

# GUEST COLUMN

## Reflections on Multilateral Diplomacy

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In recent times, we cannot forget that the UN, particularly the Security Council, became guilty of criminal and unforgivable dereliction of duty in the face of the greatest existential threat to humanity, when it failed to act jointly to fight an invisible microbe. The Security Council could not even meet because of the structural imbalance of the Council. A Chinese veto left the Council paralysed at a crucial time in history. Much of the havoc in terms of lives lost and suffering endured around the world could have been averted if only a multilateral approach was adopted like in the case of other, even less lethal infectious diseases. The fervent appeal for a UN Health Keeping Force (Red Berets), cessation of hostilities and lifting of economic sanctions fell on deaf ears. The question today is whether the UN can be reformed to make it more effective, efficient and purposeful as the world has been trying to do for many years. In sheer desperation, the world is in search of new multilateral arrangements without the infirmities of the UN as it is today. The record of the UN is commendable in many areas and still has a role in the world. It has been resilient and adapted to the needs of the present day. Many issues such as terrorism, HIV/AIDS, Outer Space, Yoga and others have been inscribed on the agenda. The Specialised Agencies have been very active in the developing countries. Peace-making, peacebuilding and peace enforcement have had many successes. Therefore, the UN will survive the forthcoming changes, but it will be forced to restructure itself. India has expressed strong commitment to “reformed multilateralism”, the contours of which are yet to be defined.

Many efforts have been made to reform the UN, but the virtual “unamendability” of the UN Charter requiring two thirds majority of the UNGA and the support of the permanent members has made them futile. As a result, some of the anachronistic provisions of the Charter remain unchanged, but ignored in practice. Pending the discovery of a formula to amend the Charter, ways and means have to be found to operate within the existing framework. Though it is logical to expand the Security Council, there is no possibility of including new permanent members with veto and therefore, India’s legitimate aspirations are not likely to be met. Various other formulas are on the table, but none which can enjoy the required support. In the process of building the post Covid-19 global order, changes are inevitable, but those may be in the form of regional arrangements and likeminded groups within the framework of the Charter itself. Having served in three UN capitals at ambassadorial level and at MEA as Joint Secretary (UN), a total of about 20 years, my suggestions will be experiential and not academic.

In its simplest definition, multilateralism is an alliance of multiple countries, pursuing a common goal. It does not have to be universal or exclusive and the requirement is only to have common objectives and purposes. The UN is not a world government, not a Parliament of the world and it is not even a democratic institution. It is simply a structure with certain rules and procedures for dialogue, negotiations, consultations and agreement, if possible for the common good. Sovereignty of each nation is fundamental and even if there is any compromise on it, it will be temporary and conditional. It is basically an exercise in words, written, spoken and unspoken. And that is why I borrowed the title of my autobiography from Shakespeare’s Hamlet, “Words, Words, Words.” If the UN was not situated in some glamorous cities, many may not even have opted for it. Even Nairobi is a pleasant city to live in, except for the crime situation. But having had four multilateral postings abroad and one

in the MEA, not by meticulous career planning, but by a conspiracy of circumstances, I would certainly say that diplomats should gladly accept multilateral assignments as they constitute the most exciting work in the Foreign Service. But I must caution you, however, that expertise in multilateral diplomacy is not considered adequate to get to the very top of the Foreign Service. Hardly any multilateral expert has become the Foreign Secretary in recent years. For that, the clinching factor is the expertise over China, Pakistan and other neighbors. If you miss multilateral posts, you can always ask for Beijing or Islamabad to make up for it. Though you may have battled with China and Pakistan at the UN, only bilateral battles matter for leadership positions.

It is not just the pride of representing India or being called Mr. India, as most of your colleagues cannot pronounce your name, but dealing with 193 countries at the same time and getting to know their patterns of behaviour and the pressures applied on them cannot be replicated. Building constituencies among them not only based on ideologies or mutual interests, but also personal interests like food, sports and games, literature and culture and then using them to your advantage are a challenge, but worth taking. Individual skills and personal attributes are fundamental to a multilateral diplomat as you do not trade in goods or services, but in ideas and concepts, some of which may be still in the making. Indian diplomats at the UN are often hailed as wordsmiths because of our ability to supply the right word at the right time to make peace break out after harrowing hours of negotiations. We also have the reputation of being peacemakers between warring factions when we find a word, which will satisfy them both. Without signing treaties or making pronouncements, multilateral diplomats create history. Because of the felicity of words that Indian diplomats have, some western delegations used to ask why we were more forceful than the Palestinians and the Namibians in making demands on their behalf! Your contribution may not be remembered long by others, but you will never forget that one simple word that you contributed was the basis of a global consensus. There are many legends there of the exploits of V K Krishna Menon and others from India. Multilateral work also gives the officers a lot of leeway in negotiations.

In most of them, we can experiment with words and ideas within the framework given by the government. I often say to other delegates that they might be able to change my mind, but they would not be able to change my instructions. But, in fact, there is much you can do within the instructions to favour them and earn IOUs, which can be cashed when you need them in another context. The only principle to be kept intact is credibility in these manoeuvres. Saying different things to different delegates in confidence is a cardinal sin. There is nothing confidential in the corridors of the UN. The hierarchy of nations is a reality in multilateral fora, but the hierarchy among diplomats is not relevant. The person who occupies the chair, whether a Third Secretary or a Foreign Minister, is a “distinguished delegate” and this imposes a major responsibility. But there are several layers of discussion before a crucial issue is settled and the matter can be sorted out by a senior colleague in the so-called “Seventh Committee”, the Delegates’ Lounge, over a Bloody Mary! Almost any mistake can be corrected in speeches or in voting through the established procedures of the Secretariat. I have corrected the speeches of some visiting political delegates, who tried to change Government policy surreptitiously through their statements. The Secretariat has a strong memory of the positions of states over the years and if a delegate says something different, they will verify whether it was a change of policy or just a slip of the tongue.

In the UN, we get to know the relative importance of each country, whereas, in bilateral posts, we tend to think that the place you are posted is the centre of the world. The Permanent Members are a class by themselves, but beyond that, there are many countries whose voice is heard with respect. The individual personality of the diplomat, even of a small country, can make a real difference occasionally, particularly if he has a group to support him. Vanuatu, a country you may have not heard of, but where I was accredited to at one time from Fiji, made waves in the environmental negotiations on behalf of the Association of

Small Island States. In multilateral diplomacy, collective bargaining has immense value. As a leader of the Non-aligned Movement, (NAM) India used to enjoy great influence during the Cold War. Recently, we had moved away from that position deliberately and the Prime Minister did not even attend a NAM Summit. I was heartened to read Ambassador T.S.Tirumurti's speech at the UN. "India will be a voice for the developing world." There have been many occasions when India was able to attain our objectives through the NAM or the G-77 solidarity. We may have to resort to some of the old NAM techniques in the new situation. I remember the occasion, when the US tried a "quick fix" to solve the issue of new permanent members by including Japan and Germany as permanent members and closing the door. There was no unanimity in NAM about a formula for change, but we joined together to oppose the "quick fix" and defeated the move.

The UN is a complex world and nobody has mastered all the rules and regulations. The joke about the UN financial regulations is that all the old experts have retired and the current experts are on holiday!" The Secretariat sometimes exploits the ignorance of the delegates and one way to stardom is to master the UN Charter and the Rules of Procedure of the UNGA and the UNSC. Some of the apparent restrictions in certain rules may turn out to be a boon if you can locate the right clause at the right time. You will be hailed as a messiah for the moment. Similarly, diligent research on the subject being discussed will be of immense value to enrich your interventions. One legendary Saudi Arabian diplomat was known for his ability to speak on any subject at any time. He would walk into a conference room, ask his neighbour as to what the agenda item was and ask for the floor immediately to make a stunning speech. Those who are posted in our multilateral missions occasionally have a chance to get deputed to the UN in Professional posts. Very often, the Government will say that the officers concerned cannot be spared, there have been many cases of officers getting deputation or resigning from the Foreign Service to join the UN Secretariat. Personally, however, I found representing India to the UN preferable to joining the Secretariat, unless it is a senior post. Some of you may wonder whether it will not be a bore to listen to endless speeches on known positions of different countries day in and day out. That is indeed so, but you will soon learn the art of selective hearing. If anything is said out of the ordinary, it will be caught and given to the press. Now with the new gadgets, debates can be followed and reported from anywhere. There is no dearth of mirth in the conference rooms when the wrong speeches are read or literal translation of certain words lead to wars of words.

Many countries retain their multilateral diplomats at UN postings for many years. With our policy of rotation of officers, UN postings are few and far between for Indian diplomats. To echo Wordsworth's famous lines, bliss is to be posted to the Mission, but to be the PR is like very heaven! Multilateral diplomats require special qualities to deal with 193 nations all at the same time. On bilateral postings, the host country becomes the centre of the world for a diplomat and it is only at the UN that one realises the relative influence of various countries. Often, seemingly unimportant countries do extremely well on account of the wheeling and dealing of their diplomats. One of my multilateral gurus used to say that the secret of exchanging IOUs with each other for appropriate use later. Another maintained that credibility was the most important trait of a multilateral diplomat. The temptation to say different things to different countries has to be resisted because there are no secrets in the Delegates Lounge.

### **Diminished Multilateral Diplomacy**

Every crisis leaves a legacy behind which stays long after the crisis itself is forgotten and the relevance of that legacy disappears. The heavy investments made to meet the requirements of the time become the reason for perpetuating some practices. The lasting legacy of 9/11 is the elaborate security checks at the airports. These are now accepted as the norm and a couple of extra hours at the airport are tolerated without any reservation. The future air travel will be further complicated by elaborate health checks and quarantines even after

Covid-19. Covid-19 has struck at the roots of multilateral diplomacy by making nations run helter-skelter to save themselves. The instinct for self-preservation drives people into loneliness; it does not promote cooperation. Even worse, it has made it impossible for the World Health Assembly, which is responsible for containing the pandemic, to even hold a meeting to deliberate on possible remedies for fear that such gatherings will increase the infection and mortality rates. Even after the world wars, it was the facility for the victors and the vanquished to meet and negotiate peace agreements that paved the way for peace and reconciliation. Those peace conferences characterised by “jaw jaw” after “war” will become a thing of the past. Historian Yuval Harari prophesied in Davos recently: “Whereas in the past, humans had to struggle against exploitation, in the twenty-first century the really big struggle will be against irrelevance” on account of the dominance of technology. “Those who fail in the struggle against irrelevance would constitute a new “useless class” – people who are useless not from the viewpoint of their friends and family, but useless from the viewpoint of the economic and political system.”

But suddenly it turned out that technological advancement became paramount not only to fight the pandemic, but also to provide an alternative in the form of virtual conferences to enable leaders to confabulate from their quarantines in sanitised palaces. It worked fairly well for small groups like SAARC and G-20 and G-7, but when it came to the World Health Assembly with 194 members, it looked like a football ground with commercials playing on screens all around. Heads of State, Heads of Government and military leaders appeared in full panoply on the screens to lament the disaster that had struck humanity. They seemed vulnerable without the huge delegations and bodyguards who used to accompany them when they strutted about in the corridors of the UN and huddled in the Delegates Lounge. Virtual conferences are just a shadow of the global conclaves that have become indispensable for nations to project their accomplishments at home, express their concerns about the state of the world, suggest prescriptions, promote ideas, make compromises, haggle over words and to sign agreements from which they walk away at will. It created an industry which promoted tourism, the hospitality industry and air travel. The most exotic places were chosen to hold these meetings even when facilities remained vacant in designated cities. From San Francisco, Breton Woods to Helsinki, Paris, Kyoto, Tlatelelco and Rio de Janeiro, cities came to be known for the conferences held there long after the agreements reached there became part of history. The charms of multilateral diplomacy were not confined to generating ideas, solving problems and building peace, but also travelling in style, earning frequent flyer miles and mixing business with pleasure. No wonder the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) came to be known as Chaps on Holiday on Government Money!

In my early days in the UN when decolonisation was still a passion, many bodies like the Council For Namibia and the Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People used to spend tons of UN money on travel to preach to the converted by promoting causes in countries which were already supportive. I remember someone saying, while watching the Blue Belles in a nightclub in Paris with a former guerrilla fighter in Namibia, what sacrifices we would not make for the people of Namibia! All these luxuries disappeared some years ago, when the US stopped paying its full contribution to the UN to stop these freedom tours. As an institution, the first to be paralysed was the United Nations, which had the responsibility to unite the world against the pandemic, partly because there was no chance for the delegates to huddle around and exchange ideas. China, as the President of the Security Council, made use of the practical difficulties in meeting to delay even an informal meeting of the Council. When it became clear that a virtual meeting was possible, China had to come out with its personal objections. If the usual confabulations of professional diplomats had taken place, China would have come under greater pressure to hold a meeting of the Security Council. Not to hold a meeting at the time of an unprecedented threat to international peace and security was an unforgivable dereliction of duty. The World Health Assembly (WHA), the annual gathering of the members of the WHO was a tame affair this time essentially because it was a virtual conference.

Multilateral diplomacy is not a series of recorded speeches delivered from different parts of the globe and adoption of a document approved over the internet without a public debate. The leaders and their Sherpas engage in a long process of setting the agenda, debating the issue, forcing compromises, even shaming those who blindly stick to their instructions framed at home without taking the sentiment of the conference into account. Without these processes, the decisions taken in such conferences appear illusory. As for the results of the conference, the vast majority of the countries of the world wanted to go to the bottom of the origin of Covid-19 through an independent investigation. There was also a strong desire on the part of many countries, including some which have a "One China" policy to invite Taiwan as an observer to the WHA as it used to do till 2016. China fought on both these fronts. On the one hand, it wanted to be considered a victor in the battle against the pandemic and a country, which is capable and willing to assist the rest of the world without any investigation into Chinese culpability in hiding the advent of the coronavirus, if not creating it. On the other hand, China wanted to reinforce its "One China" position when it found that Taiwan's claim to an observer status in the WHA was gaining traction in the wake of Taiwan's extraordinary success in tackling the virus. When it became clear that it cannot win on both fronts, China retreated from the first front and claimed victory on the second. The results may have been the same even if it was a real conference, but China would not have gotten away so lightly. The aggravation of the US-China tug of war was very visible, but if Xi Jin Ping and Donald Trump were both there, the nature of the debate would have been different. Amusingly, both Trump and Xi sent letters to the Director General to reinforce their positions rather than address the Assembly on their primary concerns. The Director General would have also faced the heat much more if 194 delegations were milling around in Geneva, instead of watching television screens at home.

Multilateralism was already on the decline when the pandemic broke out and it virtually destroyed its ambience and habitat. The technological glitches embarrassed the speakers and the WHA Secretariat. We can only hope and pray that we can return to traditional multilateral diplomacy with all its vigour and authenticity. Multilateral diplomacy is not simply hard work, the ability to juggle around with ideas and long hours of negotiations late into the wee hours of the morning. It is also about air travel, nice hotels, classy restaurants, tourism and feeling the pulse of the world. Beginning of India's "Chequebook" Diplomacy India's modest foreign assistance has been response oriented and need based, in the form of training and equipment for small scale industries and provision of experts, except in some neighbouring countries, which received development assistance. But several developed countries and China have been engaged in "chequebook diplomacy" in order to gain political influence. The budget proposals this year seem to indicate that India has As a young Second Secretary at our mission in Thimphu from 1971 -74, I used to sign a big cheque of Rs.22 crores every year to the Government of Bhutan as development assistance. As a novice in foreign affairs, I wondered why such massive amounts were being paid to a foreign Government when India was starving for resources. It was explained to me that this was a treaty obligation and the logic was that it would cost the Government of India much more to deploy its army on the border with China, if there was no friendly buffer state between India and China. The price of maintaining that state has grown ever since and today it stands at Rs.2802 crores allocated in the current budget. The budgetary allocation has been increased successively over two years, showing that following the 2017 Doklam crisis, India is according high priority to it for fear that China might try to drive a wedge between India and Bhutan by making friendly gestures to the Himalayan country. It will be an indication to China that India will make the necessary investments to meet the requirements of Bhutan in the years to come. It is suspected that China selected the India-Bhutan-China trijunction to build the road to cast aspersions on India's obligation to defend Bhutan. China might have hinted to Bhutan that, like the rest of the China-Bhutan boundary, this area could be demarcated if India was kept out of the picture.

Both Nepal and Mauritius have maintained a high priority in allocation and have received Rs 1,050 crore and Rs 1,100 crore respectively. In terms of regional allocation, Latin America received the lowest of the MEA's expenditure allocation with a meagre Rs 15 crore. Afghanistan's allocation has also come down from Rs 470 crore to Rs 400 crore. Surprisingly, only Rs.45 crore has been allocated for India's building activities in the port of Chabahar in Iran. This is a reduction from the previous year's allocation of Rs 150 crore. India is at the forefront of the construction of Chabahar port which is a major regional initiative from India. India's works at the port received a waiver from the anti-Iran sanctions of the U.S. The total aid to countries has increased by about Rs 2037.79 crore, from Rs 5,545 crore in 2018-19 to Rs 7,582.79 crore in 2019-20. Aid allocation for Maldives jumped from Rs 125 crore in 2018-19 to Rs 576 crore. As per the revised budget numbers, India spent nearly Rs 440 crore on aid to the island nation in 2018-19. The aid to Nepal increased substantially from Rs 650 crore in 2018-19 to Rs 1,050 crore in 2019-20. The aid set aside for Afghanistan was Rs 400 crore, Bangladesh (Rs 175 crore), Sri Lanka (Rs 250 crore), and Mongolia (Rs 5 crore) for the 2019-20 fiscal. The aid for Myanmar increased from Rs 280 crore in the previous fiscal to Rs 400 crore. The aid allocation for African countries more than doubled from last fiscal to Rs 450 crore in the 2019-20 budget. However, revised budget numbers indicate that India spent nearly Rs 330 crore as aid to African nations in 2018-19. Aid to Mauritius also increased drastically from Rs 350 crore to 1,100 crore. The revised budget numbers indicate that India spent nearly Rs 660 crore on aid to Mauritius in 2018-19. The total allocation to the Ministry in 2019-20 is Rs. 17,884.78 crore - an increase of Rs 2,873.78 crore over last fiscal's Rs 15,011 crore. The revised budget numbers for 2018-19 show that the Ministry spent RS 15,582 crore. But, out of this, the establishment expenditure for the Ministry is earmarked only at Rs. 5,487.26 crore. In other words, the increase in the MEA budget does not mean an increase in the funding of our missions.

Our missions are generally poorly maintained and our allowances are not comparable even to some of the other developing countries. The Representational Grant is particularly low and the officers have to stretch it out to return the generous hospitality they receive from other missions. The inclusion of assistance to foreign countries in the budget of the Ministry of External Affairs creates the false impression that the Ministry gets higher and higher allocations each year. Though external assistance is an instrument of foreign policy, it seems unfair to mix it with the operational budget of the Ministry. At a time when Indian diplomacy has to be particularly active, the increased allocation is illusory as the disbursement of assistance is automatic. The missions have no discretion to hold back the payment or to speed up disbursement as an incentive to better performance. In the case of our neighbours, the strategy seems to be to pay them to ensure loyalty and dependability, a game that the Chinese play with finesse. But there is considerable risk here because leadership changes in these countries can lead to changes in policy, making our investments unproductive. More careful planning and innovation are needed to devise means by which we are able to have more permanent benefits. More discretionary grants and entertainment should be provided for diplomats for this purpose. The Finance Minister mentioned opening new missions in countries where we do not have representation. This again has to be done with utmost care as once a mission is established, it will be difficult to withdraw it. It is possible to operate through non-resident missions in many countries in faraway places. The existing situation and possible workload should be carefully assessed before missions are established. The budget of the Ministry of External Affairs is a clear indication of its priorities. But inclusion of foreign assistance in the MEA budget may convey the wrong message about its activities. Even countries, which engage in "chequebook diplomacy", deny that they are dishing out money to curry favour. In a Xinhua commentary in 2017 China stated: "But unlike traditional aid from the West, China seldom gives budgetary support or other forms of monetary donations to foreign governments. Suitcases bulging with cash are not the Chinese way. China prefers to see itself as a country that "teaches men to fish" rather than one which simply dishes up plates of fish and chips." India's new strategy to increase its foreign assistance is likely to be criticised as the beginning of "chequebook" diplomacy.

## **Conclusion**

In the wake of COVID-19, we can only hope that the new norm will not deprive the next generation of diplomats of the attractions of globe-trotting and building friendships around the world on the advent of online diplomacy. The dynamics of the conference rooms, small and large, are an essential ingredient of the charm of multilateral diplomacy. Permanent Representatives to the UN have always been selected with great care as the post is considered the second highest in the Indian Foreign Service, next only to the Foreign Secretary. There have even been cases of officers preferring to be the Permanent Representative in New York rather than being Foreign Secretary. Our Permanent Mission in New York is almost exclusively manned by Indian Foreign Service officers, specially selected and trained for multilateral diplomacy.