

Trans-Atlantic Editors' Roundtable in Rome Spring 2005

The role of the United Nations in the 21st century

THE VIEW FROM *INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS*

In the March issue of *International Affairs* Gwyn Prins examines the significance of Kofi Annan's High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change.¹ In keeping with the journal's inclusion of articles providing practical policy recommendations, Prins suggests that the Panel's report is the most important strategic document to be published by the UN since 1945.

He puts the Panel's work into context, particularly the 2002–3 crisis over Iraq. Annan established the Panel in response to the failure of the second resolution, a resolution that was unnecessary given the achievement of 1441, and the bombing of the Canal Hotel housing the UN mission headquarters in Baghdad on 19 August 2003, which killed Sergio Viera de Mello. He states: 'it is quite premature to announce the death of the UN ... But its health is not good', and identifies the Panel's Report as the document which could secure the UN's future.

Prins believes that the plain-speaking quality of the Report makes the Panel's strategy more viable. The Panel discusses the current 'war on terrorism', for example, and suggests that in some instances this has corroded the very values terrorists target: human rights and the rule of law. It adds: 'in a world full of perceived potential threat, the risk of the global order ... is simply too great for the legality of unilateral preventative action ... to be accepted'. The Panel also raises the issue of HIV/AIDS: 'that Africa has borne the brunt of the HIV/AIDS pandemic raises the troubling question of whether international response would have been so slow if the disease had reduced life expectancy by 30 years in non-African countries'.

Prins commends the Panel's approach to problems inherent to the UN. There is no system explicitly designed to avoid State collapse and the slide to war or to assist countries in their transition from war to peace. Similarly, there is no capacity to identify countries which are under stress and risk sliding towards State collapse. The Panel goes beyond identifying problematic areas and recommends practical solutions. It proposes creating three interlinked organizations: a Peacebuilding Commission; a Peacebuilding Support office in the Secretariat; and a second deputy secretary general, responsible for peace and security matters.

¹ Gwyn Prins, 'Lord Castlereagh's return: the significance of Kofi Annan's High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change', *International Affairs* 81: 2, March 2005.

The Panel also tackles the issue of Security Council reform. This is a well-documented predicament: the present list of Permanent Members is outdated; none of them will surrender their status; the veto is archaic and cannot be abolished without the UN collapsing; countries such as Germany, Japan and India have legitimate aspirations to equal standing and so forth. It proposes two alternatives for expanding the Security Council and the criteria for membership. It stresses that privilege carries obligation, and preference for permanent or long-term seats should be given to 'those States that are among the top three financial contributors in their relevant regional area to the regular budget, or the top three voluntary contributors ... or the top three troop contributors'. Crucially, it asserts that this issue should not impede action in unrelated areas.

The Report emphasizes the case for collective security: 'No state, no matter how powerful, can by its own efforts alone make itself invulnerable to today's threats'. In essence, it is an exercise in brokerage: 'It is in every State's interests ... to cooperate with other States to address their most pressing threats, because so doing will maximise the chances of reciprocal cooperation to address their own threat priorities'.

Annan's term as Secretary General concludes at the end of 2006. As Prins remarks, his 'best legacy will have been secured if the radical, sensible, feasible reforms proposed by his panel can carry the UN—the only UN that we are likely to have or are likely to get—safely across the mountains into the new territories in which we now find ourselves.'

Given the Report's emphasis on collective security and its criticism of unilateral action, the state of 'international community' and the implications that this has for the future of the UN should be looked at. In the January 2005 issue of *International Affairs*, Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaz examine the condition of 'international community' after Iraq.² They consider this in the context of the future of the UN and the distancing of relations between the US and Europe. The Iraq crisis must be seen in the context of longstanding US–UN disputes. The arrival of the Bush administration intensified this crisis, not just because of specific US grievances against the UN, but because of the administration's general campaign against multilateralism. As Annan said in a speech to Harvard University, there is a 'crisis of solidarity' between the US and the UN.

In the period immediately around the invasion of Iraq, the tensions between the US and the UN reached their height. The quick defeat of Saddam's army marked an apex of both US self-confidence in unilateralism and its dismissal of the UN as irrelevant. Could the UN survive such alienation from the superpower?

This crisis passed quickly. The lack of any coherent US plan for the occupation and reconstruction of Iraq and the resistance to the US-led occupation forced the US to recognize that legitimacy was a central issue requiring UN involvement. Consequently the UN once again became an important forum for US legitimacy. Annan suggested that the US had found 'that it needed the unique legitimacy of the United Nations to bring into being a credible interim government in Iraq'.

² Barry Buzan and Ana Gonzalez-Pelaz, "'International community' after Iraq", *International Affairs* 81: 1, January 2005.

The UN is now involved in Iraq and, although it is too early to make a definitive assessment, it seems that the crisis between the US and the UN could be just one more on their list of differences. Buzan and Gonzalez-Pelaz conclude: 'The global standing of the UN benefits from the shift in the attitude of the US administration, whose calls for renewed UN involvement have given the latter the confidence to prove to the rest of the world that it remained a necessary force in world politics'.

It is difficult to predict how the Bush administration will act in its second term. It may continue with an aggressive foreign policy, and the appointment of John Bolton as Ambassador to the UN seems to support this theory. Indeed this is how the British press has interpreted the appointment. The Independent suggest that this 'sends a forceful message that Mr Bush remains more interested in getting his way at the UN than he is in diplomacy'.³ In 1994 Bolton stated 'There's no such thing as the United Nations ... If the UN building in New York lost ten storeys, it wouldn't make a bit of difference'.⁴ During an interview with National Public Radio's Juan Williams in 2002 Bolton stated: 'If I were redoing the Security Council today, I'd have one permanent member because that's the real reflection of the distribution of power in the world'.⁵

On the other hand, warned of the dangers of creating an anti-American Europe, Bush has made statements about strengthening transatlantic relations. Furthermore, he chose Brussels as his first port of call of his second term in office, and Europe seems keen to move beyond the feud. This spirit of rapprochement may be threatened, however, by new divisions over issues such as Iran's nuclear ambitions and European Union moves to lift the arms embargo on China, as well as old differences such as climate change.

Some research indicates that the UN might look towards Europe as a model for transformation. One World Trust recently published a pamphlet concerning the reform of the UN.⁶ The key issues it addresses are the changes necessary to make the UN a serious player in today's world, and the lessons that might be learnt from the creation of the EU. With regard to the creation of the EU, it was clear that to build a community of nations there had to be an institution that was recognised as legitimate, independent, fair and impartial by all key players, governments and parliaments. That institution was the European Commission, designed to stand outside and above national interests.

The pamphlet proposes reforms that fall into three broad areas. The first is the empowerment of the Secretary General with the right of policy proposal, and the creation under his leadership of a cabinet composed of the heads of the main UN programmes and organisations. The second is the extension, not the removal, of the veto within the Security Council. The third is the creation of a UN Parliamentary Assembly composed of national politicians that would become a second chamber alongside the General Assembly. The secretary general would have the right to order

³ Andrew Buncombe, *The Independent*, 8 March 2005.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Inter Press Service*, 10 March 2005.

⁶ Georges Berthoin and Peter Luff, 'The Reform of the United Nations', One World Trust, London, February 2005. The One World Trust is a non-profit organization that lobbies decision-makers to develop global rules and organizations to achieve the eradication of poverty, injustice and war. It conducts research on practical ways to make global organizations more responsive to the people they affect and on how the rule of law can be applied equally to all.

debates on matters of common interest in these chambers if proposals were vetoed in the Security Council. This could be the beginning of a democratic process within the UN.

It must be recognized that efforts to reform the UN cannot succeed until the support of the US is assured. This is not a naive hope; the war in Iraq has shown an increasing number of Americans how dangerous and expensive it is to attempt to impose its own world view on different cultures. The political reality is that it cannot police the world. The Republican Senator Chuck Hagel encapsulates how the US must proceed in the future in the July/August 2004 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.⁷ Even from a Republican perspective, he emphasizes the importance of alliances and international institutions, and asserts that these must be seen as extensions of US influence, not as constraints on US power. Like most he believes the UN has its limitations, but concludes that it 'is more relevant today than it has ever been'.

⁷ Chuck Hagel, 'A Republican Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs* 83: 4, July/August 2004.

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