



Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace

What is Multilateralism?

In the increasingly interconnected world, the challenges to peace and security have become complex and multifaceted. Conflicts, natural disasters, pandemics, poverty, and climate change continue to threaten peace, stability, and prosperity across the regions. To address these issues, it requires concerted efforts underpinned by a strong commitment to multilateralism.

Multilateralism is a guiding principle of international cooperation in the modernized world. It emphasizes the significance of collective actions of the States to prevent conflicts and negotiate peaceful solutions to common challenges. It is based on the idea that global issues require global solutions, and no single country can effectively tackle these challenges alone.

The International Day for Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace.

The United Nations (UN) International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace is observed on the 24th of April each year. The date was decided by the UN General Assembly at the 73rd session, in December 2018, through Resolution [A/RES/73/127](#).¹

The International Day highlights the role of diplomacy in conflict prevention and solving disputes while seeking to reaffirm the commitment of States to the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. The principles of the UN emphasize the importance of protecting human rights, peace, security, economic and social progress of countries.

Definitions

The term '*Multilateralism*' is often contrasted with bilateralism and unilateralism². As per the definition of the Oxford Encyclopedia, the term '*unilateralism*' means acting without the involvement of other countries or other groups³ and the term '*bilateralism*' involves two states.⁴ Furthermore, the Cambridge Dictionary defines *multilateralism* as a "situation in which several different countries or organizations work together to achieve something or deal with a problem"⁵.

Does this definition encompass the true essence of multilateralism? As per the definition of the UN, the term '*multilateralism*' signifies shared political endeavors grounded in a common system of norms and values.⁶ Principles such as consultation, inclusion, and solidarity are central to multilateralism.⁷

As per the study of Keohane⁸ the term multilateralism can be explained in two ways. Firstly, he explains multilateralism as a collective action of States. The institutions established on this basis prevail for a long period of time and it paves the way for countries to meet under specific criteria on different issues. Secondly, Keohane explains by quoting John Ruggie, that multilateralism is "Action among three or more states on the basis of generalized principle of conduct."⁹

As per the study of [Wijk et al.¹⁰](#), (2020), powerful countries exercise 'instrumental multilateralism', whereas small powers practice 'functional

¹ UNGA A/RES/73/127 (19 December 2018) 73rd Session
<https://www.un.org/pga/wpcontent/uploads/sites/53/2019/04/A_RES_73_127_E-Int.-Day-Multilateralism.pdf>

² Atsushi Tago, 'Multilateralism, Bilateralism, and Unilateralism in Foreign Policy', *Oxford Research Encyclopedias* (Oxford Research Encyclopedias 2017)
<<https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-449>>

³ 'Unilateralism' (Cambridge Dictionary)
<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/unilateralism>> accessed [12th June 2024].

⁴ Robert O. Keohane, 'The Contingent Legitimacy of Multilateralism' (2006) GARNET Working Paper No 09/06.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228621543_The_contingent_legitimacy_of_multilateralism>.

⁵ 'Multilateralism' (Cambridge Dictionary)
<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/multilateralism>> accessed [12th June 2024].

⁶ 'International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace' (UN Office for Partnerships)
<<https://unpartnerships.un.org/events/international-day-multilateralism-and-diplomacy>> accessed [13th June 2024].

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Robert O. Keohane, 'The Contingent Legitimacy of Multilateralism' (2006) GARNET Working Paper No 09/06.
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228621543_The_contingent_legitimacy_of_multilateralism>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Rob de Wijk, Jack Thompson, and Esther Chavannes, 'What is Multilateralism?' (2020) <<https://education.cfr.org/learn/learning-journey/approaches-foreign-policy/unilateralism-versus-multilateralism>> accessed [17th June 2024].

multilateralism'. *'Instrumental multilateralism'* refers to the use of international institutions and cooperation as means to achieve specific national interests and goals. *'Functional multilateralism'* means cooperation based on shared goals and issues. The reason behind this is that the powerful countries utilize the organizations to display their hegemonic power and as an instrument to serve their national interests.

Multilateral Cooperation

The functions of multilateralism are governed by collectively established rules that ensure sustainable and effective collaboration, offering all participants equal rights and obligations across all issues. Thus, multilateralism serves as a cooperative method and a structural framework for the international system.

Effective multilateralism strengthens global governance mechanisms by encouraging transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in decision-making processes. It is done through encouraging dialogue between governments to develop policies that promote global development and stability.

Historical Milestones

Prior to the Second World War, world politics was governed according to the interests of a few colonial regimes. Discourse for the common good barely existed. Nonetheless, the first large-scale attempt at multilateralism was marked by the establishment of the 'League of Nations' and the main aim of the League was the peaceful resolution of disputes and safeguarding of international security.

However, the outbreak of the Second World War negated the attempts of the League by emphasizing the complexities that could arise within the system. The failure of disarmament,¹¹ the impacts of the Great Depression¹² and the inability to take collective action against aggressor nations can be named as reasons behind the failure of the League as a multilateral organization.

The Second World War and its aftermath paved the way for establishment of the United Nations Organization (UNO) in 1945 with the mandate of upholding international peace, security, and human

rights. The UNO and its subsidiary bodies facilitate multilateral discussions covering a wide range of issues in the modern world.

The UN system

The UN system is comprised of six main organs that oversee issues related to sustainable development, human rights, migration, refugees, peace, and security. Each of the six main organs of the UN has a distinct role to play.

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) acts as the policy making body of the UN. The UNGA consists of 193 States. The members of the UNGA each have equal voting rights. This means that regardless of a country's size, population, or economic power, every member state possesses one vote. This principle of equality in voting underscores the UN's commitment to ensuring that all nations, regardless of their differences in size or influence, have an equal voice in the deliberations and decision-making processes of the General Assembly. The UNGA meets annually to discuss a range of international issues. It also plays a pivotal role in appointing the Secretary-General¹³ based on the recommendations of the Security Council. Apart from that, the UNGA appoints non-permanent members to the Security Council of the UN. In addition, the UNGA exercises authority in approving the budget of the UN.¹⁴

The Security Council is charged with maintaining international peace and security. It comprises five permanent members (P5), including China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Other than P5, it is comprised of ten non-permanent members. The Security Council can impose sanctions, authorize the use of force to maintain international peace and security, and establish peacekeeping operations. UN peacekeeping missions have helped to maintain stability in fragile countries, facilitate humanitarian aid delivery, and protect civilians.¹⁵ However, the Security Council acts as an exceptional organization within the UN system due to the 'veto' power of the 5 Permanent Members. The declared reason for 'veto' power in the Security Council was that the issues involving 'war' and 'peace' should have the concurrence of the major powers. Thus, the Security Council does not grant

¹¹Jari Eloranta, 'Why Did the League of Nations Fail?' (2011) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225876065_Why_did_the_League_of_Nations_fail> accessed [16 June 2024].

¹² Patricia Clavin, 'Securing the world economy: the reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920-1946'. Oxford University Press, USA, 2013.

¹³ The UN Secretariat is the administrative backbone of the UN, headed by the Secretary-General. It provides administrative and logistical assistance to the principal organs of the UN. It also facilitates meetings and coordinates activities. It offers policy

advice to member states and the Secretary-General on global issues. Furthermore, the Secretariat implements decisions adopted by the UN's principal organs and provides legal assistance to the Secretary General of the UN - The United Nations, 'Secretariat', <<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/secretariat>>

¹⁴ The United Nations, 'The General Assembly of the United Nations' <<https://www.un.org/en/ga/>>

¹⁵ The United Nations, 'United Nations Security Council' <<https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/>>

equal status to all UN member States unlike in the UNGA.

The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) coordinates the work of 14 specialized agencies, 10 functional commissions, and 05 regional commissions. ECOSOC's mandate is extensive and multifaceted. It includes promoting higher living standards, full employment, and broader economic and social progress. The Council is comprised of 54 member States, and each is elected by the UNGA for three-year terms. Through its extensive network, policy coordination, and high-level deliberations, ECOSOC continues to shape and drive global development agendas, ensuring that economic and social progress remains at the forefront of international efforts.

In serving the principles of multilateralism, the UN specialized agencies also play a crucial role. To exemplify, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) promotes education, science, and cultural partnerships between States. UNESCO has played its role remarkably by assisting States to develop common policies on education, environmental protection, scientific research, and cultural heritage protection.¹⁶

The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health. It was established on April 7, 1948, with the primary objective of promoting health and universal health coverage, improving access to quality essential services, and preparing for health emergencies.¹⁷ WHO currently serves 150 countries and plays a central role in improving health and combating global health risks. The decision-making body of the WHO comprises all the Member States and is named the World Health Assembly. The proactive role of WHO was explicitly seen in the containment of the COVID-19 virus during the 2020-2021 pandemic.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) is now a part of the UNO, although it was established originally in 1919 after the First World War. The ILO oversees the conditions and living standards of workers around the world, safeguarding the rights of

workers, and addresses issues of unemployment and gender equality in the workplace.¹⁸

In addition to these UN organs, the Trusteeship Council was established to oversee the administration of Trust Territories and ensure that their inhabitants were prepared for self-government. The Council suspended its operations on the 1st of November 1994.¹⁹

Challenges in Implementing Multilateralism

Sovereign equality is an underlying principle of multilateralism. Sovereign equality is understood as States having control over their own affairs and having equal rights and status as subjects of international law. However, there are instances where States fear that multilateral frameworks could undermine sovereignty, since States must sacrifice a certain degree of their sovereignty in order to implement multilateral efforts.

Furthermore, multilateralism in the current context is challenged by global power shifts, different perspectives, and values.²⁰ Yet there are more efforts to develop regional alliances in order to discuss common issues of trade, security, and technology sharing.

Another issue within the multilateral system is that the 'middle power' States²¹ often do not have the power to resist coercive actions by others. This becomes the reason the middle powers are concerned with maintaining their *status quo*. Although the middle powers are seemingly less powerful compared to so-called 'big power' States, they have a capacity of performing as efficient stabilizers and mediators for dispute settlement.

Most importantly, ongoing conflicts in the world and wars have hindered the progress of the multilateral system. Clashes of values and interests could also affect negatively on the progress of multilateralism. The downside of it is that the diplomatic efforts to preserve world peace keep failing. Nonetheless, multilateralism remains influential in shaping the world, and new multilateral organizations have emerged in the international system. Alongside the UNO, regional organizations such as the European Union, African Union, SAARC, ASEAN, BIMSTEC are

¹⁶ UNESCO's Major Achievement in 2023, <https://www.unesco.org/en/achievements>

¹⁷ WHO, What We do, <https://www.who.int/about/what-we-do#:~:text=WHO%20works%20worldwide%20to%20promote,better%20health%20and%20well%20being>.

¹⁸ Karen Mingst, 'International Labour Organization' (2024) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Labour-Organization>> accessed [18 June 2024.]

¹⁹ The United Nations, 'Trusteeship Council' (United Nations) <[https://www.un.org/en/about-us/trusteeship-](https://www.un.org/en/about-us/trusteeship-council#:~:text=The%20Trusteeship%20Council%20suspended%20its,remaining%20United%20Nations%20trust%20territory.>)

[council#:~:text=The%20Trusteeship%20Council%20suspended%20its,remaining%20United%20Nations%20trust%20territory.>](https://www.un.org/en/about-us/trusteeship-council#:~:text=The%20Trusteeship%20Council%20suspended%20its,remaining%20United%20Nations%20trust%20territory.>)

²⁰ Rob de Wijk, Jack Thompson, and Esther Chavannes, 'What is Multilateralism?' (2020) <<https://education.cfr.org/learn/learning-journey/approaches-foreign-policy/unilateralism-versus-multilateralism>> accessed [17th June 2024].

²¹ Park, A. S. (2022). Beyond great powers: Middle power paths to resilient multilateralism. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 10(1), 131-157.

also promoting multilateralism within their respective regions.

Critiques of Multilateralism

According to Singaporean diplomat Kishore Mahbubani, there is a constant tension between ‘*power*’ and ‘*justice*’ in the multilateral system.²² ‘*Power*’ in the multilateral process refers to the influence and the ability of a group of countries to shape outcomes in their favor and is derived from economic, military, and political influence.²³ ‘*Justice*’ refers to fairness, human rights, ensuring equitable treatment, fair distribution of resources, and the rule of law in international affairs.²⁴

In the context of the UN system the tension between ‘*power*’ and ‘*justice*’ can be observed. Despite achieving multilateral efforts in norm-setting and humanitarian activities, experts criticize the UN for inconsistencies and double standards in addressing global issues and furthering the interests of powerful States. Moreover, the UN as a multilateral organization keeps failing to maintain world peace and order. As a result, there is growing discontent with the effectiveness and fairness of global governance structures, leading to calls for significant reforms or alternative approaches to international collaboration.²⁵

Conclusions

Thus, in conclusion, it can be stated that while multilateralism fundamentally promotes a peaceful and rule-based world order, it is also undermined by the imbalance of power within multilateral organizations.

The age we live in is in dire need of diplomatic channels and strategies to solve disputes among nations and communities. Therefore, investing in effective multilateral mechanisms to resolve issues and disputes is vital. Furthermore, the strong commitment of States to the principles, laws, and regulations collectively agreed by them in multilateral forums is equally important.

By B.A.I.M. Jayawardane
(Senior Researcher)

Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies (BCIS)

²² The Sunday Times, ‘Gold standard in norms but double standards in practice: The need to reboot multilateralism.’ <<https://www.sundaytimes.lk/240602/sunday-times-2/gold-standard-in-norms-but-double-standards-in-practice-the-need-to-reboot-multilateralism-558948.html>> accessed [18th June 2024]. See also Mahbubani, K. (2022). ‘Multilateral Diplomacy’ in: The Asian 21st Century, Springer, <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6811-1_43> Accessed [13th July 2024]

²³ Mahbubani, K. (2022). ‘Multilateral Diplomacy’ in: The Asian 21st Century, Springer, <https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6811-1_43> Accessed [13th July 2024]

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Teresa Nogueira Pinto, ‘The Failures of multilateralism’ (2022). <<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/multilateralism-crisis/>> accessed [13th July, 2024]