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Editorial of GCSP Policy Brief No. 13
The United Nations and the Challenges of a Globalized World: Towards a Quantum Leap from Multilateralism to Globalization?

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Review and Critique

As an organization dedicated to the ideals of international law and the most significant global organization, both in terms of membership and scope of its activities, it is vital that the United Nations (UN) adapt to a rapidly changing world. Globalization and the end of the Cold War have significantly altered the environment in which the UN seeks to fulfill its aims and act effectively. Globalization is often perceived as eroding the capacities of sovereign states and elevating the importance of non-state actors. As such, it has important implications for the UN, which embodies the inter-state driven process of multilateralism. The unfamiliar nature of the problems that the organization is likely to face will take it into uncharted waters. If it is to remain relevant and credible, the UN must successfully respond to this changed environment.

Transnational threats to security, such as international terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, increased calls for unilateral, pre-emptive use of force, as well as reservations about the usefulness of the Security Council, are just some of the issues that the UN must face. Indeed, in some quarters, the relevance of the UN is being called into question.

Victor-Yves Ghebali identifies a related challenge facing the UN system. A state-centered, regulatory approach to development is increasingly difficult to maintain, given the steady decline in official development aid, as well as advances in globalization. Involving the private sector in the domain of development offers a possible solution to this problem. Yet, the difficulty will be to marry market goals with the universal ideals of the UN.

Although the UN Charter identifies international peace and security as the organization's major aim, the UN's founders anticipated that collective security would constitute its principal function and activity. Ghebali also argues that a change in the UN's approach to collective security is needed, not as a result of globalization, but as a direct consequence of the end of the Cold War. The demise of the bipolar system has given way to a host of largely non-military, transnational, and intra-state security issues, such as ethnic conflicts, organized criminality, and international terrorism. This means that stability and security involve non-state actors as well as state actors, and intra-state conflict as well as inter-state conflict. As a result, the concept of collective security can no longer be limited to the protection of states, but must also include human security.

This editorial addresses some important implications of globalization and transnational security for the UN. Globalization and a changed international security environment has increased the relevance of both non-state actors and intra-state conflict. The resulting challenges they pose to international organizations, which are the product of a multilateral, inter-state process, are manifold. For whom is the UN supposed to provide security and how it is to achieve these ends needs to be rethought. Equally important, determining how
development goals can be effectively met requires a new approach to development and perhaps greater partnership with non-state actors.

Dilemmas and Our Recommendations

Globalization and transnational security threats present both opportunities as well as challenges for the United Nations. In order for the UN to retain its relevance and to perform effectively, it needs to address a number of issues linked to its structure as well as its raison d’être. We highlight eight dilemmas related to this issue area and eight corresponding recommendations that may contribute to appropriate responses.

POLICY DILEMMAS

1. The UN needs to remain consensus-based VS. limitations this creates for effective governance policy

2. Need for rapid deployment forces VS. willingness and ability of member states to contribute the necessary resources

3. Opportunity to provide the international system with a body for debate, solutions VS. current legislative, political restrictions

4. Some states want the UN to maintain its traditional role VS. transnational security concerns make reform a must

5. Need for real reform of the international body VS. willingness of members to look beyond the quick fixes

6. Trust in the UN VS. trust in unilateral, coercive, state-oriented action

7. Benefit of an international forum for discussion, enforceable resolutions VS. unwillingness of the US and other big players to concede power

8. UN veto system VS. veto power as a way to stall reform, action, laws that a security council member disagrees with

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Member states should put pressure on those members who actively or through inactivity work against the UN ideals

2. UN should have a standby force for rapid development financially supported by member states for peacekeeping and other humanitarian necessities

3. The UN should reform the structure of the security council and the power of these member states to fit the new, modern dynamics of the globalized international system

4. The UN can not remain in the same governance position and needs to make strong reforms to its governance and structure

5. The UN must create incentives for longer-term planning

6. There must be consequences in the international system for unilateral actions, achieved through accountability and liability

7. The US (and others) must be persuaded by internal and external economic and political pressures into abiding by internationally adopted standards

8. Nullify the veto system or reform it to become a majority veto (3 out of the P5) and enlarge the security council membership

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The policy dilemmas and recommendations presented here are directly linked to the challenges currently faced by the UN. One of the most difficult challenges is inadequate political commitment, as well as resources, on the part of member states. While it is easy to criticize the UN for its alleged inefficiency and ineffectiveness, this condition is the product of the will of the states that make up its membership. For instance, the UN ought to have a rapid reaction force for peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance, but financial and political constraints currently prevent it from developing such a force.

Another dilemma is related to the need for reform. Some commentators and governments argue that the UN should maintain its traditional role, while others call for a shift in its focus to include greater emphasis on transnational security threats. It is our belief that the UN must be reformed, both in terms of its governance capacities and its structure. The UN structure, after all, reflects the context in which the organization was established. As the supreme decision making structure, the Security Council mirrors the unequal distribution of power that existed when the UN Charter was signed following World War II. The five major victors – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union/Russia, and China – are permanent members of the Security Council (“P5”), while ten additional seats rotate among the other members. Each of the P5 has the right to veto actions considered by the Council. The Security Council is, therefore, skewed in favor of the powers that emerged victorious from World War II. The UN veto system ought to be dismantled or reformed to become a majority veto system and the Security Council membership should be enlarged.

In addition, the unwillingness of member states to abide by UN resolutions is weakening and seriously damaging the credibility of the institution. A major obstacle to ensuring the effectiveness of the UN in today’s world is that some states are tempted to take unilateral actions that undermine the organization. States should be persuaded through internal and external economic and political pressures to abide by internationally agreed standards and obligations. For this to occur, punitive actions against states engaging in harmful unilateralism should, for example, be taken.

**Conclusion**

Globalization and transnational challenges to security present a number of challenges for all international organizations, the UN notwithstanding. The UN represents a multilateral and, thus, inter-state process, in which non-state actors and security issues that are not confined to the state are gaining in relevance. As a result, the UN needs to decide how best to respond to world development needs, while also serving the ends of peace and security.

**References**


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3 Russett, et. al., op. cit., note 1, p. 305.