

A New Debate on 'Global Governance'

By Reginald Dale
International Herald Tribune

SOUTHAMPTON, New York — World leaders who met on Okinawa over the weekend were engaging in a form of what is increasingly known as "global governance" — although not necessarily one to the liking of everyone who thinks it is a good idea.

"Global governance," at least as defined by participants at a conference here last week, means a new, cooperative, though as yet largely unspecified way of running world affairs in response to the massive changes wrought by globalization and rapid technological change.

The arguments for it are relatively simple. Many of today's problems, such as crime, disease, pollution and destabilizing capital flows, are not confined to national borders and cannot be solved by individual governments.

Individual countries, on the other hand, can harm their neighbors, if not the entire world, by, for instance, failing to control cybercrime, money laundering or environmental disasters.

Borders are also becoming increasingly porous as a result of falling economic barriers, the speed of modern communications and capital flows, and the ability of multinational corporations to operate virtually wherever they want.

The result is that the traditional nation state, tied to a specific chunk of territory, is less and less able to deal with the problems that concern its citizens. International institutions are struggling to do so but are coming under attack for lack of legitimacy or ineffectiveness.

At the same time, a host of new actors from "civil society" — nongovernmental organizations, churches, labor

unions and other activists — are increasingly clamoring for a voice, and they are using the Internet to spread their demands worldwide.

Developing nations feel unfairly excluded from a decision-making process still dominated by a handful of rich countries. As several participants pointed out at the conference, organized by the Aventis Foundation, neither the Group of Seven leading industrialized countries nor the United Nations Security Council is representative of today's world.

Critics in rich as well as poor countries attack the existing international economic and financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and above all the World Trade Organization, for lacking legitimacy and democratic accountability. But there is still a multitude of different views as to what form "global governance" should take.

Suggestions at the conference here ranged from pie-in-the-sky plans for "global democracy" to more realistic proposals for global public policy networks, grouping governments, international organizations, corporations and civil society to tackle specific economic or environmental problems.

The idea is not world government, but rather to create an additional, democratically accountable layer of international decision-making above national governments. According to a paper prepared for the conference, "global governance" would aim to safeguard peace, human rights and the planet's resources, regulate competition and ensure nondiscrimination.

There are many difficulties with this. If all countries were given an equal say, to make the proceedings democratic, the system would quickly become as in-

effective as the UN General Assembly, which never solves any serious issue.

Bringing in civil society to ensure greater accountability is problematic. Some NGOs do a great job, but others are just as undemocratic as the international organizations they criticize, and represent not the general public but narrow, single-issue vested interests.

The nation state may be under pressure from globalization, but it still is the basic political unit in which voters express their opinions and which they rely upon to represent their interests.

Another problem in going above and beyond it is that plenty of countries are not yet satisfactorily functioning nation states. Many Asian countries are still building sound national governments, while many African countries are much farther behind.

Fundamental issues of national sovereignty would have to be resolved. Those countries most interested in "global governance" tend to be those with little influence in the current system, while those with the most influence, above all the United States, are the most reluctant to yield to new international constraints.

But it is actually happening. The WTO is an example of "global governance." And the summit talks involving the G-7 countries and Russia in Okinawa took a step in that direction by pledging to "engage in new partnerships with developing countries, international organizations and civil society."

The trend will surely continue, subject to two caveats. Geostategic clashes, for instance between the United States and China, could ruin this harmonious picture. And "global governance" will not solve all the world's problems.

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