

## **The United Nations at 70 –what prospects for peace?**

I am honored to have been invited to deliver the Erskine Childers lecture for 2015 . Erskine Childers devotion to the UN and commitment to reform to take forward the opportunities presented by the end of the Cold War, is an inspiration to us all,. We should dedicate ourselves to follow in his footsteps, to defend the principles on which the UN is built and to ensure that they are implemented in reality.

The United Nations was as you know formed in 1945 at the end of the Second World War – the most terrible war in all of human history in which 50 million people died– half civilians and half Russians- we should not forget what a heavy burden the Russian people carried in the defeat of Hitler. in the words of the preamble to the Charter of the UN it was formed "To save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". I have been asked to discuss the prospects for peace and to examine the successes and failures of the UN and suggest how we can pursue the UN charter goals of ending the scourge of war, promote sustainable development, protect human rights, prevent catastrophic climate change and build peace and justice for all. This is not a small task! But it is the task that this generation has in front of it unless we are to hand onto the next generation a very dangerous world. It is right that we should discuss these issues more intensively.

We meet at a disappointing and worrying time. The Middle East is in turmoil and there are a higher number of refugees than at any time since the end of the Second World War – 60 million people, one in every 122 people who are alive are refugees. China is rising and the US set on long term decline. This has led some commentators to fear that we are at a point in history that is comparable to the pre first world war world when the Ottoman Empire was in decline and Germany was rising and Britain declining with the result that the great powers sleepwalked into the First World War. And of course it was the first World War and the unjust and unwise terms of the peace, that led on to the terrible economic depression of the 1930s, the rise of fascism and then to

the horrors of the Second World War. Some indeed argue that there were not two world wars but one more with a fairly brief interruption.

People across the world are still inspired by the United Nations and all it stands for despite the difficulties with which it has to struggle in order to try to fulfill its mandate. But it is worth remembering that Dag Hammarskjold, the second Secretary-General, who died so tragically, said that the UN “was created not to lead mankind to heaven but to save humanity from hell”. It is clear that the institution has many difficulties, not least that the great powers at the end of the Second World War – the US, Russia, China, France and the UK - have a veto powers in all votes of the Security Council. And so for example since 1982 the US has used its veto to block resolutions critical of Israel thirty-five times, While the total number of resolutions blocked by other permanent members over the same period is 27. And of course it is the Security Council that is charged with maintaining international peace and security. It has the power to establish peacekeeping operations, impose sanctions and to authorize military action. The veto power even applies to appointment of the Secretary General. Clearly it is wrong and unfair that these powers are subject to a veto by these countries, but without the veto the UN would not exist. And so throughout its 70 years the UN has had to be guided by its ideals but live with the compromises that the reality of the global order imposes. Reform of the composition of the Security Council and the veto is obviously a priority but cannot be carried through until there is international pressure and consensus that it must be done.

But we must never forget that the idea that underpinned the creation of the UN remain moving and inspiring and that its predecessor the League of Nations collapsed soon after its formation. The UN has stood up for fine values, delivered food and assistance to people in trouble across the globe, organised peacekeeping and peacemaking on large numbers of occasions and continued to exist and to bring all the countries of the world together to try to hold the world to its founding values, despite the difficulties with which it has to grapple. I hope you will forgive me if I quickly read to you the Preamble and the Purposes and Principles laid down in the charter.

The Preamble to the treaty reads as follows:

We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

And for these ends

to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors, and to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

Have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims

This was 70 years ago. The world was trying to recover from a terrible war, there were masses of refugees and colonial empires still straddled the world, but these values were drawn up and entrenched as central international norms. They are inspiring values and I fear that in the present world it is highly unlikely that such principles would be agreed to if they were not already in existence.

Although the Preamble is an integral part of the UN Charter, it does not set out any of the rights or obligations of member states; its purpose is to serve as a guide for the provisions of the Charter through the highlighting of some of the core motives of the founders of the organisation.

Chapter I: lays down the Purposes And Principles]

The Purposes of the United Nations are

To maintain international peace and security, to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace, and to bring about by peaceful means, and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations which might lead to a breach of the peace;

To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;

To achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion; ( apparently Roosevelt had to pressurise Stalin to accept religion!) and

To be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations in the attainment of these common ends.

And then Article 2 provides that

All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.

All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.

All Members shall give the United Nations every assistance in any action it takes in accordance with the present Charter, and shall refrain from giving assistance to any state against which the United Nations is taking preventive or enforcement action.

These are Profound and inspiring principles but they have not of course always been realised. The emergence of the iron curtain and the cold war immediately after 1945 was a great challenge. Wikipedia lists 150 wars that took place between 1945 and 1989. But some of these were small civil wars. An estimated 51 million people have been killed in wars between 1945 and 2000. Almost a third of these deaths were amongst the population of China. Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan suffered the highest number of war deaths during this period. Thus the UN has almost certainly restrained the prospects of war in many instances and has helped to bring wars and civil conflicts to an end but it has not lived up to the aspiration to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war. And of course there is still great injustice, abuse of human rights, poverty and suffering in the world. It would therefore be easy to claim that the UN has failed in its 70 years as those who are opposed to the values entrenched in the UN system are inclined to do. Chris McGreal, The Guardian's New York correspondent listed the familiar criticisms in his article of seventh of September. He said United Nations has been dismissed as a shameful den of dictatorships. It has infuriated with its numbing bureaucracy, its institutional cover-ups of corruption and the undemocratic politics of its Security Council... He went on to say that tensions between western governments, which see the UN as bloated and inefficient and developing countries, which regard it is undemocratic and dominated by the rich have rippled across the organisation, particularly I would say since the end of the Cold War.

Criticisms are often made of its finances. Taking inflation into account, annual UN expenditure is 40 times higher than it was in the early 1950s but it seems to me that this is hardly surprising as the membership has increased from 50 countries to 193. Its regular budget, which pays the costs of the administration of the UN include enormous daily allowances which result in many of its staff being extremely well-paid and has more than doubled over the past two decades to \$5.4 billion. Peacekeeping costs another \$9 billion dollars a year with 120,000 peacekeepers deployed mostly in Africa which I think is cheap at the price. But even with this fourfold increase in costs over the

last 20 years, total UN spending this year is still only about half of the New York City where it is headquartered which is \$75 billion budget. Clearly this is not an outrageously large budget.

There has been considerable reform since the UN was established. The UN consists of the Security Council, the General Assembly of all the member countries and the Secretariat, It also has more than 30 funds and programmes each with their own structures and budgets. These include UN Women established in 2011, the UN High Commission for Refugees established in 1949, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights established in 1993, The UN Environment Programme established in 1972, The UN Population Fund, charged with ensuring that all people have the ability to control their fertility founded in 1969 and the World Food Programme which provides food assistance to an average of 80 million people in 75 countries every year.

A big effort was made when Kofi Annan became secretary general in 1997 under the pressure of a US threat to leave the UN and failure to pay its dues, which brought the organisation to the edge of bankruptcy, when reforms of financial systems and staffing arrangements were put in place. In addition in recent years the UN has led the world in mobilising against HIV/Aids, established the International Criminal Court in 1998, got the world to agree to work together systematically to reduce poverty in drawing up the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 and established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to establish scientific agreement on the dangers in 1988 and established the system of conferences to try to agree the reduction of carbon dioxide and other dangerous emissions. We should remember that it was with the help of the UN that colonialism was dismantled, apartheid ended, the Cold War came to an end without Mutually Assured Destruction and violence poverty and disease have been systematically reduced. It is not a perfect organisation but it is a noble one and has great achievements to its credit. It could do more if the people and countries of the world would give it appropriate authority. Whatever its deficiencies the world would be in a much worse state without it.

Here are some of the success stories listed in an article in the Financial Times by Simon Kuper in March 2012

- Life expectancy is surging, especially in “less developed regions”. In the period 1950-1955, the average person’s life expectancy at birth was 46.6 years. From 2005 through 2010, it was 67.6 years.
- Extreme poverty is falling worldwide. When the UN in 2000 set a “Millennial Development Goal” of halving the percentage of humans living in extreme poverty by 2015, many people thought it was pie in the sky. Yet the World Bank estimated in February 2012 that despite recession, the world hit that target five years early. And things have continued to improve. Almost unnoticed, the world also reached its millennial development goal of halving the number of people without access to clean water five years ahead of target.
- The demand for democracy keeps rising worldwide, and despite stumbles, the number of democracies has risen fairly steadily since 1990.
- the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker showed in *The Better Angels of our Nature*, violence has been declining for centuries. Pinker says annual deaths in battle dropped by over 90 per cent from the late 1940s through the early 2000s. “Zero,” writes Pinker, “is the number of times that any country has conquered even parts of some other country since 1975.” The end of conquest is a virtually ignored milestone in history.
- Fertility rates are plunging almost everywhere – in Iran for instance, from seven children per woman in 1984 to 1.87 today. That brings great benefits the planet and poor women.

Simon Kuper concludes “All in all, life has ceased to be quite so poor, nasty, brutish and short. Oddly, though, you wouldn’t know it from watching TV news..... News nowadays is mostly devoted to recounting disasters. It didn’t use to be. The Ukrainian famine, the Bengal famine, the Holocaust, and China’s terrible “Great Leap Forward” happened almost unreported. Today, disasters are news partly because of improved technology and more democracy, partly because disasters make great TV – “if it bleeds, it leads” – and partly because media instinctively focus on bad news. Obviously, this focus increases the payoff from terrorism. It also misses humanity’s upward trend.”

So that is the picture as the UN reaches 70 years of age. The mandate is inspiring but compromised by the veto but nonetheless there has been enormous progress since 50 countries agreed to the Charter in 1945. There are now 193 countries in membership the growth being largely a consequence of decolonisation and there has been enormous progress in human development.

I turn now to the prospects for peace. The most worrying situation is the Middle East. The suffering of the Palestinian people continues and has lasted as long as the UN has been in existence and the oppression and suffering continues to intensify. Israel is in continuing breach of international law and the US veto and European failure to stand up for international law means that the UN can do little or nothing. UNRWA the specialist agency for Palestinian refugees continues to provide some relief to growing numbers of displaced Palestinians but no solution is in sight. The one cause for optimism is the growing support for the Boycott Divestments and Sanctions movement across the world with its' really important parallel with the BDS movement that helped bring an end to apartheid in South Africa.

The hope and inspiration of the Arab Spring, the rising that began in December 2010 in Tunisia and spread across the Arab world in a peaceful uprising for freedom and dignity has been crushed in all but Tunisia. Terrible conflicts are continuing in Syria, in Yemen and Iraq and there are few grounds for hope except perhaps that since the Syrian refugee crisis reached Europe there seems to be more interest in looking for an end to the war in Syria.

The agreement between Iran and the permanent five members of the Security Council plus Germany is however an important step forward and may perhaps lead to cooperation with Iran to help combat the spread of the ideology of Isis. This ugly movement seems to me to be built on the despair, humiliation and suffering of the Arab world and the intolerant and distorted Wahhabi



version of Islam that spread across the Muslim world through Saudi money. There is no military solution to this problem. Military containment is necessary but justice is the only way to root it out.

There are also worries in the South China Sea and growing tension between China and its neighbours with the US pivot to Asia a part of the picture. There is increasing tension between China and Japan as both countries have become more nationalistic and the Japanese government is changing its constitution to remove the restrictions on military action imposed at the end of the Second World War.

Spending on arms is at an all-time high. It was president Eisenhower a former Second World War general and Republican President who warned in his retirement speech that we should "Beware the military industrial complex". It seems to me that this is now a major driving force. There is no doubt that the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001 was a terrible crime but the response that led to an increase in US military spending beyond that at the height of the Cold War in order to counter and aggressive ideology led by a man hiding in a cave in Afghanistan was completely irrational.

And on top of this the expansion of NATO to the borders of Russia and an invitations to Ukraine to join NATO And the EU has lead to a resurgence of a Cold War style conflict with Russia. If there is to be a peace settlement in Syria, there has to be negotiation with Russia. It is noticeable and maybe hopeful that there has been contact between John Kerry and his Russian counterpart in recent weeks.

This is all deeply disappointing and a reflection of the US unipolar moment that has led it to ignore the UN charter, with of course continuing poodle style support from the UK. But perhaps there is a chance that they will be a movement back to multilateralism as the US has found with all its wealth and military might, it cannot contain the irregular forces resisting its domination in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and northern Nigeria.

The future is uncertain. There are enormous dangers. But it is not hopeless . There is a high risk of intensifying climate change with all the suffering and displacement that will entail and continuing conflict in the Middle East for decades to come. Alongside that we could see more tension between the West and China and Russia. Or alternatively there will be a surge across the world that strengthens the understanding that the only way to make the world safe and secure for the future is to uphold the principles of the UN charter and develop the world economy more evenly so that all can enjoy dignity and justice.

The countries of the world are about to meet in Paris under UN leadership to try to agree progress in combating climate change. And we are on the brink of agreement to the Sustainable Development Goals ,which will take over from the Millennium Development Goals and contain a commitment to eliminate extreme poverty from the world. Enormous progress is possible; We have the capital, knowledge and technology that could bring peace and justice to the world. The alternative is mounting catastrophe. Which course we take will depend on you and people like you across the world who understand that a more just world is the only safe future and are inspired by the values and track record of progress achieved through the United Nations. And for those of us that live in the UK there is a special duty to persuade our governments to give up the role of US poodle and instead work with other countries to achieve a sustainable world of peace and justice.

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