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Multilateral reforms as a priority in the G-20

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Why is in news? While assuming the G-20 presidency in December 2022, India stated that its agenda would be inclusive, ambitious, action-oriented, and decisive. Accordingly, the G-20 idea bank, Think 20, also placed multilateral reforms as one of its priorities. The T20 Task Force on 'Towards Reformed Multilateralism' (TF7) aims to construct a roadmap for 'Multilateralism 2.0'.

Importance of Multilateralism

Most of the challenges nations face today are global in nature and require global solutions. Pressing global issues such as conflicts, climate change, migration, macroeconomic instability, and cybersecurity can indeed only be solved collectively

However, multilateral cooperation is confronting multiple crises in recent years. Due to persistent deadlocks, multilateralism has lost the majority's trust

Multilateralism is also facing a utility crisis, where powerful member-states think it is no longer useful for them. Moreover, increasing great-power tensions, de-globalisation, populist nationalism, the pandemic, and climate emergencies added to the hardships.

Furthermore, disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic have reversed the social and economic progress that the global society made in the past couple of decades.

This impasse led states to seek other arenas, including bilateral, plurilateral and minilateral groupings, which subsequently contributed to further polarisation of global politics

However, cooperation and multilateral reform is the need of the hour.

Difficulties in reforming multilateralism

Reforming multilateralism is a difficult task for various reasons.

First, multilateralism is deeply entrenched in global power politics. As a result, any action in reforming multilateral institutions and frameworks automatically transforms into a move that seeks changes in the current distribution of power. Modifications in the distribution of power in the global order are neither easy nor normal. Moreover, it may have adverse implications if not done cautiously.

Second, the status quo powers see multilateral reforms as a zero-sum game. For instance, in the context of the Bretton Woods system, the U.S. and Europe believed reform would reduce their influence and dominance. This makes decisions about reform in these institutions, by consensus or voting, hard.

Third, multilateralism appears at odds with the realities of the emerging multiplex global order. The emerging order seems more multipolar and multi-centred. Such a situation facilitates the formation of new clubs, concerts and coalitions of the like-minded, which makes the reform of older institutions and frameworks more challenging.

Potential of India under G20

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Multilateral reforms also require mobilising the political will, subsequently giving concessions and conciliations. However, most reform bids have yet to take this issue seriously.

To fix the malaise within multilateralism, G-20 needs to devise multiple solutions. Currently, the multilateralism reform narrative lives only in elite circles and some national capitals, particularly the emerging powers. Therefore, G-20 should first focus on setting proper narratives of multilateral reform.

G-20 may constitute an engagement group dedicated to bring the narrative to the forefront of global discourse. India should also urge the upcoming chairs of the grouping, Brazil and South Africa, to place multilateral reforms as their presidential priorities. Since both have global high-table ambitions, it would be an easier task for India.

Competing interests and the dominance of powerful states are there to stay in multilateral platforms. Therefore, while supporting multilateral cooperation, G-20 should continue encouraging unilateral groupings as a new form of multilateralism and try to transform them into multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Creating networks of issue-based multilaterals, particularly in areas related to the governance of the global commons will be helpful in preventing competitive coalitions where other actors play the same game to their advantage, leading to a more fragmented world order

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Conclusion

G-20 should put all its efforts into solving one or two pressing global issues and showcase it as the model of new multilateralism