The global order — a fraying around many edges

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António Guterres, the ninth Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN), is sounding increasingly pessimistic about the future of the UN. At the opening of the 55th regular session of the Human Rights Council, Mr. Guterres remarked that the 'lack of unity' amongst UNSC members had 'perhaps fatally undermined its authority'. Reform is essential, but given the divisions, cosmetic changes may not be enough.

Is this the end of the road for the current global order?

The world has changed

At stake is the post-World War order whose foundations were built even as the Second World War raged on, reflecting a structure that the Allied powers – eventually the victors of that conflict – felt would prevent another global conflagration. This order is anchored in the United Nations Organisation, i.e., the UN itself, along with its specialised agencies, funds and programmes. The main organisation came into being in January 1942 when the 26 Allied nations signed the Declaration of the United Nations and endorsed the Atlantic Charter of 1941, which in turn enshrined the war aims of the United States and the United Kingdom. This is a system of international relations built to manage great power rivalry as it existed three quarters of a century ago. In the years since, power and prosperity have flowed and shifted between and from the original signatories and the international community of states has more than quadrupled.

The UN was created to stop another global war by upholding the sovereign equality of all nations subscribing to the principle of collective security. Sovereign equality, however, faltered at the doors of the Security Council, with its five Permanent Members of super equals, all of whom were Allied powers, and including of course, two major colonial powers and a third whose imperial ambitions were not quite buried.

In negotiations that stretched beyond the 1942 Declaration, the Soviet Union was further drawn into the fold with a 1943 American proposal of enforcing peace through 'four policeman', the U.S., the Soviet Union, the U.K. and China, in effect rewarding major Allied powers with a permanent veto. This might have held the Soviet Union closer to the Allies and ensured China's help with defeating Japan, but the veto effectively set in stone the power structures of early 19th century Europe, even as growing calls for decolonisation and the ravages of a global conflict were reducing the dominance of the imperial powers.

The United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference at Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, in July 1944 established the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (or the World Bank) and, in 1947, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which was succeeded by the World Trade Organization in 1995. Together, this financial and trade architecture sought to create a shared international economic order that would not repeat the mistakes of the 1920s and 1930s, plan post-War reconstruction and liberalise global trade.

It is, therefore, ironic that the creation of the IMF embedded a shift in power. By then, imperial Britain was heavily in debt, with the U.S. rising up to take its place at the head of the table. Britain had to relinquish its system of imperial trade preferences, and the sterling gave way to the dollar.

Controlling power structures

Yet, the old world clung on to the power structures of the new institutions, as reflected in the governance of the Bank and the Fund. The World Bank is always headed by an American citizen; 'Europe' (Western Europe, in practice) gets to nominate the head of the IMF. The voting rights of member-states of the Fund are virtually frozen in time, despite some limited reform. Currently, the percentage voting rights for, say, the original BRICS members (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) are 2.22, 2.59, 2.63, 6.08 and 0.63. The U.S. alone commands 16.5; add to it the votes of the U.K. (4.03), Germany (5.31) and the rest of the G-7 that tends to vote with the U.S., and that percentage approaches 30. Allocating Special Drawing Rights (a reserve asset for member-states) and most reform requires an 85% majority vote, effectively handing the U.S. a powerful veto. The IMF maintains global stability by promoting financial stability, offering advice, and providing funds to countries in financial difficulty, as long as they accept conditions set by the leadership of the Fund.

Overall, the UN system, which rests on a series of international treaties that are now firmly embedded in international law, smoothened the conduct of international relations, albeit in an image that favoured the original signatories of the UN Charter. Decolonisation, the Cold War, and the breakup of the Soviet Union brought challenges to this dispensation. But no matter how the developing world, including former colonies, grouped, they could not overcome the veto at the Security Council or the voting structures of the Bretton Woods Institutions. China, of course, found itself perched in the strange position of being a rule maker in one body but a rule taker in the other.

Rising powers responded with alternatives. The Non-Aligned Movement tried a more equal approach and moral force for political and social problems, only to have its shortcomings exposed in the 1962 India-China war. The G-77 attempted to group together to gain more heft in trade negotiations, but the very disparate needs of an unwieldy group resulted in a laundry list of demands that defied successful negotiation. Smaller, more homogenous groupings fared somewhat better.

Over the years, an alphabet soup of ad hoc groupings representing an a la carte attitude to bilateral and multilateral engagements has proliferated – some with wide-ranging remits, such as the OECD with 38 members, others with a much narrower focus, such as the Quad of the Indo-Pacific. The China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was conceived as a challenger to the World Bank, but, effectively, the U.S. veto at the Bank is replaced with Beijing's hold over the AIIB and not everyone is signing up. Despite challenges, the UN-led system is still the default option.

Global events and new fault lines

The 2020s, however, are dealing body blows to the system from within. COVID-19 shut down borders, for people, for goods, for vaccines, thereby undermining the promise of a shared global prosperity based on ever greater cooperation. Russia's invasion of Ukraine revealed the hypocrisy of one of the super equal rule-makers refusing to follow the rules. And, finally, the war in Gaza has exposed the fault lines between the developed and developing worlds; between the guilt over the Holocaust and the recognition of the Nakba; and between the need of the great powers to support the UN and its organisations and the expediency of questioning the legitimacy and effectiveness of the organisation when support for Israel demands it. Most importantly, this conflict tests the commitment of several of the Permanent Members to the bedrock of the UN system – a commitment to human rights and the genocide convention. As West Asia teeters at the precipice, the UN is being marginalised by the very players that established it.

What could replace the UN system and how? The organisations and groupings outside the UN are all ad hoc and tend to serve limited interests rather than universal values. Some function as clubs (such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the European Union, G-7, G-20, and the World Economic Forum). Others are limited alliances envisaged as maintaining regional security (such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Without global treaties and legal obligations binding them, they are essentially only as effective as their last summit. Yet, their very existence points to a need for change. The last time the global system changed was in the aftermath of an all-consuming war. That is a sobering thought on which to base an evaluation of the current crumbling global architecture.

The United Nations-led system is still the default option, but events in the 2020s are dealing a body blow

Stop the dithering and encourage green elections in India

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A midst the climate crisis, shifting to sustainable practices across every sphere of human activity has become inevitable and urgent. In August 2023, ahead of the Assembly elections in five States, the Election Commission of India (ECI) voiced its concern over the environmental risks associated with the use of non-biodegradable materials in elections (it has been urging 'parties and candidates to avoid the use of plastic/polythene for preparation of election material during an election campaign, since 1999'). Given that the conduct of every election results in an avoidable carbon footprint, there is a need for eco-friendly elections, which would be a boost to environmental stewardship alongside civic participation. Sri Lanka and Estonia, for instance, have conducted environmentally-conscious elections. As India, the world's most populous democracy, gears up for the next general election, environmental considerations must be prioritised, paving the way for 'green elections'.

Why is there a need for a paradigm shift?
The environmental footprint of elections is often overlooked. In the 2016 US presidential elections, the emissions by campaign flights by just one of the candidates alone were equivalent to the carbon footprint of 500 Americans for a year. Traditional methods of conducting elections, with their reliance on paper-based materials, energy-intensive rallies, loudspeakers, PVC flex banners, hoardings and disposable items, cause a significant environmental footprint and impact citizens' health. The magnitude of India's elections, with crores of voters, and mass political rallies, amplify this impact. The concept of green elections entails adopting eco-friendly practices at every stage, from campaign materials to election rallies and polling booths.

Research conducted by Willemson and Krips from Estonia (2023) determined that the primary source of carbon emissions during elections is from transportation of voters and logistics to and from the polling booths. The secondary source is from the running of the polling booths. Transitioning to digital voting systems could reduce the carbon footprint by up to 40%.

Implementing environmentally-friendly elections will entail technological, financial and behavioural challenges. Electronic and digital voting require robust infrastructure (especially in rural areas) and checks for hacking and fraud. Ensuring that all voters have fair access to new technologies and the training of officials are another hurdle. Financial challenges include substantial upfront costs for eco-friendly materials and technology, which would deter governments that are financially constrained. Cultural inertia in valuing a voter's physical presence at polling booths as sacrosanct is a behavioural challenge. Public scepticism towards new approaches and fear of compromises to vote security are another. Therefore, ensuring transparency and effective auditing of new adaptations are crucial.

Examples in Kerala, Sri Lanka, Estonia
Successful examples of eco-friendly electoral initiatives provide lessons. During the 2019 general election, the Kerala State Election Commission urged political parties to avoid single-use plastic materials while campaigning. Subsequently, the Kerala High Court imposed a ban on flex and non-biodegradable materials in electioneering. Wall graffiti and paper posters emerged as alternatives. Government bodies collaborated with the district administration in Thiruvananthapuram to ensure a green election. Training sessions were conducted in villages for election workers. In 2022, the Goa State Biodiversity Board had eco-friendly election booths for the Assembly elections, using biodegradable materials crafted by local traditional artisans.

In 2019, the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party launched the world's first carbon-sensitive environmentally friendly election campaign. It measured carbon emissions from vehicles and electricity used during political campaigns and compensated for the emissions by planting trees in each district through public participation. This offset the immediate carbon footprint of the campaign and drew awareness about the importance of forest cover.

Similarly, Estonia laid the foundations for digital voting as an online voting alternative. This method also encouraged voter participation. The success of Estonia's approach suggests that digital voting accompanied by robust security measures is both eco- and electorate-friendly.

A blueprint
This green transition must involve all stakeholders such as political parties, Election Commissions, governments, voters, the media and civil society. The success of integrating top-level directives with grassroots initiatives to foster a green transition is imperative.

Political parties must take the lead. The journey can begin by enacting legislation mandating eco-friendly electoral practices, with the ECI incorporating them in the Model Code of Conduct. This involves campaigning through digital platforms or door-to-door campaigning (reducing energy-intensive public rallies) and encouraging the use of public transportation for election work. Incentivising the replacement of plastic and paper-based materials with sustainable local alternatives for polling booths, such as natural fabrics, recycled paper and compostable plastics, will aid waste management and support local artisans.

The ECI can push for digital voting even though this necessitates the training and capacity building of officials. To ensure equal participation of all voters in the digital electoral process, the government must educate and support voters and ensure equitable access to digital technology. This is essential to enhance the faith of the electorate in the election system and their trust in the government. Civil society should act as a catalyst. Finally, the media's crucial role can in emphasising the environmental impact of conventional election methods, turn the spotlight on innovative eco-friendly alternatives.

Embracing eco-conscious electoral practices can help India set an example for other democracies around the world.

The views expressed are personal

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