



Reversing the Downgrading of the United Nations

Michael Oliver

September 22, 2001

The topic I have been asked to speak on - Global Governance - is central to the search for a secure world. So, although there are many nodes in the complex network of institutions that members of the international community are putting together to sustain global governance, I want to concentrate on keeping the peace.

I would like it to be clear that the other facets of global governance are of vital importance for global well-being, including the reshaping of world economic institutions, the participation of civil society in the organs of world governance, the expansion of international law and the protection of individual human rights. But, particularly since the ghastly events of September 11, I want to examine here how global governance relates to human security.

Canada's approaches to security

Canada has never been tempted to approach security through either of the two forms of "going it alone", hegemony or neutrality. We had no hope of becoming a latter-day Rome or indeed of dominating anything much beyond our own borders. And we sprawled over too much strategically significant space for the Swiss model (of neutrality) to look very promising. The only sensible paths led to alliances or to a global security system. The alliance path pointed to NATO and NORAD. The United Nations was the hope for a global system. The country as a whole tried to balance both approaches. The Group of 78 was more intent on global security and on making the UN the instrument for peace. As the original G78 Statement put it: "Canada should make it clear that from the beginning it regarded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an interim security measure until such time as a general system of collective security could be established."

Today, 20 years after G78 was founded, it is appropriate to ask how justified we were in putting our faith in the development of a global security system centred on the UN. Up to the present, it is a mixed story.

The impetus to make the UN a strong guarantor of international peace faded soon after 1945. The Military Staff Committee of the Security Council which, it must be remembered, was to consist of the Chiefs of Staff of the Permanent Five (P5) members of

the Council never came into effective existence. The Cold War, rupturing the assumption of Common Action by the Great Powers, rapidly pushed the security work of the UN down to a level of third-order importance - below the unilateral decisions of the two super-powers, and also below those of NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

The usual account of global security in the period from 1947 to 1989 thus puts East-West mutual deterrence to the fore. There is usually a word about the clear end-run - around the deadlocked Security Council by way of the General Assembly - that made the Korean War, formally, a UN peace operation. But, as the story goes, the important work of the UN in global security really begins in 1956 with the invention of its peace-keeping role. We in Canada valued that role highly - Lester Pearson made it ours - but only a hardy minority of Canadians were prepared to assert that the UN was as significant to overall security or to Canadian security as NORAD or NATO.

The story of global security loses its Cold War focus in 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the days leading up to the Gulf War. But there is an episode in the 1960s that does not fit into the accepted narrative; and, if we are to do justice to the UN as a guarantor of security, we should notice it briefly.

Glory days in the Congo

I am referring to the Congo crisis of 1960 to 1963. These were the "glory days" of the UN, if it ever had such days. Dag Hammarskjold was the Secretary-General and that brilliant black American Ralph Bunche was his deputy. If boldness, reasonableness, imagination and dedication were enough to assure success, they were there in abundance. But of course they were not enough.

Some of you will recall the circumstances. Belgium pulled out of the Congo, leaving nothing to take its place. Chaos descended, and Belgian paratroopers flew back in to rescue nuns and multinational corporations. Patrice Lumumba, the newly elected premier, asked President Eisenhower to help, and Ike remembered there was something called the UN and passed Lumumba on to it.

Hammarskjold's plan, for which he obtained full Security Council approval, including both the US and the USSR, was simple: reinforce and train the new Congolese army (which had thrown out its Belgian officers) and replace the newly returned Belgian paratroopers. The first troops for l'ONUC (L'Organisation des Nations Unies au Congo) were all African: from Ghana, Morocco, Tunisia and Ethiopia. They, and the others who joined them, including Canada, soon had their mandate enlarged to include preventing the secession of the mineral-rich province of Katanga and assuring Congo's political independence. It soon became clear that l'ONUC had been handed a job that Dag Hammarskjold described as "giving first aid to a rattlesnake". Every move the UN made could be, and was, misinterpreted as partisan: the US thought l'ONUC was favouring Lumumba, now cast as a Communist puppet, and the USSR thought it was too soft on the secessionists and their foreign corporate backers.

Lumumba was murdered, Hammarskjold died in a tragic plane crash, secession was halted, and out of the smoke came Mobutu, now a warrior in the fight for world freedom, with carte blanche to create a regime of plunder and oppression to rival that of his 19th century predecessor King Leopold of the Belgians.[1]

Nevertheless, this was much more than peace-keeping, much more than buffering a cease-fire. The UN in the Congo used legitimate force to uphold a UN member government. It was an action that found the Security Council, momentarily, acting in the way the creators of the UN in 1945 expected it would, and the Secretary-General acting as the executive head of the an independent world body.

The man responsible for telling the world about this crucial chapter in UN history, the UN information officer in the Congo, was of course King Gordon, one of the key people who created the Group of 78 and its guiding force for many years.

From Somalia on, a sorry story

In the years that followed the end of the Cold War, and particularly in the Boutros Boutros-Ghali era, the UN made other attempts to play more than a tertiary role in providing for global security, and we learned to talk of complex peace-keeping, of peace-making and peace-building. I should perhaps be counting the Gulf War as the first UN success story of post-Cold War "peace operations", but I have difficulty doing so. Both the Gulf War and its predecessor the Korean War looked far more like successful American wars. The fact that we refer to both these engagements as "wars" is enough to set off alarm bells. I will come back to that point later.

Instead, we should begin in Somalia, go on to Rwanda, to ex-Yugoslavia (Croats versus Serbs), to Bosnia and Srebrenica, to Kosovo/Serbia, to Liberia, to Sierra Leone, and to the Congo once again. What we find is a sorry story.

I am not ignoring the enormously important work of the UN and its specialized agencies in contributing substantially to keeping the peace. In helping to prevent conflict, in monitoring cease-fires, in easing the immense difficulties of post-conflict integration of demobilized troops, restoration of infrastructure, helping rebuild civil society, monitoring elections, clearing mines - the list is long and honourable. In a 1998 booklet issued by the UN there are brief descriptions of the 85 peace-related missions going back to 1948, and most of them were substantially helpful, several of them vital. Failing to give weight to these contributions to global security would be unjust indeed.

But they do not add up to a convincing demonstration that the G78 was justified in putting its faith in the UN as the centre of a global security system. Indeed, the last few years have seen the UN displaced and put back into its tertiary role in Bosnia, where the US orchestrated the Dayton Accord, and in fist Kosovo, then Macedonia, where NATO was the security instrument of choice.

The tone of the Brahimi Panel on UN Peace Operations², which reported just over a year ago to the Secretary-General, does little to encourage us to think of a broader UN security role in the future. The report is a valuable guide to reform in organization and practice; but between the lines one can read, "Get back to your tertiary role, UN, and make sure you play it better." It is perhaps unfair to criticize the Brahimi report in this fashion; it was not asked to define the roles that the Security Council and the Secretary-General should play in keeping the global peace, but simply to recommend ways of making peace operations more effective. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to reconcile the quotation the Panel takes from the Charter about the UN's responsibility to "save future generations from the scourge of war" with its flat statement that "there are many tasks which UN peace-keeping forces should not be asked to undertake and many places they should not go." If not the UN, who? If at present the UN cannot do certain things and go certain places, shouldn't it be strengthened so it can do the tasks and can go to places where saving us from the "scourge of war" requires it to go?

Was Security Council ill-designed?

Perhaps the central instrument, to which the UN Charter assigned the responsibility for maintaining the global peace, was so badly designed that it could never fulfill its mandate. That instrument is, of course, the Security Council. Is it unrealistic to think it could change itself to be a truly effective body - the linchpin in the security mechanism of global governance?

On the face of it, the Security Council's capacity to reform looks small. While the General Assembly transformed itself steadily by the admission of new members - the early trickle becoming a flood during the decolonization era of the late 1940s in Asia, and of the 1950 and 1960s in Africa and the Caribbean, the Security Council's five Permanent Members (P5) were fixed by name, and the total membership limited to eleven in Article 23 of the Charter. Furthermore, Article 27 ensured the privileged position of the P5 by giving each of them a veto. By the end of 1963, a formal amendment to the Charter was made and, two years later, the membership went from 11 to 15.

Formal amendments to a charter or constitution are a poor measure of change, however. Reform of the UN Security Council in informal ways shows more accomplishment.

- The method of selecting non-permanent members has been altered, and for one region at least leads to a lively election;
- The SC now meets almost daily;
- Contributors of armed forces now meet much more often with the Council;
- The SC holds open debates on topics selected by the rotating presidents of the Council;
- Since 1992, heads of government meet in "summit sessions" of the SC;
- Oral statements to the press are now standard after the closed "consultation sessions" of the SC;

- The President of the Council, who for 10 of every 15 months will be from a state that is not one of the Permanent Five, now has a much greater influence on the agenda;
- Pushed by Canada, the move toward greater openness, transparency and accountability is gaining a little ground;
- Presidents now report on their period in office and can be openly critical;
- Vetoes occur more rarely.

I wish my list were longer and more substantial, but it at least suggests some capacity for reform in the composition and procedures.

On more substantial matters, the Brahimi Report on Peace Operations recognizes that reforms have been made, commends the Secretary-General for publishing highly critical analyses of the operations in Rwanda and Srebrenica, and expresses the belief that the changes it recommends can be made if "member states summon the political will to support the UN politically, financially and operationally". [2]

Among the things the report calls for are

- a peace-keeping strategy with robust rules of engagement, that permits peace-keepers to act against those who renege on their commitment to a peace accord, or otherwise seek to undermine it by violence;
- clear, credible and achievable mandates;
- a capacity for "rapid and effective" deployment which would take place within 30 days for traditional operations and 90 days for "complex peace-keeping";
- more funds for and expansion of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

Sanctions policy

There is another substantive area over which the SC is showing signs of greater effectiveness: sanctions policy.

Imposing sanctions was a unusual step for the SC before the 1990s. UN sanctions were used only twice: against Rhodesia in 1966 and against South Africa in 1977. Their success in the South African case - bringing an end to apartheid - was undoubtedly a factor in the sharp turn towards frequent deployment of sanctions that marked the 1990s. It began with Iraq. Just four days after it invaded Kuwait, comprehensive trade and financial sanctions were applied. More than ten years later, they remain in place. Because they have been enforced for such a long period and have caused such horrible suffering to civilians, particularly children, such sweeping sanctions are now giving way to "strategically targeted sanctions such as arms embargoes, flight bans, travel bans, and freezing of financial assets". The acid test of target sanctions is whether "they deny the assets and resources that are most valuable to ... decision-making élites." [3]

Flexibility is seen as the key: the ability to respond to humanitarian needs and the concerns of neighbouring states and to reward partial compliance. What I find

encouraging, as evidence of a possibility of reform being accepted, is that the chairs of the SC's own sanctions committees are the source of much of the thinking on targeted sanctions and flexible sanctions.[4]

Let me sum up where we have gone thus far:

- I have contended that, in spite of Canadian governments' support for the UN, and the G78's clear preference for the UN as the manager of common, global security, today's reality is that the UN acts at a tertiary level of significance, much less important than the unilateral decisions of the United States and less significant than regional alliances like NATO.
- I have further contended that, despite its obvious weaknesses, the UN Security Council and the Secretariat are not fatally flawed, and are quite able to evolve to a higher level of importance for global security, approaching the Charter goal.

A prime saboteur

The reason why the UN has not only failed to expand its security role, but has instead been bypassed more and more often in situations where it could have been used, is not hard to find. It is all too easy to single out the United States as today's prime saboteur of the UN. The US has provided some compelling evidence to support that judgement, evidence that has accumulated at an alarming rate since George W. Bush became President.

- With no reference to the UN, or with only the most cursory justification, it has dropped bombs or missiles over the last 20 years on Libya, Grenada, Panama, Afghanistan and the Sudan.
- It refuses to pay the huge sums it owes in past dues to the UN, forcing reductions in crucial operations.
- It uses its influence to prevent the Security Council from acting in situations where Charter obligations and looming humanitarian tragedies combine, as in Rwanda. President Clinton, after the fact, admitted that something should have been done before 800,000 innocents were slaughtered. George Bush, when asked during his election campaign what he would do if Rwanda occurred again, replied that Rwanda held absolutely no strategic interest or value for the United States whatever, and therefore the United States would simply watch from the sidelines again.

Further examples of Congressional and Presidential contempt for the UN are not hard to find. (This, incidentally, is not true for the American people who, in poll after poll, put a positive value on the UN.) But it is clear that other leading powers are not very different. Russia is far more interested in restoring its spheres of influence than in calling on the UN for aid in conflict avoidance or settlement. China's involvement with the UN is at best perfunctory. And Britain clearly values its special relationship with the US more highly than loyalty to the United Nations.

But the key to the failure of the UN's security role to flourish lies somewhat deeper, I suspect. For, like their leaders, many people in member states have been shaped by the culture of war: they really cannot imagine, and perhaps do not wholly want, a world free of "the scourge of war".

Unwise to call it "war"

Certainly the language of war and the passions of war are strongly in the air this week. When the horror of September 11 had sunk in, and I had spent hours riveted to CNN. I wrote the following comments, entitled "War on Terrorism". President Bush and Colin Powell are unwise, surely, to insist that the monstrous attacks on the World Trade Centre buildings and on the Pentagon are acts of war, to designate these attacks as the "First War of the 21st Century" and to describe its response as a "War on Terrorism". There are at least three reasons why this is unwise:

1. The loss of life in New York and Washington loses its special character if it is perceived as part of a war. These deaths then join the company of those of Hiroshima (140,000), Nagasaki (80,000) and Tokyo (100,000 in a night's fire-bombing) for which the United States was solely responsible and the estimated 590,000 civilians who were killed by Allied bombs in Europe in World War Two (for whom the US shares responsibility with Britain and Canada), including those immolated in the firestorms of Hamburg (40,000) and Dresden (30,000). Putting the September 11 attacks in the "war" category - and preparing a response that is seen as retaliation for an act of war - removes the ghastly incident from the category of "crime", where I suggest it belongs, and puts it into a framework in which "victory" is sought rather than "justice", and "vengeance" is pursued rather than reducing the likelihood that such criminal acts will be repeated.

2. A "War on Terrorism", rather than a UN-sponsored police action to bring specific individuals to justice before a body like the International Criminal Court, which the US rejects, simply invites disagreement about who is a "terrorist" and who is a "freedom fighter". Does the United States not remember that it armed and supported the Mujahedin of Afghanistan of which Osama bin Laden was so effective a member? Searching out and bringing to justice the perpetrators of a specific attack on innocent people doesn't raise these questions. But if there is a generalized "War on Terrorism", who is going to define the targets? Is NATO to be asked to crush Hamas and Hezbollah? Is it to take on the Real IRA, or the Tamil Tigers, or the ETA in Spain? Or, if the focus is to be on internationalist terrorists only, will it launch attacks on all the terrorist-harboring states on the US list, including North Korea, Libya, Iraq, Iran and Cuba?

3. The "war" categorization has already brought the whole of NATO - an exclusively Northern alliance - into conflict with a terrorist foe that is primarily located in the South. Moreover, NATO involvement pits predominantly Christian countries against countries (the "harbouring states") that are predominantly Muslim.

Since then things have evolved. President Bush still talks of war - and the US and other media echo him - but he has moved away from unilateralism and seeks to build a

coalition. No mention of the United Nations, but a brand new, broader alliance. And I suspect that we are seeing an attempt to turn us all into alliance members, rather than members of the United Nations. Common security against terrorist attacks could have been the theme; the UN could have been the instrument, but we are far from that.

It is impossible to look more than hours ahead with any confidence, but I suspect that the UN is in for even sadder days than those of the last few years. Unless we do something, the odds are that we will be pushed towards a much more overt, and a very troubled, regime of US hegemony.

Let me stress the urgency of the situation. If we cannot get our governments to insist ceaselessly that this is a "common security" problem, something the UN was created to cope with, US hegemony waits in the wings.

We must urge Canada to set about forming a "Coalition for Action through the UN", linking together nations from North and South to put a check on Bush's coalition for war.

I think the UN - the whole concept of peace through sane, carefully built global governance - is in real danger.

Now is the time to re-instate and reinforce the UN. Canada should be providing leadership.

Notes

(i) Lively accounts of the Congo mission can be found in two books by Brian Urquhart: *A Life in Peace and War*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1987 and *Ralph Bunche: An American Life*. New York and London, W.W.Norton, 1993

(ii) UN Security Council, General Assembly, Report of the Panel on Peace Operations, 21 August 2000. A/55/305 - S/2000/809. The panel was chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi, former Foreign Minister of Algeria.

(iii) David Cortright and George A Lopez, *The Sanctions Decade*. A Project of the International Peace Academy. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000, pp.223-4.

(iv) The Canadian Ambassador to the UN, Robert Fowler broke important new ground when he was chair of the Angola sanctions committee in 1999.