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Is there an alternative to New World Disorder?

The state of international relations is perhaps as confused and as confusing as it has been for many decades. A number of the principal players are moving either up or down the ladder of power relationships at an unprecedented rate. The challenges to international institutions are as great as they have ever been. So this is a good moment to ask a fairly fundamental question about the direction in which we are going, as I have done in the title of this talk, and – somewhat more difficult – to try to provide an answer to it.

Neither governments, nor commentators, nor academics – with only a few partial exceptions – predicted the sudden end of the Cold War in 1989-90, the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union and the almost coincidental collapse of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Those events, marking the end of what can now be viewed as a sort of “Long War” from 1914-1990, took everyone by surprise and left the world gasping, and unsighted as to what was likely to follow. At first, particularly after an act of aggression by Iraq against Kuwait was reversed by a coalition acting under the authority of the United Nations, some believed that what would emerge almost painlessly would be a new world order, with rules-based disciplines regulating disputes and finding responses to the threats and challenges which still existed. That was the vision of the first President Bush and many others. But it was not to be. Soon enough a rash of conflicts, more often within states than between them, and frequently following the failure of state institutions, proved beyond the capacity of the existing international institutions to control and resolve; terrible crimes of genocide and appalling breaches of international humanitarian law were committed; long running disputes – over Palestine, Kashmir and on the Korean Peninsula – continued to fester and to threaten to spin out of control; and a whole range of global challenges, from climate

change to terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, from poverty to pandemic diseases cried out for global solutions but did not receive them.

Most recently the whole world has been plunged into a financial and economic crisis, more serious than any we have faced possibly since the 1930's and certainly since the 1970's. This latest crisis confronts us not only with many of the same threats to which we found such inadequate responses in the 1930's – from trade protectionism, from unemployment, from potential political destabilisation – but also new ones resulting, for example, from a weakening resolve and a reduction in resources to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, to combat climate change, to prevent and resolve conflicts. No wonder, therefore, that some begin to feel that we are condemned to live through a period of new world disorder of indeterminate duration. No wonder too that siren voices are being heard arguing that these challenges are just too numerous for us to manage all at one time, that we need to turn in on ourselves and to put our own houses in order before confronting these global issues, that too much is being demanded in the way of sacrifice, whether it is in Afghanistan or in Africa. I will argue why I think we need to resist these siren voices and why we do not need to accept new world disorder as a given and can hope to overcome or at least to reduce it.

The first thing to be said is that the situation in which we find ourselves is not as dramatically dire as we sometimes think and as screaming headlines, the horrific visual images on our television screens and the armchair pundits would lead us to believe. The coverage of events in Afghanistan by the British press is a case in point. To some extent we are the victims as well as the beneficiaries of the communications revolution which has transformed all our lives. But serious academic studies demonstrate that far fewer people are dying world-wide in conflicts than was the case in the years immediately following the end of the Cold War. It is not unreasonable to suppose that this reduction in fatalities is at least partly due to the increase in conflict prevention

activities and in international peacekeeping and post-conflict peace building efforts. Then hundreds of millions of people were lifted out of abject poverty during that long period of sustained economic growth and freer trade which preceded the present crisis. If we can ensure that that crisis is of reasonably short duration, there is no reason why that process should not resume; after all the economies of some of the largest developing countries like China and India are continuing to grow at a respectable rate. And we are getting to grips with a number of pandemic diseases, as the responses to SARS and to swine flu, not to mention the massive efforts going into combating AIDS, malaria and TB, are showing. And the culture of impunity for gross breaches of humanitarian law is under challenge as has never been the case before, with the operation of the Yugoslav, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Cambodia tribunals and the establishment of the International Criminal Court. There are bound to be hard cases like that of President Bashir in Sudan, where tensions arise between the need for justice and the plight of refugees, but we must not turn back at the first manifestation of such tensions. So, while there are indeed grounds for deep concern about the present state of international developments, they should not cause us to despair or to weaken in our resolve to overcome the challenges we face.

Another reason not to despair is that the world seems to me to be at something of a watershed moment, at a time not entirely dissimilar to that at the end of the Cold War when the moulds in which affairs have been handled are cracking, when fundamental shifts in international relationships are taking place, when there are real opportunities to re-shape our policy responses to the main challenges and the multilateral institutions on which we have come to rely for so much of our global decision making. If we allow despair and apathy to dominate our responses, these changes will simply take place without us and very possibly to our detriment. What are these shifts? There are many, but I would identify three. First, and most significant in the short term, we have emerged from that US unilateral moment which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the US was quite simply the only super-power left standing. We shall never know

how long that moment might have lasted if President George W Bush had acted more temperately and modestly and had treated US allies and its own international obligations with more respect. But he squandered that moment and he demonstrated that, while US hard power remains predominant, their ability to manage events by the sole strength of their right arm was insufficient. Now we have a new President who is reaching out to both allies and adversaries and who is working for multilateral solutions to the world's problems. There is a real opportunity to work with that new administration and to help to shape joint responses to our shared problems. Then, secondly, we are seeing the steady, and so far peaceful, rise of a number of major developing country powers, mainly, but not exclusively, in Asia – for example China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa. Contrary to much media speculation these powers are not about to dominate the world in the way the US did after the Cold War - neither tomorrow nor next year nor even during the next decade. The process will take longer than that, and it could well be uneven. But it is under way, so we need to bring these countries fairly and squarely into the international debate and into international decision-making as we have not done hitherto. And, thirdly, we have an opportunity in Europe, as Britain no longer has as an individual country, to work collectively to help fashion those global responses. But to do that we will need to work more effectively with our European partners than has been the case in the past.

What then are the principal policy responses needed in the period ahead? First, by the end of 2009 we need to have established new, legally binding and technically credible international arrangements to check and eventually to reverse the rise of global warming. The Copenhagen conference in December is the moment by which those decisions need to be taken. Before then an intensive negotiating process will need to have shaped up the main building blocks of solutions if there is to be any chance of success at Copenhagen. There will need to be limits on emissions with differentiation between developed and developing countries; there will need to be substantial resources provided by the developed countries to help developing countries become more efficient

in the use of energy; there will need to be a major increase in research into such technologies as carbon capture and storage and a whole range of renewables, and provision for technology transfer to developing countries; and there will need to be robust institutional arrangements to oversee and to implement the decisions reached at Copenhagen. Further down the road I believe we will almost certainly need to set a world minimum price on carbon which might prove more acceptable if it was not always called a tax, but that will not be for this round of negotiations. One thing all concerned will need to remember is that failure at Copenhagen will not make the problem of global warming disappear; it will simply make the problem of dealing with its consequences more costly and the damage caused to all of us, but particularly to developing countries, from failing to check its rise, greater. Another thing to remember is that there will be a reality check on whatever is decided at Copenhagen. If there is no reversal to the rise in carbon emissions and temperature then we shall have failed.

The present state of the pre-Copenhagen negotiations is not as encouraging as it needs to be. Far too much time is being spent on verbal jousting, most prominently between developed and developing countries. No one seriously disputes that the developed countries are responsible for much of the past pollution and will have to bear a disproportionate part of the cost of checking global warming. No one seriously disputes that developing countries must not be unreasonably constrained in their capacity to grow economically and that their carbon emissions will continue to increase, albeit under constraints internationally agreed. But it is developing countries which are likely to suffer most if no deal is agreed at Copenhagen – not just from the consequences of global warming but domestically too (just look at the pollution in the great cities of China, India and Brazil). So to argue that developing countries should just be given a pass on any limits at all is not only going to scupper chances of agreement at Copenhagen, it will be completely counter-productive in terms of their own interest.

Then secondly we clearly have to work together on a global basis to ensure that we all emerge as soon as possible from the present financial and economic crisis and that the systemic weaknesses which enabled it to occur are guarded against in the future. The three G-20 summits that have so far been held have made steady progress in identifying what needs to be done. It will no doubt require many more months, and perhaps years, of determined negotiation to reach the necessary decisions. One area of crucial importance will be trade policy. The immediate imperative was to avoid that slide into protectionism which was such a disastrous feature of the world's response to similar events in the 1930's. So far in this crisis the damage done by protectionist responses has been relatively small, but not so small as to give rise to complacency. And we are far from being past the moment of maximum risk, since unemployment figures will continue to rise and to exercise pressure on governments for some considerable time after growth resumes. And we need to do more than just to resist protectionism. Throughout the post-Second World War period the growth in world trade led the growth in economies; and trade was stimulated and facilitated by successive rounds of trade liberalisation. So it is crucially important to return to the negotiating table of the Doha Round of trade negotiations as soon as is feasibly possible – and the completion of the electoral cycles in the US and India should assist that – and to reach agreement on a package which provides for freer and fairer trade and which in particular takes better account of the needs of developing countries than has been the case in the past.

No sector of international relations is currently more fraught with risk than that of nuclear proliferation, so the need to resume moves towards multilateral nuclear disarmament, so abruptly and damagingly checked by the policies of the George W Bush administration, must surely be a third major policy area which needs to be addressed. The steps being taken by the US and Russia to negotiate a reduction in their strategic nuclear weapons are only a first, albeit a welcome step down that road. But the process needs to be broadened out to involve other categories of nuclear weapons, and also to involve the other nuclear weapons states – China, France and the UK.

Negotiations should be got under way on a fissile material cut-off treaty. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty should be brought into force following US and other ratifications. More thought should be given to what are called negative security assurances by the nuclear weapons states to the non-nuclear states, and also to No First Use commitments. And internationally guaranteed arrangements should be firmed up to allow bona fide civil nuclear users access to uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing facilities without the need to construct such facilities for themselves with all the proliferation risks that that involves. If an ambitious negotiating programme such as this can be got under way, then it should ensure that the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Review Conference does not become the damaging fiasco that its predecessor in 2005 was. All this leaves the hard cases of North Korea and Iran, which are getting harder to handle as the days go by. We should have no illusions. There will not be a soft landing if those two countries achieve a deliverable nuclear weapons capability. At the very least there are likely to be destabilising regional nuclear arms races as others respond to these developments. There could be worse. So a renewed diplomatic effort to head off these two countries' nuclear ambitions, one which will have to take into account their genuine security concerns, is urgently required. And that effort will have to contain a judicious blend of sticks and carrots if it is to have any chance of succeeding.

The mere mention of the Middle East Peace Process tends to provoke cynicism and a weary shrug. But events of the last few years in South Lebanon and Gaza should surely have reminded us how combustible that region is. For the first time a US President has thrown his weight behind that peace process at the outset of his term in office and not towards the end of his second one. Europe has an important role to play in any such process, not just, as it has done in the past and is still doing, by underpinning the finances of the Palestinian Authority, but also by playing an active role in any security arrangements which are part of a settlement and by strengthening its relationship with a post-settlement Israel. Any peace process will have to be inclusive, which will

mean talking to, and eventually negotiating with, Hamas. Meanwhile a national unity government in the Palestinian territories, committed to the Arab Peace Initiative, would seem to be the best way into a resumed negotiation, and both the Europeans and the US need to give their full support to such an initiative.

Then fifthly (and lastly) amongst the priority policy areas I would identify is conflict prevention and peacekeeping, in greater demand than ever and suffering numerous symptoms of overstretch. Those functions are at the heart of the UN's mandate and must not be allowed to atrophy if collective security, of which they are an important part, although not the whole, is not to suffer. Regional and sub-regional security arrangements could usefully be built up in parts of the world where they do not already exist – for example in the Gulf, in South Asia and in North East Asia – and where they do, and are beginning to perform effectively as conflict preventers and peacekeepers – the African Union is a case in point – should be strengthened by UN – with support in training, in logistics and in finance. In particular the proposal in the recent Prodi report that, where the UN asks the African Union to take on a peacekeeping mission the UN should be prepared to finance it on assessed contributions, must be followed up and endorsed. Nor should the UN neglect the need to find ways to operationalise the concept of the "Responsibility to Protect", that potentially revolutionary break-through at the 2005 UN Summit which so far has remained little more than words on paper. It is essential that this concept should cease to be regarded as simply a recipe for military humanitarian intervention. Instead it needs to be fashioned into a complete toolbox of diplomatic and economic instruments designed to prevent state failure, so often the precursor to massive abuses of international humanitarian law, to ethnic cleansing and to genocide. The UN Secretary-General's recent report on how to develop and to operationalise Responsibility to Protect points the way ahead; the challenge now is for the member states to follow it.

So far I have focussed on areas of policy which should constitute the essential building blocks for a world seeking to avoid disorder. Far too often at the UN and elsewhere recourse is made to solely institutional fixes to achieve that objective. A purely institutional approach will never work if there is not also some broad consensus over policies. But agreed policies do need a greatly strengthened and reformed institutional framework if they are to be effectively negotiated and implemented. So here are five suggested institutional reforms to match the five policy areas to which I have drawn attention:

First, at the IMF and the World Bank, the path identified by the G20 Summit in London needs to be vigorously followed up. No more pre-emption of the top jobs by Europe and the US. A bigger say in decisions for the large developing countries. New systems to warn of and to guard against systemic weaknesses in the financial system. Stronger regulatory safeguards. More resources to help developing countries in particular to weather economic crises;

Second, the G8 Economic Summits need to be expanded so that the main developing countries – China, India, Brazil and others – participate as of right and are a full part of the negotiating preparations and decision taking. A G15 might be about right for a forum that needs to avoid replicating the huge and unwieldy gathering at UN Summits but at the same time to achieve genuine representativity;

Third, the UN Security Council should be enlarged with, as a first stage but not the final word, the creation of a new category of longer term, renewable but not permanent members. This formula which was proposed by the High Level Panel and by Kofi Annan in 2004 is the only one which has any chance of achieving a broad consensus in the near future;

Fourth, the establishment of a new UN agency to oversee implementation of any climate change package agreed at Copenhagen, with energy issues, hitherto neglected in the UN system, included within its remit;

Fifth, there should be an end to the system by which the need for some rotation between regions of the post of UN Secretary-General is achieved by the pre-emptive restriction of candidates at the outset of the appointment process to those from only one region, as has been the case in all elections since 1991.

This institutional side of the international agenda should not be pursued as a single, comprehensive process. That is not likely to work and it is liable to give rise to reform fatigue such as followed the 2005 UN Summit. Far better to pursue institutional changes on a sectoral basis, moving forward when there is a broad degree of support for change.

I have attempted this evening to sketch out an answer to the question posed in the title of my talk, that is to say to show that there is an alternative to new world disorder. I would not however advocate some grandiose title for it such as new world order. That is as likely to breed resistance, rejection and ridicule as it is to muster support. What is advocated here is the building up of islands of rules-based arrangements amongst the swirling mists of disorder which I fear we will not, for a long time, if ever, wholly dissipate. That seems to me an ambitious but achievable objective and one to which we should urge our government of whatever party to devote itself.

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