

The multilateral triangle

The Biden administration's commitment to strengthen the rules-based order is laudable and it has no better partners than the EU and Asean. All three parties need to act fast.



Kishore Mahbubani

For *The Straits Times*

Bus rides can provide settings for great conversations, especially bus rides at major international conferences. In the egalitarian setting of a bus, the high and mighty can end up sitting with the hoi polloi.

So I once ended up sitting by chance next to a mighty gentleman who had once served as the chair of the National Intelligence Council of the United States. He had just heard me expound on the virtues of multilateralism, a cause I deeply believe in.

He said to me: "I can understand why a small state like Singapore supports multilateralism. It enhances the influence of small states. However, for a great power like the US, multilateralism is a great constraint."

I deeply appreciated his honesty. It captured well the ambivalence of the US towards multilateralism.

On the one hand, most of the 1945 rules-based world order that the world functions on today is the gift of Western leaders after World War II, especially American leaders and scholars.

Much of the content of contemporary international law comes from the work of US scholars (including great ones like Mr Louis Sohn and Professor Thomas Franck, both of whom I met in New York when I was serving as ambassador to the United Nations).

Indeed, Prof Franck, in his book *Judging The World Court*, notes that "in 1945, America seemed on the verge of decisive commitment to the multilateralist vision".

Yet, as indicated by the former chair of the National Intelligence Council, multilateralism has often been perceived as a major constraint on the US.

THE RIGHT TO START WARS

The biggest constraint has always been on the right of states to start wars.

Indeed, under the international law created by the adoption and ratification of the UN Charter in

1945, a state is entitled to go to war under only two circumstances: if it is either endorsed by the UN Security Council (UNSC) or if it is an act of self-defence.

This is why the US invasion of Afghanistan after the Sept 11, 2001 attacks was legal: It was endorsed by the UNSC and an act of self-defence. Operation Enduring Freedom, the American-led war on terror, was launched a month later (Oct 7) to stop the Taliban from providing a safe haven to the Al-Qaeda network responsible for the deadly attacks on the US.

By contrast, the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 wasn't legal since it wasn't endorsed by the UNSC or an act of self-defence.

Indeed, in the build-up to the war, I experienced one of the more dramatic moments in my life.

Just before the invasion, I had organised a brainstorming lunch in my New York apartment on the merits of the invasion. Most of the participants were sober, highly educated and upper-class American intellectuals. They normally stay calm. Yet, they reacted with apoplectic anger when Prof Franck asked: "What's the difference between the coming invasion of Iraq and Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939?" For a moment, I thought he was going to be lynched.

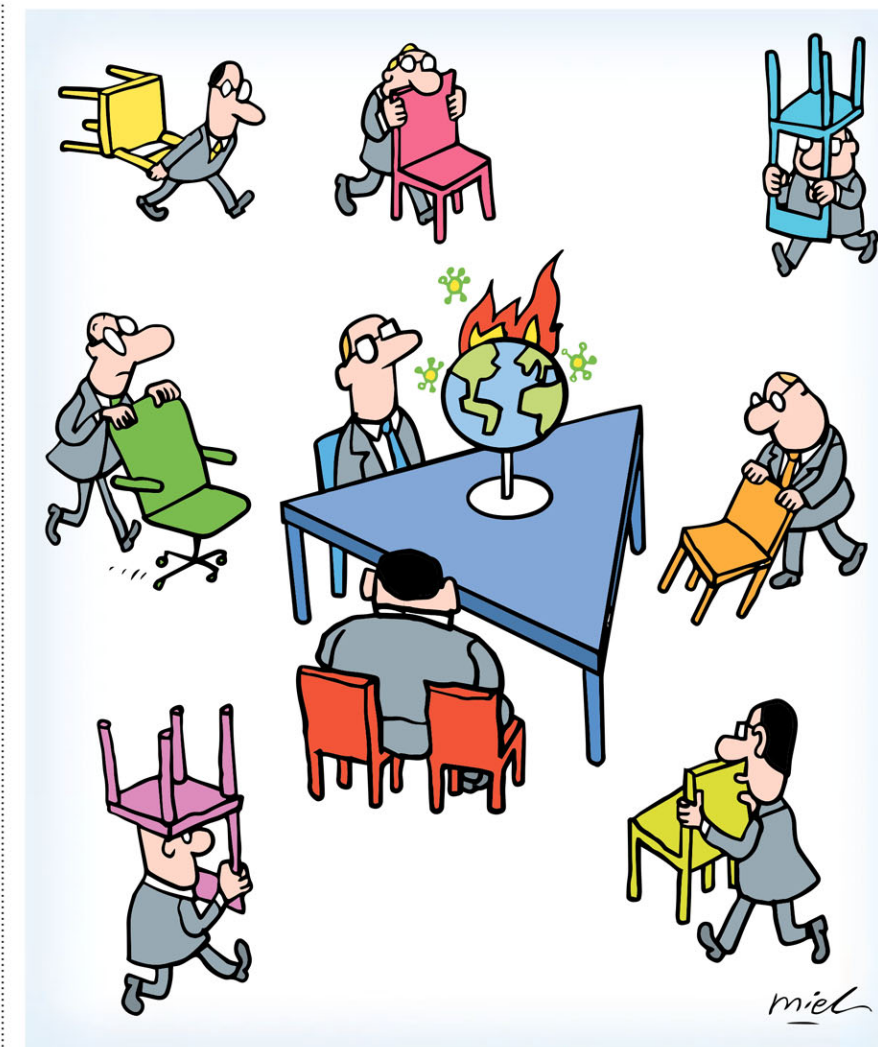
Yet, Prof Franck was only making an obvious point from the fundamental assumptions of the rule of law. Law doesn't discriminate between rich and poor, the mighty and the weak. A rule that applies to a small state applies equally to great powers.

Hence, when a great power invades Iraq, it certainly violates international law. This is why small states welcome multilateralism. This is also why the whole world should welcome the commitment of the Biden administration to strengthen the rules-based order. A rules-based order is better than an order where there's one rule for great powers and another for small states.

However, to succeed in its quest to strengthen the rules-based order, the Biden administration will need partners. The best partners would be the two beacons of multilateralism we have in our world today: the European Union and Asean.

WHY THE EU AND ASEAN?

Few in the world are aware that these two organisations are the most successful regional



multilateral organisations, performing much better than other regional organisations such as the Organisation of American States, the Gulf Cooperation Council or the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

Let me add, as an aside, that despite Asean's problems with Myanmar, a major challenge, Asean still outperforms all these other regional multilateral organisations, in delivering both peace and prosperity to its region.

In 2000, Japan's gross domestic product was eight times larger than that of Asean. Now it is only 1.5 times larger. No other regional organisation has grown as fast as Asean.

In international relations, personal relations matter as much as official relations. Hence, it helps a lot that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is a fluent French

The world is now rocked by two major challenges: the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change. Only global multilateral cooperation can deal with them. Hence, by dealing with these multilaterally, we will strengthen global multilateral impulses. However, if this is to happen, both the EU and Asean must act soon.

speaker who has developed a close personal relationship with Mr Emmanuel Macron, the President of France.

Among all the global leaders today, there is almost no other leader (with the possible exception of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who is as eloquent or as passionate in his defence of multilateralism as Mr Macron.

As he has said: "Multilateralism is not just an act of faith; it is an operational necessity. No country can overcome this challenge alone. International cooperation may be difficult, but it is objectively essential."

He has also said: "Multilateralism is the rule of law. It is exchange between peoples, the equality between us all. It is what allows us to build peace and address each of the challenges we face."

Asean has demonstrated its

commitment to multilateralism through its deeds. Indeed, virtually all the larger multilateral organisations or processes active in the larger East Asian region have either been created or supported by Asean.

One can make a veritable alphabet soup just by listing the acronyms of the many regional multilateral processes spawned, directly or indirectly, by Asean – including, for example, the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) (where Secretary Blinken spoke at recently); the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem); the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum; and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), just to name a few.

Given the extraordinary track record of the EU and Asean in championing multilateralism in words and deeds, the Biden administration could find no better partners to work with in trying to support the strengthening of the 1945 rules-based order.

NOT MUCH TIME

The world is now rocked by two major challenges: the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change. Only global multilateral cooperation can deal with them. Hence, by dealing with these multilaterally, we will strengthen global multilateral impulses.

However, if this is to happen, both the EU and Asean must act soon.

The year 2024 may seem distant but in the US presidential election cycle, it could be just around the corner. Many knowledgeable observers of the American political scene, including Mr Martin Wolf and Mr Edward Luce of the *Financial Times*, are warning that Mr Donald Trump remains a political force on the American scene.

It's not inconceivable for Mr Trump to win the next presidential election in 2024. Then the window of the US supporting multilateralism (even in an ambivalent fashion) would be slammed shut again.

Hence, while the window is still open, both the EU and Asean should seize the moment and try to strengthen as many global multilateral institutions – such as the World Health Organisation and the World Trade Organisation – as possible while President Biden and Mr Blinken are around. Time is of the essence. Let's get cracking.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Kishore Mahbubani, a veteran diplomat, is a distinguished fellow at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, and the author of *Has The West Lost It?* and *Has China Won?*