

Three Steps for the United Nations To Build Peace in the 21st Century

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The 70th anniversary of the United Nations finds the Organization in – to quote the immortal words of Charles Dickens – “the best of times, the worst of times.”

The world as a whole is moving to a higher stage of civilization. All the big indicators of modern life — health, education commerce, science, energy, shipping, communications, transportation, law, women’s rights — are expanding. Two billion people in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have been lifted out of dire poverty in the past two decades. A new global middle class is emerging. More people can claim their human rights than ever before. The major powers are not fighting one another as they did in the twentieth century.

And yet, not since the end of the World War II have there been so many refugees, displaced people, and asylum seekers. Extremism and nationalism are on the rise. Terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State and Boko Haram, have seized large territories, committed gross human rights violations, and triggered humanitarian crises. Atrocities, the deliberate starvation of civilians, and assaults on hospitals and shelters have become

common. The suffering of women and children in failed states is unendurable. Diplomacy among different regions and cultures is on the defensive, undermined by spates of violence in the Middle East and Africa.

Which is the real world? Both these views reflect reality. So how are we to make sense of such divergence and how can we build hope for an enduring peace?

In four decades in public life as a parliamentarian, ambassador, and civil society activist, I have been preoccupied with this question. I find myself repeatedly coming back to the United Nations, the only place where 193 nations come together to work out, in six languages, their global problems. The UN was started seventy years ago “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” How successful is it?

At one level, the UN’s record of accomplishments is astonishing. It delivers food every day to 100 million people in eighty countries, assists 60 million refugees, protects human rights through eighty treaties and declarations, deploys 120,000 personnel in sixteen peacekeeping missions, in addition to thirteen political and peacebuilding missions, which are averting future genocides. The UN is responsible for aviation safety, detecting global warming, and rising literacy rates among the world’s poorest. It is charting the seas and space as the common property of humanity.

At another level, the UN is criticized for its failures — it hasn’t stopped the slaughter of innocent people in Syria and Iraq, and there are still millions of destitute people. Speeches without end are made at the green marble podium in the General Assembly and float off into the atmosphere. When international tensions mount, the big powers frequently bypass the very body they built to guarantee security.

Is the United Nations effective in building human security in the 21st century? The answer is vital in trying to make sense of the conflicting trends on the world scene today

The United Nations is by far the best instrument we have to cope with the common threats the world now faces. When the Security Council acts in unity, it gets results: measures to curb the proliferation of nuclear weapons, elimination of Syria's chemical weapons, effective peacekeeping in the Central African Republic and other war-torn places. Global poverty, child mortality, and maternal deaths have been cut in half in the past twenty years by UN agencies.

Despite these accomplishments, the UN is too often dismissed by those in a hurry for instant solutions to problems that lie deep within the psyches of peoples and nations across the globe. The new instruments for peace the UN is trying to build are in the hands of fallible people, but that does not mean the essential ideas of justice the UN is promoting are deficient. On the contrary, it is the very largeness of the UN agenda that requires more time for fulfillment than those wedded to the daily news seem willing to allow. Those who do see the value of the UN ideal need to exercise courage and patience.

The UN should be regarded as a central dynamic organization helping populations everywhere to move forward. It is saving the peace in diverse regions and lifting millions out of destitution. It is trying to prevent nuclear warfare and environmental catastrophe. It is developing everyone's human rights. Its core message insists seven billion people can live together in a culture of peace based on non-violence as a starting point. It is the base of our hopes for lasting peace. With all its limitations, the United Nations is the most successful world political world political body humanity has ever

known.

Still, in these conflicting times, we ask ourselves: will there be war or peace in the 21st century? What does the UN need to do to put the world firmly on the path to peace? In my humble view, there are three requirements – certainly not an exhaustive list:

1. Develop Full Support for the Sustainable Development Goals.

A fundamental lesson the UN has taught is that there can be no peace without development. A “global partnership for development” originated at the UN Millennium Summit in 2000. States created the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), setting fifteen-year targets on aid, trade, debt relief, and improved access to essential medicine and new technologies. Civil society organizations, the private sector, philanthropic organizations, and international organizations were enlisted to expand government efforts to achieve eight goals.

The target of reducing extreme poverty rates by half was met five years ahead of the 2015 deadline. Goals to increase water supplies and reduce the number of slums were also met. Those were striking accomplishments. However, we cannot ascribe total success to the MDGs. Some states made big improvements, others hardly any. Maternal health leaped forward, but most donor states did not meet official development assistance commitments. Zones of conflict wiped out economic gains. But overall, the MDGs, showing that the international community could be mobilized, drove the human development agenda forward at a faster pace than the world had ever seen.

Its success in mobilizing diverse sectors in addressing universal poverty has led the UN to attempt its most ambitious project yet. With the Millennium Development Goals set to expire in 2015, another plan was

organized to take the development process to 2030. A team of thirty-two agency officials led by the UN Development Secretary-General Ban led this process, which may well prove to be the hallmark of his administration. His document, “The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet,” reveals the scope of the new Sustainable Development Goals, which world leaders accepted at the recent UN summit.

To cope with an increasingly ageing, urbanized population expected to jump from the present seven billion to nine billion by 2050, Ban proposed no less than a universal agenda for a shared future, one that is people-centered and planet-sensitive. Humankind faces the same global challenges, he noted. Standards based on the principles of human rights, the rule of law, equality, and sustainability must be set to ensure the global common good.

“We now know that extreme poverty can be eradicated within one more generation,” he said. “The MDGs have greatly contributed to this progress, and have taught us how governments, business, and civil society can work together to achieve transformational breakthroughs.”

2. Reform of the Security Council.

When the UN began, the five permanent members of the Security Council – the United States, the Soviet Union (now Russia), the United Kingdom, France and China – gave themselves the power to veto any resolution they didn’t like. The veto has been used 234 times. On the other hand, because Security Council resolutions are binding with the power of international law, they take on great weight with the power of the P5 united behind them. It is highly unlikely the P5 will give up the veto, but there is a movement under way to restrict its use so that it would not be applied to bar UN military action in mass atrocity situations. It would be easier to get the

P5 to agree to this restriction if the Security Council were enlarged to correspond with modern demographics. Germany, Japan, India and Brazil should be taken in as permanent members without a veto. The non-permanent members, serving two-year terms, should be enlarged from the present ten to fifteen.

Security Council reform is tied to the funding bases of the UN. All told, the entire body of work of the UN, including peacekeeping and the sweeping economic and social development programs of all the specialized agencies and programs, costs \$30 billion per year. This works out to about four dollars per person on the planet. It is only 1.76 per cent of the \$1.7 trillion that nations spend annually on arms.

The UN needs a cash injection. Although at least half the members of the UN contribute only a pittance, they are often the biggest beneficiaries. UN reform should start with all countries, large and small, paying more. It is hard to get governments to understand that investing in peace and sustainable development is in the common interests of all. This requires educating the public about what the UN does and this in turn requires sufficient resources.

Also, women's participation in peacekeeping missions would be a significant step forward. I look to a highly qualified woman to be the next Secretary-General of the United Nations. There can be no guarantee that more women in positions of authority will automatically produce a more peaceful world, but given the record of men in producing a culture of war over the past few centuries, the possibility, if not the promise, of a more feminine-inspired world order is dazzling.

3. Resolving the Two Paramount Issues.

The UN agenda for peace is long and complex, but there are two

issues that stand out above all: global warming and nuclear weapons. Both of these are immense risks to peace on the planet.

Its work on the environment best illustrates how the United Nations affects every individual on the planet. The Charter does not even mention the word “environment,” yet the organization’s preoccupation with a multitude of issues dealing with water, air, pollution, and global warming shows how the UN has evolved over the years to respond to the evolving needs of humanity. “Climate change,” said Secretary-General Ban, “is the defining issue of our time.”

The most visible part of the UN’s work on the environment is the massive effort now underway to hold the rise in average global temperature to no more than two degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. Stopping, or at least containing, global warming by reducing the emission of greenhouse gases has become a rallying cry around the world. After prolonged prodding by the UN, governments in both the North and South agree that they have a shared responsibility to protect the climate by reducing carbon emissions. But getting commitments on binding targets in accordance with the different abilities of the rich and poor countries is a lot tougher.

Many people think that because technology created this problem, technology can solve it. But pinpointing carbon reduction levels is only the start of setting humanity on a course of sustainable development. The underlying issue is our responsibilities as human beings interacting with one another on a planet where all the financial, energy, and trading systems are merging. Climate change is not only an overarching problem, it cuts to the core issue of building a world community based on rules protecting the common good. It forces us to think not only about the quality of life but also the primary issue of survival on the planet.

The rising temperature of the planet is a signal of the human distress of its inhabitants. Holding down the rise must be done immediately, but the sickness requires a holistic remedy, which almost by definition requires long-term work. Cooperation must replace competition to provide balanced development.

Climate change urgently reveals the choice humanity must now make: to selfishly pursue the benefits of the Earth, as the rich and powerful have done for so long, or to share resources more equitably for the common good. The UN is nudging the world toward sustainable development, and that may turn out to be its most lasting accomplishment.

. Similarly, the UN is trying to get the powerful governments to understand that the continued possession of nuclear weapons is a threat to, not a guarantor of, peace. It defies logic that the world has global treaties banning chemical and biological weapons but none banning the remaining 15,800 nuclear weapons.

With the nuclear powers modernizing their nuclear arsenals despite giving lip service to nuclear disarmament, we face permanency in nuclear weapons unless a Nuclear Weapons Convention or a framework of legal instruments outlaw the possession as well as use of these instruments of evil. Three-quarters of the countries of the world have voted at the UN to commence comprehensive negotiations, but the three Western nuclear powers, the US, the UK and France, are adamantly opposed, while Russia will only participate when it is convinced the US will not attempt to maintain military superiority. All countries that profess to understand the “catastrophic humanitarian consequences” of nuclear weapons need to engage immediately in establishing the legal, political and military requisites for a nuclear weapons free world.

What of Canada's role in the UN's agenda for peace? The election of a new Liberal government gives our country a new opportunity to engage vigorously in the UN agenda for peace. The new Canadian government should implement a renewed foreign policy that Canadians could be proud of. This renewal would start with an unambiguous commitment for Canada to be actively and responsibly involved again in the United Nations programs for common security. A high-profile Canadian of experience in international affairs should be appointed Ambassador to the U.N. with a mandate both to increase Canada's participation in U.N. work and bring news of U.N. work to Canadians in periodic public speeches and panel discussions.

The UN needs Canada and Canada needs the UN. A new moment to conjoin the interests of both has arrived.