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What Is Global Governance?



Lawrence S. Finkelstein

The name given this journal reflects inescapable ambiguity about the nature of the “international system,” indeed about what the international system is, or what it encompasses. Does *global* mean what has been signified by *international*, *interstate*, *intergovernmental*, or even, often, *transnational*? If so, why not use one of those terms, instead of choosing a more ambiguous one?

Evidently, something else is intended. That intention reflects the great changes that have been occurring both in the dynamics of relations in the world of states and in understandings of those dynamics. In the first issue of this journal, for example, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali emphasized the internationalization of the problems of human rights and democracy, previously thought of as issues for states to deal with within their own boundaries. He also demonstrated how the pursuit of democracy as an international goal involves the cooperation of a range of international agencies and also of many nongovernmental actors—including “political internationals,” which he saw as “the first signs of an emerging transnational democratic politics.”¹ We understand that there are many new actors in the world of states and that they play increasingly significant roles. We understand that nongovernmental actors are an important part, although by no means all, of what drives the interdependence that presses on and qualifies sovereignty. We recognize the interconnectedness of the decision processes among and within states in that world. We know that international negotiations involve what has been termed “two level games” or “double-edged diplomacy.”² We appreciate what James Rosenau has referred to as “the crazy-quilt nature of modern interdependence.”³ It is hence reasonable to be uncomfortable with traditional frameworks and terminologies associated with the idea of international relations in an interstate system.

Ambiguity affects not only what is meant by *global* but also what is meant by *governance*. While the latter word turns up often in scholarly discourse about how states relate to each other in the international system, little attention has been given to what it means.⁴ At least, it must be clear that it does not mean “government,” or we would say that instead. Since the international system notoriously lacks hierarchy and government, the fuzzier word *governance* is used instead. We use the word also in another case of ambiguity as to the presence of government—that is, when we

refer to part of what faculties are supposed to do in universities. In other words, we say “governance” because we don’t really know what to call what is going on.

These ambiguities seem to justify Rosenau’s very broad use of the term *global governance* in his article in the first issue of this journal: “systems of rule at all levels of human activity—from the family to the international organization—in which the pursuit of goals through the exercise of control has transnational repercussions.”⁵ He goes on to broaden the definition even further by saying that “rule” means “control” or “steering,” which requires only that “the controllers . . . seek to modify the behavior . . . of other actors.”⁶ Global governance, thus, is any purposeful activity intended to “control” or influence someone else that either occurs in the arena occupied by nations or, occurring at other levels, projects influence into that arena.

It is not wrong to wish to understand such phenomena. Quite the contrary. Rosenau is persuasive in arguing that our conceptual scope must be broadened if we are to understand what we have until now called international relations in the changed circumstances that surely will prevail in the twenty-first century. His vigorous scholarly imagination generates a generous spectrum of types of actors and activities that exemplifies his expansive definition of global governance. The trouble is, however, how hard it is to know what is excluded by that definition—or where to dig into the spaghetti bowl he puts on the table. It is, of course, correct that international crime syndicates, which Rosenau labels “TCOs” or “transnational criminal organizations,”⁷ are a factor to be dealt with in international relations. Does it really clarify matters, however, or facilitate the research enterprise, to toss them in a hopper along with states, intergovernmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and Moody’s Investor’s Service? “Global governance” appears to be virtually anything.

It should be possible to define global governance in a way that gives greater direction to the research enterprise without abandoning concern for or sacrificing access to an expanding universe of actors, issues, and activities. To begin with, we should be rigorous in insisting that governance is an activity—that is, doing something. If we need to institutionalize it, we must say the institution in question is a means of governance, a governance organization or agency, or an actor in governance.

Beyond that, it is important to recognize that we need the term because government is lacking in the world of states.⁸ What we need is a conceptualization that enables us to penetrate and understand the government-like events that occur in the world of states even in the absence of government. Those events occur, as Rosenau and others have insisted, across a broadening range of issues. With governance defined as such activities, the way is cleared to identify and examine the processes of influence,

decision, and action that shape or determine them; including relevant power and the means of exercising it; diplomacy and politics between and within states; alliances and coalitions of states; international pressure groups of nongovernmental actors, including political alliances such as those referred to by Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali; individuals wielding influence whether because of position or status or the power of their ideas; consensual knowledge, as well as participants in and methods of developing it; propaganda and communication; feedback loops between international, national, and subnational actors; and institutional procedures and methods that channel inputs and determine their efficacy. The governance activity being studied determines the factors of this kind that need study. Comparing governance will reveal differing patterns of factorial presence and effect. There is no reason, moreover, why comparative study of the factors themselves across governance issues should not contribute to understanding governance.

Next it is important to recognize that, although adopting rules may be a primary objective of governance, as of government, and may even be the most important service performed, it is not the only function of governance precisely because it is not the only thing governments do.

Viewing the matter this way leads to the following definition of *global governance*: Global governance is governing, without sovereign authority, relationships that transcend national frontiers. Global governance is doing internationally what governments do at home.

This definition is concerned with purposive acts, not tacit arrangements. It emphasizes what is done rather than the constitutional basis for doing it. It is neutral as between the activities and their outcomes. Scholarship about global governance is concerned not only with decisions but also with their consequences—e.g., allocative effects, programs and projects, efficacy, compliance, and domestic implementation.

The definition is flexible as to scope; it applies whether the subject is general (e.g., global security and order) or specific (e.g., the WHO Code on the Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes). It is flexible enough as to reach; it applies whether the participation is bilateral (e.g., an agreement to regulate usage of a river flowing in two countries), function-specific (e.g., a commodity agreement), regional (e.g., the Treaty of Tlatelolco), or global (e.g., the NPT). The definition accommodates both governmental and “sovereignty free” actors.⁹ And it accommodates both ad hoc and institutionalized, as well as both informal and formal, processes.

The approach is broader than Rosenau’s, from which it departs. It seeks to impart greater system to the same factors by setting “governance as activity” as the rubric for analysis. The definition points to a very broad research agenda. If it should be charged that the challenge is overwhelming, there are two answers.

Defining *governance* this way merely mirrors the breadth of government as we commonly understand it. Consider, for example, Austin Ranney's observation: "For better or worse, modern governments do just about everything . . . a complete list of all the functions performed by governments today . . . would undoubtedly include activities which directly and powerfully affect just about every conceivable aspect of human life—marriage, the rearing of children, education, the production and distribution of wealth, religion, art, sport, and so on ad infinitum." Despite political initiatives to limit the functions of government, it seems unlikely that Ranney's observation will be seriously falsified. Not every one of thirty-nine major functions he listed as performed by the U.S. government under five headings¹⁰ is necessarily conducted internationally, but, perhaps with modification, all the major headings are relevant and many of the specific functions as well. That leads to the second answer to the objection.

The definition is no broader than the international agenda is already in the era of interdependence and disintegrating boundaries between national and international arenas. What Ranney said about modern national governments is incontestably true of the international system.

It deserves underlining also that the definition does not limit governance to the reaching of decisions about rules. The term, however, has often been used that way. The predominant definition of regimes, to cite an important example, is rule oriented, although it also encompasses "principles, norms and decisionmaking procedures."¹¹ The definition stretches beyond rule making because, as do governments, the international system does more than direct the behavior of the relevant actors. To do that far from exhausts ways in which international expectations are shaped, behavior influenced, and values allocated among actors in the international system. To cite just one contemporary example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Bank sponsor the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to provide concessionary financing necessary to offset costs of environmental protection programs in developing countries.¹² No rule is directly implicated in this activity, and certainly no rule enforcement—although recipients will presumably be bound to carry out the undertakings they make to receive the funds. Yet resources are directed to advancing a public purpose and to influencing national decisions and behaviors.

Thus, governance should be considered to cover the overlapping categories of functions performed internationally, among them: information creation and exchange; formulation and promulgation of principles and promotion of consensual knowledge affecting the general international order, regional orders, particular issues on the international agenda, and efforts to influence the domestic rules and behavior of states; good offices, conciliation, mediation, and compulsory resolution of disputes; regime

formation, tending, and execution; adoption of rules, codes, and regulations; allocation of material and program resources; provision of technical assistance and development programs; relief, humanitarian, emergency, and disaster activities; and maintenance of peace and order.

Accepting this meaning of *global governance* automatically disposes of the argument that it is either synonymous with regimes or closely identified with them. In any case, it is hard to find benefit in employing the term to duplicate another one already in very wide use.

The term *governance* has been applied to international matters in a variety of ways that have been at best disorderly and perhaps confusing. Perhaps there can be agreement on a common, reasonable usage, and it is that purpose this foray in definition is intended to advance. ☉

Notes

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1. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "Democracy: A Newly Recognized Imperative," *Global Governance* 1, no. 1 (winter 1995): 8.

2. Robert Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (summer 1988); and Peter B. Evans, Harold K. Jacobson, and Robert D. Putnam, *Double-Edged Diplomacy: International Bargaining and Domestic Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

3. James N. Rosenau, "Governance in the Twenty-first Century," *Global Governance* 1, no. 1 (winter 1995): 15.

4. For a somewhat fuller presentation on this theme, see Lawrence S. Finkelstein, "What Is International Governance?" paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Vancouver, B.C., 21 March 1991.

5. Rosenau, "Governance in the Twenty-first Century," p. 13.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

8. What follows is influenced by the paper cited in note 4. That paper shows the strong influence of earlier work by Rosenau, especially the introductory chapter in Rosenau and Ernst-Otto Czempiel, eds., *Governance Without Government: Order and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Rosenau's chapter, "Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Toward a Postinternational Politics for the 1990s," in Czempiel and Rosenau, eds., *Global Changes and Theoretical Challenges: Approaches to World Politics for the 1990s* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 1-20.

9. The term is Rosenau's; see James N. Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 36.

10. Austin Ranney, *The Governing of Men*, rev. ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966), pp. 42-43.

11. Stephen Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables," in Krasner, ed., *International Regimes* (Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 2.

12. "The Global Environment Facility," *Finance and Development* 28, no. 1 (March 1991): 24.