

## Editor's Note

# The Crisis of Multilateralism

The deepening crisis of global multilateralism has made many nations and thinkers ponder on the options, solutions and necessary reforms. Reforming multilateralism has also gained a new salience in India's foreign policy under the Modi government. It is, therefore, necessary that there be improved understanding of the issues at stake and what kind of reforms that are needed. This special issue of the journal is devoted to this task. Three of India's leading diplomatic practitioners with long years of experience of the functioning of the global multilateral system have contributed their incisive analysis of the current malaise, the need for reforms, and the possible road ahead. In addition, there is a highly relevant contribution by a young environmentalist on the need for regional cooperation in South Asia to address the challenges posed by climate change and meet the targets they have set as part of the global multilateral processes, especially the UNFCCC.

In the lead essay, former diplomat P. S. Raghavan discusses the retreat of multilateralism as a result of the interplay of great power competition and conflict, globalisation, and technology diffusion and disruptions that characterises the current era. Three dominant trends of the post-Cold War era have significantly shaped the political context in which many key global institutions such as the UN Security Council and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) face paralysis. These are: the unilateralism of the leading global power, the United States, in multiple areas; the push back by Russia and the challenge posed by a resurgent and ambitious China; and the rise of middle powers desiring reforms. The divergent pulls of these significant political trends can no more be attenuated and resolved. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a test case of a dysfunctional order. He laments that "adequate attention was not focussed on creating a security architecture in post-Cold War Europe that would absorb Russia in it." He further observes: "The war and the consequent harsh sanctions have disrupted the functioning of virtually every multilateral political or economic institution or arrangement, impacting global food, financial, energy and climate security." The conflict of interest and strategic aims of the US and its Western allies on the one hand and China and Russia on the other

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have paralysed decision making in vital institutions. Simultaneously, the “middle powers” believe that “current multilateralism is skewed in favour of a few global powers, which manipulate multilateral institutions to suit their geopolitical interests.” They seek change. In the present circumstances, however, it is difficult to visualise a return to cooperation or the undertaking of desired reforms that would rescue the multilateral system. Yet, he says: “The challenge of a reformed multilateral system is to reconcile this seemingly irreconcilable contradiction, accommodating a complex diversity of perspectives, ideologies, interests and aspirations.”

In her thoughtful essay, Lakshmi Puri, who has been both at the UN and the UNCTAD, lays out an agenda for reforms from the perspective of the Global South. She asserts that multilateralism's principal missions or, as she calls them, ‘projects’ such as maintaining peace and security, strengthening democracy, promoting sustainable development and climate change action, disaster and crisis management, and making the waves of new technology work for the benefit of all, need to be conceptualised, governed and delivered as Global Public Goods (GPGs). They must “inclusively and impartially benefit all of humanity in keeping with India's ‘one Earth, one Family, one Future’ vision.” In particular, they must benefit the developing and least developed countries—representing over two-thirds of the world population that is still struggling to eliminate poverty, achieve well-being and sustainable development. She observes that the multilateral system anchored on the UN was found wanting in effectively dealing with three recent global challenges—the 2019-22 pandemic in which over 7 million people died, the swift capture of power in Afghanistan by the Taliban forces, and preventing the Ukraine war or effectively mediating an end to the conflict. The Security Council was paralysed by the division among the permanent members, while the Multilateral Financial Institutions did not respond adequately to the food, fuel and fertiliser crisis that specially affected developing countries. She says the multilateral institutions and “their structures, decision-making and work methods have long become outdated.” Moreover, the principle of sovereign equality of states, transparency and accountability is flouted in key decision-making bodies. The veto-wielding ‘Permanent Five’ have control over its decision making and the Secretariat, while entire continents have been left out of permanent membership of the UNSC. “The colonial order has been dismantled, but not the colonial mind-sets, and power dynamics within multilateral institutions has remained impervious to change.” She suggests a slew of reforms that need to be implemented. Reform cannot be put off, she says, “without risking a global

conflagration, an irreversible economic meltdown, a climate change catastrophe and failure to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, which are the lifeline for the survival of the human race and planet earth.”

Asoke Mukerji, among the most knowledgeable experts on the UN system, focuses on the urgent need for a reformed multilateralism. He argues that the United Nations Charter specifies that the UN’s primary objectives are: prevention of war, securing fundamental human rights, and promoting social progress and better standards of life for all. The UN has been unable to implement these objectives in a holistic manner. As a result, calls for multilateralism with a “human-centric” focus have become widespread. The UN Charter needs to reflect the changed international political realities so that multilateralism becomes relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. India, among the leading proponents of “reformed multilateralism”, wants the system to reflect today’s reality. However the UN is paralysed by deep divisions. While the dominant powers are seeking to revive the Cold War dynamic of calibrated armed confrontation, the majority of UN member-states, mainly developing countries, desire a multilateral system that can ensure the implementation of Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development. He asserts that: “The advocates of “reformed multilateralism” need an action plan by 2025, when the UN marks its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary, to achieve their objective.”

Exploring a different dimension of the multilateral system, scholar PK Khup Hangzo writes on the need for regional cooperation on tackling climate change. He points out that the South Asian states are active participants in global multilateral processes aimed at addressing climate change, especially the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). They have declared national targets for reducing greenhouse gas emission and decarbonisation. However, he argues, given South Asia’s vulnerability to climate change, the region has a lot to gain by adopting “a regional approach to address its multi-faceted impacts.” Reviving a regional agenda on climate change can “help address the cross-border environmental as well as humanitarian crises.”

The current issue has also been enriched by a detailed empirical account and analysis of Xi Jinping’s leadership team selected to serve the Party and the state in his third term. The article by young scholar on China, Kota Mallikarjuna Gupta argues that while the study of political leaderships and their networks are important for societies of different types, the role of the top political leaders is even more significant in authoritarian single-party states like China. Absolute political power without resistance

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or opposition helps with quick decisions and policy formulations but also poses many challenges and risks. The attempt to capture power, institutions and position among the elites of the Communist Party in China happens every five years during the Party Congress. Many factors determine the outcome of the fierce competition for power and positions in the Communist Party during the Party Congress. The article through the extensive data on the new central, provincial and military leaderships brings out the control and influence Xi wields over them. He also indicates the fierce competition to acquire power involved in the process influences ideological leanings, loyalty, political networks and governance models.

Finally, young scholar HIRAK JYOTI DAS writes a long review of an important new study — *The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East*. The review explores significant policy decisions by successive US Presidents since 1979 that have led to America's loss of influence in the Middle East. The author Steven Simon, a career diplomat who held the position of Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs at the National Security Council (NSC) in the Obama Administration and also served in the NSC under President Clinton, interrogates the Middle East policy of US presidencies from Jimmy Carter to Joe Biden, calling it "a tale of gross misunderstandings, appalling errors, and death and destruction on an epochal scale."

I am confident that the issue will bring great value to the readers and be a focus of much academic and policy discussions.

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