

## Enhancing the multilateral utility of regions in a pluralist, multifaceted global order

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### Key messages



The current transition towards a regionalised world order is a response to the structural trends of a decentred international system, characterised by global non-hegemony, shifts in the distribution of power, complex interdependence, and deep pluralism with strong cultural and political differentiations.



As a meso-layer in the multi-level system of global governance, regions can potentially deepen institutionalisation and enhance the effectiveness and capacity of global institutions through burden-sharing in governance across policy areas such as trade, security, and health and development.



The impact of the COVID-19 crisis in an increasingly fragmented and polarised international order underscores the demand for joint solutions drawing on a regional-global nexus for global governance as well as a revitalised and inclusive multilateralism.



Regions and regionalism have significant potential to add value to global multilateral forums, via functional problem-solving of transnational challenges, 'nesting', and performing key roles as norm transmitters, localisers, and entrepreneurs.



There is scope for partnerships and coordination between the United Nations and regional actors to evolve beyond the framework outlined in Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, premised on an institutionalised and networked approach, and the need for flexible and ad hoc arrangements that are not limited to a one-size-fits-all approach.

## ■ Introduction

The changing global order, characterised by a redistribution of power, diversification of actors, enhanced pluralism, and interdependence, has brought to the fore long-standing debates about the role of regions and the interlinkages between the global and regional dimensions of global governance. The quest for a reimagined and reinvigorated multilateralism, as a key part of Our Common Agenda (OCA), also advocates for a deeper reflection about the regional level of analysis as a complementary, constitutive, and legitimising layer in the multi-level international system. An initiative of the United Nations Secretary-General, OCA outlines recommendations across 12 priority areas specified in the UN75 Declaration, including the imperatives of 'leave no one behind,' reinvigorated protection of the global commons, rapid and inclusive delivery of global public goods, and enhanced partnerships for a stronger, more networked, and inclusive multilateral system (United Nations [UN], 2021). Therefore, the interface between the global and regional dimensions of a multi-level global governance system and the potential of regions to enhance global governance and multilateralism is at stake. This policy brief promotes the view that regions matter in the global order, expounding on their importance and how they can add value through multilateral utility functions and countering negative globalism.

## ■ Relevance of the regional level of analysis: The shift towards a regionalised world order

There is broad consensus that regions matter, given their increasingly vital role as arenas of governance and as actors in the global arena. However, vigorous conceptual and theoretical debates remain about the conceptualisation, nature, and purposes of regions, regionalisms, and regional organisations. This debate has resulted in a proliferation of theories and concepts aimed at understanding the modes, organisations, and practices of regionalisms across geographies and time periods. The definitional and conceptual ambiguities are compounded by additional debates regarding the drivers or logic underpinning regionalism, which may include geography, identities, economic integration, security imperatives, etc. For instance, regional representation in the UN has been informed by the organising principle of equitable geographic distribution in framing the interactions between the UN and regional actors in the context of multilateral politics.

The multidimensional and multi-layered nature of contemporary regionalism implies variations and asymmetries in the mandates, capabilities, and 'actorness' of various regions with diverse regional ideas, projects, and economies. The imprecision and heterogeneity with

reference to grouping regions, whether understood as regional organisations or informal ad hoc regional groupings, obscure the distinctions between the regional and the sub-global, resulting in a "complex landscape of crisscrossing and overlapping regional groupings" in the international order (Söderbaum, 2016b).

There are task-specific regional organisations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and general-purpose regional organisations such as the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Pertinent to the level of cooperation, distinctions can be drawn between regional cooperation, which entails intergovernmental relations, and regional integration. These, in turn, entail supranationalism, or the ceding of some authority and sovereignty to the regional level (Börzel & Risse, 2016).

Crises such as pandemics, global financial crises, as well as the crisis of multilateralism have served to underscore humanity's shared fate in an increasingly interconnected and globalised world. The evolving international order, characterised by structural shifts, redistribution of power, and diverse patterns of interaction among state and non-state actors, have illustrated the complex and dynamic nature of the international system. Simultaneously, the decentred international system has meant that transnational challenges have not only traversed borders but that the demand for collective governance solutions to multidimensional crises will require more functional agreements and institutions to deal with common challenges.

As a meso-layer between the state- and global levels, regions can act as potential avenues to understand and navigate diversity and pluralism in a multi-layered and interconnected international system. Furthermore, as an intermediate and complementary layer to global governance, regions can be perceived both as an alternative and a complement to positive globalism (Falk, 2003), including burden-sharing in governance across policy areas such as trade, security, and health and development, etc.



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The notion of an increasingly regionalised world emphasises three key benefits of regions for the evolving, interconnected world order. The first role is their function as providers of public goods on a regional scale while contributing to collective solutions of transnational challenges in areas such as security, migration, and health. For instance, regional organisations such as the AU and ASEAN cover multiple issue areas such as economic integration, security, and development. The identified need for enhanced delivery of global public goods is emphasised in OCA

(UN, 2021), which advocates for a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach that embraces the diverse landscape of actors.

Second, as 'communities of fate' in a complex and interdependent system, regions embody the multiplication and diversification of governance arrangements and serve as conduits for innovative solutions, burden-sharing and providing resources in a multi-level governance context. Regional organisations have played a lead role in conflict management initiatives such as mediation and peacekeeping, cooperating with the UN in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity.

Third, complementary to their functional problem-solving role, regions can also serve as knowledge producers and models of best practices by mobilising local knowledge and stimulating experimentation in common interests that cut across regional and global spaces. For example, ASEAN has been at the forefront of advancing knowledge on disaster preparedness and emergency relief that can positively contribute to global policy and practices.

The diversified patterns of economic, political, and cultural interactions that undergird regionalism enable a multi-stakeholder approach involving state- and non-state actors such as civil societies and businesses. This approach allows stakeholders to craft regional solutions to common challenges attuned to demands for more inclusive and representative governance networks. Cognisance of regional diversity and agency also underscores the saliency of the trend towards a regionalised world order and the ways in which a nuanced view of the role of regions in world politics can add analytical depth to understanding normative and material shifts.

The multidimensional process of interaction between the regional and global levels of governance, as well as between regionalism and globalisation, may influence the structural constitution of the global order in three possible ways: 1) transregionalism, 2) interregionalism, or 3) multiregionalism. Transregionalism<sup>1</sup> denotes spontaneous and uncoordinated interaction between regions (Hettne, 2005), whereas interregionalism<sup>2</sup> refers to institutionalised relations between regions (Hänggi et al., 2006). If patterns of interregional relations become more predominant, multiregionalism could emerge, defined as a "horizontalised, institutionalised structure formed by organised regions,

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**1** Examples of trans-regionalism include: the Asia-Europe meeting (ASEM), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and the Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation (FEALAC).

**2** Examples of interregional arrangements include: relations between the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), relations between regional groupings and single powers, for instance the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), or intercontinental forums such as European Union-African Union, and Europe-Latin America.

linked to each other through multidimensional partnership agreements" (Hettne, 2005). Although the prospect of a regionalised multilateral order is reserved for a distant, uncertain future, the ongoing transformation of the international order offers possible entry points for imagining how higher-level regionalisms such as interregionalism and multiregionalism will shape the structure of the world order. By conceptualising regionalism as a key aspect of "diversity management" (Grevi, 2018), regions as "institutions of connectivity" (Flockhart, 2016) and part of a system of multi-level governance (Hurrell, 2007), it follows that regional orders are pivotal to shaping the emerging international order and enhancing global governance and multilateralism.

### ■ **Regions as building blocks of the multilateral order: Potential for multilateral utility**

In accordance with the view of regions as actors in a multi-order international order, regions also serve as building blocks of multilateralism. Incorporating both institutional and normative dimensions, Ruggie (1993) defines multilateralism as "an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalised principles of conduct". The redistribution of power in the international order, diversification of actors and the ambiguity across policy domains has transformed multilateralism from a closed to an open system. This transformation includes state- and non-state actors and expands the scope for networked interactions between states, regions, international organisations, and non-state actors.

Shared vulnerabilities and complex interdependence, systemic shocks and crises have exposed the crisis of multilateralism and the disparity between high demand for international cooperation in relation to growing dissatisfaction with multilateral responses beset by low levels of legitimacy and accountability. Geopolitical competition between major powers, waning commitment to international agreements and institutions, and failure of international organisations to address acute crises such as mass atrocities or pandemics adds to the bleak outlook for multilateralism in a rapidly evolving international order.

Regions and regionalism have significant potential to enhance the multi-level governance system, or to perform "multilateral utility functions" (Dent, 2004). Multilateral utility refers to value addition towards global multilateral forums. In other words, how the proactive contributions of regional actors aim to "foster stability, peace, prosperity and equality in the global system, in partnership with multilateral institutions to check hegemonic structural power in multilateral institutions and to empower relevant institutions in the international system" (Dent, 2004).

First, as a meso-level institutional layer in the global governance architecture, regional organisations can deepen institutionalisation, contribute to collective legitimisation of multilateral institutions, and add to functional demand for collective problem-solving of transnational challenges (Rüland, 2011). For example, the European Union embraces interregionalism as a key aspect of its external relations and broader goals of promoting effective multilateralism and facilitating collective solutions to global problems. The EU's Global Strategy (2016) presents interregionalism as an important strategy to enhance relations between the EU and various regional entities while promoting its profile as a global actor and diffusing core norms and values across the world (Söderbaum et al., 2006).

Second, in their complementary role as building blocks of the multilateral order, regional actors can also decrease governance costs of international institutions by acting as 'external federators' in addressing transnational challenges such as peace and security, trade imbalances and climate change (Rüland, 2011). Regional organisations can contribute financial or organisational resources to overstretched global institutions, and potentially bear some of the costs in addressing global problems. Examples are regional human rights commissions or courts that enforce the global human rights regime.

A third function of multilateral utility at the regional level is 'nesting', which involves the devolution of functions through top-down and bottom-up subsidiarity. Examples of top-down subsidiarity include delegation, policing, and mutual reinforcement evident in the UN's approach to burden-sharing

in some peace and security functions of peacekeeping with regional organisations (Hurrell, 2007). Another example of nesting is the 'clearing house' function, which regional actors conduct for global forums by 'decongesting' international negotiations through coordination and articulation of group positions while also promoting consensus with members of other groups in a negotiation setting (Rüland, 2011).

Fourth, the rationalising function of regional actors acting as multilateral utilities is also related to their role as 'norm transmitters' that translate, specify, and adjust international norms within local contexts. The social dynamics of intraregional and interregional interactions may lead to norm reinforcement in which regional organisations act as "local carriers of global messages" (Hurrell, 2007). Alternatively, those social dynamics can lead to norm localisation in which regional or local actors engage in "active construction of foreign ideas through discourse, framing, grafting

■ **There is growing research focused on how regionalisation shapes international negotiations and international relations in multi-level systems of governance.** ■

and cultural selection to build congruence between transnational norms and local beliefs and practices" (Acharya, 2004).

Consequently, through processes of norm localisation or norm subsidiarity processes whereby local actors create rules with a view to preserve their autonomy from dominance, neglect, violation or abuse by more powerful actors (Acharya, 2011), regional actors can act more as norm shapers and norm entrepreneurs rather than simply 'norm takers'. Accordingly, the global order marked by deep pluralism has witnessed a shift of ideas in which non-Western actors have played a central role in advancing ideas about development, security and environmentalism, pertinent to structure and normative aspects of the emerging global order. For instance, South Asia has been lauded as the birthplace of new paradigms on human development in the works of Amartya Sen and Mahbub ul Haq. Similarly, the concept of sovereignty as responsibility, which was the precursor of the emerging norm of Responsibility to Protect (R2P), found philosophical and historical antecedents in African thinkers, such as Francis Deng, and in African institutions such as the Constitutive Act of the African Union (Acharya, 2016).

## ■ The United Nations and regions: Deepening partnerships and division of labour

The role of regions in the UN system consists of formal and legal arrangements, as well as informal regionalised practices (Laatikainen, 2020). Chapter VIII (article 52-54) of the UN Charter outlines the role of regional arrangements in the maintenance of international peace and security, including the peaceful settlement of disputes and supporting UN Security Council enforcement action, subject to the authorisation of the Security Council. A second example is regional economic commissions, established through the UN Economic and Social Council, which aim to promote regional economic integration, promote the implementation of global development goals at the regional level, and foster sustainable development across economic, social, and environmental dimensions.<sup>3</sup> In addition to their initial mandate of development analysis and promotion of regional cooperation at an institutional level (Browne & Weiss, 2013), the regional commissions of the UN have also been seen "as institutional conduits between the global, regional, and national levels," while also fostering the implementation of the global development agenda such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the regional level (United Nations Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC], 2013).

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<sup>3</sup> The five regional commissions are: 1) United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA), 2) United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), 3) United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 4) United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), and 5) United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

Furthermore, UN General Assembly Resolution 68/230 on South-South and triangular cooperation also envisaged a role for regional commissions through the regional coordination mechanism to “advance system-wide cooperation and coordination in support of South-South cooperation at the regional level” (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2013).

UN-regional relations are also embodied in diplomatic and negotiating practices, namely: regional electoral groups, regional organisations, regionalised political groups, single-issue or cross-regional political groups, co-chairs, and negotiation facilitators. In brief, studies of the social dynamics of regional actors and activities in international organisations, and how the regional, informal, or formal groups shape the norms, interests and identities of actors have provided crucial insights about the socio-political nature of UN multilateralism (Laatikainen, 2017). There is also growing research focused on how regionalisation shapes international negotiations and international relations in multi-level systems of governance (Panke et al., 2017).

■ **In a decentred international system, the fundamental issue is how regions influence the structures of the global order and redefine governance arrangements and power politics.**

The trends towards regionalisation in the international order and the changing nature of governance towards multi-level and networked forms raise vital questions about how to enhance partnerships and coordination between the UN and regional actors. While the bulk of discussions about partnerships has been constrained to arrangements as outlined in Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, informed by the principle of subsidiarity, there have been growing calls for revitalised forms of partnerships informed by principles of equality, pragmatism, and complementarity (van Langenhove, 2020).

The links between the regional and global levels of governance have to be assessed in view of the transition from a hegemonic liberal order to a post-hegemonic order, characterised by economic and political turbulence, transnational challenges and heightened demand for effective global governance amid crises of multilateralism and emergent institutional complexity. The demand for broad, inclusive multilateral frameworks and effective governance arrangements is at the core of broader questions about the UN's legitimacy and credibility and other multilateral institutions that operate in an intermestic governance context.

From one perspective, regions could enhance the legitimacy of multilateral initiatives by leveraging collective bargaining positions or representational concerns at the global-regional interface. From another perspective, the input legitimacy of regional organisations is questioned,



given perceptions of elitism and top-down dynamics of regionalisation processes resulting in diverse regional projects. Therefore, the relationship between the UN and regional bodies must be understood through complex institutional and normative filters such as legitimacy, diversity, capacity, and representation (Hurrell, 2007).

The potential positive impact of regionalism in enhancing multilateral initiatives and revitalising global governance institutions such as the UN needs to address controversial issues such as UN reform and the inclusion of non-state actors, such as civil society and business, as key players in global decision-making. A reimagined multilateralism during this time of transition requires a re-examination of institutionalised partnerships between the UN and regional organisations beyond the framework of Chapter VIII.

Furthermore, the proposal to establish a 'high-level advisory board' to advance the policy recommendations outlined in OCA takes into consideration the vital importance of systematic engagement with diverse stakeholders, such as regional organisations, regional development banks, parliaments, subnational authorities, and the private sector. A key aspect in this regard is achieving the right balance between the need for a more institutionalised and networked approach, and the need for flexible and ad hoc arrangements that are not limited to a one size fits all approach. It also calls for an assessment of the polysemous nature of regions and regionalism with different meanings in particular contexts and the implications for UN-regional links (Costa-Buranelli, 2015).

## ■ Conclusion and recommendations

Variables such as degree of embeddedness, institutionalisation, and internal coherence have a bearing on the actorness of regions and their potential as arenas for diversity and divergence in a pluralist global order. Of equal importance is legitimacy, which is linked to the question about who speaks as a regional actor, whom they represent and their degree of legitimacy in advancing interests at the global level. An important question is whether the legitimacy of a regional organisation is drawn from external contexts such as recognition by the UN or the international society, or whether it is drawn from bottom-up identity or normative communities.

The diversity of regions underscores the dichotomy between the view of regions as building blocks of the multilateral order and those that view them as stumbling blocks that may exacerbate fragmentation and interinstitutional competition in multilateral regimes. Moreover, the asymmetries and differentiations across regionalisms can also sharpen differences between regions, provided that some regions may be more

cohesive or better enabled to influence outcomes outside their region. In this regard, it is telling that references to regions or regional actors in the Secretary-General's 2021 OCA report are framed in broad, general terms, which attest to the conceptual ambiguity around the concept of region and the scale of differentiation in scope and policy remits of regional institutions and groupings.

In a decentred international system, the fundamental issue is not simply that regions matter but how they influence the structures of the global order and redefine governance arrangements and power politics. The multifaceted role of regions in a multi-order world and their potential value for multilateral utility has to consider both the complementary and countervailing interactions between regionalism and global governance with varied outcomes. Therefore, it is imperative that the regional perspective be considered alongside key trends such as the decentralisation of power and governance frameworks in a post-hegemonic world order.

### **Policy recommendations for enhancing the multilateral utility of regions**

- **Leverage complementarity:** the engagement between the UN and regional organisations should consider the variability in 'actorness,' degree of institutionalisation and policy scope of regional actors. Pragmatic partnerships should leverage the positive contribution of regions as knowledge producers, models of best practices and key hubs in networked governance. The call for enhanced coordination between the UN and regional organisations is echoed in Chapter V of OCA, premised on a networked multilateralism that is flexible, variable, cross-pillar and evidence-driven (UN, 2021).
- **Re-evaluate partnerships and expand the scope of engagement:** The partnerships between the UN and regional organisations should extend beyond the Chapter VIII framework to include enhanced collaboration in other areas, informed by niche roles, capabilities and comparative advantages of each partner. A reimagined UN-regional organisation engagement should be cross-sectoral and integrated, with increased scope for dialogue across a range of issues such as health, environment, trade and human development, etc. Equally important is the inclusion of non-state actors such as civil society and businesses in decision-making, norm-building and compliance monitoring. An expanded view of global-regional, multi-stakeholder engagement beyond the narrow focus on the UN's principal organs may also envisage engagements with the UN's specialised agencies, funds and subsidiary organs.

- Hold regular and sustained dialogue between the UN and regional organisations: UN-regional organisational partnerships should build upon regular and sustained dialogues through annual meetings across various policy dimensions. Exchanges and dialogue should be premised on: 1) comparative advantages and capabilities of regional organisations and how they can leverage their strengths toward enhancing global governance through information sharing and 'mutual learning,' and 2) the agency of regional actors to decide who speaks for them in a representative capacity. The interactions should also optimise the role of regions as local knowledge producers and potential contributors towards collective solutions to global problems.

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