The new world order envisaged by George Bush and others relies heavily on the concept of collective security: the idea that military aggression anywhere in the world can be deterred by a coalition of the great powers. The United Nations was regarded as the centrepiece of this structure and, with the end of the Cold War, it was anticipated that the five permanent members of the Security Council (the US, China, France, Britain and the Soviet Union) would be willing to act in unison to counter threats to world peace. The UN, it was imagined, would now be able to function in the manner it was always meant to.

The Gulf War was regarded as the first test of this new order. If the UN could successfully counter Iraq’s aggression against Kuwait, the foundation of an enduring collective security mechanism would be established and the world could look forward to an unprecedented era of peace. But how has the experience of ‘Desert Storm’, the UN-sponsored war against Iraq waged in February last year, affected these hopes and aspirations?

There is a sense in which ‘Desert Storm’ was successful. The Iraqi army was expelled from Kuwait, and in a fashion that might induce would-be aggressors worldwide to exercise more restraint in the future. Iraq’s defeat also involved the destruction of the country’s chemical weapons arsenal and put paid to Baghdad’s efforts to develop a nuclear force. The latter was some small comfort to those who had been reluctant to support the war but did so because they could not countenance the prospect of an Iraq armed with even a few primitive nuclear weapons.

But despite these achievements, and in contrast to the hopes and aspirations accompanying the UN’s response to the Gulf crisis, there remains a widespread belief that the action against Iraq did not establish a precedent for effective and
regular enforcement action by the Security Council. Indeed, the prospect of a succession of UN-endorsed 'Desert Storm' type operations in response to future world crises is regarded in many circles as unthinkable.

There are some obvious explanations for this disillusionment. 'Desert Storm' has again raised the issue of whether modern war is an appropriate means of enforcing international law. In the Gulf War, there was massive destruction of Iraq's infrastructure, and this has led to widespread and continuing suffering among the country's civilian population. That this should have happened at all is bad enough; that it was done in the name of the United Nations is, to many people, doubly offensive. There are other concerns as well: so much damage was done in such a short time and the potential for further destruction seemed so limitless; the allied campaign was enormously expensive (as much as US$60 billion, according to some estimates); and the military losses were so one-sided and were inflicted so effortlessly (who can forget the slaughter of part of the Iraqi army retreating along the road from Basra in the final hours of the war?).

Much of the effortless quality of this destruction has been attributed to the 'high-tech' character of the allied offensive, something which lent a sinister air to 'Desert Storm' and which has reinforced anxiety about the nature of warfare in the future. Finally, this war, like most others, had unintended consequences—not the least of which was the appalling plight of the Kurds and Shiites at the end of the conflict. And intended or not, Saddam Hussein's survival and continued repression of the Iraqi people must rank as one of the supreme ironies of the whole crisis.

But more fundamentally 'Desert Storm' has in no way dispelled long-standing doubts about the concept of collective security in general and about the enforcement function of the Security Council in particular. In the final analysis, collective security depends on cooperation among the great powers, and this remains, as it always has been, problematic. The great power veto in the Security Council still remains and, just as in the past, it can still be used to prevent the UN from taking enforcement or other action to counter aggression. On the occasion of the UN action against Iraq, special circumstances produced the necessary and unprecedented unanimity among the great powers; it simply happened to be in the interests of China, France, the UK and the USSR to follow the American lead. But it flies in the face of everything we know about world politics to imagine that this level of agreement will be a regular feature of future international crises.

There can be little doubt that the end of the Cold War helped resurrect the UN's collective security function and paved the way for operation 'Desert Storm'. But to imagine that the demise of the great ideological schism ensures co-operation among the great powers in the future is to attribute too much significance to the Cold War as a factor in international politics. It was certainly a principal factor in determining events in the postwar world, but it was not the only one. And in the future there will be other problems—especially those relating to ethnicity, nationalism, the environment, drug trafficking, refugees, terrorism and economic development and management—for which the resolution of the Cold War offers no necessary solution, and which will severely test the new-found harmony among the great powers. Given the current state of flux in what was the Soviet Union, who could confidently predict the future state of relations between Washington and Moscow (not to mention the other capitals of the shaky Commonwealth of Independent States)?

There is another feature of the UN action in the Gulf which should caution us against seeing it as a precedent for circumventing the problems of collective security. Iraq's aggression against Kuwait was so clear-cut as to make a collective response relatively easy to organise. But if the past is any guide, there will be numerous instances in the future, where, as in the case of Vietnam, uncertainty about the origins of a particular conflict will inhibit a collective response. Evidence for the enduring character of this particular difficulty with the concept of collective security can be seen in how hard it was for the UN to arrive at an agreed definition of aggression.

The experience of 'Desert Storm' suggests that reforms are needed in the way the Security Council exercises its enforcement function. First, there should be greater consideration of the use of sanctions; how they can be applied more effectively and what their impact might be in different situations. That sanctions had not been given sufficient time to work was a principal reason for opposition to 'Desert Storm' in Australia and elsewhere. Greater recourse to sanctions would help to meet some of the concerns about reliance on ever more destructive military panaceas and would go a long way towards mobilising acceptance of the Security Council's enforcement function.

Second, a way must be found to activate the Military Staff Committee of the Security Council. It was the intention of the UN Charter that enforcement actions authorised by the Security Council should be under the control and direction of the Staff Committee, the latter to be composed of representatives of the five permanent members of the Security Council. But the Military Staff Committee has never functioned as intended; the Korean and 'Desert Storm' enforcement actions were effectively under the control of the United States. That the Staff Committee played no role in the UN response to Iraq's aggression helped reinforce criticism that the Security Council had been usurped by Washington. Activating the Staff Committee and working out agreements with member states of the UN for the provision of forces under article 43 would go a long way towards enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of any future Security Council enforcement action.

The continuing difficulties surrounding the successful exercise of enforcement action is just one reason why more effort must be made to develop other aspects of the UN's security function. Principal among these is peace-keeping. In 1988 the Nobel Peace prize was awarded to the peace-keeping forces of the UN, and between 1988 and 1990 peace-keeping forces of one sort or another were active in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Angola, Namibia and Nicaragua. More recently, the UN has sent peace-keeping forces to Cambodia—the largest and most ambitious un-
dertaking of its sort ever—and to trouble-torn Croatia. The ethnic and nationalist tensions released by the end of the Cold War should be a sufficient reminder that the need for UN peace-keeping forces is not likely to diminish in the future. But more needs to be done to strengthen the financing, the methods and the logistical support for peace-keeping and more countries should be encouraged to earmark units of their armed forces for international service. The Security Council should also develop its capacity for pacific settlement or peace-making—including mediation, concerted diplomatic activity, conciliation and good offices—and should equip itself to anticipate rather than just respond to crises. As Brian Urquhart, former Undersecretary General of the UN, recently put it in the New York Review (7 March, 1991):

If the word ‘security’ is to acquire real significance, the UN must find a way to keep a continuing, systematic watch on destabilising developments all over the world, socioeconomic as well as political and military. Special attention must be given to dangerous build-ups of armaments...and to potential threats, especially to weaker nations.

The fundamental difficulties attaching to collective security were not resolved by ‘Desert Storm’. As in the past, the UN’s future security role will be predominantly that of peace-making and peace-keeping; the dream of a new era of international enforcement has turned sour.

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