

What the UN's next secretary general must do to succeed, and how Canada can help

Antonio Guterres must be a general, not just a secretary.

EDMONTON—The United Nations' new secretary general, Antonio Guterres, who will take office Jan. 1, has pinpointed his top goal: "a surge in diplomacy for peace." With the crucible of Aleppo revealing ruptures in the international order, Guterres faces a huge challenge: can he stand up to the United States and Russia, as an earlier secretary general, U Thant, did in the Cuban missile crisis, and make the UN a decisive instrument for peace? The ramifications for Canada are enormous.

Guterres, a former prime minister of Portugal and most latterly the head of the UN refugee agency, doesn't have an army at his disposal, but he has the power to influence political leaders to fulfil their responsibilities to stop the massacres and huge displacements of people, such as we have seen in Syria. To be successful, Guterres must be a general, not just a secretary.

His predecessor, Ban Ki-moon, made notable contributions to raising up humanity (particularly the Sustainable Development Goals program), but he did not significantly challenge the egregious conduct of the big powers, which are trampling on prospects for peace. U.S. and Russian promotion of the notorious arms business and refusal to work with states that are starting nuclear disarmament negotiations are scandalous.

The Security Council should have sent an international peace force into Syria

as soon as fighting started in 2011 to apply the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, but Russia (frequently with China) vetoed resolutions to stamp out the fighting. The Security Council's unanimous humanitarian relief resolution this week does not wipe out the shame.

This callous disregard for human life conjured up past instances of UN impotence in the face of the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica. Ban's failure to go to the court of world opinion over Syria contributed to the sidelining of the UN.

Russian indifference to suffering in the Middle East should be excoriated. But the U.S. is far from blameless. President George W. Bush started the Iraq war in 2003, bypassing the UN completely, and this illegal action gave birth to the terrorist movements now at the heart of the Syrian crisis.

Moreover, the U.S. led the expansion of NATO to include the Baltic states on the edge of Russia, and has maintained construction of a missile defence system in Europe that is a direct provocation to Russia.

Maybe U.S. president-elect Donald Trump will make a "deal" with Russia. Who knows how the bromance between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin will play out? But world stability should not be left to the eccentricities and macho egotism of the two men who control about 95 per cent of the about 15,300 nuclear weapons in the world.

Enter Guterres. He wants to shore up the three pillars of the UN global security agenda: peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights. He sees his role as "acting with humility, without arrogance, without giving lessons to anybody, but working as a convener, as a facilitator, as a catalyst, and behaving like an honest broker, a bridge builder, and a messenger for peace." This is no doubt laudable and bespeaks of a generous soul. (I find it interesting that his first three appointments are all

women: Amina Mohammed of Nigeria as deputy secretary general, Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti of Brazil as his cabinet chief, and Kyung-wha Kang of South Korea as special adviser on policy.) But none of this is likely to greatly impress Trump or Putin.

The secretary general has the right to bring before the Security Council any matter that in his opinion may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security. He is the one bulwark we have to hold out against the arrogance and dominance of the big powers. If he will stand up to Washington and Moscow (and not worry whether they will veto his second term five years from now), he can make the UN by far the best instrument to cope with the common threats the world faces in the 21st century.

But he can't do this alone. He needs the solid and active support of important countries. He needs Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has made it clear that Canada wants to play an important role in the UN. Canada could hardly make a greater contribution to world peace than strengthening the role of the UN secretary general in mediating between the major states to get them to work co-operatively in building a common security agenda.

The international chaos of today must give way to newly empowered world institutions. The United Nations, which after all in the 71 years of its existence has prevented a world war, must be re-presented to the world as the indispensable organization for peace. Canada could supply some vision in the development of global institutions: for instance, a multilateral centre for lessening the dangers of war, an international verification mechanism, or a world space organization.

Canada must move beyond saying no to Russia and yes to the U.S. all the time. The new UN secretary general wants a "surge" in diplomacy for peace. Now is a moment for Canada to aspire to true greatness.

Former Senator Douglas Roche is the author of The United Nations in the 21st Century.

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