

Opinion – Can the Coronavirus Crisis Revive Multilateralism?

Written by Dhanasree Jayaram

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DHANASREE JAYARAM, MAR 26 2020

Multilateralism, or rather the need for it, has now been thrust back into the limelight with the novel coronavirus pandemic. The focus is on not only the failure of multilateralism to tackle the situation more effectively, but also on the need for strengthening its fundamentals, as international cooperation is the only way to contain the spread of COVID-19 and manage its economic, social and political fallouts in the coming months. The seeds of international cooperation have already been sowed by several governments amidst scaremongering, propaganda and blame-game by some establishments and leaders. Most cooperative efforts have so far primarily manifested in the form of videoconferences (which have become the new norm in international relations) organized by regional organizations and groups of countries (minilateral and informal groups) to address the COVID-19 situation – also indicative of geopolitical alignments and realignments in regional settings such as South Asia, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific. Will the COVID-19 crisis reinvigorate multilateralism, which also serves as the bedrock of global governance of a number of issues, including climate change? There are no definitive answers to this question, but it will certainly be debated more frequently in the coming days and months as the world reels under the COVID-19 crisis and tries to outlive it.

Populist/nationalist movements and unilateral moves have threatened multilateralism in recent years. The United States (US) President Trump's announcement to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement (among his other decisions), Brexit and the divided approach of the members of the European Union (EU) towards managing migration from conflict areas of the Middle East and North Africa, to name just a few, have gone against the tide of multilateralism. Even otherwise, many would argue that the success of multilateralism as an approach towards global governance is largely overrated.

The failure of multilateralism is starkly signified in the Chinese establishment's failure to provide information at an early stage to the World Health Organization (WHO) and other countries about the evolving situation in Hubei province, even though the first case is supposed to have emerged there back in November 2019. The lack of transparency and suppression of crucial information, without doubt, led to an inevitable delay in how the rest of the world responded to the crisis. To top it, there is an ongoing tussle between the US and China over the labelling of the novel coronavirus as the 'Chinese Virus' by members of the Trump administration, and the Chinese version that the disease was introduced by members of the US Army who visited Wuhan in 2019 just before the outbreak. The US-Iran stalemate continues as the US continues to intensify sanctions against Iran amidst the pandemic crisis, and Iran rejects US COVID-19 aid.

Furthermore, in the beginning, countries chose to respond differently to the outbreak – some using the strategy of 'trace, test and treat', or in other words, mass testing (as in South Korea and Singapore); some through massive lockdowns (as in China); and others hoping to stave off the crisis by developing 'herd immunity' (as in the cases of the United Kingdom [UK] and the Netherlands). Most countries (even in Europe) have gradually moved towards lockdowns and aggressive testing since then. Nevertheless, the differences in approaches meant that the push for pooling of resources, knowledge and data on COVID-19 was in a way, dampened. Importantly, Taiwan, which was one of the first countries (towards the end of December 2019 itself) to act on the epidemic (and has been effective in containing the spread so far), is not even recognised by the WHO, forcing it out of all the major WHO deliberations about healthcare-related solutions to the COVID-19 crisis.

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There is no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis has presented an opportunity for several organizations and informal mechanisms to rejuvenate cooperation among themselves as well as explore newer avenues of cooperation. In the past few weeks, several such unilateral and regional mechanisms organized videoconferences to discuss the COVID-19 crisis. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, against all expectations, coordinated a virtual meeting of representatives from all the member countries of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), through which an emergency fund has been operationalized. Many view this as a revival of SAARC, which was considered largely obsolete until recently due to India-Pakistan geopolitical rivalry. However, even in this meeting, Pakistan chose to bring up the issue of 'Kashmir' that essentially defeated the specific purpose of the meeting.

The Indo-Pacific's rise to prominence is visible in the geopolitical alignments in this region, even at the time of COVID-19 crisis. The US has initiated a weekly teleconference call among some countries of the region – apart from itself, India, Australia, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam and New Zealand – to discuss ways to contain the spread of the disease and 'synergize their efforts' in efforts such as 'vaccine development, challenges of stranded citizens', assistance in mitigating the effects of the crisis on the world economy and so on. This, interestingly comes across as an extension of 'Quad', an informal consultative process, which is considered to have its roots in the common objective of hedging against China.

China on the other hand, is playing a very different game. It held a videoconference call with more than 10 countries in the Eurasian and South Asian regions. Although India also participated in the call and vowed to cooperate with China, one can infer that the geopolitical game between India and China in South Asia is on, especially when seen in parallel to the SAARC virtual meeting organized by India. China has offered aid, medical equipment and loans at concessional interest rates to countries in the region, including Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Similarly, China's growing influence in Europe (also manifested in the form of virtual/telephone meetings between China and more than 10 Western European countries first and thereafter, with 17 Central and Eastern European countries) – as the primary provider of public goods – is also noteworthy, which many correlate with the US' 'retreat from international engagement'.

While cooperation will continue and the series of virtual meetings held by several leaders and countries are a testimony to this fact, the geopolitical faultlines are here to stay. Multilateralism (through multilateral institutions) in the age of these geopolitical alignments and realignments will be difficult to accomplish, but its underlying principle of cooperation is likely to be the most plausible outcome of the COVID-19 crisis. Even groupings such as the G-20 and G-7 are also trying to remain ahead of the curve in these extremely dire straits to advance cooperation at various levels, but only to be spoiled by 'tactical disagreements' over the naming of the virus as 'Wuhan virus' (as reported in the case of the G-7 meeting that failed to produce a statement).

However, countries may not be in a position to completely abandon multilateralism due to the sheer enormity of the problem that lies ahead of the international community. The very fact that COVID-19 spread so rapidly from Wuhan (its epicentre) to the rest of the world shows the interconnected and globalized nature of the world we inhabit. From only a few countries to be affected by COVID-19 in the initial weeks, now almost all the countries have positive cases. It has indeed shown the world that the challenges that we face today require a multilateral response. Neither does it respect territorial/political boundaries, nor is any country impervious to its cascading impacts on various domains and sectors, especially in an interconnected world. Now, more than ever before, the call for multilateralism should therefore, be reinforced to tackle the far-reaching health, economic, (geo)political, infrastructural and social implications of the COVID-19 crisis as well as other interconnected issues such as environmental change and socio-economic inequalities. This is particularly critical for countries with poor infrastructure and less resources to deal with such an enormous crisis that depend on multilateral forums, more than others do, for resources and solutions.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author's own.

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