

S'pore has role in fostering global cooperation amid challenges to multilateralism: Experts

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Multilateralism is far from perfect, but in a world where challenges such as Covid-19 are increasingly global and transborder in nature, Singapore has a role to play in helping the world build back stronger and stem the fraying of global cooperation.

This was the conclusion drawn by a group of panellists on the third day of a four-day Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

Speaking on the topic "Multilateralism and Global Cooperation" on Tuesday (Jan 19), Professor Joseph Liow, Tan Kah Kee chair in comparative and international politics at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said multilateralism has been important to Singapore's foreign policy and even its very existence.

"Though international law and international organisations are not perfect instruments, they remain important as levellers especially for small states (such as Singapore)."

He said that despite the pushback against multilateralism and global cooperation, Singapore must continue to stress the importance of an open economy and trading system.

"We must continue to plug into these global networks in order to allow our companies and small and medium-sized enterprises, which are the engines of the economy and employment, to expand into newer markets."

Because of its limited resources, the Republic must also build and nourish strategic partnerships in areas of national priority or where it has competitive advantages, he added.

This means actively forging partnerships, such as through Singapore's role in the Forum of Small States; its convening of the Global Governance Group to ensure greater transparency and inclusivity in the Group of 20 process; and more recently, its co-chairing of the Friends of the Covid-19 Vaccine Global Access Facility to promote vaccine multilateralism.

During the session moderated by Singapore Management University associate law professor Eugene Tan, panellists pointed out that global cooperation is facing headwinds, as shown by the response to Covid-19.

Professor Dale Fisher, a senior infectious diseases expert at the National University Hospital, said that while progress has been made on the scientific front, such as using genome sequencing to trace infected cases, many countries still do not have coherent public health strategies and are not working cohesively to tackle the pandemic together.

"So it's not really surprising that after several lockdowns, people are starting to question their governments' ability to do this right," he said.

"I'm quite pleased with multilateralism at the science level, but fairly disappointed when it comes to the geopolitical framework."

He observed that some countries are putting their self-interests ahead of the global good by buying vaccines well in excess of their own needs.

The global scramble for Covid-19 shots has intensified as more infectious virus variants circulate.

World Health Organisation director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Monday that more than 39 million vaccine doses had been administered in 49 higher-income countries, whereas just 25 doses had been given in one poor country.

"I need to be blunt. The world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure," he added.

Citing the joint effort by the United States and the Soviet Union to eradicate smallpox at the height of their Cold War rivalry in the 1960s and 1970s, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Diplomatic Academy dean Tan Yee Woan said this shows that strategic competitors can work together and achieve good outcomes for the global community if they choose to do so.

"Multilateralism cannot function well if states adopt a purely transactional approach," said Ms Tan.

She added that while any attempt to create a major new international organisation in the current geopolitical climate is unlikely to succeed, existing ones can be reformed to make them more fit for purpose and better able to address big issues such as climate change, as well as emerging ones such as cyber security and artificial intelligence.

Singapore also needs to be tuned into developments at forums where it is not represented, lest they result in adverse outcomes for the country, she said, adding that small states can be better heard when they act collectively.

"Instead of being defeatist and letting things drift because of multilateral gridlock, in some instances, it is efficacious to use a building block approach and work with like-minded partners to test out ideas.

"We can be pathfinders of workable solutions which address common needs, and then seek to get broader engagement and buy-in from others," said Ms Tan.

University of California Los Angeles geography professor Jared Diamond said that as long as there is contact between humans and wild animals, viruses such as Sars-CoV-2, which causes Covid-19, will continue to emerge.

He stressed that Covid-19 is a global risk that demands global cooperation, "and nobody will be safe until everybody is safe".

But the coronavirus is not the only issue that requires such cooperation. Other looming threats include climate change, inequality and the depletion of the world's resources such as forests, fisheries and freshwater supplies.

"Even though these are bigger threats than Covid-19, they have not successfully mustered a demand for global cooperation," he said.

"My hope is that Covid-19 will galvanise the attention of the world to take seriously these big threats."