

THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: TIME FOR “PLAN C”

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In any given period, the international system is characterized by some minimally acceptable rules of order. These rules may be partially codified; but, to a large extent, they are tacitly understood, generally reflecting the balance of power perspectives of a small number of influential states. This essay considers systems in the period since World War II.

Plan A: Traditional Power Politics Plus a Weak United Nations System

The United Nations Charter, adopted in 1945, was not a democratic document. In the Security Council, the sole UN agency to enjoy binding powers, the so-called P5, the principal victors in World War II, were not only given permanent seats, but also the right to veto any resolution of which they disapproved. All other members reluctantly accepted this dispensation, relying for protection on their sovereign immunity from outside intervention. In theory, all states were sovereign equals. Each could do whatever it wished, no matter how immoral, within its own borders. Nor did it matter whether its actions were for the good of the planet. Nevertheless, most states behaved reasonably, and the system worked well enough to help avert World War III and to provide modest benefits to needy nations.

In its early days, the UN was looked upon favorably by the United States, which, together with its allied and client states, mainly in Latin America and Western Europe, could win just about any vote in the UN General Assembly. The Soviet Union, naturally, frequently used its veto to block Western initiatives. But, as the UN expanded, mainly because of decolonization in Africa and most of Asia, the balance of power shifted. What had been a primarily East-West contest morphed into opposition between the global North and South. In the new power configuration the South won many victories, but they proved to be pyrrhic in that decisions were non-binding, unenforceable and largely ignored by powerful states. New agencies continued to be created to deal with issues of global importance, but they were typically under-funded and inadequately staffed. The United States continued to pay lip service to the importance of the UN, but we also made sure that it did not become a serious contender for global political power.

Overall, the planet continued to be wracked by political, economic and social injustice. Looming environmental dangers were ignored. Leaders and diplomats were largely oblivious to many mounting dangers and failed to recognize the sowing of the seeds of terrorism.

Plan B: An Abortive Pax Americana

With the unanticipated implosion of the Soviet Union in 1989, a seemingly promising new era dawned in world affairs. The United States emerged as the sole hegemon in a politically unipolar world. Its capacity to lead was unprecedented. Many of our leaders, however, especially on the political right, perceived the global situation as enabling the establishment of a “New American Century,” a Pax Americana backed by worldwide acceptance of free-market capitalism and guaranteed militarily by “full spectrum dominance” (on land, sea, air, and outer space) and marked by pro-American, nominally democratic regimes on all continents. Remaining adversaries were to be hemmed in by a global network of hundreds of military bases. To be sure, it would be expensive; but it was a scenario we believed we could afford.

But there were problems. Nobody ever asked us to be the world’s policeman and political arbiter. We lacked the skill to export democracy to other lands. Most of the world did not buy into the neo-con myth that we were the “shining city on the hill” And then came 9/11! Our response was the unwinnable global War on Terrorism that has obsessed our political thinking ever since. Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and other nations have wreaked incalculable death and devastation and drained our economy of trillions of dollars and precluded meaningful reforms in our own country and abroad. For all practical purposes, the UN was relegated to a bit and subservient part. And most of our political establishment still doesn’t get it.

Plan C: A Transformed United Nations System

All of the problems confronting our planet before 9/11 are still with us. Some, especially climate change, have become appreciably worse. Plan B isn’t working and needs to be replaced. We need truly global, not essentially unilateral decision-making. The United Nations must be transformed and strengthened. Decisions must be binding, democratically reached, accepted as legitimate, and enforceable. The global South deserves to have an appropriate voice in world affairs. Terrorism must be addressed, not by killing ever-greater numbers of presumed potential perpetrators, but by eliminating its root causes in global and local injustice. Ordinary citizens deserve to be represented in a World Parliamentary Assembly. Better ways must be found to tap the wisdom of civil society. Unilateral military adventurism must yield to duly authorized missions carried out by a competent standing peace force. The jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court must be made universal. The list goes on.

Happily, solutions are in sight. Suggesting how best to address these issues is the purpose of my most recent book, *Transforming the United Nations System: Designs for a Workable World*. The book, published by the United Nations University Press in 2013, has been enthusiastically endorsed by numerous prominent world thinkers. You may easily order a copy on-line from Amazon, Barnes and Noble, or the Brookings Institution Press (<https://www.brookings.edu/book/transforming-the-united-nations-system/>)