

The relationship of the European Union and the United Nations : A work in progress

In 1990, when I went from five years as Britain's Permanent Representative at the European Union in Brussels to become its Permanent Representative at the United Nations in New York, the two organisations might have been living on different planets, not just different continents, for all they knew or cared about the working of the other or were involved in any sort of cooperative endeavour. All around them the frozen certainties of the Cold War were dissolving, with largely, but not exclusively, positive effects on their capacity to operate and on the scope of the demands being put on them, but the two bureaucracies and the two sets of governments, often of course the same ones, which were their shareholders had yet to wake up to the need for the two organisations to work together. EU and UN policies, both in Brussels and New York and in national capitals, were firmly contained within stove-pipes. The prevalent mood between the two was a combination of ignorance and of suspicion that if cooperation were to be developed they might find themselves competing over the same piece of turf.

Twenty years on that has all changed quite fundamentally. Here are just a few examples. On peace and security the European Union has developed its role quite substantially, although it is far from being and is unlikely ever to be, a global power in the fullest meaning of that phrase. More significantly of the UN, it has done so, unlike some of the UN's great powers - the US for example - in a way which is fully consistent with the UN's charter and objectives. Thus the EU has virtually replaced the UN, in the management of the international community's responsibilities in the Balkans; it has mounted the first ESDP naval operation to meet the challenge from piracy off the Horn of Africa; it is providing much of the finance and logistical support needed to underpin the African Union's regional peacekeeping and conflict prevention activities in places such as Darfur, Somalia and Burundi. On climate change, the European Union has been and remains in the lead, working for effective action to deal with what is, quite rightly, seen at the UN as one of the key global challenges of this century; and the fact that the EU was marginalised in the chaotic and confused negotiations at Copenhagen last December was a setback for both organisations, not a cause for gloating or despair. And whatever success is achieved in progressing towards the UN's Millennium Development Goals by 2015 will owe a large amount to the

European Union and its member states' development aid programme, far and away the biggest commitments of any of the main donors.

What led to this great shift? And what are its implications for the future direction of policy? The first cause of the shift was that the end of the Cold War removed many of the taboos which had hitherto inhibited both organisations and which had tended to contain peace and security issues within a NATO/Warsaw Pact format. With the disappearance of that bi-polar world both the UN and the EU found themselves being pressed by their members to take on more, and far more demanding, tasks than they had ever done before; and the fact that both organisations incurred some pretty bruising failures in the course of this expansion in their activities - both organisations in the former Yugoslavia, the UN in Somalia and Rwanda - did not halt that secular trend which has continued to this day. Then, secondly, far from the world moving from the certainties of Cold War diplomacy to the sort of New World Order of which the first President Bush spoke over-optimistically, there emerged a number of new global threats and challenges - from terrorism, from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, from failed and failing states, as well as from extremes of poverty, from pandemic diseases, from environmental degradation and from energy and food security issues - which no one country, not even the sole remaining world super-power, the United States, was capable of dealing with on its own. And the rapid passing of the United States' brief uni-polar moment, bestowed by the mismanagement of the George W Bush administration, served to underline that salient fact. Thirdly the EU and the UN found, somewhat to their surprise at first, that there was a large amount of common ground in their policy approaches to these global threats and challenges and that, both organisations being rather overstretched, they needed each other rather than finding each other competitors. More fundamentally both were working for a more rules-based international order and pushing back against the tendency to drift towards a new world disorder. The European Union's incorporation of the concept of "effective multilateralism" in its first ever security strategy adopted in 2003 was a clear example of this approach.

So should we conclude that these shifts in policy trends will continue to move in a positive direction and that that will of its own produce the responses the international community needs to make if the challenges of this new century are to be handles successfully - put simply, that we just need more of the

same? To conclude that would be foolishly complacent and far removed from reality. During the last year we have seen the desire to achieve the Millennium Development Goals weakened by the knock-on effect of the 2008 financial crisis on developed countries' deficits. We have seen the effort to deal with climate change frustrated by an inadequate agreement at Copenhagen last December which, unless it can now be reinforced by stronger and legally binding policy commitments, has little or no chance of enabling us to avoid the far more costly longer term consequences of failure. We have seen the challenge to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime by two countries, North Korea and Iran, continue virtually unchecked. We have also seen, largely as a consequence of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, a weakening of support for action to prevent and, where prevention fails to deal with the problems of failing and failed states even though the list of states which fall into these categories has shown no signs of getting shorter and the consequences of state failure in terms of providing havens for terrorists, of giving rise to gross abuses of international humanitarian law, even of genocide, have shown no signs of abating.

Moreover we have to face the fact that the international institutions which we currently have to handle these issues - the UN itself, the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, the climate change negotiating forum - are not particularly well structured and are not in many cases equipped with the necessary authority to carry out the tasks which the international community so readily piles onto their plates. In many cases their governance lacks representativity in that the rapidly emerging developing countries which make up the multi-polar world in which we now live are heavily under-represented. Some are so cumbersome, as we saw in the chaos and confusion of the Copenhagen Climate Change conference, as to be almost incapable of producing decisions which are other than a woefully inadequate lowest common denominator. The European Union and its members, who form an important component of all these organisations, is still, as it has done for many years, underperforming with respect to its potential, prone to inter-institutional turf-fighting and to a lack of coherence between its different external policies; it is reluctant to deploy either soft or hard power; it spends too much time hammering out tortuous compromises between its own members and too little reaching out to and influencing countries outside its borders:

All this adds up to a pretty daunting and unattractive picture, a situation in which prescriptions of inaction, of putting domestic concerns and priorities ahead of international ones are only too likely to lead to greater disorder and insecurity. Here are a few suggestions - some about institutions, some about policy - of ways in which the EU and the UN could work together to counter those tendencies

- The EU should continue to be, as it has already been for some years, a stalwart supporter of reforms in the main international institutions. This will require some hard choices, often involving dilution of the preponderant position the West in general and Europe in particular, has held in the decision-making processes of these institutions since their foundation. It will involve continuing to work away at reform of the UN Security Council, with the possibility of agreeing on a new category of longer term and removable elected members the most promising stepping stone towards an eventual move to additional permanent members;

- The EU should also continue to give its full support to the relatively recently established International Criminal Court and not allow itself to be distracted by hard cases such as that over the indictment of President Bashir of Sudan. And it should work hard at the 2011 review of the Human Rights Council to make that body and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights more effective upholders of human rights than they are at present. That will not be easily achieved as there will be plenty of pressure in the opposite direction, and it will require a unity of purpose among the EU member states which has not always been evident recently at the meetings of the Human Rights Council;

- Above all, on the institutional front, the EU will need to put to good use the various innovations introduced by the Lisbon Treaty - the new double-hatted High Representative to achieve greater policy coherence, the new External Action Service to achieve more effective outreach - and this will require it to speak far more often than in the past with a single voice and to reduce the cacophony of European voices which so often arises when the international community faces a new challenge or crisis;

So much for the institutional aspects of the agenda; but policy matters even more and presents even more difficult challenges:

- No policy area is in greater need of new momentum and impetus than dealing with climate change; and in none is the EU better placed to lead since the Copenhagen conference fell short of what needed to be done, there has been a marked weakening in support for the action that must be taken. And yet, despite some clear shortcomings in transparency and some evidence of misleading claims, the basic scientific case for action has not been faulted; and the more time we waste failing to agree the more the necessary action will eventually cost. With cap-and-trade legislation no longer likely to be adopted by the US Congress the case for resumed EU leadership has been strengthened. So at the Cancun Conference at the end of this year and thereafter the EU should be championing a 30% cut in global emissions by 2020, the incorporation of that commitment in a legally binding set of agreements, the establishment of a generally international system of verification and monitoring of the commitments entered into and rapid implementation of schemes to help to transfer technology to developing countries and to check deforestation. EU support for these objectives may not guarantee their achievement but without it failure is certain;

- Finding the right exit strategy from the financial and economic crises of the last three years is another policy area where the EU's role will be of real significance. Not only does it need, as a major component of the world economy, to put its own house in order - which it is already beginning to do - but also, through the new G20 machinery, it needs to ensure that presentations to avoid a recurrence of the 2008 crisis are taken world-wide and in a number which does not lead to the fragmentation of world financial markets and to beggar-my-neighbour regulating discordance. No exit strategy really fit for purpose can avoid the need for freer and fairer world trade. Currently the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations remains becalmed in the doldrums. Here too the EU needs to give a lead to put those negotiations on the track to conclusion. These economic and financial issues may not be, strictly speaking, UN responsibilities but the outcome for them will critically affect much that the UN does, in particular progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals;

- The EU has so far only dipped its toe into the troubled waters of conflict prevention and peacekeeping but here too it will need to work more effectively and more purposefully with the UN in

the years ahead if the UN itself is to achieve better results than its present, sometimes faltering, performance. That will mean more support in peacekeepers, in logistics and in finance for UN and regional peacekeeping efforts. It will also mean emphasising the preventive aspects of the "responsibility to protect" concept, which has so far remained little more than words on paper. It would be a huge mistake to allow the difficulties that have arisen in Iraq and Afghanistan to deter support for UN efforts at conflict prevention and peacekeeping, which will be needed more, not less, in a future era when the deployment of coalitions of the willing or of NATO-led enforcement operations are unlikely to be repeated;

- And while the EU does not, as such, have a direct role in the areas of nuclear disarmament and the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction it does have a major interest in seeing the first of these proceed along the path sketched out in President Obama's Prague speech and the second, in particular the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, sustained and strengthened in the face of the threat from the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programmes. By working more effectively in concert than in the past, the EU's member states could and should make a real contribution;

- In this field the newly concluded Anglo-French defence agreement could be of considerable potential importance because these two member states have the greatest force projection capacity in the EU, are Permanent Members of the Security Council and have traditionally been strong supporters of UN peacekeeping. So, if they are prepared on occasion to put this joint strengthened capacity for rapid reaction and for "over the horizon" back-up, at the disposal of the UN, this could provide the UN with what it often desperately needs when confronted by spoilers, as for instance was the case in Sierra Leone when Britain came to the rescue of a collapsing peacekeeping operation and in the Democratic Republic of Congo when France did so.

- Lastly I would mention the Middle East where the peace process has recently resumed, albeit in a mood of some pessimism and low expectations. No international dispute contains more risks for both the UN and EU so long as it remains unresolved, and none is a greater short, medium and long term threat to international peace and security. So the EU needs to play an active role, working always to make the

peace process more inclusive, which means working over time to bring Hamas within its scope, considering how it could support the security dimension of any settlement that may be agreed, and reflecting also how its own relationship with an Israel which will have concluded a two-state agreement with the Palestinians could be deepened and widened to give that Israel a greater feeling of security.

As you can appreciate there is a huge agenda here for the EU and the UN. If even a part of it is achieved, then the two organisations shared objective of a more rules-based international community will be advanced. Nor should we underestimate the role that the new coalition government in this country can play in moving polity in the right direction. The government seems to have got off on the right foot with both the EU and the UN. Britain remains an important player in both organisations. What we need now, I would argue, is encouragement by the British government of a more systematic and structured approach to enabling the EU and the UN to achieve a qualitative shift in the nature of their cooperation in the years ahead.