The UN as an Organization. A Critique of its Functioning

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It has become obvious that the tasks attributed to the UN by Article 1 of its Charter have not been carried out. During the fifty years of its existence, the UN has not been able either 'to maintain international peace and security', or 'to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character'.

The number of people who still believe that some day the organization will become more efficient is diminishing with time. Public opinion finds no answer to its anxiety and frustrations about catastrophic humanitarian situations, about the failure of peace-keeping operations or the spread of unemployment at world level. Everyone feels that the UN and the UN system are unable to propose any solution. Criticisms are growing and scepticism about any possibility of 'revitalization' is widespread. Some people already speak of the UN's death.

But it would be naïve to think that an objective critique of the UN organization, structure or functioning is currently possible. No criticism is neutral or objective, but part of a larger debate on the concept of global society. A survey of the various ideas and proposals for reform shows that acknowledgement of UN failure opens a larger discussion on global governance. At present the conservative approach prevails, there is no hope of any reforms being implemented, and radical views are still considered utopian. But the evolution of the global situation will probably completely change the nature of the debate in the near future as well as the attitude of the political establishment towards UN reform.

I. The Present Situation

During the fifty years of the UN's life, ideas on UN reform have evolved in relation to the types of problems this institution was supposed to address. During the Cold

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War, suggestions for reform concerned the management of the Secretariat and economic and social activities. Little was said about security matters, it being understood that the efficiency of the Security Council was greatly limited by the East-West confrontation.

That period was characterized by the creation of a number of expert groups[1] which suggested changes to the organization chart of the Secretariat and made numerous recommendations regarding a system of planning, programming, budgeting and evaluation, personnel policy, the definition of priorities, the coordination of the activities of the UN system, and the structure of the intergovernmental machinery, particularly the 'revitalization of the Economic and Social Council'. The results obtained were meagre and have not improved the organization's efficiency. The only meaningful change, the invention by Lester Pearson and Dag Hammarskjöld of the system of peace-keeping, has taken place in the field of security. But curiously it was never considered as a reform.

Towards the end of the Cold War, after 1985, some more ambitious views of reform[2] by private commissions grouping independent personalities, mainly outside the UN, began to emerge. They included the idea of the creation of an Economic Security Council, a regional system of representation and Regional Agencies. But they did not concern the security system. The merit of those proposals was that they began to put into question the existing structure, but they had no influence on the conservative attitude of governments.

After 1988, the new role of the UN in the field of security, characterized by the support given by the Security Council to the US intervention in the Gulf and by the multiplication of the so-called 'Second-generation peace-keeping operations' drew the attention of the international community to security matters, i.e. the role and composition of the Security Council, the efficiency of peace-keeping, and the possibility of more preventive action, thus opening a new field for reflection.

But even during the short period between 1988 and 1995, two phases, an optimistic phase – i.e. 1988-1991 – due to the first successes of appeasement (Salvador, Nicaragua, Namibia) and to the outcome of the Gulf War, (which led to the belief that agreement among the five permanent members of the Security Council was the beginning of a new era for 'collective security'), and a pessimistic phase – since 1991 – due to the accumulation of failures – Angola, Somalia, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Haiti, Rwanda, etc. – may be distinguished, leading to very different ideas about the need and possibility for reform.

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1   A list of these various experts groups and their main proposals can be found in Bertrand, 'The Historical Development of Efforts to Reform the UN', in A. Roberts, B. Kingsbury, *United Nations Divided World* (1993) 420-436. See also in French, M. Bertrand, *L'ONU* (1994) 109.
2   Bertrand, 'Some Reflection on Reform of the UN', Report of the Joint Inspection Unit. UN Doc. A/40/988 of 6 December 1985; P. Fromuth (ed.), *A Successor Vision: The United Nations of Tomorrow* (1987) published by UNA USA, New York; UNDP, 'Human Development Report' (1992) Chapter V (this last document lists a number of other reports and projects).

The Secretary-General himself produced a report at the request of the Security Council, entitled an *Agenda for Peace*,[3] in which he suggested some new ideas on reform (notably on 'peace enforcement'). At the same time, the idea of a possible enlargement of the Security Council progressed and received support from the US, in order to permit the entrance of Japan and Germany as permanent members.

But in parallel, far more radical views have begun to develop, putting into question the very concept of 'collective security' and suggesting a complete reshuffling of the world institutions, including the UN as well as the other Agencies, notably those of Bretton Woods.

The situation we are witnessing today, in the year of the UN's 50th anniversary, can be described as opposition between:
– a conservative approach, leading to limited reforms.
– a radical approach proposing an overhaul of the present system.

A. The Conservative Approach

There are several conservative approaches with common features; the existing Charter is still considered practically untouchable; it is still believed that 'collective security' as defined in Chapter VII, is the only possible security system, but there are suggestions for improving it; its present failures are minimized; there is still belief in the possibility of better management. The approaches differ however on the role the UN should play and on various specific points. The US position, the Secretary-General's position, and the various academic conservative positions are clearly distinguishable.

1. The US Position

This is the position of an hegemonic power which believes its leadership is indispensable to ensure the correct functioning of the organization, and at the same time feels that the organization should serve its own interests. It also displays some distrust of the organization. (The Clinton and Reagan administrations do not differ in this regard).

In order to keep the UN under its authority, the US is still in arrears for the payment of its contributions, particularly for peace-keeping operations and still criticizes the management of the organization. In a statement before the Council of Foreign Relations on 11 June 1993, Ms Madeleine K. Albright, US Representative to the UN, explained that the failures of the peace-keeping operations in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Angola, etc., were due to the 'amateurism' of the United Nations.

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3   An *Agenda for Peace* report of the Secretary-General pursuant to the statement adopted by the summit meeting of the Security Council of 31 January 1992 (DPI 1247 June 1992.) A supplement to this document was published on 3 January 1995 (A/50/60).

Suggestions for reform supported by the US consist of:

- recommending better management, even if the post of Director of management is always held by a US citizen, and requesting the creation of a post of Inspector General;
- supporting the idea of enlargement of the membership of the Security Council, in order to offer permanent seats to Germany and Japan (mainly to facilitate the financing of peace-keeping);
- favouring association of the UN with regional organizations dealing with security matters, particularly with NATO in the area of peace enforcement.

The US remains opposed to the creation of special 'peace enforcement' units put at the disposal of the Secretary-General. And, more generally, while believing that peace-keeping operations, combined with humanitarian interventions and the organization of free elections, offer a solution to appease the intra-State conflicts, the US remains reluctant to give too much authority to the Secretary-General, to allow the application of collective security as defined in Chapter VII (military staff committee, etc.), or to develop too many interventions. That policy was officially presented by President Clinton in the 'presidential directive No. 25' of 5 May 1994 which defines in a very restrictive manner the conditions permitting the US to participate in peace-keeping operations: *inter alia* the existence of national US interest, the necessity of clear objectives, sufficient financial and manpower backing from the international community and the limited duration of any interventions. Comments made by the State department underline that 'neither the US nor the international community have the mandate, nor the resources, nor the possibility of resolving every conflict of this kind'. In fact it is the sentence of death for collective security.

2. The Secretary-General's Position

Secretary-General Boutros Ghali's position is very different. He considers that he has achieved valuable management reforms by reorganizing the Secretariat, introducing a new organization chart and reducing the number of top posts. On security matters, he has stated his position mainly through the publication in July 1992 of the report entitled an *Agenda for Peace* which summarizes the traditional conservative diplomatic attitude towards the UN and its role in security matters. The main ideas contained in that report are as follows.

The implementation of a full system of 'collective security' as envisaged in 1945, and defined in the Charter, i.e. the revitalization of the machinery described in Chapter VII, full use of Article 42 of the Charter, and the conclusion of the 'special agreements' foreseen in Article 43, whereby Member States undertake to make armed forces, assistance and facilities available to the Security Council for the purposes stated in Article 42. The report adds candidly:

The ready availability of armed forces on call could serve in itself as a means of deterring breaches of the peace since a potential aggressor would know that the Council had at its disposal a means of response. Forces under Article 43 may perhaps never be sufficiently large or well enough equipped to deal with a threat from a major army equipped with sophisticated weapons. They would be useful, however in meeting any threat posed by a military force of a lesser order.

This is an official recognition of the incapacity of the Security Council to deal with threats which emanate from the aggressive attitude of any great power. So the Secretary-General's concept matches that of President Roosevelt and his 'four policemen' in charge of guaranteeing world peace. It is consequently perfectly logical that the report also recommends the use of the Military Staff Committee of Article 47 (composed of the Chiefs of Staff of the five permanent members) for the direction of such operations.

These military arrangements are completed by the proposal to create 'peace enforcement units in clearly defined circumstances and with their terms of reference specified in advance'. These units would have to be 'more heavily armed than peace-keeping forces and would be under the command of the Secretary-General'.

Finally the report advocates a larger use of 'preventive diplomacy' or 'peace-making activities'.[4] But it describes a very traditional concept of prevention. It is not a question of acting with the necessary leverage in situations which lead to conflict, but one of convincing actors decided on war to sit around a table and to begin discussions. This type of diplomatic action has never succeeded in practice and can be considered as a diplomatic illusion.

The report does not deal with the question of enlargement of the membership of the Security Council, but the Secretary-General has let it be known that he supports the US position on that matter.

3. The Various Conservative Academic Positions

The majority of conservative academics seem to share a general scepticism on the possibility of reform, experience having shown the difficulty of getting consensus on any type of change, the taboo of the Charter remaining very strong. Those who nevertheless believe that some reforms are necessary, in general favour the proposals supported by the US or by the Secretary-General as having more chance of being considered. Some others put forward ideas for reform of minor points or old ideas which have never succeeded (methods of financing, revitalization of ECOSOC), but acknowledge that even minor changes will be difficult to achieve.

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4   It is difficult to find a distinction between the definition given in the Agenda for peace-making 'action to bring hostile parties to agreement, essentially through such peaceful means as those foreseen in Chapter VI of the Charter of the United Nations', and for preventive diplomacy 'action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur'.

B. The Radical Approach

The radical approach is relatively new and does not have a complete theoretical framework, but is developing at a rapid pace. Various articles and books reflect a growing uneasiness with the performance of the existing institutions, severely criticize the ideas and principles on which the present system has been built, make new institutional proposals and even develop a new theoretical approach. This includes:

(a) an evolution of the explanations given for the present process of change. Clichés on the post Cold War era, the development of interdependence, the 'global village', the globalization of values, the 'end of history', the development of democracy and the efficiency of the market economy are increasingly considered as insufficient to explain the present situation with growing unemployment, the development of intra-State conflicts and the new threats which are emerging.[5]

(b) increasing doubts being formulated as to the value and the possibilities of a collective security system of the type defined in the Charter. This is perceptible in the numerous articles written on the difficulties encountered with the so-called peace-keeping operations of the UN and their subsequent failure. The remarks made by Adam Roberts and Benedict Kingsbury in 'United Nations, Divided World' summarizes these doubts:

> Differences of perceptions and interests among states, prominent in the cold war period, continue to be pronounced, making united action on security issues uncertain and difficult. Peace-keeping works well only when there is some peace to keep. In some situations the cost of trying to impose peace is too high. In civil conflicts in particular, peace-keeping and enforcement action may be close to impossible especially where communal hatreds have become deep seated, there are no viable geographical lines separating combatants, and the types of weapons used are easily available and difficult to control. The Charter scheme does not deal specifically with the question of breakdown of order within states and the outbreak of communal war (at 38).

(c) proposals for reorganizing the economic and social activities and the structures of the UN system already mentioned are now becoming more popular, and the possibility of modifying the Charter, an action which is indispensable if the membership of the Security Council is to be enlarged, is now considered with less reluctance. For example the idea of the establishment of an Economic Security Council has been taken up by Mr Jacques Delors, former President of the Commission of the European Union.[6]

(d) studies for reform of the IMF and the World Bank made by some members of the financial establishment (Mr Paul Volker) in the United States.

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5   Cf. J. Renninger (ed.), *The Future Role of the United Nations in an Interdependent World* (1989); M. Bertrand, *La stratégie suicidaire de l'Occident* (1993). Y. Sakamoto, editor's introduction to the UNU volume *Global Transformation* (1994).

6   President Jacques Delors' speech at IISS conference of 10 September 1993, London.

(e) the constitutionalist approach which, without proposing a new constitution for the world underlines the necessity of a 'political statute of humanity'.[7]

(f) federalist views at the global level, which until recently have been generally considered as totally utopian being now more frequently aired. For example in the European Parliament, the Trivelli report (Doc. A/3/331/93) on the future of the United Nations recommends the creation of a consultative parliamentary assembly at the world level.[8]

(g) the development at the world level of a type of global security system other than the one embodied in the Charter is now considered as a possibility. The ideas of enlarging the CSCE system to the Mediterranean area (CSCM) or the creation of other regional security systems of the same type (CSCA in Asia) in particular have been seriously studied.

Many convergent new ideas are thus developing which give a new credibility to the radical approach. But in fact no proposal for reform, major or minor, has any chance at all of being implemented now.

C. Present Attitude Towards UN Reform

In fact there is today no chance of any UN reform succeeding. The prevailing political atmosphere in the United States, Europe, Japan, Russia and China excludes the implementation of a reform of any magnitude. The procedures for reform envisaged in Articles 108 and 109 of the UN Charter, requiring a majority vote of two thirds of the member States including all five permanent members of the Security Council, for the adoption of an amendment of the present text, leave no hope of achieving agreement of such proportions on any reform. The slow headway made by proposals for increasing the membership of the Security Council is good proof of the difficulty involved. Even for such a minor modification – which would not even make the Council more effective – support by the great powers is not sufficient. No support exists for a reform of some depth, or for a reform of the whole UN system, including the IMF and the World Bank.

II. The Evolution Towards the Radical Approach

But the present situation will inevitably change, and it is very likely that the direction of change will lead the political establishment to discover the importance of defining a new global institutional structure.

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7   See in particular R. Falk, R. Johansen and S. Kim, *The Constitutional Foundation of World Peace* (1993).
8   See also Nerfin, 'The Future of the UN System. Some Questions at the Occasion of an Anniversary', *Development Dialogue* (1985).

A. The Factors of Change

The accelerated change of the global political situation, which began in 1985 with the Gorbachevian revolution in the USSR, is still continuing and will continue. It is, of course, not possible to establish a scenario, but the factors of change are well known. The future will be made of:
- an irresistible trend towards planetary economic integration;
- the consequences of this trend on the social situation, i.e. globalization of the employment market, competition between workers with very unequal levels of pay, growth of unemployment (even during periods of economic growth), a trend towards the reduction of the level of salaries for routine workers, an increase in inequality and exclusion;
- a growing number of intra-State conflicts due to psychological collective reactions (nationalism, integrism, etc.) against the pressure and publicity for the adoption of the western way of life, which remains unattainable for poor peoples;
- the growth of migratory streams, that barriers at the borders of rich countries will not stop;
- the continuing unequal growth of world population, bringing a greater disequilibrium between the number of poor and the number of rich.

B. The New Content of the Political Debate

The electorate of rich countries, particularly the middle class, will search for protection against these growing threats. This will lead to a conflict between two opposed tendencies:
- a trend towards populist, authoritarian, and nationalist attitudes, which could create a drift towards fascist regimes in the developed countries, comparable to the trend towards nazism, fascism and militarism, that in the 30s led to the Second World War;
- a reaction of defence of human rights and of democracy.

The political question for citizens will no longer be merely selecting, by way of elections, leaders able to manage national problems, but will additionally involve their making a choice between fascism and democracy. The question will be in fact to define the type of society able to solve the contradictions
- between the enormous capacity of production of goods and services and the incapacity to guarantee jobs and decent conditions of life for the population of the planet;
- as well as between the proclaimed values of human rights, democracy and peace and the trend towards wars, insecurity and fascism.

This will become a universal concern. It will thus be more and more clear that the problems at stake in the economic, social and security fields are global and must find their solutions at the global level.

C. The Discovery by the Political Establishment of the Problem of Global Institutional Structure

Consequently the present paradoxical situation of the political establishment will change. The paradox today is that in all fields of activity – business, economy, communication, techniques, sciences, arts – individuals have the possibility of finding positions permitting them to play a role at the world level. Politics is the only field in which careers are only national. No doubt those who reach the most important posts (foreign affairs ministers, chiefs of State or of Government) are playing their part on the global stage. But these roles are played in a national capacity and only politicians belonging to superpowers have a chance of exercising any real influence.

At the very time when all problems are becoming global, there are no positions (the only exception being the post of the UN Secretary-General) permitting the interests of the whole international community to be represented. This phenomenon is directly related to the loss of credibility of the political establishment in numerous countries. Such a situation will be less and less acceptable, and the only way to change it and at the same time have an influence on the world situation will soon reveal itself as a proposal for the creation of a new global institutional structure.

It is in fact surprising that the political establishment has not already seized this opportunity. But if the world political situation continues to deteriorate, the central character of the global institutional question will become more and more obvious, and will be discovered rapidly at least by some politicians.

D. A New Institutional Debate

It is not very difficult to identify the nature of the problems to be considered, when the question is taken up at the political level, in a controversy opposing defence of democracy, human rights and peace against nationalism and fascism. In fact the list of actions that global institutions should be able to carry out are:
- the establishment of a permanent cooperation between heads of State or government of the great powers and of the regional representatives of all other countries, in order to cope with global problems;
- the progressive building of world peace, i.e. the definition and implementation of methods for preventing conflicts instead of letting them develop;
- the establishment of democracy and of respect of human rights everywhere in the world;
- the guarantee of the stability of the world economy;
- the control of all difficulties and troubles due to the economic, social, cultural and political progressive integration of the planet.

The present UN-IMF Specialized Agencies system, even completed by the Group of Seven, is not able to fulfil these missions. It does not ensure any serious cooperation of the actors on the world scene. The UN General Assembly is only a stage for

confronting various propagandas. The G7 is composed only of some great powers and the Security Council is under the control of the permanent Five. The present institutional setting is able neither to appease existing conflicts nor to prevent those in preparation. The 'collective security' system, which prescribes collective action against aggressors has never worked and cannot work, and the UN has neither the intellectual equipment nor the financial resources necessary to define and implement conflict prevention strategies capable of modifying situations leading to conflicts.

The present system exercises only a very limited influence on the global economy (through the adjustment structural policies imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on poor indebted countries). It does not guarantee exchange stability in any way and is not able to prevent crises that could destabilize the economy at the planetary level. It does not permit any transfer of resources from the rich countries to the poor ones in order to reduce social inequality and to facilitate the development of underdeveloped countries. The UN does not defend democracy, since it does not provide any democratic representation of peoples, or of national minorities, or of civil society. And the UN secretariat is not well enough equipped to be able to suggest new solutions, and to propose action.

To ensure real defence of democracy, human rights and peace, the establishment of an entirely new worldwide organization is indispensable, the main features of which are easily identifiable. The need for coordination at the global level should lead to the institutionalization of regular summit meetings between representatives of the major countries and the diverse regions of the world. The development of democracy should eventually emerge with regard to representation of people at the world level. The need to build peace should inspire the development of conflict prevention strategies. In order to be efficient, the organization should have sufficiently important resources provided through international taxation, and a secretariat similar to the Commission of the European Union. Finally, to guarantee economic security, the replacement of IMF by a Central World Bank, should be seriously considered.[9]

This is the type of institutional debate towards which the present evolution of the world situation is leading.

9   See the forthcoming book, M. Bertrand and D. Warner (eds), *A New Charter for Worldwide Organization?* (1995).

Conclusion

What has been attempted here is to show that:
- there is no possible objective critique of the UN and the UN system;
- the debate on the nature of the global institution is and always will be ideological, because it is part of a larger debate on the future of the global society;
- the present debate on these matters remains academic and has not much success in influencing the conservative policies of governments;
- the evolution of the political situation will lead to a radicalization of this debate which will become part of the political debate itself.