

Reimagining Multilateralism

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Twentieth century is marked by wars and the geographical changes of the globe. First half of the twentieth century is written by two deadly wars (WWI and WWII) and the second half is about blatant struggle of two superpowers to control the world. Before entering into the twenty first century, the global stage endured the system change- the fall of Berlin Wall not only ended the Cold War but also ended the era of bipolarity. We have observed establishment of multilateral organizations such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank and International Monetary Funds (IMF) by the end of first half of the previous century. But the idea of multilateral cooperation and globalization became more popular in the early years of Twenty First century. It started the era of new world where people could connect with one another sitting into their homes and states started believing in the ideas of multilateralism and interdependence. The distance was reducing speedily and a collaborative environment was observed in the international system. States were securing their economic interests by cooperation and making alliances. Multilateral regional and international organizations were formed to benefit the mutual interests of various countries. For instance, Asian Developmental Bank, SAARC, African Developmental Bank, OPEC, Pacific Community, SCO, Organization of Africa Unity, European Developmental Bank, Global Environmental Facility and many more were established. Aim of forming these organizations was to collaborate with one another in different domains.

Although multilateralism seems a new term in the discourse of the international system but it is a historical process that has evolved with the time. Some scholars believe that multilateralism is rooted in Westphalian period which is considered foundation stone of today's modern Sovereign state system. However, from the concert of Europe to the formation of united nation organization, the concept of multilateralism remains the part of diplomacy in international arena. In contemporary international discourse, multilateralism is frequently defined in the opposition of bilateralism and unilateralism as it indicates the collaboration among three or more states. But multilateralism is based on the principles of consultations, inclusion and solidarity. It ensures equal rights and obligations for all the actors involved in it. Hence, multilateralism is referred as a method of collaboration among different states and a form of organization in international system.

United States Approach towards Multilateralism

After the end of World War II and great depression, multilateral organizations such as United Nations and World Bank were established to resolve the conflicts and economic issues collectively. This was the emergence of new multilateralism in diplomacy. And we have observed that during the Cold War several set ups like IAEA, non-proliferation regimes and NATO and Warsaw Pact served multilaterally. But during the cold war period world was divided into two blocks and most of the multilateral set ups like NATO and Warsaw pacts were the grouping of allies and United States of America ruled the capitalist block by exercising power and authority. United States dominated different parts of world (from Latin America to

South Asia) by coercion, economic dependency and security dependency and this is how sub-ordinated states joined US-led multilateral coalitions. US continued to protect the possible sub-ordinate states in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Horn of Africa. One of the examples of exercising its authority is Iraq war where USA established its authority on both Kuwait and KSA by assuring Kuwait and Saudi Arabia territorial integrity against Iraq. Similarly in countries like Somalia and Bosnia, USA maintained peace and protected rule of law between the states.¹ US continued to exercise authority embodied in multilateralism-hall mark of US foreign policy since 1945 till the presidency of George W. Bush. In 2001, the 9/11 not only challenged the legitimacy of the authority of US but was a shock for the people of the United States. Hence, people demanded something more to restore the power and legitimacy of US authority over the world.

The US administration further incorporated its coercive competencies into the multilateral institutions. United States, very smartly started reclaiming its authority and power over the world using the multilateral institutions like UN; for instance decision to use force in Afghanistan was legitimized by UN. Obama administration focused more multilateral foreign policy to restore the authority and status of US. But the Arab spring and the aftermaths of Arab spring somehow tied the hands of American authoritarianism under the umbrella of multilateralism as in Syria, Russia vetoed the sanctions against the regime in Security council and Assad regime even crossed the redline of using chemical weapons.

During the tenure of president Trump, it has been observed that American foreign policy trends have diverged from multilateral approach. Trump disdained from the international rules and institutions. His trade policies, withdrawal from Paris Accord on climate change, UNESCO, Human Rights Council, rejection of Iran Nuclear agreement, Coronavirus-19 dynamics and EU crisis all indicated shift in the foreign policy of US from multilateralism to isolationism.² However, the new Biden administration is trying to embed more into the multilateralism. During the first 100 days of the presidency of Joe Biden, he unlike Trump, convened a virtual climate summit, he has revived the arm control efforts and has extended new START treaty with Russian counterpart. He has also rejoined WHO to speed up pandemic recovery efforts.³

Chinese Approach towards Multilateralism

It is interesting to know the trends in Chinese multilateral approach. The modern multilateralism is emerged with the emergence of United States as an active global actor, therefore, before 1990s Chinese scholars and foreign policy experts used to treat multilateralism as an instrument of imperialism. But the assertive nature of multilateral institutions, for instance, United Nations made Chinese international relations scholars to believe in the power of multilateralism. Hence, Chinese international relations experts begun to treat multilateralism a legitimate subject to study. Since then Chinese scholars and

¹ David A. Lake, "Making America Safe for the World: Multilateralism and the Rehabilitation of US Authority," *Global Governance*, 16 no. 04 (2010); 473-478.

² Ernest Zedillo, "President Trump's attack on multilateralism has betrayed America's national interest," *The Elders*, 26 June 2020, <https://theelders.org/news/president-trumps-attack-multilateralism-has-betrayed-americas-national-interest>.

³ Pasty Widakuswara, "100 Days: Is Biden Keeping His Promise of Multilateralism?" *VOA*, 28 April 2021, https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_100-days-biden-keeping-his-promise-multilateralism/6205165.html.

foreign policy experts are emphasizing on the multilateral nature of the world as compared to the contemporary world.⁴ Chinese approach towards multilateralism has evolved mainly in two dimensions; economic and security.

Economically China has become part of various regional, sub-regional and international multilateral organizations. Beijing is an active partner of economic collaborative efforts in Asia Pacific. Asian Pacific Economic Corporation (APEC) has been established in contrast to European Union. Although APEC is relatively new and lacks organization of various departments as compared to EU but Bogor declaration-commitment to free and open trade in the region by 2020 is a significant document. Other sub regional multilateral institutions are also established in this region which includes The Pacific Economic Co-operation Council (PECC), North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and Australia New Zealand Free Trade Agreement.⁵ Beijing is not only an active participant of these organizations but it has voiced support for the principles of multilateralism. Chinese government is stick to the stance of free trade, investment and unbiased treatment. China has also agreed to the rules and procedures of World Trade Organization (WTO) which indicates its commitment to the multilateral cooperation. It has also established organizations like Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and New Developmental Bank to further integrate developing countries.

Furthermore, China is also part of regional multilateral security arrangements such as ASEAN Regional Forum. It is also available for resolving regional security issues collectively. Chinese availability to the following forums- e Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Council on Security Co- operation in Asia and Pacific Region (CSCAP), and Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD)⁶ indicates that it believes more in the power of multilateral arrangement in the region and across the globe.

Xi Jinping has further emphasized on the global cooperation and collaboration. He is pursuing vision of 'shared prosperity' to address the developmental challenges of the world. Shared prosperity is a call for inclusive, candid and secure world where human kind can enjoy peace and prosperity. Unlike USA, Beijing's approach of becoming world leader is rooted in the mutual coexistence and cooperation. Beijing believes in the norms of multilateralism and adopts principles of multilateralism to transform a world into a shared society.

Pandemic and Multilateralism

While discussing about multilateralism, it is important to note that how two great powers behaved during COVID pandemic. Being a super power, US response to Covid-19 was very dawdling. After the breakout of the virus in Wuhan, China adopted lockdown policy. In contrast to China, USA only lauded travel ban on twitter and banned non-US citizens. By the time World

⁴Hongying Wang, "Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: The Limits of Socialization," *Asian Survey*, vol. 40, No.03 (2000);478-479

⁵ Ibid.480

⁶ Ibid.482.

Health Organization declared Covid-19 a global pandemic, China was successful in tackling situation at home. Beijing along with Jack Ma Foundation, despite the difficult situation at home, sent group of doctors and medical supplies to various countries including Belgium, France, Cambodia, Italy, Iran and Iraq⁷. By the last week of March (2020), China delivered medical supply to 28 Asian, 16 European, and 26 African, and 10 South Pacific countries.

On the other side, situation in United States of America was not satisfactory. The Center for disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported first Corona death on February 29. Till the time, Trump was making tweets about the satisfactory points of stock market. By mid-March Trump declared nation emergency in the wake of COVID-19 and in the last week of March United States of America became leading country in corona cases lagging China far behind. United States of America responded lethargically at home and abroad to COVID-19.

When United States of America woke up to mitigate the threat of Virus, by this time, China was vigorously helping world to contain COVID-19. China opted pandemic as an opportunity to reflect the softness of Beijing regime in Europe. Through mask diplomacy,* China has not only projected its soft image around the globe but also signaled itself as a responsible global leader.

United States provided China an opportunity to proclaim multilateralism to the world. Therefore, at various national and international forums China openly advocated the practice of true multilateralism. President Xi Jinping openly talked about undistinguished multilateralism at Leaders' Summit on Climate. He also advocated true multilateralism on G20 summit. True multilateralism, Xi Jinping talked about is because, during pandemic poverty, inequality, fragility, economic recession loomed more aggressively around the globe. And the world has witnessed the discriminatory behavior from developed states towards under developed states more glaringly. Pandemic has also exposed US-led multilateralism which is based on authority and power. Politicization of vaccine is one of the examples of the multilateral approach which USA has been advocating since 1945.

Pandemic has not only exposed already existing multilateral setup but sharpened the competition between China and the USA. The rivalry between two poles is getting worse. In order to protect the supremacy of United States, it is essential to apoliticize multilateral organizations and constraint discriminatory behavior. Pandemic has underscored the existence of global community.

⁷ D. Hiro, "Comparing the US' and China's Response to Covid-19," *The Nation*, April 08, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-us-china-response/>.

* Mask Diplomacy: During the peak of pandemic in European continent, China shipped medical supplies and teams of doctors to various countries ranging from Serbia to Italy. It also helped under developed countries with financial and medical aid. China has shipped its medical supplies including masks, PPE kits, PCR kits and vaccination across the globe.

During the two years of pandemic, world has changed in many ways. For instance, policy makers have started taking health sector seriously. Now the understanding has developed that crisis like pandemic and climate change would damage global community more adversely than wars. Global collaboration is vital for containing future crisis and outbreaks as pathogens and natural calamities don't care about geo-political lines drawn on maps.

Pandemic has exposed global health system. Therefore it is necessary to focus on global health coordination by freeing WHO from political influences. G20 should improve funding to WHO. It should be empowered enough to collaborate state and non-state organizations to develop mechanism of response to any global health crisis adequately.

Being a great power the United States should promote true multilateralism to make the world a safer place. Selective multilateralism would not be in favor of the USA as selective approach would result in tilting countries toward China. It is important to note that China's multilateralism is based on win-win approach. Thus, USA required multilateral approach more than China to sustain the status of superpower.

Pandemic has also shaken world economically; months long lockdowns, halted international trade, and travel restrictions affected GDP of every state. Hence, USA should work more on shared community because shared global communities can tackle crisis more effectively. Without working on shared community, it would be hard for USA to sustain its status in unhealthy global environment.

International organizations such as World Bank, IMF and EU helped functioning of global economies but more collaboration would be essential in dealing with the looming crisis of climate change-transnational threat like Covid-19 pandemic.

Most importantly, world requires unbiased leadership that would focus shortcomings of existing multilateral system and emphasis on effective co-ordination, collaboration and positive competition.

Last but not least argument is that multilateral organizations should be free from politicization and they should declare their policies publically. These organizations should also have mechanism of accountability to make their progress more effective.

Coronavirus has exposed number of vulnerabilities of the existing global system. Multilateralism is one of the segments of twenty first century world. It has been affected by various geopolitical, geo-strategic and geo-economic factors. Moreover, the present international system is undergoing changes; emerging economies are threatening hegemony of the United States. Competition with China and containment of China has become the core foreign policy interests of US and its allies. Yet multilateralism would be strengthened even in this harsh political rivalry.

US and the former Soviet Union has worked on nuclear proliferation and non-proliferation even during the peak of Cold War, then why not China and United States work together for the betterment of the shared global community.