

AT THE UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY
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Lecture by Dr. Joseph Deiss of Switzerland, President of the Sixty-Fifth Session of the United Nations General Assembly

“Reaffirming the central role of the United Nations in global governance”

Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Research, post-graduate training and dissemination of knowledge in furtherance of the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations: these are the objectives of the United Nations University. In so doing, the UN University is providing an invaluable contribution to strengthening the credibility and relevance of our Organization. I commend you, Rector, and your team, for your dedication to spreading the message of peace, security and prosperity of the United Nations.

I spent a significant part of my career at a University, as a professor of economics. This is a time I remember with pleasure; so much so that I keep giving lectures whenever possible. I am therefore particularly glad and honored to participate in a seminar with such a distinguished group this afternoon. I thank you, Rector, for your kind invitation to share my views about the role of the United Nations in global governance.

It seems to me that we are at a critical juncture to speak about global governance, for at least three reasons.

First, the world is getting more interconnected and interdependent. We are increasingly facing global challenges that affect all countries and their citizens, whether they like it or not, and regardless of whom is responsible.

This is true for climate change and environmental issues like biodiversity and resource scarcity. This is true for many economic and financial issues; this is true for migration or pandemics. But this is true also for emerging topics like global terrorism and cyber crime.

These challenges have to be addressed through global decision-making and global action. Let me clarify at this stage that global governance is not the same thing as global government. We are not heading towards a world parliament; global governance is a way of organizing decision-making in a world of sovereign entities with national parliaments. Furthermore, global governance should be based on the principle of subsidiarity. Problems that can be addressed at the local or national level should be addressed at this level; global governance is only required for issues that cannot be solved by countries acting alone.

Second, there is a shift in political and economic power. New markets are emerging. This has been made even clearer by the recent economic and financial crisis. Emerging markets proved more resilient than more mature economies. Multinational corporations from the BRIC countries are increasingly competing with and sometimes even acquiring companies in OECD countries. South-South trade and investment flows, as well as South-South cooperation are growing at an impressive pace. These economic trends have to be better reflected in the global governance system.

Third, the global governance landscape is getting more complex. Traditional multilateral institutions, like the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions, are criticized for not being efficient or representative enough.

It can seem easier and more expeditious to act under these circumstances in a more restricted forum. New actors like the G20 or other ad hoc informal groups have emerged. Non governmental actors from the private sector and civil society are also playing an increasing role in shaping today's global world.

Yet, the mushrooming of acronyms that occurred over the last years, with the G8, the G20, the G4, the 3G, to mention only the ones using the G letter, is not a satisfactory solution.

This much should be clear: the point is not to deny the role of these new actors. The recent economic and financial crisis has highlighted the importance of a rapid and coordinated response. Yet, if we acknowledge that these restricted groupings are indeed efficient, their inclusiveness and legitimacy in turn is questionable.

We therefore have to find the best possible articulation between efficiency as well as decisive action and legitimacy.

I am convinced that the United Nations and its General Assembly have a central role to play to capture the complexity of this new world and to shape a global governance structure that is efficient, open and representative.

The United Nations enjoys unique legitimacy. With its 192 Member States, the UN General Assembly is a near-universal body and reflects the diversity of our world and interests at stake. It is there to promote the rights of every woman and man on our planet. Any matter within the scope of the Charter may be discussed by the General Assembly. The United Nations, as an operational entity, also has the expertise and the presence in the field to be the central element of the global governance landscape.

In order to raise awareness and advance the discussion on global governance, I proposed to focus the general debate of the General Assembly which took place in New York from 23 to 29 September on this issue and to reflect more specifically on 'reaffirming the central role of the UN in global governance'. I am satisfied that the topic found significant resonance in the statements of the Member States, the topic was indeed mentioned about 100 times by speakers from all regions.

The message that clearly came out is that the United Nations is the central forum for global governance but that urgent reforms need to be undertaken in order to make the Organization fit for the job.

However, while we agree on the importance of the role of the United Nations, are we really ready to strengthen the Organization today? Are we doing what is needed to help us use it better? With the alphabet soup that I have just described, are we not in the process of re-creating the United Nations outside the United Nations by multiplying discussion forums and decision-making bodies?

Would it not be better for us to act resolutely to adapt the Organization rapidly to current realities?

There are several aspects to consider in addressing these questions.

First, a strong United Nations requires a decisive effort to revitalize the General Assembly, to reform the Security Council and review the work of the Human Rights Council and Peacebuilding Commission. I am committed that there will indeed be progress on these reform processes during the 65th session of the General Assembly. While as President of the General Assembly, I do not have the power to push specific solutions, I have the power to push people to find common ground for solutions. In this regard, I hope to facilitate the emergence of win-win compromises, whereby each Member State can go back to domestic constituencies claiming a gain out of the deal.

A second aspect is to strengthen the economic bodies of the United Nations, enabling them to fully serve the purpose for which they were established. The required expertise has to be in-house. Multilateral diplomacy should not be restricted to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs; experts from other Ministries, which are ultimately the place where the technical expertise lies, should team up with diplomats.

Third, since, as I have stressed earlier, restricted and ad hoc groupings are indeed playing a useful role and – for this mere reason – are likely to continue emerging, we have to find the appropriate mechanisms for communication, consultation, and cooperation between the UN and these other actors of global governance.

As a practical step, I proposed to convene an informal debate of the General Assembly pre- and post-G20 meetings with the Secretary-General and the G20 host country. One week ago, on 22 October, the debate preceding the G20 Seoul Summit took place. Thanks to this meeting, all Member States were offered an institutional framework to express their views on the agenda that will be discussed in the G20 Summit. The point was also to help inform the Secretary-General's participation in the debates in Seoul.

We had a very constructive exchange of views that lasted for over three hours. I also intend to convene an informal meeting of the General Assembly after the G20 Summit, on 16 November. The Secretary-General will again be present as well as the Korean Presidency and the incoming French Presidency of the G20.

Beyond intergovernmental dimensions, and this would be a fourth aspect of shaping global governance, it is also essential to establish a close connection between States and the private sector, civil society and regional actors.

Representatives of Member States have to listen to other key actors and interact with them outside the walls of the General Assembly.

Openness and outreach to non governmental actors is indeed an important aspect for the UN to play its role in global governance. Civil society and the private sector are major partners. Non governmental actors bring a rich diversity of views to the debates of the UN. They are at times better placed to convey the aspirations of the people for more respect, more equality and more justice and are often more creative in seeking solutions.

An informal debate in the second half of my Presidency could further explore ways, in a more general sense, to shape a global governance system that is more representative, inclusive and open.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You have heard about my vision of a strong United Nations, which should be the main forum for global debate. I am now looking forward to your comments and views about global governance.