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The United Nations at a Fork in the Road

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On 23 September 2003, Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations said “We have come to a fork in the road. This may be a moment no less decisive than 1945 itself, when the UN was founded.”

Why did he say that?

The United Nations in 2003 was a divided organisation. The countries that make up the UN disagreed about the war in Iraq. They were divided about the attitude of the United States towards the United Nations and the multilateral system. They were divided about how best to respond to threats to their collective future - threats varying from Weapons of Mass Destruction to global warming. And the staff themselves were scarred by the attack on the UN in Iraq, during which some of their most dedicated colleagues died.

Underlying all this, many people suggested, was a pervasive division that was undermining the UN; characterised as the North/South split. Under this view, in the “north” the developed world has been more focused on so-called “hard threats” – security issues, conflict, terrorism – and the developing world has emphasised “soft threats” – hunger, disease, poverty.

I believe this characterisation is simplistic. The concerns of the developed and developing world cannot be separated into two distinct groups. Terrorism is not confined to the developed world – ask the people of Bali or Nairobi. And environmental issues are not only of concern to the developing world – ask anyone with a seaside home in Florida.

Left untended, these problems reinforce each other. Disregard a failing State today, and you may face a bastion of terrorism tomorrow. Afghanistan showed us that. Economic and health issues can impact on our ability to respond to conflict - HIV will decimate Southern African armies – some of the strongest peacekeeping nations in Africa. Poverty and social injustice lead to frustration, desperation and a sense of humiliation. Desperate people can be led into conflict and humiliated ones can be recruited to terrorism. Not that this justifies terrorism, but environments can make terrorism more likely.

That is why northern countries like the UK place a high priority on tackling poverty and environmental degradation. It is why developing countries share an interest in averting conflict and curbing proliferation and international terrorism.

Bringing the two roads back together

It is easy to see the differences in the world since the United Nations was founded. But the issues that motivated those who founded the UN and drafted its Charter were very close to those on our minds today. At their simplest, wanting to tackle strategic threats and promote social progress.

To quote the preamble to the Charter,

“We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, and...to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom”,

Both security and development were firmly on the UN agenda from day one.

In 2003 the Secretary General appointed a panel of experts to address “threats, challenges and change”. The High Level Panel’s report is expected next month. Their mission therefore is to provide a foundation to recreate the global consensus that existed in 1945 about the value and the agenda of the UN. They certainly see the linkage between security and development that I have been describing.

I don’t think I am giving away any confidences if I tell you the Panel is likely to identify six clusters of threats to international security. In no particular order they are: one, Interstate conflict; two, violence within States; three, economic and social threats arising from poverty, disease and environmental degradation; four, possession and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; five, terrorism, and six, transnational organised crime.

The UN has also produced specific development goals that should form the long-term underpinning for stability and security.

I should like to mention specifically the Millennium Development Goals, not least since they concentrate on that part of the UN’s agenda that the West is accused of neglecting. These are concrete goals, with a target date of 2015 – such as halving the proportion of people living on less than \$1 per day, reducing mother and child mortality rates, and halving the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water.

The MDGs now provide a common agenda for the entire international community – UN agencies, the Bretton Woods institutions and developed and developing countries alike. But the first deadline, due next year, to provide equal opportunities for boys and girls in primary education will be missed – a goal this audience takes for granted. Estimates for achieving all eight goals range from 2,050 to 2,150. Their achievements will require a massive injection of funds –

hence the British proposal to create an International Finance Facility, which would use some of today's ODA to lever large loans from the Capital Markets. These development objectives, which include concluding the Doha WTO Round and improve debt relief badly need impetus. My hope is that the events of next year culminating in the General Assembly Summit in September, will provide that catalyst.

In the UK we have a counter-terrorism strategy based on the four "p"s: Prevent, Pursue, Protect, Prepare. Without too much alteration, I think there is a parallel with the current agenda of the United Nations. We need to Prepare the UN; Prevent conflict; Protect our people and Pursue the rule of law.

Prepare

How can the UN best prepare for the next 50 years?

Given that the UN is the only global institution, we want it to be as effective and relevant as possible. The UN has never stood still. Look at its membership – 51 when founded, now 191. And peace keeping operations, now one of the best known and visible UN activities, are not mentioned in the Charter at all. So there has been much evolution. But there have also been failures to evolve. Mandates proliferate and overlap. New priorities emerge, without any agreement on which old activities should be dropped.

The UN has already made a start on institutional reform, not least following proposals from Kofi Annan in 1997 and 2002. That work needs to continue within the UN Secretariat, and in the UN bodies themselves. A reforming agenda is underway in the General Assembly. But there is much work to do. One of the most high-profile issues under High Level Panel consideration is reform of the Security Council.

A quick word, if I may, on this subject, which will attract a lot of media attention in coming months. The Security Council's primary role in maintaining international peace and security is as important as it has ever been. The Council is active across the broad range of threats to international peace and security. The UN's membership as a whole has a shared interest in a Council that is credible, effective and decisive.

The Security Council could be stronger if it could more closely represent the modern world. The UK has long supported the case for expanding the Security Council with both permanent and non-permanent members. We support permanent seats for Germany, Japan, India and Brazil. We also want to see a permanent member from Africa on the Council. More non-permanent members would give us the chance to increase the voice of the developing world in the Council's discussions. That must be right, as so much of the Council's work now touches the developing world directly.

But being prepared goes further than the Council. The UN needs to get better at co-ordinating between all its agencies, especially when it operates in a post-conflict environment. Political, development and humanitarian work of the UN should all reinforce each other, both in New York and in the field. We need a more coherent delivery not only by the UN family, but in concert with all partners engaged in a particular country. And ideally the coordination and direction should be driven by the government of that country.

Across the UN system, if we are going to be prepared to meet the threats and challenges of coming years, we need to be ready to act earlier than in the past. The UN needs to consider whether and how it can develop “early warning” systems for countries at risk, drawing on all its human resources in the field. This is a sensitive area – no State wishes to be identified with a label such as “failing” or “at risk”. But, done tactfully, there should be ways of offering constructive help. And before a domestic situation gets out of control and impacts on neighbours and the international system more widely.

But preparation is not just about means and speed of delivery. It is also about having the right policies in place – policies adapted to the challenges that we confront today and will tomorrow. One of the most crucial aspects of UN reform is to ensure that we have agreement on the right policies, be it eliminating poverty, tackling terrorism and so on.

Prevent

Which brings me to “prevent”. Conflict prevention has been on the agenda for some time. And with reason. The UN has a unique place at the heart of the international system. It is able to lead like no other organisation in the co-ordination of diplomatic, developmental, and security responses. It has extensive experience in supporting state-building capacity and working with civil society to implement development programmes.

There is an increasing understanding of the need for prevention work to address all possible causes of stress on a country – economic, environmental, or governance. For instance, if we can support human rights and the rule of law in a country we can tackle the feelings of injustice that can breed conflict.

The UN has a wide human resource base of experts at its disposal in the field. The UN agencies and programmes, particularly UNDP, UNICEF and UN Resident Co-ordinators, can play a vital role in gathering information and giving early warning of potential crises, and in promoting dialogue.

But there will be times when more immediate responses are required to prevent a local or regional issue becoming a threat to international security.

As Tony Blair put it earlier this year:

"The challenges and threats [today] are of a different nature from anything the world has faced before. We must face the threats posed by proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, oppressive and brutal regimes, poverty, HIV/AIDS and environmental damage. We need to take effective action in response to all these challenges, and we cannot always wait for the threat to fully materialise before we act."]

The role of the Security Council in prevention is a sensitive one. But it is essential. We need a growing consensus that the Security Council should tackle emerging threats from an early stage.

Against this backdrop, the Council is thinking about how to review and strengthen its "prevention" responses. These include four areas for further development:

- a) A more active approach to the Council's mandate under Chapter VI for the peaceful resolution of disputes, including action to deal with internal conflicts;
- b) Closer co-ordination with the Secretary-General's good offices missions and regional organisations and actors. A good example is ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, which is playing an increasingly constructive role in tackling conflicts in the region.
- c) More consistent and well-targeted sanctions regimes, including expert support, monitoring mechanisms and enforcement.
- d) Development of non-military tools for engagement and intervention, including improving police and rule of law support and intervention to provide emergency civilian administration.

Protect

But sometimes, despite all our best efforts, prevention fails. What is the responsibility of the international community to protect its citizens in these cases? They fall into broadly two categories: firstly resolving conflict between States and within States; and, secondly and more controversially, what do we do in the face of large-scale human rights abuses and humanitarian crises?

Let's look first at the easier case; the established role of the UN in peace-keeping.

It might help to list some of the key forms of intervention carried out by the UN:

- Military deployments under direct UN authority: i.e., the intervention of UN troops and support on the ground, following a peace agreement. This is usually under a traditional peacekeeping mandate. There has also been at least one deployment under a preventative mandate: the UN's former mission in Macedonia UNPREDEP.

- Diplomatic: through the use of the Secretary General's good offices, through fact-finding missions of the Security Council, and also through diplomatic work by UN Country Teams.
- Protective: under which I would include the work of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the life-saving and life-sustaining interventions by the UN humanitarian agencies – a key role which in itself justifies the existence of the UN.

Peacekeeping is becoming ever more complex. Operations are becoming increasingly complicated, integrating military, political and humanitarian functions. As missions get more complicated, there is even more need for clear mandates and better co-ordination. We are promoting a more integrated approach to planning and strategic management. And we are helping the UN develop their thinking, behind the scenes. This work ranges from improved planning of civilian post-conflict efforts to an improved ability to get missions on the ground quickly.

Let me list some of the factors which may be included in the Security Council mandate of a peace support operation, over and above a peacekeeping deployment. At the earliest stage we need to consider whether to cover the following elements;

- support to build capacity for planning and management of public services, sometimes starting from zero;
- financing for salaries in the Civil Service and local military;
- disarmament, demobilisation and re-integration of ex-combatants, sometimes including children, and crucially providing alternative employment to discourage return of conflict;
- constitutional development, preparation of elections and the basics of a democratic state;
- Rule of Law encompassing the legal framework, police, judges, penal institutions.

Getting the right Resolution is only the beginning. Ensuring delivery across the whole range of issues is the particular challenge.

But the UN does not need to do everything itself - a more proactive Security Council can recognise the role of other organisations in stabilising conflicts. It can build on the willingness of lead nations or organisations to carry out an intervention in support of the maintenance of international peace and security.

A prime example of this is the role the African Union is playing in resolving the situation in the Sudan. I shall be travelling to Nairobi next week for a Security Council meeting there. The Council will be addressing again, and this time in the

region, the prospects for Sudan. We have already set out a tough position on Darfur and given our support to the Naivasha peace process. Our aim is a comprehensive agreement, underpinned by the international community, where all Sudanese have prospect of stability and political arrangements meeting their aspirations.

More controversial than “traditional” peacekeeping is how the UN should act to halt or avert massive violations of humanitarian law and crimes against humanity. This debate, the idea of so-called “humanitarian intervention”, is a difficult one. But we can not shy away from it. Ultimately, we need to consider when force might be used. This is a tough nut to crack – but here are some circumstances where we might be faced with that decision.

We should be ready to act, for example,

- in the face of an overwhelming and immediate humanitarian catastrophe;
- when a government has demonstrated its unwillingness or inability to avert the humanitarian catastrophe or is actively promoting it;
- when all non-violent methods have been exhausted;
- when the scale of (potential) human suffering justifies the risks and dangers of military action;
- if there is a clear objective or set of objectives, designed to avert or end the humanitarian catastrophe, and the military means are available to ensure a high probability of success;
- if there is clear evidence that military action would be welcomed by the people at risk; and
- if the consequences for human suffering of non-action would be worse than those of intervention.

Even if these conditions are met, we should aim to promote a collective response. We should limit our action in scope to what is absolutely necessary to achieve the humanitarian purpose; action should be proportionate to the aims to be achieved, and of course we must remain consistent with international humanitarian law.

Pursue

Which brings me to “Pursue”. The rule of law, at both national or international level, is essential for a stable and secure international system.

Much of what the UN is involved in in the “prevent” category is to strengthen governance, including the rule of law. In each of our last two Presidencies of the Security Council, the UK scheduled open debates on Justice and the Rule of Law.

And the Council has been active on what we call “new threats”, or what Kofi Annan calls “Old threats in new and dangerous combinations”. The Security Council has passed resolutions requiring States to implement domestic legislation against terrorism and the trafficking of weapons of mass destruction, in particular to terrorists. Implementation is for States, but the UN Security Council acting under Chapter 7 of the Charter, adopted Resolutions which had a binding effect on all member states.

At the other end of the scale, we should remember that the UN is also involved in the punishment of some of the worst criminals of the last century. Through the International Criminal Tribunals on Rwanda and Yugoslavia, the UN is bringing perpetrators of war crimes to justice and ending impunity. It is also involved in a similar role in Cambodia and Sierra Leone. And potentially could do so through the newly established International Criminal Court. The aim is to end impunity and deliver justice, a key stage in the application of the rule of law, itself a vital requirement to inhibit conflict and promote democracy.

Conclusion

In 2003, much was written about the UN in crisis. China offers us a model. The Chinese character for crisis is made up of two elements – one standing for danger, and the other for opportunity.

Some in the media are seeking to portray a second Bush term in the White House as a danger for the UN. In my experience, Washington comes to the UN over and over again. To quote an immediate example, it is at US initiative that the Council is meeting in Nairobi next week to give a push to the peace process in Sudan.

And 2005 certainly presents us with great opportunities. The UN agenda next year – from the High Level Panel’s recommendations to the Millennium Review summit – is full of occasions to bring the international community together. We will be promoting a common understanding of the relationship between security and development. A consensus around shared threats should give us the foundation for action to prepare the UN, better prevent conflict, better protect people and pursue the rule of law.

The High Level Panel will report next month. There will be much activity and many meetings in the first half of 2005, particularly on financing requirements. The UK will preside the G8, and from July, the European Union. The common aim should be to garner the different proposals, and produce a successful outcome to the General Assembly Summit on 16 September.

Such an outcome could include the following:

- more effective conflict prevention, post-conflict reconstruction and peacebuilding by new structures under the Security Council to address failing states, coordinate UN activity in liaison with the IFIs, and generally sharpen up coordination and delivery;
- on development, securing donor commitment to increased aid resources through (a) EU pledges to give at least 0.5% oda/gni by 2010, (b) agreement to innovative financing mechanisms, (c) further multilateral debt relief;
- more effective aid, with better harmonisation of donor practices and streamlined multilateral cooperation;
- tighter assured delivery of the Millennium Goals;
- stronger international wmd regimes including tighter nuclear, biological and chemical controls; and reinforced cooperation on counter terrorism;
- agreed principles concerning the use of force and the international responsibility to protect citizens when national governments are failing.

Such a Summit outcome could forge a new consensus on the full range of inter-linked threats; poverty, disease, climate change, and environmental degradation, as well as a more direct security threat such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and proliferation. This would be a package in which all members of the United Nations see their principle interests identified and acted upon.

Implementation would be key, but as in so much, the crucial factor will be the political will of nations. This challenging agenda is worth the effort. If we can secure agreement, we will be able to move forward with a stronger consensus and increased energy to meet the threats and opportunities which we face. That is the challenge. It is what makes 2005 such a crucial year for the United Nations and the entire international community. Nations should not flinch from the hard and difficult responses necessary to choose the right road for the 21st century.

But let's also be realistic. We can create a better functioning UN. But it will not be perfect, not least because there are 191 different definitions (at least) of what the UN should be. Many of you will be familiar with one I am particularly fond of, by Henry Cabot Lodge, "this organisation is created to prevent you from going to hell. It isn't created to take you to heaven."