

**Notes for a Lecture**

**by Paul Heinbecker**

**at Ryerson University,**

**Toronto**

**The United Nations in an Age of “Messy  
Multilateralism”: Irrelevant or Indispensable?**

**February 12, 2013**

*Check Against Delivery*

Today, I am going to discuss international cooperation and its importance to Canada.

In doing so, I will focus significantly but not exclusively on multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations.

I am going to make three broad points;

1. that in our increasingly integrated and complex age, multilateral and minilateral state-based and innovative, multi-stakeholder cooperation, i.e., government, industry and civil society collaboration,

are more necessary than ever to good governance on a global scale,

2. that, despite its flaws, the UN is indispensable to good global governance, albeit insufficient, and

3. that Canada has both an interest in contributing to global governance, including especially via the UN, and a responsibility to do so.

Finally, I will conclude with some suggestions on what Canada could and should do.

## **Overview.**

Nearly half way through the second decade of the 21st century, the contours of the new era in international relations are becoming clearer.

No country or even any group of countries seems likely to determine the course of global affairs.

The United States, still the world's greatest power, is handicapped by modest economic growth, chronic fiscal deficits, unemployment and political gridlock.

The US is weary with global leadership and unwilling and unable to shoulder every burden.

Europe is tangled in overlapping economic woes including anemic economic growth, persistent banking and financial problems, and industrial uncompetitiveness in its South.

It has little common vision of its place in the world and an underperforming foreign policy.

China, Brazil, and India, which were the drivers of global economic growth and expansion in the past decade, turn out also not to be immune to global shocks.

As China begins to feel the gravitational pull of economic convergence, its rocketing GDP growth rates are falling well below the two digit figures that catapulted it to the rank of world's second biggest economy.

Politically, it is conducting a more assertive foreign policy than heretofore, but with the consequence of uniting others in opposition.

Brazil's once impressive growth rates have slowed as global demand for its commodities and resources weakens and upward pressure on its currency makes its products less competitive in world markets.

India is grappling with a litany of problems that are stymying its progress, not the least of which is pervasive female illiteracy, an

education system that lags its competitors, chronic corruption and pervasive red tape

Japan, still the world's third largest economy, is struggling to cope with a shrinking birth-rate and a lethargic economy, and to respond militarily to a steadily more powerful China.

Meanwhile, Russia is suspended between nostalgia and ambition, taking security risks in Ukraine that manifest how large the gap in understanding is between West and East.

Unilateralism –going it alone—in these circumstances seems likely to be unavailing.

The alternative is cooperation, both multilateral and minilateral.

Diplomacy looks likely to be a growth industry.

At its core, the concept of “multilateralism” centers on the collectively agreed norms, rules, and principles that guide and govern interstate behavior.

Multilateral cooperation is based on generalized reciprocity, in which states make common undertakings and agree to act cooperatively.

There are several, evolving multilateral approaches to managing the collective action problems of our complex and globalized world.

First and most basically, there is the UN and its Charter, the central operating system of global security.

In addition to the UN is the “new” minilateralism, sometimes informal, sometimes more structured, for example the G20, the G8, the G7, ASEAN, etc.

Beyond that is multistakeholder governance, notably of the Internet, which requires innovative forms of cooperation.

## **The United Nations**

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 a realistic one, assuming sensible policy-making and statesmanship.

It is an insight that the Government of Canada would do well to take more to heart.

The unspoken context for today's lecture is the skepticism about the UN in Ottawa especially, but also elsewhere in the country and abroad



Some of the disappointment is legitimate,  
some of it misplaced  
and some of it just plain feigned, even fabricated.

Ottawa has frequently claimed to be conducting a principled foreign policy—one that stands for democracy, free enterprise, human rights and individual freedom.

And it has criticized the UN directly and inferentially for its shortcomings in this regard.

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

In September 2012, 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.”

Mr. Harper’s foreign minister, Mr. Baird, has made similar statements.

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

According to Freedom House, the venerable US bipartisan think tank,

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 existing when the UN was founded.

In the infamous Security Council vote, Canada did not even carry all of the democracies.

[Nor, it is safe to say, has Canada a monopoly on principles in foreign policy,

although you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise if you have been listening to our leaders.

In delivering the Canadian statement in the 2011 UN General Debate, Foreign Minister Baird 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.

In the Israeli Knesset earlier this year, the Prime Minister voiced the same sentiment when he asserted that it is “a Canadian tradition to stand for what is principled and just, regardless of whether it is convenient or popular. “

(Perhaps they have the same speech writer.)

(By the way, such compliments would carry considerably more weight if third parties paid them to us, instead of doing it ourselves.)

The implication of this political hyperbole is that Canada is perhaps uniquely principled in its foreign policy.

But where is the principle in turning a blind eye to the flouting of international law?

Ottawa can readily condemn Russian occupation of Crimea but remains silent on Israeli occupation -- since 1967 -- of the West Bank.

How can the government claim respect for the rule of law and go mute on the 131 settlements and the 550,000 Israeli settlers living illegally in the West Bank?

I think it is worth taking a few minutes to refresh all of our memories of what the world has accomplished under the UN banner, of what needs to be valued and what is worth preserving.

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

What we've got is actually 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.

Aggression has been stigmatized,

and there has not been a war between major powers since

Korea.

Nation states have progressively subjected the practice of war to the

disciplines of international humanitarian law,

which seeks to limit the effects of armed conflict

and restrict the means and methods of warfare.

According to the Simon Fraser Human Security Report of 2010, over

the preceding 30 years, the number of armed conflicts around the

world dropped by 80%.

Battle deaths also decreased dramatically, as had the overall lethality

of war.

In arms control and disarmament, a series of crucial treaties have been concluded:

the treaty creating the International Atomic Energy Agency (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 respect of the CTBT, for example, including by the United States.

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”, a fundamental purpose of the UN, the international community has created an extensive criminal justice system,

which has seen some of the worst human rights offenders—

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

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 some 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.

On the environment, the UN or its constituent bodies have concluded scores of treaties

from the Law of the Sea

to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change

to the Montreal Protocol on ozone depletion  
to the Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movement  
of Hazardous Wastes  
to the Desertification Convention  
to the Convention on Biological Diversity  
to treaties protecting migratory and endangered species.

Further, the UN has passed 13 counter-terrorism treaties.

All told, perhaps 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 the former Secretary General Kofi Annan,

The UN is not a perfect organization, but ....

It is the organization that has the power to convene the whole world under one roof....

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

While Ottawa 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 self-defeating to just write the organization off.

But if the UN is not failing across the board, it is likely safe to say that no one here today believes it is succeeding across the board either.

Terrorism, organized crime, climate change, Syria, Darfur, North Korea, Somalia, Palestine, even Ukraine,

all are all current, serious examples of the consequences of a divided UN.

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

that it is almost a world government.

It is, of course, 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 popularly elected person sits in the Assembly.

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

Nor is there a sergeant-at-arms to keep order—or a sheriff to arrest perpetrators

The UN's strength is also its weakness

It belongs to all of us, progressives and regressives, democrats and authoritarians, rich and poor.

It belongs to the world and that is the world we live in.

When 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, paralysis follows.



The basic point is that the UN is not some independent entity, run by a CEO, with a mandate and the resources 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 political will,  
when those can be mustered to act.

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 for others.

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

To be fair, the disagreements are over big issues -- some new, some not -- but all intractable and all undermining the peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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.

That brings us to other instruments of diplomacy which can help resolve or at least manage intractable problems --specifically minilateralism.

## **Minilateralism**

It is largely a truism, that the larger the number of participants in a debate, the greater the difficulty in reaching a consensus.

In minilateralism, cooperation is promoted and advanced through smaller groups that typically involve the most powerful actors in the international system.

The Security Council is an obvious example of “minilateralism” in practice, as is the G20 and the G7 and G8.

The G20 is potentially the most important innovation in global governance since the creation of the UN , NATO and the EU.

The G-20 has, nevertheless, struggled so far in addressing the highly political tasks of resolving the current account, trade, and budget imbalances conundrum,

whose roots go deep into the national economic and political philosophies of the world's largest economic players

and touch their respective concepts of sovereignty.

It has been even less effective in addressing itself to major political crises.

The agreement at the Moscow g20 to get rid of Syrian chemical weapons is one of its few security successes.

## **What Should Canada do in These Circumstances?**

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

Beyond its too frequent to count declaratory statements.

First, and most basically, Ottawa should value diplomacy, including 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 of self-serving declarations partisan politics-serving gestures.

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.

The UN Security Council and the General Assembly are the locii 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 embrace as well other forms of plurilateral 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 minilateral group.

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 last 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 should 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 “tier two” 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 exercise leadership in e promoting 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.