

**Notes for a Lecture by Paul Heinbecker**

**United Nations: Resolutions and Realities**

**Lecture at the University of Windsor**

**December 1, 2005**

Today, I want to set out:

- what the UN is,
- what it is not,
- what it does;
  - in some cases what it does very well
- whether reform is possible
  - There is no doubt that it is necessary
- how it relates to the Middle East
- and what all those Palestinian-Israeli resolutions mean.

Some introduction of the subject is necessary because there is considerable confusion about the UN.

It is better to begin with what the UN is not.

- The Secretary General is not a President or Prime Minister

- He is the Secretary General
- The Security Council is not the world's cabinet
  - It is the world's most important club
- The General Assembly is not a Parliament
- The UN is not a democracy
  - Although according to freedom House, approximately 2/3 of its members are democracies, or are democratizing

The UN is a multilateral organization

- It belongs to all 191 of its members
- It reflects pretty accurately the prevailing views around the world on the issues of the day
  - The Iraq war
  - The Kosovo war

Nevertheless, it is 60 years old and suffers from all the difficulties you would expect a 60 year old institution to have, and then some

Through the vicissitudes of time, the UN has not kept up with change nor lived up to all of our expectations.

In fact, there have been embarrassing difficulties and distressing failures.

In the Alice-in-Wonderland like sessions of the Human Rights Commission, perpetrators condemn others and escape censure themselves, which would be funny were it not so tragic for the victims of the abuses.

Worse have been the conscience-shocking failures: Cambodia, the Congo, Bosnia and Kosovo, Rwanda and now Darfur, where Security Council action has been slow, inadequate or lacking altogether.

What hope do ordinary people have when the Council becomes tangled in the complexities of sovereignty, ethnicity, religion and economic interest?

It was with the UN's failures in mind that Secretary General Annan launched a major reform effort last year, establishing his High Level Panel to advise him and member countries on what needs to be done to make the UN more responsive.

This past September, 154 HOG/S came to New York, and made the least of their opportunity to reform the UN (Canada's Paul Martin and a few others excepted).

## **Why?**

1. Too satisfied with Status Quo
  - Russia, China,
2. Too afraid to risk change/ inert
  - Much of the G77

3. Too concerned with placating domestic audiences
  - USA
4. Too distracted by scandal
  - Secretariat
5. Too inept
  - The negotiating process
  - The US initiative
  - Giving the “Spoilers” (e.g., Cuba, Pakistan, Libya, etc.) too much credibility
6. Too Disengaged
  - Most world leaders, again not including Paul Martin
7. Too ambitious
  - High Level Panel ( plus/minus 144 recommendations)
  - Sachs (plus/minus 45 recommendations)
  - The Secretary General, at least initially (60 plus recommendations)

But was it there to win from the outset?

Probably not, short of WWIII

But was it a failure?

It certainly did not meet expectations, positive or negative.

The UN did not die, disappointing many neo-cons and some US Congressmen.

But it did not get a new lease on life, either.

It failed on ACD, terrorism

It neither advanced nor set back some major issues, especially the MDG's

It achieved limited progress but what it did achieve was significant:

- R2P
- Peace-building
- Human Rights Secretariat
- Democracy

Institutionally, the outcome was otherwise near zero.

- UNSC
- ECOSOC
- UNGA

Elsewhere it probably achieved enough to soldier on

## **Lessons Learned**

More dust needs to settle (cf. Brahimi Report), but the following seem plausible at this stage:

1. Short of WWII, transformation of the UN in one fell swoop is not possible.
2. Absent truly compelling necessity, reforming statutory institutions in particular is difficult
  - UNGA—The preserve of the G-77
  - UNSC—the P5 forever; the G 4 arguments for permanent seats were not persuasive,
  - ECOSOC—the appendix of the UN
3. Limited, incremental change is possible
  - if it is well-prepared, focused, has steady political backing, and complies with the Zeitgeist
  - E.G., R2P.
  - Important to re-visit not just the outcomes document but the inputs as well and focus on particulars, such as terrorism

4. Change requires consistent pressure from/participation of “the Peoples”

- More NGO engagement is crucial
- Members of Parliament

5. A better negotiating framework is essential

- E.G., an L 20 to cook the basic deal

**Is it time to Throw in the Towel? Is It Possible to Throw in the Towel?**

**We need to remind ourselves why the world needs a system of collective security based on the rule of law**

**and why the United Nations is at the heart of that system.**

**Most basically, we need to remember what the world looked like before Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt and the other architects of multilateral cooperation created the system they did.**

**A hundred years ago, the only protection against aggression was power.**

**The only checks on would-be aggressors were the costs of fighting and the risks of failing.**

**The issue was not law; it was ambition, and capacity.**

**Alliances emerged to deter aggression but ultimately collapsed and catastrophic conflict followed.**

**In World War I, as armies democratized and war industrialized, 10 million people died.**

**In World War II, with technology advancing, 60 million people died.**

**In World War III, with the advent of sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear weapons, how many people would die?**

**The generation that fought and survived the last world war, my parent's generation, knew that World War III could not be won, in any reasonable meaning of the word "won", and must never be fought.**

**There had to be a better way and that better way was the United Nations, and collective security.**



**Unlike the creators of the League of Nations, the architects of the UN were determined that this time security would be assured by combining both power and principle.**

**The United States, then as now the militarily dominant country, would be a founding member and the other major powers would likewise be present at the creation; all would contribute actively to international peace and security.**

**The world would prevent war cooperatively, where it could, and prosecute war, collectively, where it must.**

**At least equally important, the UN would help the world develop new norms and standards of international behaviour.**

**The aspirations for United Nations exceeded its grasp but it has nevertheless served the world better in the intervening period than its critics realize or admit.**

**The UN gave birth to a body of international law that stigmatized aggression and created a strong norm against it.**

**Although the Cold War saw international law breached by both sides, the norm against aggression has been much more respected than not, as has the legal force of the Charter.**

**One result has been that there were fewer inter-state wars in the second half of the 20th century than in the first half, despite a nearly four-fold increase in the number of states.**

**As regards internal wars, they too have diminished appreciably, in part due to the activism of the UN in recent years**

**While the Cold War destroyed the post-war consensus, hobbling the security vocation of the UN for many years, and the prevention of World War III owed at least as much to nuclear deterrence and collective defence through NATO,**

**there is no doubt that the world would have been a much bloodier place in the last 50 years without the world body.**

**The UN gave birth to previously unknown concepts such as peace-keeping that provided a buffer between protagonists, so that inter-state wars did not reignite, and more recently peace-building to help states from falling back into dysfunctionality and conflict.**

**It helped the two heavily armed camps avoid a nuclear Armageddon by, inter alia, pioneering arms control treaties and verification, notably, the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime.**

**That regime has made us all safer by limiting the numbers of nuclear-armed states, current challenges to the IAEA notwithstanding.**

**The success of the United Nations has gone far beyond its security vocation, from human rights to sustainable development to health services, to education, to humanitarian coordination to international regulation in the public interest..**

### **Some Innovations that People Lose Sight Of**

**1. Peacekeeping-**

- **Brahimi, \$5 billion, robust-Chapter vii,**

**2. Responsibility to Protect**

**3. Peacebuilding**

- **The Rand Corporation—Jim Dobbins**

**4. Humanitarian Coordination**

**5. Elections**

**6. Terrorism**

**7. Health Coordination**

- **HIV-AIDS**
- **Avian Flu**

**The Point of all of this is that the UN is in fact indispensable**

### **The UN and the Middle East**

**What about the Middle East? Why does the UN spend so much time “bashing” Israel?**

**The UN and the Middle East have a long history, and not all of it involves Israel, although much does**

**1947—UNGA Resolution 181, the Future Government of Palestine**

**1948—UNGA Resolution 194—the right of refugees to return or be compensated**

**1956—Suez, and UNEP**

**1967—UNSC resolution 242**

**} land for peace**

**1973—UNSC Resolution 338**

**UNDOF**

**Zionism is Racism resolution**

**UN special reps—Terje Roed Larsen**

**UNRWA**

**But, also, the first Gulf War, Southern Lebanon, Western Sahara, Sudan**

## **The Palestinian Agenda**

- **Control the diplomacy**
- **Reinforce the Palestinian claim to statehood**

## **The Israeli agenda**

- **Seek security in alliance with the US**
- **Limit the impact of the UN on Israel**
- **But latterly**
  - **Resolution on Holocaust Remembrance**
  - **Progress towards full membership on WEOG**
  - **UNSC seat in 2017?**
  -

**In fact, the UN has a huge agenda, imposed by its members, and the Israeli-Palestinian issue, as one of the great unresolved political issues is necessarily part of that agenda.**

**It is not as big a part of that agenda, as I have tried to illustrate, as it sometimes seems.**

- **About 10% of the resolutions in any given General Assembly deal with this issue.**
- **The same is true for the Security Council**

**Still, it often seems like a lot, and successive Canadian Governments have wanted to reduce the number, so far without much success.**

**And until recently, the Canadian Government has maintained a consistent voting pattern.**

