

## International Cooperation in Global Commons: Ensuring Global Stability?

- ASHEER SHAH<sup>1</sup>

If one considers Alfred Wegener's continental drift theory, the Earth was a supercontinent, an undivided common landmass. Through the passage of time, miraculous actions took place and divided the continent into the seven continents that we see today. The miraculous activities were successful in splitting the landmass but unsuccessful in splitting the global commons. Outer space, Antarctica, Atmosphere, and High Seas are all global commons. The idea of global commons is simple, like public goods in economics. It can be used and exploited by anyone. One difference that prevails is that these commons were not provided by states but provided to the states. In the case of global commons, the earth is the state, and the states are the citizen of the world. Public goods are governed by state laws, which the citizens abide by. Global commons are governed by Earth through its natural laws without the existence of any documented policies for the states. In the given situation, where no laws or policies exist, who will govern the global commons and how will they govern the global commons are among the questions that erupt when discussing the matter. What approach best suits the case of global commons, and is there any way beyond cooperation in the paradigm of global commons, is an intriguing aspect to explore.

In this commentary, I will highlight the existing practice of laws and policies, if any, in the global commons. My aim will also be to nurture the level of existing cooperation or conflict among states and stakeholders regarding the commons. It would be interesting to bring into discussion the evolution of a new global commons, virtual reality. The metaverse, the digital world and cyberspace is shaped in a borderless manner, bringing the non-state actors into the greater image of shaping policies around the world. I will conclude the commentary by emphasising the idea of the '*global village*' by Marshall McLuhan.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>McLuhan, M. and B. R. Powers. 2007. "The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century." New York: Oxford University Press.

## *Governance of Global Commons: Literary Analysis*

Ostrom et al. analysed the vitality of institutional diversity, emphasising cooperative measures when dealing with Earth's vast resources, such as marine ecosystems, international water, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> The study described four types of property rights systems of governance. The first refers to open access, where no system exists, allowing everyone to exploit and use the resources. This open access system is similar to the economic principles of public goods like parks and lakes and is the rule currently existing in the global commons. The second is group property, where the idea is simple. A group of people controls and governs the resources and is entitled to exercise exclusion powers on others. This policy is irrational to adopt for the global commons because of its vast territory. The third and fourth types are individual and government properties, which are also not feasible in the case of global commons.

Several challenges persist when governance tools are deployed in the global commons paradigm. One of the core challenges of implementing governance mechanisms in the global commons is the number of stakeholders. Numerous countries operate and access the global commons. Establishing or introducing policies is complicated due to stakeholders' vast portfolios of preferences.

Since there are numerous actors, there are numerous cultures. Numerous cultures refer to individual traditions and exploiting nature. Hence, another challenge in the global commons is cultural diversity. A particular culture might aim to preserve an ecological or marine site, whereas another group might aim to exploit the areas using high-tech machinery. The conflict of interest will be a great factor in developing policies for the global commons.

Following the diversity of stakeholders and their cultures, the complications of interlinked global commons exist. For instance, the rules of the seas will affect the fisheries industry. A certain policy might affect the wave of fish into local territories. Furthermore, due to the globalist nature of the commons, unanimous decisions are a must. What complicates the discussion is that the global commons are our only reserves. Experimentation of governance can head towards disastrous outcomes for the planet Earth.

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<sup>3</sup>Ostrom, E., J. Burger, C. B. Field, R. B. Norgaard, and D. Policansky. 1999. "Revisiting the Commons: Local Lessons, Global Challenges." *Science* 284 (5412): 278-282. doi:10.1126/science.284.5412.278. [www.scopus.com](http://www.scopus.com).

## Solving the paradox of commons

*“It is in the interest of all mankind that Antarctica shall continue to be used forever for peaceful purposes and shall not become the scene or object of international discord.” - The Antarctic Treaty, 1961.*










**Picture: Frontage Theory Antarctic Claims**

Source: Mapped: Visualizing Territorial Claims in Antarctica (visualcapitalist.com)

Antarctica, one of the global commons, has been governed cooperatively since 1959 through the Antarctic Treaty.<sup>4</sup> The Antarctic Treaty was first signed by the United Kingdom in 1959 and later by Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Chile, France, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, the United States of America and the former Soviet Union. It is the first and true evidence of international cooperation in the global commons.

The Antarctic Treaty System (ATS) previously had only 12 members; currently, the Treaty has 55 countries. The Treaty has further adopted four conventions since it was brought into force. The agreed measures for protecting faunas and floras were adopted in 1964, aiming to secure the birds and mammals of Antarctica and their natural habitats. In 1972, the Treaty adopted the convention to conserve the Antarctic seals and to stop the sealing industry from exploiting and killing in Antarctica. The Convention on Conservation of Antarctic Marine Resources was adopted in 1982 to regulate and limit fishing activities in the area. Lastly, the Treaty adopted Environmental Protection Protocol in 1998 to halt the extraction of minerals in Antarctica. The last protocol was tactical and diplomatic in nature, which will store peace, prosperity and cooperation in the region until 2048.

Territorial claims in Antarctica	Territory name	Area of claim
 Australia	Australian Antarctic Territory	3,663,915 mi <sup>2</sup> (5,896,500 km <sup>2</sup> )
 Norway	Queen Maud Land	1,677,702 mi <sup>2</sup> (2,700,000 km <sup>2</sup> )
 United Kingdom	British Antarctic Territory	1,062,171 mi <sup>2</sup> (1,709,400 km <sup>2</sup> )
 Argentina	Argentine Antarctica	908,194 mi <sup>2</sup> (1,461,597 km <sup>2</sup> )
 Chile	Chilean Antarctic Territory	776,874 mi <sup>2</sup> (1,250,258 km <sup>2</sup> )
 New Zealand	Ross Dependency	279,617 mi <sup>2</sup> (450,000 km <sup>2</sup> )
 France	Adélie Land	268,432 mi <sup>2</sup> (432,000 km <sup>2</sup> )

**Picture: Historical Antarctic Territorial claims**

Source: Mapped: Visualizing Territorial Claims in Antarctica (visualcapitalist.com)

<sup>4</sup>“How Is Antarctica Governed?” Discovering Antarctica, April 21, 2016. <https://discoveringantarctica.org.uk/how-is-antarctica-governed/>.

The Antarctica Treaty System can be utilised as a model when policymakers are governing the global commons. What is more interesting, except for Antarctica, all other global commons are already pushed to a breaking point. Plastic soups exist in the Pacific Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. Dhaka, Bangladesh, enlisted as the most polluted city in the world.

The existing governance pattern of Antarctica exists not completely without drawbacks or glitches. For instance, territorial claims have yet to be addressed through the treaty. Not addressing the topic does not solve the issue. If one looks at the Antarctic *scramble*, the territorial claims directly imply the new Westphalian world order. At present, the claims are not being pushed, and peace is persisting. However, the future is unprecedented and economic gains will remain unnurtured for how long is a question.

### **Redefining the global commons**

In my understanding, global common means a territory where no *imperialism* exists. No set of actors, groups of countries or unions dominate the fixed boundary, truly upholding the non-regulatory nature of living. This sort of structure requires pragmatic, rational and ethical thinking, thought processes and the mindset of the stakeholders. Sacrificing nature must be held by actors, if any, behind the steering of the ecosystem. It can be related to the prerequisites of democracy, one of the conditions being the efficient expertise of the decision-makers. Actors participating in the governance of the commons must be efficient in the governance practices, which on the other hand, will exclude some of the actors willing to participate but needing more qualifications. A sort of imperialistic structure develops. The structures are further tangled when one explores the new variance of global commons: the internet, the cyber world and technology (emphasising global financial systems). I provide a brief rationale for considering the three elements as global commons.

Anyone can access the internet anywhere, anytime in the world. No particular barrier exists in this domain, or where ever this regulation exists, it will have barriers in every aspect (for example North Korea). In general, the internet, cyberspace and technological advancements are open-ended factors around the globe. For instance, Facebook connects everyone just like a global village defined by Marshal McLuhan. Then again, there is China, where Facebook is inaccessible. In Social Science, a particular phenomenon can and will forever exist in parallel lenses and never uphold a singular understanding.

Technological advancement is a crucial breakthrough in reshaping the imperialistic global culture. The global financial market is explicitly dominated mostly by the dollar and other currencies like the euro, sterling and many more. Johan Galtung defines this as financial imperialism, where the centre countries dominate the peripheries and semi-peripheries.<sup>5</sup> All goodwill to technology that today new forms of transactions are taking place through central bank digital currencies, cryptocurrencies and even non-dollar traditional currency transactions. China and Russia just met to discuss the intra-trade transactions in yuan. Russia is seeking loan repayments from Bangladesh in the ruble. Complexity arises when my curious mind questions, will these breakthroughs empower the periphery states defined by Johan Galtung or transit the semi-peripheries into new centre states?

Nonetheless, the global commons must be governed and addressed systematically, efficiently and pragmatically. Upholding such mindset, I am applying the theory of supranationalism in my last header.

### **Supranational governance structure in the Global Commons**

Governing the commons will require a significant *supranational* organisation consisting of expert groups from each state. The supranational organisation will have two departments: *Subject Expert Panel* and *Policy Expert Panel*. Each country of the world will assign a group of researchers, scientists, and policy and negotiation experts for the departments of the supranational entity. The subject expert panels will provide status quo, data and forecast to the expert policy panel. Following the analysis and evaluation of the information acquired, the policy expert panel will develop governing practices of the global commons aiming for sustainability.

It is the core value of the entity to be constructed of experts, researchers, scientists, scholars, negotiators, policy specialists and elites. Political motifs, gains, objectives and goals cannot be associated with the global commons. Only then will the decision-making correctly address the global commons. In situations of policy dilemmas, the expert policy panel can either follow unanimous or majority voting.

The supranational entity will require funding from the states. This particular factor holds the unique power to shape the objectives and goals of the entity. For instance, United Nations (UN)

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<sup>5</sup>Galtung, J. 1971. "A Structural Theory of Imperialism." *Journal of Peace Research* 8, no. 2: 81–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234337100800201>.

is dominated by donor countries. Based on former experiences, a funding mechanism is a must, which will not just aim for equality but equity. The mechanism will distribute the annual operating budget of the entity among all the states based on their gross domestic product (GDP). Whatever percentage of the global GDP a state is accountable for will incur that equivalent percentage of the supranational entities' budget. And, since the organisation will be a supranational body, the governing body will not be accountable to any head of the state but rather to an auditing group.

Single or multiple states always dominate global, international and intergovernmental organisations. Only a supranational entity can ensure good governance of the global commons, given it is outer space, Antarctica, or the high seas. The ultimate goal is to establish a territory defined as a global village.

### **Conclusion**

The world is infested with chaos, rivalry, power game and scrambling. Different parts of the world are constantly exploited, used and shaped for the benefit of humans. One must understand that whichever actions we aim to take in this world is possible today because Earth is sustaining as our home, as our arena, as our playground. Whatever approach we take towards the world, exploitive or enriching, first, the Earth will have to exist and must continue to exist. We, humans, can only exploit Earth only if it exists in the solar system. There is no doubt that humans will reach Mars one day, all appreciating the unique mindset of Musk, but before that, we are stuck on Earth.

On account of such, we must sustain, foster, nurture and take care of some parts of Earth, the exact same way a mother nurtures her newly born. Given the current geographical borders and the geo-political spectrum, the global commons must be protected by heart, by any means. It is the argument for the survival of Earth, nature and, most importantly, humans. It only emphasises humans' selfish characteristics, nurturing Earth for our survival. We must unite, cooperate and act accordingly, excluding any political and economic goal, with the sole aim of survival.