

SOVEREIGNTY, DIGNITY, AND REGIONALISM IN THE NEW INTERNATIONAL ORDER



The art in this dossier features a series of postage stamps with the logos and symbols of multilateral institutions, from the most well-known that exist in our world today to those that are being built, revived, and strengthened and those, yet to be created, that are being imagined to further a new world order. Though issued by individual countries, postage stamps are designed to cross borders. They are a material assertion of national identity and sovereignty in an interconnected international landscape. Each stamp represents not a pole, but another brick in a global architecture of new alliances, new multilateralism, and a new non-alignment with the US hegemonic order.

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Dossier n° 62 | Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research
In collaboration with the Centre for International Policy Research
March 2023



Foreword

War and Peace in Our Time

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A set of current processes force us to ask ourselves about the possibility of a military conflagration that could affect us all. Some researchers have asked, in the present tense: Are we at war?

The answer varies by country, community, and ethnic group. What about the Palestinians, Sahrawis, Syrians, Yemenis, Iraqis, Afghans, and Libyans? What would their answer be? What about indigenous communities, or Afro-descendants living in the so-called First World, or immigrants of Arab or Sub-Saharan origin who live in Europe? What might they say? Many of them would, without a doubt, respond: 'We are at war', even if they are not being bombarded by artillery or aircraft day after day.

There are thousands, perhaps millions, of people who, without a doubt, do not live in peace. There is a level of violence that some deem 'acceptable', that people, they say, 'just have to live with', despite the declarations of solidarity and the soaring rhetoric that is part and parcel of multilateral events.

The experts who participated in the 7th Conference on Strategic Studies hosted by the Centre for International Policy Research (CIPI) and the Latin American Council of Social Sciences

(CLACSO) looked at this question from another angle, taking into account the range and the magnitude of the last two ‘world’ wars. This question had not been raised with such urgency for the last thirty years, since the fall of the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc. The danger of war was far from everyone’s minds when former Yugoslavia was torn apart in the heart of Europe, when Washington began its so-called War on Terror that shook the Middle East for twenty years, and when the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) failed to comply with its repeated commitments not to expand eastwards. What has changed now?

Whenever we think of past ‘world’ wars, the first thing we think of is the numbers of men under arms, the multitudes of victims and means of combat, the natural environments completely destroyed by artillery fire or chemical agents. But when reflecting on that danger, which we think of as being in the future, we tend to forget recent events that make the news day after day.

Current military budgets, taken as a whole, are much higher than they were during those wars (even when adjusted for inflation). The military resources located on borders and in overseas bases are significant and growing. The areas destroyed by oil spills, deforestation, or pollution are immense. Curable diseases and uncontrolled pandemics claim millions of human lives every year. Violence and the uncontrolled use of weapons by civilian populations are on the rise. The number of animal species that can reproduce healthily is in marked decline.

So, why is it that we don't just say that we are at war? What 'peace' are we enjoying?

In the case of Cuba, for example, we have lived through a siege that has lasted for more than 60 years because we dared to commit the crime of aspiring to be sovereign. 'War' has been imposed on us from the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and various insurgencies in the 1960s to the repeated terrorist acts and a continuous stream of coercive measures. The list is endless. We Cubans have invented a kind of 'peace' that allows us to watch our families grow, educate ourselves, and enjoy art and nature.

But the truth is that time and again we have to endure extreme situations that are not of our making, with cycles of growth and weakness assailing our GDP that make it impossible for us to embark on any undertaking in full confidence of success.

Venezuelans and Nicaraguans have a similar story to tell, for reasons I need not reiterate here. What kind of 'peace' have Bolivians been able to enjoy between one coup and the threat of another? The absence of peace is a reality in Latin American countries, where the writ of the national 'government' only runs as far as the outskirts of the capital, or just beyond, since in rural regions cartels, lawless factions, drug traffickers, and others rule the roost. Is there total peace in countries where drug trafficking dominates ports, supply routes, and markets?

If all of this is true, when we think about the possibility of a 'war', we need to think in terms of 'yet another war'.

The first thing is that the great hegemon that decided on, planned, sold, and coordinated most of the conflicts mentioned above is no more. Putting aside the problems of all kinds that plague US society, the country once known as ‘the beacon light of liberty’ is in no position to offer a model that anyone would wish to emulate, not even neoliberal globalisation as an economic model.

Nowadays, ‘Made in China’ is a much more common sight than ‘Made in the US’, and there are many more high-tech product manuals in Chinese than there are in English. When it comes to efficiency, productivity, and innovation, Asian companies are in the lead. Washington can no longer resort to competition to secure its place in the world; instead, has to resort to political manoeuvres, sanctions, and dirty tricks in order to keep its place as the top decision maker.

The current international landscape is the result, among other factors, of the failure of neoliberal globalisation in its most orthodox sense. The supposed freeing up of markets for products and capital, the proposed shrinking of the state in relation to companies, as well as deregulation, were all proposed decades ago as a way to ensure a widespread prosperity that never materialised.

The very authors of these principles, from the Chicago School to other centres of neoliberal thought, now spend their academic capital fabricating arguments in favour of balkanising the world as a means of saving what they consider to be the ‘West’, or areas inhabited by a ‘chosen few’.

Unquestionably, new schemes of regionalism have emerged in the underdeveloped world as a way of facing the economic challenges sharpened by the COVID-19 pandemic. But in the broader perspective, humanity's problems, such as the environment, health, and food, will depend on solutions that include and cater to the whole international community.

Another novelty in the world today is that at least one multinational country, Russia, is no longer idly waiting for the military encirclement around its territory to be completed. After repeatedly warning of the danger of a conflagration, Moscow decided to launch a military operation as a way to ward off the risk of being suddenly attacked and to protect Russian ethnic communities living outside its borders, according to its official statements.

Whether or not this is a 'preventive war' or is 'going straight to the source', as the United States purports, the fact that Russia is being reorganised and strengthened and has given up any aspiration of being accepted as 'Western' has drawn a line in the sand.

Despite the 'enemy' being visibly located in Ukrainian territory, all of NATO's material, intelligence, and political resources are lined up behind Kiev. They have not yet committed troops on the ground (beyond mercenaries), which would signal a confrontation of other proportions. Several of the actors involved are nuclear powers, so the possibility of an error, or deliberate use of such a weapon, also sets off an alarm. The United States is playing a risky game with the objective of expanding the European arms market and stimulating

multimillion-dollar spending on the technological renovation of military monstrosities in the face of the ‘Russian threat’.

Although most information that has been made public tends to indicate that the Atlantic alliance functions in a coherent and monolithic way in this ‘war’, we see news reports on a daily basis that indicate the very opposite. Since the announcement of ‘unlimited’ support for Ukraine at the beginning of 2022, several government leaders have left the scene – and more will follow.

Despite efforts to keep it out of the media, there are demonstrations of various sizes almost every day in European cities against NATO’s participation in the war. The first ‘casualty’ of the Russian-NATO conflict was, paradoxically, not the Rouble, but the Euro.

The way in which the so-called ‘third parties’ have reacted in the war that has the most media coverage world today is also new. The voting record of multilateral organisations clearly indicates that there is far from unlimited support for NATO’s positions and accusations. The United States has been unable to impose its will within the Organisation of American States or the Summits of the Americas, both on this and other issues.

The strengthening of relations between China and Russia, the new non-alignment, the expansion of the Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa group (BRICS), and the attitudes of countries like India, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey clearly indicate that the geopolitical map has changed and will continue to do so. We should note how third parties have spoken or acted regarding indirect

conflicts. Consider, for example, recent comments and actions of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the State of Israel, or the Islamic Republic of Iran. If a more widespread war were to break out, there would be no single 'battlefront', nor would there be 'two parties', or groups of countries fighting each other.

Despite the internal political crisis in the United States, the country still maintains its ability to 'lead from behind' and impose 'wars' and instability within 'enemy' countries without committing its own troops. Washington is committed to the breakdown of the leadership and social systems in countries that don't play the game by its rules. For a declining empire, it is always much more tempting to destroy and damage its surroundings in the face of its inability to survive, as the Romans, Ottomans, and European colonial powers did before.

Living with wars today seems to be a more common phenomenon than we are willing to admit. Building a sustainable peace will require new alliances, new knowledge, new thinking, new leadership, and, without a doubt, a new multilateralism, all of which are based on putting an end to what Fidel Castro described as 'the philosophy of dispossession'.





Introduction

Since its illegal war on Iraq in 2003 and the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–08, the United States has entered a state of great fragility. Washington has employed all of its means, from diplomatic to military, in an attempt to retain its hegemonic power, but its efforts have produced their own contradictions. In the context of this fragility of US power, various regional institutions have attempted to assert themselves, from the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) to Eurasia's Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). These initiatives have sought to create alternative trade and financial arrangements that circumvent the use of the US dollar and US-dominated financial channels while furthering political understandings that are distant from the 'Washington Consensus' and the IMF-Wall Street-Dollar complex. In some situations, the United States, which, although weakened, remains immensely powerful, has been able to undermine these projects, but in other cases, these regional formations have withstood its pressure.

The economic and political emergence of China has in many cases enabled these regional formations to maintain their relative independence from the United States and offered developing countries alternatives to the US-dominated trade and development network (anchored in the International Monetary Fund), such as through the Belt and Road Initiative. The rise of China – as well as other major powers in the Global South, such as Brazil and India – has inspired a number of new developmental ideas and theories. Among the

most popular is the concept of ‘multipolarity’, which contends that the world is transitioning from a unipolar system in which there is one overwhelming pole of power, the United States, to a multipolar system with multiple poles of power, namely the US and China. This is a reasonable construct, but it is also flawed. Instead of a bifurcated global architecture, what is more likely to occur is the emergence of regional integration, driven by a non-aligned perspective that will lay the foundation for a new kind of internationalism.

This new internationalism can only be created – and a period of global Balkanisation avoided – by building upon a foundation of mutual respect and the strength of regional trade systems, security organisations, and political formations. The struggle between the old US-driven ‘rules-based international order’ and a new emerging order that seeks to recover the spirit of the United Nations Charter (1945) is at the centre of increasing international disputes. Dossier no. 62, produced in collaboration with Cuba’s Centre for International Policy Research (CIPI), offers a provisional analysis of the realities and possibilities of regionalism and inter-regionalism (such as the BRICS initiative of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Drawing from the interventions made at the 7th Conference on Strategic Studies (November 2022), organised by CIPI and the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO), this dossier examines these two visions of the international order and argues that the actual movement of history is directing us away from the instability and confrontation of the US-driven ‘rules-based international order’ and towards a return to the UN Charter, using its principles as a guide to build a new system of robust regionalism and internationalism.

The ‘Rules-Based International Order’

Over the course of the past decade, the United States government has described the system that it has organised and controlled for the past half century by using the phrase ‘rules-based international order’. This ‘rules-based international order’, the US government claims, is superior to any other potential international system. Curiously, however, the ‘rules’ referred to are not those enshrined in the 1945 UN Charter – the document with the greatest consensus on the planet and to which each of the 193 UN member states is a signatory and bound to uphold. If the US government does not use the term ‘rules-based’ to refer to the UN Charter, then what is it referring to?

To illustrate why this question matters, it is helpful to examine the manner in which the term is used. Most often, Washington refers to the ‘rules-based international order’ in order to condemn other states and designate them as violators of its self-declared ‘rules’. However, the basis for this charge is never concretely explained. These ‘rules’ do not have precise and consistent legal definitions but are formulated to suit the needs and interests of Washington at specific moments in time. As these needs and interests change, so too do the rules. In other words, the ‘rules’ are whatever the US government says they are. For instance, the US government regularly imposes unilateral sanctions against other states on the grounds that they have violated the ‘rules’. In reality, this is an arbitrary policy used to punish entire populations for their states’ failure to adhere to instructions

from the United States, as exemplified by the decades-long blockade against Cuba. This blockade is not grounded in international law or the UN Charter. In fact, Washington ignores the immense majority of the world's peoples and governments who vote annually at the UN to condemn this cruel policy. Rather, US-driven sanctions and blockades are an exercise of power enabled by the US government's grip on international flows of finance and commerce as well as the diplomatic and military intimidation that it employs to coerce other countries. Neither popular opinion nor the views of most of the world's governments matter to the United States. What matters to the US government is that it can advance its foreign policy interests. To meet this need, Washington invents the 'rules' that define its international order, enforced by unilateral sanctions, blockades, and any means necessary.

In addition to these arbitrarily defined rules, the US government also selectively uses the provisions of international law – developed after democratic discussion in the UN and other forums – to police other countries. For instance, the US government is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (1994). However, the US Senate has not ratified this treaty, and as a result, the US government is not a party to the treaty. Despite this, it is based on this treaty that the US government conducts its 'freedom of navigation' naval exercises near the coasts of countries that have signed and ratified the treaty, such as the People's Republic of China. In other words, the South China Sea – the sovereign waters of China, a full treaty member – is being policed by a country that has not ratified the treaty: the United States. Similarly, the US government is not a state party to the Rome Statue (2002), which established the

International Criminal Court, and yet it is the United States that aggressively uses the court and international criminal laws (such as the Geneva Conventions) to prosecute those who it considers to be its enemies.

There is a long list of important international treaties that the United States has not ratified, over thirty of which are gathering dust in the US Senate chamber awaiting votes that will likely never take place. Amongst these treaties are core components of the international arms control regime, such as the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty (1999), the Convention on Cluster Munitions (2010), and the Arms Trade Treaty (2014), as well as key elements of the global human rights regime, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1981), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), and the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (2002). As far as the US government is concerned, these treaties are not part of its 'rules-based international order'.

It is important to note that even when the United States does sign and ratify treaties, it leaves itself with significant leeway to avoid abiding by their protocols. For example, although the US government accepted the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice, established by the 1945 UN Charter, the enforcement of the court's rulings is subject to the veto power of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, which includes the United States. In 1986, the court found that the US government had breached international law by violating the sovereignty of Nicaragua and ordered it to pay reparations. In response, Washington withdrew its consent

to the court's compulsory jurisdiction and used its veto power to block the enforcement of the ruling. The limitations in the enforcement of treaties, whether due to exceptions, vetoes, or the denial of jurisdiction, has allowed the US government to sign and ratify some treaties as an empty gesture towards international law. As former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson told the American Society of International Law in 1963 during a panel on Cuba, when it comes to matters that challenge 'the power, position, and prestige of the United States... [the] law simply does not deal with such questions'.¹

Furthermore, whenever an international legal institution contemplates opening an investigation of US government conduct, Washington threatens and punishes the institutions and their officials. For instance, when the International Criminal Court opened an investigation into war crimes by all parties in Afghanistan in 2019, the US government imposed sanctions against court officials; revoked the visa of the lead prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, to prevent her from being able to testify at the UN office in New York; and imposed visa restrictions on her immediate family members.²

Capitalism and the Violation of Sovereignty

Why does the United States reject the writ of international law? What is the purpose of the masquerade called the 'rules-based international order' when the UN Charter and other internationally negotiated frameworks already exist?

The plain fact is that the United States has constructed its 'rules-based international order' to promote its own interests and secure advantages for global multinational corporations, financiers, and wealthy bondholders against the popular movements and governments that seek to protect their national and territorial sovereignty and to develop a dignified way of life within their countries.

The US-led order is premised on the tenets that the owners of property (capitalists) must have the right to exploit labour and nature and that there must be no limits placed on the desires of these capitalists, who are organised into large and powerful firms. By this standard, these firms should be allowed to go anywhere and do anything in their pursuit of profit, including bringing humanity and nature to the brink of annihilation. This exploitation of labour and of nature manifests, for example, in the obscenity of hunger and in the climate catastrophe. Any country that attempts to put barriers on the boundless licence given to capitalist firms will immediately come under fire, with its government likely to be a target for 'regime change' whether through sanctions, coup attempts, or

any other plethora of methods of hybrid warfare or direct military intervention.³

Over the past several hundred years, the capitalist order has continuously violated the sovereignty of most of the world, first through colonialism and then through the creation of a set of neocolonial structures that punish countries that attempt to assert their independence. This neocolonial system allows capitalist firms to extract social wealth from countries across the Global South that would otherwise use that wealth to improve the public's living conditions and to establish a harmonious relationship with the natural world, which should be the two essential priorities for any sensible society and government. These norms, in a narrow way, have already entered international institutions and the public consciousness. For instance, modern governments' obligation to improve living conditions is enshrined in the UN Charter, but also in the various treaties and conventions whose collective aspirations were recently summarised in the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals are related to elementary concerns such as ending hunger and homelessness, establishing public education and public transportation systems, and promoting social equality and cultural enrichment. Presently, there is a \$4.2 trillion funding gap for developing countries to achieve the SDGs. Meanwhile, roughly \$36 trillion is sitting in illicit tax havens as financial instruments such as transfer pricing and fees allow global corporations to drain enormous amounts of wealth from developing countries.⁴ While the International Monetary Fund pressures developing countries to further cut social spending and create austerity conditions, there is little pressure on global corporations to honour national and international laws.

In the grip of neocolonial structures, many developing countries effectively do not have control over their resources. In other words, they are not truly sovereign, and so are unable to raise or direct the social funds necessary to meet these goals and create a dignified world. The 'rules-based international order' of the United States is thus not an order to promote democracy, but to maintain a neocolonial structure of exploitation of both labour and nature, of human beings and of the planet.



The Possibilities of Regionalism

Since the turn of the century, scholars of international relations have contemplated the emergence of a ‘world of regions’ or of ‘regional worlds’.⁵ Some parts of the world, notably Latin America and Africa, have robust traditions of regional consciousness that trace back to anti-colonial movements and carry the names of that history, such as Bolivarianism and Pan-Africanism. In other areas, the legacy of regionalism is more uneven. For example, the potential of Pan-Asianism was greatly damaged by the record of Japanese imperialism during the 1930s and 1940s, the political tensions between China and India as well as India and Pakistan, the coup in Indonesia in 1965, and the US war on Vietnam (1955–75).⁶ None of these regions, whether Latin America, Africa, or Asia, have been brought together by intrinsic characteristics. Rather, their regional dynamics have emerged from their political histories, which, in turn, have produced and amplified cultural unities. To develop and solidify regionalism, it is necessary to construct both inter-state and people-centred institutions.

Regionalism by itself is neither inherently progressive nor reactionary. During the period of decolonisation in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, a serious dispute arose between the formerly colonised states and the imperialist bloc over the nature of the new regional architecture that needed to be constructed. The imperialist bloc developed a regional state system premised on military pacts and on trade agreements that advantaged

corporations domiciled in the Western world. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), established in 1949, and the European Economic Community, established in 1957, shaped Europe into a region that could be integrated into the world order in a way that would be advantageous for the United States. Similar moves were afoot in Latin America, with the establishment of the Organisation of American States (1948); in Asia, with the creation of the South-East Asian Treaty Organisation, or Manila Pact (1954); and in the Middle East, with the Central Treaty Organisation, or Baghdad Pact (1955). Meanwhile, those formerly colonised states that did not want to enter these neocolonial structures created their own multilateral institutions, which were not yet organised regionally but alongside and through the UN system. These included the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), founded in 1961, and the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), established in 1964. At that time, no country in the formerly colonised world was prepared to anchor a more substantial regional process, since most of these nations already bore the enormous tasks of protecting their newly won political sovereignty while simultaneously constructing a new social order that advanced the dignity of their populations.

Early attempts at regional integration were assisted by the United Nations, which, for example, helped set up economic commissions in Asia and the Pacific (the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 1947); Europe (the Economic Commission for Europe, 1947); Latin America and the Caribbean (the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean or CEPAL, 1948); Africa (the Economic Commission for Africa, 1958); and Western Asia (the Economic and Social Commission for Western

Asia, 1973). The charge for these commissions has been to promote regional trade and development, but not to challenge the capitalist world system in any meaningful way. These institutions emerged alongside political manoeuvres inspired by the historic Asian-African Conference held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, which called for the formerly colonised states to cooperate in a range of areas, from economics to culture, and to adopt a non-aligned posture regarding the Cold War. Influenced by CEPAL and UNCTAD, the Latin American and Caribbean states created several trade and development blocs, including the Latin American Free Trade Association (1960), the Central American Common Market (1960), the Andean Pact (1969), and the Caribbean Community and Common Market (1973). A more radical regional vision was put forward by Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of post-independence Ghana, who called for the creation of 'an African common market of three hundred million producers and consumers' that would break the 'artificial boundaries' created by the former colonial powers.⁷ This ambitious proposal sought to transform the infrastructure networks of African countries away from being designed to remove raw materials from the continent and towards the production of internal markets for goods and service for the continent.

Significant debates in the Third World developed around the themes of dependency and development. Namely, would formerly colonised countries be able to develop their economies and societies from their 'peripheral' position within the world capitalist system, or would they remain mired in a state of dependence and subordination to the 'core' imperialist powers? A range of thinkers wrote about the developmental constraints imposed by the continued existence of

colonial structures and the newly emerging neocolonial system, from the Brazilian founders of dependency theory (Ruy Mauro Marini, Theotônio Dos Santos, and Vânia Bambirra) to Indian Marxists (such as Ashok Mitra), Caribbean Marxists (such as Eric Williams and Walter Rodney), and African Marxists (such as Kwame Nkrumah and Issa Shivji). For these thinkers, both endogenous factors (property relations and social hierarchies) and exogenous factors (imperialism), in different ways, prevented any breakthroughs from taking place both in countries that relied upon the extraction of primary commodities through agromining and in countries that had been able to develop industrial production.⁸ As a result, the agenda for national development and regionalism was centred around attempts to delink from the logic of capitalist accumulation on a world scale, which was intrinsically structured to privilege the core imperialist countries and Western multinational corporations.⁹ The collective political experiences and understandings of the newly independent countries were consolidated in a UN General Assembly resolution passed in 1974 known as the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), which called on the world to build a new global system ‘based on equity, sovereign equality, interdependence, common interest, and cooperation among all States’.¹⁰ This resolution, alongside the UN Environment Programme (1972) and UNCTAD’s Cocoyoc Declaration (1974), directly challenged the world capitalist system and re-envisioned development as centring the needs of humanity, not capital.

These political manoeuvres floundered on the rocks of the Third World debt crisis, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rise of Western-driven globalisation and neoliberalism.¹¹ The integration of

the formerly colonised world into the financial and industrial systems dominated by Western capital and multinational corporations undermined the promise of social development. In 1982, the bankruptcy of Mexico sounded the alarm on the enormity of the debt crisis and the decades of political disorientation that would follow. From 1980 to 2015, the external debt of the Global South increased by 900%, with external debt repayments to wealthy bondholders of the Global North estimated to have reached a total of \$2.6 to \$3.4 trillion per year for low-income countries in 2021–22 alone.¹² Neoliberal globalisation eviscerated the possibility of the world moving towards the values proposed by the NIEO and increased the dependency of the poorer nations until the start of the great recession in 2007. After the fall of the Soviet Union, globalisation was organised by neoliberal austerity states, with the United States operating as the arbiter of the international system (a dynamic called unipolarity).

However, the tide began to turn in the early twenty-first century. In 2003, then President of South Africa and NAM Chair Thabo Mbeki attempted to advance a peaceful solution against the US government's drive towards war against Iraq. In an attempt to hamper these efforts, Washington tried – but failed – to pressure South Africa to expel Iraq's ambassador. Across the world, millions of people took to the streets in massive demonstrations against war and in favour of a peaceful settlement. Undeterred, the United States went to war, disregarding both popular opinion and the NAM's efforts.

That same year, the US and Europeans again refused to honestly discuss issues of development and trade with the South at the World

Trade Organisation's (WTO) ministerial conference in Cancun, insisting that subsidies to agriculture in the North did not violate their own free trade nostrums. This incensed the countries of the South. Together, Brazil, China, India, South Africa, along with the group of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) bloc, resisted pressure from WTO Commissioner Pascal Lamy to 'steer' the organisation towards a 'compromise' (i.e., victory for the North). The South prevailed, leaving Lamy to lament that 'The WTO remains a medieval organisation', by which he meant that it was not sufficiently pliable to Northern direction.¹³

In the context of the debates around war and the new intellectual property rules, the emerging states of the South began to explore the creation of new entities. One such effort was the IBSA Dialogue Forum, launched by India, Brazil, and South Africa in June 2003, bringing together one country from each of the Asian, African, and Latin American continents. Complementarities in these countries led them to increase their mutual trade and to work together at international forums to advance their interests and those of the South in general. Over the course of several meetings, the IBSA Dialogue Forum produced the foundation of a new intellectual agenda built on the concepts of non-alignment and regionalism. Brazil brought the Latin American experience to the table, notably the agenda of integration put forward by Venezuela's then President Hugo Chávez (which later inspired the creation of the political bloc CELAC in 2010). Shortly thereafter, in 2006, the 14th NAM Summit in Havana saw more discussion of regionalism than at any meeting previously. Regionalism and non-alignment again appeared

as central intellectual themes later the same year when China and Russia joined Brazil, India, and South Africa to form the new major world grouping BRICS. Presently, the BRICS countries account for 40 percent of the global population and 25 percent of global GDP (though the latter figure also rises to 40 percent if the BRICS is expanded to include Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Algeria).¹⁴

The concepts of multilateralism and non-alignment anchored these new regional processes. The term multilateralism emerged after Second World War to describe processes where three or more institutions (especially states) operated together around an agreed upon a set of laws or procedures. The concept of non-alignment arose in the 1950s during the Cold War and was used by the post-colonial states to indicate that they would not join either the US or Soviet blocs but would instead pursue their own independent developmental agendas. These two concepts have re-emerged in recent decades amid the attrition of US unipolar power.

Regionalism and non-aligned multilateralism are the consensus categories of state-oriented Southern institutions such as BRICS, IBSA, and the G77. For the nations of the South, the era of US primacy, sharpened during the Bush years, has to be rolled back. The overwhelming dominance of the United States has constricted policy space for economic and social planning and institutions and has led the views of the world's majority to be disregarded on matters of global governance, suffocating developmental agendas in the South. Unless developing countries are content to be a spoke in the wheel of the US machinations, their interests are entirely set aside.



The concepts of regionalism and non-aligned multilateralism were given a decisive thrust in the 2000s by the work of Latin American countries to construct new regional institutions. At the same time, other countries in the South were contemplating the limitations of their own regional organisations, such as the League of Arab States, African Union, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. Although these latter institutions had absorbed the language of regionalism and non-aligned multilateralism, unlike the Latin American project they were unable to craft a fresh, effective policy direction for their regions or substantially remove the influence of external actors in their political processes. Nonetheless, the successful experience in Latin America and the emergence of China as a new major power has provided a significant stimulus to the ideas of regionalism and multilateralism.

Today, there is once again a robust discussion in the South about the nature of development and the potential of multilateral regionalism and non-alignment. Scholars such as Feng Shaolei, the director of the Collaborative Innovation Centre for Peripheral Cooperation and Development at East China Normal University, and María Elena Álvarez Acosta of the Higher Institute of International Relations (ISRI) in Havana, Cuba, make the case that the US unilateral sanctions policy and the war in Ukraine are accelerating the drive towards non-aligned regionalism.¹⁵ Indira López Argüelles of the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs also notes that this new regionalism appears to be grounded in the concept of non-alignment, highlighting the use of this term by Latin American regional processes to refer to ‘economic self-determination’ and ‘regional complementarity’.¹⁶

In September 2022, the United Nations General Assembly added a new item to the agenda of the UN system: globalisation and interdependence. At the core of this agenda item is the need to revive a discussion around the New International Economic Order (NIEO), which has been discussed each year since 1974 only to be relegated to the dustbin of the UN chambers. Now, with the rise of a widespread awareness that the neoliberal order has failed the world's people, there is a renewed hunger to debate the ideas of the NIEO and forge a new kind of globalisation and interdependence. In December 2022, the UN's Second Committee, which deals with global economic and financial matters, submitted a draft resolution to be debated in the UN General Assembly that brings attention to the principles put forth by the NIEO. A majority of the UN member states expressed overwhelming agreement with the resolution, including a paragraph that is of special concern to our discussion here, which recognises 'the role played by regional, subregional, and interregional cooperation as well as regional economic integration, based on equality of partnership, in strengthening international cooperation with the objective of facilitating economic coordination and cooperation for development, the achievement of development goals, and the sharing of best practices and knowledge'.¹⁷ The ideas of regionalism and interdependence, on the basis of inter-state equality, are on the table at the highest levels of the UN.

Revivals

In March 2021, sixteen UN member states came together to establish the Group of Friends in Defence of the Charter of the United Nations. This body includes several countries that have been subjected to unilateral, illegal US sanctions, including Algeria, China, Cuba, Eritrea, Nicaragua, Russia, and Venezuela. The focus of the Group of Friends is to champion the foundational principles of the UN system, namely non-aligned multilateralism and diplomacy against unilateralism and militarism. Two important points need to be considered about the emergence of the Group of Friends:

1. First, the Group of Friends contends that there is no need to create a new world system, but merely to allow for the proper functioning of the original post-war and post-colonial world. This system was built upon the international consensus to address the horrors of the Second World War, including both Nazism and the use of atomic weapons, and upon the post-colonial consensus in the Third World to establish state sovereignty. This system is rooted in the UN Charter and, importantly, in the Final Document of the founding conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, which established sovereignty and dignity as its main concepts (sections 13a and 13b). An important attempt to realise these concepts was the NAM-initiated NIEO, passed by the UN General Assembly in 1974 and subsequently rejected by the United States and its allies, who

instead championed a neoliberal world order. The revival of the NIEO is part of today's new atmosphere.

2. The emergence of a multilateral grouping such as the Group of Friends raises the question of how to begin to understand the post-unipolar world order. One school of thought argues that we will enter a multipolar world order, where different poles will be established. Evidence for this school is unclear, since, other than the United States, no major power is seeking to establish an extra-territorial reach or constitute itself as a pole (as was made clear at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China, for example).¹⁸ Furthermore, a multipolar world is not necessarily an antidote to militarism, since it could intensify rivalries and, therefore, warfare. A second school of thought makes the case that the actual movement of history favours the creation of regional blocs that would like to integrate with other regional blocs and countries in a mutually beneficial fashion. Evidence for this is robust, such as the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA, 2004) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC, 2010) in Latin America, as well as the Shanghai Cooperative Organisation in 2001 in Asia. Chapter VIII of the UN Charter endorses the growth of 'regional arrangements' to further the 'maintenance of international peace and security'.¹⁹ These regional networks are not exclusive power blocs that are designed to intensify conflict, but arrangements to improve regional trade,

manage regional conflicts, and develop cross-regional programmes to build schemes for mutual benefit.

The resurgence of the ideas of multilateralism, regionalism, and non-alignment indicates a movement away from the rigidities of unipolar globalisation, an agenda driven by the United States on behalf of international capital. These ideas announce the possibility of sovereignty – that states, and even regional alignments, can be free, to a greater extent, from the pressures of the United States and its instruments (including the IMF). But sovereignty by itself does not mean that the conditions of everyday life would be improved from their state of despair; for that, an additional term is necessary: dignity. Sovereignty creates the opportunity for a state to craft policies that enhance the dignity of people, but it does not, by itself, guarantee dignity. The terms sovereignty and dignity populate the important treaties of our time, such as the UN Charter and the NAM Final Document. These concepts – sovereignty and dignity – enable people’s movements, whether struggling for or in state power, to fight against the suffocation of unipolarity and against the wretchedness of inequality.





Notes

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