

China India Dialogue

The (insecure) future of multilateralism in Asia

Abstract

The prospects for enhancing international cooperation to respond to the major political, developmental, and environmental challenges facing humanity today depend on reforming multilateralism. An interlinked world of peace, security, and development requires greater inclusiveness, equal participation in decision-making, and enhanced connectivity. Asia, home to 6 billion of the global population of 8 billion people, is pivotal for this effort, in which Europe has a crucial role to play.

Keywords: UN Charter – reformed multilateralism – sustainable development – connectivity – Asia.

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India has been a founder-member of contemporary multilateral institutions since the League of Nations in 1920. India participated in the establishment of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (July 1944), the United Nations (June 1945) and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade/World Trade Organization (October 1947-January 1995). India prioritized her participation in multilateralism by focusing on “the economic prospects of all people, of the underdog in particular, of those who have suffered and travailed without avail for centuries” in peace, equality, and dignity (Mudaliar, 1946).

Two multilateral achievements have played a crucial role in supporting India’s priorities. The UN General Assembly (UNGA)’s Decolonization Resolution (UNGA, 1960) gave substance to the UN Charter’s provision of equal decision-making based on one-country one-vote, laying the foundation for India’s policy of strategic independence through multi-polarity. The convergence of an interlinked peace, security, and development paradigm (UNGA, 2015) provides the framework for India’s priority of sustainable development.

How has multilateralism’s support for strategic autonomy and sustainable

development impacted on Asia? Three examples illustrate the positive outcomes. The UN Security Council (UNSC) endorsement of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran’s nuclear program (UNSCR, 2015) assured the unrestricted flow of 65% of energy supplies from the Gulf region to other Asian countries (EIA, 2019). The UNGA’s unanimous adoption of Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development with its 17 goals (UNGA, 2015) promised to lift almost 320 million people in Asia (from a global population of 766 million) out of extreme poverty (World Bank, 2017). The Paris Agreement (UNCC, 2015) encouraged national efforts of large economies like China and India to cut greenhouse gas emissions and limit the rise of the average global temperature to below 2 degrees compared with pre-industrial levels.

Since March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO)’s inadequate response to the Covid pandemic has catalyzed a growing negative perception regarding multilateralism (European Parliament, 2020). The World Bank estimates that by the end of 2021, as many as 150 million people worldwide will be dragged down into extreme poverty due to the pandemic (World Bank, 2020). Beyond the WHO, the ineffectiveness of multilateralism is attributable to the UNSC, which failed to

provide political support for a coherent multilateral response to Covid-19 between March 2020 and July 2020 (UNSCR, 2020), due to differences between two of its permanent members.

From this perspective, the success of multilateralism must be measured by its impact on global welfare. The eradication of extreme poverty and bridging of inequalities between and within countries are priorities. The pivotal building block of effective multilateralism remains the early reform of the UNSC, as unanimously agreed to by world leaders during the UN 60th anniversary Summit (UNGA, 2005). Unfortunately, this reform continues to be blocked by some permanent members of the UNSC, who are opposed to text-based negotiations in the UNGA for amending the UN Charter (Xinhua, 2019).

Polarization between the major powers has encouraged the emergence of regional or plurilateral arrangements. These initiatives cannot substitute for multilateralism since their scope is not universal. Nor do they restrain the application of unilateral measures like economic sanctions, applied extra-territorially, or protectionist barriers in global markets.

This is the challenge facing multilateralism, especially in Asia and Africa. Most conflicts on the UNSC's agenda today are in these two continents (SCR, 2021), affecting the lives of 6 billion people out of a global population of about 8 billion.

India has a direct stake in effective multilateralism. In 2019, 40% of India's GDP was contributed by her international trade (World Bank, 2021). India's aspiration to become a \$5 trillion economy by 2025

(WEF, 2019), and the second largest economy in the world by 2050 (PwC, 2021), depends on greater international cooperation. India's proposal for "reformed multilateralism" focuses on the key priorities of equity and representativeness in multilateral decision-making to create "human-centric globalization" (Modi, 2020). India's approach to achieve multilaterally agreed goals depends upon ground-up national efforts and a multiple stakeholder participation in sustainable development activities (UN, 2020).

Reforming multilateralism needs political will to review the treaty provisions of the UN Charter through a General Conference, as provided for in Article 109. Such a review would include deleting references to "enemy state" (also applied to Germany) in Articles 53 and 107, as well as Chapter XIII of the Charter which is redundant after the Trusteeship Council completed its work in 1994. The review would propose new provisions in the treaty to make multilateralism more effective in responding to challenges to peace, security, and development. A viable platform to bring about such a review is the Alliance for Multilateralism initiated by Germany (DW, 2019).

Effective multilateralism requires increased connectivity between its participating states. By 2050, China and India will become the first and second largest economies of the world (PwC, 2021). Multilateral connectivity proposals to promote international cooperation must use these two countries as the drivers of international cooperation, based on the principles of the UN Charter.

India's contemporary interest in international connectivity was launched with her "Act East" policy in 1992 (Kesavan, 2020). Today, India's connectivity projects cover the littoral and maritime domains of the Indian Ocean with her SAGAR policy (Modi, 2016). These projects are negotiated through inclusive processes and uphold the provisions of the multilateral UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). While the eastern thrust extends from the Bay of Bengal to Singapore and East Asia, the western thrust encompasses traditional sea lanes of communication through the Straits of Hormuz and the Red Sea. The early completion of the Chabahar Project will provide access to landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia through the Indian Ocean.

Europe's role in Asia was highlighted during the recent India-EU Virtual Summit on 8 May 2021. This role is underpinned by "shared interests, principles and values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights". Europe can contribute to the security, prosperity, and sustainable development of a "multi-polar world" anchored on Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement. Already, European participation in the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure and the International Solar Alliance, two global initiatives co-sponsored by India, illustrate how such a role can be implemented. Four connectivity corridors in the digital, energy, transport, and people-to-people spheres, with private sector participation and funding, will help to integrate Europe with Asia (MEA India, 2021).

The success of multilateralism in Asia will depend not only on the national efforts of

Asian countries like India and China, but also on their partners outside Asia. In this context, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) platform, established in 1996, will play a major role in creating the necessary external environment for this purpose. To make this happen, Europe will need to calibrate its interests in Asia with its relationships with the United States and Russia. The objective must be to prioritize international cooperation over confrontation as the leit-motif for multilateralism in the 21st century.

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