

A requiem for multilateralism in an era of increasing interdependence



As someone who worked in the UN during that optimistic period, I present to you a requiem for multilateralism—launched about 80 years ago and now, sadly, in a state of decline.

But first, a qualification: The world is not a political unit, either in law or in fact, and the United Nations (UN) and related multilateral institutions cannot yet be viewed as part of a geographic hierarchy of governance institutions. We do not have a world state, or a world society, or even, in the real sense, a unified world economy. What we have, at best, is an inter-country community of some politicians, bureaucrats, academics, and business leaders, who share some values and look for joint action to cope with common risks and the compulsions of globalisation.

The multilateral system that has existed for 80 years is not uniform. Most multilateral institutions with significant influence over trade, investment, financial flows, or macro-policy coordination operate outside the direct authority of the UN, where all countries are equal—except when it comes to Security Council matters. Treaty bodies generally grant equal roles to all signatories. One such treaty-based body, the World Trade Organization (WTO), is now under threat—particularly due to the erosion of its dispute settlement mechanism and violations of its most-favoured-nation (MFN) rule, which mandates equal treatment for all trade partner countries, with a few permitted exceptions.

In some ways, the WTO is an exception. Most multilateral institutions lack formal authority to set standards for partner countries. Their influence stems from dialogue between nations—though often dominated by developed countries and in-house experts in institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, both of which have become somewhat peripheral to the forces shaping global financial flows.

The international system was also an uneasy compromise between dominant powers setting the rules and a concert of nations. The larger more powerful nations do not count on the UN, and this is reflected in its limited role in securing agreement between great powers and the weakness of its security actions, which operate mainly in areas peripherally relevant for the great powers. The UN's most substantial contribution is the space it provides for small and weak states to influence global relations.

However, in the '90s, the prospects for cooperative multilateralism looked promising. The UN sponsored a series of global conferences, many at the head of government level, which led to the substantive codification of shared values, norms, and standards of state behaviour, along with a common understanding of what constitutes good policy. This potential of the UN was used to great effect in the global conferences of the '90s because of the weakening of ideological divides with the collapse of communism in Russia and in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The developing countries had also moved their economic orientation more towards capitalism, which was reflected in the shift in China's economic policy under Deng Xiaoping and India's 1991 economic reform.

The shift away from the '90s started with the turn of the millennium. Now it is even worse with the US asserting what it still considers its paramount power. Perhaps, with the absence of any ideological constraints, it may even end up with a shared hegemony, say with China and Russia, who too are not quite in support of a global concert of nations.

The shaping of a consensus on values, norms and policy frameworks is something that the UN does, which cannot be done with the same measure of broad acceptability by any other international institution. The basic reason for this is its universality, the broad mandate conferred by the charter and the way in which its political processes create room for civil society. But in practice, the major advances have come from the determined efforts of issue-oriented coalitions of states willing to pursue global interests and globally connected nongovernment organizations. The strength of the UN is that it has a political process that allows such coalitions to form and to work with the more organised interest groupings to achieve substantial advances.

Given the pattern of politics in the US, its assertion of power is likely to continue. It is essential, therefore, that the UN remains a strong voice for nations affected by this political shift, as its role is particularly valuable in a world marked by deep divisions.

It allows the secretary-general to function as a community leader whose influence comes not from juridical authority or command over resources but from his capacity to uphold the shared values of the global community. States that bear the brunt of global rulership attempts by great powers like the US must use the UN as a platform to maintain connectivity with one another and assert appropriate opposition to imperial threats. Hopefully, European countries will support such an emerging coalition.

The UN and its related sectoral, finance, and trade-related entities are based entirely on state power. This may not be adequate to provide the type of response to attempted imperialism that we require today. The breadth and depth of interdependence has increased dramatically. New global actors like multinational corporations and transnational non-governmental organisation (NGO) networks are becoming significant players in international relations. Politics is being transformed by the vastly expanded reach of mass media. The internet is connecting people and enterprises on an unprecedented scale. The response to emerging imperialism must now also depend on this non-governmental network.

This view of the future of multilateralism is not entirely sad. It rests on hope — hope in the power of cooperative response among states facing pressure and in the wider growth of internationalist sentiment within the corporate sector, academia, and global NGOs. Hence my requiem is perhaps better labeled as the potential resilience of multilateralism to counter the aggressive forces growing and expanding in the world today.

Nitin Desai

The author was deputy secretary-general of the Rio Earth Summit (1990-1992) and under secretary-general in the United Nations (1993-2003). desaind@icloud.com Disclaimer: These are personal views of the writer. They do not necessarily reflect the opinion of www.businessstandard.com or the Business Standard newspaper