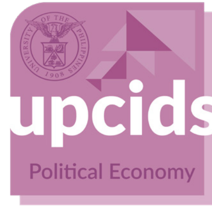

DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

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UP CIDS DISCUSSION PAPER 2020–08

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Opportunity Amidst Crisis

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The Paradox of Multilateralism Today

Opportunity Amidst Crisis[1]

Miguel R. Bautista[2]

ABSTRACT The current system of global governance arising from the Second World War is facing its most significant crisis since its establishment more than seven decades ago. This crisis is manifested in part by gridlocks in key multilateral processes and forums and an apparent inability to multilaterally address some of the most pressing challenges confronting humanity. The paper begins with the observation that the current crisis in multilateralism is the direct consequence of the increasing disconnect between contemporary realities and the conditions under which the system was created. In so doing, the discussion breaks down the crisis of multilateralism into three facets: the crises of relevance, legitimacy, and effectiveness. It proceeds to address some of the implications for the Global South, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, and the Philippines, and concludes with some ideas on how to address the crisis in multilateralism as an opportunity.

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[1] This paper is based on a lecture delivered by the author in a public forum held on on November 20, 2019 and organized by the Political Economy Program (PEP) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), in partnership with the UP National College of Public Administration and Governance (UP NCPAG), Social Watch Philippines, and Asia Pacific Pathways to Progress Foundation, Inc. (APPFI).

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KEYWORDS ■ Philippines, diplomacy, foreign policy, multilateralism, crisis, United Nations

Why would a seemingly arcane topic such as the crisis of multilateralism—or put in another way—the future of multilateralism, be of interest to a wider audience? The reason is simple: multilateralism touches on almost every aspect of our lives—from the air that we breathe, the food that we eat, and the tranquility that we enjoy.

Today, multilateral action preserves international peace and security; attempts to address—and in some cases, regulate—areas as diverse as climate change, health, trade, the use of space; and formulates protocols for first contact with an alien intelligence.

My aim is therefore to demystify multilateralism and to share with you some of my observations on the crisis in multilateralism, as well as some thoughts on implications for the Philippines and our region. I will conclude by sharing some ideas on how to approach the crisis in multilateralism as an opportunity. The paradox, as I hope you will agree, is that at this time of crisis and danger, there are very tangible opportunities waiting to be seized.

What is multilateralism?

As the word suggests, multilateralism is the management of relations among multiple parties. Today, multilateralism is the management of relations among states in the system of global governance put in place after the end of the Second World War. This refers to the United Nations (UN) system, the various institutions aimed at maintaining international peace and security, regional and inter-regional organizations, and the like. It is this aggregate machinery that I will refer to as "the system."

The foundations of this system were laid with the creation of the United Nations. Following devastation from the conflict, the aim of

the system was simple: to prevent a third World War that would lead to the inevitable extinction of humanity.

Sceptics recalled that the objectives of the previous League of Nations were similar and observed that the institution did not succeed. However, the new system differed in three very significant ways.

First, the system was based on the recognition that international peace and security depends on a solid base of prosperity. Second, the system recognized great power realities and the need for the system—especially the UN—to be able to act decisively. This is the principle that led to the creation of the Security Council. Third, in embracing the need for both collective security and development, the implication was that the UN should be a robust institution for global governance, requiring a machinery to address the technical complexities involved. Thus, for example, the UN's specialized agencies and the Bretton Woods institutions were established, with the Economic and Social Council operating as a robust coordinating mechanism, mirroring in a more modest way the Security Council's management of international peace and security.

We know in hindsight that this elegant and ambitious design never had a chance to be fully realized. With breathtaking speed, the euphoria at the end of the war quickly chilled, and the Cold War began. What many had hoped would be a supranational mechanism that would advance the noblest aspirations of humanity quickly became the strongest bastion of individual sovereignty, and the institution became polarized along ideological lines.

Yet despite not living up to its full promise and potential, the system proved to be hugely successful if measured by its most important objective: that we are still here. And the years since the end of the Second World War have been remarkably peaceful, if measured against the existence of wars among the great powers in the past.

The system has also been successful in another important way: it has significantly advanced norms and expectations that have made the world a much better and more prosperous place. Expectations of what constitutes development; an increasing focus on the dignity and well-

being of the individual; an embrace of human rights; and the erosion of the legitimacy of war as an instrument of foreign policy, are some of the most important advances in this regard.

The system and evolving expectations

These successes, however, have been overshadowed by the reality that the system is particularly resistant to change. For almost half a century, the prevailing status quo made it relatively easy for the system to function without major reform or innovation, notwithstanding some very significant and fundamental changes in the real world.

The most significant change was the wave of decolonization that led to a significant increase in the number of member states of the UN. The euphoria and aspirations of the newly independent countries meant that the world expected more from the UN. For example, the newly independent countries had their own ideas of what development should be about. They also had different expectations of how the UN should function, especially given the expansion of the General Assembly and the ostensible spread of democracy. The newly emerging family of developing countries had new ideas about the nature of the global system, as well as their place in it. To put it mildly, there was growing impatience with the continuation of the status quo, which was viewed by some as nothing more than a continuation of great power politics with a more modern face. In this tension, we cannot underestimate the important role of leadership.

At the global level, the predominant power—the United States—served not only as chief advocate but also as principal guarantor of the system. The Soviet Union nominally challenged leadership of the system, but ultimately not the legitimacy of the system itself.

At the regional level, charismatic leaders rose to maintain the cohesion of their respective blocs. This was especially important in what would be known as the Global South. Indeed, it has been observed that at its height, the Group of 77 (G-77) was more of a movement and a cause, rather than a mere coalition or bloc.

The fall of the Berlin Wall profoundly changed everything, upending the stability of the last half century and opening the floodgates of repressed tensions. Indeed, the euphoria of that historic moment initially brought into question the need for the continued existence of the system. The inability of the system to adapt in the years since has not helped.

The crisis in multilateralism

This is the crisis in multilateralism in a nutshell. We seem paralyzed as a global community in the face of great, even existential, challenges. Climate change threatens us all. The promise of prosperity for all remains elusive. Trade wars loom on the horizon. Conflicts, unrest, and strife occur and reoccur with alarming frequency and regularity. Instability and unpredictability reign. The international rule of law seems to be in question. Great power competition is back. If you keep up with events, it seems that all we do these days is face a litany of crises: the climate crisis, the humanitarian crisis, the migration crisis, the health crisis, including the dangers of pandemics and drug-resistant strains. The list goes on. The system seems helpless today.

This should not come as a surprise. While the world has changed in fundamental ways, the system itself has remained relatively static. We therefore face a fundamental misalignment along several fronts between our world and the world of the system. What we refer to as the crisis in multilateralism might therefore be best understood and addressed as three interrelated and mutually reinforcing crises, which are actually distinct and inherent facets of the broader crisis of multilateralism: the crises of relevance, of legitimacy, and of effectiveness.

The crisis of relevance is understood by the simple observation that the system is no longer relevant, as it is neither designed nor equipped for today's world. It is viewed by some as a living relic of the past.

The crisis of legitimacy is dangerous, being rooted in the concern that the system is no longer legitimate as it no longer protects or advances the interests and aspirations of the majority of humanity.

Rather, as some argue, it now seeks to defend and maintain the interests of an entrenched minority, notwithstanding the crises we have suffered through. This sentiment was especially strong after the two financial crises of recent memory, namely the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s and the global economic and financial crisis in the 2000s.

This has led to the third crisis: the crisis of effectiveness. In this view, the system is simply not delivering, focusing instead on innumerable and expensive meetings and conferences where there is much talk, but little to no action.

The reality is much more nuanced. There are many success stories. People are being helped on the ground. Quiet diplomacy is taking place and it is not only resolving, but also preventing, many problems from escalating into crises. While the conferences may not often yield very ambitious results, they are changing the way people think, and therefore, act.

Yet, while the crisis may not yet be as profound as some would portray, it is real and is the result of a number of fundamental changes arising from three distinct shifts from the past to the present.

The first is the shift from a post-war approach rooted on a Wilsonian and idealistic approach, to a return to a more traditional model of balance of power. This is a shift in terms of who wields economic and political power, and how they do so. But perhaps more importantly, there is a shift in terms of how the key players are willing to wield this power. Some are becoming more aggressive and robust. On the other hand, the United States seems to be retreating as the advocate and guarantor of the system.

The second is the dramatic change in population and demography. In many places, we have a crisis of an ageing population. Other places have increasingly young populations. Most striking of all, our world is now populated by seven billion people. In contrast, when the system was created, the world supported less than two and a half billion people. That is less than today's population of China and India combined.

The third is the increasing multiplicity of players in the international field, especially apparent in multilateralism. The rise of civil society, corporations, and other non-state actors has called into question the primacy of the state. This has multiplied the number of interlocutors and has also led to some fundamental changes in the way that many multilateral processes work.

For example, beginning in the late 1990s, there has been a growing sphere for engagement by civil society and other stakeholders in development-related processes, which has opened up the space for discussion and engagement. This has been good, drawing in more ideas and perspectives. Yet this increased inclusiveness and transparency has also led to expectations of even greater transparency in other areas—such as peace and security and human rights—where states have traditionally preferred to work with greater discretion.

Implications of the crisis

At this point, the question may arise: should we, and can we, rescue the system of multilateralism?

I would say that the answer to the first part of the question is an unequivocal, but a nuanced "yes." If the mission of the system has been to prevent our extinction, I would say that the danger of this happening is greater now than it was in 1945. This core function is therefore more relevant than ever. The system is in crisis because we now have greater expectations, aspirations, and ambitions. The purpose has evolved; the system has lagged behind.

This leads to the question of can we rescue the system? The answer is predictable: we have no choice, so yes, we must. How we do so will depend on the future we want and the characteristics that we seek to promote. This is where the opportunities are.

One opportunity is to influence the redrawing of the map of geopolitical power. Until the middle of the last century, balance of power politics was the name of the game. The power game was between the empires, with the great countries at the core and the rest

of humanity—to paraphrase Thucydides—watching and suffering what they must from the periphery.

The Cold War then changed everything. The struggle was now between the two superpowers, buttressed by their respective blocs. As the Cold War evolved, there was a paradoxical democratization of the system and of geopolitics, where developing countries played an increasingly vocal and active role, including pitting the superpowers against each other. The way the system functioned also emphasized the importance of alignments by bloc. In this way, the collective weak were able to move the previously intractable strong.

This has important implications for today. The two superpowers during the Cold War have given way to a handful of powers. Empires have been replaced by blocs. In the present day, however, the two are not the same thing. For example, the US and Soviet Union are no longer the two superpowers. The US appears to be on a recently self-imposed decline. Russia is on a resurgence, but is unlikely to reclaim the dominant role of the Soviet Union. China is on the horizon, seemingly everywhere. The great empires of Europe have given way to a European Union. In our region, the struggle for dominance in our immediate neighborhood has given way to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Yet the fluidity remains. For example, the Brexit and separatist movements like those in Spain, Scotland, and Belgium, not to mention those closer to home, are indicative of strong—but yet to be fully understood—centrifugal forces that seem to be pulling the system apart.

Compounding the challenge is that today, the Global South is adrift. For a time, it appeared that the poor no longer needed to suffer what they have experienced; they banded together in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77, and for a time, the weak appeared to become strong. Widening economic realities within the bloc, diverging outlooks and philosophies, and the lack of unifying leadership have eroded the influence and impact of the NAM and the G-77 in recent years to the point that in some crucial negotiations, such as on climate change, the developing countries speak not with one voice, but with multiplicity. This lack of unity made it easier for the traditional powers to play divide and rule, affecting the aspirations

of the Global South for the continued democratization of global processes.

For example, following the global economic and financial crisis, the South demanded that the global response be coordinated through the United Nations General Assembly, arguing that global crises demanded global action through a forum with universal representation. On the other hand, the developed countries argued for a more efficient approach through smaller forums. The master stroke in paralyzing the South as a force was the creation of the G-20. The major players of the South suddenly found themselves at the head table. Perhaps coincidentally, their voices also became more muted. This is in part reflected in the slowing momentum of developing countries in forums such as the United Nations and later, the demise of the Doha Round in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

This pattern continues, and a key implication of this pattern is the possible continuation of the erosion of democracy in the UN and the diminishment of individual voices, such as that of the Philippines, a significant country that does not have a seat at the head table. The consequence could be an emphasis on issues that are priorities for those at the head table, but not for the rest of humanity. This could include the further marginalization of development issues in the UN. This is troubling, as in the past couple of years, there has been a discernable drift in focus in the UN toward peace and security, human rights, and migration, and away from the key concerns of developing countries—most especially development.

Yet in the midst of this threat of the dilution of the development agenda from the perspective of developing countries, the opportunity is clear: the global disquiet and the mass dissatisfaction of developing countries with the direction of the system means that well-positioned and well-motivated actors can wield disproportionate influence in shaping the future by filling the leadership vacuum and presenting a clear and coherent agenda for the future.

To do so requires a leadership of ideas and a leadership of action rooted in a clear vision of what the system should look like, rather

than simply reacting to what it might become. In other words, the key opportunity is for developing countries to band together and jointly advance a positive agenda for the future.

What would such a positive agenda contain? At the outset, some very familiar stuff. We need to preserve and advance the rule of law globally and capitalize on what appears to be an established norm against offensive war as a legitimate instrument of foreign policy. We should maintain and strengthen the real link between development and international peace and security. The structures and institutions of the system should be democratized further to ensure the meaningful participation of developing countries in international decision-making.

Yet we should also think about more difficult aspects. What is democracy in the system? Given that the system has proven to be so unwieldy—especially the UN, with its 193 member states—how can we revitalize structures and working methods so that we can achieve real, faster action? And the elephant in the room is that given the interplay of entrenched interests, shifts in global power, and global instability underscoring the need for an effective UN Security Council, or at least something like it, how do we deal with the Security Council veto?

What this could mean for the Philippines

The answers to these questions are not the monopoly of statespersons. These are not new and will continue to be considered for some time. Yet, there comes a point where intellectual exercises must give way to decisive action. This is where the Philippines can find a place to exercise its rightful role globally.

For far too long, the Philippines has been reluctant to play a real and coherent lead role in global affairs, unlike some of our neighbors. Indeed, Philippine diplomacy today does not live up to the capacity and potential of what is arguably one of the best foreign services in the region, at least. Instead, Philippine diplomats often function more as social workers than as statespersons because of the nature of today's domestic politics, with its emphasis on overseas Filipino

workers (OFWs) and a view of the Philippines being a weak player in international affairs. This is self-defeating.

The reality is that the Philippines is a major country with global interests. The Philippines ranks 12th in the world in terms of population. It has more than 12 million Filipinos overseas—if this were a country, it would place at around 76 out of 193. Wherever they are, Filipinos make significant contributions to the prosperity and well-being of their host countries. Yet, at the most basic strategic level, we have not quite figured out the best way to protect our nationals overseas. One way to maximize their benefit for our country is to have a robust foreign policy based on the exercise of leadership and initiative. The best way to protect our nationals is for the Philippines to be respected as a power. This is not a question of punching above our weight; indeed, the challenge for the immediate future is how to punch *at* our weight. This requires playing the leadership role that we should be playing.

Doing so could be a combination of several things. The first is to lead with our values. Notwithstanding our frailties as a nation, we have always been proud of our grounding on the rule of law, of doing good and right, and of playing a positive role for our neighbors and the rest of humanity. We must be true to those values. We should therefore play an active role in shaping the values on which the future of the system will stand. One strength of the UN, for example, has been the evolution towards clear shared norms and values. The dark side has been that on too many occasions, the Global North has imposed its values and agenda on the Global South. We need to ensure that the future of the system is based on values that are truly shared by all. Only then will the system enjoy true legitimacy. To do this effectively, we need to act and lead in a manner that is consistent with our values.

The second is to exercise an active leadership role in shaping the future of the ASEAN. In shaping the future of the system, our place within our respective blocs should be strong and secure. This means exerting even greater influence to ensure that the ASEAN better reflects Philippine priorities and aspirations. I would make a possibly heretical observation that this could include pushing for stronger and more robust regional security arrangements.

One implication is that the Philippines should be more comfortable in asserting its security needs more clearly, and perhaps more decisively. Vietnam, for example, is respected for standing up to external threats despite being a smaller country than the Philippines. This also implies being much colder and pragmatic in selecting security partners. Power is shifting, and alignments need to be considered accordingly, based on the national interest and the proven track record of current and potential partners.

The Philippines should also exercise leadership in revitalizing the Global South. The South's leadership vacuum should be filled, and its agenda revitalized. Much of what the Global South advocates has degenerated into dogma, and there is a need for a cold and realistic assessment of its interests and future direction. This should include a review of what comprises the Global South and what issues it will address. It may well be that NAM and G-77 have outlived their usefulness and that these need to be replaced with something more relevant and effective. But someone needs to catalyze the difficult discussions and pave the way to the future.

That future lies in a reinvigorated system in which the Philippines should play a coherent leadership role. Our role in the UN has been historic and well-regarded. The Philippines has a sterling reputation in the UN, but we are not really known as drivers of the system, but more as faithful followers and custodians. We need to break this mold and seek to make the rules, rather than simply play by them. Better still, we should be shaping the future of the institutions where the rules are made.

This requires vision and confidence in the system, as well as a healthy dose of self-confidence. Individually, we have these qualities in abundance. But as a coherent national policy and approach, perhaps not as much. This is a pity for the Filipino nation and a disservice to the dedicated and gifted men and women of the career foreign service who were recruited to be statespersons and leaders, and not social workers. Perhaps this would require alternative mechanisms for the exercise of assistance to nationals functions, so that the foreign service can focus on its core mission. Perhaps this means that, as a country, we need to give due recognition to the importance and

legitimacy of an active, robust, and assertive foreign policy and diplomacy.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with the observation that crises are really the times of greatest opportunity. What marks individual and national greatness in this context is the courage to take decisive action to maximize those opportunities. Times of peace, tranquility, and stability are predictable, so freedom of action is constrained and the temptation to preserve the status quo can be overwhelming.

On the other hand, times of upheaval and instability are by nature unpredictable and frightening. Yet if one thing is true in diplomacy and international relations, we have to be comfortable with discomfort and unpredictability, because that is where you can have greatest freedom of diplomatic maneuver, and when conditions are best for challenging and changing the status quo.

The crisis of multilateralism highlights this paradox, which is a cornerstone of good statecraft. Our objective is always the maximization of welfare and it follows that we aim for prosperity, stability, and peace. Yet paradoxically, the best opportunities to achieve these goals often lie in crises. To maximize these opportunities, we need to have the courage to act.

I will close by paraphrasing one of my favorite John le Carré quotes from *The Russia House*: These days you have to think like a hero to behave like a decent human being. Or to put it in the context of diplomacy, exceptional foreign service officers aspire to be superlative diplomats; superlative diplomats aspire to be modest statespersons.

Excerpts from the Open Forum[3]

Question (Q): You spoke of the leadership role of the Philippines in the region, but isn't the Philippines constrained by domestic politics?

Miguel R. Bautista (MRB): I think that the question of international leadership is partly an issue of national psychology and history. There was a point in our history—let's say until the late seventies—when the Philippines was at the forefront of regional leadership. But, of course, with the change of regime came a psychological aversion to the Philippines pursuing similar foreign policies. You can't blame the succeeding governments because many of the leaders suffered as a result of previous Philippine foreign policy—not necessarily from the Department of Foreign Affairs—but other elements of the foreign policy machinery.

I think it was natural in the early years after People Power for the Philippines to be more inward-looking. But I think that because this became the national psychological default, we ceded regional leadership to Malaysia and Indonesia. If you look at the ASEAN, there is an emergent Malay bloc. Now, as a significant country, does the Philippines really want to passively go along with the evolution of ASEAN as a Malay bloc? Or should the Philippines be more active in helping shape an ASEAN that better reflects our aspirations? So that's one consideration.

The other thing is the significant difference between profile and leadership. We had a good profile in the UN for many years but, with very few exceptions, I don't think that this was necessarily reflected in transformative leadership. This difference is something that we have to be very, very conscious about. Confusing the two might lead to paralysis.

Now, I would say the part of the exercise to try to reimagine a better future for the region from a Philippine perspective would be

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[3] The questions and answers have been edited for brevity and clarity.

to ask the questions about the continued relevance of institutions, especially those in our own region. I think I alluded to this in my presentation. In many real ways, blocs are crucial because individual countries find it almost impossible to stand up to the big countries. This is the reason why big countries want to "bilateralize" issues. They know that a bilateral approach is in their interest.

Q: There are a lot of normative statements in your presentation about what the Philippines should do. But most political leaders we have look at things with a very short-term horizon. The bureaucracy also basically stops working, maybe six months before the elections take place, and just waits for the next administration to give them a new set of instructions. So where would a leadership that would push the Philippines to act much more vigorously internationally come from?

MRB: I agree that my presentation is optimistic. I think that multilateralists need to be optimistic to be successful. You have to develop a long-term view, because progress in multilateralism is incremental and evolutionary. The truth of the matter is that, when you look at it from a historical or long-term perspective, the situation is actually not that bad. It's actually quite encouraging.

What do I mean? First, one the core messages of my presentation is that we in the Philippines should have outgrown our parochialism. Whether we like it or not, we cannot afford the comfort of the parochialism of the past, especially now when we are presented with one of those strategic opportunities to change the system. The Philippines—with its real interests, its real weight, and potential impact—has to transcend barriers to its engagements in order to secure the best possible future for itself. We don't have a choice—it's a question of the opportunity being there; an opportunity that may not present itself again for another half-century. We either overcome our parochialism now and take decisive action, or we continue with business as usual and face the inevitable negative consequences. It's as simple as that.

Now I've been around long enough to appreciate the role that institutions play in effecting change, but I'm also a big believer in

the Great Man theory of history and progress. You need a catalyst. You need genuine leadership, and in order to have genuine leadership, especially in a democracy, you have to think about the big picture, the common good, and have a long-term vision.

I don't want to sound overly optimistic. We don't have a very good track record of transformational leadership in this country, so I'm not making the case that we're going to succeed. But we're a democracy; we are responsible for our leadership. We elected these people over the years. And if we don't elect a better set of leaders, we are going to continue the cycle.

The point I am making is very simple: it's now or potentially never. The choice is ours. If we choose to, the factors are aligned in our favor. If we choose not to, then we will continue to be a third-rate power. Now, the question that I'm posing is whether being third-rate is good enough for the Filipino people. If we collectively agree that being third-rate is good enough for us—as someone who believes in democracy—who am I to complain?

On the other hand, if we believe that we deserve more, we will have to work hard to accomplish it. It's really a question of do we, as a Filipino people, feel we deserve to live up to our full potential? I think this is a possibility. But to achieve transformation, you must work hard at it. But more important, we must be smart about our future and focus our energy because it's going to be a struggle.

Q: Beyond the UN, wouldn't the crisis of multilateralism also apply to ASEAN?

MRB: I agree that ASEAN, APEC, and other institutions are part of this crisis in multilateralism, which leads to the question of their continued relevance. But I wouldn't be too harsh on ASEAN. I think a lot of people tend to underestimate the value of ASEAN and what it has accomplished. Let's not forget that in 1967, when ASEAN was created, most of the ASEAN core countries were either in active wars or on the verge of war with each other. Now the region has become perhaps the most dynamic and stable in the world.

But it is inevitable that as we transition to a different kind of world, the general questions that we are asking about the relevance of multilateral institutions would also apply to ASEAN. I think part of this line of questioning stems from the observation that the promise of the ASEAN Charter has not yet been fully fulfilled. I think there were a lot of expectations that ASEAN would somehow emerge as a more dynamic and robust institution, that ASEAN would not be paralyzed internally by the sort of dynamics that includes the impact of external powers' geopolitical considerations.

The truth of the matter is that such dynamics involve a spectrum of the application of soft power and hard power. And, let's face it, soft power is cheaper. If you can influence people through the exercise of soft power, you don't have to go into harder, more expensive, more dangerous means. Then people would tend to follow the gentler approach. That's why diplomats are employed. We are the application of soft power.

Q: What do you hope to see with the UNCTAD XV process?[4]

MRB: The UNCTAD XV process provides an opportunity to assert Philippine leadership and change things. One of the key issues, I think, that we are all grappling with in the international community, is how to reform the international economic system so it becomes more relevant to all of us.

In the multi-stakeholder process in the Philippines that began in 2019 to engage the UNCTAD XV process,[5] you have civil society,

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[4] UNCTAD XV was originally scheduled to be held in October 2020. It has been rescheduled to April 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[5] A part of this process was a multisectoral consultation organized by the UP CIDS Political Economy Program, Social Watch Philippines, and the UP Diliman College of Science on November 21 and 22, 2019. With representatives from various government agencies, civil society organizations, and members of the academe, the activity resulted in a document containing analyses and recommendations on priority trade and development issues. The document was submitted to the Department of Foreign Affairs and the UNCTAD in March 2020. Stakeholders are working together to update the recommendations for the Philippine and G-77 positions to reflect changes in the trade and development landscape due to COVID-19.

the academic sector, and government working together to formulate the Philippine position. The results of this process will be sent to the Philippine negotiators to help and support them in articulating and advancing the Philippine position.

The nature of this contribution will make all the difference. We may send a contribution that is basically a defense of the status quo. But if what we send is something very ambitious, very clear, and very transformational, then I think it opens up a whole world of new opportunities for the Philippine delegation as it enters into negotiations, not only in UNCTAD XV, but in other related multilateral processes. If you have a very clear conceptual framework for the world and you have a very good product tailored to guide negotiations in one's sphere, it is, I think, inevitable that many of these values—many of these ideas—will eventually spill over into other negotiations.

Q: What are the implications of the rise of China and other emerging powers?

MRB: I think you will agree with me that China bears watching not because it is big, but because it is smart. I do not know of any country today that has a longer-term view than China. There is this anecdote, perhaps apocryphal, that I think is a good representation of the Chinese outlook. Zhou Enlai was in Paris sometime in the late seventies and was asked about what he thought of the French revolution. He supposedly answered: "It's too early to tell."

China doesn't fit the mold of the traditional Western powers. China, at least as far as I can recall, has not had the sort of aggressive expansionism of the traditional colonial powers. I think this is part of its national character. I think, historically, its foreign policy initiatives throughout the millennia—and not only under the Chinese Communist Party—have been about bringing the world to China. I think this is a key psychological marker.

The other thing that's crucial is that the Chinese still see themselves as anchored in the Global South. I don't think they are defending their position as a developing country in the WTO only out of economic reasons. This is an opportunity for us. The Chinese think long-term

enough to know that the Global South is a useful mechanism when you're deflecting multilateral challenges. But when you're defending your interests, go bilateral.

Remember what I said about soft versus hard power? At the end of the day it's an economic decision. I would argue that in this day and age with the prosperity and economic interrelationships involved and system of global governance that has emerged, war is increasingly unattractive.

So, part of the opportunity for the Philippines is to engage the Chinese in a web of multilateral relationships that makes it unattractive for them to depart from accepted international norms of behavior. So, the implicit question is how can you deal with China? I think that part of the answer lies in multilateralism—putting together these sorts of webs. I use "web" here deliberately because it's sticky and can constrain action. So that's one. But the second is knowing that, if war is not really a viable option, then the scope to use more vigorous diplomatic means to defend your interests opens up.

The crisis in multilateralism presents an opportunity. It provides, I think, an opening for countries to take decisive action to give their people a new narrative. To say: look, the world has changed, we must change with it. This is our place in the world, this is what we will try to do.

This is partly what I tried to do today, which is to say look, the Philippines, like many countries, is in a process of transition. It is anchored in a world where change is accelerating. We don't see the future clearly. What we need is a new narrative. Because what motivates people is hope, and if the people lose hope, then you can have a general systemic breakdown. I would argue that if the Philippines is to avoid these sorts of upheavals, you do need a new narrative, a compelling reason for the country to rally. For the Philippines, it will be difficult. We are an archipelagic country with a lot of history and a lot of divisions. But again, it's not a question of "can we?" The question is "do we have a choice?" ■

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