Opinion – Multilateralism as Panacea for COVID-19

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/23/opinion-multilateralism-as-panacea-for-covid-19/

ZERUBABEL G. TEFERA, HIBAA-HAIBADO ISMAEL AND SEKOU T. OTONDI, APR 23 2020

Three months after the first case of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China, the world registered (at the time of writing) more than 2.6 million cases, more than 180,000 deaths, and no fewer than 700,000 recoveries. The World Health Organization (WHO), leading and coordinating the global effort, supporting countries to prevent, detect, and respond to the pandemic, is heavily criticized in its handling of the pandemic at the beginning of the outbreak. There is no clear end in sight. Multilateralism is needed more than ever to avert the global health crisis. Many express concerns that contemporary multilateralism is too weak to tackle the global pandemic. The geopolitical context within which contemporary multilateralism operates makes global cooperation daunting, and the COVID-19 pandemic makes it more difficult. At first glance it appears that states themselves are self-isolating and further damaging the remaining fabric of multilateralism. However, the crisis might play a constructive role in rebuilding multilateralism after states realize the dangers of looking inwards.

Multilateralism as rule-based process of collective decision making is US president Woodrow Wilson's foreign policy legacy. Wilson famously presented a fourteen points plan to end the Great War in 1918 and build a sustainable peace. His last point advocated for the establishment of an 'association of nations … under specific covenants for mutual guarantees.' The League of Nation was established in response, and was later succeeded by the United Nations and a vast array of other global multilateral organs – such as the World Health Organization (WHO). A century after its institutionalization, there seems to be a growing consensus that multilateralism is on the decline or losing relevance. For Amrita Narlikar, the rise of nationalism, populism, and autocrats are contemporary discontents of multilateralism; whereas, for Thorsten Benner, geopolitical rivalries and perception are. Both have one plausible argument in common – multilateralism has a problem, and the problem needs fixing. However, the discontents, as mentioned above, are instead the constitutive elements of international relations which multilateralism itself is entrusted to address.

Others tend to blame the relapse on the United States and President Trump. The US has been playing a significant role in the evolution of multilateralism since Wilson's days. The US is one of the constitutive actors, not the only actor, in international affairs. International relations and multilateralism are not dependent on a single actor even if the actor has a superpower status. Not all UN member states are parties to all the treaties. The US is not a party to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Convention on Biological Diversity, and Global Compact for Migration, but these treaties govern international affairs. The US pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement, yet the agreement is still intact. The US and Israel pulled out of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization; the organization faced financial difficulties but prevailed. Do not get it wrong – this is to denounce neither the role of the US nor the principle of inclusivity in multilateralism. Instead, it is an attempt to uphold the foundation of multilateralism, "We the peoples of the United Nations." Thus, disengagement and isolation of actors or a group of actors may threaten the progress of multilateralism, not shake it to its core.

On the other hand, France and Germany present themselves as the saviours of multilateralism through their joint initiative, "Alliance for Multilateralism." The alliance attempts to revitalize international commitment to multilateralism through adaptation. It is only the anti-thesis of isolationism and disengagement, not the saviour or the insurer of multilateralism. Multilateralism is an advanced praxis designed to continue providing a controlled environment within which ideas or interests collide, including isolationism and alliance for multilateralism. Therefore, in the above two cases, it is rather the limited understanding of the concept and practice of multilateralism that argues it is in bad

shape.

Multilateralism needs fixing – but what necessitates the fix is not its failure to deliver on its mandate, but the need to infuse underlying change in this mandate. Global political and military security threats constitute the foundational mandate and multilateralism can be said to have played its part in helping overcome major global wars. It also helps formulate, forge, and manage the post-Cold War globalized world order. However, the relatively interdependent and peaceful world multilateralism helps to create, now requires more complex solutions to environmental, health, and economic challenges. The very essence of multilateralism, at least the rationale behind its existence, is to forge and preserve peace and stability at the global level through the pursuit of collective security. From the creation of the League of Nations following the Great War and the United Nations following the Second World War, the evolution of multilateralism helped the world avoid major wars. Is this enough in the twenty-first century?

Multilateralism should prove itself viable in addressing non-military or non-political security challenges such as global environmental and health challenges and also find a way to accommodate the growing influence of non-state actors without antagonizing states. Multilateralism helps the world reach important agreements such as the Stockholm Convention on Human Environment, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda – but environmental challenges continue to haunt humanity. It is yet to deliver on global health – the proposed Framework Convention on Global Health (FCGH). There is much room for improvement, revitalization, or renewed commitment.

Three months into the global health crisis, the world economy is set to lose at least $1 trillion in 2020. Defeating the pandemic and instituting a viable recovery plan require unprecedented cooperation and solidarity – international commodities only multilateralism provides. The world is responding accordingly. The US froze its contribution to the WHO, but countries such as Finland, guided by multilateral solidarity, allocated extra resources to fill the gap. Also, the G7 recognized the need for international cooperation to defeat the pandemic and the European Union called for a pledging conference in May 2020 to provide adequate funding to develop and deploy a vaccine against COVID-19.

Currently, the pandemic is yet to fully emerge in Africa. Nevertheless, given the fragility of its health and social infrastructures and systems, many, including the United Nations, are predicting the pandemic will kill up to three million people in Africa. Despite this loss, developed countries have come together in order to lobby for underdeveloped countries, many of these in Africa, to benefit from debt relief. In his recent televised speech, French President Emmanuel Macron stated that it was important to “massively cancel the debt” of African Countries in order “to help Africa fight the virus more effectively” in the name of solidarity and good neighbourliness. The world seems to have understood that the pandemic can only be overcome with a strong and coordinated international response and showing a willingness to pursue solidarity.

Meanwhile, it is of significance to note that the pandemic comes at a time when multilateralism can no longer be defined within the narrow lenses of statism. In the aftermath of the Cold War, non-state actors with different capabilities challenged the sovereign based rulebook of diplomacy and made room for themselves. It is within the backdrop that the role of non-state actors in the global efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic can be viewed. Besides, the sheer fact that state resources are limited in combating health security has increased the role of non-state actors, especially in times of crisis. The joint initiative by the Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed and the Chinese tycoon Jack Ma to provide medical supplies to African states is a case in point where state and non-state actors collaborate. The Gates Foundation’s donation to the WHO and Alibaba’s to the United States, Italy, and France also another manifestation of the role of non-state actors in enhancing multilateral cooperation in times of crisis. Such cooperation proved a success in fighting the Ebola epidemic in West and Central Africa. Thus, it is thus no surprise that the fight against COVID-19 across the globe has attracted the attention of major international non-state actors.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to reinvigorate multilateralism. Many are worried that a new era of isolationist state rivalry will become the new normal. Yet, history indicates otherwise. For example, at the height of the Cold War, the threat of polio triggered the Sabin-Chumakov partnership and led to the development of vaccines. If history repeats, or informs, the geopolitics of pride will likely not block global solidarity and cooperation in the long

term fight against COVID-19 and the associated social and economic impications. Paul Romer once noted that “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.” Any crisis also holds an opportunity, and perhaps COVID-19 has the potential to reinvigorate global solidarity and play its part in saving multilateralism from its ultimate demise.

About the author:

Zerubabel G. Tefera is an Ethiopian diplomat based in Nairobi and a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, University of Nairobi (@zerubbabel_G).

Hibaa-Haibado Ismael is a Djiboutian diplomat based in Nairobi and an alumna of Institute of Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa University (@hibais).

Sekou T. Otondi is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies, University of Nairobi (@SekouOtond).