The Future of Asia We Want: Ideas for the CICA Region

The end of the cold war ushered an era of unipolarity—characterized by the military, economic and political hegemony of the West. However, the reorganization of the global political economy and technological diffusion has led to the emergence of a more pluralistic international system—referred by Amitabh Acharya as *'Multiplex world'*.[1] A multiplex world, in Acharya's understanding, is a system of complex inter-dependence shaped by diverse array of state and non-state actors operating within multiple, often competing international orders. As opposed to a singular 'liberal international order', the 'Multiplex World System' could be characterized by multiplicity of approaches to international norms and governance.[2] As the center of gravity of global geopolitics is increasingly shifting towards the East, Asia is becoming the nucleus of the emerging Multiplex World. But Asia's ascent in the global economic ladder is not without problems. The continent is facing a multitude of economic, political and environmental challenges, which could potentially disrupt the social and economic progress. Hence, how Asia addresses these core challenges within a peaceful framework would define the future of humanity.

The 21st century has been termed by many as the 'Asian Century', as the continent has emerged as the growth engine of global economy and innovation. Decolonization and globalization have proven especially

[1] Acharya, Amitav. "After liberal hegemony: The advent of a multiplex world order." *Ethics & international affairs* 31, no. 3 (2017): 271-285.
[2] Ibid

advantageous for Asian nations, as they have given rise to new industrial hubs across the continent and lifted millions out of poverty. Even though there are regional disparities in terms of development, the success of Asian states in achieving relative social and economic progress cannot be denied. With the implementation of sweeping reforms, Asian countries have been able to reduce extreme poverty to below 5%, from above 22% in the year 2000.[3] On a broader scale, Asian economies play a pivotal role as major drivers of the global economy, accounting for 45% of the world's GDP.[4]

Despite numerous economic successes, challenges persist on the political front. Although economic development has closely interconnected Asian economies with the rest of the world, it has not eradicated geopolitical tensions. Territorial disputes and historical grievances continue to cast shadows on the horizon, posing potential obstacles to Asian nations' cooperation on critical global issues, such as Climate Change. Hence, collective cooperation on matters related to common interests becomes indispensable for Asian nations. In fact, they cannot afford to be uncooperative on these critical issues. However, in many ways, the existing multilateral forums and diplomatic approaches have failed to capture the complexities of disputes in Asia.

While Asia has the highest numbers of regional multilateral forums, many of these institutions face major constraints in addressing the long-standing historical disputes. The constraints lie not in the institution's lack of resources and capability but rather in the normative framework within which these institutions operate. The regional institutions function as 'intergovernmental forums', which means they offer space for 'state to state' or Track 1 diplomacy.

However, there are certain limitations associated with Track 1 diplomacy. Firstly, it provides limited political grounds for states to reach agreements on complex and contentious issues. Seasoned diplomats on both sides often fail to fully grasp the perspective of the other party, primarily due to their rigid

[3] "Society At a Glance: Asia/Pacific 2022", OECD *iLibrary* (2022), Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/87740c3b-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/87740c3b-en#:~:text=There%20has%20been%20marked%20progress,on%20average%20(Figure%204.1).
[4] "The Future is Asian", World Economics (2023), Available at: https://www.worldeconomics.com/Thoughts/The-Future-is-Asian.aspx

adherence to perceived notions of 'National Interests,' which can hinder fair dispute resolutions. Secondly, track 1 diplomacy tends to be driven by pre-established 'talking points' from both sides, which are typically rooted in the same conventional understanding of 'National Interests.' This creates an echo chamber effect, making it challenging for both parties to recognize the potential benefits of cooperation beyond their respective arguments. Furthermore, track 1 diplomacy tends to exclusively focus on state-centric perspectives. However, a plethora of other on-the-ground information may hold substantial relevance for resolution but often remains excluded from official discourse.

To overcome these limitations, two alternative conflict resolution and diplomatic mechanisms have emerged: Track 2 and Track 1.5. In the Track 2 approach, unofficial representatives from both parties engage in dialogue to seek consensus. Conversely, the Track 1.5 format incorporates participants from both official and unofficial backgrounds. However, these approaches come with their own set of limitations. In the Track 2 format, involving unofficial and non-state voices in discussions, there is no assurance that the recommendations will effectively reach policymaking circles. On the other hand, track 1.5, which incorporates unofficial representatives, often sees these participants in an unofficial capacity.[5] Lacking effective moderation to ensure discussions remain grounded in reality, such dialogues can easily veer off course and devolve into purely academic discussions.

Moreover, culture plays a major role diplomacy.[6] Asia is a diverse continent with diametrically different cultures and value-systems. The three major formats discussed above, have been developed keeping Western political thinking and cultural ethos in mind. Therefore, considering cultural perspectives, Western approaches to diplomacy may not necessarily align with the Asian context. Thus, the Asia needs a new normative framework of multilateral diplomacy, that would take into account the diverse cultural factors at play while also addressing the limitations associated with the three formats mentioned earlier.

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[5] Staats, Jennifer, Johnny Walsh, and Rosarie Tucci. "A Primer on Multi-Track Diplomacy: How Does It Work?" *US Institute of Peace, July* 31 (2019).

[6] Bolewski, Wilfired. "Diplomatic processes and cultural variations: The relevance of culture in diplomacy." *Whitehead J. Dipl. & Int'l Rel.* 9 (2008): 145.

The regional cooperation organizations in Asia would play the key role in this new framework of diplomacy. It would draw elements from Track 1, Track 2, and Track 1.5 formats—integrating the best practices within a 'Track 2.5' framework. The 'Track 2.5' would be guided by three main principles: Firstly, it will enable unofficial participants from both parties to actively engage in dialogue. Secondly, the official representative of a regional organization will serve as a facilitator or moderator during these discussions. Thirdly, the entire consultation process will adhere to a structured protocol encompassing timing, agenda, and resolution. The topic for discussion will be broken down into a series of agenda items, allowing participants from both sides to share their deliberations in a rolling basis with fixed timing. The dialogue moderator will ensure that the discussions stay on course based on established parameters. The moderators would combine the deliberations of the discussion in a working paper, which would then be disseminated to the official representatives of the member states through institutional channel.

Track 2.5 diplomacy could be seen as an 'Asian approach' to diplomatic engagement. This consultation format aims to strike a balance by incorporating expert insights from non-official participants while preserving the formal nature of the dialogue through the oversight of a regional organization. This moderation helps ensure that potential solutions to a given issue remain rooted in practicality. Regional organizations, being primarily inter-governmental institutions, are likely to be accepted by both parties as impartial moderators. Simultaneously, the working paper summarizing the deliberations would be given special emphasis.

Asia grapples with numerous unresolved political disputes that demand careful attention to maintain peace and regional integration. The Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) was founded with the aim of fostering interactions and confidence-building measures among Asian nations. Therefore, CICA could serve as an ideal platform to embrace the Track 2.5 format, offering a flexible and innovative mechanism for resolving disputes in the region.

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