



UNU-CRIS Occasional Papers

0-2004/17

Opening Address, ACUNS 17th Annual Meeting

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UNITED NATIONS UNIVERSITY

ACUNS 17th Annual Meeting
Geneva, Switzerland
30 June – 2 July 2004

*‘We Have Come to a Fork in the Road ... Now We Must Decide’:
Human Security in Context*

Opening Address:

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1. The ‘Architecture of Peace’

Throughout history, human societies of every kind have sought, above all, to ensure their own safety. The building of an ‘architecture of peace’ has become the institutional aspiration through which humanity might avoid warfare and live together in a secure and dignified order. In the modern era of the past four centuries, nation-states have sought, in various ways, to construct that architecture.

The 20th century saw early experimentation in global governance. Both the League of Nations and the United Nations have attempted to construct an emerging order among nation-states through three cardinal tenets – universality of membership, the rule of law and proscription on the unilateral and arbitrary use of force. Through the century the multilateral system became universal but the twin pillars of this prototype global architecture – the pacific settlement of disputes and collective security measures to contain unauthorized conflict – were undermined by two phenomena – doctrinal limitation and structural change.

The doctrinal weaknesses of the system are familiar yet seemingly intractable. The veto power, granted to all in the League and to five major powers in the UN system, continues to hamper a balanced and effective global policy-making. The lack of compulsory jurisdiction of international law encourages disregard for the requirements of self-restraint in national behaviour and international relations. The continued possession of nuclear weapons exacerbates the natural asymmetry of military might, curbing the potential of collective security and threatening the planet in ways scarcely conceivable in mid-century. And the provision of self-defence as the sole recourse to force beyond collective security has ballooned over the years into the principal justification for its use.

As the international community struggles to cope with these weaknesses, it is increasingly faced with the need to adapt to structural change in the system itself. Three developments make the world different from that for which institutional redemption was designed half a century ago.

- Inter-state aggression has been curbed but intra-state conflict gives rise to complex national and regional emergencies.
- At the global strategic level tensions have intensified on an inter-civilizational basis.
- And private groups have entered the security arena, at the regional level through mercenary and illicit trading activity, and at the strategic level through a dissident ideological challenge to the global establishment. Even the individual is now a subject of specific attention in

global governance, through the jurisdictional reach of an international criminal court and the executive power of Security Council arrest warrants and smart sanctions. Today, the security environment has not only become more fluid, unpredictable and dangerous; it is no longer shaped solely by states.

Thus the brief post-Cold War optimism has rapidly ceded to a subliminal dread of future events. Bipolar rivalry has mutated into unipolar hegemony. Initially the international community responded to an 'assertive multilateralism' in which the superpower would lead it to the common ends envisioned in the UN Charter. But structural change has taken its toll. Intra-state implosions through societal failure and ethnic slaughter defeated a sustainable collective will for conflict management, spelling the end of 'new world order' visions of the traditional kind. And the declaration of *jihad* against a forward Western military presence and the accompanying attacks on the global establishment have shaken the foundations of the international system to its core. The response by the establishment itself has been equally ferocious, posing a qualitative challenge to the contemporary international order.

2. The Contemporary Challenge

Like any architectural design sixty years on, the United Nations is showing signs of age. Both doctrinal strain and structural stress have intensified in recent years.

Doctrinally, two of the fundamental tenets identified – the rule of law and the non-use of unilateral force – are being seriously challenged. Assertions have been made that the UN Charter is 'outdated' and international law must change to accommodate the 'new realities' of terrorism and WMD proliferation. And the crises of Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq have generated debate over whether legitimacy should take precedence over legality.

Specifically, five cardinal doctrines of the traditional UN system are under siege.

- The non-use of force is challenged by proactive self-defence – the so-called 'right of pre-emption'.
- Multilateral recognition is challenged by external regime change of governments whose credentials are recognized at the UN.
- The concurrence of the P-5 is challenged by the 'unreasonable veto' theory.

- The customary right of sovereign states to acquire any weaponry for defence, including withdrawal from non-proliferation treaties, is challenged by a new norm of compulsory and selective WMD disarmament.
- Finally non-intervention is challenged from two sides: the ‘international responsibility to protect’ other citizens against gross and systematic abuse of human rights; and by the ‘national right to protect’ one’s own against an ‘existential threat’ from WMDs or terrorism.

Structurally, the United Nations has witnessed a gravitational shift in power away from the large and cumbersome deliberative organs such as the General Assembly and ECOSOC and towards the smaller executive body for peace, the Security Council. And over the past decade the Council itself has metamorphosed from a narrowly-conceived instrument for inter-state peace to a prototype body of global governance. Concomitantly the Council’s threat perception has mutated, essentially moving from traditional inter-state aggression through complex emergencies to include today generic threats that are no longer territorially specific. The Council, with all its flaws and limited legitimacy, is beginning to govern the world. This trend raises, more urgently than before, questions of Council representation, balance and objectivity.

For his part the UN Secretary-General has issued a challenge of his own. We can no longer take it for granted, he says, that our multilateral institutions are strong enough to cope with all the challenges facing them. Some institutions might be in need of ‘radical reform’. The relevance of current multilateral rules has come into question. The international community, in fact, has come to a ‘fork in the road’ – a moment perhaps no less decisive than 1945 itself. Now, he says, we must decide. The Secretary-General has formed a high-level panel on threats, challenges and change, with a mandate to make recommendations on the changes required to ensure effective collective action in response to such changed circumstances, especially by the UN.

3. The Gordian Knot

Throughout history, revolutionary moments occur when the rules that are valid for one age become obsolescent and challenged by new norms that reflect the realities of changing times. At such moments new concepts emerge that more succinctly capture the needs of the day and more accurately map the way ahead.

In the early 21st century the international community faces a dilemma. The system designed half a century ago to prevent recurrence of inter-state warfare is wrestling with qualitatively different conditions of threat and response. Different priorities are assigned by North and South to the true nature of the global threat. An impoverished majority of humankind is afflicted by resource depletion, system skew, environmental degradation, and epidemic health crises while an affluent and powerful minority feels threatened by a challenge to the establishment order itself.

That challenge is being posed to the dual struts that support political order – power and legitimacy. Those demanding change are reaching for the ultimate symbols of establishment power – weapons of mass destruction – hitherto the preserve of the state, triggering alarm that the rules of international statecraft are being bypassed to potentially lethal effect. Hitherto, such weapons were seen as symbols of stability for the preservation of the *status quo*. Now they are being sought for their use as potential agents of radical global change.

In an even more profound sense, the struggle between radical change and the *status quo* also strikes at an underlying and related contest – over claims to global legitimacy itself. The establishment finds legitimacy in a secular universality that effectively unites governments around the Charter. But that claim to the ‘unique legitimacy of the United Nations’ is being challenged by two alternative visions. Secular liberalism, in its fundamentalist form, demands radical change for the entire world – the reshaping of national societies in the liberal secular democratic mould. In extreme form it challenges the legitimacy of the United Nations. And claims to divine revelation, also in fundamentalist form in both *dar-Islam* and the West, challenge the legitimacy of the UN as well, offering an uncompromising view of the human future, through a proclaimed moral superiority that draws from an artificial moral clarity.

When alternative visions of power and legitimacy clash, the foundations of the system become seriously weakened. Stability is undermined, law is refracted and morality is rendered opaque. Unstable areas of tension become flash-points for global conflagration. Legal notions of self-defence become stretched beyond the limits of credulity. And the moral distinction between civilians and combatants becomes blurred as alternative world-views compete in armed struggle, threatening civilian populations through direct targeting or collateral damage.

There is little dispute today that the traditional multilateral system is obsolescent. The question is how and when it will change. Such change is likely, from historical precedent, to take one of two

forms. The system can collapse and, amidst post-cataclysmic trauma, a new system is devised to take its place. Or it can prove resilient and adaptable, transforming into something more relevant to the new realities. The Gordian knot can be cut, or it can, defying mythological tradition, be adroitly untied and reconfigured, with the human psyche left relatively unscarred.

System collapse is neither unprecedented nor impossible today. Enough probability estimates have been made of major attack on the soft urban underbelly of the Western world to concentrate the minds of those living in hitherto safe metropolitan areas. The battle has been carried to the inner sanctum of global power. Yet system adaptation is inherent to the contemporary order and is far preferred by a majority everywhere in both establishment and popular opinion. A teleological interpretation of the Charter could yet facilitate a consensus on how to respond to the various threat perceptions entertained in different cultures in a way that retains sufficient global unity for global legitimacy to be secured.

But how is this to be done? When the international community confronts seemingly irreconcilable forces – the unprecedented influence of private groups, the spread of destructive weaponry, seething hostility to the global establishment, repudiation of established legitimacy, obsolescence of norms and accepted doctrine – how is it to react? Only by devising a new set of concepts that can synthesize these dialectical forces.

The introduction of the concept of ‘human security’ promises to disentangle these threads by relating state and individual within a common security context. ‘Human security’ is the notion that at the heart of the concept of security is to be found the individual person, not the state. The traditional concept of ‘state security’ posits the state as the entity to be secured and the citizen as a servant to help secure the state – militarily as a member of the armed forces or through civilian means of policy-making. The concept of ‘human security’ reverses this, identifying the citizen as the object of security and the state as the means to that end through, *inter alia*, human rights and personal empowerment.

Once this revolutionary idea is accepted, several corollaries follow. Above all, security is no longer seen solely in terms of ‘hard security threats’ but also ‘soft threats’ – ‘freedom from want’ as well as ‘freedom from fear’. The over-riding contribution which ‘human security’ can make is linking discrete aspects of contemporary security issues that, under the current institutional mechanism, remain separated.

Thus, by placing the individual at the heart of the debate, the new approach tackles the hitherto irreconcilable. It addresses the needs and grievances of the impoverished. It addresses the individual fears of the powerful, albeit through unfamiliar symbols and precepts. And it addresses the dispute over legitimacy – by inviting a dialogue among those who currently engage in mutual vilification, label each other as morally sub-human and prefer to kill rather than to listen.

4. The Way Forward

In such a rapidly integrating yet unstable world, how can such conceptual progress resolve the global problems we face today? The dexterity with which the knot can be untied depends on the skill with which policy-making is prosecuted within the Security Council in future years. How can the Council, mindful of the magnitude of the challenge before it yet jealous of its inherent powers, transform to an extent that meets the criticism of some and the expectations of others? How can its extensive global powers be matched with sufficient global legitimacy?

‘Human security’ carries dual implications for institutional change. It affects first the criteria by which the Security Council might make chapter VII determinations. And it affects the relationship between the Council and the principal organs and specialized agencies. While the Council retains primary responsibility for ‘state security’, all global agencies henceforth have a direct role to play in guaranteeing ‘human security’.

It will be a qualitative conceptual challenge for the Council to embrace the concept of human security in a manner that keeps it effective and focused on the issues of direction and enforcement. Yet this can actually be done with minimal fuss. It requires having the Council distinguish, which it has not done in the past, between ‘threats to international peace’ and ‘threats to international security’. Any immediate risk of violent conflict, irrespective of origin, would comprise a ‘threat to peace’. Any ‘critical and pervasive’ pressures, of a socio-economic, environmental or health nature, would, if they are in the Council’s judgement likely to generate violent conflict in the foreseeable future, be declared ‘threats to security’.

Both these concepts are already captured in the current terminology of the Charter and could thus trigger the Council’s binding powers. All other ‘non-critical and non-pervasive’ pressures would

fall outside the Council's domain and be handled by the other principal organs and specialized agencies.

In addition the Council could establish, as a subsidiary organ, a Human Security Committee whose task it would be to determine which socio-environmental-economic issues of a 'critical and pervasive nature' should be handled by the Council as a 'threat to international security'. The United Nations already has, on the recommendation of the Ogata-Sen Commission, established a UN Trust Fund and an Advisory Board for human security. The Commission has also advocated the establishment of a 'core group' that would link disparate actors in a strong global alliance around the UN and Bretton Woods institutions'. But the litmus test of whether the international community means to act on the new concept, is whether the Security Council is prepared to embrace it.

The Committee would perform a deliberative function, receiving regular briefings from relevant senior officials. These might include the President of ECOSOC, the Administrator of UNDP, the High Commissioners for Refugees and Human Rights, the Director-General of WTO, the President of the World Bank and the Director-General of the IMF. With the exception of WTO, all of these are existing organs or specialized agencies of the UN system.

It would not be the task of the Committee to resolve every intellectual challenge pertaining to the relationship between all causes of conflict and violent conflict itself. This kind of insight and wisdom can only evolve over time. But the establishment of a committee charged with such a task would send a signal that the 'common but differentiated interests' of the South as well as the North are being taken seriously into account in a security context.

The establishment of such a committee might encounter opposition that the Security Council would be straying too far beyond its mandate into uncharted territory. But the Council has in fact undertaken a teleological interpretation of its implied powers over the past decade in terms of threat perception. There is no constitutional obstacle to such an initiative; it simply requires political consensus. That consensus, within the political grasp of the Council even in its current form, will need to be forged as the more specific contradictions of the Iraq crisis are gradually resolved.

We live in unpredictable times. The stable dangers of the Cold War have given way to the instabilities of the War on Terror. So novel is the situation that we are not even sure a war is on or, if it is, what the rules are. We need new concepts that can allow us to see more clearly ahead. We need a change of global mindset that replaces a regressive reliance on warfare with a progressive faith in dialogue, understanding and law. And we need to match the security of the individual with the capabilities of the nation-state and the potential of global governance. Once this is done, humanity will perhaps come of age and find the true redemption that has hitherto eluded us all. 'Human security' holds the promise of being the key to that future.