

Post-bipolar Challenges to Multilateralism

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Abstract

The UN system was created in 1945 by 51 founding members. We are now in the third millennium and the organization presently includes 193 state members. Such a difference has to be taken into account by political scientists and would probably shed light on many deadlocks or uncertainties the United Nations is presently dealing with. This is all the more crucial as the UN was until the present time hardly capable of reforming itself, even when the strong decolonization wave took place during the 1960s. If the UN is still reflective of the post-Second World War world, we can easily imagine that it is not properly able to take up the challenge of a new global, “inter-social” and multicultural world.

Three points will be explored in this chapter. First, we will define the main features of the 1945 context, based on the risk of a third world war (far apart from the contemporary new conflicts), on a political vision of international relations, excluding social issues and environmental problems, and on a clear domination (even a monopoly) of Northern and developed countries on the agenda. Second, we will focus on the main factors of dislocation that came to question this first order: decolonization, depolarization and globalization, to which the UN system was not properly responsive. Finally, we will assess the present challenge according to three axes: the growing split between the Secretary-General and Security Council, the inclusion and management of non-state actors inside the UN system, and the fragility of the new concept of global security as it was progressively coined by some agencies, particularly the UNDP.

Keywords

UN system – UN reform – decolonization – depolarization – globalization – bipolarity – multipolarity – minilateralism – Secretary-General – Security Council – UN Development Programme – nonstate actors – Westphalian sovereignty – League of Nations – Global South – Non-aligned Movement – NGOs – cooperation – zero-sum game – pandemics – diplomacy of connivance

Multilateralism has always been an uncertain conquest that was most commonly accepted by states as an unnatural and fragile invention. In a Westphalian world, international relations used to be understood as a combination of bilateral agreements that had to respect the sovereignty principle, conceived as the cornerstone of the international order. For this reason, multilateral conventions and organizations were most generally reluctantly consented to under duress, while necessity was conceived in the matter as the mother of invention. These necessities have been abundant since the 19th century: managing new technologies (telegraphs), new services (international post office), new transnational flaws (ship transportation) and new diseases (plague contaminations and other tropical afflictions that resulted in the creation of the International Office of Public Hygiene, founded in 1907), stabilizing the economic order and obviously keeping peace after the two world wars.

This goes to show that every new step toward multilateralism is closely affected by the historical context on which it depends (Goertz 1994). However, Westphalian states never gave free rein to multilateral organizations but rather granted them a strictly limited mission that aimed to relieve some of their own functions. When the context changes, the international institutions become increasingly at odds with their new environment. This permanent risk of discrepancy is probably one of the most problematic features currently at stake in the present UN system, which is still deeply marked by the 1945 context, while the contemporary global world presents quite different traits (Badie 2020a). The reluctance of states to remain committed to the post-sovereign rules of globalization strengthens this discrepancy and leads to an increasing risk of a multilateral deadlock, as well as a growing helplessness of UN institutions when facing new issues. When the Berlin Wall fell, a huge paradox came to light: While many observers expected a revitalized multilateralism, they had to lower their hopes and to consider that, finally, the UN system was fit essentially for bipolarity and cold war (Badie 2012), much more than for a post-bipolar and interdependent world.

Ironically, multilateralism seems to work better in a sovereigntist world, where it quietly plays the role of the “concert of nations” that many European leaders, such as David Lloyd George, explicitly had in mind when they created the League of Nations after the First World War. In a post-sovereign time, multilateralism generates much more distrust among sovereign states that consider it a permanent threat: The common strategy is then to keep it away from the main decisions and to make it a center of expertise rather than a place of an effective decision-making process. In this perspective, three main questions are to be taken into account: What are the main aspects of this gap that is widening between the present context and the one that prevailed in 1945? How can

we explain why these contextual changes have never really been instilled into the UN system? How do these failures generate the challenges that we now face and that currently threaten multilateral institutions?

The 1945 Context Is Outdated

Let us keep in mind that the present UN system is mainly the fruit of a man and a context. Franklin D. Roosevelt was ever a sincere supporter of multilateral politics, but he was deeply obsessed, in the meantime, by the humiliation that Woodrow Wilson had to face when the US Congress rejected his own project of a League of Nations. That is why Roosevelt strove to make the Security Council a solid bastion of power rather than a place for compromise. The Charter itself was accordingly negotiated – and in fact written – during the long sequence of the Second World War, owing to many interactions between allied warring nations (Rusell 1958; Schlesinger 2003). That is why the UN in its essence should be understood as deeply impacted by a traditional culture of war, a strictly political vision of international relations and a Westphalian conception of the world order: All three of these notions are now clearly outdated, while the great powers work to maintain the illusion that this old world is still relevant against all odds.

No one will be surprised that the UN culture of war was deeply marked by the old and traditional Clausewitzian vision. Everyone will agree that in 1945, the main international actors had in mind only the construction of the best way for preventing a third world war. At that time, the traditional concert of great powers met this expectation as best as was possible: At the end of the 1940s, war was still the exclusive result of power competition, an issue clearly in the hands of the “top five” ranked on a scale of military capacity. Presently, the situation has clearly turned around: War is opposing the weakest actors to each other; the great powers may manipulate new wars but do not generate them, while the conflicts slip out of the traditional control of the hegemon(s). New international conflicts are out of sync with the conflict-solving methods that are still proper to the Security Council and more generally to the UN Charter (Kaldor [1998] 2012; Münkler 2004). One of the main features of these new conflicts refers to their social origin and even their social nature: Instead of resulting from state rivalries, they arise from a process of social deconstruction (Gilpin 2016). Instead of being an interstate event, they appear as intra-state conflicts. In place of struggling armies, we find nowadays militias, uncontrolled groups, mafias and warlords (Malejacq 2019), that is to say, actors that do not fit with the Security Council method, nor the UN way of dealing.

When it faces “new international conflicts,” the Security Council is prompted to convert them into traditional conflicts, making the solutions much more problematic as it results in overlaying two types of war. The Libyan crisis is a clear example of such a risk, when in 2011 the SC decided on a military intervention for keeping peace and containing the use of force by Muammar Kadhafi (UNSCR 1973). The multilateral initiative rapidly turned into an act of power that was very promptly taken over by NATO. The initiative paved the way to an endless war in which old and new wars were merging. Desert Storm, in 1991, was one of the rare successful operations set up by the SC, as the Council faced a traditional interstate conflict in which a state invaded another one and tried to abolish its sovereignty. The UN system works much better when a traditional interstate conflict is at stake, while it performs poorly in handling new conflicts.

The 1945 context is also dominated by a strictly political vision of international relations. Just after the Second World War, the international agenda was clearly dominated by purely political issues: power rivalry, regime competition, pressure of totalitarianism, political mobilization, an arms race that was then activated by the nuclear weapon just used against Japan, not to mention, in addition, the rise of new alliances and of new camps. The new bipolarity and the perspective of two blocs facing each other set the tone of the post-war international arena. In this vision, there was no room for social issues: Development attracted little attention and the main branches of human security did not even exist in the minds of the founding state members. Environment and climate change were then meaningless, while health and food security issues were explicitly left in the hands of specialized agencies. Article 2 of the UN Charter lists seven “principles” of the organization without mentioning any economic or social needs. The UN inaugurated its role by starting from a strictly political definition of peace as non-war; in the future it would find it very difficult to detach itself from that definition.

Finally, let us point out that the UN was at that time almost exclusively composed of northern developed countries, with only four African states including South Africa, which could be then considered close to the European world. For this reason, development was not perceived as a crucial issue, while monoculturalism largely prevailed. Moreover, these traditional geopolitics strengthened the hierarchical orientation of the new multilateral system and bolstered the role of the world order guardianship played by the old northern great powers. This practice no longer functions at the present time: The “Big Brother” paradigm does not reflect the current reality, while small or weak states are becoming more and more independent from the old tutorships or protections. The main conflicts arise in a regional context, in which northern states have lost a great part of their traditional influence: Hierarchy no longer has the

capacity to enforce peace as it did before (Lake 2009). It would seem that the UN system will only be able to regain control of new conflicts if it grants a role from now on to regional powers, local actors and regional organizations in a new, decentralized process of intervention (Van Leeuwen 2009).

The cultural diversification that occurred, especially after 1960, came to weaken and even jeopardize the first multilateral constructions. This was particularly clear with the well-known Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was even denounced by many Third World leaders as a kind of “unilateral universalism.” Of course, the grievance was frequently used as a pretext for legitimizing their authoritarian rule, as well as their lack of commitment to democratic and liberal principles. It has also fueled the “clash of civilizations” rhetoric that has paralyzed many international conferences and forums. It has even contributed to bolstering a new “diplomacy of protest”: As the countries of the Global South were kept at the margins of global governance and felt excluded from a real universalism, the temptation was high, for many of these new UN members, to seek refuge in a new kind of foreign policy based on questioning and contesting the economic and political world order. As they were unable to really participate in global governance, they played the role of dissenter. The Non-aligned Movement (Belgrade, 1961) was created in this perspective (Dinkel 2019), followed thereafter by the G77, which still plays an important role in the multilateral debate. From a certain point of view, this protest diplomacy has frozen – and is still freezing – several capacities of multilateralism. However, it has also helped to popularize new concepts and new issues including sustainable development, human security and global security.

Three Major Ruptures

Three major ruptures deeply questioned the relevance and the efficiency of the classic UN Charter: decolonization, depolarization and globalization. Instead of adapting its institutions to these new sequences, the UN system reacted mainly by confirming its previous orientations. We face here a well-known political process that is probably still more evident in international relations than in domestic politics: the conviction that the status quo is less costly than change, particularly when the rules are monitored by states that do not have any interest in changing them in the short term. As Peter Katzenstein has pointed out, states, and particularly great powers, conceive themselves as actors, following what the realist theory encourages them to do, while they have to be considered first as structures, depending on the context and obviously bound to change: Rulers around the world are commonly lulled into the impression that they can control change while they are borne by it (Katzenstein 1990).

Decolonization did not really get the UN institutions moving. Even if the founding members progressively became a minority in the new Assembly, the change was contained by the old northern powers that progressively stayed away from the General Assembly and sought shelter in the Security Council, where they could enforce their own rules in the context of new issues. Very few new institutions were created in this new context, with the exception of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1965, and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) one year before. Paradoxically, this deep enlargement paved the way to a new oligarchical trend that became a reality through the rise of a new “minilateralism” that gathered together the old powers, particularly in the G7, which was created at Rambouillet by a French initiative in 1975 (Hajnal 2007; Badie 2012). Significantly, the G7 co-opted Russia after the USSR collapsed and expelled it when the connivance between the old powers came to decay. The G20 was thereafter built up in order to meet the threatening global economic crisis in 2007. Even if it included China and some “moderate” rising powers, it declined not long after, without casting a real shadow over the past hegemons and their ability to control the decision-making process. “Minilateralism” should then be looked at as a symptom of the multilateral dysfunctions and a reflection of the mistrust among the powers about the UN’s capacity to deal with the main issues at stake. It has also generated a sense of multilateral incompleteness among all the other countries.

Did *depolarization* lead more promptly to change? The fall of the Berlin Wall was welcomed as the starting point of a new era that would stimulate a more cooperative diplomacy: The success of the Desert Storm operation was perceived as a good sign of the new capacities of the UN. However, the opposing view quickly prevailed: The veto system helped to artificially extend the dead bipolar game, while it contributed to marginalizing regional wars (as was the case with the African conflicts) or reconstructing them according to the old rivalries: Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Libya are clear examples of this second trend. In fact, depolarization showed the way to a door that was never really opened: the access to a newly fragmented world in which the peace makers could not be limited to the old powers and should include local and regional actors, as well as non-state actors that were held in a secondary role during the Cold War. Warlords, tribesmen, religious actors, NGOs, mafias, even violence entrepreneurs progressively became the main players while remaining behind the institutional curtains (Hofman and Schnekenner 2011; Ezrow 2017). International organizations are then able to offer the most comprehensive range of actions for punishing or rewarding these actors, and even sharing political responsibilities (Hofman and Schnekenner 2011, 614–615). States clearly wish to limit this kind of option.

Nevertheless, globalization is definitely the main factor of a necessary readjustment that has never been really achieved. This new dynamic opened the way to three new principles that the UN partly failed to comply with: inclusion, mobility and interdependence. As mentioned earlier, given the hierarchical orientation of the UN system, inclusion was more formal than real. Admissions of new decolonized states were generally successful, even if they frequently triggered a veto, especially by the USSR: Co-optation remained for a long time an active privilege of the oligarchic P5 (the five permanent members of the Security Council). A close association of the new members to the UN governance, or even more, to the global governance, was by contrast very limited. As early as 1953, when the election of a new Secretary-General took place, the candidacies of both the Indian diplomat Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, and the former Iranian foreign minister Nasrollah Entezam were rejected without any soul searching. More generally, a tough debate was opened with decolonization: Does a too large number of players still permit the conditions for a real trade-off or not (Gilligan 2004)? The old great powers were prompt to perceive the large postcolonial international arena as the “Grand Central Station” or a “Piccadilly Circus” in place of the old, cozy and familiar concert. They often mobilized this doubt for relaunching their own “minilateralism.”

Mobility and fluidity are also tough challenges for traditional multilateralism, as they increase the number of transnational actors and multiply the meeting places and forums, while decentralizing the negotiation opportunities. Global communication is shaping a new international arena that is more and more interconnected, participative, but also fragmented (Constantinou, Richmond and Watson 2008). It is clearly increasingly hard for the UN to maintain the monopoly of international transactions and real control over the conflicts. In the meantime, many international organizations (especially private ones, NGOs, firms as well as mafias or violence entrepreneurs) are increasing their autonomy and capacity to act, while societies become more and more eager to deal with international issues (Mandelbaum 1996; Badie 2020b); the time and the paradigm of the muted Vienna Congress are now over. Globalization helps communication but frustrates oligarchic coordination. It is a kind of revenge taken by the former French Prime Minister, Leon Bourgeois, on Woodrow Wilson, as the French politician argued at the beginning of the 20th century that a new League of Nations might echo a rising global society, while the US president planned to promote international institutions connecting the states to each other in order to contain their rivalry.

But the real stumbling block is to be found in the “interdependence” principle that is clearly at odds with the sovereignty principle, that is, the main cornerstone of the UN Charter in which the “sovereign equality” among member

states is explicitly claimed. The growing interdependence among states can be seen as a positive challenge for UN multilateralism as it bolsters active cooperation among them. However, it obviously contradicts the traditional definition of cooperation that was largely adopted by the UN: “the coordinated behavior of independent and possibly selfish actors that benefits them all” (Dai, Snidal and Sampson 2017). Such a definition significantly worked to contain the traditional risk of war (Fearon 1995) and was mobilized by liberal theorists to conceive the functions of multilateralism in an interstate world, albeit an anarchic and post-hegemonic one (Keohane 1984), thanks to reciprocity, trust and reputation (Dai, Snidal and Sampson 2017).

Globalization has questioned this rather optimistic vision in two ways. First, as a new challenge, globalization generated many tensions, suspicions and frustrations in domestic politics that triggered a strong new nationalist stream that all states should take into account. This new orientation resulted in protectionist and selfish foreign policies and distanced national states from multilateralism, as could be observed with the Trump administration. Even more, this paradox was strengthened by a second factor. In a global world, cooperation cannot be considered, strictly speaking, as an agreement, a voluntary meeting of sovereign actors. It now derives from global needs, global threats or, in brief, from global security. The function prevails on the actor and the organization on its members. That is why the initial consensus is drastically challenged: interstate cooperation is no longer the starting point of UN multilateralism but is the trivial consequence of a new world order. Instead of cooperation, some scholars refer to a “societal denationalization” defined as “the extension of social spaces ... beyond the national borders” (Zürn 2001, 57–58). The risk is then clear: a growing split between two faces of the UN system, one still based on traditional state cooperation, and a second based on the definition and the management of new global requirements. The first one remains inspired by the well-known “zero sum game,” while the new one is in the line of an innovative “win – win” game which sovereign states are still reluctant to play.

Contained Innovations

The international arena’s center of gravity is then moving toward new actors and new issues (Müller 2005). This important change is a tough challenge for the UN system, which it promptly took up in an incremental way. Instead of promoting deep reforms that would have made the United Nations more effective, the multilateral system strove to adapt itself to the new context. In order

to achieve this, the lowest common denominator has been found for gathering traditional powers, firmly attached to the Security Council (“UN 1”), a Secretary-General and its administration aspiring to autonomy (“UN 2”) and a fragmented global civil society that tries to invest in the multilateral system (“UN 3”). From this perspective, rhetoric, “soft planning,” new connections with social actors and new long-term programs look more acceptable to member states than do structural reforms. One of the major axes of this option was to reach out to global civil society in spite of little willingness among the sovereign states. In fact, the new project that Boutros Boutros-Ghali and, more actively, Kofi Annan had in mind was then to seal an alliance between the UN 2 (Secretary-General) and the UN 3 (global civil society activists and agencies) in order to contain state sovereignty and the chilling effect of state power.

The UN’s openness to civil society actors was the most visible result of this new orientation. From this perspective, the concept of global social responsibility has been progressively shaped in order to integrate the major corporations in a more inclusive UN system (Segerlund 2010). The Global Compact Initiative was launched in 2000 in a spirit of defining new international commitments binding powerful non-state actors, while the number of NGOs accredited to the UN impressively increased over the Annan term and beyond (40,000 in 2021). Multilateralism should, henceforth, be considered “social” as much as political (Martens 2005). Whatever their presence and visibility in the UN lobbies, however, the contact of these non-state actors with the ruling UN institutions remained limited and were even confined to a “working group” comprised of about 30 NGOs that occasionally met with Council ambassadors. Even if they are seriously present on the ground, these new international actors still do not represent those who are fighting and cannot be real partners to a fruitful negotiation. In reality, non-state actors did not really succeed in raising themselves to the status of full-fledged international decision makers. They are essentially accepted as lobbyists and activists inside international conferences or forums where they play a role of rather efficient spurs facing reluctant or unadventurous states. In a more and more inter-social world, it seems risky to keep non-state actors away from the most important deliberations. It is then urgent to redefine more precisely who is encompassed inside this notion, beyond firms and NGOs: Should violence entrepreneurs still be excluded from any negotiations on war and peace, given what new conflicts mean nowadays and who is actually pulling the strings?

This openness to new actors has also been extended to the issues that are at stake on the multilateral agenda. Here too, Kofi Annan played a major role on the occasion of the Millennium celebration. In his famous speech delivered at the Millennium Conference, he pointed out the crucial importance of human

security. He was then using and highlighting a concept formerly elaborated by Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq, which was the core topic of the UNDP report on human security published in 1994 (UNDP 1994; Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy 2007). This new orientation was crucial: For the first time, security was explicitly and officially disconnected from military and strictly national issues. Annan paved from then on a second track in the UN process, resulting in the announcement of the eight Millennium Development Goals for 2015 (on poverty, education, gender, child mortality, maternal health, pandemics, environment and development). The project was expanded by Ban Ki-moon, in 2015, to the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals leading to the 2030 agenda. The concrete results are, for the time being, most probably poor and not really impressive; their means of implementation were accurately criticized as hazy. The fact remains, however, that a new conceptual system was definitely elaborated in an up-to-date manner.

The difficulty arises when this second track is kept separate from an uncompromising first track more and more explicitly embodied by the UN Security Council. This new orientation certainly contributed to transforming multilateral diplomacy, which split into two systems, one strictly conservative and the other bearing a new agenda, new goals and a new vision of security (Kamau, Chasek and O'Connor 2018). The institution of the Secretary-General could have drawn closer to the global civil society and had this alliance endorsed by the General Assembly, which approved the 2030 Agenda in a formal resolution (September 25, 2015). It also could have set up a high-level political forum for monitoring the SDGs under the auspices of the UN ECOSOC. However, this change failed to reach the Security Council, where the mandatory decisions about peace and war are compiled, and where old powers continue to rule according to an outdated conception of world security: more than ever, the UN 1 is separated from the UN 2 and the UN 3.

The Security Council's resilience is cultural in part, bound to a faithful commitment to the old schemes of the bipolar era and even of the historic Vienna Congress. Nevertheless, it is also strategic, as it appears to be a way to keep a minimal consensus or connivance among the main players (Badie 2012). It should also be considered as a shield by which old powers try to contain the increasing number of initiatives coming from the Secretary-General, the autonomous role of whom is increasingly held as suspect. A "social multilateralism," as it was described by Kofi Annan, is currently perceived as a threat by the P5 and, more generally, by all the states, who see it as a way of surrounding or limiting their own sovereignty. This active conservatism is explicit and even conspicuous when we observe the distance that the Council keeps from all global security issues. This major problem arose at first with the

health security question, when the AIDS pandemic was hardly discussed in the Council in July 2000. Although UNSCR 1308 claimed in its preamble that AIDS was everywhere threatening the peace and stability of the world, it only focused on the risks incurred in that respect by Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) troops. In the new context created by the 9/11 attacks, the Security Council came to neglect this issue once again and to abandon it to a specialized agency, the UNAIDS, which had taken shape some years earlier, in 1995. However, the Ebola epidemics in turn fostered two resolutions. The first one (UNSCR 2177) reiterated the point made about the AIDS disease by presenting it as “a threat to peace and security” but, in the meantime, the resolution significantly transferred the main responsibility to the local state (namely Liberia) and regional organizations.

If it took until the year 2000 for a positive step to be taken towards health security, the Council considered food security only in 2018, when it passed UNSCR 2417 (July 24, 2018). Even though starvation causes presently the death of about 9 million people per year, the Security Council ignored the issue for 73 years! This was clearly a step in the right direction, even though the issue was exclusively considered in the context of warfare, as is clearly indicated by the title given to the new resolution: “Protection of civilians in armed conflict.” Famine is denounced not as such, but as a “method of warfare,” while starvation is then only analyzed as a “conflict-induced food insecurity.” One of the points was to claim “the need to break the vicious cycle between armed conflict and food insecurity.” The authors of the text stressed the causal link between war and starvation and pointed out some of its aspects: “displacement from land, livestock grazing areas and fishing grounds, or destruction of food stocks and agricultural assets.” The text also mentions many indirect links, “such as disruptions to food systems and markets, leading to increased food prices, decreased household purchasing power, or decreased access to supplies that are necessary for food preparation, including water and fuel.” For this reason, states as well as all other fighters are required not to impede the delivery of humanitarian aid. What is more, the Council requests “the Secretary-General to continue to provide information on the humanitarian situation and response, including on the risk of famine and food insecurity in countries with armed conflict, as part of his regular reporting on country-specific situations.”

Considering the risk of conflict-induced famines in this way is understandable but it has two profound implications: It introduces a *summa divisio* that results in far-reaching consequences regarding global security. First, it gives credence to those who discriminate between two kinds of food insecurity and who prioritize one of them as more urgent or more directly connected to the Security Council role. Second, it actively reconstructs the concept of security,

considering that it gets its full meaning only if it is filtered by a war sequence. Apart from that, global food insecurity is implicitly pushed into the background and considered more as a simple shortage. Throughout the debate, the Russian delegation precisely argued that the resolution regrettably left out the economic dimensions of the issue (UN Meetings Coverage and Press Release 2018).

With respect to environmental issues, the same difficulties and the same blockages are gaining ground. Although several international conferences took place from the 1970s on (at Stockholm (1972), Rio de Janeiro (1992) and Kyoto (1995)) and were widely publicized by many media and public opinion campaigns, the Security Council progressively appeared in the meantime as the last bastion which tried to contain this new trend. A public debate was organized within the framework of the Council in 2007 and 2011, without any concrete results and without leading to a resolution (Ezeonu 2000). Furthermore, a new debate held in January 2019 met with frank opposition from the Russian delegate, Vassily Nebenzya, who claimed that considering climate change in the Security Council would be “excessive” and “counter-productive.” The words took on their full meaning when applied to a diplomatic exchange, and on that occasion the Russian ambassador delivered a clear message: The Council exceeds its own competence and undermines the relevant definition that should be presently given to security, while world peace would be jeopardized if we conceived of it beyond the traditional sphere of power. As global security is largely independent of power instruments, it does not fit the tradition of the Security Council and would then result in a new and dangerous instability.

The final blow was probably delivered in March 2020, when the COVID-19 crisis arose. The Chinese were timorous and even hostile toward the US delegation (Esteves and van Staden 2020). This typical case of “connivance diplomacy” brought together the P5 members and prevented the Council from adopting a robust resolution. Finally, long deliberations (four months!) resulted in a very feeble and partial resolution (UNSCR 2532, July 1, 2020) adopted under the German presidency and practically limited to conflict management (Docherty and Gifkins 2020). It “recognized efforts and measures proposed by the Secretary General concerning the response to the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to conflict affected countries, in particular his appeal for an immediate global ceasefire” (UNSCR 2532).

Most significantly, the COVID-19 crisis was considered exclusively through its war dimension, even if the resolution “recogniz(ed) the resolution 74/270 adopted by the UN General Assembly” (UNSCR 2532). This resolution had reaffirmed, some weeks earlier, its “commitment to international cooperation and

multilateralism and its strong support for the central role of the UN system in the global response to the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic” (April 2, 2020).

The General Assembly was obviously being cautious in adopting this resolution, which did not come close to meeting expectations in light of the new threats, but a clear division of labor was established or even confirmed, confining the Security Council to monitoring or containing war activities while leaving human security issues to the General Assembly and, overall, to specialized agencies. Furthermore, in view of their peacemaking roles, Russia and the United States were “more concerned about the ramifications of a global ceasefire on their respective operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria” than they were about fighting COVID-19 (Charbonneau 2020). Given the very serious nature of a sanitary crisis that totally dominated the international agenda and the limited resources available to the UN agencies, the UN system appeared to be one of the main victims of the global health crisis. In fact, it proved unable to take the turn toward the new global security, perhaps even the turn toward globalization.

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