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Whither Multilateralism?

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Never since the end of World War II, have we witnessed events on the international scene unfurling at such a pace, with such inconsistency verging on incomprehension. While there is no dearth of pundits ready to expound on how they see the world in a given lapse of time, no soothsayer has yet emerged to predict, with conviction and empirical evidence, the future of our universe in the short, medium and long terms.

The unpredictable events that unravel daily on the world scene can easily put paid to any forecast, however learned its source. We are living through a shifting sands period. This situation has brought many a country to redraw the fundamentals and parameters of their domestic and foreign policies. Predictability is no longer a constant. Hence regular adjustments. Rightly so. Those that fail to reckon with this verity and adjust accordingly will remain but mere confused spectators, as opposed to being proactive actors.

Is 2025 then, the year that international order, as has hitherto informed the behaviour of the world, collapsed? The picture that is emerging is clear: the order that has served the international community in good stead and acted as a leash to restrain it from going astray is today being battered by near-hegemonic behaviour of the mighty.

On 26 June, 1945, in the wake of two devastating wars, the United Nations Organisation was established. It was time for a solidly anchored rules-based world. Its lofty objective was to maintain international peace and security while achieving cooperation among nations on economic, social and humanitarian matters. 50 original states signed its Charter. Eighty years later, one would have thought that an organisation of that stature, boasting 193 member states, would be firmly anchored and consolidated. Reality is, our world is under assault and fast becoming a power-

based one. It's no longer the rules-based one that had been imagined. The old adage 'might is right' is fast becoming the new norm.

The end of the Cold War had ushered in a new environment. It turned out to be ephemeral. Certain events that developed in the years that followed that milestone in our contemporary history soon displayed visible cracks in the multilateral system. The September 11, 2001 terror attacks on US soil were conveniently used to justify the March, 2003 invasion of Iraq—despite the failed attempt of the USA to obtain a mandate for such an action at the UN. No weapons of mass destruction—the dramatic and grandiloquent performance of then US Secretary of State Colin Powell at the Security Council notwithstanding—were ever found in Iraq, which was also accused of sponsoring terrorism. Earlier, in October 2001, Afghanistan was attacked by US-led forces. Libya and Syria too were targeted. Add to these, Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan to name but these and the picture that emerges is one of helplessness at the UN. The divide within is clear. Its *modus operandi* no longer serves its objective.The biggest stumbling block is its veto system. Five permanent members hold a veto power within the Security Council of the UN. Veto is often used to torpedo any well-reasoned out attempt at solving a crisis peacefully,— the bedrock of the UN's very existence—, depending on what the big Five perceive as their national interest or that of any of their allies embroiled in a conflict. The last known veto has been exercised by the US on the crisis in Gaza. In effect, any resolution critical of Israel has unfailingly been vetoed by the US. This does not mean that the other permanent members do not wield their veto power. Quite the contrary.

The helplessness of the premier institution of the world, on the political front, has been decried time and again. Member states have been consistently clamouring for an overhaul of the system with a view to making the body effectively responsive to meet major political challenges. It is simply unacceptable that with a membership of 193 states, the permanency of seat with veto should be restricted to 5 countries only when the world characteristics have undergone such drastic changes over the past eight decades. Between 1945 and 1964 these five countries successfully carried out nuclear weapons test: USA,1945; Soviet Union (now Russia), 1949; United Kingdom, 1952; France, 1960 and China, 1964. Since then, 4 more countries are known or suspected to have joined the Nuclear Arms Club. Israel, 1967 (though it neither denies nor confirms it); India, 1974; Pakistan, 1998; and North Korea, 2006.

The current geopolitical and geo-economic scenarios are more than ever dynamic. Even the economic power-houses have shifted. China and India have moved up the

ladder, to the extent that it is now forecast that India will reach third place of world economic ranking by 2027. Yesterday's alliances are in question. Some such alliances are being forsaken or abandoned for perceived immediate economic and material gains, all in the pursuit of self-interests. New ties are being forged, propelled by the changing circumstances. As an example, the thawing of relations between the two giants of the Asian region will, for sure, bring in a new perspective on the world scene. Russia will be in that camp and will encourage a rapprochement to counter the perceived aggressive, if not coercive, posturing of the US which appears to be pursuing an agenda of unknown parameters. President Trump's actions at the economic/commercial level besides the political front uphold that view. His 'Liberation Day' tariffs is shackling everyone. Its partners in Europe are not always on the same page with it, however much they try to minimise their tell-tale differences. In effect, West Europe is treading with unsure feet, with a total absence of cohesion on foreign policy matters. The insistence of the US that the European members of the NATO should spend as much as 5% of their GDP on defence isn't popular with their public opinion. The go-it-alone inconsistent and unpredictable actions of the current US administration, as has been witnessed on such live issues as the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the Middle East imbroglio, the out-of-the-blue desire to subsume Canada and Greenland into the United States, the weaponisation of tariffs to cow the international community, have roiled the world. The latest being the instruction conveyed by the President to the Department of War (Pentagon was until recently known as the Department of Defence!) to resume nuclear weapons testing, which had been stopped since 1992 in keeping with the Convention on Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). That seems now to be history. Russia which had ratified the CTBT withdrew its ratification in 2023 whereas the USA, though having signed, never ratified it. Relationships with the USA, even among long-standing friends have become unpredictable, and have become saw-like. In sum, multilateralism is fast losing its essence. The cohesive and consensual dynamics of interactions at the level of the United Nations that have informed it and stood it in good stead thus far are fading. Is the United Nations then losing relevance? Are we now embarked on a multipolar set-up?

Similarly, other international, regional and sub-regional bodies are losing their lustre and *raison d'être.* To wit, the Non-Aligned Movement which was a powerful force to reckon with during the Cold War years has practically slid into oblivion and is no longer the solid common platform that it represented for the developing world. Sub-regional organisations equally appear caught in the throes of uncertainty and near- passivity. Take for example the Indian Ocean Commission or the Southern African Development Community or even the African Union. None of these organisations displayed a pro-

active disposition with respect to the recent events in Madagascar that recently led to an unconventional change of government. The so-called early warning mechanism put in place by the African Union to flag any sign of strife, social or political, in any of its member states, failed to trigger or simply, wasn't triggered. Action at the level of these organisations has been timidly reactive. So, has multilateralism reached its expiry date? The more cynical among us could so conclude, especially in the global South, when one scrutinises the balance sheets of certain important organisations that were meant to focus on its needs and aspirations. The withdrawal of the USA from some of these organisations exacerbates the dilemma. Funds are drying up. Essential programmes are being curtailed, if not entirely abandoned. A glaring example of the failure of the United Nations at the political level is the current situation in the Middle East. The unbridled atrocities unleashed in the Gaza Strip, where the weaponisation of hunger and famine are causing as many casualties as actual bombs, are a clear demonstration of that dismal failure and helplessness. The world is losing its bearings. So, is the new norm: each one for itself?

Yet, no country can go it alone, even if, temporarily, it may appear advantageous for some. One simply cannot live within a fortress, however great the temptation. The crumbling of the Berlin Wall should have shown us the way. But we chose the wrong path and instead of building new bridges we appear to have slipped into the construction of walls. We have passed the middle age of isolated existence. In today's world, if countries want to live in peace and harmony, lift up their societies, they need each other, more than ever.

The present form of multilateralism, if allowed to slide further, is probably breathing its last. But can we afford to let it succumb or is it time for us to set the wheels in motion to revive it but within a new format that satisfies universal aspirations? A multilateral set-up where no one is left behind, where each voice counts, where, in moments of need, one can truly count on each other. In short, a complete overhaul of the system. The UN has to be restored to its prime position and not continue to be merely a forum for debate and resolutions while humanity at large languishes. For decades now, calls have been made for its reform. Maybe the term 'reform' scares the major players off. However, it's quite glaring that one cannot address today's multifarious problems with yesterday's limitative instruments. The Security Council is near obsolescent. Its membership is too constrictive and not representative at all of the international community as it stands today. Entire regions are either not on board or, if at all, their representatives play but a perfunctory role. The membership of the Security Council needs to be expanded so that all geographical regions of the world

including Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are adequately represented. The veto power detained by the five countries has been used more often than not to stymie resolutions of conflicts and attempts to exercise the rule of international law. If it is difficult and perhaps inconceivable for those who hold such power to give it up, then consideration should be given to widen the field to other countries and regions and extend to them the permanency of membership with veto power. Countries like India, Japan, Brazil, South Africa and Egypt (in the case of the African membership, a system of rotation could be envisaged) should be considered in that category. A likely solution to obviate a blockage at the Security Council on account of a veto, would be to resolve that no single veto can stop a resolution unless two other veto-holding countries are in support. A counter veto system could also be envisaged whereby all other veto-holding member states—in an expanded Security Council— vote down a vetoing country as the case necessitates. But, in the absence of any goodwill and progressive disposition of the major players, this debate will go on *ad vitam eternam.*

The uncertain future of multilateralism is agonising. What will this chaotic paradigm lead to? Will it last? Unravelling the spaghetti bowl that seems to depict the current state of affairs on the international scene is a mammoth undertaking.

About the Author

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