

Concert or Cacophony? Searching for the Foundations of a New International Order

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The sinews of the global order are creaking. The most recent sign of age and obsolescence is the BRICS summit that just convened in New Delhi. The BRICS as a group — Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — won't reorder global politics; as much divides them as unites them. But their determination to articulate the grievances of emerging states shouldn't be ignored.

Take, for example, their call for a new development bank, one that would complement the World Bank, but with greater emphasis on the needs and priorities of developing economies as those nations themselves see them. The demand for a new international institution is the outgrowth of growing frustration with existing financial institutions and the “capture” of their leadership by the US and Europe (which reserve the top position in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, respectively).

The fight over who would succeed Robert Zoellick as head of the World Bank is the latest round in a larger debate that now encompasses the bank, the IMF, the United Nations Security Council, and bubbles up in every discussion of how global institutions are and should be run. These complaints aren't sour grapes, but reflect a larger shift in how the world works.

The global order has been in flux since the end of the Cold War. Two fundamental trends are reshaping the international system. First, power shifts at the global level are creating a more diverse international order as emerging and resurgent players pursue and assert their own interests. The likelihood of effective policy coordination has been reduced. Diverging interests as well as diverse perspectives on how to approach the growing number of new and longstanding issues on the international agenda have led to greater fragmentation of world politics.

At the same time, the emerging international order is characterized by deepening interdependence. All major (and minor) powers face challenges of economic growth, energy security, and environmental sustainability, all of which are intimately interconnected and which no nation can successfully confront on its own.

This creates a fundamental dilemma: managing this interdependence through multilateral cooperation demands enlightened self-interest at the very time that established means of interaction are being undermined.

As a result, the prospects for effective global governance — broadly defined as the collective management of common problems at the international and transnational level — are deteriorating because challenges on the global agenda like climate change, poverty, food insecurity, nuclear proliferation, or economic crises, are increasing in number, scale, and complexity at the very time that international institutions and national governments are being hobbled in their capacity to address them.

The G20 is the most important recent innovation in global governance. This group played a crucial role in dealing with the immediate challenges posed by the financial and economic crisis. Yet as soon as the sense of urgency — the fear that a global financial breakdown was a very real possibility — abated, diverging interests reasserted themselves to dominate discussions and frustrate action. Real solutions to the world's financial problems remain beyond reach, and even the legitimacy of this new organization is being contested.

Nevertheless, creation of the G20 is one sign that the international system is trying to respond to new challenges and fix urgent problems through new initiatives. It also reinforced the perception that global governance is in essence global crisis management; in other words, a coordinated and coherent multilateral policy is only possible under the pressure of a global crisis that threatens to have immediate and severe impact on a multitude of domestic populations.

There is another factor at work. As international relations become more diverse and complex, power is not only shifting from established to emerging countries, but also toward individuals and non-state actors. Modern information and communication technologies have empowered individuals and social groups to an unprecedented degree. The Internet and social media have extended the reach and influence of individuals and organizations and enabled them to directly engage in international affairs.

The growing importance and impact of non-state actors in international politics is one distinctive political development. Transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups, social entrepreneurs, faith-based organizations, multinational corporations and other business bodies, as well as trans-sectoral public policy networks are increasingly effective in framing issues, setting agendas, and mobilizing public opinion. At the same time, however, non-state actors such as criminal organizations and terrorist networks, also empowered by new information and communication technologies, pose serious threats to the international system. Although non-state actors usually have no formal decision-

making power and do not necessarily alter the policy-making process, their impact on world politics is significant and likely to grow.

The new configuration of international relations is, by and large, inherently chaotic and ungovernable. Power is increasingly geographically dispersed and politically fragmented. It is shifting from established Western powers to emerging countries, but also, to some extent, to non-state actors who assume previously public responsibilities or pursue agendas of their own. This diffusion of power is creating a new international environment that defies clear definition. In our understanding, the new global order cannot be accurately described as a multipolar world, in which a few great powers are setting the rules of the game and disciplining those who violate them. We see little agreement on what those powers are, their willingness to work together, nor the efficacy of actions if and when they do. But this is not a world in which, as Ian Bremmer and Nouriel Roubini have argued, “no single country or block of countries has the political and economic leverage — or the will — to drive a truly international agenda.” Their “G-Zero world” seems too state-centric to grasp contemporary global dynamics. But while we do not envision a concert, cacophony is not the only other option.

Global governance will become more difficult, but not impossible. Even in a world without powerful organizing forces, there are magnetic pulls and tugs that can align nations and facilitate cooperation and collaborative efforts. Let’s call this “weak polarity.” A new international order will not emerge spontaneously, but there are many things that can and should be done to foster its creation. One defining characteristic of the emerging new age is that power, at least in the sense of traditional “hard” power, and leadership are less linked. In the absence of a comprehensive, unitary approach to global governance, new forms of leadership will emerge, not as enduring as traditional alliances or international institutions, but rather patchworks of overlapping, often ad hoc and fragmented efforts, involving shifting coalitions of state and non-state actors concentrating on specific issues. The leadership exercised by “coalitions of the willing” will be more fragmented, situational, and volatile than previous attempts. But they nevertheless might achieve concrete results.

There is a thick layer of overlapping and competing authorities in the existing system of global governance and most emerging countries have no interest in upending this system; they prefer to make adjustments. But, the future international order will be no mere outgrowth of existing mechanisms. Planetary problems pose new challenges and require new problem-solving mechanisms as management of them is of a different nature and dimension than past challenges. The lowest common denominator is no longer a sufficient starting point for meaningful coordinated action on the global level. Whether this means the creation of new institutions is of secondary importance: either existing intuitions may take up the challenges or new ones will be created.

There is a lack of vision about the future of the international system and the emerging global order. To facilitate creation of such a vision, we need a strategic

conversation about global governance and the foundations of a new international order.

This is based on the report “Concert or Cacophony? In Search of a New International Order” by Brad Glosserman, Peter Walkenhorst and Ting Xu, a joint project by the Bertelsmann Foundation and Pacific Forum CSIS and is available at: <http://www.bfna.org/publication/concert-or-cacophony-in-search-of-a-new-international-order>.”

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