

The UN and the Future of Multilateralism in a Multipolar World: Navigating India's Way

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Speaking at the Valdai Club in Russia last year, India's Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar contended that a multipolar world with many players also meant a world of "weaker rules," implying a world of "stronger multipolarity" and "weaker multilateralism".¹ This remark reflects India's reading of the complex international landscape within which it has to navigate the protection and promotion of its national interest. The United Nations (UN), which has been the hallmark of multilateralism since the end of World War II, also reflects the prevailing power configuration of the current era. The UN took birth on the ashes of a multipolar Europe following the two World Wars, evolved through the bipolar world of the Cold War era, went through the phase of unipolar American supremacy post-Cold War and, despite flaws, remains the apex inter-governmental institution of global governance. India's rise, and more prominently its aspirations for a veto-wielding permanent membership at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), has been concurrent with the emergence of a multipolar world.

However, multipolarity, which is a reflection of the power configuration in the international system, is not directly proportional to multilateralism, which is at the heart of the UN system. Multilateralism is usually taken as a sine-qua-non of any institution that aspires to put the interest of a number of nation states, and not the national interest of one country alone. Does the working of the UN merely reflect a prevailing power configuration? Or, does it have the ability to restrain the great powers of the international system through a multilateral mechanism? Does India, a rising power with a claim to a permanent membership at the UNSC, intend to strengthen

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multilateralism? Or, is it in the pursuit of a status that will legitimise it as an unmistakable great power in the multipolar order? No doubt, India has been one of the earliest and most consistent exponents of the inherent spirit of multilateralism at the UN. Even its call for reform of the UNSC, and its inclusion as a permanent member, are largely based on the rationale of inclusive representation that better reflects the geopolitical realities of the 21st century. Last year, in his statement at the Ministerial meeting on the Alliance for Multilateralism, an initiative of France and Germany, the Indian Foreign Minister said,

The centrality of the United Nations to international relations and the WTO to international trade must be recognized, preserved and protected. Adherence to international law is also critical. But, if regimes and institutions are to be credible, they must also be contemporary.²

India has also professed that a multipolar world better serves its interests as well as global peace and stability. However, does multipolarity by itself lead to multilateralism in practice? Does stronger multipolarity necessarily strengthen multilateralism? While the multipolar structure seems to be taking cognisance of the rise of new power centres, the UNSC has been alleged to being out of touch with that reality. The world is undergoing a strategic flux, in which the US-led security and economic order has been weakening. The UNSC is clearly reflective of that security order which, according to many countries including India, requires that it adapt to the contemporary environment, and reform to become a more representative and inclusive decision-making process. What is the problem with the logic of allowing new power centres a greater say in how the international system is run? Since countries are inherently reluctant to share power or acknowledge a power transition, the primary problem for India is the presence of a country like China among the P-5. This remains the arch nemesis for India's claims at the UNSC. China has been a part of this apex power club since the early 1970s, following its normalisation of ties with the USA. Prior to this, the P-5 seat for China was occupied by the Republic of China (Taiwan). Thus, India has to navigate a complex politics of entitlement and representation at the UNSC in the face of obstacles coming from China with which it still has an unresolved border dispute, over which the two fought a war in 1962, and also engaged in a tense border standoff more recently. Despite recognising the mutual interests involved in greater engagement, India and China still have a lingering mistrust of each other's intentions, and there is a regional competition brewing between the two for strategic influence.

Multilateral institutions are established with the stated purpose of putting multilateral interests first over national interests. However, in reality, it will be naïve to think that those countries that establish multilateral institutions and become their members, will *not* try to use them to advance their own interests. The curse for multilateralism in multilateral institutions has been the influence of the most dominant country by dint of its capabilities, or an exclusive group of countries that take calls in the garb of multilateralism. In trying to advance multilateralism at the UN, and in the process of finding more space to negotiate its interests, India will have to deal with challenges borne out of the new great power dynamics between the USA and China that is increasingly showing regular instances of confrontation and aggressive competition. The emerging material balance between the two most powerful countries in the world is producing an environment wherein the multipolar order constantly finds itself on a ventilator in the face of a probable US-China power condominium or a great power conflict.

It is clear that the UNSC is a power club that, more than any other parameter, thrives on hard power politics. India's economic and military rise in the absolute sense is undoubtable. However, power is relative and relational in nature, and tends to be invariably compared and contrasted in international relations. From the non-alignment of the bipolar era to multi-alignment of the multipolar era, one of the essential characteristics of India's behaviour at multilateral settings, inside and outside the UN, has been its intention to maintain an independent agency of decision-making. At the UN and at other multilateral mechanisms, India's approach to the use of force, military alliances, UN peacekeeping operations, responsibility to protect, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, has been guided by its independent interpretation of fairness, even while trying to promote its national interest. India's view of what is responsible behaviour has often been guided by the exercise of autonomy in deciding its position on the merits of an issue, and not based on alliance commitments.

On platforms like the Eighteen Nation Disarmament Committee (ENDC) or the Conference on Disarmament (CD), where issues related to non-proliferation, arms race, and disarmament have been discussed and deliberated, India's approach has often been perceived by other major powers as lacking responsible behaviour. The USA and India increased their engagement in the new century, signing a civil nuclear agreement and the USA helping India to get a waiver at the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). However, India still refuses to sign the indefinitely extended Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT),

without the commitment of major powers to move towards nuclear disarmament in a time-bound phased manner. As India recalibrates its foreign policy direction, with more categorical great power aspirations based not just on normative parameters but more on hard core economic and military capabilities, it needs to come to terms with its own identity in the international system as well as others' perceptions of the image that it projects for external consumption. How would India exude responsible behaviour at the UN, when it has a multi-aligned foreign policy approach in a multipolar world? Will India's strategic embrace of the USA, even as it itself hedges its bets with a powerful China at the same time, produce new challenges for India's traction at the UN?

The one trait of its identity on the international platform that India takes pride in - independent decision-making - faces severe limitations. Is India counting on its strategic partnership with the USA to vouch for its great power candidature? Does India need a great power's recognition to be itself a great power in the international system? Will the USA only welcome India's entry verbally or also push for - and arm-twist other countries, particularly China - for India's entry as a permanent member of the UNSC? Even if the USA was willing, can it really do so - especially if the global balance of power becomes increasingly unfavourable to it? In the event that none of the P-5 members, besides giving lip service, is serious about the reform and more inclusive representation at the P-5 level, what would India's options be for making its voice not only heard but also listened to, at the UN? These are hard questions to ponder over by the Indian leadership and foreign policy bureaucracy, as they reboot India's toolkit to negotiate to attain its objectives in the international system. India's bridge-role between the developed and developing countries is one that it is well positioned, in principle, to make these changes. However, the real work is easier said than done, given India's domestic constraints and external compulsions. India's image is not simply that of a leader of the developing world. As it come to terms with its domestic socio-economic situation; it is also understood as being one of the largest economies which also possesses one of the largest militaries in the world, and so has aspirations to be at the high power table. Therefore, what is India's pragmatic strategy to get what it wants? Does it even know what it really wants? Will it give primacy to maintaining independent decision-making while traversing the UN multilateral system? Or, will it make new choices by getting closer to certain power centres through transactions that will give it the required wins which make some losses affordable?

The policy and practice of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries as opposed to the more Western notions and practices of humanitarian interventions and the responsibility to protect have been highly debated parameters and indicators of responsible behaviour in international relations. Western democracies have largely perceived India's position and policy in such matters as being more aligned with countries like China. However, as India enters into tighter strategic alignments with Western democracies like the USA, how will India manage its position on such issues? Would India like to be seen as some kind of a sovereignty hawk that gives utmost sanctity to the sovereignty wall, that considers a country to be the best judge of how it is to be governed and how its people are to be treated? Will India's rising capabilities and aspirations make it willing to shed this traditional identity, and adopt a more Western-oriented view of responsibility and interventionist attitude vis-à-vis the internal affairs of other countries? The former is an approach that India is familiar with; it is keeping with the policy of non-alignment and the practice of strategic autonomy. India has largely shied away from the interventionist approach, unless an imminent and clear danger to its core national interest has been perceived in its neighbourhood. Western perspectives of India's credentials as a democratic country have often been critical of India's reluctance to call out non-democratic forces in other countries. While India projects a policy of multi-alignment, and hedges its bets with a host of countries, it has tangibly moved towards greater political, security, and economic engagement with the global West in the 21st century.

Thus, what will be New Delhi's interpretation of responsibility pertaining to issues of human rights and the rise of non-democratic forces in countries, near and far? India has a certain broad alignment of views with other democracies in the West. However, India's own internal and external compulsions have meant that the democratic coming-of-age in India has had its own history of diverging from Western democracies at international platforms like the UN. There needs to be greater clarity in India's narrative as it aspires for a greater voice at the high table - a narrative around its rise as an international player that is indispensable in finding solutions to global problems. In this effort, India will find itself at a crossroads of deciding what to accept and what to forego to be where it wants to be. While maintaining consistency may not be a necessary requisite for foreign policy successes at multilateral settings, it is important to be clear about what India stands to gain by changing course in terms of ideational and material benefits, and what it stands to lose if it decides to keep doing what it has been doing.

The relationship between hegemony and multilateralism is an intriguing one. The US hegemony that came into being after the end of World War II was not built merely on the coercive power of its military capabilities. The multilateral order that the USA constructed in the security and economic realms have equally contributed to its hegemony having sustained in the international system. However, the same USA, on the pretext of imminent threats and present dangers has, more than any other country, flouted multilateralism, thus inviting scathing criticism regarding the legitimacy of its global leadership and responsible behaviour. Therefore, what should be India's narrative of global responsibility and leadership of multilateralism at a time when its most consequential partner in the multipolar era happens to be the USA?

America's credibility regarding its leadership of the multilateral order has suffered more with the advent of the Trump administration. President Trump's calls for "America First," his contempt for multilateral approaches, and the overt transactional direction that US foreign policy has taken has been a real dampener for multilateralism. Added to this, is the Brexit shock to the glow of European Union (EU) multilateralism as well as a move towards ultra-nationalism and protectionist tendencies across the world. Thus, the behaviour of great powers - and among great powers - at any given point of time is germane to the working of multilateralism in general, and particularly at the UN. Consistent and disruptive unilateral behaviour of the great powers throws up challenges that India has to manage in general, and particularly at the UN platform.

How would multilateralism at the UN survive and grow amidst great power politics? Should proponents of multipolarism try to overcome it and pave a new pathway? History is witness to multilateralism always having to negotiate great power politics. Multilateralism as a working order of the international system has been a constant feature, irrespective of the prevailing configuration of powers. Multilateral settings are established and sustained under great power patronage, even as lesser powers find it useful to constrain great power behaviour in the international system. Thus, there is no multilateralism and there is no UN minus great power politics. They are in fact, joined at the hip.

Multilateralism has always been, and will exist, as a means of identifying and finding solutions to some of the most pressing transnational issues. Sometimes, some issues will be relatively easier than others to create consensus among countries; in others, it will be difficult if the great powers of the day find it hard to create a consensus if it conflicts with their self interest.

International treaties, that are the backbone of international law, are still largely the product of multilateral negotiations. Conflict resolution and conflict prevention across the world, still require different permutations and combinations of multilateral frameworks. It is for countries to handle the technicalities of the practice of multilateralism and check if they really favour multilateral interests, or if they have been designed to fake multilateralism while conceding to the interests of the power club.

One of the primary concerns is to project multilateralism as an attractive proposition for the relative attainment of common goals, more particularly on issues related to the management of the global commons. How to make compliance to the multilateral order beneficial, and how to make defiance of it costly even for great powers, will remain a task cut out for the UN system. More dimensions and layers have been added to the notion of global commons, and multilateral initiatives will be imperative to manage the consequence of the use of new technologies, as currently seen in the case of the advent of 5G technologies, and divergences on the issues of monopoly and national security concerns.

As newer norm-and-rule makers populate the UN multilateral system in the multipolar era, the 75th anniversary of the UN presents both opportunities and risks for the international community to renew and invigorate its commitments to multilateralism. Communicating the relevance of the UN, and a multilateralism mechanism that delivers, and is accountable in the emerging geopolitical environment, is crucial. Multilateralism as a concept and practice has been the backbone of the UN system; but the currently relevant question is about its efficiency and effectiveness. What does efficiency and effectiveness require? And, what are countries - particularly the P-5 countries - willing to do and accommodate to make multilateralism work? What would be the role of new powers like India? How could multilateralism at the UN be more than just a marriage of convenience among the co-conspirators of global security and the economic order?

The growth of Indian national power will always be relative and relational to other countries. The power asymmetry inherent with stronger powers makes it imperative for India to employ a pragmatic use of multilateralism as an arrow in its foreign policy quiver in order to advance its interests outside and inside the UN. Relatively speaking, India has been found lacking in its ability, if not willingness, to establish and sustain multilateral institutions, apart from becoming members of those that are established by others. Such a deficit limits India's ability to gain from multilateral institutions which have been established, in the first place, for advancing another country's interests

even while advocating a multilateral spirit and mechanism. This becomes important at a time when great powers seem to be competing to advance national interests through and within multilateral institutions. India needs to think through the external perceptions of its performance on global and regional issues, as well as decipher expectations of what India's role would be in consonance with its capabilities and aspirations. While India's foreign policy mandarins profess that India's interest would best be served in a multipolar world order, and recurrently project India's desire for stronger multilateralism, they should deliberate more on how to navigate the processes of multilateralism in a multipolar era, disproportionately dominated by two great powers.

Notes :

¹ "External Affairs Minister's conversation with Valdai Discussion Club, Moscow on 27 August 2019," Media Centre, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 19 October 2019, at https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31957/External_Affairs_Ministers_conversation_with_Valdai_Discussion_Club_Moscow_on_27_August_2019, accessed 10 April 2020.

² "EAM's statement on Ministerial meeting on the Alliance for multilateralism: Building the network and presenting results," Media Centre, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 27 September 2019, at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31873/EAMs+statement+on+Ministerial+meeting+on+the+Alliance+for+multilateralism+Building+the+network+and+presenting+results>, accessed 10 April 2020.

