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Is the United Nations Worth Saving?

I know from spending nearly four years in the General Assembly, the Security Council and ECOSOC that the UN has all the problems you would expect a 60 year old institution to have, and more. I know, at the same time, from first-hand experience in nearly 40 years in government that the institution remains far more important than “professional” UN-bashers would have us believe. As a consequence, most people are just dimly aware of the institution’s strengths and only too conscious of its weaknesses.

We live in a time of historical amnesia, strategic myopia and diplomatic inertia. When our security is under threat from seemingly every side -- disease, terrorism, the climate, population growth, natural disasters — we need to remind ourselves why the United Nations is still vital, and why it warrants our support.

If there is one lesson of 9/11 that we can all agree on it is surely that there is no security in a gated world. Engagement and cooperation, not isolation and unilateralism, are the keys to security. Multilateral cooperation is indispensable and the UN is at the heart of the multilateral system.

The bad news is that 154 world leaders came to the UN last month and made the least of their opportunity to reform the institution. Too many UN members were either too satisfied with the status quo or too fearful to risk change. In avoiding making things worse, a major opportunity to make things better has undoubtedly been missed.

The good news is that 154 world leaders did come to New York and did re-affirm their belief in the centrality of the UN. They accomplished enough, and agreed to put enough in train, to permit the organization to soldier on. In any case, the truth is that we do not have many alternatives-- unilateralism is achieving a good deal less than its proponents promised.

To make the case for the UN, we need to go back to first principles, to review why the world needs a system of collective security based on the rule of law, to re-examine why it needs a system in which progress is made for the world’s wretched, as well as for its rich, and to reconfirm that the United Nations is at the heart of that system. Most basically, we need to remember what the world looked like before Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and Lester B.

Pearson 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, which emerged in the 19th Century to deter aggression, ultimately collapsed and catastrophic conflicts followed. In World War I, as armies were democratized and war industrialized, 10 million people died. In World War II, with technology advancing and battles killing soldiers and citizens alike, 60 million people died — that is 60,000 times the death toll of Katrina.

In World War III, with the advent of sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, how many people would die? The generation that fought and survived the last world war, my parent's generation, knew that World War III could not be won... in any reasonable meaning of the word "win" ... and must never be fought.

There had to be a better way and that better way was the United Nations. The world would prevent war cooperatively, where it could, and prosecute war, collectively, where it must. The UN would help the world develop new norms and standards of international behaviour. The UN would defend human rights. The UN (and the Breton Woods institutions) would promote economic growth and assist countries to provide better lives for their peoples. And the UN would assist colonialism to pass into history.

What Has Worked at the UN

These aspirations for the United Nations exceeded the organization's grasp but it has nevertheless served us well in the intervening period, far better than its critics realize or admit. Despite the Cold War, which saw transgressions on both sides, the UN gave birth to a body of international law that has stigmatized aggression and created a strong norm against it. The norm against aggression came to be much more respected than not and, as it did, the legal force of the Charter grew. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union in promoting communism shattered the war-time consensus and hobbled the security vocation of the UN for many years.

Certainly, the prevention of World War III owed a lot to nuclear deterrence and collective defence through NATO. But few would contest that

bloody as the world has been in the last 60 years, it would have been a much bloodier place without the world body. 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. The UN has served as mid-wife to the birth of more than 100 countries since 1945, the great majority of which came into being peacefully. The UN's "forum function" has been indispensable to preserving relative stability, helping in the process to create the political conditions underpinning a lengthy period of economic growth and technological advancement. "Jaw, jaw", to paraphrase Churchill, is better than "war, war".

The UN has given birth to concepts we take for granted now such as peace-keeping, which provided a buffer between protagonists, so that the inter-state wars that did break out did not reignite when they ended. The UN has assisted in 170 peace settlements. More recently, as conflict has become relatively more frequent within states than between them, the UN has developed the process of peace-building, to help failing and failed states re-create their institutions of government and the economy, so that they pose fewer dangers to their own citizens-- and to us.

Perhaps the UN's most important contribution, certainly from a human security point of view, has been to the dramatic reduction of inter and intra-state wars, both of which have diminished substantially since the end of the Cold War. The UN has initiated numerous conflict prevention initiatives and has been much more ready since the Cold War to authorize its members to use force to stop internal conflicts. There have been 60 military interventions under UN auspices.

The UN has helped scores of countries in their transitions to democracy — including Cambodia, Nicaragua, Bosnia, Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa, East Timor and, more recently, Burundi, Afghanistan and Iraq. The UN has helped East and West avoid a nuclear Armageddon by, inter alia, pioneering arms control treaties and verification, notably, the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). That regime has made us all safer by limiting the numbers of nuclear-armed states, current challenges to the IAEA notwithstanding. This accomplishment was justly recognized by the Norwegian Nobel Committee a couple of weeks ago when it gave the 2005 Peace Prize to the IAEA and its head, Mohamed al Baradei. Incidentally, that brings the number of Nobel Prizes awarded to the UN to nine.

The UN has helped member countries create a body of international human rights and humanitarian law — over 500 multilateral treaties — that, as it has been progressively written into the laws of states, has helped an increasing share of the world's people live in larger dignity and freedom. To take just one example, the creation of the International Criminal Court. Now, the world's monsters can no longer sleep soundly in their beds, confident that they are immune to prosecution for abusing their own peoples, or others.

It is both fitting and re-assuring that last week, Joseph Kony, the head of the Lord's Resistance army, the army of child soldiers in Northern Uganda, as the first person indicted by the new court. "Fitting", because he truly is one of the world's monsters. "Reassuring", because the court is doing what its backers said it would do, prosecute the worst perpetrators of atrocities, not harass ordinary American GI's as the Court's opponents said it would do.

The success of the United Nations has gone far beyond its basic security purpose. In pursuing its second major vocation, economic development in the world's poorer countries, the UN has taken on the task of attacking abject poverty around the world. It has virtually invented the idea of sustainable development, reconciling the once polar opposites of economic growth and environmental protection. It was the UN that convened world leaders in the year 2,000 to establish the Millennium Development Goals, the time-bound targets covering eight crucial social and economic fields.

More broadly, the UN has helped the world to feed its hungry, shelter its dispossessed, minister to its sick and educate its children. UNICEF has inoculated 575 million children against childhood diseases. The UNHCR has housed 50 million refugees and internally displaced people over the years, including 17 million people last year. The UN Mine Action Service has assisted states party to the Ottawa Treaty in their destruction of 37.5 million landmines. The World Food Program fed 100 million people in 2003 alone.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs coordinated the massive international relief operation after the December, 2004, Asian Tsunami. It is assisting crucially in the international response to the South Asian earthquake and the Central American floods and mudslides. It even helped out in New Orleans when that city was tragically overwhelmed by hurricane Katrina. More mundanely, the UN has regulated the world's air travel, coordinated its mail services, overseen its patents, regulated its shipping and

apportioned its electromagnetic spectrum, among many other unsung but necessary tasks.

From counter-terrorism treaties, to the nuclear non-proliferation regime, to environmental protection accords, to human rights conventions, to the spread of democracy, to the promotion of economic development, the UN has been indispensable.

What Has Not Worked at the UN

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 fact, there have been distressing inadequacies.

The ECOSOC became lost in the ideologies of the Cold War and North-South struggles and, consequently, has never lived up to the hopes of the Third World; much of its power has long since migrated to other international organizations.

The behaviour of the Human Rights Commission, an Alice-in-Wonderland body where perpetrators escape censure and point the finger at others, would be funny were it not so tragic for the victims of the abuses.

Worse have been the conscience-shocking failures of the UN. The genocide in Cambodia, the millions dead in the Congo, and the ethnic "cleansing" in the Balkans are indelible stains on the soul of the world body.

In Rwanda, even as 800,000 people were being systematically slaughtered, the Security Council played word-games about genocide, preferring to talk of "acts of genocide", splitting hairs in order not to trigger the mutually agreed obligation under the Genocide Convention to intervene in the slaughter.

Now, it is Darfur that appeals to our collective conscience. Meanwhile millions have been expelled from their homes and thousands upon thousands have died.

What prospects do ordinary people have when UN members, especially its most powerful members, lose themselves in the complexities of sovereignty, ethnicity, religion, regional politics and economic interest and fail to act?

The UN's failures, humanity's failures, take many other forms. Poverty traps rob the poor of their potential in vast stretches of the world, while the unfulfilled promises of assistance by some donor countries and the graft of some host governments combine to preserve the tragic status quo.

New issues arise, notably religious fundamentalism and the potentially catastrophic combination of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction which, rather than eliciting a cooperative response, tempt the powerful to go it alone and the weak to turn a blind eye, jeopardizing as they both do so the very essence of collective security.

Fixing the United Nations

Some governments are just plain oblivious to the UN's weaknesses, or indifferent to them, trusting to fate to fix them. Others would just forsake the UN altogether and look to their own strengths in a dangerous age.

The first course would condemn the UN to an existence increasingly on the periphery of humanity's vast need. The second course would condemn the world to repeat history in infinitely more dangerous circumstances. The wiser course is to adapt the institution that our parents bequeathed to us so that it serves our own times and safeguards our children's future.

It is too early to draw all the lessons from last month's failure to adequately reform the UN. Two or three lessons already do seem clear enough, nevertheless. First, absent the calamity of a world war, which provided the incentive to create the UN in the first place, across-the-board transformation of the institution will not work. Second, the membership will nevertheless agree to delimited changes, if they are well thought out, targeted on issues on which a consensus can be created and actively but patiently promoted by governments and civil society.

That is precisely what happened with respect to the Canadian commissioned, and championed, report on the Responsibility to Protect, which was one of the few innovations adopted in New York last month.