THE UNITED NATIONS: MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE POST–COLD WAR WORLD

Is the United Nations capable of coping in any meaningful way with the military conflicts and humanitarian crises that characterize the post–Cold War world? Are the reforms currently being implemented or under consideration (including Charter revision) likely to significantly enhance the Organization's capacity for meeting those challenges? How will the United Nations finance the Secretary-General’s preventive diplomacy, peacekeeping and peacemaking agenda? Is the Organization approaching or past the point of institutional overload? Are the demands and expectations now impossible for the United Nations to meet, setting it up for failure and thus—again—massive popular disaffection?

The panel was convened at 2:00 p.m., Wednesday, March 31, 1993, by its Chair, Edwin M. Smith, who introduced the panelists: Keith Krause, Centre for International and Strategic Studies, York University; David J. Scheffer, U.S. Department of State (unable to attend); and Sir Brian Urquhart, The Ford Foundation.

REMARKS BY EDWIN M. SMITH*

One of our panelists, David Scheffer, is unable to participate because of urgent business in connection with his new responsibilities as assistant to Madeleine Albright, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

The end of the Cold War has rapidly unsettled many of the assumptions that undergirded international relations for more than forty years. The changing realities have challenged institutions and norms based on those assumptions. Organizations established after World War II to respond to certain threats have not responded adequately to new and different threats. Meanwhile, traditional norms that limited international intervention in response to problems within states no longer effectively prohibit multilateral action. As changing arrangements have forced adjustment in international institutions, state actors have begun to recognize limitations in the conventional principles that have ordered their relationships. Many questions have been raised concerning traditional norms, as contemporary political actors have challenged them in word and deed. The international community has faced unimagined challenges to conventional notions of political territorial integrity, as self-determination and secessionist movements have shattered the stability of several states. At the same time, evolving crises have forced multilateral organizations into actions that defy long-held beliefs about the inviolability of the domestic jurisdiction of states. This New World Order forces us to rethink conceptual structures that have become comfortable lenses for our view of world politics. While that rethinking may force us into drastically new and different visions, results may prove rewarding.

At the same time, we may be confronting the frustrations involved in attempting to analyze and generalize issues from our limited understandings of contingent and evolving events. The current apparent global disorder may simply reflect the inadequacy of our implicit assumptions as observers. Similarly, the seeming ineptitude of the existing international institutions may show the frailty of their foundational conceptions. We may be involved in trying to understand an opaque

* University of Southern California Law Center.
reality where anachronistic institutions rely too comfortably on traditional norms as they try to understand only vaguely comprehensible conflicts.

If we have concerns about the limitations and possibilities of international institutions, we need to reconsider some underlying assumptions. The Cold War saw the frustration of the common security concept. One of the primary problems resulted from the use of the veto by the United States and the Soviet Union, each seeking to prevent Security Council action advocated by the other. Repetition of this sort of manipulation cast a shadow upon the credibility of the Council. Dissension among its leaders paralyzed attempts by the United Nations to implement collective security measures. Those measures could be disregarded by either of the superpowers or by any state commanding the strong support of either of them. Ideological conflict between the superpowers had incapacitated institutional mechanisms for responding to threats to international peace and security.

In the aftermath of the Gulf war, the contrast between this critical description of the United Nations and more recent comments by American and other officials could not be more stark. In fact, the actions of the leaders of the superpowers showed astonishing changes in a global landscape previously assumed to be immutable. Agreement between American and Soviet leaders on very controversial UN action gave credence to assertions of a New World Order. In January 1992, the Security Council held its first heads of state summit. In the joint statement that closed the summit, the heads of state raised issues that were new to the notion of collective security. The summit statement came as new collective action demonstrated the broader vision suggested by the Council. In the past, it has been restrained from addressing many issues by the contention that action would infringe upon the domestic jurisdiction of member states. Since the Gulf war, however, the Council has treated several internal conflicts as within its jurisdiction. It specifically designated Iraqi suppression of Kurds as a source of refugee flows that threatened international peace and security. Peacekeeping missions in both Cambodia and former Yugoslavia have attempted to remedy internal ethnic or political conflicts. The relief mission in Somalia is a response to internal armed conflict caused by clan rivalry. In each instance, the activity undertaken by the United Nations has moved beyond the traditional notions of response to threats to international peace and security.

Although it may have reached new levels of respect among peoples and nations of the world, the United Nations now confronts entirely unanticipated threats. The Organization may have passed through a troubled adolescence only to enter a period of maturity that could overwhelm it. Some of its prospective difficulties grow from political compromises that occurred at its founding. New concerns have been raised about the legitimacy of the Security Council, some of which reflect questions that go deeper than skepticism about the Council's makeup. Fresh questions arise partly in response to a lack of fit between the collective security institutions and contemporary problems. These questions may imply a challenge to the paradigm that undergirds collective security.

The stable postwar order cracked with the dissolution of the Eastern bloc alliance and the disappearance of the Soviet Union. This old order served to mask serious intrastate ethnic and nationalist conflicts. It is important to note that in many respects, the Gulf war maintained an illusion of vitality for state-centric notions of collective response. The UN mechanisms and the norms and rules of its Charter provided the framework for action against Iraq. However, the plight of Iraqi Kurds, combined with the conflicts in former Yugoslavia and Somalia,
has caused serious observers to question the relevance of the state-centric conception of collective security.

Within recent months, the most disturbing disorders have grown from conflicts within states. At present, at least forty-eight intrastate conflicts rage throughout the world. In order to invoke the rules and procedures of international organizations, diplomats have attempted to characterize internal conflicts as threats to state-centric notions of peace and security, portraying internal violence as sufficiently threatening to international peace and security to merit collective response through traditional institutions. These characterizations seem hollow and irrelevant in the face of violence that remains horrendous whether or not there is a credible threat to neighboring states.

Even when the instrumental goals of this characterization are realized, collective security institutions based on the state-centric model could prove inadequate as vehicles of response to these bloody conflicts. Collective security institutions and organizations lack norms and rules for involvement in intrastate violence, even though the loss of life may approach genocidal dimensions. States, in their attempt to thwart cross-border invasion, find themselves unable to justify to their citizens risky actions to end internal conflicts. These inadequacies should cause critical observers to question the utility of existing collective security institutions and organizations and the norms and rules upon which they base their actions.

The unprecedented challenges posed by the New World Order require both new norms and more effective means for implementing appropriate policies. Collective security structures devoted to the protection of traditional states became paralyzed in the face of massive disorder within states. At the same time, collective involvement in massive internal disorders may exacerbate fears among weaker developing states of a rebirth of colonial forms of domination. Effective collective action will require the balancing of legitimate concerns for threatened populations with due respect for the political independence of these populations.

With continued problems in Iraq and new problems elsewhere, the optimism that the function of the United Nations raised following the Gulf war has waned. Some of the Security Council's willingness to initiate new approaches has met with only grudging support from nonwestern states. Much of this disaffection may arise from doubts emanating from a combination of military predominance and practice procedural control of the United Nations in the hands of the United States. The Security Council summit attempted to address the new range of responsibilities facing it.

In his recent report, An Agenda For Peace, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali addresses a number of approaches to the broad range of problems within the United Nations. In addition to peacekeeping, a traditional UN activity, and preventive diplomacy, there is a complement of new proposals. Even with these new approaches, however, the report adopts much of the state-centric image that accompanied the formation of the United Nations. By failing to recognize that states are not the sole participants in the international system of peace and war, the report misses the opportunity to address new options. In addition, it fails to develop the concept of preventive diplomacy in ways that are necessary to serve critical early-warning functions.

An Agenda for Peace has sparked significant debate on important and relevant issues. Although many people concerned with the United Nations, both within

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and outside the Organization, are addressing these questions, the issues remain in doubt. Some of the most disturbing difficulties involve the financing of new UN endeavors. The Organization confronts enormous challenges in adjusting to newly perceived relations of power and influence. It is easy to highlight the risk confronted by the United Nations; but prescriptions based on the traditional images of the global system face many of the same risks. Realignments and modifications in the nature of power and influence in the international system require different conceptual foundations, if proposed solutions are to have any substantial success. Joseph Nye has made some provocative observations that bear directly on the traditional assumptions and the new context. According to Nye, both realists and liberals tried to fit new situations into the old paradigm. Realists continue to regard military power as the primary element in international power. They cite the Gulf war as their best evidence. Liberals, on the other hand, see Wilsonian elements emphasizing peoples and international institutions relying on broad values and international law.

From these initial conceptions, proponents of the competing images have developed a number of descriptive paradigms to explain the confusing international scene. Some contend that there will be a recurrence of bipolar power-balancing, while others consider a multipolar system more likely. Still others contend that a tri-polar, economically based structure will live on. One writer even argues that we have entered an era of unipolar hegemony in which the United States will dominate.

Nye suggests an image of multilevel interdependence as the alternative and contends that the linkages between international actors vary depending on the level of analysis. At the unipolar level, states are the principal actors and the military power of the United States makes it predominant. At the economic level, international institutions and groupings of state actors exercise predominant power. At the transnational level of interdependence, the distinctions blur between domestic and foreign policy, making nongovernmental organizations, political parties and domestic interest groups having both national and transnational contacts the international arbiters of foreign policy, or more accurately, of “intermestic” policy.

Nye notes that some international institutions have begun to adjust to the range of values and actors implied by the system of multilevel interdependence. In particular, the United Nations has reacted to immediate problems with mechanisms that may prove well-adapted to a different and evolving global order. This situational response, forced by the necessity of reacting to immediate crises in spite of anachronistic concepts and capabilities, may suggest a style of institutional learning that has some promise for the future. Unfortunately, anecdotal instances of creative crisis-response offer very thin ground for optimism. Institutional inertia within both the United Nations and national governments can frustrate the initiative of those facing real problems “on the ground.” Commitment of both existing governments and groups seeking self-determination to the political dimensions of the concept of sovereignty will limit their willingness to accept new UN initiatives. Recent discussions of “micronationalism” indicate some of the dimensions of this problem.

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4 Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali has used the term. See United Nations Security Council Summit Opening Address, Jan. 31, 1992, NEXIS/Federal News Service.