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The Resilience of Multilateralism: From Moribund to Renewal?



The coronavirus has taken multilateralism on a roller coaster ride, but it is neither the first nor last force to impact the international cooperation sorely needed to address issues on a global scale. Can multilateralism be rejuvenated or will it, as a slew of critics predict, be left in the doldrums? Photo taken by Daniel Schludi on Unsplash.

FEATURED COMMENTARY

Multilateralism in 2021: Better Than 2020?

By Joel Ng



President Biden's electoral victory is expected to provide a spell of relief for international cooperation, but ultimately small and middle powers should uphold and finetune the multilateral rules-based system for their own interests. Photo taken by Markus Spiske on Unsplash.

Unilateralism, COVID-19, and urgent domestic government commitments weakened multilateralism in 2020. However, countervailing trends of cooperation, prospective reopening, and shifting domestic dynamics may provide the opportunity to get multilateralism back on track in 2021, but it will require firm commitment.

Commentary

WHILE 2020 was overshadowed by the global pandemic, the effect on multilateralism has been somewhat mixed. Part of this is because the pandemic itself is not the origi-

nator or even main cause of the pressures on multilateralism – and in some ways may have even relieved certain tensions. But part of this is also because every crisis presents an opportunity for change and may sometime provide the impetus needed to jolt countries and leaders away from practices that are problematic.

There are three forces that negatively impacted multilateralism in 2020, but these have been counteracted by three equally important drives. The long-term impact therefore will depend on the way policymakers steer around or redirect these forces in

2021.

Forces Against Multilateralism

The narrative of multilateralism under siege had already begun with the populist victories in the United States and United Kingdom in 2016 and escalated during the Trump administration. This first force against multilateralism – populism – was exemplified by Brexit, the trade war against China, and had echoes in protectionist movements elsewhere.

The second force against multilateralism was the outbreak of COVID-19,

leading first to travel restrictions and then to domestic shutdowns across the world. International human interaction – a vital glue of international cooperation – plummeted as travel came to a halt worldwide.

The third force against multilateralism was a consequence of the pandemic: As the economic toll of these restrictions became clear, governments had to spend their war chests to keep their economies on life support, leaving little else for international engagement, which in physical terms was largely sus-

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pending, but also in institutional terms, left in neglect.

Put together, 2020 saw the virtualisation of multilateralism both in form (going online) as well as in practice (the suspension of major talks and summits). While the EU maintained a semblance of physical interaction, it was quite ironically mostly dedicated to handling Brexit, an unwinding of a multilateral agreement.

ASEAN had gone fully virtual, with sensitive issues such as the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea talks forced into suspension.

Forces For Multilateralism

Yet 2020 was not wholly negative. The first force against unilateralism was renewed impetus for cooperation. Against the US-China trade war, countries on the sidelines saw the need for other cooperative avenues to a hedge against the deteriorating relationship between the two global superpowers.

This necessarily lacks superpower support, and free riding would not be sustainable. Such prospects offer the opportunity for countries to make a more sustained and participatory approach to global governance, rather than taking instructions from the superpowers.

COVID-19 further galvanised new initiatives such as the Covax vaccine alliance. It was apparent immediately that the threat of COVID-19 would require international cooperation as even faraway outbreaks presented domestic risks to any country seeking to re-

main open to international engagement and globalisation.

As vaccines begin to roll out and the arrival of warmer weather provides respite in the northern hemisphere, international reopening will require ample amounts of cooperation and trust to resuscitate ailing economies.

The final force is a complex one, because it requires thinking about the domestic politics of major powers, much of which do not follow any international trends, but there are promising signs.

Domestic Politics and Multilateralism

Since populism reappeared as a political force and upset the longstanding status quo in many countries, even scholars of multilateralism have had to dive deep into the domestic politics of the major powers because foreign policy is inexplicable without understanding their domestic conditions. Populist upheaval from domestic tensions significantly changed the political landscape but it also offers us clues – and hope – as to how the multilateral landscape will look in 2021.

The commencement of Brexit and its attendant problems pose important questions to unilateralists. Similarly, the rejection of Donald Trump's nativism in the US has made it straightforward for President Joseph Biden to set his stall apart from recent US foreign policy. Meanwhile, the huge domestic interventions due to COVID-19 will demand a return to growth, and this implies an outward trade-oriented strategy for

most economies.

According to Kurt Campbell, likely to head the US' Asian or Indo-Pacific strategy, the US will return to the diplomacy of persuasion and attraction rather than the transactionalism of the Trump era. However, the crux of sustained commitment remains embedded in its deeply-polarised domestic politics.

While the Democrats managed to win back both the Senate and the presidency, the pendulum of US politics tends to swing against the incumbent party during mid-terms. This sets an urgency for Biden to push his domestic agenda through quickly and early and may crowd out important foreign policy shifts, as foreign policy tends to be less contentious and therefore easier to push through. Nevertheless, continued questions about US commitments to internationalism will continue even from erstwhile allies.

Going Forward: System Less Beholden to Major Powers?

Human interaction across borders has fallen because of the pandemic, and this is one of the essential ingredients for international cooperation. As the pandemic looks likely to stretch on through 2021, the risks are greater than ever, the need for investment in multilateralism more imperative than ever.

While strong headwinds against multilateralism persisted throughout 2020, there are signs that these are abating, and taking up the forces that promote cooperation signal opportuni-

ties for rebuilding a better international system. However, with US commitment likely to remain weak and distrust of China continuing in global politics, the impetus must fall on smaller powers to drive this.

Ramping up 'minilateralism' through regional arrangements, facilitating coalitions based around common challenges rather than ideology and size, and turning to the second tier of economic powers such as Germany, Japan, or France as engines of growth offer some outlets for productive cooperation.

It will cost smaller countries more to uphold but the dividends may be greater if they can construct a system more attuned to their challenges and less beholden to the whims of the great powers. ■

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EXPERT TALK

Multilateralism is not just a function of great power interests

By Jörn Dosch



RCEP is one example of how multilateralism has strengthened in regional contexts thanks to small and middle powers, even where global cooperation has been dealt a blow. Photo taken by Prachatai on Flickr and tagged under a generic Creative Commons 2.0 licence.

The signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) on 15 November last year marked a decisive step for multilateralism but was also a *déjà vu* moment. Just as with the founding of the Asia Pacific Cooperation (APEC) forum 21 years earlier, the establishment of RCEP seemed to have caught the rest of the world by surprise and was greeted by a mixture of concern and admiration. Both events caused immediate speculation about a substantial economic power shift to Asia. Recent comments in numerous newspapers revived debates about Asia's rise and a related decline of the West that already dominated headlines two decades ago.

However, the important difference today is that most European observers see RCEP, unlike APEC, through the lens of China's ambitions and not as success of multilateralism *per se*. To quote a typical example, the leading German business daily *Handelsblatt* wrote, "China is acting and the West is watching... China has both the right and the ability to shape the rules of international cooperation according to its ideas."

This perception follows a common pattern in Europe. Multilateral projects in Asia tend to appear on the radar screen of decision-makers and journalists only when they can be linked to the seeming interests and strategies of great powers. Consequently, RCEP is mostly presented as an historic success for China and a major blow to the United States.

In reality, the world's largest free trade area, as RCEP is often dubbed, emerged as an ASEAN initiative to consolidate the group's existing trade agreements with partners in the Asia-Pacific region, and had been eight years in the making. Without trying to minimise China's role in finalising the agreement, RCEP is equally, perhaps primarily, ASEAN's success. Despite often-heard critical views regarding the gap between ASEAN's far-reaching vision of regional integration and the reality of the slow and incomplete implementation of agreements, the grouping remains one of the most effective regional organisations in the world. ASEAN is an excellent example that small and medium-powers can advance their economies and enhance

their international status through multilateralism. Sure enough, the way ASEAN deals with the coup d'état in its member state Myanmar will be closely watched and seen as an indicator for the extent to which Southeast Asian regionalism provides a framework for the management of conflict and political crises. As in the past, an informal approach to dealing with Myanmar is likely to be the instrument of choice.

Regardless of the specific outcome in this case, there is a certain tendency to assess the effectiveness of multilateralism, particularly with regards to regional organisations, mainly on the basis of a current crisis. The EU, for instance, is being heavily criticised for its, as many suggest, insufficient COVID-19 response, especially when it comes to Brussels' vaccine procurement. Yet, a comprehensive joint strategy is in place, not to forget a massive economic stimulus programme, and there can be no doubt that the member states are better off collectively than they would be on their own.

Overall, there has been a

wrong perception that the Trump presidency served multilateralism a deadly blow. Trump certainly weakened international cooperation at the global level but did not destroy multilateralism. The unpredictability of Washington's actions has even strengthened multilateralism, especially in regional contexts. "America is back": President Joe Biden's commitment to diplomacy and international treaties is encouraging and important, but it would be too limited a view to assess the success and future of multilateralism solely in relation to the interests and roles of the US and China. ■

Guest writer Dr. Jörn Dosch is Professor of International Relations and Development Cooperation at the University of Rostock, Germany. He contributed this commentary for this issue's Expert Talk section.

Expert Talk: Multilateralism in 2020 and Beyond

Multilateral Matters invites experts to contribute their views on the state of multilateralism in the new decade, following years of sustained attacks on multilateralism, commonplace narratives of its decline and death, as well as COVID-19's impact on international cooperation most recently. Featured in this issue:

Dr Chilamkuri RAJA MOHAN
Director, Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore

Ms Elina NOOR
Director, Political-Security Affairs and Deputy Director, Washington D.C.
Asia Society Policy Institute

MM: In your opinion, what are some multilateral challenges in 2021?

RAJA MOHAN: Trade and climate change have emerged as the most important multilateral issues. Significant changes in US policy towards both issues since the election of Joe Biden as the President of the United States have set the stage for a sharp focus on these two issues. On trade, Biden has signalled that he is not returning to the old uncritical embrace of economic globalisation. His emphasis on protecting the interests of the American middle class is likely to lead to a renegotiation of the terms of international trade among major economic actors. Biden's elevation of climate change to the top of US international agenda has begun to persuade other major actors to take a fresh look at the issues involved.

ELINA: The pandemic remains a huge multilateral challenge for global public health, with knock-on political, economic, and security

effects. Although the US, under the Biden administration, has pledged a return to multilateralism, international cooperation on the pandemic, economic recovery, climate change, as well as political and security matters is still fraught with geopolitical tensions. The distribution of vaccines has become not only a matter of diplomatic competition between the United States and China but also of nationalism, with the EU's export controls on vaccines.

MM: What are viable multilateral solutions to tackle these challenges?

RAJA MOHAN: Given the deep differences among key actors, it appears unlikely that there will be solutions within universalist frameworks like the WTO or the 2015 Paris accord on mitigating climate change. It is entirely possible that a coalition approach—in which a few likeminded countries announce solutions that will begin to persuade others to join—might emerge.

ELINA: The challenges I have listed are huge and will require political will among the world's largest countries to cooperate. This political will may be in short supply given how these global crises are hitting countries hard on the domestic front. As an incremental approach, the immediate solution may lie in regional structures. In Southeast Asia, ASEAN offers an encouraging example of regional crisis response through multi-sectoral cooperation in health, foreign affairs, and tourism, as well as in cooperation with its Dialogue partners.

MM: Given current geo-

political and geoeconomic dynamics, which areas of multilateral cooperation will be mostly likely advanced? Which ones will be least likely advanced?

RAJA MOHAN: Progress on constructing new political coalitions among democracies/likeminded states could see much progress. Asian regional multilateral institutions like ASEAN, EAS and others might have to work hard to cope with the geopolitical shifts.

ELINA: I expect multilateral cooperation on climate change to advance, simply because the crisis is so urgent. Technological cooperation will be a sticking point, given intense US-China rivalry in this space. This will be unfortunate given how much of the world has come to rely on the digital space, especially in the past year. In Southeast Asia, travel restrictions mean that diplomatic negotiations on sensitive topics like the South China Sea Code of Conduct will now be severely limited given the constraints of virtual meetings.

MM: How did and/or will the pandemic shape multilateral cooperation?

RAJA MOHAN: The pandemic has reinforced the proposition that the world must diversify their critical supply chains away from China. This could strengthen the search for trusted supply chain networks among likeminded countries.

ELINA: The pandemic underscored the importance of multilateral cooperation but it also showed that in the absence of global leadership by major powers, smaller countries gained/

reclaimed their agency and demonstrated that they could make a real impact together with non-state stakeholders. GAVI's COVAX facility and AMC is an example.

MM: What were the biggest surprises, if any, in how multilateralism evolved last year? What issues are flying under the radar but are ones to look out for in 2021?

RAJA MOHAN: For me, the unexpected progress in the Quad in 2020, driven by the deepening conflict between India and China, is a major surprise. With the Biden administration coming out in strong support for the Quad framework, we might be at the beginning of a rearrangement of security politics in Asia and its waters.

ELINA: Last year proved that even smaller, less powerful countries when working together can contribute constructively for their own interests as well as for the international community's in a global crisis. It chipped away at the notion that the world's wheels would stop turning in the absence of a single leader.

Flying under the radar are two issues: (1) the global economic downturn; and (2) the issue of technological ruction between the US and China. As the Biden administration consolidates its policy approaches, how the US and China move forward on managing (or not) trade and technological tensions will have spillover effects on the rest of the world given global supply chains and the interlinked nature of a digital future, from software to standards. ■

From Centralized to Decentralizing Trade Multilateralism

By Pradumna Rana

The focus of the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, led by the US and other Western powers, was to establish a number of rules-based international economic institutions to provide global public goods. The General Agreement on Tariffs and trade (GATT) was established to promote an open global trading environment. In 1995, the GATT was replaced by the World Trade Organization (WTO) which at that time had 123-member countries as compared to 164 presently. This rules-based multilateralism has brought about unprecedented economic prosperity and social development all over the world.

Presently, however, the world is moving from the system of centralized trade multilateralism towards decentralizing multilateralism or a multi-layered system with the WTO as the senior global institution and various regional and inter-regional free trade agreements (FTAs).

This partly reflects the move from a unipolar to a multipolar world. Also, the European Union (EU), Japan, ASEAN, and China have taken a stand against Trump's "America First" policy and his emphasis on "bilateral and reciprocal trade" and signed a large number of regional and inter-regional FTAs with other trading partners.

Soon after Trump's inauguration, the European Parliament gave its consent to the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. The Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement came into force on 1 February 2019. The EU approved the EU-Singapore trade pact in February 2019, signed the agreement with Vietnam in June 2019, and is negotiat-

ing with Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand. EU negotiations with China for a bilateral investment agreement are also progressing albeit slowly. More recently, EU members and China signed the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.

Japan also played a key role in driving the 11-country Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). A number of high-profile officials from Beijing have recently voiced opinions about China's interest in joining the CPTPP.

The ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the largest and broadest— but not the deepest— FTA in the world, was also signed in November 2020. India pulled out at the last minute, but the ministerial statement notes that India can come in when it is ready to do so.

China has taken a complementary approach to regionalism and inter-regionalism, by focusing on infrastructure and physical connectivity. In this regard, President Xi Jinping's signature project, the Belt and Road Initiative, is the main game in town.

How has the establishment of new regional and inter-regional FTAs, which has led to the decentralizing trade multilateralism, affected the governance of international trade? Unlike the "contested multilateralism" theorists who focus only on the costs, one has to consider both the benefits as well as the costs of the process.

On the side of benefits, first, regional and inter-regional FTAs provide an alternative approach to liberalizing trade and are use-

ful when WTO negotiations stall as is currently the case. Second, modern regional and inter-regional FTAs typically promote deeper integration as compared to the shallower integration of the WTO which mainly tackles "on-the-border" barriers. Regional and inter-regional FTAs can therefore address "behind the border" issues such as rules for protecting investments, intellectual property, environment and labor rights, and regulations on product standards that are relevant to supply chain trade which now constitutes a bulk of global trade.

Regional and inter-regional FTAs also have a number of costs. The first is that they are discriminatory in nature. Granting preferences to some countries effectively discriminates against trade with others which could be more efficient trading partners, resulting in potentially costly trade diversion. That said, problems with trade diversion are more serious at the theoretical level than in practice. The second category of risks associated with regional and inter-regional FTAs are the so-called "spaghetti bowl" effects. This arises when overlapping FTAs create a web of trade agreements with different documentation rules, inspection procedure, and rules of origin, in effect raising the transaction and compliance costs for businesses. While there is some element of truth, a number of studies including one by the Asian Development Bank and the other by the Inter-American Development Bank have found that these costs tend to be overestimated.

The third cost is the fear that regional and inter-regional FTAs, especially the mega-FTAs which are sizable and cover large

segments of world trade and GDP, could undermine "WTO Centrality" mainly in litigating trade disputes. But again, several other authors have found that, in actuality, the dispute settlement procedures contained in regional and inter-regional FTAs have not introduced direct competition with the WTO. A significant number of disputes tabled at the WTO have involved members of existing regional and inter-regional FTAs using the WTO to resolve their bilateral disagreements.

On the whole, so far, decentralizing multilateralism appears to have outweighed the costs mainly because the latter are overstated. The move from centralized to decentralizing trade multilateralism, therefore, may have improved global trade governance. The move could have also enhanced the resilience of Asian countries to global shocks like COVID-19 by enabling diversification of trade and supply chains.

Going forward, in the post-pandemic world, the decentralization process is expected to continue as different regions of the world recover at different paces. Barring major conflicts, global trade governance is expected to improve further. ■

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Multilateralism and COVID-19: The Added-Value of EU-ASEAN Inter-regionalism

By Frederick Kliem



With varying levels of health security prevalent in the region, ASEAN could look to the EU's experience in alleviating pressure on under-resourced national healthcare systems. Photo by Alberto Giuliani taken from Wikimedia Commons and tagged under a generic Creative Commons 4.0 licence.

Beyond the immediate health threat, the COVID-19 pandemic is testing international cooperation and presents a daunting challenge to regionalism. In both Europe and Southeast Asia, nation states initially reacted unilaterally, uncoordinated and pursuing only their own narrowly defined national interests. Examples abound: without consultation and with almost immediate effect, Malaysia announced a border closure, including the causeway with Singapore—a critical supply route for goods and labour. Vietnam unilaterally shut its ASEAN borders with Cambodia and Laos, which in turn prompted Cambodia to shut its own borders in retaliation. In the European Union (EU), meanwhile, members almost immediately abandoned the most sacrosanct EU principles. Italy became the first country to be severely affected, and Rome activated the EU Civil Protection Mechanism whereby EU members in need can appeal to other mem-

ber states for crisis assistance. But instead of EU solidarity, Rome's plea remained unanswered for several weeks. Worse still, other countries decreed export bans on relevant medical goods, forsaking both European solidarity and the EU single-market—acts the EU Commission President called a 'painful story' of 'only for me' responses.

Yet, due to the particular transboundary nature of pandemics, regional and inter-regional cooperation is necessary for successful pandemic management. Europe and Southeast Asia are particularly vulnerable to pandemics, owing to their deep interconnectedness in terms of integrated supply chains, trade and investment, and people-to-people connectivity — intra- as well as inter-regionally. A similar case applies to the respective regions' deep connectedness with China, where the virus was

first detected. Such admirable linkages advanced regional integration, but they also dangerously exposed both regions to pandemics.

While urgent national responses are legitimate and indeed necessary, pandemics are by definition a case for international cooperation, and failing to meaningfully coordinate regional pandemic management raises doubts as to ASEAN's and EU's value-added regionalism. Pandemics inevitably transcend the nation state and, thus, connect domestic public policy domains and make national public health a matter of region-wide concern. In a hyper-globalised world, COVID-19 also transcends regions and makes Asia's COVID-19 crisis a European problem—and vice versa. Both effective pandemic management and national health governance in one state may prevent an acute regional or global crisis.

Consequently, regional and inter-regional cooperation becomes a *sine qua non* for everyone's safety and prosperity; effective pandemic management must be put onto regional and inter-regional agendas.

Fortunately, several months into the pandemic, both the EU and ASEAN—widely recognised as the most successful regional organisations—somewhat recovered from their initial COVID-19 paralysis. In particular, the EU has responded belatedly but remarkably comprehensively. ASEAN, too, has begun to coordinate their national responses and brought under way regional COVID-19 measures, such as joint stockpiling and a common Response Fund. There is plenty of room for EU-ASEAN cooperation, building on existing strong inter-regional ties.

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EU-ASEAN inter-regionalism can help find a way out of this crisis in a two-dimensional sense. First, both organisations should be willing to look at each other's measures and initiate programmes for inter-regional learning; second, the EU and ASEAN should cooperate closely with joint programmes for capacity building as well as financial assistance. With their long-standing inter-regional ties, there is sufficient inter-regional trust and plenty of existing mechanisms to meet both dimensions.

Inter-regional learning

Much of the inter-regional policy and norm diffusion literature agrees that crises are oftentimes drivers of policy adaptation by drawing lessons. Far from suggesting that ASEAN should simply imitate the EU's deep institutionalisation, or vice versa, the respective approaches are worth studying.

One of the main problems in Europe is the premium the EU puts on unrestricted travel within the visa and border-free Schengen Zone. Although COVID-19 was ravaging the continent, it remained possible until late 2020 to travel for leisure and holiday across the EU, even without mandatory quarantines in government facilities. Naturally, citizens made wide-ranging use of this freedom with the result that COVID-19 measures in individual countries were almost meaningless as tens of thousands of new cases were imported and exported daily.

Brussels would be well advised to temporarily replicate ASEAN's sovereignty conscious *modus operandi*. ASEAN nations closed national borders immediately, without any implicit intent to harm regional integration. In fact, when Malaysia closed its border with Singapore, for example, this was followed by bilateral agreements on safe essential cross-border transport. ASEAN members demonstrated that

closing borders does not equate to a retreat into nationalism but instead to effective pandemic control.

ASEAN, on the other hand, should look towards the EU for effective mutual management support. In inter-connected regions, pandemic resilience is only as strong as its weakest link. For that reason, EU members provided mutual support by seconding medical doctors and experts in support of the most pressured healthcare systems across the EU, countries opened their ICUs to other EU patients and sent ventilators and field hospital equipment across the continent. Comparable to EU practices, ASEAN should assume a role in immediate pressure relief for lesser-developed healthcare systems. There are many more examples, and the large number of EU-hosted EU-ASEAN webinars on COVID-19 can support such learning trajectories.

Inter-regional support

In light of the vastly greater resources the EU has at its disposal, inter-regional cooperation remains a one-way street. ASEAN cannot produce a bailout package of EU dimensions, but the ASEAN Rescue Fund is a step in the right direction. ASEAN has secured buy-in from its ASEAN Plus Three partners to contribute to the fund, and should put this onto the ASEAN-EU agenda too. ASEAN will find a further generous partner in its major development cooperation partner—the EU.

Indeed, as part of Team Europe's global response to the coronavirus pandemic, the total European support to ASEAN sums up to more than €800 million (€350 from the EU budget, €450 from member states). This support addresses both the health and socio-economic impact of the pandemic in Southeast Asia, while focusing particularly on the need for public communication and research. The EU support to Indonesia, for ex-

ample, has included digital solutions for tracking COVID-19 expenditures of the Government, helping to ensure their transparency and accountability. But funds are also in support of capacity increases of local health institutions and workers to manage the caseload and to better reach people living in rural and remote areas.

It will take a large amount of effort and political will for ASEAN and the EU to emerge from this pandemic jointly and unscathed. But if they manage to capitalise on current momentum, there is a real chance that history will remember COVID-19 as a driver of regional cooperation, and both organisations will emerge stronger from the pandemic than when they went into it. ■

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In Retrospect: South Asian Multilateralism 2020

By Nazia Hussain

Multilateralism in South Asia took an unexpected turn with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. As regional organisations around the world geared up to address this once-in-a-generation crisis, New Delhi reached out to the moribund eight-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) grouping — Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan — at a time when SAARC had been ticked off as defunct since its last Summit in 2014. Described as a “slow boat to nowhere”, SAARC is internally fraught being hostage to India-Pakistan rivalry.

SAARC Response to COVID-19

While the dormant SAARC could barely address its structural challenges, the grouping has performed surprisingly well in swift implementation of collective measures to tackle the pandemic. In fact, relatively successful and better equipped regional groupings such as the European Union and ASEAN were seen to have had a muted initial response in collective tackling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At an impromptu virtual summit on 15 March 2020, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the creation of a COVID-19 Emergency Fund and pledged US\$10 million; subsequently all SAARC member states voluntarily pitched in. India also proposed a shared electronic platform for all SAARC nations to help in training of emergency personnel, disease surveillance and joint research.

Furthermore, existing mechanisms like the SAARC Disaster Manage-

ment Centre (SDMC) and the SAARC Development Fund (SDF) had been activated for coordinated response. The SDMC set up a COVID-19 website with daily updates of confirmed cases throughout South Asia and actions that each country is taking. Meanwhile, the SDF allocated \$5 million to soften the blow of financial losses and severe socio-economic impact from the pandemic.

Leadership and political will is critical for substantial joint response and SAARC leaders proposed collective ways to combat COVID-19. Afghanistan suggested that SAARC adopt a shared telemedicine framework to provide health care to the remotest parts of the region. Maldives called for closer cooperation between countries' respective health emergency agencies and a long-term economic recovery plan for the region.

Sri Lanka and Bangladesh emphasised the need for the deliberations to continue at the ministerial level as well as among health experts. Pakistan offered to hold a SAARC health ministers' video-conference and proposed establishing a working group of national authorities to exchange health information, data and coordination in real time.

Multipronged Regionalism

While SAARC countries coming together for issue-based cooperation is significant to reigniting the regional bloc, it might be premature to herald the emergence of a SAARC 2.0. For starters, the inherent issue of Indo-Pak rivalry still simmers below the surface. The virtual summit did not see Pakistan's participation at the leaders-level and the country utilised the SAARC COVID-19 forum to

raise the Kashmir issue.

The SAARC Charter requires unanimity in the decision-making process and unless the nature of the relationship between the South Asian neighbours changes, the best SAARC can expect is interim issue-based cooperation. And if indeed SAARC makes a comeback as the regional grouping of choice in South Asia, it does not necessarily mean that the recently invigorated Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) will return to the backburner.

Changing geopolitical realities with Beijing's expanding footprints in the neighbourhood and beyond is shifting the traditional boundaries of a largely continental South Asia to a maritime one, rendering SAARC somewhat obsolete. As such, New Delhi had instead turned its focus on sub-regional groupings such as BIMSTEC, the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) initiative, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as alternatives to deliver on connectivity, development and counter-terrorism efforts.

While inherent problems within SAARC remain, BIMSTEC has much higher coherence among member states. SAARC includes Pakistan and Afghanistan without which it is hard to imagine a South Asian neighbourhood. BIMSTEC not only caters to the wider concept of the 'Indo-Pacific', it also includes two ASEAN member states (Myanmar and Thailand) in its ranks, which broadens the scope of regional cooperation.

Moreover, where SAARC has fallen behind providing regional connectivity, BIMSTEC strives to fill in –

the BIMSTEC Connectivity Master Plan is a \$50 billion project which would have 167 connectivity-related components linking India up to the east coast of Vietnam through extension of the Trilateral Highway involving India, Myanmar and Thailand.

As Beijing extensively engages South and Southeast Asian countries through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), both in land and maritime domains, the strategic geography and regional architecture have been rapidly evolving. A multi-pronged approach to advancing South Asian regionalism could be the way forward with SAARC as well as sub-regional groupings such as BIMSTEC playing their respective roles rather than being portrayed as competing entities.

India opting out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) – signed by 15 nations representing nearly a third of the global economy – somewhat dampened regional multilateral efforts. New Delhi is likely to instead engage its neighbours through alternative regional initiatives — the fifth BIMSTEC summit 2021 to be hosted by Sri Lanka is expected to mark the remodelling of the grouping as an initiative to be reckoned with. With access to the Indian Ocean and the Himalayas, BIMSTEC is becoming the theatre of convergence and competition for China's BRI, India's Act East policy, and Japan and India's Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. ■

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Practical Steps for a Return to Multilateralism?

By Alan Chong



Cooperation between Japan and other G20 countries to reduce multilateralism's disproportionate over-reliance on American leadership is sorely needed in the post-pandemic age. Photo by the Government of Japan taken from Wikimedia Commons and tagged under a Creative Commons 4.0 licence.

As a year of trial for multilateralism, world order in 2020 appears to have waxed and waned according to three political tectonic forces. The first is the Trump Administration's aversion to multilateralism and its active efforts in thwarting the operation of existing multilateral organizations. The second is a follow on from the first: the Trump Administration's full scale confrontation with China on the technological, economic and diplomatic fronts. The third is of course the COVID-19 pandemic. As so many of this issue's contributors have argued, the pandemic tempted many states to resort to unilateral border closures and lockdowns. The conventional logic was explained to be that if workers, businessmen, refugees, and tourists crossing borders introduced the virus to the far-flung corners of the world, stopping such flows would diminish the virus' spread.

Strewn amidst all these negative trends, also lie the practical steps for restoring

the health of multilateralism. One of the Trump Presidency's most ironic, and probably enduring, legacies is to remind the world what the costs of doing away with multilateralism feel like: supply bottlenecks, negative wage spirals, hampered digital connectivity and depressed economic prospects worldwide, despite short-lived bumps in American economic expansion. Worse, there was painful supply chain diversion, albeit one hopes will be temporary in nature. Under Trump, the UN, the WHO and the WTO were all delegitimized and starved of American support. As a result, many states suffering distress from economic imbalances, refugee influxes and widespread illnesses from COVID-19 did not receive adequate direction and other aid. The arrival of the Democrat Joseph Biden in the White House on 20 January 2021 looks to be on course for overturning the ill-conceived unilateralism of President Trump.

The world has learnt once

again that the fortunes of global order are closely tied to the domestic political priorities of the American leadership. Put another way, it is a fact of global political life that the world economy is still hitched upon the decisions of a disproportionate player in the world economy. This is also why it is urgent that the other major economies of China, Japan, the EU, along with the G20, ought also to attempt to steer collectively towards 'good practices' that avoid both over-reliance on the US economic engine and the temptation to pursue exclusively national solutions to global problems.

A fourth factor that the COVID-19 pandemic impact has brought to everyone's attention is the fact that globalization – whether economic, touristic, political or medical – is not dead despite many heady pronouncements in the middle of 2020. Globalization, which has brought about a lowering of barriers to trade, travel and work as a direct consequence of an

integrated world economy and international political community, joins states and societies in a chain of benefit that equally imposes the pain of withdrawal should that chain be broken. Of course, this chain of benefit did not produce welfare equitably for everyone on the planet. But in its pre-COVID-19 formation, it lifted many populations' hopes for a better life. Alas, it brought the virus too. Today, as we enter the vaccination phase of the pandemic, it is reassuring that just about every captain of industry and minister of trade is calling for the reopening of travel, logistical networks and the repressed consumption of middle classes worldwide. This will in turn keep the employed in their jobs and cut down unemployment dramatically. The logic of multilateralism as the coordinated momentum of 'win-win' solutions has never appeared more alluring. ■

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