



GLOBAL ORDER IN TRANSITION: RELEVANCE AND REFORM OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The modern international legal system is in the process of significant change in response to evolving geopolitics, the emergence of new world powers and the increasing complexity of global challenges. International organisations play an important role in facilitating cooperation and stability and building a normative system of multilateralism. This essay aims to explore the continued relevance and the requirement for structural reforms in international organisations amidst ever-changing world order. The study will begin with an examination of the historical underpinnings of the evolution of international organisations as an instrument of global governance, including their role in fostering cooperation and decision-making among nations. It will then appraise the contemporary developments that have significantly impacted the dynamics of power relations among nations, encompassing the creation of a multipolar world. It is an undeniable fact that international organisations have substantially contributed to the creation of international laws. However, it is imperative to note that the changing dynamics of geopolitics have created structural limitations in the decision-making processes of international organisations. Against this background, the essay critically assesses the proposals for institutional adaptation and structural reform that are geared towards enhancing the responsiveness, inclusiveness and effectiveness of international organisations. The essay contends that positive reform, premised on the pillars of cooperation and institutional adaptability, is essential for ensuring that international organisations become effective instruments for global governance in the twenty-first century. Overall, the essay underscores the need for revitalising international institutions for the maintenance of an inclusive and rules-based international legal order.

KEYWORDS: *International Organisations; Global Governance; Structural Reform; Multipolar World Order; Multilateralism.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The International legal system currently faces a time of substantial change, characterised by the juxtaposition between established institutions and ever-evolving geopolitical dynamics. While International Organisations have been conceived on the premise of a balanced world order and multilateral cooperation, they are now being put into the spotlight due to the emergence of new centres of power, growing strategic tensions and increasing complexity of transnational issues. Thus, the significance of International Organisations as the core element of the modern global system has re-emerged.

It is commonly viewed that the present dynamic state of international affairs is a “polycrisis”- a state of overlapping geopolitical, technological and ecological challenges (World Economic Forum, 2024). Under these circumstances, it becomes essential for International Organisations not only to operate as a means of facilitating cooperation between states but also to adapt to rapid changes and respond to systemic shocks. However, in light of the historical roots of their design, it is unclear how effective they can be in coping with challenges posed by the 21st century.

Traditionally, such institutions were formed with the purpose of preventing anarchy in the international system by facilitating cooperation and collective action among states. As noted by Shaw (2017), the development of international law and institutions has been interconnected throughout history, reflecting political facts while influencing state behavior. The United Nations (UN) and the Bretton Woods Organisations’ have contributed to the establishment of normative frameworks covering areas such as the use of force, trade, human rights and environmental issues. However, the effectiveness of their contribution in creating a rules-based order in the international arena has also revealed several structural constraints in a multipolar world order.

The change of world order from unipolar/ bipolar to a more complex structure of power relations has influenced the functioning of the existing system of international relations. Countries like China and India, as well as blocs such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and new members) whose membership was increased in 2025 have demonstrated that the Global South is becoming a stronger actor, posing challenges to the Global North and its dominance over international institutions. Consequently, the competition became fiercer and stimulated the creation of new venues for cooperation, such as G20 and regional organisations.

The question with respect to the International Organisations is, therefore, twofold; relevance and adaptation. The inability to make decisions in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is evidence of the problems associated with the gap between the ideal of legality and reality (Hurd, 2017). Also, arguments surrounding the restructuring of International financial institutions in addition to criticism on the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) indicate more fundamental issues of representativeness and responsiveness (Chimni, 2017).

In this regard, this essay will explore the theory that the modern crisis in International Organisations is more than just a problem of inefficacy, but rather structural misalignment. The line of argument for discussion is thus that adaptive multilateralism is the answer to the future of International Organisations as these transform from centralised bodies into coordination hubs in an interconnected world of fragmented governance.

However, International Organisations continue to be vital. The crucial part they play in dealing with issues that have become challenges to humanity across the globe makes this very clear. What is needed is not the dissolution of these organisations but rather their transformation into something better and more adaptive, just like what is being advocated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Our Common Agenda (2021).

2. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION: FROM CONCERT TO CHARTER

International Organisations' architecture is a result of a prolonged history of evolution influenced by changes in power balances and normative hopes. The Concert of Europe that followed the Congress of Vienna in 1815 was considered as the first institutionalised form of cooperation. While highly restricted and Eurocentric, it was the first step towards establishing an international order, regulating relations among major powers collectively.

The League of Nations could be considered as the very first organisation aimed to operate as a global institution with preventive measures of wars and collective security. Even though it implemented new mechanisms of work, it failed due to structural flaws and the lack of involvement of certain key powers. The failure to prevent aggression in the early 1930s proved the inefficacy of idealistic legalism without proper political support.

Unlike the previous efforts, the United Nations (UN) was a more pragmatic organisation since it included the Security Council with veto right for permanent members. Despite this, the Council received broader participation and became stronger than the previous ones. As Mazower (2012) states, it was both a political and legal solution.

After 1945, there was a growth in International Organisations with the establishment of institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), each building a complex web of governance regime for stability, development, trade and healthcare. The post-colonial period added more members, adding new concerns like development and sovereignty. Yet the power imbalance remained, with decisions made according to the needs of the dominant powers (Chimni, 2017).

This history shows both a consistent effort to create order and an evolving process of responding to political realities. However, many organisations still carry the power imbalances of their formation period, causing friction between their structure and current conditions.

Nevertheless, this continuity of power imbalances in historically structured organisations presents a significant question as to whether the reforms can reshape institutions initially established to maintain geopolitical balances.

3. INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AS NORM ENTREPRENEURS

Besides fostering cooperation, International Organisations are also key players in setting global standards. They act as ‘norm entrepreneurs’, determining the development of International Law and the perception of global challenges.

Initially, the International Law was formed upon the state consent. Nevertheless, International Organisations today actively participate in the process of lawmaking by introducing soft-law norms in terms of resolutions, declarations and guidelines. These soft-law instruments may become customary International Law despite being non-binding as they usually have strong normative force. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) played a crucial role in the establishment of the principles of decolonisation and human rights (Shaw, 2017).

Furthermore, specialised bodies of the United Nations (UN) take part in the process by providing interpretive materials and monitoring tools. Alvarez (2005) suggests that International Organisations are actively engaged in the law-making

process that goes hand in hand with treaty making procedures. This implies that nowadays, the practice of law formation has moved away from the consensual model to a more institutionalised and normative one.

In addition to these, recent analysis also shows that such developments are in line with the growing trend of “informalisation” of global governance through which norms are developed in a non-conventional way (d’Aspremont, 2017). Although this provides more flexibility, at the same time it also gives rise to certain questions related to accountability and democracy.

The role of International Organisations in the development and implementation of global norms can be observed in various fields including human rights, trade and climate change governance. The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) sets and implements human rights governance standards while in trade governance, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) has provided an elaborate regime for dispute settlement. The Paris Agreement on climate change also serves as an example of how International Organisations can help in addressing global problems despite weak enforcement mechanisms.

Apart from legal obligations, there are other factors which encourage states to adhere to international norms. According to Klabbers (2017), legitimacy of the regime is not derived just because states have consented, but it is also based on principles of equity, inclusivity and effectiveness. However, this very legitimacy is under threat due to increasing concerns about the democratic deficit (Chimni, 2017).

4. MULTIPOLAR DISRUPTION AND FRAGMENTATION

As far as the global order advances, the emergence of multipolarity is a clear fact today. The contemporary world order involves distributing power among an increased number of actors, which poses a challenge to the International Organisations.

Emerging powers such as China and India and groupings like BRICS have gained additional influence. For instance, the establishment of various Chinese institutions, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), may be regarded as an example of an innovative participation strategy. In addition, India's chairing at G20 can be seen as an illustration of the growing importance of flexible and issue-based cooperation. According to Acharya (2018), the new world order is characterised by pluralism but not a retreat from multilateralism.

Speaking about the "new world order" the term "multi-aligned" can also be applied. Indeed, multi-alignments imply the strategic engagement of states in different institutions rather than their membership in blocs. Thus, multi-alignments add complexity to the functioning of existing International Organisations.

The multipolarity under analysis has also brought about the fragmentation of global governance. For instance, smaller groupings such as QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) or AUKUS (Australia, United Kingdom and United States) allow for making decisions faster but, on the other hand, contribute to undermining the role of universal institutions. Furthermore, emerging fields of global governance tend to be developed outside the scope of existing institutions.

Thus, minilateralism is also gaining momentum in contemporary international relations due to increased focus on efficiency. Nevertheless, this tendency raises concerns regarding the universality of global governance institutions (Wilkins, 2025).

Probably, the most important change associated with multipolarity is the loss of universality of International institutions. There exist two competing visions of international order- one based on liberal principles and the other, sovereignty-oriented. Deadlocks in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) over the Ukrainian conflict, for instance, may be considered as its evidence (Hurd, 2017).

Additionally, initiatives to decolonise International law show an intention to make global institutions more diverse and balanced (Chimni, 2017). These facts show how essential it is for International institutions to be able to reconcile diversity and coherence.

Therefore, the question is not only about redistribution of power but also of fragmentation of authority.

5. STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS

There are a lot of structural weaknesses within the International Organisations that hinder their effectiveness. First, the use of veto power by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) may lead to paralysis in decision-making and International security. Originally meant to strengthen the positions of major powers, such practice has made them weaker and illegitimate (Hurd, 2017).

There remain some deficits in representation, particularly in terms of Global South. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank use voting mechanisms that grant more power to the votes of the dominant states. It raises questions related to the legitimacy and democracy.

Bureaucratic institutions limit the possibility to act. The epoch-making experience of the World Health Organisation (WHO) with respect to global health governance, including its dependence on state collaboration, has been analysed during the COVID-19 crisis.

The discussions around drafting the global pandemic treaty (World Health Organisation, 2023) indicate that problems mentioned above exist, but it is still extremely hard to gain the necessary commitments from sovereign countries.

Modern concerns relating to artificial intelligence (AI) and cybersecurity indicate additional problems that emerge when conventional organisations try to regulate rapidly changing processes. According to the regulatory reports as well, there are evident gaps in newly emerging fields like AI and cybersecurity, which are scattered at the regional level and do not have binding nature. It becomes clear that initiatives such as European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act (2024) also indicate the trend towards regional standard setting.

6. REFORM DISCOURSES

Attempts at reform of international institutions can be seen through tensions between normative and political considerations. The reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has become one of the key subjects of discussion, with suggestions to increase the number of member states and restrict the use of veto rights. At the same time, real changes cannot be achieved without gaining the approval of current permanent members. As it appears from recent discussions on reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), meaningful changes cannot also take place due to the involvement of geopolitical considerations, which only confirms the perception of the inertia of institutions.

While discussing the reform of international institutions responsible for economic governance, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are mentioned the most often. There is a growing need for reforms that will improve the representativeness of member states and reflect their actual mandate. While some steps towards achieving more equality in economic governance have already been undertaken, further changes will come slowly and involve political considerations.

In addition to the creation of new organisations, alternative to the established structures, there has been a trend of the emergence of informal governance institutions such as the G20. Accordingly, an intriguing question arises if the informal institutions are just supplementing the traditional organisations.

7. TOWARDS ADAPTIVE MULTILATERALISM

It would be desirable to define adaptive multilateralism as an alternative mode of governance based on flexibility, multi-level governance and functional differentiation. Accordingly, International Organisations will cease to be hierarchical institutions and transform themselves into coordinating nodes in an ecosystem composed of both governmental and non-governmental entities.

As such, in addressing these problems, one could propose an approach based on the principle of adaptive multilateralism as an alternative way of conceptualising International Organisations. It involves promoting flexibility, inclusiveness and resilience as key features of International Organisations.

One could consider flexibility as involving variable geometry which means that states can adapt different levels of participation depending on their involvement in the various issues. The problem, however, consists in ensuring coherence, which should be addressed by transforming International Organisations into coordination centres.

Inclusivity becomes essential as well because increased participation and representation, especially from the perspective of the Global South, is needed to achieve legitimacy. In particular, intellectual movements like the Third World approaches to International law (TWAIL) point at historical inequities and need for more varied perspectives (Chimni, 2017). Thus, inclusiveness, in turn, involves the necessity to take into account a wider variety of normative and developmental perspectives.

Resilience, therefore, implies the existence of institutions capable of addressing new challenges, which includes anticipating new developments, working on an interdisciplinary basis and relying on scientific knowledge.

Ultimately, adaptive multilateralism implies a move away from inflexible institutionalism towards flexible and diverse forms of governance.

8. THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE: BEYOND INSTITUTIONALISM

The evolution of global governance suggests a gradual departure from institutionalism to a system that includes institutional, informal and regional arrangements. Power is no longer held exclusively by International Organisations

but is distributed among a network of states and non-states, resulting in a more decentralised structure for global governance.

Despite the advantages brought about by this change, issues of fragmentation, legitimacy and coordination become significant factors. In this regard, the International Organisations should not be viewed as hierarchical organisations but as institutions that facilitate cooperation and norm-building in various governance structures.

Therefore, a departure from institutionalism does not imply the end of International Organisations but its changing role amidst the changing nature of the global order.

9. CONCLUSION

The role of International Organisations is vital for the international legal system, but their efficiency requires adaptability. Multipolarity, fragmentation and issues of legitimacy have revealed certain flaws of International Organisations, but at the same time, they give the chance for change.

It does not mean the end of multilateralism but its evolution. Changes should include adaptation to the realities of the modern world, improved representativeness and responsiveness to the contemporary issues.

Adaptive multilateralism can become the way out. In general, the future of International Organisations is not in their replacement by another institution, but in adaptation and innovation. It means:

The real problem of our time is not global governance per se, but its adequacy to the needs of an evolving world.

Thus, in this new world order, the role of International Organisations should change. From the static centres of power and control, they need to become active participants of cooperation and coordination among different levels of governance.

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