

## EDITORIAL

### *US UN AND Us*

At the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648, the powers of Europe created, through the Treaty of Westphalia, an institutional structure that sometimes is regarded as the formal start of the modern state system. At the close of the Napoleonic Wars, the powers of Europe created, through the Congress system, an institutional structure that governed the affairs of Europe for the next 50-100 years. In 1919, at the conclusion of World War I, the victorious powers created an international organization, the League of Nations, which they hoped would usher in a new era in international politics. After World War II, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development were created to give institutional expression and underpinnings to a new period.

In all of these instances, the leading powers of the day led in shaping the process and the content of the new order. Yet there were also benefits to weaker states. Indeed, the father of modern Realism, Hans Morgenthau, argued that it was in the interests of great states to pay attention to the legitimate interests of others. In fact, Morgenthau opposed the pursuit of one's interests without attention to this need for legitimacy, and condemned – as blasphemous, in fact – an identification of one's interests and objectives with those of a higher power.

Many hopes for the UN were quickly confounded by the onset of the Cold War, yet the organization survived, and played a constructive role in the management of crises, and in the changing nature of the international order. In this, it has shown itself both able to change yet also remarkably resistant to change. The universalization of membership in the United Nations has altered the issues it deals with, and the approaches it takes, to the point where, in recent decades, the US has often been opposed to it. These attitudes, unfortunately, have entered into the soul of the American Republican Party and their equivalent on the internationalist left. At the same time, the composition of the Security Council, based essentially on the distribution of power at the close of World War II, has only marginally been modified (through the 1965 expansion), and is consequently increasingly out of touch with the prevailing, much less the emerging distribution of power. Note that we speak here of "power:" we do not share the fond illusion that the United Nations is a world government or should be a "democratic" one, much less that the Security Council should be reformed along "democratic" lines.

Since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, large-scale, much less coherent and sweeping, changes in the world's political-institutional structure have not occurred. Nor has US leadership in this matter been visible. In the 1990s, true, there was some talk of a "New World Order" (a phrase damaged by unfortunate connotations), but this vanished with the Bush Senior Administration and the development of a particularly vicious phase of US partisan politics. Under the current Bush Administration, the question of US intentions and strategy for a world institutional structure become more pressing, yet also more opaque and more unsettling.

Everyone knows – or ought to know – that the UN is a flawed institution. Everyone should know that the blame falls largely on the sovereign states that compose its membership. The Volcker Report shows how bad the consequences of this can get – but the underlying causes are no mystery. It does not just condemn UN bureaucrats or the UN system. The Volcker Report also calculates that \$10 billion of the \$12 billion it found in corruption, mishandling and sanctions-busting with respect to Iraq was not attributable to the Oil-for-Food program, but to illegal oil exports outside the purview of that program – but within the power of the individual members of the Security Council.

Efforts to reform the United Nations are now being made with a renewed sense of urgency, but not of hope. What is lacking is a strong sense of American leadership in this matter: not only that the United States is committed to the success and reform of the United Nations, but also that it has a vision for such reform which will also appeal to the broad range of the organization's membership, to their enlightened self-interest as well as to American interests.

Commentators in the Republican Party or the internationalist left often argue that the world faces a choice between the US and the UN. In fact, the best choice is for the US and the UN. It is a maxim of Realist foreign policy that the strong make the rules, but equally that the ability to enforce rules at acceptable cost depends significantly on the degree to which other states see that these meet their interests and so accept the rules as legitimate. Even the sole surviving superpower needs the willing agreement of others, based on their perception that their legitimate interests are also served. Ad hoc “coalitions of the willing” are no substitute for a stable institutional structure that can attract and hold the willing support of the “weightier part” of the international community. Even a dominant power – especially a dominant power – must bear this in mind if it wishes to create a system that will extend beyond its “unipolar moment.”

These other states, in turn, must recognize how much they also gain from a settled, capable world political-institutional structure, and need to temper their pursuit of individual interests. Reckless and short-sighted pursuit of self-interest leads to disaster even faster for weak states than strong ones. Yet this has also been a characteristic of state behaviour in the UN. As a weak state, Canada has an interest in a viable, multilateral institutional structure which is rules-based yet effective. An ideological approach to these issues is politically-naïve and likely to lead to costly failure. It also may steer perilously close to the blasphemy of which Morgenthau speaks. The US is not god, but neither is the UN.