

Multilateralism and Ideational Power

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Abstract

Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, opened the Sixth Model United Nations (MUN) Simulation Exercise on 24 August 2017 in Tehran. The theme of the UN Security Council Simulation this year was the nuclear programme of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea (PDRK). In his speech, Dr. Zarif first applauded the Model UN simulations held by the International Studies Journal, and mentioned that he has missed teaching international relations in an academic setting. He also mentioned that it was heartwarming for him to see so many women participants in the room, and took pride in Iranian women being interested in international relations and world politics. Dr. Zarif also spoke about the significance of Cold War as well as the collapse of Soviet Union and the role that the UN played 30 years ago. He also emphasized that "We all need to arrive at a good, reliable, and convincing understanding of this period of transition, which was perceived at a certain time in the past to be of a rather short period and expected – or simply aspired to – arrive at a definitive position of unchallenged American global hegemony. Well, that hasn't come to pass." He also touched base on the issue of North Korea (DPRK) and mentioned that "it is not only states that are engaged in the drama, a much larger catalog of players and actors, inclusive of non-state actors – falling under the general rubric of civil society – are also involved and bear on the situation." In addition, he talked about the significance of 'change and power' in international relations and iterated that "power could be defined as increasing influence and decreasing vulnerability." Dr. Zarif mentioned a few historical and political events in which the issue of power and gaining hegemony were involved. Lastly, he discussed how the Security Council failed Iran and watched in silence when Iraqis used chemical weapons on Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war. In the end, he wished the participants success and luck in the Model UN simulation and hoped that they could "move in the direction of – hopefully – political-diplomatic resolution of a regional tension with grave consequences for international peace and security."

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Introduction

Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, opened the Sixth Model United Nations (MUN) Simulation Exercise on 24 August 2017 in Tehran. The theme of the UN Security Council Simulation this year was the nuclear programme of the People's Democratic Republic of Korea (PDRK).

The MUN Simulation Exercise has been jointly organized for the past six years by International Studies Journal (ISJ) and the United Nations Information Center (UNIC) - Tehran - at the Tehran Peace Museum.

Following is the text of Minister Zarif's remarks at the event.¹

I am very pleased to join my dear colleagues who have organized an important exercise; Dr. Zakerian and his colleagues at the International Studies Journal (ISJ), and my dear old friend and now retired colleague, Ambassador Asadi, who has presided the UN Security Council Simulation Exercise for the past four years. I am also grateful for the

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1. The statement was made in Persian, and subsequently translated into English by ISJ.

valuable assistance of the United Nations Information Center (UNIC) to this initiative, and to Ms. Maria Dostenko, Head of the Center, for joining us today. I find it quite symbolic and relevant that the event is being held at the Peace Museum here at the historical Central Park of Tehran – as has been the case in previous years. The kindness and cooperation of the Museum’s dedicated and hard-working management and personnel is highly inspiring and very much appreciated.

Holding Model UN Simulation Exercises at the Peace Museum reminds me of the bitter and dismal historical failure of the United Nations Security Council in dealing with the brutal use of chemical weapons by Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War. A few weeks ago, in a bilateral exchange, the foreign minister of one of the Council’s Permanent Members alluded to the use of chemical weapons as a ‘national red line.’ I reminded him of the exchange I had with his fellow countryman some 32 years ago in New York. As a young Iranian diplomat I had called on the President of the Security Council to inform him of Iraq’s use of chemical weapons against us – Iranians. He told me, bluntly and in so many words: “I am not authorized to talk to you on this issue, only about the need for ceasefire in the war”! So, holding this Model UN Exercise here in this hall reminds me of that bitter exchange, the ugly reality of the use of chemical weapons, and the Council’s abject failure to rise to the occasion and fulfill its basic, inherent duties under the Charter. And we kept suffering from the increasing, repeated use of prohibited chemical weapons for several more years. That exchange in mid-1980s raises a serious question about the kind of ‘reassuring’ pronouncements we hear these days from the representatives of some of the Permanent Members of the Security Council – the only countries who were members of the Council then – and also from some other countries whom some of you represent in this Simulation Exercise. Permanent Members and non-Permanent Members, both groups, should accept the responsibility for their collective historical failure then and act to compensate for that – if possible at all.

Let me also tell you that speaking to you here reminds me of the courses on diplomacy I used to teach a few years back. Since I took this office I’ve been deprived of the opportunity of teaching such courses, and as I see, most of the representatives here are women. That is really heart-warming. I sincerely hope some of you would join the Foreign Ministry and represent Iran at international organizations. It is a matter of honor

and pride that so many young Iranian women are interested in international relations and represent various universities across the country in this Exercise today.

What you have initiated is a very important exercise, for yourself, all of you, and for demonstrating its importance to others. Let me make a few introductory theoretical remarks about the essence of the exercise you're engaged in. You might find our understanding of and approach to international developments; I mean, of the Foreign Ministry, of interest and use. All of us who are actively engaged in the field of international relations and international law have this very concrete understanding that we are living in a period of international life that is quite different from the past. In the past, at least up to the beginning of the 1990s, so far as we vividly remember, the frameworks, the rules, and the parameters governing relations and actions were generally known, and the chain of action-reaction was, to some significant degree, generally predictable. The Security Council deliberations – and the outcome – were almost totally predictable. There used to be a defined framework of relations which were characterized with such terms as the 'Cold War Era' and the 'bi-polar world.' The most salient feature of that era was its general predictability; you could, depending on the issue at hand and the major players involved, predict the outcome of the debate. And as we all remember, the major players were limited; the representatives sitting at the seat of the Permanent Members of the Security Council, and within that limited framework, you had the representatives of the two major superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR). It wasn't difficult at all to guess, or predict, what would transpire as a result of the interaction between the P5, and more concretely, between the two big ones.

Then, starting in the early years of the 1990s, we entered into a new era. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union – more as a result of its own internal dynamics and accumulated problems and inefficiencies than any other external factor - the United States appeared to be under a peculiar triumphalist illusion; that the end of the bi-polar world was tantamount to the beginning of the ascendance of the uni-polar world; that is, the US as the emerging dominant single world power. Now the whole world knows that the US illusion was euphoric, short-sighted, and still worse, inflicted tremendous damages in its wake; enduring damages – and sufferings - the world is still trying hard to grapple with and

hopefully surmount and undo. The turbulent, tragic situation gripping our region for quite some time, the situation in Afghanistan, in Iraq, and even in Syria, are the direct outcome of that American illusion of supposedly emerging uni-polar world. President George Bush, Sr., said it in so many words at the UN General Assembly. He claimed that the world had entered a new world order, and that the Americans had incurred huge costs to realize that world; in their own words, in human blood and in money. Now everybody realizes that the only outcome of all those so-called American sacrifices has been the rise of violence and extremism in our surrounding region, and of course, with serious implications and consequences far beyond our immediate region. Fact of the matter is that the period of transition from one world order to a presumed new one took much longer than the Americans had anticipated or planned for, and has proved much more costly and tortuous than they could ever conceive of.

So far, we have left behind 27 years of this tumultuous new era, whose end or culmination is not yet in sight. We all need to arrive at a good, reliable, and convincing understanding of this period of transition, which was perceived at a certain time in the past to be of a rather short period and expected – or simply aspired to - arrive at a definitive position of unchallenged American global hegemony. Well, that hasn't come to pass. The previous bi-polar world – as we used to know and analyze it - has come to an end for all practical purpose. But – and this is a very important but – the expected uni-polar new world order a la Washington has simply not emerged. In the new, dynamic situation that has developed in the meantime not only the US is not the sole, preponderant power, rather, and more importantly, not all important and critical developments in the world do any more emanate in or from the West proper. And this is a very significant development on a global scale and with quite serious and enduring consequences.

An important parallel phenomenon has also appeared on the bigger scene in international relations. Quite distinct from the days when states were practically the only players in the game, the theatre now also comprises non-states actors - quite a diverse, chequered mosaic for that matter. It is not difficult at all to discern that in recent years many major developments in the world carry, albeit to varying degrees, the signature of non-state actors, and of course, of a different nature and in various directions. The issue you are dealing with here today relates to North Korea – PDRK – but, it is not only states that

are engaged in the drama, a much larger catalog of players and actors, inclusive of non-state actors – falling under the general rubric of civil society - are also involved and bear on the situation. It's quite a number of years that the international community has been dealing with such non-state actors as ISIS [Daesh], Jabhat-nusrah, Taliban, Alqaida, and others of their ilk.

On the changes in the larger context of international relations, let me share this with you. Around November, December last year, I and two of my colleagues¹ published a book – in Persian - entitled “International Relations in the Post-Western Transitional Era”. We were under the impression then that coining the term “post-Western” was indeed of a radical, revolutionary nature, and hence, not so easy for others to stomach; just too much out-of-the-box thinking. Our central argument in the volume revolved around analyzing the developments since the end of the Cold War. We argued that the previous dominant mindset and paradigm has shifted; from an earlier paradigm when everything emanated in the West, succeeded by another period and paradigm when the West appeared to shape and direct everything – every major event or development, even those occurring in other parts of the world. What we meant by the new term was that the context has changed quite substantially; that neither things just emanate from the West nor the West is in the sole driving seat anymore. It was almost a revelation that a couple of months later at the Munich Security Conference, in early 2017, the main question was what would happen in the post-Western world? Fact of the matter was that when we introduced that term in our book, it was criticized at home by some of our academic colleagues and friends as somewhat too radical, even somehow ‘outlandish’, as though we had suggested that the West proper has lost all its role and weight in the world. That wasn't what we meant. What we argued then – and argue now – is that the Western once unchallenged monopoly over international relations and in shaping and directing developments has been broken. The state of preponderance and monopoly of the past has all but come to a grinding halt, for the same vein that the monopoly of states in the world affairs has also ended. States – sovereign members of the

1. Dr. Seyyed Kazem Sajjadpour (Senior Advisor to Foreign Minister) and Dr. Ebadullah Mowlaie (Ambassador to Vienna, Austria)

United Nations who have always looked at the system as an essentially intergovernmental apparatus – are loathe to accept and come to terms with the reality that out there in the real world there also exist other actors – non-state actors -- who bear on the situation, on almost every situation, and quite seriously at that in many instances and as relates to different issues.

Fellow diplomats who have been active in multilateral processes and discussions on environment and social development know fully well that, depending on the issue and the situation at hand, states were almost unanimously dead set against the participation and involvement of non-state actors in the process, in formal sessions at the UN and in multilateral processes. Interestingly enough, when weapons of mass destruction were being discussed, it were the Western countries that opposed the engagement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and on social development and human rights, it were the developing countries that did not favor the involvement of NGOs. Well, as I said, states' opposition to non-state actors' engagement depended on the issues under discussion. Looking back, states have espoused the position of exercising monopoly over conduct of international relations, and within that general rubric, the once preponderant Western bloc enjoyed, for all practical purposes, the monopoly position of shaping events and developments. This monopoly has all but ended in both cases, and we should recognize it as a critical shift in the state of affairs on a global scale, and across the board. That position of monopoly in decision-making has practically ended, and accordingly the monopoly over the instruments of power. This is exactly where your exercise here today – simulation of the UN Security Council – becomes an important exercise with quite significant implications.

Discussion of change in the context, catalog, and composition of actors leads me to the question and concept of power. All students of international relations are quite familiar with the literature on power, sources of power, change over time in the composition of the sources of power, and what I would like to emphasize, the gradual but inexorable shift from the earlier primacy of hard power to the growing role and impact of soft power. These are quite familiar discussions, and the subject of never-ending theoretical reflection critique - arguments and counter-arguments. What I would like to venture here is to look at the concept from a somewhat different angle; that is, power could be

defined as increasing influence and decreasing vulnerability. It almost sounds like a self-evident statement - to the degree that you reduce your vulnerabilities you succeed in increasing your influence – your power. As already indicated, previously reliance on hard power, particularly military prowess, was considered the sole instrument for achieving both ends, whether in the form of gunboat policy or the strategies recognizing war as a legitimate means of foreign policy. Setting aside the theoretical or theological basis for the justification of war – or ‘just war’ as it used to be called in the West in the past – it cannot be denied that resort to and reliance on war as a means of pursuing foreign policy goals was part and parcel of state policy.

The supremacy of military prowess as the fundamental source of power was somehow shaken when economy came to the fore, a critical development during the latter half of the 20th century. That brought in its wake the paradigm that countries without a strong economy cannot play an important, effective role in the world and in international relations. The role of non-military sources of power further widened with the advent of social and cultural factors; they also came to bear on the diffuse composition of power construct. The US active interest during the 1960s and 70s in making inroads into the educational and cultural institutions of the Soviet Union as a conduit for presence and influence could be seen as a reflection of their changing perceptions of the concept of power and the ultimate goal of wielding power – then through newly-found avenues and mechanisms of soft power, even though of a quite rudimentary caliber compared with the situation these days.

Along this continuum, then came the power of ideation, a somewhat new instrument or factor, or at least an instrument that has come to be exploited in an increasing and more systematic manner by those not in the league of the traditional mighty. The ideational instrument – factor - is diverse in itself and starts with such claims as pursuit of independence, introduction of a new message and paradigm, and culminates in consensus-making; a widely respected principle and practice in the international community and multilateral world for the past several decades. This brings me again to what you are doing here at the Simulation Exercise of the UN Security Council; a body that wields real, effective power, including by the traditional powers with the military prowess. On the PDRK – North Korean - situation, obviously the US and

China, both enjoying military might, happen to be in a much stronger position to bear on the situation than others. Aside from decades-old political and ideological affinities between Beijing and Pyongyang and close cooperation in many areas, military and civilian, China's mere geographical proximity to PDRK, in itself a source of power, access and influence. This natural state of neighborhood also provides a natural conducive context and actual conduit for effective economic and trade relations, and it happens to play a unique role in the situation in quite a number of practical ways. This Chinese unique position on the one side and the US military might and presence in the Korean Peninsula on the other accords each of them the position and status to play quite a different role in the situation, both in an out of the Council, than that of other members of the Security Council, let's say Senegal or Ethiopia as non-permanent members not directly or even closely involved in the unfolding drama. Given the actual parameters of the situation, China and US can – and in fact do – exert an un-proportional role in the Council deliberations, whether to facilitate reaching consensus on the action or measure to be adopted or to undermine or torpedo a consensus decision.

But, contrary to the situation in the 1970s, 80s, and even in the 90s, this sort of situation is not the end of the story. The capacity for consensus-making has developed over time into a self-standing source of power in the multilateral world. The General Assembly, as the most universal body within the entire UN system, has served as the actual theatre for the realization of this unique source of power. Just look at the example of Malta, a very small Mediterranean island, which introduced the idea of common heritage of mankind with regard to the seabed reserves and played a central role in the UN negotiations on law of the sea. All of us are now quite familiar with the significance the concept of 'common heritage of mankind' has acquired in the work of UNESCO. As another example, you could also look at the role of another small African country, Cape Verde, in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

What is important to note, for you here in the Model UN Simulation Exercise, and for all of those interested and involved in multilateral work, is that the ideational power, both in the form of introducing ideas and conceptualization as well as in consensus-building on ideas, concepts, policies and measures, creates power. Given the composition of the Council and the stark difference between the Chartered-based status,

authority and power of Permanent Members and those of non-Permanent Members, I strongly urge those of you representing non-Permanent Members, especially the smaller countries, to look at the Exercise from this vantage point and exercise your 'ideational' instrument. This instrument, given its diverse and versatile nature, can indeed be utilized creatively towards impacting and changing the state of affairs, the actual state of relations at the international level, which many of us in different parts of the world find wanting, and in dire need of change. It is important to consider that the resolution adopted by the Security Council, on the specific issue – situation – at hand or any other issue and situation is neither everything nor a useless piece of paper. There have existed wrong or misplaced understandings in the past that perceived a Council decision in one of these two extreme, opposing alternatives. Such a dichotomous perception, embedded in or emanating from an 'instrumentalist' approach to international law, could not be farther than the reality on the ground in its multi-dimensional and complex nature. Power, let's say traditional hard power, is neither everything, nor can it be brushed aside or disregarded. A much more sophisticated understanding of the dynamic reality in the real world is needed today, for the real actors, and also equally important, for the academia and analysts. The valuable educational exercise Dr. Zakerian – ISJ - has initiated can help expand and institutionalize the kind of dynamic and proactive understanding I am talking about.

This brings me to the idea of 'thinking out of the box' – a familiar, even if quite challenging idea. Let me tell you - out of hard-won experience and also analytical reflection, each reinforcing the other – that the Permanent Members couldn't be happier to see that the rest of the world look at them as omnipotent and believe that having nuclear weapons is everything. If we, that is, the rest of the world, come to believe in such a dictum, then it follows, logically, that each and every one of us and all of us collectively, should, in fact, must, accept their unchallenged superiority, and that everybody else must act according to their peculiar whims and wishes – however selfish and self-centered they might be. As is universally known, the nuclear weapons states have the capacity to destroy themselves and the entire world tens of times, even thousands of time; what is called MAD – Mutual Assured Destruction. Given such a potential capacity and capability on the part of a limited number of powerful members of the international community, the rest of

the world is facing an impossible situation; we must acquiesce and keep silent so they would not resort to and engage in “madness”. And, of course, that is not a viable option.

A static understanding of the complex reality in the bigger picture points to the imperative of acquiescence and submission. An alternative dynamic understanding, however, depicts a different picture and scenario. The latter, albeit not a rule and perhaps more an exception, was the case even during the Cold War era and under the strict rule of the bi-polar world. The price the Islamic Republic of Iran paid in the 1980s, in the course of the Iran-Iraq War, especially with regard to the use of chemical weapons and our heroic and obviously tremendously costly resistance, is on display in this very hall, the Peace Museum. In those terrible days, all those countries now crying loud over the use of chemical weapons were not only totally silent at the UN and in the Security Council, they were in fact complicit in providing those prohibited weapons to the Saddam Hussein’s regime. As indicated earlier, they were not even interested in engaging in a *tete-a-tete* bilateral diplomatic exchange on the matter, let alone its public, open discussion by the Council.

Coming to the end of my remarks, I would also like to share this piece of history that the Security Council failed us so badly on the use of chemical weapons, notwithstanding the clear provisions of the reports of the Secretary-General documenting, beyond a shred of doubt, Iraqi use of these weapons against Iranian combatants and civilians. Under the abusive sway of the supporters of the Iraqi regime, the only thing the Council mustered itself to do was to issue a statement of the president stating that chemical weapons had been used against Iranian forces – as though we Iranians had used them against ourselves. It is so ironic, but true, that the Council’s unbelievable silence in the face of those repeated, proven atrocities did not end until Saddam Hussein, in a second ill-conceived military gamble in a span of ten years, invaded and occupied neighboring Kuwait in August 1990. All at once, the Council, in a new-found consciousness and vigor, set on a course of issuing a chain of biting resolutions under Chapter 7 of the Charter – quite unlike the acquiescent approach and conduct a decade earlier when Iran fell victim to the full-fledged military aggression of the Ba’atist Iraqi regime. The point I am making here, beyond an obvious, unequivocal reproach of the Council’s unacceptable conduct, is to share with you this finding that

even in those tough days the Islamic Republic showed to the whole world that POWER – as traditionally defined and understood – was not the only determining factor. Other factors, of a different nature and caliber, were also at work; soft power instruments, which we, and others in the international community, happen to have, and which could be utilized, even if with inescapable difficulties, to our own advantage and to the detriment of the traditional sources of prowess. And on a final note, let me ask all of you to keep in mind, here today, and more so in all your future endeavors, in the academia and wherever you end up working, that ideational power tends to be more resilient and enduring than material power. At the end of the day, when everything is said and done, it is words that vanquish swords. I am sure an approach and attitude premised on this historically-proven dictum can positively impact our future, both in our country and on a larger scale across our turbulent region. I wish all of you utmost success in deliberating on a potentially explosive situation in the Korean Peninsula, trying to avert a military conflict, and move in the direction of - hopefully – political-diplomatic resolution of a regional tension with grave consequences for international peace and security.