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The Future of Power

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Global government is unlikely in the 21st century, but various degrees of global governance already exist. The world has hundreds of treaties, institutions and regimes for governing interstate behavior involving telecommunications, civil aviation, ocean dumping, trade and even the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

But such institutions are rarely self-sufficient. They still require the leadership of great powers. And it remains to be seen whether this century's great powers will live up to this role.

As the power of China and India increases, how will their behavior change? Ironically, for those who foresee a tripolar world of the United States, China and India at mid-century, all three of these states — the world's most populous — are among the most protective of their sovereignty.

Some argue that our current global institutions are sufficiently open and adaptable for China to find it in its own interests to become what Robert Zoellick, president of the World Bank, once called a "responsible stakeholder." Others believe that China will wish to impose its own mark and create its own international institutional system as its power increases.

The countries of the European Union have been more willing to experiment with limiting state sovereignty, and they may push for more institutional innovation. But it is unlikely that, barring a disaster like World War II, the world will witness "a constitutional moment" such as it experienced with the creation of the United Nations system of institutions after 1945.

Today, as a universal institution, the UN plays a crucial role in legitimization, crisis diplomacy, peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, but its very size has proven to be a disadvantage for many other functions. As the 2009 UN climate-change summit in Copenhagen demonstrated, meetings of 192 states are often unwieldy and subject to bloc politics and tactical moves by largely extraneous players that otherwise lack the resources to solve functional problems. As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it recently, "The UN remains the single most important global institution ... but we are constantly reminded of its limitations. ... The UN was never intended to tackle every challenge; nor should it."

Indeed, the main dilemma that the international community faces is how to include everyone and still be able to act. The answer is likely to lie in what Europeans have dubbed "variable geometry." There will be many multilateralisms and "minilateralisms," which will vary by issue with the distribution of power resources.

For example, on monetary affairs, the Bretton Woods conference created the International Monetary Fund in 1944, and it has since expanded to include 186 countries. But the dollar's global pre-eminence was the crucial feature of monetary cooperation until the 1970s. After the weakening of the dollar and President Richard Nixon's decision to end its convertibility into gold, in 1975 France convened leaders of five countries in the library of the Chateau de Rambouillet to discuss monetary affairs. The group soon grew to seven, and later broadened in scope and membership — including Russia and a vast bureaucratic and press apparatus — to become the Group of Eight.

Subsequently, the G8 began the practice of inviting five guests from the emerging economies. In the financial crisis of 2008, this framework evolved into the G20, which boasts a more inclusive membership.

At the same time, the G7 continued to meet on a narrower monetary agenda; new institutions, such as the Financial Stability Board, were created, while bilateral discussions between the United States and China played an increasingly important role. As one experienced diplomat put it: "If you're trying to negotiate an exchange-rate deal with 20 countries or a bailout of Mexico, as in the early Clinton days, with 20 countries, that's not easy. If you get above 10, it just makes it too darn hard to get things done."

He's right, of course. After all, with three countries, there are three bilateral relationships; with 10, there are 45; and with 100 players, there are nearly 5,000. That is why on issues like climate change the UN will continue to play a role, but more intensive negotiations are likely to occur in smaller groups such as the Major Economies Forum, where fewer than a dozen countries account for 80 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.

Much of the work of global governance will rely on formal and informal networks. Network organizations, such as the G20, are used for setting agendas, building consensus, coordinating policy, exchanging knowledge and establishing norms. In other words, the network provides power to achieve preferred outcomes with other players rather than over

them.

To cope with the transnational challenges that characterize a global information age, the international community will have to continue to develop a series of complementary networks and institutions that supplement the global framework of the UN. But if major countries are divided, it is unlikely that even network organizations like the G20 can set the agenda for the UN and the Bretton Woods financial institutions to act upon.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the G20 seemed to help governments coordinate their actions and avoid rampant protectionism. The world waits anxiously to see how it will perform when it meets again in Seoul in November.

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