[Amanat Ali Chaudhry](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/amanat-ali-chaudhry)

January 30, 2021

**A multilateral world**

The writer, a Chevening scholar, studied International Journalism at the University of Sussex.

The corona pandemic has changed the world drastically. While humanity is still in the midst of overwhelming the virus through accelerated vaccine production programs, the resurgence of Covid-19 has proven to be far deadlier than during the first wave. Even if the virus is defeated down the line, there is a near consensus among the scholars that old rules of the game that governed the pre-corona world will not be applicable anymore, necessitating fresh thinking and an innovative approach to deal with a largely altered global landscape.

As the world tries to grapple with the ‘new normal’ in an effort to adjust to the changed reality, a voice of reason emerged from the Davos Agenda event hosted by the World Economic Forum on January 25. Chinese President Xi Jinping used the opportunity to shed light on a whole range of political, economic, social, and developmental challenges facing humanity in a post-corona world.

The importance of President Xi’s address lay in the fact that it was his first such public articulation after the change of leadership in Washington. The contents of his speech, one assumes, must have been listened to very attentively in the White House as the Biden administration prepares to roll out its China policy, a delicate act requiring patience, vision, and pragmatism.

A careful reading of the text of the speech shows that Xi Jinping not only identified the issues plaguing the world but also presented workable solutions. He was also quick to convey his country’s readiness to work with the international community in pursuit of shared goals and objectives.

President Xi reminded the world that despite the trillions of dollars in relief package as part of fighting corona-induced recession said to be the worst ever after WWII, the global recovery remains shaky and the future outlook of the world economy is uncertain. He suggested macroeconomic policy coordination and a revision of “the driving forces and the growth models of the global economy” for a long-term and steady development.

The Chinese leader made a strong case for respect for diversity and peaceful coexistence, calling it an essential condition for the progress of human civilization. Differences, he said, pose no threat but added in the same breath that when attempts are made to impose “hierarchy on human civilization” under the influence of “arrogance, prejudice, and hatred”, the world order begins to unravel.

Another task he urged the world to attend to pertains to the dangers of the widening gap between the global North and South. The pandemic has further perpetuated the gaps between the developing and the developed world as they follow different trajectories. The stronger representation of the global South in the global economic governance will give them space to achieve development. The developed world will benefit from such an inclusive model of growth and prosperity. Working in silos will not only deepen the divide but also raise the costs for the North.

The Chinese leader highlighted the need for collective action to fight the shared challenges such as climate change. A setback caused by a public health challenge anywhere in the world on the pattern of Covid-19 is likely to disrupt all endeavors for progress in this day and age of economic globalization. It is beyond the capacity of one country to address such health-related scourges with global consequences. Hence the need for joint action.

President Xi Jinping underscored the complexity of the challenges and proposed a return to multilateralism as a way out of them. This call for a multilateral approach stems from his vision of building a community with a shared future. It has four key aspects.

Firstly, multilateralism is all about consultation and coordination. It is about desisting from building “small circles” and staying away from starting “a new Cold War”. Common problems facing humanity cannot be tackled in a divided world. Shared human values such as peace, development, justice, democracy, and equity must inform the efforts to build an “open economy” with inclusive “principles and policies of cooperation” to safeguard peace and stability.

Secondly, rules-based international order is the key to making multilateralism a success. According to the Chinese leader, the United Nations is still the best platform for international engagement with its Charter providing the consensus around the universally recognized norms and principles for a state-to-state interaction.

Thirdly, an approach to international relations grounded in antagonism and confrontation, whether it is reflected in the Cold War, trade war, or technology war, is hurtful for all, as it serves as a disincentive for win-win engagement. A mindset marked by a zero-sum view of the world and the one which looks at the relations between the nations from the prism of a Cold War mindset is the biggest hurdle in developing a culture of trust and understanding.

Fourthly, a multilateral approach to promote common development, equity, justice, and democratic aspirations is underpinned by changing global landscapes. Geared by technological innovations including artificial intelligence (AI), the transformation in the 21st century is breathtaking. As scores of challenges have underlined, the role of multilateral organizations such as WHO, and WTO, etc. could not be more central to the reality of our present-day world. A people-centered and fact-based policy orientation should be at the heart of rethinking the international financial system in a way that accommodates the interests and rights of the developing countries.

After he outlined the challenges and offered a roadmap to convert them into mutually beneficial opportunities for all, President Xi presented China as a role model and a champion of economic globalisation that succeeded in denting poverty as no one else has as part of becoming a “moderately prosperous society”.

The Chinese leader put his country at the core of global efforts to contain the coronavirus. It included extending assistance to 150 countries, supporting 13 international organizations and dispatching 36 medical teams to the countries in acute need. He highlighted the need for scalping up cooperation in R&D and declaring the vaccines as public goods.

President Xi vowed to continue with the policy of opening-up by promoting trade and investment liberalization and facilitation as a strong voice of economic globalization. China, he said, would implement the 2030 SDGs agenda by doubling down on the ecological front in the form of achieving carbon neutrality by 2060. Beijing will promote South-South cooperation through dialogue and engagement. The policy of unilateralism and “arrogant isolation” as Xi put it, is destined to fail in our fast-changing world.

This speech at the Davos moot from the leader of the second most powerful country must reinforce a sense of normalcy returning to a world that has been rattled by a surge in populism, narrow ethnic nationalism and erosion of democratic values, and norms.

The world has heaved a sigh of relief at the election of Joe Biden after four disastrous years of Donald Trump. The new US President made the right noises and struck the right chords during the election campaign. He now faces the monumental task of translating the campaign promises into reality by setting in motion a process that leads to a multilateral world invested in the shared goals of common development, prosperity, and peace.

How President Biden manages his country’s relations with China will be a defining feature of his foreign policy agenda. A relationship with Beijing based on cooperation and dialogue will not only be beneficial for both countries but will also incentivize a global effort to make this world a better place for future generations. President Xi’s speech, loaded as it is with symbolism, could not have been better timed.

Email: amanatchpk@gmail.com

Twitter: @Amanat222