

The United Nations and the G20

Rivalry or Synergy?

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The United Nations is the world’s central operating system. It performs its own core functions and enables other organizations to work better. Absent the UN and its universal membership and legal framework, smaller, exclusive groups, like the G20, would be much more controversial, less effective and less legitimate. The United Nations remains a necessary albeit not sufficient response to managing the world’s kaleidoscopic issues. The key governance questions will be to determine not just what needs to be done but also how it can be done and by whom. Answers to these questions will have to come through the world’s multilateral institutions and through innovative global governance that complements the UN.

Our world presents more complex governance challenges than ever before. We live in an era when three or four huge economies dominate and in which no country is in a position to determine unilaterally the course of world events. The most pressing realities of this world require responses beyond the capacities of even the most powerful governments alone. Nor do governments have the field of governance to themselves; other players from major corporations to civil society organizations to intelligence organizations to cyber-criminals are playing, too. The key governance questions will be to determine not just what needs to be done but also how it can be done and by whom.

The United Nations

In contemplating what needs to be done to improve global governance, it is appropriate to take stock of what has already been done, particularly by the UN. By and large, member states working through the UN have succeeded in meeting the key goals they set themselves in San Francisco in 1945: “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”, at least world war; to protect human rights; to foster universal justice; and to promote social progress and better standards of living. Motivated by the memory of the 60 million dead in the Second World War, and conscious of the vastly greater power of weapons of mass destruction that some now possessed, states progressively stigmatized aggression. Partly as a result of the deterrence effect of weapons of mass destruction, partly as a consequence of the norm building through the United Nations and partly as a result of simple human progress, there has not been an actual war between major powers since Korea.

According to the Human Security Report 2009/2010¹, there has been a major decline in the number of armed conflicts around the world over the preceding 20 years, with high-intensity conflicts dropping by almost 80 percent. Battle deaths had also decreased dramatically, as had overall lethality of conflict. UN member states have also developed international law to bring the practice of war under the disciplines of international humanitarian law. The various and myriad conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa have stalled this progress, but have been offset by the stability existing in other regions.

As for human rights, a whole corpus of conventions has been concluded, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic and Social Rights and many other conventions. These treaties are respected unevenly around the world but over time they are progressively assimilated into state practice.

To “foster universal justice”, the International Court of Justice has quietly rendered landmark scores of judgments and opinions over the years. UN member states have also created an extensive criminal justice system, comprising the International Criminal Court and ad hoc UN tribunals. Despite the systems’ dependence on the cooperation of member countries to bring alleged perpetrators to court, they have administered justice to some of our times’ worst human rights abusers.

And last but not least, the UN system can claim a fair share of the credit as regards the remarkable economic and social progress the world has made in the course of three generations. Our world has been changing dramatically and largely for the better, despite the brutal realities of terrorism, the tragic loss of life in civil war and natural disasters and the consequent vast refugee flows. The great majority of people around the world are richer, healthier, longer lived, better fed, better educated, better informed, better connected and safer than they have ever been before.²

The UN has concluded 45 treaties on the environment and 13 counter-terrorism treaties. All told, over 500 multilateral treaties have been concluded under UN auspices. The member countries of the UN have, thus, spawned an extensive body of international law, treaties, norms, practices and institutions that govern most facets of interstate relations.

Despite its problems, the UN retains its unique legitimacy, derived from its universal membership and the adherence of all 193 members to the UN Charter as the basis of international law. In part because of the international legal system derived from the charter and the international law and treaties built upon the charter, the UN has become the world’s central operating system. The UN performs its own core functions and at the same time also enables other organizations to work better, both within the ambit of the UN organization—for example, UNICEF—and beyond it, for example NATO, which to maintain public support for its operations needs the UN to certify their legitimacy. Absent the UN and its universal membership and legal framework, smaller, exclusive groups, especially the G7 but also the G20, would be much more controversial and probably correspondingly less effective and legitimate.

¹ Human Security Report 2009/2010: The Causes of Peace and The Shrinking Costs of War, p. 19.

² See variously WHO World Health Statistics 2014, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, September 2015, IMF World Economic Outlook April 2015.

The UN also makes it possible for initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals and the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in September 2015, to be subcontracted out successfully. The reverse is also true -- products of other entities, notably of the G7 and G20, can be imported into the UN for consideration by its larger membership. Most fundamental, the UN and its charter provide the rule book for the conduct of international relations, which almost all states, including G20 states, see as in their interest to respect.

At the same time, the United Nations suffers from the scleroses and frailties of a 70-year old very human institution. It is plagued by divisions, often grounded in genuine differences of interests, albeit also often narrowly defined, between rich countries and poor; between the Security Council and the General Assembly; between the nuclear powers and others; between the climate changers and the climate victims; between the Russians and the US and its allies; between the Israelis and Arabs and Muslims more generally; between the Indians and Pakistanis; between North Korea and its neighbors; and, during the Bush years, between a unilateralist Washington and a multilateralist New York.

Often overlooked in the many criticisms of the UN is the fact that the organization has undergone extensive innovation and renovation and, in the process, substantial reinvention. From peacekeeping to peace enforcement and peacebuilding, to international criminal justice systems, to sustainable development, to refugee protection, to humanitarian coordination and food relief, to democracy and electoral support, to human rights conventions, to health protection, the organization has been changing and equipping itself to acquit its increasingly demanding responsibilities. As a consequence, the UN has a broader political presence in the world than any other organization and much substantive expertise in dealing with contemporary challenges, such as instability and fragile states.

The G20

The G20's³ legitimacy is derived principally from its effectiveness both in addressing the crucial economic and financial crises of 2008 and from the prospect that it could act effectively again in other crises if need be. Its legitimacy also stems from the fact that its membership accounts for 67 percent of world population, 75 percent of world trade and 85 percent of global gross economic product.⁴ Those factors do not constitute universality, of course—the least developed countries are notably missing, as is what might be called the UN's middle class, including some of the very constructive smaller powers—but nor are they trivial. When the G20 reaches agreement among its members, a large part of whatever problem it is addressing is on the way to resolution. At the same time, restricted membership groups of governments, like the G20, can bind themselves if they wish, but they can only commend their decisions to others especially other UN members, not command compliance.

It is taxing to generate consensus in the UN, and it can also be difficult among G20 members, as well. The comparatively smaller numbers of countries certainly simplifies and facilitates any search for consensus but the main protagonists in world affairs are present in both institutions as are their disagreements. And, as in the UN, the G20's disputes are intractable: financial and

³ Turkey is currently presiding the G20. For its members see: <https://g20.org/about-g20/g20-member-map/>

⁴ See: <https://g20.org/about-g20/g20-members/>

banking governance reforms, fiscal and monetary policy coordination, trade imbalances and the like.

Further, ways of thinking and acting established over generations are not modified quickly, and interests rarely change because of the institution in which they are addressed. For the heretofore hegemonic United States, effective G20 partnership requires not just hearing others' views before deciding and acting, but also developing shared assessments and acting in concert with others. All member governments have to reconcile self-interest and the common interest and to privilege co-operation over autonomy, the effective over the merely efficient, and the legal over the expedient. All of that is easier said than done, especially in the absence of galvanizing common threats. At the same time, a G2 of the US and China is unlikely to emerge, at least in any overt, generalized sense because just as the G7's membership base proved to be too narrow to deal with the complex, integrated challenges of the contemporary world, a G2 would likely prove even less capable of harnessing the diverse views of economically capable powers.

Notwithstanding sometimes warranted criticism of the G-20, its member countries have been effective in cooperating to stabilize financial markets, coordinate regulatory reform, and launch economic stimulus. In doing so, they have succeeded in averting grievous harm to the global economy, including quite possibly a global depression. The group has been engaged in re-engineering the financial system to prevent a recurrence of the crisis and in maintaining the global flow of capital. It has put issues on the table that were once regarded as the exclusive province of sovereign governments, notably monetary policy, exchange rates, and debt levels, thereby taking preliminary steps toward longer term global macroeconomic governance. The G-20 has, nevertheless, struggled so far in addressing the highly political tasks of resolving the current account, trade, and budget imbalances conundrums, whose roots go deep into the national economic and political philosophies and purviews of the world's largest economic players and touch their respective concepts of sovereignty. Nor has the G20 addressed itself formally to political-military security issues.

G20 leaders have promoted International Monetary Fund reforms that will, if fully implemented, give developing countries greater influence in that organization. China has become the third largest IMF shareholder, bypassing Germany, as part of an overall 6 percent transfer of voting power to dynamic and underrepresented economies. Progress in reforming the IMF has been made, but a clear and widely shared view on the appropriate role and functioning of the Fund nevertheless remains elusive.

The G20 has to date been the best solution to the legitimacy/efficiency conundrum of the UN and other large bodies, reconciling inclusiveness with efficiency. Time will tell whether G-20 countries can provide the requisite leadership to prevent future economic crises and to achieve balanced, stable, and sustainable global growth in a world of complex financial and economic interdependencies. The G-20 has stuck close to its self-prescribed economic and financial mandate because, undoubtedly, it will be judged primarily on its success in this domain. For everyone's sake, G-20 leaders have to get the economic and financial issues right, as well as the related reforms to the governing rules and regulations.

As is apparent in the chairmanships of Canada, Korea, Mexico, Australia, and Turkey, Tier II G20 countries of the G20 are broadening the field of concern of the entire group. Canada was influential in the creation of the Financial Stability Board. Among other things, Korea put development cooperation on the G20 agenda. Mexico stressed “green growth”, Australia promoted infrastructure investment and Turkey is expected to urge the G20 to address the challenges facing the Lower Income Developing Countries.

If the experience of the G7 is any guide, when leaders come together, they take advantage of each other’s presence to discuss the pressing issues of the day, whatever the formal agenda is. Most leaders are not content for long dealing with economic and financial issues to the exclusion of all else. Nor is such an exclusive focus a sound use of the scarce time of the most powerful people on earth. In any case, exogenous pressures are growing for the group to take on other issues, including climate change, internet governance and global governance reform, including UN and Security Council reform.

How the G20 Could Help the UN

It is a truism that the UN works best when the major powers are not at loggerheads, as they so often are. The G20 countries are members of disparate UN political and geographic groups: notably the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and Group of 77, NATO and the EU, ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), as well as the Organization of American States (OAS). To the extent that G20 membership induces a sense of solidarity among the twenty and qualifies their identification with these various groups, cooperation under UN auspices will be made easier, helping the UN to work more productively, generally, on day-to-day issues and on specific topics.

Permanent representatives at the UN are often constrained by the institution’s divisions. G20 leaders, however, are blessedly far removed from the New York arena of antiquated ideologies, accumulated grievances, and diplomatic delusions that impede progress there. The G20, operating at the head-of-government level, has the luxury of focusing on the substance (and of over-riding domestic political concerns) of a given issue and ignoring institutional prerogatives and inertias. It can catalyze action that individual bodies of the UN find difficult or impossible to achieve on their own. The G20 can encourage and facilitate cooperation within the UN and between the UN and other bodies. Further, the very existence of the G20 and its evident capacity to act outside of UN parameters if UN members are dilatory or obstructive creates an incentive in New York for action and cooperation among those who do not want the UN to be bypassed.

The G20 could help sort through UN Security Council reform questions. With one or two exceptions, the gap between the power of several of the candidates for permanent seats and the power of the smaller permanent members of the Security Council is becoming so wide that it risks destroying the legitimacy and effectiveness of the institution. Increasingly, as well, important initiatives such as the Iran nuclear agreement benefit from the inclusion of Germany’s heft as the emerging dominant power of Europe. For the aspirant countries, an unrepresentative and anachronistic council that does not reflect contemporary power realities is an illegitimate one. Worse, it is an ineffective one.

Reform does not necessarily equate with enlargement. Some opponents of an increase of permanent seats think that the council has a performance and accountability deficit—citing Rwanda, Srebrenica, Darfur, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen, and so forth. They contend that more members do not necessarily increase the council’s effectiveness and that permanent seats are incompatible with accountability. Further, there are also issues of principle and pragmatism. Opponents of adding permanent seats prefer democratic practices to anachronistic privileges. Some are also opposed partly as a matter of self-interest, presuming that their own countries would not get a permanent seat and-- what would be worse—in some cases that a regional rival would.

For a generation, progress on this key question has foundered on the rocks of national interests. Reconciling the positions of those who want permanent seats for themselves and those who prefer other solutions to UN governance challenges has thus far proved impossible. But, as all the protagonists are members of the G20 and all enjoy more or less permanent seats in the G20, which is in some respects the economic equivalent of the Security Council, it should be possible for professional politicians, for whom compromise and the politics of the art of the possible are everyday realities, to find practical political accommodations. The main aspirants are present in the G20 as are the permanent members and together they could cut a deal to commend to the wider membership, if the requisite political will existed.

The UN Security Council normally operates at the permanent representative level, and the G20 functions as a body of heads of state and government. Vastly more effort and money are allocated to the latter in capitals than to the former, a fairly accurate barometer of the importance to political leaders of the two bodies. At the same time, each entity has its own capacities. There is a strong argument in favor of the G20 members investing major effort in the work of the council. The G20 could inject high-level political energy periodically into council deliberations, as President Obama did in 2009 in chairing a Security Council session devoted to arms control and disarmament. The G20 could, in principle, bring the UN Security Council to focus on the security dimensions of refugee flows and the General Assembly launch a conference on the prevention of refugee flows and on burden-sharing in response to such flows where unavoidable. In addition, there has been a perceptible reluctance on the part of some G20 countries to participate in UN-led peace operations, out of concern for the military and political effectiveness of such missions. The G20 could contribute to upgrading the UN’s capacity to act effectively in these areas.

How the UN Could Help the G20

The UN can mainly help the G20 by extending its effectiveness. G20 decisions enjoy greater legitimacy if they are endorsed by the UN than if they are not, making the UN a kind of political “force multiplier.” Further, global problems require global solutions, and, as Bruce Jones of the Brookings Institution has pointed out, “However much influence the G20 have, the problems they confront are the kind where the weakest link can break the chain.”⁵ Unless smaller states see that their views are reflected in decision making or at least that their interests have been

⁵. Bruce Jones, “Making Multilateralism Work,” Policy and Analysis Brief for the Stanley Foundation, April 2010, www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pab/Jones_PAB_410.pdf

duly and fairly considered, they are unlikely to “buy into” the action proposed. Unresponsiveness can have repercussions in, for example, the attitude of the G173-- that is, the 173 countries that are not in the G20 -- toward illegal migration, the drug trade, and international terrorism and piracy. It can also affect the G173’s willingness to collaborate on financial regulation, notably regarding tax haven and banking reforms, or the spread of pandemics of infectious disease.

Much of the membership of the UN is apprehensive about the G20. UN members recognize that the G20 came into existence when and how it did because a myriad of political and structural problems prevented existing institutions, principally the G7 and IMF, but also the UN proper, from addressing the global financial crisis effectively. They realize that similar impediments are obstructing progress on other global issues that are more directly under the UN’s purview.

Given the complexities and interdependencies of the global economy, it is important for the G-20 to be consultative and inclusive if its outcomes are to be endorsed and effectively implemented by others. The G20 therefore needs to take seriously the need for outreach and, to an extent consistent with efficacy, inclusion.

Governance Innovation

Newly “empowered” states especially chafe at the prospect of exclusion. At the same time, for efficacy’s sake universal entities will likely continue to need restricted “minilateral” groupings such as the Security Council with its 15 members and the IMF Executive Board, with its weighted voting shares distribution. Even in the universal setting of climate change negotiations and conference diplomacy recourse is necessarily had to small, leading groups to negotiate outcomes acceptable to all. Cooperation is promoted and advanced through smaller group interactions that typically involve the most powerful actors in the international system, with the results then commended to and sometimes under Chapter VII of the UN Charter imposed on the world at large. The Iran nuclear agreement is a case in point. The exclusive G7 and G20 are inherently minilateral in character, but are not integral to any multilateral institution.

There is also room and, indeed, need for cooperative leadership at the regional and global levels by what might be called Tier II countries, essentially the “non-nuclear” members of the G20, and other influential, economically significant states with proven track records of constructive and innovative diplomacy. These are countries that cannot impose their own policy preferences on others but who understand that there is a need to identify emerging security issues and bring them to the appropriate organizations and institutions for deliberation and, where possible, resolution. Cooperation among this new, variable geometry like-minded is likely to be issues-based rather than values-based but the common thread running through their deliberations will likely be the need to promote regional cooperation to improve governance and to prevent and respond to conflict.

Multi-stakeholder engagement is another feature of the evolving international system and is characterized by the participation of non-state stakeholders. One variant on the multistakeholder approach to problem-solving was the Ottawa process that engaged civil

society and governments to produce the anti-personnel landmine treaty of 1997. Climate change is a further current example of this phenomenon—involving scientists, energy and transportation companies, wildlife protectors, environmentalists, national and state governments and ordinary citizens. Internet governance is another emerging multistakeholder initiative. As with climate change, state and non-state actors are engaged in managing, maintaining and developing rules of behavior for complex systems in which the stakes are high. Competing for influence are the major internet providers; artistic or intellectual content providers; technology companies like Google; business and commercial interests who use the internet, including banks and credit card companies; development cooperation activists; the proponents of free speech; hackers who challenge computer security systems; law enforcement agencies seeking to protect the public from internet abuses such as child pornography; government authorities who promote free and open access or who seek to constrain it; and ordinary citizens. The extent to which multi-stakeholder systems of governance can and should be integrated into existing multilateral institutions remains to be seen.

Conclusion

A great deal has been accomplished under the UN banner. The United Nations has brought greater order, predictability and progress to global affairs, and greater modernity, security and dignity to peoples' lives. Times nevertheless are changing and the trend towards a greater voice and responsibility at the global level for the world's emerging powers is evident. The G20 embodies that change and the UN needs to adapt. The G20 is not a panacea for all that ails the world, and other forms of governance innovation are emerging. The G-20 is nevertheless a potentially important complement to the UN system and helpful addition to the institutions that assist nation-states to govern relations between themselves in the age of globalization. The United Nations embodies universality and the G20 efficiency. The UN and the G20 can help each other with the synergies they can create. The G20 can strengthen the United Nations by reducing the gaps among the major powers on contentious issues, making decision making in the world body easier and more effective, and the United Nations can return the favor by extending the G20's reach vis-à-vis the G173, a group that the G20 cannot command and whose cooperation it needs.