

**Effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the Security Council in the last
twenty years**

IAI, Panel : 12 November

Cutting the past up into small, entirely artificial, bite-size pieces is a favourite pursuit of the historian, the analyst and the journalist. It does help to highlight trends and to identify turning points; and to make history a bit more digestible. As long as one remembers that it is entirely artificial, that even through the most revolutionary events there is a strong element of continuity, there is something to be said for it. In the case in point, the study of the Security Council's effectiveness and ineffectiveness in the first two decades after the end of the Cold War, the artificiality is less obvious and the justification more evident than it often is in other contexts because pretty well everything did change at the UN, and above all in its Security Council, with the fall of the Berlin Wall twenty years ago, and with the approaching end of the Cold War, which had

already produced some rays of light in the year or two which preceded the fall of the Wall.

The Cold War period Security Council had been a pretty frustrating place to work. It had admittedly had its successes. Peacekeeping after the end of classical inter-state conflicts had been created in the interstices of the UN Charter – not actually referred to in it. The Council had provided a platform on which the great powers and other states could let off steam at the height of an international crisis. But more often than not a veto from one of the five Permanent Members of the Council had frustrated any attempt to bring hostilities to an end. Proxy wars between clients of those permanent members raged on unchecked. Towards the end of that forty-five year long Cold War period, the permanent members began to discover a capacity to work together and, very belatedly, threw their weight behind the Secretary-General's efforts to end the Iran/Iraq war. And they fashioned, and sustained through considerable vicissitudes, the

first of the major, multi-faceted peace operations, in Namibia, the precursor of many others to come and a major success.

But those early straws in the wind had not really prepared anyone for the fundamental shifts in the Security Council's modus operandi which occurred following Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait in August 1990. Not only did the Council then proceed deliberately, and virtually unanimously, up the escalating ladder of condemnation, massive and militarily enforced economic sanctions to the authorisation of the use of force to reverse the aggression; but, once Kuwait had been liberated, the Council was put in full charge of the aftermath – a peacekeeping force on the Iraq/Kuwait border, the demarcation of the disputed frontier, reparations for war damage, and the coercive destruction of Saddam Hussein's programmes for producing weapons of mass destruction. Other successes followed – a large peacekeeping operation in Cambodia, successful peace operations leading to free and fair elections in El Salvador and Mozambique. But nemesis soon struck – in Somalia, in

Bosnia and, most humiliatingly of all in the genocidal slaughters in Rwanda and at Srebrenica.

What went wrong and why? Firstly the sudden lifting of many Cold War taboos and the ending of no-go areas – the authorisation of the use of force, the imposition of comprehensive economic sanctions, the multiplication of big, complex peace operations world wide, the first cases of humanitarian intervention – far and fast outstripped the capacity of the organisation to manage them on the ground. New wine was poured into some pretty old and cracked bottles. When the going got rough – when Saddam Hussein played hide and seek with the weapons inspectors, when the Bosnian Serbs bombarded Sarajevo for several years, when the Somali warlords killed peacekeepers in cold blood – the resources in material, and in political will, to support the UN were lacking. Secondly the member states failed totally to use the end of the Cold War to conduct a systematic review of the new threats and challenges which the international community now faced and to adapt the organisation to cope

with them. And that was not because the opportunity was not there. The first ever Security Council Summit, in January 1992, correctly identified many of the main new threats – from terrorism, from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, from a whole range of challenges not previously regarded as security risks at all; extremes of poverty, pandemic disease, environmental degradations. The new Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali in response tabled an ambitious and imaginative paper “An Agenda for Peace”. And then, nothing. The member states were too busy fire-fighting individual crises and handing themselves massive post-Cold War peace dividends to do anything effective. Above all, and thirdly, none fully appreciated just how daunting and widespread the challenge to international peace and security was from failing and failed states. Little was done about preventing states from failing in the first place; and coping with the outcomes of state failure proved to be dauntingly complicated, lengthy and costly. And then, fourthly, a first major attempt to remedy the lack of representativity and legitimacy arising from the Security Council’s outdated composition, dating from

1945, reached deadlock over the issue of additional permanent members. So, by the end of the first post-Cold War decade, the wheel had appeared to come full circle; the Security Council was badly discredited; major opportunities had been missed; UN peacekeeping was in recession.

But the wheel had not in fact come full circle. And, while the second post Cold War decade certainly took place under less favourable auspices than the first, it saw the Security Council remaining centre stage in the handling of international disputes as it had not been during the Cold War and it saw a second, major wave of demand for UN peacekeeping. In that first capacity, there were further major setbacks, with force being used without Security Council authorisation in Kosovo and in Iraq. The new wave of peacekeeping operations produced successes in Sierra Leone, in Burundi, in Liberia, in Southern Sudan and in Haiti to balance failures or half successes in Darfur, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Ethiopia/Eritrea. With more than 100,000 peacekeepers deployed now, at the end of that second decade, the UN's and the UN Security Council's

indispensability can hardly be doubted, but nor can the continuing weaknesses of the system. Moreover a major reform campaign, between 2003 and 2005 had brought only a meagre harvest – the establishment of the Peace-building Commission, the setting up of a Human Rights Council, and the promulgation of the new norm of the Responsibility to Protect – and many rejected proposals. Another attempt to enlarge the Security Council failed. Threats to one of the cornerstones of international peace and security, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, from North Korea and Iran, continued to grow virtually unchecked.

So what are the prospects now? I do believe we are at a watershed moment in international affairs. That brief, unilateral moment when the United States was the only super power left standing has ended. None, least of all the US itself under the Obama administration, believes that the global challenges we face can be handled simply by unilateral action. The emergence of the principal developing countries – China, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Mexico – as major players on the international stage, has been

recognised in the creation of the G20 as the primary forum for coordinating economic issues. However the direction of travel and the role of the Security Council is not yet clear. There are plenty of negative indicators. The re-emergence of a kind of Permanent Member penumbra, inhibiting not only the handling of problems like Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Chechnya, or like Tibet, but also those of Zimbabwe, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, is one such indicator. Another is the rather fumbling recent performance of the European Union, which, over the last twenty years has emerged as a key UN player, as the provider of nearly half the organisation's resources and as the driver of reforms. Recent divisions amongst EU member states at the Human Rights Council have not helped to remove the impression that Europe still punches below its weight at the UN. And then there is the failure, despite all the post-Cold War advances, to get to grips with old, festering disputes over Palestine, over Kashmir and over the Korean peninsula.

What challenges then need to be met and mastered if that watershed moment is not to be squandered as were the previous opportunities at the end of the Cold War? Here are five policy areas which are, surely, crucial to the UN and its Security Council's future effectiveness.

First there needs to be a marked improvement in the cooperation between the five permanent members of the Security Council. Of course they will not always agree. But their ability to hammer out a broad, shared agenda in the years ahead, and to implement it, will be essential if the Council is to become more effective. This will mean reaching compromises from time to time; and being able too to reach out beyond their narrow group to the main regional players involved in whatever international problem or dispute is on the table. The contrary proposition, of divided counsels and confrontation will ensure frustration and the emasculation of the Security Council.

Second, the bread and butter of the Security Council's work, peacekeeping, will need to be handled more professionally. There needs to be a rapid response capability – not a UN standing force which I fear is an idea whose time has not yet come – towards which the European Union's system of battle groups could, but has not yet, made a serious contribution. The damage done to the image of peacekeeping by human rights abuses by peacekeepers must be checked, if necessary by establishing some kind of international jurisdiction for dealing with abuses. The Responsibility to Protect needs to be moved away from controversy and empty words to become an operational concept, but not a simple recipe for military intervention, rather a whole toolbox for preventing states from sliding towards failure in the first place. Cooperation between the UN and those regional and sub-regional organisations with some capacity for peace operations, the African Union in particular, needs to be strengthened and underpinned, by training, logistics and specialised skills and by finance from UN assessed contributions when a regional organisation is asked and authorised by the

UN to act on its behalf. The experience of Iraq and Afghanistan means that coalitions of the willing and organisations like NATO are unlikely to be queuing up in future to take on peacekeeping tasks. So strengthening UN and regional peacekeeping should be a shared priority of all members of the organisation.

Then, thirdly the twin issues of nuclear non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament need to be taken forward in a far more purposeful and effective way, with a much greater commitment of high level political effort than in the past. The Security Council summit meeting on 24 September set out a formidable agenda – reductions of the permanent members' nuclear arsenals with global zero as the final objective, a fissile material cut-off treaty, enriched uranium and reprocessing services guaranteed internationally, a successful NPT review conference in May 2010, universal application of the International Atomic Energy Agency's Additional Protocol. That agenda has thus now been endorsed by all five recognised nuclear weapons states which is a major step forward. But

actually making it happen will be much harder as will preventing a break-out by North Korea and Iran from the NPT regime.

Fourth, we are now just a few weeks away from the Copenhagen conference on the environment and climate change. This is not, not yet, primarily a matter for the Security Council. But, if we cannot check and then reverse the process of global warming, it very soon will be, because the links between the negative consequences of unchecked climate change and global security are becoming ever clearer and more threatening.

And then, fifth, the Great White Whale of international diplomacy, Security Council enlargement needs to be harpooned. Already a new attempt to square the circle is under way in the General Assembly. Another failure will merely damage further the credibility and legitimacy of the very organisation which needs to be strengthened. My own view is that the only realistic prospect of making progress in the short term lies in

the option of creating a new category of longer term, renewable, elected members which could, but would not at this stage necessarily lead on to the subsequent creation of new permanent members. This option was put on the table in 2004 by the High Level Panel and the Secretary-General but immediately rejected by the aspirants to new, permanent seats. Let us hope that wiser, cooler counsels will prevail on this occasion.

That is quite enough for the Security Council and the UN membership to be getting on with. Nobody has a greater interest in success than the European Union. Failure will scupper the Union's objective of achieving effective multilateralism. Success will advance the prospects for that rules-based international community which is the best way for a European Union, whose relative weight in tomorrow's and the next day's world is inevitably going to be less than it has been in the past, to prosper and to protect its own interests, in common with those of others, not as in previous centuries, in domination over them. So, we had better get to work.