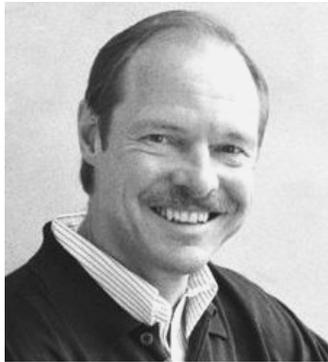


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Perspectives



The United Nations: A Once Noble Ideal in Tatters

After vigorously opposing the US-British led war on Iraq, France is now leading a small chorus demanding a major role for Europe in the reconstruction and administration of post-war Iraq. To many, such a notion is mind-boggling and illustrative of precisely the type of arrogance of which French officials have accused the United States. But whether we approve of French impudence is rather irrelevant: Paris, after all, holds a permanent seat at the all-powerful United Nations Security Council and that in itself guarantees that the world will have to put up with the French viewpoint for some time. Or does it? The events leading up to the Second Iraq War suggest that the machinery of the United Nations will have to be comprehensively rethought. Some notable foreign policy experts have even started to question whether the UN can survive.

“If we want this to be a better world, the UN is our only chance,” a man I admire reminded me a few days ago. Then he asked me whether I had ever read its founding charter. “It’s a document of great beauty...noble, daring and idealistic.” Actually, I’m familiar with the document and it is all these things--take a look at the preamble, which is reflected on the next page.

But what was foreseen in 1945 is at stark odds with what the United Nations is today. Libya’s chairing the UN Human Rights Commission is a travesty and the decade-long effort by France and Russia to hamper mandated weapons inspections in Iraq is reprehensible. The by-passing of mandated Security Council procedures by America and NATO during the Kosovo War, or the US and Britain in the case of the current invasion of Iraq, is equally disturbing. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that the permanent members of the Security Council persistently advance their own national agenda, with little regard for the wellbeing of the world at large. Smaller nations, guided by such example, get whatever privileges and advantages they can for themselves.



*Charter of the United Nations, signed at San Francisco on June 26, 1945.
Preamble*

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and

to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and

to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and

to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS

to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors, and

to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and

to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and

to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples.

Why it no longer works

There are many reasons why the UN no longer works. To begin with, most of the objectives articulated in the United Nations' charter run counter to human nature and are simply not realizable. The UN was conceived in a world reduced to ashes. Anguish gives rise to hope, out of destruction grows creation, and the noblest resolutions are invariably born out of utter despair. Similarly, idealism disappears when things get cushy. And life in the post-war period, at least in those nations which call the shots, has been comfortable indeed.

Other reasons for the UN's gradual descent are structural. Institutions attract idealists and bureaucrats; the former generally end up at the bottom of the hierarchy, while the latter flourish and rise to the top. I had a lot of exposure to senior UN functionaries during the late 1970s and I can unequivocally say that I've never met a more corrupt and self-serving lot. No matter who the UN's Secretary General of the day is, the organization is firmly in the hands of the mandarins who run the day-to-day affairs of its literally dozens of agencies employing tens of thousands. The negatives at work are familiar ones: waste is rampant, corruption thrives, duplicity or ignorance are prerequisites to advancement. Other large organizations battle the same ills, but in the United Nations, whose stated goal is idealism in its purest form, they are all the more apparent.

Other structural problems have arisen as a result of the UN's established processes. The most obvious example of something that doesn't work is the UN Security Council. France and Britain are no longer two of the world's five most significant nations, but they're still entrusted with two out of five permanent seats and hold veto power. The French seat should go to the European Union; the British one to India. And to further bring the UNSC's composition in alignment with today's economic and political realities, the permanent membership should be expanded, from five to perhaps a dozen nations.

Even worse is the concept of unanimity. In order to pass any resolution, all five of the Security Council's permanent members have to agree. If any one member "vetoes" the proposal, it cannot be enacted. I don't know who thought of the idea that the five strongest nations on world would ever agree on anything. During the Cold War years, it was a given that the West would veto whatever the East wanted, and vice versa. And since the demise of Communism, the veto mechanism has been a virtual guarantee that the UNSC's agenda is governed not by what is good for the world, but by the narrow self-interest of one or several of its permanent members. France's recent charade was a magnificent illustration of just how easily the United Nation's process can be manipulated and how a completely self-serving agenda can be hidden behind the cloak of morality.

The UN's future

Where do we go from here? My bet is that the UN is incapable of overhauling itself. I also find it hard to imagine that France or Britain will voluntarily give up their power, or that any of the other three permanent Security Council members will want to share their privileges or see them in any way diminished. If my assumptions are right, the UN will continue to muddle along, but lose even more of its effectiveness. When Vladimir Putin invaded Chechnya, he was careful not to turn to the UN for permission. Bill Clinton, quite similarly, decided to go to war over Kosovo without any consultation of the UN Security Council. Not many people noticed.

George W. Bush thought he'd do it differently. He sought consultation with UN and learned to regret it: the media maligned him and his public support eroded. I don't think we'll see a repeat of this episode. In the future, China, Russia and the US will pursue their international objectives without consultation. Aspiring powers will draw their lessons and do as the large powers do.

More than ever, the UN will be an expensive paper tiger. The world will be a more dangerous place!

May 9, 2003

A Brief History of the U.N. Why Comprehensive Reform is Needed

On April 8, I reprinted the founding charter of the United Nations in these pages—one of the most noble and reverent documents ever conceived by mankind. I also concluded that the UN of 1946, a beacon of hope for a war-weary world, was at stark odds with that of today. During the fifty or so years since its inception, the world body has gradually sunk into disrepair. Its bureaucracy has grown exponentially, to the point where the wheels of most of its agencies are clogged and where corruption has become a major problem.

Key international decisions are mostly made by the UN Security Council, an exclusive club of five that has become accustomed to advancing narrow national self-interest over the welfare of humanity at large. Those destined not to wield power are handed symbolic authority: Chile is occasionally allowed to be one of the rotating members of the Security Council; Libya gets to chair the UN Human Rights Commission.

A regime of callousness

The UN's dealings with Iraq were the most powerful demonstration of just how callously the world's business is being conducted. Following the first Iraq War and the positive identification of production facilities for weapons of mass destruction by the UN, the Security Council conceived UNSCOM, a regime designed in 1991 to supervise "the destruction, removal or rendering harmless of its weapons of mass destruction, ballistic missiles with a range over 150 kilometers, and related production facilities and equipment" (Resolution 687).

During the ensuing twelve years, France and Russia, with remarkable consistency, interfered with precisely the set of rules they had helped establish—presumably to protect their considerable investment in Iraq. Most recently, the US and Britain, two other permanent members of the Security Council, staged a preemptive invasion of Iraq—officially to protect the world from Saddam's illicit weapons, but coincidentally advancing economic interests of their own. China, the fifth permanent UNSC member, joined Russia and France in promising a veto, if Washington and London brought the matter to a vote. Beijing, interestingly, held the third largest royalty interest in Iraqi oil reserves.

Is there ever any vote of the UN Security Council in which the permanent members do not vote in their own self-interest? I have carefully sorted through the UNSC's agenda of the past 25 years and cannot find a single incident where the US, Britain, France, the Soviet Union (later Russia) and China did not brazenly pursue their own selfish agendas. In short, the UN's political decision making process is everything *but* ethical. If the world experiences occasional periods of stability, it's not because idealism got us there, but rather because an impasse between the permanent Security Council members or mutual fear between them held everyone in check.

Students of history will point out that this has been so almost since the establishment of the UN. And they're right. Because Stalin was distrusted and feared when World War II ended and the Chinese revolution amplified Communism's aspirations of world domination, the UN Security Council soon split into two voting segments: the Communists and the Capitalists.

The Cold War era: ideology over life

Interestingly, no one accused the UN of cynicism during the period between 1950 and 1990, when this arrangement prevailed. Yet under that illusory regime, the US orchestrated the rise of figures like Marcos, Mobutu, Suharto, Noriega and Saddam Hussein—figures ruthless enough to guarantee that their nations stayed in the Western orbit. That their ruthlessness also guaranteed the oppression of hundreds of millions of people was coincidental. Russia and China followed the same practices; the tyrants who rose to the top in the Communist world included Ceausescu, Hoxha, Honegger, Mengistu and Pol Pot. During the Cold War era, more than ever in recent history, ideology was allowed to take firm precedence over life.

When the United States, Britain and France invariably vetoed initiatives that would benefit Communism, this was viewed not only as logical, but as principled. And when the Soviets and the Chinese reliably thwarted the West's agenda, it was seen as confirmation of Moscow's and Beijing's wickedness. In other words, things became as jaundiced as they are today almost immediately after the UN's foundation, but the Cold War created the illusion of dignity.

The collapse of Communism brought out the best and the worst the UN had to offer. In absence of a convenient morality-label, like “anti-communism”, the shenanigans of the Security Council were exposed like never before. The UN understood how this eroding image could damage it and quickly boosted its role as peacekeeper to compensate. For a while, that worked: no one cared much how the post-war transition would unfold in economically less sensitive places. The missions in Rwanda, Bosnia, Cambodia, East Timor and Kosovo didn’t much interest any of the major powers, the collapse of Communism had left many armies under-utilized, and the UN was as eager as always to expand its bureaucracy and boost its political influence.

World’s second largest oil reserves

But something like Iraq had to come along sooner or later. It contains the world’s second largest oil reserves and the economic and political ambitions each of the five Security Council members have for it vary significantly. France and Russia embarrassed themselves continuously during the years of mandated weapons inspection; the US and Britain exposed major cracks in their own ethics during the negotiations leading up to their invasion. And now, that a post-war Iraq is being discussed, disagreement runs as deep as ever. France, Russia, China, Britain and the US each pursue different objectives, while the United Nations bureaucracy is articulating its own agenda.

As we’ve seen, this is not unusual—what is different is that the hypocrisy of it all is so blatantly exposed. And the victors of the latest showdown, the US and Britain, no longer make any pretense about their expectations from the UN. Even Secretary of State Powell, the only member of the Bush cabinet to still define himself as a diplomat, now routinely tells the UN where it shall not tread. The victors, in a nutshell, will tolerate the UN where it serves them and ignore it where it is a hindrance.

Suddenly, an outpouring of complaints

This state of affairs has been decried by many, but it has been utterly inevitable. To me, the only miracle is how long it took for the façade of the United Nations edifice to crumble. How bad are things? There is little question that the world is becoming a more dangerous place. Instead of seeking discourse within the Security Council, the major powers will increasingly advance their own agendas without UN sanction. The recent experience of Washington demonstrated how little chance of success the UN consultative process has and how considerable the chances of embarrassment are. And as the major powers ignore the United Nations, aspiring players will emulate their behavior.

Despite all this, I see a faint silver lining. The organization’s existence and future are being challenged like never before. The invasion of Iraq was the catalyst that opened the floodgates to a stream of demands and complaints from minor players, and intense debate is always a good thing. Here is a small sampling, all from the past six weeks:

-Chile and Mexico (rotating members of the UN Security Council) repeatedly denounced the permanent Security Council members for their cynicism, accusing them of ignoring them when there is no major confrontation and of pressuring them when there is.

-Japan, which pays a whopping 20% of the United Nations’ budget, is also peeved. An envoy appointed by the cabinet met with the US Ambassador and told him that the Japanese people are deeply frustrated that they pay that much and have no role in important decision-making. Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara’s comment wasn’t official, but highly publicized: he described the UN Security Council as “a vague-talk shop made up of winners of the last war.”

-Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard, argues that some people simply shouldn't be members. He believes that "France's seat distorts the council's effectiveness."

-India, Pakistan, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Egypt, Nigeria, South Africa and Indonesia all want to be on the Security Council, as well. They don't want to pay more, but they want to have the same voice as France or Britain.

-Some German politicians have a different view; they feel their country should be represented *because* it pays a substantial contribution.

Such talk is healthy and much needed. The structure of the UN Security Council has been rendered inoperative and no longer reflects the balance of power in the world. Moreover, agreement on the real issues, between member nations themselves and between members and the United Nations, is more elusive than ever, which suggests that things may well get worse before they get better.

But there is a rapidly broadening debate and more people than ever understand the UN's shortcomings and its dysfunctional structure. Good things may come out of that. Eventually. □

Publisher: Cavelti & Associates Ltd., Toronto, Canada.

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