
The United Nations Entering Into the Twenty-First Century

ADDRESS

by

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour indeed to address the annual international seminar of the European University in Antwerp and I wish to thank you for offering me this opportunity. As a diplomat and academician myself, I am glad to see that your vision of the future is deeply rooted in history. To me, Antwerp, a city which deserves to have been selected as “Cultural Capital of Europe” is also the home town of Peter Paul Rubens, the remarkable man whose many accomplishments in the field of diplomacy and in pursuit of peace are at least as noteworthy as his artistic ability.

I was invited here today to share with you some thoughts on the United Nations entering into the twenty-first century. The threshold of a new century is always a propitious time to indulge in contemplation, especially when drastic changes in the world justify a complete re-evaluation of the international situation. The events of November 1989 led to romantic over-expectations about the dividends to be derived from the end of the cold war. That enthusiasm has already sobered somewhat. It now seems as though actors and observers of the international scene have reached a state of critical reappraisal of the new realities.

The change we are talking about here is not just a change of structure from cold war to post cold war. It is a deeper change; a change in the civilizational paradigm. It affects not only relations between States but relations between individuals.

In the summer of 1993, Professor S. Huntington published a controversial article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” which stirred a debate throughout academic and diplomatic circles. Huntington developed the idea that:

“ The fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future”

I believe the theory that Professor Huntington has developed applies to the past when civilizations developed largely in conditions of autarky and experienced a low level of mutual interaction which explains the sharp contrasts between them. The present conditions of interdependence opens the opportunity not for the clash but for the mutual enrichment of civilizations. We are moving at an accelerated pace towards the global world in which the unity of civilizations is our force and their diversity is our wealth. The interpenetration of civilizations as well as international cooperation tends to blur the “fault lines” described by Professor Huntington. What is important for Western Civilizations is not to give lessons, but rather to listen to those civilizations which over centuries have had time to reflect without books perhaps, but with the help of their oral tradition, their sensitivity and their memory. It is against this background that the new role of the United Nations in the twenty-first century will emerge. I am convinced that Member States will increasingly value the United Nations as an effective tool to reconcile and harmonize the interests voiced by the Member States and by a multiplicity of new actors on the international scene.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE UNITED NATIONS

Since I am speaking here before an academic audience which usually likes to explore the ins and outs of all possible scenarios, even the most extreme, I thought I would bring up a question which sometimes is raised: will there still be a United

Nations in the twenty-first century? Will it not disappear due to lack of support? After all, there has been a historic precedent set by the demise of the League of Nations. What is it that would prevent the United Nations from experiencing the same fate? And assuming that the United Nations survives the turbulence of the present transition period, what role will Member States want this organization to play on the international scene?

Immediately after the cold war, the trend was to dismiss these difficult questions by asserting gratuitously that “there was no alternative to the United Nations”. Of course, this is not so. Alternatives to the United Nations do exist. The question is whether the international community is ready to accept the consequences they might entail.

Unrestricted Unilateralism

Assume for a moment that Nation-States decided to forgo multilateralism as a preferred instrument of diplomatic action and opted instead for unrestricted unilateralism. What would happen? In many cases, such a policy might lead to a denial of the principle that international relations must abide by the rule of law. It would probably bring a new division of the world in different groups of States. Coalitions would emerge and since they are usually set up against a perceived common threat or enemy, one can assume that they would be basically confrontational in nature. Furthermore, in the absence of any organized structure to voice the predominant opinion of the international community, very little moral weight will be brought to bear upon delinquent States. Thus it seems to me that such scenario is the surest path to a world of instability and insecurity.

Of course the State has the right to take unilateral actions but to make them the subject of international norms, they need to be undertaken within the framework of the United Nations Charter.

It is hard to believe that States which have experienced the benefits of multilateralism for a number of years would be ready to dispense with the United Nations altogether. In addition, if we go by the precedent of the dissolution of the League of Nations, we should also go by the precedent of the creation of the United Nations shortly thereafter. The urge of the international community to recreate an international forum bears witness to the vital usefulness of such an organization.

Unmanageable Globalization

The important process which is already taking place now and which will dominate the twenty-first century is globalization. The term is still nebulous and refers to the growing interdependence of countries world-wide. Whether it is due to rapid advances in the fields of transportation, communication, and information technology, or whether it refers to liberalization of trade, mobility of capital, and new practices of multinational corporations, globalization is usually a two-sided-coin. On the positive side, it triggers a synergy of integration of the world community and offers good prospects for growth, job creation, increased personal exchanges and enhanced tolerance. On the negative side, a free-wheeling globalization process, left totally unchecked by outside moderators could lead to an ever increasing gap between rich and poor Members of the international community and this entails the risks of social upheaval.

This is not to say that the pessimistic option has the best chances of prevailing.

Attempts to determine the overall costs and benefits of globalization still remain highly ambiguous. I am personally inclined to think that the world has more to gain than to lose in the process, provided globalization is managed properly. But the fact remains that globalization involves changes of unprecedented magnitude and that members of the international community will need to devise new ways to make globalization a manageable process.

This is where the United Nations has a promising role to play. It is uniquely positioned to provide a forum, but also a centre for agreed action, to address the challenges of globalization, to raise public consciousness, to get governments to focus on problems that transcend narrow national interests, and to undertake joint responsibility for eradicating such social diseases as poverty, ignorance and selfishness. For example the experience of the United Nations in the field of development promotion can be put to use to make sure that entire continents such as Africa take part in the benefits of globalization.

Thus globalization makes the United Nations necessary more than ever before.

Fragmentation at the expense of integration

In our hypothesis of “alternative options to the United Nations”, I can foresee yet another scenario, one in which the conflicting forces of integration and fragmentation would be left to compete with each other without outside intervention.

Even nowadays, against the background of fast development of functional and especially regional integration, fragmentation is taking place as a result of repeated assaults on the classic notion of Nation-State. The forces of fragmentation are

perhaps most visible nowadays in Eastern parts of Europe, in central Asia and in the African continent. Behind the human drama which takes place in central Africa, it is the mapping of this continent which is at stake. But the forces of fragmentation are not limited to these regions.

Peace and security are certainly at greatest risk in this fragmentation scenario and it comes as no surprise that the need for the United Nations would be great in this area. The number of requests for UN Peace-keeping operations has grown significantly in the last decade.

All of these three alternatives could very well occur in the twenty-first century. But who will determine ultimately how to oppose the negative trends in changes; and whether to go down the path of multilateralism with the United Nations or whether to explore other solutions? At this point, the choice rests entirely on the decision-making power of the sovereign State. It remains the principal actor on the international scene and the basic entity of public international law. Despite the emergence of new actors in international affairs, no organization can replace the State. Contrary to wide-spread misconception in this respect, the United Nations is not a supra-national entity empowered to impose policies of its own upon any particular State. It represents no more than the collective will of its 185 Member States. If the States were to decide tomorrow to leave the United Nations, this organization would be nothing more than an empty shell.

But new developments in this last decade point to the growing realization that the State cannot do everything, nor should it have to. I am inclined to believe that in a period of civilizational change characterized by irreversible interdependence, States will realize that alternatives to the United Nations would only lead to new

confrontations, revolutions and violence.

The new role of the United Nations

The fact that there is no substitute to the United Nations as a safety net in a time of global change does not mean that the United Nations of the twenty-first century will be an exact replica of the Organization we have known in the last fifty years. It will evolve and in fact, it has already begun to do so. But this is a slow process, which takes place gradually. The United Nations is already undergoing an in-depth transformation, and it is of course not a one-act play.

(a) The United Nations as a Reconciler

What will emerge from this transformation? I foresee that the main role of the United Nations in the years to come will be one of reconciliation. The major task of the organization will be to promote a propitious international environment so that change will occur in an evolutionary, non-violent and democratic way.

In the years to come, the Nation-States will remain the main actors on the international scene. Since world stability is primarily based on a balance of interests amongst these States, the predictability of foreign policy depends largely on the ability of States to define clearly what their national interests are. The United Nations offers a forum in which to voice these national interests and in which to test the limits of these asserted interests. Reconciling diverse if not conflicting views of Member States on an infinite variety of issues is a traditional role of the United Nations but it remains a permanent challenge.

The issues which the United Nations are dealing with more and more, go beyond national jurisdiction itself. This trend has started with the discussion of the common heritage and today the United Nations is deeply involved in such problems.

The challenges before the United Nations which go beyond the national jurisdiction of States are for example:

- proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;
- illicit trafficking of any kind of weapons;
- human rights;
- environmental protection;
- drug trafficking and money laundering;
- international terrorism.

All of these instances represent a clear deviation from the traditional sovereignty-oriented philosophy of the United Nations, but they illustrate the expanding area of United Nations activities in a world of permanent change.

In exploring the new activities of the United Nations in the twenty-first century, I would not like to convey the impression that the main goals of the Organization have changed. This is absolutely not the case. The United Nations continues to abide by its Charter and accordingly, its main task remains the maintenance of Peace and Security throughout the world. But even in this traditional field we can see the changes. The concept of peace is no longer interpreted "stricto sensu". It has gained a much broader acceptance and increasingly, the United Nations recognizes that it must pursue with equal vigor the goals of "stability and well-being", if its wants to create the conditions for Peace and Stability. In view of this new peace promotion, the United

Nations has had to develop new approaches which were not envisioned in the Charter. "Development" and "Democracy" have come to be considered among the most effective ways and means of peace-building and conflict prevention.

(b) Reform of the United Nations

To make the United Nations relevant to the new realities, it is not enough just to transform its spheres of activities. Of no less importance is the transformation of the organization itself. The agenda of the reform starts with the availability of resources needed to deliver its programmes. The organization cannot function on the brink of bankruptcy. The effective functioning of the UN makes it necessary for all Member States to pay their contribution in full and on time and to reimburse arrears which now amounts to 3.2 billion dollars.

The reform of the United Nations is not limited, as the media might lead you to believe, to the downsizing of its permanent Secretariat and to drastic cost-cutting measures though it is a part of the reorganization and it is already under way. It involves a comprehensive reappraisal of the role of every organ of the United Nations and new strategies to make these various bodies work better together. The reform implies the restructuring of all major bodies of the UN, and at the top of this agenda is the Security Council, the General Assembly and the ECOSOC.

* Reform of the Security Council: The majority of Member States agree that the Security Council of the United Nations (which according to the Charter, bears the

main responsibility for the maintenance of peace and security,) should be reformed in order to better reflect the realities of the world today. Reform in the context of the Security Council aims at making this institution more democratic and more representative. The most heated debates focus on the issue of the composition of the Security Council which is outdated in as much as it reflects the balance of power at the end of World War II. Most Member States favour an increase in the membership of the Council. The principle of the representation of Germany and Japan is generally accepted and there is a general understanding that other regions should be represented. Another aspect of the discussion concerning the reform of the Security Council involves the use of the right of veto which some countries view as undemocratic and would like to see considerably restricted. Finally, the relationship between the Security Council and the General Assembly is also under scrutiny with a number of delegations suggesting that the Council should be more accountable to the General Assembly and that the relationship of these two organs should be more balanced and coordinated.

* Reform of the General Assembly: Applied to the Plenary organ of the United Nations, reform is essentially structural, aimed at rationalizing the work of the General Assembly, reducing the number of items on its agenda, and abolishing various subsidiary bodies which have outlived their usefulness. Streamlining the decision-making process in the Assembly could be greatly enhanced by developing mechanisms to harmonize the position of Member States within regional groups at a preliminary stage.

* Reform of the Economic and Social Council . Reform of the ECOSOC aims essentially at revitalizing this body which was originally intended to be the equivalent of the Security Council in the economic and social fields. To this end, the policy-

making role of the ECOSOC should be enhanced and its capacity to serve as a central mechanism for coordination of the activities of the United Nations system should be strengthened. The activities of the ECOSOC should be prioritized and related programmes or agencies should be consolidated according to functional lines. The ECOSOC is also the main body concerned with the strengthening of cooperation between the United Nations and the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO.

* To this top priority list, I would like to add the necessary reform of the Trusteeship Council: Among the various bodies of the United Nations, the Trusteeship Council is the one with the most obviously out-of-date mandate. Proposals have been made to abandon it, but it was also suggested to entrust it with a new form of Trusteeship, "the trusteeship of common heritage". The question is still pending.

New Life of the Chapters of the United Nations Charter

However, the transformation of the United Nations also dwells upon its interaction with regional structures and other new actors on the international scene. Indeed, with the new demands placed on the United Nations especially in the field of peace-keeping, cooperation with regional organizations, as envisioned under Chapter VIII of the Charter, has been given new life. In the last few years, the United Nations has cooperated with the Organization of American States in Haiti; with the Organization of African Unity in Burundi, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia and in the Western Sahara; with the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Afghanistan, and Tajikistan and with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the division of responsibility with regional authorities should be seen in a global context and judicious choices will have to be made in the future regarding the way tasks are assigned so that they are performed in

the most effective way.

In any case, I trust the on-going transformation of the UN will lead to the revival and enrichment of the UN diplomatic instruments which are provided for in the Charter. Until now, we have relied too heavily on political and diplomatic methods and they were successful in many cases, but with the return of an era of consensual decision-making, the art and science of negotiations has regained its pre-eminence. However, fuller use should also be made of the legal instruments adopted by the United Nations during its first fifty years of existence. So far, they have been widely under-utilized. Their implementation can only be enhanced by the creation of such bodies as the War Crimes Tribunal of the Hague or the upcoming International Criminal Court.

To conclude I would like to add that successful transformation can be summarized in two key concepts: democratization and refusal of double standards.

NEW PARTNERS FOR THE UNITED NATIONS

Faced with multiple challenges, the United Nations must rely on new partners in its quest for the right solutions to specific problems. To this end, the organization is developing a new concept of solidarity. Its' aim is to ensure the broadest possible public support of its activities and to set up links of communication with all social strata - non-governmental and religious organizations, parliamentarians, municipal authorities, representatives of the scientific community and of the media as well as business leaders.

Developing a new partnership with the private sector

Traditionally, the United Nations has been involved in world economic transactions through its activities in setting norms and standards for participants in international business. It has also come to be known for its ability to mobilize resources in support of the efforts of developing countries towards achieving a degree of sustainable development. Finally, it has contributed, through its peace-keeping activities in various countries, to the creation of a stable political environment favourable to investment and business activities.

For its part, the private sector takes advantage of the business opportunities offered by the United Nations and its agencies. Private manufacturers and consulting firms are regularly participating in rounds of competitive bidding initiated by the UNDP, Humanitarian agencies or UN Peace-keeping forces.

However, it is felt increasingly in international circles that business need to be more closely involved in support of the objectives of the United Nations and of its Charter. Multinational corporations possess enormous resources and can considerably influence the course of political events. The private sector is key to creating growth and spreading the benefits of globalization. But considerations of "good corporate citizenship" should be systematically included in the design of such companies economic strategies. The private sector would then be a leading force behind social and economic development, and a formidable ally in the promotion of democratic institutions. A lasting partnership between the United Nations and the private sector must be established on this mutually beneficial basis.

Developing New Partnerships with Organized Members of the Civil Society

In order to broaden its basis of support among “the peoples” of the international community, the United Nations is turning to new partnerships with organized members of the civil society. It seeks to develop closer ties with religious leaders for instance, regardless of their denomination. The moral weight of church leaders bears considerable influence on the faithful of this world and where the teachings of the church dovetail the goals of peace, security and well-being of the United Nations, there is room for ample and fruitful cooperation.

The same applies to cooperation with members of the academic and scientific community. Their research takes place increasingly in a global environment of virtually instantaneous intellectual exchange. They provide a vital link between their constituents in local universities and their network of fellow scientists world-wide. Developing their awareness of the goals and activities of the United Nations could enhance their receptiveness to global problems and allow the international community to enroll their know-how in addressing the changes envisioned in the twenty-first century.

The “People to people” approach to world problems which is gaining support among Member States of the United Nations has also led the organization to reinforce its ties with municipal authorities. Indeed, it is felt that the answer to problems the United Nations has to address at the highest political level, lies ultimately at more basic levels. Changes do not inevitably trickle down from the highest political authorities, they also work their way upward. Thus the global objectives of peace, security, well-being and development depend in the first place on the ability of local authorities to provide basic levels of services.

Between local authorities and a global organization such as the United Nations, there are multiple layers of government institutions with which cooperation should be enhanced and beyond institutionalized authorities, the United Nations has developed partnerships with organized members of the civil society. Over the past decade, the growth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in number and influence has been phenomenal. Presently, 1614 NGOs have consultative status with the ECOSOC and this represents only the tip of an iceberg, because the United Nations system interacts with thousands more. Through the dedication of their highly-motivated staff and their ability to mobilize private funds, they present great potential for peace, development and democratization. Thus the United Nations is working at developing a productive relationship of consultation and cooperation with these organizations.

Considering the growing significance of the media in today's world, the United Nations has also started to consider how future cooperation with this partner could be enhanced. It is common knowledge that the mandate of the United Nations and its role in solving world problems was very often misrepresented by the mass media. To change this situation was the purpose of the United Nations World Television Forum which was held for the first time in New-York in November 1996. The participants discussed the growing impact of television on decision-making and stressed the need for television to continue to represent a multiplicity of cultures and viewpoints. Through its Department of Public Information, the United Nations is seeking to strengthen its ties with key media groups and to make sure that the entire family of UN organizations participates in this outreach effort.

I hope that in describing the emerging new role of the United Nations, the impact of its structural reform and the momentous extension of its network of partners, I have brought to you the image of an organization which is considerably more

flexible than is usually acknowledged and that can contribute significantly to peace, stability, well-being and development in the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, I would also like to convey the general feeling of optimism which prevails within the United Nations as Mr. Kofi Annan takes over as Secretary General of the Organization. In his first press conference after his appointment by the General Assembly last December, Mr. Annan said :

“ Governments need to come to an understanding on what they want the United Nations to do”

I have all reasons to believe that with the commitment of its Member States the United Nations will cross the threshold of the twenty-first century in the best possible conditions, and will serve the interests of the peoples throughout the world.

Thank you for your attention.

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