

Meeting the challenges of a multi-polar world

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It is more than twenty years now since the end of the Cold War stood many of the certainties of international diplomacy on their heads and invalidated many of the assumptions which had up to then guided the decisions of governments. And yet we are still not much clearer, either within each of the states which together constitute the international community or collectively between these states, what sort of world has taken its place and, every bit as important, what sort of world we would wish to see taking its place and which we should be working to bring about. For a brief period, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire in Central and Eastern Europe and the end of apartheid in South Africa, some believed that a new world order was, almost effortlessly, within our grasp. But that was not to be as peacekeeping disasters followed each other in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda, revealing the weaknesses of the systems we had in place for avoiding and coping with the failure of states. And a number of other threats or potential threats to international peace and security - from terrorism, from the proliferation of nuclear weapons, from climate change, from cyber attacks, and from a whole range of economic and social issues such as extremes of poverty, pandemic diseases and food security, which had never previously figured on the security agenda - began to surface and to demand global responses which the international community was ill equipped to provide. One could be forgiven for thinking that we were navigating through new world disorder, and not heading towards its opposite.

During that same period of twenty years or so we have seen the fortuitous emergence of the United States as the only world super-power left standing, and the waxing and rapid waning of a uni-polar world in which the United States decided unilaterally what was to be done or not to be done in many international crises requiring a wider response. Whether that period could have been extended had the Bush administration been less hubristic at the outset and had it made

less egregious blunders over Iraq we shall never know. But what is not seriously in doubt is that that period is now over and is not likely to return - that its return is not indeed the objective of the present US administration of President Obama; and that we are already living in and will, to a steadily increasing extent, have to come to terms with, a multi-polar world, with a number of the largest developing countries - Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa to mention a non-exhaustive list - elbowing their way to the top tables of the world and by their relative greater rate of growth than that of the main developed countries playing a much more significant role in the world economy. It is that multi-polar world and the challenges it faces on which I will seek to throw some light tonight.

First a few words about this addition, multi-polarity, to the lexicon of international diplomacy. It can, of course, mean many quite different things. It could signify a situation in which other major countries or groups of countries worked together to contest the predominance of the United States or of what is still loosely known as the West - this is the sort of pattern which, over several decades, the Non-Aligned Movement tried and failed to establish and which is perhaps pre-figured in the acronym BRICS, (the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) which have begun to hold meetings between themselves. It could, alternatively, mean a world where the big decisions were taken by the two biggest economies of the world, the US and China, cutting deals between themselves, which is often known as the G2. In my own view neither of those two models is likely to emerge as a predominant one, although elements of them will no doubt influence the debates and decisions in wider global forms. For all its decline relative to the main emerging nations, the United States and its allies in the developed world will remain critical players, militarily of course but also economically, financially and in many other ways, for the handling of the challenges the international community faces. To seek to organise responses to these challenges in opposition to them will be futile, a simple recipe for ensuring that global solutions to global problems do not emerge, and that all, often the developing countries to a greater extent than the developed ones, are

worse off as a result. As to the G2 I doubt whether either of the two principals, the US or China, will, for a whole range of political and economic reasons, want to be cast in that role or will be willing to cooperate systematically across the whole of the international agenda in the way that a G2 would require. So the definition of multi-polar on which I will focus is a much wider and looser one, that of a world which every day requires more solutions at a global level to common problems but in which there are more and different key players than there have been in the past, players who will inevitably, and whom it is in our interest that they should, be more directly and more effectively involved in the search for and shaping of the necessary responses.

What then are the main challenges which this multi-polar world in which we live now faces? There are plenty of them, that is for sure; and they are not easy to handle as we have already discovered to our cost in recent years. Not one of them can be effectively addressed by individual countries taking action on their own - and that goes even for the most powerful states in the world - nor can they be effectively addressed by only one or other regional groups of countries such as we have in the European Union. They all require action world-wide if the challenges are not to carry the day by default, inaction and divided counsels and if we are not all to be the poorer and the more insecure as a result.

Uppermost in most peoples' minds, particularly in the developed world, will be the financial crisis of 2008 and the economic consequences of it which are still with us and will be so for some years to come at least. The fact that that crisis did not so far lead to trade protectionism, to beggar-my-neighbour exchange rate changes and to massively high rates of unemployment leading to fundamental political destabilisation and war, as happened during the last crisis of this dimension in the 1930's, was largely due to the effective concertation of policy responses by the main world economies, both developed and developing, acting through the newly constituted G20. But we are far from being out of the woods yet. Unemployment is still rising

or is at unsustainably high levels in many countries and with that we can be sure that protectionist pressures will increase. The agenda set out at successive G20 meetings remains largely unimplemented. The prospect of further after-shocks, such as we have seen recently over Euro-zone countries' sovereign debt levels, is ever present. So if we are to ensure that proper precautions are taken against any repetition of the 2008 crisis that G20 agenda will have to be carried through in a much more determined and coherent way than is currently the case. And any valid exit strategy from the crisis will need to address the issue of trade policies which will re-start the motor of rising world trade that has done so much to drive rising levels of prosperity since the end of the Second World War. That is the case for taking up again the Doha Round of trade negotiations and carrying them through to a successful conclusion and one that, this time, genuinely benefits the developing countries. Bilateral free trade agreements have a role to play but they are no substitute for a rising tide of world trade which will lift all the boats.

But trade is by no means the only thing that needs to be done to help developing countries. Last month's UN Summit in New York should have served as a salutary reminder of just how far we, the developed countries, and our developing country partners are from achieving the Millennium Development Goals at the 2/3 mark we set for ourselves in 2000. On present policies and with present levels of resources we are simply not going to reach those targets by 2015. But is the renewed and redoubled engagement necessary going to be forthcoming? That is what the New York communiqué words say but will they be followed up by deeds? Already siren voices can be heard saying that priority in public spending must be given to the developed world's domestic needs. But that is surely a false argument. The developing world did not cause the crisis of 2008; and they can not afford to wait while we sort out problems which are, relatively, much less than theirs. There are legitimate concerns about the quality of aid and the purposes to which it is put; but those need to be addressed by tougher anti-corruption measures in both developed and developing countries, not by cutting back on aid volumes. This

is a field in which the European Union needs to give a lead and to do far more to bear down on its laggard members, such as France and Italy, which are falling down on the commitments entered into at the Gleneagles G8 Summit some years ago. In addition those countries such as China, India and Brazil which are rapidly making the transition from developing to developed status should be working to transfer the lessons they learned along that road to others less fortunate than themselves; and not simply indulging in a mercantilist rush to secure raw materials for their own needs.

Another potential victim of the financial and economic crisis through which we are passing is climate change policy. We should have no illusions; the Copenhagen Accord of last December, even if it is fully implemented by those who have subscribed to it, will not be sufficient to check and reverse the global trends which are leading us towards extremely dangerous and damaging developments in the world's climate. To do that there will need to be stronger and more far-reaching commitments; those commitments will need to be legally binding as they currently are not; and they will need to be independently and internationally monitored so that all can be assured that the playing field is relatively level. Again the idea that we can give climate change policies a lower priority while we sit out our domestic problems is a mistaken one. The evidence from the vast majority of scientists and economists - and it is pretty clear now that the excitement over what was called by the press "climate-gate" has not shifted the central scientific assessment of the risks we face from inaction - demonstrates that the longer we put off taking remedial action the greater the eventual cost, not just in money terms but in lives too and many of those in developing countries whose responsibility for the problems the developed world has caused is minimal. So it is high time to get back to the negotiating table with a sense of purpose and a determination to do better at Cancun this December. Here too the European Union needs to give a lead and to do so more effectively than it did in the run-up to and at last year's Copenhagen meeting. It needs to reach out to the other main world players including the developing world and to do something to fill the vacuum which risks being created

by the US Congress' failure to act in a timely manner to check carbon emissions in their own economy. Further down the road I believe myself that steps to create a minimum world price for carbon will be needed but that will be for a later stage in a negotiating sequence which will need to continue throughout the century ahead if we are to avoid disaster.

Security and development are inseparable partners. Without the first the second cannot be achieved; and without the second security problems are sure to arise. So, few things have been more damaging to the course of world stability and prosperity in recent years than the failure of the international community to get to grips effectively with the problem of failing and failed states. Over the last twenty years examples of such states have occurred in every continent - from the Solomon Islands to Afghanistan, to the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Haiti. There have been success stories, many of them UN peacekeeping success stories - in Namibia, Cambodia, Mozambique, El Salvador, Sierra Leone and Liberia, but there have also been terrible failures and the lack of collective preventive action even when it was quite clear that failure of a state loomed. And the consequences of state failure have been appalling - a haven for terrorists in Afghanistan, genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, piracy in Somalia, massive breaches of international humanitarian law in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo. So when one hears the arguments being marshalled against intervention to prevent or remedy state failure, and these voices are being heard more often in the wake of all the mistakes made in Iraq - which of course was not a case of state failure - and of Afghanistan, which was such a case, but which is proving very hard to handle, the question arises as to what the international community intends to do the next time a state slides towards or into failure. Are we going to pass by on the other side, arguing that it is just too difficult? Are we going to tolerate genocide or havens for terrorists? These are hard questions to answer and answering them often divides the international community. Five years ago the UN Reform Summit of September 2005 subscribed unanimously to a new international doctrine known as the "responsibility to protect" those whose states were either unwilling or unable to protect them themselves. Since then, with the

possible exception of Kenya, where the international community did help to bring the country back from the brink of anarchy and ethnic strife, those fine words have remained just that, words on paper. What is needed is to focus more on actions, not necessarily military or coercive actions, to help prevent state failure actually occurring rather than concentrating, as the debate has tended to do so far, on the highly contentious issue of military intervention after a state has failed. And we do surely also need to strengthen the UN's peacekeeping capacity in every possible way and to increase the support which the international community is prepared to give to regional peacekeeping. Because one consequence of what has happened in Iraq and Afghanistan is that there will not be much appetite for missions of that sort in the future. So, unless we are to stand idly and helplessly by we are going to need more operationally effective UN peacekeeping not less of it.

The relative success of last May's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference should not lull us into the belief that the coupled challenges of preventing further nuclear proliferation and of moving towards a world free of nuclear weapons has in some sense been settled. Far from it. The NPT, which has for nearly fifty years now been one of the cornerstones of international peace and security, remains under great stress. Should either of its two current challengers, North Korea and Iran, achieve a serious nuclear weapons capability and prove able to sustain it there is not likely to be a soft landing. Far more likely would be wider regional break-outs from the NPT regime, and that in two regions already prey to manifold tensions. There could be worse than that. So the continuing efforts to find a diplomatic path to rolling back those two countries' ambitions need full support even if the short term prospects do not look too promising. Just as important is that the recognised nuclear weapons states (China, France, Russia, the UK and the US) make good on their promises to move towards nuclear disarmament, as they failed to do when first committing themselves in 2000. The US and Russia have made a beginning with last year's treaty reducing the number of their strategic weapons. Much more needs to be done; the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty should be ratified; further

reductions of strategic weapons should be negotiated, with the other three joining in; a Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty is needed; and tactical nuclear weapons in Europe should be removed by both Russia and NATO; the prominence of nuclear weapons in the defence doctrines of all those who possess them needs to be reduced. That is a tough agenda, and the opposition in the US Senate to even the relatively modest strategic weapons reduction treaty shows just how difficult it will be to achieve. But the alternative of a world with substantially more nuclear weapons states than at present is not a more secure world. It is exactly the opposite.

Those are some of the global challenges that face this new multi-polar world in which we live. None of them will be fixed without a substantial degree of policy convergence among the principal players. But, equally, that will not be achieved unless the main international institutions on which we rely to deliver results are reformed and, where necessary, supplemented. Currently these institutions - the UN and its Security Council, the IMF, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation - are making pretty heavy weather, their governance structures are out of date and far from providing that degree of representativity and thus of legitimacy which are essential if they are to be fully effective. There needs to be an end to the marginalisation in decision-making of the new, emerging developing countries. That will require some sacrifices by the West, including us Europeans, who presently dominate these structures, but these sacrifices do need to be made if the institutions themselves are not to become of waning usefulness to all their members. So the leading developing countries need to be given a bigger say at the IMF and the World Bank and an opportunity to occupy their top management positions. The reform of the Security Council may need to pass through a transitional phase with a new category of longer-term, renewable members being added to the existing structure, but it does need to move ahead. The UN needs at least a fully-fledged agency to deal with the inter-linked issues of climate change and energy. And we do need somehow to break out of the tyranny of negotiating by consensus in bodies now containing one hundred and ninety two members which is what so nearly shipwrecked completely the Copenhagen conference on

climate change and this year's Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty's Review Conference. Doing so will be a highly sensitive issue. There will be a role, I believe, for bodies like the relatively newly-founded G20 to give momentum to the wider negotiations even if there can be no question of their taking legal decisions on behalf of countries not present. But, if the G20 is to achieve that role, it will need to become a more structured and systematic body than it has proved to be so far, almost certainly moving beyond its present remit as the principal coordinator of economic issues only. In that context a phasing out of the G8, whose continued usefulness now seems very much in doubt, could be a useful step.

In advocating these institutional changes one should not ignore the fact that the emerging developing countries will not necessarily be comfortable bed-fellows. Their agendas will in some cases be different from ours. They will not tamely accept Western leadership in everything we seek to do. But I do believe that it is only by giving those countries a serious amount of responsibilities in the handling of the main global challenges of today and tomorrow that we will be able to find the world-wide solutions that are so urgently required.

What is the place in all this for the Britain of 2010 where many eyes are turning inwards as the new coalition government grapples with the budget deficit? I would suggest that a mere glance at the massive agenda I have described is enough to demonstrate how foolish and short-sighted a policy of introspection would be. With all our troubles and financial constraints Britain remains in single figures in any global league table of the capacity to make a difference and that is true whether you are talking of trade or of aid or of investment or of the projection of power. Moreover as a leading member of the European Union we have the opportunity to put much more weight into the international scales than our own alone. So the decision to stand by our commitments on aid is welcome. We should remain an active and reforming member of the network of international organisations which is so crucial to our future, helping to bring the new emerging developing countries into a fuller place in their decision making. And above all we

should be working systematically, together with our European partners, for a rules-based international society which will be the best guarantee against any drift towards new world disorder.