

POLICYBRIEF

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80 Years of Structural Crisis in Multilateralism With Deep Contradictions Still Unresolved

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Background

The United Nations (UN) was created with the ambition of fostering an egalitarian form of multilateralism, yet it now finds itself grappling with deep contradictions rooted in the structural inequalities inherited from colonialism and the post-Second World War order. These asymmetries of power, particularly between the Global North and the Global South, remain embedded in key institutions such as the Security Council (UNSC), where the persistence of the veto power sustains an exclusionary system of governance. This system has not only hindered timely responses to humanitarian crises but has also laid bare the shortcomings of the [Responsibility to Protect](#), which depends on collective action from the international community to be effectively upheld.

Adding to this strain, the growing geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China has further eroded avenues for cooperation, a reality that became especially evident in the World Health Organization's challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar power dynamics are evident in financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which operate under weighted voting systems that favor developed nations that contribute more, creating an environment of inequality for developing countries in decision-making processes. Neoliberal globalization policies have exacerbated these disparities, prioritizing the economic interests of the North over the sovereignty of the South.

Highlights

Power asymmetries are embedded in the institutional structure of the UN system.

The disjunction between the UN's aspirational egalitarianism and the hierarchical realities it sustains contributes to its legitimacy crisis.

Reform of the UN should include curtailing the scope of UNSC vetoes, expanding the UNSC to include emerging powers, empowering the UNGA, and increasing the role of non-state actors in global governance.

Beyond the UN system, international cooperation itself is challenged by rising nationalism, democratic backsliding, and scepticism about global governance.

The future of multilateralism depends on the UN's capacity to modernize its structures, secure financial independence, and restore its normative authority.

Adding to these systemic-level asymmetries, the growing geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China has further eroded avenues for cooperation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this reality became especially evident in the challenges the World Health Organization faced in navigating relations with member states while fulfilling its public health mandate.

These structural imbalances are far from abstract; they shape, in very tangible ways, how international crises are managed. In the case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the UNSC moved quickly to convene emergency meetings and refer the matter to the General Assembly, although practical action by the

and the Global South. As demonstrated across multiple domains—from climate finance to UNSC representation—the pervasiveness of Northern prerogatives is not merely a political imbalance but a constitutional condition. The persistence of veto powers and the asymmetrical allocation of risk-bearing obligations have ossified into mechanisms of exclusion.

Overcoming the inequity embedded in the multilateral system requires more than procedural reform. It demands a reconceptualization of constitutional cooperation that neither idealizes a return to uncritical universalism nor collapses into cynical relativism. Instead, what is needed is a transformative

constitutionalism, one that reinvents multilateralism as a dialogic, pluralistic, and justice-oriented space, attentive to risk, voice, and dignity across legal geographies. Vaccine hoarding by wealthier states not only exacerbated public health vulnerabilities but also revealed the structural incapacity of the current regime to deliver

equitable solutions in times of crisis. Likewise, the selectivity in the responses of international bodies to conflicts, such as those in Palestine and Ukraine, illustrates how normative values are filtered through the lens of geopolitical interests rather than universal legal standards.

On what moral anchors can we sustain vital programs—climate action, peace, aid—when the compass of collective commitment appears demagnetized?

Do we possess the collective will to forge a multilateralism that is legitimate in its design and, through new grammars of cooperation, both just and effective?

Challenges of the Structural Crisis in Multilateralism

Multilateralism in Crisis: The UN and the Challenge of a Fractured Global Order

The international order is going through some serious changes. With China on the rise, the U.S. losing some of its dominance, the game-changing impact of artificial intelligence (AI), and the lasting effects of the pandemic, global dynamics are shifting. It is against this landscape that multilateralism—

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UNSC has been sharply constrained by Member State vetoes that blunt enforcement. By contrast, the situation in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory has persisted for decades without an effective resolution. And on climate change, small Caribbean Island states—despite contributing minimally to global emissions—continue to struggle to secure adequate financing for climate resilience. A system that democratizes global governance and rectifies historical inequities is urgently needed.

The Tension Between Multilateralism's Aspirational Egalitarianism and its Institutional-Legal Architectures

The Unfulfilled Promise: How Constitutional Architecture Can Perpetuate Inequality

The paradox between the aspirational egalitarianism of multilateral governance and the legal architectures that underpin global hierarchies lies at the heart of the legitimacy crisis confronting the United Nations and its specialized agencies. This disjunction, far from being accidental, is built into the very DNA of the postwar international order, where legal temporality, economic sovereignty, and epistemic recognition are allocated unevenly between the Global North

once the bedrock of international cooperation—now faces a legitimacy crisis.

The UN, long regarded as the embodiment of the multilateral vision that emerged after the Second World War, remains bound to the power structures of 1945. The UNSC, dominated by its five permanent Member States, each able to veto decisions, increasingly reflects an outdated hierarchy that sidelines influential actors from the Global South. Reforming this body to include emerging powers and curtail the scope of the veto is not merely a matter of fairness, but an urgent practical necessity. Additionally, a more empowered General Assembly—endowed with greater influence and operational capacity—could serve as a genuine democratic counterweight to the UNSC. In today's complex multi-actor landscape, including non-state actors, such as technology companies and civil society organizations, is also essential to ensure that global governance evolves in step with contemporary realities.

However, institutional reform on its own will not be sufficient. The UN's financial situation is highly dependent on member states, relying heavily on voluntary contributions that are frequently tied to political conditions. This dependence constrains its capacity to respond swiftly and impartially to crises. Such financial vulnerability reflects a deeper tension between national interests and collective responsibilities, especially when major donor states leverage funding as a means of advancing their geopolitical agendas.

Moreover, growing distrust in multilateral institutions—driven by rising nationalism, the decline of democracy, and skepticism about global governance—poses a real threat to the essence of international cooperation. Increasingly, countries are choosing unilateral actions or forming temporary alliances, pushing the UN aside and undermining the international rules-based order.

The consequences are clear. The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) is in jeopardy, not just because of a lack of funding but also due to insufficient political will. While summit diplomacy has achieved notable progress—particularly in reducing poverty—wide equity gaps persist. Since the adoption of the [1995 Beijing Platform for Action](#) and through the work of UN Women, there has been genuine, though fragile, advances in gender equality. Yet these gains remain vulnerable, as emerging technological shifts, such as the

automation of labor, risk undermining the progress that has been made.

The 2018 Global Compacts on [Migration](#) and [Refugees](#) marked significant steps forward in setting shared principles and commitments. However, their impact has been weakened by the absence of binding global enforcement mechanisms and by the resurgence of nationalist policies that add to existing stricter post-pandemic border controls. At the same time, AI is rapidly reshaping global power relations in the absence of adequate governance frameworks. The UN cannot regulate the entirety of this evolving technological sphere. Establishing a global treaty that prohibits the military use of AI and safeguards human rights is not merely aspirational—it is an urgent necessity.

Growing distrust in multilateral institutions—driven by rising nationalism, the decline of democracy, and skepticism about global governance—poses a real threat to the essence of international cooperation

The future of multilateralism will depend on the UN's capacity to modernize its structures, secure genuine financial independence, and restore the normative authority that once made it a central force in shaping global agendas. Now more than ever, we need a renewed commitment to inclusive, equitable, and forward-thinking global governance to tackle the challenges of a divided world.

Pathways to Reform

Reforming the United Nations: A Call for Bold Change in an Age of Uncertainty

The future of the UN hinges on its ability to evolve alongside the world it aims to support. A key focus should be on reforming the UNSC by expanding permanent membership and curbing veto power. Global power dynamics have shifted significantly since the mid-20th century, yet the Council seems stuck in the past. By embracing structures that are more inclusive and adaptable, the UN has the opportunity to restore its legitimacy and address the complex challenges of the present era. Without such changes, the mounting discontent in underrepresented regions will persist, further eroding trust in the multilateral system.

Equally important is advancing transparency and accountability by reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies in the UN system and improving its operational agility. Many UN bodies remain hampered by slow administrative procedures, which limit their capacity to respond promptly to urgent crises. Streamlining internal processes and clarifying institutional roles would not only strengthen performance but also help restore public confidence in the organization's ability to deliver tangible and meaningful outcomes. In a world continually unsettled by unforeseen events—whether armed conflicts, pandemics, or climate-related disasters—the UN must strengthen its capacity for early crisis response. Investing in robust frameworks for conflict prevention and climate action is not merely advisable; it is indispensable for the survival and resilience of the international community. The UN already possesses the necessary tools, but they are often used too late or ineffectively. By anticipating crises and acting before situations spiral out of control, lives and resources can be saved.

Another area where we need to think outside the box is bringing non-state actors into the fold of global governance. Governments can't tackle today's challenges all on their own. It's time to meaningfully involve civil society, the private sector, and local governments in decision-making processes. These actors are often more closely connected to the communities directly affected, and thus bring fresh perspectives, a heightened sense of urgency, and valuable local knowledge that can significantly strengthen multilateral initiatives.

To remain relevant, the UN must align its agendas with the promotion of fair trade; a priority made even more urgent in the current context of rising protectionism and economic fragmentation. It must also regard peacekeeping and conflict mediation not as mere diplomatic formalities, but as indispensable instruments for safeguarding global stability. Equally important is the effective implementation of human rights agreements—moving beyond mere words to ensure real accountability when violations happen. Lastly, the organization should keep pushing for sustainable development and global health cooperation, acknowledging that poverty, inequality, and health insecurity are deep-rooted issues that contribute to global instability.

The stakes could not be higher. Without structural reforms, we risk seeing multilateralism give way to a new order characterized by even greater power asymmetries. That would not only betray the UN's founding vision but could also lead to greater chaos and exclusion. The world still needs a platform where dialogue, not force, shapes international relations. The UN is essential, but it needs to embrace bold changes to avoid becoming irrelevant in an increasingly fragmented world.

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