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The World in Turmoil: Multilateralism in Crisis

Dinesh Bhattarai*

Abstract

The United Nations was established on 24 October 1945 in the aftermath of the Second World War (WWII) with 51 founding members. Its purpose was “to save the succeeding generations from the scourge of war, promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.” At its core was the principle of the sovereign equality of all member states, ensuring that no nation, no matter how powerful, had the “license” to act solely in its interests. However, the Cold War developed soon after 1945, dividing the world into a bipolar order led by the United States and the Soviet Union. The establishment of the Bretton Woods financial institutions after WWII was to ensure a “high degree of economic collaboration among the leading nations” so that the world did not relapse into economic warfare as witnessed in the preceding decades. The Western-dominated world, which created the so-called rules-based international order-including the UN as the avatar of internationalism is in disarray, with conditions worsening and becoming increasingly chaotic. Great power rivalry, deepening integration, technological interdependence, unprecedented interconnectedness and fierce competition dominate the agenda between and among nations. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the pre-existing geopolitical trends of terrorism, jihadism, cybersecurity, cryptocurrency and climate crises. As the old order faces mounting challenges, a new global order is struggling to be born, it cannot be said with certainty whether this birth will be peaceful or descend into violence. No nation can confront today’s complex challenges and build a safer world alone. This write-up attempts to examine the current state of multilateralism, discuss implications of weakening multilateralism and finally look into the potential role of emerging nations and middle powers in building an architecture of new multilateralism. It also focuses on how Nepal can work to protect its national interests and preserve its national space and honor within an evolving geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: rules-based international order, United Nations, multilateralism, Middle Powers, Cold War, United States, China, Russia, Ukraine, Nepal

*Dr. Bhattarai is a former Foreign Affairs Advisor to the Prime Minister of Nepal and is also a Member of Nepal Council of World Affairs.

Introduction

History is a witness to the change in the global political architecture that occurred after the wars in 1815, 1918 and 1945. The establishment of the UN and Bretton Woods financial institutions defined the next four decades after WWII. The Cold War that emerged between the two poles featured defense and deterrence. Despite the development of nuclear bombs, major confrontations were avoided. The world witnessed several side rivalries and wars through proxies in different parts of the world. The leaders of the two poles continued to hold talks despite differences.

The Cold War peacefully ended in 1990 without firing a shot. Bipolarity had ended, quickly followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It established the unquestioned supremacy of the US. The then US President George HW Bush called it a dawn of a “new world order.” The process of globalization intensified, and it created deeply embedded interdependencies through trade, investment and technology. Several free trade agreements were negotiated and came into being. China joined the World Trade Organization at the turn of the century. This had far-reaching implications for globalization. Much of the time after 1990, globalization was at the center and emerging nations like India, China and Turkey have been the biggest beneficiaries of this process. Thanks to globalization, 800 million Chinese citizens were lifted out of poverty. The intensified process of globalization produced relative peace, progress and prosperity. The new world came to be economically integrated, more socially interconnected and geopolitically interdependent, where nations’ destinies have come to be intertwined.

Globalization then appeared as immutable as the weather. The then US President Bill Clinton had said in Hanoi in 2000, “Globalization is not something that we can hold off or turn off: It is the economic equivalent of a force of nature, like wind or water” (Stone, 2025). Concurring with this idea, the then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, at a Labour Party Conference in 2005, said, “I hear people say we have to stop and debate globalization. You might as well debate whether autumn should follow summer. They are not debating it in China and India. They are seizing its possibilities, in a way that will transform their lives and ours.” The immediate post-1990 period was euphoric and witnessed political and economic liberalism. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama described the period as the “end of history,” meaning there was no alternative to the liberal order. After decades of globalization and relative peace, no one wanted another Cold War. Multilateralism was back in international relations and diplomacy with the UN at the core of these changes was distinctly visible.

From Bipolarity to Unipolar Post-Cold War

The terrorist attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 changed the post-1990 scenario. The attacks shattered the unquestioned supremacy of the US and the unipolar post-Cold War period. The US declared a Global War on Terror, (GWOT), and fought terrorists in Afghanistan and Iraq. The UN's avatar of multilateralism was conveniently sidelined in the whole process. There was a financial crisis in 2008-9 following the collapse of Lehman Brothers in the US. A global shift of power to a large number of players was evident. The world was seen moving from unipolarity to multipolarity, which meant a world of multiple and competing centers of powers, aspiring for equal power and seeking status emerged and came to the global top table. Things turned around and politics came back to the driving seat.

These were times of turbulence, characterized by intense power competition, uncertainty and heightened volatility. If the first half of the twentieth century saw two devastating world wars, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen significant geopolitical realignments across the globe, witnessing a variety of changes ranging from geopolitical, geoeconomic, geo-technological and eco-cultural changes and challenges including artificial intelligence and increasing use of robots. Chinese President Xi Jinping calls these developments "great changes unseen in a century." Francis Fukuyama's warning that the US is losing its ability to lead globally as political polarization and a lack of bipartisan consensus is undermining its long-term influence. He argued that the US's retreat from the liberal world order it once championed created a dangerous vacuum inviting instability and the resurgence of the law of the jungle in international relations (GZERO, 2025).

The apex of multilateralism - the UN, along with the Bretton Woods financial institutions, ensure "a high degree of economic collaboration among the leading nations," (Jones, Pascual, & Stedman, 2009), established in the immediate aftermath of WWII and the World Trade Organization (WTO), seem to be fast aging and proving inadequate and unable to address the new generation of changes and challenges. There is no denying the fact that the Western-dominated world that created the so-called rule-based international order is in disarray, with conditions worsening and becoming chaotic. A new generation of challenges stares at humanity and transnational challenges and threats, grouped under "problems without passports" have proliferated.

Today, contemporary debates revolve around great power rivalry, deepening integration, technological interdependence, unprecedented interconnectedness and fierce competition, all of which dominate the agenda between and among nations.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the pre-existing geopolitical trends including terrorism, jihadism, cybersecurity, cryptocurrency and climate crises. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 violated the principles of non-aggression, sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations as embodied in the UN Charter. Put together, these events are destabilizing nations from within and beyond, reshaping the geopolitical landscape, and raising critical questions about the sustainability of the US-led liberal international order and the UN itself. As the old order faces mounting challenges, a new global order is struggling to be born. Whether this transformation will be peaceful or descend into violence remains uncertain. In such a scenario, policies need to be reexamined as global conditions evolve with the interests in mind. The nature of challenges demands cooperation among emerging middle and small powers - yet such collaboration remains elusive, unattainable and even unthinkable under the prevailing circumstances.

There has been a rise of nationalists globally. Moderates have suffered significantly. Populist nationalists disdain national democratic institutions and target international organizations. Policymaking seems to have been driven from "expert-brokered consensus to personality-driven populism." They denounce these institutions as elite-driven and out of touch. Countries are prioritizing their national interest over the global good. At a time when rhetoric is strong and populism is at its peak, respect for basic human rights, democracy, tolerance and humanitarian aid has grown weak and appears secondary to the play of geopolitics. Globalization is facing a backlash against many aspects of it in different parts of the world. Inequality is growing. There are growing trends of de-globalization unfolding deeply. International organizations have to struggle with anti-globalist resentment. The concept of a borderless world and free trade has come under assault. The President of the World Economic Forum Borge Brende says, "National interest is now at the core, global interest less so." However, "trade and investments have been driving engine for growth over the last decade, and growth is also prosperity." Prof. Dani Rodrik says "Globalization didn't fall in our laps from the sky. We made it and we could remake or unmake it" (Rodrik, 2019)

Internationalists are deeply pessimistic. Multilateralism is in deep crisis, because global financial institutions are not inclusive, and countries of the Global South are left behind. Great powers play to their convenience and often display double standards. Inconsistencies are regular in their behavior. The rightist candidate in France Marine Le Pen has proclaimed she is for local and "against global." "Trump's position as President of the US - the largest funder and primary backer of numerous international organizations - makes his antagonism uniquely consequential," on multilateralism (Carnegie & Clark, 2024). The Economist, (May 9, 2024) writes,

“The liberal international order is slowly coming apart, its collapse could be sudden and irreversible.” The order that has been in place since WWII is eroding and is about to collapse. In the absence of order, there will be anarchy. The disintegration of the order seems to be accelerating and distinctly visible which could yield brutal results. Sanctions are used four times as much as they were during the 1990s; the US has recently imposed “secondary” penalties on entities that support Russia’s armies (The Economist, 2024). It writes despite de-dollarization, the dollar remains dominant and emerging economies are more resilient, global capital flows are starting to fragment.

“We live in an increasingly dangerous and threatening world. There are more flashpoints in today’s global geopolitics than we have seen in decades, presenting a generational challenge” (Panetta, 2025). The former US Defense Secretary adds that we are governed either by leadership or by crisis. If leadership is there and willing to take the risks associated with responsibility, we can avoid or certainly contain crises. But if leadership is absent, we will inevitably be governed by crisis. Civilians are trapped in conflict zones and killed for no reason. The same is true when it comes to foreign policy. The most powerful nation – the US is being challenged by an emerging power China, which is working to replace the US as the number one power.

The establishment of the Bretton Woods financial institutions in the aftermath of WWII seems to be fast aging, and struggling to address modern challenges and meet the needs of developing nations. Multiple factors are attributed to the escalating tensions among major powers like the US, Russia and China, paralyzing the most important organ of the UN - the Security Council - responsible for maintaining international peace and security. “History will not be kind to leaders too tangled in the intrigues and rivalries of corridors of powers in Washington and New York to seize the opportunities of the moment. International financial institutions and national governments, particularly Western ones whose standing in the global system is already under strain, should welcome the UN engagement” (Malloch-Brown, 2023).

In an age of “poly-crisis,” inertia and rivalries are producing a dangerous breakdown of multilateralism, (Malloch-Brown, 2023). Rich world and the Bretton Woods financial institutions are working in tandem. They are bridling at any means by the UN to stray into their territory. But the US and its friends are not only resurrecting redlines better suited to the history books than the present crisis. In today’s chaotic, complex, and turbulent world, the UN is increasingly marginalized, as seen in its handling of the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza. Climate change is fast accelerating.

Fiscal space is being shrunk and development spending is less. “Problems without passports,” and other transnational challenges including the outbreak of Covid-19 have exposed incapacity to confront, fragmented the world, destroyed multilateralism and disrupted cross-border supply chains (James, 2022). They have deepened and aggravated the situation. What if Covid-19 erupts again, financial crisis, contagion, droughts, floods and fire require global action that needs to be taken.

Peacekeeping is the jewel in the crown of the UN system (Kontorovich, 2025). Its peacekeepers protect 125 million people on a budget only a bit bigger than that of the New York City Police Department (The Economist, 2020). The US pays the lion’s share of the peacekeeping budget. The Trump administration is likely to cut American contributions to the UN peacekeeping system. The UN is often sidelined and almost non-functional on major pressing issues. The UN Security Council tasked with the primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security remains paralyzed at the hands of permanent five (the US, Britain, France, Russia and China), thanks to their veto powers and frequent uses in partisan interests.

Big powers have often been the violators of international rules. Talk of the so-called rules-based order and so-called universal values has been a fashion whereas respect for international rules and principles is proving an illusion. It has been seen that they tend to criticize violations of international law and norms committed by geopolitical adversaries. The then leader of the Republicans in the US Senate, Mitch McConnell, threatened that sanctions would be imposed on the International Criminal Court if it issued arrest warrants for the leaders of Israel (Al Mayadeen, 2024). The developed countries have never met their commitments to Official Development Assistance. The Global South is marginalized. They have been confronting a deepening climate crisis. Though they make little contribution to carbon emissions, they are grossly deprived of climate finance or climate justice. There seem to be more violations of international rules and principles than fulfilling their commitments. The existing institutions have been unable to “properly address these countries’ specific needs. But this isn’t just about need, it’s also about opportunity” (Ibrahim, 2024). They are losing credibility or proving defunct.

In a bid to create an alternative, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, attracting 149 countries, and has floated its initiatives like Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilization Initiatives (GCI), Global Development Initiative (GDI). The BRICS established a New Development Bank. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), initiated by China, has 106 members in its fold including most of Europe, the United Kingdom and Canada (Ancheta, 2023).

China called for jointly promoting a universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization; upholding and practicing true multilateralism; jointly fostering new drivers and strengths for global economic development; and jointly tackling major global challenges such as climate change, food security and energy security.

In 2023, China brokered a peace deal between two regional arch-rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf region making them resume diplomatic relations after they broke ties in 2016. Beijing also announced a peace plan for ending the Ukraine crisis. Though seen as a headline-grabbing advertisement for Beijing's ideas for a reformed global order in the West, Beijing's peace plan for Ukraine entitled "China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis," on 24 February 2023, contains twelve points: "Respecting the sovereignty of all countries, abandoning the Cold War mentality, ceasing hostilities, resuming peace talks, resolving the humanitarian crisis, protecting civilians and prisoners of wars (POWS), keeping nuclear power plants safe, reducing strategic risks, facilitating grain exports, stopping unilateral sanctions, keeping industrial and supply chains stable, and promoting post-conflict reconstruction" (Bhattarai, 2023). After President Trump's latest "lengthy and productive call" to Russian President Vladimir Putin, there are signals that they are prepared to start negotiations to end the war in Ukraine and China is also pushing to play a role (Wei, Ward, & Norman, 2025).

These initiatives should serve as a wake-up call for Washington summoning it to reach beyond bilateral and regional initiatives. China is using these initiatives to build its spheres of influence that could one day become a competing global order. President Xi's deliberate display of political ambition is an attempt to present China as a true defender of the international order. China says it upholds the UN Charter safeguarding the territorial integrity of states and non-interference in domestic affairs. China understands the benefits that will come to Beijing from shifts in geopolitical power. China has its own new overarching idea for the global stage. On 4 February 2022, China and Russia issued a joint statement in which they described the China-Russia relationship "has no limits and there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation." President Putin told Chinese state media that the two countries had "profound mutual trust" and were strengthening their "foreign policy coordination in the interests of building a just multipolar world order" (The Economist, 2024). It was an attempt to curtail the US power and advance their own position. India is worried about Chinese power as China's nuclear weapons arsenal is expected to expand from around 400 warheads to more than 1500 by 2035 (Bugos & Klare, 2023). This means that if the US retreats abdicating its historic role, it is China that will gain most from the vacuum created by its departure. The US must therefore respond to changing global order by championing a new multilateralism.

In recent years, China has been the most prominent and powerful advocate of a multipolar order. Member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and Vice Premier of the State Council Ding Xuexiang, in his address at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, stressed that economic globalization is an inherent requirement for the development of productive forces, and an inevitable result of technological advancement. It is not a “you-lose-I-win” zero-sum game, but a universally beneficial process where all can benefit and win together. Protectionism leads nowhere. Trade war has no winners. It is important to tackle the development challenges with universal benefit, and pool strengths with inclusive cooperation, to usher in a new phase of economic globalization that is more dynamic, more inclusive and more sustainable. We need to find a win-win and all-win solution, one that is based on mutually beneficial cooperation, and not only makes the pie of economic globalization bigger but also distributes it better (Xinhua, 2025); (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, 2025).

The US approach to unilateralism in a multipolar world has landed the international institutions in deep crisis. Former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown says, “America that was generally multilateralist in a unipolar world is closer to unilateralism in a multipolar world. A toxic brew of multiplying conflicts, worsening climate impact, the pandemic and spiraling debt has brought the system to its knees, appearing almost incapable of properly addressing these converging crises. Adding the unknowns of a Trump administration in the mix will do little to allay concerns (The Guardian, 2025). It is necessary to reinvent multilateralism for a multipolar world. A reinvigorated multilateral system is a far better way to arrest the slide toward a “one world, two systems.”

The US has been the undisputed leader of nearly 80-year-old global institutions designed to enhance international cooperation but now seems to be absenting itself from a serious debate about their relevance and potential reforms. It is still the number one power having worldwide power projection capabilities. The world needs anchors. At the moment there are none. A unilateral mindset was attributed to have led to chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan, as there was no substantial consultation with the allies that formed the Afghan coalition. The world still looks to the US for leadership. Rejuvenated multilateralism will help to seek solutions to global problems through global institutions. The need is to listen to countries as equals to find a common cause. The US should support global institutions it played a major part in creating.

The withdrawal by President Trump on 20 January 2017, from international commitments like the Paris Climate Accord and UN Human Rights Council, cutting funding for UNRWA, the Palestinian Refugee Organization, withholding funding

for the World Health Organization and restricting support to UN entities, and other orders that are related to US international commitments, raised questions about its engagements with international organizations that constitute the backbones of liberal international order which otherwise was championed by the US leadership (Mason & Nichols, 2025). He considered the UN as anathema to his “America First” agenda. He has remained critical of International Organizations (IOs) and shown trends of disengaging from them.

President Trump’s nominee for envoy to the UN Elise Stefanik, who is seen as “combative and confrontational” and served as the third-ranking Republican leader, in an op-ed for the *Washington Examiner* wrote, “The UN has proven again and again that it is a cesspool of antisemitism that has completely turned against Israel in its darkest hour.” She applauded Trump for withdrawing from the “corrupt and antisemitic” Human Rights Council. She added, “As the largest financial contributor to the UN, the US must present the UN with a choice: reform this broken system and return it to the beacon of peace and freedom that the world needs it to be, or continue down this antisemitic path without the support of American taxpayers” (cited in Kelly, 2025). She has also praised House Republicans for voting to impose sanctions on the International Criminal Court. As the largest contributor to the UN, Washington’s most important weapon will be its wallet- decisions about how much it financially contributes or does not contribute to the UN. In 2022, the US contributed more than USD 18 billion, accounting for roughly one-third of total UN funding (Bolton, 2024). The Heritage Foundation, a think tank based in Washington D.C. reported, “The US provided more funding to the UN system than 185 member states combined” (Schaefer, 2023).

The Economist (January 16, 2025) writes President Trump’s “second term will not only be more disruptive than his first; it will also supplant a vision of foreign policy that has dominated America since the Second World War.” How the president’s promise of “peace through strength,” will unfold in coming days needs to be carefully watched. David Sanger writes in the *New York Times* that the president’s words “nothing will stand in our way,” will make “America far more conservative at home and more imperial abroad” (Sanger, 2025). Trump’s remarks on turning Gaza into a “Riviera,” taking back the Panama Canal, and buying Greenland are seen as provocative, and a breach of the UN Charter (The New York Times, 2025). Given the fragmentation and decay, deeper, more chaotic collapses are possible and can strike suddenly once the decline sets in. Analysts predict further erosion of institutions and norms. The zero-sum worldview and transactional approach could cause an outright war between the West and Russia and between the US and China over Taiwan.

The geopolitical landscape is full of conflicting, competing and overlapping arrangements over interests, space and honor. The world is under much pressure from the global financial crisis, the Russia-Ukraine war, continued volatility in the Middle East, refugees, pandemics, rising nationalism, protectionism, and nationalist populism. All indications point out the reality that the existing world order was not functioning effectively and efficiently, and no leader has come forward to lead in these uncertain times defined by balance and wisdom.

Many leaders have now come to recognize that old approaches do not work. Washington Consensus has lost support. Emerging countries in Asia and Africa, with their development and economic strength, have arrived at the global top table. A new balance of power has emerged. As the global economic center of gravity continues to shift towards Asia, whose economic competitiveness and migration have transformed debates in the US and Europe, there is a need to reform or replace existing institutions. The emergence of G-20 in 2009, was a big recognition of global shifts and new centers of power. The weight of the rising economic strength of emerging countries should also be recognized on the boards of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. The US should work with others with respect. Political scientist John Mearsheimer argues that the liberal international order established after 1990 would fail, being replaced by a multi-polar world, characterized by three types of systems/orders: an international order, with a focus on cooperation, limited in its enforcement capabilities; and two systems/orders manifesting around two spheres of influence, that of the US and of China (Mearsheimer, 2019). With the rise of China and the weakening of Russia, there are “orders within orders.”

Multilateralism stands as the best tool to mobilize collective efforts. It is only through multilateralism that the challenges of the new generation such as climate changes, pandemics and technological, demographical, and geo-cultural changes can be addressed. This requires multilateralism to be reoriented and redefined in a new global context. New multilateralism should consider new realities regarding the balance of power at a regional and global level. Narratives have changed, and they too, need to be embraced, redesigned, redefined and reoriented for collective action. This changing context needs to be embraced and given due importance in the context of contemporary realities.

Multilateralism at Crossroads: Need for Global Cooperation

Has the world become multipolar? Leaders, political pundits and investment bankers

have argued that the world has been a system of “complex multipolarity” ever since the 2008-09 global financial crisis. There is a popular notion that the world is moving towards multipolarity. Multipolarity is seen as a preferred alternative to bipolarity as multipolarity creates room for others to participate, and forge partnerships with diverse groups. They suggest that it is already multipolar, as the world witnesses the rise of the global south and the shrinking power and position of the West. Others argue that polarity refers to the number of great powers in the international system and that for the world to be multipolar, there have to be three or more such powers. Today there are only two countries with the economic size, military might, and global leverage to constitute a pole: the US and China. Other great powers are nowhere near them, and they will not be there anytime soon. The mere fact that there are rising middle powers and nonaligned countries with large populations and growing economies does not make the world multipolar (Bekkevold, 2023).

Jo Inge Bekkevold, a senior fellow at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, argues that for the world to be multipolar, there have to be three or more such powers measured by defense spending or military might, economic wealth, technological power and various forms of influence among others. He argues that they are only with two nations - the US and China with comparable indexes of these indicators. Compared to the US and China’s GDP, the GDP of Japan, Germany, India, Britain and France is way behind. Their versions of multipolarity come with differing perceptions and are highly polarized. He further writes, “Russia, of course, is a potential candidate for a great power status based on its land area, massive natural resources and a huge stockpile of nuclear weapons. Despite being labeled as a successful regional cooperation organization, and tireless efforts put up by its leaders, the European Union has not yet emerged as a third pole. EU member states have varying national interests and their union is prone to rifts” (Bekkevold, 2023). Economic blocks that have emerged are too heterogeneous to function as poles and they can easily fall apart. BRICS - a group of five emerging nations was expanded following the Johannesburg summit in September 2023 and seems to be a non-coherent bloc. A group of over 120 countries that belong to the NAM (non-aligned movement) remains a movement and not a pole.

The *Foreign Policy* magazine reports a new survey under the title “Can the West Revive Multilateralism? (Eisentraut, 2024). The survey reveals that support for international cooperation and state of the rule-based multilateralism is dismally low. This survey conducted, on behalf of the Munich Security Conference, reached out to over 9,000 people across nine populous global south countries-Brazil, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey-about their societies’ views on multilateralism and the global rules-based order.

On the question of prioritizing bilateral relations over multilateral initiatives and international organizations, rather than invest bilateral relations, absolute majorities in each surveyed country agreed - from 76 percent in Pakistan to 51 percent in both Saudi Arabia and Brazil (Eisentraut, 2024). The survey did not subscribe to the Chinese and Russian narrative of the so-called rules-based order and universal values.

The 79th UNGA, which met with the theme “Leaving No One Behind: Acting Together for the Advancement of Peace, Sustainable Development and Human Dignity for Present and Future Generations,” brought the world leaders together. They adopted the “Pact for the Future” to demonstrate how the international community values rules-based multilateralism and show that multilateralism is far from dead. The UN remained a mute spectator on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel’s retaliatory response in Gaza. Israel has reinforced the impression that the big powers “only criticize violations of international law and norms committed by geopolitical adversaries and that they value some lives more than others” (Eisentraut, 2024). This reflected double standards and broken promises on the part of great powers which made the multilateral system caught as described by the UN Secretary General in “colossal global dysfunction.” The dysfunctional UN has failed to carry out its mission. The revival of rules-based multilateralism - the overarching goal of the Summit of the Future - thus depends on Western countries’ ability to address the perceptions of double standards.

The UN stands as the preeminent institution of multilateralism. There has hardly been any support for investments in multilateral cooperation. Institutions depend on mutual trust and respect for rules. A climate of distrust erodes the foundations of global cooperation. Despite years of deliberations, the world body has not been able to conclude several tasks including the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT), and the global pandemic treaty. The world body has stood helplessly as events unfolded such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the Hamas-Israel conflict. In a rules-based international order, standards are applied to all state actors. Frequent breaches on the part of P-5 nations undermine multilateralism. There is a growing trend to prioritize bilateral relations rather than invest in multilateral cooperation. The UN needs to be reformed and restructured, and its functioning should be redefined and reoriented toward problem-solving. The decline of the international system threatens to push world affairs into a state of anarchy that favors banditry and violence. Without trust and an institutional framework for cooperation, it will become harder for countries to deal with the

21st-century challenges, from containing an arms race in artificial intelligence to collaborating in space (The Economist, 2024).

Africa is home to a wealth of key assets. Projections indicate that the continent will have the world's largest, youngest workforce within ten years, provided these young people get the relevant skills and have the entrepreneurial and innovative mindsets needed in this rapidly changing world. Africa also owns major reserves of critical and low-carbon minerals, a huge carbon-sink potential and a wealth of biodiversity, all crucial for the world's green transition (Ibrahim, 2024). Climate change has become the defining issue of the day. COP28 called for transitioning away from fossil fuels. The implementation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is gloomy and has veered off-track for poorer countries, drowning in the very same toxic brew of conflict, climate crisis and post-Covid debt. Unmet expectations feed frustration and anger, fueling instability and conflicts. Less development in these countries means more insecurity globally (Ibrahim, 2024).

To deal with a series of current crises, diplomacy is needed more than at any other time. For this, there is a need to reform multilateral institutions and make them resilient. This is the time to restore faith in multilateralism, fight disinformation and address crisis and fragility. The world's multilateral architecture is the best mechanism humanity has for confronting existential transnational threats. Allowing it to rot, weaken or otherwise, unravel would leave all countries far too vulnerable in an increasingly volatile world (Carnegie & Clark, 2024). The then US President Joe Biden, at the Munich Security Conference in 2021, said, "There is a dire need to coordinate multilateral action." Trends prevailing point toward bilateralism at the expense of globally coordinated action. This all undermines international institutions created after WW II.

There are also views that the crisis in multilateralism, especially at the security level, could be overcome through multi-regionalism. The Charter of the United Nations (Chapter VIII, Article 52) provides regional arrangements or agencies for dealing with matters relating to international peace and security. Several regional cooperation organizations exist in different regions of the world and they could play a pivotal role in achieving long-term stability. Regional organizations are close to realities. They are considered less intrusive and more sympathetic to the concerns of the South than the global ones.

Nepal's Commitment to Multilateralism

Nepal is committed to democratic pluralism at home and multipolarity in

international relations. Located between the two huge, and rising global powers - India and China - each with distinct social and political systems, Nepal occupies a strategically critical and sensitive position on the world stage. Despite immense challenges, Nepal sets an example of how it has protected its sovereignty and maintained its independence amidst overwhelming odds. Ever since joining the UN in 1955, Nepal has demonstrated its unwavering dedication and commitment to multilateralism. Nepal's proactive approach to multilateralism is key to safeguarding its sovereignty, national interests, and diplomatic space amid shifting geopolitics. It must stay constructively engaged globally and regionally, leveraging its UN peacekeeping strength and legacy, as the largest troop contributing country to the UN peacekeeping missions, to enhance moral authority. Nepal can continue to advocate for fair trade, development aid, disarmament, climate justice, peace, harmony, and tolerance in a diverse world while maintaining its nonaligned stance.

Nepal firmly believes that *Panchasheel* - the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, rooted in the teachings of Lord Buddha - remains vital for fostering stable interstate relations in today's complex and chaotic world. Nepal can proactively advocate for their relevance in global and regional forums. Advancing the five principles of peaceful co-existence would not only reinforce Nepal's commitment to global harmony but also elevate its standing and give Nepal a place of pride and honor on the international stage.

As a landlocked, least-developed country, it can advocate for similar nations while capitalizing on its hydropower potential, cultural assets and natural diversity. Nepal's Buddhist heritage strengthens its position to advocate peaceful and harmonious diplomacy and expand its cultural, educational, and tourism partnerships. By embracing a pragmatic, strategic approach to multilateralism - balancing diplomacy, promoting economic diversification, and global governance - Nepal has the potential to contribute to creating a fair, just and peaceful order and have its voice heard in placing multipolarity at the heart of international relations. For this, Nepal must first put its internal house in order, strengthen national institutions and ensure inter-ministerial cooperation, consultation and coordination on all matters of national interests. The foreign ministry must be respected as the focal point of all foreign affairs ensuring that every international engagement is channeled through it. Any foreign-related correspondence must be routed through it. This approach will project a unified and coherent message to both neighbors and the wider international community.

Conclusion

The world is on the cusp of a big change. These are turbulent times, uncertainty and instability appear to unsettle the world. The traditional framework of international relations is under serious strain and in decline. Unfolding events are revealing seismic shifts in the global balance of power. Amidst the voices of unipolarity, bipolarity, multipolarity and non-polarity, emerging countries and middle powers have started discussing the concepts of the “era of relative powers,” the “era of overlapping systems,” “era of dialogue and compromise,” and the era of “neo-polar world (McGlinchey, Mathur, & Acharya, 2022). The world is witnessing a kind of anarchy in the international system. The proliferation of transnational challenges and threats including the rapid expansion of technologies such as artificial intelligence, will require multilateral coordination and cooperation. Allowing them to grow unchecked would be catastrophic. Just like rapid globalization was welcomed until public majorities concluded that it had outweighed the good, deglobalization will also challenge the underlying consensus sooner than everyone thinks. The prospects of a new Cold War looms on the horizon. The world will have to create some order in a disorderly world.

As geopolitical crises and economic instability rise, regional and global institutions are struggling to respond effectively. What is needed is a political thought of enduring significance. The leadership of the 20th century displayed more creative talents than any subsequent generation of leaders. Today, the world is missing a leader to offer solutions and directions defined by wisdom and balance, and good communication is missing between the political and scientific worlds. There is a need to revitalize and renew multilateralism and reform global institutions, strengthen regional partnerships or alliances, and foster inclusive diplomacy. The world needs to recommit to cooperation, adapt institutions to contemporary challenges, and ensure that multilateralism remains a force for global stability and progress. Multilateralism has survived crises before and the UN has emerged as an inevitable organization. Nations must show shared resolve to confront the common challenges and seize the opportunities together. The current turmoil may well be another turning point, offering an opportunity to reshape global governance for a more equitable and resilient future. Global challenges demand global solutions through collective actions. There is a need to reorient global institutions for collective action. The changing world needs multilateralism to survive and prosper. Reviving multilateralism is closely connected with the faith in the value of international rules and principles. Great powers can work to restore their credibility by demonstrating their serious commitment to implementing the international rules

and principles they rhetorically embrace. There has to be a dramatic transformation of the US attitude toward the UN - the apex of multilateralism. The world needs to reflect on what the UN's second Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld famously said, "The UN was not created to take humanity to heaven, but to save humanity from hell" (UN, 2025)

The UN, as a custodian of multilateralism continues to be relevant, and deserves sincere commitment from the P-5 countries to make it an effective, relevant, and result-oriented organization. So far, decision-making has revolved around the world's most powerful countries, but this dynamic is shifting. States once considered peripheral are emerging as influential players on the global stage, expanding their political, economic and diplomatic clout. These rising middle powers can no longer be overlooked. They need to be taken seriously. Multilateralism gives them better security and access to vital technical expertise while shielding them from political costs. The world should "hold fast to its determination to live by shared values and common rules and to steer together the multilateral institutions that the enlightened leaders of the last century bequeathed to us" (Tharoor, 2003).

Faith in multilateralism can be revived as suggested by the late Prime Minister of Nepal B. P. Koirala in his address to the 15th UNGA in 1960, in which he stated that "the real solution of the world's problems, including the problem of world peace and prosperity, lies in the direction of strengthening and extending the authority of the United Nations. This authority will be strengthened and fortified if the decisions of the United Nations are respected faithfully and loyally by all powers, big and small" (Bhattarai, 2024). It can, thus, be fairly concluded that "any crisis of multilateralism can only be solved with more multilateralism."

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