



The World Today

Darfur: A Portrait of Multilateralism's Failure?

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Multilateralism in the twentieth-century has provided the capacity of collective action to deal with issues such as *intrastate* conflict. Discussions among stakeholders serve as an attempt to solve global issues. In post World War international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), multilateralism has enjoyed popular usage. With the new millennium however, multilateral negotiations have lost its effectiveness as the most important and viable tool in dealing with conflict. A prime example is the situation in the Darfur region of Sudan.

Multilateralism is the formal engagement of three or more actors with a vested interest in a situation. It involves various actors such as states, international organizations e.g. UN, non-state structures, the media and civil society. These stakeholders meet to agree upon an action that brings resolution to the issue. The stakeholders may discuss the prevention and management of acts and determine whether any action intended or committed has contravened international law.

Multilateralism has failed miserably as a response to the Darfur crisis. The reaction of the international community towards Sudan and the ongoing crisis in Darfur is a tangled web of power politics, energy geopolitics, differing perceptions of humanitarian concerns at the state and regional levels; and of the causes and workings of the armed conflicts in the Sudan. It should be appreciated that each actor has different agendas. These biases are perhaps the primary inherent inefficiency of multilateralism.

The current conflict in Darfur has a long history and has developed along racial and ethnic lines. It places at risk long standing albeit fragile patterns of co-existence. A number of previously neutral ethnic groups are now positioning themselves along the Arab/African divide, aligning and cooperating with either the rebel movements or the government and its allied militia.

Along with the thousands of deaths due to the conflict and the resulting disease and malnutrition, more than a million people have become displaced in Darfur with over 200,000 crossing the border into neighbouring country of Chad. It is believed that Sudanese government sponsored forces are responsible for hundreds of indiscriminate and targeted attacks on civilians in Darfur amounting to serious violations of both international human rights and humanitarian law.

Arguably intervention in Darfur has been slow. Several factors have been identified as causes for this slip such as the inaccessibility of the area, lack of access by

international humanitarian agencies, journalists and other observers, and the news blackout imposed by government officials in the capital of Khartoum. On deeper observation it may be noted that for many observers, the Darfur crisis is an unhelpful distraction from the ongoing peace negotiations aimed at settling a twenty-year conflict in southern Sudan.

There has been a growing tide of disenchanted news reports surrounding conflict in Sudan particularly the role of the UN. However, no conclusions can be made on whether the UN has completely failed to address the Darfur crisis. Former US Ambassador John Bolton is on record saying that there has been enough talk and that immediate action should be taken on the issue. For the UN, the integral factor of consensus is crucial as varying opinions of those involved may affect the outcome of multilateral engagement.

Multilateralism appears to be under challenge. It is unfortunate that the UN Security Council is dissuaded to confront the Sudanese government. Given their individual interest within the region, it comes as no surprise that they have pursued a strategy of “sustained stagnation” either individually or collectively. Each Council member has notable interest within the region particularly France, Russia and the People’s Republic of China. Noticeably, China has come under attack for its non-action. It is argued that China could influence the resolution of the conflict in the Sudan due its tangible trade and investment affiliation within the region.

The achievement of effective and effective multilateralism is based on the understanding of the role of the international community. The engagement in multilateralism as a response to the Darfur crisis has highlighted a grave misapprehension of what is at the core of multilateralism. It has failed to produce a reasonable response to the humanitarian crisis.

It is argued that the response in Darfur has been governed by the “politics of convenience”. The protocol that governs the process of multilateralism has been deemed by many to be indispensable in order to endorse conflicting state interests at the expense of civilians caught in the crossfire.

Power remains at the heart of multilateralism. The success of multilateralism relies on the power of the international community to reach a resolution and the inherent will to do so. This is clearly evident in the international response to the Darfur crisis.