**Diplomacy`s lens**

BY J A M I L A H M A D 2021-04-13

TRADITIONALLY seen through the lens of peace and security, the diplomacy of modern times covers the entire spectrum of international relations, from trade to health.

The scope and scale of multilateralism was first enlarged with the establishment of the United Nations after World War II.

Naturally, the UN became the home of multilateralism by enabling cooperation on development, trade, human rights, health, education and science etc. Environmental subjects, however, remained absent in this discourse until the UN Stockholm Conference in 1972 established the UN Environment Programme and laid the foundation of what is now an elaborate architecture of global environmental governance.

Today, there are more than 500 recognised multilateralenvironmentalagreementswith legislative bodies on every dimension of the environment. The UN Environment Assembly, with universal representation, serves as the world parliament on environmental policies. The UN conventions on climate change, biodiversity, desertification and ozone depletion etc, are part of a mosaic that keeps expanding to address new challenges that transcend national boundaries.

The most recent global treaty in the series is the Minamata Convention on Mercury of 2017 that aims to protect human health and the environment from the adverse effects of mercury. A similar example is that of the ozone treaties, established in 1987, where governments and scientific and private sectors workin tandem to prevent further depletion of the ozone layer caused by certain gases used in refrigerators and air conditioners. As a result, the ozone layer that protects the earth from harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun is on its way to complete replenishment.

But the expansion of environmental multilateralism also poses operational challenges for smaller countries. A heavy agenda and multiple meetings require delegations to follow several overlapping processes simultaneously. It is no big deal for resourceful nations but a hard task for countries with small diplomatic cadres. In numerous countries, including Pakistan, professional diplomats normally take the lead in such processes with technical input from `line ministries`. This, however, is not an ideal arrangement. Around the world, the need for a specialised group of environmental diplomats is now well acknowledged. Backed by institutional support and equipped with knowledge and skill sets of multilateralism, qualified environmental diplomats better serve national interests and also contribute towards strengthening international environmental governance.

In the 50 years since the Stockholm confer-ence, the global environmental movement has matured into an influential powerhouse of scientific institutes, civil society networks, academia, philanthropists and activists ranging from young Greta Thunberg to nonagenarian David Attenborough. Others like the late Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai, Al Gore and Pugh Lewis have also strengthened and enriched environmental multilateralism through their contributions.

However, much more needs to be done.

Amidst humanity`s unrelenting war on nature, environmental diplomacy is set for a tedious battle as the world marks the International Day of Multilateralism and Diplomacy for Peace on April 24. The UN is poised to play a pivotal role, just as did 75 years ago, for enabling the world to work collaboratively in responding to global challenges.

The UN Environment Assembly has reaffirmed `the urgency to continue our efforts to protect our planet also in this time of crisis` calling for collective action as `essential to successfully address global challenges`.As the world faces growing poverty, rising inequality, social unrest, economic crisis and the existential threats posed by environmental and climate emergencies, UN Secretary General AntónioGuterres has rightly called for a reinvigorated multilateralism.

In recent years, nationalistic and fissiparous tendencies have put a lot of stress on multilateral endeavours, but the world at large appears to strongly support inclusive multilateral collaboration. More than 1.5 million people in 195 countries were asked about the need for international collaboration and their expectations of the UN in a survey conducted on the eve of UN`s 75th anniversary. An overwhelming 97 per cent expresse d f aith in multilateralism; an immediate expectation was the improvement in healthcare in the next 25 years while environmental issues and climate change were identified as the biggest long-term global challenges.

Though environmental multilateralism is and will remain an uphill battle, it will be made easier by the environmentally conscious global citizenry who will keep the proverbial torch burning.  The writer is director of intergovernmental affairs, United Nations Environment Programme.