

INTERVIEW

Regional security organizations in times of transition

**An interview with Jaap de Hoop Scheffer
on the effects of the global shift of power
in the world today**

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Jaap de Hoop Scheffer served as Foreign Minister of the Netherlands, was Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2003, and served as the 11th Secretary General of NATO from January 5, 2004 until August 1, 2009. On September 1, 2009 Jaap de Hoop Scheffer became the first holder of the Kooijmans Chair for Peace, Justice and Security at Campus The Hague, which is part of Leiden University. This part-time position has a maximum duration of three years. He will not only focus on issues in the areas of peace, justice, and security but will also lecture in the field of international politics and the practice of diplomacy. Despite his serene reputation, he is also known for speaking his mind when he needs to. In this interview, de Hoop Scheffer, who describes himself primarily as a 'Professor of the Practice', speaks openly about his vision of the future role of regional security organizations. He also comments on the future of human rights, the OSCE and the effects of globalization on world politics and current developments in the Middle East.

You were the OSCE Chairman-in-Office in 2003 and Secretary General of NATO from 2004 to 2009. The NATO and OSCE are considered among the most important security organizations today. Both organizations operate in a rapidly changing world. The world is not the same as it was in 2004 and changes seem to affect both security and human rights issues. How can security organizations contribute to security today?

Since 2004 'power panels' are shifting. This encouraged me to emphasize the role of the G20 in my inaugural lecture last year as it affects security organizations. I think that regional security organizations will maintain their position in international relations in the future. NATO, for example, will remain the world's most important security organization. Nevertheless, the new Strategic Concept, which was adopted in Lisbon in 2010, is of vital importance for NATO's future. The new Strategic Concept places security in a wider global perspective as an essential part of today's global power shift. In addition, I foresee the founding of new regional security organizations, although this will happen over an extended period of time.

We are heading towards a world in which spheres of influence and power relations are diffuse and have to crystallize. Historians will probably come to define this period as transitional. For the foreseeable future the United States will remain the most important military power in the world. Economically, however, the United States will have to compete with China, for example, which has recently surpassed Japan and has become the world's second largest economy after the United States. Upcoming economic powers, the so-called 'new kids on the block', want to have a say in organizations like the G20. The G20 is the only platform in which these economically upcoming countries join conventional powers to discuss on equal terms.

Despite these changes, you do foresee a future for regional security organizations?

During my mandate as Secretary General of NATO, we had a discussion leading up to the new Strategic Concept. We asked ourselves whether or not NATO should control and regulate world affairs. Was it the role of NATO to act as the world's policeman? Recent cases show that there is no clear answer. For example, not all members of NATO fully agree with the current operation in Libya. I think that they had a responsibility to react, given the direct threat to the people of Benghazi. Let us not forget that Libya is in Europe's backyard. The situation in Afghanistan, however, is completely different. It is clear that NATO cannot bear all the burdens and that the mandate and power of NATO is not unlimited. Because of these restrictions it might be useful to think about new regional security structures, also in Asia. APEC and ASEAN fulfil the role of regional organizations and partnerships, but neither qualifies as a security organization.

Within the OSCE, human rights are seen as an integral part of security policy.

From a historical perspective, politico-military interests and human rights interests seem to contradict each other. China's perspective on human rights is, for example, completely different from the Western view. What will be the influence of the global shift of power on the promotion of human rights?

This is one of the key topics today. Human rights are definitely influenced by the current global shift of power. It reminds me of discussions I had with President Karzai of Afghanistan during my time as NATO Secretary General. The universality of human rights was an important topic and we did not always agree on the definition of the notion of universality. That is a debate with cultural and religious undertones and, as a consequence, is not without complications.

Today, human rights are often criticized for being a Western export product and an extension of Western power politics. What will be the role of Europe in this discussion?

Well, first of all I do believe in the universality of human rights. Nevertheless, we have to consider this matter in all its complexity. Europeans stand in a Jewish-Christian-humanistic tradition. Our norms and values evolve from this tradition. The West has been calling the shots for centuries. Naturally, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights evolved out of this Jewish-Christian-humanistic tradition and the hegemony of the West. It is called a Universal Declaration, but the West decided on its content. Human rights emerged during the second half of the twentieth century which was dominated by the West. The countries which will be the dominant powers during the twenty-first century will determine what the role of human rights shall be.

Is it possible for the West to make concessions to upcoming powers in relation to human rights issues?

Globalization might increasingly give rise to problems with respect to the notion of the universality of human rights. If promoting human rights in the world is the objective, Europe has to take responsibility. Promoting human rights is not something we have always been doing or do for fun. The promotion of human rights is deeply rooted in our Jewish-Christian-humanistic mentality. It is something that comes from the bottom of our hearts. The promotion of human rights will not become any easier during the coming decades. It will probably be a long and bumpy road. I remember a speech by Hillary Clinton, not so long after Obama took office in January 2009, in which she said: 'The United States must always stand for our values, and therefore we must raise human rights, which remains at the heart of American diplomacy. But we cannot say that that's all we're going to be talking about, or the fact that we disagree there eliminates the need for us to work together on climate change, North Korea, Iran, and so much else'. In this speech Clinton set forth a more pragmatic view on the current US foreign policy. In my opinion, human rights should and will remain at the heart of international relations; after all, they are also closely linked with political and security issues.

You know better than anyone that reconciling political reality with ideological elements in foreign policy is not always easy.

As a 'professor of the practice', I often see how academics struggle with the discrepancy between a beautifully written thesis and political reality. I want to make a contribution to reducing the gap between the two. Like I said earlier, human rights are not just an ideological aspect of foreign policy. Human rights represent our deepest values. The West cannot grant concessions on something that inspires us deeply. The former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Maxime Verhagen, rightly emphasized that promoting the universality of human rights does not allow us to easily grant concessions on the matter. But once again, the day to day reality is

more complicated than it might seem from a safe distance.

During the Cold War, the transatlantic region had to deal with the Communist Soviet Union, whose view of Human Rights was also different from the West.

That is a true and interesting point. But Communism also had its roots in the Jewish-Christian-humanistic tradition, although it had perverted those values. That makes the Cold War period entirely different from the issues we are facing today. The recent upcoming powers, such as China, India, Indonesia and South Africa, are descended from a completely different culture and tradition. That is the most difficult, but at the same time, the most fascinating aspect of our time.

What will be the outcome of this global shift in power?

That is difficult to predict. As I said earlier, the panels are shifting and you can see the consequences. Barack Obama, for example, qualifies himself as the First Pacific president. This implicates a shift in the focus of the United States from the transatlantic region to the Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Recently, someone said to me: 'The Americans have sailed the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea freely for years and now the Chinese are saying: wait a minute, these are our inland waters'. This is a direct result of the changes in the balance of power. The US will certainly remain fully committed to Europe but the security situation on the Old Continent is no longer of primary concern for US foreign policy.

What can we do to prevent the changes in the power balance from leading to new conflicts or perhaps even wars?

Much remains to be done to prevent Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' from taking place in the future. In any case, the West needs to accept that we, who have been calling the shots for centuries, will play a more moderate role in the future.

How can the OSCE contribute to security in this period of transition?

The OSCE will probably remain an important regional security organization. Due to its role at the end of the Cold War period, the OSCE has gained a lot of experience with regard to transitional periods. As frictions between cultures will apparently increase in the future, the OSCE will remain of the utmost importance. The OSCE 'soft-power tools' will be particularly important in the future. One example is ODIHR's experience in monitoring elections and providing seminars on human rights for NGOs. I do not think that the Council of Europe will be able to step into OSCE's shoes when it comes to monitoring elections.

Furthermore, the OSCE has a very important symbolic value. As Chairman-in Office of the OSCE I visited the Caucasus and Central Asia, where I experienced the positive impact of such visits. I remember a conversation with human rights organization members in Turkmenistan, who said that they felt strengthened by my visit. Nevertheless, a lot of work for the OSCE remains to be done especially when you take into account that some Turkmen human rights activists were imprisoned on the eve of my visit to Turkmenistan.

In the current debate on the events in the Arabic World, there does not seem to be a role for the OSCE and the Council of Europe, two organizations which both have a vast amount of experience with periods of transition for

states and governments. What is the reason why the OSCE and the Council of Europe take no part in this debate?

The current turmoil in the Arabic world occurs in Europe's backyard. Moreover, Europe has institutions and organizations that have the resources and experience to support societies and governments in transition. But Europe should only be directly involved when it is requested by an Arab government. NATO shall only play a minor role as well since it is not and should not be within its capacity to act as a nation builder.

I think that an important role will be taken up by civil society. Civil society recently gained an important role in the field of human rights. Assistance in the process of transition will not occur on governmental levels but rather between civil societies. There is no need for government intervention in institution building. Change has to come from within and should not be imposed by external forces. Another difficulty is the divergence between Arabic countries. The societies of Egypt and Tunisia are relatively homogeneous, for example. Yemen and Libya, by contrast, are more tribal in structure and history. I foresee only a role for Europe when it comes to institution building, when requested by the Arab nations concerned.

The events in the Arab world also show that there is still a lack of consensus on foreign policy between the EU members.

True. The current lack of consensus within the European Union is disappointing. The European Union has failed to respond adequately to the challenges in the Arab world. The United States is currently 'leading from behind' in Libya and has said: 'Europe, it is over to you, now you take the lead'. And at this point, to my great disenchantment another expression, Europe's foreign policy, has proven and has shown itself to be very immature. One month after the turmoil and actions by NATO, I have not heard one single European politician say something about a post-Gaddafi era. Even Europe's High Representative, Catherine Ashton is not involved in the discussion on the future of the Arab world. The debate is only focusing on who participates in the bombing of Libya and who recognizes the transitional council in Benghazi, which makes no sense because when I joined the diplomatic service, I already learned that the Dutch government only recognizes states and not governments.

If the OSCE is asked to become involved, which I consider highly unlikely, it has to consider it seriously. Nevertheless, I think that the OSCE could only play a minor role, since most OSCE members, and Russia in particular, consider North Africa to be beyond the borders of the OSCE.

The former Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, said: 'In the prospect of an international criminal court lies the promise of universal justice'. During the last decades we have seen the establishment of international courts among which were ad-hoc courts and the permanent International Criminal Court in The Hague. The Chief Prosecutor of the ICC, Luis Moreno Ocampo, has recently issued arrest warrants against Omar al-Bashir and Muammar Qaddafi. To what extent has international law lived up to its promise of bringing universal justice and a safer world and can it still do so in the future?

I think we will experience an ongoing discussion about the 'length and strength' of the arm of international justice. The arrest warrants against Gaddafi and Bashir and the arrest and extradition of Charles Taylor to The Hague, have shown and proven that rulers can never consider themselves immune from justice. Furthermore, the achievements of the Cambodia Tribunal, the ICTY, the ICTR and the ICC have enhanced the credibility of international law. Nevertheless, here again we can see a discrepancy between the objectifying principle of law

and political practice. The recent indictment of Gaddafi has shown, for example, that issuing an international arrest warrant is a very complex affair. The arrest warrant was not supported by everyone within the international diplomatic arena with the argument that alternatives to make him leave the country were being undermined. Granting exile or a safe way out in exchange for stopping the bloodshed was no longer an option for Gaddafi. Many contemporary politicians think that this discrepancy merits further discussion.

I remember, for instance, the negotiations with the head of the Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony, in the jungle in the North of Uganda. The international community almost came to a cease fire with Kony, but then there was the indictment of Kony and the negotiations were immediately cancelled. The massacres in the North of Uganda and the South of Sudan continued and negotiations were only resumed after another 30,000 people were killed. This shows how difficult this issue is. On the one hand, we cannot legitimize the fact that perpetrators of the most heinous crimes can escape the rule of international law. On the other hand, political reality sometimes makes it extremely complicated to indict a violator under international law.

Turning to another topic, travelling from Amsterdam to Jakarta takes less than 24 hours nowadays. Messages from one end of the world to another are sent in less than seconds. Social media are changing the notion of communication. How will these developments affect international relations?

Besides the global shift of power, there is also clearly a shift in the means of communication between people throughout the world. Communication between people from different parts of the world is increasing. Frequently, people from different backgrounds and cultures, with for example different views on human rights issues, can easily get in touch with one another. The revolution in the means of communication, along with migration, will ensure that cultures will coalesce with each other. I think that the benefits and the downsides of these developments are already apparent.

I think that the emergence of social media and the way news is brought to people will clearly affect geopolitical relations. People are nowadays influenced by 'instant news'. I remember, during my mandate as Secretary General, how difficult it was for NATO to give an adequate, public response to an attack in Afghanistan which involved innocent citizens. On the one hand, the Taliban would respond immediately by saying, for example: 'Forty innocent people killed by NATO attack'. On the other hand, NATO first had to verify the number of citizens involved in the attack before it could bring out a press statement. The time between those two statements could lead to, for example, outrage and protest among Afghan people or even condemnation by members of the international community. This shows that the timing, speed and content of 'news' are essential and are able to affect geopolitical relations.


The shift in the means of communication will contribute to a fundamental reshuffle of power relations in the international community. Security policy is, for example, increasingly linked to cyber politics, which can potentially be a very dangerous and aggressive element within international relations. Social media in general and Facebook and Twitter in particular have, for example, the power to mobilize masses of people. This development became evident in the protest in Tahrir Square in Egypt. Openness is another strength of social media, which was shown with the spread of films and photos around the world which depicted the protests and human rights violations in nations like Syria. Rulers are exposed to critique much more than they were before. For President Assad it is virtually impossible to cover up human rights violations during the current protests.

In the past people were part of the same information discourse. Today, people have their own sources of information. The potential danger is that people are informed within seconds, but incorrectly. Through social media everyone is capable of creating and spreading his or her own news and reality, and because news moves around within nanoseconds, incorrect or misinterpreted news can have very negative consequences.

Would you like to make some concluding remarks?

Like I said before, we are heading toward a world in which power relations are diffuse and not crystallized. The international diplomatic arena will no longer exist as only emanating from states. Under the influence of the global shift of power and the shift in the means of communication, other institutions and organizations, such as NGOs, multinational companies and human rights organizations will be accepted as political actors within the international diplomatic arena. Because power relations are diffuse and news and facts are spreading around the world immediately, I would like to stress that giving oneself time to reflect on current developments can prevent a relatively small spark from having major consequences in the world today.





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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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