

Evolution of Indian Strategic Alignments with the Global Multilateral Groupings Since Independence: Insights into New Indian Multilateralism

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Abstract: This paper explores the evolving dynamics of India's strategic alignments with global multilateral groupings since 2014, shedding light on the emergence of a new paradigm in Indian multilateralism. In recent years, India has demonstrated a proactive approach in engaging with diverse multilateral forums, signaling a departure from its historically cautious stance. Through a comprehensive analysis of India's engagements with key multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, G20, BRICS, SCO, and others, this study seeks to delineate the underlying motivations, challenges, and implications of India's evolving multilateral strategy. Drawing upon primary sources, policy documents, and scholarly literature, the research underscores India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, economic integration, and regional stability as key drivers of its multilateral engagements. Moreover, it highlights the nuanced balancing act undertaken by India in navigating its relationships within these multilateral fora, amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics and power configurations. By examining the trajectory of India's participation, leadership roles, and policy initiatives within global multilateral platforms, this paper aims to provide valuable insights into the contours of India's emerging multilateral diplomacy, its implications for regional and global governance, and the evolving landscape of international relations in the 21st century.

Keywords – multilateralism, plurilateralism, Indian strategic alignments

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INDIAN MULTILATERALISM

After independence, India's global standing in almost all the spheres be it political, economic, or diplomatic was not in a good shape. For establishing an Indian voice on the international level, Indian leaders opted to associate the country with the global multilateral forums. Also, it went well with the Nehruvian

approach of having an idealist world view of global trust and peace. It also provided India with a forum to raise its voice against the existing colonial structures worldwide (drishtiias, 2023)

India started its multilateral journey with the United nation's membership. Its importance in the Indian foreign affairs circle can be assessed by the fact that Nehru opted for the UN route to resolve the issue arisen after the Pakistan's violation of the proposed boundary in 1947. The UN did not favour India directly but asked for plebiscite in Kashmir, stressing on the right to self determination for the people of Kashmir (drishtiias, 2023)

Soon India provided leadership to the nations which did not want to get intertwined in the big powers' cold war(USA and USSR). The Non-Aligned Movement was founded and held its first conference (the Belgrade Conference) in 1961 under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Sukarno of Indonesia (drishtiias, 2023). On similar lines, India also participated in GATT negotiations, supporting the cause of developing nations in the formulation of rules of GATT. In 1960s, India took steps and consultation with other developing nations to reform UNSC and expand it. For this very purpose, a grouping namely G-77 was formed, with India being an active partner in it (Malone, 2011). Thus, it is evident that even after debacle over the Kashmir issue, India was very much appreciative of the impact of multilateral institutions. In Post Nehruvian era (1964-1971), Indian establishment sought a more pragmatic take on the multilateral institutions' issue. It focused more on improving its bilateral relations with other nations (including superpowers), leaving behind the tints of idealist and anti-colonialist foreign policy. This shift

can be attributed to the failure of UN started to surface on various occasions, especially in matters involving superpowers.

After this period, Indian relation with the UN got a bit estranged as India found it very difficult to balance its stance during soviet invasion in which it saved itself from criticizing the soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Indian nuclear test in 1974 did not help the relation either with majority of the countries. Indian military intervention in East Pakistan and Srilanka too did not go well with establishments such as UN and NAM.

NEW FORM OF MULTILATERALISM

Within the field of global governance, the multilateralism that has been observed in recent years—especially since 2000—has been marked by both continuity and change. During this time, there has been a complicated interaction between more modern forms of multilateral cooperation, such as issue-specific coalitions and regional blocs, and more established multilateral organizations, like the United Nations (UN). Academics have presented a range of viewpoints about this dynamic multilateral environment.

Modern multilateralism is notable for its ability to adjust to shifting power structures and international issues. The notion of "complex multilateralism," which highlights the proliferation of varied actors beyond states, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multinational companies, and sub national entities, has been emphasized in the post-2000 age by researchers like Joseph S. Nye Jr. The growing number of participants is a reflection of the realization that global problems like pandemics, terrorism, and climate change are interconnected and require multi stakeholder collaboration to find answers.

Moreover, one noteworthy aspect of multilateralism in the twenty-first century has been the emergence of regional organizations. For example, the European Union (EU), which has its own institutions and decision-making procedures, stands out as an example of regional integration. Scholars such as Amitav Acharya have also studied how regional powers influence multilateral institutions and norms, showing how regional dynamics interact with global governance frameworks (Acharya, 2005).

Conventional multilateral organizations have also come under fire and been urged to change. A "pluralist approach" to multilateralism, which recognizes the multiplicity of players and procedures involved in global governance, has been pushed by academics like John Ruggie (Ruggie, 1997). Ruggie's notion of "embedded liberalism" emphasizes how multilateral institutions must adjust to changing social and economic conditions while maintaining the values of justice and equity.

To solve international difficulties, issue-specific coalitions and partnerships have also emerged in the twenty-first century. Ad hoc multilateralism, for example, is when states band together to address particular challenges outside the purview of established institutions. Examples of this type of multilateralism are the Iran nuclear deal and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

However, concerns of efficacy, legitimacy, and accountability have also been brought up by this diversification of multilateral techniques. Ad hoc coalitions and unofficial networks, according to critics, may not be as inclusive and transparent as official global institutions, which could undermine democratic ideals and exacerbate power disparities.

So, a combination of continuity and change characterizes the type of multilateralism that has been seen recently, especially after 2000. Traditional international organizations like the UN continue to play a crucial role in global government, but they coexist with a wide range of different multilateral setups, such as coalitions focused on particular issues and regional organizations. The consequences of these advancements for the legitimacy and efficacy of international cooperation in tackling the intricate problems of the twenty-first century are still up for dispute among academics.

INDIA'S PRESENT DILEMMAS WITH MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS

India has been part of many major international multilateral institutions such as United Nations, WTO, IMF, BRICS, SAARC, UNFCCC, etc. India faces myriad of challenges and roadblocks in these platforms.

United Nations – In United Nations, India majorly is struggling and lobbying against the archaic and undemocratic functioning of the United Nations,

especially the UNSC. UNSC still provides for veto power only to the 5 permanent members, ignoring the present realities of the world. Presently, many countries such as India, China, Brazil, etc are marching on the path of growth and have a major say in the global concerns. So, India is calling for expansion of UNSC membership and provision of veto power to the new major economies of the world, based on the present geopolitical realities. Basically, India is stressing on the democratization of the highest global body. The inability to bring the necessary changes in the global governance, India is inching towards the “universal multilateralism to selective coalitions” (Mohan, 2010)

WTO - India's engagement with the World Trade Organization (WTO) reflects a complex interplay of domestic economic imperatives and the broader dynamics of global trade governance. Despite being a founding member of the WTO and a vocal advocate for the interests of developing countries within the organization, India faces several challenges that impede its ability to fully harness the benefits of global trade. One major issue is the imbalance in negotiating power between developed and developing nations, with developed countries often pushing for trade liberalization measures that disproportionately impact developing economies like India. Moreover, India's concerns regarding agricultural subsidies, intellectual property rights, and services trade have not always been adequately addressed within the WTO framework, leading to disputes and stalemates in multilateral negotiations. Additionally, the WTO's decision-making processes, which typically require consensus among all member states, can hinder India's ability to pursue its trade agenda effectively, particularly when faced with strong opposition from influential developed countries. Furthermore, the WTO's rules and mechanisms have been criticized for favoring the interests of powerful nations and multinational corporations, limiting the policy space available to India and other developing countries to pursue their development objectives through trade policies. As a result, India often finds itself in a position where its interests are not fully served by the existing WTO regime, necessitating a nuanced approach to navigating the complexities of global trade governance while striving to safeguard its

national interests and promote inclusive and sustainable development.

UNFCCC- India, as a developing nation with a large population and significant dependence on agriculture and natural resources, faces numerous challenges within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). One major issue is balancing its economic development aspirations with its commitments to mitigate climate change. India aims to uplift its population out of poverty while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions, but this often requires substantial financial and technological support. Negotiating fair and equitable terms in global climate agreements, ensuring technology transfer, and securing financial assistance for climate mitigation and adaptation remain critical objectives for India within the UNFCCC framework. However, despite the repeated attempts, India is unable to get proper assurance from the developed nations on the topic of financial resources and technology transfer, based on the principle of “common but differentiated responsibility”

As above cases show India's tryst with the multilateral institutions, it is quite evident that India is not having dream run in its multilateral engagements but at the same time significance of multilateral collaborations can't be neglected. At these times when world is going through many transnational issues such as religious extremism, climate change menace, global drug cartels, global value chain issues, etc, the cooperation among nations attains more importance. To tackle this dilemma only, India has changed its approach towards new engagements with multiple countries.

India New Vision For Multilateralism

India's approach towards multilateralism has been evolving over the years, reflecting its growing role and interests in global affairs. Presently, Indian government has been introducing new features in its approach towards multilateralism which are as follows

1. Inclusivity: India emphasizes the importance of inclusivity in multilateral forums, advocating for the representation of diverse voices and interests, particularly from the Global South. This inclusivity extends to issues such as climate change, where India has been a vocal advocate for the concerns of developing countries.

2. Reform of Global Institutions: India has been a strong proponent of reforming global institutions like

the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to reflect contemporary geopolitical realities. India seeks a permanent seat on the UNSC, arguing that its inclusion would enhance the council's legitimacy and effectiveness.

3. Non-alignment and Strategic Autonomy: India maintains a non-aligned stance in its foreign policy, seeking to maintain strategic autonomy and not aligning firmly with any single power bloc. This approach allows India to pursue its interests independently and engage with multiple countries and organizations on its own terms. For example India has joined QUAD in one hand and SCO on another hand. It symbolizes India's attempt to maintain its strategic autonomy amidst geopolitically fractured world.

4. Focus on South-South Cooperation: India emphasizes the importance of South-South cooperation, which involves collaboration among developing countries. India has been actively involved in initiatives such as the India-Brazil-South Africa (IBSA) Forum and the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) to promote cooperation and development among emerging economies.

5. Economic Diplomacy: India leverages multilateral platforms for economic diplomacy, seeking to enhance trade, investment, and economic cooperation with other countries and regions. Initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) are examples of India's engagement in economic multilateralism. However, India is also protective of its interests in some instances such as withdrawal of India from the negotiations of RCEP (Dar, 2024).

6. Focus on Connectivity: India prioritizes connectivity initiatives, particularly in its neighborhood and the broader Indo-Pacific region. Projects such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) aim to enhance connectivity and economic integration across regions.

7. Climate Change and Sustainable Development: India actively participates in multilateral efforts to address climate change and promote sustainable development. While committed to tackling climate issues, India emphasizes the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (Stone, 2017),

highlighting the historical responsibility of developed countries in addressing climate change and advocating for support for developing countries' efforts.

Overall, India's approach towards multilateralism is characterized by a commitment to inclusivity, strategic autonomy, and cooperation among diverse actors to address global challenges and promote its national interests on the world stage.

OBSERVATIONS

1) India is now inching towards more selected multilateral arrangements to fulfill its strategic, economic and other objectives. This can be seen in Indian refusal to join the RCEP giving the reason of protection of farmers' interests.

2) India is moving beyond the rule taker type of participation to rule maker type of interaction in the grouping.

3) India is choosing its multilateral alignments which serve its purpose. It now want to overcome legacy issues such as in SAARC. It is now focusing more on BIMSTEC because of the frequent roadblocks laid down by Pakistan in the functioning of the Group.

4) India is employing its multilateral alignments to fulfill its geo- strategic goals. India's participation in the QUAD and I2U2 along with the participation in RIC and SCO signals about the balancing that India is trying to achieve in this turbulent global order.

5) India is voicing its issues and the concerns of other like-minded countries more than ever in any given groupings be it WTO, UNFCCC, UNSC, etc. This gesture provides sway over the global south nations and portray it as more favorable leader than China.

6) India is also shifting towards specific bilateral collaborations, focusing especially on particular issue of concern. For example, India and Japan is now collaborating for power-plant installation in Bangladesh and AAGC in Africa. On similar lines, India is collaborating over weaponry system development with Russia. There are numerous such examples.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

India is at a critical crossroads in the modern world order, where its multilateral interactions will determine not just its own future but also the direction of the international community as a whole. India must take a proactive and realistic stance in its multilateral

relations as it negotiates intricate geopolitical dynamics and new obstacles. Here are a few ideas on how India might get more involved on the multilateral front in the current global system:

1. **Diversification of Partnerships:** By developing closer connections with both conventional and non-traditional partners, India should prioritize broadening the scope of its international activities. India should look into new opportunities for cooperation with developing nations like Brazil, South Africa, and Indonesia while preserving its strategic alliances with nations like the US, Russia, and Japan. Moreover, enhancing connections with regional institutions such as the SCO, SAARC, and ASEAN can increase India's clout in its near area.

2. **Promotion of Regional Stability:** India ought to give top priority to programs that work to advance stability and peace both inside and outside of its own borders. This entails actively taking part in peacekeeping missions, humanitarian assistance programs, and conflict resolution initiatives run by regional organizations like the African Union and the United Nations. By contributing to regional stability, India can enhance its credibility as a responsible global actor.

3. **Trade Liberalization and Economic Integration:** To advance trade liberalization and economic integration, India needs to take a proactive stance in international forums like the World Trade Organization (WTO). India can promote equitable and transparent trade practices to protect its economic interests and create a favorable atmosphere for international trade. Furthermore, India ought to investigate prospects for enhanced economic collaboration via venues such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

4. **Climate Change Mitigation and Sustainable Development:** India ought to give top priority to international initiatives that attempt to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and advance sustainable development, considering its susceptibility to the effects of climate change. India's active participation in forums like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) can help shape global climate policies while addressing its own environmental challenges. Furthermore, India should leverage international partnerships to enhance access

to clean energy technologies and promote renewable energy adoption.

5. **Counterterrorism and Security Cooperation:** India has to work closely with the international community to confront terrorism in all of its forms and manifestations because it is a victim of cross-border terrorism. India can improve border security measures and destroy networks that finance terrorism by fortifying its cooperation with groups like the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). In order to combat shared security challenges, India should also actively participate in regional security initiatives like the Quad and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).

6. **Encouragement of Technology Cooperation and Digital Diplomacy:** India should use technology and digital diplomacy to strengthen its multilateral ties in the digital age. By promoting initiatives such as the Digital India campaign and the International Solar Alliance (ISA), India can showcase its technological capabilities while addressing global challenges such as digital divide and climate change.

In conclusion, India's engagement in multilateral forums is indispensable in navigating the complexities of the present global order. By adopting a proactive and inclusive approach, India can effectively safeguard its interests, promote regional stability, and contribute to the collective efforts towards global peace, prosperity, and sustainability.

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