Multilateralism:
Its current challenges and way forward

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'Multilateral institutions rarely die; they simply fade into irrelevance': asserted India at an open debate of the United Nations Security Council in New York on "Effective Multilateralism through the Defense of the Principles of the UN Charter" on 24 April 2023. The evidence is plain to discern, and the reasons are compelling—even if one examines the track record of multilateralism over the past five years.

A dithering and ineffective response to COVID-19. An institutional paralysis in the face of escalating crises. A disinclination to effectively reform the international financial institutions. A WTO that seems stuck, as its dispute-resolving mechanism remains in limbo. A very real liquidity shortfall —the highest in four years —and the picture of misery seems complete.

But is this new? Have we not been down this path before?

Even a cursory look at its evolution shows that multilateralism has always contended with headwinds. The tugs and tensions of 193 nations working together carry within themselves the seeds of their 'failure'. Five remain more equal than others, fortified by the power of the veto. And where national interest often trumps global cooperation, particularly in this era of resurgent nationalism.

The Cold War severely tested the United Nations' ability to respond to global crises. The Korean War, the Berlin Blockade, the Hungarian uprising, and the Cuban Missile Crisis were all examples. The veto was liberally used in this phase, particularly by

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the two ideological rivals: the United States and the Soviet Union. This led to paralyzed decision-making, even inertia, for which the institution was criticized.

The 1990s brought some respite, or as some would have it, a so-called golden era. A plethora of treaties and agreements were signed, the most notable being the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the World Trade Organization. The Kyoto Protocol was another success. Cut to 2000 and the Millennium Development Goals, and one could almost believe in the rhetoric: 'We're all in this together.'

But even in this period of 'success', there was a Srebrenica and a Rwanda. Both stand out as stark failures of the UN to keep the peace and protect the civilians. Reminding us that even when there is no direct veto at play, the interests and actions of Security Council members can impact on the UN's ability to prevent mass atrocities and protect civilians.

The post-2000 period marked a resurgence of geopolitical tension, during which the UN was repeatedly bypassed. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the 2014 US-led coalition against ISIS in Iraq and Syria stand out as two notable examples.

This critical deficiency in keeping the peace has inevitably triggered a churn at the UN, reflected in a flurry of meetings and reports. In 2003, then Secretary General Kofi Annan had convened a group of eminent personalities to look into a reinvigoration of the UN, in the effort to make this more fit-for-purpose and relevant to take on the complex challenges of the 21st century. This led to the High Level Panel Report on 'Threats, Challenges and Change' or the Blue Ribbon Panel report, as it came to be known. The report included recommendations on key issues: counterterrorism, peacekeeping and peacebuilding, human rights, the rule of law, development, and poverty reduction. Some of these recommendations have translated into concrete outcomes, notably establishing a Peace Building Commission. So, not all talk-talk is talk and action.

The Panel's focus on Security Council reform reflected the prevailing mood within the UN. The invasion of Iraq—when the Security Council had been famously side-stepped or rendered irrelevant—was the proverbial inflection point. To the credit of the Panel, they suggested two concrete models towards reform: a model 'A' focused on a comprehensive reform of the Security Council, and a model 'B', suggestive of a reform in the non-permanent category only. The newly formed G4–sensing a real moment—had pushed for reform. It is another matter that the proposed change

did not happen, with the naysayers and spoilers among the member states preventing the bid. Underscoring the tangled dynamics of this multi-layered debate, which is also politically fraught.

This remains the status quo to date. Reform has not taken place at the United Nations Security Council. While the Summit of the Future last year acknowledged the need for reform to make the Security Council more representative and inclusive, with the admission of developing countries in particular, the ongoing and annual intergovernmental negotiations seem to be headed nowhere. Likewise, Secretary General Guterres's exhortations to member states to 'reform or rupture' have had little impact.

Given this resistance to reform, it is little wonder that pundits are speaking of the UN's decline. After all, what is it securing if it is unable to secure peace? The painful paradox is that eventual solutions to Ukraine and Gaza may emerge not because of it but despite it.

It is not as if meetings are not taking place or that participation is lacking. The Multilateral Index 2024, brought out by the International Peace Institute in New York, suggests that member states remain engaged in the system, with robust participation across all domains except trade, even if that participation is more adversarial than collaborative. So, it's not participation that's at fault; it is the geopolitics of it.

What is the way forward? Here, it is worth repeating the well-known truth that while failure to adapt may not lead to extinction, it almost inevitably leads to obsolescence. And that is precisely what is happening. As the Council becomes increasingly unable to act, issue-specific regional alliances — minilaterals and plurilaterals — have begun to take on greater prominence. One study suggests that at least twenty such alliances are active today. Is the world then leaning towards regionalism as the default option? Where speed and agility are the currency and where targeted, tailored solutions chart the path forward as multilateralism falters.

The reasons for this are not far to see. These minilaterals and plurilaterals bring together seemingly aligned countries with common interests. Therefore, decision making is agile, targeted, and cohesive. Think of the QUAD's COVID-19 vaccine initiative. The Myanmar quake response. Or the nuclear-powered submarine

initiative of AUKUS. Unlike multilateralism, where the wheels turn very slowly, or where it simply does not deliver.
Significantly, all countries are on equal footing. Every voice matters, fostering decisions that are more inclusive, equitable, and attuned to the group's shared priorities. There are no spoilers, naysayers, or gridlock, either.

Is this then the way forward as the world shifts and shapes into a new order? A tilt towards regionalism? The trend appears to be real. While it is true that minilaterals lend themselves to critiques of exclusivity — even being cast as cliques — it is equally true that they have emerged as a pragmatic response to the inertia and gridlock that increasingly afflict multilateral institutions. Born of necessity rather than design, these formations reflect a shift toward flexible, interest-based cooperation and are likely to endure as part of the evolving global architecture.

Where does that leave multilateralism? The UN will neither vanish nor collapse, nor die. It continues to hold salience through the work of its sectoral bodies. Over the years, it has distinguished itself through impactful interventions in education, health, food security, humanitarian relief, and even the preservation of culture. The value of this legacy cannot be so easily dismissed or diminished.

It is also a fact that the small states—108 out of 193- need the United Nations to amplify their concerns, which would otherwise go ignored or unnoticed in an unequal world. Consider issues such as climate change, sea level rise, natural disasters, loss of biodiversity, and technical assistance. Where else, if not at the UN, does this diverse constituency come together as equals — each with one vote, one voice?

The challenges afflicting today's world—climate change, terrorism, and pandemics—demand global cooperation. No single country can go down this path alone, as meaningful solutions require collective decision-making. This is what the UN does best, even if that best is often a least common denominator outcome.

That said, it cannot be denied that failure to reform pushes it down the path of irrelevance. So even as it endures—for its convening power, norm-setting role, and symbolic value- the UN coexists with a rising preference for mini-laterals in today's multipolar world. This hybrid, if imperfect, reality—part regional, part multilateral—increasingly defines the current era of global cooperation.

About the Author

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj is a retired Indian Foreign Service officer of the 1987 batch. She last served as India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations from August 2022 to May 2024 until her retirement. On 21 June 2022, Kamboj was appointed as the Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations in New York, making her the first female Permanent Representative of India to the United Nations. She served as the President of the UN Security Council in December 2022, becoming the first woman from India to hold this position. She led two signature Security Council meetings in an open format focused on reformed multilateralism and counterterrorism, aligning with India's foreign policy priorities. She has previously served as High Commissioner of India to South Africa, the first female Indian Ambassador to Bhutan, and as Ambassador and Permanent Representative of India to UNESCO, Paris.