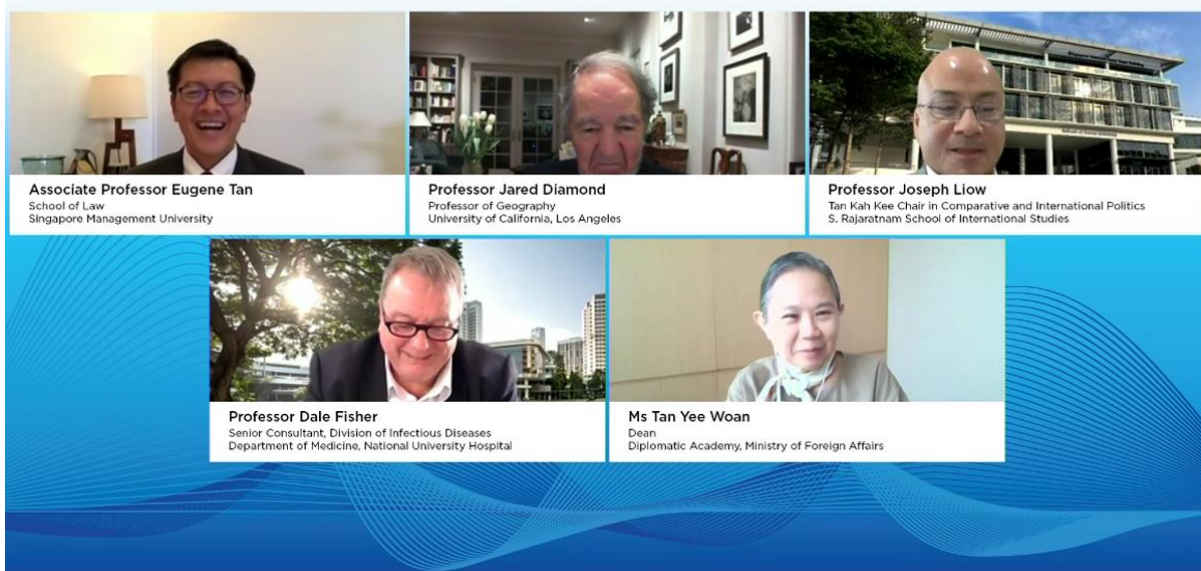


Singapore Perspectives Conference 2021: Reset Multilateralism and Global Cooperation

By Shazly ZAIN

The seventh forum of Singapore Perspectives 2021 focused on [“Multilateralism and Global Cooperation”](#). Moderated by Professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University’s School of Law, the panel consisted of Professor Jared Diamond who is a Professor of Geography at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA); Professor Joseph Liow, Tan Kah Kee Chair in Comparative and International Politics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University; Professor Dale Fisher, Professor at the National University of Singapore’s Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, and Senior Consultant at the Division of Infectious Diseases at the National University Hospital Singapore; and Ms Tan Yee Woan, Dean of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Academy.

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Caption for photo: Panellists from the seventh forum discuss issues relating to multilateralism and global cooperation

Opening Remarks by Professor Jared Diamond

Professor Diamond opened his remarks with a reflection of COVID-19, commenting that the virus is something old and new at the same time. Pandemics are nothing new in history, with

the Black Death of the Middle Ages being a notable example. Compared with past pandemics, COVID-19 is a mild disease with approximately 2 per cent of those infected dying from the disease. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is new in the sense that it has spread quickly worldwide through the same channels that have enabled globalisation, trade, and global transportation networks. COVID-19 is also a very transmissible disease.

The current virus has many lessons to teach the global community. One direct lesson is that COVID-19 is a disease that originated from animals. In fact, all the diseases that have emerged recently have originated from animals. As humans continue to remain in constant contact with wild animals, COVID-19 will not be the last such disease that plagues the world.

Another lesson is the need for cooperation. COVID-19 is a global risk that demands global cooperation, as no country will be safe from COVID-19 until it is contained or eliminated everywhere. But COVID-19 is not the only global issue today, let alone the most serious issue. The worst that COVID-19 could do is kill 2 per cent of the global population, while there are threats to the world that endanger everyone such as climate change, resource depletion (of global fisheries, forests, topsoil, etc.), and the rising inequality occurring around the world. Despite these other threats, COVID-19 has mustered a greater response for global cooperation. Professor Diamond suggested that the pandemic's success in capturing global attention is due to the more visible and direct impact as compared to other global issues like climate change. He expressed hope that this pandemic will galvanise the global community to take the other global risks more seriously.

A final lesson from COVID-19 is to "be prepared." There have been emerging diseases in the past. The mechanism in which SARS came about (i.e., animal-human contact) is the same mechanism that brought about COVID-19, yet the world was caught off-guard again. Professor Diamond shared the example of Finland, which has made preparedness a central theme in its national identity due to historical reasons (Soviet occupation, etc.) As such, the Finnish government convenes a monthly commission to consider potential threats to Finland. This commission had also planned for an epidemic several years ago and had taken steps to be prepared, developing supply lines for face masks, personal protective equipment (PPE), and survival items such as fuel, electricity and food.

Singapore thrives on global cooperation, trade and global connections. Singapore is also a small state with a small population. The city-state lies in between larger, powerful countries, and gets its climate, water, food, and other resources including diseases from its neighbours. Professor Diamond described how Singapore has a leadership role in Southeast Asia, and how it already leads the region in science and government efficiency. He described how Singapore, with its robust public healthcare system, could also be a role model to its neighbours in tackling issues such as the pandemic.

Like other global problems, tackling COVID-19 requires a global effort, which paves the way for multilateralism and its associated organisations. There is no way Singapore can solve the COVID-19 crisis in Singapore by itself. Even if Singapore successfully eliminates the virus within its borders, it is only a matter of time before it would re-enter the country. He argued that multilateralism has successfully battled pandemics before; the World Health Organization (WHO) eliminated smallpox, a deadly disease, 40 to 50 years ago through global efforts and coordination. Regional cooperation has also eliminated some diseases among livestock.

Today, the WHO is leading the way in eliminating polio. These successes should provide a sense of hope in the global community as the world continues to fight against COVID-19.

Opening Remarks by Professor Liow

Professor Liow's discussion took a step back from the immediate COVID-19 crisis, and examined multilateralism and global cooperation in general. He shared that the number of multilateral or intergovernmental organisations had ballooned from just 37 at the beginning of the 20th century to more than 7,000 at the end of the same century, and that the figure is likely to be much larger today. Since the end of the Cold War, multilateralism has been an important feature and pillar of the world order, especially in fostering much-needed global cooperation.

Professor Liow shared three points. First, multilateralism has enhanced security cooperation, especially during the Cold War, which involved small satellite wars and the proliferation of nuclear weaponry. Many of these wars were focused on national liberation, even if there were overtones of superpower rivalries. The United Nations (UN), despite being far from perfect, played an important role in managing some of these conflicts. Multilateralism also played a role in curbing the proliferation of nuclear weaponry while encouraging nuclear disarmament.

Second, multilateralism has deepened and strengthened economic cooperation and governance. Not without its flaws, the Bretton Woods system and modern organisations like the International Monetary Foundation and the World Trade Organization have provided the fundamentals for a liberal global economic system with rules for financial, commercial and economic activities.

Third, multilateralism has also facilitated the growth of transnationalism in the sense that national and regional governments have been awakened to the idea of cross-national cooperation. Sister cities served as examples of attempts to foster deeper commercial and cultural cooperation between different groups. These bilateral efforts eventually became multilateral efforts, and the ASEAN Smart Cities Network is a good example of this. Other examples of similar cooperation can be seen between the central banks of the G10 countries, which work together to coordinate monetary policy.

In terms of the value of multilateralism to global cooperation, there are three principles that underpin these efforts. The first of these principles is inclusivity. Inclusivity does not mean including every country in every international organisation, but rather refers to enabling countries with direct interests in certain issues to participate in addressing them with the relevant organisations. As the world becomes increasingly closer, issues are increasingly becoming complex and transnational. By that logic, states will have to cooperate to ward off those dangers.

The second principle is the importance of having a rules-based order. While power remains the key instrument and currency of foreign policy, especially for larger states, it cannot be the sole tool for stability to prevail. The sharpening of raw power can be mitigated in two ways, having a balance of power and a rules-based order. These rules would underpin and govern national relations, and states would need to commit to abiding by these rules. Many of these rules and commitments are expressed and encapsulated by the multilateral institutions.

The final principle is the notion that multilateralism is based on the idea of global cooperation, rather than conflict. The risks of applying raw power, resulting in many conflicts, highlight the importance of cooperation.

The world today is amid various transformations that are bringing about societal change and political dislocation, creating complex situations for the global community to overcome. The first and most frequently discussed transformation or issue is the shift in global power, illustrated profoundly by the relative decline of the United States and the relative rise of China. The US has long been accepted as the dominant power in global affairs, and this has been eroded due to numerous events that have undermined the leadership role of the US. This occurred at a time of China's rise and assertion regionally and globally. China's recent efforts in mitigating COVID-19 and developing a vaccine serves as examples of this rise. China's rise signals a challenge to the US-European centric global system, to which most of the world has become accustomed.

The second transformation is the changes to modes of production caused by a technological revolution. The technologies defining the 4th Industrial Revolution are quickly permeating daily life and their consequences are not yet fully known. Some concerns include job displacement, exacerbated inequality, the consequences of free and unregulated use of technology that undermine ethics and privacy, national security risks, and the growing importance of Big Tech.

A third transformation would be that of information. The digital revolution has meant that information is no longer the domain of those with power. However, this comes with the risk of fake news and misuse of information. Professor Liow highlighted how data was misused in the lead-up to the Brexit vote. This threat of misinformation and disinformation threatens to undermine trust between, among people and governments, and the international community has yet to develop systems to regulate these issues.

Professor Liow also described barriers to multilateral cooperation. One key barrier was the reality that multilateral organisations exist to further the interests of states and not vice versa. Another barrier is the gap between rhetoric and reality. After the SARS and Ebola outbreaks, numerous multilateral agreements were made to combat future medical emergencies. However, the immediate response of most countries to COVID-19 was to shut borders and reduce global cooperation.

Singapore's foreign policy and success has been rooted in multilateralism. Professor Liow suggested three areas of focus: enforcing the importance of international laws and organisations in its foreign policy; stressing the importance of an open economy and an open economic system; and building and nourishing strategic partnerships to compensate for Singapore's size and limited resources.

Discussion and Q&A

Professor Dale Fisher noted that COVID-19 exposed many failures of countries and societies. The lockdowns in many countries have resulted in some good outcomes such as reduced pollution levels and recovery for wildlife and nature in general. Many experts have also called COVID-19 the "Great Revealer", as the virus has exposed overcrowded accommodations in shelters, prisons, nursing homes and other locations. Many of these locations have become

high transmission points. COVID-19 has also given unforgiving reminders to society about the unequal effects the pandemic has on different groups.

Professor Fisher expressed disappointment towards the coordination failures between governments and even between governments and its people. There were many instances of countries blaming one another and even state or regional governments blaming other states or the federal government. Self-interest has also arisen as countries begin buying up vaccine supplies, leaving poorer nations in a more vulnerable position. He agreed with Professor Diamond on the importance of preparedness, especially in the immunology world. He described how readiness was an important factor and how in the months leading up to a pandemic, and how Western countries failed to take adequate steps to ready themselves for the inevitable COVID-19 outbreak. Without proper policies in place, repeated lockdowns caused many to lose trust in governments.

Professor Fisher also shared that examining multilateralism and populism or nationalism as binary choices may be inadequate because most countries would end up in between the two. He also shared similar concerns with Professor Liow over the transformation of information. Community buying of conspiracy theories and misinformation based on said information being more interesting than the truth will inhibit attempts at combating COVID-19 and other present or future issues. There is a need to ensure that science and policies are in sync with the community through constant engagement. Extrapolating the example, Professor Fisher questioned how countries could promote global responsibilities over national interests if people still faced the conflict of community responsibilities and individual rights within countries.

Despite the challenges, Professor Fisher expressed optimism for the future. Through global cooperation, the WHO has managed to set up Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) with three arms: tests, therapeutics, and vaccines (commonly known as COVAX). It is an unprecedented effort to ensure vaccines are safe and available for all countries globally. Other efforts such as gene sequencing and the sharing of information have also been made possible due to global cooperation on a scientific level. However, geopolitics have prevented better global cooperation.

The need for global cooperation will only increase overtime, according to Ms Tan, who expressed concern that states are being forced to choose sides in geopolitical rivalries. She cited Professor Diamond's earlier example of the smallpox and how its eradication came at the height of the Cold War. The Soviet Union, the US, and the WHO and other multilateral organisations had figured out a way to cooperate to achieve a common goal despite their rivalries. Strategic competitors can cooperate to achieve a common goal if they choose to do so.

Multilateralism had always not been plain sailing; it has had to contend with ideologies such as populism, protectionism, and nationalism. While the effectiveness of many international organisations could be better, many have important mandates that continue to be relevant.

In Ms Tan's opinion, today's geopolitical climate will not allow the creation of new international organisations to succeed. Hence, reformation of existing organisations is necessary. Singapore also needs to be attuned to forums where the city-state lacks representation, in case they result in adverse outcomes for Singapore.

Multilateralism cannot operate transactionally, and for such efforts to work, credible leadership is needed. For a long time, this role has belonged to the US. Ms Tan believes in the near term, no other state or group of states can fully reprise this role.

Q&A

An audience member asked about the drivers for businesses, organisations, and nations to cooperate to tackle the current COVID-19 issue. Professor Diamond said his cynical view was that strong cooperation to eradicate COVID-19 globally would only come after such players suffer reinfection due to the actions of others. This was echoed by Ms Tan, who shared that most people would only act if they were directly affected. She added that for smaller states like Singapore, it is important to do what is feasible and influence other countries with good leadership and experience and results, or work with like-minded countries. Domestic audiences should be geared towards multilateralism by fostering cooperation at home, in order to allow global cooperation to flourish.

Professor Liow raised the issue of public interest in global cooperation and how public interests can transcend boundaries. Political leaders are responsible and obligated to those who have empowered them to advance and defend national interests. The public also needs to realise that their interests are increasingly intimately intertwined with the interests of others. Professor Liow shared concerns over the lack of trust in data and within and between countries, arguing that a trust deficit is hampering global cooperation efforts. Politicisation of issues where many politicians and individuals are attempting to take advantage of crisis to advance their personal agendas also inhibits global cooperation.

Professor Fisher raised a contrarian view on vaccine nationalism and how countries were approaching inoculation in a nationalist manner. Wealthier countries were buying up most of the vaccines available. Many of the countries with high infection levels are wealthier countries with more resources to fight the pandemic. Professor Fisher also remarked that many Asian and African countries were doing much better at combating COVID-19 than wealthier nations.

Audience members were curious about how Finland maintained the political will and domestic interest to constantly be prepared. Professor Diamond shared that most people view Finland's state of preparedness as a costly exercise. However, recent events have demonstrated that it is surprisingly cheap to be prepared and extremely costly not to be. Financially, Finland's stockpiling of resources is funded by a trivial tax on petrol. Professor Diamond also cited cultural and historical influences in Finland and many other countries' success in combating COVID-19. Asian countries in general tended to be more cooperative as compared with European countries or the US, which historically value individualism.

Singapore's role in the Southeast Asia and ways to help younger Singaporeans better connect to region were also discussed. Professor Liow lamented over the lack of attention given to the Southeast Asia when educating Singapore's youth. While he believed there is nothing wrong in Singaporeans having an interest in other parts of the world, they should not lose sight of their immediate neighbours. Professor Liow also questioned the removal of the Malay language from the curriculum. He described how Malay is often cited as the lingua franca of Singapore's immediate neighbours, and that it should be reintroduced in the education system.

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