

## Multilateralism Under Seize?

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### Abstract

The multilateralism as a practice of collective mechanism among states as well as set of principles like diffused reciprocity, indivisibility of state interests and collective and cooperative organizing norms underlying international institutions have come under strain in recent years. The multilateralism is faced with multiple internal and external challenges in the form of unilateralism, new nationalism, populism, protectionism etc. The states which were instrumental in supporting the norms of multilateralism in the post-War II period are now aligned against it. The unilateralism and protectionism of the Trump administration is the greatest challenge to multilateralism, followed about rising populist nationalism in European countries. The source of American threat is largely the new leadership, whereas the European nationalism has roots in masses. The other major actors like Russia and China are not inclined to follow multilateralism as a matter of first choice. The paper aims to focus on the nature of these challenges and the possible scenario for the future.

**Keywords:** Unilateralism; Bilateralism; Major Powers; Diffused Reciprocity; Individuality of interests.

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### Introduction

International politics, declared Morgenthau, is the struggle among nations for power to realize their national interests. The realism talks of exclusivity of national interest, but multilateralism makes a dent on this premise by pleading for the aggregation of national interests of all states. In a way multilateralism makes a dent on the

exclusivity of the national interests and paves the way for the pragmatic and sustainable realization of national interests of all states. The post-War international order was anchored around the idea of multilateralism. But the roots of the multilateralism go much deeper in the history, the nearest being the First world War and the formation of the League of Nations (1920) on the ground of common and shared interests of international community. In fact, the belief that there are certain common interests of all members of world society, which could be pursued with common efforts and cooperation resonated the post-War international institutions like the UN and GATT (WTO) etc, as well as inter-governmental processes and efforts. This resonance underlying world institutions, processes and efforts came to be known as 'multilateralism' in contrast to the ideas and practices of bilateralism and unilateralism. It is not to suggest that the multilateralism has smooth passage over last seven decades, rather it faced many problems and subversions. But what we have been witnessing last one decade is more pronounced

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and bold and appears irreversible. The challenges to multilateralism emanate not from those who unwillingly subscribed to it, but from those who championed its cause since the end of World War II. The US and her European allies championed the cause of multilateralism as they played instrumental role in tailoring the post War global order. The rest of the nations, mostly developing world struggled to seek some exemption from the rigid multilateralism to overcome their specific vulnerabilities. But now the order is reversed.

As the global financial crisis (2008) gripped Europe, nation after nation became inward looking as they experienced the rise of nationalism and populism focusing on unilateral concerns. The refugee crisis of 2015 compounded the woes of European countries. The influx of millions of refugees from the Middle East to Europe shattered European cohesion as well as multilateralism, as each nation was looking for national solutions to address this humanitarian challenge. The Brexit crisis epitomizes the future in store for Europe. As this was not sufficient, Donald Trump came as the president of the US in January, 2017 with his 'America First' formulation, which is full display since last three years. Trump backed from the multilateral norms, which America stood for last seven decades and went on the spree of unilateral actions one after another. He abrogated Paris climate deal (2015), pulled out of Transpacific partnership (TPP), initiated one sided trade demands with America' trade partners including trade war with China, denounced the Iranian nuclear deal to name a few. These developments undermine the spirit of multilateralism from the most powerful nation as never before. This paper seeks to delineate the essence of multilateralism and it evolved over the decades, analyzes the challenges faced by it and throws light on the possible ways to retrieve it.

### The Essence of Multilateralism

Scholars of international relations have defined multilateralism with two approaches: Quantitative and Qualitative. Quantitatively, any interaction with more than three actors may be called as multilateralism in the same manner as interaction between two nations is called bilateralism. Scholars like Keohane (1990), and Corbetta and Dixon (2004) find it reasonable to describe multilateralism as process of interactions between at three or more states. But most of the scholars of the international politics are not satisfied with this quantitative approach and opt for the qualitative approach to

capture the essence of multilateralism. A noted scholar in the field, Ruggie (1992) remarks, 'we can better understand the role of multilateral norms and institutions in the current international transformation by recovering the principled meanings of multilateralism from actual historical practice; by showing how and why those principled meanings have come to be institutionalized throughout the history of the modern interstate system; and by exploring how and why they may perpetuate themselves today, even as the conditions that initially gave rise to them have changed'.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica (Retrieved 2019), multilateralism is a process of organizing relations among states; which is characterized by three principles: *indivisibility of interests* among participants, a commitment to *diffuse reciprocity*, and a *system of dispute settlement* intended to enforce a particular mode of behaviour. Individuality of interests means that participants share some common interests and agree to them. For example, the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) Clause of WTO is based on the individuality of interest of its members. The UNO is based on the shared interest of the members of the global community: promotion of international peace and security. The principle of diffused reciprocity dilution of reciprocity-that an action of a state will be rewarded by similar action by other state. Bilateralism is based on the principle of reciprocity: mutually agreed give and take between two states. Since under multilateral arrangement, countries share some common indivisible interest, their perceived or real individual interests may lead to disputes among them. Hence, there is a need for a dispute settlement mechanism, which ensures that countries act in accordance with the expected norms. These two norms reinforce the other two principle of multilateralism.

According to Ruggie (1992), a pioneer in the study of multilateralism, 'At its core, multilateralism refers to coordinating relations among three or more states in accordance with certain principles. He identifies three principles underlying multilateralism: generalized organizing principles (of institutions), indivisibility (of interests of states), and diffuse reciprocity. Generalized organizing principles of conduct specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence. Thus, multilateralism denies differentiation on a case-by-case basis according to power or individual preferences and demands. Indivisibility requires multilateralism to be based

around socially constructed public good. Diffuse reciprocity requires multilateralism to be opposed to discrimination and preferential bilateralism.

In nutshell, the quantitative description of multilateralism as the interactional arrangement among three or more state is not found adequate by modern scholars. Qualitatively, the essence of multilateralism revolves around four factors: generalized system of organization of international institutions which is not particularistic, but general to all participants; the belief in the common and indivisible interests of member states; diffused reciprocity; and a mechanism of dispute settlement, based on the common interests of all.

### **Multilateralism, Bilateralism and Unilateralism**

When juxtaposed with two other related processes of international interaction—bilateralism and Unilateralism, the principles of multilateralism become more explicit and pronounced. Multilateralism requires states to follow international norms and pay more respect to international institutions; whereas in case of unilateralism, a single state tends to influence international relations; and in case of bilateralism, two states may conduct relations with the focus on reciprocity ignoring the concerns of other states. Tago (2017) remarks that in order to understand multilateralism in foreign policy, it is crucial to understand how international society has developed institutions, norms, and regimes. By contrast, studies of unilateralism and bilateralism tend to focus on how a powerful state conducts its foreign policy by neglecting international institutions and legal constraints.

However, these three patterns may not be as contradictory in actual practice as they seem to be. If we trace the evolution of multilateralism after the World War I, we find the examples when unilateralism and bilateralism has been used to promote the idea and practice of multilateralism. For example, following the World War I, it was America's unilateral action, which led to the formation of League of Nations in 1920 and that was based on the idea of multilateralism, not with standing the fact that it could not succeed due narrow unilateralism of its members. Similarly, after the World War, the US came forward unilaterally to lay the foundation of post war international institutions including the UN, IMF, the World and the GATT. Thus this brand of unilateralism succeeded in promoting and strengthening multilateralism; as

it was based on the common and shared interests of the international community. Also, The US and Soviet Union started bilateral negotiations for the nuclear arms control negotiations resulting in the signing of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which is now considered a major multilateral nuclear non-proliferation regime. This indicates that multilateralism needs the unilateral and bilateral support of major powers of the international community.

It is true that in modern world, the majority of interactions among nations are based on the bilateral pattern, as states find it more conducive to realize their immediate goals through the process of bilateralism. Unilateralism is also practiced by powerful nations to realize their enhanced national interests at the cost of other and lead to friction and war. In the light of above, the principles and practice of multilateralism may be justified on the following grounds:

1. As international community consists of a number of states, the unilateral realization of national interest by one nation or few nations is not feasible and sustainable in the long run. It leads to friction, resistance and conflict. Multilateralism is the only viable and sustainable way of realization of national interest. If we examine the evolution of international community since the inception of modern state system since the Peace of Westphalia (1648), it is the steady movement towards multilateralism, amidst occasional endemic bouts of unilateralism and existence of bilateralism.
2. The international community is a close network of multiple interactions among nations, which makes them interdependent on each other in various ways. The process of globalization and the modern means of communications, if anything, have further enhanced and intensified the interdependence among nations and various other members of global community. We are on the way of global citizenship and global public opinion. Public diplomacy, process and means of a nation to generate support for its policies and programmes across the world, has emerged as an accepted practice. The importance of soft power, based on the ability to attract and persuade other nations in contrast to hard power, based on coercion (Joseph Nye, 2004) attests the growing importance of interdependence and multilateralism. Thus, if the global community is multilateral by

nature, the international relations should be restructured around this natural evolution.

3. The contemporary challenges of the world are also global in reach and effects. The problem of Climate Change, violation of human rights and migration, terrorism, trade and development issues and others have assumed global proportions. The international community may not be able to address these challenges through bilateral or unilateral mechanisms. The process of multilateral approach remains the only viable mechanism to address these global challenges. Thus the future of global community lies in the strengthening the idea and practice of multilateralism. If we examine the evolution of international community since the inception of modern state system since the Peace of Westphalia (1648), it is the steady movement towards multilateralism, amidst occasional endemic bouts of unilateralism and existence of bilateralism. Highlighting the importance of multilateralism in solving contemporary global challenges, Linn (2018) remarked that multilateralism and the multilateral institutions faced serious threats. This in turn threatens the continuing progress in solving critical global economic and social challenges. Just to be clear, though, multilateralism is not just about the financing of investments. It is also very important about developing and maintaining rules-based and fair global economic and social relations among countries and peoples, about setting widely accepted norms and monitoring their adherence, about establishing networks to create, collect, and exchange knowledge and data, and about resolving potential conflicts among partners and competitors for global resources, markets, and influence.

### Threats of Multilateralism

At present, there is over whelming discourse on the threat of multilateralism. There are voices from organizations, scholars and think tanks, which express concerns for rising threats to multilateralism, which has been the most important underlying principle for organizing interactions and institutions among members of international community. UN General Assembly in December, 2018, officially declared 24 April as the International Day of Multilateralism and

Diplomacy for Peace, which called for 'Preserving the values of multilateralism and international cooperation, which underpin the UN Charter and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is fundamental to promote and support the three pillars of the UN - peace and security, development and human rights. The international norms and rules-based system that have steered nations through seven decades must rise to meet the mounting challenges of protectionism and isolationism. Global issues such as climate change, geopolitical tensions, humanitarian and migratory crises are cross-cutting, implicating the values and interests of nations and necessitate collective attention and action. Technological advancement has also impacted the political and socio-economic landscape and inter-state relations'. It acknowledges the use of multilateral decision-making and diplomacy in achieving peaceful resolution to conflicts among nations (UN: 2019).

In September 2019, at the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session in New York, Germany in partnership with France, Canada, and other countries launched '*the Alliance for Multilateralism*', which is a loose group of 50 nations working to boost international cooperation. Its purpose is to tackle global issues such as disarmament, digitalization and climate change. During the first meet of the alliance at New York, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas remarked, 'Despite all the crises happening across the world, the rule-based global order has brought us peace and prosperity like never before in history'. Earlier speaking at the UN General Assembly, Maas said, "Anyone who loves their country, ladies and gentlemen, will be committed to cooperation, because only by working together we will all have a future," the German foreign minister said. It contradicted Trump's anti-globalist speech days before, in which the US president told world leaders the future belonged to '*patriots*' and not '*globalists*.' Meanwhile, European Council President Donald Tusk, while speaking at the UN General Assembly said that the idea of an imminent clash between globalism and patriotism is "false and dangerous." history shows how easily love of country can turn into hatred toward neighboring nations. EU foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, remarked that we all share the same goals, when it comes to securing, reforming and expanding international cooperation (DW.com: 2019).

These collective concerns underline the threats faced by multilateralism in general and multilateral global institutions in particular. In brief the

foundational principles of multilateralism are faced with the following threats:

### Unilateralism

Unilateralism consists of those foreign policy actions, which are taken by mostly major powers of the world, disregarding the common will or interests of other members of global community. According to R. Wedgewood, unilateralism is a situation, in which a powerful state does not respect the multilateral norms and adopts a self centered policy. This foreign policy position is generally used by a hegemonic state. Thus, unilateralism is a position where a powerful state tries to achieve its policy goals using its own resources without the need of international support and pursues a foreign policy that would not follow accepted international norms. But, the practice of unilateralism has some political costs for such states. In international community, unilateralism is considered a selfish and illegitimate conduct the states following such policies suffer damage on their goodwill among nations. It also undermines their soft power capabilities (Tago: 2017).

At Present, the foreign policy actions of American President Donald Trump are the best example of unilateralism. He has pulled out America from the Paris Climate Change Agreement in 2017, and unilaterally abrogated the Iranian Nuclear Accord in 2018. Over the past couple of years, US President Donald Trump has championed '*America First*' policies and cut funding for multilateral organizations like the United Nations. Trump has also withdrawn the US from bodies like the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO (DW.com: 2019). Trump had made an aggressive speech at the 2018 UN General Assembly, wherein he praised sovereignty and independence of America over 'global governance'. Amidst opposition from Congress, Trump administration has curtailed US contribution to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), ended all US financial support to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and threatened retaliatory steps should the ICC pursue investigations of US or allied citizens. America is the largest source of funding for UN agencies. Trump's unilateralism is unprecedented in American history (Charbonneau: 2019). He has threatened tightening Visa regime for the immigrants. Trump is bent upon construction of wall along the US-Mexico border, in spite of considerable opposition from the Congress. His immediate predecessor, President Barack Obama

had made multilateralism a central element of U.S. foreign policy under his administration.

### Nationalism

The sharp edges of nationalism, based on the populism are equally a potential threat for the principles of multilateralism. The nationalism prompts states to go for unilateral or narrow policies without consideration for the other states. Since last one decade, there is rising trend of populist and nationalist tendencies across the Europe. The failure of many European economies in the wake of 2008 global financial crisis has forced these states and their people towards inward looking nationalist solution to this crisis. The crisis was further compounded in the wake of Middle East migrant crisis, which ruptured the consensus among EU members as they came to deal with issue in 2015. According to various independent estimates, more than 464,000 migrants have crossed into Europe by sea for the first nine months of 2015. The refugee crisis has put to test the much acclaimed European values of generosity, tolerance, respect for human rights, inclusive culture and so on. The initial reaction has ranged from the outright refusal to accommodate refugees (Hungary) to the more accommodative posture adopted by Germany and France. The influx of refugees has risen economic, cultural and security concerns in European capitals. Many observers think that influx of unexamined refugees has also facilitated entry of terrorist elements and the terrorist attack in France on 14 November, 2015 is the handiwork of such elements. Some observers have raised the threat to Christian values by the influx of large number of Muslim refugees. Many European countries have shown reluctance and even refusal to shelter Muslim refugees and preferred to take in only Christian refugees from Syria. Many East European states like Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have expressed a strong preference for non-Muslim migrants. In August 2015, Slovakia and Poland announced that they would accept only Christian refugees from Syria. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has publicly announced that Muslim refugees are threat to Christian values. It is a clear violation of the EU's non-discrimination laws. These countries have defended their policies by citing their social discomfort with growing Muslim communities. In spite of much talk of human rights many European countries face the difficulty in integrating minorities in the social and cultural mainstream. It seems as if

the national interests have consistently trumped a common European response as well as multilateral approach to migrant influx.

The European multilateralism suffered another jolt, when British citizens favoured withdrawal of Britain from the European Union in a national referendum in June 2016. The Brexit continues to haunt the British and Europe alike. The British Prime Minister is so fond have British nationalistic aspiration that he has threatened to leave the EU with or without the deal by the due date. Britain also decided not to participate in the German led the new alliance for Multilateralism initiated in New York in September, 2019. Some European diplomats claimed that Britain had been distancing itself from an event fearing it might be construed as an implicit rebuke to Donald Trump's advocacy of national sovereignty (The Guardian: 2019).

The much publicized 'America First' is nothing but the epitome of rising new nationalism in America under the leadership of Trump. Even during the Presidential campaign, Trump aroused the feeling of nationalism during canvassing.

In brief, the rising nationalism and populism in Europe and America goes against the basic spirit and principles of multilateralism. However, the vital difference between the nationalism in Europe and America is that it is largely motivated by popular sentiments in Europe in the wake of series of financial and other crises, whereas in America, it is largely fuelled by contemporary American leadership led by Trump and his advisors, with the sense of complacency of a hegemonic power to disregard the public opinion. Hence both have different consequences. There is a feeling of restoring multilateralism among European leadership as the German led multilateral alliance suggests, but there appears to be no such efforts on the part of American leadership.

### Protectionism

Since the World War II, the developed countries have been at the forefront to liberalize trade and investment across the states as it was considered necessary for the economic growth and wellbeing. General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was established as a part of *Bretton Woods Agreement* (1944) along with International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The basic objective of these mechanisms was to institutionalize the principles of multilateralism in international trade and economy. As globalization and its LPG project

gained momentum, a more liberalized and rule based trading regime was put in place in 1995 under the banner of World Trade Organization (WTO). Again, the European countries and the US emerged as champions of this liberalized framework, though. The less developed states had many reservations to economic liberalization.

The practice of liberalized trade and economy had positive impact on developed states. In the last twenty-five years, the real income in the OECD economies grew at almost 4 percent yearly, while the volume of export increased by almost seven percent. However, in the first half of the 1980s, the chemistry of the situation seems to have changed as protectionist tendencies developed almost everywhere in the world. The very same multilateral nature of the world trading system is under threat, as illiberal discriminatory practices are being implemented bilaterally and, even more often, unilaterally (Costa: 1985).

The break down of Soviet Union and a strong impulse of globalization based on neo-liberal ideas since 1980s brought a an shift in the global economic structure, where some actors like China, India, South Korea and ASEAN members made a dent on the economic hegemony of the European, Japan and the US. During 1990 to 2017, the GDP share in the global economy of European Union declined from 31.5 percent to 21.7 percent; that of Japan from 13.4 percent to 6.1 percent and that of the US from 25.5 percent to 24.4 percent. On the other hand, the comparative GDP share during same period of China rose from 1.7 percent to 15 percent, that of India from 1.4 percent to 3.3 percent and that of Brazil from 1.9 percent to 2.6 percent. Thus, the 'unipolar' world order, dominated by the United States since the end of the Cold War has lately shifted to a 'multipolar' arrangement, owing to the growing geopolitical weight of countries such as China, as well as many emerging economies. (WEF: 2018). This has caused the developed countries to resort to protectionism, whereas the rising economies are asking for more multilateralism.

It is true that America's multilateral approach has been instrumental in ensuring a stable international order and economic prosperity for members of the Western bloc during the Cold War and even among the countries in the former Eastern bloc after the end of Cold War, but it is equally true that the multilateral system now faces major challenge from the US itself. The economic and trade protectionism spearheaded by Trump administration is writ large everywhere: abrogation of Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), renegotiation of NAFTA (North American

Free Trade Agreement) with Canada and America, unilateral enhancement of import duty on steel and other goods from his European allies, India and Japan and initiation of trade war with China. The US-China trade war not only covers not only the entire range of their bilateral trade of \$737 billion, but also under the global economic growth as both are the two largest economies of the world. The US justifies her unilateral trade actions against China on the plea that the trade deficit of \$378 billion suffered by the US is the result of manipulative trade practices of China (USTR: 2019). The WTO was envisaged as the symbol of rule based liberal trade regime, but country after country in its zeal to gain trade markets through bilateral and plurilateral Free Trade Agreements has undermined the necessity and legitimacy of WTO, as the deadlock in global trade negotiations demonstrates. Again, The America has also tried to scuttle the Dispute Settlement Mechanism of the WTO to avoid adverse pronouncements arising out of her trade protectionism. Thus, in today's deeply interconnected world, we need rules and institutions to govern markets and economic activity more than ever. Yet multilateralism is under increasing strain (WEF: 2018).

### Other Actors

While the US actions under the Trump administration are the main culprit to undermine multilateralism, the records of other major powers like Russia and China are equally uninspiring. Russia has tried to discredit the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), as she faced investigations into use of chemical weapons in Syria as well as the poisoning of a former Russian intelligence agent and his daughter in Salisbury, UK. China has always been selective on multilateralism. At present, she is trying to expand her influence across the UN as she has emerged second largest contributor to UN finance after the US. China's assertive forays to the UN are hardly multilateral. They are just tools to advance her narrow national objectives. China has tried to undermine the functioning of the UN's Human Rights Council and has used its influence within the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs to curtail access to the UN premises for selected non-governmental organizations. China has played an inconsistent role in multilateral international governance. Sometimes it has contributed to the creation and maintenance of international regimes, but on many other occasions, it has selected free

riding and even resorted to threats to undermine multilateral regimes to improve its position. For example, China continues to disregard the UN Law of Sea Convention over her claims on the South China Sea and she has declined to follow the international arbitration in favour of Philippines. Both China and Russia seek multilateralism when the other option like unilateralism or bilateralism is less attractive to them (Tago: 2017).

The internal challenges of the multilateral institutions are no less daunting due to compromising and self-seeking attitude of leadership. Fear of provoking Trump and risking precious US financing has in some ways paralyzed The UN Secretary-General António Guterres has persistently tried to avoid confrontations with Trump due to fear of losing funds from America resulting in the selective paralysis of the UN functions. Guterres has also avoided facing the public criticism from other powerful member states like Russia, China, Saudi Arabia or Syria. While Guterres has repeatedly praised Beijing's controversial 'Belt and Road Initiative', he has refused to publicly condemn their policy of incarceration of lakhs of Uyghur Muslims in the 'political re-education' camps. China's Uyghurs say that they feel abandoned by Secretary-General Guterres. (Charbonneau: 2019).

### Conclusion

The above analysis leads us to conclude the following main points:

1. That multilateralism is inherent in the very nature of the contemporary interconnected world. Multilateral approach is the only approach to be effective in addressing the contemporary global challenges related to environment, security and development.
2. That in last one decade or so, the multilateral principles underlying the international order since last seven decades, has been under threat from various sources due to global shift in economic and political power structure caused by the rise of new powers.
3. At present, the major threats to the process and principles of multilateralism arises from those who laid its foundations: the US and European countries. The unilateralism and protectionism of the Trump administration is the greatest challenge to multilateralism, followed about rising populist nationalism in European countries. The source of American

threat is largely the new leadership, whereas the European nationalism has roots in masses.

4. Multilateral process is relatively difficult in comparison to unilateralism and bilateralism, but once it clicks, it has amazing results. Given the global nature of multilateralism, multilateral policies are diplomatically intensive but offer the potential for great payoffs (Jones: 2019).

The possibility of the strengthening multilateral principles appears weak so long as the largest global player the US is not roped in the process. The US is still the lynchpin of global cooperation. Coalitions can be built to address particular issues or on a regional basis; but preserving – let alone deepening – the existing system of global governance will be impossible without US support (WEF: 2018). Given Trump administration's natural apathy to multilateralism, the world may need to wait for the new President in 2020. Economically, the US is less dependent on global trade as just 18 percent of her GDP is based on trade, but she may face some negative consequences for undermining multilateralism as her global leadership may suffer the legitimacy crisis.

Other alternative are either not viable or weak. China has poor track record multilateralism and it continues to be the last options for her if unilateralism or bilateralism does not work. Russia has the tradition of protesting US unilateralism but does not have the experience and inclination to assume leadership of multilateralism. The European leadership, except Brexit-infested Britain, appears inclined to restore the threatened multilateralism, but is hampered by their restive population and lack of consensus. The fate of Iranian Nuclear Deal is the classic example of failure of European countries including Russia to save the deal from American onslaught. India too appears keen to strengthen multilateralism, but it lacks the requisite international influence. Thus, India needs the coalition of other democratic partners like European Union, Japan, Canada and others. The emergence of such coalition or its ability to face the US opposition needs to be tested.

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