

# GLOBAL STRATEGY FORUM

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## Lessons For The Post-COVID World: No Time For A Victors' Justice

After as debilitating a crisis as COVID-19 has turned out to be, certain truths are beginning to emerge. Firstly that once it is over things will not just return to where they were before. Socially, economically and internationally the status quo ante will have changed dramatically and not always for the better. Some aspects were already changing when the virus struck. Twentieth century world political institutions were already under strain. The global public mood was generally discontented and increasingly volatile, and as we have seen very recently, local protests can become national and then international very quickly. International relations were at their most unreliable for half a century. There was a growing disenchantment with conventional politics as witnessed by the emergence of Trump in the US, and the rise of populist politics within Europe and increasingly around the rest of the world as well.

History teaches us some basic lessons on the outcomes of major traumas, most recently the aftermaths of world conflicts, but also of economic and health crises as well. Many commentators are already wrestling with the emerging lessons on health and economic challenges, not least the

impact of COVID-19. The ending of such crises nearly always leave vacuums to be filled. Following the two 20th century world conflicts, the solutions largely fell within what can loosely be described as the portfolio of Victors' Justice, designed to favour the interests of those who won the war. In the beginning they were none the less admirable for that, but the seeds of their eventual failure ran dangerously and increasingly deep.

The design and creation of the United Nations was very much a case in point. Its purpose was the establishment and maintenance of a peace favourable to the victors although in an almost immediate quirk between the victors as well. The design of the Security Council with its Permanent Members and its system of vetoes was and remains an object lesson in serving and preserving the victors' interests. The Marshall plan while clearly altruistic in purpose ensured that its effects on its beneficiaries suited the longer term visions of its proposers and funders. NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, was designed to meet the post-war threat of Soviet Russia, a job it fulfilled admirably during the Cold War but which, with the ending of that war, swiftly became an instrument of war itself rather than of the defence of its members which had been its original purpose. The European Union, another post-war institution whose essential raison d'être was



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the prevention of another European war successfully brought together historically warring nations in a way that achieved its founding purpose. It is a fair surmise that none of these would have been created without the trauma of the Second World War and are still to be applauded.

We are now emerging from another trauma, that of COVID-19, which in turn should provide us with another set of opportunities to build new institutions and to explore new initiatives based on what we have learned from the last few months. The real difference between now and 1945 is that in the current trauma, we are all victims all facing the same assault and therefore there are no victors and only losers. Whatever is created now cannot be based on winners and losers and so should be fairer and stronger for that. I hope that we will see a lot of work being done in the medical and scientific field as well as in the financial sector and that of social welfare and that lasting answers will be found and developed. For the moment I wish to concentrate on the fields of security and international affairs where again I believe we will find new and imaginative structures to be explored and developed.

However, I want to start by looking at what we already have and asking what is and what isn't working any more, particularly in the absence of any continuing need or justification for victors' justice. We could do no better than to look at those examples I have already mentioned.

Starting with the United Nations, it cannot be denied that over the last two decades far from being a purveyor of international justice and fairness, it has become too often proved an unwitting underwriter of injustice and unfairness. Leaving aside the political dimension, its hitherto much-lauded offshoots, UNESCO and the WHO, have also become a little tarnished at the edges. But it is its political dimension, the United Nations Security Council, which has cast the most doubt over the integrity of its purpose.

The system of veto means effectively that no effective decision can be taken if any of the Permanent Members, that is to say the great powers - largely the victors of a war 75 years ago with the addition of China - disagree. This has in effect meant that any of these 'great powers' who see their unscrupulous actions or those of their closest cronies threatened can simply vote to prevent further action. Injustices such as Israel's creeping annexation of the West Bank or Russia's annexation of Crimea or China's current behaviour in Hong Kong remain unsanctioned because of often a single veto. It results in a blatant underwriting of injustice and leaves the rest of the world feeling irrelevant and impotent. Of course there must be some system of veto, but not one which can cynically be wielded by one often reprehensible power, however big and strong and wealthy. If we need to find a starting point for the growing waves of political cynicism throughout the world there are few better places to start than this. There has to be a better way and now in a time of 'no victors', no better moment to seek it.

Then there is NATO, a glorious concept which genuinely kept the peace in the Cold War. Then with the ending of the Cold War, it lost its clear purpose and its shape. An ideological defensive wall against a pernicious philosophy was one thing; playing Great Game politics was another. Allowing itself to be recruited by David Cameron into the Libyan regime change campaign was a fatal nail in its essential integrity. Whose freedom was this great defensive military organisation defending and look at the mess they left behind? The same question could be asked about the campaign in Iraq. There is no doubt that an unpoliticised military organisation could still have a role to play, but not until it more clearly redefines its purposes in today's post-COVID world.

Finally there is the European Union, a glorious dream at the end of an horrific war. It was born out of idealism but has increasingly been overtaken by economic ambition and bureaucratic empire building. The current COVID-19 crisis should have been a test



of what this greater unity could achieve. Instead just as its professed purpose was most needed, it slipped back in confusion into the shadows allowing the members to ride off one by one into the growing storm each to meet it in their own way. The concept of the great Union was swept aside and found fundamentally wanting. And as world economies collapsed around it, just when a roar was required, all that was heard was a squeak.

Each of these failures is retrievable, but none without fundamentally re-visiting their basic purposes. It is not the purpose of this piece to begin this process but rather to act as an introduction to a serious exploration of the implications and possible way forward. The EU needs to look again at the important differences between a federation and a confederation, between a cultural Union and an economic obsession. It needs above all to go back to its roots.

NATO needs to redefine its territory and its potential foes. I believe its concept is still highly relevant in today's increasingly uncertain world. It must somehow detach itself from the highly politicised membership which is currently its hallmark. In a post-COVID world where there are no winners nor losers, it should have a simple objective of opposing illegal and threatening military action and it should have a broader client base with a wider global base.

The biggest of all these challenges involves the United Nations. The first task should be to revisit definitions upon which future reforms can be founded. Most important will be the need for generally accepted and cooperatively enforceable rules on ownership and sovereignty. Then the failing of the UNSC must be dealt with. Vetoes should be retained, but in a way where a single member, however powerful, should not be able to stand in the way of the counter-view of the rest, and that the structure of the UN and its economic and military dimensions should be such that no one or two great powers could thwart the clear view of the rest without facing condign economic and military sanctions from the rest. And

in the course of all this the system of financing the UN must be closely revisited.

These then are some of the aspects which need to be explored urgently with a view to using the momentum created globally by the pestilence to seriously begin to build a better and less corruptible system for a fairer, more just and acceptable world.

It's a hell of a challenge; but what better moment to undertake it before the world discovers the unscrupulous ways of winning again?

*Lord Lothian*  
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