

Notes for a Presentation

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Council

The United Nations Security Council:

What It Is; Why It Matters

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Check against delivery

I have been asked to talk about the United Nations, particularly about the Security Council.

how it functions as the UN's most powerful body

why the Security Council (and the UN generally) still matters

what Canada's relationship with the Security Council has been

and what explains Canada's failure to win a seat more recently.

In summary, I am going to argue that, despite its shortcomings,

the UN remains indispensable to preserving and promoting peace and progress,

that, despite some high profile failures, the UN is broadly effective in preventing and responding to conflict in fragile states,

that the UN is integral to, albeit insufficient for, cooperative global governance,

and that the UN is reforming, innovating and adapting to changing times,

I am also going to discuss what in my view are the ill-advised and counterproductive postures adopted by the Canadian government towards the UN.

And I will argue that the Government of Canada would do better to engage the UN and promote reform than to sit in petulant, ineffective judgment on the periphery.

UN Successes

I think it is worth taking a few minutes at the outset to refresh our respective memories of what has been accomplished under the UN banner, of what merits respect and preservation.

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

What we've got is actually a lot, and it shouldn't be casually deprecated.

By and large,

and despite the fair and unfair criticisms of the organization,

the UN is broadly meeting all the goals set for it in San Francisco in

1945:

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war;
- to promote human rights and the equality of states under the Charter;
- to foster universal justice and respect for treaties and the rule of law; and
- to promote social progress and better standards of living.

As I have been asked to focus in on the UNSC, I will talk mainly about preserving the peace direct, although all of the UN's purposes and programs are inter linked.

As former Secretary General Kofi Annan once observed, without security there is no prosperity, without prosperity there is no security and without human rights and justice there is no security or prosperity.

The "social work" done by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UNICEF, the World Food Program, The World Health Organization, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance, among others, is indispensable to the promotion and preservation of peace and security.

Preserving the Peace

Mindful of the 60 million people who perished in the Second World War, nation states have progressively brought the resort to war under the disciplines of the UN Charter.

The Charter constitutes the international “rules of the road” that most countries see as being in their interest to respect, most of the time.

UN member states have, further, brought the conduct of war under the rules of international humanitarian law,

in order to restrict the means and methods of warfare and mitigate the effects of combat .

As a consequence, in part, of the universal endorsement of the UN Charter, aggression has been stigmatized,

e.g., Russia’s aggression against Ukraine,

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

According to the Human Security Research Project of Simon Frazer University (Press Release March 3, 2014),

from the early 1990’s to the present day,

the overall number of conflicts has dropped by some 40 percent, while the deadliest conflicts, those that kill at least 1000 people a year, have declined by more than half.

The decline in the fatality rate in combat has been even more dramatic.

According to the Human Security Report of 2013, in 1950, the annual rate of (reported) battle-related deaths per million of the world's population was approximately 240;

in 2007, it was less than 10 per million, a 24-fold decrease.

There are many causes for this decline, of course, from human progress to education to economic integration to nuclear deterrence to technological advance to the expansion of democracy.

But the UN has also been a significant factor.

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, the UN has spearheaded a massive upsurge of international activism

comprising multilateral, multi-disciplinary UN missions,
working in cooperation with other global and regional
organizations and with countless non-government organizations.

(see the Human Security Report of 2013)

Since 1989, the Security Council has authorized 31 “peacekeeping”
missions--compared to 15 in the previous 40 years (source: UN List of
Peacekeeping Operations 1948-2013).

This activism has been directed towards preventing wars,
stopping those wars that could not be prevented,
and preventing those wars that stopped from restarting.

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

Over 500 multilateral treaties have been concluded under UN auspices

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

the motherboard of global governance,

making it possible for ideas such as the 2015 Millennium

Development Goals and the follow-on sustainable development goals to drive policy and

making it possible also for other organizations, notably NATO and

the G-8 and the G-20,

as well as civil society,

to function more effectively, and with less opposition than if the

universally inclusive UN did not exist.

All of this brings greater order, predictability and progress to global affairs,
and greater modernity, security and dignity to peoples' lives.

To quote 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 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. “

The UN's strength—its universality-- is also its weakness

The UN belongs to **all** of us, progressives and regressives, democrats and
authoritarians, rich and poor.

It belongs to the world and reflects the diversities and contradictions of that world.

Not an Incipient Global Government

It is important to understand what the UN is and what it is not.

The legendary Swedish Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold once observed that the UN was not intended to take you to heaven,

Just to save you from hell.

Not a lofty ambition, obviously,

but still a worthwhile one and realistic, albeit still difficult to achieve.

It is an insight that the Government of Canada

would do well to remember.

Misunderstandings also abound about what the UN is, and what it does.

They largely start with the misconceptions many people have of the UN,

that the UN is an incipient world government

that it has executive capacity to act independently to prevent and end

conflict,

and that the existence of conflict is, *ipso facto*, evidence that the UN is

failing in its most basic responsibilities of saving the innocent from

violence.

Like planes landing safely at Vancouver international airport, UN success

stories are rarely news—east Timor, Kosovo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Ghana,

Burundi, Mozambique, Angola, Mali, Haiti

Its failures though do make headlines, often tragic ones, such as Rwanda

Srebrenica, Darfur, Libya.

The UN is of course not an all powerful government, capable of coercing good behavior.

People familiar with the Westminster system of government and other parliamentary systems are perhaps more prone than others to confuse the UN organization with governance structures closer to home.

They think of the Secretary General as the equivalent of a Prime Minister, the Security Council as a kind of cabinet and the General Assembly as a parliament.

None of these statements is true.

In reality the Secretary General is neither a Head of Government nor a Head of State.

According to Article 97 of the UN Charter, the Secretary General is “the chief administrative officer of the organization”.

When the UN was founded, the position was deliberately entitled
“Secretary General”

Its incumbents have been, as a wag once observed, more secretary than
general.

They do not, as Prime Ministers do, appoint their ministerial collaborators.

The reverse is closer to the truth.

Secretaries General are chosen by the Five Permanent members of the
Security Council,
and effectively serve at their pleasure.

The P5 do not select Secretaries General who are likely seriously to
challenge them and their policies and privileges, much less defy them.

In addition to his¹ administrative responsibility of implementing the decisions of the membership expressed through the Security Council and the General Assembly,

and of managing a large secretariat responsible to 194 states party,

the Secretary General has essentially two powers, one statutory and one intangible.

Under the first, the Statutory Power, the Secretary General “may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security”,

And, with the second power, he can use the “bully pulpit” of the UN to exhort,

and sometimes to embarrass,

¹ All Secretaries General have been male.

member states to do better,

He can also effectively go over government's heads to appeal direct to their people, as Ban Ki Moon did in the Fall in his interview with Peter Mansbridge of the CBC on climate change.

The Secretary General can lend the weight of his office and the still generally high regard in which it is held around the world,

to build support for emerging norms of behaviour as Secretary General Annan did for the Responsibility to Protect

He can also spend the currency of his personal credibility, where sufficient reserves exist.

But his executive powers are limited.

Notably, he cannot on his own decision deploy troops, much less employ troops in combat;

he is dependent on member governments to provide troops to the UN, and he is dependent on the Security Council to deploy them.

He cannot even alone impose economic sanctions on rogue states.

In private sector terms, he is far from being a Chief Executive Officer, with the near unbridled decision-making authority that goes with such a position.

He does not even preside over meetings of the Security Council.

That is done by Security Council permanent representatives on a monthly rotating basis.

The Security Council is not accountable to the Secretary General.

The reverse is true.

Nor, except in the most perfunctory way, is the Council even responsible to the General Assembly.

The Five Permanent members enjoy a unique status, far beyond the rest, including the elected members of the Security Council.

The P5 are permanently in the centre of the diplomacy action at the most important security table on earth,

which positions them to affect every security issue that comes before the Council

And to protect their own interests.

The P5 are constantly engaged in diplomacy with each other

— a kind of modern day global *Concert of nations*,

which helps to avoid conflict between them by miscalculation or inadvertence.

No P5 power has gone to war against another P5 power since Korea, and strictly speaking not even then, as China was not a UN member at the time.

Permanent members of the Council also enjoy,

in both senses of the word “enjoy”,

veto over UN action.

No Council resolution can be passed against the will of any P5 member.

The veto was the price paid by the international community to create the UN in the first place.

Neither the US nor the (defunct) USSR would have subjected themselves to majority voting on war and peace.

No veto, no UN

Russia/the USSR leads the league in veto usage since 1945 having exercised its veto power 101 times since 1945,

followed closely by the US (79)

and more distantly by the UK (29), France (16) and China (9)

(Dag Hammarskjold Library, UN, New York, 2014).

A bit over half of the US vetoes (42) were cast on Israel-Palestine and Middle East resolutions,

while the vetoes cast by the remaining P5 members covered a range of issues.

The veto is near omni-present, either in its exercise or in the threat of its exercise, which happens far more often.

When all P5 members agree, there is little that cannot be done under the UN banner.

When there is disagreement, stasis prevails, as is the case with Syria.

The Charter recognizes two kinds of Security Council decision—
the peaceful settlement of disputes under Chapter VI,
and the coercive settlement of disputes under Chapter VII.

Chapter VII foresees the imposition of economic and other sanctions,
and ultimately military engagement with the offending state.

Decisions under Chapter VII are legally binding on all UN members.

The obstacles to action are the member states,
primarily the P5,
not the “professional” UN as an entity or the Secretary General.

The P5 are failing to find sufficient common ground to resolve the issues of
the 21st Century—Syria, ISIS, Ukraine, Palestine.

They are members of the most privileged club on the planet,

They are devoted to preserving their own veto powers
so much so that they are prepared to respect the vetoes of their peers,
no matter how tragic the consequences for others, as in Syria.

All efforts to limit the veto, e.g., to restrict its use to matters of vital national
interest,

or to eschew its use in cases of mass atrocities,

ideas advocated by the French,

have failed thus far.

As have all efforts to revise Security Council membership to reflect
contemporary power relationships and to remedy the perceived legitimacy
deficit.

But the world though is changing,

and new power centres will inevitably make their marks on the UN

as a whole

and on the Security Council in particular.

And they will not necessarily have the same hierarchy of values as the West has had in its time of unchallenged ascendancy.

While the Harper Government deprecates the UN, others

—Japan, Germany, India, Brazil, South Africa, Nigeria—

seek 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.

The UN is the aggregate of the member countries, and is dependent on their common purpose and political will to act,

when those can be mustered for the common good.

The point is that in judging the Security Council and the UN as a whole, we are not judging the professional secretariat, or the iconic building on First Avenue in New York.

We are judging the member countries, including ourselves.

We need to be aware that the organization's challenge is that not only are many of its problems intractable, some of its members are intransigent.

Canada and the United Nations

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 is misplaced –the product of a unique Canadian blend of misconception and misunderstanding.

and some of it is 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, the Prime Minister literally went out of his way to snub the UN.

Instead of participating in the annual General Debate, attended by other heads of government, he spoke to the Appeal of Conscience Foundation's annual fundraising dinner, held literally down the street from the UN in New York,

There, he 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, however, the argument that the UN is an Assembly of Dictators is a straw man.

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

in 2013 the number of electoral democracies in the world stood at 122.

That is 63% of 194 UN member countries, up from 41 % in 1989.

Further, according to Freedom House's Freedom Index, which evaluates the state of freedom in the world as a factor of the civil liberties and political rights of individuals,

147 countries are free (88) or partly free (59).

Civil liberties ratings are based on an evaluation of freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights.

Political rights ratings are based on an evaluation of electoral processes, political pluralism and participation, and the functioning of government.

In the infamous 2010 UN Security Council election, Canada did not even carry all of the UN's 122 democracies.

In fact, the democracies abandoned us in droves in the second round of voting,

after most had kept their commitments to support us in the first round.

They preferred a bankrupt Portugal—also a democracy—to a solvent Canada.

Although you could be forgiven for thinking otherwise if you have been listening to our leaders,

Canada does not have a monopoly on principles in foreign policy,

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.)

In any case, such compliments would be considerably more satisfying if third parties paid them to us,

instead of our having to do pay them ourselves.)

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

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

Ottawa readily and rightly condemns Russian occupation of Crimea but remains silent on Israeli occupation -- since 1967 -- of the West Bank.

And where is the sense in deprecating UN reform?

In his speech to the General Debate in 2012,

a speech sitting in judgment of the UN's presumed failings, Mr. Baird argued that

“... we cannot and will not participate in endless, fruitless inward-looking exercises.

Canada's Permanent Mission to the United Nations will henceforth devote primary attention to what the United Nations is achieving, not to how the UN arranges its affairs.

The UN spends too much time on itself.

It must now look outward.

The preoccupation with procedure and process must yield to the tracking of substance and results.

If the UN focuses on the achievement of goals—such as prosperity, security and human dignity—then reform will take care of itself.

This and other parts of the speech present rich targets for critics of current Canadian foreign policy.

I will restrict myself to two observations.

First is the obvious point that all large, successful organizations

—from Toyota to Google to the Government of Canada—

engage in continuous reform and innovation to remain relevant and effective,

Second most knowledgeable people would consider that the UN is indeed focussing on the achievement of goals

--the Millennium Development Goals are perhaps the most obvious example.

The government also renounced the Kyoto Accord, walked away from the

Desertification Treaty, the only country to do so, failed to ratify

the Arms Trade Treaty, the only NATO country to do so and failed to ratify

the Cluster Munitions Treaty.

In fact, Mr. Baird did not adduce a single example of the problem he was decrying.

Conclusion

I have argued generally that despite its shortcomings the UN remains indispensable to preserving and promoting peace and progress,

That, despite some high profile failures, the UN is broadly effective in preventing and responding to conflict in fragile states.

That the UN is fundamental to, albeit insufficient for, cooperative global governance, and

That the UN is reforming, innovating and adapting to changing times, including regarding military missions,

and that Canada would do better to engage with the UN and to promote reform rather than to sit petulantly in disgruntled judgment on the sidelines.