



Internet governance and the UN in a multiplex world order era?

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Introduction

Over the last two decades Internet Governance (IG) has emerged as an increasingly complex and fraught field of policymaking involving both states and non-state actors on a multitude of arenas. Facing this complex field, the role of the United Nations (UN) in IG has been both varying and contested. While the UN has been discussing issues related to IG since the 1990s, disagreements on both substantive issues and where discussions ought to take place have intermittently resurfaced and remained relevant, but recent processes and challenges to the status quo asks questions about the direction going forward. In the UN, recently established processes aims to revamp the approach to IG, while the negotiations over a cybercrime convention, and the 2022 ITU

plenipotentiary have made the long-running contests between western and authoritarian states over this topic more visible. Broader trends and rising tensions globally raises questions not only about the future for the global nature of IG and the role of the UN in this, but also whether decoupling and alliances with like-minded states might become more dominant than global multilateral and multi-stakeholder channels, i.e a trend pointing towards a multiplex field of internet governance.¹

This policy brief offers an overview of the most important trends, processes and challenges related to IG policymaking under the UN-umbrella. We start out by offering a brief examination of the origins and roles of selected processes and organizations. Subsequently, we discuss recent initiatives to revamp the involvement of the UN on IG, as well as some considerations on how these processes tie into greater contestation on the global stage. Looking ahead, we argue there are three main challenges for IG going forward that have a big impact on these processes: 1) Great power rivalry, disagreements and decoupling, 2) inherent components of the technology itself which makes international IG a challenging task, and 3) the pace of the technological change is high and accelerating, while the mechanisms for collaboration and governance is not, they are on the contrary, slow and fragmenting.

Forums of Internet Governance

IG is decentralized and at times a complex field. While there has been written extensively on the various forms of governance of importance to IG, this policy brief takes a narrow approach to IG and examines dedicated forums and organizations. In this section, we will briefly depict the main organizations and processes within the UN umbrella over the preceding decades, and some of the controversies surrounding them.

WSIS and WGIG

2 The role of the UN in IG harkens back to processes set in motion at the end of the 1990s. As the importance of digital technologies became evident, questions of how they were to be governed at the international level were raised. Realizing that globe-spanning connectivity required cooperation at the international level, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was held over two phases to lay the groundwork for the emerging issue of IG. Throughout the process, a set of goals for the future of Internet were laid out, which while not binding under international law were still committed too by its participants.

The first round of meetings was held in Geneva in 2003, the next one in Tunisia in 2005. In the first meeting in Geneva, WSIS established a global goal of an inclusive information society for everybody. The 2005-meeting followed up the 2003-meeting by emphasizing implementation and financing mechanisms. In New York in 2015 a follow-up meeting, the WSIS+10, reviewed the progress and extended the mandate of the IGF for 10 years, with a new meeting planned for 2025 to review the process.

Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the IGF+:

The primary outcome of the WSIS-process was the establishment of the IGF as a complementary organization to UN processes. Structured as a multistakeholder forum for discussing internet

governance, the forum invites states, NGOs, private companies etc to participate at equal footing. The non-binding feature of the IGF allows it to have a rather flexible agenda and touch upon a wide range of areas pertaining to IG in its annual meetings. While this flexibility represents an organizational strength and asset, it has also simultaneously been understood as an organizational weakness. Because IGF is an ad-hoc project on the fringes of the UN organization, it is a forum for discussions without commitments, leading to criticisms of it being an ineffectual talking shop.

This criticism was mitigated in 2019 with a proposal to establish three specifically designed architectures for strengthening digital cooperation. One of these architectures became the IGF Plus to address shortcomings and gaps in the digital ecosystem by dealing with disagreements on future models of internet governance. In this way it is also an ambition for the IGF Plus that it will be able to provide input to the OEWG, involve parliamentarians, and connect to other related ongoing cybersecurity processes in the UN.²

ITU

The role of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in IG has long been a source of tensions. As a UN-organization initially addressing issues around telegraph communications, the ITU has expanded to encompass 193 states and more than 900 companies, universities, and other organizations. Currently, the ITU organizes its activities around three main tracks or sectors: Radiocommunications, Standards, and Development. Its activities on Internet Governance falls under the Standards track.

Throughout its history, the scope and role of the ITU in Internet Governance has at times clashed with the pre-existing ecosystem of non-state actors and distinct bodies working exclusively on issues relating to the Internet. While the ITU remains an important venue, it has taken a backseat approach compared to bodies like the IETF on topics like standard-setting. Periodically, calls for expanding the role of the ITU has been made, not only on standards but also on a potential role for cyber security. As the ITU is both able to make binding commitments for its signatories and is structured in a way that affords a larger role for states, expanding the scope of the ITU has been the goal of those seeking a larger role for the state in IG.

GGE and OEWG

The UN's Group of Government Experts was established in 2001 after a Russian initiative. Initially the group consisted of technical expertise from a geographically representative selection of 15 states, but in the mid-2010s around 60 states sought membership, gradually changing a body initially involved in technical issues to become a gradually more politicized group. Being a body

primarily providing recommendations and not binding decisions, prior to 2017 it was able to reach a consensus of sort to provide final reports after its high-level meetings. Nevertheless, in the 2017-meeting the group did not reach consensus and was temporarily dissolved. In 2018 a new GGE-process was started in parallel with an Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) which was supposed to discuss and deal with more or less the same topics as the GGE, but including all the 193 member states of the UN as well as non-state actors. As such, the OEWG was supposed to strengthen and contribute to a more open, democratic, transparent, and inclusive forum for the international discussions on regulation of cyberspace. The GGE was restarted after a US initiative and the OEWG was established after a Russian initiative, with Western states having a greater chance to achieve majority support for its initiatives in the GGE, while it is the other way around in the OEWG. The GGE has now been halted, while the OEWG's mandate has been renewed until 2025.

UN, INTERNET GOVERNANCE, AND POWER POLITICS

While the WSIS process clarified and cemented the role of the UN in IG, ever since there has been a string of controversies and disagreements. Partly these go all the way back to WSIS process itself, and issues such as the extent to which multi-stakeholderism should be the governing principle, bridging the digital divide between developed and developing nations, as well as the appropriate forums for IG.

Regarding the forums where discussion takes place, expanding the role of the ITU has long been a preferred site for those who want an expanded role for the state in IG. Diplomats from authoritarian states have sought to push contested issues to the ITU where the chance of securing support is greater than in multistakeholder forums. Similarly, Huawei has sought to move deliberations over standard-setting from the IETF to the ITU. In response, a range of Western states has pushed back against such expansions, alleging that doing so would undermine the continuation of an open internet steered by democratic principles. At the three-week ITU plenipotentiary in 2022, these divisions were plainly obvious.

Broadly speaking, the division remains between a set of states seeking to continue IG in its current form with heavy involvement of non-state actors, and those seeking to promote a more state-centric vision of the Internet where governments and intergovernmental bodies are the primary organizations. Over the preceding decade, these tensions have become increasingly important. Both because digital technologies writ large became more important, but also due to growing pushback against the domination of the US, the growth of China fuelling a broader challenge to the existing international order, the consolidation of key digital markets under a

handful of global corporations, and political tensions internationally increased. In conjunction with these shifts, disagreements over the structure of IG, how to address concerns over cyber security and the persistent inequalities in digital access and development continued to present thorny issues. By the turn of the decade, conflicts between different perspectives on how to manage diverging realities and how to control the Internet had become evident.³

Beyond the disagreements and contests over IG, the inability to govern and the failure to meet targets related to digital equality and development remains an issue. Disagreements between authoritarian and western states remain very real, but a range of issues affecting developing states are not necessarily accurately captured by this distinction. Moreover, a different set of issues emerging from the growing harms of digital technologies and unease over emerging technologies add to the problems of a governance deficit at the international level.

A revamped UN in an age of digital contestation?

In the face of mounting challenges for IG, the UN has taken a string of initiatives to expand its role in the field. Starting with the 2019 publication of *The Age of Digital Interdependence* - and followed up by the 2020 publication of *Roadmap for Digital Cooperation* by the UN Secretary General - a renewed emphasis on questions of IG at the UN at the turn of the decade looks apparent. Throughout 2023, these efforts will be collected towards the development of a Global Digital Compact facilitated by Sweden, Rwanda and the UN Tech Envoy, which in turn will feed into the 2024 Summit for the Future where the compact is supposed to be signed by UN member states.

In sum, the moving parts and shifting sands of IG creates a challenging arena to navigate going forward. The ability of states like Russia and China to further their aims in multilateral forums might benefit from unhappiness with the results of the current order, as well as the legitimacy of anchoring IG in forums where states are the primary actors. The combination of expanding ambitions and the offensive of what Raymond & Sherman label "Authoritarian Multilateralism" could shift the governance of the Internet away from liberal values and ideas.⁴ For European states, the Biden-administrations use of unilateral initiatives like the Summit for Democracy to further their IG-goals, and the shift in the 2023 US cyber strategy towards building coalitions of like-minded states asks questions about whether future IG-governance initiatives from Washington will prioritize other avenues than international forums. At a minimum, the clamp-down on Chinese platforms and technology providers in the US imply a shift away from a global and open Internet and at least in some areas a stronger role for the state when security concerns are at risk.

Conclusion

Internet Governance has been an area of both great evolution and a few persistent themes ever since it appeared as an issue at the UN during the 1990s. Tensions between Western states preferring a multistakeholder-approach, largely building on existing organizations and institutions and with a strong role for non-state actors have faced against an increasingly vocal bloc of authoritarian states wanting to re-centre IG with states as the primary actors.

Yet beneath the surface of these long-running themes, the nature of IG and the role of the UN might be starting to change. On the one hand, a push initiated for the UN to take on a larger role has opened the door for more extensive discussion on questions in IG. This development has been coupled by a more assertive stance by authoritarian states and a willingness to

pursue more large-scale changes in how the Internet is governed. This push is again bolstered by widespread discomfort with the outsized role played by large digital companies, the inability to bridge the digital divide, and the need to govern and regulate emerging technologies like AI.

With tensions between China and the US rising, the spill-over into questions of IG asks questions about the scope for substantive agreements, or whether the long-argued for decoupling and increased multiplexity in IG might become a reality going forward. With key issues of privacy, human rights, and the future of multilateral governance, keeping up with and influencing the broader implications of IG-discussions is both a vital and challenging exercise, perhaps even more pertinent than ever, for the years ahead.

Endnotes

¹ Multiplex world order is described by Amitav Acharya as a world order “... that reflects multiple centers of authority and capacity in global governance.” See: <https://multiplexworld.com/> Or: Acharya, A. (2017). After Liberal Hegemony: The Advent of a Multiplex World Order. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 31(3), 271-285. doi:10.1017/S089267941700020X

² See: <https://dig.watch/event/igf2021/igf2021-final-report>

³ See: “Digital great game: The west’s standoff against China and Russia” <https://www.politico.eu/article/itu-global-standard-china-russia-tech/>

⁴ Raymond, Mark & Justin Sherman: Draft Paper presented at NUPI

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