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*Gridlock: why global cooperation
is failing when we need it most*

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“GRIDLOCK: WHY GLOBAL COOPERATION IS FAILING WHEN WE NEED IT MOST”

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Academics and policy makers have, over the past decades, become so used to dysfunctional mechanisms of global governance that few would disagree that urgent reform is needed. Indeed, much of our contemporary debate seems to revolve around how to fix international institutions. In a memorable 2009 TED talk on global ethic vs. national interest, then UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown told a joke about the UN Secretary General asking God "when our international institutions will work properly." Rather than providing a response, Brown went on, "God cried."

Yet just why is it so difficult to reach international agreement on issues such as climate change, trade, finance, nuclear proliferation, small arms trade and biodiversity, among others? Why is a state of "gridlock" increasingly characteristic of international negotiations and organizations? And why do things seem to be getting worse?

In *Gridlock*, Thomas Hale, David Held and Kevin Young argue that the previous successes of international cooperation, by facilitating peace and fostering economic linkages, have deepened interdependence to the point where international cooperation is now more difficult. That suggests that global governance successfully dealt with problems it was initially designed to address, but failed to address problems which have emerged from their very existence. Put differently, interdependence not only creates a demand for international institutions, but effective international institutions also create a structure that, in turn, generates an even stronger interdependence.

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readers will agree with the book's underlying premise that global governance fails to solve many problems, even though it must be pointed out that there is no consensus on the issue. In *The System Worked*, Daniel Drezner argues that given the slow and convoluted way global governance works, it is always easy to find fault. He also reminds the reader that global governance is no panacea: "The best global governance structures in the world cannot compensate for dysfunctional national governments." Finally, he contends that most observers merely point to global governance's most obvious failures - the Doha Round, the climate change summits and the deadlock at the G20 - without bothering to study the underlying trends, many of which are far more promising. The 2008 financial crisis showed, Drezner says, that global economic governance - the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank and the G20 - clearly passed the stress test. Though Drezner does have a point -- no international governance structure can make up for ineffective national government -- his view remains that of a minority. Particularly in developing countries, most observers and policy makers believe existing institutions have failed both to address global issues, but, equally important, they have lost their legitimacy as they have been incapable of providing emerging powers with more responsibility. It is difficult to interpret the rise of alternative institutions led by non-Western powers -- such as the AIIB, the NDB, the BRICS grouping, CICA, etc. -- as anything other than a desire to alter the status quo.

The authors of *Gridlock* point to four reasons for the current stalemate: growing multipolarity, harder problems, institutional inertia, and fragmentation.

Pointing to growing multipolarity as the cause of current gridlock is controversial in the Global South for two reasons. First of all, while it is true that post-World War II order has generated some benefits for developing countries, it must also be recognized that the so-called liberal global order never included the world's entire population, and for a considerable time large countries like China, India, Indonesia and the entire African continent were not part of it, thus benefiting far less from the public goods provided by that order. To observers in those countries, the current gridlock may actually seem more attractive, given that the decisions it produces, despite the inefficiency, at least are legitimate. After all, contrary to the phrase "the larger the group, the less it will further common interest", it may better to have a voice in a dysfunctional system than to have no voice in a functional one. It is thus not that exactly "the increasing prominence of a diverse range of countries that has led to a divergence of the countries that matter most in world

politics." After all, large developing countries 'mattered' all along -- rather, they were previously overlooked, and it is only now that they have the power to make their voices heard.

Secondly, seen from Brasília, Delhi or Pretoria, growing multipolarity produces a major benefit that easily offsets gridlock -- namely, the increasing capacity to constrain a hegemon's transgressions that frequently undermine the system. Seen from the United States, unipolarity may be a prerequisite for a stable and functioning liberal order, as such a system allows it to override rules and norms in specific moments. After all, hegemons are never entirely constrained, benefiting from exceptions, escape clauses, veto rights and other mechanisms that allow them to use institutions as instruments of political control. In a multipolar order, developing countries believe, these loopholes can be closed or severely reduced. In this context, it often surprises Western analysts when they hear that Brazilian or Indian policy makers, when asked about the greatest threat to international stability, point not to North Korea, Iran or Syria, but to the United States.

Of course, this does not mean that *Gridlock's* basic argument that deals are more difficult to make today than in the past is wrong -- as any observer of the G20 or even larger gatherings can attest. As developing countries will increasingly participate in discussions they previously had no interest in (or no understanding of), transaction costs are set to increase.

The second reason seems less controversial, and few would contest that the complexity of problems has increased markedly over the past decades. Environmental degradation, the risk of pandemics, internet governance and financial regulation are in fact so complex that they forced Foreign Ministries across the world to open up and seek help from other ministries as they prepare and conduct negotiations -- interestingly enough, this has been major contributor to broadening the debate about foreign policy in places like Brazil, where the topic has traditionally been of little interest to non-specialists.

Institutional inertia is, without a doubt, a key threat to the legitimacy -- and hence effectiveness -- of global institutions, and the UN Security Council, the World Bank and the IMF best symbolize a growing frustration among emerging powers with these institutions' incapacity to adapt to a more multipolar reality. Interestingly enough, inertia may lead to the demise of some institutions, but not to governance mechanisms in a certain area per se. Development finance provides a good example: Fed up with the World Bank's Western-centric distribution of voting rights, emerging powers simply set up their own

institutions, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS-led New Development Bank (NDB), yet they do not question the need for international financial institutions to promote the establishment of rules and norms for lending practices.

We have not witnessed a similar phenomenon in the area of security since the UN Security Council still reflects the global distribution of military power relatively well. Only if countries such as India and Brazil developed military capacities that allowed them to single-handedly carry out complex interventions -- like the NATO campaign in Libya -- would they contemplate setting up a parallel institution. Put differently, the UNSC still faces no competition comparable to the World Bank because the world is still unipolar only when it comes to the distribution of military power, contrary to the realm of economic power.

Finally, the authors argue that fragmentation -- the growing number of platforms to deal with global challenges -- contributes to today's gridlock. To some degree, this occurs because of growing multipolarity, and emerging powers' desire emulate the successful Western strategy of forum shopping. In "The Art of Power Maintenance: How Western States Keep the Lead in Global Institutions", Robert Wade shows how, in 2009, Western states led by the UK and the United States marginalized the United Nations General Assembly from a role in debating the global financial crisis and its impacts, so as to leave the subject to interstate organizations dominated by the West - which, naturally, were careful not to propose any measures that could be harmful to Western interests. In the same way, eluding the two facile and overly simplistic extremes of either confronting or joining existing order, the creation of several China-centric institutions will allow China to embrace its own type of competitive multilateralism, picking and choosing among flexible frameworks, in accordance with its national interests. We can witness similar strategies by regional powers such as Brazil, which has created UNASUR as a means to avoid operating through the OAS whenever it feels the latter reduces its capacity to defend its national interest. Fragmentation is thus likely to grow further along with multipolarization.

Worst of all, according to the authors, gridlock is likely to continue to be pervasive, and there is no easy way to solve it. That poses great risks, potentially making great power rivalry the sole driver of world politics. Most leading thinkers would agree. Looking towards a more multipolar world, Moises Naím predicts that in the 21st century "power is becoming easier to disrupt and harder to consolidate," predicting a troubling trend of a far less resilient global system with weaker national and international institutions. If "the

future of power lies in disruption and interference, not management and consolidation,” Naim writes, “can we expect ever to know stability again?” In the same way, Kupchan writes that “The world is headed towards a global dissensus” and Schweller seems to resign himself to throw his hands up in despair and then turn philosophical: “Disorder is not necessarily something to fear or loathe. We may, instead, embrace the unknowable, embrace our unintelligible world, our futile struggle to come to terms with its incomprehensibility.” While they may be right, such a statement is also proof of a global order in which the West never really had to engage others on a level playing field and build a genuine dialogue.

And yet, while the transition to genuine multipolarity – not only economically, but also militarily and regarding agenda-setting capacity – will be disconcerting to many, it is, in the end, far more democratic than any previous order in global history, allowing greater levels of genuine dialogue, spread of knowledge and ways to find more innovative and effective ways to address global challenges in the coming decades. Getting to such a scenario, admittedly, will be a major challenge.

In the final chapter, aptly entitled 'Beyond Gridlock', the authors point to silver linings. They argue that social movements may come to positively influence established institutional structures. In the same way, they point to some examples of how existing institutions have provided emerging powers with more space, thus enhancing their legitimacy.

Gridlock is thus a remarkable analysis that specifies in detail why global institutions so often fail to produce the desired results, and a must-read for those who think about trying to strengthen international cooperation.

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