

The United Nations and the Contemporary World Crisis

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I have been asked by Professor Daniel Mettraux to address the matter of “The United Nations and the contemporary world crisis.” To venture onto this terrain in the third year of the current war (2004) necessarily requires the addition of a few elements so to fully engage the topic. Important concerns bring citizens to be active in the United Nations Association, and similarly important imperatives bring many concerned readers to seek guidance in this journal. A frank appraisal of the obstacles that impede realization of the purposes of the U.N. should make clearer the course through which American interests may also be realized.

The first matter is the issue of “crisis.” Is there a “current world crisis” and if there is, of what does it consist? Ever the optimists, we here must believe that by knowing the origins and nature of a problem, we have taken a key first step toward its remedy.

Let us take our elements, one by one. Is the U.N. in a crisis? The U.N. as an organization has reached the venerable age of 58, a time in most human lives when the typical invocation of the term “crisis” shortly precedes the announcement of death. In this sense, our diction can mislead: I am glad to declare that no such imminent demise is on the U.N.’s horizon. Parts of the U.N. system are thriving, remain indispensable to an improved human condition, and will remain vital well into the future. The new plagues of SARS and bird flu, as much as the intractable HIV/AIDS epidemic of the last two decades, can only be addressed collectively. Organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) are and must remain near the center of coordinated action as our efforts increase at the national level. Similarly, unified action by the world community is vital if the spread of the world’s most terrible weapons is to be stemmed. The U.N.’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), despite some setbacks, must continue to prod the Security Council toward effective action in this regard. In 2004 and beyond, focused non-proliferation efforts by both the IAEA and the United States will find congruent purposes in

regard to Iran and North Korea. These and some other functional agencies of the U.N. have vital agendas deserving of continued support by the United States and its allies.

If the U.N. is not roiled by crisis top to bottom, there are whirlpools of failure. Justifiably, many have challenged the U.N. to perform better in regard to its core missions: the promotion of international peace and the better realization of human rights. It is here, at these most important levels that crisis is revealed. Consider, for example:

- The internal war within the Russian Federation has raged in Chechnya for now eight years;
- Across West Africa failed states continue to flounder in near anarchy;
- In the African Great Lakes region, international and internal conflicts have compounded a long simmering, genocidal inter-ethnic conflict;
- In the Sudan, competing regional organizations (Arab League; African Union) cannot agree on remedies to stop the killing in Darfur;
- Only an uneasy truce impedes the two nuclear powers of South Asia from a most dangerous new round of war;
- The human tragedies associated with authoritarian nightmares such as Burma's seem to know no end.
- And the United States continues to wage a worldwide, open ended, indeed unending, war on international terrorism.

In each of these conflict areas, the U.N. has been unable to fully realize its potential. Peace, the true peace in which basic human rights can be realized, has continued to elude humankind in 2004. The United Nations of 1945 raised hopes that a collective road might take humanity away from the scourge of war; the United Nations of 1948 proclaimed to all that human rights are universal. Successfully to have trod down this path would have had us walk with angels. Alone, with but human companions, it is that road which most clearly has eluded us. Why? This essay outlines the beginnings of an answer, formed from three components. Foremost, and organized around a critical chronology, I will analyze the forces that have obstructed realization of the promising elements in the U.N. charter. Second, I will assess the American contribution in this regard; and finally, I briefly will suggest alternative directions for the U.N. and for our country.

Originally, the purpose of the U.N., as articulated in the U.N. Charter sought a future for humanity free from the scourge of war, a life for humanity fitting for full development of the human potential. As amplified in the General Assembly's Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, our collective purposes were enlarged beyond mere avoidance of conflict between states: the human potential could only be fully realized, it was asserted, in democratic societies free of coercion, intimidation, racism; racial, ethnic and religious discrimination; sexism, and the oppression created by impoverishment of human potential. These were values with which Americans could be comfortable; they were clearly stated values that made tyrants uneasy. The Soviets declined to vote for the Universal Declaration, but overwhelmingly the General Assembly of 1948 enacted it anyway.

But we, the human community, were not so united, though we gave unity its full due of lip service. Even as we penned soaring aspirations, even as millions aspired to realize those promises, tyrants resisted, cynics twisted, and universals became mere words, text on paper. This brings us to the first dirty truth about our contemporary crisis. The consensus of 1945 to form an organization to end war, the consensus of 1948 to focus that organization on the realization of human rights, these received truths were not ever true universals. So has it been ever since.

Prof. Karen Mingst of University of Kentucky has broken the history of the U.N. into five eras, discrete periods that briefly can be reviewed so to focus our attention on enduring problems that emerged from particular aspects of each age. Her book "The U.N. in the Post Cold War World," defined five eras; in each, the institutions of the United Nations played differing roles. Correspondingly, the role of the U.S. evolved.

First, from 1945-48, came a brief era of consensus in which the main task of the U.N. was to preserve the wartime alliance, and in this all the great powers briefly were united. The instructive feature of this era, however, was its brevity. Ending by 1948, we might take greater general meaning from that fact than from gauzy visions of a lost heyday of global possibility. Conflicts of interest always will tend to develop among states. Still, there were some

achievements in the first era: U.N. institutions were created, giving shape to the ideas in the Charter; and the U.N. thus was able to affect a pose as the locus of global authority. Like a debutante's first grand entrance to the ball, all things must have their initial unveiling. During the early era a couple wars involving less than major powers were stopped in their tracks, setting a precedent that the organization could act effectively, at least when wars were started by actors other than the great powers.

But the main themes of the era, and the main forces shaping global conflict and its management, were more archaic. Unlike the possibility that a romantic concept, "collective security," might unite all against war, it turned out that the old pre-war ways of power politics continued to run the world. Familiar if not comfortable with anarchy and the logic of force, it was the logic of the gun that determined outcomes in China (i.e., communist military victory establishing the Peoples Republic of China, PRC), that heralded three decades of killing in Indochina, and that ravaged communities across South Asia. The birth of the PRC, of India and Pakistan, more resembled the seventeenth than the enlightened new values of mid-20th century.

As we now know, powerful ideologies and super-powerful states far more than the U.N. would shape the post-war world. Within a short time, the consensus of 1945 had dissolved, the Cold War had begun, and rival new alliances divided the globe. Far from "collective security" preserving the peace, it was the traditional balance of power among states that defined the limits of ongoing and potential conflict.

In spite of this, a belief grew that the U.N. had had some positive impact in regard to its core mission. The U.N. contributed to international peace and stability, it was argued, by providing a forum in which disputes could be aired, and by exercising some leadership in conflict areas related to the withdrawal of great powers (e.g., Britain) from the Third World. In this regard, a first plan by the U.N., a Partition, was drawn up to address the matter of Israel and the Arabs, but this document, rejected as it was by all Arab member states in the U.N., did little to stem the conflict there as Britain withdrew. A year of war, 1948-49, determined new lines of control different from the Partition plan; and the U.N. ultimately deployed diplomatic pressure to bring a local ceasefire. U.N. agencies then were established to salve the wounds of the defeated Arabs,

institutions that sustained displaced Arabs, keeping them in a condition of (now apparently permanent) dependence upon the U.N.. Was this a model of U.N. conflict resolution which would be serviceable when issues of de-colonization resurfaced in Asia and Africa in the decades to come? Few would so contend. Ironically, had this ardor for war stopping as the U.N.'s global mission not been so quickly applied, it is the belief of this author (and others, e.g. Luttwak) that realistic conditions for a genuine Middle East peace might have been created half a century ago.

Phase Two of the U.N.'s development found a wholly new role for the U.N.: serving as an adjunct to a superpower, and being in essence an American instrument for prosecuting the Cold War, 1950-55. During this era, the main focus of the organization was to legitimize U.S. actions to contain communism. Here the main actors were the General Assembly, through a "Uniting for Peace" resolution regarding Korea, and the members of the Security Council who tactically skirted a Soviet veto in the case of communist aggression on the Korean peninsula. (The Soviet delegation was absent when the Korea vote occurred; they were boycotting the Security Council at that time in protest over the exclusion of the PRC from the U.N.). This era was a sunny time for U.S. interests, an era when Americans fully could support the U.N. organization. Essentially, the U.S. was able to operate part of its foreign policy through the U.N. to carry out a set of c o n t a i n m e n t - o f - c o m m u n i s m g o a l s .

Supporters of the U.N. can also find that the U.N. contributed to international peace and stability during this era by establishing that the U.N. does in fact have an enforcement mechanism, in setting that precedent against the Communist aggression in Korea. Moreover, pacifists and other believers in the idea that peace emerges through talking could be heartened by the role played by the U.N. in providing a mediation mechanism in other disputes. Still, the resolution of large scale conflicts in the era lay outside the scope of the organization. In Korea, and at the Geneva conference regarding Indochina, power—guns— not global norms, dictated outcomes.

This subordination of the U.N. to the will of the U.S. could not last long. The third phase in the U.N.'s evolution, as Prof. Mingst portrays it, was one of Preventative Diplomacy, and it lasted from about 1955 to 1973. In this era, the main foci of the organization were several:

- to attempt to assist in preventing crises from crossing into wars involving superpowers (e.g., Suez); and
- to give a legitimate forum for expression of grievances by rulers of states in the underdeveloped world, and
- to deploy neutral peacekeepers to separate war weary combatants in smaller, regional wars, so to give time for negotiated settlement of disputes (e.g., Cyprus; Israel and Egypt).

The main actor during phase three was the General Assembly, increasingly under the influence of newly admitted, neutral Third World states. Only to the limited extent that superpowers acquiesced did the Security Council play any meaningful role. Thus, the war in Vietnam, the 1962 Cuban Missiles crisis, the suppression of the Hungarian (1956) and Czechoslovakian (1968) revolutions, and a host of other crises central to the mission of the organization, fell outside the realm of meaningful U.N. action.

Even so constrained, *aficionados* of the U.N. still can point to contributions to international peace and stability during this era. Though direct U.S. pressure on its French and British allies did more than U.N. mediation to produce a cease fire agreement ending the Suez crisis of 1956, U.N. initiatives reinforced these efforts. Subsequently, the provision of U.N. peacekeepers to Sinai provided a trip wire to notify the global community of impending conflicts, as took place in 1967 when Egypt's expulsion of the U.N.'s Sinai contingent virtually announced that international conflict was imminent.

To underline the main point about this era: the major international conflicts lay outside the agenda of effective U.N. action. The conflicts in Southeast Asia --Vietnam-- are the best, but surely are not the sole, examples. The exceptional, and relatively successful, U.N. intervention in the Congo belies the broader pattern of U.N. ineffectiveness in stemming regional conflicts in regard to the other wars on the African continent in the era (e.g., Angola; Mozambique) as well. A second feature of the era also is salient to the analysis here: as anti-Western grievances began to find a voice in the General Assembly in this era, and as the volume of that voice grew louder, U.S. domestic support for the institutions of the U.N. began to diminish.

Since the U.S. long had championed de-colonization, and found it useful again as a strategy to woo the Third World away from the Soviets in the early Cold War era, the anti-American element in Third World anti-Western diplomacy surely surprised many Americans. Additional factors may help us to understand why domestic support for the U.N. would wane in the U.S.. Most Americans regarded the fundamental rights mentioned in the 1948 Universal Declaration to merit U.N. protection. In this regard, in the 1950s and 1960s, Jewish Americans – a key constituency supportive of internationalism defined broadly – in particular became ever more frustrated with a U.N. General Assembly disposed to ignore, explain away, and at times even to encourage the new wave of anti-Semitism welling up around the world. Of more than 2000 anti-Jewish incidents documented to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights to 1959, no action was taken until that year. The report submitted to the General Assembly about the problem was carefully edited to eliminate any reference to anti-Semitism, and it led to no action (Bayefsky).

In Phase 4, a dynamic of “Developed vs. Developing Worlds,” divided the organization, and from 1973 to 1990, very little reversed the slide in U.S. confidence in the ability of the U.N. to achieve its original purposes. The foci of the organization in this era again were several: to legitimize Third World states’ demands for a New International Economic Order, or N.I.E.O.; to provide a forum to facilitate the airing of (and at times even to orchestrate) anti-Western grievances of Third World states; and to isolate states unpopular with the majority in the General Assembly, South Africa and Israel, especially. The main actors in Stage Four were the General Assembly and the functional agencies of the U.N., e.g. UNESCO. In the Security Council, on the other hand, the repeated use of the veto by the USA formalized the hardening of U.S. relations with the organization that had begun to develop earlier.

Predictably, opinions are divided on the question of “did the U.N. contribute to international peace and stability in the 1970s and 1980s?” Some, e.g. Prof. Mingst, find a positive contribution, pointing to the fact that by facilitating negotiated settlements of conflicts, for example in the Iran-Iraq war of 1981-88, the U.N. returned to first purposes. To many Americans, on the other hand, a more jaundiced view hardened. Pres. Ronald Reagan’s U.N. Ambassador, Jeane Kirkpatrick, advanced a thesis that the U.N. had become a vehicle not for

problem solving but for "conflict extension." Her views reflected a growing consensus among the major internationalist voices in the two US parties, for her 1980s indictment of the organization departed only in small details from the views of one of her Democratic Party predecessors as U.N. Ambassador, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Moynihan later gained added influence over the debate on U.S. policy toward the U.N. when he took his skepticism into the U.S. Senate as Senator from New York.

The U.N. had wandered from its original purposes not just on matters of international security. On human rights, the trend of hostility to the concerns of the U.S., most Westerners, and some Western allies was most acute. In 1964-65, when the U.N.'s International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination was asked by Brazil to include anti-Semitism among its concerns, a coalition of the Soviets, their allies and the Arab states succeeded in defeating the measure, using the argument that anti-Semitism is not a racial but a form of religious discrimination. But when, in 1981, the General Assembly passed its first declaration denouncing religious discrimination, anti-Semitism was again excluded. This odious pattern continued: in 2003, the diplomatic sponsor of the resolution, ever-neutral Ireland, openly justified the exclusion saying the question of anti-Semitism was one to be considered by U.N. bodies dealing with racial, not religious, discrimination (Bayefsky). Doing anything about hatred of the Jews was always someone else's job at the U.N.

By the mid 1970s, it did not take being hit across the face with a two by four to recognize the odious motivations behind these U.N. human rights sleights-of-hand. But for good measure, in 1975 the General Assembly delivered one, passing to its eternal shame the famous "Zionism is racism" resolution with few dissenting votes. Proudly, America's Moynihan stood against this vote and the ugly pattern it represented, setting precedent unbroken by five U.S. administrations. Under strong U.S. pressure, the "Zionism is racism" canard ultimately was repealed by the General Assembly in the early 1990s, but the ringing bell of damage to the organization's standing in terms of the attentive U.S. public could hardly be un-rung.

This brings us to the modern phase, or in Mingst's periodization Stage 5, in which she discerns a "Post Cold War U.N. role as peace maker," beginning around 1990. Inspired by the rhetoric of Pres. George Herbert Walker Bush (1989-93), who spoke expansively of a "New World Order"

in which the U.N. would play a more central role, the long slide in U.S. public support for the U.N. briefly was slowed. Advocates for the organization certainly can point to an enlarged list of U.N. activities and some notable achievements, to argue that with the end of the long night of Cold War came a new dawn of possibility. It is undeniable that more peacekeeping operations have been mounted since 1990 than in the entire preceding 45 years. U.N. advocates can point not just to burgeoning numbers of missions, but to whole new foci of the organization, which included new capabilities.

First, the organization took new steps to authorize member states to stop international aggression, as when the Security Council authorized the U.S.-led coalition's campaign in 1991 to liberate Kuwait from conquest by Iraq; and when it imposed sharp sanctions on postwar Iraq, sanctions that lasted another 12 years. Second, in the 1990s the definition of U.N. authority was expanded to include threats to the peace that might arise *within* one nation, as in the resolutions and actions to protect of the Kurds of Northern Iraq. This, it can be argued, set a precedent for regional organizations, such as NATO, to act similarly. And act they did, as when NATO moved militarily to protect the Kosovars of Serbia-Yugoslavia in 1999, an action embraced only after the fact by formal U.N. administration of the province. Third, the U.N. asserted a new capability to intervene militarily to end humanitarian disasters, as in Somalia, even without permission of a host government. Fourth, the U.N. acted to facilitate transitions to peace by dispatching mediation teams, observer missions, and electoral monitors, as in Cambodia, El Salvador, and Kosovo. Fifth, the Security Council directed new entities to establish mechanisms of accountability after internal or external wars, re-uniting the organization's original mandates regarding promotion of peace and of human rights. Thus, the U.N.'s tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda broke new ground.

In all this flurry of comings and goings, it must be acknowledged that a fresher sense of unity of purpose in the Security Council after the end of the Cold War, facilitated. But small comfort should be taken from that brief, and now transcended, attitude. While peace in Cambodia, El Salvador etc. must be cheered on, the origins of those peace settlements rest not on universal norms, not within the tardy actions of the Security Council, not in a final triumph of "collective security." No. The end of the conflicts of the Cold War era was a reflection of a new global

power arrangement: the emergence of the U.S. as the single super-power; and the corresponding sunset of the malevolent Soviet Union. In this matter, the U.N. had precious little to do.

Moreover, we reflect on all this in 2004, not 1994. In hindsight, U.N. Missions to Somalia, Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and so forth appear considerably less a model for emulation than when that warm glow of “doing something” was felt as peacekeepers first were dispatched in 1993-94. As the late Warren Zimmerman, U.S. Ambassador to Milosevic-era Belgrade wrote in his aptly titled memoir Origins of a Catastrophe, in Bosnia “diplomacy was reduced to a kind of cynical theatre, a pretense of useful activity, a way of disguising a lack of will. Diplomacy without force became an unloaded weapon, impotent and ridiculous.” Indeed. Mogidishu, Sarajevo, Srebrenica, Kigali are more than place names to today’s generation of thoughtful citizens, and to our ever more needed citizen soldiers.

Meanwhile, the partisan hijacking of the U.N.’s Human Rights mandate continued. By 2004, almost 30 percent of the resolutions passed by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights to condemn actions of specific states have been directed at Israel. One committee after another has been established to focus solely on Israel. Israel is the only state with its own permanent inter-state monitor, The Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs, a body now 36 years old. A committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, authorized the same day in 1975 as the odious Zionism-is-Racism canard, has been churning out studies and reports for a full 29 years. In 2003 alone it authored 22 reports; its 24 members and 25 observers all keep busy. What, other than the institutionalization of bias is behind all this? Not one standing body of the U.N. represents the interests of the stateless Kurds!

All this must be contrasted with the sluggish behavior on other issues by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, a body where agenda items to condemn genuine human rights violators such as Syria or China or Zimbabwe never have passed. Not one resolution condemning punishment by amputation in Sudan, not one vote denouncing repression of Christians (or anyone) in China, none. South Africa will have nothing to do with “naming and shaming” Zimbabwe, but it leads the charge to do just this against the Jewish state.

It gets worse. The U.N. has evolved from an organization that turns a blind eye to anti-Semitism (in the 50s), to one that has become a forum that legitimizes it. In presentations to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, Palestinian delegates repeatedly have modernized the blood libels of anti-Semites of the Middle Ages, when they have charged Israelis with killing Arabs in order to properly observe Yom Kippur, and when they have charged Israel with injecting Palestinian children with HIV-positive blood. (I must emphasize that not one shred of evidence in support of these outrageous charges was submitted to, nor formally demanded by, that U.N. body). One recent nadir in this trend was the 2001 conference on racism at Durban, South Africa, which accurately has been characterized as a festival of hatred against the Jews and America. Three years earlier, of course, Osama bin Laden openly declared war on “Crusaders and Jews,” issuing a sweepingly broad threat at civilians worldwide, a threat that scarcely raised an eyebrow at the U.N. and precipitated no formal denunciations until after September 11, 2001 (Lewis).

Thus, to Prof. Mingst’s “5 periods” of U.N. history, formed as they actually have been by the interplay of powerful belief systems with state actions in pursuit of their interests, I suggest our schooling needs a “sixth period:” the world since September 11, 2001. While the U.N. has let the task of constructing a durable structure for peace slip its grip so to give hate a forum, and while the organization repeatedly has acted to legitimize an agenda on human rights that must be called willfully unbalanced, outside its clubby halls, men in less Western garb have been creating their own messages. Unanticipated in the Charter of the U.N., and unplanned by any of the great powers, is the world of power and violence flown home to Americans on that darkest of sunny days.

The emergence of global warriors, transnational terrorists with a will toward mass slaughter, men and women who openly murder based on religion and nationality, men and women who openly declare their desire to accomplish far more terrible deeds with weapons of mass destruction, this new force challenges the basic assumptions of the U.N. system. Imperfectly to be sure, that system always attempted to order and to better regulate behavior within a community composed of states.

Today's stateless terrorists have demonstrated that they possess key attributes known since the 17th century only as the tools of states. As the September 11 attacks and dozens of subsequent bombings (e.g., Bali, Istanbul, Madrid) demonstrate, the capacity for wholesale killing has been seized by non-state actors. Organized violence is being used in the furtherance of a strategy designed to coerce others and thus to accumulate influence for the users of this violence. The March 2004 Madrid bombings clearly were orchestrated to coerce change in a state's international policy, and they succeeded in this regard. But unlike the states of the so called Westphalian system, and unlike the global community envisioned during the heady days of romantic one-world thinking, the new actors of today seek neither equilibrium (as did most states at most times), nor a community based on rights, mutual respect of differences, and the rest of the idiom of human rights. They seek a reordered globe, subservient to their conception of their God, only. In this their impact most resembles that of the revolutionary states of the 20th century (e.g., Nazi Germany) and earlier centuries (e.g., Napoleonic France), states that aimed to transform the international order and its rules.

The U.N. system arose from the ashes created by a world of war spawned by revolutionary states. With minor exceptions, in its nearly six decades the U.N. proved unable to respond to new revolutionary states that arose, partly due to the stronger influence of powerful *status quo* powers and partly due to its own internal infirmities.

Returning now to my initial question where we began (that is: "Is there a crisis?"): Yes, there is an acute crisis in the world today. Organizationally, and conceptually, both states and existing international organizations (and especially the U.N.) are poorly organized to address effectively the challenge posed by the new terrorists. Something *is* new under the sun. But as the U.S. response to the 911 Commission Report demonstrates, states and alliance systems are demonstrating a capacity to reorganize, redeploying energies to meet the new challenge; international organizations, by and large, are not.

Instead, the stale routines at the U.N. have us, again this year, weighing a fence. Not the fence Saudi Arabia currently is building to keep Yemenis from illegally entering the kingdom. And

not yet has the U.N. found fit to condemn the U.S. for efforts to control entry to our territory – though that day can be expected to come. No, the fence that is so important that it merits special U.N. condemnation seeks to protect Jews from suicide bombers. This unbelievably biased focus is revealing. It only makes sense when we recognize that the organization itself is a reflection of crisis, a crisis borne of its own creation. Hypocrisy has produced its own bitter harvest.

Where might we begin to construct a more fitting response? Clearly, some are tempted to recognize international anarchy for what it is; some states (e.g., the U.S.) have fashioned doctrines of preemption limited only by self-constructed chains on national ambition. This approach, the one taken by the Bush Administration, has been controversial, challenging norms thought by some to have long been settled in international organizations, limited by domestic law, and recognized as the prudent behavior of states even within a fundamentally anarchic state system. If an alternative course is to emerge, it is much more likely to be nourished by appreciation of the roles played by power and interests in constraining the new actors. An adjunct role, at best, appears to be the future of the United Nations.

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