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THE UNITED NATIONS AT FIFTYSOMETHING: CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

J. Martin Rochester

The United Nations' fiftieth anniversary has come and gone. One might have hoped that amidst the hoopla associated with such a highly visible milestone the international community would have utilized the occasion for engaging in serious institutional reform of the world organization. Alas, that was not the case. It is not too late to organize a major reform project timed to take advantage of the symbolic opportunities presented by another milestone, the upcoming millennial moment. However, if such a project is to prove meaningful rather than merely hortatory, there is a need for it to proceed based on a realistic analysis of both the possibilities as well as constraints surrounding the UN. The UN is ultimately a creature of the international community, and can do only as much or as little as its environment will permit. As Lord Caradon, the former British ambassador once said, "There is nothing fundamentally wrong with the United Nations--except its members" (cited in Gardner, 1975: 16). This paper attempts to assess critical features of the contemporary international system that form the backdrop for UN reform, and examines major reform challenges associated with these system parameters.

Given the current malaise of the UN, including its state of virtual bankruptcy, there is admittedly a sense of gloom and doom pervading the institution that would suggest the winds are not favorable to global institution-building. However, any knowledgeable observer of UN history will recognize that obituary-writing for the UN is nothing new, and hence reformers should not necessarily be deterred by a chilly climate. The history of the UN can be seen as a rollercoaster ride, marked by periods of highs and lows. To the extent one can discern a pattern, it has been the steady erosion of the initial euphoria that accompanied the UN's creation out of the ashes of World War II, with periods of "decline" and "crisis" punctuated by short-term revival and bursts of renewed hope only to be succeeded by another round of failure and ever compounding cynicism. In this sense, we should not make too much of the fact that the 1990s has seen the UN transformed from the would-be centerpiece of a "new world order" to the embodiment of the "new world disorder" (Carpenter, 1991). Indeed, the study of international organization generally has been characterized by a tendency toward either extreme optimism or extreme pessimism, of which the wild mood swings of the 1990s are only the latest example. The lesson here is that analysts, in appraising UN prospects, need to be reminded to avoid what Giovanni Sartori once called both "bad idealism" and "bad realism" (Sartori, 1965: 51).

Bad idealism is perhaps best manifested by the many bombastic statements made by the founders of the UN in 1945. President Truman expressed the expectation that the delegates were about to create "machinery which will make future peace not only possible, but certain" (*U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, 1945: 789). Even more expansive was Cordell Hull's statement: "There will no longer be need for spheres of influence, for alliances, balances of power, or any other of the special arrangements through which, in the unhappy past, the nations strove to safeguard their security or to promote their interests" (cited in Eban, 1995: 39-40). Manifestations of bad realism are even easier to come by. For example, less than a decade after the founding, a leading architect of the UN Charter declared that "the UN is in a state of coma, and there isn't much time

left to revive it" (Romulo, 1954: 32). Following resuscitation in the Hammarskjold era and again after the 1973 Middle East War, the organization perhaps reached its nadir in the 1980s, with even its most fervent supporters lamenting it had become an "irrelevant" place:

The fact is plain. The United Nations has fallen upon hard days. It goes through its paces in a workaday routine that is increasingly ignored or condemned and that threatens to become increasingly irrelevant in the real world. . . . To some, its future is at best obscure (Waldheim, 1984: 106).

My own view -- somewhere between bad idealism and bad realism, with a slight tilt toward the former -- is captured in a notable line spoken in 1988 by an individual who had been at one time among the UN's most fervent critics: "A change that is cause for shaking the head in wonder is upon us [and offers] . . . the prospect of a new age of world peace. . . . The United Nations has an *opportunity* to live and breathe and work as never before [italics mine] " (Reagan, 1988: 1). The opportunity is arguably no less great eight years into the post-Cold War era than it was at the start of the era, even if it remains to be seen whether the current generation of leadership in the United States and elsewhere is capable of seizing the opportunity and summoning the kind of vision, will, and energy that another generation was able to demonstrate in the immediate post-World War II period.

The Contemporary International System: Possibilities and Constraints

One is reminded of the remarks attributed to former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan near the beginning of the Cold War: "As they left the Garden of Eden, Adam turned to Eve and said, 'we live in an age of transition'" (cited in Kissinger, 1995: 99). It is safe to say we live today in an age of transition, whether from Cold War to Hot Peace or however else one wishes to describe the transformation humanity is currently experiencing. Clearly, the contemporary international system is considerably more complicated than the 45 year bipolar system it superseded. Some aspects are an extension of trends which were observable at least as early as the 1970s, but the trends have accelerated and been joined by completely new phenomena. To the extent one can discern the key features of this system, still in its infancy, they are the following.

First, there is a growing diffusion and ambiguity of power. Although some (Krauthammer, 1991; Cheney, 1990; Tucker and Hendrickson, 1993; Strange, 1995; May, 1993-94) still speak of a world of "superpowers" (or at least a single superpower), it would not appear that any one or two states are capable of *moving* the international political system in quite the way the United States and Soviet Union were at times able to do over the half century of the Cold War period. True, with the demise of the Soviet Union, the United States, in some respects, enjoys a greater concentration of power and more privileged position today than during the "Pax Americana" following World War II. However, such a proposition is based more on raw statistical, paper indicators of power than on any actual demonstrated capacity and will to wield influence. The nature of influence itself has shifted more toward the use of economic resources than military resources (Rosecrance, 1986); the U.S. has yet to show whether its political system can commit

the necessary resources to lead, whether through carrots (foreign aid is stagnant) or sticks (elite and mass tolerance for military casualties is at an all-time low). As Joseph Nye (1996: 2) has said, the U.S. cannot afford to be the lone "global policeman" but must settle for the role of, at most, "sheriff of the posse."

Second, there is a growing fluidity of alignments, including lingering East-West and North-South axes of conflict, as well as West-West, South-South, and other variations. In place of bipolarity, we now have "unalignment," notwithstanding the persistence of NATO and other alliance arrangements (Ravenal, 1990). The ideological divide between East and West has become muted, even if it is premature to declare "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1989). The North-South conflict also shows signs of losing its defining character despite the partial widening of the rich-poor gap, as growing diversity within the "developing" world makes "Third World" solidarity harder to sustain and continued use of the latter terminology harder to justify. When 108 members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) met in Bandung-- the place where the movement had first begun, under the banner of anti-colonialism--they had to search hard for a rationale for their existence. Some observers have pointed to newly emergent alignment configurations, either continental/regional blocs built around economic relationships (Sjolander, 1993; Emmerij, 1992) or cultural entities engaged in "a clash of civilizations," in particular the "West against the Rest" (Huntington, 1993). Still others see the kind of Moslem-Serb-Croat conflict that occurred in Yugoslavia as the harbinger of a series of localized conflicts that will increasingly define international politics and that will not necessarily fit into any larger global axis of conflict.

Third, related to the above two trends, there is a growing agenda of issues confronting national governments, associated also with ever more intricate patterns of interdependence, as economic, environmental and other issues compete for attention with traditional military-security concerns. Finance ministers recently have been getting at least as much coverage in the mass media as defense and foreign ministers. Indeed, the "foreign policy establishment" in most states has been widened to include virtually every government agency, as the boundary between domestic and foreign policy that has been blurring for some time has become almost conceptually nonexistent (Rosenau, 1996).

Fourth, there is a growing role being played by nonstate actors (multinational corporations, IGOS, and NGOS) competing with states in determining what happens on the world stage. The first three systemic properties alluded to are consistent with a predominantly state-centric view of the world, although they do represent some "decaying of the pillars of the Westphalian temple" (Zacher, 1992). To the extent that this fourth property takes hold in the international system -- and there remains considerable debate over just how far this has proceeded -- the sovereignty of states and the viability of the Westphalian state system itself are called into question (Lewis, 1996; Cable, 1995; Schmidt, 1995).

There are those who fear the contemporary international system may be more unstable and dangerous than its predecessor. John Mearsheimer (1990: 35) has suggested that "we may wake up one day lamenting the loss of the order that the Cold War gave to the anarchy of international relations." Abba Eban (1995: 50) has stated:

The Cold War, with all its perils, expressed a certain bleak stability Nationalist rivalries, religious fanaticism, unsolved territorial disputes, ancient prejudices and enmities [and other conflicts suppressed below the surface of the Cold War system] ... had all been squeezed into a Pandora's box. The end of the Cold War set these tensions free; they can now explode in their own right and seek their own horizons.

The pessimism was not limited to noted realists, but could be found in "idealist" circles as well, as Sir Brian Urquhart (considered by some to be the father of UN peacekeeping) likewise opined that "the post-Cold War world has not less but more tension" (Childers and Urquhart, 1994: 11).

It is hard to understand why there has been so much sentimentalizing and waxing nostalgic over the Cold War, given Korea, Vietnam, the Cuban missile crisis, and other such episodes. The current tendency to romanticize Cold War politics as somehow more predictable and manageable than the present milieu overlooks the enormous good fortune humanity experienced in surviving the East-West struggle. The new world order/disorder in the 1990s is messier but not more dangerous. Admittedly, there is a schizophrenic quality to the contemporary system, with the forces of disintegration and integration competing with each other on fairly equal terms.

Among the manifestations of disintegration are: the continued proliferation of ministates (Palau, with 15,000 people -- hardly the size of an American suburb -- being the latest "statelet" to join the United Nations); the phenomenon of "failed states" (Somalia, Rwanda, and the like) whose governments have completely collapsed and make the international system look nonanarchic by comparison; growing subnational ethnic conflict and unrest in the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and other so-called developed states, with the specter of some 1500 distinct cultural groups in the world possibly seeking their own statehood down the road; and a movement toward decentralization of power away from central governments toward more localized authority -- and to an extent out of public hands altogether -- even in states without any ethnic stresses.

Among the manifestations of integration are: the kinds of centripetal regional dynamics seen most conspicuously in the European Union; the globalization ("Coca-colanization") of the international economy; the profusion of IGOs (now numbering over 1,000) and NGOs (between 10,000 and 30,000 depending upon whose definitions and data are utilized); and the spread of earth-spanning technologies (such as CNN now reaching over 140 countries and the Internet over 100).

It is hard to know how all this will play out. However, alongside the worries expressed by Mearsheimer and others, there would seem to be some room for cautious optimism as well. The most hopeful sign is that, contrary to the historical pattern of major war being the engine whereby one international system gives way to another, as in 1945, this time--in 1989-90 -system transformation occurred without war, and virtually without a shot being **fired**. This may well be the single most extraordinary moment in the life of the Westphalian system, one that flies in the face of all realist theory and has no precedent in modern nation-state politics. It could be argued that this thankful development is also the source of most of the current problems associated with efforts at United Nations reform, i.e., there is no single, visible, palpable crisis seemingly capable of energizing the next round of global institution-building akin to 1945. All we have to motivate

us is an uneasy, ill-defined "global problematic. " Leaderships must somehow summon the vision and energy without "benefit" of systemic war as a catalyst.

Institutional Reform Challenges

There are presently **five** working groups within the United Nations laboring over UN reform issues. One is examining issues of international security arising out of the Secretary-General's *1992 Agenda for Peace* report. Another is examining UN institutional capabilities in the economic-social field, relating to the Secretary-General's *1994 Agenda for Development report*. A third is looking at changes in the area of UN financing. A fourth is considering changes in the composition and functioning of the UN Security Council, while a **fifth** is reviewing proposals for strengthening the UN system generally, including the General Assembly and Secretariat. I will mainly focus here on the challenges facing the first working group, and then relate these briefly to the concerns treated by the other working groups.

During the Cold War, the UN involvement in the war-peace area essentially took one of three forms, which represented distinct conceptual roles: (1) peaceful settlement (i.e., mediation, good offices, and other third-party procedures provided for under Chapter VI of the Charter); (2) collective security (i.e., mobilization of the entire organization to punish aggression, using either economic or military sanctions, under Chapter VII of the Charter); and (3) peacekeeping (i.e., insertion of military personnel as a neutral presence between warring parties--an innovation that evolved outside the Charter, sometimes labeled Chapter VI and). Peaceful settlement procedures were most relied on of the three. Collective security was virtually nonexistent unless one counts the military sanctions taken against North Korea and the economic sanctions taken against Rhodesia and South Africa. Peacekeeping became the most visible UN role, although somewhat limited.

Prior to 1988, a total of thirteen UN peacekeeping missions had been organized, the last of which had been the UNIFIL operation in Lebanon created in 1978. With the end of the Cold War, more new peacekeeping operations were authorized between 1988 and 1992 than in the entire previous history of the organization. In the 1990s, all told, twenty new peacekeeping missions have been established. The UN has been asked into Angola, Afghanistan, Namibia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, the Western Sahara, Cambodia, Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Haiti, and other hotspots, while maintaining ongoing missions in Cyprus, Lebanon, and elsewhere. As of mid 1996, there were some 66,000 blue-helmeted and blue-berated UN military and civilian personnel, drawn from over 50 countries, scattered across the globe, ranging from 39 military observers on the India-Pakistan border to several thousand troops in a number of countries. In addition, in a few cases the UN has employed economic and/or military sanctions against states found to be in violation of the Charter (Iraq, Somalia, Serbia, Haiti, and Libya). The record has been mixed, with the failures (e.g., Somalia, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Angola) exceeding the successes (e.g., Cambodia, Namibia).

Unquestionably, the UN has been overloaded while understaffed and underfunded in the war/peace area. The annual peacekeeping bill in recent years has been roughly \$3 billion, more

than the regular annual operating budget of the UN but nonetheless inadequate. The problem has not just been the sheer number of peacekeeping missions undertaken, and the lack of appropriate financial and administrative capabilities, but also the increasingly complex nature of the tasks entrusted to the organization. In addition to monitoring ceasefires, the UN has been asked to monitor elections, build democracy, construct governments, manage refugee repatriation, remove land mines, and perform assorted other jobs.

Recognizing the need for a more systematic approach to UN involvement in the security field, the Security Council asked Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to prepare a proposal outlining the proper role(s) the UN might play in the post-Cold War era and what reforms would be needed to enable the organization to function effectively. The result was the *Agenda for Peace* document (1992), which envisioned a continuum of conflict situations in which the UN might get involved and which added some conceptual roles not part of the Cold War era typology.

First was peace maintenance; in cases where disputes had not yet escalated to hostilities, the UN might play a role in identifying flashpoints through an early warning system, might dispatch "ready-to-go" teams of regional experts to negotiate settlements, and might even engage in preventive deployment of troops with the blessing of at least one of disputants. Second was peacemaking; where peace maintenance fails, peacemakers could be sent to restore peace. Third was peacekeeping, which--unlike what happened in Yugoslavia--was to follow rather than precede peacemaking. Fourth was peacebuilding, i.e., creating conditions for a long-term durable peace through postwar reconstruction assistance that included infrastructure repair, refugee repatriation, de-mining of the landscape, conduct of plebiscites, and other services. Fifth was peace enforcement, where certain parties to a conflict were obstructing UN efforts at humanitarian intervention or other UN-authorized security operations. And sixth was old-fashioned collective security aimed at punishing aggression. Among the institutional changes called for by the Secretary-General was the creation of a rapid deployment force numbering as many as 60,000 troops.

While all six roles pose daunting challenges for the UN, the first three are the least ambitious and, for that reason, the most practicable and most worth focusing institutional efforts on. If by peacebuilding is meant resurrecting failed states and engaging in nation-building physically and emotionally, it would seem beyond the capability of any external actor and would seem only to invite added UN failure. As for peace enforcement, it blurs the line between peacekeeping and collective security, leading some to label it as falling under "Chapter VI and 3/4." There will remain some need for peace enforcement/collective security, but the UN should undertake the punishment of an aggressor only under very select circumstances--preferably with economic rather than military sanctions--since such a role is inherently provocative, conflict generating, and potentially damaging to the organization. (The US-led, UN-authorized Desert Storm operation that removed Iraq from Kuwait in 1991 is often cited as a model of collective security; but one must recall the extraordinary circumstances involved, namely the particularly outrageous nature of the aggression--Saddam Hussein's attempt to eliminate completely another UN member, something no state had dared to do in 45 years--which enabled the US to mobilize a near-universal coalition against Iraq. Even so, the collective security operation might not have occurred had oil not attracted the interest of the international community and had China chosen to veto rather than abstain from voting on the critical Security Council resolution.)

Collective security will remain a difficult concept to operationalize, for the same reasons that have always obtained, namely the problematical assumptions that (1) it is easy to define aggression and assign culpability, (2) alignments will remain sufficiently flexible and alliance commitments unencumbered so as to permit the mobilization of grand coalitions against aggressors, and (3) a grand coalition can be formed that will invariably be at least equal to or superior to any aggressors' forces. It continues to be hard to envision legally-formally or otherwise how the UN might be used to counter aggression committed by, say, the United States. Hence, the understandable cynicism surrounding collective security on the part of much of the UN membership.

Aside from these constraints, one must add that "the doctrine of collective security enshrined in the UN Charter is state-centric, applicable when borders are crossed but not when force is used against peoples within a state" (Nye, 1992: 90). Given the fact that the overwhelming percentage of violent conflicts today are not interstate wars but rather civil wars (with or without an external element), the collective security concept as it has emerged in the twentieth century may need further refinement to be useful in the post-Cold War era. Also needing further refinement is the new role of humanitarian intervention, which has contributed to the current "Article 2(7) controversy"; the latter provision of the UN Charter stipulates that nothing in the Charter shall authorize the UN to intervene in the domestic affairs of member states, yet the creation of safe havens for Kurds in Iraq as well as similar UN actions elsewhere have raised concerns on the part of member states regarding possible erosion of their sovereignty. Some scholars have warned of a "new imperialism," with the US and other Western powers imposing their views of human rights and international norms on the UN membership. It has even been suggested that a wholly new "post-Charter paradigm" is needed to cope with changes in the nature of the security environment in the post-Cold War era (Arend and Beck, 1993).

For all these reasons, the UN would do well to focus primarily on peace maintenance, peacemaking, and peacekeeping. A rapid deployment force may well have some utility, although it should be less a standing army than one that is based upon member states willing to earmark and train designated contingents within their regular armed forces for preventive deployment/peacekeeping duty, a peacekeeping reserve fund that obviates the need for ad hoc "tin cup" collections whenever the need arises, and improved command-and-control routines between the Security Council, the Secretary-General and field operations.

As for the role of the United Nations in the social-economic realm, there have been several shifts in g in recent years. Throughout much of the Cold War, it was a given that economic-social issues offered a greater growth potential for the UN than peace and security issues, based on the assumption shared by functionalists and nonfunctionalists alike that an international organization's ease and effectiveness in forging collaboration was likely to be inversely related to its degree of involvement in matters touching the core interests of states. This was reflected in the UNA study *Successor Vision*, published just prior to the end of the Cold War, at a time when the UN was experiencing a nadir in terms of its performance in the war-peace area; the study (UNA-USA, 1987: 94) assumed that "where UN peace and security mechanisms are concerned, major structural changes will not yield the sort of results anticipated in the realm of social, economic, and humanitarian affairs. " However, this logic was turned on its head as the "new world order" dawned in the early 1990s and as the tractability of problems and the prospects for

UN reform were deemed greater in the war-peace area than in economic development and other areas; as two observers put it at the time, "the UN has become a Januslike system of two faces--the UN of peace and security, relatively purposeful and effective, to which influential governments pay active and growing attention, and the UN of economic and social affairs, halting, hortatory, and often ignored by powers great and small (Whitehead and Laurenti, 1991: 18). By 1996, it was open to question as to which arena offered the most promise for the UN. Failures in Bosnia, Somalia, and other war situations were matched by seemingly inconsequential global forums to address issues of structural violence and development, such as the World Social Summit in Copenhagen and the City Summit in Istanbul.

Some degree of institutional reform is needed to revive the organization. The current makeup of the Security Council is so patently an anachronistic anomaly, bearing no relation to the power structure of the contemporary international system, that it is a foregone conclusion that changes are imminent. In addition to Japan and Germany, which now are among the leading donors, there is a good reason to add India and another "developing country" giant as privileged members in order to enhance the legitimacy of Council decisions, assuming this can be done in a way that does not alienate those states denied a place on the Council and that does not increase the chances for paralysis. The reform ideas contained in the unfortunately timed *Successor Vision* study, which were largely cast aside as the international community became preoccupied with building a "new world order," should be revisited, including an upgraded Economic and Social Council modeled to an extent after the European Union's Council of Ministers but without the supranational trappings of the EU. In place of the "road show" extravaganzas staged in Copenhagen, Istanbul, Beijing, Cairo, and other capitals, better use should be made of regular General Assembly sessions. There has been talk of accommodating more direct participation by NGOs as a nod to the burgeoning "international civil society," but this seems fanciful at this time as are many of the proposals advanced by the Commission on Global Governance (1995). In the end, recalling Lord Caradon's remarks, the future of the United Nations will rest more on changed attitudes than on changed structures.

Conclusion

For those who study world order, one of the most glaring paradoxes and puzzles one finds today is that the need for coordinated problem-solving on a global scale -- to cope with truly planetary security, economics, and environmental concerns--is arguably greater than ever before, at the same time that central guidance mechanisms are less feasible to implement in some respects than in previous historical periods, due to the structural changes in the international system alluded to earlier. The argument can be made that, if comprehensive, global approaches to world order such as the League and UN have failed or worked only marginally in the past, they are all the more unlikely to succeed in the present milieu--in which amidst growing power diffusion and the absence of any one or two states powerful enough to move the system, there are more actors than ever clamoring for seats at the global bargaining table; in addition to the almost 200 states seeking representation, many of which do not have the resources to participate meaningfully in the hydralike network of IGOS, there are also the many varieties of nonstate actors wanting input and now enjoying a degree of legitimacy in the state system. Hence, despite a growing literature

on "global governance" (Rosenau, 1995; Commission on Global Governance, 1995; Knight, 1995), one still finds many observers leaning away from "global bargaining" over "global agendas" and advocating instead the decomposition of problems in smaller forums, i.e., subglobal multilateralism or even "minilateralism."

However, aside from ignoring the reality of global interdependence, such anti-globalist thinking understates the possibilities for global institution-building. It is easy to forget how close the world came during the Law of the Sea Conference in the 1970s to producing a single set of rules, signed by over 150 countries, governing virtually every human activity (fishing, navigation, mining, etc.) on 70 percent of the earth's surface; the few loose ends, mainly having to do with the mining provisions, are gradually being worked out in the 1990s as major holdouts are close to ratification. Even though the stakes in the post-Cold War era have become diffused, and no one actor may have a singularly vested interest in promoting global order as much as in the past, there would appear enough at stake for some subset of states to provide the collective good represented by international institution-building.

It is worth quoting Abba Eban (1995: 55), the former Israeli foreign minister, who, in a recent article coinciding with the UN's 50th anniversary, attempted to "revisit the UN idea"; after devoting the entire article to a realist critique of the organization which generally dismissed any greater UN role in the security or economic-social fields for the foreseeable future (other than the occasional disaster relief mission), Eban concludes with a passage that almost brands him as an idealist:

The world organization had the misfortune to be born with a grossly inflated vision of its interventionist power. Yet if expectations are reduced it might still be possible to reach a positive balance between vision and reality. It would be ridiculous if the first era of planetary interdependence were to find the world without a unitary framework of international relations. With all its imperfections, the United Nations is still the main incarnation of the global spirit. It alone seeks to present a vision of humankind in its organic unity.

At no other time have so many, people crossed frontiers and come into contact with people of other faiths and nationalities.... In light of these slow but deep currents of human evolution, the idea of an international organization playing an assertive role in the pacification of this turbulent world may have to bide its time, but it will never disappear from view. History and the future are on its side.

As the millennium approaches, one hopes that history will intersect with the future to produce meaningful UN reform. Possibilities abound if humanity avoids the temptations to indulge in bad idealism and bad realism.

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