



Talk and discussion

The UN in the new world order

Full text of address given by former UN Under-Secretary-General Sir John Holmes to members and supporters of UN Association Chichester District on 29 June 2017 at County Hall, Chichester

"Ladies and gentlemen, my main focus today will be on current trends in the world which have left multilateralism in general, and the UN in particular, facing an uphill struggle. I will also be talking about the UN as a whole, and what role the new Secretary-General might play, in this context. And I will be trying not to depress you too much in the process, or at least to leave you with a hint of optimism for the future at the end.



Let me start off by declaring my view of the UN, not from an academic or diplomatic point of view, but as a former employee. I am not a starry-eyed idealist who thinks that all our problems would be solved if we would only entrust ourselves more to multilateralism and the will of the General Assembly. But neither am I one of those armchair critics of the UN, who think New York and Geneva are all hot air, and that the institution has failed us. I appreciated, even enjoyed, my time working there, in so far as you can enjoy working on disasters. I certainly met there many dedicated and talented international civil servants whose sole motive was to improve the world and the lot of its people.

My underlying view is that we are getting the UN which we as an international community currently deserve. The world needs an institution with a universal membership, where every country has the right to be heard, where all issues can be and should be discussed, where countries can meet and talk, and where crucial norms and standards about international

behaviour can be enshrined, once they are agreed. We need a body like the Security Council where vital decisions about war and peace can be debated, and measures like sanctions and the deployment of peacekeeping forces agreed. We need UN specialised agencies with the mandates and legitimacy to help with the vital aims of development, humanitarian assistance, health, improvement of the environment and so on. The incredible work these agencies do on the ground is too often forgotten.

This is the institution we already have.

Naturally we have to acknowledge that it works very imperfectly, most of all in present circumstances precisely on the big subjects of war and peace. But the problem is that there is then a constant temptation, which neither the man or woman in the pub nor the media columnist in search of easy targets is at all inclined to resist, to blame the UN itself as an institution for all the failures to fix the world's problems.

Of course the UN's own staff and organisations have to share some of the blame. There are many weaknesses, and plenty of not very productive activity in some places. The hot air quotient is often high.

But the responsibility for the major shortcomings should be placed squarely where it belongs, with the member states themselves. If the UN has been ineffective for years in dealing with the Palestinian issue, and is doing nothing much about Syria now, it is because the big powers don't agree about what should be done, and how. If there is lack of necessary international agreement on some key and pressing issues, it's because not enough member states want this to happen. If the UN Secretary-General is often described as more secretary than general, that is because that is precisely how the big powers want him to be. If SG is so often taken to stand for Scape Goat, not Secretary General, that is because this is the way the member states too often treat him.

The bottom line is that, for all its faults, we desperately need the UN and we need it to work as well as it can. If we abolished it in its present form, as some people have from time to time suggested, we would have to reinvent it immediately and would almost certainly finish up with something very similar.

There are urgently needed reforms, not least of the Security Council, to make it more representative of the world as it is now, not the world of 1945. The longer this is delayed, the greater the risk of the UN being seen as out of touch and irrelevant. But, again, if the reform is delayed, the reason is not through any lack of will in New York, from the Secretary General or the Secretariat, but because the member states themselves cannot agree on how it should be reformed, and would rather see no progress than watch a rival country take a spot they would like themselves.

The other sad truth is that we are going through a crisis of global governance and of faith in multilateral institutions at a time when we need them more, arguably, than we have ever done.

We face a raft of quintessentially international problems which know no borders, and which no government can hope to solve on its own: for example the problems of cyber security

which we struggle to understand, let alone control; the existential issue of global climate change, which we have mostly decided to pretend is not happening; and the unpleasant and terrifying reality of nuclear proliferation which we do not know how to stop.

Meanwhile on the economic front, the World Trade Organisation also faces a major crisis, as the reluctance to contemplate new multilateral trade agreements has been compounded by the sabotage of so-called plurilateral agreements like the Trans Pacific Partnership or the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and as protectionism has been gradually creeping back onto the global scene.

I do not suggest that the UN can magically fix all these problems. There are no simple solutions for any of them. The best we can mostly do is to manage them better, not worse. In any case, we have to recognise that there is a fundamental difficulty in using a mechanism where all 194 countries have to agree for some major steps to be possible. Other mechanisms will often have to be used. But the solutions have to be negotiated somewhere, and in the end the steps forward we take have to be given multilateral approval, best of all at the UN, even if they are negotiated elsewhere.

The big problem now is that they are not being negotiated elsewhere, or even discussed elsewhere, because there isn't an elsewhere. The G20 could be that place, and has the sort of global representativeness which the old G8 could never have. But apart from a short spell in 2008/9 when the financial crisis looked like leading to global meltdown, and the G20 was the vehicle used to agree the desperate measures which prevented this, the G20 has been a talking shop which none of the big powers seems to want to use to decide anything or solve any real problems.

Does this matter?

In many areas we can no doubt muddle through, and decide on things when we absolutely have to. There are many smaller groups – public, private, and mixed – who are getting on with actions which will ultimately be helpful for us all. Regional organisations like the African Union and ASEAN can help. It's sometimes called minilateralism, or messylateralism. It's better than nothing. But is this muddling through and partial discussion likely to be enough for issues like climate change, cyber security, or nuclear proliferation? Will they resolve major conflicts in a lasting way? I doubt it. That is why multilateralism and the UN are arguably more vital than ever.

I have an even more fundamental worry too. **I fear that the assumptions which have underpinned mainstream international attitudes and policies since the second world war, which lay behind the creation of the UN, and which have served the world so well over so many years, are now under serious challenge;** I believe that this trend is dangerous for everyone, not just the west; and I am sure that we all need to redouble our efforts to take on this new trend and show that it has feet of clay. And I am also sure that the new UN Secretary-General has a crucial long-term role in this process of restoring our faith in these assumptions and attitudes, and therefore in multilateralism and the UN.

What were these basic assumptions which have served us so well over the last 60 years? I would single out seven:

- First and foremost a belief that every country's interests were best helped by an international political and economic order which set rules and had at least some ways to enforce them.
- Second a conviction that multilateral institutions like the United Nations were in the collective interest and were worth the political and financial support needed to keep them going, and that conflicts could be prevented or resolved and peace built by such institutions.
- Third, a determination that in the economic and trade field, protectionism would not be resorted to in future, as it had been in the 1930s, built on the widely-held perception that not only was such trade action not in the overall interest, but also that it hurt above all those who practised it.
- Fourth, a view from the richer countries that they had both an obligation and an enlightened self-interest to provide aid and assistance to poorer developing countries.
- Fifth, a growing attachment to standards of human rights and norms of national and individual behaviour, which were seen as universal in application and effect, and a corresponding weakening of the Westphalian national sovereignty view which had prevailed hitherto that, while international cooperation was worthwhile, what individual countries did behind their own borders was essentially their own affair.
- Sixth, an increasing willingness to be constrained by arms control and non-proliferation agreements, both nuclear and conventional, based on a belief that even if this left some countries more powerful than others, everyone would gain from not having to engage in expensive, dangerous and ultimately counterproductive arms races, and that soft power around culture and technology was in the end going to count for more than military strength.
- Seventh, a widening conviction that the biggest problems faced by most countries were not domestic but international, respecting no borders, and not susceptible to national solutions, no matter how strong or tough the national government involved. The most obvious example was environmental damage.

There was another fundamental element in all this, which was the existence of a country powerful enough to stand behind the rules-based order, intelligent enough to understand that this order was in its own interests even though it could often impose its will without it, and with a global reach and view able to penetrate all continents, to greater or lesser extents. This country was of course the United States. Frankly it is no longer playing this role today.

Many of you may be thinking that I am looking at the past through rose-tinted spectacles, and that you hardly recognise the picture I am painting of a golden age of multilateralism, compared with the dangerous cold war reality which many of us grew up with, and the many conflicts and crises we have been through in the past 60 years.

And you would certainly have a good argument to make. This was not a golden age from numerous points of view. Many, perhaps most, countries did not behave for much of the time in accordance with their principles, including some of the countries claiming to be the global leaders of the international rules-based system. Mistakes and misunderstandings were legion, as were injustices and aggressions. The vein of western hypocrisy was deep and wide. The Soviet Union never really believed in this kind of project, any more than Russia does now, and there were plenty of other countries which did not either. The multilateral institutions too often proved divided and ineffective. Might was too often right. Lip service was paid to human rights norms and institutions, but not real respect.

And yet, and yet...There was at least an ambition to create a better world through multilateral institutions, a belief that there were universal values and norms, respect for which would be in all our interests, and acceptance that globalisation and collective attempts to tackle global problems were worth the effort. And there were important successes:

- a major reduction in wars between states on all continents, with the partial exception of Africa;
- the spread and evident beneficial effect of freer trade and investment on an international level;
- the spread of democracy from a handful of countries to become the dominant form of government across all continents, even if the theory is frequently better than the practice;
- the creation and successful use of neutral peacekeeping forces to hold the ring in conflict situations;
- the lifting of the shadow of extreme poverty and deprivation from hundreds of millions of people in parts of the developing world;
- huge progress in spreading basic education, in particular for girls;
- massive strides towards eradicating some of the world's worst diseases;

We should count these blessings more often than we do, since otherwise we give the impression, readily reinforced by relentless media focus on bad news, crisis, disaster and conflict, that the world is in terrible shape, and all is going to hell in a handcart.

Nevertheless, we do seem to be sliding today into a view of the world which is more cynical and more consciously dominated by the realities of hard power and military might than anything we have experienced for a couple of generations. This can be seen for example in the celebration of so-called strong leadership dedicated to the defence of narrow national

interests in a number of important countries, with Russia and Turkey perhaps at the top of the list, but a number of others not far behind, including of course to some extent the United States of Donald Trump and the China of Xi Jinping. Plenty of examples are to be found in Africa and Asia too.

This kind of attitude often goes along with a disregard for genuine democracy, whatever the respect for its formalities, as a sign of weakness. It is echoed in the populism which has risen to the fore in many parts of Europe, and which has produced such odd bedfellows between President Putin and the far right in several countries – so-called strong leaders often seem to respect, even like, other strong leaders, until of course they come into conflict with each other.

It tends to be accompanied by a reliance on the unilateral threat or even use of force, internally and externally, on bilateral more than multilateral deal-making, and on an unwillingness to accept that compromise is not a dirty word and a sign of weakness, but rather the basis of benefits for all. This approach is not interested in how other governments and leaders behave towards their own people. National sovereignty is back in fashion, and a narrow view of national interests tends too often to prevail.

What drives this? There are a number of strands, in my view.

One is a disillusion with the apparent inability of democracy to get things done with speed and efficiency, and with its accompanying cacophony, criticism of incumbents and general messiness. Getting the trains to run on time still has a surprisingly strong appeal to many, especially in an increasingly complex world. China's political model does not usually have many admirers or imitators, but there are an increasing number of voices to be heard across Asia saying that at least stuff happens there on the economic and infrastructure front. President Putin has always benefited from the comparative chaos presided over by his predecessor, President Yeltsin. Such sentiments have of course been a staple diet for dictators over the centuries.

A second related strand is the accusation that the international rules were set by the west to suit themselves after the second world war, that they do not really represent universal values at all, and that there is therefore no reason why others should feel bound by these rules. China is an interesting case in this respect. The Chinese often make just this criticism, and do not feel that they are given enough respect in multilateral institutions. But at the same time these very rules and these same institutions have done a great deal to facilitate China's rise. An interesting variant is the view held currently by some in the US, that the very rules they have been upholding have led to their own weakening, because they have allowed others to rise, put decent Americans out of work, and undermined US ability to act in defence of its own interests. Hence the growing reluctance of the US to act as the ultimate guarantor and defender of the system of international order, and a belief that the US may be better off in a world where its power and strength simply have to be respected by others.

A third strand is the manifest failure to adapt the institutions of the cold war sufficiently to the new realities of today's international order. I have already mentioned the continuing blockage of all efforts to change the composition of the Security Council from its current 1945-shaped membership. The World Bank and IMF have been moving slowly to reform

themselves, but the pace is glacial. Many other bodies, in and out of the UN, seem stuck and unable to change in convincing ways. All this breeds cynicism among those countries excluded or held in positions of inferior status, and a temptation to look elsewhere for salvation.

A fourth strand is the view that globalisation, by which I mean broadly speaking the internationalisation of production and relative freedom for market forces to work internationally as well as nationally, has not produced positive results for most countries and most people and is in the end a con-trick by the west and/or world elites to line their own pockets. At national level, this leads to a rejection of free trade and investment agreements on the grounds that these are one-sided and unhelpful for the weaker economies. At individual level in western countries it drives the view that globalisation has produced only one-sided benefits for the already rich and their bankers, and cheap producers elsewhere, and has little or nothing to offer ordinary people.

It is of course this view which mixes so toxically with political perceptions about excessive immigration to produce rejection of the current political and financial classes, in this country and elsewhere in the west. Peoples' sense of fear and unease is reinforced by the current wave of extremist violence, and the difficulty even the strongest countries have in dealing with so-called asymmetrical conflict – which leads to a longing for simpler solutions and a rejection of careful and nuanced positions about trying to include all countries and individuals in a more harmonious whole.

I have little doubt myself that economic globalisation overall has been a major factor in the growth and prosperity which have been so important in lifting living standards in so many countries since the Second World War.

However, and it is a very significant however, there is also little doubt that globalisation, even if beneficial overall, also produces winners and losers, nationally and individually. Part of the problems we need to confront now come from failure to be sufficiently honest about these realities, including the downsides of immigration for the lived experience of many people, and consequent failure to address the consequences for the losers and those most directly affected. If workers are put out of their jobs by economic globalisation, or particular regions are affected, the answer should not just be a shrug, but on the contrary, the full panoply of active measures to help. Otherwise globalisation is going to take the blame alone, to all our detriments.

Am I exaggerating this new mood and new attitude of unconstrained and unashamed nationalism, and extrapolating too far from the examples of a few individuals and a few countries? I hope so, and I can think of reasons why I might be:

- The governments of many countries, not least in Europe, remain largely attached to multilateralism and to the search for collective solutions to current problems.
- The Paris accord on climate change was a valuable step forward, even if inadequate to the scale of the problems we face, and now rejected by President Trump.

- Despite dangerously assertive behaviour in the South and East China Seas, China is being in some ways drawn further into the international system, for example through its role in UN peacekeeping, and has almost by default become the defender of multilateralism, as embodied by the Paris Agreement.
- Populism in Europe, though powerful, and delivering an important message to European leaders, to which I am not at all sure they are listening, has not achieved the kind of electoral success many had predicted. The triumph of President Macron in France is a signal of renewed hope for many.
- Democracy has strong roots across the globe, and is the choice whenever people really have a chance to express a view – I have long been a strong believer in the Churchill dictum that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other forms of government so far devised.
- The current crop of destructive civil wars and conflicts in the Middle East will come to an end eventually, and Islamic State will prove a busted flush, though a continuing terrorist menace, which may give us all a chance to get back to better, more agreed ways of settling conflicts.
- President Trump's bark may prove much worse than his bite when it comes to protectionism and the multilateral system.

It is therefore perfectly possible that what we are seeing is more of a blip than a long-term trend, and that what one might call the liberal, democratic international consensus will reassert itself, despite its current disarray and discouragement. Yet I remain worried that the current trend is deep-seated as well as unhealthy. There is no god-given law which says that the ideas we have clung to for the last 60 years are bound to prevail. History has certainly not ended. There is no doubt that the proponents of false international nostrums have the wind in their sails.

So where does all this leave the new Secretary-General, António Guterres? Let me declare an interest. I have known him for a long time, since I was Ambassador in Lisbon at the time when he was Portuguese Prime Minister. I worked with him very closely when I was the UNUSG for humanitarian affairs and he was the head of UNHCR. I have always liked and respected him. He was clearly the best of the available candidates to be SG, even though many would have preferred a woman and it was really Eastern Europe's turn. He has the experience, the contacts, the political skills, the linguistic talent, and the instincts to be a great Secretary General. He won general support, even from the Russians, who were not obviously inclined to be well-disposed to a western candidate, and enjoys a lot of respect around the world. He starts with a lot of advantages, and a lot of hope riding on his appointment.

His problem is however, obviously, that he has won the role against the background I have been describing of the decline of respect for international institutions in general, and the UN in particular, and the fall from grace of multilateralism, and the rise of a new insistence on the importance of national sovereignty. He has taken office at a moment when there is a US President who does not believe in or respect the UN, and who may cut off much of its

funding at any moment, matched by a Russian President who believes only might is right. He is in charge in New York as the Middle East daily plumbs new depths of horror and dysfunction, and much of North Africa descends into famine and despair.

What can he do in such circumstances? What should he do?

The first point I would make is that we must not load him with too many expectations, and therefore set him up for failure before he starts. Any SG, no matter how clever and cunning, can only do so much on his own. He has to bring the member states with him, particularly the Permanent Five members of the Security Council, but also the many different groups of countries, geographical and otherwise, who make up the full UN membership. This means he has to pick his battles very carefully, and focus his efforts where he can really make a difference.

He cannot of course ignore any of the big international issues. He may have to take positions on them, or speak out about them from time to time. But he needs to be selective about where he applies his own efforts publicly or behind the scenes. This means that, for example, in the central area of peace and security, he cannot realistically aspire to bring peace where the warring parties are simply not ready for it, and in areas where the major powers are slugging it out and are just not going to allow the UN to play a major role until it suits them. Guterres cannot fix the ghastly conflict in Syria in present circumstances, and would be wasting his time to try, although the UN and its machinery, including peacekeeping forces, should be in reserve for when the moment comes. The same applies for now to Iraq.

But there are other conflict areas where the UN might be able to make a political difference, even where the problems seem equally intractable. I wonder for example whether the truly awful mess in Yemen might not benefit from an injection of more vigorous UN diplomacy. The same could be true of Libya, or even Afghanistan.

And the UN must of course continue to try to play a central role in places where the big powers are not really interested, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and the Central African Republic. These are all suffering dreadfully from past or present conflicts, as well as numerous other ills, and desperately need continuing international attention. The UN must go on giving it to them, including through peacekeeping efforts where appropriate.

Which is also an opportune moment to remind us all of the continuing importance and value of UN peacekeeping. Its record is a good deal better than much of the commentary you hear, for example in places like East Timor, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and certainly a lot better than the track record of non-UN military interventions, which have combined vastly expensive political and eventually military failure with truly disastrous efforts at nation-building. There are still 16 UN peacekeeping forces around the world, with more than 110,000 troops and police in them. I hope incidentally that the UK will be more active in this area in future.

Away from the conflict area, I hope the new Secretary-General will again try to pick his areas of concentration carefully. He can do little or nothing himself about economic or financial issues for example, and serious rules about cyber warfare and cyber espionage are probably beyond anyone for now.

But he can maintain the UN focus on the major cross-cutting challenges of the environment, and particularly **climate change**. No-one else can play such a key convening and cajoling role.

He can make sure that the humanitarian effort of the UN is effective and well-coordinated with non-UN actors such as the NGOs and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, and that international generosity keeps pace with the rising needs of the world's **displaced and suffering people**.

He can give further impetus to the moves to bring together **humanitarian and development aid**. He is certainly very well placed to do this with his own humanitarian background and instincts.

He can maintain global focus on commitment to making a success of the **Sustainable Development Goals**, and continuing the dramatic progress we have seen in areas like basic education and health.

He can press for a renewed focus on **arms control**, which has become the forgotten area of international policy-making.

He can make another attempt, as I think he is certainly planning, to **shake up the UN system** through internal reform, and for example to make sure that more of the senior appointments, in the UN secretariat in New York and the specialised agencies, are based on merit and competition, not Buggins' turn and preference founded on nationality or regional rotation.

He can, as I believe he will, make a big push for more resources to go into **conflict prevention** as well as conflict resolution, and try to make sure that predictable civil conflicts within troubled countries are headed off before they become the destructive horrors we currently see all over the Middle East and North Africa.

This is already a huge agenda.

However, to bring me back to my major theme, **his single biggest task, over time, must be to lead a global movement taking us back to the belief that the international community can all benefit from rules and cooperation, and that multilateralism can be effective.**

This is hardly an easy job, and is certainly not one which can be achieved by just making speeches. It can also not be achieved by taking on current leaders like Presidents Putin, Trump and Xi Jin Ping head on. That way lies disaster for the UN and its role.

What António Guterres will have to do is to mobilise and channel the forces which already exist in favour of a less nationalist and more internationalist view of the world, and of the right way to make all countries and all peoples better off, economically and otherwise. He has to help change the current strong leader and national hard power narrative into something more constructive and mutually beneficial, around which governments and peoples can rally.

Part of this will have to be the realisation and the practical demonstration that the alternative does not really work, certainly not in the long term, even for the most mighty of countries. The UN Secretary-General has to be at the side of the leaders concerned as this begins to happen, gently coaxing them towards fresh habits of working together and finding common solutions.

Part of this may well be the inevitable pendulum swing of ideas, as views drop in and out of fashion. We can see that in our national politics, as evidenced by the unpredictable and unpredicted swings at the latest election. The same can and does happen internationally too.

The moment will come when there will be a reaction to the current admiration for cynical power grabs, and indifference to what happens in other countries as long as your own narrow national interests are protected, and a desire for a different approach. And that moment must be seized firmly when it arrives.

The good news is that there are plenty of forces to be mobilised in favour of such a change of approach and change of narrative, and not just the members of the UN Association, wonderful though you undoubtedly are.

Among many of the younger generations, thinking internationally comes as second nature. For those living in the digital world, and getting their news through social media, national borders often seem much less directly relevant than to older generations. Their heroes and their iconic companies are anything but national – I note for example that the founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, recently made a passionate plea for internationalism. I am not sure about his political skills or ambitions, and he may have a hidden commercial agenda too, but I certainly welcome the sentiments.

In this country, the younger generations did not share their elders' enthusiasm for leaving the EU, often for instinctive reasons. That may help to explain some of the voting patterns we saw in the last election. The point is that here and elsewhere there is a fund of idealism and hope for a better world ready to be tapped if we can find the right language and policies to make it convincing. This means not just empty slogans about a kinder, gentler world, but hard-headed arguments about why this is the best approach for all, including the strong.

There is therefore reason to hope that the counter arguments to the prevailing negative global narrative will start to come through. That would be in the global interest, and I believe our British interest too, as a country whose fate is more closely bound up than most with international engagement.

None of this will happen if those who believe in more international cooperation, not less, and in the benefits for all of globalisation, if handled right, do not speak out when the chance is there, and do not find new and better arguments to convince a sceptical public that cooperation, openness and globalisation really can and do work for the general good. We all have a responsibility here. Staying silent is not an option.

And the UN Secretary-General has to be at the forefront of this, showing through his actions as well as his words that there can be a better way to solve crises and resolve conflicts, that there is strength and prosperity in solidarity, not just politically correct soundbites, and that enlightened self-interest is the way forward, not just blinkered defence of national security or economic interests.

I think that António Guterres, though perhaps relatively quiet so far, can and will play such a role when the moment comes. But he will of course need a lot of support to be effective, and much of this support will need to come from Europe in general and the UK in particular. That is a positive agenda for both government and civil society, but it is by no means a battle won in advance. I am sure the UN Association will be ready to play its full part in this future struggle, and I am sure that it will find a good deal of support, not least from the younger generations when it does so.

I have said a number of gloomy things this evening. It has not been an easy period to feel good about the world and its future. But let me at least finish on this relatively optimistic note."