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# The United Nations system and the future

BRIAN URQUHART\*

The effectiveness of the United Nations is mainly determined by two factors, the international climate and the way governments choose to use the organization. There is now an extraordinary change in both of these conditions. We hear no more talk of the 'evil empire' and, instead of Soviet negative rhetoric and blocking tactics, there is a veritable cornucopia of neo-internationalist Soviet proposals. President Reagan, addressing the General Assembly on 26 September 1988, said, 'A change that is cause for shaking the head in wonder is upon us . . . the prospect of a new age of world peace. The United Nations has an opportunity to live and breathe and work as never before.'

If I had been writing about the United Nations two years ago I should probably have adopted a somewhat wistful tone of 'What might have been' and 'What on earth can we do now?' I might have mentioned Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar's 1982 annual report on making the United Nations, and especially the Security Council, work better and have said that it was a pity that the Security Council had been unable to act on it. I would have referred to the necessity of unanimity and of East-West cooperation in the face of threats to the peace. I would have spoken of the dream, apparently never to be realized, of a collegial Security Council rising above national preoccupations to fight for the common good. I would have referred to the desirability of pre-emptive international action to prevent disputes developing into conflicts. I would have extolled the desirability of fact-finding to establish the real situation in incipient conflicts. I would have suggested means of strengthening peace-keeping. I should have urged that governments not rest on their laurels when they had managed to agree on the text of a resolution, but follow up that resolution with all the support necessary to make it a reality. I would have urged the diminishing of rhetoric and the use of the United Nations less for confrontation and more for cooperation on difficult problems. I might have expressed regret that in an age of revolutionary change, old political relationships and problems had so far prevented the recognition of the undoubted fact of interdependence.

In other words, I should have pronounced a lament for 40 years of tiptoeing around the Cold War, and especially around the obstructions of Soviet policy. I might have tried to revive my own spirits and those of the audience by talking of what had been achieved by people simply doing what they could in an inclement international climate and impossible political conditions, and of how it was surprising that so much had been achieved.

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This article is based on the 14th Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, given in September 1988 in memory of the distinguished international relations scholar Martin Wight, author of *Power politics* (London: RIIA, 1946) and *Systems of states* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), who died in 1972.

Now, by contrast, there seems to be a sudden, dazzling outburst of common-sense among governments. This trend seems to date from early 1987 when the permanent members of the Security Council got together, at the suggestion of the Secretary-General, to consider what could be done about the Iran–Iraq War. General-Secretary Gorbachev, in his famous article on Soviet international policy which appeared in *Pravda* and *Izvestia* in September 1987, helped to set the tone. ‘Why are we so persistent in raising the questions of a comprehensive system of international peace and security? Simply because it is impossible to put up with the situation in which the world has found itself on the threshold of the third millennium—in the face of a threat of annihilation, in a state of constant tension, in an atmosphere of suspicion and strife, spending huge funds and quantities of work and talent of millions of people only to increase mutual mistrust.’<sup>1</sup>

Since that time, Soviet representatives have produced a continual spate of ideas. What is remarkable is not so much the novelty of such ideas, many of which have often been put forward by people in the West, but the fact that the Soviet Union has put them forward at all. They have urged, for example, a more active and independent role for the Secretary-General. They have suggested a far greater degree of international verification in different areas of activity. They have suggested that peace-keeping would be greatly strengthened by central training and logistics institutions. They have extolled the merits of independent fact-finding, something that they have bitterly opposed in the past. They have suggested the resurrection of the Military Staff Committee, consisting of the Chiefs of Staff of the five permanent members, which has been more or less inactive since 1946, but was originally hailed as the ‘teeth’ of the United Nations. They have suggested that the purely intergovernmental institutions of the United Nations system are not enough and that they should be paralleled by some form of non-governmental system representing the people of the world. They have talked about the desirability of an international intellectual commission to give a voice in world affairs to the world’s most creative people.

In listening to all this one sometimes feels like pinching oneself, but there is no question that the international climate has become clement in a way that it has not been since 1945. On top of this the countries of the Third World, after all the rhetoric and radicalism of the 1970s and early 1980s, have become pragmatic, unideological, cooperative, mature and constructively self-critical. The net result is that conditions for international activity are more promising than at any time since 1945.

This great change has already had some practical results. Soviet forces have left Afghanistan under an arrangement negotiated by the United Nations. Iran and Iraq have ceased hostilities under a ceasefire agreement negotiated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations. The parties to the problem of Western Sahara have accepted in principle the Secretary-General’s proposal for a settlement. The leaders on the island of Cyprus have gone back to the negotiating table under the good offices of the Secretary-General. The problems of Namibia and Angola are on their way to a satisfactory settlement and the independence process for Namibia will shortly commence under United Nations supervision. There are a number of negotiations going on in order to try to deal with the problems of Cambodia and its neighbouring states.

1. *Pravda*, 17 Sept. 1987.

**Negotiation and consensus: the balance sheet so far**

Is it really time to proclaim the 'renaissance' of the United Nations? This seems to be the mood in some sections of the media which in the past have not been slow to pronounce the United Nations dead. It would be wise, I think, to react rather cautiously to the current developments. The UN, although the media seldom remember it, has had periods of enthusiasm and success before, under Dag Hammarskjöld in the 1950s, for example, not to mention the euphoric atmosphere which attended the organization's birth in 1945. As late as 1973 the UN's actions in bringing an end to the Middle East war were hailed as a vindication and a great success for the organization. In fact, a sober assessment of the UN's 43-year history would show a lot of positive developments—developments, incidentally, which have prepared the ground for the present positive situation. The peaceful conclusion of the process of decolonization, the development of human rights as a priority item on the agenda of the international community, the massive promulgation of international law, are all general developments of permanent importance. Attention to great global problems such as the environment, population, food, migration, water and many others have been a notable feature of the United Nations system's business since the early 1970s. The negotiation of the Treaty on the Law of the Sea is an outstanding example of the capacity of the international community to tackle an immensely complex problem by negotiation and consensus. It is to be hoped that the ideological objections to the Treaty by the three powers which have held out against ratifying it—the United States, Britain and West Germany—may soon be overcome. There have been great strides in international action for disadvantaged groups of people, in disaster relief and in dealing with problems of refugees. The international machinery on the drug problem is now being mobilized as never before.

On the peace and security side, although the Security Council has hitherto been unable to function to its full power as envisaged in the Charter, effective methods of conflict control and negotiation have been improvised, and the Council has a long record of suggesting the comprehensive terms of settlement for a number of very difficult problems. The technique of peace-keeping, a complete innovation 30 years ago, has become an accepted practice. The new climate may well give it a chance to grow into a far more broadly effective institution.

All in all the international community, during 40 very difficult years, has demonstrated some of the possibilities of collective responsibility and of cooperative management of global problems. And we are now beginning to reap the harvest of all this hard and mostly unacclaimed work.

The Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, summed up the present juncture well in his current annual report on the work of the organization:

The developments of the past months have not been fortuitous. They are the result of diplomatic activity sustained over the years by the United Nations and intensified recently. On matters of international peace and security, the principal organs of the United Nations have increasingly functioned in the manner envisaged in the Charter. The working relationship of the Security Council and the Secretary-General has rarely if ever been closer. I am thankful for this as also for the recent improvement in international relations at the global level that has opened new possibilities for successful action by the world body. Multilateralism has proved itself far more capable of inspiring confidence and achieving results than any of

its alternatives. Millions around the world have had a gratifying demonstration of the potential of the organization and the validity of the hopes they place in it.<sup>2</sup>

### **Back to basics: what must be done**

I do not think the time has yet come for too much self-congratulation either by governments or by international organizations. In fact, we are just getting in sight of the starting-line on which we all believed we were in 1945. The conditions are unprecedentedly favourable, but there is still a very long way to go.

Let me illustrate what I mean by posing a number of questions. On the peace and security side, for example, will the Security Council be able, as the custodian of international peace, to inspire enough confidence for nations to entrust their security to it rather than going it alone in often disastrous unilateral adventures? Will the renunciation of force in international relations and the peaceful settlement of disputes—two basic principles of the United Nations Charter—become the reality in governmental policies? Will the new climate affect really difficult problems such as the Israel–Arab Palestinian problem? What about the original Charter concept of collective security leading progressively to disarmament? In 1945, after six years of world war, this seemed eminently sensible, but we don't hear very much about that concept today. Is it still a long-term objective of governments? Is the steady progress towards the rule of law in international affairs still a basic objective of the governments of the world? What effective role will the United Nations be able to play in the vast economic and social problems which all countries, in different degrees, now face?

These are some of the questions we need to ask before we get carried away by the current tide of optimism. It seems possible that the necessity for collective responsibility for international peace and security is now coming into focus, but it would certainly be premature to entertain the notion that war as an instrument of international policy is going out of style.

### **Future tasks**

Such a development would be eminently desirable and might be coming about just in time, for while we are resting in the new sunshine of global detente, a new and mighty range of problems looms before us. The broad range of *economic problems* facing the world, and especially the developing countries, are formidable enough in themselves. Debt, burgeoning poverty and population, and rampant social decay are only some of the phenomena which, if not checked and remedied, can only produce increasing instability. *Environmental problems* are intricately related to other developments, and we now appear to be facing a serious man-made threat to the sustaining balance of nature which has preserved us since the dawn of time. The very concept of international security must now be expanded to include the environmental security of the planet itself.

Most of these so-called global problems can only be tackled by major cooperative efforts by all the governments and peoples of the world. Such efforts will require energy and resources on a scale which demands that conventional conflicts, which have

2. Javier Perez de Cuellar, *Report of the Secretary-General on the work of the organization* (New York: United Nations, 1988), p. 3.

hitherto absorbed so much of our attention and resources, be treated far more effectively by the international community. Governments have not only to accept the fact of interdependence—that much overused word—but also to act on it, and act cooperatively. Some Soviet representatives have said that this is a basic reason for the radical change in Soviet international policy. Surprisingly enough, at the moment we seem to be in a better position to move ahead on the peace and security side of international life than on the economic or environmental side.

The current mood of optimism may serve to remind both governments and the public that we already have a basic international framework in the United Nations, its specialized agencies and programmes, and in the various regional organizations. It may not be the best or most effective design, but it is a basis, and it is the only one we have. We now need to get this machinery going, and to improve, revitalize and modify it as the situation so obviously demands.

### Updating the UN machinery

What sort of changes are required to update the international machinery and make it more effective? This is a vast subject, and the following suggestions are merely random samples.

The mechanism of the *Security Council* has already undergone an extraordinary transformation, with the permanent members cooperating on a consistent basis in considering the problems before the Council, something that they have not done since the UN's inception. The original idea of a collegial Security Council dealing with problems of peace and security for the common good, rather than on the basis of individual national interest, now for the first time seems to be a possibility. I mentioned earlier various suggestions that it may now be possible to make use of the *Military Staff Committee*. The Military Staff Committee was to consist of the Chiefs of Staff of the five permanent members, and to assist the Council not only on military and enforcement matters, but also on general questions such as disarmament. The international climate may now be right for the revitalization of this body. It could perhaps also be used for new tasks such as providing a more consistent and adequate logistical basis for United Nations peace-keeping operations, which have hitherto tended to be conducted on a logistical shoestring of improvisation and good luck.

*Peace-keeping* itself has taken on a new lease on life. This invaluable technique requires the full support of the Security Council, the cooperation, however grudging, of the parties in conflict, and a rigorously correct use and direction of the operation. Adequate funds and logistical support and the availability of suitable troops are also vital. The new climate may make it possible to enhance these essential prerequisites as never before. If so, peace-keeping may take its place as a historic step towards the principle of non-violence in international relations.

It may be possible now to *change the approach to the negotiation of difficult problems*. Hitherto negotiations have tended to start from zero, with long discussions of procedure and to degenerate into counterproductive bargaining. If a benevolent international consensus could set forth the outline of the final objectives of negotiations on difficult problems, it might be possible to structure the negotiations themselves in a more focused and positive way.

It is worth considering why the notion of *international mediation* has been largely moribund since the mid-1960s. For example, Count Bernadotte, who was assassinated in 1948, was the last person to have the temerity to put forward a comprehensive plan

for a settlement of the Palestine problem. In fact this cost him his life. Perhaps the climate is ripe for international mediation to take the stage once again.

The introduction of the rule of law has always been regarded, in theory at any rate, as a desirable basic development in international relations. One way to encourage this development would be a far greater tendency by governments to bring justiciable cases of international disputes to the *International Court of Justice* instead of letting them become political footballs between countries. It would follow, of course, that governments would get into the habit of abiding by the findings of the International Court.<sup>3</sup>

In the Law of the Sea Treaty, the Seabed Authority provides a *model for developing international authority* over important parts of humanity's common heritage. The Seabed Authority has been objected to in some countries, including the United Kingdom, as a quasi-socialistic measure. On the other hand, it is unquestionably clear that a far greater degree of international management and authority is going to be required if humanity's common heritage is not to be recklessly expended in a way which will bequeath to our grandchildren a series of irreversible problems. This is a debate which should be urgently pursued.

The problems now facing humanity require more than a routine diplomatic or political reaction. If we are to hope to solve them and restore the word 'progress' to our vocabulary, intellect and technology will have to be mobilized to work in tandem with intergovernmental organizations. The European Commission has shown the way in which this can be done on a regional scale. It would seem that the international conditions may now allow a far greater degree of *intellectual and technological cooperation* in the world at large than has been practicable hitherto.

The idea of a parallel *public and non-governmental international network* to push for support for international programmes, to bring non-governmental concerns to the fore and to raise public consciousness is by no means a new idea. The United Nations has run a number of conferences where there was a parallel non-governmental conference, in the environment conference in Stockholm in the early 1970s, for example, and in the conference on the status of women in Nairobi in the early 1980s. The setting up of such a parallel network on a broader basis might well give international organizations the vitality, the human factor and the responsiveness which they have hitherto tended to lack.

The strains of the East-West relationship have hitherto posed major obstacles to *good organization and administration* in the United Nations system. To take only one example, the political conditions have made it impossible hitherto to consider whether the Secretary-General might have one or two deputies to relieve the enormous burden of a job which is, in fact, three or four full-time jobs. The objection has been that it was difficult enough to get general agreement on one top international civil servant, and to get agreement on more than one would be politically impossible. It seems conceivable now that this obstacle to good leadership and organization may have been at least significantly reduced.

These are just a few of the practical possibilities which may now be opening up. There are certainly many more, but to get tangible results will require a great deal of work. It will also require leadership of the highest order and commitment by governments to principles and to long-term goals. A new degree of consistency and

3. Since this lecture was given, the United States has responded positively to Soviet suggestions on greater use of the International Court of Justice.

common sense in using international organizations will also be required. Only better and more flexible organization and innovative ideas will provide the international capacity to adjust with success to the enormous changes that are now taking place worldwide.

Inevitably, such an adjustment will cut across national sovereignty and the short-term interests of nations. The question is whether a sense of collective responsibility will overcome such obstacles and make progress possible. Such advances will require a far greater involvement of an informed public and a far higher level of intellectual stimulus than has been the case until now. If we are to go forward to a successful readjustment of our international system we need to involve the Martin Wights of this world as well as politicians, diplomats and technocrats.

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In the brief euphoria of 1945, the United Nations was conceived of as a sort of *Pax Victoriosa*. Looking back we can see that much of the orientation of the organization was a retrospective attempt to deal with the problems of the 1930s in a way in which governments had significantly failed at the time. Unfortunately the political conditions quickly soured, and what had seemed a dream about to be realized was soon forgotten or derided as an unrealistic flight of postwar idealism.

After 43 very hard years of revolutionary turmoil and change there is a new international atmosphere and a new chance, but the basic problem remains the same. Ralph Bunche identified it in 1946: 'Building an international order in which freedom, justice, and mutual respect shall prevail is a slow and tortuous business. With nations, as with people, organized effort is needed to induce them to live and get along together in community.'<sup>4</sup>

We have a new opportunity, which is also a tremendous challenge. I hope that the organized effort which Bunche mentioned can at last be freed from the cynicism and flat-earthism about international organizations and international cooperation which has been so notable in the past. What is needed is a period of measured and well informed enthusiasm. We are moving in the right direction; but almost everything else remains to be done.

4. Ralph Bunche, 'Fundamental freedoms and non-self-governing peoples', address 1 May 1946 to the Biennial Assembly of Methodist Women, Columbus, Ohio.