

8 Enhancing Global Governance

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A Concerning Standpoint

Not since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 has the world been reminded that a major war fought with nuclear weapons could spiral out of control, as the war in Ukraine evolves, not only as a devastating armed struggle but also as a geopolitical encounter being shaped by the behaviour of both Moscow and Washington. On the Russian side, aside from launching an aggressive war that has featured battlefield miscalculations and setbacks, it has been compelled to respond to a robust NATO response that was likely unexpected.

There are ominous intimations that nuclear weapons could be introduced by Moscow into the war in Ukraine if security threats to Russia's homeland cross thresholds of perceived further danger. Russia can be further faulted by its refusal to admit the military miscalculation embedded in its aggression against Ukraine and reverse course without causing further carnage. The United States/NATO has imposed comprehensive punitive sanctions combined with a seeming refusal to explore diplomatic paths leading to a political compromise that would admittedly face formidable obstacles.¹ This posture is reinforced by a public insistence by NATO governments on a Ukrainian victory, 'no matter how long it takes'. Such an outlook means prolonging and escalating the combat phase of the war. This hard line is underscored by continuously increasing NATO commitments of massive economic and military assistance to Ukraine of ever more technologically advanced weaponry.

Adding to concerns about the global context are signs of worsening United States-China relations, although somewhat relaxed by some intimations of a mutual pullback from confrontation. Yet China has made menacing official assertions about their resolve to reincorporate Taiwan into China, by force if necessary. Such sentiments likely prompted the United States to make several hostile provocative moves with respect to China while the Ukraine crisis was unfolding, most dangerously with respect to its commitment to defend Taiwan, whatever the consequences. Such provocations were reinforced by the adoption of a series of anti-Chinese economic policies against the background of the earlier formation in 2021 of a new alliance arrangement joining Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (AUKUS), which is clearly aimed at China. It is widely regarded around the world as prompting China, in turn, to test the American political will by taking a mixture of provocative diplomatic moves of its own, blended with a less defensive deterrent posture. Given the interactive global governance processes bearing on war/peace issues, such developments in the past have often been preludes to geopolitical confrontations, crises and even mutually destructive warfare.

While this geopolitical drama continues to develop, humanity, if conceived of as a collective unity, is numbly experiencing a deepening biological-ecological-economic-ethical-political-spiritual crisis on a global scale that poses interrelated threats of species extinction that have never before clouded human existence on the planet. The war in Ukraine is an alarming symptom of several dimensions of this crisis, including a geopolitical mentality among foreign policy elites, ill-equipped intellectually and bureaucratically to cope with such a novel challenge in a manner commensurate with the unprecedented severity and complexity of the threat.

Against this background, the short-sighted focus of political leaders and their most influential advisers on the immediate, short-term challenges is also symptomatic of the broader underlying crisis. It seems that political leaders are ill-equipped to react responsibly, which would require taking into fuller account these longer-range structural challenges and concerns. It raises the bio-political question never seriously posed earlier in human history as to whether there exists a species will to survive as a species of sufficient strength to address this constellation of issues now confronting humanity (Falk 2016: 253–62).

This chapter focuses on whether the current sub-systemic dominant mental and behavioural structures of state-centric global governance possess a realistic potential for unified systemic guidance given present conditions. And further, will policy guidance be in forms respectful of ecological sustainability and human rights, as well as being attentive to risks of species survival? There is a need to promote inter-societal equity if cooperative problem-solving on regional and global scales is to succeed in the spirit of working towards achieving a delicate balance between power and justice in world politics.

The Enigmas of Global Governance

Global governance provides a way of describing the various types of order that prevail when the world is conceived holistically, yet used with precision so as to avoid creating impressions that the institutionalist globalising terminology implies advocacy of a ‘world government’. In this sense, global governance encompasses existing systemic norms, processes and institutions of global reach, as well as sub-systemic norms, processes and institutions at all levels of social and political interaction, including at global and local levels. As matters now stand, the world, as conceived from a systems’ perspective, is sub-system dominant—that is, in general, the parts prevail over the whole when addressing global-scale problems to be solved. Existentially, it is a system in which only a few of the parts, conceived of as leading political actors, exert systemic influences.²

This pattern of interaction, exhibiting both state-centric and the hierarchical/hegemonic quality of current forms of global governance, was illustrated by the behaviour of leading states in 2020–22 during the COVID-19 pandemic. This behaviour was shaped by national rather than global interests. Additionally, it was protective of intellectual property rights in vaccines. As such, governments failed to fashion a restorative global response to the pandemic that was people-based and responsive to both the interconnectiveness of the disease’s transmission and the inequalities among states when it came to relevant medical knowledge, equipment, facilities, and treatment.

Prior to the emergence of nuclear weapons and the advent of climate change, this defining condition of sub-system dominance, while humanistically troublesome, did not fundamentally threaten the future of humanity when conceived of as a species or the planetary viability of a sustainable ecological habitat.³ While the threat to the human species is

given prominence in most commentary, the current bio-political crisis is also endangering the survival of non-human species and the viability of their ecological habitats.

Throughout most of modern history, diverse imperialisms have subjected territorial sovereignties and the majority of humanity to a variety of arrangements designed to subordinate and exploit the interacting parts on the basis of hierarchy and hegemony (Mazower 2012).⁴ In modern times, the development of technological innovations, especially those relevant to warfare and connectivity, has played a decisive role in shaping these sub-systemic hierarchies, but without much impact on the overall systemic structure.⁵

Increasingly, humanity is bound together by what David Held called 'a community of fate', without the corresponding systemic or sub-systemic adaptations and normative dispositions to address mounting global-scale threats by effective, legitimate and equitable means.⁶ These dysfunctional structures at the systemic level reveal several of the root causes of the underlying dilemmas of global governance.

As the first such crisis in world history, the political class lacks experience in and knowledge about such matters. The response over the years to the advent of nuclear weapons is not encouraging, which transitioned from near panic immediately after World War II to the contrivance of a new structure of normalcy based on a hegemonic hierarchy commonly known as 'the nonproliferation regime'. Mechanisms of holistic solidarity and systemic cooperation exist but are too weak and superficial, and hence easily distracted. What mechanisms exist have clearly exhibited their disutility when it comes to overcoming the multidimensional crisis identified earlier.

These structural features suggest incongruities between the hybrid state-centric/geopolitical managed world order, historically generated by European experience, including its hegemonic and colonial expansions far beyond continental boundaries, and contemporary challenges of global-scale problem-solving. It is these challenges that have become imperative to address in the 21st century. Such challenges were to varying degrees detected earlier, but not in ways that led to adaptive responses, especially when it comes to governance (Talbot 2008).

To transcend the systemic crisis presupposes a sufficient political commitment and understanding to support the establishment of appropriate mechanisms for the promotion of the global public good. Such mechanisms are needed, first of all, to promote global public interests in relation to the vital question of upholding traditional security interests of states and the ecological stability of the world, as well as much increased efforts to take due account of such secondary causal factors intensifying these primary dangers as contagious disease, extreme poverty, food insecurities, energy supplies, and price volatility.

The United Nations is not completely impotent in the face of these mounting challenges. Within the last 40 years, it has usefully set forth at least a preliminary normative agenda responsive to many of these concerns, although evading such fundamental issues as demilitarisation and denuclearisation, first, in the eight Millennium Development Goals, and more recently in the more ambitious 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which were agreed upon in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs as the centrepiece of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These articulations of goals, presumed to be shared, can be seen as tentative gestures towards the need for enhanced global governance, limiting state behaviour, at least as it pertains to development, widely regarded as embodying the priorities of the Global South.

Sceptics point to the avoidance of the war/peace agenda and the marginality of such rhetorical devices as being more accurately regarded as aspects of the problem rather

than signalling the start of a solution. At present, the dangers are acknowledged, and rudimentary mechanisms for appropriate responses exist, but only in embryonic and essentially voluntary forms that leave implementation to the discretion of ambivalent sovereign states. This response structure is not in keeping with the magnitude or urgency of the problem-solving challenges, as evidenced by the worsening of global warming and the chilling reminders of the frightening reality of nuclear dangers, whether catastrophically activated by accident or deliberate policy. By separating 'development' from 'peace', the United Nations indirectly acknowledges deference to geopolitics when it comes to war prevention and global security, which can be interpreted as an abandonment of the core pledge of the Charter Preamble.

Effective Global Governance Does Not Imply World Government

As suggested by Strobe Talbott (2008), a former high-ranking government bureaucrat, it seems selfishly important for government officials and advisers to distinguish 'global governance' from 'world government' to avoid the taint attached to the latter in policymaking circles. As he also suggests, the preference for euphemisms, such as 'multilateralism', does not do the job when in government. Although Talbott favours collective decision-making beyond the state, he does not identify mechanisms needed and orientation advocated for the maintenance of 21st-century international peace and security, given the persistence of hegemonic and hierarchical state-centrism.⁷

The approach adopted here to global governance is one that does not view world government as a likely, desirable or necessary solution in the foreseeable future, even granting the range of unprecedented dangers facing the existing quasi-anarchic international society that is fragmented in multiple respects and organised hierarchically and hegemonically.⁸ In the years after both world wars of the last century, there were influential persons in the West who insisted that world government was the indispensable solution to the then-perceived challenges of global governance arising from the persistence of warfare between major states, fought with ever more destructive weaponry, alongside acute worries in the years after 1945 that a third world war was possible, given the sharpening rivalries between the West and the Soviet Bloc. If such a war were to occur, it would almost certainly be fought with nuclear weapons and produce systemic catastrophe. A secondary yet still crucial concern is to manage the post-war economic recovery in ways that do not bring about a new economic depression of the sort that agitated the pre-World War II global setting in the 1930s and brought widespread hardship to civilian populations almost everywhere.

This dual approach to global governance focused on the prevention of a future world war and the avoidance of a second Great Depression. It has never become sensitive enough to the priorities of the Global South. The elites of countries, especially those recently achieving political independence and sovereign statehood, possessed policy imaginaries that were dominated by memories, past and present, of anti-colonial struggles, anti-imperialism, and by a variety of post-liberation challenges of national development. This latter struggle was accompanied by the widespread belief that the world economy was rigged against the modernising development of the South when it came to trade and investment.⁹

Even in the West, radical centralising schemes of global governance reform faded from serious consideration when it became evident that no political traction existed for downgrading territorial sovereignty in favour of a more adaptive post-Westphalian or

post-statist innovative reconfiguration of international order along World Federalist lines. Such proposals that were forthcoming conformed to Western liberal ideas of constitutionalism and were compatible with transnational market-driven, private-sector interests.¹⁰

Despite this dominant trend, plausible and more globally oriented ‘governmental’ proposals continued to be made as late as the 1960s, but again without generating enough public enthusiasm or policy relevance to make them happen, or even to put them forward as worthy of consideration in most influential policymaking circles.¹¹

A more constrained version of global security governance resting on somewhat increased, yet cautious reliance on institutional centralisation can be found in a book of mine published in the mid-1970s.¹² Such an approach is more sceptical about entrusting the United Nations with meeting the global governance challenges that were at the time beset by Cold War confrontations and growing North-South tensions associated with the collapse of colonialism in Asia and Africa. It substitutes the less specific framework of ‘central guidance’ as a proposed legitimate and effective way of overcoming the obstacles to global reform associated with state-centrism as shaped by geopolitics while not encroaching upon the territorial sovereignty priorities of social, economic and political development in the Global South or risking global tyranny as a mode of dystopian governance arising from a premature transition to world government.¹³ In this regard, see the books contributed to the World Order Model Project (WOMP) by Rajni Kothari and Ali Mazrui (Galtung 1980; Kothari 1974; Mazrui 1976; Mendlovitz 1975). Recent academic articles have suggested that this may be a time to revitalise WOMP, which has stimulated some effort by still active WOMP participants to explore the viability of such an option (Falk 1975; see also Lopez-Claros, Dahl and Groff 2020).

It is somewhat ironic that the most transformative institutional attempt to unify global governance followed from the Western geopolitical victory in the Cold War, the longest ‘war’ of the past century. It did not lead governments or arouse civil society to seek a safer, more equitable and sustainable approach, but it did lead U.S. policymakers to seek a militarised form of unified global governance, with unipolarity replacing bipolarity and filling the geopolitical vacuum occasioned by the Soviet implosion in 1991. Possibilities for the emergence of a more benign unipolarity exist, perhaps in response to increasing pressures exerted by unsolved global challenges. This post-Westphalian approach to governance is explored in the following section devoted to an exposition of this ‘global state’ prospect, which is at sharp variance with the Westphalian notions of territorial sovereign states and a state-centric world order.

In summary, despite the emergence of global-scale problems of severity that require urgent attention and major resource allocations, world government is neither feasible nor desirable at this stage of world history. It is not feasible because there is no political traction supportive of such a centralised globalisation of governmental authority, even in minimalist forms.¹⁴ It is not desirable because present political elites are too often motivated by nationalist priorities, recently increasing in a range of authoritarian formats. Beyond this, political leaders are generally committed to retaining geopolitical prerogatives as integral to the protection of their sovereign rights. A prominent example of such prerogatives is the right of veto granted to the five permanent members of the Security Council, which is further reinforced by provisions throughout the UN Charter. In an extension of legalising geopolitical primacy, the Security Council is the *only* organ within the UN system with the authority to make decisions on matters of peace and security, as distinct from the United Nations General Assembly’s limited authority to issue recommendations and offer advice.

These prerogatives, within and outside the United Nations, are disruptively manifested by the behaviour of the three current geopolitical actors with global ambition (United States, China, Russia). For the foreseeable future, global governance solutions, to have realistic prospects of enactment, will have to be fashioned within the constraints of the Westphalian framework. This framework is a hybrid form of world order combining state-centrism and an overlay of geopolitics whose significance is often under-appreciated even in the academic literature on international relations (IR).¹⁵ The relevance of normative globalism by way of international law prohibitions on the use of force and other restraints is accorded a transformative potential by a small, legalistic minority of international jurists (Hathaway and Shapiro 2017).

At present, this geopolitical overlay is creating a high risk of global breakdown in the form of a major war. This risk arises from the post-Cold War unipolar circumstances that led the United States to establish a loosely linked non-territorial global security state, which amounts to an untested approach to global governance. It seeks legitimacy and effectiveness by a combination of fear, respect, leadership, and benevolence that rests on its worldwide projection of full spectrum military superiority, a neoliberal world economy and coercive diplomacy, exacted through sanctions, covert operations, arms sales, and boycotts. Sustaining unipolarity was sometimes criticised as too costly and ineffective, yet seldom hostilely contested in the West until China emerged as an all-too-credible geopolitical rival and Russia mounted a further challenge on its borders by attacking Ukraine. No longer is a geopolitical war for global dominance or shaping a new structure of geopolitical alignment a remote fear.¹⁶

Situating the United Nations

Except for my own contribution to WOMP, the other participants did not accord major attention to the United Nations as either a political actor or as an important part of their agenda of policy priorities. Instead, they stressed such normative goals as permanent sovereignty over natural resources, the right to development, a new international economic order, a new international information order. The United Nations was viewed as a site of struggle on North/South issues rather than a venue notable for conflict resolution and multilateral cooperation. Even for economic policy, Global South countries placed their emphasis on national plans and regional coordination. Global governance was not seen as a matter of great concern, as the Global South was keenly aware that geopolitics—even after the successes of the global anti-colonial movement—remained within the exclusive control of the United States and the Soviet Union and their close allies, especially on matters of war and peace.

To what extent has this marginalisation of the United Nations been overcome in the present period due to the ending of the Cold War and rising global concerns relating to climate change, and the challenges to global hegemony being mounted by the Global South? It would seem that the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), negotiated under UN auspices and ratified by countries in the Global South, represents a rare overt challenge to the hegemonic aspects of the nuclear dimensions of global security that have prevailed in international society and are reflected in the design and operation of the United Nations since its founding. The leader of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, never tires of pointing out that ‘the world is greater than five’, a mantra targeting the dominance of the five veto powers in the Security Council. This slogan can be understood as an expression of exasperated frustration with the UN hegemonic approach to global governance.

It is still important to recognise that despite these fundamental shortcomings, the United Nations makes useful and numerous contributions to global governance in numerous ways that affect positively the daily lives of hundreds of millions of people. Although the United Nations has not been sufficiently empowered to address the fundamental challenges imperilling the future of humanity and the eco-viability of the earth's natural habitats, these life-enhancing contributions deserve appreciation and increased funding.

At the same time, even with the opportunities existing at the end of the Cold War to promote global reforms bearing on war prevention, nuclear weaponry, arms trade through support for a stronger, more independent United Nations, positive adjustments were not forthcoming. It seems that the architectural design of the United Nations as the principal means of global governance in 1945 was deliberately configured to be virtually reform-proof or, to put it differently, that geopolitical dominance persisted in the 1990s, making efforts to curtail the veto power or endow the United Nations with greater financial and administrative independence still lacking in political traction, perhaps even more so than in 1945. The victorious side in the Cold War prevailed without prevailing in an actual war and proceeded to claim sole legitimacy for itself as providing the world with a globally governing orientation nationally, politically and ideologically.¹⁷

As noted, the principal weaknesses of the United Nations were built into its design, as confirmed by the operational experience of the UN system in relation to peace and security, world economic policy, human rights, and other policy issues. The United Nations had no effective control over the political and economic behaviour of its major member states that remained sovereignty-oriented, especially the permanent members of the Security Council possessing a right of veto. This has meant that the most contentious issues in international life are not often resolvable by compromise, judicial assessment and respect for international law. Political leaders have proven incapable of producing solution-oriented diplomacy that depends on the willingness of parties to a conflict to accept cooperation, constraint, compromise, and accountability as a desirable alternative to threat diplomacy, arms races and actual coercion. And in the security domain, the traditional means of seeking order and stability is to rely on the discretion and good judgement of those who execute policy on behalf of geopolitical state actors, with adjustments reflecting the new security environment created by weaponry of mass destruction and speed and accuracy of delivery.

For management of the economy, the governance structure of the world was institutionalised in World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and, later, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), institutions conceived and controlled by global capitalist states and mindful of free market economics rather than the normative complaints of the Global South. In this sense, post-1945 global governance of the world economy was managed by Western interests quite separately from the United Nations in organisations collectively known as the Bretton Woods institutions (for reliable elaboration see Ikenberry 2001, 2011). These institutional settings were largely free from Cold War tensions yet were deemed crucial to avoid a recurrence of the Great Depression with its devastating effects on human security. It is revealing that the West was willing to accept a deeper engagement with internationalism in the economic sphere than the political sphere and made some effort to entice Soviet Union participation. The Soviets did play an active part in the founding negotiations at Bretton Woods but withdrew, later rejoining in 1992, not as a separate state but as 15 distinct republics.

In summary, these five permanent members of the Security Council enjoy a right of exception to all Security Council decisions in the form of the veto, and by this

dominance, they limit the United Nations's role with respect to peace and stability. Such control is differently institutionalised by way of weighted, veto-free voting procedures of the Bretton Woods institutions framing of world economic policy. Strategic reliance on this veto power has resulted in relegating the United Nations to the role of being a virtual spectator when it comes either to preventing and resolving major conflicts or to regulating important security arrangements from the time of the Cold War to the present multi-dimensional crisis arising out of the war in Ukraine. This UN design also freezes the hierarchy of power as it existed in 1945, thus diminishing the legitimacy of the United Nations as representing the peoples of the world more than 75 years later. This power-ranking misrepresents the actual distribution of power, given that three of the five permanent members belong to the West (United States, United Kingdom, France), no African or Latin American country elevated to this elevated rank of UN membership, and only China from Asia. In country terms, the 1.2 billion people of India are under-represented in the Security Council, as are such important countries as Indonesia, Nigeria, Brazil, Pakistan, Japan, Germany, and South Africa.

Although the Security Council is the only component of the UN system with the authority to reach decisions authorising the use of force and to impose punitive sanctions on states, it is not by any means the whole story when it comes to evaluating UN past, present and future contributions to global governance. The same goes for the world economy with its control under the combined auspices of Bretton Woods and major market-oriented states often alleged to be acting in concert with the large multinational corporations.

Within the spheres of health, development, environment, human rights, disaster relief, multilateralism, and the dissemination of knowledge, the United Nations plays vital roles throughout much of the world, roles which are ignored by the media but not by people widely scattered geographically, whose lives have been bettered in many ways due to UN local activities.¹⁸

A variety of proposals through the years have surfaced to circumvent the impasse at the United Nations, resulting from tensions between major states, especially those with geopolitical status. Most recently, the Liechtenstein Initiative of 2020 has been put forward as a way to inhibit reliance on the obstructiveness of the veto in the Security Council under certain conditions (Abrams 2022; Donaldson 2022). This proposal would be unlikely to enhance the legitimacy or effectiveness of the governance capabilities of the United Nations, but in the current atmosphere would tend to make the organisation a Western geopolitical tool in rivalry with China and Russia with respect to conflictual behaviour, whether of an interstate or intrastate character.

This kind of reform motivated by partisan geopolitics helps to explain the impulse to support a one-sided Western interpretation of global crises in the event of the outbreak of violent forms of geopolitical conflict such as has unfolded in Ukraine. Such an approach to reforming the role of the United Nations as the institutional mainstay of global reform, if implemented under crisis conditions, would almost certainly lead to either the withdrawal of states likely to be the targets of a veto-free United Nations or at best their refusal to fulfil punitive obligations imposed by the majority. This pattern of pure state-centrism (that is, excluding geopolitics) explains the demise of the League of Nations, which was reduced to impotence because it could not obtain or retain the participation of such major actors on the global stage as the United States, the Soviet Union and Germany). The United Nations, by obtaining and maintaining near-universal participation, has succeeded where the League failed. Admittedly, this has come at the cost of

virtual irrelevance for the United Nations that has accompanied the war in Ukraine and, indeed, every major occasion where the policy of a permanent member (or its close allies) seemed to challenge the norms of the UN Charter.

Any view of global governance that regards the rivals of the West as the wrongdoers and the West as the upholder of a 'rule-governed' world order is misleading. Adherence to the UN Charter and international law by the United States and NATO is presumed, and a searchlight of disapproval is shone on disruptive behaviour by geopolitical rivals. This one-sidedness based on double standards overlooks the experience of the United Nations during its existence. The United States and its principal allies have repeatedly evaded international law and UN Charter provisions without occasioning any adverse consequences, not even censure. The United States has resisted strong expressions of consensus among the membership whenever its strategic interests were at stake, including when domestic political implications were at play, as with Israel on one side and Cuba on the other. This pattern of disruptive behaviour is evident, going back to the Vietnam War and more recently in the attacks and occupations of Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, and support for Saudi Arabia's armed intervention in Yemen.

State-Centric Coalition Formation

The Brazilian jurist Roberto Mangabeira Unger, a founder of Critical Legal Studies at Harvard Law School, has written a stimulating, highly original short book outlining an approach to global governance by way of coalition building on a grand scale (Unger 2022; see also Mazower 2012). Unger's point of departure is to affirm the necessity of accepting, even affirming, the sovereign state and state system as constituting the permanent structure of world order. Hence, he opposes views that seek to transcend or transform Westphalian structures and processes. Unlike most serious discussions of attainable and preferred responses to the crisis of global governance, Unger does not consider the Westphalia framework an obstacle to a benevolent future for humanity but as the foundation for constructing a more stable, effective and cooperative system of world order, which when and if successfully realised might appropriately be known as 'Westphalia +'.

Unger dismisses cosmopolitan speculation and the World Federalist approaches as not only lacking in political traction but also as undesirable. Such reformist ideas are undesirable because Unger believes that the statist framework, as currently operative, is the most efficient way to uphold the various forms of sub-system diversity encountered throughout history. Unger presents territorial sovereign states as socio-political spaces that are free to experiment within their borders according to diverse societal imaginaries. Unger is not at all insensitive to the detrimental aspects of political fragmentation when it comes to contemporary problem-solving on a global scale, especially with regard to war/peace and human security concerns. He rests his hopes for a better future for humanity on incremental and selective forms of coalition building that include geopolitical actors as participants rather than exempting from accountability those states that used to be called great powers in the international relations literature.

It is not that Unger opposes a role for the United Nations and international institutionalism in meeting the challenges of global governance, but his assessment is that the United Nations, as seen from a functional perspective, has so far failed because of the primacy of the Security Council and the irresponsible behaviour of its permanent members. The United Nations has not taken advantage of obvious opportunities to strengthen the

organisation's effectiveness. In this regard, the end of the Cold War in 1992 and the millennial year of 2000 were deeply disappointing.

At present, the three dominant states display a high level of willingness to build security coalitions against real or imagined rivals and almost no serious willingness to search for peace-building coalitions and to engage in agreements with adversaries, even when it is perceived by the relevant governments to serve mutual or common interests. Unger believes that such myopic behaviour can be changed.

One attractive feature of Unger's approach is its extreme flexibility, combined with the encouraging belief that the only way to work towards satisfactory forms of global governance is to accept the norms and procedures of a statist world order as they currently function. He did, however, combine this with the dubious acceptance of international law as authoritatively setting limits on the behaviour of states.

Despite the suggestiveness of his central argument, it rests on a number of questionable assumptions. The United States, China and Russia are not presently prepared to subscribe to a world order that precludes their pursuit of clashing strategic ambitions and retention of geopolitical freedom of manoeuvre, above all with respect to border security and nuclear weaponry. Secondly, these current great powers manipulate international law in peace and security contexts, deploying it to a certain extent as a partisan policy tool by which to inflame public opinion against adversaries while refusing to be bound by international law if its norms obstruct behaviour in support of their strategic interests. Such double standards seem most deeply embedded in the political consciousness of Western foreign policy elites and seem dauntingly difficult to overcome. Thirdly, there is little indication that these geopolitical actors are unhappy about the governance weaknesses of the United Nations. Despite such important world public order achievements as the Law of the Seas Treaty (1982), the arrangements agreed upon were interpreted to allow nuclear weapons testing in the oceans and to permit navies to have freedom of the high seas as a permissive justification for the pursuit of dangerous ambitions distant from territorial homelands, and at the expense of other weaker polities whose populations were exposed to severe harm in the form of health hazards.

'Global State' Solution

'To the extent that there is an American hegemony or empire of global scope, then the United States, however ambivalently, incompletely, incompetently and temporarily, is a de facto world government of some sort' (Deudney 2007: 244–45).

What Deudney labels as 'de facto world government' I choose to call a (non-territorial) 'global state' that is neither a world government (some form of global constitutionalism) nor a world empire (formally subordinating existing sovereign states). It is more accurately understood as a dynamic *sui generis* arrangement which currently partakes of both governmental and imperial features, and is under multiple challenges from geopolitical rivals, and less directly from the Global South.¹⁹

While the challenges of global governance are not currently susceptible to generating positive responses in forms qualifying as global government, there is more plausibility for the prospect of unitary control of global problem-solving under the aegis of 'a global state', although with limited functions and distinctive properties that are very different from existing national states. The United States has invested heavily in establishing the security infrastructure for such a unification of problem-solving authority and capacity to

implement global security goals but oriented towards national and private-sector interests rather than being responsive to global interests.

In part, the heightened stakes of the war in Ukraine reflect the superimposition of geopolitical rivalry on Westphalian dynamics of international conflict. The United States is currently making a major effort to repulse the Russian military challenge to its unipolar position while also responding to the Chinese challenge that, up to now, has taken the form of economic and technological competition. If the United States succeeds in repulsing these challenges, it will occupy a unique position at the pinnacle of the international order. As indicated earlier, such an arrangement is not likely to achieve legitimacy or be recognised as an acceptable form of 'global governance' by most sovereign states and the most populous nations in the world. At best, such a political arrangement will be passively accepted but more probably exist under constant challenge and hence be unstable in relation to war prevention.

This type of global state rests disproportionately on militarist ascendancy, based on a global network of foreign bases, alliances, navies patrolling the five oceans, arms sales leverage, cyber warfare capabilities, and dominance of space.²⁰ Such ascendancy rests on claims of 'full spectrum dominance', achieving credibility by its presumed capability to meet all international and internal threats to the political status quo posed by adversary forces. Although there is no doubt about the realities of this unprecedented military destructive capability, it has repeatedly failed to deliver political outcomes in accord with the aims of U.S. foreign policy. This draws into question whether military power currently possesses the historical agency to allow a global state of this character to administer mechanisms for the solution of global-scale security governance challenges. This includes threats posed by nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, as well as by non-military developments, of which climate change and ecological devastation are the most pervasively dangerous.

It is not only the short-sightedness of militarism and claims of moral superiority as the proper response to the problems of global governance but also the muddled ideological approach taken to give an aura of legitimacy to this unipolar geopolitical stance.

Biden articulates the American global vision as providing leadership for a coalition of democracies against an array of autocracies. The alliance of democracies is portrayed as alone capable of providing humane and effective varieties of governance for the world. Such polarisation is at odds with the *de facto* claims of political unity and operational behaviour associated with the global state claims as underpinning global security governance. Furthermore, the proffered ideological alignment is not reflected in existing alliance relations that are one of the pillars of support for the militarised geopolitics that the United States has favoured since the end of the Cold War.

Biden identifies China and Russia as exemplars of such autocratic governance patterns but passes over the fact that there are now very few genuine democracies in the world, and some of the more repressive countries are routinely included in the ideological coalition that the United States purports to be leading. Such selective advocacy of democracy and human rights has been reduced in practice to state propaganda aimed at the Euro-Atlantic countries. It functions to mobilise support for the pursuit of aggressive geopolitics and the re-Westernisation of the post-colonial world. In this form, the structures and administrative capabilities of an American-led global state cannot contribute positively to the need for global governance mechanisms capable of generating sufficient global public goods in the context of human and ecological health, climate change, food, energy, equitable economic arrangements, migration, and demilitarisation, which together fulfil the requirements of human security that global governance structures are tasked to achieve.

It is possible, although seemingly remote from the standpoint of the present, that if the United States manages to maintain geopolitical ascendancy in the face of Russian and Chinese challenges, then it might also experience a benevolent transformation of its own identity to offer the world generally positive leadership to meet such urgent collective goods problems as it arguably did with respect to the economic reconstruction of Europe and Japan in the period after World War II. Such an option is not visible or plausible on current political horizons, but future stresses may induce a radical reordering of priorities, including the partial demilitarisation of the current U.S.-led embodiment of a global state in response to reformist demands from within the United States and transnational pressures from without and from below. Civil society activism has a potentially influential role to play in reshaping the U.S. global role and is likely to be self-mobilised by a deteriorating set of ecological circumstances and nuclear dangers that call attention to risks imperilling species survival that seem certain to be increasingly evident in the years ahead.²¹

This more benevolent version of the global state would probably reflect internal moves in the direction of what the Quincy Institute in Washington advocates under the rubric of ‘responsible statecraft’, which could include a framework of constraint shaped by adherence to international law and backing off claims that benign world order depends on the ideological triumph of countries friendly to the West. Such adherence might facilitate geopolitical accommodation with China, and even Russia, and include certain elements of demilitarisation starting with annual percentage military budget cuts, stricter regulation of arms sales, a No-First-Use Declaration for nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, a graduated closing of many foreign military bases, and even adherence to the 2021 agreement negotiated for several years at the United Nations, the TPNW.

Against such a background augmented by dire warnings from climate scientists and ecologists, the kind of solidarity needed to reach agreements among diversely situated and governed sovereign states might become feasible, possibly under the auspices of the United Nations, but not necessarily (Unger 2022). At an earlier time, the public order of the oceans was negotiated in a global setting that led to a series of negotiated bargains between developed and less developed states, as well as between states with varied access to ocean navigational and other resources.

In other words, where the political will existed to achieve a consensus and effective leadership in arranging trade-offs between states with vastly differing interests (e.g., offshore resources vs. navigational transit for navies), a generally satisfactory result that served global interests and human security proved quite often reachable. The word ‘generally’ might bring the Charter into closer accord to geopolitics, which has operated dysfunctionally with respect to the pursuit of international peace and security. It is Unger’s view, discussed earlier, that the processes of inter-governmental coalition formation would likely supersede the United Nations, rendering it irrelevant, at least with respect to the big problems facing humanity. Unger also suggests that successes of coalition building could stimulate reformist energies within the United Nations, especially among the permanent members of the Security Council, to avoid institutional marginalisation. Such considerations might even prompt moves within the United Nations to amend the Charter to eliminate or greatly limit the veto power, grant more authority to the secretary-general while removing funding from the control of member states and enhance the role of the ICJ and of international law generally. In effect, if the United Nations can be reconfigured to overcome the geopolitical primacy that has so often paralysed it in the past, and instead accept guidance from and respect for international law, it could play a

coordinating role for coalition building by a variety of groupings of political actors working on a range of global governance issues, widening its central activities to encompass human security and lessening its preoccupations with the maladies of clashing national security claims of member states.

The Geopolitical Management of Power, Authority and Global Problem-Solving

There is another approach to global governance that may be worth scrutinising because, in comparison with more idealistic alternatives, it is immediately attainable and, to some extent, already provides order to international society, which retains its anarchic character; this, despite the contemporary complexities of interdependence and digital interconnectedness, as well as the overall economic performance in the face of predatory forms of capitalism. This approach can be best described as ‘the geopolitical management’ of power, authority and global problem-solving. This geopolitical approach to global governance has two principal modes of expression:

- a unipolar management model that is historically represented by the United States as the first ‘global state’ in world history, as discussed in the previous section;
- a multipolar management model in which the geopolitically leading states act in concert both transactionally and in a growing shared commitment to global public goods.

Despite its relative ease of attainability, there are serious drawbacks to the acceptance of such a multipolar managerial approach, including resistance in the Global South. In an important sense, the war in Ukraine will be remembered as much, or more, for how it influences geopolitical alignments and practice as for its effects on the future of Ukraine. To the extent that the geopolitical level of conflictual engagement does not extend the unipolar mandate, there are many reasons why a managerial, de-ideologised approach among either the three geopolitical actors or high levels of bipolar cooperation between China and the United States holds promise for an era of geopolitical cooperation.

This scenario for the future presupposes that Russia—after its invasion of Ukraine—curtails its geopolitical ambitions sufficiently to neither need nor want to act as a full partner in this altered framework of geopolitical leadership. It also depends on altered outlooks in both Washington and Beijing that envision the benefits of promoting a cooperative international order that outweighs the current mood of implacable rivalry. If this were to happen, it might roughly resemble a globalised reframing of the Concert of Europe (1815–1914) that maintained continental peace and stability for much of the 19th century. If any such rearrangement materialises, it would likely upset the 190 or so countries currently on the outside looking in. Tensions could be reduced only by reassurances relating to equity, common cause and a strengthened global rule of law and a firm commitment to pursuing peaceful settlements of all international disputes.

The most plausible sequence would be to start such a process in an area where the need for cooperative action of global scope is obvious to all, where the complexity of the overall challenges lends itself to compromises and trade-offs and where ideological factors are not intrusive. Climate change and sustaining biodiversity would be an obvious starting point, but other challenges involving human trafficking, the criminal drug trade, migrations, demilitarisation, and denuclearisation also could be mutually attractive under certain conditions.

Concluding Remarks

The inadequacy of present structures and processes is evident from the inability to act responsibly in relation to problem-solving challenges of global scope. At the same time, the Westphalian blend of state-centrism and geopolitics seems firmly entrenched, even within the UN framework. Under these circumstances, both the political leadership of the world and civil society movements are increasingly under pressure to serve the global public good or be confronted by catastrophic, multidimensional risks of the greatest gravity.

Traditional ways of behaving persist, although dysfunctional, and world leaders and publics seem easily distracted by immediate short-range concerns and ideological differences. In such circumstances, it combines rationality and humility to acknowledge the dependence of humanity on ‘a politics of impossibility’. Such a politics has a non-utopian relevance due to two empirical realities: the future is unknowable and has generated ‘impossible’ political outcomes within lived historical memory: for instance, the Soviet implosion, the peaceful dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, the Arab Spring. Waiting for the impossible is not a counsel of despair because the impossible only happens when enough people act fervently to attain what they view as necessary and desirable. In the end, sustainable global governance in the 21st century is dependent upon finding and keeping a balance in the international order between justice and stability.

Notes

- 1 For Ukraine and NATO, the most formidable obstacle would be to acknowledge any kind of Russian territorial gains stemming from its recourse to aggressive war by launching an attack on Ukraine in 2022. For Russia, formidable obstacles include obtaining assurance that Ukraine would never join NATO and securing a reliable protective UN presence for ensuring the human rights of the inhabitants of the Donbas region. Despite these obstacles, ending the war diplomatically seems the best available option for all sides and for world peace and security.
- 2 For a classic work on a systems approach to world order, see Kaplan (1957).
- 3 A central conclusion drawn from Jared Diamond’s (2004) important work.
- 4 See McCoy (2021) for the ebb and flow of this imperial form of control; also Kennedy (1987).
- 5 Since the late 18th century, there have been periodic attempts to reduce the role and severity of war by agreement, political arrangements and international institutions, of which the United Nations is the latest and most ambitious iteration. For a notable, although in the end unconvincing, attempt to regard the Pact of Paris in 1928, outlawing aggressive war as itself a system-transforming happening, see Hathaway and Shapiro (2017).
- 6 When geologists pronounced the present era as ‘the Anthropocene’, it reflected a scientific assessment that the salient characteristic of late modernity was the degree to which human activity, for better or worse, impacted the fundamental features of the natural habitat on planet earth.
- 7 Talbott (2008) examines the history of attempts to overcome the limitation of statist forms of world order but fails to advance a preferred model other than prudent geopolitical management.
- 8 As influentially depicted by Bull (1977), whose approach is reevaluated by others 40 years later in Suganami, Carr and Humphreys (2017).
- 9 See Reves (1945) for a more comprehensive academically framed account of the long history of world government advocacy and critique; see also Lu (2021) and Cabrera (2010).
- 10 For one set of proposals for such reform, see Falk (1971, 1975). Instead, the national security elites of leading states opted to continue relying on their own national security arrangements in the Nuclear Age—based on national military capabilities adapted to the new weaponry and conflict constellations, regional alliances and nuclear deterrence postures—to provide national security, which proved dangerously precarious during the Cold War decades, especially when hostility morphed into patterns of geopolitical confrontation between the two nuclear superpowers; compare Sherwin (2020) with Mearsheimer (2001).

- 11 Perhaps the most notable effort along these lines was developed by Grenville Clark and Louis B. Sohn (1966); sympathetically assessed in Lopez-Claros, Dahl and Groff (2020); compare more modest and partial institutional innovations that do not transform structures of sub-system dominance but contest geopolitical primacy from below; also Falk and Strauss (2011).
- 12 My contribution to WOMP attempted to construct ‘a central guidance system’ as an alternative to both the existing Westphalia framework or a World Federalist–preferred solution (Falk 1975).
- 13 Views were presented along these lines by non-Western participants in the World Order Models Project (WOMP). WOMP was a transnational network of scholars drawn from all parts of the world who subscribed to shared values but who were otherwise free to participate according to their own ideas about a future preferred world and how to make the transition in the period 1960–90.
- 14 Authoritatively depicted in Deudney (2007), a fine treatise on republican ideas about upholding security in various historical time periods.
- 16 A notable example of normative transformation is the importance given to the Pact of Paris (1928) prohibiting non-defensive recourse to war by (Hathaway and Shapiro 2017).
- 15 For exceptions see the British School associated with work of Bull (1977) and Wight (1966) and the non-defensive uses of force.
- 16 See Falk (2023) for advocacy of recognition of geopolitical fault lines to safeguard peace and stability.
- 17 See an influential, triumphalist interpretation of the outcome of the Cold War by Fukuyama (1992); for an even more succinct view, see the opening sentence by President George W. Bush of the cover letter to an official strategy document: ‘The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise’ (Bush 2002; Wight 1966). Note particularly the words ‘a single sustainable model’, exhibiting the belief that only America works. Such a sentence would be rendered absurd a mere ten or so years later in view of China’s rise.
- 18 Seeking a more positive appreciation of the UN role by pointing to these activities that escape the media radar is a major objective of Falk and Von Sponeck (2023).
- 19 See also Michael Mandelbaum (2006) for a more ideological presentation of the United States as providing the world with the benefits of what amounts to world government. Mandelbaum provides a more historically grounded account of how the content of American exceptionalism shifted from a rejection of European imperialism and nationalism to the embrace of global supremacy. See also Wertheim (2020).
- 20 Estimates of American foreign military presence differ, but it is historically unparalleled. One helpful tabulation of military bases is the following: Overseas Base Realignment and Closure Coalition (2022). It lists 750.
- 21 A series of books in the early 1970s called attention to the dangers of exceeding ecological and other limit conditions, which caused a stir at the time, but was then ignored until the climate crisis. See Commoner (1971) and Meadows *et al.* (1972).

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