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FIVE WAYS TO SAVE MULTILATERALISM FROM COLLAPSING

Kiyotaka Akasaka

- Multilateralism is now in grave danger, not only because of Trump's "America First" policies, but also because of an increasing number of countries that ignore international norms and organizations.
- The future of multilateralism is bleak but not hopeless. The merits of multilateralism overwhelmingly outnumber its demerits.
- Vigorous initiatives must be launched to save the current world order based on multilateralism. Japan can, and should, play a more active role.

The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.

Multilateralism is now in grave danger, not only because of the incessant "America First" policies of US President Donald Trump, but also because of the disarrayed and uncoordinated international responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, an increasing number of political leaders of many countries, big and small, tend to ignore both international norms and international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization.

The list of challengers or "spoilers" of multilateralism is becoming longer, as Xi Jinping of China, Kim Jong-un of North Korea, Vladimir Putin of Russia, Hassan Rouhani of Iran, Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, Bashar al-Assad of Syria, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela and others have come to challenge international laws and norms in one way or another.

The projected victory of Joe Biden as the next President of the United States is indeed good news for multilateralism, but the danger of multilateralism losing its global significance will not be entirely abated, as challengers to multilateralism are still numerous.

The worsening relations between the United States and China in recent years have been inhibiting the working of multilateral institutions in areas such as trade, health, climate change, and human rights. The current coronavirus pandemic has shaken global governance in public health, with the WHO's initial handling being heavily criticized for seemingly favoring China.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has lamented the current state of multilateralism in his speeches at the United Nations, stating his fear of "the world splitting in two, with the two largest economies on earth creating two separate and competing worlds, each with their own dominant currency, trade and financial rules, their own internet and artificial intelligence capacities, and their own zero sum geopolitical and military strategies." He stressed the need to avert such a fractured world and to maintain a universal system with strong multilateral institutions.

Indeed, the merits of multilateralism, particularly those of the United Nations, lie in the universality of membership around the world. The international legitimacy of decisions made by any group of nations, be they the G7 or G20, cannot be assured if the group does not have universal membership. That is why decisions or resolutions by the UN Security Council are considered to form the basis of international law, as all members of the UN have agreed to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council (Article 25 of the UN Charter).

There are, however, some important downsides of multilateralism, such as the painfully slow process of decision-making due to the involvement of many participants, and disproportionate power given to small nations as members large and small are normally given equal voting rights. Multilateral institutions such as the UN General Assembly and the WTO often use a consensus rule for making decisions, and big elephants like China and India hide behind the curtain of the group of small developing countries, making it harder to reach decisions. Discontent with multilateralism is shared by many Americans, and it may not be wise to expect a sudden change under a new American administration.

The future of multilateralism is therefore bleak but not hopeless. If the merits and demerits of multilateralism were compared on a balance sheet, the merits would overwhelmingly outnumber the demerits, as there are so many global issues waiting for multilateral responses. There is no alternative to multilateralism in order to solve such problems as climate change, infectious diseases, refugees, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation, as they do not respect national borders.

It is now crystal clear that vigorous initiatives must be launched to save the current world order based on multilateralism. But what exactly can be done? There is no silver bullet, but the following five initiatives, among others, seem to be critically important for world leaders to address urgently.

First and foremost, we need a global leader or leaders to reinforce current multilateral institutions such as the UN, WHO, UNESCO, UNRWA, UNFPA, WTO and others that have been weakened by vicious attacks and criticisms from the Trump administration and other countries. It was the United States that took the initiative to create and strengthen these multilateral institutions in the first place, and now the return of US leadership under a new US administration is ardently anticipated, although it must be acknowledged that the US's global sway has been relatively diminished.

Now that the influence of the United States has waned over the years, not only because of Mr. Trump's policies but also because of its relative decline in economic size and leadership, middle-ranking liberal democracies such as Japan, EU member states, India and ASEAN countries must adopt more active policies to reform and strengthen multilateral institutions. They should organize regular dialogue meetings similar to the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue among Japan, the US, Australia and India. It does not seem appropriate to expect that China will replace the United States as a champion of multilateralism, for China's track record in its engagements with multilateral institutions

shows that China is interested in cherry-picking whatever benefits it from the existing rules, rather than leading the way in new initiatives.


Second, the reform and reinvigoration of the UN Security Council is all the more important as it can and must play a more effective role in maintaining peace and security all over the world. The dysfunction of the UN Security Council in dealing with the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, the Middle East peace process, the Syrian civil war and other situations has had a symbolic impact on the world's perception that multilateralism is not effectively working. It is high time that bold imaginative proposals be put forward to break the logjam of the Security Council reforms.

Third, the financial basis of multilateralism is crucial and it must be strengthened. The regular budget of the UN is about that of Japan's tiny Tottori Prefecture with a population of just 560,000. The assessed budgets of the UN and various other multilateral institutions, including the WHO, should be greatly increased. Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) has been halved over the last 20 years, and it should be re-increased, particularly for multilateral institutions.

Fourth, the WTO under new leadership should be given a greater role in promoting freer global trade and in managing dispute settlement procedures. Japan is in a uniquely important position in this respect, as it has been leading regional and bilateral free trade initiatives. Bilateral and regional free trade agreements were originally expected to supplement global efforts to promote free trade, and the WTO's efforts to ensure free trade among its member states must be strongly supported.

Fifth, the success of the SDGs must be ensured by constant campaigns led by the UN Secretary-General and world leaders like those in the final phase of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the period 2000-2015. Responsibility for carrying out programs and achieving the 17 lofty goals rests with member states and they must be constantly supported by the UN leadership. SDG summits should be organized regularly on the UN Secretary-General's initiative at the UN Headquarters.

In all these areas, Japan can, and should, play a more active role. Mr. Abe in his eight years of premiership did take some notable initiatives in supporting multilateral efforts in such areas as trade, a free and open Indo-Pacific, peace building in Africa and an environmental agenda. There are now growing calls from many corners of the world for Japan under its new prime minister Mr. Suga to undertake global and regional initiatives to maintain and strengthen multilateral institutions in concert with other like-minded liberal democracies. Japan has quite a number of bilateral issues, including

territorial disputes with neighboring countries, and as a consequence multilateralism has long been put on the back burner in Japan's foreign policies. It is high time that multilateralism was given more weight and priority. 

Kiyotaka Akasaka is the former United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information.