



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

**WE'RE ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION ABOUT THE FUTURE OF MULTILATERALISM
UN80 and China's Global Governance Initiative are not competing visions of world order. They are
competing pathways to the same destination.**

By Daryl Swanepoel

If one had to judge contemporary commentary on global governance, one would conclude that the world faces a stark choice. On the one side stands the United Nations and its UN80 reform agenda. On the other stands China's Global Governance Initiative (GGI). One supposedly seeks to preserve the existing international order; the other seeks to replace it.

It is a compelling narrative. It is also largely wrong.

That was one of the more surprising conclusions I reached while preparing a paper for presentation at the recent annual meeting of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS) in Lisbon. Rather than relying on commentary or political rhetoric, I examined the primary policy documents underpinning both reform agendas. The picture that emerged was considerably more nuanced than the conventional wisdom suggests.

Both initiatives begin with the same diagnosis. The existing multilateral system is under strain.

The United Nations acknowledges this through the Pact for the Future and the Secretary-General's UN80 initiative. China makes the same argument through its Global Governance Initiative and related policy documents. The language differs, but the concern is remarkably similar: institutions created in the aftermath of the Second World War are struggling to keep pace with a world that has changed dramatically.

The international order no longer reflects the distribution of economic, political and demographic power that exists today.

This is where much of the public debate goes astray.

The assumption is often that China wishes to dismantle the United Nations and replace it with an alternative order. But the documentary evidence tells a different story. China's own policy documents repeatedly affirm the central role of the United Nations, arguing not for its replacement but for its reform so that it becomes more representative of contemporary realities.

That does not mean the two agendas are identical. Far from it. The important differences lie in where each believes the greatest deficit exists.

The UN80 agenda begins with effectiveness. Its principal concern is how existing institutions can become more capable, more adaptive and better equipped to respond to increasingly complex global challenges.

The GGI begins with legitimacy. It argues that institutions cannot remain effective if they continue to underrepresent much of the Global South and if significant numbers of states feel excluded from meaningful participation in global decision-making.

One focuses primarily on institutional renewal. The other focuses primarily on institutional rebalancing. These are differences of emphasis, not necessarily of ultimate purpose.

Indeed, once one strips away the geopolitical rhetoric, an interesting picture emerges. Both agendas support multilateralism. Both recognise the continued centrality of the United Nations. Both accept that global challenges increasingly require global responses. Both acknowledge that institutions must evolve if they are to retain legitimacy and effectiveness in a changing world.

That should change the way we think about contemporary international politics.

Too often, debates about global governance are framed as contests between rival powers. Every proposal is interpreted through the prism of strategic competition. Who proposed it becomes more important than what it proposes. That approach risks missing areas of genuine convergence.

The more useful question is not whether reform is necessary. That debate has largely been settled. The more important question is whether the international community can build sufficient political consensus to deliver reform.

That is where I believe an important opportunity exists.

Countries such as South Africa are frequently described as middle powers. I prefer a different term: bridging powers.

Rather than forming another geopolitical bloc, bridging powers can help identify areas of overlap between competing reform agendas, build issue-based coalitions and facilitate dialogue across political and ideological divides. In an increasingly fragmented world, that role may prove more valuable than raw power itself.

The future of multilateralism is therefore unlikely to be determined by the triumph of one vision over another. It will depend on whether the international community can reconcile two equally legitimate demands.

The first is for institutions that are effective enough to solve global problems. The second is for institutions that are representative enough to command global confidence.

Ultimately, that is the real debate. Not whether multilateralism should survive. But whether it can evolve quickly enough to retain the trust of a world that looks very different from the one that created it eighty years ago.

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