

Crisis in the UN, NATO and the EU

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Introduction

I am very honoured to have received the invitation to deliver the 2003 Erskine Childers lecture on *Crisis in the UN, NATO and the EU* – an ambitious title if ever there was one. And what better time to be delivering such a speech - despite the end of the Cold War *we still live in a hugely dangerous and insecure world*. Launching Amnesty International's 2003 Annual Report, its Secretary General, Irene Khan, said that the American government's response to the 11 September 2001 attacks 'far from making the world a safer place, has made it more dangerous by curtailing human rights and undermining the rule of international law'.¹ One of the key critiques of the Iraq war was that it would make global terrorism more likely, not less, and recent developments seem to be bearing out that verdict.

We are, quite clearly, currently entering a new phase in the international system. The geopolitical shift that has taken place since the end of the cold war has been monumental - a shift that has culminated in George W Bush and his neo-conservative backers taking control of the United States Presidency. The world is currently facing an American government with a more unilateral approach to foreign policy than at any time in recent history. This has led many to question how the international system should be run.

It has even raised the most fundamental question of all: *should there, indeed, be an international system at all, or would we do better simply with variable geographies of 'coalitions of the willing'?* In the *Spectator* a few

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weeks ago, an article appeared by Richard Perle, a key architect behind the US driven war on Iraq, and chair of its defence policy board, an advisory panel to the Pentagon, which the *Guardian* reported under the headline 'Thank God for the death of the UN. Its abject failure gave us only anarchy. The world needs order'. It starts:

Saddam Hussein's reign of terror is about to end. He will go quickly, but not alone: he will take the UN down with him....What will die is the fantasy of the UN as the foundation of a new world order. As we sift the debris, it will be important to preserve, the better to understand, the intellectual wreckage of the liberal conceit of safety through international law administered by international institutions.²

I think it says something about the tone of the article that I had to check that it was not a spoof. Certainly for myself, and I'm sure for many others, *security through international law administered through international institutions* is a noble aim that we aspire to. To see it so blatantly attacked, pilloried and ridiculed comes as something of a shock. I examine how it is that this aspiration has become so debased by so many, in the US administration in particular, and what needs to be done to revitalise our international institutions to enable them to fulfil the aim of global security more effectively and credibly.

Multilateralism *versus* Unilateralism

It would indeed be difficult to deny that many of our international institutions are indeed in crisis, and are in urgent need of reform. But I suspect this is not the principal reason why the elements in the US administration are so dismissive of them. On the contrary, I would argue that it is precisely because they *could* be very effective that the US is refusing to join them. Take the International Criminal Court: the US is furious with European leaders, because they have tried to stop the UN Security Council voting to renew the exemption of the US from

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prosecution by the new war crimes tribunal.

In an extraordinarily bitter attack, the Bush administration has accused the European Union of 'actively undermining' American efforts to protect its peacekeepers from prosecution, and that 'Europe's objections will undercut all our efforts to repair and rebuild the transatlantic relationship just as we are taking a turn for the better after a number of difficult months.'³

In the case of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, the US is reluctant to sign because its provisions might just affect the way American corporations do business.

The US is withdrawing from international institutions not because they do not work - although many of them could work a lot better, as I shall discuss - but because they do not allow the US to follow its unilateral desires. When it came to Iraq, the United Nations failed, in US terms, because it refused to do what the US wanted. For many of the rest of us, that signalled a success, not a failure.

Why, then, does the US advocate a unilateral approach? To understand this we need to look at what drives US foreign policy. There are, I believe, two driving forces:

- firstly, the desire to be the world's unchallenged economic and political force. To do this the US must protect its domestic economy from foreign companies while at the same time opening up foreign markets to its own companies. Crucially, this necessitates control of energy supplies and their transport routes, otherwise the US economy would be fundamentally unstable and a hostage to those who control the energy supplies and routes;
- secondly, a desire to be the world's unchallenged military power. This is primarily directed against China, Russia and the European Union, the only powers anywhere near capable of challenging the US militarily in the foreseeable future.

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But to what extent is this unilateral intent new? It has been argued that what Bush did in Iraq was not something completely new; President Clinton used military force at least three times without Security Council authority:

- in Bosnia in 1995;
- in bombing Baghdad for four days in December 1998;
- in attacking Yugoslavia over Kosovo in 1999.

But Bush's behaviour can be seen as different in several ways:

- His drive for war on Iraq was prompted by the new doctrine of pre-emption – a frightening *carte blanche* for interventions almost anywhere;
- Bush was explicitly trying to achieve regime change, whereas Clinton's unsanctioned use of force had more limited objectives;
- And, critically, Bush was issuing a direct challenge to the UN. Prior to Clinton's intervention over Kosovo, it was already clear that Russia and China would veto any action, and so the US never drafted a resolution calling for force. Bush's speech, by contrast, bluntly demanded that the UN show its 'relevance': 'All the world faces a test, and the UN is facing a difficult and defining moment. Will it serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be irrelevant?' He might just as well have said: 'Will it serve the purpose of its founding, or will it serve the political interests of the United States?'"⁴

We now, therefore, stand at a moment of enormous political significance. Not only do we face a devastated Iraq, where large components of the population are calling not just for 'No to Saddam Hussein', but 'No to the US' as well; and a humiliated and enraged Arab world, along with a shattered system of alliances. We are also seeing mounting international opposition that includes an emerging global people's movement saying not only 'No to Washington's War', but also 'No to Washington's Empire'.

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The war on Iraq was not only an oil-grab, important though that aspect of the war undoubtedly was. It was also part of a broader attempt to reshape global power relations as part of a relentless drive for power and empire. The US administration has used 11 September 2001 as an opportunity, justifying its unilateralist position, to advance its foreign policy goals and promote US interests. Intervention in Afghanistan, whilst failing in its public justification of making Afghanistan a place where terrorists could not operate, has given the US control over central Asia - Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. It now has military bases in those countries for use *vis-a-vis* China, Iran and Russia, and has also secured the vast new oil and gas producing areas of central Asia. Whilst providing security of supply to the US, control over these energy reserves will also give the US further leverage over the EU and China.

If this sounds too extreme, or you are in any doubt about it, take a look at the publications of the Project for a New American Century. They are shocking in their blatant claim for US world domination.⁵

The US seeks domination of space as well. The website for US Space Command shows that the US is seeking to turn space into a war zone. That is not my interpretation – they proudly admit it. The US wants to ‘control space’ and from space to ‘dominate’ the Earth below. The cover of its ‘Vision for 2020’ report shows a laser weapon shooting a beam down from space zapping a target below, with the words: ‘The globalisation of the world economy will continue – with a widening between haves and have-nots’. The implication is clear: from space, the US would keep those ‘have-nots’ in line.⁶

NATO

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But, continuing the assessment of international institutions, and the US response to them, what of NATO? I would make the case that NATO was created primarily to enable the US to maintain its control over Western Europe. Ostensibly, of course, its public rationale was to provide protection from a Soviet invasion, an invasion we now know was never considered as a serious option by the Soviet Union. Crucially for the Americans, NATO also forestalled European autonomy on defence and security matters whilst the apparent Soviet threat remained. A Europe that was dependent on America for its security was a Europe that would not threaten US key foreign policy goals.

With the demise of the Soviet Union, the US's main lever for exerting control over Western Europe disappeared - the end of the Cold War liberated Western Europe from its dependence on the US. With NATO in limbo for the last ten years, some member states of the European Union have begun to develop their own Common Foreign and Security Policy.

However, the US is not in retreat in Europe - indeed, it is fighting a strong offensive rearguard action. Whilst the US is clearly of the mind that NATO is militarily redundant, it still considers NATO to be a crucial *political* alliance. It sees the role of a post-cold-war NATO as preventing the EU from developing too strong a common foreign and defence policy, which could co-ordinate military and political policy without reference to US interests. This could also explain why the US is so keen on enlargement of the EU. Not only does an enlarged EU offer the US a larger single (and stable) market for US companies, for genetically modified crops for instance, but it also presents more opportunities to keep the EU politically divided over foreign policy. A politically divided EU, with France, Germany and others wanting an independent EU foreign policy, but the UK, Poland and others prioritising the transatlantic alliance, the thinking must be that the EU will be less of a challenge to the US on a global level.

Given such a transatlantic rift, the demise of NATO is probably inevitable, since it no longer has a *raison d'être* for independent minded European

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states. This is to be welcomed, but I would caution against replacing NATO with a militarised Common Foreign and Security Policy for the EU. The costs of seeking to match the US as a military competitor would, in my view, be far too high in its effects on other spending on social and public services, health and the environment.

I believe that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which is the organisation most inclusive of all European countries, could be best placed to replace NATO. It uses consensus decision-making and is not dominated by the larger countries. It refrains from unwanted interference in the internal affairs of member countries and works in co-operation with non-governmental organisations.

I welcome the OSCE's broader view of the concept of common security, which in many ways is similar to the Green concept. The aim of the OSCE, in principle, at least, is to prevent and solve conflicts, both in the short and the long run, by addressing underlying causes such as human rights abuses, economic inequalities, and ethnic tensions.

The use of consensus decision making in the OSCE means that action takes time to agree and compromises have to be made, but the decisions made have strong support. Crucially, I also support its emphasis on arms control and disarmament and the provision of mutual rights of inspection into other countries' security affairs, demonstrating the value of openness and transparency in building mutual confidence. The OSCE must be substantially developed to render it more effective in achieving these aims. But it offers the building blocks, at least, for strengthening peace across Europe.

Role of the European Union

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I have said very little so far about the role of the EU. Can it, and should it, aspire to be the counterweight, politically, economically and militarily, to US strength? The question is not as straightforward as it sounds.

Militarily

A respected political analyst wrote recently that the main problem with the EU is that ‘it doesn’t do war’.⁵ In my view, nor should it, and it was never supposed to: half a century ago, the European Union’s founders decided to ‘pool’ some national sovereignty in order to bind themselves together so that conflict between them would become impossible.

Robert Kagan, the conservative American thinker, argues that while US ‘warriors’ will fight wars in the ‘post 9/11 Hobbesian jungle’, self-satisfied and risk-averse Europeans are capable ‘only of doing the dishes’ (quoted in ref. 7). Kagan is being deliberately provocative, but his taunt may usefully encourage us to work out where our comparative advantage as members of the EU lies. The ‘softer’ powers of development, nation-building, and democratisation should not be undervalued: to the contrary, they should be developed. As one irritated Eurocrat recently snapped, ‘war is for wimps.’

Economically

In some ways, it is even harder to imagine the EU as a counterweight economically. As a member of the European Parliament’s Trade Committee, I have watched the EU pursue the agenda of ever greater economic globalisation every bit as vigorously as Washington.

There is indeed a paradox at the heart of the EU, summed up in two recent European Summit objectives. At Lisbon, the EU adopted a major new objective – to become the most *competitive* economy in the world. Just a short time later, under pressure from Greens and others, it adopted a further objective – to become the most *sustainable* economy in the world.

Unless the quality and direction of the EU’s economic activity changes, these two objectives are not reconcilable. The EU has some of the best

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environmental policy-making in the world, but it often fails to achieve the environmental standards it sets itself. This is primarily because whenever there is a potential collision between economic competitiveness and environmental sustainability, the economic priorities tend to win. The proposals for an EU energy tax, which could be one of the single most effective ways of internalising environmental costs and shifting towards sustainability have been blocked for years, on the grounds that such a tax could damage the competitiveness of European industry.

Politically

There is certainly the potential for the EU to act as a political counterweight, but only if it first achieves the pre-condition of legitimacy.

I would make the case that the EU currently faces a crisis of legitimacy:

- the derisory turn-out in the last European elections;
- anger and frustration from civil society movements which often attends EU summits. At Gothenburg, this spilled over into major street protests, as people claimed that the EU now ranks as part of the ‘problem’, along with the World Bank and IMF, rather than as part of the ‘solution’;
- Ireland’s original ‘No’ vote to the Nice Treaty (which I would argue was only changed to a Yes in the second referendum because the question was changed to for or against enlargement).

The ongoing Convention process was intended to bring EU institutions closer to the people. But it would be very hard to say that this has achieved: the process has still been very remote, very top-down.

Our verdict here must, then, be that the EU has the potential at least to play the role of counterweight – if it is fundamentally reformed.

Democratically

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You will not be surprised to hear me as an MEP arguing for more powers for the European Parliament; it needs a new ‘Big Idea’. Fifty years ago, its aim was clear – to bring peace to Europe by binding countries together in an ambitious free trade project. Now that project risks being an end in itself, and people are no longer clear what the EU is *for*. A new Big Idea could be about genuine attempts to achieve sustainability in all its facets. The EU could be a leader in renewable energies, in learning to live more lightly on the planet, and in pioneering different economic models – but it needs to resolve its internal contradictions first.

Reform of the United Nations

To return to my starting point: how could the UN itself better achieve global security?

The UN system needs fundamental transformation. The current structure of the UN Security Council, with permanent seats for France, the UK, the US, Russia and China, is not only undemocratic but also quite unworkable because of the right of veto. There should be no permanent seats and no veto.

Under a reformed UN, the most important decisions, such as going to war, would require an overwhelming majority of the assembly’s weighted votes. Powerful governments wishing to recruit reluctant nations to their cause would be forced to bribe or blackmail not just three or four other members of a Security Council, but rather most of the rest of the world, in order to obtain the results they wanted.

What should be the weight of each of those votes? How can it possibly be right that the 10,000 people of the Pacific Island of Tuvalu possess the same representation as the one billion people of India? ⁸ Each inhabitant of Tuvalu, in other words, carries 100,000 times as much weight as each Indian. Countries should be represented in proportion to their populations,

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and decisions should be made by a weighted absolute, or two-thirds, majority.

But these kind of institutional reforms are not enough on their own. There are at least two further challenges:

- Dominique Moisi, deputy director of France's Institute for International Relations, believes Iraq only brought long-festered problems to the surface. According to him, 'the old concepts of legality and legitimacy have split. The UN stands for legality but not for legitimacy' (cited in ref.4). The implication is that there must be more thoroughgoing democratisation of UN institutions, such as exploring the possibility of sending elected politicians or people's assemblies to represent our interests there.
- The second challenge is to define more clearly what we mean by 'security'. Security must be more than just military security. We will only have a more peaceful world when we tackle the root causes of conflict – and that means tackling the poverty and inequality that makes the growth of conflict more likely.

As Thomas Jefferson remarked, 'as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered...institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.'⁹ One of today's new truths is that freedom is about much more than the right to vote, once every few years, for one of a few increasingly identical groups of politicians. Freedom is also about the right to decide your economic destiny – and that is precisely what globalisation – the global spread of neo-liberal capitalism – is taking away from people the world over, impoverishing them in the process.

We therefore need major changes in our global financial system and regulation – and the UN has a key role to play. As Erskine Childers himself recognised, it is still entirely appropriate to envisage the strategies for the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation being negotiated and agreed at the UN. Unless we address the vast and increasing

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inequalities between rich and poor, global insecurity can only grow.

That means fundamental changes in the rules and processes of the WTO and a shift away from ever-greater international competitiveness, with every nation trying to out-compete the other, leading to a downward spiral of social and environmental standards. In its place, there must be a greater stress on building local and regional economies over which people can have greater control. And it means an end to the dominance of the EU and US at world trade talks.

Reform proposals are all very well, but what will make them happen? If they have not happened yet, what grounds for hope do we have that they might in the future? I will end on a positive note, because - contrary to much that is said and written about the UN today - I do not share Richard Perle's belief that it will die and good riddance.

There may be no country or group of countries capable of launching a military challenge to Washington's power drive, but there is, perhaps for the first time since the end of the Cold War, a serious competitor challenging the US empire for influence and authority. This is global public opinion, including a mobilised international civil society joined by key governments as well as the United Nations itself. None of these on their own might be enough. But together:

All of those forces together make up the astonishing movement towards a new internationalism that today forms the global challenge to the empire. And the United Nations, while not the only sector, is at the centre.¹⁰

The combination of events in mid-February 2003 - the unprecedented Security Council response to France's Foreign Minister Dominique De Villepin's call to defend the UN as an instrument of peace and not a tool for war and the resulting refusal of the Council and its members to accede to US demands, the outpourings of millions across the globe on 15 February 2003 when 'the World says no to war', and the amazing reaction to those

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demonstrations, provide even clearer evidence that we are at a critical historical juncture. An analysis in the *New York Times* defined this as a moment proving that once again there are two superpowers in the world ‘the United States, and global public opinion’.¹¹ And if we can harness that global public opinion to reform our institutions, we will be well on the way to a more secure world.

To quote George Monbiot again:

...the US seems to be ripping up the global rulebook. As it does so, those of us who have campaigned against the grotesque injustices of the existing world order will quickly discover that a world with no institutions is even nastier than a world run by the wrong ones. Multilateralism, however inequitable it may be, requires certain concessions to other nations. Unilateralism means piracy: the armed robbery of the poor by the rich.⁸

The challenge we face, then, is not just to write different rules. That has been done a hundred times over by NGOs, progressive think-tanks and governments. The challenge is to mobilise public opinion into believing that those changes are urgent and necessary – and to build the political will. I believe we are seeing an emerging global movement, for example – the 2002 World Social Forum at Porto Alegre, Brazil, and on the 15 February 2003 marches – that might just prove the catalyst to achieve it.

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