

Notes for a Lecture

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The UN, Global Governance and Avoiding Hell

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Check Against Delivery

I have asked me to talk about Canada and Multilateral Engagement, in order to help you position yourselves to analyze the contemporary challenges faced by the United Nations security institutions, the possibility of change in these organizations, and the rationale for and nature of Canada's participation.

I am going to argue generally that despite its warts the UN is indispensable, albeit insufficient for good governance on a global scale,

And that Canada has an interest in participating actively and a responsibility to do so.

The legendary Swedish Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold once observed that the UN was not intended to take you to heaven, but only to save you from hell.

Not a lofty ambition, obviously, but, while difficult to achieve, a realistic one, given sensible policy-making and statesmanship.

It is an insight that the Government of Canada, and the Canadian Forces, would do well to take to heart.

The unspoken context for this lecture is that there is much skepticism about the UN especially in Ottawa, but also elsewhere in the country and some places abroad

some of it legitimate,

some of it misplaced

and some of it just plain fabricated.

The frequency of Ottawa's condemnations of the UN accelerated dramatically after Canada lost the 2010 Security Council election,

which suggests sour grapes as a partial motivation.

At the Appeal of Conscience Foundation's annual fundraising dinner, held in New York in September of 2012,

--the dinner Prime Minister Stephen Harper attended when he skipped the UN General Debate and snubbed the UN--

the Prime Minister asserted that his government would not try to "court every dictator with a vote at the United Nations

or just go along with every emerging international consensus,

no matter how self-evidently wrong-headed."

He slew quite a few straw men that night.

The Prime Minister is entitled to his opinion, like every other Canadian, but not to his own facts.

In reality, the UN is not an Assembly of Dictators.

According to Freedom House, the venerable US bipartisan think tank, founded by Democrat Eleanor Roosevelt and Republican Wendell Willkie,

in 2013 the number of electoral democracies in the world stood at 118.

That amounts to a little over 60% of UN members—and more than double the number of democracies in the world when the UN was founded

Also according to Freedom House, 48 countries are free (90) or partly free (58)—over 75% of UN members.

A free country, by the think-tank's definition, is one where there is open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life, and independent media.

A “partly free country is one which enjoys some but not all of those attributes.

—countries such as Colombia, Egypt, Haiti, Malaysia, Cote d'Ivoire

An “unfree “ country is one where these attributes are absent—e.g., China, Russia, Cuba, the Congo, and Syria.

Nor is there a lot of evidence that Canada has a monopoly on principles, including in foreign policy, although you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise if you have been listening to our leaders.

In that same speech in a New York hotel, the Prime Minister said that “When confronted with evil in the world, we do take a stand, we take strong, principled positions, whether popular or not.”

A year earlier, in delivering the Canadian statement in the 2011 General Debate, Foreign Minister Baird similarly asserted that

“standing for what is principled and just, regardless of whether it is popular or convenient or expedient “ ...
“is the Canadian tradition .”

Canada “will not go along”, he said, in order “to get along”.

He echoed those sentiments again in his 2013 address to the UN General Debate.

Such compliments carry considerably more weight when third parties pay them to you rather than when you pay them to yourself.

Mr. Baird also flew back to New York in November 2012 to make it clear personally just how much he and his government disagreed with the vast majority of UN members on the Palestinian bid for Non-Member Observer State status,

He delivered a lawyer-like brief for a blind-eye policy condemning the Palestinians recourse to the multilateral 193 member UN as “unilateral” and ignoring unilateral Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands since 1967 and Israel’s unilateral , illegal settlement policy which has seen 500,000 Israelis settled on Palestinian land.

Where is the principle in flouting international law and ignoring the rights and suffering of the Palestinian people?

Despite our appeal, the Palestinians won that vote by 138 in favour to 9 against (Canada, Czech Republic, Israel, Marshall Islands, Micronesia [Federated States of], Nauru, Panama, Palau, United States), our new “like-minded”, and 41 abstentions.

Members of parliament, cabinet ministers, political staff and officials, and the government's allies in the press take their lead from these criticisms.

Canadian Forces leaders have added their own considerable weight to the criticisms of the UN.

Speaking of the Bosnia war, General Rick Hillier wrote in his 2009 memoirs that:

“the UN was fundamentally incapable of running effective military operations. The UN Security Council...cannot provide effective vision, strategy and guidance to a UN military commander in the field. It certainly could not respond to dynamic and rapidly changing situations, particularly on weekends and holidays”

In the latter comment he was echoing General Lewis Mackenzie who while in Bosnia offered this advice to future commanders:

“Do not get into trouble as a commander in the field after 5pm New York time, or Saturday and Sunday. There is no one to answer the phone.”

I served on the Council in the year 2000 and supervised Canadian participation on the Council in 1999 and my own experience is very different.

The Council worked evenings, nights, and weekends, and still often does.

(By the way, General Hillyer made a similar comment about NATO in his book.

“People at the NATO headquarters were talking about all kinds of pie-in-the-sky ideas for Afghanistan but they had no strategy, no clear articulation of what they wanted to achieve, no political guidance and few forces. It was abysmal.”)

This kind of disparagement of the UN largely dates from experience in Bosnia and Rwanda.

Canadian Forces have not been significantly involved in peacekeeping operations for a long time and a lot has happened in the intervening years, starting with the adoption by the UN General Assembly of the report of the panel on United Nations Peace Operations, better known as the Brahimi report, in 2001.

I was in New York when the Brahimi report reforms were adopted.

Among many other things, the Brahimi report recognized that times had changed for UN military missions.

The lessons learned from the UN's experiences in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, as well as in Sierra Leone, required change in peacekeeping doctrine.

The principle of neutrality as between the oppressor and the oppressed in conflicts was outdated.

"Equal treatment of all parties [in conflict] can in the best case result in ineffectiveness and in the worst ...complicity with evil."

Further, realistic mandates and requisite staffing and equipping by the Council were prerequisites to success..

In the intervening years, "Civilian Protection" has become part and sometimes the most important part of new mandates.

Reforms have included:

- greater recognition that realistic mandates and requisite staffing and equipping by the Council were prerequisites to mission success.
- changes in organizational structure within the United Nations to improve the administration and management of peacekeeping operations;
 - including creation of the Department of Field Support to complement the Department of peace Keeping Operations.
- systems to recruit and deploy a vast number of military, police and civilian personnel;
 - the UN currently has 120,000 troops deployed in 14 missions with a combined budget of \$8 billion up from \$2.5 billion just 10 years ago
- improvements in training to prepare people adequately for field duty;

- modifications of budgetary and financial rules within the organization to facilitate expenditures for the rapid start-up of new missions; and
- revisions in logistics and procurement procedures to provide missions with basic equipment and commercial services required for new operations.

A potentially important reform was the creation earlier this year of the Force Intervention Brigade in the Congo, comprising 3069 troops whose purpose is described by the UN to “neutralize” armed groups.

In one of the more curious assertions in his speech in the 2012 General Debate, Foreign Minister Baird derided the UN as the locale of “fruitless, inward-looking exercises”,

“The UN spends too much time on itself.” He said, “ It must now look outwards” “Reform will take care of itself.”

Canada would henceforth ignore UN reform efforts.

Serious weaknesses remain, but the United Nations, like every large governance institution , has to continue to reform,

which makes Foreign Minister Baird's dismissal of UN reform all the more puzzling.

Whatever Canada's official views, while the reform process is often tortuous at the United Nations, real progress has been made in strengthening the UN machinery's capacity to implement complex military mandates.

For those who might want to look deeper into this area, I suggest you read "UN Peacekeeping: 20 Years of Reform" a report of former UN Deputy Secretary General, and DND Deputy Minister, Louise Frechette .

It is available on the CIGI website.

You could also read the study done for the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs,

entitled "Protecting Civilians in the Context of UN Peacekeeping Operations: Successes, Setbacks and Remaining Challenges"

by Victoria Holt and Glyn Taylor.

The lesson they all relate in their own ways is that reform is not a destination but rather a process, and that incremental change is likely to be more availing than root and branch change.

Still, it is not only Canadians who complain about the UN, especially about the UN Security Council and the Secretariat.

Amnesty International,

has said that Kofi Annan's resignation as Joint Special Envoy on
Syria was as a result of UN Security Council failure,

which showed in their words that the UN was

"tired,

out of step

and increasingly unfit for purpose"

So Is the UN Failing ?

I think it is worth taking a few minutes to refresh all of our memories

of what has been accomplished under the UN banner,

of what needs to be valued

and what is worth preserving.

Otherwise, as Joni Mitchell once sang in another context, we won't know what we've got till its gone.

What we've got is a lot,

and it shouldn't be lightly deprecated.

By and large, all the goals set for the UN in San Francisco have been met:

- saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war;
- protecting human rights;
- fostering universal justice; and
- promoting social progress and better standards of living.

With the memory of the 60 million dead in the second world war seared into their consciousness,

nation states have progressively brought the practice of war under the disciplines of international humanitarian law,

which seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict

and restricts the means and methods of warfare.

Aggression has been stigmatized, and there has not been a war between major powers since Korea.

According to the Human Security Report of 2010, over the preceding 30 years, the number of armed conflicts around the world has dropped by 80%.

Battle deaths have also decreased dramatically, as have overall lethality.

In arms control and disarmament, a series of crucial treaties have been concluded: the creation of the IAEA, the Non-Proliferation

Treaty, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Conventions, the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Landmines Treaty, the Small Arms Treaty, the Cluster Munitions Treaty, to name only the most prominent.

These agreements have not yet all been ratified, but they all have multiple and significant signatories, who are morally and politically obliged to act in conformity with them until such time as they do ratify them.

Hence the broad conformity with the CTBT, for example.

As for human rights, a whole corpus of conventions has been concluded, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

to the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and

Economic and Social Rights,

the Convention against Genocide,

the Convention against Torture,

the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,
the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against
Women,
and the Convention on Children's Rights,
to name some of the most significant.

These conventions are respected unevenly around the world but over
time are progressively assimilated into state practice.

To "foster universal justice", the international community has created
an extensive criminal justice system,

which has seen some of the worst human rights abusers—

Charles Taylor, Vlatko Mladic, Slobodan Milosevic-- face justice
in the Hague and elsewhere.

And last but not least, as regards economic and social progress,

for hundreds of millions of people, including in Africa,

poverty is down,
education is up,
and health is improved,
although the plight of the bottom billion remains to be
effectively addressed.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees assists over 34 million
refugees each year, the World Food Program (WFP) and other UN
bodies feed over 90 million people, and the World Health
Organization (WHO) and UNICEF have all done major service to the
world's poorest and dispossessed.

By 2015, 90 percent of the world's children will be immunized against
the six major vaccine-preventable diseases —
pertussis, childhood tuberculosis, tetanus, polio, measles and
diphtheria.

The UN or its constituent bodies have concluded 45 treaties on the environment

from the Kyoto Protocol on climate change

to the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion

to treaties on migratory species and endangered species and beyond.

The UN has passed 13 counter-terrorism treaties.

All told, over 500 multilateral treaties have been concluded under UN auspices.

The member countries of the UN have, thus, spawned an extensive body of international law, treaties, norms, practices and institutions that govern most facets of interstate relations.

With these “apps”, the UN Charter has become the world’s central operating system,

the motherboard of global governance, making it possible for ideas such as the Millennium Development Goals to become policy drivers, and

for other organizations, notably NATO and the G-8 and the G-20,

as well as civil society,

to function more effectively.

All of this brings greater order, predictability and progress to global affairs,

and greater modernity, security and dignity to peoples’ lives.

To quote Kofi Annan again,

The UN is not a perfect organization, but we need it....

It is the organization that has the power to convene the whole world under one roof, to come and discuss common issues.

It is the one organization that tries to sustain the norms that allow us to live in a peaceful way.

Recently, we came up with a responsibility to protect.

It is only the UN that could have come up with that sort of a norm. Who else?

While the Harper Government deprecates the UN, others—Japan, Germany, India, Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria—

compete with each other for permanent seats on the UN Security Council.

They do so because they recognize that the UN Security Council is the top security table in the world.

So, to put it bluntly, it would be short-sighted and stupid to just write off what our parents and grandparents have achieved,

as if this generation had the wit and will to start from scratch and do better.

But if the UN is not failing across the board, it is not succeeding across the board either.

Understanding why it succeeds and fails starts with the conception people have of the UN,

that it is almost a world government.

People in this room will understand that it is no such thing.

People familiar with the Westminster system of governance and other parliamentary systems some times confuse the UN organization for governance structures closer to home.

Burt the Secretary General is not a Prime Minister, and is not even a Chief Executive Officer.

He was deliberately called the Secretary General and is, as a wag once observed, more secretary than general.

The Security Council is not a cabinet and is not, except in the most perfunctory way responsible to the General Assembly.

And the General Assembly is not a parliament except metaphorically.

Not a single elected member sits in the Assembly.

One of the hardest ideas to get across is that the UN is,
to paraphrase the old Pogo cartoon character,
us,
all of us.

The UN belongs to progressives and regressives, democrats and
authoritarians, rich and poor because it belongs to the world and that
is the world we live in.

When e all agree, there is little that cannot be done under the UN
banner.

When some major powers, especially any of the veto-holding powers,
disagree, there is little that can be done, as David Bosco has observed
in *The Lessons of History*, part of your readings.

In any case, the UN is not some independent entity, run by a CEO ,
with a mandate and a capacity to act in the common interest as it sees
fit.

Nor is the UN a recalcitrant and indolent secretariat isolated from the
world in its iconic tower on First Avenue in New York.

The UN is the aggregate of the member countries, and is dependent
on their common purpose and will,
when those can be mustered,
to act.

To the extent it is like a parliament, it is one presided over by the
speaker, without a prime minister.

If anyone is failing, it is the five permanent members of the Security
Council,

who are so devoted to preserving their own veto powers that they are prepared to respect the vetoes of their peers, no matter how tragic the consequences.

The P5 are failing to find sufficient common ground to resolve the issues of the 21st Century.

To be fair, the disagreements are over big issues, some of them new, some not, but all undermining the peace in the 21st Century.

Transnational organized crime is threatening the security of people everywhere, but especially in Central America, the Caribbean and Mexico.

Africa, increasingly used as a transit way by South American gangs selling drugs to Europe, risks becoming a narco-continent.

An effective response to climate change remains elusive.

Internet governance challenges are growing and cyber security is a burgeoning issue.

Meanwhile, the next pandemic never seems more than a plane-ride away.

Meanwhile Afghanistan struggles,

Pakistan seethes

China flexes its muscles and tensions rise in the South China Sea,

and North Korea remains unstable and dangerous.

Iran continues to test the limits of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Israel threatens war on Iran to try to prevent its acquiring nuclear capability, and

Syria descends ever deeper into civil and sectarian war, pulling its neighbours into the vortex.

The international community, especially the West, has wrung its hands raw over Syria, but done little more than offer to hold the Turks' coats if they take on Assad militarily.

Meanwhile the death toll mounts inexorably past 120,000, millions are displaced from their homes and countless thousands of children are orphaned and psychologically scarred from the depraved violence they have experienced

The entire thesaurus of condemnations of the warring parties has been exhausted -- long since by Ottawa with its heavy emphasis on policy by press release.

Two of the few bright spots are the ongoing destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, and the interim agreement between the P5 plus one and Iran on curtailing Iranian nuclear weapons capabilities.

The point I am making is that in judging the necessity of the UN, we need to be aware that the UN's challenge is that not only are some of its members intransigent, many of its problems are intractable.

Members have incompatible visions of the future and disagree on the appropriate role of the organization and the grounds for collective action.

Perhaps most fundamental is the issue of philosophy.

Does the state exist to serve and protect the people, or is it the job of people to serve and protect the state?

If you believe that the state exists to serve and protect the people, your sympathy must be with people trying to overthrow a despotic government.

If, like the Russians and Chinese apparently do, you believe that the people serve the state,

you endow any government with legitimacy, including those built on secret police, torture, militias and coercion.

Whoever gets to the top in a state,

however he (it's always "he") gets there, or stays there,

that person is the legitimate leader and should not be interfered with by outsiders.

The UN Charter, with its proscription of interference in the internal affairs of states, tends to accept the latter philosophy.

International practice in recent years,

which has seen outside intervention in several states

and the bringing of justice to major human rights abusers,

has tended to defend the principle that the state exists to serve and protect the people.

Hence the adoption by the entire UN, including the members of the UNSC, of the Canadian led norm, the Responsibility to Protect,

which may be why the Russians and Chinese appear to have decided to make a stand on Syria.

But the philosophic question of who serves whom, the state or the people, is a major one.

And it is at the heart of divisions over Syria and the Responsibility to Protect.

That, and some residual buyer's remorse on the part of the Non-Aligned Movement.

The only bright spot is the ongoing destruction of the chemical weapons

What Should Canada do in These Circumstances?

Here are a few things the Canadian government can do in these very difficult circumstances to make global governance more effective,

beyond its too frequent to count declaratory statements.

First, and most basically, Ottawa should value diplomacy, especially multilateral diplomacy, and invest in it, not deprecate it.

In a multi-polar world, diplomacy, and not just economic diplomacy, will matter more than ever.

Ottawa needs to return to the hard work of diplomacy and exit the alternative universe it has created for itself.

If the United States, now and for years to come the leading global power, is to continue to wield decisive influence, it will need to fix its myriad governance and economic problems.

But, even then, a return to the dominant status quo ante is not in the cards; others can and will assert legitimate claims to participate in global leadership.

The United States will likely find it beneficial — even necessary — to share its burdens and some of its authority with its allies.

It will even find it advantageous to accept that others will sometimes work together without it.

It is clear that the Obama administration at least feels the US does not need a bigger foreign policy, but rather a smaller defence policy.

Canada can pick up a larger share of the governance burden — diplomatic, military and development cooperation .

Second Ottawa should recognize the ongoing value of the UN to Canada — and of Canada to the UN.

Multilateralism is not a four letter word.

As David Bosco has observed, the UN Security Council and the General Assembly are the loci for regular and sustained contact on the major, and the emerging issues, of our times.

It is a vehicle for diplomacy, including Canadian diplomacy, and in fact a very useful one for rallying broader support for Canadian objectives..

Ottawa should stop sitting in judgment of the organization and start taking some responsibility for improving and reforming it.

Among other things, it could tackle the UN's governance issues,

especially Security Council membership, the veto and the process for selecting the Secretary General

which is less transparent than the selection of a pope

Third, Ottawa should recognize the UN's limits and promote other forms of cooperation, notably minilateralism.

In an age of "messy multilateralism",

universal entities like the UN need "minilateral" groups of key countries

who can work together across regional boundaries and political divides to achieve results

that can be commended to the world and the UN membership at large.

The G-20 is one such minilateralist invention.

The government should push its partners to broaden the mandate of the G20 to discuss security issues.

It is a waste of resources to bring the world's most important leaders together and miss the opportunity to have them deal with whatever the most important political issues are— be the economic issues

If G20 leaders are confined to work that otherwise could be done by finance ministers , the institution courts the risk of death by boredom.

The recent G20 meeting in St. Petersburg, where G20 leaders made progress on the eventual Syrian chemical weapons agreement, is a good example of what G20 leaders can do when necessary.

Fourth, Canada can lead in developing policy coalitions of the willing on specific issues.

These will include new, informal coalitions of the policy-willing among countries that are not themselves “great powers” by the traditional definition, but that nonetheless have compelling strategic interests, and the diplomatic and, sometimes, military capacity, economic strength and political disposition to make a significant difference.

Ottawa could promote such partnerships among the second tier countries of the G20, and others.

Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, Korea and Australia are already moving in this direction in order to bring emerging security issues to the top tables.

And Fifth, Canada can lead in innovating the governance response for a world that is transforming itself at a rate never before seen.

Canada can lead in the promotion of new forms of cooperation, notably multi-stakeholder governance of mega issues such as climate change and Internet governance which require cooperation by governments, business and civil society to meet the challenges arising in the global commons that defy conventional, state-based management.

Conclusion

All of this is admittedly a tall order, more a menu for Canada than a prescription.

But dangerous times demand leadership—from the front, side and behind—and it is in Canada's interests that Ottawa accept its responsibilities.

If Canada and others can muster the vision, the will and the wisdom to lead, the UN will help us save ourselves from hell.