Recurring Themes / Thèmes récurrents

UN High Level Panel Report on Threats and Institutional Reforms

Le rapport des Nations Unies du Groupe de personnalités de haut niveau sur les menaces, les défis et les changements

A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility

Report of the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change

LORD HANNAY OF CHISWICK *

Now that the UN Secretary-General has sent forward to the whole UN membership the report of his high-level panel on Threats, Challenges and Change together with his own preliminary thoughts on it; and now that the report itself is fairly and squarely in the public domain, it is a good moment to launch a wide-ranging public discussion of the report, and in particular of its recommendations. For all the setbacks it has faced in recent years, the UN remains indispensable to the international community which it serves. Support for the UN is, however, broad but shallow; expectations of it are often excessive, as is the subsequent criticism when it fails to meet these expectations. If support is to become both deeper and better informed about the realities of international life, it is essential that national politicians and the institutions of civil society are drawn into this public discussion.

I will not provide a synopsis of the report, which is the outcome of a year's hard work – six three-day sessions of the Panel itself, a large number of regional and other seminars and symposia designed to reach out to national politicians,

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academics, journalists, commentators on international relations, a mass of written submissions which were sent in to us, and briefings from experts in the fields we were studying – firstly because the report has its own synopsis and, secondly, because in any case I would urge that it be read in full and at leisure. It is densely argued and its recommendations are far-reaching – indeed I would venture to suggest that it is the single most far-reaching official review of the UN’s role, in particular in the fields of peace and security, since the founding fathers met in San Francisco in 1945 and signed the UN Charter. It takes an overall approach to this enormously complex subject which needs to be looked at in the round, even if the individual recommendations need to be followed up on a number of different tracks. So I will focus on a number of the underlying themes which came to dominate our work and to shape our conclusions; and on some thoughts about the follow-up.

The first thought I would like to emphasise is that the Panel, composed as it was of sixteen individuals drawn from every region of the world, has submitted a report which represents the views of all of us. Of course there were differences of analysis and perspective amongst us – there still are, no doubt – but we were able to reach a broad measure of agreement on what needed to be done if the UN was to become more effective and more able to respond to the demands for peace and security which reach it from so many different quarters. And we firmly agreed with the Secretary-General that it is the touchstones of effectiveness and equity that need to be applied to every aspect of the reform agenda. It was that view that led us to ensure that our approach was a policy-driven one, and not one dominated by institutional tinkering; one that started from an examination of the policies needed to enable the UN to respond to the threats and challenges of the twenty-first century and which then moved on to look at the changes both in policies and institutions needed to deliver the objectives set out so eloquently in the UN Charter and as valid today as they were in 1945.

We began, naturally, with the threats the world faces. Clearly these have changed quite fundamentally since the end of that long Cold War period when the world lived on the brink of annihilation from a clash between two nuclear-armed super-powers and when many regional wars fought by the proxies of these two super-powers were simply off-limits to the UN. One of the chief weaknesses of the UN over the last fifteen years has been the failure to think through carefully and systematically the implications of that seismic shift – a failing more attributable to the membership than to the UN Secretary-Generals and their staff – after all it was Boutros-Ghali who provided a basis for such a re-think in his 1992 paper called “an Agenda for Peace” but the member states were too busy or too distracted to pay much attention to it. We have attempted to remedy that failure, or rather to enable it to be remedied, if the member states can this time overcome their chronic attention deficit.