

UN Reform : Why has it stalled, and what can be done about it?

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In Europe we have recently been commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the end of the Cold War. And, for all the benefits that have flowed from those two events, we have been brought up against the reality that they did not somehow, miraculously, usher in a new world order but rather something closer to a new world disorder. In place of the single, existential threat to the whole world from a nuclear exchange between the super powers and the frozen certainties of Cold War diplomacy, we now, all of us on a world-wide basis, face a whole range of new challenges and threats - from extremes of poverty, from pandemic diseases, from terrorism, from the spread of weapons of mass destruction, from failing and failed states, from climate change, from energy and food security issues - many of which would not, in the past, have been classified as security problems properly speaking at all but which we now realise could critically affect both our security and our prosperity. And we also need to recognise that not one of those issues can be effectively handled without collective action internationally, often on a global basis.

But the other aspect of reality which should have been brought home to us by events over the last few years is that our collective efforts to meet these threats and challenges have not been anything like as effective as they should have been, that the multilateral institutions on which we have come to rely for working out solutions, the UN prominent among them, have been under-performing. The brief unipolar moment which followed the end of the Cold War when the US was the only super-power left standing, has passed, unlamented; we live now in a multipolar world in which all the different players, including the new emerging powers, among whom Brazil is prominent, are as yet uncertain of the roles they wish to play and of how best to pursue that blend of protecting their national interests and of furthering the collective interests of mankind without which disorder is likely to become endemic and the objective of a rules-based international community will slip further from our grasp. We have a stalled world trade negotiation, a climate change conference which fell well short of what is needed, an eroding nuclear non-proliferation regime, a world economy and financial system which is still only convalescent after a near-death experience. We are bad at preventing states failing; and at restoring them sustainably when they do fail. Human rights abuses are still far too prevalent and make a mockery of the fine words to which we all subscribe at international conferences. The Millennium Development Goals shimmer in the distance, like a mirage.

So, what do we need to do to remedy these failings? How does UN reform fit into this picture? What role can Brazil, an emerging power, hope to play? First a couple of health warnings. It is an illusion to suppose that the shortcomings in our collective international performance can simply be remedied by a few institutional fixes, by the creation of a new institution here, the radical reform of an old one there, a change in the weighting of votes, without achieving at the same time some kind of a broad consensus on the policies we want these reformed institutions to implement. It is of course equally an illusion to suppose that consensus on policy outcomes can be achieved and put into effect without institutional change to ensure representativity and equity in the decision-making process. Institutional reform and policy consensus are really two sides of a single coin. The second health warning relates to the need to break away from the old categorisation of countries as either developed or developing. It is not just that these categories are to some extent, although not entirely, outdated; after all China, India, and for that matter Brazil, certainly have developed and developing

elements within their own economies. More importantly, however, the distinction between the two categories is no longer, if it ever was, a useful one in terms of securing balanced negotiated outcomes. The logic of this has been, rather belatedly, recognised in the establishment of the G20. And if the G20 is to become, as it is intended to be, the primary instrument for the coordination of international economic policies, and not just a succession of photo-opportunities, then the way in which it bridges the old division between developed and developing countries will be its trademark characteristic.

Turning now to the subject of UN reform, I think I can claim to be a true believer, having participated as a member of Kofi Annan's High Level Panel in 2003-4 which produced the most ambitious set of UN reform proposals put forward since the organisation was founded in 1945. But I also bear the scars from that experience and above all from the very modest amount of progress that was made in following up on recommendations. I would draw a couple of lessons from that experience. The first is that you do need to get the timing right. There was a case for making a major UN reform effort in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq War, but, with the benefit of hindsight, one can see that the wounds from that experience were too fresh and unhealed to make it easy to reach consensus; and the fact that the Secretary-General and his senior staff were immersed in the agonies of the oil-for-food scandal during the crucial period of the reform negotiations was another heavily negative factor. The second lesson is of broader application. I seriously doubt whether it is in fact wise to launch another system-wide UN reform campaign in the near future. There is a real risk of reform fatigue and overload setting in. And, while quite a number of the recommendations we made, and which were not followed up, are ideas whose time has since come, for example the setting up of the G20; or whose time may be about to come, for example the proposals for strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation regime, it is important to be aware of the damage done to the organisation's credibility and reputation by the appearance of failure. So I would favour myself a sectoral approach to UN reform, moving ahead on both policy and institutional reform in a particular area when the political conditions are propitious.

To take just one example of what I mean, let us look at climate change. While the Copenhagen Accord was a step forward, it fell well short of what will be needed if we are to check and then to reverse climate change. Those shortfalls relate both to substance, the extent of the limitations on carbon emissions, the machinery for ensuring technology transfer, the financial transfers needed to help developing countries achieve low carbon economies; but they also relate to the institutions needed to implement what is agreed, a legally binding settlement, the establishment of international monitoring and verification machinery if all the participants are to have confidence that the obligations will be equitably shared. Without such international machinery I very much doubt if the accord can be sustained; and the chances of getting a wider and deeper agreement at the Mexico Conference will be much less, if not minimal. Evidently a major effort will be needed to convince China of the need for such international monitoring and verification machinery. That is an area where Brazil, a country with a major stake in achieving a successful outcome at Mexico, could play an important role.

Clearly when one talks about UN reform one cannot avoid facing up to the Great White Whale of international diplomacy, the enlargement of the Security Council. Twice, in 1997 and then in 2004, attempts to reach agreement based on the creation of new permanent members failed. Failure on those two occasions was due to a multiplicity of

causes. China's relationship with Japan, the lack of enthusiasm for enlargement by Russia and the US, the problems of the African countries in agreeing on candidates for permanent seats, the strong opposition of a group of middle-ranking powers which could not aspire to permanent seats. Have these negative factors changed decisively since 2004? I rather doubt it. So, if there is to be a positive outcome to the negotiations, currently under way in New York, there may be a need to look again at the alternative approach put forward by the High Level Panel and Kofi Annan, the idea of a new category of longer-term, renewable members of the Security Council. I can well understand why such an approach will never be the first choice of a country like Brazil, whose case for permanent membership has, in the meantime, if anything, strengthened. And it would only make sense if it was recognised that this was only a transitional step along the road to a more definitive outcome. But I fear it may be the best that is practicable in the near term future.

One final institutional issue needs to be considered carefully, and that is the problem which has arisen out of the massive size of the UN membership of 192 and the difficulties this creates when one moves from debate of the sort which traditionally occurs in the General Assembly to the taking of decisions. We saw that problem coming close to shipwrecking the Copenhagen Conference on climate change. We have seen it, too, contributing to the deadlock in the Doha Round of trade negotiations, although that is not strictly speaking a UN matter. There are no simple solutions. The agreements we are talking about need to be global, or at least very nearly so, if they are to be effective. Could the main building blocks for a positive outcome to the negotiations be shaped up first in smaller groups such as the G20 while actual binding legal decisions were left to the whole membership? Or could majority voting be used, as it is in the General Assembly, to stop an agreement being prevented by a small group of spoilers? No doubt strong objections will be advanced against those and any other innovations. But we do surely need to consider the possible consequences of continuing deadlock at the level of the whole membership. That could well lead to agreements being reached among a smaller group, outside the UN framework. That would, I believe, neither be good for the UN nor for the search for global solutions to the global challenges we all face in the years ahead.