

THE FUTURES OF THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE WORLD SYSTEM

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Summary

The range of reforms or thinking about the future of the United Nations (UN) in emerging world orders is largely predicated on prior beliefs of the nature of the good society and on possible futures of the emerging world order. This entry investigates these positions, summarizes recommendations for UN transformation and explores the future of the world system.

The theoretical positions that determine how one sees the future of the UN and the world system include the following: idealist, structural-functionalist, realist, historical-structural. From these positions emerge perspectives on what type and level of

governance is required for the creation of a good society, and more specifically, what changes are needed to the UN. Some of the changes recommended include: adding member states to the Security Council, inclusion of nongovernmental organizations in the UN, disbanding the UN, strengthening the role of the Secretary-General and, increased accountability of the UN.

Generally there are three positions in the debate as to what the United Nations should look like in the future: (1) reinvigorate and realize its original purpose, (2) rethink its structure and mission, and (3) transform and expand its purpose. What position is likely to emerge as dominant is partly dependent on the likely future of world society. Three scenarios are explored: A Gaian planetary society, Collapse, and a High-Technology civilization.

1. Theoretical Assumptions

This section contextualizes discussions on the futures of world governance as they relate to the futures of the United Nations. An analysis of the earth's life support system must occur in the context of the futures of governance. Simply put: can ecological decisions, long term and planetary in scope, be conducted within the confines of the present nation-state system and its representative structure, the UN (and its family organizations)? Or does there need to be a new global governance system? Can the UN be reformed? However, these and other issues cannot be adequately addressed without uncovering foundational assumptions such as if humans are good or evil, if institutional or consciousness change is necessary. These assumptions can be categorized under the headings of: idealist, realist, structural-functionalist, and historical-structural. From these assumptions emerge a range of positions on whether the UN should be transformed, reformed, or disbanded.

1.1 Idealist

Among others, idealists such as P. R. Sarkar, Charles Paprocki, R. G. H. Siu, and Robert Muller believe that a parliament of humanity or a world government democratically constituted by world citizens is humanity's natural progression from barbarism to civilization. Only internal fear, greed, hate, and other emotions have kept humans from achieving this goal. The UN will realize its true mission as humans themselves move towards perfection. Indeed, the UN itself will become a global government or governance system. This is fundamentally the moralist-idealist position adopted by humanists, utopians, and spiritualists. The future is described as a world of a mixture of sensate and ideational civilizations; an integrated world that is holistic, wherein there is economic balance between regions, between city and rural areas, between genders, and within the minds of each person. Individuals themselves in this future find a balance between the materialist and spiritual tendencies within themselves. In this vision of the future, nations gradually disappear and identity is reframed around bio-regions and other more rational, less sentimental (not religious, national, racial, territorial) forms of social organization. The local as contextualized by one's humanity will become far more important than identity framed along lines of nation.

Less inclusive in its idealism—but idealistic nonetheless—is the Western liberal view of the long linear march of democracy, the perspective that democracy is the highest form of human social organization. The role of the UN is to facilitate democracy throughout the world, stamping out the structures and ideologies of feudalism, fascism, totalitarianism, and racism. Democracy, however, is contained within the nation-state. The United Nations remains primarily an organization of nations. People are collectively best joined within the nation-state rubric. Nations, however, can and should, join together to create a parliament of nations thus ensuring collective security. Thus, in this perspective, we are likely to see the emergence of micro-states, moving from the current 200 or so to 1000 small states. States would be far more local with the UN ensuring that minorities in each state had their rights protected (minorities here including nature, children, women, other cultures). The UN would not only protect the local sphere but the global commons as well. Nations may become more porous through economic globalization or through developing into regional associations such as the European Union. Over time, confederations might emerge, eventually leading to a globalized society.

Within the UN itself as well as within the framework of the nation-state, hierarchy of power is desirable since there are the wise and the foolish, the rational and the irrational, and the parent and the child. Eventually power and responsibility will be shared once the foolish change their ways and children grow up, once all nations become truly democratically representative. This has been a pervasive American model, democracy having originated in Greece and passed through Europe to finally rest in the US, it is believed. Now that communism is dead, it is only the chaos of the Third World that needs to be managed; that is, world order is primarily a function of implementation, merely a technique. The image of the emerging world order is one where the principles of the European enlightenment, as further articulated by the US State department, are realized. The UN would ascertain that universal human rights are respected, that nations follow liberal models of economic growth, and that territorial boundaries are honored.

1.2 Structural-Functionalist

An alternative structural-functionalist view argued for by Zenia Satti posits that the UN must be seen historically. The UN came about to meet certain needs and changed once these needs were met. The League of Nations represented the shift from the European balance-of-powers system to the notion of collective security, of the view that the entire body of nations would safeguard each other from aggression. However, noncompliance from states and its weak structure (the inability to stem aggression when it suited powers) led to the downfall of the League. Nations continued to make agreements based on their national interest.

Because of the failure of the League of Nations to become a supernational authority, the UN was less idealistic in its goals, eventually focusing not on becoming a supernational authority but on developing mechanisms of regulating the balance of power between the two world blocs. As a result, general universal notions of justice or peace, behind the idea of collective security, were in practice abandoned. As a consequence, UN meetings have become focused on symbolic politics for consumption in the home nations of leaders. However, with the end of the Cold War, the UN is once again in a transition

phase. What type of UN results in the near future is dependent on a range of variables, including world geopolitics, particularly the power of the United States, the growth of the world economy, technological advancements, and the globalization of culture. In any case, the expectations of the UN are higher now, having reverted to an idealistic phase, at least towards the vision of global governance if not world government. Radical reforms, for example, call for a consensus on global human rights, on denying sovereignty of criminal nations, for a world militia, that is, a UN organization that is more than the United Nations. Clearly, unlike the 1930s during the demise of the League, the UN is not irrelevant. As Boutros Boutros Ghali has remarked, "The United Nations has almost too much credibility."

Given that the emerging world order is believed to be fraught with local and regional ethnic and religious conflicts, usually carryovers from colonial and communist days, the UN must expand its functions. The task of the UN now that the world is no longer bipolar is to expand peacekeeping and peace-building, to gradually move towards world governance on issues of ecology, development, human rights, and other problems that no one nation-state can individually tackle. The goal of the UN is to aid in the original goal of the creation of a community of nations.

1.3 Realist

From a realist view, critics argue that any future of the UN must deal with the fact that it is primarily run by one nation and that all nations use it when it is to their political benefit. Thus, even though the actual balance of powers has shifted, governments remain committed to national self-interest. The realist discourse continues to dominate, with global justice applied equally to all nations remaining an elusive, if not impossible, idea and reality. Thus, there is an international War Crime Tribunal for Yugoslavia but not for the former Soviet Union (for atrocities in Afghanistan and Chechnya). Thus the idealist future does not deal with the resentment small nations might feel toward big power hegemony. How they will find a voice in the UN as it becomes more active remains the operating design question. If they cannot, then we should again expect to see the euphoria surrounding the UN transformed to the realization that it is merely a branch office of American foreign policy, argue critics.

In this realist position of the UN, the image of the future world order is that it will be primarily dominated by a few nations, those currently wealthy and having nuclear advantage. The UN will be used on a case-by-case basis to press military, strategic, economic, and cultural advantages.

Alternatively, instead of a unipolar world, there is evidence that in terms of relative power (since no nation has economic, cultural, military, and territorial domination) the most likely world future is that of a multipolar world. This assertion can have a range of consequences for the future. First, instead of the assumption that the UN can easily restructure, now that traditional bipolar tensions have diminished, it could mean that there will be more tensions, as not one but multiple hegemonic powers vie for who gets to run the world. Peace theorist Johan Galtung argues that we might have an emerging Islamic power (two or three generations hence), India, China, Japan, and three Western (US, Europe, and Russia) hegemons. However, since zones of power are clearly

demarcated in this multipolar world order, structural reform of the UN might indeed be possible. There is a range of potential conflicts ahead which the UN must prepare to handle: (1) within spheres of interest; (2) between two hegemons and in border areas; (3) multipolar (uniting in pairs or other variations); (4) a coalition of hegemons (as against Iraq); and, (5) a coalition of peripheries (they of course will not gain UN legitimacy since they were not victorious in the Second World War).

Thus we would expect the UN to play a different role as it tries to accommodate the cultural and governance assumptions of these very different world powers. In this model of the future, we would expect continued efforts by India and Islamic nations to gain full-time Security Council membership, thus joining the US, France, UK, Russia, and China.

In any case, the guiding assumption is that the UN has come about for various reasons and its structures reflect these reasons. There is no grand march of history, no *Geist*, no divine force leading humanity to progress, to civilization. Nor is there any *a priori* reason why nations should peacefully coexist. Power and its pursuit, in contrast, are natural. The Prince must rule, whatever guise he decides to use.

1.4 Historical-Structural

Related to the functionalist views is a historical-structural position offered by Immanuel Wallerstein and Crane Brinton which asserts that because of our historical evolution there are only a range of possible world structures available: world ideology as in a world church (the Holy Roman Empire or the Caliphate, for example); a world state as with the communist model; world empire as in the Mongol empire or the Roman empire; or world capitalism as politically constituted by the particular mix of interstate relations, the call for democracy within nations, and the actual state of anarchy between nations.

Mini-cultural systems or small self-reliant states or regions have historically tended to capitulate to these larger structures, as they have been unable to fend off globalizing trends. Thus, we should be surprised if a world government or world governance structure emerges that is multicultural, multi-civilizational and resolves issues of local/global, market/state, individual/collective, and spirit/body/mind dilemmas. Idealistic utopians, however, argue that these paradoxes can be resolved, that humanity is on the verge of bifurcation, and that we should expect a higher level of complexity to emerge that creates a new human being; one not tied to the dark past, but one committed to a humanistic, ecological, gender-equal, inclusive view of the future.

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