

The message in the Peace Nobel — multilateralism

That the pandemic could also be impacting the anti-poverty fight is another reason why the world needs full solidarity



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It is a paradox that precisely at a time when the salience of cross-national and global challenges has significantly increased, nation states are less willing to cooperate and collaborate in tackling them. COVID-19 recognises no national or regional boundaries as it rages across the world. One would have expected that countries, particularly those with technological and financial capabilities, would agree to pool their resources together to work on an effective and affordable anti-virus vaccine. Instead, there are several parallel national efforts under way even as the World Health Organization (WHO) has put together a Covax alliance for the same purpose. There is a competitive compulsion at work which may be appropriate in economic and commercial domains. When the lives of people are at stake, active collaboration would have enhanced our collective ability to overcome what has become a public health-cum-economic crisis. But we live in an era when nationalist urges, fuelled by a political opportunism, diminish the appeal of international cooperation. As pointed out by Nicholas Eberstadt of The National Bureau of Asian Research, “The post pandemic world will have no choice but to contend at last with a problem long in the making: the awful dilemma of global integration without solidarity.”

Looming food crisis

This year's Nobel Peace Prize to the World Food Programme (WFP) is a recognition of its role in combating hunger and malnutrition across the developing world. But the WFP's achievement are modest, not because it is an inefficient

institution, but because it is perennially under-funded. But more important is the message which this award is sending to the world — that we need multilateralism as an expression of international solidarity. It is also a warning that the novel coronavirus pandemic is reversing the substantial gains made in the fight against poverty.

According to the WFP, 132 million more people could become malnourished as a consequence of the pandemic. To the 690 million people who go to bed each night on an empty stomach, perhaps another 100 million or more will be added. This counts for a major world-wide catastrophe and unless the conscience of the world is aroused, we will be condemning vast pools of humanity to living in wretchedness and deprivation. The Nobel Prize to the WFP will hopefully nudge our collective conscience to come together and relieve this looming humanitarian crisis.

The UN at 75 is still important

The United Nations is at the centre of multilateral institutions and processes. It is celebrating the 75th anniversary of its founding. While it is a pale shadow of the vision with which it was invested at its founding, nevertheless it has kept alive the notion of international solidarity and cooperation. If it has become increasingly marginal in mobilising international responses to global challenges, the fault lies with its most powerful member countries. They have deprived the UN of resources. They have resisted efforts to institute long overdue reforms; 75 years on, its structure no longer reflects the changes in power equations that have taken place. It is anachronistic that a country such as India continues to be denied permanent membership of the Security Council. And yet despite these disabilities, the UN is now an essential part of the fabric of international relations; its role has become even more important precisely because

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the salience of global issues has expanded and the need for multilateral approaches in finding solutions has greatly increased.

India has been a consistent advocate of multilateralism and Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently said: “India firmly believes that the path to achieve sustainable peace and prosperity is through multilateralism. As children of Planet Earth we must join hands to address our common challenges and achieve our common goals.”

Institutions and problems

There is a network of multilateral institutions, several as part of the UN system. Others are inter-governmental in nature; still others may be non-governmental of a hybrid character. This is a network which enables governance in areas which require coordination among nation states and set norms to regulate the behaviour of states so as to avoid conflict and to ensure both equitable burden sharing and, equally, a fair distribution of benefits. This network continues to function and deliver benefits to participating states despite the less than propitious international environment. However, going forward, there are more complex challenges which would require a different mind-set and patterns of behaviour.

While there are multilateral institutions they have become platforms for contestations among their member states. There is recognition of the need to cooperate but this is seen as compulsion rather than desirable. When parti-

cipating in multilateral negotiations, whether at the Committee on Disarmament in Geneva, or later at multilateral negotiations on climate change in the run-up to the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in 2009, my brief would be the same as other country representatives — concede as little as possible, and extract as much as you can. If all delegations work on the same brief, is it any wonder that even a supposedly “successful” outcome is invariably the least common denominator? This may be appropriate when dealing with trade or security matters but not in tackling global challenges such as climate change or the current pandemic.

Globalisation here to stay

Given the scale, urgency and seriousness of the challenges we confront, we need maximal, not minimal, responses. The dynamics of negotiations and their outcomes would dramatically change if delegations came with a brief to contribute as much as possible within the limitation of resources and demand the minimum in terms of assessed needs. This is the international solidarity which a globalised world requires to handle the dense interconnections that bind us.

Globalisation may have stalled, but as we become increasingly digitised, there will be more, not less, globalisation. The pandemic has triggered galloping globalisation in the digital economy. Globalisation is driven by technology and as long as technology remains the key driver of economic growth, there is no escape from globalisation.

Don't we need to first focus on getting our domestic imperatives right and then think of international cooperation? In the contemporary world, the line separating the domestic from the external has become increasingly blurred. In tackling domestic challenges deeper external engagement is often indispensable. This is certainly

true of climate change. Even if India's carbon emissions became zero tomorrow, climate change would continue to affect us if others do not also reduce their emissions. The pandemic originated in a third country, but soon raged across national borders. If there had been a robust and truly global early warning system, perhaps it could have been contained.

The thread in challenges

When one speaks of the rising salience of cross-national issues we must also take into account the inter-connectedness among various challenges. For example, food, energy and water security are inter-linked with strong feedback loops. Enhancing food security may lead to diminished water and energy security. It may also have collateral impact on health security. Raising crop yields with current agricultural strategies means higher incremental use of chemical fertilizers and toxic pesticides. India's unprotected farmers are exposed to serious health risks as a result and often get bankrupted not due to crop failure but debilitating health costs. It is in recognition of these inter-connections that the international community agreed on a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are cross-domain but also cross-national in character, and hence demand greater multilateral cooperation in order to succeed.

Finally, this also points to the need for a more democratic world order since lack of cooperation from even a single state may frustrate success in tackling a global challenge. A fresh pandemic may erupt in any remote corner of the world and spread throughout the globe. Prevention cannot be achieved through coercion, only through cooperation. It is only multilateralism that makes this possible.

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