



Considering the Crisis of Multilateralism: The UN and its Relationship with US Hegemony

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Abstract

The UN's multilateral framework is widely considered both an effective component of global governance and, simultaneously, in a constant state of crisis. To evaluate this paradox, I explore the tension between the tendencies of great power politics and the principles of multilateralism. This reveals the crisis in multilateralism stems from the UN's relationship with the US and, in particular, a perceived centrality to the nation's hegemonic order. The underlying assumption being that any attempt at hegemony, whether from the US, China or Russia, involves reordering the international community through initiatives like the UN System, the Belt and Road Initiative or the Soviet Bloc. Thus, systems of global governance may simultaneously act as systems of global hegemony.

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1. Introduction

Thinking about global governance often conjures images of delegates from around the world convening at UN Assemblies, establishing which issues are pertinent and how to address them collectively. This essay will explore the tension between the UN's attempt at multilateralism and its relationship with US hegemony. It illustrates how prospects for planetary governance are undermined by a perceived centrality to, as McCoy (2019) puts it, *The Washington World Order*.

This argument will not diminish the UN to little more than a proxy for US and Western interests. Doing so downplays the good it does. Fundamentally, the UN's affect on the world constructs the view that it resembles a global government. In fact, the Global Governance Group asserts that through the UN's multilateral framework the most basic terms of the world order are established (Peterson, 2023: 284). The concern is that, despite good work, the UN struggles to elude the critique that it serves a particular world order rather than reflect a more holistic system of planetary governance. For some, it projects across the world political values and economic norms which derive from Western epistemology, favouring the US and its allies by organising the international system according to their social, political, and economic foundations (McCoy, 2019). This paradox fuels data showing that while 90% of the world's population are aware of the UN, only 40% claim to trust it (UNDP).

2. The UN System and Multilateralism

To unravel this tension, we can begin by analysing the UN's multilateral framework to better understand the mechanisms which allow the organisation to provide governance. This requires understanding the purpose and function of multilateralism. We can draw on Cox's work (1992, 1997) and extract key assumptions to better understand this.

Cox explains the "world order can be examined within a global system having three principal components – a global political economy, an inter-state system, and the biosphere or global ecosystem" (1992: 161). This underpins the assumption that multilateralism comprises the diplomatic and economic relations between states regarding "the interrelationships among the three spheres" (1992: 161). In essence, multilateralism consists of the negotiations and agreements between states concerning fundamental domains in global politics such as trade, conflict and the environment. Thus, we can say the purpose of multilateralism is for states – and increasingly non-state actors – to negotiate issues that require collective action and to outline common goods which are most in need of global protection. The Paris Agreement is an example of a multilateral arrangement that commits collective action to addressing the issue of climate change. Equally, the United Nations Charter can be viewed as an example of a multilateral agreement to establish peace and security as common goods.

Second is Cox's assumption (1997: 106) that multilateralism operates between "the interaction of two macro tendencies: internationalization and democratization." Internationalization refers to the deep interconnectivity between states, driven primarily by economic globalization. Even the world's most solitary nation, North Korea, struggles to maintain genuine isolation in the 21st Century. The UN Comtrade database reveals roughly \$1billion worth of goods traded in and out of North Korea during 2022 (Buchholz: 2023). Democratization refers to the entrenchment of democratic values which have been used to morally justify liberalism as the optimal foundation for the world order. This is to say, because liberalism takes ideas of freedom, human rights, and equality seriously, it has a stronger normative claim to defining the world order than rival doctrines like authoritarianism, fascism, or communism. Thus, we can use Cox's interpretation of internationalization to suggest multilateralism functions in tandem with the economic interconnectivity between states. This means countries are encouraged to come together and discuss issues because if they do not, they risk excluding themselves from agreements that will likely impact their economic and political stability, indirectly if not directly. Moreover, multilateralism and democratisation overlap. Guiding principles for multilateralism derive from

liberalism, specifically emphasizes on equality and pluralism. Therefore, multilateralism functions as part of the liberal order, alongside other tenets like democracy and human rights.

In summary, multilateralism is a liberal approach to international politics that endeavours to take the interests of multiple nation-states seriously. It identifies and address issues that transcend borders – international poverty, human trafficking, the climate crisis – and recognises the economic interconnectivity between countries. With a clearer understanding of multilateralism, we can now situate it within the UN system to explore how it offers scope for global governance.

Abdenur (2016) offers one such example, indicating how the UN's multilateral framework provided "Southern agency" during the formation of the organisation. His perspective challenges the notion that the UN was imposed by the West onto the rest of the world and instead discusses the active role non-Western nations had in forming the UN Charter. Samarasinghe and Kuele (2023), support this, recognising the instrumental role played by the 13 African and Asian states, present at the 1945 San Francisco conference, in crafting Chapters XI and XII on non-self-governing territories and trusteeships. They also note the role of Latin American countries in developing Chapter VIII on regional arrangements. For these scholars, the UN has always invited and utilised the expertise of countries from various regions – Latin America, Africa, and Asia – beyond the West. More recently, in 2014, the UN General Assembly launched the Open-Ended Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This formulated 17 goals that states could use to create national performance targets for 169 areas of economic, social, and environmental development. The efficacy of the SDGs are contested. The UN's 2023 (UN GSDR, 2023: 4) report shows deterioration in the progress of 8 out of the 17 goals (but attributes much of this to the "lingering drag of COVID-19"). This reinforces opinions that the SDGs resemble overly complex, and seemingly pointless, sets of ambitions (Lombord, 2015). However, all 193 member states negotiated and committed to the agreements, pointing to the organisation's broad scope for governance. Despite the slow progress toward achieving the goals, the magnitude of collaborators and committers make the SDGs a useful example of UN multilateralism (Mathewson, 2015).

There is consensus among scholars that UN multilateralism provides a platform for countries in the Global South to help plot the course of the world order. Much of this agreement aligns with the post-colonial view put forth by Adebajo (2023). This designates agency to previously colonised countries who are now part of the UN system. He evaluates the active participation of less powerful countries in the development of international law, countering notions that their membership within the UN is tokenistic and that they remain passive recipients of policy. These interpretations of UN multilateralism give credence to a perspective that the organisation provides a holistic and improved model for global governance. Insofar as it allows a wider range of countries to exercise autonomy in a forum that invites their participation. From this, we can see how the UN attempts to offer a system for planetary governance.

3. The Crisis of Multilateralism

However, for all the benefits offered by the UN's multilateral system, it has faced potential crisis for the best part of 40 years now. This was captured in 1988 by the then Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Sir Shridath Ramphal (1988). He observed:

"The paradox – and the tragedy – of recent times is that even as the need for better management of relations between nations and for a multilateral approach to global problems has become more manifest, support for internationalism has weakened – eroded by some of the strongest nations whose position behoves them to be at its vanguard and who have in the past acknowledged that obligation of leadership."

Sir Ramphal recognised a tension between the tendencies of the world's superpowers and the principles of multilateralism. In fact, much of Cox's work on multilateralism was in response to this

perceived crisis and offered ways for the UN's multilateral framework to manoeuvre around great power politics. Aligning with Sir Ramphal, Cox (1997: 103) identified "a phase in which the United States and other great powers had distanced themselves from the UN. They looked upon the UN sceptically as an unfriendly assembly of Third World Countries." Returning to Adebajo's perspective, the agency exercised by the Global South, while positive in and of itself, seemed to also have an adverse effect, frustrating powerful nations to the extent that they responded by imposing unilateral agendas. More recently, Tourangbam (2016: 303) writes "[t]he curse for multilateralism in multilateral institutions has been the influence of the most dominant country by dint of its capabilities, or an exclusive group of countries that take calls in the garb of multilateralism".

The crisis illustrates how the legitimacy of the UN is undermined by the competing unilateral interests of dominant nations such as the US, China, or Russia. For example, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council wield disproportionate power within the system with the ability to veto proposals. In 2023 the US vetoed a proposal for a humanitarian pause on Israel's shelling of the Gaza strip in response to the October 7th Hamas attacks, despite 12 out of the 15 members of the security council agreeing to the proposition. During the 1950s, the Soviet Union's representative Vyacheslav Molotov earned the nickname *Mr. Veto* for consistently blocking the admission of new members to the UN. For Holloway (2000), the UN Security Council has long acted as an arena for great power politics to unfold; where the US asserts its dominance and competing powers try to frustrate their efforts.

4. The UN and US Hegemony

This crisis highlights a bridge between great power politics and multilateralism which, in turn, helps inform our understanding of how the UN connects with US hegemony. Ruggie (1993: 11, 25) explains that multilateralism is a defining characteristic in the US hegemonic order. He argues the creation of the Marshall Plan, the UN system, the Bretton Woods system, and NATO all comprise a network of institutions that simultaneously sustain US leadership and promote multilateralism. If we subscribe to Ruggie's observation then the plurality promised by the UN's multilateral framework is only ever partially achieved. Insofar as the remit for multilateral arrangements can never extend beyond what the US recognises as fitting within *its* vision for the world.

This prompts us to consider the risks of coercion and unaccountability. Specifically, we must put aside whether we agree with liberalism and ask whether democracy, capitalism, human rights, and multilateralism are tools for coercing the non-Western world into adopting fundamentally Western social, economic, and political values. We must also consider whether we are past a point where the spread of these socioeconomic norms needs to be justified. If we are, then surely this generates the issue of unaccountability. If non-Western nation-states disagree that liberalism has a distinct moral claim to providing the foundation for the world order, then the spread of these values may well happen in a coercive and unaccountable manner. Might this coercion take place through economic globalisation? This is to say, the deep interconnectivity between countries means they have virtually no choice but to engage with the liberal system; to take out loans from the World Bank, to attend UN assemblies, to pursue growth, prioritise free-market economics and to codify human rights law at a national level. Lundestad (1986: 263) offered an answer to these considerations, calling US hegemony an "empire by invitation".

Lake (2020), however, discusses why the US led LIO may, in fact, be declining. Primarily, he argues, this is due to the separation of interests between the US and Europe; the former turning its attention to the Middle East and Asia with the latter facing inward by addressing Eastern European states. The decline is exacerbated by the 2008 financial crash, Trump's presidency, intervention failures in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the relatively poor handling of COVID-19. According to Lake (2020: 464), this opens the possibility for "an alternative Chinese-led international hierarchy built around all or part of the current Belt and Road Initiative countries." The potential for this major external rival to US hegemony implies countries are not totally

convinced by a liberal order. Currently, 139 countries have joined the BRI, a figure edging closer to the total number of UN member states.

5. Conclusion

The UN's multilateral framework indicates the best attempt at a system of planetary governance but the vying for hegemony that characterises great power politics will always generate concerns about coercion and unaccountability. The relationship between the UN and the US exemplifies this tension. It reveals that what can be perceived as an attempt at planetary governance simultaneously fits into a hegemonic system. The rise of China and the rapid growth of the BRI may signal the early stages of a system which rivals the US's. Depending on its eventual scope and the political practices which constitute it, it may also come close to resembling a form of planetary governance. Had Soviet communism spread to the extent that the US so deeply feared, then that too, may have resembled a different attempt at global governance underpinned by a totally different set of values. In each case the relationship with hegemony means the notion of planetary governance would likely always be open to accusations of coercion, unaccountability and advancing the interests of the hegemonic power in question.

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