

Prospects for the UN following the US Presidential Election **Lord Hannay of Chiswick, Chair of UNA-UK**

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Ever since the UN was founded at San Francisco in 1945, the role of the United States in the world body has been a crucial and indispensable one. Not only was the United States, to use Dean Acheson's phrase coined in a different context, "present at the creation"; it really was, along with a UK much weakened by its exertions in two world wars, the principal shaper of the UN Charter, which remains to this day the glue which binds the global polity together, a truly remarkable document, whatever failings or shortcomings there may have been in its subsequent implementation. Since those early days the UN policies of a succession of US administrations have zigzagged their way between strong support and disruptive and often destructive criticism. In recent times, since the end of the Cold War freed the UN from so many of the taboos which had previously paralysed it, those contradictions in US policy have been in full display; in 1990 the US turned to the UN for the legal authority to reverse Iraq's war of aggression against Kuwait, passed over to the UN the whole responsibility for handling the aftermath of the Gulf War and paid off its own debts to the organisation which had been such a running sore over many years. Then under George W. Bush's administration the US's UN policy swung to the opposite extreme in which unilateral action became the norm, with multilateral action very much an optional extra and with many human rights provisions being flouted. We may now have moved away from that brief uni-polar moment into a more multi-polar world, but the size, weight and worldwide influence of the US mean that it remains the power which makes the weather at the UN and it will continue to be so for many years to come. So, as we stand on the threshold of Barack Obama's presidency, it surely makes sense to weigh up the implications of his arrival in office for the UN, to try to identify ways in which his administration could help to strengthen and reform an organisation sorely in need of such reinforcement and to consider too what policies Britain should be advocating at this important turning point in international relations.

The first thing that can be said is that the startling surge of support for Obama's candidacy all round the world, the broad lines of policy set out in his election platform and the almost universal welcome for his convincing victory, with only Russia sounding a grumpy note, are all positive indicators for the future. In part these are reactions to the hostility towards, and lack of trust in, his predecessor, despite the efforts made by George W. Bush during his second term to repair some of the damage inflicted in his first; and the widespread rejection of the unilateralism which had characterised his administration. These positive signs offer hope that some of that mutual trust and confidence, without which multilateral organisations such as the UN cannot function to their full potential, will now begin to make themselves felt as many difficult decisions come down the track. But we do need to remember that trust and confidence are a two-way street. It is no good the rest of the UN membership simply sitting passively waiting for the new US administration to make all he running. They too will need to play their part if solutions are to be found to the many global challenges that face us all.

Before we give way to too many flights of Obamamania it would be wise, moreover, to sound a few caveats. The first, naturally enough, relates to the financial turmoil and the world economic recession which will be the new president's inheritance. Not only will the early months of his presidency see him

inevitably pre-occupied with addressing these problems, but there will be plenty of siren voices singing that now is not the time to be taking firm, but necessarily expensive, action on climate change, that the resources for reinforcing the efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals are simply not available, that the move towards freer and fairer trade is untimely when many workers are losing their jobs. It will take courage and determination to resist these siren voices but, if President Obama does not do so, and if we others do not help him to do so, then the international skies will rapidly cloud over and a golden moment will have been lost.

Another caveat has to be that the Obama administration's policies are not likely to appear quite so different or to materialise quite so rapidly as some may be hoping and expecting. The closure of Guantanamo will be hugely welcome, but it will take time to organise. The withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq will be a tricky operation fraught with all sorts of risks. The strengthening of the efforts to stabilise Afghanistan with an effective strategy to address development and state institution-building as well as the military weaknesses will not be achieved overnight and will demand increased support from all of us, from we Europeans in particular. Nor will US exceptionalism simply disappear to be replaced by some new dawn of effective multilateralism. So we will all need some patience and perseverance if the opportunities now presented to us are to be seized.

For the UN the early tests will come as much in the field of policies as in the field of institutional arrangements and machinery, although effective responses in both fields will be needed if the page really is to be turned on the setbacks of recent years. Most prominently the climate change negotiations, which began last December in Bali and which are due to culminate in Copenhagen at the end of 2009 with agreement on binding post-Kyoto limits on carbon emissions, will need to be brought to a successful conclusion. That is a formidable challenge; and already a race against time. Some positive developments have taken place in recent months. The two developed country hold-outs from Kyoto, Australia and the US, are now participating fully in the negotiations. The leading developing countries, China, India, Brazil and others have recognised that it is not enough simply to blame the developed world for the mess we are in and expect them to clear it up unaided. But the obstacles to an agreement are serious ones. Helping developing countries improve their energy efficiency and narrow the massive gap which separates the amount of energy required to produce a unit of production in the West from the much higher amount required to do so in the developing world will require costly transfers of technology and help with investment. Achieving a balance in the burden-sharing between developed and developing countries will be at the heart of the negotiations, the chief issue on which they could fail. It will be crucially important that the European Union stands by its earlier commitments to reducing emissions and agrees how to validate and implement them. It will be just as important that the Obama administration demonstrates that it too will be able to implement any agreement reached with effective cap-and-trade arrangements; and reaches some kind of understanding with China as to how the world's two biggest polluters will share between them the burdens of cutting back carbon emissions. And then, as part of any successful outcome at Copenhagen, there will surely need to be agreement on a new UN body or agency to oversee and to help to implement the detailed commitments entered into.

Another key policy challenge for the UN is to revive the process of multilateral nuclear disarmament which has languished and indeed retrogressed so badly in

recent years. To achieve that it will be vital that the US and Russia, which hold 95% of the world's nuclear warheads, give a clear lead by resuming negotiations on strategic, intermediate and short range missiles. There are good signs that the Obama administration will accept the case, so eloquently expressed by groups of elder statesmen on both sides of the Atlantic, in favour of moving towards nuclear disarmament and will take the initiative. That will need in due course to lead on to US and other ratifications of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, to negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty and to the establishment of internationally guaranteed arrangements, under the aegis of the International Atomic Energy Agency, for the supply of enriched uranium and reprocessing services which are essential if the expansion of civil nuclear energy production which is already under way is not to lead to greatly increased proliferation risks. Moves like this by the Nuclear Weapons States, led by the US, are essential if the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Review Conference is to lead to strengthened anti-proliferation disciplines based on universal application of the IAEA's Additional Protocol and not to end in a fiasco like the 2005 conference. These multilateral steps will also greatly strengthen the political weight of the efforts being made in parallel to head off North Korean and Iranian programmes which could trigger major regional crises and a wider break-out from the rules of the NPT.

No regional crisis needs more urgently to be addressed than that in the Middle East, with the Arab-Israel dispute at its heart. President Obama has said he will do that "from the first day". That is good news. Too often in the past the essential US input has been withheld until far too late, when the president's mandate was close to expiry. But deeds, as well as words, will be needed. Ways will have to be found, perhaps through the formation of a Palestinian administration which includes all the democratic forces in the West Bank and Gaza, to make any continued peace process genuinely inclusive as well as to situate it firmly within the framework of earlier Arab peace proposals for a two-state solution which would guarantee the existence and security of Israel. Both the UN and the European Union will need to make more effective contributions to any such process than they have done in the past. Nothing would do more to restore general trust and confidence at the UN than clear indications that serious negotiations for a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israel dispute were under way and that the new US administration was throwing its full weight behind them.

There is hope too that the arrival of President Obama in office will lead to the revival of the UN's sadly flagging efforts in the field of human rights. The closure of Guantanamo, the ending of extraordinary rendition, the renunciation of techniques amounting to torture should all contribute to a restoration of the US's human rights credentials. That needs to be followed by the US joining the Human Rights Council; and by a serious effort in this 60th anniversary year of the Universal Declaration to get the recently established Human Rights Council to function more effectively and even-handedly than it has in the recent past and to begin to think about desirable reforms to the Council when its terms of reference come up for review in a few year's time. There needs to be an effort too to make an operational reality of the Responsibility to Protect, which has remained mere words on paper since it was endorsed by all member states in 2005. There is a need to address the concerns of those who feel that the Responsibility to Protect is simply designed as an instrument to legitimise military intervention in developing countries; but there is every bit as much a need to find ways of heading off the failure of states before they fail by a whole range of international actions and of mitigating the sufferings of their citizens.

What should we be hoping for in the way of institutional development at the UN and more widely in this opening phase of the Obama administration? Not, I would urge, a League of Democracies, that deeply flawed idea with which advisers of both US presidential candidates have flirted in recent months. The last thing the world or the UN needs just now is an approach which separates democratic sheep from undemocratic goats and thus makes it more difficult to find global solutions to the many global challenges we face and risks propelling us back into a Cold War-type situation. Enlargement of the G8 of a kind similar to that practised recently on an ad hoc basis at the Washington financial summit but in a more sustainable way would be one step in the right direction. So too would be reforms designed to give the main developing countries a bigger say at the IMF; and an end to the pre-emptive right of the Europeans to appoint the Director-General of the IMF and of the US to appoint the President of the World Bank. Might it be possible at last to achieve an enlargement of the UN Security Council to make it more representative and thus increase the political legitimacy of its actions? Negotiations are due to re-start on this in the New Year. Much, though not all, will depend on the attitude of the incoming US administration. The best hope seems to lie not in returning to the attempt to agree in one step on new permanent members. That approach failed in 1997 and in 2005; and the UN can hardly afford another failure. Better surely to try Kofi Annan's and the High Level Panel's other option of creating a new category of longer-term, renewable but still elected seats as a first move along the road. Whether or not Security Council enlargement succeeds, it is clearly important for the new US administration to work hard and imaginatively to achieve a better working relationship among the five permanent members and thus reverse the rising tide of vetoes which has begun again to paralyse the UN's work. And then it is high time for the Secretary-General to have another go at Secretariat reform. His predecessor tried long and bravely to achieve a number of necessary reforms but was frustrated not so much by any intrinsic defects in his proposals as by the prevailing atmosphere of distrust between developed and developing countries. If that atmosphere can now be dispersed, and I believe it can, then the opportunity for secretariat reform must not be missed.

I have tried to set out the main, but by no means all, areas where the prospects for the UN have brightened as a result of the recent US election; and I have tried too to warn against the pitfall of excessive expectations. In the end the UN will be judged, and will be weakened or strengthened, by its response to unforeseen events, a crisis in a peacekeeping operation, a major natural disaster, a threat to international peace and security, an outbreak of pandemic disease. Its ability to rise to these unforeseen challenges will be crucially affected by US policy, by whether the administration in Washington turns to the UN when such circumstances arise, is prepared to work at the UN with others in genuine partnership to handle the crises and is ready to provide the UN with the resources and political backing it will need to see the matter through to a successful conclusion. We can hope, but we certainly cannot be sure, that these positive responses will be forthcoming. Success will breed success, and failure failure. And we can also hope that this new administration and its charismatic leader will be ready to explain to the American people just how important a successful UN is for a successful US foreign policy. Such explanations have not always been forthcoming in the past, but they are an essential part of any sustained recovery by the UN from the disappointments and setbacks of recent years.