Regional security organizations in times of transition: An interview with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer on the effects of the global shift of power in the world today

Rick van Hemert & Harm Hazewinkel

Jaap de Hoop Scheffer served as Foreign Minister of the Netherlands, was Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2003, and served as the 11th Secretary General of NATO from January 5, 2004 until August 1, 2009. On September 1, 2009 Jaap de Hoop Scheffer became the first holder of the Kooijmans Chair for Peace, Justice and Security at Campus The Hague, which is part of Leiden University. This part-time position has a maximum duration of three years. He will not only focus on issues in the areas of peace, justice, and security but will also lecture in the field of international politics and the practice of diplomacy. Despite his serene reputation, he is also known for speaking his mind when he needs to. In this interview, de Hoop Scheffer, who describes himself primarily as a ‘Professor of the Practice’, speaks openly about his vision of the future role of regional security organizations. He also comments on the future of human rights, the OSCE and the effects of globalization on world politics and current developments in the Middle East.

You were the OSCE Chairman-in-Office in 2003 and Secretary General of NATO from 2004 to 2009. The NATO and OSCE are considered among the most important security organizations today. Both organizations operate in a rapidly changing world. The world is not the same as it was in 2004 and changes seem to affect both security and human rights issues. How can security organizations contribute to security today?

Since 2004 ‘power panels’ are shifting. This encouraged me to emphasize the role of the G20 in my inaugural lecture last year as it affects security organizations. I think that regional security organizations will maintain their position in international

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relations in the future. NATO, for example, will remain the world’s most important security organization. Nevertheless, the new Strategic Concept, which was adopted in Lisbon in 2010, is of vital importance for NATO’s future. The new Strategic Concept places security in a wider global perspective as an essential part of today’s global power shift. In addition, I foresee the founding of new regional security organizations, although this will happen over an extended period of time.

We are heading towards a world in which spheres of influence and power relations are diffuse and have to crystallize. Historians will probably come to define this period as transitional. For the foreseeable future the United States will remain the most important military power in the world. Economically, however, the United States will have to compete with China, for example, which has recently surpassed Japan and has become the world’s second largest economy after the United States. Upcoming economic powers, the so-called ‘new kids on the block’, want to have a say in organizations like the G20. The G20 is the only platform in which these economically upcoming countries join conventional powers to discuss on equal terms.

Despite these changes, you do foresee a future for regional security organizations?

During my mandate as Secretary General of NATO, we had a discussion leading up to the new Strategic Concept. We asked ourselves whether or not NATO should control and regulate world affairs. Was it the role of NATO to act as the world’s policeman? Recent cases show that there is no clear answer. For example, not all members of NATO fully agree with the current operation in Libya. I think that they had a responsibility to react, given the direct threat to the people of Benghazi. Let us not forget that Libya is in Europe’s backyard. The situation in Afghanistan, however, is completely different. It is clear that NATO cannot bear all the burdens and that the mandate and power of NATO is not unlimited. Because of these restrictions it might be useful to think about new regional security structures, also in Asia. APEC and ASEAN fulfil the role of regional organizations and partnerships, but neither qualifies as a security organization.

Within the OSCE, human rights are seen as an integral part of security policy. From a historical perspective, politico-military interests and human rights interests seem to contradict each other. China’s perspective on human rights is, for example, completely different from the Western view. What will be the influence of the global shift of power on the promotion of human rights?

This is one of the key topics today. Human rights are definitely influenced by the current global shift of power. It reminds me of discussions I had with President Karzai of Afghanistan during my time as NATO Secretary General. The universality of human rights was an important topic and we did not always agree on the definition of the notion of universality. That is a debate with cultural and religious undertones and, as a consequence, is not without complications.