

Summary of eDiscussion on the Reform of Multilateral Institutions
Policy Research Division, Foreign Affairs Canada
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From November 1 to December 3, 2004, Canadians were invited to share their thoughts through the Canadian International Policy site on the reform of multilateral institutions and the policy direction Canada should take in this regard. A series of video interviews with various experts on the topic were hosted on the site to help stimulate and inform the debate. In all, 20 responses were received, with an average length of 300-400 words. Participants included academics, students, members of the NGO community and other Canadians. Below is a summary of the key arguments made:

Most participants agreed that Canada should play a leading role in promoting a rules-based system and that the key goal of reforms should be an enhanced capacity of institutions such as the UN to respond quickly and decisively to emerging crises. In addition, several respondents referred to the need to revive the legitimacy of multilateral institutions, though, as expressed below, their prescriptions for doing so were varied.

UN Security Council reform

“...while the [Security] Council is anachronistic and unrepresentative, the belief that expansion leads to increased legitimacy is tenuous and inherently wrought with difficulties.”

There was disagreement surrounding a possible expansion of the UN Security Council. While one candidate advocated the inclusion of more representatives from the developing world as permanent members of the Council, another was sceptical of the prospects for any extension of veto rights, noting that proposed reforms would have to be sensitive to the strategic interests of the Council's current veto-holding members. A third contributor argued that an expanded Council would not resolve the body's legitimacy-deficit and instead supported a more equitable system for the appointment of rotational members, a set of clearly defined principles on which the authorization of Chapter VII military force could be based, and judicial review of controversial Council decisions.

UN and WTO voting structure reform

“...though the idea of ‘one citizen one vote’ may be appealing, it remains a threat for most developed countries, Canada included.”

Several participants lamented the absence of equitable representation in decision-making structures of the largest multilateral institutions. It was noted that reforms of current procedures would likely not result in greater influence for Canada. In this regard it was suggested that Canada accord greater weight in the WTO to developing countries, or advocate the replacement of the UN's ‘one country, one vote’ policy with a system in which votes are weighted according to the populations of member countries. These two suggestions were deemed unrealistic by another participant who argued that voting

procedures which do not account for real power differentials would likely result in the marginalisation of the multilateral institutions concerned by powerful developed countries. A second option for reform of the UN voting system was later offered according to which the weight of votes would be calibrated according to a country's population and its contribution to the UN budget.

WTO expansion

“We should recognize and celebrate the fact that free trade amongst free nations is the best, perhaps the only effective guarantor of peace.”

Amongst the more radical reforms suggested was the expansion of the mandate of the WTO to include many activities which are currently the province of UN member agencies such as the International Telecommunications Union and the World Intellectual Property Organisation. A new Security Council would accompany this and take the form of the current G20. Under this proposal, “refusing to accept the agreed peaceful dispute resolution mechanism [would be considered] an act against peace,” in turn authorising members to defend themselves. This participant also recommended that a ‘NATO+’ constellation be formed to include countries such as India, Japan, Brazil and South Korea. This expanded NATO would help add ‘credible, global muscle’ to the WTO and the UN.

In contrast, referring to the dominance of free market economic principles in the governance of multilateral institutions, another respondent noted that “free trade and economic liberalisation are not ‘ends’ in themselves. And as ends they are rather counterproductive in moving the world towards [global social] justice.” This respondent argued that Canada should “champion the human face of multilateralism” by working to counter obstacles to human development.

Strategic positioning in the UN and WTO

“Given the current instability and unpredictability in multilateral [affairs]... perhaps the predominant Canadian strategic objective must be to deepen additional partnerships with willing and able actors similarly oriented towards improving multilateral institutions.”

Disagreement arose over the way to best enhance Canada's influence in institutions such as the UN or the WTO. One argument was that Canada should tailor its approach in order to help the US achieve its own objectives through multilateral avenues with the larger goal of encouraging US engagement in the multilateral system. This respondent noted that “without US participation, multilateral institutions are doomed to irrelevancy...” In contrast, another respondent explained that Canadian interests are best served by increasing ties with the EU, commenting that “the basis of any degree of self-determination...relies on having more than one major partner/option.” A third respondent suggested that Canada should promote cooperation between the US and China through multilateral structures in order to facilitate ‘peace and prosperity’ in the event of a bi-polar international system.

Development institutions (World Bank, UN, Asian Development Bank etc.)

One participant offered a series of substantive comments on the reform of those multilateral institutions addressing international development issues. Among these were proposals for greater grant funding to support 'soft' issues such as governance, a more serious commitment to promote private sector development in target countries and greater administrative support for the Canadian offices in these institutions, which are charged with reviewing voluminous development proposals under tight time constraints.

Alternatives

“Canada must continue to identify multilateral initiatives that are timely and concrete...on a case by case basis [in order to achieve] short-term foreign policy objectives while working with the UN for long-term reforms on how to better respond to crises.”

Finally, the suggestion was also made that Canada should look to other means of multilateral engagement to advance its foreign policy goals, notably through a greater focus on issue-oriented, rather than institutionally-based multilateral initiatives.

Suggested feature issue topics

Below is a list of feature issues suggested by Canadians through the International Policy site. These proposals will be considered when determining future subjects to be highlighted and discussed on this site.

- Canada's foreign policy in the Middle East
- Canadian humanitarian assistance (e.g., Haiti, Sudan)
- Canada's policy towards reducing global inequality and environmental degradation
- Canadian foreign policy and international law
- Foreign investments and their impact on developing countries (e.g. mining activities)
- Canada's role in UN peacekeeping operations
- Canada's role in the resolution of the Cyprus problem
- Canadian values and identity: image, pertinence and credibility throughout the world
- Pre-mission security training for humanitarian aid workers
- Chinese tourism in Canada
- Importance of a region-specific foreign policy (EU, Latin America etc.)

Official response

A summary of the views presented during the eDiscussion has been received within Foreign Affairs Canada and is currently being reviewed by policy planners.

Their response will be posted on the Canadian International Policy site in January. It will provide Canadians with reactions to their ideas as well as background information about Canada's current positions on the renewal of multilateral institutions.