

Transformation of the UN's Power in International Governance—from Political to Ideological

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Abstract

By the beginning of the new millennium, the world had come to realize the need for a more representative model of global governance to address a wide range of issues. The UN responded by enhancing its ideological authority and placing the Millennium Development Goals and later the

Sustainable Development Goals atop the global agenda. This article explores the strengthening of the UN's institutional forms of ideological power, which is realized through discourse on humankind's future development, norm-setting, and Global Performance Indicators (GPIs). The UN's sustainable-development-based political culture influences leading states, major intergovernmental organizations, and the international non-state sector, but the organization's drift towards ideological forms of power may eventually negatively affect the international rules of competition and cooperation.

Keywords: international governance, world order, ideology, political culture, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Global Performance Indicators (GPI), the UN, G20.

In the first decade after the collapse of the bipolar system, the prospects for a unipolar world order were discussed globally. However, as the limitations of this model became increasingly obvious by the turn of the millennium, a demand formed for more representative institutional models of international governance. As an alternative to the unilateral action of a hegemon, the UN has the potential to meet this demand.

In this article, the emergence and functioning of new institutional forms of international governance, under the auspices of the UN, are considered through comparative analysis of key UN sustainable development documents, G20 documents, and national sustainable development doctrines, which indicate the UN's growing ideological authority at the national and international levels.

Conceptually, the article is based on Michael Mann's four sources of social power—ideological, economic, political, and military (IEMP model)—and is complemented with practical-relational constructivism. In line with this concept, we consider the UN as a subject (agent) in international relations, which, along with states, has the opportunity to use all four sources of social power, but due to the established practice, it is ideological power that becomes the basis of the UN's influence.

We define international power as “a generalized means” (Parsons, 1968, p. 263) used to meet the needs of a subject in international relations through interaction based not on a subject-object dichotomy but designed to facilitate joint actions and achieve a common goal... “This concept of power is based on dialogue that is always carried out between equal but not identical participants” (Tikhonov, 2008, pp. 90-91). At the same time, international power in conditions of sovereign equality and diversity of IR participants is characterized by power relations through voluntary submission or cooperation between subjects.

Ideology is here defined as a system of collective (international) meanings that surpass personal (national) experience. Its collective and individual recognition ensures the manageability of interstate relations by putting into practice the reasonable, moral, and emotional in the foreign policy of a state. Relations in the ideological sphere are built around two tasks: ensuring security and developing or motivating commonality (Zinoviev, 2002). The former is solved through social practices that legitimize actions on the basis of guidelines for creating rules and justifying order. The latter, by changing mainstream discourse through critically assessing reality and developing a concept of the future (Griffin, 2006; Hamilton, 1987; Skinner, 2002).

A broad discussion organized by the *International Organization* journal in 2019 showed that intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations tend to use Global Performance Indicators (GPIs) to affect the behavior of international actors (Kelley and Simmons, 2019). Studies have reported on the effect of the Millennium Goals on the educational policies of 114 states (Bisbee et al., 2019) and the social pressure exerted by GPIs on public and business decision-makers (Honig and Weaver, 2019; Doshi et al., 2019). This article considers the impact of GPIs as an ideological element of international governance.

BIPOLARITY'S BIRTHMARKS: THE CRISIS OF THE UN'S POLITICAL INFLUENCE

The relatively peaceful dismantling of the bipolar system helped create conditions for the UN to fully resume the functions laid down in

its Charter. The UN acquired the ability to fill the power vacuum in international governance by using the primacy of international law to address significant socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and humanitarian issues (Bogaturov, 2006, p. 9). However, the Cold War consigned to the UN the task of preventing war between the two nuclear powers (Freeman, 2023) by facilitating their strategic communication, while the broad issues of human development were shifted to the bloc level (Kissinger, 2014). These changes affected the institutional structure of the UN: its main international economic institutions (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization) were detached, the UN Trusteeship Council was suspended, and the UN Security Council began adopting political decisions by consensus among its permanent members.

The demolition of the Yalta-Potsdam international order further reduced the influence of the UN, which could not quickly adapt to the new international environment. Its diminished role became first evident in its area of immediate responsibility—international security (Zagorsky, 2015, p. 24). The UN failed to propose competent approaches to resolving conflicts: the scale of violence in Rwanda was monstrous, and the UN's voice was completely ignored in the Yugoslav conflict (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 364).

THE UN'S VALUES IN THE NEW WORLD ORDER

In the early 1990s, the UN sought to rethink the concept of interstate relations. The year 1992 saw several landmark events: UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's "Agenda for Peace," and the UN Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro—which put more emphasis on human security and environmentalism in UN activities. New issues in the UN agenda were elaborated by relevant UN departments. The UN Development Program began compiling the Human Development Index, and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development promoted relevant indicators. However, the economic and political resources of the organization remained low. In his report, *We, the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*, UN Secretary-General Kofi

Annan said: “Our resources are simply not commensurate with our global tasks” (UNGA, 2000a, p. 52).

Economic and political clashes between states began to undermine “the UN’s relevance” (Knight, 2000, p. 129). This spurred the organization to define new priorities in its development strategy. They were articulated by Kofi Annan in the same report: “We must strive not to usurp the role of other actors on the world stage, but to become a more effective catalyst for change and coordination among them. ... the United Nations needs to embrace the new technologies more wholeheartedly than we have in the past” (UNGA, 2000a, p. 49). Systematized UN values of peace were officially presented at the Millennium Summit as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UNGA, 2000b). The 2005 World Summit formalized the shift towards sustainable development through a system of interdependent and complementary elements in the economic, social, and environmental areas (Larionova, 2020, p. 161). The UN’s development of the concepts of human security and environmental protection can be viewed as a new approach to using institutionalized ideological power in international practice.

The UN’s new values (axiology) prioritized human interests, and called for fighting poverty and protecting the environment, thereby constituting an alternative to traditional state interests and increasingly popular civilizational values (Chebankova and Dutkiewicz, 2021; Efremova, 2016). This article demonstrates that the UN’s authority and ideological influence in international relations increased in the 21st century. The UN is becoming not just a mediator in political relations, but a guardian of universal humanity-saving values based on the MDGs and SDGs, contributing to the development of a single universal political culture in modern interstate relations.

THE UN’S IDEOLOGICAL POWER IN ACTION

Efforts to promote sustainable development and the UN’s role in international governance were facilitated by a number of fundamental global changes in the first decade of the 21st century.

Firstly, the crisis of Pax Americana and the U.S.’s failure in the military campaign in Iraq in 2003, which showed its inability to act as

a world policeman, caused Washington to reorient its foreign policy from unilateral actions to the creation of a U.S.-centered network of international partnerships. **Secondly**, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis exposed the need for more inclusive multilateral cooperation in regulating the world economy. Thirdly, that crisis undermined the neoliberal ideology and values of the Washington Consensus and its economic institutions.

The disillusion in U.S. leadership and the neoliberal model of economic development at the end of the 2010s spurred international demand for new values. The MDG-based UN axiology provided a good ideological and value framework for a new model of international multilateral partnership. The SDGs served as a vivid example of increasingly complex and transversal modern approaches to global governance, which had a major impact on the international agenda (Luckhurst, 2020, p. 57; Krylov, 2012, pp. 67-68).

Analysis of the G20's summit agendas confirms the UN's ideological influence via the SDGs. Declarations of the first G20 summit touched on the UN MDG discourse just marginally and called for building a global partnership on the basis of the common principles for financial market reform, an open global economy, transparency, accountability, and integrity (G20, 2008). As forum diplomacy developed further, the G20 sought not only to coordinate global economic policy, but also to help implement some of the UN values. This led to the creation of the Environment and Climate Sustainability Working Group and the Anti-Corruption Working Group (Karin and Shorr, 2013).

Work to embed UN values in the G20 agenda began after the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs. The 2015 Anatolian Summit reaffirmed the participants' commitment to the SDGs: "The 2030 Agenda, including the Sustainable Development Goals... sets a transformative, universal and ambitious framework for global development efforts" (G20, 2015). The following year, the G20 Action Plan on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted in Hangzhou, China (G20, 2016). From a regulatory point of view, this document not only finally formalized the main areas of interstate cooperation based on the UN axiology, but it also expanded national

obligations to implement the SDGs. Additionally, the G20 Action Plan strengthened the institutional component of the SDGs agenda by initiating the Development Working Group, which received broad powers to coordinate and concentrate political resources to develop specific G20 decisions concerning the SDGs.

The evolution of the G20 agenda is a clear example of the UN's influence on the multilateral interstate interaction. The placement of UN-committee-developed values on the G20 agenda ameliorated both disagreements among the G20's member states and criticism of it for insufficient engagement with non-member states (Luckhurst, 2020, p. 59).

Interaction between the UN and the G20 is indirect and appears like a consistent harmonization of positions via large-scale communication, through which the UN has been able to spread its political culture to interstate relations thanks to developed ties with non-profit, business, and civil actors.

The UN's institutional space played a significant role in popularizing the MDGs. According to Article 71 of the UN Charter, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) is responsible for communication with international and national NGOs. Over the years, it has built a wide network for interaction with the non-state sector, which allows the UN to significantly expand discourse on the new values and introduce it into the theory and practice of world politics. The Council's potential for influence can be estimated using the following data: 5,593 NGOs have active consultative status with the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations (CoNGO) under ECOSOC; more than 1,500 NGOs are associated with the NGO/DPI Executive Committee, operating under the UN Department of Public Information (DPI); other UN bodies, including the General Assembly and the Security Council, regularly engage non-profit and civil organizations (ECOSOC, 2023).

Such a wide network of communication between the UN and NGOs has facilitated the consolidation of the UN's political culture, based on sustainable development values, in public opinion—both in individual, especially developed, countries, and at the global level. In the new millennium, the UN began to play a key role in international

governance as a holder of the global agenda and a coordinator of policies regarding the most pressing international development issues. In turn, the active engagement of non-state actors in the decision-making process helped promote the UN discourse among the G20 states. Business and civil sector leaders, who often work in so-called outreach groups, are regularly engaged in drafting G20 summit decisions through the Business Twenty (B20), Civil Society (C20) and its individual segments (W20, Y20), expert and academic circles (Think-20, Science-20), and trade union associations (L20) (Prokhorova and Shokhin, 2017, p. 107).

There is currently emerging a large-scale network of “power interactions,” involving institutional forms of UN ideological power, the economic and political power of leading states, and the non-state sector. An illustrative example is power interaction between the UN, G20 and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). The latter regularly participates in drafting decisions of G20 summits, and actively supports the 2030 Agenda through its highest consultative status at the United Nations since 1946, and observer status at the UN General Assembly since 2016 (ICC, 2023). Acting through the ICC World Chambers Federation, the ICC coordinates the work of more than 12,000 chambers of commerce. In other words, the UN-G20-ICC interaction alone encompasses tens of thousands of government, business, and public-sector specialists. So, a new political culture, based on sustainable development values, has taken root in the system of international relations, thus regulating, unifying, and legitimizing the actors' behavior.

THE UN'S IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCE AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The SDGs have been recognized as a universal international benchmark for development not only at the multilateral level but also at the level of national doctrines in major countries. Since 2016, developed and developing countries have been directly or indirectly adjusting their socioeconomic development strategies and international aid principles in line with the SDGs. For example, Germany, Canada, Japan, and India have adopted doctrines that stipulate the deadlines and officials responsible for achieving certain SDGs (Ignatov and Mikhnevich, 2017, p. 166).

Countries have begun to use the UN axiology to justify not only their foreign policies but also domestic political activities. At the national level, the ideological influence of UN values helps build consensus between the state, society, and the individual. By employing “the best international practices” (to use the UN term), governments try to minimize the critical and negative public reaction to their socioeconomic policies.

The governments of developed and developing countries turn to the SDGs to justify foreign aid, long-term social and environmental projects, and political commitments assumed under multilateral and bilateral agreements. The new UN political culture thus helps governments to shape public discourse in order to legitimize management decisions in foreign and domestic policies.

States support the SDGs with targeted and consistent information policies, promoting state SDG priorities and practices, and engaging non-state actors to draft, adopt, and implement SDG decisions. For example, Germany has been carrying out the Sustainable Development Communication Strategy since 2014, and Global Affairs Canada ensures the transparency and accessibility of data on the financing and nature of its foreign projects under the International Development Assistance Accountability Act (Ignatov and Mikhnevich, 2017, p. 173). Governments expand their support for Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) of SDG implementation as a central element of the annual SDG monitoring process. In 2020, 47 VNRs were presented at a meeting of the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development: nine from Latin America, 11 from Europe (including Russia, for the first time), 11 from the Asia-Pacific region, and 16 from Africa.

The adoption by states of the UN SDG-based political culture in internal strategic planning and external doctrines is visible in UN General Assembly speeches. For example, in 2014-2021, Chinese officials mentioned “Sustainable Development Goals,” “SDG,” and “2030 Agenda” 37 times, Brazilian officials 29 times, German officials 12 times, and Russian officials 7 times. The following characteristics of the Sustainable Development Goals can be found: “the SDGs have already been adopted as a law” (Colombia, 2016); “2030 Agenda... is

a goal we must approach collectively... our government's priorities align with those of the international community" (Argentina, 2016); "Implementing the SDGs remains a priority" (Burundi, 2018); "... we need to work towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals..." (Turkey, 2018); "we are firmly committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Agenda..." (Greece, 2019) (UNGA, 2023).

Developed and developing countries have thus embedded the SDGs into their policies and fully adopted this international discourse, having recognized the legitimating power of the "best social practices."

DISSONANCES OF THE UN'S IDEOLOGICAL POWER

However, MDG reports for 2005-2015 showed that countries faced growing challenges when trying to meet the targets adopted in 2000 (UNDP, 2012). The most serious problems were unsurprisingly associated with insufficient funding and lack of political will. Achievement of the Goals arguably depends directly on the socioeconomic capabilities of a state, or on external financing. States' inability to achieve the MDGs in the medium term undermines confidence in the UN's proposed social development axiology. The past 15 years have proved that the eight Millennium Goals cannot serve as a universal agenda in their current interpretation.

As a result, new dividing lines have emerged on the basis of states' socioeconomic differences. For most developing countries with rather small budgets, the MDGs appear to be universal but hard to achieve. Poorer states face pressure to increase social spending rather than develop infrastructure (Peterson, 2010, p. 16). Furthermore, the MDGs increase such states' dependence on foreign aid and undermine self-sufficient economic development strategies. Norwegian economist Erik Reinert has been most critical of the MDGs, calling them "palliative economics" (Reinert, 2007, p. 240).

In 2012-2014, the UN launched a procedure to assess drawbacks in MDGs' implementation. Its results were presented in the UN Secretary-General's report *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet* (UNGA, 2014). Ban Ki-moon highlighted the following set of problems: a)

access to vital and environmentally sound technologies is unevenly spread, with the poor and many developing countries essentially locked out; b) pervasive poverty, gross inequalities, joblessness, disease and deprivation for billions; c) policy incoherence between current modes of international governance in matters of trade, finance and investment; d) inequities in the international system to the disadvantage of developing countries... there must be a more fair representation of emerging and developing countries; e) urgent action is needed to mobilize, redirect and unlock the transformative power of trillions of dollars of private resources to deliver on sustainable development objectives; f) the regulatory frameworks and incentives that enable private investments and business models... must be aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2015, the UN released a new “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” that proposed 17 Sustainable Development Goals based on 169 target indicators (UN, 2023).

The MDGs’ expansion naturally broadened their international audience, attracting a wide range of public institutions in developed countries, including the research community, transnational businesses, civil society, and youth movements and organizations (Lanshina and Barinova, 2019). By expanding the agenda and increasing the number of participants, the UN was able to restore the attractiveness of the SDGs and ensure the priority of its interpretation of world development values.

However, the ideological and value aspects of the UN agenda evolved without accompanying institutional reforms: asymmetries between the UN’s security and development institutions were not corrected, and the UN’s economic authority remained low. The only institutional innovation was the High-Level Policy Forum, a mechanism for monitoring sustainable development (UN, 2012, p. 16). However, it was subsequently relegated to popularizing and promoting the SDGs at the national level through individual states’ voluntary public commitment to the SDGs. As a result, the SDGs became symbols more than objects for practical implementation, a problem from which the MDGs had already suffered, acquiring a sort of ritual significance within UN institutions. The UN’s drift towards solely

ideological influence was indirectly recognized by international officials themselves: “This is no time to succumb to political expediency or to tolerate the lowest common denominator. The new threats that face us, and the new opportunities that present themselves, demand a high level of ambition and a truly participatory, responsive and transformational course of action” (UNGA, 2014, p. 5).

The first five years of the new development model showed that the SDGs' broad formulation had only increased asymmetries. When the SDGs were announced in 2015, environmental safety was linked to socioeconomic development, and the fight against climate change was declared an integral part of sustainable development (UNGA, 2014, p.11). As a result, environmental issues turned out to be the main prerogative of the UN, threatening the UN's ideological power as the right to economic development collided with the right to protect the environment. (China is the most vivid example of this contradiction: the country has made the greatest contribution to fighting poverty, but its “economic miracle” has exerted a heavy anthropogenic burden on the environment (RIA, 2020).) It was this contradiction that became particularly obvious during the 2021 climate summit in Glasgow, where developing countries' need to advance their real economies came up against developed countries' advocacy for investment in a costly energy transition (RBC, 2021).

The SDGs' contradictions obstruct the 2030 Agenda's implementation, which may discredit the entire UN system of international governance in the medium term.

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A new model of governance is emerging in international relations, in which institutional forms of the UN's ideological power interact with the political and economic power of leading states and non-state actors to increase the heterogeneity of administrative decision-making in international affairs. The UN is emerging in the new world order as a source of institutionalized ideological power and, based on the axiology of sustainable development, is exerting an ideological and value-based influence on the behavior of states. Promoting the idea of sustainable

development, UN institutions have become guardians of universal values within the new political culture, which legitimizes national development strategies and interstate interaction and offers the best social practices.

A detailed elaboration of the universal sustainable development values has permitted the UN to coordinate international discourse in the medium term and enhanced the regulatory and motivating power of the SDG Index and Indicators. The SDGs have gradually become the core of the G20 agenda. Major powers have de facto recognized the UN's ideological power in their foreign and domestic policy doctrines. Interaction between the UN and the G20 is facilitated by their influence over non-state actors. UN-G20-NGO interaction, and the UN's institutional influence in ECOSOC demonstrate the emergence of new global governance and interstate interaction practices. The UN's ideological power, the political and economic capabilities of the G20's members, and the active involvement of non-state institutions, together create a network of international power capable of qualitative social change. This could eventually produce a new world order for governing the chaos-prone system of international relations.

However, the UN's new political culture faces challenges that could, in the medium term, substantially reduce its ideological power and the emerging orderliness of international relations.

Firstly, the UN axiology's prioritization of social spending (potentially at the expense of the development of the real economy and infrastructure), as well as the contradiction between socioeconomic development and the limitations of climate change, endanger the attractiveness and legitimacy of the UN's ideological power.

Secondly, the UN's shift towards ideological power reduces its control over the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, while still remaining responsible for it. UN institutions become dependent on major powers' interests and multilateral communication. If the 2030 Agenda fails, this could discredit the concept of universal interstate cooperation, increasing anarchy and competition between exclusive national or civilizational projects.

The shift in the UN power model from politics to ideology, over the past 30 years, is changing the organization's reputation. Endowed

with explanatory and motivational power and leading the way towards sustainable global development, the UN appears to be an institutional bearer of the global conscience.

Unfortunately, the existence of a moral guideline does not guarantee that it will be followed.

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