

# **The major powers must unite behind the UN**

The failure of the major powers to overcome their narrow, short-term interests has crippled the UN's ability to enforce the peace and security of the world.

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Outside, the headlines blared the new war on the ISIS extremists in Syria and Iraq, but inside the United Nations headquarters in New York, the focus was on building a culture of peace and forging an agenda to wipe out the worst forms of poverty by 2030.

Destroy. Create.

The tensions inside me were fierce as I watched debates play out in the one place charged by international law to protect the peace and security of the world.

The speeches were exhortatory. It was like standing on a mountain and reveling at the sight of the green fields below. But, at the same time, people over the horizon were being slaughtered by barbarians who have not the slightest regard for elementary humanitarian law.

For three days, I watched UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon open various meetings with words of encouragement, while he himself and the world body he represents were being completely ignored by United States President Barack Obama and the other kingmakers as they formed a new coalition to rout Middle East extremists.

I had come to New York to speak at a day-long forum to mark the 15th anniversary of the adoption of the UN Programme of Action on the Culture of Peace. This set of actions centering on non-violence and an end to all forms of discrimination, taken up by hundreds of civil society organizations and not a few governments, was eclipsed by the militarism that followed 9/11.

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars, with their devastating consequences, including giving birth to the extremists now running amok in the Middle East, have set the UN back. Yet the UN goes on planning for a better tomorrow.

Article 24 of the UN Charter is clear: "In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security."

Present-day politicians don't seem to remember that, in 1961, US president John F. Kennedy and Soviet Union leader Nikita Khrushchev authorized their principal arms control negotiators, John McCloy and Valerian Zorin, to negotiate a framework for comprehensive disarmament. The superpower leaders agreed to "support and provide agreed manpower for a United Nations peace force." The framework agreement was unanimously endorsed by the General Assembly, but the document was overtaken by the Vietnam War.

In 1992, former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali returned to the subject in his Agenda for Peace, in which the Security Council would control a permanent force to deter aggression. Two years later, the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Armed Conflict recommended the establishment of a UN rapid reaction force of some 5,000 to 10,000 troops, the core of which would be contributed by members of the Security Council. So the idea of the UN Security Council acting to protect innocent civilians from atrocities is not new.

The idea was further refined in the UN's 2005 Responsibility to Protect doctrine, in which, if peaceful means fail, collective military action can be taken on a case-by-case basis under the authority of the Security Council. The UN has actually tried to exercise the Responsibility to Protect in Mali, the Great Lakes region of Africa, and Libya, but it is hampered by the veto system in the Security Council, in which any of the five major powers can unilaterally stop a proposed action. Thus the Security Council has not acted to stop the slaughters in Syria and Iraq.

The failure of the major powers to overcome their narrow, short-term interests has crippled the UN's ability to enforce the "peace and security" of the world. President Obama, although a reluctant warrior, is trying to put together a coalition that is sure to worsen the anti-Western feeling among Muslims and sow the seeds of a new generation of extremists.

The fact that the major powers will not unite to enforce an end to the barbarism of 2014 is a tragedy for the UN. The present weak leadership at the top of the institution is a further disturbing factor. I cannot imagine Dag Hammarskjöld or Kofi Annan allowing themselves to be silenced at

the rupture of the charter they are sworn to uphold.

The UN has a bag of tools, not the least of which is the International Criminal Court, to protect civilians and enforce justice. The countries of the world need to get behind the UN at this moment of crisis, which I fervently hope Prime Minister Harper will keep in mind when he addresses the General Assembly in a few days.

The thinking I have been expressing here is described by some self-appointed realists as flawed. They argue that terrorism defines the 21st century and can only be met by a so-called war on terror. I disagree.

There will always be individuals willing to give their lives to attack an enemy. But terrorism is an aberration, not a system of change in people's lives and attitudes toward one another. There are not civil society groups by the thousands coalescing around terrorism, rather there are civil society groups by the tens of thousands implementing at ground level, in many ways, the values of the culture of peace.

This huge and often unsung movement, which rejects war, is driving the present transformative moment for humanity. The movement to the culture of peace—however soft it may appear on the surface compared to the hard decisions of warfare still lingering in the militarists' offices—is the real power of the 21st century. This is the power the UN charter represents. If the charter is continually overridden, the UN will be reduced to a social welfare agency.

Don't get me wrong. Through its economic and social programs, particularly the Millennium Development Goals, the UN has lifted millions out of poverty and is a blessing for the world for that reason alone. But it was meant "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Though my latest visit to the UN has produced tensions within me, I dare not lose hope in the power of the only world body we have to contribute to building a safer, more equitable world.

Former Senator Douglas Roche's latest book is *Peacemakers: How People Around the World are Building a World Free of War*.