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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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**THE RISE OF PLURILATERALISM: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND
INDIA’S EMERGING ROLE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE**

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Manuscript Info

Abstract

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Plurilateralism is gaining importance with newer alignments happening across various parts of the globe. While we were used to multilateral agreements between countries for the past few decades, there has been bold changes in the said structure with countries preferring smaller groups. Two things are happening simultaneously: The charters and conventions assigned with multi-lateral associations are now being seen as hindrances in arriving at consensus and forward thinking. Countries are seeing it easy to reach out to smaller countries based on a political, social or economic commonality. This article delves into the various facets of Plurilateralism, challenges the models of multilateralism and showcases the growth of Plurilateralism. Various used cases are mentioned to drive the point. Existing literature is very WTO centric but its time to look at other Plurilateralism-centric initiatives across various parts of the globe. It examines the critical paths taken by India in specific also.

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Introduction:-

Plurilateralism refers to a method of governance in which a smaller group of countries within a broader multilateral framework collaborate to reach agreements on specific issues. As per Cerny (1993), it may also be termed “as a shred interest among a limited number of governments that bring these together for interconnection”.

Plurilateralism is characterized by agility and specificity, as it typically has limited number of countries collaborating on one or few specific issues / interests. This tactic ensures allows for quick consensus, quicker decision-making and progress, as participating nations are often aligned in their goals and willing to commit to relevant agreements without the need for universal consensus. Plurilateral agreements are particularly effective when addressing specialized areas (social, environmental economic or political like trade liberalization or environmental policies), where broader multilateral efforts may stall due to divergent interests or complex negotiations. One distinguishing aspect between plurilateral from multilateral negotiations is in fact complexity. Multilateral negotiations are more complex because of the greater number of parties, issues, and perhaps a longer time frame as well.

It is to be acknowledged that plurilateralism fits in between the air-tight multilateralism structure on one hand and the unstructured bilateralism.

We never had serious actual or academic interest on this topic internationally. Offlate we are seeing more and more academic pursuance in this field.

Need for the study

Most of the articles or write-ups that have been written on the said topic are WTO centric whereas many things are happening across the globe. Over the years, we have many associations across countries which have come up in the neighborhood and sometime which have come across oceans. We will be delving into some of these in this paper.

Methodology adopted

The Eisenhardt methodology (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014), famous for its multiple case study approach, offers a structured methodology for investigating complex phenomena, making it particularly effective for dissecting the phenomenon of plurilateralism through few case studies. This article utilizes this methodology to analyze multiple cases and nuances in how plurilateralism compares against the other methods of association among nations.

Literature Review

There is a distinction between plurilateral from multilateral negotiations primarily based on size and complexity. Multilateral negotiations are more complex due to involving more parties, issues and often a larger time period. To manage this complexity, multilateral talks often adopt a plurilateral structure, where a smaller group of leading parties self-select to take the main roles, while others participate in more limited or defensive capacities. This "pluralization" helps makes the wider multilateral process more manageable. (Zartman, 1994)

Plurilateralism is defined in a broader sense to include any form of mini-lateral agreements that encompass specific areas or involve any group of countries, effectively covering bilateral and regional agreements that were previously seen as distinct categories. This expanded definition positions plurilateral agreements as important building blocks of the multilateral system, much like regional trade agreements are often viewed, suggesting that these targeted, smaller-scale deals can complement and strengthen the overall multilateral framework rather than undermine it. (Scott & Wilkinson, 2012).

Plurilateral negotiations involve a subset of members within a multilateral organization reaching an agreement, with the intention that the deal will eventually be adopted by the entire membership. (Saner, 2012)

The typical characteristics of plurilateral associations are as follows: Flexibility (in participation and issue selection), Agility (in responding to evolving industry needs) and Potential (to pave the way for multilateral rulemaking). (Nakatomi, 2013).

Plurilateralism, though a response to slow progress in WTO negotiations and technological changes in trade, poses significant risks to the pursuit of global justice. Instead of abandoning multilateralism, there is a moral imperative to reform the WTO & other multilateral organizations to align it with development, human rights and environmental sustainability. On the other side, Plurilateralism has more chances of uplifting transparency and inclusivity and has the potential to sustain multilateralism in the long run. Abandoning multilateral institutions is not the solution. (Risse, 2017)

A probable risk: proliferation of plurilateral agreements could destructure international trade law, marginalize developing countries and reduce the political legitimacy of the multilateral organisations. In this regard, we have lessons to learn from EU, including the need for institutional embedding, transparency, open participation and support for non-members. (Basedow, 2018)

Plurilateralism has emerged as a distinct governance model in the area of geo-politics. It has been proved that it differed from bilateralism, multilateralism and regionalism. It involves legally binding, sector-specific agreements negotiated among a cohort of countries within or adjacent to existing international institutions. (Dimitropoulos et al, 2025)

The Multilateralism vs Plurilateralism debate

We will see the issue from multi-dimensions of this debate; some of these are as follows

A Comprehensive issues

There are few issues which affects not just countries but also every individual citizen. Space research has opened the vistas for many aspects and it is expected to benefit humankind in many ways; some of which are: improved medical technologies including diagnostics, newer materials development, improvement in communications, improvised monitoring of climate change, asteroid mining and improvised disaster management. The possibilities that are there will have ramifications for the mankind.

On the similar note we have access to the Poles; this cannot be allowed to specific countries.

Hence, we cannot have some issue which will entail non-monopoly / non-cartel access or power to control these. In these cases, we cannot have plurilateralism; that is ruled out.

B There has been a shift from multilateralism because of the hegemony of United States. Major funding Institutions like IMF and World Bank require 85 percent of votes like a typical multilateral organization and then we have atleast 16 percent votes of the United States making it an unwritten monopoly in decision making. We saw the self-withdrawal of the United States from Paris climate agreement (a comprehensive issue like climate change protection). We also saw it's self-withdrawal from the United Nation's International Maritime Organization.

With the presence of the United States in abig way, countries are finding it better to forms "coalitions of the willing".

C Multilateral organizations like The UN have a complex web of Committees and Commissions which may have common interests and Vision at times. If The UN has a large list of sub-committees, the IMF has a huge array of group of countries; the association and the reason for the association is not clear across many groups. This makes the decision-making process pretty difficult at times.

D While we singularly carve out and discuss plurilateralism, it is important to note that we loosely had this concept within the large multilateral Institutions too. Drawing inference from the previous point, the Group of Nations within the framework of IMF or the various sub-committees of The UN seem to be plurilaterals also.

E One tends to argue and bring the contexts of Preferential Trade Agreements (PTAs) and informal groups as discussion points when any discussion happens on plurilaterals or plurilateralism. However, one has to note that PTAs usually strive to lower trade barriers among member countries in a preferential manner, which can result in trade diversion and may not fully tackle global trade issues. In contrast, informal groups, despite their influence in policy debates, do not have formal treaty-based obligations that ensure parties adhere to specific agreements.

The Plurilateralists

The 1996 Ministerial Declaration on Trade in Information Technology Products at Singapore committed major WTO members to eliminate tariffs and other duties on a wide range of IT products by 2000, aiming to boost global trade, technological development, and economic growth in the sector. This agreement, covering over 80% of world IT trade, formed the basis for the Information Technology Agreement (ITA).

The 2015 Ministerial Declaration on the Expansion of Trade in Information Technology Products is a WTO agreement where participating members committed to progressively eliminate customs duties on a broad range of IT products between 2016 and 2019. This plurilateral deal aims to boost global IT trade by reducing tariffs, updating product coverage regularly, and encouraging wider participation among WTO members.

These two are often cited in all literature on plurilateralism. However, we have many occurrences from across the globe regarding the same.

A AUKUS Partnership

The AUKUS partnership demonstrates the shared dedication of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to fostering a peaceful, secure, and stable Indo-Pacific region while ensuring it remains free and open. AUKUS aims to enhance member country's ability to safeguard security and defense interests by leveraging their established bilateral relationships. It seeks to deepen information and technology sharing while integrating security and defense-related science, technology, industrial bases, and supply chains more closely. The alliance is generally perceived as a strategic enhancement aimed at countering and deterring Chinese aggression and ambitions in this crucial region. It consists of two pillars namely:

Pillar 1 focuses on assisting Australia in acquiring its first conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine fleet. It is to be noted out here that this pillar does not entail transfer of nuclear weapons to Australia.

Pillar 2 focuses on cooperation in eight advanced military capability areas namely: artificial intelligence (AI), quantum technologies, innovation, information sharing and cyber, undersea, hypersonic and counter-hypersonic and electronic warfare domains. Thus, one can say this is association is from a security point and political point of view rather than economic.

B The International Solar Alliance

The International Solar Alliance (ISA), launched by India and France during the 2015 Paris Climate Conference, is a treaty-based intergovernmental organization aimed at fostering solar energy adoption among solar-rich countries located between the two Tropics (Cancer & Capricorn). India's leadership in the ISA reflects its strategic ambition to align domestic renewable energy goals, such as achieving 100GW of solar power by 2022 and sourcing 50 per cent of its total power capacity from the fossil-fuels by 2030 (Jha, 2023). The ISA operates as a platform for action-oriented programs like solar applications for agriculture, mini-grids, rooftop systems, hydrogen production and e-mobility. Its flagship initiative "One Sun, One world, One Grid (OSOWOG), envisions a transnational electricity grid connecting solar power globally but faces logistical and financial hurdles. While aiming to gather \$1

trillion for solar projects by 2030, the ISA has faced challenges in attracting adequate financial support, mainly depending on commitments from India and France. India's strategic deployment of the ISA as an economic tool underscores its push to lead global solar energy governance while also tackling concerns related to energy security and climate funding. The ISA's legal structure merges treaty-backed legitimacy with non-binding commitments, which adds adaptability but reduces enforceability. The ISA signifies a daring initiative with transformative potential for the global shift towards renewable energy. It also marks a notable change in global energy governance, embodying plurilateralism principles—an adaptable, issue-centered approach to international cooperation engaging specific countries instead of the entire globe.

C Minerals Security Partnership

The Minerals Security Partnership (MSP) is a plurilateral initiative launched in 2022, led by the United States and joined by countries including Australia, Canada, the European Union, India, Japan, South Korea and the United Kingdom. Its core aim is to secure and diversify global supply chains for critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel and rare earth elements which are essential for clean energy, advanced manufacturing and defense technologies (White & Case, 2014). The MSP addresses vulnerabilities caused by overreliance on dominant suppliers particularly China, by promoting collaborative investment, responsible sourcing and high environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards (Down to Earth, 2023). The partnership encourages transparent and sustainable mining, processing and recycling and mobilizes both public and private sector involvement to create resilient, ethical supply chains. Through these efforts, MSP supports the global energy transition, economic security and innovation in green technologies. MSP partners created the Finance Network to unite the development finance institutions (DFI's) and export credit agencies (ECAs) from MSP member government, with specific goal of concentrating efforts on project financing.

D Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)

In May 2022, the United States, together with Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). The goal of this initiative was to boost resilience, sustainability, inclusivity, economic growth, fairness and competitiveness among participating economies. The IPEF aims to strengthen cooperation, stability, prosperity, development and peace throughout the region, while providing direct benefits such as increased economic activity and investment, and supporting sustainable and inclusive growth that favours workers and consumers.

The framework's launch paved the way for future negotiations on four main areas: (1) Trade, (2) Supply Chains, (3) Clean Energy, Decarbonization, and Infrastructure, and (4) Tax and Anti-Corruption. IPEF is structured to be adaptable, allowing members to participate in any combination of pillars, rather than requiring commitment to all four.

It is evident that these are not small associations. These have important and multiple countries as their members but they are aligned by a common purpose. None of them have gone through the typical process of organizing acceptance at a popular level, take years to draft agreements and have the same vetted through all the parties. In fact some like the ISA was created in the sidelines of a conference of a major association.

Two other points emerge:

- a Individual's influence matters in bulldozing a decision. In this context, one ought to mention India which has started gaining influence in the geo-politics arena. The nation is being invited to the session of G7 despite it not being a member.
- b We might have a scenario where fewer countries start a relationship and other countries gravitate towards it over a period of time.

India's tryst with Plurilateralism

R-I-C triangle

The geopolitical Russia-India-China (RIC) troika was conceptualised by Russian leader Yevgeny Primakov in 1996 to challenge the unipolar dominance of the US. The annual gathering of RIC foreign ministers was formalized in 2002. Together, these three nations represent a significant portion of the geographical and geopolitical landscape of the Eurasian continent. In terms of natural attributes, they encompass nearly 30 million square kilometers and have a combined population exceeding 2.98 Bn, which is ~37 percent of the global population. They are rich in natural resources, besides being strong in the three key pillars of economy namely agriculture, education and manufacturing. They are good at technology and the globe recognizes their prowess. Economically, all three are classified as emerging economies, with a combined GDP surpassing USD 25.68 Tn, which makes up ~22.3 percent of the world's total GDP.

India has been actively involved in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), but not in all its pillars. India has been very clear about its stance about the four key pillars of this plurilateral organization.

India has chosen not to participate in the trade pillar of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), as most of the issues promoted by the IPEF do not align with India's trade policies. The IPEF's emphasis on strong labour and environmental standards conflicts with India's position and may create market access barriers. The fact that the IPEF does not offer tariff cuts also makes it less appealing to India. Joining the IPEF is important to counter the growing influence of China in the Asia Pacific region. However,

India's economic interests must be prioritized. India has been advocating for data sovereignty, arguing that data localization is necessary to maintain it. The US has expressed concerns about India's potential demands for data localization.

The International Solar Alliance

The ISA represents a joint effort between India and France focused on combining resources to address climate change through the adoption of solar energy solutions. It was envisioned during the discussions of COP21 in Paris in 2015. After a 2020 revision to its Framework Agreement, every UN member state can now become a part of the Alliance. At present, over 100 countries have signed, and more than 90 have ratified to become complete members. Its aim is to free up \$1 trillion in solar funding by 2030 while lowering technology and financing expenses.

With the warring factions

The leadership in India is seen as a pivotal expectation for most part of the world. India has become an entity which is drawing newer geo-political equations. India is one of the rare countries which has a comfort in talking with warring nations together at the same time. Though it has been vocal about war being an issue, it has been maintaining good relationship with both the parties. Whether it is Iran and Israel or Russia and Ukraine, India does have influential stake with all. Why this is being discussed in the context of the paper? As was the case of ISA, India could be pivotal in building many more future plurilateral organizations.

Possible Drawbacks of plurilateralism

While we have aggressive literature available on the growth of plurilateralism, it is to be noted that this model has its own drawbacks.

We have no structured proof to showcase the benefits of plurilateralism on the low-developed (LDC) and under-developed (UD) countries. As researchers, we believe that any change should impact this set of nations positively. The larger countries do not see descent competitive advantage in partnering with these countries. Moving from multilateralism to plurilateralism does not hold foreseeable benefits for the LDC & UD set of countries.

There are chances that promotion of plurilateralism might bring in more asymmetry in the economic balance of the globe. We anyways have polycrisis engulfing us in terms of physical wars, tariff wars and climate changes.

Unlike Multilateral organizations, plurilaterals do not have a stabilized and hierarchical structure and thus they risk the chance of scoring low on sustainability.

Conclusion:-

During the course of the paper, we saw the indulgence of plurilateralists across a myriad of issues like alternate energy, mineral power, trade increment, polarized security and the like. This proves the point that polycrisis that the world is seeing can be well addressed and tackled by plurilateralism. Getting global concurrence or ratification will become more and more difficult paving the path towards increment in plurilateralism across many parts of the globe.

History teaches us that world orders are never permanent –they evolve, collapse, and re-emerge. What we are witnessing today is not disorder, but a painful transition. As scholars and citizens, our role is to study, reflect, and engage with these developments not with alarm, but with informal awareness. The world is changing-again-and it is our duty to prepare our students and our societies to navigate it with as much clarity and conviction.

We may have a dilemma at times whether there is a need to move away from the Single Undertaking and accept more ‘variable geometry’ and/or ‘plurilateral’ approaches (involving a limited number of multilateral actors) and whether the rather similar concept of ‘critical mass’ agreements offers any promise. The designated leaders must take a conscious call post mutual negotiations with the key actors.

The possibility of greater fragmentation and the danger of marginalizing developing countries continue to be major worries.

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