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- 40 POWER SHIFTS AND POWER DIFFUSION: IMPLICATIONS
ON THE MULTILATERAL SYSTEM
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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.

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Power Shifts and Power Diffusion: Implications on the Multilateral System

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Since the end of the Cold War, the international multilateral system has been facing many challenges. However, response to these challenges has been slow and insufficient. On one hand, globalization is growing more complex. On the other hand, the system is struggling against historic predicaments that have largely rendered it ineffective and irrelevant. At the same time, the system is attempting to improvise around its constitutional and structural restrictions to adapt to challenges. In particular, power shifts have taken the system by surprise since the end of the Cold War. From unipolarity in the aftermath of the Cold War, to underway power shifts southward and eastward, the system has been unable to manage evolution in the international political environment. These shifts have been further compounded by power diffusion from state to non-state actors, with the latter consolidating as autonomous, active players at both international and domestic levels. Moreover, non-state actors have been challenging nation-states and their international system and have been seeking more recognition and sway. In light of the above, this article will attempt to analyze the implications of power shifts and power diffusion on the multilateral system.

Power Shifts: The Dynamics of State Power Politics

For the multilateral system to be effective, it needs to reflect the distribution of power among its members. The current system was formed in the aftermath of World War II. The victorious allies designed it according to their interests, at the exclusion of the defeated states. Although there have been some subsequent changes in the membership of multilateral institutions, the underlying power formula remained flawed. This is most obvious in the composition of the UN Security Council. During the Cold War, power politics stood in the way of more effective multilateral cooperation. Afterward, the system witnessed some signs of progress, but it quickly fell victim anew to great power complacency. More recently, flaws in the distribution of power have increasingly troubled the system. Specifically, the main dimensions of power imbalances in the system relate to shifts in US power, shifts inside the conventionally powerful North and the rise of

new powers from the developing world. This section will analyze these three dimensions, while keeping focus on the relationship between power distribution and the performance of the multilateral system.

While the United States maintains its position as the world's military hegemon, it faces possible military power redistribution in the future, and it has already lost its dominance as the economic hegemon. Current trends suggest further shifts in other elements of power.¹ This is truly a multipolar world, where power – hard or soft – is distributed asymmetrically.² This world order is characterized by the emergence of new global actors such as China, India and a resurgent Russia. Most importantly, the rise of new and old powers puts pressure on the United States and diminishes its capacity to lead.³ In other words, the world power map is being rebalanced with no single power center.⁴ By challenging US power and making new allies around the world, the EU and China have shifted power toward three relatively equivalent centers: Washington, Brussels and Beijing. In addition, pivots, such as Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA), are consolidating in the international arena.

Together, these shifts could have serious global implications, especially that no single country or combination of countries can conceivably substitute for US leadership.⁵ Notably, the US administration admits that it needs more help in dealing with global challenges, as President Obama made it clear before the UN General Assembly in September 2009. Of particular concern here, power shifts pose challenges to the power base of current multilateral institutions. These institutions, be it the UN or the Bretton Woods institutions, reflect the international power status in the aftermath of World-War II. Today, however, power distribution has substantially changed and there are several ascendant powers on a quest to advance their own interests. In fact, the current world order reflects a move from the old East-West dichotomy to a new South-North dichotomy. It also resembles the world order of the 19th century, where Great Britain was at a tight lead ahead of several other powers.

As a result, current multilateral institutions are becoming ineffective. Indeed, recent power shifts raise questions about the legitimacy of the structures of these institutions, which in turn weigh on their effectiveness. Moreover, there seems to be a great deal of ambivalence about multilateralism, particularly from the United States.⁶ Although the United States is widely acknowledged to be the greatest beneficiary of the current system, domestic US politics and its foreign policy reflect dissatisfaction with it. Hence, the system is indeed in a precarious situation.

International analysts posit the rise of the BRICS as an introduction to a transformation of global governance structures. In particular, it is widely held that unless new powers, such as China and India, are accommodated and fully incorporated in the current system, its future will remain uncertain.⁷ It is perhaps imprecise to rely on uncertain extrapolations, but this remains wiser than relying on a status quo that is more than 60 years old. Multilateral institutions are the creation of powerful states in the first place. If these

institutions survive shifts in global power distribution in the short run, they cannot stand them for long. Historically, global governance structures could not persist long after the decline of the powers that established them, even when power shifts were gradual and peaceful. And today, no doubt, there is an ongoing tectonic global power shift that poses challenges to the current US-dominated multilateral system.

However, emerging powers differ with respect to power potential, political systems, economic visions, perceptions of risks and attitudes toward the current international system, which makes it complicated to integrate them into the system. Recent trends indicate that the United States understands these facts, as it has been reflected by its variable approaches to emerging powers, including the recent US-India nuclear deal and the emerging G-2 forum with China.⁸ Nonetheless, the end results of US efforts in this domain are uneven and continue to fall short of meeting many of the aspirations of emerging powers. In addition, assuming that the United States chooses to better accommodate emerging powers, it is likely to face resistance from other conventional powers, such as the UK, France, Germany, Russia and Japan. Such a move is also likely to be resisted by some other opponents, such as Mexico in the case of Brazil and Pakistan in the case of India, and from developing and poor countries on the margins of the system. These latter countries are expected to resist losing the little influence they actually have in multilateral institutions. Thus, one ends up with a conundrum, the essence of which is that rewriting the rules of the multilateral system is an almost intractable task. Over and above, bringing more players to the game does not often lead to better understanding, effectiveness or efficiency. Although better representativeness is advocated to enhance legitimacy, it could also compromise effectiveness.

The US National Intelligence Council (NIC) projects that US dominance will significantly diminish by 2025 and that the principal arena of American superiority, military power, will become less significant in world affairs.⁹ A multipolar system is emerging with the rise of global heavy weights such as China and India. Additionally, gaps in power will continue to narrow between developed and developing countries. Together with the dynamics of globalization and the growing influence of non-state actors, the international system as formed after World War II, will almost succumb to history. Moreover, the NIC predicts that the notion of community of states will almost no longer exist, i.e. nation-states will weaken markedly. In this regard, it is necessary to differentiate between the West – the United States and Europe – and the rest, led by China. There is no doubt that the rise of the rest has evolved on the basis of Western concepts such as capitalism and investment in science and technology. However, with respect to the Western notions of political liberalism and democracy, some of the newly emerging giants do not concur, especially China. Though China is liberalizing, it remains authoritarian. And, although democracy is often considered a global value and a prerequisite for modernity, the Chinese model of development is an outstanding exception. This is evidence that Western liberalism never really penetrated the psyche of much of the world. In fact, it seems that with the last wave of globalization,

Westernization has given way to modernization, opposite to what Francis Fukuyama predicted in his book *"The End of History and the Last Man"*, where he contended that Western democratic governance is the final form of human governance.¹⁰ In addition, it is clear that the most fundamental elements of modernization have transcended their Western origin to become universal values not Western per se. India, for instance, is modernizing, embracing democracy, but certainly not Westernizing.

This poses the question of what would be the relationship between the West and the rising rest. Would the rest accept a world order based on Western primacy and Western conceptions of order, including capitalism and democracy? Answers to this and related questions could shape the future. In any case, it is expected that with the rise of China, more countries may get attracted to China's development model at the expense of Western models of political and economic development. It is also expected that with new powerhouses coming to the world scene, Western traditional alliances may be at risk of weakening. Hence, the future may indeed witness significant reshuffling in global governance and underlying international politics.

History indicates that hegemony invites counterbalancing attitudes, while power exercised through multilateral institutions invites more respect and longevity. Hence, American hegemony puts the world on the road toward confrontation. On the other hand, if the United States withdraws from its global leadership seat, it might produce chaos. In particular, the outcome of the ongoing power transition will mostly depend on US policy toward China. In the meantime, the United States is capable of shaping the environment in which China rises. If the United States is keen on preserving its leadership, it should strengthen the rules and institutions of the current West-centered order.¹¹ This would be a wise strategy, because if the defining struggle is between the United States and China, China may win, but if it is between China and a reformed West-centered system, the West will be more capable of winning. Relationships among emerging powers could also play a decisive role. If these powers cooperate, the transition would be quick and smooth; whereas if they compete, the transition could be prolonged and turbulent.

It is also important to note two contradictory historical trends with respect to world power distribution. Firstly, epochs dominated by one or two powerful states tended to experience more peace and stability.¹² Rome, the Cold War and, to some extent, the decade following the end of the Cold War are examples of this. On the contrary, periods with several powerful states were often marred by violence and turbulence. This was the case during the era of power concerts in Europe from the early 19th to the early 20th century, when Great Britain was the principal power, but not a hegemon. The second trend is that multilateral cooperation and the dose of democracy in international relations tend to run the opposite way. In other words, they increase during periods of power transition and abundance of power centers and vice versa. For instance, there was more respect for international norms during the Cold War than today, and, no doubt, the League of Nations was significantly more democratic than the United Nations.

As for the future, it seems that there are two main potential scenarios: systemic conflict between the West and the rest, or eventual assimilation between them. On one hand, there are some who predict that the transition of power will be marked with tension, distrust and even conflict.¹³ It is thought that as China rises, other aligned countries will piggyback and try to redraw the rules and reshape the institutions of the international system to better serve their own interests, whereas the declining hegemon and its allies will start to see the rise of the rest as an increasing threat.

Deepening global connectivity is an important factor here, as it is stimulating a world order increasingly autonomous from Western control.¹⁴ The emerging powers in this new world order have already started to redraw the map of global governance according to their own perspectives of what is legitimate and sustainable. This approach risks exposing the world to confrontations, especially if the West chooses to act aggressively in order to block further development of a new world order. In this case, the West would find itself facing a bloc of countries spearheaded by an economic powerhouse, China.

In fact, the current state of world affairs indicates a Hobbesian future, as scarce resources threaten a war of all against all.¹⁵ Nature puts increasing pressure on human needs and aspirations, and the scarcity of resources, pollution and climate change seem to run opposite the dream of prosperity for all. It appears as if Malthus has returned once more to dismiss the Kantian notion of "perpetual peace". In such a world, it will be hard to reconcile the West's old rich with the South's rising poor. In short, today, the world is facing so many challenges and liberal visions promising a peaceful and prosperous future for all are no longer tenable.

On the other hand, the shift may be gradual, orderly and peaceful. War between great powers has largely become unthinkable, mainly because established and emerging powers benefit from the current system, and because all of them are in crisis together. Historically, changes in global governance structures came at staggering costs, but the good news this time is that facing another great war is a remote possibility. Although the emerging new world order is likely to be one with more rivalries, it is also expected to be one with more negotiators and regional leaders, each with interest in keeping the peace.¹⁶ In addition, the projected US-Chinese power transition is expected to be different from similar transitions in the past, because China faces a world order different from those that prevailed in the past. China faces a West-centered international system that is more open to newcomers, integrated and rule-based. It follows, then, that the Western order is hard to overturn, but easy to join.

The current multilateral system is more than sixty years old. It is centered on the West, but it has gradually seeped out of Western control. Taken together, the relative decline of the United States and the power shift toward emerging powers necessitate changes in the rules and institutions of global governance. The most immediate changes should be to accommodate rising powers, especially China. However, these changes should also protect the interests of the West, ensure stability and provide more prosperity for all.

In fact, it is the West, and most particularly the US, that can and should take the lead to reform and reinvigorate the multilateral system. There is no doubt that reforming the system to make it more responsive and representative of the new map of global power distribution can help the system become more effective. Nonetheless, this reform does not appear to be forthcoming. Instead, the current reform momentum in multilateral institutions seems trapped in gaps of self-interested, short-sighted positions. Although the reform agenda does seem promising in some cases, the world can barely move on implementing its essential elements.

Power Diffusion: The Proliferation of Actors in the International System

Globalization dilutes conventional state power through two fundamental forces.¹⁷ First, cross-border exchanges take place beyond the control of governments. Second, the administrators of these exchanges are often non-state actors such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), business firms and terrorist groups. Fareed Zakaria describes non-state actors as “the predators of globalization”.¹⁸ Groups and individuals are being empowered, while international hierarchies are being compromised. NGOs are now penetrating all aspects of life. Capital and business firms are travelling the world for investment opportunities, thus rewarding some governments and punishing others. Terrorist groups, drug cartels, dissident groups and militias create safe heavens for illicit activities in and across countries. In particular, Anne-Marie Slaughter has dedicated special effort to studying the phenomenon and implications of the rising role of non-state actors. She argues that the concept of nation-state is “out of fashion” and that, since the early 1990s, the world has been witnessing a relapse of “medievalism”,¹⁹ when authority was shared among many players in individual political units.

The information revolution has transformed the world into a small village. As a result, global challenges have outgrown the capacity of nation-states and international organizations. Non-state actors employ new global tools to amplify their role and power. At the domestic level, they put pressure on local authorities. At the global level, they contribute to the work of inter-governmental organizations, monitor them, motivate change and struggle to carve out bigger stakes for themselves. Terrorist groups, organized-crime networks, militias and the like organizations also exploit increasing global connectivity to further hostile objectives, which undermine state sovereignty and raise concerns about the benefits and sustainability of globalization. More perplexing are the various relationships between different non-state actors at both domestic and international levels. For instance, NGOs monitor the social responsibility of business firms and terrorist groups cooperate with organized crime groups.

Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, often reiterated that post-war multilateral institutions were built for an international world, but we now live in a global world. In such an environment, notions of sovereignty and state authority are becoming anachronistic. In addition, the conventional wisdom that nation-states are the building blocs

of the international system is coming under challenge, *vis-à-vis* non-state actors. While governments generally cooperate with non-state actors, provided that this does not infringe on fundamental sovereign rights, non-state actors, in turn, continuously challenge nation-states and the multilateral system and seek more room and recognition. Nevertheless, the participation of non-state actors in the system does not come without problems, whether related to legitimacy, integrity, policy coherence, quantity or quality of participation.

In part, the increasing role of non-state actors is also an indication that some states are falling short on accounts of sovereignty and territorial integrity. While state sovereignty and territorial integrity are formally considered sacrosanct, non-state actors proliferate and feed on some weak states. For example, terrorist groups use territories of nation-states as safe heavens. In addition, global networks of humanitarian organizations are often called upon by sovereign states to fill in sovereignty gaps caused by the inability of these very states to provide for the basic needs of populations in hardship. Hence, there is a need to revisit the notion of sovereignty to make sure that states are not only enjoying its rights, but are also held accountable on its responsibilities, and to provide a common, stable framework for the contributions of non-state actors.

When a paradigm can no longer keep pace with reality, there appears a need to move onto another one. The classic form of multilateralism is currently under pressure, not only from unilateral policies of great powers, but also from global structural changes imposed by the weakening of sovereignty and the growing role of non-state actors. As a result, the current multilateral system needs transformation. To this effect, alternative forms of multilateralism have been suggested. One alternative is “communitarian multilateralism” that is claimed to be already thriving.²⁰ This conceptual model relies on the tendency to establish collective identities and common understandings in networks of actors across the globe. In other words, actors originating from different nation-states tend to form their own informal and exclusive platforms of cooperation, which could be identity-defined, such as religious associations, or substance-defined such as global networks in areas of security, environment and justice. Another alternative is that of Anne-Marie Slaughter, who argues for a new world order based mostly on horizontal trans-national networks of infra-state authorities such as institutions in charge of the environment, health and education at the domestic level.²¹ In addition to the latter networks, the structure of the contemplated world order includes vertical governmental networks, such as supra-national institutions, as well as states and non-state actors.

On the other hand, there is the argument that the state needs to be revived.²² Until recently, the world order was too state-centric, with little attention to non-state actors. As the current wave of globalization accelerated, the failed promise of multilateralism has contributed to moving the focus to informal, sub-national and trans-national dimensions of world politics. In such an environment, civil society, private sector and other non-state actors erode state authority. This erosion has gone too far and it is time to return the

state to its central role. Although non-state actors can contribute to addressing global challenges, they should only do that as supplements not substitutes for the nation-state. In fact, part of the success of non-state actors derives from their intrinsic recognition of the centrality of nation-states. In other words, non-state actors matter because they influence the policies of nation-states. In addition, the power and capabilities of these actors cannot be compared to those of nation-states. They also face legitimacy deficits because of lack of transparency and accountability.²³ These are reasons why the nation-state should remain the principal actor in the global system.

The UN and other multilateral institutions have been attempting to adapt to the phenomenon of non-state actors. Currently, there are two royal gates in the UN for NGOs and private-sector entities to partner with the world body in different activities, namely the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Global Compact. However, these two mechanisms reflect attempts to turn around the challenges posed by non-state actors rather than facing them upfront.²⁴ The UN constitutional framework does not recognize the participation of non-state actors in the international system. And, by and large, the same applies to other multilateral organizations. Thus, there is a need for a more comprehensive approach in addressing this phenomenon.

Global Governance Deficit: The Institutional Challenge

This section addresses the response of the multilateral system to global problems, in light of global power shifts and power diffusion. Obviously, the system is attempting to adapt to the new global setting. And it is normal that the system reacts to developments in the surrounding environment a posteriori. Unfortunately, reform efforts in different multilateral institutions tend to avoid the most critical issues, proceed slowly and make only modest progress. As a result, global problems accumulate and fester. Hence, globalization and inadequate response to it, are putting huge pressure on multilateral institutions. In particular, shifts on the world power map and power diffusion from states to non-state actors are increasingly rendering the system illegitimate, in view of its outdated power formula, and irrelevant to its rapidly evolving environment.

During the cold War, the multilateral system was struggling to find its way in the midst of bipolar competition. After a short bout of optimism in the aftermath of the war, it turned out that the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity posed another daunting challenge. For instance, unipolarity gave the world superpower more leeway, as demonstrated in the case of the US-led war on Iraq in 2003. Afterward, however, the war on Iraq proved so significant to be considered by some a landmark turning point toward yet another world order; one that is not unipolar nor bipolar. Ever since, the system has been struggling to adapt to new realities of world politics. And it emerged that the Cold War era had one important advantage; that of relative order, as each of the two superpowers was wary of the other. Hence, the world witnessed an era of relative security and stability. In contrast, the world today lacks a similar balance, and so it lacks a similar order.²⁵

There also seems to be a dilemma of both too much and too little multilateralism. On one side, many arguments suggest the real problem is the proliferation of overlapping multilateral institutions. For example, Daniel Drezner argues that one of the main challenges facing the multilateral system today is the proliferation of institutions and arrangements since the end of the Cold War, with the number of institutions, international conferences and treaties reaching about 5000 in 2003.²⁶ Reasons behind this include failure of existing structures to address global problems, besides lack of reform in these structures. Many others argue that the international environment of collective decision-making reflects proliferating formal and informal governance structures.²⁷

Indeed, globalization has multiplied the number of actors and transactions and increased cross-border flows. This puts enormous pressure on global and regional institutions. Hence, there has been a steady increase in reforms of existing institutions and growth in new institutions and arrangements, including hybrid arrangements involving different actors such as the Global Environment Facility and the Global Compact. In addition, there has been an explosion in ad hoc, informal forums such as the G-8 and the recent G-20. In particular, reliance on diverse multilateral responses is clear in the contexts of the global war on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) anti-proliferation efforts. Indeed, the abundance of multilateral structures, formal and informal, could contribute to efficacy. It may imply that formal rules regulate more of the behavior of actors, especially powerful ones, thus promoting what could be called "institutional thickness", i.e. the deepening of rules. However, the growth of structures addressing the same issues also raises questions about the effectiveness, accountability and sustainability of global governance; poses challenges to the authority of formal governance structures; and encourages forum shopping and dilutes the sense of legal responsibility. In addition, overlaps and gaps in and between international and regional structures and arrangements make coordination among their activities a daunting task. This results in higher transaction costs and puts resource strains on members, especially poorer ones. Furthermore, while new alternatives may give existing arrangements healthy competition, they also complicate the vision of reform in the multilateral system, as it is usually hard to eliminate or even relocate power within multilateral arrangements, once they come into existence.

On the other side, some argue that there is a lack of multilateral response in some areas.²⁸ For instance, there are no formal multilateral frameworks to regulate subjects such as tactical nuclear weapons, small arms, deforestation, information privacy, cyber space and internally displaced persons. Lack of international agreements in these areas, however, does not imply lack of governance altogether, as there could be other mechanisms or informal arrangements to address them. The opposite is also true, as some areas could fall under specific multilateral accords, but face problems of implementation. However, international agreements are generally considered the best means to regulate the behavior of nation-states and other international actors.

Along similar lines, Francis Fukuyama argues that the world today does not have enough multilateral institutions to confer legitimacy on collective actions.²⁹ For instance, the UN failed to either endorse or prevent the US-led war on Iraq in 2003. Hence, establishing new institutions that can better balance the considerations of legitimacy and effectiveness should be a primary task for coming generations. In addition, while the world is rife with hierarchical institutions such as the UN, it needs institutions that can guarantee horizontal responsibility among states, thus holding each state accountable on its acts or lack thereof. To sum up, it is clear that although the scene of world politics is predominantly marked with proliferating multilateral arrangements, gaps in some areas indicate that states fail to produce adequate multilateral response in these areas.

There is also a problem of dualism between existing formal rules of multilateralism and evolving new modes of international cooperation.³⁰ While existing formal rules fall short of providing adequate response to global challenges in many cases, most new modes of governance lack either formality or appeal. For instance, forums such as the G-8 and G-20 serve as selective platforms for important decisions, but lack formality and binding force. By comparison, an organization such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) lacks appeal and faces charges of politicization. This dual dilemma hinders the performance of global institutions and deprives them of clear future prospects. Moreover, because of the fundamental nature of this dualism, the world does not seem likely to address the underlying root causes any time soon. Thus, there is a need for new consensus and new approaches in dealing with the whole spectrum of global problems.

Conclusion

The multilateral system is undergoing a critical phase of its evolution since its consolidation in the aftermath of World War II. Major reasons behind this situation include shifts in world power distribution, especially over the last two decades. These shifts are slowly rendering the underlying power formula of the current system unsustainable and depriving it of more legitimacy and effectiveness. At the same time, non-state actors have been gaining ground and popularity as agents capable of tangible action. In addition, they have been challenging state power and the nation-state system and have been seeking more recognition and legitimacy as independent actors. Hence, the rise of non-state actors has further exposed the ailments of the multilateral system.

Shortly after the end of the Cold War, the multilateral system has fallen victim to great power indifference and lack of political will. In particular, the world's sole superpower has demonstrated a great deal of ambivalence about the system and has itself dealt it some of the gravest blows throughout its history. Lacking US respect and support, the multilateral system will be headed toward further marginalization. Recently, however, with the current Obama administration, there has been some improvement in the multilateral attitude of the United States, motivated by its more sensible need for help from

others. But this relative improvement still falls short of what is needed to address the complicated challenges of the multilateral system.

It should also be noted, that there has been some effort to address both power shifts and power diffusion, together with other age-old problems of multilateralism. For instance, the recently revamped G-20 is one case in point attesting to the fatigue of traditional powers and the necessity of bringing emerging powers onboard. However, forums such as the G-20 are selective, informal groupings that raise concerns about the future of multilateralism. As for non-state actors, states and multilateral institutions have their doors open for partnership with these actors, giving them a stake in global governance. Nonetheless, the increasing role of non-state actors raises several legal and practical problems, including in terms of legitimacy and division of labor. In the meantime, reform efforts in multilateral institutions are slow and ineffective. And problems posed by increasing global connectivity, paradoxical proliferation/shortage of multilateral responses and dualism of multilateral structures make steering a clear path to the future a very challenging task. In sum, what is needed, today, is a holistic revision of the current multilateral system enjoying the indispensable support of the US and other great powers, in order to make it more responsive to the imperatives of our global world order.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Daniel W. Drezner, "Two Challenges of Institutionalism", in Alan S. Alexandroff (ed.), *Can the World Be Governed? Possibilities for Effective Multilateralism* (CIGI/Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2008), pp. 139-159.
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