

Bipolar Breakdown Can Lead to Multilateralism

Yet it is within this uncertain and frightening context that the United Nations has an historical opportunity to come into its own and realize its potential after decades of being hamstrung by East/West confrontation. Since no one nation can any longer cope with these crises alone the world is ripe for a more fully developed multilateralism. By showing strong leadership now the UN can help to place international relations on a sounder footing and indeed begin to shape that elusive new world order. The stakes are high, nothing less than the survival of the planet. Great expectations are now centred on the United Nations which in the 1980's was derided or ignored, but now in virtually every emergency of the human condition is expected not only to "do something" but to be a kind of miracle worker.

But if, as can be safely assumed, the UN has had numerous successes in the past it has seen many failures, and today suffers from serious shortcomings which in its present state will leave it unable to reach its potential and worse, hopelessly unfit for the struggles that lie ahead in this decade and beyond. Among them: a chronically unstable, almost tragic financial situation, redundancy and excessive layering in the Secretariat, a widespread lack of coordination which leads to waste and missed priorities, a proliferation of institutions (often a substitute for problem-solving) and the lack of preparedness of some of the UN's major organs - such as the Security Council - to face the future because they reflect outdated political realities. After nearly half a century, it would be extraordinary if this were not the case.

Empowering the UN

Yet there is no substitute for the UN - nothing else can do its job. What is urgently needed is a leaner, more efficient, financially sounder organization, but beyond that some basic changes are called for to enable it to face problems never dreamed of at San Francisco in 1945. In brief, there must be a willingness not only to do away with what is no longer useful, but also in some cases to establish entirely new structures in place of the old. Both are difficult concepts and resistance can be expected.

UN reform is on everyone's lips these days. Universities, think tanks and groups of eminent persons are hard at work on this and most seem to be aiming at 1995, the UN's 50th anniversary - a useful destination. The hope is that all these efforts could culminate in a celebratory conference which would "ratify" the best new ideas worked out in the previous three years by various preparatory committees. For example, the former Wilensky team of UN Ambassadors that worked on Secretariat reform in 1990-91 might form a core-group to carry the process forward across a wider front.