



Multilateralism and Asia

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This article is based on **A multilateral alternative, by Asia** which was published in The Hindu on 09/01/2020. It evaluates the new multilateral world order that is being evolved by Asian powers i.e. India and China. It has indicated that the contours of the new order, with India and China as key players, should not be seen through a western prism. Indo-China with their civilization values hold promise to usher a new era of development based on the Asian values of discipline, hard work, frugality, educational achievement, balancing individual and societal needs, and deference to authority. It distinguishes between multilateral world order dominated by western powers and the recent emergence of Asian powers while indicating an inherent value system.

The Asian Century?

The Asian Century refers to the dominant role that Asia is expected to play in the 21st century due to its burgeoning economy and demographic trends. The concept of the Asian Century gained credence following the rapid economic growth of China and India since the 1980s, which propelled both of them to the ranks of the world's largest economies. After a gap of 200 years, Asian economies are again larger than the rest of the world combined. Indo-China is working hard to resolve its border issues which may provide the multilateral alternative to a world divided by values (Asian values), and no longer by ideology.

Need For Asian Values

- Asian values are set of values promoted since the late 20th century by some Asian political leaders and intellectuals as a conscious alternative to Western political values such as human rights, democracy, and capitalism. Advocates of Asian values typically claimed that the **rapid development of many East Asian economies in the post-World War II period was due to the shared culture of their societies**. They also asserted that Western political values were unsuited to East Asia because they fostered excessive individualism and legalism, which threatened to undermine the social order and destroy economic dynamism. **Among Asian values that were frequently cited were discipline, hard work, frugality, educational achievement, balancing individual and societal needs, and deference to authority**. Critics of Asian values disputed their role in economic growth and argued that they were being used to protect the interests of East Asia's authoritarian elites.
- Western labels (western prism) do not explain the actions of civilizational states like China and India. The two countries are responding to unique national problems with a new development paradigm and view of the world order. Both implicitly question Western ideas and institutions as they seek their legitimate space in setting global rules. They have different, rather than **divergent, approaches with convergent goals**. As there are inherent fundamental differences between the Asian and western values a new multilateral world order led by Asian values would be starkly different as compared to the multilateral world order which was until recently led solely by the western countries and their value system.
- In western world **competition is always seen as a Zero-sum game**, that's the reason why the western world has always seen the rise of new economic power as a threat to their dominance. This zero-sum approach has pushed the western countries to counter the rise of new power and it has also forced them to enter into many security alliances and conflict zones.

Asian Giants Challenging Western Power Construct

- Nearly after two centuries, the combined GDP of Asian economies has become larger than the rest of the world, this fact indicates the arrival of the Asian century and the rise of the Asian powers. They have emerged to global economics scale by capitalizing upon technology, their human resources and more importantly their civilizational values.
- Western institutions are collapsing and many multilateral platforms are becoming dysfunctional. The emergence of bilateral trade negotiations, failed climate talks, inability to check conflict vulnerability, forced inclusion of intellectual property rights, etc. are some of the issues which are raising concerns about the ability to cater the need of the present world. In these situations, Indo-China have got the opportunities to rebuild them with Asian vision.

- Recent initiatives like multilateral Belt and Road Initiative (BRI; 2013) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (2014), launched by China challenge the global governance paradigm. Likewise in 2015, emerging India established the International Solar Alliance, laying out a distinct global sustainable development framework.
- The United States has already recognized the 'Asian Century' bypassing multilateralism and direct dealings with China, India the Indo-Pacific construct are some examples of it.

New Framework for Global Governance

- Current global governance arrangements favor flexibility over rigidity, prefer voluntary measures to binding rules and privilege partnerships over individual actions. Along with that individual empowerment, increasing awareness of human security, institutional complexity, international power shifts, and the liberal world political paradigm will define the future of global governance. Initiatives like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have the potential to redefine this new mode of governance.
- China with the launch of BRI has a head start over India in laying out a new multilateralism based on "common interests" as different from agreed goals of a negotiated treaty.
 - It optimizes, not maximize, financial returns with countries having an effective veto by remaining outside.
 - Half of future BRI funding is expected from multinational corporations and multilateral banks, adding to their stake in solving difficulties, making it more inclusive.
 - It also provides a strategic framework for new global institution building as its scope is as wide as multilateral treaties.
 - Apart from that China is developing block chain-based financial infrastructure in BRI countries and exploring an international block-chain currency for digital settlements without relying on the dollar, thus reducing U.S. leverage and reducing the hegemony of western economic power.

Conclusion: Embodying Asian Values

- The emergence of Asian powers cannot rule out the importance of the U.S. It is evident that the U.S., China, and India will retain their civilizational models into the future. In Asia, differences will center on overlapping priorities - **Security (the U.S.'s efforts to maintain hegemony), economic (China's emphasis on connectivity, markets, and growth) and equitable sustainable development (India-led framework of digital infrastructure designed as a public good).**

- Countries having similar conditions like India are looking for its vision of a digital, cooperative, sustainable multilateral strategic framework to complement the frameworks of the other two powers. Early concrete moves for their simultaneous rise, are in the global interest and will be a win-win situation for all.

Drishti Mains Question

Asia is providing the multilateral alternative to a world divided by values, and no longer by ideology. What defines 'Asian Values' and how they are different from western values?
