

Webinar V

Standing Up to The Empire

Reclaiming Southern
Multilateralism

31st May | Saturday | 4 pm - 5:30 pm IST



WEBINAR REPORT

FOREWORD

The fifth webinar in the Political Economy of the Trump Era series examined the historical exclusions and contemporary fractures of the multilateral system through the lens of the Global South. Titled “Standing Up to the Empire: Reclaiming Southern Multilateralism”, the session interrogated the structural foundations of the international system, shaped by colonial legacies, U.S. hegemony, and capital-driven globalisation and asked the fundamental question - what it would mean to rebuild multilateralism rooted in the values of equity, justice, and democratic sovereignty.

The discussion underscored that the current crisis in multilateralism is not a rupture, but rather a continuation of decades-long manipulation by powerful Northern states. The so-called multilateral order, they argued, has always been asymmetrical, serving the interests of capital and empire rather than the development needs of the South. From the Bretton Woods institutions and GATT to the WTO and IMF, the Global South has remained marginal to the decision-making core, despite periodic assertions of autonomy through forums like UNCTAD, the Non-Aligned Movement, or the G77.

The discussion traced the arc of Southern resistance, from the Bandung Conference of 1955 and the demands for a New International Economic Order in the 1970s to contemporary struggles against Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) regimes, debt crises, and climate colonialism. The webinar foregrounded how the ideology of neoliberalism which promotes deregulation, financialisation, and corporate capture of governance has undermined collective action, eroded developmental policy space, and deepened social and ecological crises across the South.

Speakers also critiqued the limitations of existing platforms like BRICS, noting that while they may symbolise Southern assertion, they remain embedded in capitalist frameworks and do not offer a meaningful alternative to the structures of global domination. At the same time, they drew attention to emerging possibilities from African leadership in pushing for a UN Tax Convention to the slow momentum around a binding treaty on transnational corporations and human rights. The speakers stressed the importance of reclaiming democratic sovereignty not only internationally, but within Southern states themselves, many of which are now governed by authoritarian or elite-driven regimes that suppress dissent and serve transnational capital.

Crucially, the webinar called for a radical reimagining of multilateralism, not simply as a redistribution of seats at Northern-dominated tables, but as a structural transformation of global governance itself. This means rebuilding economic self-reliance, reversing austerity and privatisation, creating public-public partnerships, investing in agroecology, public health, and mission-oriented innovation, and strengthening regional cooperation outside imperialist frameworks. It means restoring the agency of peoples’ movements, labour, and civil society to shape the global agenda, not through elite diplomacy but through transnational solidarity and resistance.

This webinar included speakers Bishwajit Dhar, Shalmali Guttal, Guillaume Long, and Dinesh Abrol, and the discussion was moderated by Jahnavi Sen

OPENING REMARKS



Jahnavi Sen

Journalist
The Wire



We're in a moment today that is being described as a deep crisis for multilateralism, with right-wing populist leaders in the Global North, particularly U.S. President Donald Trump, showing an open disregard for any sort of global coalitions that are meant to address climate change, public health, trade hierarchies, and other pressing concerns.

But before going into this present moment of crisis, and the possibilities it may hold for South-South solidarity and new international alliances with different priorities, it would make sense to talk a little about the existing multilateral system, and how it has or hasn't been serving the needs of developing economies across the world.

The Bretton Woods Agreement was signed in 1944 after the Second World War, and while some negotiators from Global South countries were present, their voices were not given equal weight. The rules that emerged centred on the primacy of the U.S. dollar and the economic interests of Europe and the U.S. The decade following that saw several countries gain independence from colonial rule, and with that, there was a renewed call for a more just, equitable economic order. One of the most memorable outcomes of that was the Bandung Conference of 1955, of which this is the 70th year anniversary, when leaders from Asian and African countries set the aim of focusing on South-South solidarities. This was followed by demands for a New International Economic Order, one that would strengthen policy autonomy and deepen solidarity among Global South countries.

But despite these efforts, what we've seen in the last four decades or so is a growing unipolarity in the world. Multilateral institutions haven't been able to substantially challenge that and several of them have not even tried.

The shake-up we're seeing now under leaders like Trump is driven not by an attempt to build a more equitable system, but based on further othering and discrimination. But at the same time, the world is facing challenges that cannot be solved by individual nation-states. There's the climate crisis, pandemics, digital transformations, rising inequalities, and many others.

These are urgent issues that need just, equitable, and also international solutions."

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Biswajit Dhar
Economist



The first thing I'd like to begin with is the concept of multilateralism. In my view, we never really had a truly multilateral system. We often talk about the post-war multilateral system, but in effect, it never existed. And there are several reasons for that, which I want to briefly touch upon.

What we are witnessing today is not a breakdown, but rather a continuum of manipulations by the Global North, manipulations of a system that has been touted as multilateral but never existed. The Bretton Woods Conference, and one of the institutions that emerged from that post-war framework was the multilateral trade system. Though the World Trade Organization was established only in 1995, its predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), was signed in 1947 and started functioning in 1948.

Right from the beginning, GATT was a system for the North and driven by the North. Developing countries sat on the margins of what was being called a multilateral system. Without going into too many details, I'll just refer to a key moment - a review of the GATT system about a decade after it came into existence. This was conducted under the leadership of the renowned trade economist Gottfried Haberler. The three-member committee he led examined where developing countries stood in the GATT system.

The Haberler Report made it clear: developing countries never felt they were part of a multilateral system. They felt excluded, even exploited. This led to a wave of thinking about how to reform the system. The real push came after the establishment of UNCTAD in 1964. UNCTAD, being a forum of the developing countries themselves, was instrumental in pushing changes to GATT. This resulted in the addition of a new chapter, Part IV, which introduced a number of concessions for developing countries.

I refer to this because it's important in the context of what Trump has been saying - that the U.S. never had reciprocity in trade. But one of the key provisions in Part IV was precisely that: developed countries accepted that they would not seek reciprocity from developing countries. This was codified as Article 28 of GATT and became the basis for what we now call "special and differential treatment" for developing countries.

In essence, developing countries were allowed certain flexibilities, particularly in tariff reductions, because it was understood that they were not on an equal footing. So when Trump speaks of unfairness, he takes out the historical context. Reciprocity was never part of the original design for North-South trade relations.

Yet, even with these concessions, the functioning of the GATT continued to disadvantage developing countries. When the developing world started asserting itself in the 1970s, it led to the adoption of the UN General Assembly resolution on the New International Economic Order (NIEO), a landmark moment. For the first time, the Global South spoke in one voice and demanded wide-ranging reforms in trade, finance, and the global economic system, largely managed by the Global North.

The truth is: true multilateralism has always been an aspiration for the South. The NIEO resolution, like many others from the General Assembly, was adopted but it didn't translate into meaningful action in making the global trading system more equitable. After the NIEO, there were serious attempts to bring in global codes of conduct for multinational corporations and discussions on technology transfer. These were all efforts by the South to make the global economy more equitable.

But it never was. And the 1980s marked a turning point. Whatever aspirations the developing world had were pushed to the back burner during the Uruguay Round negotiations. That period marked the beginning of the neoliberal era. If we are to date it, it really began in the mid-1980s.

Developing countries faced two major crises around that time. One was the debt crisis, which engulfed most of the Third World. The second was the erosion of trade gains through the Uruguay Round, which many of us have argued was an extremely unequal treaty. The agreements that emerged on agriculture, intellectual property, and others and were heavily shaped by U.S. and EU interests. And the developing countries have been backpedaling ever since.

So the crisis of multilateralism that developing countries have long faced is now reaching a crescendo under Trump. Despite attempts by the North to place the burden on the Global South, they themselves have failed to manage the global economy effectively, primarily due to the dominance of finance capital, over which governments have little control.

We're now in the midst of a deep crisis. Since the mid-1990s, we've witnessed a series of financial crises, beginning with the Mexican peso crisis in 1994. This period has been shaped by the forces of globalisation, which essentially became the project of global capital. In the quest to maximise rent, production was shifted to cheaper locations in the Global South, leading to the emergence of global value chains. These shifted manufacturing away from the industrial North to new industrialising countries in the South, especially in East Asia.

I see the crisis the U.S. is now facing as an inevitable consequence of this globalisation process. After the 2008 global recession, the U.S. realised that its manufacturing base had been hollowed out. It could no longer sustain its external payments, even with its control over the global payments system via the dollar.

Trump is now trying to undo the outcomes of the past four decades. Production moved from the North to the South, and he's trying to reverse that, essentially unleashing a new crisis on the global system.

So how can the Global South respond? In my view, the only way out is through collective action. But politically, this is not easy. Bandung emerged in a specific post-colonial context. The newly independent countries came together in a spirit of shared struggle and purpose. That spirit led to the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, which became a powerful political force.

Today, we don't see anything similar. When we look at the Global South, the question arises: who will take the lead? Who will pick up the baton and revive that spirit we saw 70 years ago?

Some argue that BRICS could play that role. But I don't think so. BRICS is not a political formation. It wasn't born out of struggle, it came out of a Goldman Sachs investment thesis. It lacks the political vision and unity needed to lead.

So the struggle for the South remains. Can we free ourselves from the control of the North? Can we build a future that is not defined by exploitation, as it has been for the past eight decades? Can we create a system that is equitable, that serves the interests of our people and meets our development aspirations?

That, I believe, is the biggest question we face today. Unless we get our act together, the crisis that Trump has unleashed will be here to stay. And there will be no end in sight to the problems that confront us.



Shalmali Guttal

Senior Analyst,
Focus on the Global South



Just addressing the title of our webinar, *Standing Up to Empire*, I want to begin with a fundamental question: what is this empire that we are actually organising and resisting against?

It is an empire dominated by one or a small collection of wealthy nations. But its material heart is capital. Its central ideology is capitalism. That is the beating heart of this entire imperial system. Yes, of course, there are long-held beliefs and ideologies around racial, religious, and cultural superiority. These are important in shaping how the empire has manifested in different forms and contexts. But the critical motivation has always been financial, economic, and strategic hegemony. This cannot be separated from capital and capitalism.

So, standing up to empire entails standing up to the economic, financial, political, and strategic structures that entrench that hegemony. Going by the Bandung spirit, which continues to be invoked, this means committing to peace, justice, self-determination, and solidarity. It also means resisting settler colonialism in all its forms, as we see continuing in Palestine and in many parts of the world and resisting imperialist structures.

But as we've been reminded, all of us are embedded in these structures. Looking at history, since the onset of colonial domination in the mid-17th century, the Global South has made repeated attempts to forge a collective challenge to empire and its hegemony - the Non-Aligned Movement, the establishment of UNCTAD, and the call for a New International Economic Order. These were all efforts to build a new world.

Yet, these collective attempts were undermined, first by the debt crisis of the early 1980s, then by the structural adjustment programmes and austerity measures imposed by the World Bank and the IMF, followed by the establishment of the WTO. All this took place alongside the deliberate sidelining of UNCTAD and GATT, and concerted efforts by the Global North to halt any legal or enforceable measures to discipline transnational corporations, who are the primary actors in our capitalism-dominated world.

This combination of the World Bank, IMF, and WTO has formed a powerful anti-development, anti-equality, anti-hunger, and anti-solidarity force against the Global South. Alongside, we witnessed the rapid expansion of neoliberalism, which shaped the development paradigms that much of the South adopted from the 1980s and 1990s onwards - paradigms centered on endless economic growth, privatisation, liberalisation, and deregulation. Or more accurately, re-regulation, more precisely regulation in favor of finance capital, corporations, and elites.

This form of globalisation, economic and financial, not only resulted in what we call the "lost decades of development," but also in recurring financial and debt crises that continue to trap countries in vicious cycles of debt, poverty, hunger, and social and political unrest. Countries of the South have stood up against these impositions, including at the WTO and against structural adjustment policies. But philosophically, we are caught in a dangerous dialectic, one where we are continuously reacting to the moves of the North. We do not own the narrative. We do not own the discourse.

We are constantly countering what the empire does. So, standing up to the empire also means reclaiming that agency and the ability to set our own terms. How do we do that? How do we forge a path that is not simply a response to what the US, UK, or other powerful countries are doing? That path of sovereign development has yet to be fully charted.

Even as some wealthy countries in the North are now stepping back from globalisation and neoliberalism, the economies of the South remain deeply integrated into global finance capital. Many of our countries rely on export markets for revenues, and on imports for essentials like food, healthcare, and industrial goods. Domestically, we have seen the dismantling of structures of self-reliance in manufacturing, industrialisation, food sovereignty, and basic services. Our ability to rebuild economies post-colonialism, not in the image of the coloniser but based on the needs and visions of our own working classes and liberation movements, has been deeply undermined.

And as neoliberalism and global capitalism expanded through the 18th and 19th centuries, the South has also become increasingly divided. So, building a new multilateralism from the South demands deep and structural shifts, both internationally and nationally.

When we talk about multilateralism, where was the Global South in this structure to begin with? Democratic multilateralism and meaningful international cooperation are already challenged by narrow nationalisms and sovereignty-driven politics. These serve domestic elites and capital that is already closely integrated with transnational capital.

Even within the United Nations system, multilateralism is being hollowed out by “multi-stakeholderism,” where corporations step into governance spaces left behind by the abdication of states. This is tied directly to structural adjustment policies and austerity. But it is also enabled by the G7, the Paris creditors cartel, and now even the UN leadership itself, which has forged alliances with the World Economic Forum and allowed corporations to take a seat at the global governance table because the North refuses to finance the UN. There is a very big crisis of multilateralism in the United Nations as well.

So yes, we have BRICS. But BRICS is not the vehicle through which we can build Southern multilateralism. BRICS has not moved away from capitalism. Its banking and financing initiatives remain embedded in capitalist logic. So when we talk about rebuilding multilateralism from the South, we need to go beyond simply reclaiming seats at global governance bodies like the G20 or G7. We need a new trade regime rooted in food sovereignty and human rights. We need to reclaim financial and economic governance. But we also have to address something else, a deep democratic deficit within our own countries.

If we do not address what is happening nationally, we will never be a global force capable of resisting the empire. Many of our democracies today are democracies only in procedure. They are elite-driven. Many are governed by authoritarian and even fascist regimes. We cannot build a new multilateralism from the South on that foundation.

From the South, we must demand that governments open civic space, enable participatory politics, and ensure governance that is secular and inclusive, not shaped by religious, racial, gendered, or cultural supremacy. Governance must be rooted in universally accepted human rights and democratic values. Our constitutions have powerful provisions, many of which are being actively undermined, including those related to refugee protection, asylum, and regional solidarity.

Where is South-South solidarity if Southern countries do not support asylum seekers from other parts of the South due to religious or geopolitical concerns? So rebuilding economic self-reliance also means asking what solidarity actually looks like in practice. It is not enough to invoke it rhetorically through phrases like “South-South cooperation.” We have to go much deeper.

This includes investing in public goods and services, reversing privatisation, and rebuilding the public sphere. We need public-public and public-community partnerships. We need to invest in the kinds of technologies and systems that allow for food sovereignty, self-reliance, and the reclamation of our own wealth and capacities.

And we need an educated, progressive public because that is one of the most important resources for any country negotiating its place in this world. I say "resource" for lack of a better word, but I mean it as one of the deepest forms of wealth a nation can have.

So, in closing, we must return to the issue of capitalism. We cannot stand up to the empire while remaining embedded in global capitalism. The empire is predicated on and driven by capitalism.

What we need is a multipolar world, built by the South, but with new institutions and processes that do not replicate domination. We must acknowledge that while the centers of capitalism may have shifted over the last 500 years, the expansion of capital has always corresponded with the subjugation of the South.

Capitalism was born with colonialism and imperialism, and it now reaches into the remotest corners of the world through technology. We have no real mechanisms to stop it. I am not taking an anti-science or anti-technology stance but rather a pro-people, pro-planet position.

We need a post-capitalist global order, where we prioritise cooperation over competition, and solidarity in action through policy and principle. In that world, there is no place for fascism and authoritarianism. Because unless we dismantle those systems, we will not be able to address hunger, inequality, or the climate crisis."



Guillaume Long

Former Minister of
Foreign Affairs, Ecuador



I believe there are opportunities before us. There are things we can do to push forward a vision of global South multilateralism. When I use the term multilateralism here, I mean it in its broadest sense. I am not just referring to formal international law or activities within the corridors of the United Nations. I am speaking of collective action, and more specifically, a more democratised version of international relations and what we can do to build it from the global South.

In fact, the structural conditions of the international system today are quite ripe. Unipolarism is widely understood to be ending, if not already over. We are seeing the rise of China as a global power, forming what looks like a bipolar order. But even that is too narrow a definition. We also see the rise or reemergence of other global powers. There is increasing fragmentation in the international system, with middle powers and regional powers coming to the fore.

One would think that these conditions lend themselves to the kind of multilateralism we are advocating for, especially a non-aligned, global South-driven multilateralism. Add to that the role of actors like Donald Trump, whose aggressive and brash approach to empire may prompt more countries to seek non-alignment or act rebelliously. In international relations jargon, weaker states either balance or bandwagon. What we are seeing now is a mix of both. Scholars refer to this as hedging. States submit on issues that matter more to the hegemon but rebel on issues that are critical to themselves. This is happening, undoubtedly. But it is mostly happening through bilateral actions, not through collective or coordinated platforms.

We are not seeing enough global South collective action. And this is unfortunate. Because, quite pragmatically, countries could harness greater power and bargaining capacity by acting together. Through unity of voices in multilateral platforms, they could present clearer demands and create zones of governance that increase their stake in the system and reduce their peripheral status.

Now, again, it all depends on whether you see the glass as half full or half empty. There are some promising initiatives. Some things are happening. There was, of course, some talk of BRICS, particularly mentioned by Professor Dhar. I agree with his approach. I do not think BRICS is really an alternative. Rather, I see BRICS more as a *threat*, a threat to Western-dominated global governance.

It serves as a signal, as if to say: look, there is an alternative. But it is still not an institutionalised threat. It does not yet exist concretely as a functioning alternative. In fact, I see it more as a threat to the IMF than to global governance institutions more broadly.

If China were to consolidate its leadership and the New Development Bank were to begin playing a truly global role, BRICS could indeed become a threat to the IMF and to the kind of conditionalities the IMF imposes. It could challenge some aspects of neoliberalism. Of course, we would need to examine what kind of conditionalities might emerge from a more China-dominated financial order. There would likely still be conditions, but probably far fewer or less severe than those associated with the IMF.

So BRICS, although it originates from the global South, is still very much China-led. It has some potential, especially in the realm of international political economy and development finance. It could contribute to a more robust multilateralism from the South. But we are not quite there yet.

Beyond BRICS, there are other developments, albeit more isolated. We have seen the G77 becoming somewhat more active in recent years. UN General Assembly votes, for instance, often reflect a level of unity. Two-thirds of the General Assembly, largely composed of countries from the Global South tend to vote together on certain issues.

However, these votes rarely have real-world consequences. It remains a legalistic world, dominated by what we might call the *epistemic community* of Global South diplomats. They say the right things and vote the right way, but governments often fail to follow through. In fact, heads of state are frequently unaware of what their diplomats are doing at the UN. That is a structural problem.

Still, there are important developments worth highlighting. One such example is the UN Tax Convention. It is a significant breakthrough and has been led by several African countries. This has been a historic demand of the Global South for decades. When I presided over the G77 in 2016 and 2017, we pushed this agenda forward very aggressively. It is now finally taking shape. There have already been three votes this year alone, and it is going to happen. The language in the negotiations so far is quite radical, directly challenging OECD norms that have long prevailed.

Another major initiative, though lacking visibility, is the binding treaty on transnational corporations and human rights. This could be transformational. It aims to create a pro-human rights, pro-labour, pro-people legal jurisdiction to challenge the abuses of transnational corporations. In many ways, this treaty is the mirror image of the ISDS (Investor-State Dispute Settlement) mechanisms that currently protect capital. It puts the primacy of human beings over capital.

A working group at the UN has been elaborating this treaty since 2014. We are now over a decade on, working on the seventh draft. But it is still very much alive. It focuses on capital-labour and capital-people relations and it is something that the Global South should continue to champion.

We have also spoken today about the WTO. There are, indeed, pockets of resistance from the global South within the WTO. But we must do more to maximise them. There are several low-hanging fruits that are not being picked.

Let me return to ISDS, one of my personal areas of focus. Investment-state dispute settlement mechanisms continue to severely constrain the policy space of states. They are a major problem for labour rights and environmental regulation, particularly in the mining and fossil fuel sectors. Many governments are afraid to introduce progressive public policies for fear of being taken to arbitration in corporate-run tribunals across the world.

ICSID, based at the World Bank in Washington D.C., is the most well-known, but there are many others. A majority of states in the Global South are still parties to these agreements. India is not one of them, which is good news. Indonesia is not either. Several Latin American countries withdrew during the region's progressive wave, what some call the *pink tide*, though I am not fond of that term. But in sub-Saharan Africa, most countries remain bound by these mechanisms.

It is ironic that even the Global North is now questioning ISDS mechanisms. They, too, are realising the extent to which such mechanisms are hindering domestic policy, particularly in the context of energy transition. Every time a coal mine is closed or an environmental regulation introduced, governments are taken to court. The European Union and the United Kingdom, for instance, have recently withdrawn from the Energy Charter Treaty, one of the most powerful investment agreements. Yet these same countries continue to insist that global South countries remain bound to these regimes, demanding adherence as a condition for investment. This is a classic case of "do as I say, not as I do."

To counter this, what we need is collective action. Countries could, through regional blocs or coalitions like the G77, decide to withdraw together from agreements like ICSID. This is a classic example of how multilateralism from the South could work, not just conceptually, but in real and concrete terms.

Another low-hanging fruit, this time in the human rights and humanitarian sphere, is the issue of Palestine. The scale of the crimes currently being committed against Palestinians is perhaps the most egregious since the Nakba of 1948. And yet, the levels of solidarity from the global South are far lower than they were in the 1960s and 1970s. Back then, despite apartheid in South Africa and other ongoing struggles, the South was far more united in its support for Palestine.

Today, we are not even close to those levels of solidarity. If we compare this to the Global South's role in the anti-apartheid movement, we fall short. Countries continue to vote well at the UN, but even these votes are not followed up with concrete policy. India is a particularly unfortunate example. It has moved away from its historic non-aligned and pro-Palestinian positions in recent years.

There is far more that could be done in this area. The policy space exists. What is missing is political will.

Before I close, let me raise one final area that we often forget as an opportunity for multilateralism which is regionalism. I strongly believe that regions are the new multilateral blocs. This may be less relevant for South Asia, where India dominates the region, but it is highly relevant for Latin America and Africa.

To resist divide-and-rule tactics from the United States - the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, regional multilateralism is essential. Latin America has tried. We created CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) and UNASUR (Union of South American Nations). These institutions created regional governance frameworks. They did not establish international law, but they imposed conditions on capital and on hegemonic power. They enabled internal political and economic cooperation and built a form of strategic autonomy.

It is no surprise that the regional organisations created in the Global South have borne the brunt of the most intense attacks from the global North. In the Americas, for example, we are left with the Organisation of American States, headquartered in Washington, financed by the United States, and dominated by the United States. It is quite evident that it is in the interest of the US to maintain control over regional multilateralism in what it still perceives as its own backyard — the Western Hemisphere.

This is precisely why I believe in creating zones of autonomous regionalism from the global South. Africa has made more progress than Latin America in this regard, but even there, the space remains heavily permeated by Northern interests. It is something we need to strengthen and defend.

Let me end by reflecting on why we are where we are. There is a great deal of potential, yet much remains to be done. If we wish to return to the spirit of UNCTAD or the moment of the New International Economic Order, as discussed earlier, we must acknowledge that even those efforts were only partially successful. And frankly, I would argue that we are still quite far from even reaching that point again, which, in itself, is quite damning.

I believe the main hurdle is, fundamentally ideological. The ideology of neoliberalism runs entirely counter to collective action. It promotes free-riding, self-seeking individualism, and an aversion to cooperation. And this dynamic exists not just at the individual level, but also at the level of the state.

Even in today's multipolar or bipolar world order, there is very little in the way of ideological contestation. Yes, China may offer a more state-led approach to capitalism. But overall, we are still locked within a global consensus of capitalism. This has had a major impact on global thinking and has seriously undermined the ideological foundations necessary for the kind of collective action we hope to see.

The second ideological challenge, closely linked is the prevailing ideology of development. During the era of the NIEO, there were genuine debates and competing visions of what development could mean. That is no longer the case. Today, the market is the only game in town. State planning has become a dirty word. Law, institutions, and frameworks shaped by state actors are seen as irrelevant or inefficient. These prevailing beliefs are not conducive to building a genuine multilateralism from the global South.

In conclusion we need a major push from the Global South. I believe it is possible. The structural conditions exist. Many of us are already working in this direction. What we now need is to identify and focus on concrete areas where we can take forward this agenda. I have already mentioned investment treaties like ISDS, the UN Tax Convention, Palestine, and the potential of regional multilateralism. There are numerous areas where progress can be made. But we must recognise that it will be a difficult push, because the real barriers are ideological.



Dinesh Abrol

Public Policy expert



In our context, the region remains highly fragmented, and regional cooperation is hardly advancing at present. India and China, for example, are often seen more as competitors or rivals. While we do cooperate in some areas, the reality is that we mostly trade and have limited extensive collaboration. He rightly pointed out the importance of regional cooperation, and I believe that is an essential starting point for this discussion.

Let me build on that regional starting point and also raise the issue of how national development ought to be pursued. There are important lessons from the past. When the Bandung spirit was alive, many of us were practising a form of selective delinking from colonial empires. At that time, we followed a dirigiste state model, embracing self-reliance as national policy.

In the multilateral sphere, South-South cooperation meant collective self-reliance, and several projects emerged under this framework. Institutions such as the South-South Centre were established. We saw the rise of numerous technical cooperation projects, including the Buenos Aires Action Plan, which fostered technological collaboration among developing countries. Southern multilateralism during that period was clearly anchored in a decolonial ethos and in advancing collective self-reliance in a number of ways.

It is true that we could not dismantle the dominance of the North within institutions like the WTO, GATT, IMF and the World Bank. But we did manage to carve out some space even within these structures. In the early days of the GATT, for instance, we secured a certain degree of policy space. The General Agreement on Trade in Services was one such example. That space was real, even though over time many countries of the South surrendered it. The erosion of that space came not from initial exclusion, but from gradual compromise. Nevertheless, the fact remains that developing countries did achieve some gains through collective negotiation, even if that momentum declined later.

Even though we did not succeed in dismantling the power of the North, we did contest it. Unfortunately, a genuine multilateralism never truly emerged. What we witnessed instead was a form of multilateralism dominated by corporate interests. The freedoms afforded by this system served corporations far more than they did labour, or indeed the cause of genuine development. This was because it was overwhelmingly trade-driven.

We must remember that from the 1950s to the 1980s, our development experience was not trade-driven. We focused instead on building internal markets and capacities. This was true not only in India but in many parts of Africa and Latin America as well. That approach should be recalled. It resonates with what Samir Amin called “selective delinking”. After the 1990s, of course, the integrationist project of globalisation gained ground. But it is important to remember that the South once pursued deliberate and strategic forms of delinking.

In fact, much of India and China’s present strength can be traced back to that strategy. If you examine China’s recent development, its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its national growth, it closely resembles what India had aimed for in earlier decades. While not entirely autarkic, China’s development model has relied heavily on state-owned enterprises and strategic investment. It has also established a lead in many technology sectors.

According to current studies, China now leads in 37 out of 44 emerging technologies and surpasses the United States in at least five. This technological advancement has powered initiatives like the BRI. Although the BRI is led by a single country and not an example of true Southern multilateralism, it does open up opportunities for other countries in the South. It has, at the very least, disrupted the narrative of unchallenged Western-led globalisation. Even the United States has been forced to revert to certain forms of protectionism.

Countries such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China are all initiating bilateral and multilateral ventures of their own. These developments indicate that opportunities still exist. There are signs of future potential as well.

If we reflect on how the idea of collective self-reliance and the New International Economic Order emerged, it is clear that these were built on the strength of movements. Anti-colonial and national liberation movements in Africa and Asia were the driving force. In Latin America, too, earlier movements contributed to this foundation.

Today, once again, space is opening up for movements to play a leading role. Take agriculture, for instance. Around the issue of climate change, we are witnessing the rise of significant global movements. The Food and Agriculture Organisation now recognises the importance of agroecological approaches, thanks largely to grassroots mobilisation. These movements began in Latin America and gained global strength. Contrast this with older institutions like CGIAR or ICRISAT, which promoted high external input agriculture. Agroecology is now firmly on the global agenda because of movement-led advocacy.

We see similar dynamics in energy. Renewable energy and solar technologies have benefited when complemented by national self-reliance. China is a case in point. The success of electric vehicles like the BYD, or advances in solar panel manufacturing, has enabled China to offer technological cooperation to Africa and others. While China's current focus is still largely on infrastructure and resource access, it has the capacity to share environmentally friendly and digital technologies, which is true of India too.

India's pharmaceutical sector made a significant contribution during the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa. We built meaningful cooperation in the health sector at that time. However, we did not capitalise on this momentum. Today, joint ventures between India and Africa in pharmaceuticals are too few. Had India invested in industrial cooperation, as China has done in some areas, we could have seen a stronger form of South-South multilateralism.

It will, of course, take time to dismantle the Northern-dominated global governance structures. But that should not be cause for despair. The real question is: how do we build South-South cooperation today? What are the possibilities for de-dollarisation? What alternatives exist in terms of trade using our own currencies, such as the rupee, or through bilateral agreements like the one we currently have with Russia?

Objectively speaking, countries like Brazil, Russia, India and China are already pushing back against empire. This may not yet be coordinated, and India and China may not always see eye to eye. But this can change, and I believe it will. The logic of confronting empire will eventually force cooperation.

The people of the world are also rising. I have given examples from agriculture and health, where we managed to selectively delink and build our own capacities. We defeated Big Pharma, built a pharmaceutical base. But now the question is: is Indian capital willing to support deeper forms of South-South cooperation? Or is it content simply to export and trade?

That is a challenge we must address. How do we place pressure on our own domestic forces, the ones with the capabilities and resources to support South-South cooperation? Are they willing to invest in such a future?

We certainly have the capacity. Today, our STEM talent is mostly serving Western corporations from offices in Hyderabad, Bengaluru and elsewhere. But this same talent can be redirected towards mission-oriented projects. Think of what Mariana Mazzucato and others have proposed and the return of public purpose and mission-led innovation. India once used this model for atomic energy and space. There is no reason we cannot do it again.

Internationally, too, we can launch mission-based cooperation in key sectors, in technology, in health, in energy, and in education. South-South cooperation must advance across the technological, economic, and social sectors. If we build trust, as we did in the 1950s to the 1980s, we can again succeed. The pace may be slow, but the battle can be won.

I remain optimistic. I believe there are governance opportunities on the horizon. If India and China do not remain perpetual rivals, they can become carriers of South-South multilateralism. The Indian people's movement must work in that direction. Such cooperation is not only essential for prosperity, but for peace as well. And that must be our shared objective."

A large, bold, black quotation mark graphic, consisting of two thick, curved lines forming the opening and closing of a quote. It is positioned on the right side of the page, with a horizontal line extending from the left towards it and another extending from the right towards it.

The above text has been transcribed from the first webinar in the series on **The Political Economy of the Trump Era, titled **"Standing Up to the Empire: Reclaiming Southern Multilateralism"** and has been subject to minor edits for clarity and readability.*

ABOUT THE SERIES

The world seems to be going through a convulsion. While on the one hand a genocidal war rages on amid both outrage and apathy, there is also uncertainty and whispers of recession as far as the economy is concerned. For decades the empire invested in “restructuring” the world with its neoliberal whims. It remained on top of the food chain as finance capital reshaped the world. It minted astronomical dollars riding on globalization and by offshoring its production to harness cheap labour in the global South. At long last the empire now seems to be anxious looking at its own reflection. It seems in the need to recalibrate, to assert its might, and suddenly the so called “leader of the free world” is using protectionist rhetoric. While some may simply call him a Mad King, but there seems to be a method in Trump’s madness as he doubles down, for instance, on China. The world is still trying to grapple with the unfolding tariff war as a bully tries to browbeat the world. And there are too many questions that need answering. Why is it shunning its erstwhile allies? Why does it seem to be abandoning institutions that have served its interests for decades? Will other countries simply accept the diktats? Will they all line up to make a “deal”?

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

Probably these words of Gramsci best capture the moment today. On one side it shows a toxic amalgamation of racist, Islamophobic, homophobic and neo-fascist elements along with pro-fossil, anti-environment and crony capitalist oligopolies. On the other side, it seems to have bared the crude reality of US belligerence by stripping it off the liberal veneer. It’s a troubling time, but it is also a moment that is pregnant with opportunities and possibilities for a global realignment of democratic and progressive forces. From trade to banking, from jobs to food; from energy to environment, from war to peace - this moment has the potential to reshape each of these aspects and as such it becomes crucial to understand and unpack it. At this crossroad of history, it is crucial to also determine where India stands, or what role it should ideally play. While we have in yester-decades shown the spine to talk back to power, why are we kneeling today to get a “deal”?

For more details on the webinar visit: www.cenfa.org

