



Portuguese Journal of International Affairs

AUTUMN/WINTER 2010

- 62 UNITED NATIONS: BUILDING LEGITIMACY AND MAINTAINING REVELANCE
IN A WEAKENED INSTITUTION
Mohamed Mansour Kadah



Portuguese Journal of International Affairs

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)

Rua Vitorino Nemésio, 5

1750-306 Lisboa

PORTUGAL

Email: ipris@ipris.org

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Europress

ISSN

1647-4074

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Chapters in books: Manuel Ennes Ferreira, "China in Angola: Just a Passion for Oil?", in Christopher Alden, Daniel Large and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira (eds.), *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 295-317.

Articles in journals: Paulo Gorjão, "Japan's Foreign Policy and East Timor, 1975-2002" (*Asian Survey*, Vol. 42, No. 5, September/October 2002), pp. 754-771.

Articles in newspapers: Paulo Gorjão, "UN needs coherent strategy to exit from East Timor" (*Jakarta Post*, 19 May 2004), p. 25.

5. Diagrams and tables should be avoided, or kept to a minimum.

United Nations: building legitimacy and maintaining relevance in a weakened Institution

MOHAMED MANSOUR KADAH

Diplomat, Egypt, and PhD researcher at the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, New University of Lisbon, Portugal

The United Nations (UN) is widely regarded as indispensable. In spite of all its problems and failures, it remains the most sublime embodiment of the human aspiration for a better future. No doubt, the world body has been facing challenges ever since its inception, but today's challenges are even more in number, more sophisticated in nature, and even more daunting. Still, from all the challenges facing the UN today, the question of legitimacy based on equitable representation and the issue of relevance to the surrounding global environment seem to be substantially detrimental. It is argued here that these two challenges undermine the effectiveness of the UN and underline its increasing marginalization. This is mostly because the UN, as it stands today, still reflects the parameters of the world at the time it was established more than sixty years ago. Over the last few decades, however, the distribution of power among states has shifted eastward and southward, with newly emerging powerhouses, such as China, India, and Brazil playing an ever-increasing role in global governance. Nonetheless, these emerging powerhouses are still more or less marginalized in formal global governance structures, most particularly the UN Security Council and Bretton Woods institutions. In addition, at a time when globalization has unprecedentedly increased the level of interdependence across the globe, it has also carried along global opportunities and challenges that require transitional approaches, tools that are hardly in place in the UN or elsewhere. This comes at the time when state authority is facing new legal and practical restrictions and suffering from encroachment from non-state actors that have been proliferating over the last two decades. Furthermore, with the end of the Cold War, the world found itself with a unipolar order that is hard to manage, which has been exposing the UN and multilateralism at large to violent tides.

The question of legitimacy

For a multilateral institution to be considered legitimate, it has to satisfy three main criteria: inclusiveness, effectiveness, and accountability.¹ Critics of the UN often lambast it for lack of representative legitimacy, i.e. lack of equitable representation. Since the inception of the UN more than sixty years ago, world politics have undergone radical changes in power distribution. In parallel, calls for changes in the membership of the Security Council and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) have been resurfacing throughout. Lately, calls to enlarge the Security Council in both the permanent and nonpermanent classes have become a salient feature of the debate on UN reform. Historically, at the time the UN was established, the Security Council was carefully configured to be the power hub of the organization and of multilateralism at large, with prime responsibility on maintaining international peace and security. At that time, it was agreed that great powers would assume disproportionate responsibilities and thus they should receive exclusive privileges, i.e. the so-called right to veto.

Later on, and as the number of newly independent countries multiplied due to the movement of decolonization mostly between the 1940s and 1960s, the South came to play a more dominant role in world politics. At the time, newly independent countries, being vulnerable former colonies, rushed for UN membership, and followed through by establishing two main platforms for projecting their collective power in the world body, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Group of 77 (G-77) in the 1960s. Thus, in addition to the East-West rivalry of the Cold War, another dichotomy appeared and became increasingly dominant on the world arena, the so-called North-South divide. Later on, while the East-West rivalry subsided with the collapse of the former USSR, the North-South divide survived and further consolidated itself in the UN and international politics at large.

Throughout its life, the UN Charter has been amended three times, including two times to enlarge the membership of two out of its six main organs, the Security Council and the ECOSOC, the last time being in 1973, i.e. 38 years ago. In 1963, as the number of developing member states more than doubled from 51 in 1945 to 113, the South successfully passed resolution 1991 (XVIII) in the General Assembly, providing for the expansion of the Security Council from 11 to 15 members. Shortly afterwards, calls for further changes in the membership of the ECOSOC emerged. But only in 1971 did the question of doubling the ECOSOC membership gain significant momentum, at the behest of the South, with outstanding support from the US. Once more, by September 24th 1973, the move to double membership of the ECOSOC was appropriately in force.

In 1993, membership to the UN further increased from 113 to 184. In the meantime, calls for further enlargement of both the Security Council and the ECOSOC continued, but the end of Cold War significantly shifted the focus toward the Security Council. In fact, the

end of the Cold War seemed to have ushered in a revitalization of the UN in particular and multilateralism at large. Most conspicuously, the Security Council made some audacious and swift moves, among others, on liberating Kuwait after its invasion by Iraq in 1990. Consensus, under enhanced US leadership, became the order of the day. In parallel, the notion of sovereignty came under revision and suffered from withdrawal in the face of the US-sponsored new notion of humanitarian intervention, which largely shaped the debate on international intervention in Somalia in 1992. Consequently, member states outside the Council felt a stronger impulse to get onboard with the council, to promote their distinct interests and to share in the fruits of its new successes.²

In response, the General Assembly established the so-called Open-Ended Working Group on the Question of Equitable Representation and Increase in the Membership of the Security Council and Other Matters Related to the Security Council in 1993. Discussions in this Group have focused on two main clusters, one on membership, expansion, the veto, and voting, and the other on working methods and decision-making procedures. Ever since, the group has not been able to break the deadlock of discussions, specially regarding the first cluster, because of the wide gaps in positions and other complications in the process. With regard to the second cluster, the debate has induced the Council to voluntarily introduce some improvements on its working methods to enhance transparency and participation in its activities. However, in the final analysis, discussions have not succeeded in concluding any consolidated reform package thus far.

The war on Iraq is commonly quoted as a landmark in the course of multilateralism at large and of the UN in particular. While the UN was significantly paralyzed during the Cold War, the military action against Serbia without UN authorization in 1999, together with the War on Iraq in 2003 in contempt of the world body, are two major indications of the marginalization of the UN in the post-Cold War era.³ In the aftermath of the war, and in light of the complications and problems that it brought about, many writers and politicians have begun proselytizing a new new world order, where the new world order is considered the one proclaimed after the end of the Cold War. One central pillar of this argument is the decline of US power, especially in its soft aspects. Another important pillar is that the war motivated other powerhouses and even US allies to attempt to constrain US power.⁴ Today, newly emerging powerhouses continue to project their relative power and seek a more leveled playing field in the UN Security Council.

Henceforth, this climate was conducive to establishing the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change, which, among others, contributed to further moving the debate on Security Council reform. In an attempt to help reach a breakthrough, the panel proposed two models of reform. Model A provides for six new permanent seats without veto, and three new two-year term non-permanent seats, to be shared by the regional groupings. In contrast, Model B provides for no new permanent seats, but proposes a new category of eight four-year renewable-term seats and one new two-

year nonpermanent and non-renewable seat. Although the panel regarded the veto as an anachronistic vestige of the past, it concluded that there is no practical means of changing the status quo, obviously because of the expectation that the five permanent countries would not give it up easily.⁵

Later on, the Outcome Document of the 2005 Millennium Review Summit stated: “we support early reform of the Security Council as an essential element of our overall effort to reform the United Nations in order to make it more broadly representative, efficient, and transparent, and thus to further enhance its effectiveness and the legitimacy and implementation of its decisions”.⁶

In 2007, and after several further episodes, it was decided to launch negotiations on the subject in due time. Ultimately, negotiations commenced in February 2009. Throughout the debate and negotiations, however, there have been several key deadlocks, especially with regard to the veto power and the size of the Council. Historically, the veto power has received the brunt of criticism from non-veto member states as a symbol of an undemocratic and unjust world order. On the other side, veto proponents contend that it is a major factor behind the survival of the UN until today.⁷ In any case, there is very little hope to reach agreement on whether the veto right should be abolished, extended to new members, or even restricted in use. As for the size of an enlarged Council, the main bargain seems to be between legitimacy and effectiveness. In this regard, there are two main camps, one advocating the viewpoint that enlarging the Council to reflect the growth of membership and the new world realities would enhance its legitimacy, which in turn could further bolster its effectiveness.⁸ On the other hand, there is the viewpoint that though enlargement of the Council is plausible to reflect better diversity and enhance its legitimacy, the enlargement should be kept to minimum, should be measured against the effectiveness of the Council, and should reflect the real distribution of power in the world. In general, positions held by different member states and groupings seem irreconcilable, which indicates that serious negotiations would be virtually immovable, especially given the practice of divide-and-rule tactics by reform opponents.

Most importantly, today, there seems to be a significant reshuffle in the global power map, which renders the power formula in the Security Council unbalanced. Lately, the US, the sole superpower since the end of the Cold War, has been in decline relative to others.⁹ It is not even close to holding the same overwhelming material and soft influence it had in the 1940s.¹⁰ This has become particularly evident after revelations of wrongdoings in the global war on terrorism, the developments of the war on Iraq, and in the midst of the current global economic crisis. In parallel, international analysts posit the rise of Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC) as an introduction to a transformation of global governance structures. Unless such new powerhouses are accommodated and fully incorporated in the current system, its future will remain uncertain.¹¹ In one analysis, Richard Haass argues that the world today appears to be multipolar, with the

US, China, the EU, India, Japan, and Russia as major powers. These six major powers have over half of the world's population, account for around 75% of global GDP and 80% of global defense spending.¹² In addition to these six major powers, there are several other regional powers in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and East Asia and Oceania. Foremost, multilateral institutions are the creation of powerful states. While these institutions could survive shifts in global power distribution in the short run, the festering of mismatches between governance structures and real power distribution could shake the foundations of these institutions in the long run. Historically, global governance structures could not persist long after the decline of the power of their initiators, even when power shifts were peaceful. Likewise, today, there is an ongoing tectonic global power shift that poses challenges to the current US-dominant multilateral system. Thus, the US needs more help from others to continue its global leadership role. In fact, the current world order reflects a move from the old East-West strategic dichotomy of the Cold War to a new South-North strategic dichotomy. It also resembles that of the 19th century, when Great Britain held a tight lead ahead of several other powers. In the meantime, the UN is becoming more and more ineffective because it does not have some of the influential players accommodated onboard. Moreover, power shifts raise questions about the legitimacy of UN structures, which further reduces the effectiveness of the world body.

The issue of relevance

The other major challenge facing the UN is relevance to the surrounding global environment. This challenge is less clear, less pressing, but no less detrimental. It does not motivate states like membership to power structures does, but it undermines the ability of the world body to make a difference and isolates it from its stakeholders, thus leading to increasing marginalization of the organization. Hence, there is an argument that we need a new UN for this new century.¹³ The reasons behind this kind of argument are many, but most importantly include the implications of globalization on the UN mission, the ailments of the Westphalian notions of nation-state and sovereignty, the proliferation of actors in international relations, and the ramifications of the current unipolar world order on the UN.

Firstly, with respect to the implications of globalization on the UN, it is doubtless that the last wave of globalization has changed the world landscape radically and forced a redefinition of global opportunities and challenges. It has been mostly driven by shifts in paradigms, with neoliberal capitalism and democratic governance becoming the dominant ones. On one hand, neoliberal capitalism has gradually deprived the UN of its development mission, as it has undermined endeavors under the world body's auspices to promote a more just world economic order.¹⁴ On the other hand, although democratic

values have become universal ones, the prevalence of democratic governance stands in contrast to democracy deficits at the UN and other institutions of global governance. In addition, globalization has brought about an unprecedented degree of interdependence among states, thus creating torrents of new opportunities and challenges. And although the UN has somehow managed to develop some innovative approaches to address challenges posed by globalization, the world body has only succeeded in so doing by maneuvering around its constitutional constraints, not by addressing these constraints in a holistic manner.¹⁵ The resulting inability of the UN to effectively and adequately address new pressing international challenges undermines confidence in the world body and casts doubts about its future.

Secondly, the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 laid down an international system based on the notion of sovereign nation-states, a concept enshrined in the UN Charter. Accordingly, the UN and the larger international order are based on nation-states as building blocs and basic players, and today the most chronic problems facing mankind are transnational in nature and require collective action that is not usually forthcoming at the UN. This lack of collective action needed to address global problems was often referred to by Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, as “problems without passports”. In essence, it reflects some kind of tension between intergovernmentalism and transnationalism. It also indicates a deficit of global governance, and stands as one root cause behind recurrent failures of the UN and other global forums on several fronts. Rightly, the UN was not intended to face modern transnational challenges such as terrorism, global warming, and nuclear proliferation. Nonetheless, if the UN fails to adapt itself to these new challenges, it will risk fading into irrelevance.

There are also some other severe sovereignty dilemmas facing the UN such as national strife, civil wars, and mass violations of human rights. Although these phenomena happen primarily inside nation-states, they could very well affect peace and security across borders and could denigrate basic, universal human values. Thus, they raise controversy about the Westphalian notion of sovereignty, which is enshrined as one of the most essential principles of the UN Charter, “sovereign equality of all members” as spelled out by Article 2 of the Charter. As a result, and particularly since the end of the Cold War, the notion of sovereignty has been subjected to gradual erosion. Instead, new notions, such as humanitarian intervention, the responsibility to protect, and human security, have been gaining ground. In reflection of this trend, the Report of the UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change states: “whatever perceptions may have prevailed when the Westphalian system first gave rise to the notion of state sovereignty, today it clearly carries with it the obligation of a state to protect the welfare of its own peoples and meet its obligations to the wider international community”.

Paradoxically, the redefinition of the notion of sovereignty violates the letter of the same Article 2 of the Charter on “noninterference in domestic affairs”. In an attempt to resolve

this conflict, some authors make the argument that the Westphalian system as it stands today is profoundly flawed and needs fixing, and the world is left with one of two options: either replace the old system with a new one that is responsive to the need of globalized governance, or fix it in a way that binds countries to respect their external as well as internal obligations.¹⁶ Another more startling argument is that to govern effectively, states need to cooperate with each other and, at the same time, to reserve the right to intervene in each other's affairs.¹⁷ However, this far, there has been a polarization on issues related to humanitarian intervention at the UN, and there is hardly any hope that member states could reach a consensus reconciling humanitarian intervention with state sovereignty.

Thirdly, there have been qualitative and quantitative shifts in global players and stakeholders. Remarkably, the last two decades have witnessed a proliferation of actors in the international system, a situation which is infringing on the role of states as basic players at the international, regional, and even domestic levels. This development could be assimilated to a return of "medievalism", when authority was shared among many different players inside individual geopolitical spheres.¹⁸ The new rising actors include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have exploded in number and have come to advance distinct interests by monitoring, challenging, and at times confronting governments. NGOs are also involved in a fierce quest to further consolidate their legitimacy and secure more recognition as independent players at the international level. Multinational Corporations (MNCs) are also new powerful actors that lead a global economy where national barriers have subsided in the face of transnational economic activities, especially those related to capital flows. Thus, states strive to regulate and direct the activities of MNCs, but cannot control them. In some exceptional cases, MNCs possess unparalleled power in the face of some small and least-developed countries. The list of new actors extends to include regional organizations, international networks of state officers, local authorities, and illegal actors such as dissident and terrorist groups. In response, the UN has been striving to accommodate non-state actors in its system. In addition to the imperative of these efforts on practical grounds, they also contribute to promoting the notion of democratic global governance. Historically, the participation of NGOs in the UN commenced with the birth of the UN at the San Francisco conference. Henceforth, the role of NGOs in the international system has been developing, but this has been especially clear since the end of the Cold War. This historical relationship brings to the UN an important civil-society approach to global challenges. Thus, today, there is a large and growing network of NGOs at the ECOSOC. In 2004, a UN Panel of Eminent Persons published a report on the relationship between the world body and NGOs. This report recommended a wider participation by NGOs in all aspects of UN activities at headquarters and national levels. In addition, Kofi Annan pioneered the establishment of the Global Compact, the first partnership of its kind between the UN

and the global business community. The Compact was launched in 2000 on the basis of the notion of global corporate citizenship, which indicates that with rights to operate at the global level, come responsibilities toward the global community.¹⁹ All these efforts notwithstanding, there continue to be operational difficulties and constitutional and legitimacy dilemmas related to the participation of non-state actors in the international system. Moreover, there seems to be a subtle confrontation between state and non-state actors on legitimacy and authority. In fact, this confrontation is one important dimension of the UN's ongoing struggle to develop true, mutually beneficial partnerships with non-state actors for better global governance.

A Fourth and final set of challenges relates to changes in world power politics. Former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali argues that the crisis in the UN is not connected with September 11th or the war on Iraq, it actually started with the end of the Cold War and was mainly driven by changes in power distribution and the emergence of one superpower, which caused difficulties for the international community in managing the new order.²⁰ In general, the US, as a sole superpower, seems to exercise ambivalent engagement with the rest of the world, and its foreign policy reflects a tug of war between championing universal values such as democracy and human rights and protecting its distinct national interests by all means. The episode of Iraq clearly proved that while the UN was suffering from paralysis during the Cold War, its new suffering is from marginalization in the unipolar world order. Unfortunately, this marginalization is expected to continue in the future, as proselytized by theories such as "multilateralism à la carte" of Richard Haass, and Francis Fukuyama's "multi-multilateralism".

Conclusion

What does the future of the UN look like? This is a question that concerns everyone. Historically, the UN was created for the post-war world, and this is deeply rooted in its constitution, structure, and working culture. Today, however, the world has significantly changed, with power shifts and the new imperatives of globalization putting increasing pressure on the world body. In particular, this article contends that the challenges of representative legitimacy and relevance to the surrounding global environment are expected to have particular decisive impacts on the future of the UN. Lack of power balance in the world body deprives it of much of its legitimacy and effectiveness, and developments in the surrounding environment are outdoing its rules and capabilities, which is increasing the marginalization of the organization. Thus, firstly, the UN needs to put representation in its power structures in line with real power distribution in order to protect its legitimacy and enhance its effectiveness. The ongoing exercise for this purpose falls short of finding a clear path. However, amendment to membership has happened in

the past, is needed today, and could very well impose itself in the future depending on the circumstances. It is argued here that unless new powerhouses are fully integrated and accommodated in the UN system, the future of the system will remain uncertain.

Secondly, the governing rules and working methods at the UN need to be revisited to enable the world body to face up to the challenges of the day. This exercise has to take into consideration four main factors. First, increasing global interdependence has brought about new global challenges that necessitate transnational approaches. Thus, there is a need to empower the UN with the mandate and means required to effectively address the challenges of the current wave of globalization. Second, the notions of sovereignty and noninterference in internal affairs have to be reconciled with the imperative of preventing mass atrocities and grave violations of human rights at the domestic level. In fact, the legitimate prerogatives of state authority and the universal values of human life and dignity are not, and should not, be taken as mutually exclusive. Third, the role of non-state actors in the international system has been increasing. Although states and intergovernmental institutions have been developing new partnerships with these actors, there remain significant practical and legal difficulties that need to be squarely addressed, so as to ensure the optimum use of these partnerships. Finally, the UN was engineered around the concept of power concerts. Today however, the prevailing world order is unipolar and this is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Consequently, the world body should be reconfigured to manage this new world order, including by holding all states accountable for their actions or lack thereof. Of course, these are all major challenges that require vision, will, and a lot of effort and time. However, sooner or later the international community will have to face these challenges, otherwise problems in the UN would further foment and its role and contribution to global governance would continue to decrease. In fact, it is the future of the UN that is at stake, and to secure this future such major challenges as legitimacy and relevance have to be faced in a holistic manner.

(Endnotes)

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