

THE UN: IF IT DIDN'T EXIST, WE WOULD HAVE TO INVENT IT

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I know that the UN has all the problems you would expect a 60-year-old institution to have, and more. I also know that the institution remains far more important than politically motivated “UN-haters” would have the world believe. Nevertheless even the reasonably attentive public is far more aware of the institution’s weaknesses than of its strengths.

At a time when our security is seemingly under threat from every side — terrorists, disease, pollution, population growth, natural disasters, short-sighted foreign policies — we need to remind ourselves why the United Nations remains vital to international governance and why it warrants the world’s engagement, even as it needs renovating.

In an interdependent world, engagement and cooperation, not isolation and unilateralism, are the keys to security.

Last September, 154 world leaders came to the UN, and, regrettably, made the least of their opportunity to reform the institution.

As the dust has settled on the summit, however, it has become evident that such profound renovations as the secretary-general sought are probably only possible in the wake of a cataclysm that sweeps all before it, as the Second World War did. In that sense, the UN is the victim of its own success.

To understand the case for the UN, it helps to go back to its origins to review why the world needs a system of collective security based on the rule of law, and to recollect that the United Nations is at the heart of that system.

A hundred years ago, the only effective protection against aggression was military capacity — your own and that of your allies. The only checks on would-be aggressors were the costs of fighting and the risks of failing.

In the First World War, as armies were democratized and war industrialized, 10 million people died. In the Second World War, as war was democratized and technology advanced, killing soldiers and citizens alike, 60 million people died (1,600 times the death toll of three years of war in Iraq). In a Third World War, with the advent of sophisticated weapons of mass destruction, how many people would die?

The generation that fought and survived the last world war knew that a Third World War could not be won in any reasonable meaning of the word “win,” and must never be fought.

The world's aspirations for the United Nations have exceeded the organization's grasp, but it has, nevertheless, served us reasonably well in the intervening period — far better than its critics realize or admit.

However, bloody as the world has been in the last 60 years, it would have been a much worse place without the UN. Indeed 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.

The UN has initiated numerous conflict-prevention initiatives and has been much more ready since the Cold War to authorize its members to use force to stop internal conflicts. From 1945 until 1989, the end of the Cold war, there were 13 UN military operations. Since then, there have been 42 military interventions under UN auspices, and the UN's annual peacekeeping budget has grown to over \$5 billion.

The UN has given birth to concepts we now take for granted such as peace-keeping. The UN has helped East and West avoid a nuclear Armageddon.

The UN has served as mid-wife in the births of more than 100 countries since 1945, the great majority of which came into being peacefully. More broadly, the UN has helped the world to feed its hungry, shelter its dispossessed, minister to its sick and educate its children.

More mundanely, the UN has regulated the world's air travel, coordinated its mail services, overseen its patents, regulated its shipping and apportioned its electromagnetic spectrum, among many other unsung but necessary tasks.

It is trite but true that if the UN did not exist we would have to invent it — if our generation could generate the political will and vision to do so.

Nevertheless, 60 years is a long time in the lives of institutions. It must be said that there have been serious disappointments.

The behaviour of the Human Rights Commission, an Alice-in-Wonderland body where perpetrators escaped censure and pointed the finger at others, would have been funny were it not so tragic for the victims of the abuses. Worse have been the conscience-shocking failures of the UN in Cambodia, the Congo, and the Balkans that have left indelible stains on the soul of the world body.

In Rwanda, even as 800,000 people were being systematically slaughtered, the Security Council played legal word-games about genocide, preferring to talk of “acts of genocide.”

Now it is Darfur that appeals to the feeble collective conscience. The UN's reaction, that is to say, the member countries' reaction, has been unconscionably slow.

The UN's failures, humanity's failures, take many other forms. Poverty traps rob the poor of their potential in vast stretches of the world, while the unfulfilled promises of assistance by some donor countries and the graft of some host governments combine to preserve the tragic status quo.

Some governments are just plain oblivious to the UN's weaknesses, or indifferent to them, trusting to fate to fix them. Others would just forsake the UN altogether and look to their own strengths in a dangerous age. The first course would condemn the UN to an existence increasingly on the periphery of humanity's vast need. The second course would condemn the world to repeat history in infinitely more dangerous circumstances.

It is just plain foolish to throw out the international rule book now. Now is the time, in a single super power era, to reinforce the rules of the road and encourage the development of a culture of law.

The wiser course is to adapt the UN, the institution our parents bequeathed to us, so that it serves us better now and safeguards our children's future. Two lessons from last fall's summit seem clear enough by now.

First, absent the calamity of a world war, which provided the incentive to create the UN in the first place, across-the-board transformations of the institution are not possible.

Second, the membership will, nevertheless, agree to limited changes if they are well thought out, targeted on issues on which a consensus can be created, and actively but patiently promoted by governments and civil society. That is precisely what happened with respect to the Canadian-commissioned and championed report, the Responsibility to Protect.

Other outcomes of the summit are important, for example, the creation of the Peacebuilding Commission, which will be led by a Canadian..

A standing police capability for the UN is being created. In the months since last fall, the old Human Rights Commission has been disbanded, and what in all probability will be a more effective Human Rights Council has taken its place.

An extensive international criminal justice system is developing under UN auspices. These courts constitute a major innovation found nowhere in the Charter.

Now, the world's monsters can no longer sleep soundly in their beds, confident that they are immune to prosecution for abusing their own peoples, or others.

A further UN innovation in recent years has been the idea of sustainable development, the reconciliation of the once polar opposites of economic growth and environmental protection. Scores of environmental treaties have been concluded under UN auspices.

Despite the UN's well known failure to agree to a definition of terrorism, 13 counter-terrorism treaties have been concluded by the General Assembly.

All told, over 500 multilateral treaties have been concluded under UN auspices. The UN has in the process helped member countries create an extensive body of international law, helping an increasing share of the world's people live in dignity and freedom.

Perhaps the most visible recent UN innovation has been the creation of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. That office coordinated the massive international relief response to the December 2004 Asian Tsunami.

The point is that from counter-terrorism treaties, to human rights conventions, to the support of democracy and promotion of the rule of law, to coordinating disaster relief, to fostering sustainable development, to rebuilding states emerging from conflict, it is clear that the UN has taken very significant strides into the 21st century.

I am not suggesting that all is well. Last fall's summit revealed how little consensus there is on some crucial issues facing the organization. There are several important pieces missing in the reform puzzle.

Notably absent is agreement on criteria to govern the use of force, which is especially important when by invading Iraq the American administration demonstrated its willingness to flout the will of the membership.

Also missing is a definition of terrorism, because of disagreement on what constitutes a legitimate response to occupation by foreign forces, particularly on the West Bank and in Iraq.

Last fall's summit lent renewed impetus to strengthening ethical conduct and accountability; modernizing UN financial regulations and rules; enhancing independent oversight; and updating the program of work through review of mandates older than five years.

The United Nations has served us better than most people realize, whatever its critics might say, not least in the development and promotion of international law.

The UN has manifestly not kept up fully with the times, and needs renovation.

The disappointments of last fall's UN summit notwithstanding, the UN has in fact made numerous and far-reaching innovations. Finally, that there is no better way than the UN. Hegemonic power lacks legitimacy, and after the Iraq debacle, credibility, and is not an alternative to multilateral cooperation.

The UN will muddle through and remain at the heart of the international system, because it must. There really is no ready and realistic alternative.

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