

The United Nations in Global Governance: Rebalancing Organized Multilateralism for Current and Future Challenges

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The world has changed enormously since the creation of the United Nations. There are four times as many state actors, a correspondingly greater number and proportion of nonstate actors, and a tremendous diversity in the types of state and nonstate actors compared to 1945. There has been a matching proliferation in the number, nature and types of threats to national security and world peace alike. Consequently, the growing number and types of actors in world affairs have to grapple with an increasing number, range and complexity of issues in an increasingly networked, deeply intertwined but also more fragmented world.

The security problematique has morphed from defusing and defeating national security threats to risk assessment and management and being prepared – normatively, organizationally and operationally – to cope with strategic complexity and uncertainty. That being the case, the overwhelming challenge is to structure the institutions of international governance such as to make them more robust – so that they can withstand both exogenous and endogenous shocks; resilient – so that they can bounce back when they do buckle in the face of some shocks; and flexible and adaptable – so that they can deal with the rapidly changing nature and source of threats, including black swans.

The Importance of Multilateralism

Multilateralism refers to collective, cooperative action by states – when necessary, in concert with nonstate actors – to deal with common problems and challenges when these are best managed collaboratively at the international level. Areas such as maintaining international peace and security, economic development and international trade, human rights, functional and technical cooperation, and the protection of the environment and sustainability of resources require joint action to reduce costs and bring order and regularity to international relations. Such problems cannot be addressed unilaterally with optimum effectiveness. This rationale persists because all states, as well as some nonstate actors, face mutual vulnerabilities and intensifying interdependence. They will benefit from and are thus required to support global public goods. Even the most powerful states cannot achieve security nor maintain prosperity and health as effectively acting unilaterally or in isolation. We have seen this demonstrated again and again, and so the international system rests on a network of treaties, regimes, international organizations and shared practices that embody common expectations, reciprocity and equivalence of benefits.

In an interdependent, globalized and networked world, multilateralism will continue to be a key aspect of international relations. Limitations do and always will exist. The utility and

effectiveness of formal multilateral institutions are, inevitably, conditioned and constrained by the exigencies of power. Powerful states may work through or around multilateral institutions at their pleasure and selectively. Some issues may defy multilateral approaches. Changing normative expectations may cast doubt on the constitutive values of specific international institutions. But the theoretical rationale of institutionalism – that all states benefit from a world in which agreed rules and common norms bind the behaviour of all actors – is broadly intact and indisputable.

All actors depend upon multilateralism and the underwriting of regularity and public goods in the international system. But if they are to remain viable, international organizations and the values of multilateralism embedded in them must be reconstituted in line with 21st century principles of governance and legitimacy. Just as importantly, they must be capable of addressing contemporary challenges effectively. This may involve moving beyond the original roots of multilateralism, reassessing the values on which multilateralism is based and promoted, and recognizing that contemporary and prospective challenges call for more agility, nimbleness, flexibility, adaptability and anticipatory rather than always reactive solutions.

At the centre of the existing multilateral order is the United Nations. Of course one part of the United Nations is an international bureaucracy with many failings and flaws and a forum often used for finger pointing, not problem solving. Too often has it demonstrated a failure to tackle urgent collective action problems due to institutionalized inability, incapacity or unwillingness. Yet the world body remains the embodiment of the international community, the focus of international expectations and the locus of collective action as the symbol of an imagined and constructed community of strangers. Moreover, the UN record since 1945 demonstrates an under-appreciated capacity for policy innovation, institutional adaptation and organizational learning, for example with respect to peacekeeping missions.

That said, without continual structural and procedural reforms, the legitimacy and performance deficits will accumulate and there will be an intensifying crisis of confidence in the world's system of organized multilateralism centred on the United Nations. The values and institutions of formalized multilateralism as currently constituted are neither optimally effective nor legitimate. The chief multilateral organizations do not meet current standards of representivity, consent, juridical accountability, rule of law, broad participation, and transparency – and therefore political legitimacy. This is an acute problem precisely because international organizations play an increasingly important and intrusive role in people's lives. The more this happens, the more people will realize that multilateralism is value-laden, connoting fundamental social and political choices regarding the balance between the market and equity, human rights, governance, and democracy. A range of public policy decisions and practices have been transferred to the international level, raising a number of pressing normative challenges to the Westphalian foundations of multilateralism as citizens become rights holders and states are deemed to have responsibilities of sovereignty.

That is, the challenge to the values and institutions of multilateralism results not merely from any particular distribution of power, but also from systemic factors like the nature of the state, the nature of power, the nature of security and threats to international security, the actors who drive security and insecurity, and the global norms that regulate the international behaviour of state and nonstate actors alike.

Repositioning the United Nations for Tomorrow's World

The centre of the multilateral order cannot hold if the power and influence embedded in international institutions is significantly misaligned with the distribution of power in the real world. A global financial, political and moral rebalancing is currently underway. From 2000 to 2010, the share of global GDP of the world's three leading emerging economies – Brazil, China and India – doubled and their share of world trade almost tripled. Their dynamism and optimism is in marked contrast to Europessimism.

As power and influence seep out of the US-led trans-Atlantic order and migrate towards Asia, Latin America and eventually also Africa, how and by who will the transition to a new system of structuring world affairs be managed? Conversely, how successfully and speedily will the newly empowered big players of the Global South manage their transformation from occasional spoilers to responsible globalizers?

The world is interdependent in areas as diverse as financial markets, infectious diseases, climate change, terrorism, nuclear peace and safety, product safety, food supply and water tables, fish stocks and ecosystem resources. In addition to their potential for provoking interstate military conflicts, these are all drivers of human insecurity because of the threat they pose to individual lives and welfare.

The challenge of global governance – governance for the world to produce order, stability and predictability even in the absence of a world government – is sixfold:

1. The evolution of international organizations to facilitate robust global responses lags behind the emergence of collective action problems;
2. The most pressing problems – nuclear weapons, terrorism, pandemics, food, water and fuel scarcity, climate change, agricultural trade – are global in scope and require global solutions: problems without passports in search of solutions without passports. But the policy authority and legal capacity for coercive mobilization of the required resources for tackling them remain vested in states;
3. There is a disconnect between the distribution of decision-making authority in international institutions and the distribution of military, diplomatic and economic power in the real world;
4. There is also a disconnect between the concentration of decision-making authority in intergovernmental forums and the diffusion of decision-shaping

influence among nonstate actors like markets, corporations and civil society actors;

5. There is a mutually undermining gap between legitimacy and efficiency. Precisely what made the G8 summits unique and valuable – informal meetings between a small number of the world's most powerful government leaders behind closed doors on a first name basis, without intermediaries and with no notes being taken – is what provoked charges of hegemonism, secrecy, opaqueness, and lack of representation and legitimacy. The very feature that gives the United Nations its unique legitimacy, universal membership, makes it an inefficient body for making, implementing and enforcing collective decisions;
6. During the Cold War, the main axis around which world affairs rotated was East–West. Today this has morphed into a North–South axis. The Copenhagen conference on climate change was suboptimal in outcome in part because of the colliding worldviews of the global North and South.

The net result of the sixfold governance deficits is to disempower, disable and incapacitate joint decision-making for solving collective action problems. As a corollary, the fundamental challenge for the international community is how to restructure and reform the United Nations in order to reposition it at the centre of collective efforts to manage current and anticipated global problems over the next quarter and half century.

The paradigmatic institutions of global governance have been the G8 and the United Nations. The G6/7/8, set up in 1975, was always a narrow club of self-selected countries and, as such, never possessed either electoral or representative legitimacy. Conversely, its many real accomplishments notwithstanding, the United Nations has struggled to be relevant and effective. Both the G8 and the UN Security Council had become structurally obsolete by the turn of the century. Looking at the two together, unlike China, Brazil and India are not permanent members of the UN Security Council. Unlike Japan, China and India are not members of the G8. It is difficult to imagine any real contemporary global problem that can be addressed with the requisite degree of effectiveness and legitimacy without the active participation of all three Asian giants at the top table of decision-making.

The emergence of the G20 spoke powerfully to the need for an alternative global steering group to draw in all the world's powerful actors as responsible managers of the world order as stakeholders, not merely rule-takers. Potentially, the G20 offered the best crossover point between legitimacy, efficiency and effectiveness. Its purpose would be to steer policy consensus and coordination, and to mobilize the requisite political will to drive reform and address global challenges while navigating the shifting global currents of power, wealth and influence. But in order to be legitimate, it still must work with and not independently of or against the United Nations.

Unfortunately, what began as a major institutional innovation with the first G20 leaders' summit in 2008 has fallen victim to aimless meandering and a rhetoric-action gap where

photo-ops have displaced global leadership. The group's identity has been diluted and its effectiveness compromised. Far from being a streamlined executive body for global governance, the G20 is arguably already bloated and unwieldy.

A tripartite division of labour is necessary:

- Only technical experts – including national and international civil servants – can do the necessary thorough groundwork by way of advance studies, pre-negotiations, and identification of options with attendant costs and benefits;
- Only heads of governments personally engaged and with sufficient familiarity with and trust in one another can focus and deliver on the tradeoffs as a steering group on behalf of the world;
- Only universal organizations, led by the UN system, can authenticate and legitimize the grand bargains.

Thus the real challenge is how to retain the positive attributes of the existing nodes of global governance while shedding their pathologies. One answer is to configure and operate either the G20 or the United Nations as the hub of networked global governance. Whichever of the two succeeds in the task first will enjoy a considerable advantage in positioning itself at the centre of the new multilateral order.

The United Nations is the symbol and core of global governance but lacks the attributes of a world government. It must continue to lead efforts for the creation and maintenance of a rules-based order that specifies both the proper conduct to be followed by all state and nonstate international actors and mechanism and procedures for reconciling differences among them. The United Nations will continue to play a central role in the development of global governance through filling five gaps in all issue-areas: knowledge (empirical and theoretical), normative, policy, institutional, and compliance (monitoring and enforcement).

For many, globalization is both desirable and irreversible for having underwritten a rising standard of living and material prosperity throughout the world for several decades. For some, however, globalization is the soft underbelly of corporate imperialism that plunders and profiteers on the back of rampant consumerism and almost brought the world to its knees in 2008–09. There is growing divergence in income levels between countries and peoples. The deepening of poverty and inequality – prosperity for a few countries and some people, marginalization and exclusion for many – has implications for social and political stability among and within states. The rapid growth of global markets has not been accompanied by the parallel development of social and economic institutions to ensure balanced, inclusive and sustainable growth. Labour rights have been less sedulously protected than capital and property rights, and global rules on trade and finance are less than equitable. Even before the global financial crisis, many developing countries were worried about the adverse impact of globalization on economic sovereignty, cultural integrity and social stability. “Interdependence” among unequals is

tantamount to the dependence of some on international markets that function under the dominance of others. The financial crisis confirmed that absent effective regulatory institutions, markets, states and civil society can be overwhelmed by rampant transnational forces. It also raised questions of the roles of international financial institutions and ratings agencies – with their known proclivity to insist on austerity and reduced spending for cutting deficits instead of looking to fostering economic growth as the means to raise public revenues – in dictating policy to elected governments.

Globalization has also let loose the forces of “uncivil society” and accelerated the transnational flows of terrorism, human and drug trafficking, organized crime, piracy, and pandemic diseases. The notion that endless liberalization, deregulation and relaxation of capital and border controls (except for labour) will assure perpetual self-sustaining growth and prosperity has proven to be delusional. For developing countries, lowering all barriers to the tides of the global economy may end up drowning much of local production. But raising barriers too high may be futile or counterproductive. Where lies the golden middle?

No other body can tackle these pathologies more effectively, with greater legitimacy, lesser transaction and compliance costs, and higher comfort levels for most countries as their organization, than the United Nations system.

Structural and Procedural Reforms

How can the United Nations be recalibrated to rise to the new and emerging challenges?

Most attention on structural reform in the UN system has been focussed on the Security Council. It is unrepresentative in both permanent and elected membership, unanswerable to the peoples of the world, unaccountable to the General Assembly, not subject to judicial oversight, and yet has betrayed the high hopes placed in it in 1945. With respect to the primary responsibility being vested in it, of maintaining international peace and security, there were two requirements: that states would not resort to the use of force unilaterally, but would come together to use force collectively when ordered to do so by the security Council. The historical record since 1945 shows that those resorting to the use of force unilaterally need fear Security Council censure and punishment only rarely, while those who need international military assistance cannot rely on the Security Council for prompt and effective help. Given the changing nature of armed conflicts and the fact that civilians now comprise the overwhelming victims of conflict-related violence, disease and starvation, reliable and predictable protection of civilians from conflict-related grave harm is the litmus test of the UN’s credibility as the security provider.

In addition to a better permanent membership that reflects today’s power balance, the Security Council must also be more representative of a broader constituency of interests

in its elected members. One possibility might be to adopt or adapt the IMF's constituency system of representation.

One of the best ways to empower the UN's member states is to empower the General Assembly as the only plenary UN body. The UN Security Council is the most important UN organ and its geopolitical centre of gravity. But as it progressively expanded its powers and reach, so it steadily constricted the role and relevance of the General Assembly. The United Nations derives its unique legitimacy and its unmatched convening power from its universal membership; the only UN body in which all UN member states come together is the General Assembly. That should be a major source of its authority and legitimacy. But the very same universality makes the General Assembly a suboptimal organ for efficient decision-making.

One solution to the conundrum lies in capacitating the office of the President of the General Assembly. One concrete example of institutional innovation would be to create a new post of Science Adviser to the President of the UN General Assembly. The modern world is pervasively influenced by science and technology in myriad ways on a daily basis. Similarly, international organizations touch upon human and social activity every day in countless little and not so little ways. It has become increasingly important to bring these two facets of human life together through appropriate governance arrangements that will put science and technology at the service of humanity without borders. That is, science, technology and innovation for human development for all will not simply happen but must be made to happen through global governance. This in turn presents an opportunity for the United Nations, as the custodian of the Global Agenda, to reclaim relevance with most member states and "the peoples" of the world, and, within the United Nations, for the General Assembly to reassert leadership in an important dimension of the Global Agenda. This can be done with the creation of a new post of Science Adviser to the President of the United Nations General Assembly, and for a Knowledge Compact to be among the early priorities for the Science Adviser that would set out the principles governing the global exchange of science.

The question of the most legitimate method of choosing the chief executives of international organizations – from the heads of the World Bank and the IMF to the UN Secretary-General – can no longer be avoided. As we have seen in recent times, the leakage of legitimacy of the CEO can quickly translate into ineffectiveness of performance of the institution itself.

Article 97 of the UN Charter says that the Secretary-General "shall be appointed by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council." But the selection process is not specified above and beyond this vague formulation. Instead it was adopted by the General Assembly in 1946. The General Assembly could just as easily change the terms and conditions of the appointment so as to make the Secretary-General less subservient to the Security Council, for example through a non-renewable single term of office of seven years. It could also use its power of appointment to provide substantial

input into the selection beyond rubber-stamping the choice made by the Security Council, whose overriding motto is: offend no permanent member. There are many possibilities. The key point is that attention needs to be given to this now, immediately after the Secretary-General has been renewed, in order to detach consideration of the issue from the immediacy of an impending selection.

The American revolutionaries defined tyranny as the fusion of legislative, executive and judicial powers in one authority. There is some risk that the UN Security Council may progressively approximate such a tyrannical fusion of powers as it becomes more active and assertive. To match the growing powers of the Security Council there is a matching growing need for an independent constitutional check on the world's only all-powerful law enforcement executive body. The broader UN community must manage the UN's most critical bilateral relationships without compromising the UN's independence and integrity by appeasing any one or more of the P5.

Procedurally, the consensus and majoritarian basis of decision-making of some international organizations has also come into question. According to the existing rules of many international organizations, the status quo of no action is an acceptable outcome if agreement to act cannot be reached through consensus. But while this may be acceptable to member states, it is less and less tolerable to vast numbers of peoples in the face of genocide, terrorism, nuclear apocalypse, and climate change. For many observers, international organizations that are rendered paralyzed, even if following proper rules of procedure, then their helplessness to deal with the most pressing problems makes them illegitimate. That is, their procedural legitimacy contributes to the erosion of their performance legitimacy.

UN Security Council decision-making procedures may be flawed and defective, but at least they are regulated and subject to international oversight and are therefore preferable to unilateral action. For multilateral enforcement action to be effective, it must be based on a unity of purpose and action in the international community so as to avoid fracturing the existing consensus. For collective enforcement action to be equitable, it must balance the competing interests among the many constituencies that make up the international community and avoid privileging the interests and viewpoints of one over the others. To achieve freedom from fear, citizens must be assured that national authorities with the legal monopoly on the means of violence will not unleash the agents and instruments of violence on the people; and states must be assured that the most powerful will aim to settle differences of opinion around the negotiating table and not on the point of tank turrets, helicopter gunships and missiles – let alone nuclear warheads. When countries disagree on the substance of policy, they must agree on rules and procedures for resolving differences by peaceful means.

Multilateral institutions must recognize and involve nonstate actors on the basis of criteria that ensure their legitimacy and effectiveness. In the areas of social and economic welfare and humanitarianism in particular, nonstate actors have become integral and

essential components of multilateral action. Twenty-first century multilateralism cannot be confined therefore to relationships among states but must reflect the plurality of international relations, including the key roles of nonstate actors. By the same token, NGOs themselves must acknowledge, and act on the acknowledgment, that they are now oftentimes actors and participants in the global policy process. With influence on decisions come responsibility for the consequences and distributional impacts of the decisions. Similarly, the for-profit private sector too must take a greater interest in issues of international governance and pay its due share of the costs of the provision of global public goods.

Conclusion

The survival and vitality of international organizations depend on two factors: the capacity to change and adapt and the quality of their governance. Based on human solidarity across borders and transcending national perspectives, the United Nations provides and manages the framework for bringing together the world's leaders to tackle the pressing problems of the day for the survival, development and welfare of all peoples, everywhere. Yet multilateralism is under unprecedented challenge, from arms control to climate change, international criminal justice and the use of military force overseas. At such a time, it is especially important to reaffirm the UN's role as the principal embodiment of the principle of multilateralism and the main forum for its pursuit. For it remains our best and only hope for unity-in-diversity in which global problems require multilateral solutions. It is the embodiment of the international community and the custodian of an internationalized human conscience. It represents the idea that unbridled nationalism and the raw interplay of power must be mediated and moderated in an international framework of rules and norms. This is what makes the United Nations the centre for harmonizing the ever-present national interests and forging the elusive international interest.

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This paper draws and builds on the following works:

Ramesh Thakur, *The United Nations, Peace and Security: From Collectively Security to the Responsibility to Protect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

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