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Multilateralism in 2021: Better Than 2020?

By Joel Ng

SYNOPSIS

Unilateralism, COVID-19, and urgent domestic government commitments weakened multilateralism in 2020. However, countervailing trends of cooperation, prospective reopening, and shifting domestic dynamics may provide the opportunity to get multilateralism back on track in 2021, but it will require firm commitment.

COMMENTARY

WHILE 2020 was overshadowed by the global pandemic, the effect on multilateralism has been somewhat mixed. Part of this is because the pandemic itself is not the originator or even main cause of the pressures on multilateralism – and in some ways may have even relieved certain tensions. But part of this is also because every crisis presents an opportunity for change and may sometime provide the impetus needed to jolt countries and leaders away from practices that are problematic.

There are three forces that negatively impacted multilateralism in 2020, but these have been counteracted by three equally important drives. The long-term impact therefore will depend on the way policymakers steer around or redirect these forces in 2021.

Forces *Against* Multilateralism

The narrative of multilateralism under siege had already begun with the populist victories in the United States and United Kingdom in 2016 and escalated during the Trump administration. This first force against multilateralism – populism – was exemplified by Brexit, the trade war against China, and had echoes in protectionist movements elsewhere.

The second force against multilateralism was the outbreak of COVID-19, leading first

to travel restrictions and then to domestic shutdowns across the world. International human interaction – a vital glue of international cooperation – plummeted as travel came to a halt worldwide.

The third force against multilateralism was a consequence of the pandemic: As the economic toll of these restrictions became clear, governments had to spend their war chests to keep their economies on life support, leaving little else for international engagement, which in physical terms was largely suspended, but also in institutional terms, left in neglect.

Put together, 2020 saw the virtualisation of multilateralism both in form (going online) as well as in practice (the suspension of major talks and summits). While the EU maintained a semblance of physical interaction, it was quite ironically mostly dedicated to handling Brexit, an unwinding of a multilateral agreement.

ASEAN had gone fully virtual, with sensitive issues such as the Code of Conduct on the South China Sea talks forced into suspension.

Forces *For* Multilateralism

Yet 2020 was not wholly negative. The first force against unilateralism was renewed impetus for cooperation. Against the US-China trade war, countries on the sidelines saw the need for other cooperative avenues to a hedge against the deteriorating relationship between the two global superpowers.

This necessarily lacks superpower support, and free riding would not be sustainable. Such prospects offer the opportunity for countries to make a more sustained and participatory approach to global governance, rather than taking instructions from the superpowers.

COVID-19 further galvanised new initiatives such as the Covax vaccine alliance. It was apparent immediately that the threat of COVID-19 would require international cooperation as even faraway outbreaks presented domestic risks to any country seeking to remain open to international engagement and globalisation.

As vaccines begin to roll out and the arrival of warmer weather provides respite in the northern hemisphere, international reopening will require ample amounts of cooperation and trust to resuscitate ailing economies.

The final force is a complex one, because it requires thinking about the domestic politics of major powers, much of which do not follow any international trends, but there are promising signs.

Domestic Politics and Multilateralism

Since populism reappeared as a political force and upset the longstanding status quo in many countries, even scholars of multilateralism have had to dive deep into the domestic politics of the major powers because foreign policy is inexplicable without understanding their domestic conditions. Populist upheaval from domestic tensions

significantly changed the political landscape but it also offers us clues – and hope – as to how the multilateral landscape will look in 2021.

The commencement of Brexit and its attendant problems pose important questions to unilateralists. Similarly, the rejection of Donald Trump's nativism in the US has made it straightforward for President Joseph Biden to set his stall apart from recent US foreign policy. Meanwhile, the huge domestic interventions due to COVID-19 will demand a return to growth, and this implies an outward trade-oriented strategy for most economies.

According to [Kurt Campbell](#), likely to head the US' Asian or Indo-Pacific strategy, the US will return to the diplomacy of persuasion and attraction rather than the transactionalism of the Trump era. However, the crux of sustained commitment remains embedded in its deeply-polarised domestic politics.

While the Democrats managed to win back both the Senate and the presidency, the pendulum of US politics tends to swing against the incumbent party during mid-terms. This sets an urgency for Biden to push his domestic agenda through quickly and early and may crowd out important foreign policy shifts, as foreign policy tends to be less contentious and therefore easier to push through. Nevertheless, continued questions about US commitments to internationalism will continue even from erstwhile allies.

Going Forward: System Less Beholden to Major Powers?

Human interaction across borders has fallen because of the pandemic, and this is one of the essential ingredients for international cooperation. As the pandemic looks likely to stretch on through 2021, the risks are greater than ever, the need for investment in multilateralism more imperative than ever.

While strong headwinds against multilateralism persisted throughout 2020, there are signs that these are abating, and taking up the forces that promote cooperation signal opportunities for rebuilding a better international system. However, with US commitment likely to remain weak and distrust of China continuing in global politics, the impetus must fall on smaller powers to drive this.

Ramping up 'minilateralism' through regional arrangements, facilitating coalitions based around common challenges rather than ideology and size, and turning to the second tier of economic powers such as Germany, Japan, or France as engines of growth offer some outlets for productive cooperation.

It will cost smaller countries more to uphold but the dividends may be greater if they can construct a system more attuned to their challenges and less beholden to the whims of the great powers.

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