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74th UNGA Debate: Nationalism or Multilateralism?

By Viji Menon

SYNOPSIS

The annual General Debate of the 74th session of the UN General Assembly session, which took place recently, reflected a world becoming more divided and polarised. While some questioned the benefits of globalisation others reaffirmed their belief in the necessity for multilateral action to tackle international problems.

COMMENTARY

THE ANNUAL General Debate of the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) took place from 24 September to 1 October. During the Debate, the Heads of State/Government and Foreign Ministers expressed their concerns and views on global issues.

The majority of countries espoused the view that the world needs stronger multilateralism to tackle its toughest challenges. They called for greater regional and international cooperation on issues ranging from climate change and sustainable development to abuses of human rights and terrorism. However, others also questioned the need for multilateralism, giving priority to their respective national interests.

National Interest vs Globalism

As the host country, the United States kicked off the General Debate with a statement by President Donald Trump, which derided globalism, asserting that it exerted “a religious pull” over past leaders, causing them to ignore their own national interests. He claimed that the future “does not belong to globalists”, but rather to “patriots”.

He declared that wise leaders always “place the good of their people and country first”. In this vein, he criticised China for its unfair trade practices which he said, justified the imposition of tariffs on Chinese imports. President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil adopted a similar tone, observing that the US “epitomises” the spirit that must prevail among member states: respect for freedom and sovereignty.

The President of the European Council of the European Union, Donald Tusk, disagreed with these remarks, pointing out that the suggestion of a conflict between patriotism and globalism was “false and dangerous”. He declared that patriotism in the 21st century must have a global dimension, and that solutions to global threats had to be found at the UN.

Multilateralism and Free Trade

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in delivering Singapore’s statement, supported the current world order based on multilateral institutions and international law. He said that Singapore is a “staunch advocate” of the UN, warning that nationalist, isolationist and protectionist sentiments will only lead to a more polarised and unstable world. He urged developed countries to keep trade and markets open in order to avoid a fragmented world with less prosperity, fewer jobs and dimmer prospects.

He stressed that growth required trade, investments, and technology. All these activities depend on working with others, within an open and orderly international framework of rules. He pointed out that it would be very difficult for any country to develop and progress on its own. While the post-war multilateral institutions such as the WTO had serious weaknesses, he said that the solution would be to reform these institutions rather than bypass or dispense with them.

Similar views espousing strong support for multilateralism and free trade, were expressed by many countries, from all continents, such as France, Germany, Bolivia, Chile, Burkina Faso, Finland, Romania, Austria, Lesotho, Slovenia, India, Norway and Sweden. The President of Chile echoed Prime Minister Lee’s message about reform of the WTO.

China’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, without referring to the US, said that unilateralism and protectionism posed major threats to the international order. Warning nations not to forget the lessons of the Great Depression, he said tariffs and trade provocations only upset global industrial and supply chains and undermined the multilateral trading regime. He stressed that in today’s inter-dependent world, “countries rise and fall together”.

Other Areas for Multilateral Cooperation

Transboundary issues such as climate change, terrorism, sustainable development and pandemics were mentioned by all countries as areas where international cooperation was paramount. On climate change, developed and developing countries alike expressed support for the Paris Climate Agreement, and called for more international cooperation in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. (World leaders were earlier chastised by Swedish activist, Greta Thunberg, at the World Action Summit for not doing enough to prevent climate change).

The small island developing countries were particularly strident in pointing out that global warming and sea-level rise were existential threats for them. They urged that particular attention be paid to the oceans in the next round of talks on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Many countries, including New Zealand – which witnessed massacres in two mosques in Christchurch earlier this year – Sri Lanka, India, Maldives, Belgium and Tajikistan called for more concerted efforts to prevent terrorism. Against the backdrop of the spread of militant tendencies such as Buddhist, Christian and Hindu extremism, as well as far-right supremacy, or what Time calls “white nationalist terrorism”, these countries urged, among other measures, steps to curb radicalisation through the Internet.

Belgium pointed out that the collapse of the “so-called caliphate” in Iraq and Syria did not spell the end of the ongoing radicalisation of vulnerable people by ISIS, and called for more international cooperation to fight extremism.

A Divided but Interconnected World

This year's General Debate amplified the divisiveness troubling international relations. To a large extent, Donald Trump's world view and unconventional leadership exacerbated the differences in moving forward as countries grapple with the 4th Industrial Revolution and climate change. The global consensus on the benefits of globalisation have diminished and multilateralism is being challenged by some countries, particularly by the US.

It was the US and the western democracies that championed an open, rules-based international order that emerged after 1945. All countries had benefitted from free trade. But, the view that globalisation and free trade have worsened inequality has grown, giving rise to protectionist sentiments. President Trump's speech gave voice to these sentiments.

However, it was encouraging that most countries reaffirmed the relevance of multilateralism and a rules-based international order for solving the world's most intractable problems, such as climate change, sustainable development (including free trade, creating jobs and eradicating poverty), pandemics and terrorism. There is a realisation that in an interconnected world more international cooperation is needed rather than more unilateralism to tackle these challenges.

The issues raised in the General Debate will drive the work of the six main Committees during this UNGA session. While UN General Assembly resolutions (unlike UN Security Council resolutions) are not binding on member states, they do nevertheless raise awareness of international standards, norms and rules that countries have to take cognizance of in their policies and in their behaviour. Hence, it is important for Heads of State/Government to make seminal speeches and set the principles and goals in the General Debate.

In a more polarised world, the challenge now for UN member states going forward, will be to arrive at an international consensus on addressing these concerns. Otherwise, there is the possibility of conflict, resulting in a more unstable world.

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