An inconvenient truth

di Jochen Prantl*

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The question of how to manage global security relations in the 21st century needs to be addressed in the context of the debate about the future of the western liberal order. This US-led order is becoming increasingly challenged by the gap between the rising demands of international society and the lack of means to deliver them. On the one hand, due to the complexity of the post-cold war security environment, there is a demand for stronger multilateral institutions and greater global governance. On the other hand, old power-based logics still prevail. In order to bridge the gap, there is a striking need for better platforms to forge common agendas. There is also a need to rethink statist conceptions of legitimacy and develop a more dynamic understanding of collective action. Multilateral pluralism is, indeed, in high demand. Yet, who are the rule-makers and rule-takers? Many predict that there will be a shift of power towards the east, and that the western liberal order has lost its legitimacy. Is it possible for this order to be transformed into one whose custodians are truly global shareholders? There are various forums through which this might be achieved. This article will examine three such platforms: the UN security council, regional organisations and informal institutions, and the role they can play in ensuring order in an increasingly multi-polar world.

The UN security council: dawn or dusk?
It seems to be common wisdom that the UN security council is overdue for radical reform. The perceived crisis of the United Nations stands in sharp contrast to the boom in peace operations. In August 2008, a total of more than 107,000 military personnel and civilian police were serving in 16 missions, with an annual budget of $ 7.1 billion. Given such dynamism, is the council just "the imaginary invalid"? Not quite; there is much room to improve its decision-making, effectiveness, and representativeness. Any reform proposal needs to clarify what exactly is wrong with the council today and how the proposed measures would remedy its shortcomings.

If the membership of the security council was to be adapted to better reflect the global distribution of power, what would this mean in practice? Most reform efforts are overly concerned with enlarging the council's membership as a proxy for legitimacy and representativeness. Yet, there are two problems with this approach. First, reforms need to strike a balance between effectiveness and representativeness - a larger security council is not necessarily more effective. Secondly, much of the council's weakness rests in political disagreements between its most powerful current members. The recent Russian and Chinese vetoes on Myanmar (2007) and Zimbabwe (2008) reflect the difficulties in agreeing on collective action. The deeper underlying question is how to politically engage key stakeholders such as China, Russia, Brazil and India, inside and outside the security council to manage 21st century security relations collectively and responsively.

Regionalisation of security?
Greater cooperation with regional organisations in dealing with conflict has been a persistent theme at the security council since the mid-1990s. While the regionalisation of security is arguably

consistent with the spirit of the UN Charter's Chapter VIII, there are several issues that need to be kept in mind. The first is the difficulty in defining a space for regional collective action. Regions are social constructs and therefore subject to political contestation eg the boundaries of a security region may differ from those of an economic region. Second, regional security cannot be isolated from the global context and the interplay between regional and global dynamics further complicates the process. Third, while regional organisations have insider knowledge that is useful, sometimes their proximity to a conflict makes it more difficult for them to be perceived as impartial by the various groups involved. Fourth, the degree of institutionalisation and the nature of cooperation vary across regions, as a comparison between Europe and Asia illustrates. Finally, there is a capability problem in many regions, such as Africa, which impacts on the ability of the regional organisation to cope with a broadened mandate. Therefore, the need to maintain the security council's primary role is key, not only to address the global-regional dynamics, but also to ensure adequate coordination with regional organisations.

Informal institutions

Informal institutions - contact groups, core groups, groups of friends - are an integral part of the recent development of international organisations. As the problem-solving capacities of formal multilateral frameworks are challenged by the quantity and complexity of global conflicts and risks, informal institutions accommodate increasing demands for multilateral pluralism. Although the record of such institutions has been mixed, they have taken on complementary functions, not only as problem solvers, but also as agents of incremental change. They constitute a safety valve to channel some of the pressure for institutional reform and adaptation and remedy some of the failings of the security council and regional organisations. Yet, they are certainly not the Yet, they are certainly not the *deus ex machina* for curing the public bads of governance. At best, such mechanisms may offer an alternative route for the application of more flexible procedures in addressing collective action problems. By engaging stakeholders that do not have a seat on the council, informal institutions may help make decision-making more inclusive. They reflect a move away from statist towards more dynamic concepts of how to legitimise institutionalised governance.

However, it must be noted that the informal institutions described above do not refer to the idea of a concert of democracies that is currently in vogue. By establishing a clear dividing line between democratic and non-democratic states, such an alliance would make it even more difficult to forge a consensus to address global challenges. Moreover, given their dislike of any form of intervention, democracies such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, and South Africa would be reluctant to join the alliance. The concert of democracies could look dangerously similar to an interventionist west-versus-the-rest alliance, which constitutes the worst case scenario for addressing global challenges. On the other hand, inclusive informal groupings can play a constructive role in international affairs.

Moving forward

Prior to the United Nations' 60th anniversary summit in September 2005, there was much talk about reviving the spirit of the 1945 San Francisco conference. As we now know, such a spirit did not materialise. This is not entirely surprising. "San Francisco" was preceded by "Dumbarton Oaks" where great powers came together to forge a consensus on how to organise global security after the second world war. At the moment, such great power leadership does not exist. Yet, it will be an essential ingredient for the successful management of global security relations in the 21st century. We should be careful not to be taken in by overly optimistic views of global governance. Much of the current public discourse reminds one of a Greek chorus that is expected to critically reflect upon, but has become separated from the drama of world politics, staying silent about the inconvenient truth we need to internalise: the uneasy co-existence between new forms of

institutionalised governance and old-style great power relations. Exclusive approaches like the proposed concert of democracies will build fences rather than help address common global challenges. What we need are more inclusive platforms for key stakeholders to foster cross-regional dialogue between the developed and developing world. Expanding the G-8 by including Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa as full members may provide a starting point.

Jochen Prantl is director of the Centre for International Studies at the University of Oxford