

CUTS Webinar, 18th September, 2020

PSM's Speaking Note

Imperative of Resurrecting Multilateralism

In his address to a recently held meeting of the ASEAN-India Network of Think Tanks, Indian Foreign Minister, Dr S Jaishankar remarked that “multilateralism has failed the test as the world lives through an unprecedented challenge in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic which has thrown up ‘trust’ as the most valued commodity in international relations today”.

“Just when multilateralism was most in demand, it did not rise to the occasion. If we saw little leadership, it was not just due to the admittedly anachronistic nature of key international organisations. Equally, it reflected the intensely competitive nature of current international politics,” he added.

This sums up the current state of the world, and there is a remarkable similarity between the world that we are witnessing today and that about a century ago - during the inter-war years, which resulted in the demise of the League of Nations. While at that time a rising power refused to join the international comity of nations, this time another rising (and expansionist) power is doing everything that goes against ‘trust’.

It in this context we need to understand the implications and aftermath of a number of disruptions that the world has witnessed recently. Starting with an expansionist approach in the South China Sea and in the Himalayas, and followed by Sino-American trade and technology war and the COVID-19 pandemic, there is complete disregard to a rules-based multilateral system of governance on the part of a regime which, ironically, benefitted most from it in the sphere of trade, connectivity and poverty reduction.

Therefore, what is needed is ‘trust-building’ among the nations for the delivery of global public good in a fair and equitable manner so that there is peace, security, stability and prosperity for all. That is possible if a better sense about the virtues of being a ‘good international citizen’ prevails.

Therefore, some pertinent questions are: can it happen?; what should be the role of traditional as well as emerging powers for making that happen?

With this as a background, on 3rd September, 2020, we organised a webinar with a number of eminent speakers such as Pascal Lamy, former Director General of the WTO and currently the Chair of the Paris Peace forum.

Among other points, he argued that “the reasons behind this fall in multilateralism are many-fold and they are reflected in a series of crisis in recent times and as a result multilateralism has reached its lowest point. A major reason is division among the major sovereigns in respect to their interests and values, resulting in divergence of thoughts and actions.”

“The hardware of international cooperation has largely become obsolete. On the one side, we have a system based on sovereignty and on the other there is an increasing divergence on what sovereignty means, which is hindering the system to make progress.”

In that webinar I argued that India, along with Brazil, Germany and Japan, should be inducted into the United Nations Security Council as a permanent member. While big powers should learn how to agree to disagree, it is the responsibility of middle and emerging powers like India to convince them about the virtues of multilateralism. That can happen if we expand the membership of the UN Security Council and reform its functions.

At a recent meeting of BRICS foreign ministers, the issue of expanding the permanent members of the UNSC was reiterated along with the demand that two countries of Africa should also be included in this list.

If and when, there are more permanent members then the number of temporary members may be adjusted.

Thus, taking forward that discussion, today we are organising this webinar with a hope that there will be a renewed political interest on multilateralism among the global community and that all powers would listen to this imperative.

In today's webinar, we are pleased to host another eminent panel of experts who will speak on various facets of multilateralism, how they helped the global community to ensure peace, security, stability and prosperity in the post-war world and what needs to be done for its resurrection. It is time to reinvent multilateralism in a new avatar.