Abstract

Clubs and Global Governance—Russian International Studies Association (RISA)

April 26, 2014

Assessing the role of clubs in global governance first requires considering the essential conditions necessary for global governance. The most fundamental conditions are: 1) effective institutions to implement global governance and 2) agreed rules or norms that define global governance and animate its institutions.

To what extent are these two conditions satisfied in the world today? From a historical perspective, institutions are becoming increasingly effective and rules/norms are becoming increasingly well-defined. Yet from a practical perspective, both appear rather weak.

International institutions like the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund are highly-developed and can be efficient in some areas. Nevertheless, major powers in the international system are generally not prepared to empower institutions based on strict equality between states, such as the UN General Assembly, and understandably prefer institutions that provide greater influence to the powerful. However, because power varies over time, it is difficult for these latter institutions to reflect the international distribution of power at any given time (or, for that matter, to find an agreed standard to measure power). The gap between institutional arrangements and the real distribution of power is naturally a source of tension among leading states.

At the same time, rules and norms appear increasingly to be a source of tension rather than accord among major players in the international system. State sovereignty and the right to protect are clearly at the core of this tension.

As a matter of theory, one might expect weak states to protect the principle of state sovereignty even more jealously than powerful ones, as strong rules and norms privileging sovereignty would be of greatest benefit to the weak in protecting them from foreign interference or intervention given their limited military, economic and political capabilities. In practice, however, weaker governments generally appear to align with stronger allies and partners in specific cases—at least so long as their concrete interests are not directly affected.

Also, some fundamentals of moral sense do differ between cultures and societies. This affects how governments and citizens view moral imperatives in crises. It thus contributes to differences in norms.

What can clubs contribute in this environment?

They can strengthen regional and functional governance. Some successful regional clubs include the European Union, ASEAN, and the OAS. The G-20 is a successful functional group managing international financial and economic issues.

Clubs can also serve as factions within larger organizations, such as the BRICS group of emerging economies within the G-20 or the Group of 77 in the UN and its subsidiary bodies.

The balance between membership and effectiveness is a critical question for any club. While smaller groups are often likely to be more coherent and therefore more effective, club size is clearly not the sole determinant of effectiveness—shared interests also matter. The recent decision by the G7 countries to refocus their attention on that group rather than the G8 is perhaps the clearest example of this and reflects the fact that the G8 failed the membership test; the G7 and Russia did not sufficiently share interests and goals. This reflects less on Russia’s conduct in Ukraine than on the decision to create the G8 by adding Russia to the G7 in 1997 at a time when Russia did not fit into the group’s existing self-definition. Some in the G7 countries never really accepted Russia’s G8 membership and began to call for Moscow’s expulsion almost immediately after its incorporation in the group.

The G7 without Russia is likely to be much more cohesive, though its influence has been steadily declining in parallel with its falling share of the global economy. Perhaps more important, the G7’s organizational structure constrains its impact. The G7 has no permanent secretariat to implement or monitor agreements and it often appears to repackage existing policies and programs rather than developing significant new initiatives. The G7’s next summit will be extremely important as an opportunity to define the group’s future.

Russia’s government is unlikely to miss its G8 membership too much, both because the G8’s recent accomplishments have been limited but also because Russia’s officials have not looked too comfortable at recent summits as tension over gaps between the G7 and Russia have grown. Many have suggested that the BRICS group may be more useful for Russia, but this remains to be seen. While the BRICS represent a large and growing share of the world economy, the extent of their shared interests and goals remains uncertain. This is less a function of the fact that some are democracies and some are not as it is a consequence of the very different circumstances of the BRICS countries and their economies. South Africa’s economy is considerably smaller than the other four nations and appears to have been included for symbolic reasons. Russia’s economy is fundamentally unlike other BRICS due to its heavy dependence on energy, which has been a driving force of Russia’s growth but a constraint on the others (notwithstanding great optimism about offshore energy projects in Brazil).

Some in Russia have chosen to see the BRICS as a rival group to the G7. While some form of rivalry could emerge, it would require establishing this competition as a shared goal within each group in a way that it currently is not. It seems unlike that G7 members or most BRICS countries will actively seek this kind of competition in view of the massive interdependencies between them. To the extent they do compete, it is likely to be as lobbying groups within the G20 and in other for a where they may have different perspectives on global economic governance.

How this affects global governance depends heavily upon results. If the G7 and the BRICS are able to develop compromise-based reforms to international institutions, their competition could actually strengthen global governance. Conversely, if their differences paralyze other groups, broader governance will suffer and the international system will be less stable.