

The United Nations can help us get through these dark days

By DOUGLAS ROCHE JUNE 9, 2022

Russia's war on Ukraine must be strongly condemned, but that war, heinous as it is, does not invalidate the right to peace. If anything, it reinforces the overriding imperative of building a world structure that supports the right to peace. Such a structure already exists: the United Nations.

EDMONTON—The Russian war in Ukraine is bogged down and no one knows how it will end. The West is dispirited, frantically pouring billions of dollars into war machinery that could lead to nuclear conflict. This is not a strategy with a hopeful future. It is time to look beyond NATO, which only offers more militarism, and fix our eyes on what the United Nations can do to build up the possibilities for a more peaceful world.

Many people think the UN can't do anything because of the veto system in the Security Council in which any of its five permanent members can stop a measure from going forward. Russia used its veto to block a resolution that would have forced it to stop its aggression in Ukraine. It will likely use its veto again to stop any reform of the Security Council.

But the General Assembly, the body where all 193 member states of the UN meet, is now challenging the Security Council by expanding the concept of "uniting for peace." The Uniting for Peace device, long on UN books, was designed to provide the UN with an alternative avenue for action when a permanent member uses its veto to obstruct the Security Council from carrying out its functions.

On March 2, 2022, the General Assembly, by a vote of 141-5-35, adopted a resolution demanding the Russian Federation immediately end its invasion of Ukraine and unconditionally withdraw all its military forces. The representative of the European Union put the matter succinctly: "This is not just about Ukraine, this is not just about Europe, this is about defending an international order based on rules. This is about whether we choose tanks and missiles or dialogue and diplomacy."

The vote condemning Russian aggression clearly showed Russia's isolation from the rest of the international community. Lichtenstein pushed forward by sponsoring a resolution with 83 co-sponsors (including Canada), which was adopted by consensus by the General Assembly, aimed at holding the five permanent council members accountable for their use of the veto. The assembly decided that its president shall convene a formal meeting within 10 working days of the casting of a veto by one or more permanent members of the council, and hold a debate on the situation as to which the veto was cast. This Uniting for Peace resolution was seen as an important step forward in strengthening United Nations' accountability.

While it is true that the Uniting for Peace resolutions cannot by themselves stop a war, they show the growing momentum for accountability within the UN system. The new mandatory debate mechanism opens an opportunity for the General Assembly to take a strong moral position for peace. A strengthened General Assembly can become an alternate to the deadlocked Security Council. The world can speak more clearly through a revitalized General Assembly.

This moment in history, overwhelming as it is, is calling us to recognize a human right to peace. That right will not magically appear out of nowhere. We must claim it, and we do that, as former U.S. president John F. Kennedy said, not by expecting "a sudden revolution in human nature, but on a gradual evolution in human institutions." Strengthening the United Nations system is a practical way to advance the concept of the right to peace.

The "right-to-peace" idea seems far removed from the horrors we are witnessing daily in Ukraine. Yet only this long-range view—a vision of humanity cooperating for mutual survival—will see us through the present crisis.

In 2016, the General Assembly actually adopted a Declaration on the Right to Peace, which stated, "Everyone has the right to enjoy peace such that all human rights are promoted and protected, and development is fully realized." Even though it passed, the declaration was very controversial and consigned to a file case in the UN basement. Its time has clearly not yet come.

But in our darkest days, which we are now passing through, with more calls for ammunition and fewer calls for negotiations, we should keep in mind Kennedy's words about common security, which are just as applicable today as they were when he uttered them in the Cold War days of 1963: "Some say that it is useless to speak of peace or world law or world disarmament—and that it will be useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude. I hope they do. I believe we can help them do it. But I also believe that we must reexamine our own attitude—as individuals and as a nation—for our attitude is as essential as theirs.... Let us not be blind to our differences, but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by

which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

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Douglas Roche is a former Canadian Senator. Among his books is 'The United Nations in the 21st Century'.