

Case of US Unilateralism at the UN

Sarah Akram^{*}

Abstract

The new world order has been instrumental in shaping and promoting multilateralism over the last seven decades. The end of the World War II led to the evolution of a world order where multilateral organisations and multilateral treaties have paved the path for a stable and better world. However, the current rise in unilateral tendencies undermines the edifice of the contemporary world order. The United Nations (UN) being one of the global bodies has been instrumental in promoting multilateralism and norm-setting in the international arena. However, the recent rise in unilateral tendencies has undermined the UN's role quite significantly. All the reasons that underpinned the flourishing of multilateral institutions after the World War II remain valid today. However, big powers continue to undermine multilateralism at all global forums. This paper will attempt to explore the present rise of the United States (US) in moving towards unilateralism and how it has shunned it at the UN as well.

Keywords: Unilateralism, Multilateralism, US, UN, Global Powers, Emerging World Order.

Introduction

The current world order can be best described as highly chaotic, where states struggle in several realms of cooperation and conflict. The world is an entirely different place since the creation of the United Nations (UN) and compared to 1945, there are now various types of state and non-state actors. Also, threats both traditional and non-traditional have increased. There is much more uncertainty and complexity in the existing world and as the world grapples with many problems, it can be said that there is greater challenge for multilateralism and for the UN as well. In an interdependent world, multilateralism is crucial and a key aspect of international relations. Multilateralism is the only possible answer to the global problems currently

^{*} The author is a Research Fellow, Centre for Strategic Perspectives (CSP), Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI).

being faced by the world at large, weakening or putting it in question only generates instability and hopelessness, distrust and polarisation. To strive for a peaceful world order, the principle of globalism and multilateralism should be the driving force. The UN member states must take up the multilateral agenda with a renewed commitment.

The UN being the embodiment of the international community is at centre of the current multilateral order. According to the UN Charter of 1945, the organisation has a significant role in maintaining international peace and security, international cooperation to address global socio-economic, cultural, and humanitarian issues and also to uphold respect for human rights and non-discriminatory fundamental human freedom. These are the main pillars of the UN system. However, recent years have shown that the United States (US), a member of the permanent five (P5) has been instrumental in flouting the principles of what may be called the multilateral system under the auspices of the UN. The paper will explore the role of the US at the UN in the era spanning the last two decades and how this has been detrimental to the well-being of the UN system as well as multilateralism as a whole.

The paper will address the following research questions:

- a) Is unilateralism a threat to the multilateral world order?
- b) What are the reasons behind the crises of multilateralism?
- c) How has the US altered the course of multilateralism at the UN?

Challenge to Current Multilateral System

Serious challenges are being posed to the already existing multilateral system and new trends are shaping the international system. There are several reasons behind the declining multilateralism and the US is also one of the key players in this transition to unilateralist tendencies. US multilateralism is not an anomaly, as discussed in this paper, however, the US has acknowledged the multilateral treaties just as much as they did not undermine the US dominance in the international system. It may be noted that as China's economic and military influence is growing, so is its range of global interests. China has adopted this multilateral approach and is initiating overtures like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aimed at spreading its influence globally. The reasons behind declining

multilateralism may be many but which define the current challenge to the current multilateral system are a crisis in the balance of power; with the US in direct competition with China, the weakening of the existing multilateral institutions.¹ Most importantly, the challenge of rising nationalist leaders has also exacerbated the difficulties of the existing system. Therefore, the narrow nationalist agendas are gaining strength due to the above challenges. It may be noted that power also breeds unilateralism and one of the biggest challenges to the current system also arises when the present multilateral order fails due to its structure. This results in protectionist stances by big powers like the US. The inequalities of the multilateral system are systemic as powerful nations have not initiated any reforms of the multilateral organisations and institutions, an example is the voting right of the P5 members at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) where they possess veto powers.

The world cannot function without a multilateral order as the contemporary order is highly interrelated and increasing globalisation has made it mandatory for the world to have cooperation in order for it to uphold multilateral values required for a stable and just world order. The UN has been synonymous with global leadership and interconnectedness of the big and small powers alike. Common issues like climate change, prevention of conflicts, global health concerns, consultations, and consensus on international laws require multilateral consent. The world has progressed when it comes to governance and the progression of the rule of law. It can be said that multilateralism in the present world, serves the interests of all nations, whether big or small. This is the result of interconnectedness and globalisation per se. The evolution from unilateralism to bilateralism towards multilateralism has been a long journey spanning several decades. The existence of international institutions and organisations is an integral part of the international system and it would be difficult to imagine life without these.

Similarly, the world economy would collapse without international trade and it may be seen that industries like aviation and telecommunication are all very pertinent examples of how the world is deeply connected via interdependence. The advent of modernity and globalism has also brought

¹ Alex Pascal, "Against Washington's 'Great Power' Obsession," *The Atlantic*, September 23, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/09/multilateralism-nearly-dead-terrible-news/598615/>

in newer challenges; however, dependence has also increased manifold. Climate change and terrorism are examples of problems that require multilateral solutions. Despite the need for collective responsibility and better forms of cooperation, the concept of 'nation first' has emerged leading to unilateral decision making and departure from multilateral commitments. The concept of multilateralism brings with it the principles of collective good and norm-setting in a highly interconnected world. With the advent of the 'do it alone approach' which is a manifestation of unilateralism, it can be said that the pressure on the UN has increased. The performance and effectiveness of the UN as a harbinger of multilateral values then becomes questionable, adding to other questions of true representation and transparency. Therefore, the big question arises regarding the legitimacy of multilateral organisations like the UN when they fail to uphold the principles of multilateralism which is a huge challenge in the contemporary world.

Multilateralism has long been synonymous with cooperation between states as well as a kind of interdependence which is a direct result of globalisation and the contemporary world order itself. Multilateralism's link with the UN cannot be undermined or kept out of perspective and the fact that multilateralism does not in any way undermine the sovereignty or independence of nation-states. It is, therefore, a notion of collective responsibility for greater well-being as well as a quest to fight common challenges and problems. The advent of uni-polarity after the demise of the Soviet Union marked the end of the bipolar world, but at the same time signalled a better framework which encapsulated more cooperation among states for common causes. The post-Cold War world witnessed the rise of numerous multilateral organisations and institutions, some of which were regional. These alliances grew in scope and began to embody a new sense of belonging at all levels. The end of the Cold War also marked the beginning of renewed vigour as far as multilateralism was concerned, and this was due to the absence of big power vetoes at the UN. This made the UN stronger and more robust for the maintenance of international peace and security. A very pertinent example is the UN peacekeeping which grew in mandate and scope during the post-Cold War era. The UN peacekeeping missions increased in number from twelve until 1989 to 72 in 2017 with a lot of upgradations at all levels.² Similarly, the formation of the World

² Jurgen Ruland, "Principled Multilateralism" versus "Diminished Multilateralism," Some General Reflections in

Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995 as well as the Kyoto Protocol in 1997 marked the beginning of cooperation in several important spheres. Just as the world was moving towards a more cooperative multilateral order, several strains began to emerge, thus leading to a weakening of the evolving multilateral order.

The UN has been flouted on several occasions by big powers like the US, a permanent member of the UNSC which has been reflective of its unilateral approach. This unilateral approach creates a kind of chaos which undermines the international system. It can be seen that the post-Cold War era also witnessed a mushrooming of multilateral institutions as well as the beginning of an era during which multilateral architecture evolved more than ever. The resentment against the UN system also began to be seen during this era, as the US was instrumental in the creation of the UN and happens to be one of the biggest funding sources of the organisation. Therefore, it can be easily said that the US is responsible for undermining the UN and the multilateral system due to the power it wields. The US has had unilateralist tendencies and it can be said that medium and small powers have been somewhat subservient to the US dictates at the UN. The permanent membership of the Security Council gives the P5 powers and especially the US, a lot of power to exercise their agendas. The need for the UNSC reform may be another debate; however, the fact is that realism holds sway in every sphere of international politics. Therefore, the biggest challenge to the multilateral system is big power politics and the current pandemic has also exposed the costs of global dysfunction. The COVID-19 has shown cracks in the system with the World Health Organisation (WHO) being dragged into controversy by the US, accusing it of siding with China. The COVID-19 has also exposed the cracks in the system by showing that the developed countries did not do much to help the developing countries during these dire times. A lack of inclusive and equal partnership has been instrumental in increasing the weaknesses of the system and this itself remains a huge challenge.

Unilateralism: An Emerging Trend

The post-World War II world experienced the building of a wide and all-encompassing multilateral infrastructure which has been largely responsible

Multilateralism in a Changing World, eds., Christian Echle, et al. (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Singapore: 2018), 6.

for norm-setting for which the US was a major influencer. In the contemporary world, the US is taking the lead in promoting unilateral order with changing policy approaches. The 1990s marked the beginning of new trends, although significant strides were made in forming a more cooperative multilateral framework which entailed newer and stronger international organisations and frameworks for cooperation. Ironically, the US was at the forefront in building the multilateral architecture and on the contrary, the successive US governments were responsible for promoting unilateralism. The evolving order was disrupted by several factors, among others, mostly linked to the successive US administrations and their foreign policy outlooks. Examples can be of how the Clinton administrations' multilateralism was faced with a setback after the Republican's victory in the Congressional elections.

Gradually, foreign policy choices of the US Presidents began to reflect unilateralist approaches. Similarly, the 9/11 attacks on the US marked the beginning of a new era of the American unilateralist foreign policy, based on political realism. This was the commencement of the American unilateralist agenda which until the date has a deep impact on the UN as well as other international cooperation frameworks. Although, it can be said that the American foreign policy has always had a unilateralist tendency, but the complete departure from certain cooperative frameworks reflects a deeper paranoia and inward-looking approach. For example, the US President Bush did not refrain from expressing his disapproval for international organisations and examples are given below. This was the beginning of new realist postures that the country was going to undertake in the coming years. After President Bush came to office, he rejected the Kyoto Protocol, refused to sign the statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and also withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which was a bilateral treaty with Russia.³

It can also be seen that not just the US but other powers also began to view the multilateral order with suspicion and began to show reservations. The reasons behind this disdain were several, but mainly the transition of revisionist powers like China, India, Brazil and South Africa (BRICS) which have taken great strides in development and had growing economies which could compete in international markets for trade. Therefore, the

³ Ibid.,6.

BRICS states, mentioned above were deeply wary about the system in place and the norms governing the system as they had had no say in the rules of the system. The lack of participation in the formation of the system emerged as the main grudge against the existing set of rules and was viewed as infringing upon their rights. It can be said that the international order is asymmetric and in favour of bigger powers which draw the boundaries and set the rules, but with the emergence of new progressive powers, with stronger economies, like the states mentioned above, the rules of the game began to alter.

These revisionist powers became highly critical of the international organisations and their lack of say in them. Decision-making rules lie with the powers that were instrumental in forming these organisations, thus depriving other powers of being a part of the norm-setting framework e.g. in the UNSC, the power lies with the P5 and the veto right is synonymous with power. Similarly, in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), voting rights are attached to financial contributions.⁴ The WTO is also no exception when it comes to the dominance and control of the big powers. The new millennium also brought in emerging powers to the forefront, but at the same time, there were big hurdles in decision making and unpleasant power struggles began to lead to complicated power struggles, thus leaving behind the problems at hand. This resulted in failures to reach agreements on common important issues, an example of which is climate change. This marked the beginning of an era where political realism began to become a part of the multilateral organisations, thus making their output minimal, instead of becoming result and solution oriented.

Another problem faced by the multilateral world order, which evolved in the post-Cold War period has been the realist point of view, which is highly dismissive of international institutions and therefore, end up marginalising them. However, the most important role of multilateralism has been in norm-setting in the past decades which worked to the benefit of the post-war world. On the other hand, in the present world, multilateral institutions face the challenge of changing the older norms which hold no legitimacy now.⁵ The debate around multilateralism eroding in the face of

⁴ Ibid.,7.

⁵ Amitav Acharya, "Multilateralism, Sovereignty and Normative Change in World Politics," in *Multilateralism Under Challenge? Power, International Order and*

unilateralism is largely true, but not completely accurate. Multilateralism remains a choice of nation-states where they feel it advances their interests. The priorities of nation-states around multilateralism can change and are not static in any way and this is primarily the reason why states have withdrawn from agreements which did not suit their interests.⁶ Therefore, one way of looking at multilateralism is that it promotes the interests of the state pursuing it.

Case Study of the US at the UN: Implications for Multilateralism

The end of the Cold War made the US the sole superpower with unlimited economic, political, military and cultural influence. However, just as the country was supposed to uphold and promote values of globalism, its role began to go contrary to the role it was supposed to perform. This dichotomy, seen in the US foreign policy in previous years began to be recognised as a distinguishing feature of its foreign policy outlook in the post-Cold War era as well as the post-9/11 era. It may be noted that many of the post-World War global institutions, synonymous with multilateralism, especially the Bretton Woods financial institutions as well as the UN were sponsored by the US leadership of that time. The US played a leading role in patronising these global institutions. Presently, the US is one of the biggest contributors to the UN budget with a contribution of 22 per cent.

However, the concept of collective security as envisioned by the UN Charter and as explained in Chapter 7, clearly determines the UNSC's role in case of aggression and the initiative to take military and non-military action, when required.⁷ The question is that if the Security Council is responsible for upholding and maintaining international peace and security, then unilateral action by any UN member becomes questionable. It can be said that the US actions in undermining the UN, to promote its self-interest in lieu of its economic and political pursuits have a huge impact on the

Structural Change, eds., Edward Newman, Ramesh Thakur and John Tirman (United Nations University Press, India: 2006), 96.

⁶ Robert W. Murray, "Whither Multilateralism? The Growing Importance of Regional International Societies in an Emerging Multipolar Era," in *Multilateralism in a Changing World*, 15.

⁷ UN Charter: Chapter VII: Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression, <https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii/index.html>

multilateral world order. The Cold War period also witnessed intense ideological differences between the then Soviet Union and the US which made matters of collective security very complex. An example is the Korean War, during which the UN was able to approve the despatch of troops to the Korean peninsula because the Soviet Union had left the conference while the discussion was still going on. Similarly, the Gulf War in 1990 was also approved by the UN because the Soviet Union was cooperating with the US.⁸ The end of the Cold War also left the UN to deal with an all-powerful member state like the US. The US by its actions in the UN and otherwise can be comfortably defined as a power that does not like to be bound by the values of multilateralism. This can be seen in its dealing with the UN, but it can still be said that the US likes to depart from multilateralist values when its national interest demands and prefers to stay in the former when suitable. Therefore, it can be said that unilateralism is one of the USs most defining characteristics and that it oscillates between being unilateralist and multilateralist. It cannot be ignored that the US plays an active role in world affairs and it can be seen in many areas like human rights, promotion of democratic regimes etc. However, the freedom to act has been the distinguishing feature of the US foreign policy.

As mentioned above, the US has provided the impetus for the formation of international organisations, but it has, however, never completely submitted itself to them. Therefore, the relationship between the US and the UN as well as other multilateral forums has always been contradictory and riddled with difficulties. The September 11 attacks on the US, resulting in the destruction of the twin towers in New York and the Pentagon brought together a coalition of the willing to attack Afghanistan in self-defence and this move, according to the US was not contradictory to the UN principles as it was done in self-defence. Since Article 51 of the UN Charter gives the provision for self-defence, therefore, it was deemed legal for the coalition attacking Afghanistan.⁹

An example of the flagrant violation of multilateralism was the US invasion of Iraq, without the UNSC's explicit approval.¹⁰ A case study of

⁸ Changrok Soh, "United States Foreign Policy and United Nations: the Case of the War in Iraq," *The Korean Journal of International Relations* 44, no., 5(2004):48.

⁹ Article 51, UN Charter: Chapter VII.

¹⁰ Suzanne Goldenberg, "US will Attack without Approval," *The Guardian*, November 11, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/11/iraq.usa>

the war in Iraq provides with ample evidence about the US's unilateralist approach, undermining the multilateralism espoused in the charter of the UN. This was no less than a disruption in the international order and can also be called a very serious power struggle between the US and the UN. The absolute disregard of the UN by the Bush administration in 2003 before attacking Iraq became a prime example of the US unilateralism at that time. The UNSC implicitly rejected the US moves and ignored the UN charter while accusing Iraq of accumulating Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). A UN approval to attack would have warranted a deeper investigation into whether Iraq possessed the WMDs or not. The US chose the 'do it alone approach' and carried on attacks on Iraq, thus leading to death and destruction and chaos. The US kept on applying extreme pressure on the UNSC to send weapons inspectors to Iraq, thus forcing Iraq to agree to the inspections.¹¹ The US continued with aggressive lobbying in the UN about Iraq having WMDs and hiding them and also the assertion that the regime in Iraq is a threat to peace as it is a part of the axis of evil. However, in February 2003, the US had argued the same assertions at the UNSC but failed to gain favour with all the members and despite that proceeded with the war.

Recent years have also shown that the US has been undermining the UN on several other occasions at the cost of other nations e.g. the US decided to walk out of the Paris Climate agreement in 2017, citing it as a liability for its taxpayers and businesses and the country will formally exit the treaty in 2020. Climate change remains a very pertinent issue in the present era and the rationale behind the Paris treaty has been to reach a common consensus on mitigating the effects of global warming.¹² Similarly, the US also announced its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. This can be called coercive unilateralism to punish Iran. This scrapping of the deal was frowned upon, but the US continues with its endeavour. Another example of coercive unilateralism by the US is the United Nations Relief Works Agency's (UNRWA) funding cut in the year 2018, therefore

¹¹ Soh, "United States Foreign Policy and United Nations," 55.

¹² Lindsay Maizland, "Global Climate Agreements: Successes and Failures," Council on Foreign Relations, January 25, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/paris-global-climate-change-agreements>

slashing all funding for the year 2019.¹³ This was a major setback for UNRWA as it funds refugee communities with regards to health care, schools and other social services and the funding cut has left so many livelihoods in jeopardy.

A very adverse unilateral move by the US during the recent Covid-19 pandemic has been the slashing of funds for the WHO.¹⁴ President Trump has cited the failure of the organisation to act effectively during this crisis and has also pinned the blame on it for hiding facts about the Covid-19 spread, as the sole reason behind this decision. It may be noted that the US was the largest single funder of the WHO for 2019. This has taken place at a time when the world most needs solidarity and cooperation. All these examples of the US undermining agencies under the UN umbrella show a pattern of blatant disregard of the UN by the US in the past two decades. Such moves have made the UN less effective and dented its values of mutual co-existence. Apart from the UN, President Trump has on several occasions, privately expressed his desire to withdraw from NATO, calling it a drain on the US. Resultantly, Trump's national security team struggled to keep American strategy at work, as a mention of withdrawal would drastically reduce Washington's influence in Europe and also embolden Russia. Trump's dislike for alliances and commitments is evident from these overtures.¹⁵

Conclusion

The debate around diminishing multilateralism and the case of US unilateralism at the UN reveal the undermining of multilateralism has been a consistent pattern in the past few decades. The fact that the US has always had unilateral tendencies cannot be denied, but its blatant disregard of global unity and multilateral values does tell a different story. The US is the most noticeable disruptor of the global system and the concept of the 'nation first' has been behind this nationalistic behaviour. It can be said that complex global problems require multilateral solutions at every level and with the

¹³ James Reinl, "UNRWA Raises \$110m But Still Cash-strapped After US Cuts," *Al Jazeera*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/25/unrwa-raises-110m-but-still-cash-strapped-after-us-cuts>

¹⁴ "Coronavirus: US to Halt Funding to WHO, Says Trump," BBC, April 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52289056>

¹⁵ Julian E. Barnes and Helene Cooper, "Trump Discussed Pulling US From NATO, Aides Say Amid New Concerns Over Russia," *New York Times*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/14/us/politics/nato-president-trump.html>

world being so interconnected, the rise of myopic right-wing populists has made it difficult to restore trust in the multilateralist system. The US is perceived as dismissive and at times even a bully when it comes to its self-interest at forums like the UN. This selfish attitude has done much damage to multilateral causes.

To make the UN a fair international governing body, it is imperative for the US and other big powers to play a constructive role in managing global problems. The UN is an organisation with its member states and their subsequent funding and votes which leaves it with a lot of limitations that cannot be overcome. The UN as an organisation needs a transformation, with a meaningful revision of its charter, which must help address the concerns of all its member states. Common causes and agendas keep this organisation alive and in some areas, it does make an impact, examples of which are peacekeeping and several other endeavours, which may have their shortcomings but are still considered successful enterprises of the UN. The debate around the UN's shortcomings is not new but at this point in time, it needs to be redressed as it has gone a bit too far with the US undermining so many multilateral endeavours of the UN and cutting funding when most needed. Big power politics is undermining the UN and the world needs to rethink and review the adverse effects of declining multilateralism. From Trump's worldview, there is a great power competition and for the US to win, it must compete in every sphere. This zero-sum perspective and the rising anti-China frenzy continue to erode international cooperation.

Just as the curtain falls on the Trump era, there is much anticipation about how the incumbent Biden administration will engage with the UN and other multilateral organisations. It may be seen that President Joe Biden has vowed to turn over the previous administration's hyper-nationalist "America First" policies that have constrained the US role at the UN and steer the American leadership back where it has always belonged, that is centre stage.¹⁶ It is likely that he will follow a pro-UN tradition like his predecessors and rejoin organisations that Trump quit. Biden has also signalled that he will rejoin the UN agreements previously quit by the Trump administration and also his campaign posturing with the slogan "The US is back" is a likely signal towards America's transition towards a greater re-engagement with the world.

¹⁶ Stephen Schlesinger, "How Far Will Biden Go With the UN?," December 16, 2020, <https://www.passblue.com/2020/12/16/how-far-will-biden-go-with-the-un/>