

# At the World's Summit: How Will Leading Nations Lead?

June 2009

**Jam** a

*James Traub is a contributing writer for The New York Times Magazine and director of policy for the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. He has written four books, including The Best Intentions: Kofi Annan and the UN in the Era of American World Power and, most recently, The Freedom Agenda: Why America Must Spread Democracy (Just Not the Way George Bush Did).*

The implosion of the European system of alliances which produced World War I convinced the statesmen of that era that global security had to be governed by a new system, embodied in a new institution—the League of Nations. The subsequent calamities of the Great Depression and pitiful failure of the league to deter the Axis powers prompted another round of anguished introspection and a new generation of institutions—the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), The World Bank, and The World Trade Organization. Now, sixty years later, we stand, or so it is widely said, at the threshold of another burst of invention—“Creation 2.0,” as it has been called. Rather than a war, the ferment this time comes from a global financial crisis, the emergence of novel and interconnected transnational problems, and the swift rise of a new cohort of powerful states, all of which have exposed the limits of the post-war institutions, and perhaps rendered them obsolete. Even hard-shell realists have become converts. “We’ve got a new world now,” says Brent Scowcroft, the first President Bush’s national security advisor. “But we still have habits of mind of the 20th century and the Cold War, and all the institutions we have were built for a world which has disappeared.”<sup>1</sup>

And so we have reached a kind of Darwinian pivot—adapt or die. Or have we? It takes a crisis of immense proportions to overcome the inertia which inheres in institutions—and even more, in the distribution of power within those institutions. There is surely no more glaring example of institutional archaism than the UN Security Council (UNSC), which affords permanent membership to the five states which change than the UNSC. Why? In no small part because you can’t keep China out of the world’s inner councils, and while China is already on the Security Council, it remains an outsider for other prominent forums. Other dynamics are also at work. The financial crisis has empowered the IMF, but not the bank.

national peace and security, has been compelled to look beyond its narrow membership. Since 2007, the eight have extended to China, India, Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa a kind of ex officio status. But the global financial crisis has made this arrangement not only vaguely insulting but also untenable; in November of 2008, President George Bush, no friend of multilateral institutions or of emerging powers, convened a meeting of the G-20. The twenty leaders met again in London in April, and are

meeting on the margins of the July G-8 meeting in Italy. The goal is to achieve rough consensus both on mechanisms for financing adaptation to climate change (none now exist) and on the development and dissemination of key technologies. Climate negotiators also hope to get a head start, though not much more, on the terms of a new treaty to replace the Kyoto Protocol—a process which formally begins in December, when all parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) meet in Copenhagen.

If the expanded G-8 is truly to become a “global apex forum,” then the question of who sits on it becomes a momentous one. Picking the right criteria for membership has thus become a cottage industry within the Washington think tank world. In one intriguing paper, three officials at the Center for Global Development have proposed that any such institution must both bring together states with the most resources, thus ensuring that decisions will be effective, and those with the most people, so that deliberations will also be seen as truly representative.<sup>5</sup> Setting a threshold of states that represent more than two percent of the world’s population or its total GDP, they come up with a G-16 of major stakeholders. As a way to make the group more representative without too great a cost to effectiveness, they suggest adding five regional representative countries—thus producing a version of the G-20 that gives smaller nations a place at the global high table. The population criterion would link its legitimacy to the representation of people and not just states, and the use of transparent objective criteria could help preclude endless haggling over particular candidate nations. Alternatively, the Center for American Progress has suggested that the current membership be retained until 2014, at which point the group be reconstituted to comprise the two largest economies from each of five regions, as well as the ten largest remaining economies.

The criteria, whatever they are, must be transparent and objective. It is, after all, harder to slam the gate at twenty than it is at seven or eight: Spain, which felt

One possible inference to be drawn from this exercise is that the world would be best served by modest expansion of the G-8, bringing in other states depending on

only if “we convince others that they too have a stake in change—that such reforms will make their world, and not just ours, more secure.”<sup>14</sup>

It is not just the exigencies of the moment, but the convergence of the moment with this American leader that has prompted hopes for a latter-day internationalist “creation.” Yet the building of really meaningful institutions, and the fundamental reform of existing ones, requires an enormous expenditure of political will. The UN reform package drafted by Kofi Annan in 2005 failed because only Annan was willing to devote himself to its passage; he was no match for inertia, vested interest, or hostile ideology. The passionate advocacy of Gordon Brown, who in a speech in New Delhi in early 2008 asserted that “the post-war rules of the game...must be radically reformed to fit our world of globalization,” has gone largely unnoticed outside the United Kingdom (especially as Brown’s own popularity has plummeted).<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, the heavy lifting must come from Washington.

Barack Obama will not carry a dog-eared copy of a poem in his pocket; he is a pragmatist with an acute awareness of the limits of the possible. But neither is he confined, as older figures might be, by the need to demonstrate toughness through elaborate displays of American supremacy or autonomy. Obama’s commitment to institutional reform will likely be guided, and limited, by pragmatic considerations. While his chief of staff, Rahm Emmanuel, has famously remarked that “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste,” the primary preoccupation of the Obama administration in the near term will be the imperative of crisis management.

Policy experts have been greatly encouraged by the appointment of figures from among their own ranks, including Anne-Marie Slaughter, to key positions within the administration. Slaughter is now leading a broad State Department policy review of the whole range of global institutions. The process, Slaughter says, has been focusing especially on the issue of G expansion, with the goal of devising broad principles which can be applied to subject-specific institutions. Slaughter also expects to stress the need for deeper connections between the “informal institutions,” like the G-8, and the formal ones, such as the United Nations. Of course, there is no guarantee that whatever ideas emerge from such deliberations will survive the interagency process. Slaughter notes that both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are “pragmatists” who “don’t want process for process’ sake.” But they are also, she adds, acutely aware of the imperative to adapt to the realities of the 21st century.<sup>16</sup>

Security Council expansion is the briar patch of global governance reform. Fifteen years of failed efforts to add permanent members to the council have produced a hardened sense among UN experts that reform is an exercise in futility. Expanding the council was a centerpiece of Kofi Annan’s reform effort; the effort not only failed, but came close to dragging down the rest of the reform program with it. Current members of the “P-5” do not wish to see their power diluted through the addition of new permanent members, even if the newcomers would not command the same right of veto as the current members; and for all the Non-Aligned Movement protestations about the UNSC’s composition, the candidacy of India and Japan provoked a good deal of opposition within Asia, as did that of Brazil within Latin America.

And yet at the same time the Security Council is the single most glaring emblem of the legacy culture of global institutions. The council, it is true, has not been disabled by its purported illegitimacy—though it has been disabled by internal divisions—but



China is loath to let its currency rise more than incrementally, but almost certainly won't do so as long as it remains a bit player in the world of global finance. The financial writer Sebas





that only the UNFCCC can serve as the forum where “all actors can voice demands and seek clarification.”<sup>23</sup> The UNFCCC is a universal body; what’s more; it has brought states together with the scientific community, NGOs, financiers, and others. Many of the transactions through which emerging states accept painful restrictions on emissions, and industrialized states agree to foot much of the bill, will probably be thrashed out in some version of the Major Economies Forum and in bilateral and multilateral diplomacy. But only the UNFCCC can formalize these understandings and provide input to the full range of other actors. The UNFCCC, in turn, must extend its consultative network toward other UN bodies, The World Bank, and energy-related institutions like OPEC.

The IPCC is an intriguing example of a boundary-crossing institution. At its core, 3,000 climate scientists around the world are exchanging information, which they codify in an assessment report every five years. The 2007 report, in asserting that the evidence for climate change had become “unequivocal,” and that the likelihood







209 Iowa Avenue  
Muscatine, Iowa 52761

Address Service Requested

Nonprofit Org.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
Cedar Rapids, IA  
Permit 174

## The Stanley Foundation

---

The Stanley Foundation is a nonpartisan, private operating foundation that seeks a secure peace with freedom and justice, built on world citizenship and effective global governance. It brings fresh voices and original ideas to debates on global and regional problems. The foundation advocates principled multilateralism—an approach that emphasizes working respectfully across differences to create fair, just, and lasting solutions.

The Stanley Foundation's work recognizes the essential roles of the policy community, media professionals, and the involved public in building sustainable peace. Its work aims to connect people from different backgrounds, often producing clarifying insights and innovative solutions.

The foundation frequently collaborates with other organizations. It does not make grants.

Stanley Foundation reports, publications, programs, and a wealth of other information are available on the Web at [www.stanleyfoundation.org](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org).

The Stanley Foundation encourages use of this report for educational purposes. Any part of the material may be duplicated with proper acknowledgment. Additional copies are available. This report is available at <http://reports.stanleyfoundation.org>.

The Stanley Foundation  
209 Iowa Avenue  
Muscatine, IA 52761 USA  
563-264-1500  
563-264-0864 fax  
[info@stanleyfoundation.org](mailto:info@stanleyfoundation.org)

Production: Amy Bakke, Lonnie Buchanan, and Jill Goldesberry