

Has Broad-Based Multilateralism Lost Its Place in International Relations?

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After the momentous events of 1989 and 2001, the international system has entered a phase of major transformation.

Although this is less pronounced in East Asia – where the rise of China will be the dominant issue during the coming decades – than elsewhere, I think it is fair to talk about us gradually entering into a post-Westphalian world.

It is the Westphalian settlements after the Thirty Years War in 1648 that is often seen as having originated the modern state-based international system.

It was based on two major pillars.

The first was that the evolution of technology and finance had lead to the situation that it required states to organize and finance the destructive mechanisms necessary in order to threaten other states. Thus, only functioning states could make war, and thus only functioning states could make peace. The international order was an order of orderly states.

The second was that the internal order of any state was a question only for that state or its ruler. This conclusion came after more than a century of strife in Europe in which everyone had intervened everywhere in order to protect those of the same beliefs as yourself. The convulsions of Christianity had come very close to destroying Europe, and now the principle of more or less absolute state sovereignty was proclaimed in order to calm things down.

Although never absolute, these two principles have remained the foundation of the international system ever since. Both the major efforts of the last century to build a truly international order – the League of Nations and the United Nations – were based on them.

But today, they have both crumbled.

While the principle of state sovereignty was previously seen as sacrosanct, the combination of the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, and the non-intervention by the international community in Rwanda in 1995 has led to an intense discussion on the right or duty to intervene in sovereign states in order to prevent massive violations of human rights.

And in contrast to the previous unchallenged dominance of the state in the international system, the September 2001 attacks against the United States illustrated the threat that the marriage between modern technologies and ancient hatreds can present even the most powerful state with. Small bands of dedicated individuals can now have the power to threaten the fundamental interest of the most powerful of states – and that even absent the possibility of such groups acquiring the technologies of mass destruction.

This, in its turn, has led to a debate on the right to intervene in order to pre-empt threat of this sort from developing. The publication of the US National Security Strategy a year after the devastating attack ignited a major international debate on the issue and the intervention in Iraq in 2003 has intensified that debate even further.

Thus, there are fundamental reasons why there is disorder in the international system. To a large extent the pillars of the old order have broken down, and we have yet to see clearly what kind of new or renewed order can emerge to replace it.

There are fundamental differences between how these issues are approached in different parts of the world, notably between the United States and Europe. Within Europe, I might note, differences are smaller than they are sometimes made out to be.

The old transatlantic alliance of the era between 1948 and 1989 is gone and will not come back. Its true father was Joseph Stalin. We were united by a common threat in the present, and there were also elements of a common vision for the future.

Since then, we have seen the dominating agendas on the different sides of the Atlantic diverging profoundly.

To simplify things - Europe sees itself as at peace, while the United States sees itself as at war.

While the 1989 agenda that will continue to dominate Europe for at the least another decade or so is about building peace by the sharing of sovereignty on a regional basis, the 2001 agenda that I believe will continue to dominate the US agenda at the least until 2008 is about winning war by exercising what the United States consider its sovereign rights on a global scale.

To an outside observer, the United States today is a curious combination of supreme confidence in its capabilities – primarily military – and extreme awareness of its vulnerabilities. It seems to be as self-confident as it seems to be afraid.

It's a combination that very easily risks driving policies in a direction that is not necessarily constructive.

The United States today spends roughly as much on defence as the rest of the world taken together. It invests massively in destructive powers that can reach anywhere on the globe at any time.

But while the United States is thus a superpower par excellence in relation to all other powers, it is distinctly not a superpower in relation to the problems it and the world is facing. It might have supremacy in outer space, but it can't assure the security of the short road between Baghdad airport and the heavily fortified Green Zone.

Today's active US Army has 33 combat brigades. This is a fairly small force. It's a smaller number of combat brigades than in the German Army a decade ago and the Swedish Army two decades ago.

Over half of these brigades are today on combat duty in Iraq or Afghanistan. Everyone with any experience of these issues knows that this is totally unsustainable. Even if one adds the Marine Corps as well as selected National Guard units the picture remains essentially the same.

The theoretical alternatives for the future are clear – either the United States undertakes a massive expansion of its ground forces, suitable for long-duration stability and occupation operations, or it tries to build global coalitions where responsibility for policy formulation as well as policy implementation is shared.

The alternative that is not there is just to march back home and turn the back towards the world. Even the combination of two vast oceans and the Department of Homeland Security will not be able to protect the citizens of the United States in such a scenario – absent from the fact that the United States is a nation with its citizens, its assets and its interests spread all over the globe.

There was a time when we could turn our back towards far-away countries of which we knew little. In this time of both globalisation and the marriage of modern technologies and ancient hatreds that option is simply no longer there.

The task we are confronted with is state building in large and perhaps expanding areas of instability.

Of crucial importance are the interlinked twin state building efforts in the former Fertile Crescent – the liberation of Iraq from its past and Palestine from its present.

From a European perspective, the entire post-Ottoman area from Bihac in Bosnia in the northwest to Basra by the Gulf in the southeast - with its often-weak state structures and numerous conflicts - is our “near abroad”, the future of which will impact directly upon our societies.

And Zbigniew Brzezinski has recently written about what he calls the Grand Balkans – from the Indus to the Nile.

Throughout this area we face the challenge of fragile, failing or failed states and the necessity to reform, assist and build.

But the areas that we need to be concerned with are not limited to this Greater Balkans. Increasingly, we are forced to intervene and help in different parts of Africa. There is a belt of possible genocide that stretches from the Great Lakes region along the southern edge of the Sahara and throughout most of West Africa.

Ivory Coast – to mention just one country where the risks are obvious – is two-thirds the size of Iraq, and has roughly the same population with no less than 40 000 citizens of the European Union.

The burdens that this puts on us are great. The Security Council has already decided on more than a doubling of peacekeeping operations during this year. On top of this, we now see rapidly increasing needs in Africa’s two largest countries – Sudan and Congo. Just a few days ago, Kofi Annan called for a doubling of the peacekeeping presence in Congo.

In the pre-2001 world we could conceivably – if we had the conscience – have turned our backs to these issues. In the post-2001 world, we simply can't. We can't ignore the problems, because over time they will not ignore us.

There is thus no realistic alternative towards the building of global coalitions to try to handle all these challenges. For all the occasional rhetoric, the United States is neither willing nor able to take responsible for them all. Were it to try, it would soon be overwhelmed by their magnitude and – I fear - ultimately fail.

I'm moderately optimistic that a Bush 2 or a Kerry 1 administration – out of necessity or out of conviction – will start to move in this direction. But I'm pessimistic on whether there will enough of an international response in time to make much of a difference. Agendas have diverged, thrust has been declining and resources for sustained engagement in distant areas are even more lacking in other countries than they are in the United States.

Looking at the coming year, there are both opportunities for improvement and risks for further deterioration in the situation.

The opportunity for improvement might come with the report of the High-Level Panel to contemplate changes in the international system set up by Kofi Annan and due to report after November 4th.

It will – in a rather realistic way – address key issues like reform of the Security Council, the legality of humanitarian interventions, the practicability of augmented state building efforts, the necessity of new approaches to counter the proliferation of technologies of mass destruction, the urgency of further improving counter-terrorist cooperation and the imperative of trying to facilitate a process of globalisation that is seen to be fair and full of promise for everyone.

The report might – in combination with the five-year review of the so-called Millennium goals – lead to a summit of heads of state and government to reshape part of the international system to start to make it more responsive to the new needs of the post-Westphalian era.

The risks for a further deterioration are nearly all linked to developments in the Greater Middle East.

On top of the list I would put how to handle the issue of Iran's obvious attempt to accelerate its efforts to be able to, if it so decides, acquire nuclear weapons on short notice.

While Europeans have been favouring a policy of engaging with Teheran, with less than total success, the US has been adopting a policy of isolating Teheran, with even lesser success. Behind it all lurks the risk of Israel at some point in time attempting to undertake unilateral military operations against nuclear installations in Persia.

If worst comes to worst, this might cause dangerous new strains across the Atlantic, dramatically increase the risk of open war in the Middle East and wreck virtually any possibility of achieving stability in Iraq. There is an acute need of statesmanship on the issue, and there is no realistic alternative to Americans and Europeans working together within a wider multilateral framework that the one way or the other engages also Iran.

There are no easy or fast solutions to the challenges the international system is now confronted with. I believe it will take a considerable time until we see the changes in different political systems – primarily in the United States and Europe, since this is the pre-eminent potential axis of good on the globe – that will make it possible to start to shape the international system in accordance with the new realities.

When this happens, it will have to be a system that is truly inclusive. A rules-based international order has to be based on rules that are seen as legitimate by everyone concerned, and for this to happen the will have to be shaped through an inclusive global process. Of particular importance will be to engage the emerging powers of Asia – China and India.

At stake is not the least the future of the process of globalisation and development of the global economy. Let's remember that globalisation is a rule-based international

order shaped not by God but by man. But in the same way it can be shaped by man, man can destroy it.

All previous processes of globalisation have at some point in time collapsed with devastating consequences sometimes spanning centuries.

To prevent this from happening, and paving the way for future generations to be able to share the benefits of globalisation, is what it is all about. The stakes are truly high.