

Cornerstone of the Global Order:

Why the UN Matters and How it
Should Reform

Yang Jiemian and
H. E. Kevin Rudd

Editor's Note: *The United Nations (UN) commemorated its 70th anniversary in 2015 and, after months of deliberations, selected its new secretary-general on October 5, 2016. With regard to the ever more important role of the UN in global governance and international system building, the China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies initiated a dialogue between Professor Yang Jiemian, President Emeritus of the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies and H.E. Mr. Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister of Australia, during the latter's visit to Shanghai in early September 2016. The dialogue focused on the dynamic global and regional situations, the UN's crucial role, and future conceptual and structural reforms for the UN.*

New Contexts for the United Nations

Yang: It is important for us to discuss the international contexts of the United Nations at this time of globalization and the growing prominence of

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global governance. The world has witnessed great changes since the end of World War Two and the founding of the United Nations in 1945. These profound changes can be grouped into three categories. The first is war and peace. There were a number of “hot wars” during the Cold War, such as those in the Middle East, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. In the post-Cold War period, there were the Gulf Wars and the Kosovo War. Meanwhile, there were new concerns and challenges in both non-proliferation and non-traditional security realms. The second category is related to economic development. The world managed to achieve economic recovery from the devastating World War Two faster than expected because East Asia served as an important engine of this rapid growth. In the past one or two decades, there has been an ascendance of emerging economies in the non-developed world. The third type of changes is the global and regional endeavors for better governance along with new trends of fragmentation and anti-globalization. In addition, the actors in international politics have, both intensively and extensively, increased. The complexities of global affairs have been ever deepening.

However, many of the changes mentioned above have not outdated the UN's guiding principles and continuous practices, but renewed them in the changed and changing circumstances. In my opinion, the following have withstood the test of time and those drastic changes:

First, the purposes and principles of The UN Charter still prevail. They have remained as relevant as before over the past 71 years. China believes that the world's continuous chaos should not be attributed to the outdatedness of *The UN Charter*, but the lack of compliance and implementation of it. Of course, it is also important that the international community renew and update the purposes and principles of *The UN Charter* and, more importantly, enrich and reinvigorate them in light of the trends of our time and new demands of the world. Therefore, the most pressing task is to enhance global efforts, consultation, and coordination in meeting those global challenges.

Second, the UN-centric international system and order and its affiliations are not outdated. The United Nations is the most universal, representative, and authoritative international organization of the present world. It has greatly contributed to peace and development through various organizations and mechanisms. During the post-Cold War period, there were several attempts to bypass the United Nations to deal with major hotspot issues. However,

in the end these attempts failed and those actors had to come back to the UN for legitimacy.

Third, the world's main agendas set by the United Nations are quite salient. In the past 71 years, the UN — with its three pillars of peace and security, development, and human rights — has played an irreplaceable role and accomplished a great deal in promoting human progress. What merits our special attention is the effective promotion of the UN's efforts on development and climate change. Having said so, we must also recognize the new changes and challenges of today's world.

Why the United Nations Still Matters

Rudd: Yes, I quite agree with your analysis and rationalities. In my opinion, the UN still matters today for the following three reasons. *First, the UN is still a cornerstone of the post-war global order.* The global and regional institutions use multilateral means to manage differences and maximize peaceful cooperation between states, based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all states. This principle is particularly important for smaller and middle powers in the international system, which historically have often become the casualties of great-power politics gone wrong. And it is here that the UN plays the central role.

Second, the principle of multilateralism itself matters. The principle of multilateralism is important because it militates against unilateralism, predatory bilateralism, or a Darwinian view of international relations based on the "survival of the fittest." We have seen these principles at work too many times before in the history of international relations. If our common objective is a peaceful and just global order, there are unique principles alive in the concept of multilateralism itself that are worth sustaining for the future. These are, among others, legitimacy, universality, norm-setting authority, convening power, the power to initiate, the power to take collective security action, and the power to deliver economic and social programs.

Third, there is no credible substitute for the UN. A further reason why the UN matters is that, despite its most ardent critics, the UN cannot readily be replaced. Therefore, the only common-sense approach to the future of global governance is to make the best of the institutions we already have. To think otherwise is to construct castles in the air in pursuit of a perfect order that could never exist. We should never succumb to the intellectual

temptation of allowing the perfect to get in the way of the good. Our task is to make the existing international infrastructure as functionally effective as possible, given the vast array of new challenges confronting us for the future. This task, in itself, constitutes a formidable body of work.

New Conceptual Building of the United Nations

Yang: We definitely see eye to eye on the UN's importance. In the meantime, I believe both of us want the United Nations to keep up with the times. 71 years are shorter than a split of a second in the long history of humankind, yet a period long enough to see the fundamental developments in international politics and world economy. The world should never be complacent with what it has, but should strive for new principles, new agendas, and new mechanisms — in other words, better global and regional governance. For the UN's future development, I have the following three suggestions concerning theory and conceptual building:

First, re-define the roles of state and government. Nation-states have long been the principal actors in international relations since the establishment of the Westphalian system in 1648. However, in the context of globalization, pluralism, and diversifying levels of sub- and transnational actors, greater efforts should be made to re-conceptualize the roles of the state and the government. The UN should re-define its relations with other non-state actors ranging from NGOs to sub-multilateral institutions like the BRICS.

Second, promote neo-regionalism. In the absence of a world government and effective management in global governance, the United Nations should give greater recognition to regionalism, such as Asian Pacific cooperation, European integration, and Western Hemisphere organizations. In addition, creative thinking should be encouraged in sub-regional and inter-regional cooperation, while due recognition should be paid to the relationship between regionalism and global governance.

And third, strengthen globalism. The United Nations needs to absorb new ideas and concepts, such as global governance, new security concepts,

Though under constant criticism, the UN remains a cornerstone of the post-WWII global order.

and transnational outlooks. Development was equated to economic growth in the initial decades of the United Nations' agendas. People did have good reasons to think so and act accordingly in the long years of poverty, scarcity, and longing for economic wealth. Later on, the world has come to recognize that economic growth alone is far from enough. Consequentially, the United Nations has gradually replaced economic growth with comprehensive, balanced, and sustainable development. Comprehensive development includes the fields of economic growth and restructuring, social progress, and good governance. Balanced development calls for consulted and coordinated developments both inside and outside any given country. It also aims at social justice and equality. Sustainable development attaches greater importance to environmental protection and ecological awareness. All these have been added into the UN 2030 Agenda, otherwise known as the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which put forward higher targets and specific and indexed requirements for the world.

Above all, the UN needs conceptual innovations so as to keep up with the times.

Main Arguments of the New ICM Report

Rudd: In terms of the UN future development and improvement, I have just published the Chair's Report on *UN 2030: Rebuilding Order in a Fragmenting World* in my capacity as the Chair of the Independent

Commission on Multilateralism (ICM). Here I would like to brief you on the backgrounds of the ICM and the Report's main arguments.

The United Nations is now 71 years old. And the world 71 years ago was a vastly different place from the world of today. The question inevitably arises, therefore, as to whether this post-war institution called the UN remains "fit for purpose" to meet the needs of the international community in the century unfolding before us. If not, what can be done in practical terms to bring its mission, structure, and resourcing up to date to meet the formidable challenges ahead? This was the subject of conversation between UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and President of the International Peace Institute (IPI), Terje Rød-Larsen, in the summer of 2014, as the UN

prepared for its 70th anniversary celebrations. It was decided that the IPI would convene an independent review of the UN multilateral system. Its purpose was to make recommendations on the system's future for the next secretary-general to consider at the beginning of her or his new term in January 2017. And I was asked to chair it.

The core arguments of this report are simple. *First, the UN matters.* Just now I already put forward three main reasons and now I would like to give my other arguments.

Second, after 70 years, the UN has become so factored into the international order that we are barely conscious of the continuing stabilizing role it plays in setting the broad parameters for the conduct of international relations. We tend to take the UN for granted. We see it as a comfortable part of the international furniture, a permanent fixture, a given. But as history reminds us, nothing is forever, least of all the durability of global institutions, whose history is recent and whose precedents are fraught. Nor is history necessarily linear — we are not somehow destined to enjoy increasingly “progressive” forms of global governance. As noted above, historical “regression” is equally possible. And if the UN itself one day disappears or, more likely, just slides into neglect, only then would we become fully aware of the gaping hole this would leave in what would remain of the post-war order. Without the UN, we would be left with increasingly brittle state-on-state relationships, with little remaining to mediate, negotiate, or resolve inter-state crises when they arise. By that time, it would simply be too late to lament the UN's demise.

Third, while the UN today is not broken, it is in trouble. Many fear it is starting to drift into irrelevance as states increasingly “walk around” the UN on the most important questions facing the international community, seeking substantive solutions elsewhere and increasingly seeing the UN as a pleasant diplomatic afterthought. Many are concerned that the UN, like many old institutions, is being overwhelmed by the major systemic changes and challenges now buffeting the international community at large. This report argues that the UN has a 20th century institutional structure and culture that is struggling to adapt to these new 21st century realities. And if it fails to adapt, the UN will slowly slide into the shadow-lands.

Fourth, the Report argues that the UN is capable of reinventing itself. All 21st century institutions must do this in order to survive the pace and

complexity of change around them. There is no point dreaming that the UN could be rebuilt from the ground up. But we can intelligently reexamine the UN's functions, structure, and allocation of resources to make it better equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

Though people tend to neglect the UN's role and its adaptive efforts, it still has great potential of self-rejuvenation.

Finally, the Report holds that there is no such thing as "one-off" reform. For the UN to have a robust future in delivering results that are directly relevant to the challenges of the international community, we must actively engage in a process of continually reinventing the institution. There is an argument that the institutions of international relations inherently tend toward entropy that, as institutions are formed, the processes of long-term decay already begin to set in. If this argument is valid, as I fear it might be, the only antidote is to have a conscious, continuing program of active reinvention—to remind the institution of its core and continuing values, to refresh its institutional culture and, where necessary, to reprogram some of its functions. This is all to ensure that the UN is effectively responding to the real policy challenges of our time, rather than mechanically reproducing the responses of the past, thereby retaining its relevance for the future.

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Yang: Thank you very much for such comprehensive and in-depth introduction to the report. Looking forward to the UN's future, the world has a lot to do. Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out in his speech at the UN General Assembly on September 29, 2015 that standing at the new historical starting point, the UN needs to have in-depth thoughts on how to better answer such important questions as world peace and development in the 21st century. In today's world, countries are interdependent on each other and share weal and woe. We should inherit and advocate the purposes and principles of *The UN Charter* to establish a new type of international relations with win-win cooperation at the core and forge a community of shared destiny among all of us. Of course, these are the principles that need to be elaborated upon and put into practice. Therefore, I would like to hear your wisdom and insights on the future reform of the United Nations.

“Fifteen Points”: Recommendations for Future UN Reforms

Rudd: Let us concentrate on my recommendations for UN structural and operational reforms starting with the new UN secretary-general in January 2017. Based on the growing sense of structural urgency, I tried to put forward a range of fresh proposals — practical rather than revolutionary — to deal with the emerging deficit in effective global governance. These have been organized around the core concept of “delivering effective results” on the ground for us peoples of the world. In summary, they are as follows:

1. The member states formally recommit themselves, at the summit level, to the principle of multilateralism as an essential element of the current global order, rather than allow the current process of strategic drift to continue as multilateralism is replaced by other plurilateral or even unilateral decision making;
2. The policy objectives of the UN at any given time will be set by member states, with the Secretariat playing a policy advisory role, in addition to an implementation role;
3. The Secretariat can better advise the Security Council (UNSC) on the complex matters before the council by providing better policy capacity, including in policy planning;
4. The report argues for an enhanced role for the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in assuming political responsibility for the delivery of the UN 2030 Agenda;
5. The UN General Assembly might consider streamlining the processes of the Fifth Committee to increase administrative efficiency and provide better transparency of financial data for member states on the core question of the allocation of the UN’s overall budget. The UN General Assembly has also embraced its own ambitious program of reform to increase the transparency of the selection process for UN secretaries-general;
6. In order to effectively and efficiently deliver on the policy decisions of the UN’s deliberative bodies, the UN also needs to change some of the functions, structures, and ways resources are allocated in its existing machinery. In particular, the UN needs a flatter structure all around, with priority always placed on field operations;

7. The UN must add specific capabilities to its repertoire to make a doctrine of preventive (as opposed to reactive) diplomacy an operational reality, rather than just an attractive intellectual nostrum. This should include an effective policy-planning capability, a dedicated deputy secretary-general on preventive diplomacy, an enhanced Department of Political Affairs, a cadre of professional special envoys, and an integrated conceptual and operational approach to security, development, and human rights mandates to produce a capacity to deal with the root causes of conflicts, as well as a capacity to act immediately in response to unanticipated crises;
8. The UN should appoint a deputy secretary-general on sustainable development to take final responsibility, with the World Bank, on the actual delivery of the UN 2030 Agenda. It should also devise new, comprehensive protocols with the World Bank, other international development banks, and the civil society for the delivery of the SDGs. And it must do the same with the private sector, and private capital in particular, to fill the global financial gap to implement the UN 2030 Agenda;

The UN needs to undertake progressive reform steps while adopting practical measures to deliver effective results.

9. The UN should appoint a deputy secretary-general on humanitarian support to develop more efficient and effective compacts with the international NGO sector to increase the combined impact of these UN and non-UN agencies on the ground;
10. The UN should use this higher-level executive management team to “bust” traditional silos at the center of the system by bringing the peace and security and

the sustainable development agendas together into properly integrated mandates and mission statements for UN staff on the ground;

11. The UN must also create the “Team UN” by making all funds, programs, and specialized agencies on the ground operationally answerable to a single director of UN operations for each mission—whether these are primarily peacekeeping, joint military-civilian, or exclusively civilian operations;

12. The UN must fully mainstream gender equality into its executive management, with gender parity achieved for all management positions at headquarters and for the directors or their deputies of UN operations in the field;
13. The UN must also mainstream the global youth agenda within UN management by establishing the UN Youth, given that the youth constitute almost half (42 percent) of the global population and 60 percent of the population of developing countries and that there is now a chronic global youth unemployment challenge;
14. The UN must develop comprehensive protocols and compacts with regional organizations to define agreed norms, functional overlaps, and, where possible, common funding to maximize measurable performance on the ground;
15. The UN must learn to live within the reality of a highly constrained budget, while deploying its budget and staffing resources more efficiently, effectively, and flexibly than at present.

Yang: Obviously you have spared no efforts in visualizing the future and proposing the concrete recommendations. The UN reform will certainly be a lasting process full of difficulties. However, so long as the international community keeps pooling wisdom and efforts, the future is bound to be better and the UN will grow stronger as well.