

Who Will Save Multilateralism from Itself? The United Nations at 75

By Stefano Gennarini, J.D.

INTRODUCTION

From the moment Donald Trump was elected to the U.S. presidency four years ago, there has been a loud clamor that multilateralism is in crisis. His “America First” doctrine has been excoriated as an invitation to dismantle the UN system. This could not be further from the truth.

The sovereign equality of states is the foundation of the UN Charter, which was adopted seventy-five years ago on October 22, 1945, in San Francisco. One cannot fault a sovereign state for defending its own interests. Populism is not a threat to multilateralism properly conceived. But populism is indeed a threat to the imperialist project that Western elites are promoting through multilateral institutions. This “woke” imperialism wants to refashion the world and impose uniform social and economic policies through gender ideology and the green economy.

The real threat to multilateralism, properly conceived as a tool for international cooperation between sovereign states, is not populism but the global network of bureaucrats and politicians intent on imposing social and economic uniformity on the world, at any cost, and without any democratic legitimacy. This *Definitions* analyzes recent trends that undermine multilateral cooperation and attempts to define the broad contours of the proper scope for international cooperation.

The Epoch of “Woke” Imperialism

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International cooperation through multilateral institutions was never meant to quash national prerogatives on social and economic policy. Sadly, the U.S. foreign policy establishment, the European Union, and other Western powers no longer agree with this basic premise. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western powers have transformed the multilateral system into a neo-colonial structure for social and economic engineering. This has been accomplished in a piecemeal way through a complex network of non-binding resolutions and agreements. It has been a gradual and coordinated effort to expand international control of domestic policy space.

The process of integrating UN policy and multilateral mechanisms into national and local policy is a rapidly expanding feature of multilateralism. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the Human Rights Council, and the Paris Agreement on climate change are key elements of this network of UN mechanisms and agreements that seeks to intrude more and more into national policy space on social and economic issues. The ongoing reform of the UN development system launched by UN Secretary-General António Guterres is accelerating the integration of international policies and mechanisms with domestic policy space because it consolidates all the powers and resources of the UN system in the hands of the UN secretariat, ultimately giving the UN secretariat a say in sovereign states’ internal policy decisions in previously unthinkable ways.¹ If you consider also the outsized influence of the UN secretariat on UN negotiations (more on this below) this should be cause for concern for anyone interested in protecting the political legitimacy of multilateral institutions.

The general public has barely begun to understand how intertwined national and local bureaucracies in every country are with international mechanisms, even in developed countries like the United States. They haven’t realized how much power international institutions have accumulated over the past 75 years.

Major and minor global aid donors, including the United States, the European Union, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Nordic countries, and Japan, have similar coordination and bureaucratic instructions that seek to align global aid with multilateral agreement. This happens in a range of policy areas, including environmental and economic policy, but above all international coordination has been effective in the field of social policy.

For example, U.S. federal law requires the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to coordinate its policies and programming with multilateral agencies and to implement them in line with international agreements about “gender.” Few Americans know this or understand what this means. The law establishing this mandate, the Women’s Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act of 2019 (WEEE Act) codified an elaborate suite of gender policies adopted by the U.S. Agency for International Development during the Obama administration to streamline “gender integration” and “gender analysis” at the agency at all stages of the USAID program cycle.²

Essentially, every U.S. foreign aid policy and program is vetted from the moment it is conceived, through its design and implementation, and all the way to its evaluation, by “gender specialists” and gender officials in every bureau and office of the international aid agency of the federal government. These gender specialists are mandated to align U.S. foreign policy with multilateral agreements, which ensures that the gender specialists are more responsive to globalist goals than domestic political priorities. This is highly troubling given the increasingly controversial use of gender policies to promote abortion, and the LGBT agenda.³

On the other side of the Atlantic, the European Commission is also exploiting the coronavirus pandemic to coerce countries both in Europe and beyond to adopt international LGBT human rights standards and other globalist goals. On November 12, the European Commission presented the first-ever EU Strategy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, non-binary, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ) equality. The strategy was announced by President Ursula von der Leyen in her 2020 State of the Union Address with an open challenge to the socially conservative EU country Poland.⁴

The strategy promises to make “hate speech” and “hate crimes” EU crimes by 2021 and to impose mutual recognition of “rainbow families” across the European Union by 2022. It sets forth a sweeping set of social engineering measures to impose uniform LGBTIQ policies across the European Union. It also promises to ramp up EU diplomatic and foreign aid efforts to promote the LGBTIQ cause across the globe. The strategy covers health, education, culture, sport, medical and social research, marriage, online regulation of “hate speech,” employment, and other policy areas.

The discretion of the European Commission over long-awaited EU recovery moneys for the COVID-19 crisis will be used to

penalize any country that stands in the way of the realization of the LGBTIQ strategy. Similar conditionality should be expected on international aid funds across the globe, as the EU strategy pledges to do with European aid funds, and as U.S. foreign policy moves closer to implementing.

Whereas it remains to be seen how successful these social engineering efforts will be, their mere existence and reliance on multilateral mechanisms should raise alarm bells. In particular, given the economic destruction wrought by the international political response to the COVID-19 pandemic, any conditionality attached to COVID-19 recovery aid has the potential to be coercive.

The Trump Moment: The Rise of Populism

Western political leaders and the international institutions they control eagerly welcomed the tentative political victory of Joe Biden in the U.S. Presidential Election this November. Even before the victory is official, they breathed a sigh of relief. They view Biden as a leader who will return to normalcy in international relations by aligning U.S. foreign policy with globalist goals after the difficult four years of the Trump administration.

The dominance of a new kind of ideological imperialism is reflected in how the very word “sovereignty,” which was once a staple of UN agreements, has all but disappeared from UN parlance and fallen into disfavor. The shock of Western elites was palpable when U.S. President Donald Trump mentioned “sovereignty” 21 times in his first speech to the General Assembly in 2017, pledging to respect other countries’ cultures and traditions.⁵

Staring down the same scoffing globalist elite in 2019, President Trump prophesied, “The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots.” He explained, “The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbors, and honor the differences that make each country special and unique.”⁶

Trump withdrew from the Paris Agreement and the Human Rights Council early in his administration. It is often claimed that U.S. President Donald Trump’s “America First” doctrine, including the U.S.’s withdrawal from multilateral agreements and mechanisms, and from the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2020, is a threat to multilateralism and international cooperation. But that is misleading. Trump’s populism was

never a threat to multilateralism. It only threatened the “woke” imperialism of Western donor countries.

Perhaps no one has been more disappointed by the ascent to power of populist parties and leaders in the mold of Trump across the globe than the officials and staff of international organizations themselves. Their bureaucratic power on issues ranging from the environment to migration and humanitarian cooperation is threatened by leaders asserting national prerogatives in these contexts. They see their own power as an indispensable for the success of multilateralism and the preservation of peaceable relations among states.

As the policies and actions of multilateral institutions and agencies become further and further removed from the lived political reality in countries across the world, it will undermine international cooperation. It will weaken the political legitimacy of the multilateral project and good will towards international institutions.

Oddly enough, it never occurs to the globalists that a massive increase of power for unaccountable international mechanisms and agencies could actually harm multilateralism, yet that is precisely what will happen. As the policies and actions of multilateral institutions and agencies become further and further removed from the lived political reality in countries across the world, it will undermine international cooperation. It will weaken the political legitimacy of the multilateral project and good will towards international institutions. A process of this type is already at work across Europe, as Brexit and the tensions within the EU on issues ranging from immigration to social issues testify.

The case of France provides an example of what will increasingly happen, not just in Europe, but around the world, unless global elites wake up to how globalist goals are politically disconnected from the everyday reality and concerns of their populations.

“The din of nationalism always leads to the abyss,” French President Emmanuel Macron declaimed in a dramatic, almost panicked, voice during a fifty-minute speech, the longest by far at the 2018 General Assembly general debate, in which he condescendingly lectured the world on the danger of Trump’s populist policies.⁷

Ironically, not long after he delivered his UN speech, Macron was confronted by street protests and riots in Paris due to populist unrest with globalist policies. The protests were brutally repressed by Macron’s government, and their coverage by media has been severely curtailed for fear they might spread to other disgruntled Frenchmen. Since then, France has had a quasi-permanent ongoing stream of protests.

No matter how good its intentions, the more the international agenda drifts away from the everyday concerns of people and

the more it seeks to impose abstract and uniform policies on the entire world, the more it will contribute to the widening of the democratic deficit of international governance mechanisms.

The 2020 Global Bureaucratic Reset

It is ironic that this year, marking the 75th anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, should be the first since the founding of the organization that world leaders did not meet in New York for the General Assembly high-level debate because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some might be tempted to think it symbolic of a crisis of multilateralism. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic has proven how little need the UN system has for political oversight from UN member states. Despite almost no in-person meetings due to global travel and normal diplomatic processes shutting down, the system has continued to function almost seamlessly.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath is further accelerating transnational policy integration and increasing the power of the UN system in unforeseeable ways by concentrating power in the executive branches of governments across the world and making it easier to coordinate how bureaucracies operate across borders in a wide range of policy areas.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, UN and WHO officials repeatedly claimed that uniform and coordinated policies to address the COVID-19 pandemic were lacking, and that international institutions needed more power and resources to effectively address the pandemic. But these claims belittle the remarkable influence the UN and the WHO exercised from the beginning of the crisis. Indeed, the pandemic has highlighted how dependent on the UN bureaucracy governments have actually become.

Health ministries from almost every country have followed the guidance of the WHO to some degree or another, for better and for worse, including initially adopting flawed protocols to deal with the respiratory conditions caused by the novel coronavirus, and adopting unprecedented and unproven measures like lockdowns, quarantining of healthy persons, and other draconian social distancing policies that have undermined religious freedom and civil liberties, threatened public health and social order, and brought the global economy to a grinding halt.

Furthermore, the pandemic is being exploited to accelerate social engineering goals of globalist elites.

From the outset of the pandemic, UN Secretary-General Guterres talked about how it created the opportunity to “Build Back Better” even as the tragic crisis unfolded and millions lost loved ones and livelihoods. In the aftermath of the pandemic, most UN resolutions have adopted the approach of the Secretary-General. Instead of calling for government policies to help get their citizens back on their feet, the pandemic is being exploited by globalist elites to socially engineer a greener, more feminist, and more LGBT-friendly world.

Early in March 2020, as governments looked to the WHO for guidance on how to deal with the coronavirus, officials of the international health agency promoted abortion as “essential” in a guideline on “Clinical management of severe acute respiratory infection.”⁸

“Women’s choices and rights to sexual and reproductive health care should be respected irrespective of COVID-19 status, including access to contraception and safe abortion,” the WHO manual reads.

Soon thereafter a WHO staffer said the WHO has been working to ensure abortion drugs are considered “essential” during a webinar hosted by a pro-abortion journal. She also promoted the WHO’s official view that where access to abortion is difficult or illegal, women should self-administer abortions and health workers should provide them with the drugs to do so.⁹

The UN Secretary-General’s humanitarian plan to respond to the pandemic designated “sexual and reproductive health” an essential category in the COVID-19 response,¹⁰ and it went beyond ambiguous euphemisms. It called on the global humanitarian response to the pandemic to be guided the *Inter-Agency Field Manual on Reproductive Health in Humanitarian Situations*, which not only treats abortion as a humanitarian right, citing UN treaty bodies and special procedures, it also says that medical personnel in humanitarian situations must refer for abortions against their consciences.¹¹

A Bureaucracy Without Checks and Balances

Many U.S. conservatives deride the UN system as a waste of time and money because they say that it does not have any real positive legal power. Indeed, much of what takes place at UN headquarters is an elaborate and expensive game of show-and-tell for the global political elite. But it is a mistake to think that the UN system is toothless or does not have influence. When conservatives and skeptics of multilateralism don’t engage

the UN system meaningfully, it allows the UN bureaucracy to proceed with its own agenda, without regard for the sovereignty of states.

Those familiar with how the UN system operates know that it has plenty of money and power and that it wields that power effectively to shape global affairs and the national policies of many countries who rely on international mechanisms for financial and political support. And like all bureaucracies, the UN system is most powerful in a political vacuum, as happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. This should give the entire world cause to pause and reflect if this is indeed something necessary or positive.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted systemic flaws in the UN system that undermine international cooperation in line with the founding principles of the UN system.

UN officials in the secretariat and agencies openly call on each other and international donors to bypass diplomatic channels and work directly with government ministries, especially health ministries and gender ministries, when they need to push particular policy items. They know that by going to capitals directly they can avoid a thorough legal and diplomatic scrutiny of the implications of any given policy and programme for the sovereignty of the state in question. Internal government ministers tend not to have the competence to effectively analyze and evaluate these implications. Moreover, government ministers in aid-dependent countries tend to be more beholden to foreign donors than diplomats and ministries of foreign affairs, thereby increasing the chances that government ministers will rubberstamp whatever the foreign power wants to promote.

There is a chronic lack of oversight by the General Assembly and other inter-governmental bodies of the United Nations, whether it be the Economic and Social Council, or executive board of UN agencies, leaving the secretariat and agencies to operate largely unchecked.

Meanwhile, the trend among States is to concede more and more sovereign prerogatives to international bureaucracies on a host of social and economic issues.

The details of agreements and how international agencies operate is increasingly the work of bureaucrats without any meaningful supervision or input from sovereign states, their democratic constituents, or their diplomatic representatives. The

only states involved in actually monitoring the work of the UN system are the ones paying for specific activities—those who can afford to do so, which are overwhelmingly wealthy Western countries.

This tends to create a moral hazard. Diplomats are increasingly abdicating their sovereign prerogatives. And politicians, too, are increasingly giving the UN system more power by default. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that domestic politicians and government ministries are also happy to defer to decisions by international bureaucrats rather than face any political backlash or being held accountable for their mistakes at home.

Essentially, there are no checks and balances within the UN system. There are concentric and overlapping spheres of influence, but there is no way for one UN body to limit what another UN body does. There is only one direction: forward. The reforms being promoted by states will not remedy these problems, indeed, some would exacerbate the existing flaws in current functioning of UN system, the Secretary-General Guterres' UN development reform proposals in particular. Guterres' proposals consolidate more power and discretion in the hands of the Secretary-General and the bureaucracy he oversees. This is very troubling if one considers how radical the UN bureaucracy is on many social issues.

For example, in the struggle between social conservatives and radical feminism, the Secretary-General has communicated that he is firmly on the side of feminists and that he is willing to give them a greater say in UN policy-making as a way to drown out opposition to radical social policies.

Whenever Guterres speaks to feminists, he is careful to couch his dialogue in Marxist categories, speaking of how “the patriarchy is an obstacle to human rights” and of how “the central question is the redistribution of power.” During a virtual townhall meeting with feminist groups he made the case for a global culture war through the COVID-19 pandemic response.

“This is an ideological battle to fight... This is what we fight. There is a pushback against this redistribution of power. Many governments want to keep the (United Nations) organization strictly intergovernmental. But we will be very much committed in ensuring that civil society will have a growing role in decision making at national level and indeed international level.”¹²

This unchecked rhetoric amplifies the special status afforded by international institutions to socially liberal policy groups,

often funded by wealthy governments. This faux-civil society engagement with the UN system suppresses the voice of smaller and poorer countries and drowns out any opposition to liberal social policy from authentic civil society organizations. It is troubling that the Secretary-General should be so openly able to admit this without any controversy.

Meanwhile, the direct interference of the UN system into domestic political affairs is also increasing rapidly. Some UN officials have defended their interference, saying that it is not coercive as long as there is not the threat of the use of force. According to this view, the entire UN system should be allowed to campaign for any political cause in a country, partnering with local groups and local politicians, and it would not be considered interference.¹³ An entire UN agency—UN Women—was created to just this: to promote social and political causes working directly with local lobby groups and politicians. It is a little-known fact that UN Women does not carry out any traditional UN programming in the areas of nutrition, sanitation, or health. Rather, its activities are solely in the normative sphere.

The sprawling bureaucratic overreach is not helped by the way international diplomacy functions. Diplomats rotate in and out of New York and Geneva relatively quickly. The most experienced diplomats in New York tend to have been at their posts for a maximum of six years. Yet UN officials and staff are permanent, sometimes remaining in their posts for decades. Similarly, governments change, and countries often change position on international affairs, but the UN bureaucracy rarely ever changes position. This results in a power imbalance whereby the UN secretariat essentially sets the terms of every debate because it controls the agenda of the United Nations and is the institutional memory of the organization.

Conclusions

The recent trends outlined above undermine the sovereignty of states and reduce their agency and involvement with international institutions. They also further widen the democratic deficit in the decision-making processes of international institutions, which is already at a critical point.

If these trends continue, the UN system will alienate sovereign states to the point that they either regard it as irrelevant or malignant, imposing its will through coercive power. We are seeing a bit of both of these consequences depending on whether a country is wealthy or poor. Wealthy countries like the

U.S. tend to look at the UN as irrelevant, ignoring its real power at its own peril, whereas poorer countries feel compelled to adopt whatever conditions are requested in order to be on the receiving end of the desperately needed assistance provided by UN agencies and international donors.

Unless respect for sovereignty is institutionally streamlined and ingrained in all aspects of the functioning of the multilateral system, it will continue to be in crisis and decline. And ultimately, it won't be Trump's fault, as he recognized the importance of sovereignty before it was politically popular do so.

Endnotes

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stefano Gennarini, J.D. is the Vice President for Legal Studies at the Center for Family and Human Rights (C-Fam). He represents C-Fam at UN headquarters in New York and researches and writes on international law and policy.

Rebecca Oas Ph.D.
Editor

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Suite 20000
New York, New York 20017

info@c-fam.org
www.c-fam.org

