

UN is the forum for peace and prosperity

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Retaliation against the United Nations following Ottawa's overwhelming defeat in New York last Thursday on Palestine's status would hurt Canada more than the UN. A more constructive response is needed.

Ottawa has recalled Canadian ambassadors from New York and Geneva as well as their counterparts from Tel Aviv and Ramallah ostensibly to advise on Canada's relations with Palestine and Israel. The UN is also inevitably on the agenda. Dissatisfaction in Ottawa with the UN, already high since we lost the 2010 Security Council election and reinforced by last week's vote on Palestine, is partly legitimate, partly misinformed and largely misplaced.

Since the UN was created in San Francisco, we have by and large succeeded in achieving the major goals we set for ourselves there: saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war, advancing and protecting human rights, fostering universal justice, and promoting better standards of living. Driven by the memory of the 60 million dead of the Second World War, the world has progressively stigmatized aggression. According to Simon Fraser University's Human Security Report of 2010, since the end of the Cold War alone, the number of high intensity armed conflicts around the world has dropped by 80 per cent, partly because of preventive diplomacy and UN interventions. Battlefield deaths have also decreased dramatically, as has the overall lethality of conflicts, as humanitarian law has sought to limit the effects of armed conflict by restricting the means and methods of warfare.

Under the UN banner, a whole corpus of human rights protections has been agreed, 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 the Rights of the Child, to name some of the most significant. These conventions are respected unevenly around the world but they do create standards that over time are progressively assimilated into state practice. To "foster universal justice," the international community has created an extensive criminal justice system, which has seen some of the worst human rights abusers, from Ratko Mladic to Charles Taylor, face justice in The Hague.

For hundreds of millions of people, including Africans, poverty is down, education is up, and health is improved. In its 60 years of existence, UNICEF has seen a 50-per-cent reduction in children's under-five

mortality. By 2015, 90 per cent of the world's children will be immunized against the six major vaccine-preventable diseases — pertussis, childhood tuberculosis, tetanus, polio, measles and diphtheria.

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All told, hundreds of multilateral treaties have been concluded under UN auspices, spawning an extensive body of international law, treaties, norms, standards, 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 G8 and the G20, as well as international civil society to function more effectively.

As Kofi Annan has observed, the UN is not a perfect organization, but it is the only one with the power to convene the whole world under one roof and to sustain the norms that allow the world to live peacefully.

If the UN as a collective is far from failing across the board, it is not succeeding satisfactorily either, and many of its challenges are intractable. Iran continues to test the limits of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. A two state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict remains elusive. Afghanistan struggles, Pakistan seethes, tensions in the South China Sea rise, and North Korea tests more missiles. Transnational organized crime threatens the security of people in Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico and West Africa. An effective response to climate change remains elusive.

In creating the UN, the “greatest generation” deliberately did not establish a world government, with executive authority and a capacity to act in the common interest as it sees fit. Ban Ki-moon is not a CEO, much less a head of state. The organization he serves is not a league of democracies. But according to the American NGO Freedom House, only 48 countries are “not free.” More than half of the world's governments are electoral democracies. So, the UN is not a collection of thugs and tyrants, unworthy of our attention, and leading countries like Japan, Germany, India and Brazil campaign for permanent Security Council seats.

Last week Canada was decidedly on the losing side of a massive vote to grant Palestine enhanced observer status at the UN. Only eight countries, half of them automatic supporters of Tel Aviv and the U.S., voted with us against the Palestinian request. One hundred and thirty-eight countries voted in favour, while 41 abstained. We found ourselves offside of the vast majority of the world's democracies, including all the countries we once considered good company — Australia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Sweden, none of which has lessons about principled foreign policy to learn from Ottawa.

The overwhelming majority of UN members want to see a two-state solution. Most recognize Israel's right under international law to defend itself but they disapprove of Tel Aviv's long-standing occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and of its ongoing, illegal settlement policies. That was once Canada's view but Ottawa has grown silent on the settlements despite its stated strong opposition to actions that prejudice the outcome of negotiations.

In conducting its review, Ottawa should focus on the Middle East, not the UN, and tack gradually back to a fair-minded position as it has on other issues. Supporting your friends right or wrong may be a policy but it is not a principle. Nor is it in Canada's interest.