Notes for a Statement

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The UN Has Its Own Problems

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In attacking Iraq against the will of the international community, and in mishandling the occupation, the US did itself, and the UN, incalculable harm.

Nevertheless, it would simply be wrong to lay all the UN's misfortunes at Washington's door.

Rote apologies for the UN are no less damaging than mindless attacks on it.

The UN Charter was written in and for a different age and treats national sovereignty as an absolute and constant good.

As a consequence, over time a contradiction has arisen between the most basic purpose of the UN, "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," and one of its cardinal tenets, state sovereignty.21

Because most of today's wars, the Iraq war being a significant exception, currently arise within the

borders of existing states, the inhabitants often cannot be protected without intervention from outside.

There is no consensus on how to respond to this new reality.

Equally, there is no agreement on how to reform the ageing, unrepresentative Security Council, still the most important political/security body on earth.

Fundamentally, the UN's strength, universal membership, has also become its weakness.

Its membership has swollen to 191 countries, making the achievement of consensus on any issue a Sisyphean task.

As the UN has expanded and the world economy has been globalized, disparity between the richest and

poorest has deepened, making the North-South economic divide ever more pronounced.

Poverty eradication and development became the near exclusive compass points of the South, which often dismissed security as an issue of interest primarily to the North and of little consequence to the South.

The poorer countries, feeling vulnerable to the more powerful states, especially to the sole superpower, banded ever more resolutely together in the hoary Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and G-77.

Combined with the strong preference for consensus in the General Assembly, this herd instinct made lowest-common-denominator outcomes the norm and provided a ready tool for political mischief, which was happily exploited by spoilers in the

service of long dead ideologies and activists and reactionaries with dubious political objectives.

Further, faced with the impossibility of moving the Security Council on Middle Eastern issues, largely because of the US veto, the Arabs under Palestinian leadership made the General Assembly their default forum.

They have ready allies in much of the South, which has only relatively recently emerged from occupation and/or colonialism and which identifies with the Palestinians' powerlessness and plight.

Meanwhile, regional groups, which are indispensable to the efficient administration and management of the business of UN bodies, have themselves sometimes produced destructive electoral outcomes, notably in the stunningly

counterproductive election of Libya to the chair of the Commission on Human Rights.

Under these various pressures, the General Assembly has come to be seen in some countries, notably in the US, but also in Canada, as more theatre than parliament, with performances that are usually ignored outside the UN's immediate precincts, except where they censure Israel.

The world has also changed.

There is very little international agreement on what the most important issues are, much less on how to resolve them.

Most fundamentally, there is little common perception of the threat, including terrorism.

There is correspondingly little agreement on how to respond.

Some of the most dangerous confrontations attract only episodic Security Council engagement: the China-Taiwan issue, the Korean peninsula division and the South-Asian nuclear standoff.

While the number of interstate conflicts has declined in recent years, the proportion of intrastate conflicts has increased and it is here that the

contradictions inherent in the UN Charter itself have become a central issue.

Further, economically and socially, the world is polarized between rich countries and poor.

There is no real consensus about the contributing factors of the all pervasive issue of poverty and how to remedy it.

At once seen as a cause and a cure, globalization has generated great wealth and considerable disparity within and between countries and revealed how inadequate existing institutions are for coping with the problems of the twenty-first century.

[1]The UN Remains Indispensable

None of this is to say that the UN has failed definitively and that it is time to walk away from it.

Warts and all, it remains indispensable.

Most fundamentally, the UN Charter is at the heart of the development of international law.

Few outside the ambit of American exceptionalists doubt that the rule of law is preferable to the law of the jungle; a world governing itself by freely accepted laws is likely to be safer and more stable than one run by the self-appointed and self-interested powerful.

In forty years time, would Canadians be content to grant similar, exceptional dispensations from international law to China as they might concede to the US now? Would Americans?

Global problems can only be solved through over arching cooperation.

From security to trade to finance to the environment to human rights, in sum, the complex of treaties, conventions, norms, institutions and formal and informal networks that the world has created, and continues to create, is integral to international order and prosperity.

Multilateral cooperation, not multilateralism as an ideal or end in itself, is essential.

For example, while the UN is often an object of uninformed criticism on terrorism, the UN General Assembly has passed a dozen basic counter-terrorism treaties.

As these treaties have been progressively absorbed into domestic legislation around the world, norms and standards of international behaviour have been established and performance and compliance enhanced.

What is true for terrorism is equally true for human rights, where the UN has passed six core treaties, including on women's rights;

for arms control and disarmament, where the UN is at the heart of the nuclear non proliferation regime, including its weapons inspection capability;

for health, where the World Health Organization is central to the effort to control and eradicate communicable and other diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and SARS;

for the environment where the UN has generated seventy-six treaties, including the ozone treaty so important to the health of Canadians;

for international trade and investment, where GATT and WTO-written rules have fostered an explosion of international commerce, and so on.

Beyond rules, norms and laws, there is an alphabet soup of UN acronyms IAEA, ICAO, IPU, ITU, WMO, WIPO, among many others, that stand for organizations helping the world to manage one aspect or another of international interchange.22

The UN is also indispensable to international humanitarian operations.

For example, UNICEF has inoculated 575,000,000 children against childhood diseases, the World Food Program fed over 100,000,000 people last year alone, the UNHCR has protected 22,000,000 refugees and internally displaced people, and the UN Mine Action Service has reported the destruction of over 30,000,000 landmines, which has saved countless limbs and lives.

This work has been belittled by some as mere international social work.

It may be social work but it delivers very real human and international security benefits.

[1]Towards Reform Of The United Nations

The UN suffers from excessive caution and diplomatic sclerosis at a time when it is facing decidedly new demands.

The fundamental political and legal challenge facing the UN is to determine when and under what conditions the international community is justified in intervening in the internal affairs of member states.

The grounds on which there is a disposition to contemplate reform in descending order of practicability, include humanitarian crises, the illegal development or acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, the provision of safe haven for terrorists and the overthrow of democratic governments.

Officials from countries that gained their independence in the living memories of their citizens see sovereignty as a crucial bulwark against once and

future domination and are understandably reluctant to risk creating new pretexts for interference by others.

Their worries are entirely comprehensible but not, nevertheless, a sufficient basis on which to protect the interests of their citizens in a changing world.

As Secretary General Annan said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "[t]he sovereignty of States must no longer be used as a shield for gross violations of human rights."23

Elsewhere he argued, "[t]his developing international norm in favour of intervention to protect civilians from wholesale slaughter will no doubt continue to pose profound challenges to the international community.

In some quarters it will arouse distrust, scepticism, even hostility.

But I believe on balance we should welcome it."24

The tragic losses of 11 September raised a related challenge.

Does the nexus of WMD and terrorism provide another justification for outside intervention in a state's internal affairs? Secretary-General Annan also put this issue starkly, in his seminal address to almost one hundred heads of government gathered in New York for the 2003 General Debate: "[s]ome say . . . since an armed attack with weapons of mass destruction could be launched at any time . . . states have the right and obligation to use force pre-emptively." [The secretary-general clearly was referring to the US Administration.] "This logic

represents a fundamental challenge to the principles on which, however imperfect, world peace and stability have rested for the last fifty eight years. . . .” He told the leaders assembled that “we have come to a fork in the road and that we must decide whether radical changes are needed.25

The secretary-general has done his part to respond to changing needs, using his bully pulpit to urge reform and establishing a blue ribbon panel to propose specific remedies to the UN’s problems, both as regards what the UN does and how the UN does it, in that order.

It is incumbent on UN member states to acknowledge the new dangers we all face collectively and to find the will and creativity to adapt the world organization to changed times.

All UN members but particularly the developing countries are going to have to come to a new understanding of the limits of state sovereignty and the advantages of sharing and pooling it, if the UN is to be effective.

The onus to adapt does not fall, nonetheless, exclusively on the poorer, younger countries.

The United States and some others are also strongly attached to the idea of sovereignty.

The US will need to resist the temptations of exceptionalism and unilateralism and resolve to cooperate on global issues, which can only be resolved multilaterally.

Nor is security the only major problem facing the UN.

The yawning gap between rich and poor belies many western countries' charitable self-images, bedevils multilateral cooperation and undermines international security.

The international community is not on track to achieve the economic and social goals leaders set themselves at the Millennium Summit.

Rich and poor country governments, business and civil society organizations, all get a failing grade in the effort to meet the voluntarily chosen targets.

[1]Canada And The United Nations

Canada can help the UN to reform itself.

As much by virtue of our values, of who we are as a society, as by what we do in the world, although that needs our urgent attention too, we do have the standing to contribute.

Other countries rightly see Canada as one of the very few countries where minorities' rights are protected and diversity is valued.

Our years of peacekeeping and putting the protection of people at the heart of our foreign policy have gained us considerable respect.

Our position on the Iraq war has earned us substantial political credit with the less powerful among the UN's members and with many, probably most, of the more powerful, as well.

Canada is well positioned to carry out an effective foreign policy.

An effective foreign policy requires a beefed-up, combat-capable, peace-building-trained military, especially ground forces capable of intervening in conflict, a contemporary rather than a prospective financial commitment to poorer countries, and a diplomatic service with the resources to meet our own and others' expectations of us.

Finally, our will needs to match our wallet, which has never in Canadian history been better able to afford an effective foreign policy.

On the two overarching challenges the UN faces, the absence of a common threat perception and the stubborn disparity between rich and poor, Canada, with its long tradition of bridge-building among different international constituencies, can play an important role, as the secretary-general reminded Canadians in the Canadian Parliament in March, 2004.

Perhaps the most important such role is to help the world and the US reconcile their very considerable differences.

This means taking the initiative to impart to others the particular insights into what motivates the United States that we gain from geographic proximity and political and cultural propinquity.

In an effort to alleviate American isolation and insecurity, and to be credible to others, we will have to "speak truth to power" in Washington.

This means not shrinking from dealing frankly, albeit courteously, with US administrations when we think they are wrong, as many Canadians believe they were on issues as diverse as Iraq, the International Criminal Court, Kyoto, and the development of still another generation of nuclear weapons and missile systems.

It, equally, means not shrinking from supporting and defending American positions when we think the US is right, as for example, on North Korea, on Taiwan and on the propagation of democracy by example, generally.

It also means, finally, not subordinating foreign policy imperatives to bilateral anxieties.

Redressing the insecurities of both the US and the Developing World is impeded by rigid interpretations of sovereignty on both sides.

In the Developing World, there is a historically understandable, albeit irrational, fear of too much outside intervention but an all too true and present reality of too little, as Rwanda tragically demonstrated, and the conflicts in the Congo and Sudan continue to confirm.

In Washington, an atavistic interpretation of sovereignty often fuels exceptionalist policies and frequently encumbers the negotiation and even precludes the ratification of treaties.

We need to use our political capital to persuade Developing World countries, the Africans above all, that by limiting and pooling their national sovereignty they can serve their own interests.

It is Africans who have most desperately needed intervention in recent years.

The African Union charter is a pudding that will be proved in the eating.

We can work to alleviate the concerns of Latin Americans, who hear in the US invasion of Iraq echoes of the Monroe Doctrine and of a century of intervention.

We can urge Asians to recalibrate their surprisingly strong attachment to the seventeenth century European idea of Westphalian sovereignty.

We need to work to understand, and to persuade others to address, Washington's sense of unique vulnerability.

Canada can also help the secretary-general to rebalance the international agenda, and to empower the United Nations to organize a global response to the global challenges of disease control, hunger, lack of schooling and environmental destruction.26

The past thirty years have seen some dramatic improvements in the Developing World.

Life expectancy has increased by eight years.

Illiteracy has been cut nearly in half, to 25 per cent.

People surviving on less than $1 a day has been almost halved in the 1990s.

Still, some fifty-four countries are poorer now than they were in 1990.

In twenty-one, a larger proportion of people are going hungry.

In fourteen, more children are dying before age five.

In twelve, primary school enrolments are shrinking.

In thirty-four, life expectancy has fallen.

Such reversals in survival were previously rare.27

The Millennium Development Goals address these daunting challenges.

They present an effective framework for delivering on the commitment to alleviating poverty.

Many of the solutions to hunger, disease and lack of education are well known.

UN-bashers notwithstanding, the specialized UN programs and agencies have extensive expertise and hands-on experience in dealing with these challenges.

Here, Canada could help by marshalling talent from across our widely respected public service and civil society organizations to support the UN's efforts to build capacity in the poorer countries, in order to enhance the quality of their own governance.

As we help others build their own effective institutions, we also help the UN regain its effectiveness, an interest that we and the Americans share.

Reform of the United Nations system is necessary but not sufficient to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The weaknesses of other international bodies need remedying and the lacunae between them need filling.

The Bretton Woods organizations, for example, have representation and voting rights anomalies.

The World Bank has grown to dominate others in the field and its role vis-à-vis the regional development banks and especially vis-à-vis the UNDP needs recalibrating.

Nor, in a floating exchange rate world, is the IMF's mandate clear, including vis-à-vis the more powerful countries which currently can and do ignore its prescriptions.

NATO, a trans-regional alliance, is also struggling with the reality that neither the values of its members nor the threats they face are as common as they once were.

The G-8, while effective in mobilizing the major industrialized countries on key issues, such as HIV/AIDS and the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), is nonetheless handicapped in achieving broader objectives by virtue of its limited membership.

Prime Minister Paul Martin's proposal for the creation of a larger, north-south group that would be more representative of power and population realities now and foreseen is one possible answer to this problem.

Such broader-based participation would facilitate broader-based “buy-in” by developing countries.

Because heads of government have both the horizontal perspective and political authority that their individual ministers by definition do not have, a G-20 at leaders’ level could make breakthroughs on intractable problems.

Prospects for progress on HIV-AIDS and other communicable diseases, on trade and agricultural subsidies, on terrorism and WMD, on international financial reform, on the Millennium Development Goals and, not least, on the reform of the UN itself would be enhanced if the world’s leading countries could sensitize each other and reach general understandings among themselves.

Such a group would complement rather than compete with the UN, which would retain its unique legitimacy by virtue of its universal membership, its statutory responsibility for peace and security and the centrality of its Charter to international law.

A G-20 could also facilitate the work of the UN, including the Security Council, by helping reduce North-South economic polarity and US-"other" security gaps that often bedevil UN deliberations.

International organizations are notoriously difficult to reform, the UN perhaps most difficult of all.

Still, no one can be confident that absent a determined effort at innovation the world organization on which we count for nearly every facet of international relations and global governance will muddle through.

The system of laws, norms and treaties that the UN represents, backed up by formal and informal networks of officials and experts on economic and social cooperation, human rights, the judiciary, the police and security, is crucial to Canada's well-being and independence.

It is manifestly in Canada's interest to promote UN reform so that the organization functions effectively as a universal forum for the deliberation on and collective management of the world's global problems.

Overcoming the fear of change is neither easy nor certain but the attempt to do so is timely and necessary.

The suffering of the Second World War generated the international will to create the United Nations.

It is not too much to hope that the shock of the second Iraq war will generate the collective resolve to reform it.