

EU-India Cooperation: Partnership for a New Multilateral Agenda

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Crisis of Multilateralism and Impact on India and the EU

The assumption of cooperation between states at the global level is that it creates a win-win situation for all concerned parties and that in essence defines multilateralism. Since the end of World War II, the creation of a new multilateral arrangement encapsulated within the United Nations (UN) architecture with institutions located in New York, Vienna and Geneva to name a few, has defined the engagement between states creating a rules-based order. Multilateralism is about collaboration and it has not been without problems as the global south has felt that it was relegated to the level of a rules taker than being a rule maker, which was solely within the power of the WWII victorious states. The Cold War only served to embed the structure and create ideological cleavages and standoff resulting in the paralysis of the UN Security Council entrusted with the task of preserving peace and security. The end of the Cold War in 1990 not only expanded the growing space for democracy but also brought back focus to the UN as centre for managing multilateral relation with respect to the global public goods.

However, the new millennium has shown the shifting balance of power across the global level as Cold War bipolarity gave way to the moment of US hegemony and subsequently to the multipolar era of today. As Nye indicated, the world is more like a three-dimensional chess game with all weight not concentrated on the top and this indicates to how the redistribution of power is happening along the military, economic and transnational axisⁱ.

For India and the European Union, two strong actors committed and embedded in their political thinking to the value and spirit of collective action, this crisis of multilateralism affects how they engage with each other and other countries. India as an emerging power seeks a more favourable rules-based order that is more inclusive and its current term as non-permanent member of the UNSC showcases the confidence reposed by other countries. On 26 June 2020, addressing the Franco-German led Alliance for Multilateralism, Foreign Minister Jaishankar said for a world reeling under the impact of COVID19, it stands at a “transformative moment and going ahead one needs “a ‘reformed multilateralism’--one that is relevant for the age in which we live, not when this architecture was erected”ⁱⁱ. The EU, which a collective actor of 27 Member States that showcases multilateralism, has argued since 2003 about “effective multilateralism” as its operating principle that endorses action under the UN principles. While both are different kind of actors wedded to democracy and cooperation and though there is strong ideational convergence, the current crisis of multilateralism also impacts how they enhance their cooperation.

Challenges to the Global Political Compact to Collective Action

What we witness today is a rapidly changing environment with disruptions created by economic and political power shifts, the impact of globalisation, a dramatic surge by technology (such as AI, blockchain), the unmistakable concentration of influence and power of select corporations and the networks among people that have all eroded the absolute power of the state which has been the poster child of multilateralism as the sole actor creating rules. In the backdrop of 75 years since the creation of

the UN framework, the world is witnessing “contested multilateralism”ⁱⁱⁱ. It brings higher transaction costs as geopolitical uncertainty has coupled with the erosion of and contestation of the liberal order raising fundamental questions on the sustainability of multilateralism.

The output of collective action for the constituency- the people of the world -their wellbeing, peace prosperity and security and health as the pandemic revealed stands threatened today like never before as the multilateral order is losing its cohesive power and the ability to deliver. A growing technology enabled networked world has shown how it can bypass the state unless it is regulated. The existing top-down model is being upended by technology that has penetrated the lives of communities more rapidly than state. From linear patterns to cross-cutting exponential horizontal platforms, the networks of business, politics, economics and security has made democracies also more vulnerable to hybrid attacks that can undermine political systems. Influence of voters through media and social networks is a reality that has been witnessed in Europe, the US and in India. The speed of change and the impact of technology is going to be even more rapid – a geometric growth producing benefits but also volatility in the systems and structures that are increasingly becoming inefficient and unable to produce rules that benefit the distribution of the global public goods.

It is a crisis moment in international politics with questions about the sustainability of the liberal order, which both India and the EU strongly endorse. Preserving the functioning parts of the order and gearing up to meet the new uncertainties requires New Delhi and Brussels to think beyond the current parameters that has a little short term but more long- term thinking as the power balance is clearly in dynamic mode. The fundamental changes in the current landscape of multilateralism reveals that the global political compact is breaking down as the benefits have not accrued to all countries in the same manner.

COVID has underlined how a pandemic has destroyed all dimensions of predictability and lack of cooperation between states along with a rampant vaccine nationalism has put millions of people at risk creating protected and unprotected populations. Human rights, proliferation of weapons, disaster relief, climate change, a fair, just and equity producing trading order are critical parts of this multilateral framework. There is no perfect recipe for managing the multilateral challenges with predictable or preferable outcomes. So where are India and the EU in this changing multilateral landscape?

EU-India Cooperation: Partnership for a New Multilateral Agenda

The 2025 strategic roadmap has laid out the goal posts for strengthening and expanding the India-EU strategic partnership engagement. It shows the priority areas to be foreign and security policy, environment and climate change, digitalisation, sustainable modernisation and research and innovation, that are all important to the bilateral, the regional and global structures. In a world where multilateralism is eroding, the way ahead is ‘Partnership in Leadership’ by India and the EU by choice and not by chance. The current crisis offers an opportunity to shape multilateralism through joint action. The shaping of the multilateral and partnership would mean that the EU and India put out political intentionality. Below are some recommendations that envisage the challenges and offer outcome of the engagement by joint action. This should be guided by what both India and the EU intend to be the hallmark of their engagement.

1. In order to create new win sets for the partnership, there is a need to capitalise on the existing embedded relationship in foreign policy to devising a new and bold partnership between India and the EU. Developing joint positions on global issue areas will enhance their presence at the UN level.
2. India should use the opportunity of its two-year membership in the UNSC to work in close cooperation with its European partners to be more effective and build coalition of similar ideas to genuinely bring forth solutions. A key area to work would be counter terrorism and funding

and strengthening international legal frameworks by showcasing their joint efforts in a time bound manner.

3. The COVID-19 has shown the need for joint and collective action and India and the EU should partner in developing a robust system of distribution of the vaccines in developing countries. Indian manufacturing and a strong financial input from the EU will be a masterstroke of providing protection to millions.
4. In the light of the pandemic, both India and the EU should work to strengthen the WHO and build it into a much more agile and responsive organisation. There is a wealth of scientific community on both sides that should partner to build resilience through knowledge sharing, and joint production to create better health access to communities.
5. Investing in joint, coordinated and collective action by identifying clear and deliverable short- and long-term goals that bridge the 2025 roadmap and the SDG 2030 agenda is another way forward. By focus on the Paris agreement, International Solar alliance, a definitive endorsement can be given by India and the EU to be leaders in addressing climate change.
6. The building of a new global political compact requires bilateral and interregional efforts. Here India and the EU should step forward to make digitalisation available as a low-cost solution to rebuilding communities and groups of people ravaged by the pandemic.
7. Cyber security is growing to be an increasing theme in the years ahead as digitalisation has been speeded up by the pandemic. As the EU GDPR has become a global benchmark, India should partner the EU to strengthen this area both at home and in third countries by focusing in the South Asian region as a first step to build confidence and trust.
8. India and EU should actively showcase their partnership by co-branding their efforts on community building in third countries by jointly proposing new sustainable clean energy and climate partnerships and investment in education that bring technology and investment together. They should export the successful models undertaken in India to other regions of the world.
9. Moving from path dependency of the relationship to taking different kinds of political decisions, there has to be an ambition to be partners in strengthening Multilateralism and reframing the rules of engagement where necessary by linking the decision making today to the strategic roadmap.

ⁱ Joseph Nye, (2011), *The Future of Power*, Perseus Books Group

ⁱⁱ https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/32792/EAMs_remarks_during_the_Virtual_Ministerial_Meeting_of_Alliance_for_Multilateralism

ⁱⁱⁱ Julia C. Morse & Robert O. Keohane, (2014) “Contested multilateralism “, *The Review of International Organizations*, 9:385–412