

National Sovereignty & Universal Challenges: Choices for the World After Iraq

Briefing Paper No. 1

“Beyond Gulliverization: What is to be Done?”

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Lenin famously asked just over one hundred years ago “What is to be done?” So should we, as we prepare for our meeting on “National Sovereignty and Universal Challenges”. For this meeting to be a success, something more than just another interesting conference, we need to think in advance about what would constitute a positive result, and then work to that end. I believe we need to end the meeting with a view, perhaps differing views, about what should follow. Where do we take the dialogue after Brussels? We need to know what is to be done.

This means getting beyond analyzing, interesting though that is, how the world is changing, becoming more interdependent, and challenging old forms of sovereignty. We need to get beyond identifying villains and heroes or heroines. The blame game won't help.

We know a “new world order” is not just around the corner, and that preventing deadly conflict remains a high priority. We know globalization presents huge challenges as well as opportunities, and that it needs to be shaped so more can benefit. We know the United States is, by a considerable margin, the most powerful country in the world. We know its present leadership, but other Americans as well, feel their country is seriously threatened.

There are those who argue for re-establishing a multi-polar system in the world. It is clear this would not only not be welcomed by the U.S., but would be actively resisted. It is also clear that the U.S. will resist “Gulliverization”, being tied down by the Lilliputians of the world. We should know by now how *not* to deal with the United States. There is a perception in the U.S. that much of the world wants to check or constrain American power. Not surprisingly, the U.S. is not going to cooperate in such an endeavour. We need to find a better way.

Yet the reality is that we are living in an increasingly interdependent world, a world in which “mutual vulnerability” is significantly increased and will increase further. Sovereignty is, in truth, not what it used to be – although it does not follow that there will be a “withering away of the state”, as Marxists predicted, a prediction echoed by current commentators as well. Rather states have to share central stage with other actors, non-state actors such as NGOs and business. But states, by and large, have a distinct role both because of their authority and legitimacy.

We know there are major global challenges to be faced: climate change, biodiversity, ocean fisheries, weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, infectious disease, poverty and more. We need more than trying to muddle through to respond to them.

What we really need is to reengage the United States in building more effective ways of managing our global interdependence. The U.S. has led in this effort in the past and needs to again. But it won't happen if American leaders believe that, between the lines, the real purpose of much of the rest of the world is to constrain U.S. power.

What is to be done? We need to identify the major global challenges which require "governance" beyond the level of the state. We won't be able to do them all, so that is why setting priorities is important. We then need to design effective and innovative forms of governance. In many cases these new forms can and indeed should include non-state actors. We need to work with Americans, inside and outside the Administration. Above all what we must not do is to corner and isolate the U.S. That won't work. Nor should we be advocating multilateralism as an end in itself. The same is true for international institutions, including the United Nations. That is not sufficiently plausible. Multilateralism and international organizations are means to an end, critical means, but not ends.

Three years ago, with Moises Naim, I wrote a small book, ALTERED STATES: Globalization, Sovereignty, and Governance, published by the International Development Research Centre. Many of the arguments remain true. States are in fact changing. Globalization, seen in its multidimensional definition, is driving the process. Sovereignty is changing and new forms of global governance are both a reality and increasingly needed. If I was to rewrite the book now I would be much more explicit about engaging the United States in the process. The question is how best to do this, I hope that some ideas will come out of this important meeting.

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