The Future of the International Organizations

Reflections on the future of the international organizations are a subject which is apparently becoming fashionable, the reason quite obviously being that their very existence seems to be threatened or called into question. What in particular has brought the phenomenon into the limelight is the attitude of the United States Government. By deciding to withdraw from UNESCO at the end of the current year 1984; by intimating that a similar policy might be adopted in the near future in respect of UNCTAD; by reducing the level of its participation in the various voluntary funds; by trying to persuade its Western allies not only to put a stop to increases in the budgets of all the world-wide organizations, but also to adopt a political line similar to its own at the other levels, the United States Administration has indicated quite clearly that it does not see any bright future for the organizations within the United Nations system if they continue to act or to evolve as they do at present. The American hard-liners would even like to go further, and one representative of an American foundation has recently published a book entitled "A World Without the United Nations". This would suggest a concrete programme. There are also, as you know, many other bodies which justify referring today to a crisis in the world organizations.

In these circumstances, it is not simply because the methods of looking into the future, whether by extrapolation, the methodical use of authoritative views, matrices or scenarios are in the state of retarded development we are all aware of in the institutional or political sphere, that reflections on the future of the international organizations cannot just be an exercise in prognostication. It is also because the state of crisis through which we are passing highlights the fact that the international organization concept, in spite of the vast number of studies devoted to the subject, is by no means clear-cut. As Professor Michel Virally says: "Today we are not faced with the phenomenon of the international organization as we are faced with the phenomenon of the State… we are faced with an extraordinary variety of international organizations… There is no model to which all of them can be referred in the same way as today, in spite of the many constitutional differences, there is a State model of which the basic elements are invariably the same." Nor is it at all certain that these organizations can be typed in a way acceptable to all. Actually, historically speaking the phenomenon of the international organization is extremely recent; clearly we are dealing with strange beings in the throes of growth, a kind of institutional embryo whose present structure is such that we cannot imagine what may one day be their definitive status.

Thus the only way of considering the future of these institutions would really be to try and analyse the factors which have gone into their establishment and today condition their evolution; then to try to discern how these factors are operating during the present crisis; and finally to weigh the question whether the evolution of the crisis is likely to culminate in reform of the existing organizations or, on the contrary, to help to bring about their demise and possibly their replacement by a completely different system.

It is not my intention to undertake a serious examination along these lines in the context of the outline I have been asked to present here today. What I can do, on the other hand, is to present an introduction to some reflections on the subject, bearing in mind that you are among those who will be called upon to pursue and develop them.

I.   Analysis of the factors

Since the end of the Second World War, intergovernmental organizations have developed continuously as far as their numbers, the size of their membership, the strength of their secretariats, and the level of their budgets are concerned. Between 1943 and 1984, the number of these organizations has grown from 10 or so to 337. This figure includes 32 world organizations, 50 organizations whose member States are scattered over several continents, and

255 regional organizations. The tendency for the membership of these organizations to increase has affected not only the United Nations and the organizations belonging to the United Nations system, which have become virtually universal, but many organizations which have extended their geographical coverage, like the Europe of the Six which has become the Europe of the Ten and tomorrow will be the Europe of the Twelve, and so on.

The increase in the budgets of all these organizations and in their staff numbers has, with few exceptions, been steady and more rapid than the growth of the budgets of the States themselves in many instances. Added to all this there is the still more rapid development of an international network of non-governmental organizations which deal with everything - industrial relations, aid to the Third World, protection of human rights, disarmament, etc., the known numbers of these exceeding 4,500. Every year the number of intergovernmental organizations increases by 10 or so, and the number of NGOs by more than 200, each of them also expanding its membership and the size of its secretariat.

Thus quantitatively, the international organizations are dynamic. But on the qualitative Side, i.e. in regard to their efficiency and their powers, we find the converse, and this is reflected in the present crisis among the world organizations.

I do not feel that I am departing to any considerable extent from the accepted views on the history of the international organizations if I distinguish three types of factors which are at the basis of this irrational evolution and which can explain the present features of this proliferation of organizations. In the case in point they are the technical factor, the ideological factor and the historical factor.

The technical factor is essentially the advent of a world economy and the greater and greater interdependence which is the outcome of this. It is the factor underlying the establishment of most of the intergovernmental, regional and world-wide organizations: those concerned with postal services, telecommunications, transport, energy, health, environment, etc.; all the so-called "product" agencies (coffee, rice, wheat, oil, mineral resources, petroleum, etc.); all the regional or world-wide credit organizations; the economic co-operation agencies; and finally, those whose objective is the development of the countries of the Third World.

The ideological factor is essentially the search for peace, supplemented by the struggle for human rights. It is the factor underlying world organization through its forerurmers - the Hague Peace Conference, the League of Nations and the United Nations. It is the combination of this factor with the historical factor, i.e. in particular, the times of collective emotion and utopian constructiveness which came after the two world wars, that is at the basis of the present system of international organizations having a political importance, in other words tending to some extent to delimit, or even to limit, the absolute sovereignty of nation States. Here we are concerned with three very different types of international organizations: institutionalized military alliances; the United Nations; and the regional co-operation organizations making for community-building and integration, the most important example of these being the European Community. The military alliances reflect the deep division of the world, whereas the features of the category represented by the United Nations, the European Communities and a number of other regional solidarity organizations cannot be explained without a more in-depth analysis of the historical and political factors in the forefront when they were set up. These factors include an analysis of the reasons for the failure of the League of Nations (which for example led those who drafted the Charter to introduce the veto in the Security Council and to set up the Economic and Social Council); American isolationism in the 1920s (which led to the United Nations Headquarters being located in New York); analysis of the role of the European nations in the two world wars, which led Jean Monnet, Robert Schumann and a few others to make a bid, without putting it higher than that, for the political integration of Europe; the notion of a pragmatic method calculated to achieve the progressive construction of peace, in the case in point David Mitrany's theory known as "functionalism", which led to the establishment around the United Nations of a network of virtually independent specialized agencies, with instructions to make contacts between technicians - assumed to be better able to understand one another than diplomats, particularly if they are undertaking "action in common" -; and finally the

phenomenon in the 1960s of decolonization, which increased the membership of the United Nations threefold and confronted the United Nations system and the European Communities with the problem of development of the Third World and helped to increase the number of new agencies specializing in development.

Within this whole complex, it is easy to perceive the possibility of distinguishing the technical and sectoral organizations from those with a political approach; and within the latter category, to distinguish those which are concerned merely with concerted action from those in which federalist or integration trends are beginning to emerge. But in actual fact, each of the organizations, particularly the more important of them, is concerned to some extent with everything at the same time, and the jurisdictional boundaries are difficult to draw. In the present system there is a great deal of overlapping, and this is perhaps one of the aspects of the embryonic state I mentioned a little earlier. The future evolution of this whole complex will depend on the way in which the three types of factors described above operate.

As regards the technical factor, there is little doubt that it will continue to operate in the same direction. We may conjecture without any great risk of error that the present trend towards the growth in number and size of world problems (reflected during the last few years particularly in matters of energy and oil prices, the environment, currencies, indebtedness, stagnation, unemployment and inflation) is almost bound to continue. The continuous, rapid increase in the number of inhabitants of the, globe, particularly the poor; the development of population migration; the increase in the speed of transport and communications; the possibilities for the dissemination of information; interdependence in respect of foodstuffs; the size and numbers of multinationals; the contagious nature of economic and social difficulties; and a spate of other factors operating in the same direction, provide sound reasons for thinking that the curve of interdependence which is going on before our very eyes will continue upwards for a long time to come.

The kind of influence which this phenomenon of expansion to world-wide status will exert on the present system of international organizations obviously depends both on the capacity of this system to respond and on historical and political data which are unforeseeable. I cannot help but list here some of the items which in all probability will be instrumental in fashioning the future of the international institution system, even though no-one knows whether there will be others which cannot be foreseen, or quite clearly how these items will combine. Perhaps the search will do no more than indicate that the problem is not a simple one. The trend towards simplification is only too common in this sphere, some people imagining that the world could, for example, survive perfectly well without the United Nations, while others maintain (no doubt facetiously, but thus indicating their pessimism or their disappointment) that it is only after a Third World war that mankind will finally be able to construct a real world organization worthy of the name. The items which need to be adduced in any overall thinking on this subject seem to me to be the following:

First the foremost, the real risk of a world conflict. The only response we have had to this question came in one of the latest works of Raymond Aron, a specialist in such problems: War Improbable, Peace Impossible. In other words, the tension and the difficulties of co-existence between the West and the Soviet world is likely to continue for a long time to come, which definitely limits the possibility of development or evolution of any world organization. Any change in the present state of East-West relations, whether due to the emergence of China or the Third World or to internal changes in the regimes of one of the two super-powers, or to any other cause, would in any event represent a major event for the evolution of the world organization.

Other problems which may well be thought likely to have an effect on the structure of the organizations include the following:

The development on an increasing scale, to the point of reaching the level of an "invasion", of migration by larger and larger numbers of persons from the Third World to the rich countries

The growing awareness of its political strength, no longer merely by the "Third World elite" but by the whole of the "foreign proletariat", better and better educated, more knowledgeable and more numerous, in a world which is becoming more and more unified by technology and information

The psychological reactions that these phenomena can produce in the rich countries

The change in values of a gradually increasing fraction of the population in a great many countries in the face of the danger to mankind of the present nuclear arms race, or more simply as a reaction against the absurd aspects of modern society.

The ideological positions of the three worlds existing side by side in the United Nations are well known. Simplifying them a great deal, one might say that the three approaches in confrontation are:

The teleological approach, namely an approach "which regards international organizations as an actor in the international system"[1] and regards the gradual increase in its functions as a means 'of establishing a new international specific, democratic and liberal order". This is the approach which characterized the western democracies when the United Nations was established.

The restrictive approach, under which "the international organizations belong to the superstructure", can: "only reflect the power relationships" existing at international level, and must "remain strictly within the limits of their powers". This is the position of the socialist countries, and the American position is now distinctly closer to it.

The "claims" approach, in which "international organizations are the best means of transforming the hierarchic, stratified structures of the international system", in other words "a battlefield and a means of radically transforming the international system into what it is customary to call the new international economic order". This is what is also known as the Strategy of the 77.

But although a certain degree of evolution has come about over the years in respect of these three approaches (a certain relaxation on points of detail in the socialist position, and a rapprochement between the Western countries and the socialist countries in their opposition to the Strategy of the 77), these changes have not helped to facilitate negotiations or to produce a common approach. On the contrary, the blocking of world-wide negotiations, in short the present crisis, is the direct outcome of the incompatibility between the ideologies of groups of States separated by the East-West and North-South dichotomy.

II.   Possible trends in the present crisis and the possibility of reform

The present crisis in world organization is, however, not confined to the blocking of overall negotiations at the economic and social levels or to the rivalry of the two super-powers in respect of the ineffectiveness of the Security Council. What seems to me to be new in the crisis of world organization in 1984 is the fact that in most of the countries, and in almost all circles, a threshold appears to have been reached in the sense that this long-standing crisis is today beginning to seem no longer tolerable. Various signs indicate this, and in particular the tone, the extent, and the unanimity of critical comments. A few of the manifestations of this attitude are the hardening of the American position, which I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation; the agreement by all the main contributors, western and socialist, to impose a "zero growth" on the regular budgets of the organizations; the concomitant reduction in many voluntary contributions; the number of investigations into the administration of organizations and evaluation of their achievements; and the doubts expressed more and more strongly within the organizations themselves about the effectiveness of their secretariats. One of the most striking phenomena is perhaps the unanimity of criticism from widely separated sources, wether from American conservatives, which I cited just now as proposing to wind up the

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[1] All the expressions in inverted commas on this page are used by Mr. Georges Abi-Saab in his introduction to a UNESCO publication entitled "The Concept of International Organization" which summarizes concisely the "concept proper to certain groups of States".

United Nations, or from "radicals" (on the left) denouncing as utter failures the more progressive organizations such as UNCTAD. In this respect it seems to me significant, for example, that an American university periodical as serious as International Organization should have published in its last issue a highly critical article [2] explaining how, thanks to or in spite of UNCTAD, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and challenging the legitimate right of most of the Governments of States of the Third World to represent the interests of their peoples. When criticism from the left in this way reaches the same conclusions as criticism from the right, namely that the present institutions are useless and incapable of responding to the various problems, and particularly when this criticism is beginning, if not to be shared, at least to be listened to with some degree of attention by moderates, it can be said that an alarm signal is sounding.

The more and more constant unanimity of criticism mentioned above is not, of course, linked with a scheme for transforming or reforming the international organizations. Deep divergencies do subsist as to the nature, the role and the future of world organization, but it is in the nature of a crisis, once it becomes open, to provoke reaction. It is fairly symptomatic in this respect that the idea of a genuine crisis, such as would be brought about, for example, by the withdrawal even for a temporary period of a number of States from some of the main organizations, is no longer today in many circles regarded as a sacrilegious hypothesis or an eventuality to be feared, but on the contrary as the possible starting-point for a welcome reorganization. People are not as yet saying, as did Chateaubriand: "Come, welcome storms! ", but loss of patience is in the offing in many quarters.

Thus it may be that reflections on the future of the international organizations, at any rate the world-wide organizations, are today reflections on the near future and not on the far-distant future. This being so, the idea that reform is necessary, conceivable and feasible is perhaps one of the more immediate consequences of such a situation. Hitherto, as you know, the idea of reform of the United Nations has always appeared utopian. The first thing that is taught to students about the international organizations is that amendment of the Charter of the United Nations is not on the cards, since no agreement could be achieved on the type of amendment desirable and because certain groups of States, the socialist countries in particular, are vehemently opposed to the very idea of such a reform.

But the idea of reform today is taking on a new dimension. What is envisaged is either getting rid of the present institutions and replacing them by others (in which case the obstacle of the Charter would no longer exist), or the thinking is along the lines of changes in methods, programmes and administrative structures such as could completely overhaul the organizations without the necessity to interfere with their constitutions.

In both cases, the way is open to constructive thinking, since the starting-point is obviously the more and more evident inability of the world organizations to adapt to the problems raised by the speed of growth towards world status.

If this notion of possible and desirable reform were to take root, we would certainly witness the blossoming of a large number of ideas and projects. Those who would like to get rid of the United Nations or UNCTAD, for example, would find themselves obliged to specify how they could be replaced. Feasible models for world organizations or the articulation of regional organizations would have to be formulated and submitted to examination and obviously to criticism. Those, on the other hand, who feel that a new deal is possible from within the existing organizations, without this involving amendment of the Charter, would have to clarify their ideas concerning the type of internal restructuring measures and modification of programmes, or concerning new methods and feasible differences of approach, for example, to the organization of research or technical co-operation, which could be both effective and acceptable to most of the States.

We do not know whether an open crisis will begin tomorrow or only in a few years or even a few decades, and it is not certain that the present situation, if prolonged, would engender

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[2] International Organization, Spring 1984: UNCTAD's Failures: The Rich Get Richer, by Robert Ramsay.

sufficient novel and practicable ideas to bring about a transformation of the international organizations in the direction of greater efficiency. But I would like to propose, in concluding this presentation, that you hold on to three ideas in which I profoundly believe:

The first is that a really serious crisis challenging the structure of the world organizations is inevitable, since they have been too long in adapting to new and changing conditions throughout the world, and in consequence it is urgent and necessary to think more deeply on the possibility of reform or reconstruction and the ways and means of achieving it.

The second idea is that the most important task of the world organizations is not to concern themselves with peace, human rights, technical co-operation or development, but to help to bring about a meeting of minds of ideologies and cultural notions concerning the nature of the problems facing mankind and the types of solutions needed. If this assumption is correct, it follows that the most effective means of making the dialogue more productive, facilitating a meeting of minds, and increasing mutual understanding, does not necessarily consist in preserving ill-adapted structures. Getting rid of these structures can likewise contribute to this end, by forcing people more strongly to reflect on the issues.

The third idea is that reflection on the international organizations, especially if it is concerned with improving and renewing the theoretical apparatus, is not simply an academic exercise but has a political significance. The role played by the ideological factor at the present stage in the development of the international organizations is, as we have seen, crucial. The structure, effectiveness, and possible future powers of the international organizations of tomorrow depend on the ideas produced today on what their future can be.

In view of all this, I would like to think that this presentation has helped to convince you that it is important for each one of you to take part in this search and in these reflections.

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