

# MULTILATERALISM IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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The advent of democracy in South Africa presented our country with an opportunity to play an active role in multilateral diplomacy. We began to participate actively within the UN system, the African Union (AU) and other multilateral groupings. This became a cornerstone of our foreign policy with a Strategic objective of our commitment to promoting the interests of the African Continent as a whole. Which I think this bodes well with the given topic, *Multilateralism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An African perspective*.

Multilateralism has a number of compelling factors that makes it imperative for countries to utilize it as one of major vehicles in the conduct of contemporary relations. From an African perspective, the following attributes of multilateralism are undoubtedly true:

- Extensive use of the wide outreach mechanisms of the multilateral systems especially with regard to human rights, democracy, governance and the indices of development.
- Inclusivity; transparency and some degree of collective decision making.
- Collective approach to crises and challenges - multilateral systems have contributed to peace-building in Africa. About a decade ago there were more than 20 conflicts in various countries of Africa. But this has largely been reduced through multilateral efforts. Some of the UN's biggest peacekeeping Missions were on the African continent including those in the DRC, Sudan Sierra Leone and Liberia.

There are a growing number of global challenges that countries can no longer deal with single-handedly or in small groups. These undoubtedly have a serious bearing on the African Continent. Climate change, terrorism, poverty and transnational crime are

typical examples. The scope and nature of these challenges make it imperative to forge effective multilateral cooperation. Hence multilateral solutions become the natural and most logic choice to pursue.

Accordingly, an envisaged African perspective of Multilateralism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century entails the following:

1. *Re-adaptation of Multilateral institutions:* In as much as the prevalent multilateral architecture has its roots in the post Second World War context, the last few years have seen a rapidly evolving global environment. The cold war which was instrumental to the evolution of multilateralism for the second half of the twentieth century has ended. Likewise, the bipolar world order ended in favour of a single super power and in the last few years, the emerging strength of a few developing countries is beginning to register itself. These developments are impacting on the manner in which the existing multilateral institutions are constituted and their decision making processes. As a result of these developments, there is an emerging trend to reconfigure multilateral institutions in a manner commensurate to the post-cold war realities.
2. *Imbalance in the decision-making and policy making processes:* The continuing imbalance in the decision and policymaking processes of the global trade, economic and financial institutions continue to characterise the functioning of some multilateral institutions. This trend weakens the world's response to poverty and underdevelopment and also results in lesser participation of developing countries in international economic decision-making and norm setting processes of organizations that promote good global governance. Africa has been effectively marginalised from the policy-making of the most influential economic and financial institutions, whose policy direction and decision-making processes probably affect them most.

3. *Partnership formations:* The international community is witnessing the growing trend of the formation several interest-based initiatives formed among like-minded countries aimed at fostering cooperation and partnership in specific areas. Examples of these initiatives include the India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) initiative, New Africa-Asia Strategic Partnership (NAASP) and Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). These formations are crucial and provide South Africa with the platform to strike a mutually beneficial strategic partnership and to deepen economic and political relations as well as in strengthening South-South cooperation.
  
4. *Politics versus economic development dichotomy:* The prominent place given to political issues in the agenda of major multilateral institutions continues to create a false impression that the conduct of international relations has a lot to do with politics and little to do with socio-economic development and poverty alleviation. This trend is not only a limited understanding of realities on the ground but it also continues to exacerbate differences within the international community between those that over-emphasise politics and those that give equal weight to socio-economic development. Challenges to peace and security in an *African perspective* do not only require political interventions but continue to demonstrate that the successful achievement to relative peace and stability is also dependent on socio-economic development.
  
5. *Dominating influence of powerful countries:* Both as a trend and a challenge, few powerful countries continue to dominate the decision-making processes in multilateral diplomacy. In this context, the international global trading, financial and political order favours the wealthy and the powerful nations of the world and this trend poses a challenge for multilateralism just like it has a negative impact on the implementation of multilateral solutions to issues and prevalent challenges.

6. *Reform of the Multilateral Systems:* Of course Africa is made up of 54 States that are unique and different, even though they face some common challenges. Multilateral systems are not static and should be in constant need for continuous review. The need for reform of some of the multilateral institutions therefore becomes imperative to make them function even better. Multilateral institutions are strategic for the advancement of Africa's interests, including political, peace and developmental aspects. We see them as representative of the international community and therefore supposed to be reflective of the geopolitical realities of today. The adoption of the 2005 World Summit Outcome for example resulted in major UN reforms such as the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission; the creation of the Human Rights Council; new functions for the Economic and Social Council and some management reforms were implemented.
  
7. *Africa also playing its Part.* Ultimately the challenge is for African countries themselves to coordinate better in the multilateral system. Respond favourably and timeously when challenges of conflicts, human rights, democracy, governance and the indices of development surface. Collective approach and decision making to crises and challenges in a manner that is inclusive and transparent.
  
8. In Conclusion as per the given topic, ***Multilateralism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: An African perspective***, one of the fundamental principles of South Africa's foreign policy remains the Consolidation of the African Agenda that has a vision of an African continent that is prosperous, peaceful, democratic, non-racial, and non-sexist. An African Continent that is united and which contributes to a world that it just and equitable.

**I THANK YOU.**