

POSTFACE: *THE UN AND WORLD GOVERNANCE*

Reactions to the document

The document under discussion, *The UN and World Governance*, has elicited more than a dozen responses that address both the document itself and the questions that it was designed to raise. There proved to be little in the way of forceful reactions to the document itself, contrary to what one might have imagined given the nature of a subject matter that often provokes bitter debate. The document was nevertheless intended to provoke a reaction — which it certainly has — and most of the comments centre on how to move forward towards a possible future world governance.

Criticism is easy, art is difficult: in many ways this well-known saying sums up the main criticisms levelled against our analysis. Overall, most commentators were not dismissive of our criticisms of the UN, especially as we did not fall into the trap of limiting our criticisms to the age-old debate about enlarging the Security Council. Nevertheless, criticisms were raised on several occasions of an alleged over-emphasis on diagnosis that failed to come up with concrete proposals to remedy the problems that had been identified. “*In conclusion,*” one comment reads, “*I feel that the diagnosis is correct (...), but I also feel that what is missing from this document are several possible options for the future, which could be used as basis from which to take the discussion forward. In particular, the final part of the document needs to be clearer in terms of the future role we envisage for the UN.*”

A second series of critiques addressed our pessimistic view of states’ abilities to transcend their natural self-regard and to defend their “common” interests, which conflict at times with national interests. The following comment expresses this point well: “*You can be absolutely certain that a large number of member states do not yet have the maturity required to place the common interest above their own neighbourhood quarrels. However, the challenges of globalisation and the depth of the changes that have come in its wake, as well as those posed by phenomena such as population growth and climate change, mean, to my mind, that we already see the emergence of a collective awareness, at least in the scientific community, which is gaining influence among politicians.*”

Taking these criticisms as a starting point, three major themes emerge from the comments made. The first touches on the UN’s ability to deal with problems of world governance, be they associated with war and peace, the environment, the economy or hunger, to name just a few. The second is linked to the first to an extent, but is a problem in its own right: the role of the state. The third theme is that of the future itself, or more precisely, that of the management of collective problems, notably institutional changes in order to adapt to tomorrow’s challenges.

Regarding the UN, almost everybody agrees on the fundamentals: the UN is ill-suited and ill-equipped to meet the multiple missions we ask of it. Almost every body also agrees on the reasons for this state of affairs, be they historical, political or structural. The UN is the product of history, of which it is to a prisoner to a degree. As the limits to its missions were set in 1945, it is unable to respond to an ever-growing series of demands emanating from a rapidly changing world.

An illustration of its ambiguous nature, as highlighted by one commentator, is that the organisation's very name is problematic, referring as it does to "nations" rather than "states". This is not only a question of semantics: a number of current conflicts are rooted in the nation/state dichotomy, with some communities present across several national territories (Kurds, Uzbeks and Kirghiz for example) while the majority of states worldwide encompass several nations, a situation that leads almost invariably to conflict. Conflicts of identity will feed the wars of tomorrow just as surely as will competition for dwindling resources. The resolution of infra- as opposed to inter-national conflicts is already a major preoccupation. We are at present almost legally and physically defenceless in the face of such challenges. The United Nations, then, should act as the main arbiter, capable of guarding against, checking and resolving these types of conflict. Article 42 of the chapter VII in the Charter gives a glimpse of the possibilities in this area, provided that the notion of international security is broadened, since another article in the Charter indicates that the UN functions according to a principle of non-interference in countries' internal affairs.¹

When it comes to the possibilities of UN reform, most commentators are sceptical, especially when the Security Council is mentioned. On the other hand, many of them concur in praising the excellent work accomplished by the many specialist agencies.

It is also clear that a short- or medium-term viable alternative to the UN is hardly likely to emerge. As things stand, the only visible alternatives are attempts to group together various states, based on regular encounters between heads of state or government representatives. The G7, G8 and, in particular, G20 are taking on an increasingly important role in international politics. This importance is partially due to the UN's shortcomings. The appearance of the BRIC countries, comprising emerging or re-

¹ Article 2-7 of chapter I which directs the reader to article 42: *Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter; but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII.*

Chapter VII, Article 42: *Should the Security Council consider that measures provided for in Article 41 would be inadequate or have proved to be inadequate, it may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. Such action may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations.*

emerging powers, is part of the process that seeks to transform inter-state geometry. Evidently, this phenomenon lies within the domain of states, more specifically, the most powerful or visible states. It therefore conforms to UN-style architecture, and in no way constitutes a revolutionary change. Quite the opposite, since it represents an approach well-known to historians, two examples being the 19th century's Holy Alliance and Triple Entente.

Nevertheless, the UN exists, it achieves things and, most importantly, it enjoys an international legitimacy that no state or other trans-state or supra-state organization can rival at present.

The UN also has strong symbolic value. Officially, the UN serves as an international forum where representatives of big and small countries alike can express themselves, even if the small countries often remain (very much) on the sidelines. This means that the UN is the only multi-lateral system with global reach. It continues to exert a moral influence over world affairs, especially since the Guantanamo debacle caused the USA to definitively lose the moral upperhand it still had in 2000, even if diminished by the Vietnam war and professed support for Latin American putschists. As one commentator said: *“The UN exists as a universal global authority; to tackle the problems that world governance currently raises, the best solution would be to adapt it to suit the singularities of the contemporary world and optimize the way it functions to meet the needs of humanity’s future.”*

Breach and revolution

The trend in the modern world since the 17th century, particularly since the 1789 revolution, has been to want to solve the world's major problems by putting the past behind us and rethinking institutional mechanisms and the structures responsible for meeting the requirements of the moment. In other words, we have often wanted, rightly or wrongly, to solve problems linked to major political, economic and social changes by creating new institutions and new mechanisms for political management. This trend, which originally concerned the political organization of states, has since the 20th century come to apply to supra-national political management. This was the vision behind the creation of the League of Nations after the Great War and the UN after the Second World War, the latter issuing from the former, even though in radically different form.

The debate between evolutionaires and revolutionaries is not new: examples include the heated exchanges between partisans of the 1789 model and its detractors, and the philosophical altercations between Edmund Burke and Tocqueville, and between Marx and Engels on one side and Bakounine on the other. These and all the other examples from history help everyone to form an opinion, and the debate remains open.

When it comes to the UN, the question is: should we use it as a basis for elaborating a new architecture for world governance? Or should we break with the venerable organization and start afresh?

The answer to this question, as revealed by the comments on the document under debate, depends on the way the UN and emerging alternatives are perceived. The alternatives remain unclear and are not necessarily risk-free. We focused on the emergence of a civil society capable of influencing events. But this assertion prompts further questions: is civil society capable of playing this role? What legitimacy does it have? What would it bring to the table in terms of added value? And, most of all, what exactly is “civil society”, particularly in terms of its international and global dimensions?

Several commentators rightly underlined that our critique of the UN is also a critique of the state. But can we argue that, despite the fact that the state raises a number of problems, and even creates them, its role in the context of world governance should be reduced? It is possible that a new architecture for world governance, as well as the UN’s future, should be rooted in the state, or more precisely, in a renewed state. Moreover, even if the centrality of the state is problematic, why not try to develop other centres of power and action rather than minimize the state’s scope?

The state and world governance

The problem of the state and world governance arises every day. The list of failed states, such as Somalia and Zimbabwe, grows ever longer. The problems linked to a country’s collapse are limitless, including for the international community (one example being piracy on the Somali coast). For these countries, bad governance or the absence of governance are directly responsible for the country’s political, economic and social implosion, and they provide a negative illustration of the role the state can play in relation to a country or region’s stability. On a different level, the 2008-2009 economic crisis shows how the absence of safeguards and basic regulations, based on common sense, can quickly degenerate into a situation that has wide-reaching and innumerable consequences — primarily the 100 million people joining the ranks of the poor, according to the latest reports. The belief that economic affairs must be conducted with as few regulations as possible has until now been one of the two pillars of international relations, the other being respect of national sovereignty in relation to internal affairs (explaining the absence of external intervention in Zimbabwe, for example). In both cases, it is vital to rethink current practices. In both cases, the state is at the heart of the problem, and is for the most part the solution to the problem. And in both cases, the UN should set an example. This is, in any event, the opinion of most commentators.

The state should be the main guarantor of human rights, protection of liberties and security. Nevertheless, how many of the 200 states that exist on the planet accomplish their task satisfactorily? The future of world governance thus depends primarily on the future of state governance, whether it national or regional, as is the case of the European Union. The problem could be expressed another way: if states are incapable of reforming the UN, is the UN capable of reforming states? Is it at least capable of moving in that

direction? This is quite possibly where the nub of the problem lies, where the UN can reinvent itself. As one commentator stresses: “*What is important is satisfying the needs for freedom, values, prosperity and security of citizens in all communities and nations, whilst respecting other people and the common good. This is the goal of the quest for better governance.*”

Carl Schmitt, the famous German jurist, was already pointing out in the 1950s that the state, analogous to an 18th century European conception, was in a phase of decline that corresponded closely to the decline of Europe. But Schmitt was also sure that the existence of the state, or more precisely, states, could only be questioned in a world where war was banished forever. He said “Any political unit implies the possible existence of an enemy and thus the coexistence of another political unit. Thus, as long as the state as such continues to exist on this planet, there will continue to be several states, with no possibility of a universal state that encompasses all humanity and the entire planet. The political world is not a *universum* but, as it were, a *pluriversum*.”²

If we take this notion to its logical conclusion, the end result of the UN ideal, perpetual peace, would enable a post-state governance to be established. The paradox then is that the UN is a product of the state, and that states define and support it. In concrete terms, this dilemma is illustrated by the Permanent Security Council which refuses to step aside to allow a reorganization of the UN security system.

The UN as the mainspring of world governance?

If we agree on the fact that the specialist UN agencies should continue their (important) work, and that they should therefore be given more support, what will become of the UN as an institution that guarantees world peace and freedom?

Here again many commentators agree that the UN should have an expanded role in the future, going beyond the role played by the agencies. There are several interesting suggestions that could circumvent or even resolve the problem of the constant limit set by member states, and by the Security Council in particular. In other words, if we cannot reform the UN, can we not simply improve it?

The UN suffers from a lack of autonomy, confidence and assurance, from a democratic deficit and a degree of inefficiency due to the complexity of a bureaucracy of its scale. The ideal would therefore be to start by endowing the Secretariat with more power and greater visibility. In other words, the UN Secretariat should be the emblematic figure of world governance. The Obama phenomenon and his Nobel prize prove to what extent the world has a need for a figure who might be capable of representing humanity as a whole. It is, however, impossible for a man or woman elected by a people to defend primarily the nation’s interests to take on the role of “world president”.

² *The Concept of the Political*, George D. Schwab, trans., University of Chicago Press, 1996. The first reference alludes to *The Nomos of the Earth*, published in 1950.

Until now, the UN has had trouble electing a representative of this kind at its head. However, the example of Kofi Annan showed that a General Secretary with enough stature can widely influence the affairs of the world. But Kofi Annan, and Dag Hammarskjöld before him (1953 – 1961), are the exceptions. It is now important to ensure that others like them are appointed to lead the UN organization. This calls for real elections, with candidates who are not, or at least not necessarily, UN apparatchiks and whose election could stand as a model for democracy. Consider the benefits of a Mandela or Jimmy Carter yesterday, or a Lula or Michèle Bachelet tomorrow at the head of the UN! The form taken by such elections still needs to be defined, which means the UN system would need to be reconfigured, or at least supplemented by the structures for organizing a democratic vote, whether directly or indirectly, with all the difficulties this process implies.

The idea of creating a parliament within the UN could work in this direction, giving the UN a much-needed democratic boost and open competition which would help to strengthen the Secretariat whilst possibly making the UN system more autonomous. Such an infusion of democracy could eventually lead to the long-awaited reform of the (undemocratic) Permanent Security Council. But here again, an election system for a world parliament is yet to be devised.

Nonetheless, the UN could profit from the influence it has, even without changing its form, and act as a true intellectual and moral world leader. We know the impact that ideas have, and how they can shape the architecture and direction of tomorrow's world. We could call this a comparative advantage. In the field, the UN has the resources to attract the greatest minds of our time, deliberate on the major problems facing tomorrow's world, draw up road maps and even generate the energy that could spark the implementation of major projects. In some senses the UN already works in this direction, but it could do far more, even under current circumstances — if it develops the will to do so. But if history has taught us one thing, it is that the UN has trouble creating the necessary will unless pushed from the outside. Is this push possible without the autonomous initiative of social, culture and political movements which are currently in an embryonic stage?

We know that the UN's power is limited by its structure and configuration. There is nothing to stop it extending its influence, however. Much remains to be accomplished in the spheres of human rights, development and inequalities. The UN is well placed to make a difference.

Without having to make any far-reaching changes, the UN could also act in a more horizontal manner, including within the organization itself. We know that the world is highly interdependent, that its problems are inextricably linked to each other. The creation and multiplication of links between the various UN bodies and the agencies could only be positive.

In the future, the UN should also work with a growing number of extra-state partners, including civil society actors as well as a wide range of NGOs and private foundations,

which often carry out remarkable work in the field. The UN should also deepen its involvement with local and regional authorities. In short, it needs to develop partnerships and extend its networks. There is nothing new in these suggestions, but although this ground has been explored before, its potential remains largely untapped.

Over and above the issues of improved internal organization, there are other issues which have not been addressed at all. In the field of war and peace, which spurred the creation of the League of Nations then the UN, much remains to be done. If we want war to be eradicated from the planet one day, the only solution would seem to be setting up a permanent and autonomous supra-national army, rather than a conglomerate of international contingents, specializing in preventing war and maintaining peace, and endowed with a real capacity to fight and use force. This idea is particularly relevant when we know that many opinions, including within the UN, agree that at some future date, new sources of conflict will emerge and combine with other existing or future phenomena to generate a string of disasters. What organization other than the UN could deal with these threats and oversee this army? Although launching a project of this type is extremely complex, the issues that need confronting are on the same scale.

Conclusion

To sum up, although the UN currently seems to be overtaken by events, and could be rapidly engulfed by the massive transformations it has not really been able to tackle, hope remains that it will be able to play a leading role in devising and building a new world governance. To do so, the UN must first overcome its shortcomings, then seek to further exploit its comparative advantages, and get involved in areas it has neglected until now (one example being the economy) whilst strengthening its presence in its preferred fields, like peace and human rights.

Above all, it needs to think of the future and develop tomorrow's major projects. As one of the comments says, "*In any event, it is essential to make people aware of a shared destiny.*" The UN cannot accomplish all this by itself, or even with the sole support of states that traditionally support it as well as hold it back. Other actors need to come on board. The UN, as an institution, needs to encourage them. We know that only large-scale crises and emergency situations trigger major political reorganization. The crisis and the urgency have arrived, and the UN's main duty is to convey that message.

The United Nations Organization rose from the ashes of the highly flawed League of Nations, an improved version of its predecessor which had laid down the first foundations of world governance. The world now needs a third version of the LoN/UN. Maybe it is already on its way. But the urgency of the situation means that we cannot wait forever. If we need to think about the future in terms of the UN, we also need to think about the alternatives, with or without it.