

The United Nations and the G20: Synergy or Dissonance?

Paul Heinbecker

This chapter assumes that to achieve effective global governance, the world needs both the nascent G20 and the sexagenarian UN to succeed, and that the success of each can be greater if the two cooperate. The chapter examines in summary form some of the main factors in play between the two. It makes a plea for perspicacity and wisdom from G20 members vis-à-vis the UN, so that they do not inadvertently undermine the institution as the new group evolves, and for open-mindedness and good sense on the part of the non-G20 UN members, so that they do not discourage cooperation.

The world is changing dramatically, and largely for the better. People around the world are richer, better fed, better educated, and safer than they have ever been before. Since 1980, world income has doubled. Since 1990, almost half a billion people have climbed out of poverty, notwithstanding the stubborn, tragic exception of the billion poorest. Our world is more successful and more integrated, and it is a more complex governance challenge than ever before. Although the United States remains uniquely powerful and China and others are growing rapidly, no country is in a position to determine unilaterally the course of world events in the twenty-first century. The single-superpower era is following its two-superpower predecessor into history. We are entering a time of either enhanced cooperative governance if we are wise or destructive international competition if we are foolish. In this changing context, the UN remains a necessary

but not sufficient response to the world's issues. The G20 is a further necessary but insufficient response. Effective global governance depends considerably on the success of both institutions. Further, the world needs the two to cooperate in order to benefit from the synergies that cooperation can generate.

It is too early for certitude about the future of the G20, whose course is not yet established. Its agenda will likely go still deeper into economic and financial cooperation and reform of the international monetary system before it addresses other issues. Thanks in part to Korea's leadership, development has, however, become the first "new" issue on the G20 agenda, in the sense that development—albeit economic and financial (and social) in character—goes well beyond the immediate self-interests of the G20. Over time, but likely not very much time, the G20 will probably complement its financial and economic agenda with deliberations on other issues that require agreement among the most senior players in global governance, including possibly climate change, **and** global governance reform, including UN and Security Council reform, as President Sarkozy has mused, and international security and arms control. The experience of the G8 has been that when leaders come together, they take advantage of each other's presence to discuss the pressing issues of the day, whatever they are. Most G20 leaders will not be content for long dealing exclusively with economic and financial issues. Nor will their finance ministers and treasury secretaries want them to do so. Nor will the world need them to.

For many years, the G8 served as the locus for high-level political discussions among its members, notably on terrorism, arms control and disarmament, regional crises, and so forth.

Some see a continuing, albeit narrowed, role for the G8, focusing on development, democracy, and peace and security. According to Canada's prime minister, Stephen Harper, those are all matters that can best be addressed through close cooperation among friends and like-minded allies. President Sarkozy has said that he intends to focus the 2011 G8 Nice summit on Africa and security and leave it to the future to decide if the G8 should endure.

It does seem very likely that the G20 will ultimately absorb the G8. The time demands of summit diplomacy—exceeding a dozen gatherings a year and more for some leaders—as well as the wear and tear of travel across time zones and impatience with any redundancy of forums seems likely to result in consolidation of the groups. The more diverse membership of the G20 means fewer areas of common interest and possibly shallower consequent agreements. But there would be offsetting advantages in terms of the breadth of support for any agreement reached. The G20 is the best solution so far to the legitimacy/effectiveness conundrum.

[1]The UN and the G20 in Perspective[end]

Universal adherence to its charter by member states confers unique legitimacy on the United Nations. Further, in part because of the international legal system derived from the charter and the international law and treaties built on the charter, the UN has become the world's central operating system, a kind of motherboard of global governance. The UN performs its own core functions and at the same time also enables myriad subsystems to work better, both within the ambit of the UN organization—for example, UNICEF—and beyond. The UN makes it possible for other organizations to function more effectively, notably NATO, which needs the UN to

certify the legitimacy of its operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The UN also makes it possible for initiatives as such as the Millennium Development Goals to be subcontracted out efficiently. The reverse is also true. The products of other entities, notably of the G8, can be imported into the UN for consideration by its larger membership. Most fundamental, the UN and its charter provide the rule book for the conduct of international relations, which all states, including G20 states, see it as in their interest to respect.

At the same time, the United Nations suffers from the scleroses and frailties of a sixty-five-year-old very human institution. A lot of water has gone under the UN bridge since 1945. It is plagued by divisions, often grounded in genuine differences in interests (or perceptions thereof), between rich countries and poor; between the Security Council and the General Assembly; between the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) and the rest; between the nuclear powers and others; between the climate changers and the climate victims; between the Israelis and Arabs and Muslims more generally; between the Indians and Pakistanis; between North Korea and its neighbors (and the United States); and, during the Bush years especially, between a unilateralist, excessively exceptionalist Washington and a steadfast, multilateralist New York.

What is not always clear is whether the intractability of the problems that the UN faces causes the divisions among the members or whether the divisions among the UN's members make its problems intractable. In my judgment and experience, the latter is more often the case; the UN's own hoary groupings are probably a greater threat to the organization's viability in the twenty-first century than the G20 is. These many weaknesses hinder the UN's effectiveness and

consequently diminish its efficacy, prompting some to look elsewhere for solutions to the day's problems.

Despite its problems, the UN retains its unique legitimacy, derived from its universal membership and the adherence of all 192 members to the UN Charter as the basis of international law. It is also more effective than its detractors think. Overlooked in the criticism of the UN is the fact that the organization has undergone extensive innovation and renovation and, in the process, substantial reinvention. From peacekeeping to peace enforcement and peacebuilding, to international criminal justice systems, to sustainable development, to refugee protection, to humanitarian coordination and food relief, to democracy and electoral support, to human rights conventions, to health protection, to landmine removal, and to managerial accountability and oversight, the organization has been changing and equipping itself to acquit its increasingly demanding responsibilities. As a consequence, the UN has broader political presence than any other organization and much substantive expertise in dealing with contemporary challenges, such as instability and fragile states.

The G20 enjoys its own legitimacy, derived principally from its effectiveness in addressing the crucial economic and financial crises of 2008. Its legitimacy also comes from the fact that its membership accounts for 85 percent of global gross national product, 80 percent of world trade, and 67 percent of the planet's total population. Those factors do not constitute universality, of course—the least developed countries are notably missing, as are some of the very constructive smaller powers—but nor are they trivial assets. When the G20 reaches agreement among its members, a large part of whatever problem it is addressing is on the way to resolution.

Consensus is difficult to generate at the UN, and it is not yet clear whether it will be easier to create at the G20. Present in both entities are the main protagonists and the main disputes are **notably** the intractability of trade and budget imbalances, climate change, and nuclear disarmament. Further, ways of thinking and acting established over generations cannot be modified quickly. For the heretofore hegemonic United States, partnership will need to mean not just hearing others before deciding and acting, but also developing shared assessments and acting cooperatively. For some others among the G20, notably China and India, national interests will have to be reconceived to include more directly the well-being of the international system itself. All twenty governments will have to reconcile self-interest with the common interest and to privilege co-operation over domination, multilateralism over unilateralism, the effective over the merely efficient, and the legal over the expedient. All of that is easier said than done, especially in the absence of common threats.

Restricted groups of governments, even the G20, can bind themselves if they wish, but they can only commend their decisions to others, not command compliance. Absent the UN and its universal membership and legal framework, smaller, exclusive groups, especially the G8 but also the G20, would be much more controversial and their legitimacy more contested. As a consequence, they would also be less effective.

[2]How the G20 Could Help the UN[end]

It is a truism that the UN works best when the major powers are not at loggerheads. The G20 countries are members of disparate UN political and geographic groups, notably the Non-

Aligned Movement (NAM) and Group of 77 members of the South and the democratic countries of the “North”, that are often (at ideological odds with each other and frequently at political cross-purposes too. To the extent that G20 membership induces a sense of solidarity among the twenty and diminishes identification with other groups, cooperation under UN auspices will be made easier, helping the UN to work more productively, generally, on day-to-day issues and on specific topics. Indeed, as we have seen in the case of the IMF, consensus among the G20 is a powerful stimulus to action and reform.

Permanent representatives at the UN are often constrained by the institution’s divisions—notably between the Security Council, where the five veto powers dominate, and the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly, in which the “South” prevails—and hobbled by instructions from their capitals. Leaders, however, are blessedly far removed from the hothouse of New York and the antique ideologies, accumulated grievances, and diplomatic delusions that impede progress there. The G20, operating at the head-of-government level, has the luxury of focusing on the substance (and domestic politics) of a given issue and ignoring institutional prerogatives and inertias, thereby catalyzing action that individual bodies of the UN find difficult or impossible to achieve on their own. The G20 can encourage and facilitate cooperation within the UN and between the UN and other bodies. Further, the very existence of the G20 and its evident capacity to act outside of UN parameters if the UN is dilatory or obstructive create an incentive in New York for action and cooperation among those who do not want the UN to be bypassed.

[3]Security Council Reform[end]

With one or two exceptions, the gap between the power of several of the candidates for permanent seats and the power of the lesser permanent members of the Security Council is becoming so wide that it risks destroying the legitimacy and effectiveness of the institution. For the aspirant countries, an unrepresentative and anachronistic council that does not reflect contemporary power realities is an illegitimate one. Worse, it is an ineffective one.

Not everyone equates enlargement with reform. Some opponents of an increase of permanent seats think that the council has a performance and accountability deficit—Darfur, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and so forth. They contend that more members do not necessarily increase the council's effectiveness and that permanent seats are incompatible with accountability. Further, there is also the issue of principle. Opponents of adding permanent seats prefer democratic practices to anachronistic privileges. Some are also opposed partly as a matter of self-interest, presuming that their own countries would not get a permanent seat and, in some cases, what would be worse—that a regional rival would.

For a generation, progress on this key question has foundered on the rocks of competing interests. Reconciling the positions of those who want permanent seats for themselves and those who prefer other solutions to UN governance challenges has thus far proved impossible. But, as all the protagonists are members of the G20 and all enjoy more or less permanent seats in the G20, which is in some respects the economic equivalent of the Security Council, it should be possible for professional politicians, leaders for whom compromise and the politics of the art of the possible are everyday realities, to find practical political accommodations. It happens that there will be a potentially useful overlap between the G20 and the Security Council in the next

period. Ten G20 members (six G8 members) will be on the council, as will five of the leading six aspirants for permanent council membership.

[3]Climate Change[end]

The leaders' G20 was created to deal with the last economic crisis. The next economic crisis might well be driven by an inadequate response to climate change. Stopping and reversing climate change, the mother of all tragedies of the commons, was never going to be easy. There are precious few examples of humanity managing to come together in its own enlightened self-interest to change its collective course on a major governance issue. But there are some such examples: notably, World War III has been avoided (so far), the proliferation of nuclear weapons has (largely) been averted, and the ozone layer has been (mostly) preserved.

Negotiations among all 192 members of the United Nations, while an essential component of any ultimate climate change agreement, has nevertheless proven too unwieldy, too susceptible to conflicting interests and contradictory ideologies, and too vulnerable to the actions of a handful of spoilers to be able to reconcile competing and diverging climate change interests within a responsible timeframe. For climate change as for most overarching global issues, the crucial negotiations have usually taken place in back rooms of large gatherings, among groups of twenty or so of the most engaged countries. In Copenhagen, even that process was bypassed as five countries—the United States, China, Brazil, India, and South Africa, some of the worst polluters—cut a deal among themselves that they then offered to others on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. The Copenhagen solution, however, was inadequate substantively and unfair procedurally. While it had some merit—more than seventy countries, including thirty-five

developing countries signed on to the deal and pledged to take “nationally appropriate actions”—it lacked targets and timetables, and it back-end loaded its promises of financial transfers.

Further, G20 members from the European Union, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Australia, Turkey, Indonesia, and Russia were all sidelined—as was Canada, which is a significant generator of greenhouse gases (GHG) in its own right and the leading foreign supplier of oil, gas, electricity, and uranium to the United States, the world’s second-leading GHG emitter after China the United States—. The G20 would have constituted a much more representative group for negotiating agreement. Further, a deal acceptable to the G20, with its complex membership, would likely have attracted less opposition.

Copenhagen will not save us from climate change, nor, in the absence of progress in the U.S. Congress, will Cancun in 2010. It is possible that the follow-up gathering in South Africa in 2011 will not do so, either. Partly in frustration with the difficulty of devising a fair global treaty expeditiously, coalitions of the willing are turning to “bottom-up” actions on a national and regional basis, although that course risks making the world a crazy quilt of incompatible regulations and trade protectionism masquerading as climate sensitivity.

Whether the solution is to be an overarching mega-deal or a series of internationally sanctioned issue-specific deals, the world has to be brought to “yes” on the necessity to act. What is needed is a group big enough to include all the nations whose cooperation is indispensable but still small enough to facilitate agreement—that is, to be effective on substance and efficient in negotiation.

There are two alternatives that, happily, can add up to one solution: the Major Economies/Emitters Forum (MEF) and the G20. The MEF has the requisite vocation, reducing

emissions, and the G20 has the requisite focus, economics and finance. The G20 is by its own declaration the world's "premier economic forum," and climate change mitigation and adaptation raise primordial economic issues, including the probability that not acting is going to be more costly for all than acting would be, as British economist Nicholas Stern has persuasively argued. For both substantive and procedural reasons, it would make sense for the MEF to morph into the G20 (all the MEF countries are already in the G20) and for climate change, starting perhaps with its economic and development dimensions, to be made a standing item on the G20 agenda.

International Security

The UN Security Council is equipped by chapter VII of the UN Charter with the power to "legislate" in member countries, a power that the G8 and G20 do not (and should not) have. The decisions of the council taken under chapter VII are binding on member countries whether they are council members at the time or not. The post-9/11 decision to deny terrorists access to the world's financial system is an example. The council's writ covers peace and security, fairly broadly defined. Major international political and security issues continue to be brought to the UN for deliberation and decision. The response to 9/11, the Iraq war, the Israeli-Lebanese war, and the Iranian nuclear program are high-profile examples.

The UN Security Council normally operates at the permanent representative level, and the G20 functions as a body of heads of state and government. Vastly more effort and money are allocated to the latter in capitals than to the former, a fairly accurate barometer of the importance to political leaders of the two bodies. At the same time, each has its own capacities. There is a strong argument in favor of the G20 members investing major effort in the work of the council,

including in the creation of UN military missions. There has been a perceptible reluctance on the part of some G20 countries to participate in UN-led operations, out of concern for the effectiveness of such missions. The G20 could contribute to upgrading the UN's capacity to act effectively. The G20 could also inject high-level political energy periodically into council deliberations, as President Obama did in 2009 in chairing a Security Council session devoted to arms control and disarmament.

[2]How the UN Could Help the G20[end]

The UN can extend the G20's effectiveness. G20 decisions enjoy greater legitimacy if they are endorsed by the UN than if they are not, making the UN a kind of political "force multiplier." Further, global problems require global solutions, and, as Bruce Jones of the Brookings Institution has pointed out, "However much influence the G20 have, the problems they confront are the kind where the weakest link can break the chain."¹ Unless smaller states see that their views are reflected in decision making or at least that their interests have been duly and fairly considered, they are unlikely to "buy into" the deal in question. Unresponsiveness can have repercussions in, for example, the attitude of the G172 toward illegal migration, the drug trade, and international terrorism and piracy. It can also affect their willingness to cooperate to prevent evasion of climate change regulations by unscrupulous industries and the spread of pandemics of infectious disease and their willingness to collaborate on financial regulation, notably regarding tax and banking reforms.

¹. Bruce Jones, "Making Multilateralism Work," Policy and Analysis Brief for the Stanley Foundation, April 2010 (www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pab/Jones_PAB_410.pdf).

Much of the membership of the UN sees the G20 in positive, albeit apprehensive, terms. The G20's efficacy is generally acknowledged at the UN. Many UN members recognize that the G20 came into existence when and how it did because a myriad of political and structural problems prevented existing institutions, principally the G8 and IMF, but also the UN proper, from addressing the global financial crisis effectively. They realize that similar impediments are obstructing progress on other global issues more directly under the UN's purview. Further, they are well aware that smaller, powerful groups are capable of bypassing the UN when disagreements there prevent effective action. At the same time, the G172—that is, the 172 countries that are not in the G20—have legitimate concerns about the latter's possible evolution. To quote Singapore permanent representative Vanu Gopala Menon, speaking on behalf of the Global Governance Group, an informal group of moderate countries that have joined forces to deliberate on the need to strengthen the UN role in global economic governance:

We firmly believe that the G-20 process should enhance and not undermine the UN. All countries, big and small, will be affected by how the G-20 deals with the issues it takes under its charge. Given the complexities and interdependencies of the global economy, it is important for the G-20 to be consultative, inclusive and transparent in its deliberations for its outcome to be effectively implemented on a global scale

The most fundamental problem is that the lack of seats at the G20 table for the G172 greatly reduces the latter's ability to protect their peoples' interests, or at least to air those interests in the hope that doing so will, ipso facto, afford some protection. The more the G172 members are excluded, the less confidence their populations will have in the ultimate fairness and efficacy of

the multilateral system and the less interest they will have in responding to the G20's wishes. There are two further problems. Despite the presence at the G20 table of some developing countries, no place is reserved for the poorest and no one is carrying their proxy. Equally problematic, the capable smaller countries, such as Norway, Switzerland, Chile, Singapore, and New Zealand, are absent as well, effectively depriving G20 deliberations of those countries' generally constructive and frequently innovative diplomacy.

The G20 therefore needs to take seriously the need for outreach and, to an extent consistent with efficacy, inclusion. There are several steps that the G20 can take, none of which will be really satisfactory to those who are absent but all of which are likely to be better than nothing. First and most fundamental is that the chair of the G20 in a given year should make it a solemn responsibility to consult others besides his or her G20 counterparts on the G20 agenda and seek substantive rather than pro forma input. The chair or the appropriate high-level representative could do so by attending major meetings of, for example, the African Union, ASEAN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Organization of American States, and so forth. Unless a leader is prepared to commit to such an effort and to commit the country's diplomacy to genuine consultation, he or she should not seek to host the event. Second, the G20 should to the extent feasible adopt a constituency approach, as is done in the IMF (for example, Canada's executive director represents a constituency including Ireland and the Caribbean). Third, in order to ensure a voice for the G172 at the G20 table, especially for the poorest, the UN secretary-general should attend the G20 as a matter of right (as should the heads of the IMF and, when development is on the agenda, the head of the World Bank). The secretary-general should be

represented at the G20 preparatory meetings by his own sherpa. As is the case with the EU, the African Union head should attend as a matter of convention. Further, the UN (and the Bretton Woods organizations) should be encouraged to contribute their perspectives and ideas at G20 ministerial meetings.

At the same time, to obtain the maximum benefit from the meetings of the G20, the number of people at the table needs to be tightly restricted. It is imperative that the table be small enough that those sitting around it be able to look each other in the eye and interact directly when necessary. They need proximity and intimacy to really understand each other's perspectives, especially their disparate political interests and limitations, and to engage each other. Distance across large tables destroys spontaneity and favors formality and disengagement. As a consequence, the table should be small and only government leaders should have dedicated seats at it. One or two additional rotating seats, as in the UN Security Council, could be allocated to nongovernment leaders to use when invited by the host chair to speak.

The annual G20 meeting could be held at UN headquarters or elsewhere in New York or that vicinity. Having the G20 and the UN meet side by side would help to make the work of each more coherent. As all of the leaders come to New York for the General Debate in September anyway, parallel G20 sessions would spare leaders the wear and tear of an extra trip. Further, as major security infrastructure is already in place, meeting in New York would greatly reduce the expenses of a summit (Toronto is said to have cost Canadian taxpayers more than \$1.1 billion). The leaders could stay an extra day or two in New York at the trivial, incremental cost of a few extra nights in a hotel. The chairmanship could continue to rotate as it now does.

The inescapable conclusion is that the UN and the G20 need each other. The UN embodies universality and the G20 efficacy. If the United Nations and the G20 behave constructively and sensibly, they can produce synergies. The G20 can strengthen the UN by reducing the gaps among the major powers on contentious issues, making decision making in the world body easier and more effective, and the UN can return the favor by extending the G20's efficacy vis-à-vis the G172, a group that the G20 cannot command but whose cooperation it needs. The UN, for its part, needs to be sensibly responsive and strategically savvy, resisting the blandishments of its ideological "spoilers." And the G20 needs to take the initiative to develop an effective modus operandi with nonmembers to resolve genuine issues of inclusion and exclusion and to find a way to give voice in its deliberations to the less powerful poorer countries and to the small but competent richer ones. More generally, the G20, which can undoubtedly harm as well as help the world body, should take care to reinforce rather than diminish the UN and its charter and the body of treaty law derived from it. Otherwise, to paraphrase Joni Mitchell, you won't know what you had til it's gone.