

China India Dialogue

Consensus-building vs Alliance-building: Multilateralism
in Asia should be peaceful and prosperity-oriented

Abstract

A yawning gap exists between different understandings and interpretations of multilateralism. Any interpretation of multilateralism with verbal or value limitation is in nature an opposition against true multilateralism and is a come-back of alliance-building which leads to selective multilateralism and struggle of powers among the nations. History has repeatedly shown that such multilateralism could be rather dangerous. Multilateralism in Asia should be peaceful and prosperity-oriented. Peace and prosperity can never be achieved through military presence of western alliances in Asia or militant confrontations among the Asian countries; on the contrary, they will only be achieved via global consultation and cooperation.

Keywords: multilateralism – alliance-building – peace and prosperity-oriented – UN-normed – the shared future of humankind.

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Consensus-building vs Alliance-building: Multilateralism in Asia should be peaceful and prosperity-oriented

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Currently, multilateralism is a remarkably hot topic in international politics. The world is facing numerous unprecedented challenges, such as rising unilateralism and increasing protectionism, putting multilateralism in danger. A wide gap exists in different interpretations of multilateralism among the United States, European countries, India and China.

1. Which multilateralism?

Multilateralism as a term, is widely used in an inflationary way in the international order, but it still lacks a consensus.

In history, multilateralism initially played an important role in coordinating the common use and sharing of trade channels and communications by many countries, multiple parties, and thus making goods and technology flow in those many countries, even in the whole world, that has promoted the modernization of humankind. The classical understanding of this term in the 19th century was politicized and was defined mainly in European diplomacy, meant to keep the balance of powers among nations. In fact, multilateralism was no more the simple form to organize relations among more than three countries, but a strategy for alliance-building at that time, a tool of power

struggle, trying to avoid dominance of any power and war among the nations. Unfortunately, with two bloody world wars happened, this kind of multilateralism didn't work anymore.

Multilateralism, a system of global governance in the current sense, is a new form of interaction for common peace and development among the sovereign countries after WWII as a historical lesson from the disaster of humanity. The remarkable characteristic embodying the multilateralism is of course the United Nations with the principles: having international affairs and world future questions addressed through consultation and determined by everyone working together, in the light of the UN Charter. This is the common value and foundation of multilateralism.

But in recent years, multilateralism has been getting more and more complicated, which can be just put into a picture: with President Trump it's in recession, then with President Biden, it could be in renaissance; and with these American uncertainties, the world has been caught in anxiety and despair. It seems that everything just depends on who is the US President and what this president is about to do. However, the "multilateralism" that President Biden is upholding in a high profile way, is

a selective and exclusive multilateralism, a policy of America First in a multilateral way.

What I am deeply concerned about is that the hard proven multilateralism after WWII is now falling into division and shows its limitation. Paradigms like value-based multilateralism or new multilateralism are getting more and more popular. If the UN-normed multilateralism has guaranteed world peace for decades, why a new one is needed? If not UN-value-based, then what kind of values do we need? It's not without doubt that adding verbal limitation to multilateralism is in nature practising exclusive and selective politics in the name of value. It seemed very much as global civilization mission of Europeans in the 19th century, which was described by Professor Osterhammel in his book *Die Verwandlung der Welt - Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, he reiterated that "the global civilization mission of the Europeans was an ideological tool of imperial world conquest." (2009) Discussing multilateralism, we do need a sense of history and the lessons taught by the history. The truth should be that every nation has the right to live and to develop in the autonomous way suitable for its historical and social situation.

What I want to emphasize is that any interpretation of multilateralism with verbal or value limitation is in nature an opposition against the true multilateralism and a come-back of alliance-building which leads to selective multilateralism, struggle of powers. As history has shown us, such selective multilateralism or pseudo-multilateralism could be dangerous.

In China, it is widely recognized that history repeatedly proved that hegemony has doomed to be a failure, so that no country should seek hegemony, no matter how strong it is developing or has developed. A rising China should only seek a better life for Chinese people and make contributions to the world's peace and development. In China, a majority of people keep a clear distance from the discussion whether China should lead the world or not, just reminding of "Group of Two" (G2) suggestion made by US-President Barack Obama. China didn't follow. In the Chinese discourse, multilateralism does not need to carry an ideological value, but a common value of humankind, meaning multilateralism should be an open, inclusive, sustainable and humane multilateralism for the shared future of humankind (Xi, 2021), it is not a matter of leadership. Democracy and freedom together with peace and development, fairness and justice are human values for all, they are to be promoted and practiced, not to be weaponized in geopolitical confrontation. Those who believe to be better in realizing such values should show the world with examples of best practice, but not forcing preaching.

2. Why multilateralism?

The problems facing the world are complex. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the international community has been plagued by infectious diseases, public health and safety problems, environmental pollution and global warming, the North-South gap and the extremely poor population, space security, network security and so on. All these challenges can only be addressed globally and by all

nations together. In this sense, we need multilateralism more than ever.

Furthermore, the divided multilateralism-approach cannot be a right response to the global challenges. To tackle such risks and challenges, the global community needs consensus-building, rather than alliance-building.

The COVID-19 has proved that such virus is the common invisible enemy facing the humankind, and countries are not enemies to each other. So all of the world must be united, and fully coordinate the international medical and health resources and mobilize the global community through multilateral cooperation. In this sense, it is necessary to propose an open, inclusive and sustainable multilateralism. After having suffered all kinds of global crises, the world community should clearly realize that multilateralism has to be a forced choice for humankind while facing common challenges, not out of romantic phantasy of an enemy against which an alliance should be built to safeguard the interests of one or several countries.

3. What kind of multilateralism?

To examine what is happening in the regions where the American has sent its military forces since 9/11, we will find there is still no peace, but so many humanitarian crises in the related areas. I think Europe has a deep understanding of this and it has suffered heavily and the suffering will continue, such as refugee crisis. Tradition has it that Germany was regarded as a civilian power after WWII. In the past, Germany didn't like other great powers

that use ideological or even military force to obtain their own geopolitical, economic or military interests, and in doing so the country has been widely respected. But now in my new observation there are some changes in German foreign policy, especially the militarization trend, not only in policy debates, but increasingly in the practice. Germany is sending a frigate through the South China Sea and even intensifying military cooperation with Japan (Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2020 & 2021). Maybe it is just a symbolic gesture, but not in hopes of peace, probably for the memory of wars started from these two countries.

Recently, Europe has tried and is trying to strengthen its military presence in Asia-Pacific region. If Europe works together with some Asian countries in the field of military power, I don't think this is a true multilateralism. Alliance-building in the 19th century in Europe has proved dangerous, it is not helpful, not even responsible for the issues in our time. If European countries should send warships to Asia, it would surely intensify military tensions or feeling of tensions in this region. Everybody knows that more weapons are not necessary a guarantee for peace. Peace and prosperity will not be realized with more weapons, with military presence, but with business and economic cooperation. I think, more business, more economic activities, more cultural exchanges, that will be a great help and will be good for well-being of the people in this region, also for the people in Europe.

Another point is if the US or Europe wants more multilateralism, please do it with well-meaning deeds. In fighting against

pandemic, for example, China is the biggest export country of vaccines and masks. (Bloomberg, 2021) China says it wants to help other countries, if we are needed and if we can, we will help. And China did help and is helping other countries. That is a good practice of the true multilateralism from my point of view. The US-government, however, put a strict limitation for vaccine export. Europe just followed suit. So in this sense, multilateralism should only be judged by deeds. Moreover, multilateralism should never be abused for some country's own geopolitical interests, as shown very clearly in the global struggle against Covid-19.

4. How can Asian countries make contributions to multilateralism?

Asia has become the most dynamic region of the global economy in the 21st century. The peace in Asia determines the development direction of the world. Asia should be a region where countries respect each other and work together to develop Asia into a peaceful and stable region. This would be an opportunity and responsibility for the whole world.

But due to the diversity and complexity of history, culture and approach toward modernization of Asian countries, Asian affairs should be handled by Asians themselves, just like European affairs handled by the Europeans. If Europe plans to build a so-called valued-based alliance with some Asian countries against other countries in Asia, that is not practicing multilateralism but an attempt of undermining multilateralism, furthermore revitalizing the old history of European balance politics which failed catastrophically. The

intervention of other great powers outside the region hasn't brought peace to Asia, many conflicts among Asian countries such as border issues were often unfortunately resulted from the European colonial time in the past. And military engagements of Europe today can only make the region extremely complicated and triggered at any moment. Militarism is not the answer to our time, and military multilateralism is not either.

China and India are both of the world's oldest civilizations which have gifted the world with many wonderful achievements through the millennia. For thousands of years, China and India have learned from each other in their own civilizations and spirits. The Chinese talk about the *Tianxia* "All-under-heaven" system and *Tianxing* heaven processes (Xunzi, about 300 BC). Ancient Chinese philosophy emphasized *Tianxia Datong* the great harmony of the world (Confucius, about 500 BC), including the relation between the mankind and nature. That was and should remain the natural law of the world. "Reincarnation" of India as a key principle of Buddhism also embodies a kind of humanistic care. India has a significant influence on the cultural history of Asia and the world as well. The spread of Indian religions like Buddhism, has also shown a different nature from Western religions of monotheistic character.

So, for Asian countries, multilateralism should not mean alliance-building. Multilateralism cannot mean to contain any countries or to lead a group of countries in order to maintain or even expand his own power. Multilateralism should be integrative, not exclusive and expansive.

In the post-pandemic era, we're facing many challenges like curbing the impact of the pandemic, reviving the global economy, and tackling climate change. Asian countries, China and India in particular, need to stand united and work together through consultation, coordination and collaboration, for a peaceful Asia in the 21st century. Geopolitical egoism will not only harm the stability in the region but themselves in the end.

Last but not least, European Union sets with its integration history a new model of international relations, war is no more the necessary way to peace and prosperity. India and China are both known as old civilizations, Buddhism and Confucianism are characteristics of inclusiveness in their doctrines and integrative openness in the practice. Together they will have spiritual and material capabilities to play an exemplary role in building global solidarity and upholding the true multilateralism. But the first step for them is to trust each other, which seems to be the most difficult step they should take at the same time now.

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