

The Present and Future of Multilateralism and Expectations for Japan*

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Abstract

The international community faces a mounting crisis in multilateralism. The shift by certain major States in pursuing a “my country first” posture, trending towards nationalism, and inward-looking foreign policies is not a cause, but a symptom, of the challenges that multilateralism is confronting. The basis upon which multilateralism is declining seems rooted in the loss of hope by citizens who feel their expectations for the post–Cold War period have been betrayed, and who believe that they have been left behind by the policies and effects of globalization. To address this difficult issue, it is first necessary to rightfully acknowledge the outcomes achieved through multilateralism and the rationale of therefore maintaining the rules-based international order. Secondly, to restore people’s trust, it is urgent and essential that reforms be made to ensure that multilateral institutions are capable of effectively addressing and resolving issues that are becoming manifest in the 21st century. And thirdly, it will be vitally important to anticipate trends in major global reforms and explore more creative ways to engage in multilateral diplomacy. Japan should be a leader, advocating for the importance of multilateralism at this crucial juncture. To that end, Japan would be well-advised to extend its powers of assistance and backing to the discussions now underway on reforms to the United Nations and other multilateral institutions.

Introduction

Since the end of World War II, the international order has been maintained and preserved by multiple foundations, including, inter alia, the United Nations (UN) system and the Bretton Woods institutions; various regional organizations and multilateral alliances; multilateral treaties and arrangements addressing specific issues, including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, and the regimes and institutions that sustain them. The principles of “great power unanimity” of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, sovereign equality of the UN Member States, non-intervention in internal affairs, and territorial integrity were all key factors in the multilateral system, which contributed to maintaining the balance of power and stability between East and West during the Cold War.

With accelerating globalization, the international community in the post–Cold War period has come to place heightened importance on multilateral frameworks in order to address an array of global-scale challenges concerning, among others, peace and security, free trade systems, human rights, public health, humanitarian assistance, climate change, and sustainable development.

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Despite unilateral actions, such as the United States (US) invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change in 2015 seemed to underscore the effectiveness of multilateralism in addressing global issues through multilateral negotiations and coordination.

However, in 2018—three years after these major multilateral achievements—the international community was facing a mounting crisis in multilateralism following both the United Kingdom’s decision to withdraw from the European Union as well as the US withdrawals from the Paris Agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Iran nuclear deal, and the UN Human Rights Council.

It was multilateralism that was the most crucial issue at the high-level meeting of the UN General Assembly in 2018, which was attended by the heads of state and prime ministers of 126 countries. In stark contrast to US President Donald Trump’s rejection of the “ideology of globalism” and emphasis on the “doctrine of patriotism,” a number of world leaders expressed their commitment to UN-centered multilateralism and the rules-based international order, arguably demonstrating a sense of crisis. However, in the view of the author, the shift by major Member States to a “my country first” posture and inward-looking foreign policies is not a cause, but a symptom, of the challenges which multilateralism is confronting.

What are the root causes of these challenges to multilateralism? What is needed for its revitalization? What form should multilateralism take in the 21st century? And what role is Japan expected to play? This article will address these questions from the perspective of the UN.

1. Root Causes of the Decline of Multilateralism

To maximally achieve their foreign policy objectives, all sovereign states choose the most appropriate option from unilateralism, bilateralism, or multilateralism. Generally, a superpower is likely to pursue its national interests through unilateralism or bilateral diplomacy since these enable it to overwhelm its counterparts. Moreover, medium and small powers tend to seek opportunities to exercise its diplomatic powers in a multilateral framework to achieve its foreign policy goals.

When discussing multilateralism, it is imperative to bear in mind that the term itself has a largely normative dimension. John Ruggie, who served under former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Planning, defined multilateralism as an institutional model for the coordination of relations among three or more nation-states based on generalized principles of conduct.¹ In the context of the post-Cold War international community, this “normative” dimension was also manifest as an order based on liberal norms promoted by the US-led Western countries. The creation of the post of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1994, the adoption of the concept of “Responsibility to Protect” in 2005, and the establishment of the UN Human Rights Council in 2006 all illustrate normative rules of behaviour in the post-Cold War era.

However, in 2012, the situation in Syria exposed the dysfunction of the Security Council—the core of the UN’s multilateral system—which gave the impression that cracks had begun to appear in the foundations of multilateralism in the post-Cold War era. Russian diplomats frequently argued that Russia would never allow regime change in Syria as the Western countries had done in Iraq or Libya. As is widely known, the US and Russia are still in sharp conflict on Syrian issues, such as regarding the use of chemical weapons. The US-Russian strategic rivalry has become reminiscent of the Cold War-era relationship. It has had an impact on issues pertaining to the situation in Ukraine, reduction and control of nuclear arsenals and other strategic weaponry,

¹ Ruggie, John G. “Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution,” *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Summer 1992), pp. 561–598.

and cyber security. This has led to the dysfunction of the UN Security Council contravening the “principle of great power unanimity,” which in turn is a primary cause behind the crisis in multilateralism. Furthermore, if the US and China fall into the “Thucydides Trap,” the impact, not only on multilateralism, but on global stability, will be tremendous.²

At the same time, the current decision-making mechanisms of multilateral diplomacy are no longer as simple as they were during the Cold War era of bipolar confrontation between East and West. The world is shifting towards a multipolar system and several regional major powers—no longer emerging powers—have acquired formidable influence and assertiveness. As a consequence, it has become increasingly difficult to reach an agreement not only within the UN Security Council but particularly within multilateral fora where decisions are made in consensus. For instance, the Conference on Disarmament has been deadlocked for over 20 years, and the 2005 and 2015 review conferences of the NPT—one of the pillars of the international security system—failed to adopt a consensus final document on substantive issues.

However, the root cause behind the decline of multilateralism appears to be the loss of hope by a number of people who feel their expectations for the post-Cold War period have been betrayed and that they have been left out of the benefits of globalization. In his statement at the General Assembly in 2018, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres described this sense of hopelessness as a case of “trust deficit disorder.”³ Due in part to the ineffectiveness of the Security Council, the Syrian civil war has become a protracted conflict, spurring a massive outflow of refugees. Additionally, migrant flows from, among others, Africa’s Sahel region and Libya have triggered a social and political crisis in Europe. While contributing to economic growth worldwide and reducing the level of extreme poverty by half, the effects of economic globalization have made a growing number of people feel that conditions of economic disparity and inequality have actually worsened. A look across the advanced industrial world reveals an intensifying sense of antipathy towards efforts at international cooperation as well as the open societies and institutions cultivated by the international community under the banner of multilateralism. This sense of hopelessness and loss of trust have begun feeding a vicious cycle further eroding multilateralism, spurring political trends towards populism and exclusionism at the domestic level and giving expression to inward-looking unilateralist foreign policies at the international level.

2. Multilateral Diplomacy and Multilateralism in the 21st Century

Secretary-General Guterres has sounded a warning that tensions reminiscent of the Cold War have returned in the increasingly complex environment spurred by the shift towards a multipolar world. He has emphasized the need to revitalize and strengthen the multilateral system for achieving and maintaining world peace and security. Cataclysmic changes caused by climate change, large-scale refugee and migrant flows, and the “fourth industrial revolution” marked by artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber technologies, which will impact trends affecting not only the security dimension but practically all areas of society, are global-scale challenges that cannot be addressed through unilateral or bilateral diplomacy. The following three points are proposed to overcome the current decline of multilateralism and to revitalize and reinforce it.

The first is to rightfully acknowledge the outcomes achieved through multilateralism and to accordingly maintain the rules-based international order. Although not explicitly covered by provisions of the UN Charter, peacekeeping operations (PKO) devised by members of the

² Allison, Graham, Professor, Harvard University. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. (“*Beichu senso zenya—shinkyu taikoku o shototsu saseru rekishi no hosoku to kaihi no shinario*”) (Japanese translation by Asako Fujiwara, Diamond Inc., 2017). When a rising power challenges a ruling one, the resulting tension carries a strong risk of war. Allison describes this as an example of Thucydides’s trap, named after the ancient Greek historian.

³ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-09-25/address-73rd-general-assembly>

international community to deal with challenges to peace have prevented conflicts from escalating and contributed to their resolution. Also, achievements in fields such as public health and education would not have been possible without multilateral cooperation. It is essential to reaffirm that the UN Charter and the various UN institutions, which possess unparalleled legitimacy attributable to their universality, are actually at the core of these norms and institutions. The norms of the 21st century should be more than purely elements of an order governing behaviour between sovereign states; rather, they should be human-centric in their nature and capable of recovering the trust of those who feel excluded or left behind. We must send a clear message explaining why multilateral cooperation is needed now more than ever.

Secondly, to restore people's trust, it is urgent that reforms be made to ensure that multilateral institutions are capable of effectively addressing and resolving those issues that are becoming manifest in the 21st century. It is regrettable that, in the post-Cold War period, the Member States could not make serious efforts to implement reforms in several areas, such as reforms to the Security Council. Efforts at UN reform led by Secretary-General Guterres, including to the Secretariat and UN system, should be understood within this broader context. UN institutions should be capable of preventing and resolving conflicts whenever possible, and they must be able to effectively contribute to refugee relief and the mitigation of economic disparities. To these ends, UN institutions must not be simply bureaucratic entities, but should possess the intellectual capacity to formulate and present visionary solutions to these difficult tasks. Virtually all of the issues that the international community now faces are fraught with difficulty and cannot be addressed or solved by a single organization. The UN has already amassed experience in cooperating with the African Union (AU) and other regional organizations in peacekeeping operations and the mediation of peace accords.⁴ Still, there needs to be a framework that will enable multilateral institutions to function even more effectively while coordinating and forming cooperative partnerships among multilateral organizations. This may be referred to as a form of networked multilateralism.⁵

And thirdly, it will be vitally important to anticipate trends in major global reforms and explore more creative ways to engage in multilateral diplomacy. Dealing with the new challenges, including the weaponization of AI, will require the construction of new norms through multilateral diplomacy. It is likely that the formation of norms in the 21st century will require not only the more traditional international legal instruments such as treaties but also soft norms such as political declarations and commitments—which are not legally binding but are monitored—voluntary codes of conduct of private companies and scientists, and industrial standards. That being the case, new creative multilateral diplomacy should be pursued based on the contributions of more inclusive, “multi-stakeholder” processes as well as traditional multilateral government negotiations. With this approach, the “convening power” that the UN wields as a forum for dialogue and negotiation will presumably increase in importance.

3. The Role Expected of Japan

Since joining the United Nations in 1956, Japan has been committed to a pacifist diplomacy shaped by moderation and has continued to be a respected member of the international community.

⁴ For example, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a security mission in Afghanistan led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), formed a cooperative alliance with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Currently the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is actively engaged in Somalia in cooperation with the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), while the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is working in South Sudan with the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

⁵ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2018-11-09/strengthening-multilateralism-and-role-un-remarks-security-council>

The soft power it has amassed over this long period and the trust it has earned from the international community should not be underestimated. As a country which has led initiatives in multilateral cooperation in fields ranging from humanitarian and development assistance to peace-building and public health, I hope that Japan will be a leader which advocates the importance of multilateralism at this crucial juncture. To that end, Japan is expected to extend its powers of assistance and backing to the discussions now underway on reforms to the UN and other multilateral institutions. It would also arguably be worthwhile for Japan to utilize, in full, the trust it has earned within the international community and play more proactive roles in coordination and mediation in the interests of other countries. Moreover, I hope that Japan will act as a country capable of conveying wisdom and vision for the 21st century, connecting civil society, sovereign states and global society as it did in the past through the promotion of human security and other important policy concepts at the international level. Finally, it should also be noted that in order to realize this in today's world, which is globalizing and flattening at ever accelerating speeds, Japan itself urgently needs to tackle the tasks of dismantling its seniority system, ensuring diversity, and evolving into a society that enables all citizens to be active participants regardless of age or gender.