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US retreat, Indian reform: multilateralism under Trump and Modi

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ABSTRACT

From early 2017 to early 2021, Donald J. Trump's disengagement of the United States from international institutions, later amplified by the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, produced a weakening of multilateralism at the global level. The overlapping leadership of Narendra Modi diverged on the issue of multilateralism, producing a dynamic of US retreat and redoubled Indian efforts at reform. Despite their common recourse to populism in their respective countries, the United States and India present disparate cases of how populist leaders engage with multilateralism. Trump prioritized national sovereignty and framed international institutions as an imposition on US freedoms, while Modi envisioned international institutions as an avenue through which to remake multilateralism, elevate India's reputation, and reap domestic political dividends. Trump's protectionist and inward-looking policy narratives appealed to communities disadvantaged materially and socially by hyperglobalisation and financial crisis, while Modi's efforts at elevating India's profile and engagement in multilateral forums resonated with long-standing elite desires for India to enact leadership in global governance. They drew popular support, too. Finally, China's rising global influence encouraged India to increase its own influence within existing multilateral institutions and develop new avenues of multilateral action, while Trump's nationalist response was to turn away, and inward.

Introduction

The inauguration of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States of America in January 2017 led to an abdication of a US global leadership role during his tenure.[1] Trump's nationalist and populist "America First" vision pivoted decisively away from US foreign policy traditions that had leveraged close relationships with allies and partners to promote a liberal international order.[2] Yet while Trump rejected multilateralism and international institutions, the nationalist and populist leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India appeared to sense an opportunity. Championing the "rebirth and reform" of multilateralism, Modi redoubled efforts to position India as a "leading power" – a country that shapes or drives events and is willing "to shoulder greater global responsibilities."[3] The overlapping tenures of Trump

and Modi therefore produced – on the surface at least – a multilateral dynamic of US retreat and an Indian forward surge.

Trump's and Modi's divergent approaches to multilateralism pose important questions of the relationship between populism and foreign policy. Scholars read Trump and Modi as populist leaders because they deploy a "thin-centred ideology" of anti-elitism and antipluralism in their domestic political discourses.[4] The extension of these dimensions of Trump's populist ideology to the domain of US foreign policy seems clear: Löfflmann argues that Trump's populism manifested as a rejection of a bipartisan, elite US-foreign policy establishment position that had long been committed to the "perpetuation of American global power and an activist US leadership role in support of Western liberalism," while Mearsheimer claims that Trump framed international engagement through multilateralism oppositionally: as a threat to self-government and as a detraction from narrow national security and economic interests.[5] The role of populist ideology within India's foreign policy, however, is debated. Some scholars are unequivocal in characterizing Modi's foreign policy as populist.[6] Others disagree: Wicaksana finds that in the Asian cases of Indonesia and India, anti-elitism and antipluralism "are not actualized in foreign affairs."[7] Plagemann and Destradi observe a surprising degree of openness and cooperative impetus in India's foreign policy under Modi: "a shift to a populist government has not led to a decreased readiness on the part of India to contribute to global (and regional) public goods."[8]

This article presents both a comparative overview of the divergent approaches toward multilateralism of the populist leaderships of Trump and Modi between January 2017 and January 2021. It does so by utilizing the three levels of analysis postulated by Singer as an organizing device. As the Introduction to this Special issue makes clear, the first level of Singer's framework focuses on the role of the decision maker; the second level on domestic factors such as the state, interest groups, regime type, media, public opinion and other factors; and the third level on systemic factors, including the relative material capability of states in the international system. The article concludes with some reflections on the reasons behind this divergence.

Trump and Modi: foreign policy divergence at the level of the individual?

One potential source of the divergence between Trump's and Modi's approaches to multilateralism is the two leaders' individual-level foreign policy approaches. Friedrichs' comparative study of populist leaders' conceptions of their nation's identity and policy preferences includes a quantitative analysis of both Trump's and Modi's foreign policy speeches. Friedrichs finds that Trump's discourse upheld expectations that populist foreign policy will exhibit "negative, dichotomous Othering" in relation to "significant other" states, marked by fear.[9] Such an oppositional attitude was a hallmark of Trump's

America First policy agenda and his hostility toward international organizations. It produced threats to cut US funding to the United Nations (UN), a campaign to marginalize the International Criminal Court, efforts to paralyze the World Trade Organization (WTO), and withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) – among other hostile actions.[10] When the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic delivered the multilateral order further into crisis in early 2020, Trump suspended funding to the World Health Organization (WHO) and then gave formal notice of US withdrawal.[11] His style of populism emphasized national sovereignty over and above shared international values, casting international institutions as an impingement upon US freedoms.[12] In a 2019 speech before the UN General Assembly, he argued that "the future does not belong to globalists … The future belongs to patriots … to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbors, and honor the differences that make each country special and unique."[13]

By contrast, Friedrichs finds that Modi's foreign policy discourse – surprisingly for a populist leader – reflects a "sportsmanlike" national identity conception, emphasizing solidarity in relation to "significant other" states rather than an oppositional attitude. This matched the ways in which substantively, as well as rhetorically, Modi's India had approached multilateral engagement after coming to power. At the 2015 Paris Climate Summit, for example, Modi reportedly hired the global communications firm, Edelmann, to project India's climate change message to the international media as cooperative and productive, and his government overcame longstanding hesitations to sign the Paris Agreement[14] (see also Vyoma Jha's essay in the special issue). Alongside President Emmanuel Macron of France, Modi also sought to position India as a provider of international public goods by launching the International Solar Alliance and contributing an initial US $30 million to establishing its headquarters in India.[15]

With Trump's ascendance to the US presidency in 2017, multilateralism headed for crisis. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated this trend. Yet from early 2020 onwards, India's approach to managing the Covid-19 pandemic centered on billing itself constructively as the "pharmacy of the world." This compared favorably to Trump's unilateral approach that framed both China and the WHO as scapegoats. In July of the same year, in a session that commemorated the founding of the United Nations, Modi declared in his (virtual) address to the UN Economic and Social Council that the UN had emerged from the "furies of the Second World War" and that "the pandemic provides the context for its rebirth and reform."[16] This 75th year of the UN saw a renewed Indian drive for what one former Permanent Representative of India to the UN in New York referred to as a "call for reformed multilateralism," centering on UN Security Council reform and the foregrounding of development issues in the UN's work.[17]

At the leader or first level of analysis, Trump prioritized national sovereignty and framed international institutions as an imposition on US freedoms,

while Modi largely envisioned multilateralism as a domain in which to present a cooperative India and reshape international institutions. Yet crucially, Friedrichs' analysis reveals that Modi's foreign policy language revealed no more global solidarity than leaderships before him. Longer-standing domestic trends therefore appeared to be at play in the Indian case, while the US domestic context mattered for Trump's popular appeal, too.

Leveraging international "reticence" and "rise" for domestic audiences

At the domestic or second level of analysis, different sets of domestic actors appeared consequential for the reception of Trump's and Modi's respective foreign policy projects. Modi's efforts at elevating India's profile and engagement in multilateral forums resonated with elite, pan-partisan, bureaucratically-entrenched and long-standing desires that India deliver moral and political leadership in global governance. They also engaged new domestic publics – on whom more research is needed – who traditionally had not been the main domestic consumers of foreign policy. Trump's protectionist and inward-looking policy narratives found fertile ground among communities in the United States who had been disadvantaged materially and socially by hyperglobalization and financial crisis.

Aspirations for an enhanced role for India in multilateralism found pan-partisan appeal among influential foreign policy thinkers in India. For example, opposition Congress politician Shashi Tharoor, and Samir Saran – head of the Observer Research Foundation, a think tank that has worked closely with the Modi government to produce India's annual geopolitics conference since 2016 – joined forces to publish a book in 2020 in which they advocated for India to intervene decisively in global governance at an unprecedented moment of world disorder. For the authors, this was not simply a case of India stepping in where others had withdrawn, but an opportunity for India to draw on its unique national and civilizational characteristics and experiences to remake multilateral institutions in ways that were fairer and more representative. For Tharoor and Saran, it was time for India, the "first post-colonial great power" with a "unique cultural ethos" to bring about a "New Delhi consensus" – something they described as "an international system that works for the world's inspirational masses."[18] In their view, India's future global leadership role was both obvious and natural:

> If Asia is going to be the defining region of our times, it must be intuitively evident that India, which has successfully combined economic growth with its own distinct and unique liberal traditions, will indeed be the heir to and guarantor of the international system . . . India as a leading power must take this challenge and deliver on it, for its own sake and to help achieve the global ambitions of a better world.[19]

Similar beliefs were echoed by key figures in the Indian foreign policy bureaucracy. Asoke Mukerji, Permanent Representative for India to the UN from

April 2013 to December 2015 – whose tenure bridged the dispensations of the UPA II government (2010–2015) and the first Modi-led NDA government (2014–2019) – described in a 2018 article intended for consumption by his foreign policy colleagues[20] how "multilateralism directly impacts on the process of transforming India into a world power," both in general terms, and in the context of a turn toward inward-looking policies by great powers.[21] He continued,

> India's destiny is linked with the continuation of effective international cooperation. It must, therefore, play a leadership role in upholding the principle of international cooperation, which is under severe challenge today from unilateral measures being taken by the major powers.[22]

The sense of naturalness that India should be at the table as new international norms crystallized was supercharged by US disengagement from multilateral institutions and, from 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic. When the Foreign Ministers of France and Germany launched the Alliance for Multilateralism in September 2019, establishing an informal network of countries committed to renewing their commitment to multilateral cooperation and to adapting it "where necessary," India was front and center. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's statement at the launch underscored India's track record of multilateral commitment through UN activity and budgetary contributions, and emphasized Indian public support for "larger international commitments."[23] At this heightened moment of world disorder, Indian foreign policy actors and analysts saw a practical window of opportunity for India to move forward on long-held objectives to renew and reform core multilateral institutions, but also a social opportunity for India to finally secure recognition as a leader after decades of marginalization in world politics.[24] Prominent Indian commentators argued that India was "uniquely positioned to help resuscitate multilateralism."[25]

Modi's personal endeavors to raise India's profile on the world stage are new in two ways, however. First, they have targeted a far wider domestic populace as the audience for Indian foreign policy than before, in particular through the use of the media.[26] Modi has reaped domestic political dividends from perceptions of greater status conferral upon India under his leadership in seeking to enhance India's (and therefore Indians') image and reputation on the world stage. For Hall, the Modi government's approach to foreign policy has stood apart because it recognizes "the potential value of foreign policy for domestic electoral politics."[27] Second, Modi has leveraged the discursive and normative resources of his domestic Hindu nationalist agenda. He has linked his ambitions for increased global recognition for India, implicitly or explicitly, to a narrow imaginary of the nation.

One example of this was Modi's earliest multilateral initiative as prime minister – the (successful) advancement of a UN General Assembly resolution in 2014 to establish an annual International Day of Yoga (IDY). While the resolution did not mention India nor reference the origins of yoga, from June 2015 onwards the connection of yoga to India's "pure" pre-Islamic

civilizational heritage was implied through annual Indian government-led national and international celebrations of the IDY to massive scale. These PR efforts sought to create the impression that the already significant popularity of yoga globally stemmed from the introduction of the IDY. The value of this initiative was its showcasing, to Modi's domestic support base, of his ability to harness the UN for the dispersal of Indian (Hindu) culture and to enhance India's global recognition.

By contrast, the domestic landscape and domestic imperatives in the United States proved receptive for Trump's strategy of disengagement from multilateralism. In particular, as Poletti and Zambernardi argue, "growing skepticism about the merits of free-trade among key diffuse interests and large segments of US public opinion" made trade policy issues, in particular, "more salient and contested."[28] Hyperglobalization and financial crises had produced job losses, wage decline and rising income inequality with the result that substantial demographic groups had become discontented with their allocation of material resources and social recognition.[29] Trump's inclination to take a protectionist stance was calibrated to appeal to "an increasingly polarized and protectionist electorate."[30] But trade policy was just the most visible part of the populist urge to turn inwards. As Löfflmann argues, "Trump was able to exploit the longstanding disconnect between elite and public opinion on the appropriate degree of US global engagement."[31] Trump's America First framing spoke to beliefs among his domestic base that multilateralism was encroaching on US sovereignty, and that the promotion of US values abroad detracted from national security and economic interests.[32]

Systemic churn: divergent US and Indian responses to the rise of China

At the systemic level, the Trump administration oversaw a further deterioration of US-China relations. Meanwhile, in mid-2020, a tense – and at one point violent – border standoff took place between Chinese and Indian troops in the Galwan Valley. This incident heightened preexisting Indian concerns about the intentions of its northern neighbor stemming from China's reassertion of territorial claims in Arunachal Pradesh, pressure on the India-Bhutan-China trijunction arising from a China–India border standoff in June 2017 at Doklam, and China's wider behavior toward its neighbors in the South China Sea.[33] A shared concern within both Washington and New Delhi about the growing influence of China crystallized.

Within this context of increasing US-China polarization, powerful changes had already begun to weaken multilateralism at the global level. As Jones and Malcorra argue, even before Trump's election campaign, "the dynamics of conflict were changing, the politics of globalization and trade were changing, the provision of global public goods was stalled, and great-power tensions were rising."[34] While Trump's instinct was for the United States to turn

inward as a means to fend off these challenges, for India's leadership the stakes *within* multilateral institutions remained high. China's influence had been steadily growing within international organizations, especially the UN, with Chinese nationals taking up the leadership of major UN agencies and using levers of different kinds (including financial) to garner votes and support at the UN and elsewhere.[35] India was compelled to counteract Chinese dominance in international institutions, and had the advantage of not needing to grapple with the "anti-incumbency" logics that certain incumbent great powers – in particular the United States and the United Kingdom – confronted as perceptions grew of them as world leaders in decline.

These dynamics played out strongly in India's late candidacy for elections to the International Court of Justice in 2017. The Indian candidate Dalveer Bhandari was one of seven judges to be elected to the world court in November 2017, famously prompting the withdrawal of the UK competitor candidate, leaving the ICJ without a British judge for the first time in its history. Although the voting procedures leading to this outcome paint a more complex story, this achievement was claimed by some as a victory for India against a former colonial power and an assertion of a rising country displacing a declining great power.[36] Moreover, in June 2020, India was elected to the UN Security Council for the 2021–22 tenure (its eighth since the founding of the UN), having centered its proposed agenda specifically on the reform of multilateral institutions.[37] These latter two successes meant to underscore that India, not just China, could get the numbers in UN elections.

In parallel, the Modi leadership prioritized outreach to the Global South, in particular through a seemingly geopolitically-motivated uptick in efforts at development cooperation. Against the backdrop of China's assertive connectivity outreach via its Belt and Road Initiative, in 2017 India jointly established the India-UN Development Partnership Fund (India-UN Fund) as a "dedicated facility within the United Nations Fund for South-South Cooperation."[38] The India-UN Fund self-describes as "a notable example of South-South cooperation with the multilateral system … [that] supports projects that advance all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Priority is accorded to partnering with small island developing States, least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and countries affected by disaster."[39]

US-Indian divergence on multilateralism combined to produce a curious dynamic in the two countries' bilateral relations. On some issues, including defense and security, bilateral or minilateral cooperation between the two countries improved, even as Indian leaders criticized Trump's multilateral policies. In July 2017, for example, Nirmala Sitharaman, India's Minister for Commerce and Industry, issued a thinly-veiled condemnation of Trump's stance on multilateral institutions at a public event in Geneva, arguing that the "inward-looking policies of individual nations" were jeopardizing "the spirit of multilateralism."[40] By contrast, in September 2018, and by that time

India's Defense Minister, Sitharaman was celebrating the bilateral defense cooperation that had "elevated India-US relations to unprecedented heights," in the context of the two countries' first "2 + 2" dialogue (a bilateral institutional mechanism between foreign and defense ministers).[41] Systemic factors appeared to carry weight: Trump's return to geopolitics clearly sat well with an India confronting an intensified challenge from China at the border.

Overall, at the systemic or third level of analysis, Trump met China's rising global influence with a turn away from a global leadership role brokered through institutions to an embrace of traditional great power politics. Under Modi, by contrast, India doubled-down and sought both to increase its own influence within existing multilateral institutions and to develop new avenues of multilateral action and influence.

Conclusions: India, the United States and the future of multilateralism

Despite Trump's and Modi's respective domestic populist projects of antipluralism and anti-elitism, only in the case of Trump did exclusionary nationalism translate into a rejection of a liberal-institutionalist view of world politics and an anti-elite challenge targeting institutions of global governance. For Modi, domestic and system-level imperatives appear most consequential in explaining why expectations of a populist foreign policy are not observable in India's approach toward multilateralism. First, international institutions have long been a site of both frustration and opportunity for a country that materially, has faced challenges and vulnerabilities within international institutions as a result of great power dominance; and socially, has sought recognition as an important player in world politics in precisely these same spaces. An opportunity to lead in reshaping the norms and sites of global governance offers a solution to both of these problems. Second, as Modi has expanded the domestic reach of foreign policy consumption in India, conspicuous successes in the international domain play directly into his own domestic popularity. Linking international spaces and policies to Hindu nationalist ideas and tropes in the minds of domestic audiences bolsters perceptions that Modi's cultural or spiritual innovations in foreign policy are both uniquely his, and can convey international endorsement of his domestic populist agenda. Finally, for an India that cannot yet materially match China nor compete for influence from the same resource base, multilateral mechanisms offer India one way to better meet the China challenge.

There remain, however, limits to Modi's ambitions to bring about the rebirth and reform of global governance. First, with the commencement of the administration of President Joseph R. Biden in early 2021 and his announcement that "America is back," the crisis in multilateralism has lost some of the urgency felt in 2020.[42] Of course, a Trump-like figure could return to lead the United States and disrupt the renewed levels of US commitment to a multilateral order, once again creating space for India.[43] Second, India may find it challenging to provide

the resource base needed to deliver global or regional public goods – the staple of any multilateral leadership role – given many of India's challenges at home. As one critic of those arguing for an "Indian imperative," that is, for India to step up at a moment of world disorder remarked, "the link between India and its ability to shore up the liberal order is a bit tenuous, perhaps bordering on wishful thinking."[44] Finally, Modi's exclusivist nationalist agenda at home sits uneasily with claims of India's "unique liberal traditions" and other global leadership credentials. Can Indian global leadership under Modi convince an international audience, or has the central audience for him only ever really been domestic?

Notes

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