

THE UNITED NATIONS AT FIFTY: ADJUSTING THE MULTILATERALISM SYSTEM

(SEGUNDA DE DOS PARTES)

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Abstract. *This paper is a brief examination of the adjustment which the UN system has been undergoing in an attempt to remain a relevant actor on the multilateral stage. The discussion of the process of adjusting the UN multilateral system to a changing global environment is done within the context of the major UN reform proposals and positions that have coined the political debate among the primary actors involved in the reform process.*



II. The state of the UN at the end of the cold war

While the end of the Cold War may have ushered in a "new chapter in the history of the UN" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992-93: 89) questions persist about the ability of the organization to respond to the increasing demands and challenges given its limited resources,

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its internal financial and administrative problems, and its structural deficiencies (Knight, 1994). Further complicating the issue is the penchant for most states, including the security council's permanent five members, to overload the UN's agenda while at the same time denying the organization the necessary wherewithal to carry out its missions. One author has labeled the result of this – "fainthearted multilateralism" (Risse-Kappen, 1994: 2).

The resources needed to cope with the expanded global security exigencies are clearly dwindling and this is expected to continue as long as the economic recession in member governments persists (Barton, 1994: 6) and as long as they continue to direct their resources to building military industrial complexes. The total UN budget for 1992 was approximately \$5.4 billion compared with the

roughly \$1 trillion of the world's annual military expenditures.⁹ As of 31 January 1994 arrangements to the UN regular budget totaled US\$1,315 million and the outstanding amount in the UN peacekeeping budget was US\$1,437 million.¹⁰

Financial problems aside, the biggest problem for the UN during this time of transition, however, is that it is still operating within the framework of the constitutive principles upon which it was based at its initial moment and, as a consequence, it now increasingly appears as "a decision frozen in time." In addition, as the earlier evidence shows, the majority of UN's change efforts to date has tended to be of a reflexive adaptive or incremental reformist nature, precisely because a) there is a general reluctance within the organization to engage in the kind of learning exercise which questions the underlying premi-

9. It is estimated that current world military spending could finance the UN (presumably at the current rate in which it is funded) for close to the next 185 years. See Rourke, 1993: 325.

10. Figures provided to the author by the UN Bureau of International Organizations, Department of State, Washington, DC. April 1994.

ses upon which the organization has been based since 1945, and b) most of the member states and individuals within the UN secretariat are hesitant to embrace the kind of purposive transformative change that may be required if the UN is to have any relevance in a post modern era since this might cause a major disequilibrium in the UN system.

1. Understanding the context of the debate concerning UN reform

The history of UN organizational change is one of few successes and many daunting failures.

Many of the failures have been due to ideological conflicts between member states from the North and the South, the inability of the members of the organization to reach a consensus on what ails it and on what needs to be done to correct the situation. In addition, much of the reform agenda's emphasis has been placed on managerial, administrative and structural measures aimed at making the organization more efficient and effective, rather than on the more important issue of making it more relevant to changing realities in the international system. Clearly, the failures to bring about macro institutional reforms in the UN raises serious questions about the organization's ability to learn and to implement really far-reaching and transformative changes.

Because of its predominately western-oriented, technocratic and incrementalist bias, the dominant 'reformist' approach to organizational change in the UN is suspect to the charge that it places the western states and organizational technocrats at a distinct advantage. For that reason, it has been increasingly challenged by emerging counter-hegemonic positions which place the focus of organizational change on delivery systems, equitableness, fairness and justice, and on adapting the UN system to changing requirements of the globe, if only in limited issue areas (Meltzer,

1978: 993-1018). Most of the recent reformist analyses have however tended to revert to the traditional rationalistic approach which, in most cases, accept rather uncritically the primary existing structures of the UN system as well as its initial Charter goals. In other words, they are to a great degree firmly planted within a traditional approach to evolving multilateralism.

The dominance of a primarily Western, technocratic approach to change seems to be stifling the system's vitality and curbing, to some extent, its innovativeness and capacity to make needed adjustments in the face of new challenges. Further complicating the issue is the penchant for most states, including the Security Council's permanent five members, to overload the UN's agenda while at the same time denying the organization the necessary wherewithal to carry out its missions.

The biggest problem for the UN during this time of transition, however, is that it is still operating within the framework of the constitutive principles upon which it was based at its initial moment and, as a consequence, it now increasingly appears as "a decision frozen in time." In addition, as mentioned earlier, the majority of UN's change efforts to date has tended to be of a reflexive adaptive or incremental reformist nature. If we are to believe the combined analysis of recent scholars who have tackled the issue of UN reform within the broader historical context of changing multilateralism, the fifty-year old UN system may be "unreformable" (Smouts in Schechter, 1996: 4) and may now be left with two basic choices: dissolution or succession.

III. The direction of future UN institutional adjustment: from tinkering to transformation

Given the persistence of the idea that the fate of humankind depends on

state/societal collaboration and cooperation around common security issues, dissolving the UN can be considered nothing more than "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." As several commentators have noted in the past, the elimination of the UN today may only result in the reinvention of the wheel tomorrow. This being considered, it therefore makes much sense to utilize the current propitious and transitional environment to reflect on what changes are needed for the world body to become a relevant instrument of multilateralism in the twenty-first century and beyond.

This task requires much more than incremental tinkering with organizational charts, shifting financial envelops, reordering bureaucratic priorities, downsizing headquarters and field operations, streamlining managerial and administrative procedures, or oiling the intergovernmental machine. While such strategies are deemed important by several member-state representatives within the UN system, they have generally resulted in a concentrated focus on "reformist" prescriptions that prove to be too limited and narrow in scope, as well as very superficial and short term in vision and effect.

While it will be important to continue to deal with the immediate or short-term issues of "reform" within the UN, it is perhaps more important at this critical juncture to adopt a longer-term adaptation agenda (and strategy) that focuses on deciphering what the needs of international society are, and on developing ways in which the state and societal institutional mechanisms can be adjusted to meet those needs. Immediate political issues which generally engage the responsibilities of states will have to share the stage with longer-term structural issues which tend to depend to a proportionately greater extent on a broader range of societal groups and

social forces. Thus a mix of state and societal action will be necessary if the UN is to adapt successfully to the emerging conditions of the post modern era.

The major problem, is that the UN system is still very much a state-centric institution which has made little accommodation for actors from civil society. Furthermore, considering the nature of the power relations currently governing the reform process in the UN system, any "successful" reform effort would most likely result in entrenching the status quo. The basic dilemma facing the organization at the moment is that very little in the way of reform can be done without the United States. However, with a Republican majority in the US Congress and a Democratic President in the White House, US policy in this area is unpredictable at best. The US is also reluctant at this time to commit the kind of resources that might inject new life into this multilateral institution. The consequence of the above is that most of the proposals for UN reform remains in the category of "good ideas" that lack political substance to support them.¹¹

Conclusion: Toward a Critical Approach to Change in the UN

Given the rapid changes we have witnessed since the end of the Cold War and the evidence that the reform within the UN is problematic, perhaps it is now time to challenge the traditional neo-liberal institutionalist thinking by adopting a more critical position on the role of multilateral institutions in world affairs. A critical theory of multilateralism would be one that emphasizes the importance of analyzing that nexus between evolving global order and changes to the concrete manifestations of the multilateral process (i.e. to the institutions and organizations that engage in multilateral activity).¹²

Advocates of this approach will first ask, "what are the ways in which international society (and global order) is changing" and "do we have the correct institutional structures and arrangements to deal with the new demands that emerge from such changes?" This approach conceives of the multilateral process as a *longue durée* historical one in which the UN system represents only the most recent universalist attempt¹³ at institutionalizing a particular form of world order; viz. the immediate post-1945 world order.¹⁴ In accordance with this critical view, the UN system cannot be treated as a given. Its institutional arrangements must be considered relevant only for a specified period



and must, inevitably, be adapted, modified or perhaps even radically transformed over time as material circumstances change or as prevailing meanings, practices and purposes are challenged by a new intersubjective consensus.

According to this critical view of multilateralism, therefore, multilateral institutions, like the UN system, if they are to remain relevant, must be viewed as historical open systems in the sense that they are necessarily affected by conditions of their broader, as well as task, environment. However, they do not receive new demands and challenges from those environments as "empty vessels." They embody and to a large degree tend to perpetuate the relationships of power

and understanding of world order at given historical junctures. In this sense, the UN system is a by-product of the practices of realist "power politics" and "embedded liberalism" that governed the immediate post-1945 period, as well as an outcrop of the broader phenomenon of modernity out of which those realist and liberal ideas emerged. That particular institutional expression of world order acts as a limitation and constraint on the future potential and possibilities of this organization.

Once international society changes, however, so will be the pressure on the UN system to reform and adapt its processes and structures to accommodate such changes. And, it is also possible that changes in world order could open up windows of opportunity for the UN system to be transformed or significantly altered. But perhaps more promising efforts at meeting the needs of international society may be found outside the UN system by examining the ways in which transnationally-linked groups

11. This point was made to me by Robert Cox in written correspondence.
12. The term "institutions" is used here to signify the "broadly understood and accepted ways of organizing particular spheres of social action". Thus, examples of institutions could include anything from marriage, the nuclear family, the state, diplomacy, rules of international law, and formal organizations. See Cox, 1992: 137.
13. Alternative conceptions of how the world can be organized include imperial hierarchy, unilateralism, bilateralism and regionalism.
14. 'World order' "designates an historically specific configuration of power of whatever kind". In this usage, "world order" is "neutral as regards the nature of the entities that constitute power" in global relations. See Cox, 1992: 161.

in civil society are trying to confront global problems using non-traditional multilateral methods. Future examination of this "new" multilateralism may yet inject new life into the neo-liberal institutionalist position, but it could also dismantle the very foundation upon which this school of thought is built.

The challenge for the next fifty years is for international relations scholars and practitioners to move beyond neo-liberal institutional thinking so that they can contemplate the possibility of building a third generation multilateral institutions. This does not necessarily have to involve the dismantling of the existing multi-

lateral system. It could quite conceivably entail the elimination of those institutional features of the UN which have become irrelevant and replacing them with more relevant organs. It could also mean building new multilateral institutions from the "bottom-up" and placing less emphasis on those "top-down" institutions that continue to persist. ♦

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