

Headline: Twin Indian initiatives for PH membership

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Strategic affairs analysts are currently focused on great power competition, especially in the Indo-Pacific. But we are faced with other, equally consequential challenges. As we learned with COVID-19, neglecting such “non-traditional security issues” can have catastrophic consequences.

Sadly, multilateralism, the best way to address global challenges, is in crisis. Its flagship, the United Nations, is largely ineffective. The recent proliferation of plurilateral platforms, from G20 to the Quad, tell their own story.

India has always been a committed multilateralist. A UN founding member, it is the largest troop contributor to UN missions. Beyond the UN, India’s championing of Asian-African solidarity in the 1950s led to the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961.

However, if the Cold War years were largely about NAM’s passive strategy of avoiding great power dependencies, the current era demands a more action-oriented approach by developing countries.

In this context, two recent initiatives by India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), open new opportunities to revitalize pragmatic multilateralism. PM Modi has chosen two critical issues at the vortex of security and development: addressing climate change and surviving natural disasters.

Solar energy has moved center stage as the most effective means to meet growing energy demand while addressing climate change. Recent energy policies of almost all countries reflect this. For the Philippines, solar is projected to account for 50 percent of estimated renewable energy output by 2030.

This transition to a greener future will, however, not succeed unless the process offers an avenue for less-developed nations to participate actively. The renewable energy transition has to be based both on universal access and affordable rates.

This needs a platform that brings together all stakeholders: developed and developing countries, private and public companies, scientific research entities and social organizations, as well as national governments and international organizations.

The ISA was set up by India jointly with France on the sidelines of the COP21 in November 2015. Since then, nearly 90 countries have joined. Significant strides for operationalizing the ISA have been taken, with funding of over \$30 million from India alone. The ISA Secretariat has been set up. The first meeting of the ISA General Assembly in October 2018 and the first World Solar Technology Summit in September 2020 were key milestones.

The founding principle of ISA is to harmonize and aggregate demand for solar finance, technologies, innovation, and capacity-building to realize economies of scale, thereby rendering solar energy reliable and affordable. While all will benefit from the ISA platform for national purposes, support from members is purely voluntary.

No country recognizes the devastating impact of natural disasters more than the Philippines. Recent volcanic eruptions and typhoons causing tragic loss of human lives and damage to infrastructure underline the continuing threat.

Handling disasters requires a range of measures from weather forecasting to community level actions and post-disaster relief and rehabilitation. Most of these are best accomplished within national frameworks. However, there is a great role for international sharing of best practices in disaster prevention, management, and mitigation.

An emerging area of attention here is creation of resilient infrastructure. Given the enormous investments in creating infrastructure, estimated at a mind-boggling \$94 trillion over the next 25 years, it is essential for countries both to upgrade existing infrastructure and ensure that future infrastructure is disaster-resilient.

PM Modi launched the CDRI at the UN Climate Action Summit in September 2019. Like the ISA, CDRI is based on voluntary engagement and offers a hitherto unavailable multilateral forum to share best practices for a critical need. The initial response from both developed countries, including co-initiator United Kingdom, as well as a range of developing countries has been enthusiastic. Efforts are now underway to expand CDRI membership.

The Philippines has had a standing invitation to join the ISA. This was renewed during the Ministerial level Joint Commission in November 2020. At the meeting, External Affairs Minister of India Dr. S. Jaishankar also invited the Philippines to consider joining the CDRI. Given the Philippines' pivotal role in the region, and its own national needs both for solar energy as well as disaster management, we hope for an early decision by the Philippines to join these twin Indian multilateral initiatives, adding another facet to the thriving engagement between our vibrant Asian democracies.

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