delivery of global public good in a fair and equitable manner so that there is peace, security, stability and prosperity for all. That is possible if a better sense about the virtues of being a 'good international citizen' prevails. Can it

Multilateralism is at its lowest point in recent history

happen? What should be the role of traditional as well as emerging powers for making that happen?

Given this Background and Context, CUTS International organised two webinars on the imperative of resurrecting multilateralism on 3rd and 18th September 2020. More than 150 participants from all over the world including government, think tanks, academia and civil society groups virtually participated.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

Importance of multilateralism

The current situation shows us that there is no alternative to address the scale of problems faced by the world including those related to climate change without adhering to the principles and norms of the multilateral system.

The global boat on which the entire people on earth can travel is sinking and a joint attempt can only keep it from sinking

There can be no other important mission in the world today than resurrecting multilateralism owing to the fact that we are fully inter-connected and inter-dependent. Suggestions were made to make the vaccine for Covid-19 pandemic a global public good in the greater global interest.

For doing it, there should be strong and impartial international institutions.

Multilateralism in its low

There is a gradual reduction of the faith in multilateral institutions around the world, which is a matter of great concern. Multilateralism is at its low when it is needed the most, due to the current global challenges such as the pandemic and climate change. Multilateralism reaching its low point in the recent past is not a sudden happening.

It happened gradually and there are numerous long term and short term factors for this decline. The divergence of values and interests of sovereign powers changed over the past 30 years.

Increasing inequalities around the world has created an anti-globalisation sentiment.

International cooperation has become largely obsolete in the previous years.

Today, from many sides, there is an effort to create political capitals denouncing the United Nations and other international organisations. Insufficiencies of legally binding and non-binding international instruments are restricting their ability to hold multilateralism to its fullest.

Resurrection of multilateralism to its fullest should be an utmost priority for all

Resurrection is a necessity

The faith in international institutions must be rebuilt and the international instruments should be updated and strengthened according to the need of the day. International institutions should act in the interest of all.

They should be given the freedom to exercise their power without any biases. Newer approaches can be adopted as a solution to resurrect multilateralism. Polyilateralism is such a solution which was proposed in the discussions.

If nation states seem reluctant in sharing their sovereign rights, other actors such as businesses, non-governmental organisations, think tanks, academic institutions and mega cities have to be included and provided with an opportunity to exercise

Forgetting short term losses and focusing on long term gains of multilateralism is needed to win over the Covid-19 exacerbated anti-globalisation sentiments

their influence and power as part of the cause.

Multilateralism has to be revitalised through the application of a multi-stakeholder approach. People should understand the values that polyilateralism can bring for global peace, security, stability and prosperity. Mobilisation at the local level is required to tackle the problems, which currently does not exist.

Need reforms and revitalisation

Recreating or redrawing of multilateralism is not possible in today's world. The rules-based order created in 1945 was beautiful because it shaped an amazing multilateral framework. It has flaws, which should be corrected.

Reforming and revitalising multilateralism from within is possible and necessary

The current system of multilateralism has to be upgraded and improved from within. Countries such as India, France, Germany, Japan, China, South Korea, United Kingdom, Brazil, United States and Russia

have to play a greater role in encouraging cooperation, for example, through shaping a stronger leadership for multilateral institutions.

Equity and trust-building

Every member of the international community should get equal voice and power in a multilateral world. This is a chance for like-minded countries that have a common agenda to come together in a multilateral world.

This can lead to exclusion of other voices. Therefore, all countries should be heard and should have equal rights and voice for resurrecting multilateralism in a multipolar world.

Multilateral cooperation can be built and fostered by regional institutions

Democratisation of international relations is very important in today's context. The issue of equity is to be addressed while reforming multilateralism. Trust-building is needed among nations for the delivery of global public good. Different countries have different values and they are intrinsic to their sovereignty.

Therefore, it is important to have a balanced approach for understanding and exercising the values of 'agree to disagree'.

Foster regional cooperation

Regional economic communities should not just discuss regional issues but act, such as the 'Association for Southeast Asian Nations' does, to deliberate upon issues on which global cooperation is needed.

It is important to foster local level cooperation for larger global goals. Regional institutions can build momentum at the local level and help provide a trusted edifice for international cooperation for global causes.

Take interests of all members

Many countries have sentiments against globalisation due to inequitable growth and growth without employment. International institutions recognising the needs of all its members and acting for everyone will help build trust among members. This is the most important requirement to resurrect multilateralism.

SPEAKERS

- **Pradeep Mehta**, Secretary General, CUTS International
- **Pascal Lamy**, Chair, Paris Peace Forum
- **Lakshmi Puri**, Former Assistant Secretary General, United Nations
- **Jorge Heine**, Research Professor, Pardee School of Global Studies, Boston University and Former Ambassador of Chile to India
- **Bruce Stokes**, Executive Director, Transatlantic Task Force: Together or Alone? German Marshall Fund
- **Sabina Dewan**, President and Executive Director, JustJobs Network
- **Kishore Mahbubani**, Distinguished Fellow, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore
- **Lydia Kulik**, Head of India Studies at the SKOLKOVO Institute of Emerging Market Studies, Moscow School of Management
- **Vijay Latha Reddy**, Former Deputy National Security Advisor of India
- **Henry Huiyao Wang**, Founder and President, Center for China and Globalization
- **Asoke Mukerji**, Former Ambassador of India to the United Nations
- **Bipul Chatterjee**, Executive Director, CUTS International

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