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GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Wanted: New thinking, not tinkering

By Kishore Mahbubani, For The Straits Times

THE need to reform global governance has never been greater. Paradoxically, at a time when the world urgently needs new thinking in global governance, old thinking dominates. The Economist's cover story on global governance in July brilliantly used the image of the Tower of Babel to capture the contradictions and confusion surrounding the global governance debate. Sadly, the essay itself was full of conventional wisdom to the effect that we only need to reform existing global governance institutions.

Tinkering will not work. The world has changed fundamentally since 1945 and will change even more radically. We need new thinking, not new tinkering. To arrive at the new thinking, we need to focus on three tensions that have arisen in global governance.

The first tension is between the desire to cling to sovereignty and the need to respond to globalisation. Globalisation has changed the world fundamentally. Most new challenges respect no borders. Neither terrorism nor epidemics, financial crises nor environmental challenges, respect borders. None can be solved by any country working alone. At a time when the global village needs to convene global village councils to address these issues, these very institutions are being weakened.

Sadly, the most powerful country in the world, the United States, is allergic to global governance. Strobe Talbott explains this allergy well: 'It is not surprising that talk of global governance should elicit more scepticism, suspicion and sometimes bilious opposition in the US than elsewhere. The more powerful a state is, the more likely its people are to regard the pooling of national authority as an unnatural act.' Paradoxically, the US has the most to gain from good global governance because the richest home in any village has the most to lose from global disorder and instability.

The second tension in global governance is between the old and new rising powers. We are coming to the end of two centuries of Western domination of world history. All the new emerging powers are non-Western. Yet, the West continues to be over-represented in existing global institutions.

The United Nations' founding fathers wisely created the veto to anchor the great powers in the UN. Sadly, they did not anticipate that the great powers of the day could become the great powers of yesterday. Britain and France could help by giving up their seats in favour of a common European seat. If they did, they would embarrass the Asian powers who are busy undermining one another's bids to gain key seats in global organisations.

Similarly, the Group of Eight represents the great powers of yesterday. It maintains a charade of addressing global challenges. This charade is sustained by the Western media, which legitimises the G-8 as a global village council, though it represents only 13.5 per cent of the world's population.

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Persuading great powers to give up privileged positions will not be easy, unless a new social contract can be created that also serves their long-term interests. The rich Western powers stand to lose the most from global disorder. Hence, it should be in their interest to support a new principle that all new and old powers who want to occupy privileged positions in global organisations should take on responsibilities commensurate with their privileges. Hence, if genocide breaks out in Rwanda or if a financial crisis arises in Asia, all great powers must assume the responsibility to address these challenges.

This approach will also help to resolve the third tension between great power imperatives and the need to reflect the views and interests of the majority of the world's population in global governance. Great powers can no longer dominate global politics as they did in the 19th and 20th centuries. The majority of the world's population has gone from being an object of world history to becoming the subject. People want to take greater control of their destinies and not have their views or interests ignored.

Hence, any reform of global governance should pay attention to both institutions that respond to great power interests (like the UN Security Council and G-8) and institutions that respond to the universal interests of humanity (like the UN General Assembly).

It will not be easy to resolve these three tensions. If we are unable to do so, both rich and poor countries will become losers, and our global village might be destroyed. Therefore, there is an urgent and pressing need to discard old thinking on global governance and prepare new perspectives. Every villager understands the wisdom of this phrase: 'To protect our home, we must protect the village.' Hence, we should say: 'To protect our country, we must protect the planet.'

The writer is Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at NUS. This essay was written for the World Economic Forum's Summit on the Global Agenda, set to take place in Dubai this weekend.

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