

United Nations Reform and the New Collective Security

United Nations Reform and the New Collective Security edited by Peter G. Danchin and Horst Fischer . Cambridge : Cambridge University Press , 2010 . 450 pp., £75.00 hardback, 978 0521515436

The call for UN reform became evermore urgent after the US and its allies went to war in Iraq without prior UN authorisation. The sidelining of the organisation caused an internal crisis, and then Secretary General Kofi Annan soon undertook an extensive reform agenda to restore its reputation. In this book Peter G. Danchin, Horst Fischer and a group of distinguished scholars set out on the unenviable task of establishing what such UN reform might mean in practice. To do so they analyse key documents in the UN reform process: the High Level Panel Report, the Secretary General's 'In Larger Freedom' Report, and the 2005 World Summit Outcome document.

The book addresses four key themes: success of institutional reform, place of international law and concepts of collective security; the 'threat' to collective security (who addresses it and how); the violation of Human Rights, and non military threats such as environment, disease and technology; collective security innovations and limitations of the recently formed Peacebuilding Commission and Human Rights Council (and also dealing with state failure, massive human rights violations, terrorism and weapons proliferation); how the development agenda can be achieved in the context of the new collective security regime.

The authors and editors ask certain pertinent questions. Can the UN reform agenda of genocide prevention and Responsibility to Protect be implemented? Can proper representation of the emerging giants like India, Brazil, Japan and Germany be accomplished? Can the norms and institutions necessary for collective security to function in this ever increasing complex world be put into practice? Can the UN persuade countries to forego their narrow agenda and realistically work for achieving more effective global governance in the 21st century?

The main obstacles to the reform agenda are identified and include: Realpolitik, state sovereignty, the emphasis on process over results in organisational culture, ongoing North-South confrontations and the problems of acute funding and decentralisation.

One of the key findings of the text is that the global issues of poverty, war, terrorism and climate change are interlinked and require a broader understanding for achieving collective security and world peace. No government, single group or individual can address these issues on their own. Urgent cooperation and concerted action between states and civil society is needed. Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary General of the UN eloquently explained how the UN could facilitate such concerted action when he said he believed in the necessity of a world organisation, which would be much more than the convenient facade or pawn of the super powers; a regulatory body enhancing peace and security as well as human rights; a body guided by the notion of global solidarity.

The major task of the UN is to be the ultimate diplomat. It should learn to deal with the world of Realpolitik, simplify its bureaucratic functioning, and become a transparent, accountable and democratic body fit enough to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The editors and the contributors of the book should be applauded for going a long way in simplifying the complicated workings of the UN in a way that can be translated into the political discourse and practice of our times.

Vijay Mehta

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