

**Selective Security: War and the Security Council since 1945:  
International Institute for Strategic Studies: 29<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

I am delighted and honoured to have been invited by the International Institute for Strategic Studies to open today's discussion on the recent study by Adam Roberts and Dominik Zaum on the question of selective security at the UN Security Council since 1945. I read this study soon after it appeared and found it fascinating, informative and provocative – to the extent that I immediately picked up my pen and took issue with a couple of points in a letter to Adam Roberts to which he replied most courteously. So you can be assured that my contribution today will raise some critical points.

Before addressing the study itself I would not wish to miss the opportunity to pay tribute to Adam for the massive contribution he has made, and is still making, to the academic work of the UN and more widely on collective security, over a long and brilliant academic career. The cool, calm, analytical approach he has brought to the subject matter contrasts with the two extremes of utopian hype and vituperative denigration to which the UN is so often subjected by its admirers and detractors. For all his objectivity no one could ever be in doubt where Adam's hopes lie; but he has never allowed that sympathy to cloud his judgement.

This latest study on the selectivity with which the Security Council has handled questions of war and peace over more than sixty years is particularly valuable in that it looks dispassionately at a subject which is all too often the object of emotion and denunciation – the pejorative phrase “double standards” flies around and accusations of US hegemony and of the tyranny of the numerical majority of developing countries are exchanged. This study sets all that in its historical context and establishes clearly that the Security Council always has been and always will be to a considerable extent selective in its actions, with the causes and motivations of that selectivity varying very greatly over time. The key question posed by the study is therefore not whether selectivity exists at the Security Council, but whether it can be to some extent systematised and made less arbitrary, and thus, one would hope, less objectionable, than is currently the case. And that is where, I have to confess, some doubts creep in. One particular manifestation of selectivity, the improbability of the Security Council ever taking action on the territory or against the interests of one of the Permanent Members of the Security Council, is not going to be whisked away any time soon.

But that big, and admittedly arbitrary, exception does not mean that more systematic selectivity should not be examined with care. I myself flirted with the concept when I left my job at the UN in 1995 and suggested to the then Foreign Secretary (this is a quote from my recent book *New World Disorder*) “New world disorder does not look like abating very quickly. Since the US will not and the rest of us cannot cope with new world disorder on our own, we will need a UN which is an effective instrument for handling and containing these problems if we are to avoid the risk of spreading regional instability and economic dislocation which is against our wider interests. We will need, however, to be a bit cautious and conservative about what we ask the UN to take on in future. It needs a higher success rate than it has recently achieved if it is not to be discredited; so enforcement should be off limits, to be undertaken either by coalitions of the willing, if possible with UN authorisation, or not at all. But we should not resort to pure classical peacekeeping nor should we rule all civil conflicts off limits. The UN has made great strides in developing a capacity to put a country back on its feet and return to normality.” End of quote. Of course it is a lot easier to write these words on paper than it

is to apply them in practice. And I have always thought that the concept of the UN (by which is meant the Secretariat) learning to say "no", if they do not believe the conditions for success are there, was a bit fanciful in circumstances where the collectivity of the membership in the form of the Security Council was pressing for action. That sort of selectivity needs to be applied by the Council, not just by the Secretariat, which can probably not afford to go much beyond "yes, but...".

Another form of selectivity which was canvassed in the High Levels Panels report of 2004 and which was put forward by Kofi Annan in his paper "In Larger Freedom" was that the Security Council should itself promulgate certain guidelines – broadly speaking the criteria for a "just war" as brought up to date in modern times – which it would apply when considering actioning the use of force. These guidelines, which it was never suggested should be legally binding or in any sense justiciable, would in my view have done quite a bit to increase the practicability of Security Council action and thus also its deterrent effect on potential transgressors of international peace and security. But they did not commend themselves to the membership or at least to certain parts of it (our own government did try to promote the idea) and therefore never saw the light of day in the Outcomes Document endorsed by the September 2005 UN Summit. These guidelines could be worth re-visiting if and when we find ourselves with US administration which puts a greater emphasis on finding multilateral responses to the challenges the international community faces.

One area where selectivity does seem to be becoming a bit more systematic and a bit – but only a bit – more effective, is when regional organisations take some of the burden off the shoulders of the UN. In Europe, after that lamentably hesitant and defective start in the wars of the Yugoslav succession, both the EU and NATO, often working in close contact, are making an effective contribution to stabilising the Balkans and that looks set to continue so long as the EU does not allow enlargement fatigue to weaken the single most powerful weapon in its armoury, the prospect of eventual accession. In Africa too some progress has been made and the case for the African Union taking on wider responsibilities for peace operations is a compelling and convincing one. But in Darfur the current practical wants of that option have been evident; and in Zimbabwe the political limitations on action being taken by the regional neighbours of a country clearly slipping towards state failure have been cruelly exposed. So the regional approach is no panacea, even if it surely makes sense to pursue it with perseverance and not to be too discouraged by early setbacks.

My somewhat reluctant conclusion therefore is that the international community would be unwise to embrace the concept of selectivity, as opposed to simply acquiescing in its ineluctable manifestations, until there is a great deal more common ground on how any kind of selectivity was to be applied in an equitable and less arbitrary manner, how, to use an awful piece of jargon, it was to be operationalised. Otherwise there is a risk that embracing selectivity without any guidelines for its application will further undermine the legitimacy and the credibility of an organisation, the Security Council, which enjoys no surfeit of these commodities.

I would not wish to conclude these remarks without taking issue with one particular form of pretty arbitrary selectivity on which I take a less relaxed view than do the authors of this study, namely the question of nuclear weapons. The study suggests that what it describes as "the disarmament view" of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a deal whereby the P5 promise to disarm in return for the restraint of the non-nuclear powers is "historically questionable and politically damaging". It is hard to dispute, historically or

otherwise, that the P5 did undertake – both at the review conference in 1995 which prolonged the NPT *sine die* and then again at the next review conference in 2000 – that they would move towards nuclear disarmament. And I would argue that the fact that, since the turn of the century they have done virtually nothing to fulfil that pledge and have, if anything, moved in the other direction is intensely damaging politically to a non-proliferation regime which is currently under great stress not least as a result of the activities of North Korea and Iran. If those activities are to be checked and are not to lead to an even wider break-out from the regime; if the 2010 NPT review conference is not to end in failure like the 2005 one; if the impending rapid expansion of civil nuclear energy, which will, I believe, be an essential part of any effective counter to climate change, is not to lead to greatly increased proliferation risks; then I suggest the P5 will need to take the advice of that group of US statesmen, led by George Schultz, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn and Bill Perry and resume the move towards nuclear disarmament to which they committed themselves in 1995 and on which some progress was made in the last decade of the twentieth century. With new administrations in office in both the US and Russia, who, between them, hold 95% of the world's nuclear warheads, the opportunity is there. But it will not last for ever. And the risk is that if that opportunity is not taken, this particular manifestation of selectivity will become progressively less selective, to the detriment of international peace and security.

I apologise if I have played a bit the role of a doubting Thomas in initiating a debate on this extremely valuable study. On one particular part of it I do agree wholeheartedly and without the slightest hesitation and that is on the deeply flawed nature of the proposals for a League of Democracies. I do not believe such a concept would wash; discovering its impracticability would waste a lot of valuable time and energy; and it would necessarily undermine the authority and effectiveness of those multilateral organisations we already have. Fortunately it seems less likely that it did a few months ago that the League of Democracies will become part of any country's formal international agenda. What that agenda does need urgently to contain is a series of practical steps to strengthen and to reform those existing institutions. And the study we are considering today makes a notable contribution to that objective.