

## Regional Security Councils – A Way Towards UN Reform

By Leelananda De Silva

The current UN model, conceived in the 1940s has many anachronistic features, especially in the composition of the UN Security Council. The Security Council is based on the premise of five big powers and the rest of the world being small powers. That premise does not hold any longer. The Security Council as the central organ of the UN lacks legitimacy. Many problems are regional and not global and it should be possible to address them at the regional level within a UN framework. The middle and small powers, equally with the big powers should have the opportunity to influence Security Council agendas. Security Council tasks need to be devolved to the regions and not concentrated in New York.

The United Nations was created for another world. In 1945, there were only 50 member states. There were the big powers and small powers. Five countries were defined as big powers. The UN Security Council (SC), the central organ of the UN, in its conception, reflected this pattern of thinking. The five big powers were made permanent members, and were vested with the power of veto. Other member states were to select six from among them to be members of the SC, which at that time numbered eleven members. Later, the number of non- permanent members was increased to ten, making an SC of fifteen. The non- permanent members are elected for a period of two years. Since that time, there have been continuing efforts to reform the SC, and many ideas have been considered without much success. None of these reform proposals are acceptable either to the big powers or the majority of member states of the UN General Assembly (UNGA).

We can briefly set out some of these reform proposals. One has been to abolish the power of the veto which now rests with the five permanent members of the SC. Not unexpectedly such a proposal does not find favour with the veto wielding members. Another has been to expand the membership of the SC from 15 to 20 or 25. This proposal has languished due to many factors. Would the SC be made unwieldy by such an expansion? How does one select the new ten members? Should there be more permanent members in the new enlarged SC? Should they have the veto or not? Who should be the new permanent members, even without a veto? In all these proposals there is another feature. The smaller countries who constitute the majority of the nearly two hundred members of the UN, will not stand to benefit by these proposals. Most of them will remain outside the SC for most of the time.

The problem with these proposals for reform is that they do not take account of the new configuration of world politics. There is no longer the pattern of 1945 where there were big powers and small powers. The big powers themselves may be only two and not five. The most important development has been the rise of middle powers and regional powers, not visualized in the UN charter. There are about twenty to thirty countries which can be defined as middle powers, on the basis of political, economic and population criteria. Most of them are not represented in the SC at any one time. The other striking feature has been the growth of regionalism and the regional factor. The UN charter had little to say about it. The reaction of the UN to the regional dimension of global politics has been to establish, in the 1940s and the 1950s, six regional economic commissions, as departments of the UN in New York. The UN has no regional political dimension, and has confined itself to economic and social issues. Outside

the UN, countries have grouped together in regional and sub regional entities (the African Union, for example) and with which the UN has tried to establish relationships on issues such as peace keeping. Increasingly, the UN, and the SC, have also moved towards greater reliance on regional bodies to find solutions to inter- state and internal state problems. This is evident in UN and SC responses to recent problems in Libya, Syria, Congo, Sudan and others.

In the context of these new developments and the way in which the world is being shaped by political and economic factors outside the UN, the efforts for UN reform might also consider new directions. Instead of focusing on the reform of the current SC (those efforts can continue), there is an opportunity to redesign the UN international security apparatus. Most problems that are emerging now are not global ones, although they have global implications. They are not of the same order as those during the cold war. Many of those problems can be addressed at regional levels at least initially. Regional solutions appear to be viable, and there are key states within regions with the resources to manage them, provided there is a legitimate regional security framework.

So far, the efforts to reform the UN has focused on the SC. Is there another alternative way out, taking note of ground realities and the growing significance of the regional dimension in international relations? The proposal being made here is to establish a new mechanism within the United Nations in the form of Regional Security Councils (RSCs), as subsidiary bodies of the UNSC. Each region (Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, West Asia) would be organized to constitute a representative RSC. The powers of the RSC will be defined by the SC and the RSC will be the body within the UN which will act as caller of first resort. Regional problems will be first addressed by the RSC, and every effort will be made by them to sort them out at that level. Unlike the SC, the RSC need not be confined to political and security issues and might be enabled to take up economic, social, humanitarian and environmental issues as well. The overriding criterion for an RSC to take up a particular issue will be regional instead of global security. The establishment of RSCs will not require amendments to the UN Charter.

The composition of each RSC need not follow a standard pattern. Each RSC could have a membership of between 10 and 15 regional members. The permanent non- regional members of the SC could be either given observer status in an RSC or can be given full member status. Among the 10 to 15 regional members, there could be five to seven permanent members, or members serving for a long term, and about five members elected once every two years by the regional members. The six RSCs (Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and West Asia) in total will have a membership of about 90 members, nearly half the UN membership. This kind of composition of an RSC will enable many more countries to be engaged actively in UN affairs. The permanent members of the six regions which will number in total about 30 to 40 members will be a key global group in the management of international relations. They will constitute a middle tier between the UNSC and UNGA. Most of the middle powers will be brought within this group. It will be the counterpart of the Group of 20 on the economic side.

Without describing the composition of the permanent membership of all RSCs in all regions, some initial ideas can be set out. For the Asia- Pacific region, the permanent members could be Australia, India, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Japan, Pakistan, Philippines and Vietnam. There will thus be seven permanent members for this large region. For Latin America, among the seven would be Argentina, Brazil, Canada and Mexico. In Africa, Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa might be permanent members. The feasibility of various options will have to be considered in depth, and what is described here are early pointers in this proposed new direction.

By establishing RSCs within a UN framework, there will be new credibility for the UN and it will fill the missing gap of the regional factor within the UN. If the RSCs are to be empowered to address political, economic, social, environmental, human rights and humanitarian issues, there will be a new potential for a more integrated approach to regional security management. That would also raise the issue of the future of the existing UN regional economic commissions. Is it necessary to continue with them? Some regions might even do away with them. They could also be re-shaped to fit into their own regional context without being identical bodies imposed on the region by the UN in New York. Their budgets could be regionally mobilized and no longer dependent on New York. They will have more autonomy as a result and better able to be representative of the region. They could be viewed as operational arms of the new RSCs.

There are many advantages in implementing the proposal for RSCs. It will reduce the pressure for the reform of the UNSC. It will enable the middle powers who are now seeking UNSC membership on a permanent basis to obtain such status as some of the rivals might be satisfied with a greater profile at the regional level. The UNRSC system will enable the mobilization of a larger number of countries and specially the rising middle powers in the management of international relations within a UN framework. Even the smaller countries, will have greater access to UN bodies through a greater focus on the regional level. The UN will be truly devolved to the regions without being seen as a top down institution acting at the behest of big powers.

(Leelananda De Silva has been a consultant to UN and other multilateral organizations. He put forward the bare elements of this proposal at a conference on the UN system held at Wilton Park, the British foreign office conference centre in Sussex, England).

A brief CV of Leelananda De Silva follows.

Leelananda de Silva served in the government of Sri Lanka from 1960 to 1977. He was involved in UN negotiations in New York, Geneva, Rome and Bangkok as a member of the Sri Lankan delegation. He was Secretary-General of the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Sessions of ECAFE (now ESCAP) held in Colombo in 1974, and acted as the Secretary of the Economic Committee of the Fifth Non-Aligned Summit held in Colombo in 1976. Between 1970 and 1977 he was engaged in the management of the international economic relations of his country, especially relating to the UN bodies and the Commonwealth. Between 1978-1982 he was attached to the International Foundation for Development Alternatives in Nyon, Switzerland, and also functioned as Executive Secretary of the Third World Forum. Since 1982 he has been a consultant to many UN bodies (UNDP, UNCTAD, ITC, FAO, UNDCP, IFAD, UNDESA, ESCAP, UNOPS). For these bodies, and primarily for UNDP, he has worked in over thirty countries in Asia and Africa on short-term assignments. He has undertaken over fifty evaluations of UN projects and programmes. In the 1990s he contributed to the preparation of the UN Secretary-General's Triennial Policy Review of operational activities on development. He has also been an advisor to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, both in Geneva. He has written extensively on development issues, and his book on development aid – A Guide to Facts and Issues – was published by the UN and the Third World Forum in 1984. Recently he wrote the history of ECAFE/ESCAP for the UN Intellectual History Project. He has also been an Associate Fellow of the Warwick Research Institute of the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom.