

The United Nations and the Future of Global Governance

Expert Roundup (Council of Councils, CFR)

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As we adapt to emerging global threats, let's not lose sight of what we have achieved. The UN has largely fulfilled the chartered goals established in San Francisco sixty-seven years ago, and, in doing so, has spawned an extensive body of international law, treaties, norms, practices, and institutions that govern most facets of interstate relations. With these "apps," the UN Charter has become the world's central operating system--the motherboard of global governance--making it possible for ideas such as the Millennium Development Goals to become policy drivers, and for other organizations (notably NATO, the G8, the G20, and civil society) to function more effectively.

Nevertheless, in too many ways, it remains our parents' UN. As we all struggle to adapt to the realities of a rapidly changing world, from climate change and population growth to pandemics and transnational organized crime, we are inadequately served by an unaccountable and anachronistic Security Council; a Secretary General chosen in a process akin to a papal election (and beholden to the Council); and various sub-appendage (like ECOSOC, UNESCO and the Human Rights Council) of questionable utility.

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What to do? In an age of "messy multilateralism," minilateralism offers hope. Universal entities like the UN need minilateral groups of key countries that can work together across regional boundaries to achieve results that can be commended to the membership at large. The G20 is one such minilateralist invention. Recently, G20 member countries stabilized financial markets, coordinated regulatory reform, and launched an economic stimulus, thereby quite possibly averting a global depression. They have also taken preliminary steps toward global macroeconomic governance by addressing issues like monetary policy, exchange rates, and debt levels, which were once regarded as the exclusive province of sovereign governments.

So far, G20 leaders have focused on their self-prescribed economic and financial mandate because, undoubtedly, they must get these issues right. But that does not mean that the G20 should ignore security challenges until the economic Shangri-la emerges.

The G-20 is not a panacea. But G-20 leaders could help the international community bring UN architecture and processes into the twenty-first century. Areas in need of most reform include the outdated membership configuration of the Security Council and the selection process (and empowerment) of the secretary general.



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