The United Nations and the North South Divide

By

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Introduction

At the foundation of the United Nations in 1945, there were 51 member states, a majority of them from the industrialized North. With the decolonization process that began in the late 1940s - to a large extent encouraged and accelerated by the UN -membership increased dramatically, and the issues on the UN agenda shifted to include concerns of the former colonies. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), focusing on geopolitical issues, emerged from the Bandung meeting of 1956 and got off the ground in 1961, with the aim of providing substantive alternatives to the positions advanced by the competing superpowers and their respective blocs of allies. Many of the newly independent countries also organized themselves into the Group of 77 (named G77 after the original number of memberstates, though the coalition now has 133 members), pursuing an agenda of economic and social development and redistribution of wealth, often with support from Eastern Bloc state. Both groups have, on occasion, provided a strong and effective voice for the South.

In the heady days of the early post-colonial period, notably the 1960s and 1970s, international conditions (guilt or at least unease over the colonial past in the North, optimism in the South) favored narratives of grievance and claims for redress and assistance. Many of the deliberative processes of the UN rapidly locked themselves into a pattern of demands from the South more or less energetically resisted by the North (Schmelzer, 2016).

Under pressure from developing countries frustrated with the liberal economics promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) was set up in 1964. Discussions in UNCTAD were

strongly influenced by the G-77 and included demands for increased development assistance and trade concessions from the developed world to support economic development in the South. These ideas were rooted in the neo-Marxist and dependency theories of development that were evolving at the time. They pointed to the asymmetry of an international capitalist economy, in which countries of the developing world, dependent on the export of primary commodities, were at a chronic disadvantage compared to the industrialized and more diversified economies of the North.

The culmination of this dynamic was the G-77 attempt during the 1970s to fashion a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in an attempt to restructure international power relations. Through plans for so-called global negotiations and a myriad of UN discussions, the South sought to achieve adjustment in the terms of trade by means of price stabilization, the regulation of transnational corporations, increased foreign aid, and reduced foreign debt. The initial success of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in boosting oil prices in the mid-1970s forced countries in the North to pay heed to the agenda of the South. However, at the Cancun Summit of 1981 that brought together leaders from both North and South? the NIEO substantively met its nemesis when it came face to face with 'Ronald Thatherism

The term Global North-South Divide is a geo-political representation of the unequal economic development across the globe. It is rooted in the post WW-II era and remained a predominant policy framework in relation to policies on International Development between 1970s and 2015 (Singh, 2018). The imagery of the global North and the global South was strengthened by post-colonial politics, Cold War, Non-Alignment Movement, demands for economic restructuring by low and middle income countries following the oil crisis in the 1970s and the like (Ehrlich, 1980).

The countries located in the Northern hemisphere were usually rich, technologically advanced, powerful and industrialised, and former imperialists whereas the countries located in the Southern hemisphere (except for some like Australia and Japan) were former colonies, poor, relied on primary and traditional economy, and had limited international political influence (Ehrlich, 1980; Singh,

2018). The dividing line between the North and the South was sometimes called the ◎poverty curtain◎ (Haq, 1976; Escobar, 1995 in Thérien 1999). In 1980, the Independent Commission on International Development Issues (Brandt Commission), appointed at the WB◎s initiative, made an imaginary line (the Brandt Line) representing the North and the South to acknowledge poverty and unequal development between the two parts of the globe with some exceptions (Independent Commission on International Development Issues, 1980).

States were the primary actors in devising international policies using international platforms to ease their interaction and ensure consolidated intervention wherever needed. Most resources for development came from states. IOs had thus, a limited role to play, shaped by the funding provided primarily by the states. These organisations even competed with each other for influence and the resources that followed it3. For instance, in late 1960s, the NATO and the OECD competed for promoting the idea of addressing environmental concerns in relation to economic growth (Schmelzer, 2016).

The oil crisis and the oil glut in the 1970s forced many countries from the South to seek loans from the WB (Heyneman, 2012). With US backing (Baker Plan, 1985), the WBoffered Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) to these countries (Heyneman, 2012). These SAPs were integrated policy packages covering almost all policy areas, negotiated between the WB and the finance ministries (irrespective of the protests by other ministries) of the loan-seeking countries (Heyneman, 2012). This made the WB a major policy actor in the global South influencing not only development, but all policies including education. The end of the Cold War, rise of the US as a global hegemon and the EU◎s internal market, all contributed to an atmosphere where peaceful economic competition (rather than war) could be managed through regulations (Singh, 2018).

The WB-led policy integration was followed by policy convergence between 1989 and 2001. All policies related to development were included in a single policy on International Development. Even though the UN claimed to facilitate this convergence through various conferences, sources reveal that it presented a distorted picture of reality.

Convergence was not planned till 1995 and the OECD planned the convergence since 1995 for economic reasons4.Following the Copenhagen Declaration, 1995 which brought together economic, social and environmental issues, the OECD proposed International Development Goals, 1996to make policy convergence areality (Hulme, 2009). Later these goals were adopted as MDGs in 2001 with cosmetic changes as targets for development to be achieved till 2015 (Hulme, 2009; Singh, 2018). When policies converged, IOs started cooperating and aligning their roles with each other (Singh, 2018).

Most policy negotiations remained hierarchical as states negotiated on international policy platforms. The engagement of the South (aid recipients) was limited since apart from other reasons, funding came from the North (aid-donors). Outcomes were measured in terms of aid effectiveness or the amount of aid resources spent on a particular initiative (OECD, 2013). In most cases it meant ensuring the achievement of goals laid in the beginning of each initiative (OECD, 2013). The OECD also led the development of an implementation machinery for policy consolidation by 2008 through development financing and measurement (OECD, 2008; UN 2009).

As the financial crisis aggravated in 2008, huge influx of immigrants, demographic challenges, restructuring of economic patterns and the like, lead to pockets of poverty in the North (OECD, 2012).In contrast, rising living standards, demographic dividends, booming economies and the like lead to pockets of affluence in the South (OECD, 2012). The OECD thus argued for dropping the North-South Framework in 2012, claiming that the divide between the North and the South was no more a reality since development challenges needed to be addressed all over the globe (OECD, 2012).

The Fall-Out

The intergovernmental process at the UN, and in the General Assembly in, particular, has been stuck for some years in the dynamics of the immediate post-colonial period, crippling many substantive debates and reducing a number of important issues to questions of process and tactical advantage.

Negotiations, mostly behind closed doors, on key resolutions within the General Assembly tend to involve a limited number of delegations generally coalescing around either the EU or G7 positions. They can also feature a role for others who try to stake out more neutral space in order to be in a position to broker a substantive outcome acceptable to all. It is in such negotiations (as well as intergovernmental debates about normative issues) that the North South architecture of UN negotiations is often the starkest. Success is often measured locally not by concrete outcomes but by negotiating triumphs recorded in texts of little interest in the outside world. This is particularly the case on economic issues over which the UN has little purchase, unlike the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, G-7, the Paris and London Clubs (of creditors), and the regional development banks.

Delegates, however, often continue to play the game that they have mastered: tactical jousting over ideologically charged issues, generally without much hope or expectation of affecting the world at large. Although the General Assembly features hundreds of agenda items, speeches and resolutions vary little from year to year. Debates on important issues of our age, such as the damaging debt burden in much of the developing world, take on an unreal tone in the mouths of individuals who often know little about the issues involved. At best, these speeches constitute superb demonstrations of debating skill. At their frequent worst, they are consigned, at huge expense in the six official UN languages, to the dustbin of history.

The parties often cancel each other out substantively, achieving a nil result for the UN. At the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban, the EU countries (along with Norway) sought, without success, to bridge the division by acting as mediators between Arab states and other Palestinian supporters on the one hand and the United States and Israel on the other over a proposed declaration branding Israel as racist. This issue, echoing past confrontations over resolutions equating Zionism with racism, overshadowed the entire conference and prompted a walkout by the US and Israeli delegations.

This shows that battle-lines do not invariably correspond to the North-South divide. Another example is the area of population and development, where

abortion has been a lightning rod in negotiations. Here, the United States has joined with a number of Catholic and Islamic developing countries in resisting the majority wishing to view contraception through the lens of reproductive health.

Noth-South engagement has also evolved differently in different UN forums. In the UN Security Council, the NAM Caucus has, from time to time, played an influential role, particularly on Middle East issues and on Bosnia, in the latter case frequently working with the United States (in the period 1992- 95), and in the former against it. One recent example of US-NAM confrontations over the Middle East occurred in March 2001, when the seven NAM members in the Security Council tabled a resolution to establish a protection force for the Palestinians: the United States vetoed the resolution. In April 2002, Syria and some other NAM members of the council were unable to assemble the positive votes (including those of some other NAM members) necessary to condemn Israel for blocking a fact-finding UN mission to Jenin, following intense conflict there between Israeli troops and Palestinian fighters. The fact that it does not have a veto, on the other hand, hampers NAM's 'blocking power' (even when it can field six or seven of the council's 15 members). China, while often expressing solidarity with NAM, has proved unwilling to use its veto on NAM's behalf.

A Case in Point: The Brahimi Report

Consider the Report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations (called the Brahimi Report after the panel chair).This report, which for several months was the subject of a contentious debate at the UN, often divided across North-South lines, was issued by the United Nations Secretariat in August 2000. The Panel on UN Peace Operations was set up by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in the wake of two unusually self-critical reports on the role of the UN in the massacre of Srebrenica and the genocide in Rwanda to put forward suggestions on how to make UN peace operations more effective and proactive. Its recommendations included vastly improved planning, the hiring of new staff in the Department of Peace-Keeping Operations, the creation of a new information and strategic analysis unit to enhance conflict prevention activities, and the establishment of an interdepartmental task force for each mission.

While serene over the need for the use of force on occasion to defend and enforce Security Council mandates, it also reminded the UN community that the UN should never seek to implement tasks for which it is ill-equipped.

Even though the Brahimi Report was broadly welcomed in the Millennium Summit Declaration and endorsed by the Security Council summit in September 2000, member-state delegations at the UN experienced extreme difficulty in coming to terms with it constructively and practically. Many from the South saw the attention received by peacekeeping reform as necessarily detracting from the priority they accorded to economic and social issues. Discussion rapidly became politicized. A further lightning rod was the report's suggestion that stronger, more centralized analytical capacities were required for conflict prevention and management, calling forth for some the specter of a UN intelligence capability. Representatives of the South were worried about the potential intrusiveness of improved UN information management; the North was worried about financial, personnel, and materiel over commitment in the peacekeeping field. Though these were all relevant considerations, delegates rapidly became entrenched on one side or the other of the North-South divide in confrontational, often hostile debate. The mood has since improved, with many of the Brahimi Report recommendations now endorsed, but the delay and the tone of the debate were damaging.

Does the North-South dialectic at the UN, and specifically in the General Assembly, reflect sentiment among international relations practitioners and scholars elsewhere? Reaction to the Brahimi Report provides some instructive clues. In a joint exercise with the Center on International Cooperation (CIC) of New York University, the International Peace Academy (IPA) in the spring of 2001 organized, through local partner institutions, regional consultations on the Brahimi Report's recommendations. Government, nongovernmental, academic, and other experts with a broad range of views attended from all over Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. The conclusions from each of these meetings were strikingly different, although all were critical of the way business is done in New York and, in particular, of the practical outcomes arising from UN deliberation. One example: a number of Asian interlocutors remained deeply concerned that national sovereignty be respected at the international level and that non-intervention in the internal affairs of countries continue to be highlighted as

an international norm; African interlocutors, on the other hand, raged against the unwillingness of the outside world to intervene in the conflicts of the area. In brief, some Asians worry about too much international intervention, and some Africans about not enough.

How do these national and regional perspectives play out at the UN headquarters in New York? The growing economic and social differentiation within the South has increasingly challenged coordination. For example, since the economic boom in Southeast Asia in the 1980s, the so-called Asian Tigers have far less in common with developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa than they used to. The same can be said for several Latin American states. The challenges and dilemmas facing Chile are hardly the same as those for Mali. However, in New York, efforts are made to craft synthetic positions that span the South, positions that often respond to the interests of very few of the countries involved. This was very much the case when the Special Committee on Peace keeping Operations met during the fall of 2000 to debate the Brahimi Report and its recommendation. The discussions suffered from a parallel debate at the UN on humanitarian intervention. Enhanced UN capacities for peacekeeping were seen by some of the Southern representatives as a Trojan horse for rampant intervention by the North. The nuances of opinion and stark differences of view that we detected among participants from the South in the regional consultations described above were not reflected in any UN forum. The prevailing system, where consensus is forged largely within each bloc, allows little room for them. Ambassador Brahimi himself was perplexed by the positions taken:

When the report came before the Working Committees of the General Assembly, we began to hear expressions of doubts, and at times, open resistance; and these came, surprisingly from a number of Non-Aligned countries. Measures meant to strengthen the UN capacity to analyze and to respond to conflict situations were particularly singled out for criticism and even outright rejection because it was feared that such capacity would be used to undertake intelligence activities for the benefit of Western countries, specifically the United States. Although I have been active in the Non-Aligned Movement since its earliest days and continue to share all the concerns of the developing countries, I confess that I was at first surprised, indeed, at times intrigued, by some of the positions expressed during the debate.

Nevertheless, after much debate, many of the recommendations of the Brahimi Report are being implemented, particularly those aiming to strengthen the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations. With Brahimi today heading up the UN's assistance mission to Afghanistan, there is a sense among UN member-states of all regions that he is attempting to practice what he preached in the report, aiming to achieve a 'light footprint' for UN operations while achieving tangible results. To date, many member-states have been happy with the outcome, which they see as one of the few positive developments arising from the events of 11 September 2001.

The North-South Divide Today: The Monterrey Conference

Is the North-South divide at the UN still as pronounced as it once was? Perhaps not. Early accounts of preparatory negotiations for the International Conference on Financing for Development held in Mexico in 2002 might have suggested so, but, late in the negotiations, an agreed text emerged, not only commanding consensus but making possible attendance at the conference by US President George W. In early talks, Southern countries stressed issues such as debt relief and foreign direct investment, while Northern countries emphasized good governance and human rights standards. These differences over where to place the main responsibility for development - in the North or in the South - threatened to engulf, and ultimately water down, the draft document for the conference.

However, compromise did intervene, even allowing the Monterrey Consensus text to drop the ritualistic invocation of the 0.7% of GNP target for official development assistance (ODA) among industrialized countries. This flexibility was rewarded in several important ways: immediately before Monterrey, the US government announced a significant ($5 billion) increase in its ODA over the following three years, and the EU countries, after bruising internal battles, also agreed to sizeable increases. The event inspired some confidence that the sharp declines in ODA of the 1990s might now be a thing of the past and that promises of improved governance in developing countries, notably those enshrined in the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), might prove more than a mirage.

Many UN member-states have recently displayed evidence of diminishing ideological zeal in pursuing their national or group objectives, a development that might relate to the shock of large-scale terrorism successfully directed against the world's most powerful country in September 2001. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, 26 August4 September 2002, a low-key affair, proved a happy surprise in this regard. It tackled some important issues, such as sanitation, and involved the private sector to a greater extent than similar previous UN meetings. While a number of issues, particularly energy, proved controversial, battle-lines did not form along the North-South divide. Indeed, on energy, the OPEC countries lined up with the United States to oppose European activism on alternative sources.

Relevance of the UN

What is perhaps the UN's most important role has resided in the development of international norms. The organization provides the umbrella under which important international treaties are developed. Emerging challenges requiring global action, such as climate change and AIDS, have frequently been addressed first within the UN system. The UN also serves as a weathervane of broad international trends, such as the greater adherence (at least in principle) to human rights standards and the imperative of humanitarian action, two issues championed by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

However, negotiating practices at the UN have often been confrontational and ineffective. Recent developments aside, these practices may have led people outside the organization to conclude that the UN has lost its relevance. The deliberative and many of the operational activities of the UN, for example, have largely ceased to interest the media in either the North or the South. Elsewhere, the situation has evolved considerably. Given the vacuum created by UN debates, ministers have migrated to other forums. For a long time, G7, IMF, and World Bank meetings set the pace. These were the meetings that leaders from both the North and the South wished to influence and attend. However, they are mainly seen as initiatives driven by the North.

Some commentators have even argued that other organizations have hijacked the UN's agenda. The Overseas Development Institute writes in a 1999 briefing paper:

'In some instances, the UN has provided the framework. More often, however, the UN has been side-stepped or side-lined: by new membership organizations (WTO), by bodies which rich countries control (G7, IMF), or by independent organizations (NAT0). It thus seems that ministers and senior officials are walking away from negotiating frameworks they do not find relevant to their needs.

On some global issues, the World Economic Forum at Davos, a private initiative, left UN debates in the shade during the 1990s (although its star now seems on the wane after a highly mediatized but intellectually ridiculed meeting in New York in early 2002). Elsewhere, a number of new, genuinely useful forums involving key decision makers from both the North and the South have emerged. Perhaps the most promising is the Group of 20, composed of finance ministers of leading economic powers in both North and South." Discussions are (relatively) informal, mostly unconfrontational, substantive, and focused on shared interests and concerns rather than on mutual recriminations. Another recent initiative that could generate useful dialogue across the North-South divide has been spearheaded by the leaders of South Africa, Nigeria, Algeria, and Senegal, who presented African ideas on the implementation of economic and political reform of the continent to G-8 leaders during their July 2001 meeting in Genoa.
Regional organizations are also gaining ground. As a result of its inaction, the UN Security Council's exclusive role in authorizing the use of force internationally has been challenged - by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Liberia and Sierra Leone and by NATO in Kosovo. Indeed, a sense has emerged that regional organizations and arrangements will play more, and the UN less, of a role in international security in the future.

The reserved approach of the Bush administration may constrain the UN in the normative area for some years. The USA's 'go it alone' approach might soften to accommodate its new focus on fighting international terrorism, as it did for example on 24 September 2001, when the House of Representatives voted to pay a large share of the USA's back dues to the UN.

In a strong speech to the UN on Iraq, President Bush demonstrated on 12 September 2002 that the UN continues to be viewed as an occasionally useful instrument of US foreign policy. Within days, an initially skeptical membership

had moved towards the US position, forcing Saddam Hussein on 16 September to offer unconditional access to UN weapons inspectors. This sequence illustrates how powerful US leadership can be at the UN when it is sensitively managed, not least vis-A-vis developing countries. However, the USA clearly engaged in this exercise reluctantly, and its positions on climate change, on a treaty-based approach to controlling nuclear testing and on international criminal issues have not evolved at

Conclusion

The North-South divide does not define all debates at the UN, nor is this fault line confined to the UN. Unfortunately, however, the UN's significance to the major political, economic, and social questions of our age remains debatable, and, indeed, is much debated." The political ecology of the UN, and especially that of the General Assembly, often seems stuck in the past, with North-South polemics all too often paralyzing action.

As long as UN discussions continue to be conducted mainly within this framework, many outcomes will remain largely meaningless or even actively counterproductive. The recent UN conference on AIDS is a depressing example In this Special Session, delegates wasted valuable time squabbling over the mention of drug abuse, prostitution, and homosexuality in the draft declaration rather than focusing on the issue at hand: how to combat the global threat of the AIDS pandemic (Similar dynamics were on display at Durban. As Louis Emrnerij, Richard Jolly, and Thomas Weiss point out, 'while the UN has on many occasions risen intellectually to face global challenges, it has also failed many times.

More pragmatic, action-oriented approaches need to emerge. Historically, the greatest success that involved countries of the North and the South working te gether was the anti-apartheid struggle, placed on the UN agenda by Africa's newly independent nations. One positive contemporary example can be found in the emerging field of 'human security', where highly effective coalitions of countries spanning both the North and the South have been successful in advancing developments such as the landmines ban and the International Criminal The Ottawa Convention to abolish the use of anti-personnel landmines was negotiated by countries of the North and the South outside of the UN framework - to avoid

the endless hurdles of UN disarmament discussions - but is now incorporated as a UN treaty. The process was effectively pressed forward by an influential group of NGOs - the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). Lakhdar Brahimi has pointed to a 'profound dissatisfaction with the state of international relations'. He argues that 'there is strong, bitter resentment of what is often seen as arrogant big power domination of the UN, total disregard for the interests and aspirations of the majority of mankind and blatant double standards, particularly in the management of conflict. It is vital that this resentment be addressed. If anything positive can come out of the horrific terror attacks in New York and Washington in September 2001, it should be the emergence of a concerted approach to addressing this bitterness, one possible root cause for the support Osama bin Laden's advocacy has received on the streets in much of the Islamic world.

The results-oriented negotiations towards the Monterrey Consensus, an ability to overcome largely ideological battles over the right to intervention, and actual implementation of much of the Brahimi Report, which was set in motion recently, suggest a more pragmatic mood at the UN. Nevertheless, in its institutional culture, the North-South divide remains the main organizing principle for delegations, which threatens the UN with irrelevance and redundancy. The new, more sober attitude of delegations needs to be encouraged. It could prove fleeting.

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