



# IJMRRS

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## **Decolonising Multilateralism - the Indian Way**

One of the pillars of India's foreign policy has been an attempt to "decolonise multilateralism," focusing on discussing and reforming 21st-century multilateralism towards a more inclusive global commitment. Today, India's voice carries strategic weight globally due to her enhanced economic power, political stability, and nuclear capability. However, multilateralism needs to acknowledge current global crises, such as power shifts, geopolitical rivalries, zero-sum nationalism, and unforeseen catastrophes like the COVID-19 pandemic. Reform is required to keep the system relevant in a rapidly evolving geopolitical context. India looks forward to being the leading voice for the "forgotten multitudes" in the postcolonial era.

## **The Multilateral Paradox**

Multilateralism at the global or regional level is based on certain fundamental principles such as indivisibility, generalized rules of conduct, and diffuse reciprocity. Despite advocating these ideals of liberal internationalism, multilateral cooperation has been a contested reality. A web of multilateral institutions has evolved over time, including the erstwhile League of Nations, the United Nations, Bretton Woods structures, and various regional formations. However, the system itself is often circumscribed by conflicting interests that cannot be easily aligned.

The post-World War global order was shaped by the "hegemonic powers" according to their interests. For example, key decisions at the UN Security Council are still dependent on the concurrence of all five self-declared permanent members, and voting shares of the Bretton Woods institutions like the IMF are disproportionately inclined towards wealthy states. Today, the Westphalian state system and cultural nationalism remain at the center of world politics, unlike Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities." Consequently, many developing countries have long felt disempowered in global multilateral economic, financial, and trading arrangements. A rules-based world order thus increasingly reflects the distribution of power at a given moment in time.

## **India's Experience with Multilateralism**

India's approach to multilateralism has evolved over decades, shifting from an idealist moraliser to a pragmatic leader amidst various challenges. Multilateralism has undoubtedly been a driving force behind India's transformation. We owe a share of the success of the Green Revolution to the support of the Food and Agriculture Organization; the eradication of polio and major vaccination campaigns to the World Health Organization; the protection of our rich cultural heritage to UNESCO; the White Revolution and child nutrition initiatives to UNICEF; and decent employment conditions to the International Labour Organization. Yet, India's relationship with multilateral institutions has remained highly complex.

The first major setback at the UN came as early as 1947 on the Kashmir issue. Our foreign policy was henceforth prioritised on nation-building projects, designed defensively to provide the country with its own voice in an intensely bipolar world. In 1954, India pushed for special provisions in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade for developing countries to protect their nascent economies. Nehru's instrumental policy of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was a rational response to the Cold War. India played a leading role in the formation of the G-77 in the 1960s. Today, 134 out of 193 member states of the UNGA belong to the G-77. The unanimous adoption of Agenda 2030 in 2015 reflects the diplomatic strength held by the G-77 owing to its numerical strength.

The second setback came in 1962 when China invaded Aksai Chin, but most multilateral organizations, including NAM, refused to condemn China. In the wake of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, India was heavily criticised in the UN for interfering in what was deemed a domestic matter for Pakistan. Only the Soviet veto in the UNSC prevented an official condemnation by the UN. Nonetheless, in 1974, India went ahead to conduct its first nuclear test, snubbing non-proliferation. Despite the criticisms, India never signed the NPT on the grounds that it was unfairly biased toward the established nuclear powers. India's move was seen as a "strategic departure" from traditional internationalism.

In the post-Cold War order, India urgently needed to diversify its partnerships; hence, we actively engaged in most multilateral missions. To overcome the financial crisis of the 1990s, New Delhi had to engage with the IMF and the World Bank for economic reforms. In 1992, the Look East policy focused on improving ties with Southeast Asian nations, culminating in full partnership with ASEAN in 1996. The G-20 group of developing countries was formed in 2003 through an India-Brazil collaboration.

Despite the pressure, India tested nuclear weapons for a second time (Pokhran II) in 1998, fully assuming its nuclear state status, causing international condemnation and sanctions. However, in 2004, the Indo-US Next Steps in Strategic Partnership (NSSP), approved by the IAEA, accepted an India-specific waiver. This marked a significant milestone for India, projecting its newfound strategic weight.

### **The New Narrative**

The world is currently witnessing a growing multipolar order directly linked to the emergence of new powerful players in the global economy and polity, such as India, China, and Brazil. These advances induce a counterbalancing of North and West hegemony with a rising South and East. The Global South celebrates mutual recognition and empowerment among states that identify as the "subaltern." With China emerging as the new competition to US hegemony, India is looked up to as the potential counter, given its democratic credentials, soft power, and reputation as a benign international actor.

Critics call it the "Indian century," characterised by India's unprecedented growth, stability, and increased influence in multilateral and bilateral spheres. As Ashok Kumar Mukerji states, "India has outgrown its role as a third world, non-aligned nation to exercise influence in global governance, be it as part of the Five Interested Parties in the World Trade Organization (WTO); the Brazil, South Africa, India, and China (BRICS) group at the Copenhagen climate change negotiations in 2009; or the Group of 4 (G4) coalition of countries (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan) demanding permanent membership in the UNSC." India is also the world's largest arms importer, with an 11% global share (2018–22), further boosting its potential role in security affairs.

India has been an eight-time UNSC non-permanent member, making it almost a "quasi-permanent" member. At the WTO, India is a member of the Five Interested Parties. About 49.23 per cent of India's GDP is contributed by international trade. As the world has significantly turned towards Realpolitik again over the last three decades, New Delhi must reconsider its conventional pro-multilateral approach. India has now garnered the strength that will allow it to influence bilateral decisions and take unilateral action if necessary.

### **Possible Inhibitions Today**

Global power-sharing eventually requires burden-sharing for an effective and legitimate reform process. India has undeniably upheld international cooperation for peace, security, and sustainable development. Nevertheless, speculations remain about India's willingness and capacity to take on global responsibilities to match her global aspirations. Given India's notable success, one needs to confront the question of whether and how we will contribute to dealing with global challenges. India's growing strength will fuel expectations for her to engage in global burden-sharing. Unless we are ready to do so, we may lose the support of our subaltern partners.

If China is to emerge as the new hegemon, India must also reconsider her prospects. So far, India has not committed to taking up as extensive and potentially expensive economic burden-sharing obligations as China, for example, the creation of a pan-South Asian energy grid. We need to acknowledge that projecting international growth depends on the ability to shift domestic policies and expenditure towards increasing domestic demand, thus reducing current account surpluses. India has struggled to resolve the current account trade and budget imbalances conundrum.

Moreover, New Delhi has actively pursued regional formations like ASEAN and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), despite China's deep involvement in both. Instead, India should have focused on her leadership in the Indian Ocean, within which it could have been a potential hegemon. However, looking at the present geopolitical context, the picture appears not so optimistic. Countries in the Global South, especially India's neighbours, are often at ideological odds, working to cross purposes. While the G-20 attempts to connect the North-South divide, there is greater diversity in political cultures in the G-20 and G-77 than in Western platforms like the

EU. Regionally, the BRICS and SAARC solidarity remains questionable given the regional apprehensions vis-à-vis India, China, and Pakistan.

### **What Lies Ahead?**

As India forges ahead with "strategic autonomy," effectively straddling all four contrasting hemispheres, a fundamental shift in narrative is anticipated. Prioritising friendly regional alternatives like the BIMSTEC, Indian Ocean Rim Association, BBIN, or strong formations like the OPEC+ or I2U2 will possibly yield better outcomes in the long run. India must continue on its path of "à la carte multilateralism" (as American diplomat, Richard Haass calls it).

The collapse of the system must be checked, or it would result in potential anarchy. The notion of decolonising multilateralism, as India suggests, is a reform process and not a revolution. This would come from consensus-building facilitated through dialogues with emerging powers that are currently underrepresented in global governance institutions. The Global South has to feel a real sense of belonging in these institutions. It is important not to overdo the mandates of multilateral institutions amidst insufficient consensus.

Conceived as a means to an end, multilateralism has for over a century dealt effectively with global challenges like climate change, human rights violations, and rampant poverty. As long as it delivers fruitful outcomes, multilateral channels are worth pursuing.

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