

Collective Security and the UN, as printed in the Record, September 17, 2005

As pundits and columnists pour over the outcome of the UN summit held this week in New York, and publish their immediate and, unavoidably, superficial assessments of it, it is important to keep matters in perspective. Multilateral cooperation will continue because it must. No single country, not even the United States, is capable of managing a globalizing world. There simply is no better idea available than multilateral cooperation.

An effective UN at the heart of multilateral cooperation is a major objective for Canada. At a time of historical amnesia, strategic myopia and diplomatic inertia, it is important to remind ourselves why the world needs a system of collective security based on the rule of law. Most basically, we need to remember what the world looked like before Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and the other architects of multilateral cooperation created the system they did. A hundred years ago, the only protection against aggression was power. The only checks on would-be aggressors were the costs of fighting and the risks of failing. The issue was not law; it was ambition, and capacity. Alliances emerged to deter aggression but ultimately collapsed and catastrophic conflict followed.

The generation that fought and survived the last world war knew that World War III could not be won, in any reasonable meaning of the word “won”, and must never be fought. There had to be a better way and they believed that better way to be collective security, through the United Nations. The architects of the UN were determined that their security would be assured by combining both power and principle. The United States, then as now the militarily dominant country, would participate but all would contribute actively to international peace and security. The world would prevent war cooperatively, where it could, and prosecute war, collectively, where it must. At least equally important, the UN would help the world develop new norms and standards of international behaviour.

The aspirations for United Nations exceeded its grasp but it has nevertheless served the world better in the intervening period than its critics realize or care to admit. The UN gave birth to a body of international law that stigmatized aggression and created a strong norm against it. One result has been that there were fewer inter-state wars in the second half of the 20th century than in the first half, despite a nearly four-fold increase in the number of states. While the Cold War destroyed the post-war consensus, hobbling the security vocation of the UN for many years, and the prevention of World War III owed at least as much to nuclear deterrence and collective defence through NATO as it did to the UN, there is no doubt that the world would have been a much bloodier place in the last 50 years without the world body.

The UN gave birth to new concepts such as peace-keeping that provided a buffer between protagonists, so that inter-state wars did not reignite, and more recently peace-building, that helps failing and failed states from falling back into dysfunctionality and conflict. It helped the two heavily armed camps avoid a nuclear Armageddon by, inter alia, pioneering arms control treaties and verification, notably, the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime. That regime has made us all safer by limiting the numbers of nuclear-armed states, current challenges to the IAEA notwithstanding. The success of the United Nations has gone far beyond its security vocation, from human rights to sustainable development to health services, to education, to humanitarian coordination to international regulation in the public interest.

Sixty years is, nevertheless, a long time in the lives of institutions, as it is in the lives of people. Through the vicissitudes of time, the UN has not kept up with change nor lived up to all of our expectations. In the Alice-in-Wonderland like sessions of the Human Rights Commission, perpetrators condemn others and escape censure themselves. Worse have been the conscience-shocking failures: Cambodia, the Congo, Bosnia and Kosovo, Rwanda and now Darfur, where Security Council action has been slow, inadequate or lacking altogether. The war in Iraq undermined support for the UN, in the US because the UN did not support the war and in other countries because it did not prevent it. The oil-for-food program scandal has added another measure of dissatisfaction.

It was with these failures in mind that Secretary General Annan launched a major reform effort last year. Following months of increasingly frenzied diplomacy, 150 heads of state and heads of government, the largest such gathering in history, convened in New York this week to review progress on the five year old millennium development goals and to reform the UN. Some real progress has undoubtedly been made, for example in peace-building, i.e., helping failing states recover and the responsibility to protect people from crimes against humanity, although the real proof of these puddings will only be evident in the months and years ahead. But quite a lot, notably Security Council enlargement and the modalities of the new Human Rights Council were kicked down the road to the 60th session of the General Assembly where the same Ambassadors who had negotiated themselves into exhaustion these past months are being asked to give it another go. On some key issues, notably disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation and the International Criminal Court, no agreement could be reached at all, while development funding has stood still and women's gains at the Beijing conference have been set back. Much compromise is evident. Was the outcome equal to the need and commensurate with the effort? Alas, probably not, but it will not be possible to say definitively for some time, yet. But whether the UN has achieved reforms or "reforms" or more likely both this week in New York, there will remain no alternative to us all than making multi-lateral cooperation work.