

Online Event

“21st century strategic rivalries: redefining multilateralism and cooperation spaces”

Thematic Briefing

This webinar is part of a project, developed by the Brazilian Center for International Relations (CEBRI) with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), on the re-organization of multilateral politics and global governance. It looks into how the deterioration in the multilateral scenario and changed conditions of globalization are altering the regulatory and policy environment for participation in the global economy. The main objective of the project is to map out trends and issues which should guide the strategic thinking of emerging economies in the re-direction of multilateral politics.

It focuses on four areas where regulation and global agreements are paramount: trade, the digital economy, sustainability and international conflict resolutions. The research starts from the premises that the multilateral order and institutions which guided global agreements since the post-war are in disarray. The fault lines of the system are multiple and have a long trajectory. Problems stem from: the representative divide between the collation of power which shaped the Breton Woods multilateral framework and the current economic order, changed drivers of economic growth which cannot be regulated by the existing institutional framework, and the low capacity and willingness of the system to accommodate change within the existing institutional parameters.

The sequence of crisis of the first decades of the 21st century: the financial crisis of 2008, the ongoing US-China conflict and the global pandemic have exposed the frailties of the system while also making evident the demands for regulation of global public goods and dreads. At present, all participants call for reforms of the system but the political options available for setting new regulatory premises of multilateral governance are sparse and fragmented. Central to the debate on reforms is the question of whether a post-hegemonic world order can master an acceptable global framework for rethinking the equation between national interests and collective rules. Equally relevant, what types of political frameworks can accommodate existing global diversity and ensure regulatory norms, institutional mandates and instances of conflict resolution which are binding? Are the existing political instruments such as regional economic and security agreements and inter-regional institutions capable of bridging the gaps of global institutions?

In the background of these large issues a set of questions seem particularly relevant:

- 1) From many perspectives, Asian powers are bound to play a larger role in a new world order. On the one hand, the major powers in the region have very diverse means of engagement and leadership both at multilateral and regional fora. On the other hand, the region has been able to create a panoply of cooperation mechanisms, starting with ASEAN, but also including more recently a host of China-led organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and new development finance institutions such as the AIIB and the NDB. Furthermore, regional trade agreements such as RCEP could give impetus to Asia-led rules of the game. In what sense those cooperation spaces are building blocks for new rules-setting at multilateral institutions? Is it possible to think of an Asian vision for the multilateral framework redefinition?
- 2) Prof. Mahbubani has quoted in some of his writings the Indian academic Pratap Bhanu Mehta who once described the difference between Chinese and Indian societies in simple terms: “He said that China was a closed society with open minds while India was an open society with closed minds.” The two powers share a huge disputed border that recently has been the stage of serious military incidents with fatal victims, almost sixty years after the last war. Amid growing uncertainties in the China-US rivalry, the spat with India adds unexpectedly to the deterioration of China’s geopolitical space both in Asia and globally. Shall we expect rationalism and pragmatism to prevail? How central could this dispute be to the role of Asia in shaping a new world order? What impact could it have on other groupings such as the SCO and the BRICS?
- 3) The multilateral institutions set up under American leadership in the post-II World War have been subject to criticism and distrust from different US administrations whenever they were not conduits for US interests. This seems to have reached its nadir in the Trump administration. But one could argue that most of the principles that were valid in 1945 are still valid today, perhaps even more, in view of the starker common global challenges such as climate change, social inequalities, migration, terrorism, cybersecurity, etc. Is the UN Charter still a true expression of the universal principles to be followed? If so, where should reform really start? Is it reasonable to think there could be a global mobilization to reform the UNGA? Are Asian powers capable of offering the world the leadership commensurable to their human and economic weight?
- 4) How can the outcome of the US election affect the current US-China conflict? Could an administration more prone to multilateral dialogue diminish inter-regional conflict in Asia and contain an anti-China realignment? What can be the negotiating basis for the restoration of a more cooperative international environment for China?
- 5) One of the arguments of the book “Has China won?” is that the current anti-China US environment is in part due to China’s alienation of demands for market entrance from US firms. A similar argument has also been made by other China watchers such as Stephen Roach. Yet have a more assertive

Chinese foreign policy and such regional initiatives as the China +16 also not contributed to the China containment drive? What avenues of foreign policy are available to China which can reflect its own global dimension and yet contribute to a less aggressive environment?

- 6) One of the most frequent criticisms of the BRICS is the extreme diversity and cultural breach between its members. Nonetheless, its Heads of State have been meeting yearly for over 10 years now. The group has also set up the New Development Bank, a concrete expression of its desire to offer a contribution to development finance attuned with the aspirations of its members and aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goals. At the same time, some of its members have diverging views on many issues, including the use of S&D treatment, combatting climate change and on proposals such as the Belt and Road Initiative. How meaningful could the development of a clear and coherent concept of sustainable development finance and its implementation mechanisms be for the BRICS group? Could it be an important contribution to the current realignment?
- 7) The concept of development has been central to the multilateral world, culminating in the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in 2015. At the time when many countries and institutions shape up their strategies around these goals, they also face the failure of the Doha Development Agenda, the challenges of reforming the WTO and the struggle for policy space. How to equate these forces? Whither the concept and practice of development in the multilateral world? And how to equate that with national development policies?