



The New-Age Multilateralism: The Indian Way

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Alumni Note

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Introduction

Crafted to promote cooperation among nation states, the multilateral system grew into prominence after World War II and found expression through a variety of forums, e.g. the United Nations, NATO and the World Bank (to name only a few).¹ With the advent of the 21st century, the multilateral system that had – thus far – helped maintain the liberal international order is gradually being criticised for not yielding the “desired” results. However, we live in a world that is politically, culturally, technologically and economically more complex than the post-war era. Such a dynamically changing world, marked by transnational challenges that encompass terrorism, pandemics and nuclear proliferation, requires the restructuring of the multilateral system to ensure thorough cooperation among nation states that would ultimately help sculpt innovative solutions for addressing modern problems.

In such a scenario, scholars and analysts interested in international relations and politics are raising concerns about both the legitimacy of a global order that is increasingly perceived as a congregation of Western democracies imposing their long-held values² on the growing powers, and the effectiveness of multilateralism in fostering international cooperation.

The Indian experience

The rest of this brief article will focus on the crisis of multilateralism. The article takes a position that is in contrast to the growing general sentiment about the inefficacy of multilateralism.³ This position is elaborated through the perspective of India: first, by emphasising how India’s role in manoeuvring minilateral cooperation could be construed as a strategy in the face of a prospective shift in the balance of power and, second, by highlighting how India’s diplomatic policy has the potential to revive multilateralism.

India is well acquainted with minilateralism, which is mutually beneficial international cooperation orchestrated among a smaller international circle and is known by a plethora of terms, including “smart multilateralism” and “plurilateralism”.⁴ Over the past decade New Delhi has played a very active role in strengthening issue-based international alliances with various nation states. These alliances are based on common interests and shared values in terms of which the agenda is to address a variety of transnational challenges, including regional conflicts, climate change and trade. There are several

¹ <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/7/multilateralism-is-in-crisis-or-is-it/>.

² M. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and S.C. Hofmann, “Is the Liberal International Order in a State of Terminal Decline?”, LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) blog, 2020.

³ <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/addressing-inefficacy-multilateralism/>.

⁴ <https://isnblog.ethz.ch/uncategorized/effective-minilateralism-for-the-eu-what-when-and-how>.

known examples in this regard that include the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). Also dubbed as mini-groupings, these smaller circles of international cooperation constitute contemporary minilaterals.⁵

Navigating through the China-led, Russia-led and US-led minilateral structures,⁶ India has certainly moved beyond its non-alignment strategy from the Cold War era, which was motivated by the need to create scope for international peace by not participating in the military scenarios of a bipolar world. In the post-Cold War era, thus, India gradually gravitated towards a multi-aligned agenda. India's multi-alignment policy is targeted at not only reducing political, economic or military dependence on any major power, but also at augmenting its position in a gradually changing international order – precipitated by the rise of China and other developing economies.⁷ Despite India's thoroughly recognised role in minilateral cooperation, it is essential to note that the country is not a member of any formal military-based treaty alliance.

India's experience with minilateral cooperation, non-participation in formal military alliances and adoption of a multi-aligned agenda (a key feature of its participation in various minilateral forums) appear to have two closely related advantages: on the one hand, the pattern of cooperation comes across as a supplement⁸ to multilateralism⁹ without delegitimising it. On the other hand, the country's preference for non-treaty partnerships that eschew the need for a permanent bureaucracy¹⁰ are indicators of a “contingent balancing”¹¹ approach that stands out as contemporary. At the same time, New Delhi is hopeful about the potential future prospects for multilateral cooperation and a global order¹² that allows increased representation from the Global South. Consistently, references to a rules-

⁵ In the Indo-pacific context, cooperative alliances between a group of three to nine nation states has come to characterise minilateralism. The cooperative partners are both from the Indo-pacific region and beyond (extra-regional states).

⁶ <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2021/06/09/indias-multi-alignment-the-origins-the-past-and-the-present/>.

⁷ I. Hall, “Multialignment and Indian Foreign Policy under Narendra Modi”, *The Round Table*, Vol.105(3), 2016, pp.271-286.

⁸ <https://www.orfonline.org/research/explaining-the-rise-of-minilaterals-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

⁹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/the-daily-dialogue/modis-multilateral-approach-influenced-by-his-personality-changes-in-context-44530/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/india-is-likely-to-push-the-g20-envelope-on-select-issues-11668964103723.html>.

¹¹ <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/new-delhi-view-world-order>.

¹² https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31899/EAMs_remarks_at_Center_for_Strategic_and_International_Studies_Washington_DC_on_01_October_2019.

based order by the West have ignited debates on “whose rules” govern this order among Indian political elites.¹³

Recently, these debates have gained momentum in the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. A very striking example is India’s neutral position on the Russian invasion. While some critics may be willing to interpret India’s neutrality as an instance of abandoning the liberal international order, the Indian external affairs minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, has consistently called for a peaceful and diplomatic settlement of the Ukraine conflict. Without compromising Kyiv’s sovereignty, he has re-affirmed India’s position as a protector of the international order.¹⁴ What India might prefer, though, is an international order in which nation states find it possible to avoid the negative impact of great-power competition or rivalry, a sentiment that not only resonates with India’s history, but also with other voices from the Global South.¹⁵ With India (and some other countries in the Global South) preferring to be in no one’s camp, the grand strategic outcome is a prospect for diminishing conflict.

Further contemporary developments

Despite the criticisms levelled against India’s foreign policy from certain quarters, New Delhi’s drift from non-alignment to multi-alignment and accompanying engagements with groupings continue to confer special advantages on the country. Furthermore, 2023 is expected to be a significant year for India’s ambitions with its presidencies of the G20 and SCO. The world is expecting to see how India will leverage the benefit of its past alliances and experience with contingent balancing to address issues that are pertinent to multilateral cooperation and to ensuring a rule-based international order in the long run. The hope for India, against the backdrop of a dynamically evolving strategic order, is not without precedence, though. First, India has dexterously not only tried to build close alliances with established powers, indicating its commitment to preserving the existing tenets of the global order, but has also formed alliances with other states, which signals its allegiance to a revisionist agenda. Second, India’s involvement in the SCO and QUAD provides important scope for the country to assert its autonomy while acknowledging both the US and Russian-Chinese lines.

¹³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/jaishankar-cites-silence-on-challenges-to-rules-based-order-in-asia-to-push-back-against-pressure-to-oppose-russia-actions-in-ukraine-101650961842426.html>.

¹⁴ <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/12/india-upholds-the-rules-based-liberal-international.html>.

¹⁵ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2022/08/02/how-do-global-south-politics-of-non-alignment-and-solidarity-explain-south-africas-position-on-ukraine/>.

With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "One Earth, One Family, One Future" G20 agenda,¹⁶ India is further expected to craft diplomatic manoeuvres through the soft power prism, grounded in the country's ancient cultural heritage and spirituality. This certainly sets the stage for reinvigorating issues of global economic governance, a primary theme of the G20, with tools of soft power that pervasively include Indian food, traditions, and yoga (among other themes), with the aim of reaching out to the global audience in an all-embracing manner. Along these lines, Dr Jaishankar has announced that planning for the G20 development ministers' meeting is currently under way. The meeting is likely to be hosted at Varanasi¹⁷ in August 2023. This is one of India's holy cities, which is popular among domestic and international tourists for its exquisite temples and elaborate rituals performed alongside the sacred River Ganges.¹⁸ In preparation, Prime Minister Modi inaugurated the world's longest river cruise (on MV *Ganga Vilas*) on 13 January 2023 in Varanasi¹⁹ via video conferencing. Over the span of 51 days, cruise tourists have the opportunity to visit a variety of heritage sites, national parks and other sacred places besides Varanasi itself. In a nutshell, India's enmeshed soft power diplomatic potential is expected to translate into persuasive diplomacy for bringing various nation states together for strategising a collective agenda within the multilateral umbrella.

The "new-age multilateralism"

Prime Minister Modi's repeated calls for reforming multilateralism²⁰ paired with India's established alliances with both developing and developed nation states, including its position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict that is reminiscent of its non-alignment policy, lays the groundwork to argue that our contemporary times may not be witnessing a collapse of the existing global order. Rather, it is more relevant to say that the global order is undergoing a transformation and will gradually evolve into a more inclusive system of governance that would have the potential to accommodate new actors from the Global South in the interests of addressing contemporary problems.²¹ Furthermore, it is likely that soft power foreign policy tools would assume greater significance within a transformed global order.

¹⁶ https://www.narendramodi.in/g20_home.

¹⁷ <https://tfipost.com/2022/12/bhagwan-ram-is-fast-becoming-the-symbol-of-indias-soft-power-in-global-diplomacy/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.thetravel.com/why-visit-the-varanasi-ghats-india/#the-ganga-aarti>.

¹⁹ <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/have-a-glimpse-into-beauty-check-out-inside-pictures-of-worlds-longest-river-cruise-ganga-vilas-article-96926870>.

²⁰ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/at-un-meet-modi-calls-for-reformed-multilateralism/article32118114.ece>.

²¹ M. Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and S.C. Hofmann, "Of the Contemporary Global Order, Crisis, and Change", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol.27(7), pp.1077-1089.

En route to this transformation, multilateralism has a chance to survive – despite the current crisis – albeit in a modified form. This new-age multilateralism could be sporadically characterised by ad hoc mechanisms, in the form of minilateral arrangements that could confer benefits of flexible and innovative decision-making for augmenting decisions on matters of regional and global governance. In other words, minilaterals are expected to play a major role in terms of issues where it may be harder to break deadlocks at the multilateral scale, hence necessitating a shift from “high politics” to “low politics” for resolving impasses in a minilateral manner. And successful outcomes achieved through minilateral endeavours are expected to be gradually taken to multilateral settings with the aim of garnering broader international support. New Delhi is in a unique position to play a leading role in this geopolitical transformation by virtue of India’s experience through its multi-alignment policies in forming issue-based alliances with various nation states.

Minilateral initiatives are thus expected to thrive under the umbrella of new-age multilateralism. With feedback loops established across the lateralism poles, it is further expected that the rise of minilaterals will not undermine the vigour of multilateral cooperation. As such, some theorists and analysts are also inclined to view minilateralism as situated between bilateralism and multilateralism.²² Furthermore, India’s navigation within the spectrum of lateralism, coupled with its increased requests for reforming multilateralism, is expected to precipitate shifts in the balance of military, economic and cultural power – in other words, to create a “multipolar world”.

Although it is premature to envision the G20 as an alternative to multi-lateral cooperation, India has certainly made the first move to call for an “all-inclusive” order for structuring the discourse on global issues with the Indian-inspired “One Earth, One Family, One Future” agenda. Clearly, 2023 will be a diplomatically intense year for India and for the Indo-Pacific region, which hosts a number of security hotspots.

²² https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/10/minilateral-diplomacy-middle-power-india-israel-uae/?tpcc=recirc_latest062921.