UN-veiling world governance

by Thierry Tardy

With the 68th General Assembly of the United Nations set to open shortly in New York, it is worth re-examining what global governance means today in an environment where the state-centric Westphalian system has long given way to a more multi-centric and less regulated world.

With the notable exceptions of the Holy See, Palestine, and Taiwan, virtually all states are members of the United Nations and therefore sit in its parliament, the General Assembly. Bringing together its 193 member states every year in September, the Assembly hosts a session that lasts at least until December, but in practice often closes shortly before the next session starts. Together with the Security Council, the General Assembly represents a relatively well-accepted form of state-controlled global governance.

How it all started - and evolved

In his latest book *Governing the World. The History of an Idea*, American historian Mark Mazower recalls how efforts to govern the world have a long and painful history. Already in the early 19th century, the 1815 'Concert of Europe' following the Napoleonic wars was aimed at providing European nations with an informal mechanism to rule collectively over the destiny of the continent. Subsequently, the League of Nations was also an attempt to offer the great powers an instrument of world governance, but the mere absence of the US and Russia from the League was sufficient to render the organisation ineffectual and unable to prevent the disasters of the 1930s. In 1946, when the League was replaced by the United Nations, not only did the US join as a founding country, but the organisation's headquarters were also established on American soil in recognition of US supremacy. Long before the current US pivot to Asia, the decision to base the UN in New York was a clear indication that Europe was losing its centrality on the global stage: "If the seat is in the New World, it is the end of Europe" declared a French diplomat in 1946. This also informs the very nature of the UN, and indeed any global governance mechanism that is at the juncture of power politics and liberalism, as demonstrated by the composition and role of the Security Council, and the manner in which the UN seeks to serve the common good and, in a way, transcend sovereignty.

Almost seventy years later, the need for global governance is greater than ever, and while the UN may still claim to be at the centre of the international security architecture, it is increasingly being challenged both from the top - i.e. by its member states - and by those directly affected by its activities.

For Mazower, this is so because of a mismatch between the state-centric nature of the UN and the transnational character of 21st century economic and security challenges. In his explanation, he makes the reproachful accusation that 'old-fashioned political scientists had mostly missed the fact that international affairs was becoming

less focussed on large formalized institutions and more dependent upon informal clusters and horizontal interagency relationship that blurred the boundaries between officialdom, corporations, and NGOs.'

Mazower's analysis converges with that of Paul Kennedy, author of *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. In his work *The Parliament of Man. The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations*, Kennedy makes the point that 'transnational changes challenge the 1945 state-centered constitution even more, simply because they lie well outside the assumptions and expectations of the politicians who assembled at Bretton Woods, Dumbarton Oaks, Yalta, and San Francisco.' If global governance is about designing responses to the multitude of complex threats to world peace and stability, then the Westphalian, top-down approach of the United Nations might no longer be the most appropriate one. It can be safely presumed that the sets of policy responses crafted for the international conflicts of the 20th century are no longer adequate when addressing issues concerning the environment, state failure or religious radicalism. To succeed in defining the norms of interaction among the actors of the system, and possibly enforcing them, global governance agents must therefore take on board the evolution of centres of power as well as threats.

States, sovereignty, and peace-building

This set of questions is important for any kind of security actor, and is certainly of relevance for the European Union, which struggles as much as the UN with adapting to new challenges, the concept of transnationalism, and the notion that governance may come from less formalised and state-centric mechanisms.

This in turn leads to the issue of state sovereignty, and both Mazower and Kennedy explore how this is challenged by the evolving forms of governance. For Mazower, international institutions do not curtail sovereignty as much as they are often accused; instead, states tend to join institutions in response to the loss of sovereignty incurred during the processes of globalisation. The question is then whether these institutions actually allow states to better shape - or govern - the environment in which they operate, or are they left marginalised by other types of actors and processes. Interestingly enough, crisis management operations combine a human security approach that poses a direct challenge to state sovereignty (as the concept of the responsibility to protect shows) with capacity-building activities that are very much aimed at enhancing sovereignty. After all, it is through peace operations that both the UN and the EU attempt to replicate the centralised, state-based system that they represent and know best in third countries. As Kennedy puts it, 'the main instruments to deal with the [21st century] transformations are still the nation-state structures so familiar to us, though palpably inadequate for the tasks ahead.'

In this context though, both the UN and the EU possess merits that make them relevant actors in the realm of global governance. As stated by the 2011 World Development Report on 'Conflict, Security and Development', contemporary sources of conflict have more to do with socio-economic tensions and deficits of governance structures than inter-state rivalries and power politics. In policy terms, this means that tackling the causes of conflict requires a large array of long-term activities that go far beyond military containment. This is precisely what Kennedy means when he states that 'It is one thing to drive away limb-chopping thugs in Sierra Leone or to topple dictators like Saddam Hussein, but quite another to devise a due process for a nation's long term recovery'. The ability to engage in long-term recovery operations is central to global governance, and notwithstanding difficulties, this is what the UN and the EU are best placed to provide. This is so because of their broad approach to the concept of security, and consequently the width of their policy instruments. Once a stabilisation phase has produced the conditions of 'negative' peace (termination of conflict), the shift to 'positive' (i.e. sustainable) peace can only be achieved through a social engineering process that combines a top-down (internationally-led) and bottom-up (local-led) approach and that is as broad-ranging as possible. Short-term security imperatives may impede the application of the comprehensive approach due to its political and operational complexity, but long-term peace can rarely be achieved without an inclusive approach that addresses the root causes of instability.

True, the UN and the EU face great difficulties in finding their place in the evolving governance structures: the 68th General Assembly of the UN will most likely not resemble the Parliament of Man, and the EU remains far from living up to the ambitions of its successive treaties. Yet both institutions offer comparative advantages that few other security actors possess and they thus remain indispensable, if imperfect, instruments of global governance.

Thierry Tardy is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

QN-AL-13-027-2A-N | ISSN 2315-1129