

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Is Multilateralism Dead?

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S*ummary*

Cooperation and collaboration through multilateral institutions are the only viable and sustainable responses to a world grappling with complex global challenges.

Given that some of the most significant institutions of the United Nations (UN) have failed miserably in discharging the functions for which they were established, many argue that multilateralism has withered away. The most prominent and glaring example quoted is the abject failure of the UN Security Council (UNSC) in ensuring peace, stability and security in the world. This was the express purpose for which the UNSC was established in 1945 at the inception of this Institution. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has been raging for the last three years and seven months with ever-increasing intensity, violence, death toll and destruction, but no end appears to be in sight. The UNSC has failed to even adopt a Resolution to enforce a cease-fire because of the veto by Russia, one of the permanent members of the UNSC.

Similar is the case with the Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza, continuing relentlessly after the heinous terrorist attack that killed 1,200 Israeli civilians and the capture of 250 Israeli hostages by Hamas on 7 October 2023. The expanse of the conflict has widened to cover not only the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Syria and Iran, but now even Qatar, which was an essential mediator for the return of the remaining hostages and establishment of a ceasefire in Gaza. No endgame for this conflict also appears to be in sight while tensions, volatility and deep anxiety in West Asia and beyond continue to rise.

The second example adduced is the total collapse of an important institution like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which, along with its predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), has successfully served since 1945 as the bedrock of rules and regulations of the multilateral trading architecture. Global growth, productivity, investment, employment and other economic activities are linked to a stable and predictable trading and economic environment. These have been severely vitiated over the last few decades, particularly since China joined the WTO in 2001. While China succeeded in gaming the system to its advantage, the US business and industry actively colluded with it.

In recent years, specific actions of the US in rendering the Appellate Body totally ineffective and paralysed, and inflicting the tariff shocks on the whole world in complete violation of its commitments under the WTO, have upended the functioning of the WTO with serious consequences for peace, security and prosperity of the world, particularly of the Global South countries. The crisis in the WTO is reflected in the fact that it has ceased to be a forum to negotiate future multilateral trading agreements. The Doha Round/Doha Development Agenda, which was launched in 2001, has so far been able to come up with only two, not unimportant but not very consequential agreements, one on Trade Facilitation and the other on Fisheries. Most of the critical issues, like agriculture, market access, services, etc., continue to be in limbo because of the disruption caused to the system over the last few years.

Another instance, though not of the severity and magnitude of the above two, is the conduct of the World Health Organisation (WHO) immediately after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019/early 2020. It is generally believed that if the WHO's top leadership had been unbiased and more proactive, particularly at the start of the pandemic, the rapid spread and destruction caused could have been controlled and curtailed significantly. Some other UN agencies that have courted considerable controversy and faced significant backlash are the Human Rights Council (as well as its predecessor, the UN Commission on Human Rights), the UN Secretariat and its internal administrative and justice systems, etc.

The rapidly emerging regional and minilateral groupings appear to be driven by rising nationalism, geopolitical tensions, and global power shifts. Many countries prioritise national interests, leading to unilateral policies undermining collective action and existing agreements. Increasing geopolitical competition and a decline in trust between nations complicate efforts to find consensus on global issues. The decline in liberalism, coupled with a postcolonial backlash against Western dominance, has weakened the foundations of the multilateral system. Institutions such as the UN and WTO struggle to respond effectively to crises. They are facing challenges to their functioning, such as the paralysis of the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism.

This trend is evident in disillusionment and frustration with globalisation, the rise of protectionist policies, and the challenge to established multilateral agreements and organisations. As a result, many nations are shifting towards plurilateral and regional agreements, seeking strategic autonomy, independence of decision-making, and focusing on regional partnerships to act as a buffer against uncertainties and advance their interests. They wish to hedge their bets and leverage their options in the face of growing unpredictability, principally due to the disruptive actions in security and economic areas, particularly by the three prominent global actors, viz. the USA, China and Russia.

As a result of the precipitous decline in the effectiveness of multilateralism, countries are shifting to plurilateralism, mini-lateralism and the renewed pursuit of strategic autonomy. Some examples of the pluri-lateral and/or mini-lateral arrangements include the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, G20, The Quad, the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative (BBIN), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), among others. Some of these, like the G20, BIMSTEC, BRICS, etc., focus more on economic cooperation, while others, like the SCO, are more security-oriented groupings. However, it has been observed that these distinctions between the two sets are getting blurred and largely fading with time.

Multilateral institutions and a rules-based international order serve the interests of the weakest countries the most, be they weak economically or in safeguarding their security. For developing countries, the erosion of multilateralism increases insecurity and stifles their voice in global affairs. The weakening of cooperation at the multilateral level also makes it harder to achieve consensus and advance solutions for critical issues like climate change, trade, terrorism and human rights. In Africa, multilateral platforms immediately after the Second World War were used for decolonisation and to oppose apartheid, but the current system's erosion leads to fragmentation and greater insecurity. For countries of the Global South, the weakening of multilateral institutions reduces their ability to advocate for their interests, pushing them toward South-South cooperation and self-reliance. In the European Union, the rise of nationalism and protectionism threatens the EU's coherence, with forces like Brexit and other centrifugal tendencies challenging its existence and normative power.

The aphorism about the existence of God by Voltaire, the prominent French Enlightenment writer, in 1769 could, with a suitable modification, apply to multilateralism also: “If multilateralism did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it.” This emphasises the indispensable benefits of multilateral cooperation and international institutions like the United Nations. In a world grappling with complex global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, economic crises, energy transition, digital economy, AI, terrorism, peace and security, and sustainable development, cooperation and collaboration through multilateral institutions is the only viable and sustainable response.

Without this framework for collective action, unilateral approaches would prove inadequate and even dangerous, leading to greater political, economic, and security misadventures and a less stable world. It is imperative to create an equitable and balanced security and financial architecture to manage shared challenges and protect against the dominance of any one or two powers. One of the vital reasons why the UNSC does not work effectively or efficiently is that it has not changed with time. The UNSC was established in 1945 when the UN had only 53 members. Today, there are 193 members of the UN. Strength and composition of the UNSC needs to be changed by adding countries like India, Japan, Germany, Brazil and others to make it egalitarian and unbiased.

Suitable reform of the multilateral institutions is vital for their coherent and constructive functioning. Only then will they be able to inspire confidence, earn credibility of the member states, and fulfil the objectives for which they were established. Failing this, the world will splinter into opposing power blocs pitted against each other. This could spell disaster for the world, but particularly for the weaker members of the Global South, who do not command significant military or economic power to safeguard and promote their sovereignty and financial interests.

About the Author



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