

THE ROLE OF THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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The UN Security Council seems to be one of the most admired and envied institutional bodies in the world – except perhaps by those who actually have to work on it.

Even the nations like India, Japan and Brazil who are criticizing the Council for lack of representativity are doing so because they want to get on to it: they think the idea as such of having a limited group of nations with such special powers is great. Outside the UN, I have often heard debates in other institutions about why they can't have something like the Security Council to ensure stronger leadership and faster action. This idea is often raised in the EU context in the shape of an inner core of big states or original founding states. It has also been repeatedly proposed in the OSCE, mainly by Russia.

So perhaps if we want to look at the basic role of the UNSC we should ask not just what it was created for but *why it could* be created in that form, which really has little parallel anywhere else in the world structure.

The answer to its original purpose is set out very clearly in the original UN Charter. I quote: 'In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agree that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf.' The emphasis here is indeed on quick and strong action, and the question of what the action should be for lies in the very first words of the Charter which talk about saving future generations from all the horrors of war. And as to why the particular group of nations on the UNSC should be suitable for stopping war: well, they consisted of the three Western Allies who won the second world war plus Russia and China, and these could be considered the most obvious set of countries who might go to war *with each other* at world level in the cold-war situation after 1945. Secondly they were the world's only nuclear powers at that time and it is no accident that another article in the charter asks the UNSC to take special responsibility for the restraint of armaments and for reducing them as soon as possible to the necessary minimum.

The question, of course, is how far this original mission, shape, and powers of the UNSC correspond to the different security challenges and to the tasks of not just saving but improving the world in the twenty-first century. We have much less risk today, thank goodness, of nuclear war or any other war between the world's great powers but we do have many more very cruel local conflicts and several more possessors of nuclear arms. Perhaps most crucially, our idea of security and welfare today goes far beyond simple notions of war and peace to include the need for economic development, individual human rights and the rule of law, proper management of the environment, and defence against non-state and non-traditional threats like those from terrorists and from international crime and smuggling, to name just a few. How does the UNSC match up to this new set of tasks?

One obvious point - but one that I don't often hear discussed - is that the Security Council can only work within the limited competence of the UN itself, and that competence has never extended to running the world's financial, economic and trading activities which are so important for the broader dimensions of human security and welfare today. That is the job of the global financial institutions (IMF, World Bank and WTO), and if there is an equivalent to

a core group of strong nations for that purpose it is actually the G8, It is true that the UN's specialized agencies deal with many aspects of economic and social existence and with important security challenges like disease, hunger and refugeeism, but in practice they are not very effectively coordinated by the UN centre in New York and even less by the Security Council as such. It is really only fair therefore to look at the UNSC's role in terms of the evolution of the more traditional, conflict related and armaments related security agenda.

Here again we ought to note that a lot of relevant work now goes on in other places, not ably in regional organizations like NATO, the EU, ASEAN or the African Union which not only look after their own members' security but try to supply it to others especially in the form of peacekeeping capacities. In the last fifteen years, while the number of UN missions to crisis areas has risen, the number of missions carried out by these other actors has grown much faster. It is also worth noting that the UN itself recently set up a Peacebuilding Commission to take on – and some would say, to take away from the Security Council - the more detailed tasks of rebuilding after conflict which are now seen as so crucial for a lasting peace.

However, most people would still see the UNSC and the UN itself as having the most crucial and central role in deciding where new interventions should take place; in giving them a clear international legal base, and ensuring their legitimacy as something more than the selfseeking adventures of some self-appointed 'international policeman'. Equally important, the UNSC has unique powers to try to avoid or limit open conflicts and to cut off non-conflict developments that are particularly dangerous for peace, by positive steps like mediation and peace talks or by the threat and imposition of various sanctions. This range of options are still highly relevant for today's conditions as seen by all the UN's recent activity on Iran, North Korea, Darfur and Kosovo among others.

Since 2000 we have also seen some intriguing signs of the UNSC learning to work in new ways to tackle those new security challenges that don't just arise at state level but involve the actions of individuals, companies, or social and religious groups in a fluid globalized environment. In its resolutions numbers 1373 and 1540 the UNSC has created something very like universally applicable laws against the financing of terrorism and the unauthorized ownership and trade in WMD, respectively, which can grip on dangerous actions taken right down to the individual level – that is, if states play ball in enforcing them. In terms of broadening out to the new security agenda, it is also notable that the UK succeeded in the UN's last session in getting the dangers of climate change brought on to the UNSC's agenda as a security issue. It seems that issues of energy security and related conflict management will also call for more attention at global level, with developments like the recent race to stake national claims under the ice of the North Pole; and it would be very surprising if any future world health epidemic did not involve the UN's central organs as well as the WHO. If the UNSC could pursue such openings for adaptation and exploration, as well as doing its more basic job of intervening in more traditional dangers to peace, it would certainly deserve its place as a continuing central actor in 21st-century security.

The obstacles to it doing that in a convincing way are also the reasons why it is very important for different types of nations, including smaller ones like Iceland, to get onto the Security Council and have a chance to influence its work from time to time. First, the dominance by large nuclear states doesn't just mean that they all too frequently block action through their right of veto. It means that there is a kind of conspiracy among them not to raise at all those issues that they see as their private business, whether it be Northern Ireland or Chechnya or the way the US thinks itself free to violate international law or the breaches of

human rights by China. They are also generally less interested in the non-military and more mundane issues of human security, including financial and economic stability and freedom of communications, that matter so much to a small but highly globalized nation like Iceland. And last but not least, they have been pretty hopeless in their task of controlling armaments of any kind, especially in the last ten years or so – although there are some hints in British and even in US policy that this issue might be ripe for revival in 2009-10.

Returning to my first words about the UNSC being less admired by those who actually work on it, a young British diplomat who later resigned from the service had this to say but the Security Council's tangled negotiations over Iraq in 2002: 'It got so bad that we would reject anything the French and Russians proposed simply because it was their proposal, and vice versa....What we all lacked in that nasty overheated little room was any sense of what was really going on'.

If any of that is true, it is not a reason to turn our backs on the UNSC because all of us, human beings as well as states, desperately need it to do better. Any new hands and clean intentions that can be brought to the job, for example by Iceland securing temporary membership, offer a new reason for hope and in my personal view are very much to be welcomed