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**THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM  
BY JAYANTHA DHANAPALA**

I begin by thanking the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) for their kind invitation to address you on this critically important subject and at a crucially important juncture in international relations. In its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, SIPRI continues to be both a forum and a catalytic agent in the intelligent and perceptive global discourse on peace and conflict. Its Yearbook has served me throughout my diplomatic career as an indispensable repository of reliable data on international peace and security and an objective commentary on the trends and themes behind the events of the years. I congratulate its Director and its staff for the high quality of their research and wish SIPRI many more years of success.

**The evolution of multilateralism**

The world order today remains dominated by the nation- state system that we trace back to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, which ended the Thirty Years War in Europe. The new nations of the South emerging from the decolonisation process - first in Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Asia and Africa - have embraced this system with enthusiasm, drawing on their historical and cultural traditions to assert strongly held national identities. Despite the strong trends of globalization, aided by the Information and Communications Revolution that have integrated the peoples of the world today, the forces of nationalism continue to prevail buttressing the nation-state system. While some nations yield aspects of their sovereignty to form regional groupings, others willingly cede areas of governance to international organizations in a pragmatic recognition that multilateral approaches have comparative advantages over other approaches.

At the apex of the multilateral system is the United Nations, which after 60 years, is engaged in a process of renewal and reform aimed at strengthening multilateralism. The debate over multilateralism is not however coterminous with the debate over the UN or the direction of its reform. It is basically about the options available to nation states in the conduct of their international relations - whether they want to go it alone unilaterally, act in groups plurilaterally, or be a part of a more universal approach multilaterally.

Let me quote the Foreign Minister of Sweden, Jan Eliasson, who is also today the President of the UN General Assembly -

*"I believe we are now at an important juncture in history. In a world of much insecurity and mistrust, do we redouble our efforts to create a multilateral system that can deal with today's challenges? Or do we retreat behind our borders, trying to build up our defences against the modern-day threats, but finding that we cannot build them high enough?"*

As a concept, "multilateralism" continues to evolve and is not easily pinned down in a definition. It is an approach in the management of international relations that seeks to solve shared global problems by coordinating the policies of states in accordance with agreed global principles and norms. The membership of multilateral groups or organizations can vary -- from the more universal, 191-member UN to treaty regimes that have a few signatories. The aim however is the same - the promotion of a global public good that is commonly desired by the states participating in the process and that may not be attained optimally unless there is collective action.

While that remains the substantive pillar of multilateralism, the procedural pillar involves the process of having all nations participate - not always on an equal basis - in discussion, debate, compromise and finally in agreement through consensus or voting on an agreed course of action. The process of multilateralism is clearly not enough per se. It must take place within a rule-based international order. The supreme objectives of multilateralism are enshrined in the preamble of the Charter of the United Nations. They include saving humanity from 'the scourge of war', protecting and promoting human rights and human dignity, preserving the rule of law, and promoting economic development and social progress. The process, as prescribed in the Charter, involves the practice of tolerance; peaceful co-existence, unity and the non-use of force 'save in the common interest'.

While the word 'multilateralism' is actually never used in the Charter, the concept clearly forms the framework. The 2005 Outcome Document of the UN General Assembly, for example, stated unambiguously "We reaffirm the vital importance of an effective multilateral system, in accordance with international law, in order to better address the multifaceted and interconnected challenges and threats confronting our world and to achieve progress in the areas of peace and security, development and human rights ....." That endorsement of multilateralism by the Heads of State and Government of the nations of the world remains authoritative.

### **The value base of multilateralism**

But it is not only the objectives and procedure that sustain multilateralism as its pillars. The very foundation of multilateralism lies in the shared values that were mentioned in the Millennium Declaration, adopted in the UN in 2000 - freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility. Together they form a value base - an ethical foundation - that is cohesive, inspiring and durable. From each of these fundamental values nations of different power equations, levels of development, geographical size and populations can find a common basis for action. It is a moral compass for the global community.

Individually, the values set out in the Millennium Declaration represent powerful forces that have inspired and motivated humankind throughout millennia of history. They have been, and continue to be, the accelerators of human progress. Collectively, they represent the benchmarks of multilateralism against which we must assess our performance as individual nations and as the international community in taking humankind forward to a safer and better world. Consider for a moment the weight of these fundamental values in inspiring human action in the modern age --

- ❖ **Freedom** - was the spur that rid the world of slavery, colonialism and apartheid; *it is the shared multilateral value that protects men, women and children from fear, exploitation and abuse, from injustice and deprivation and from want and hunger.*
- ❖ **Equality** - is what drove societies to abolish discrimination on the basis of colour, creed, wealth, ethnicity, aristocratic origin and gender; *it is the shared multilateral value that empowers individuals in society and nations in the international community whether big or small, rich or poor, mighty or meek.*
- ❖ **Solidarity** - is the sense of a common identity as one human family with reciprocal duties and obligations that has led to social contracts and social security within countries and to the aid and assistance of the wealthy and developed countries to those who are stricken with disease, disaster and endemic poverty; *it is the shared multilateral value that must ensure the elimination of injustices, asymmetries in globalised development and absolute poverty.*
- ❖ **Tolerance** - is the glue that has bonded us together as human beings with mutual respect for each other despite our astonishing diversity both within nations and in the international community; *it is the shared multilateral value that will prevent ethnic and religious conflict within nations and the 'clash of civilizations' on a global scale, ensuring instead an 'alliance among civilizations' and the celebration of human diversity as an endowment.*
- ❖ **Respect for nature** - is what has preserved the available and potential natural resources of our planet Earth and our ecological system as our common heritage to serve the genuine needs, and not the greedy wants, of humankind; *it is the shared multilateral value that will guide us to sustainable development, managing our consumption of resources equitably and wisely so that we pass on the world which we occupy as a trust, to generations to come in at least as healthy and wholesome a state as we received it from preceding generations. Finally,*
- ❖ **Shared responsibility** - is the common realization that we are one human family placed together in a world that is more integrated than ever before through the processes of globalization and that the management of public goods has to be achieved optimally through participatory, people-centred endeavours and good democratic governance at the national level and through multilateralism and international organizations - with the UN at its centre - in the collective response to global challenges to international peace and security; *it is the shared multilateral value that will prevent humankind from descending into anarchy and self-destruction through selfishness and profligacy and the insurance policy to achieve a rule-based international order founded on the bedrock of international law, human rights, equity and justice.*

Following the publication of the influential Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change in December 2004 -- and the Secretary-General's own report "In Larger Freedom" -- the Outcome Document of the UN General Assembly added significantly to the fundamental values stated in the Millennium Declaration by asserting, "We acknowledge that peace and security, development and human rights are the pillars of the United Nations system and the foundations for collective security and well-being. We recognize that development, peace and security and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing".

### **The alternatives to multilateralism**

No government -- however powerful and wealthy -- can achieve the translation of these values into practical action by itself. It is a quintessentially multilateral endeavour that has to be undertaken in a spirit of co-operation and compromise. A major drawback with multilateralism is that despite the obvious benefits that nations derive from pursuing this policy there are few advocates of it. Nor is there an emotive appeal around it that can help to mobilize international public opinion.

This is in contrast to the emotional appeal of nationalism -- and its more debased form of jingoism or chauvinism -- which is used as a trigger for unilateralism. Advocates of multilateralism are frequently criticized as being unpatriotic in a subtle undermining of policies of greater interaction with the international community. Wrapping themselves with the national flag, advocates of concepts of unilateralism are able to make serious inroads in public opinion. Xenophobia is often the refuge of critics of multilateralism. That confuses the issues. Another alternative to multilateralism is isolationism where a nation disengages from the international community. This is scarcely practicable in today's world.

To combat these pressures for the adoption of unilateral or isolationist policies, it is vital that in every policy choice before Governments a cost-benefit analysis of multilateralism must be made and publicized. This could be related to a question of signing a multilateral treaty such as the Kyoto Protocol or the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), or it could be a matter of joining an international organization such as when Switzerland had to have two referenda before deciding to enter the UN. The analysis may not always point to advantages in favour of the multilateralist option, but it would indeed help to focus attention on practical choices devoid of emotion.

Advocates of multilateralism also make the mistake of framing the choice in Manichaeian terms, with the 'good guys' portrayed as the multilateralists and the 'bad guys' as the unilateralists. This crude oversell of multilateralism can do more harm than good. Unilateralist and plurilateralist policies and actions can advance the multilateralist agenda. We should therefore look for the potential of these different courses of action as being complementary rather than antithetical. For example, the work of regional organizations - wisely provided for in Chapter VIII of the UN Charter - allows the African Union (AU) to engage in peacekeeping activities to implement the resolutions of the UN. The action of Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan also draw their legitimacy from UN resolutions.

At this point of my argument, it is important to draw a distinction between multilateralism and plurilateralism. Membership in regional groups or in groups of like-minded nations and 'coalitions of the willing' are plurilateral links because they are less universal in character. There may well be some who see a rosier future for plurilateralism than in multilateralism, since when a country is among like-minded nations fewer demands are made of it to compromise or change its policies. Multilateral groupings involve more diverse members and harmonizing their interests will take longer. The temptation thus is to avoid the hard work of diplomacy involved in reconciling differences and to opt for working with those who share a common perspective. To achieve global norms and global action, however, multilateralism is essential. Besides, for plurilateralism to be truly effective and sustainable, it has to be committed to these norms and principles.

### **Making multilateralism effective**

Multilateralism as an ideology would be ineffective unless its benefits in practical application are demonstrable. This is perhaps why the term 'effective multilateralism' has gained currency. For multilateralism to be effective, there must be certain pre-requisites such as the combined political will of nations to act together, institutions to implement action and resources. There must also be the perception that the benefits of multilateral action must be equitable in the benefits it brings to the international community and thus we can have what might be called, 'equilateral multilateralism'. Availability of resources must be predictable and cannot depend on subjective decisions on the part of participants in the process according to the progress being achieved.

Multilateralism as an approach to the management of international relations has the flexibility to be employed across a wide range of issues. Multilateral co-operation on matters of direct impact to the citizens of this world can only result in an improvement of standards of living. Political issues, human rights, economic and social issues, and environmental and other issues have all been addressed at the multilateral level within the UN context and outside.

The multilateral process is also not confined to nation states. We have seen an increasing participation of non-governmental organizations and civil society groups. This has harnessed the energy, ideas and resources of groups otherwise constrained to channel their views solely through governments. Their participation also makes the process more transparent and compels governments to act with responsibility and accountability. It is essential for public support and legitimacy of policies in the eyes of the public. The women's conference in Beijing, the environmental conference in Rio and the Habitat conference in Istanbul are examples of the multilateral process benefiting from the active participation of civil society who contributed towards the implementation of the decisions arrived at these gatherings. Globalization has led to a greater awareness among the peoples of the world and this is being expressed in a louder public voice. Existing political institutions in nation states are not always adequate vehicles for the expression of this public voice of civil society. This 'new superpower', as international civil society has been called, needs the multilateral system to articulate its needs and multilateralism in this context helps to democratize international decision-making.

### **The future of multilateralism**

Having examined the various advantages of multilateralism and its nuances, let me address the issue of its future. Indeed, multilateralism faces not one but many possible futures. If unilateralism is to prevail unchecked, we could have an anarchic global system of everybody for themselves, with the powerful and mighty dominating the weak. The irreparable harm to the global system and the reactions of the weak to this situation would lead to a collapse of the rule of law and the system of global cooperation on which the world has come to depend.

There is also the scenario of partial anarchy where nations choose to cooperate selectively while protecting their core security interests. Here it is possible to envisage a future where states continue with standards ensuring the safety of air and sea travel, rules governing international communications and other norms involving sectors in the daily economic and social life of citizens. They would not cooperate however to prevent global warming, conflicts

and terrorism and other major global challenges. That too is a future fraught with grave danger.

There is thus no other viable scenario but full-scope multilateralism with plurilateralism complementing it.. This will involve the fullest cooperation on all fronts, including sensitive areas of security, and with more verifiable treaty regimes. I see the future of multilateralism moving inexorably in this direction because of the force of circumstances. In the wake of 9/11, the vulnerability of the most powerful to the asymmetric use of force was exposed. It is a fallacy that only the weak need multilateralism. For the US too the UN is an indispensable instrument through which action can be taken to enforce global norms with multilateral authority.

The active co-operation of all states is now required to ensure there is no recurrence of this kind of catastrophic terrorism. Thus the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1540 to prevent weapons of mass destruction being used by terrorists -- and other UN conventions against terrorism -- must all be universal. That chain of international cooperation will be as strong as its weakest link. Consequently capacity building where necessary and a close dialogue with all partners in the multilateral process are indispensable.

The future of multilateralism depends on the world order at any given time. During the Cold War, although some international cooperation did take place, conditions were by no means conducive. With the end of the Cold War, there was a possibility of a new era for multilateralism, but the invasion of Kuwait disrupted the world order that was emerging. Again after the first Gulf War, where we saw the collective use of force to punish a delinquent member of the international community, there was a promise of a 'new world order'. Again that hope was frustrated by the emergence of aggressive ethno-nationalism especially in the Balkans, conflicts in Africa with the horrible spectre of genocide in Rwanda and continuing tensions in the Middle East and other regions. The much-anticipated "peace dividend" also never materialized in those post-Cold War years.

Today -- after the Millenium Assembly and the Millenium Declaration around which the leaders of the world united; after 9/11 which again united us all against terrorism; and after the Outcome Document of the 60<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly and its common commitment to the reform of the UN in order to strengthen multilateralism -- we are well positioned to move into a better future.

### **Multilateralism in arms control and disarmament**

In a lecture at SIPRI, I cannot but address arms control and disarmament. The multilateral system for disarmament and arms limitation is widely regarded today as moribund. The responsible approach for those of us who remain committed to disarmament through the rule of international law is not merely to engage in hand wringing. We must do something to breathe new life into the system.

Disarmament, especially the elimination of WMD, is at a critical crossroad. It is over a decade since the end of the Cold War led to an illusion of security as the prospect of global nuclear war receded into the background. The disarmament endeavour did lead to positive results in the past.

Concrete reductions of nuclear weapons through actual destruction of missiles followed the INF and START I. Reductions (but not destruction) of deployed strategic weapons followed more recently after the Moscow treaty of May 2002, although most experts do not consider this a disarmament treaty. As a result, we do have fewer nuclear weapons deployed today than at the height of the Cold War. These were the results of bilateral negotiations between the two major nuclear weapon states.

In the multilateral field, the CTBT was signed in 1996 in a dramatic breakthrough for the advocates of nuclear disarmament who had long seen this as a litmus test of the political will to disarm. It is still not in force because key countries have not ratified it. The Biological Weapons Convention entered into force in 1975 and, although lacking in verification provisions, has established a legal norm banning these weapons. Likewise the Chemical Weapons Convention, which entered into force in 1997, has also banned this category of weapons enforcing it with an intrusive verification system implemented by a secretariat. Other treaties and conventions have been concluded on conventional weapons, landmines, nuclear weapon-free zones and other areas.

These apparent successes are now under siege partly through clandestine violations but also through a growing cynicism about the value of treaty commitments without effective verification and enforcement mechanisms. In the nuclear weapons area, existing treaties stand a real danger of being overturned as nuclear weapons are, quite unabashedly, being given a new rationale and the dangers of both indefinite possession and clandestine proliferation have acquired a new urgency. Not only has the threshold for the actual use of nuclear weapons been lowered dangerously but also mere allegations of actual and intended WMD possession have been and continue to be elevated to the status of *casus belli* without allowing the multilateral system to work its way through its procedures.

Some recent developments give us cause for hope, especially since two of them are initiatives from the world's sole superpower. First, the US delegation to the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament recently presented a draft treaty on a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT) - a long-awaited development that hopefully will galvanize this body to perform the task for which it is solely empowered - the negotiation of multilateral disarmament treaties. Criticisms of the draft for its lack of verification provisions or for ignoring the problem of existing stocks should be taken up once the negotiating process begins.

The second development is the important US announcement of its readiness to engage in talks with Iran regarding the latter's nuclear energy development proposals and the package of incentives developed by a group of countries to be presented to Iran. This is an excellent example - like the six nation talks over North Korea's nuclear issue - of plurilateral initiatives within the context of multilateral objectives as set out in the IAEA and UN Security Council.

Finally there was the release in New York on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June of the Swedish Government-sponsored Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission report by its Chairman, the highly respected Dr. Hans Blix. The independent commission of international personalities, in which I was honoured to be included, seeks to jump start multilateral disarmament in weapons of mass destruction after the failure of the NPT Review Conference of 2005 and the absence of a single line on disarmament issues in the Outcome Document of the last UN General Assembly. Underlying its 60 recommendations is the general principle that "disarmament and

non-proliferation are best pursued through a cooperative rule-based international order, applied and enforced through effective multilateral institutions, with the UN Security Council as the ultimate global authority".

### **Some pre-requisites for a multilateralist future**

For multilateralism to function in a rule-based international order the global system must accommodate emerging powers like China and India not only as major economic players, but also as political partners. This involves changes in the international financial, economic and political institutions. China is already in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and this has led to great benefits both for global trade and for China's economy. Russia's early admission to the WTO is also necessary. The G-8 needs to be expanded at least to include China and India in the first instance. Security Council expansion to include other emerging powers will be more complicated but it is a challenge we cannot shelve indefinitely. Multilateralism will gain in credibility and effectiveness if multilateral structures reflect global power realities more accurately.

The future of multilateralism also depends on its unambiguous acceptance as a normative ideal, a desirable practice, and a political reality. The UN is the embodiment of multilateralism as a normative ideal with its fundamental organizing principle being the 'sovereign equality of all its members' (Article 2:1 of the Charter) in contrast to the organizational framework of the international financial institutions of the Bretton Woods model. The principle of equilibrium among the principal organs of the UN system must also be preserved. For this the Security Council and the General Assembly must work in close harmony while the major contributors to the UN Budget need also to work closely with the G-77 avoiding confrontation especially in the reform process. Global problem solving cannot take place without multilateralism as a desirable practice. That has been the lesson of the past and that is the only viable way for the future.

Multilateralism is, finally, a political reality because no one power or group can exercise untrammelled power or achieve its goals without international cooperation. The combination of these three aspects of multilateralism in a harmonious way enables the powerful and rich countries to see the wisdom of working with the weak and poor countries and for the weak and poor countries to accept the reality of working with the powerful and rich in order to achieve results.

The concept of national sovereignty has changed drastically today and not just because of the acceptance of the "Responsibility to Protect" principle in the Outcome Document of the 60<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly session, in the context of protecting populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. Technology, deregulation, humanitarian crises, terrorism, health hazards and environmental threats have all had the cumulative effect of strengthening the need for multilateral approaches and international cooperation. Globalization is an economic, social and political reality. It is only multilateral structures that can accommodate and reflect that reality. These structures also prevent the marginalisation of population groups and contagious instability at a time of rapid and sweeping change in an interdependent world.

Let me conclude with a quotation representing the ancient wisdom of my continent Asia. Confucius, a very long time ago, said

*"By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is bitterest."*

We have had the good fortune of having learned through all three means the wisdom of multilateralism. Will we use that wisdom in the conduct of our international relations in the future?

*(Jayantha Dhanapala is a former United Nations Under-Secretary-General and a former Ambassador of Sri Lanka. He is currently the Senior Adviser to the President of Sri Lanka and a member of the SIPRI Governing Board)*