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During
Crises

Policy Brief No.18



Resolving Global Crises

The Urgent Need to Revive Multilateralism
& Re-think Australia's Role

17 March 2022 | Erika Feller



Summary

Key Points

This Policy Brief makes the following key points:

- (a) Russia's unlawful military invasion into Ukraine, invoking a right to humanitarian intervention despite the necessary pre-conditions being absent, is currently the most egregious, but one of a multiplicity of current global threats which defy resolution or effective response through states operating unilaterally.
- (b) These global threats include: questions over last year's COP26 summit on climate change; the ongoing Covid pandemic; conflict and the threat of conflict from Syria and Yemen to the South China Sea; severe hunger from East Africa to Afghanistan; historically high refugee displacement; widening wealth disparities; and mass migratory movements.
- (c) Such crises are the background to arguably one of the most hard-hitting reports recently released by UN Secretary General António Guterres: *Our Common Agenda*. The report was adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly, including Australia, on 16 November 2021. It makes recommendations for "multilateralism with teeth", with the aim of achieving a 'UN 2.0' able to offer "system-wide solutions to 21st century challenges".
- (d) A Summit of the Future is foreseen for September 2023. One outcome would be a Declaration on Future Generations. The path to it is presently being carefully charted.
- (e) An important question is how Australia will now engage with these initiatives. Former head of DFAT, Frances Adamson, has acknowledged that: "An international rules-based order is in our best interests, and an effective multilateral system is the surest way to get there".

Recommendations

This Policy Brief makes the following recommendations:

- (a) **Serious Review and Engagement:** The next Australian government will need to seriously review how its past policies and programs are placed within this global strategy. It can be but hoped, with the Federal election process now in train, that all contenders will take the time to familiarise themselves with *Our Common Agenda* and will commit to engage wholeheartedly and constructively with it.
- (b) **Balancing Our Focus:** There is a need to re-think the preference for increased military spending over investment in conflict prevention and a forward-looking peace agenda, and a reluctance to commit to serious goals and programs to halt climate deterioration.
- (c) **Re-thinking Refugee Policy:** Domestically, there is a need comprehensively to review Australia's asylum policies which, counter-intuitively, have been developed in a manner more likely to undermine than shore up an effective global response to refugee outflows.
- (d) **Recovering Leadership:** Australia's next government should look to find inspiration in past periods when Australia was a leader in constructing frameworks to address global challenges, including the standards framing international cooperation on refugee protection.

Resolving Global Crises

The Urgent Need to Revive Multi-lateralism & Re-think Australia's Role

1. Introduction

Russia has invaded Ukraine, on the internationally contested basis that its forces need to be mobilised in the breakaway eastern regions of the country, to maintain law and order in the midst of heightened civil conflict, as well as to protect civilians more broadly against an alleged neo-Nazi threat. The Russian government is purporting to invoke the right to humanitarian intervention despite the necessary pre-conditions, including UN Security Council endorsement, being absent.

Russia is acting unilaterally in flagrant violation of international law principles which underpin the sovereignty of nations, peaceful relations between them and respect for the safety, dignity and integrity of civilian life. This is but one of a multiplicity of current global threats which defy resolution or effective response through states operating unilaterally.

Myanmar is another. The February 2021 military coup in that country was followed by serious repression of street protests, human rights violations, resurgent civil strife, and ongoing conflict between the military and warring factions. The ASEAN [5 point plan](#) agreed in April 2021, which called among other things for an immediate cessation of violence in the country and which laid out pathways (including dialogue, mediation, and

humanitarian assistance) to assist Myanmar in this regard, has been largely ignored. ASEAN member states themselves have been less than forceful in pushing for its implementation.

This Policy Brief focuses on the report *Our Common Agenda*, arguably one of the most hard-hitting reports recently released by the United Nations (UN) to strengthen multilateralism to address a range of crises, and urges more robust Australian engagement with these processes.

2. Multiplying Crises

The world is struggling to grapple with a range of urgent crises, including:

- **Climate change:** [COP26](#), the latest international climate change conference held in October-November 2021, is well behind us with the jury still out on the chances of countries genuinely pulling together to address the global climate crisis, degraded oceans and historic biodiversity loss.
- **Covid Pandemic:** The Covid pandemic continues, leaving unacceptable numbers of lost or damaged lives in its wake.
- **Conflict:** Beyond Ukraine, conflict rages still in Yemen, Syria or Ethiopia, driving millions to

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The report *Our Common Agenda* was adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly, including Australia, on 16 November 2021.

seek safety across borders. The threat of conflict in the South China Sea is real.

- **Hunger:** The UN World Food Program assesses some 13 million people are threatened with severe hunger in the Horn of Africa due to the driest conditions recorded on the Peninsula since 1981, while deeply distressing stories about rights violations and starvation facing 8 million people in Afghanistan continue.
- **Displacement, inequality and migration:** The world is confronted by historically high refugee displacement, widening wealth disparities, and mass migratory movements.
- **Digital threats:** UN Secretary General António Guterres has recently expressed his deep concern about the prevailing lawlessness in cyber space: “Our personal information is being exploited to control or manipulate us, change our behaviours, violate our human rights, and undermine democratic institutions. Our choices are taken away from us without us even knowing it”, he said.¹

3. The UN’s *Our Common Agenda* Report

Navigating this complex global environment, there are options. They are the topic of arguably one of the most hard-hitting reports recently released by Guterres. The report *Our Common Agenda* was adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly (UNGA), including Australia, on 16 November 2021.²

At its heart is a belief in the criticality of improving the way countries cooperate to manage the world’s common resources (oceans, land masses and space) and public goods like global health.

The goal is to safeguard the planet and its resources for future generations.

The Agenda contains recommendations which address a multiplicity of issues, from the big-ticket ones like climate change and loss of biodiversity, peace and disarmament, to the more micro-issues like coordination to reduce international tax evasion.

There are proposals to reinforce respect for human rights, refugee rights and their global safeguarding organisations, as well as strengthening accountability for grave violations. The Agenda also looks at measures countries could take to reduce violence world-wide in all its forms, including violence from criminal groups and interpersonal violence in the home, both of which, it asserts, kill more people collectively than large-scale violent conflict. Some recommendations are uncontroversial, like gender parity initiatives and measures to bring youth into the bigger conversations, while others could be more problematic, including the call for a new dialogue on outer space, or having former Heads of State come together to lay out global governance options for the world’s resources.

Then there are recommendations, some new, others resurrected, that go to the heart of how the UN functions. Working towards a ‘UN 2.0’ able to offer “system-wide solutions to 21st century challenges”, the Report envisages an institution more inclusive, responsive, and consultative to ensure it is “a reliable guardian for our future”.

4. “Multilateralism with Teeth”

For those UN Member States sceptical about “multilateralism with teeth”, as Guterres calls it, a report of this reach will be approached with caution. For others, it will be received as a timely

and innovative document which intelligently maps important pathways ahead.

Follow up is now in train, most recently through a five-part series of “open, inclusive, informal thematic consultations” at the UNGA which began in February 2022 and are scheduled to conclude this week. The UN’s input is being coordinated by Austrian Under Secretary General, Volker Turk, charged by the Secretary General to spearhead it over the coming months.

Urgency is accompanying this process. A number of governments seem to be taking this to heart, at least at the level of reflection, with charting where and how to follow up on this Agenda now underway. The United States offers one example. In December 2021, Deputy to the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Amb. Jeffrey Prescott, laid out three of the priorities the Biden Administration sees for the United States’ long-term multilateral strategy, defined as an “affirmative, prescriptive agenda for the future of multilateralism”.³

5. Australia’s Role

An important question is: how will Australia now engage with this initiative? The election process is gearing up and the issues on the agenda are increasingly clear. Even while the narrative about Ukraine and defence spending is ramping up, it seems the election will otherwise be fought on local issues, with little attention focused on matters that count beyond our borders. That is short-sighted to say the least as nothing remains beyond borders, even where they appear to be tightly shut. Covid has made this very clear.

Former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Frances Adamson, acknowledged in December 2019 that: “An international rules-based order is... in our best interests, and an effective multilateral system is the surest way to get there.” Early that same year, the Australian

Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marise Payne, stated: “We stand for an international order based on rules and cooperation, that upholds peace and prosperity for all nations.” The problem is a rules-based international order has seemingly proven more compelling for some global concerns than others.

The next Australian government will need to seriously review how past policies and programs are placed within this global strategy. These include, not least, the clear preference for increased military spending over investment in conflict prevention and a forward-looking peace agenda, and a reluctance to commit to serious goals and programs to halt climate deterioration.

They also include domestic asylum policies which, somewhat counter-intuitively, have been developed in a manner more likely to undermine than shore up an effective global response to refugee outflows.

6. Paying Attention to Refugee Policy

It is worth giving some space to these asylum policies, which are extant and an outstanding contradiction when it comes to social justice and *Our Common Agenda*. The Agenda stresses the need actively to progress the Global Compact on Refugees, which Australia endorsed.

There was a time when Australia was a leader in helping to develop the standards framing international cooperation on refugee protection. Refugees were refugees, regardless of whether they fled en masse across the border into a neighbouring country, or whether they arrived as groups or individuals seeking asylum.

The underlying premises of urgency of need and responsibility to respond were the same and the protection regime kicked into play for both types

An important question is how will Australia now engage with this initiative. Former head of DFAT, Frances Adamson, has acknowledged that “an international rules-based order...is in our best interests, and an effective multilateral system is the surest way to get there”.

If Australia means what it says about upholding the international order as a system of rules and norms that apply to all, it must find a better alternative to a system which locks people up without viable solutions at a heavy human and financial cost.

of situations. The growing problem of mixed movements and the expansion in transnational crime and people smuggling has seriously eroded Australia's commitment in this regard. Together they materially contributed to fuelling a different response, based on clear distinctions being made between the refugee problem and the asylum problem, so that persons who fled in large numbers to their neighbours were responded to as refugees while asylum seekers, including those with valid claims, who embarked on a boat journey further afield to Australia were called upon to rebut the presumption that they were illegal migrants.

Asylum seekers and migration control have become synonymous, with the preferred place for rights protection being outside the country's borders. Deterrence, including indefinite detention regimes, are now at the centre of an asylum policy which rests on laws from which reference to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees has been deleted.

In tandem, intake of refugees through resettlement programs has decreased and the settlement programs for regular arrivals have been cut back. The resettlement response to the Afghan situation does not stand up against that of comparable countries like Canada.⁴

National responses found their reflection in Australia's dealings on refugee challenges in the Asia-Pacific region. There was a nod towards regional cooperation arrangements, but the driver has been countering terrorism and transnational crime, not least through the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime which Australia co-chairs with Indonesia.

One cannot take issue with countering terrorism and crime, just not as the main driver of multilateral cooperation around refugees. Large

scale refugee arrivals in host countries, 80% of whom are in the developing world, bring with them huge burdens both calculable (financial costs) and incalculable (social harmony, security). Supporting refugees in their regions of origin to stabilise refugee populations and stop onward movements falsely assumes that you can corral humanitarian disasters, particularly in ecologically fragile, underdeveloped border regions, which lack infrastructure, are often politically unstable and minimally policed, and where there is already competition among local communities for scarce resources like land or water. There is fine line between responsibility sharing and responsibility shifting.

The current situation in Ukraine, which has seen some 3 million people flee the country with the UNHCR predicting this number could double in months, is an immediate opportunity for Australia to demonstrate its stated commitment to good humanitarian citizenship. Prime Minister Scott Morrison recently announced that in addition to financial contributions, the Government is currently preparing additional humanitarian support options "like programs we had for the Kosovars some years ago," i.e., the introduction of the 'Kosovar Safe Haven (Temporary) Visa' by the Howard Government in response to the 1999 Kosovo refugee crisis.

Australia's temporary protection arrangement for Kosovars became mired in problems caused by a failure to think seriously through the consequences of bringing people half-way round the world to enjoy temporary protection for an indeterminate duration without clear and agreed parameters for ending the program and the temporary protection in a manner fully respectful of the circumstances of the individuals impacted. If the 1999 temporary visa scheme is to be the model, the Government will have to carefully avoid the pitfalls which compromised the

generosity of that response, especially with respect to granting and cancelling visas, the rights of visa holders while in Australia, and the possibilities for their longer term resettlement in the country. Canada, for example, had agreed to couple the temporary protection they offered to Kosovars with the possibility of resettlement on a durable basis for those who could not or would not go back when circumstances might allow. This was not formally part of Australia's offer.

7. Re-thinking Refugee Policy

If Australia means what it says about upholding the international order as a system of rules and norms that apply to all, there is an immediate opportunity here for Australia to collaboratively participate in the global effort to respond to this huge outflow of people, unprecedented in recent times in a way which aligns its engagement with the lessons of the past, with capacity issues, but also the responses of other like-minded states.

As pressing is the need to find a better alternative to a system which locks people up without viable solutions at a heavy human and financial cost.

It is incomprehensible that refugees and asylum seekers can remain in indefinite detention, offshore, in hotels in Melbourne, or wherever, under Australia's watch. They should be released as an absolute priority. A fair onshore refugee status determination process which does not discriminate among refugee claimants by method of arrival should be reinstated.

If Australia's arrangement with Nauru is to continue, it should be comprehensively re-thought to ensure respect for due process, international responsibilities, and human decency, accepting that there will be some boat refugees who will be Australia's responsibility. The 1951 Refugee Convention must be reinstated as a central reference point.

A more generous humanitarian intake program should be put in place. The local narrative also needs to be turned around, given a factual, less emotive base, to promote understanding not further obfuscation about, and alienation of, refugees in the broader society.

A Summit of the Future is foreseen for September 2023. One outcome would be a Declaration on Future Generations. It can be but hoped, with the Federal election process now in train, that all contenders will take the time to familiarise themselves with Our Common Agenda and will commit to fully engage with it.

8. A Summit of the Future

Further to one of the Agenda's key proposals, a global Summit of the Future is foreseen for September 2023. One outcome would be a Declaration on Future Generations. The Federal election process is now in train. It can be but hoped that all contenders will take the time to familiarise themselves with *Our Common Agenda* and will commit to fully engage. In a reversal from recent past practice, the orientation should be as much towards the deliverables which the international system can expect from Australia as on what we can require from it.

The UN's *Our Common Agenda* Report

The report *Our Common Agenda* was adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly, including Australia, on 16 November 2021. At its heart is a belief in the criticality of improving the way countries cooperate to manage the world's common resources (oceans, land masses and space) and public goods like global health. The goal is to safeguard the planet and its resources for future generations. The Agenda contains recommendations which address a multiplicity of issues, from the big-ticket ones like climate change and loss of biodiversity, peace and disarmament, to the more micro-issues like coordination to reduce international tax evasion.



References

Endnotes

- 1 At a time when “the only certainty is more uncertainty”, countries must unite to forge a new, more hopeful and equal path, UN Secretary-General António Guterres told the General Assembly on Friday, 21 January 2022. In laying out his priorities for 2022, he observed, “We face a five-alarm global fire that requires the full mobilization of all countries,” - the raging COVID-19 pandemic, a morally bankrupt global financial system, the climate crisis, lawlessness in cyberspace, and diminished peace and security. He stressed that countries “must go into emergency mode”.
- 2 Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 15 November 2021 [without reference to a Main Committee (A/76/L.8/Rev.1 and A/76/L.8/Rev.1/Add.1)] 76/6. Follow-up to the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda”
 1. Welcomes, as a basis for further consideration by Member States, the submission of the rich and substantive report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda”, [A/75/982] as requested by Member States in the declaration on the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations.
 2. Calls upon the President of the General Assembly to initiate, under his overall guidance, a process of follow-up (para 4).
- 3 “First, we must work to ensure the multilateral system safeguards a rules-based order and hold accountable countries that would invade their neighbors, commit genocide, or proliferate dangerous weapons. Second, we must ensure human rights remain at the core of the UN system, standing up for the rights of vulnerable communities, improve the ability of the UN Human Rights Council to conduct meaningful inquiries, ensure that our digital future is free and open, and strengthen democracy at home and abroad. Third, we should make sure the UN and other international organizations are capable of responding to the challenges of today and tomorrow, including on climate, cyber, migration, AI, and global public health and pandemics. The work to re-engage the United States within our multilateral system will be a years-long project. We will need money from Congress. We will need to modernize our multilateral workforce. We will need ideas from the think tank community. And will need to partner in creative ways – working with the private sector, civil society, and state and local governments to see these goals through. We will need to ask tough questions, such as how do we ensure the Security Council and General Assembly don’t break down into Cold War-style stasis? How can the UN exercise principled leadership amongst the divergent values systems of its funders?” See Keynote Remarks delivered in December 2021 to a US-UN Re-Engagement Roundtable, convened, in Washington, by the Stimson Center, US Institute of Peace, Alliance for Peacebuilding, Refugees International and United Nations Association of the National Capital Area.
- 4 Canada recently offered a resettlement programme of 20,000 places, increased subsequently by a further 20,000 places, outside the regular intake programmes, to Afghans fleeing violence and persecution following the Taliban takeover. Australia’s offer was of 3000 places, to come from its already agreed humanitarian quota.

Governing During Crises Series

Governing During Crises is a research theme established by the School of Government at the University of Melbourne. The series seeks to develop our understanding of governing in the face of different types of crisis, at a time when Australia has recently faced the bushfire crisis, is currently addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, and faces even larger and longer-term challenges including climate change.

This Policy Brief series aims to distil academic research into policy analysis and clear recommendations, drawing on the cutting-edge research taking place at the School of Government and the University of Melbourne more broadly, as well as the School of Government's extensive global networks. Selected briefs will be produced in collaboration with the COVID-DEM project (www.democratic-decay.org), which examines how the pandemic is affecting democracy in Australia and worldwide.



Author

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In this Policy Brief the author has benefited from work she is currently co-authoring with John Langmore in relation to the UN's Common Agenda and its implications for Australia. Mr Langmore is a professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne and is currently Chair of the Board for the Initiative for Peacebuilding at the University of Melbourne.

The author is grateful to Hannah Irving for her assistance in producing this Policy Brief.

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