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**The US, the UN and Human Security: Protecting People in a
Unipolar World
by Paul Heinbecker***

Check against Delivery

*Paul Heinbecker is Director of the Centre for global Relations, Governance and Policy at Wilfrid Laurier University and Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. He recently retired after 38 years with Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs, most recently serving as Ambassador to the United Nations (2000- 2003). This paper does not necessarily reflect the views of the institutions above.

Tonight, I would like to discuss human security, the US and the UN, and make some suggestions for reforming the UN for “human security” purposes.

It might be worth recalling at the outset how Canada became involved in developing the Human Security idea. When Lloyd Axworthy, whom many of you know, was Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada, I was the “political director” in the Canadian Foreign Affairs Department. At that time, we were looking for a policy term that would encapsulate the comparatively innovative security agenda we were carrying out under Lloyd's Axworthy's direction. It was, in essence, a people-protection agenda, and included the anti-personnel land mines treaty, women's rights generally, the protection of women in armed conflict, conflict-affected children, the abortive Canadian-led intervention in eastern Zaire, Canadian participation in the Kosovo war, a small arms treaty, operational reforms of the Security Council, the International Criminal Court, and the Responsibility to Protect report that the Government of Canada had commissioned.

We knew this all worked in practice but, as the saying goes, we needed a theoretical term that in a simple phrase, at once explained it, “cohered” it and, we hoped, dignified it. The honour of coining the term “human security” usually goes to the late Mabul ul-Haq of the UN Development Program, although in fact it was used even earlier by the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros Ghali. In any case, the Government of Canada did not invent the term “Human Security”; we simply appropriated it. The Government of Canada was, nonetheless, probably the first government to embrace the term, Human Security, and to use it extensively, some might say brazenly in acknowledging no intellectual property rights, to describe a central purpose of our foreign policy.

Human security means different things to different people. That is probably inevitable but in my view regrettable because I think as the focus broadens, the value of the concept diminishes. The definition of the term we used—essentially the physical protection of people—is quite narrow, on purpose. It is, also, much narrower than the more expansive meaning that was to be given to it by the Ogata/Sen Commission, established by the Japanese government. The Japanese were uncomfortable with the implications for the Japanese constitution of the military dimensions of the Canadian approach. They were, also, concerned about third world sensitivities with respect to military intervention even when all else failed.

We wanted a term that would, over time, become a norm of behaviour which would encourage the protection of people, and not only of states, when their existence was threatened. We, also, wanted a concept that would eventually stand with national security as a basic public policy purpose, and would be accepted as a reason for military investment.

We believed that the more encompassing economic and social definitions, essentially human well-being and dignity, while entirely laudable in their objectives, would risk meaning all things to all people and end up meaning nothing to anyone, at least nothing new and “actionable” by governments. As President Bush (not often one of my compass points!) was quoted recently as saying, “when everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.”

In the light of humanity’s failures in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Congo and all the rest of the tragic taxonomy of international neglect and indifference, we saw a pressing need for an idea to galvanize action to save innocent lives. Equally important, we saw the need for a concept which people, some whom thought that real armies only made war, could rally to and thereby save lives and protect the innocent, especially when there was no strategic or other classical, narrow national interest at stake with which to justify action. By the way, we even experimented with the term “HumSec”, in an attempt to make the idea sound more appealing in military-minded precincts, especially in the Canadian Defence Department and in Washington.

When Lloyd Axworthy left office to pursue other interests, Canadian foreign policy likewise pursued other interests. Although the Canadian Government never actually abandoned the human security agenda, it never pursued it again with the same sense of purpose. In any case, we were well aware at the time that what we were proposing, that is putting people not just states at the heart of security policy, was virtually Copernican in its foreign policy significance. We were also aware that that is what many Canadians thought we had been doing all along, in UN peace-keeping. Canadians did not erect a monument to their peace-keepers in downtown Ottawa because they thought it strategically important to Canadian interests to keep President A safe from insurgent B, or to protect the army of country X from the army of country Y, or vice versa. They did it because they thought it important to save the lives of innocent people threatened by conflict. That very few peacekeeping mandates have ever provided for the direct protection of civilians would have surprised and dismayed them.

Of course, the little appreciated truth of a Human Security agenda is that it takes money—a lot of money—to succeed, not least to pay for the combat-capable ground forces on whom intervention to save lives depends. In fact, that penny (no pun intended) has not really dropped yet, and not only in Canada. Sometimes I had the impression that Ottawa seemed to think that it was enough for Canada to be innovative diplomatically. Ideas Were Us! Muscles were someone else.

But I digress.

It is evident that the institution that best lends itself to advancing the human security concept is the United Nations, at least it is in principle. It is also distressing that the UN is our best vehicle because the inconvenient reality is that the UN has real problems of its own and that UN reform is excruciatingly difficult. Just how difficult is evident from the “fudged” title of the Secretary General’s high level panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. The word “reform” does not appear in the panel’s title nor in its terms of reference, because presumably to use the word is to concede that what exists now is in need of reform, a proposition that many member countries dispute.

Sometimes the UN is reminiscent, figuratively, of the old Soviet economy, of which it used to be said that there were two options for reform, the realistic one and the unrealistic one and that the more realistic option was that reform would be effected by visitors from outer space rather than by the Soviets themselves. In the UN’s case, by those in charge, I mean the member countries, not the Secretariat, who have done a reasonably good job of fixing what is under their own control.

The UN as a club is facing two major challenges, one its membership can do something about—reform-- and one only the American people can deal with—US cooperation. Again like the Soviet economy, it is not clear which is the more unlikely, that Americans will constrain the exceptionalist impulses of US foreign policy and work again cooperatively with the rest of us to make the UN realize its potential, or that the rest of the UN membership will finally accept the need to find a cure for the diplomatic dystrophy that is weakening, dangerously, the organization they need and profess to value.

The Context

The context in which these daunting challenges intersect is potentially a very dangerous one, which ought to be motivation enough to effect reforms to the UN, although those of us who have seen how all too readily the membership can resort to cut-off-your-nose-to-spite-your-face policies recognize that sadly it may not be. Many participants here today have commented that we live in a profoundly divided world. The common values notably with respect to human and civil rights, which once united America and Europe and Canada and many others in both aspiration and practice, seem less common than they used to. Nor is it clear that our interests are as concentric as they once seemed.

As a consequence, there is scant international agreement on what the most important issues are today, and less international agreement on how to resolve them. Speaking specifically of security, I see no common perception of a threat, although there is both an understandable anxiety about apparently growing Islamic fundamentalism, on the one hand, and a considerable fear of the sometimes provocative effects of American foreign policy, on the other. When Washington declared war on terrorism, essentially on a heinous tactic but a tactic nonetheless, not on a tangible enemy such as the Al Qaeda network, and when it portrayed terrorism in monolithic terms, Washington gave itself mission impossible. When it attacked Iraq despite the sketchiest of links between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime and despite having no hard evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and over the objections of undoubtedly the great majority of UN members, the US both isolated itself in world public opinion and generated volunteers for the cause of resistance to US policies. In conflating Iraq with the Palestinian-Israeli issue, US foreign policy itself came to be seen by many as part of the problem, not of the solution. That is not to exculpate the Islamic radicals for the atrocities they have perpetrated in the name of some obscure theory of competition with the West, nor to condone the complicity of those governments that have made it possible for the extremists to survive and flourish. It is to say that we are transiting an especially dangerous period of history.

The US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, together with reflexive US support for Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians will not necessarily morph into a conflict of the West versus Islam. There are wise people on all sides who recognize that this is a danger that is best avoided. But it is a singular danger, and one that would be foolish for any of us to ignore.

In the meantime, Washington is wrestling, as well, with its own posture vis-à-vis multilateral cooperation. Successive American administrations have progressively come to realize that with the demise of the Soviet Union, US foreign policy no longer faces either check or balance abroad, the key restraint on the exercise of power domestically. At the same time, others, particularly other industrialized countries, were more than ready to cede global leadership to Washington, in part because of the US's sheer capacity to lead, in part because others saw (and still see) no international threat to themselves or, much more distressing from a human security perspective, no obligation to others, sufficient to warrant heavy investments in military capability. Many preferred to spend their tax resources and political energy on domestic needs, where political demands were most urgent and political rewards most likely to be reaped.

As a consequence of the leadership role that others readily conceded to the US, albeit one the US willingly sought, and because of the considerable costs and risks involved in the US's acquitting these responsibilities, many in Washington on both sides of the political aisle came increasingly to regard the US as bearing a disproportionate burden and, partly as a consequence, and partly because of the assumptions inherent in American exceptionalism, as meriting, therefore, exceptional dispensations from international law and norms.

Where the Founding Fathers found it prudent to organize governance by off-setting the power of one branch of government, but relied on checks and balances of power among them, US administrations have recently assumed that others abroad should be expected to presume American good faith and to trust American judgment and motives.

American “exceptionalism” is not a new phenomenon—it dates from the arrival of the Puritans in North America-- and it unquestionably has had its positive as well as its negative consequences. The US has exercised exceptional leadership, for example, in the development of post-war institutions, not least the UN itself, in the promotion of human rights and the development of international law, in the containment of Communism and the defeat of the Soviet Union, and in the preservation of stability among Japan, China, Russia and the Koreas. (It is also the case that from Iran in the fifties, to Vietnam in the sixties, to Chile in the seventies, to Iraq and Afghanistan in the eighties, the US has chalked up some major errors.) But it is the more self-serving expressions of exceptionalism that have, inter alia, led to an American questioning of the applicability of the UN Charter, indeed of international law per se, to the United States. Witness the advice to President Bush, recently made public; that he was not bound by the Torture Convention or the Geneva Protocols, and indeed that these international agreements might have been unconstitutional, despite American adherence to the UN Charter. Or consider the frequently repeated view of many in Washington that obtaining UN Security Council endorsement of US military action against Iraq was merely discretionary. To quote Charles Krauthammer of the Washington Post, “Why it should matter to Americans to get a Security Council nod from...the butchers of Tiananmen Square is beyond me.”

In its attempt to exempt itself from the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court in the summer of 2002 the US held peace-keeping hostage, insisting on an Alice-Through-the-Looking-Glass legal interpretation of the Criminal Court statute and of the UN Charter, itself. In doing so, the US was seen by many as taking exceptionalism to extreme lengths. Moreover, at no time in lead-up to the Iraq war in the Winter of 2002 and the Spring of 2003 did it seem to give official Washington any pause that a large majority of UN member states disagreed that war in Iraq was necessary and urgent. Nor did it seem to occur to the war's advocates that these objections were not just the unavoidable and transitory reaction to “decisive” American leadership, to be endured until the policy was vindicated, but a disagreement that mattered, not least to the US's prospects of success in Iraq beyond the war itself.

No faction has elicited more unease and generated more outright hostility abroad towards the United States than the “neo-con” faction. The neo-cons are in fact their own coalition of the willing and their motives were mixed, albeit all axed on the use of American military power. Faced with a potential nexus of terrorism, rogue states and weapons of mass destruction, some neo-cons felt the projection of American power abroad and regime change in Iraq were important to American security. Some wanted to proselytize on behalf of American-style democracy in the Middle East, believing a democratic Iraq would generate a political transformation in the region, which would have beneficial consequences for stability in general and for Israel in particular, and which would end terrorism for good. All saw US security and related interests as best, in fact only, assured by US power unhampered by quarrelsome international organizations, the UN above all, by “quaint” international treaties and by tiresome, often feckless allies. None saw more than an a la carte role for multilateral cooperation, including for alliances like NATO. Richard Perle doubtless spoke for many in this Administration when, writing in the Guardian a year ago, he predicted the death of the UN as a side-benefit of the attack on Iraq. Whatever the neocons had in common, their unity appears to have fractured in the inhospitable political science laboratory of Iraq. But, with respect to the US and the UN, as the old dictum goes, be careful what you wish for. One possible outcome of the Iraq experience, as was the case with Somalia and, of course, Vietnam, is a retreat by the US from intervention abroad again, including in cases where the rest of us might greatly welcome it.

Together with changing international power correlations, there has been a neo-con moment, to paraphrase Charles Krauthammer of the Washington Post which has been as intense as it was short. The neo-cons' errors of judgment on Iraq, their ignorance of the Middle East and their dubious world-view have been costly and deleterious to the reputation of America and the Administration, which has had to change course on several policy fronts, whether for strategic or only tactical reasons, time will tell. The US has, also, dropped its effort to secure immunity for its troops from ICC jurisdiction, although its animosity to the ICC remains. So the US appears to be adjusting its foreign policy and in that process easing one of the crucial problems the UN faces, that of US cooperation.

Fixing the United Nations

What is the UN membership doing about the UN's problems? In attacking Iraq against the will of the international community, and in mishandling the occupation, the US did the UN, and itself, incalculable harm. It would be a major mistake, nevertheless, simply to lay all the UN's misfortunes at Washington's door. The UN Charter was written in and for a different age and treats national sovereignty as an absolute and immutable 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. Because most wars, the Iraq war being a significant exception, currently arise within the borders of existing states, the inhabitants often cannot be protected from the scourge without intervention from the outside.

There is no consensus internationally, at least yet, on how to respond to this new reality and, equally, there is no agreement on how to reform the aging, unrepresentative Security Council, still the most important political/security body on earth. Most fundamentally, the UN's strength, its universal membership, has become also its weakness. The multiple purposes of 191 countries make the achievement of consensus on any issue a Sisyphean task. The convention of consensual decision-making in the General Assembly and in special sessions invites truculence and diplomatic games-playing by spoilers, such as Cuba, Libya and Sudan, among the so-called G77 and the Non-Aligned Movement (the NAM), two overlapping and hoary hangovers from the Cold War. This contentiousness is particularly regrettable because the UN really does need reform. The most pressing and fundamental challenge the UN faces is to come to a common understanding of when and under what circumstances the international community is justified in intervening in the internal affairs of member states.

The possible grounds for intervention include humanitarian crises, the illegal development or acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, the provision of safe haven or financing for terrorists, the inability of states to control international crime and the overthrow of democratic governments. These are extremely difficult issues and there are understandable reasons that UN's approach to them tends to be cautious to a fault.

A large proportion of UN member states are former colonies, which consider the concept of sovereignty a crucial bulwark against renewed domination. They are understandably reluctant to risk creating new pretexts for interference by others. They have bad memories- such as of the Berlin Conference of 1885-when Europeans created colonies that made economic sense to the colonizers but left the colonized with a legacy of suffering and arrested development that continues 140 years later. These worries are entirely comprehensible. They are not, nevertheless, an effective basis on which to protect the interests of their citizens, or of ours, in a changing world. This is particularly true for military intervention for humanitarian purposes.

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”. It would be tragic if the suspicion and hostility created by the invasion of Iraq made military intervention for humanitarian purposes even more difficult than it already was. The Iraq war would not have satisfied most of the tests presented in the seminal human security report that the Government of Canada commissioned on this subject, the Responsibility to Protect. And, in any case, while US motives in attacking Iraq might be widely suspect, that scarcely constitutes grounds for leaving the grossly abused elsewhere to suffer what they must.

“Bad cases make bad law”, as lawyers in the Common Law tradition know only too well. And Iraq was a bad case with which to establish norms of behaviour. Dharfur would be a better case. It would meet the just cause threshold proposed in the R2P report, particularly as regards “ethnic cleansing” and “large scale loss of life, actual or apprehended”. Dharfur arguably also meets the Genocide Convention test as regards the intentional destruction of a group, in whole or in part. Although the Security Council has been unconscionably slow to act, still Secretary Powell and Secretary General Annan appear to have learned the lessons of the nineties. Clearly, the Council needs to do better in protecting the innocent in Dharfur, as everywhere else. That means addressing the main weaknesses the UN now faces with respect to military intervention for humanitarian necessity in the Third World, where there is a historically understandable 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.

The UN high level panel is engaged on these issues and there are several things that it can and should recommend. First, it should encourage the UNSC to establish operational principles that will make it more likely that the Council will behave consistently and coherently in protecting the innocent. Specifically, the council should be urged to establish thresholds for action and principles to guide decision-making. It could do worse than simply endorse the triggers of the R2P report and its precautionary principles.

Second, the UN panel should recommend strengthening links between international human rights/humanitarian action organizations and the Council's decision-making process, both to ensure the Council has the clearest possible understanding of what is happening in a given conflict and to facilitate more timely decision-making.

Third, the panel should recommend that Council members assume a special responsibility for the UN's military operations. Membership on the Council is a privilege that, under the Charter, derives primarily from a capacity to contribute to maintaining international peace and security and implies a responsibility to do so. If a country wants to be on the Council, it must be ready and willing to participate in peace-support missions and human security interventions.

Fourth, and fundamentally, the panel should urge the General Assembly to modify its interpretation of sovereignty to include the responsibilities as well as the privileges of states, notably the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens, which is closer to the original Westphalia model in any case. The Assembly should specifically acknowledge that when the state is unable or unwilling to acquit these responsibilities, it is incumbent on the international community, pursuant to a Security Council decision, to do so.

Fifth, the panel should recommend the full participation of all the Breton Woods institutions both to prevent war through development and to rebuild the peace after conflict. The panel report will be just the beginning of the reform. There is much the membership, itself, can and should do as well to improve the prospects of reform and to complement Security Council action.

First, we should help the Secretary-General to rebalance the international agenda more generally, in order to deal with the non-military sources of conflict. Member states need to empower the United Nations to organize a global response to the global challenges of disease control, hunger, lack of schooling and environmental destruction. We need a vision encompassing education and health, democracy and human rights and good governance, as per the Millennium Goals on which, currently, no one is doing enough, according to the World Economic Forum monitoring project. We cannot build peace without alleviating poverty and we cannot build freedom on foundations of injustice. We need to work with states at risk to enhance the quality of their governance structures, to increase the accountability of their leaders, to reduce corruption, to build institutional capacity and to strengthen legal and judicial systems.

Second, there will be no satisfactory reform unless the human security of people in the richer countries is also addressed. The potential nexus of WMD and terrorism, therefore, also must figure in our calculations of when intervention by the international community, pursuant to a Security Council resolution, is justified. This is an extraordinarily complex issue but not one that the UN membership can, or should, shrink from addressing. It is vital that the UN reach a modus operandi on this most difficult issue. Radical changes may be needed. This is the fork in the road that last Fall in the UN Secretary General Annan warned world leaders they faced. We need to work also to understand, and to persuade others to address, Washington's sense of unique vulnerability, so that the UN is relevant to Americans. The US may need the UN but the UN also needs the US. Neither can succeed without the other. Canada, in particular, should take the initiative to impart to others the particular, probably unique, insights into American motivations that we gain from geographic proximity and political and cultural propinquity.

Third, it is evident that reform of the United Nations is necessary but not sufficient to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The weaknesses of other existing bodies need remedying and the lacunae between them need filling. The Bretton Woods organizations, for example, also have representation and voting rights aberrations. Further, the World Bank has grown to dominate other institutions in the development field and its role vis-à-vis the regional development banks and especially the UNDP needs recalibrating. Nor is the IMF's mandate clear in a floating exchange rate world, including vis-à-vis the more powerful countries which currently can and do ignore its prescriptions. NATO, a trans-regional alliance constructed on common values and united by a shared threat perception is struggling with the reality that neither the values nor the threats 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 NEPAD (New Economic Partnership for African Development), nonetheless is handicapped in achieving broader objectives by virtue of its limited membership.

We need, also, to innovate. Canadian Prime Minister Martin has proposed complementing the G-8 (and the UN Security Council) with a larger, north-south group of about 20 government leaders that would be more reflective of power and population realities now and foreseen than the G-8 is.

Prospects for progress on HIV-AIDS and other communicable diseases, on trade and agricultural subsidies, on terrorism and WMD, on protecting the innocent, 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 to the particular problems they face, diminish the differences between them and, where possible, reach general understandings among themselves that they could commend to the wider international community.

Such a group would reinforce and complement the UN rather than compete with it. The UN would retain its unique legitimacy by virtue of its universal membership and its indispensable security role as framed in the Charter and international law. But it would not face every issue divided into mutually uncomprehending camps.

Fourth, we should all pull our own weight. It is neither fair nor wise to leave international leadership to the US. Obviously, the US will predominate for years to come. But, all good international citizens should shoulder their share of the burden of making the international system work. Furthermore, when the US declines to lead, as it will undoubtedly do sometimes, that must not come to mean no help for the dispossessed and the abused. The West has never been richer and more able to help others, including through military intervention. Nor have some developing countries ever been better able to afford to help. What is needed is for all of us to do our respective parts in making multilateral institutions work and in investing in human security.

Fifth, and finally, reform will never come from New York. UN Ambassadors will never be able to agree among themselves, unless their governments give them the requisite directions to do so. It is capitals that must effect change. For capitals to effect change, citizens will need to persuade their leaders of the need to act internationally. And for citizens to present a compelling case to governments for better ways to interact abroad, they must be both knowledgeable and committed. That means that organizations such as ACUNS will need to do an even better job of understanding and advocating change to the UN system. Reform will not be done in a day. There will be plenty of scope for research and plenty of need. This audience is perhaps uniquely equipped to contribute to that effort.

Conclusion:

It is evidence of the UN's resilience that despite the many difficulties it faces, the organization has persevered and, even, begun to rally. Member countries have, by and large, come to realize again both that multilateral cooperation is a necessary means to some important ends and that the UN is not irrelevant, as President Bush wondered in his UN General Debate statement in September, 2002, but rather indispensable to the good management of international relations. The Iraq experience has re-confirmed that the general concurrence of the world expressed through the UN remains necessary to confer legitimacy on acts of war and that that legitimacy is a prerequisite to broad-based, effective cooperation in the management of war's aftermath.

Most governments have come to the realization that the UN per se is central to global cooperation. In an integrating world, it is more evident than ever that overarching economic and social problems, such as climate change and communicable diseases, can best and often only be resolved globally. The old cliché is actually true; if we did not already have a UN, we would need to invent it. This is not to say that the UN's deep-seated problems can safely be ignored. Reform is clearly and urgently needed.

A possible outcome of the Iraq experience, made only too plausible by perverse human nature, however, is that the rest of the membership will conclude that as the UN did not endorse the Iraq war, the UN is not broken after all and does not, therefore, need fixing. Neither outcome would bode well for the imperatives of Human Security.

Unless the UN high level panel's report is a "write-off" member countries need to support it and press for its adoption. The dream of a world of laws and not men, of justice as well as power seems still possible, more so today than even last week. What we need now to do is to bring international practice into the 21st Century by making the UN relevant both to the most powerful and to the most vulnerable among us.

Then we will begin to give real meaning to the idea of Human Security.

Thank You.

