

The United Nations at the Crossroads of Ideals and Reality

Ramesh Thakur

A wag is said to have remarked that ‘The interesting thing about Richard Wagner’s music is that it ain’t as bad as it sounds’. The same might be said of the United Nations: it is not quite as bad as it is often made out to be. If the organisation is in crisis, it is a crisis of expectations. Its Charter begins with the grand words ‘We the peoples of the United Nations’. The reality is that it functions as an organisation of, by and for member states. The great Soviet-era dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn once remarked that at the UN, the people of the world are served up to the designs of governments. The United Nations needs to achieve a better balance between the wish of the peoples and the will of governments; between the aspirations for a better world and its performance in the real world; between the enduring political reality enveloping and at times threatening to suffocate it and the vision of an uplifting world that has inspired generations of dreamers and idealists to work for the betterment of humanity across cultural, religious and political borders. There is no better example of this than Erskine Childers himself: with few illusions about UN flaws and shortcomings and the need for reforms, he nevertheless remained, to the end, a dedicated servant of the organisation’s founding ideals.

The United Nations is at once the symbol of humanity’s collective aspirations for a better life in a safer world for all, a forum for negotiating the terms of converting these collective aspirations into a common programme of action, and the principal international instrument for the realisation of the aspirations and the implementation of the plans. The Charter of the United Nations was a triumph of hope and idealism over the experience of two world wars. The flame flickered in the chill winds of the

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

Cold War, but is yet to die out. The global public goods of peace, prosperity, sustainable development and good governance cannot be achieved by any country acting on its own. The United Nations is still the symbol of our dreams for a better world, where weakness can be compensated by justice and fairness, and the law of the jungle replaced by the rule of law, although the lion in the jungle may prefer otherwise. It is helpful to be reminded by Judge Rosalyn Higgins, in the third Erskine Childers Lecture in 1999, of the World Court's role in keeping international peace and security. Three years later, Denis Halliday returned to the theme of a single standard of international law.

In sum, the United Nations has to strike a balance between realism and idealism. In the midst of the swirling tides of change, the UN must strive also for a balance between the desirable and the possible. Its decisions must reflect current realities of military and economic power. It will be incapacitated if it alienates its most important members. In a world in which there is only one universal international organisation but also only one superpower, the UN must tread a fine line so as neither to become irrelevant to the security imperatives of the US as today's supreme power, nor become a mere rubber stamp for US designs. The challenge posed to the international organisation by the unilateralist impulse in Washington is discussed by Caroline Lucas MEP in the 2003 Erskine Childers Lecture. The UN will lose credibility, its very *raison d'être*, if it compromises core values. The United Nations is the repository of international idealism, and Utopia is fundamental to its identity. Even the sense of disenchantment and disillusionment on the part of some cannot be understood other than against this background.

Human Security

One of the UN's early great achievements was to oversee the decolonisation of large parts of the human family. Emerging from colonial rule in the shadow of the Cold War that was transcendental as well as

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

global, many of the new countries were less interested in the Moscow-Washington security rivalry than in development. Because they dominated the UN membership by sheer weight of numbers, their particular focus meant that the organisation soon acquired two great mandates: peace and security, and growth and development.

In the 2001 lecture, Professor Paul Rogers notes that with the end of the Cold War, the much anticipated peace dividend failed to materialise. Instead there seemed to be a spurt of ethnonational conflicts, complex humanitarian emergencies and even genocide with massive civilian deaths. The intensification of conflict and human vulnerability blurred the Westphalian line between the domestic and international spheres of human activity. In parallel with this, the dominant paradigm of national security, with its narrow focus on territorial integrity, state sovereignty and political independence, began to weaken under assault from the broader concept of human security.

National security puts the individual at the service of the state, including the ultimate acts of killing others and being killed oneself as and when called for duty by one's government. *Human security* puts the individual at the centre of debate, analysis and policy. He or she is paramount; the state is but a collective instrument to protect human life and enhance human welfare. The fundamental components of human security can be put at risk by external aggression, but also by factors within a country, including 'security' forces where the state is too strong and, at the other end of the spectrum, structural anarchy under conditions of state failure. The reformulation of national security into human security is simple, yet has profound consequences for how we see the world, how we organise our political affairs, how we make choices in public and foreign policy, and how we relate to fellow human beings from different countries and civilisations.

The linkage between the two great agendas of security and development became clearer and more widely accepted after the end of the Cold War.

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

‘Peacebuilding’ was the conceptual bridge connecting both agendas. It fits far more comfortably under the conceptual umbrella of human than national security, whether it be with regard to eradicating landmines, protecting civilians from atrocities or reducing maternal, infant and HIV/AIDS mortality through improved health care systems and better access to affordable medicine.

The Changing World Context

The world has changed profoundly and fundamentally, in ways both good and bad, since the birth of the United Nations in the ashes of the Second World War. The issues and preoccupations of the new millennium present new and different types of challenges from those that faced the world in 1945. With the new realities and challenges have come corresponding new expectations for action and new standards of conduct in national and international affairs. The revolution in information technology – which makes global communications instantaneous and provides immediate access to information worldwide – has heightened awareness of conflicts and depredation, poverty and hunger wherever they may be occurring, combined with compelling visual images of the resultant suffering.

When the UN was founded, its membership consisted of 51 states. Today it stands at 191. The newer members have typically been developing and ex-colonial countries that brought to the UN their own set of priorities and concerns and thereby altered the balance of the organisation’s work agenda. Alongside the growth in the number of states there has occurred the rise of civil society actors who have mediated state-citizen relations and given flesh and blood to the concept of ‘We the peoples of the United Nations’. On balance they have been a positive force for the good, for example with respect to the progressive advancement of the human rights agenda, international humanitarian law, gender protection and empowerment and the protection and conservation of the environment. The new actors have brought a wide range of new voices, perspectives, interests, experiences

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

and aspirations. Together, they have added depth and texture to the increasingly rich tapestry of international society and brought important institutional credibility and practical expertise to the policy debates.

This has been especially valuable in the post-Cold War context with a new emphasis on democratisation, human rights and good governance alongside the persisting reality of internal wars and civil conflicts, often accompanied with ugly political and humanitarian repercussions. Where political institutions are inadequate and political structures insufficiently robust, the transfer of power can be chaotic, disorderly and violent. Populations are vulnerable to manipulation, exploitation and abuse by unscrupulous armed bandits. The weakness of state structures and institutions in many countries has heightened the challenges and risks of nation-building, and sometimes tempted armed groups to try to seize the levers of political power in order to exploit the resources of economic wealth, including 'conflict diamonds'. Internal conflicts are made more complex and lethal by modern technology and communications and in particular by the proliferation of cheap, highly destructive small arms which find their way into the hands of child soldiers. Violence becomes a way of life with catastrophic consequences for civilians caught in the crossfire.

Moreover, few modern conflicts are purely internal. The networks that sustain them can involve a range of ancillary problems like trafficking in arms, drugs and children, terrorism, and refugee flows. Whole regions can be quickly destabilised. Sometimes the rich world is deeply implicated. Civil conflicts are fuelled by arms and monetary transfers that originate in the developed world, and in turn their destabilising effects are felt in the developed world in everything from globally interconnected terrorism to refugee flows the export of drugs and the spread of infectious disease and organised crime.

Yearly we face the paradox of the major challenges remaining constant, while many of the contingencies demanding urgent and immediate action are inherently unanticipated and unpredictable. For example, war is a

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

constant feature of international relations, yet some of the major outbreaks of armed conflict, internal and inter-state, have caught us by surprise with respect to the locales, protagonists and issues. Poverty has remained stubbornly persistent, yet the distribution of pockets of poverty has changed over the course of the UN's lifetime. One of the best examples of this, of course, is East Asia, which has lifted record numbers of people out of poverty in a remarkably short period. At the same time we face today some challenges that were not and could not have been foreseen in 1945, including, for example, global warming and HIV/AIDS. With '9/11' we saw elements of conceptual confusion between traditional security, challenges to state sovereignty and the threats of terrorism from 'rogue' actors, including non-state actors, with access to weapons of mass destruction.

The primary purpose of the United Nations is the maintenance of international peace and security. The strategic logic underpinning multilateral institutions is that of a world united in action on the road to a common destiny. Reflecting the conviction that the use of force under international auspices may sometimes be necessary in the cause of peace, Chapter 7 of the UN Charter spells out many provisions in relation to collective enforcement. Yet one of the lessons of recent times is that the United Nations is not good at waging wars.

By contrast, the organisation has been especially good at a slow, steady and unremitting effort to find political, economic, legal and institutional alternatives to military force as a way of tackling problems of security as well as development, good governance and environmental protection. This ambitious project of international institution building is far from complete. The organising principle of global governance is multilateralism, and the United Nations lies at the very core of the multilateral system of global governance – governance without global government. The system of collective security proved illusory from the start, and the procedures for resolving disputes peacefully have also proven to be generally elusive. The major UN contribution to peace and security during the Cold War took the

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

form of consensual peacekeeping operations. After the Cold War, this expanded to multidimensional peace operations to reflect the more demanding complex humanitarian emergencies.

In the meantime, however, the human rights and human security agenda had greatly expanded and in the 1990s was often expressed in the form of the so-called challenge of humanitarian intervention. Increasing use was made also of sanctions as an instrument of international statecraft. According to several data sets, the number of armed conflicts rose steadily until the end of the Cold War, peaked in the early 1990s, and has declined since then. The UN Security Council was revitalised with the end of the Cold War, with a jump in resolutions (especially under the enforcement chapter 7 of the Charter) peacekeeping missions and sanctions regimes, with an accompanying fall in the use of the veto by the permanent members.¹

Often, the developing countries found themselves scrambling to resist, typically in UN forums, the fast-changing norms of humanitarian action and compulsory disarmament, even pre-emptive disarmament and regime change. At the same time, the rapid pace of events placed increased strains on the creaking UN system and intensified the urgency of demands for changes in the workings, structures and policy responses of the organisation.

Reforming the United Nations

The topic of UN reforms, so dear to Childers, is addressed by almost all the contributors in this collection. The United Nations has to operate today in a global environment that is vastly more challenging, complex and demanding than the world of 1945. If existing institutions fail to keep pace with the changing world around us and the expectations of citizens, they will fall by the wayside and be replaced by new forms of association. The price of continued relevance and survival of the United Nations is thus

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

continual change, adaptation and learning by the organisation. Set up to manage the world in the revolutionary conditions prevailing after a major world war, the organisation has had simultaneously to reflect, regulate and respond to the changing circumstances all around it since 1945, and in particular since the end of the Cold War.

To be faithful to the nations and peoples of the world who have kept faith with it for six decades, the UN must persevere in its efforts to consolidate its strengths, fill in the gaps and eliminate wasteful habits and procedures. Under Kofi Annan's stewardship, the United Nations has been receptive rather than resistant to reform, far more so than is commonly realised. In 1997, the newly elected Secretary-General announced major structural changes alongside budget and staff cuts in order to streamline the unwieldy body.² In 2002, he unveiled the second stage of his reform programme, calling for a shift away from endless meetings and reports and a greater focus on the things that really matter to the world's people.³ Internal structural changes have streamlined co-ordination, facilitated information sharing, strengthened cohesion and given greater strategic direction to the work of the world body.

Efforts to emphasise reform as an ongoing process are reflected also in a number of reviews, initiatives and developments outside the Secretariat. The Brahimi Panel looked back on the half-century's experience of peacekeeping in order to bring it into line with the realities of the new century.⁴ Its report contained far-reaching recommendations on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of UN peace operations. The report also underlined the importance of structural conflict prevention, and the integral linkage between peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Other reports have underlined the UN's new-found capacity and willingness to engage in serious introspection with regard to some painful episodes in its history and draw the necessary lessons from them. In an externally commissioned report on the genocide in Rwanda,⁵ and through a report of the Secretary-General himself on the fall of Srebrenica,⁶ the UN offered candid and critical accounts of the shortcomings in UN peacekeeping for public debate

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century
and reflection.

The Security Council has been working better, with innovative means of ensuring more openness and transparency in its decision-making and greater consultation with troop-contributing countries as well as other member states. The Council has also been more daring and imaginative in tackling threats to peace and security on a broader front, for example with respect to the trade in conflict diamonds and a special session on HIV/AIDS as a threat to international peace and security. The General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) have made efforts to improve their work methods and standing with more focused and practical treatment of strategic agenda items. The Monterrey conference on financing for development was unprecedented in bringing together different parts of the international system, including the international financial institutions.

The net result of the cycle of reforms and reviews has been to enable the UN to act with more unity of purpose, coherence of efforts, and agility in coping with many challenges over the last five years, including Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone. The 2002 *Human Development Report* marked a new milestone in the organisation saying what needs to be said with regard to good governance.

Reform as Work in Progress

This does not mean that the UN can sit back and rest on its laurels. The agenda for internal reform is never complete for any organisation. The United Nations must not change reluctantly, adapting only grudgingly to the pressure of circumstances. Rather, it must anticipate, lead and embrace change. But it can do so only with the will of member states, the commitment of staff and the support of the peoples of the world. It must continue to change the way decisions are made.

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

The responses to date to calls for UN action have not been as prompt, effective or uniform as they need to become. The gap between the UN's promise and performance remains unacceptably large. Few can be confident that the next group turning to the UN for protection will not be cruelly betrayed because the world body lacks the ability to make critical decisions quickly, or the mandate and resources to act. Dame Margaret Anstee, in her lecture delivered in 2000, noted that the crisis confronting the UN intensified in the 1990s, at the same time as the need for an effective UN became more urgent.

For most people, the mention of UN reform conjures up either one of two scenarios: reforming the structure, composition and procedures of the Security Council; or eliminating waste, inefficiency, bureaucratic rigidity, costliness and so on associated with the world organisation. With governments in many Western countries, and with ordinary people in many developing countries, the UN is often seen as a bloated, high-cost, junket-loving irrelevance to their real needs and concerns – little more than a talk-fest.

To deliver on the core missions of the organisation, the capacity of the United Nations in general – and of the Security Council, the General Assembly and ECOSOC in particular – have to be strengthened. Structural reforms in the Security Council remain stalemated and most countries see it as having been captured by the major powers. As Razali Ismail and Patricia McKenna noted in the 1997 and 1998 Erskine Childers Lectures, the Security Council is neither democratic nor representative. The structural flaws and procedural bottlenecks in the Council reflect power imbalances and conflicting claims on values and interests along the North-South axis.

The main donors are frustrated with the protracted, wasteful and counter-productive posturing in the General Assembly. The smaller states in particular find the present processes too complex, protracted, demanding and altogether too formidable to be genuine participants and not merely ringside spectators. We need simplified structures and streamlined

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

processes, with roles and responsibilities clearly delineated, which will restore their sense of ownership and empowerment. The frequent policy paralysis in the two major political organs, the Security Council and the General Assembly, also places a premium on the political role of the Secretary-General. Summit conferences become battlegrounds for vested groups to carry on ideological trench warfare by other means.

But the burden of changing all this rests with governments, not the organisation. Dame Margaret notes how the reform of the organisation is vital, but root-and-branch reform has been held hostage to the vested interests of member states.

The philosophy underpinning Kofi Annan's 2002 report, *Strengthening the United Nations: an Agenda for Further Change*,³ can be summed up in a few words: clarify, simplify, rationalise, streamline and evaluate. There were five principal messages.

First, the UN must be clear on what to do before it can learn how to do it well. There is a need to shed some accumulated responsibilities that are no longer relevant in today's world, in order to devote more focussed attention on today's urgent issues like terrorism, water scarcity, HIV/AIDS, human rights, ageing, etc. The Secretariat, like any bureau, is a means of structuring political vision into a feasible legislative agenda. The landmark Millennium Summit of September 2000 marked an unprecedented global consensus on the human condition and what to do about it. The motivating spirit behind the sustained attention to UN reforms is how the ambitious template of the Millennium Declaration can best be translated into an achievable agenda of action within a realistic timeframe, through institutional, programmatic and administrative arrangements.

Second, the UN must simplify and rationalise its rules of procedure and processes in order to reduce complexity, cut paperwork and time, and increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness. The organisation cannot become captive to the tyranny of trivia. So much of the UN's work takes the form

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

of providing documentation and facilities (including interpretation and translation) for debates and decisions by the governments of the world that the efficiency and effectiveness of these services need continual improvement and modernisation. At present there is too much paperwork which is too complex and full of jargon, too long and often produced too late. The organisation needs fewer meetings, simpler processes and shorter documents written in clear and crisp language.

Third, the UN system is dispersed across the world, comprising a number of different units often working together with partners from government, civil society and the private sector. This places a premium on co-ordination. UN agencies, funds and programmes working in each country should be able to pool their resources and undertake joint programming; and establish common databases and knowledge networks.

To achieve its goals, the UN involves all stakeholders and forges new partnerships with governments, the private sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), a trend welcomed by most contributors in this volume. The UN works closely with civil society organisations to combat disease, poverty, humanitarian disasters, and to build, consolidate and monitor norms. The relationship with civil society has been examined by a panel of experts who, having consulted broadly, submitted their recommendations in 2004 on how to strengthen the UN-civil society partnership.

Another Annan achievement has been to make the UN much more welcoming towards the private sector. In 1999 the Secretary-General urged global business leaders to make globalisation work for all the people of the world. They responded to this challenge, and the resulting Global Compact provides the UN with a framework of ten core principles, drawn from human rights, labour and environmental standards, for involving the private sector in its various development goals. The Global Compact has the potential to be an important instrument for instilling civic virtue in the global marketplace.

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

Fourth, there is a serious disconnection between the establishment of programme priorities and the allocation of resources to achieve common goals. There is little coherence between the disparate planning and budgeting exercises and decisions on institutional priorities are made in isolation from decisions on the use of scarce resources. Long timelines, excessive micro-management, limited budgetary flexibility and arbitrary resource constraints are not helpful to efficiency and efficacy. The planning and budgeting cycle must be simplified, rationalised and made more efficient.

Finally, and this would have been of particular interest to Erskine Childers, the report looked at how to attract and keep the best people as UN staff by offering them a rewarding career as international civil servants. The reforms were never meant to be a cost-cutting exercise. Rather, the goal is to have the right people in the right jobs, with the appropriate structures in place to let them get on with their jobs and be rewarded or sanctioned for their performance. The UN has to be lean, but must not be mean. Nor must cost-cutting be driven by ideological extremism to the point where relentless shedding of ‘excess’ fat turns the organisation into ‘UN Lite’. At the same time, the work ethos of the organisation must be transformed from a culture of entitlements and automatic increments to a culture of results-based performance and rewards.

Conclusion

Shakespeare’s aphorism is as applicable to organisations as to individuals: ‘the evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones’. Let it not be so with the United Nations. Rather, let us recall with pride its many accomplishments. Razali Ismail gives us a good summary: decolonisation, elimination of apartheid, human rights promotion, refugee protection, peacekeeping and peacemaking missions, international law expansion and extension, non-proliferation, environmental conservation,

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

and other common problems requiring collective action.

The United Nations was established to provide predictability and order in a world in constant flux. Charged with the stewardship of the world's collective destiny, the UN is both the symbol of a common future for the betterment of all humanity, and the institutional means of bringing about such a better future for all of humanity. The debate over Iraq in 2002–04 demonstrated the true test of UN relevance: both as a brake on an unjustified and unilateral resort to war, and as a forum for legitimising the collective decision to enforce community demands on outlaw regimes.

Dr Jenny Tonge commented in her 2004 lecture that we live in a time when multilateralism is under unprecedented challenge, from arms control to climate change, international criminal justice and the use of military force overseas. At such a time, it becomes especially important to reaffirm, as Paul Rogers did in his 2001 lecture, the role of the United Nations as the principal embodiment of the principle of multilateralism, and the main forum for its pursuit. As Razali already noted in 1997, the causes and consequences of public policy challenges and decisions are international, but the authority for addressing them is still vested in states. The UN's mandates are global, while its staffing and financial resources are less than that of major municipal authorities. Hence the dilemma confronting the United Nations of doing too little and too late, or being over-committed and over-stretched.

Member states are entitled to demand value for money, to insist that the funds they provide should be spent as efficiently as possible, with the emphasis on results and outcomes rather than process. If the organisation fails to accommodate its structures, processes and agendas to the transformations sweeping the world, it will risk atrophy and fade into irrelevance. But equally, if the United Nations does deliver on its side of the bargain, member governments will have to consider ways of funding it better for achieving agreed priorities. They too must be prepared to pay money for value.

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

If we want multilateralism to be the preferred route, then strengthening the UN and making it more effective and relevant is imperative. For its performance has been patchy and variable. It has been neither uniform in its response nor consistent in the quality of services provided. The urgency for structural reform of the intergovernmental organs – the Security Council, the General Assembly and ECOSOC – is now extreme, and the work of the high-level panel plus the dynamics of the international political environment have created a window of opportunity that, once closed, may not open again for some considerable time. If the UN is to respond positively to the rising tide of demands and expectations against a steady-state base of resources, it must lift the overall quality and professionalism of its decision-making. Internal reforms initiated by the Secretary-General are an effort to redesign and rededicate the organisation so that in its structure and by its operations, it helps to bring about a world where fear is changed to hope, want gives way to dignity, and apprehensions are turned into aspirations.

References

1. Wallensteen P, Johansson P. Security Council Decisions in Perspective. In: Malone DM, ed. *The UN Security Council: from the Cold War to the 21st Century*. Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 2004: 17-33.
2. *Renewing the United Nations: a Program for Reform*. Report of the Secretary-General. New York: United Nations doc. A/51/950, 14 July 1997.
3. *Strengthening of the United Nations: an Agenda for Further Change*. Report of the Secretary-General. New York: United Nations doc. A/57/387, 23 September 2002.
4. *Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations*. New York: United Nations doc. A/55/305-S/2000/809, 21 August 2000.
5. *Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Actions of the United Nations during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda*. New York: United Nations, 15 December 1999.
6. *Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to General Assembly*

The UN and its Future in the 21st Century

Resolution 53/35 (1998). New York: United Nations Secretariat, November 1999.