PARIS – We are little more than a decade into the twenty-first century, but a terrible precedent has already been set: all of the major international negotiations and cooperative efforts initiated in this century thus far have ended in failure.

With regard to the environment, the fight against global warming has come to a standstill, with the United Nations’ last three annual climate-change conferences, in Copenhagen, Cancún, and Durban, failing to renew the Kyoto Protocol.

Similarly, although last year’s conference in Paris to review the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and subsequent nuclear-disarmament talks between US President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in New York, made positive inroads, the results were a far cry from ensuring a future free of nuclear arms.

The list goes on: events in the Middle East have killed all prospects for peace in the region; the measures taken to aid global recovery – including regulatory improvements, such as separation of retail and investment banking, elimination of tax havens, and cracking down on rating agencies’ conflicts of interest – have been feeble; and the last two G-20 meetings have been gross failures.

The causes and parties responsible for these failures are diverse, but there is one constant: in recent years, nationalistic, even xenophobic, rhetoric has intensified dramatically. Patriotism and sovereignty are now stressed ever more insistently, while expressions of distrust of “others” have appeared everywhere – even in the Arctic Ocean, where Canada and Russia are engaged in what one expert has called “Cold War lite.”

The consequence of the international community’s increasing balkanization is that consensus-oriented conferences tend to end in impasses. These failures do not mean that most people around the world do not see eye-to-eye on these issues, or that they are unprepared to make timely, even courageous, decisions. Unfortunately, ordinary people’s sentiments rarely triumph when governments meet.
The conclusion is unavoidable: it is the quest for absolute consensus – unanimity – that is undermining progress on major global concerns. Consensus-oriented negotiations can work when a treaty is being struck between victors and vanquished – the strong and the weak. After World War I, the Allied Powers tried to promote international peace by creating the League of Nations. But the League’s unanimity requirement effectively gave all members veto power, and the United States Senate’s refusal to ratify its Covenant condemned the effort to a premature death.

The League’s abject failure to prevent World War II resulted in a second effort to build international comity after the fighting ended. The new UN was much better structured than its predecessor, and the world gained an institution that fosters debate and deliberative decision-making much more vigorously than is possible in consensus-driven organizations.

But a shift that contradicts the UN Charter’s spirit has occurred. In an effort to avoid resolutions or measures that expose their disagreements, the world’s great powers have adopted the habit of organizing worldwide debates and conferences that revert to decision-making by consensus.

According to the UN Charter, the primary focus of the General Assembly and the Security Council is to promote international security. But the UN has become the “general operator” for global conferences, acting as administrator and furnisher of services and facilities (such as locations and interpreters) for events that are not officially part of its core operations. As a result, the UN is increasingly taking the blame for these conferences’ failures, which not only leave the issues unresolved, but also undermine the UN’s authority.

The Rio+20 conference, which will examine the progress made since the first “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro 20 years ago, will take place there this June. Designed with a wide range of objectives, including a focus on both the green economy and sustainable development, the conference seems destined to fail. Without consensus, no action can be taken, and consensus will be impossible.

Of course, there is a chance that the world will recognize its quandary at Rio. If a majority of the countries present dares to declare that demanding consensus is equivalent to enforcing paralysis, and if they insist upon following the voting procedures enshrined in the UN Charter, we could see enormous progress.

Global warming and economic crisis are threatening international security. This alone justifies referring these issues to the UN General Assembly, which, unlike the Security Council, knows no veto power. A strong declaration and a call for binding measures to address these issues would then be possible.
The economic and environmental crises before us are too urgent to play games that give the appearance of international unanimity. It is past time to address not only global warming and the economic crisis, but also the international decision-making process. Why not start with Rio?

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