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The International System & New Zealand

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Our world is transformed by a spellbinding revolution in communications technology, by incessant flows of people, ideas, capital and commerce across borders, by striking progress in science, medicine and space/ undersea exploration. We call it globalization. While there are some distant corners of the globe as yet largely untouched by convulsive change, others are embroiled with cruel internal conflict. The causes are varied but they include destabilizing repercussions of globalization alongside regional, ethnic and religious hostility. The Middle East today provides an example of such multiple pressures. In the world at large however while inequality and distribution of income remain to imperil growth and stability, more people have been lifted out of absolute poverty over the last 40 years than at any other time in history – China is chiefly responsible for that dramatic change.

Globalisation & Tribulation

Instantaneous exposure to cataclysmic events in real time through the media, is what distinguishes modern human experience – Syrian victims of chemical weapon attack, gruesome power of the Fukushima tsunami, hideous brutality of airborne suicide bombing in New York, repeated agonies of tens of thousands malnourished refugees in Ethiopia, Somalia and other places; and so it goes on and on and on. In a real sense the modern international relations agenda is shaped, or at least strongly influenced, by the power of communications technology. Our senses are overwhelmed by constant tragedy. What does it all mean, where in the world are we headed? Is the international system up to the task of mediating the challenges?

There is a profound need for confidence, for reassurance, for predictability about safety and wellbeing – both individually and collectively – because this present globalization of our world offers both great opportunity and heightened risk almost in the same breathe. For governments, who are our collective agents, the need to cooperate constructively for the good of humankind and the planet itself has never been more acute. Globalization has moreover extensively empowered non government forces and influences, so that political authorities are not in charge in quite the same way as before. Powerful governments, notably the US, have responded (in the name counter terrorism and cyber

security) by significantly enhancing intrusive powers of world wide surveillance, scrutiny and clandestine disruption. This has provoked extensive popular concern including inside NZ, about consequential threats to civil liberties, personal privacy and freedoms on the internet.

Law Abiding; Needs & Disappointments

The need to nourish trust between nations points above all to the vital necessity for accepted rules to govern predictable international behaviour. It was the cruelty and widespread desolation of prolonged 20th century conflict that first inspired efforts, led by the US, to invent a system intended to create rules based foundations for the collective pursuit of peace, prosperity, justice and respect for the rights and dignity of the human individual. The resultant UN and related systems were, and remain, an unprecedented global experiment. After some 70 years however the original architect along with other governments has grown progressively disenchanted with the experiment that is now severely tested by the forces of globalization.

The UN contains moreover within itself the inevitable seeds of severe disappointment given the fateful link between its lofty ideals and the stark reality of niggardly government behaviour driven by narrow self interest. The multilateral system does not exist in a vacuum. Its capacities and relevance depend squarely on commitment from member states, large and small and their willingness to pool their sovereignties in collective effort. At the bottom line it is the quality of their political and diplomatic relations one with another which therefore create the opportunities in, and set the tone at, the UN and in other international institutions. Logjam at the UN Security Council (UNSC) over for example what to do about the agonies of Syria are a function of degraded bilateral relations between key members - the US and Russia - that are the result of a series of actions over time by *each* government that have vexed the other. There is not a monopoly of virtue around the UNSC table. Neither the system and nor its members live up to expectations.

Yet the sheer range responsibilities for collective effort assigned by common agreement to the UN and related agencies (from agricultural development to nuclear weapons; from fisheries to intellectual property; from the rights of the child to the law of the sea and so on) cannot simply be disregarded. The very fact of universal membership moreover actually legitimises the system, and by providing a permanent negotiating platform across a vast range of intergovernmental activity (something the world has never previously experienced), it offers (however imperfectly) opportunity for large and small alike to bargain, to defend interests and help collectively set the rules of the road. The UN General Assembly performs the annual role of a safety valve for letting off steam by member countries on contentious issues as well staking out national positions on key problems and permitting senior corridor contacts between adversaries. Popular opinion is mostly captured however by

deplorable gridlock at the UNSC, but there is vastly more to the actual system than just the Council. Much of UN work on economic and social improvement, refugees, human rights and averting conflict, proceeds without fanfare.

Changing the Order of Things

Nonetheless frustration and disillusionment with the system and its inefficiencies, lack of drive and, even, corruption - as well as severe disappointments with related multilateral institutions - are entirely justified. Yet at the same time the idea of chucking over the whole multidimensional enterprise and starting afresh with a clean slate to invent a replacement system, would be massively unrealistic in all the circumstances of the world today. The recent invention of G20, comprising leaders of the world's twenty largest economies, in the wake of the 2008/09 global financial crisis, is a new pinnacle feature on the international system landscape but not one to replace what already exists. Its principal task is to integrate the economic policies of its own select membership so as to navigate a way out for the entire world community from global economic crisis.

To remain relevant the international system today requires crucially that it is reformed to reflect the world as it is emerging in the first years of this new century. G20 is a step in that direction. One thing is certain, international relations in the 21st century will surely be different from those of the 20th century although some instincts in some major capitals remain obstinately stuck in old ways of thinking. Yet it is crystal clear that no one country or group of countries, however powerful, is capable alone of resolving a raft of key threats to well being in this interconnected world – the spread of highly dangerous weapons, climate change, energy supply, illegal migration, crime, internationalised terrorism, health pandemics etc. etc. – which demand cooperation from big and small alike. It is clear too that tectonic plates beneath international relations and in particular the centre of gravity of the global economy, are shifting. The emergence during the past 40 years of a group of newly industrializing countries, led by China and others, who have seized the opportunities presented by globalization to achieve impressive economic advance is a fact now of international life. The very pace and intensity of these changes create additional pressures upon global resources and environment, as well as aggravating social and economic expectations. But the changes demonstrate too that to be modern and successful in the globalizing world does not require that a country necessarily be western. Indeed the 2008/09 global financial crisis (GFC) and its aftermath, caused by negligent financial regulation, greedy speculation and severe insolvency in major western economies, reinforces that point. For NZ the overall combination of circumstances serves conclusively to reshape the balance of our external interests.

NZ Psychology & Responses

How can or should NZ external policies adjust to this threshold moment, remembering that for an important part of the 20th century our security and our prosperity were conceived to depend upon close ties with a handful of powerful Atlantic nations? That convenient marriage of our security and prosperity interests was the product of two world wars plus an extended cold war, and it created a particular NZ psychology of dependency which we seek to perpetuate today - even as the international context which produced that psychology is part of history; and even while NZ external interests as well as the complexion of our own society are being transformed. We need of course to guard a proper sense of proportion and remain steadfast about certain core values as well as key principles for an effective international system - most notably to sustain NZ support for the rule of international law. There are two particular considerations here.

First, it is crucial that the newly industrializing countries, and especially China, accept themselves to play by agreed rules; to act in predictable and principled ways. The international community, including NZ, has reasonable and justifiable expectations about such commitment. For it to happen however a greater role in management and agenda setting of the international institutions must be extended to Beijing and other key emerging governments; but for that to happen requires as well that major western powers – the US, Britain, France – make the necessary space and share their longstanding monopolies of command. There is unsurprisingly some reluctance here. Inside the IMF for example, while there is acknowledgement that China deserves greater say and influence over global monetary policy because of its growing economic clout, Washington is dragging feet over action to secure necessary changes and expressing doubt about China's actual willingness to assume the burdens of global responsibility. Here there is a real chicken and egg dilemma. Which comes first? The US is however pursuing regional trade initiatives through leadership of the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations that specifically exclude China. The balance of NZ interests squarely rests with effective accommodation of a peaceable China by major western industrialised countries, globally and regionally, and acknowledgement on all sides that a more hybrid international order is emerging where leadership will no longer be the exclusive privilege of the west. Making the world safe for diversity becomes a supreme international task for the 21st century.

A second reason for affirming the prime importance of the rule of international law relates to NZ's firm commitment to restore and expand its US relationship in the foreign, military, security intelligence and trade/economic policy integration areas. This is an exemplary objective but we cannot ignore the reality of growing American disinclination to be involved in negotiation or ratification of a lengthening list of international treaties or codes. Conservative opinion in the US holds that laws governing the country should only be made by politicians accountable to Americans,

and not (as they see it) unaccountable bureaucrats in multinational organizations. In some cases (the Law of the Sea) where the US has not signed, the Administration constructively opts to act in practice, as if it is a signatory; but in others (human rights, various arms control measures including the ban on nuclear weapon testing and on strengthening international justice etc.) Washington now either stands aside from involvement or signs up only with specific exemptions regarding application to the US itself.¹ In the high politics of international security, Washington does not accept that the commitment of American military force necessarily depends upon authorisation from the UN Security Council. This is an immensely sensitive issue. Where the US has launched strikes without Council authorisation as in Iraq in 2003 American leadership credentials have suffered, or as in Kosovo during the 1990s, US incursion in company with others, simply has not produced the vital solution to ongoing problems.

Realities of NZ's Situation; Changing our Method

It is a fact of NZ life that this country exists and operates in the international system below the radar screens of powerful countries. This is not necessarily a disadvantage. It provides the foundation for independent foreign policy whenever that suits NZ interests. Over the last decade of the old century, and the first years of the new one, under successive governments, NZ displayed nimble accomplishment, regionally and globally, politically and economically operating beneath the radar screens. It is a counsel of wisdom nonetheless that small countries should always remain on best of terms with the powerful. NZ shares interests, values and history with the US. That is not however a recipe for simply perpetuating the original NZ 20th century psychology of dependency. A judicious relationship of 'friend and not ally' of the US suits modern NZ which now has other vital interests that it has nourished and needs to preserve, most of all a relationship with China which has taken some 40 years to cultivate and is now of central importance to NZ prosperity and well being. In precisely the same vein the longstanding NZ commitment to the rule of international law, as a small country in global affairs incapable of asserting interests by compulsion or force of arms, remains crucial. There may indeed be difficult choices ahead between certain essential NZ interests and enhanced bilateral ties with the US, especially at a time when Washington strives to reinvigorate US global leadership on its own terms in changing international circumstances, while the costs of leadership are immense on an economy whose fundamentals remain under enduring stress, and whose political system appears dysfunctional.

Foreign policy, it has been said, is all about managing contradictions. NZ has managed before and will doubtless do so again. We have however recently reformed the actual conduct of our external

¹ Kaye D. Stealth Multilateralism. Foreign Affairs. Sept/Oct. 2013. pp 113-124

relations along the lines of 'a business model'. NZ is pretty unique here since other governments have considered but discarded the 'business model' as a basis for conduct of their external relations preferring to strengthen customary professional diplomacy with a balance of political, economic, commercial and security versatility - a recipe that served NZ interests previously. The new reforms have controversially entailed elimination of measurable levels of senior and mid-level experience. It is far too early to judge how far the conduct of our relations and interests are improved or degraded by the changes.

The lesson over the past 40 odd years for NZ in Asia is however that predictable enduring trade/economic ties inside the international system for governments depend first and foremost on something much more than a 'business model' - namely the careful sustained cultivation of political diplomatic relationships. Indeed Asian leaders themselves have publically warned outsiders to avoid an Aladdin's Cave mentality in dealings with the region that concentrates only upon the glittering economic gains to be made and avoids deeper involvements and political commitments. The basic lesson is not new. The same message for NZ derives too from Europe where the stay of execution for exclusion our farm exports at the time of British entry into the European Community, rested entirely upon political diplomatic efforts. Trade policy alone was insufficient. And from that supreme diplomatic effort of some 50 years ago, a clear line of descent runs down directly to Fonterra today. The connexions between professional diplomacy and economic advantage are real and longstanding. The same need for broader and more sophisticated basis for relations building is true today for the Middle East, for Latin America and, of course, with regard to Australia our most important partner comprehensively right across the board.

The Prime Minister has said that NZ's relationship with China is "unquestionably and unashamedly an economic relationship". The question of whether China which has certainly heard that message, actually itself shares the same opinion is something else again. We should not assume so. The relationship experience is that sustained diplomacy is indispensable first to create, and then to safeguard opportunity. Fonterra's mishaps with infant formula milk powder in China and elsewhere suggest that commercial agility, while also absolutely vital, is not on its own sufficient to guarantee enduring predictable economic partnership.

UN Security Council; NZ Ambition.

How the world actually perceives present day NZ will be tested in 12 months or so from now when a vote of the entire UN membership will decide whether NZ wins a non permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) for 2015-2016. The vote is in effect a straw poll by the world on NZ's contribution to the world. This is a pretty rare experience in the scheme of things for this country - we

last sat on UNSC 20 years ago, and our previous tenure was some 30 years prior to that. In nearly 70 years of UN existence, NZ has served a full two year non permanent term just twice (we served a half term of one year in the 1960s). The present bid for a seat sits amidst an overall NZ external effort that is itself conspicuously portrayed by politicians, officials and in documents as a concerted, comprehensive endeavour to restore international economic competitiveness to NZ through free trade agreements, foreign investment attraction and support externally for the NZ private sector. No one would dispute the absolute necessity of that goal, but the UNSC bid will not of course be decided on the grounds of a single minded NZ crusade for transactional relationships across the globe.

In comparison to the previous UNSC bid, NZ has this time been on the campaign trail for much longer, and expended far greater resources, and there is still a year or so to run. An impressive and effective web site uploaded by MFAT distinguishes the campaign effort. The final ballot is of course secret and any candidate must remain suitably sceptical about assurances of support however readily given right up to the final vote. Nothing should be taken for granted. The final twelve months of the campaign will decide matters as New York becomes the epicentre of the contest, and how NZ plays its hand on issues and crises before the UN, foreseen and unforeseen, will count. Our campaign effort to date reflects the seriousness of the competition that NZ confronts from Turkey and Spain, for one of the two UNSC seats that are available. In 1993/94 NZ prevailed against serious competition but it was a close run affair requiring more than one ballot. With a fair share of good fortune NZ can prevail again. There is however more at stake than previously in domestic terms. Success would vindicate the distinctive but controversial reforms championed by NZ political leaders at MFAT over recent times. Failure would on the other hand discount them. That helps explain the tenor of the present NZ campaign.
