

# **Lecture**

**by Paul Heinbecker**

## **the United Nations and Canada**

**“Whose UN Is It, Anyway?”**

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**Check Against Delivery**

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## **Introduction**

**I am going to talk to you about the world we live in, and the UN ‘s and Canada’s place in it.**

**More specifically, I am going to discuss:**

- **How the world is changing**
- **How the UN Is Responding to the Change**
- **And what this complexity means for global governance, for Canadian foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis the United Nations,**

## **A Multipolar World – The “Rise” of Asia—and of Others, or It’s the World, Stupid!**

The world is changing, dramatically, before our eyes, and most of that change is being driven by Asia.

We in the West forget all too easily, if we ever really knew, that China and India not being major powers is the exception in history.

As observed by CIGI International Advisory Board of Governors member, Kishore Mahbubani,

Asians have long been regarded in the West as just consumers of world history,

reacting tactically and, with the obvious exception of Japan, defensively to the surges of Western commerce, power and thought.

But, now the Asians are again producing history as they did for eighteen centuries before the rise of the West.

In that sense it is more accurate to speak not of the “rise” of Asia, but of the “return” of Asia, to the forefront of regional and world affairs.

China, Japan and India currently rank 2nd, 3rd and 4th in the world in terms of GDP at Purchasing Power Parity.

Consider this insight from a new book Kishore Mahbubani, a former colleague of mine in New York and a member of the advisory board of CIGI:

“They called it the Industrial Revolution [in Europe] because, for the first time in all of human history, standards of living rose at a rate where there were noticeable changes within a [single] human life span—changes of perhaps 50 percent.

At current growth rates in Asia, standards of living may rise 100 fold or 10,000 percent within a human life span.”

I cite these statistics to reinforce the point that Asia has become a determining factor in international relations, and is likely only to grow more significant as time goes by.

And that is not the whole story of global change, of course.

The European Union, with a combined GDP of almost \$17 trillion, is the world’s largest economic entity.

The EU, which counts two nuclear powers, and 10 other countries that have the money and the technology to give themselves nuclear weapons if they want to, accounts for \$256 billion of military spending, cumulatively second only to the US.

Europe's next door neighbour Russia is "back", thanks to rampaging commodity prices, especially gas,

and its own blend of democratic autocracy that delivers legitimacy through rising standards of living.

Russia's economy ranks 10th in the world, just behind Canada's in GDP terms.

Russia's military, with in excess of 14,000 nuclear warheads, remains the second most powerful in the world.

And, as events in Georgia confirm, Russia intends neither to be taken for granted nor to be dominated.

At the same time, while Russia's reaction to the Georgian provocation was probably excessive and certainly self-serving, it does not signal a return to the Cold War.

Latin America, long a continent apart in political terms, is demanding and getting a decisive place at the top tables, such as the Doha (trade) Round, the Bali Climate Change process, and, increasingly, the UN Security Council.

Growing volumes and varieties of cross-border flows of finance, investment, goods and services, together with the rapid and widespread diffusion of technology, have accelerated economic interdependence.

Since 1974, exports have doubled as a proportion of world economic output to over 25% and on existing trends will rise to 34% by 2030.

World income has doubled since 1980, and almost half a billion people have climbed out of poverty since 1990, the great majority of them in Asia..

Clearly, times are changing, and quickly.

It is not your grandfather's world, or even your father's

A more cooperative approach, with a much larger quotient of diplomacy, will be necessary if the world is to be a peaceful place.

### **The UN and the Challenges of an Unruly World**

Economic progress, uneven as it may be, has not, regrettably, been matched by comparable political progress.

In fact, the world is almost as divided politically as it is integrated economically, with consensus scarce on almost every major issue,

from global governance to terrorism, arms control and disarmament, climate change to the Middle East and Afghanistan.

So many major global issues seem at an impasse: nuclear weapons proliferation and disarmament, international terrorism (we cannot even agree on a definition), the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, global pandemics, critical food scarcity and rising food and fuel prices, the Doha round of trade talks, climate change, etc.

Why do these problems persist, other than because of the evident imperfections of human nature?

There is no simple answer, but the response would likely include all of the following.

First, and most basically, there is a profound lack of trust and human solidarity that makes solutions elusive—that is the case in the Middle East where 60 years of conflict have poisoned relations and impeded compromise.

The invasion of Iraq has only made things worse, Senator McCain's optimism notwithstanding.

Many Americans, including the Bush Administration, thought that 9/11 changed everything.

Around the world, many thought that it was the unilateral US invasion of Iraq that had changed everything.

The absence of trust and solidarity also plagues the Darfur conflict, where humanitarian principles cry out for intervention but where colonial legacies and contemporary distrust prevent it.

Second, many of the most pressing problems are global in scope and require global solutions.

But the policy authority and resources for tackling these problems remains vested in states—that is the case for climate change and terrorism.

Third, there is a disconnect between the distribution of authority in existing international institutions and the distribution of military and economic power in the world.

India and Japan are outside of the Security Council; China and India are outside the G8.

Very few global issues can be resolved effectively without involving all three of them, and others.

Fourth, there is a gap between legitimacy and efficiency.

The UN's unique legitimacy flows from the universality of its membership,

But “universality” makes for a terribly inefficient and frustrating reality when making and implementing collective decisions.

Conversely, the G7/8 forum facilitates decision-making but its restricted membership renders its conclusions unrepresentative and, therefore, to the extent that they impinge on non-members, lacking in legitimacy.

Nor, without the world's emerging countries taking part, are those decisions effective.

Fifth, under the Bush Administration, there has been a retreat from international law and treaties, particularly as regards climate change, human rights and arms control and, especially, nuclear disarmament.

Under the influence of the Neo-cons, the US has put its faith near totally in US military power, rather than in treaties, alliances and cooperation.

Finally, and not least significant, the world has shifted on its axes, from East-West during the Cold War to North-South now.

One consequence at the UN is that suspicion prevails and fundamental disagreements reign even on what the institution should do.

### **The United Nations; Irrelevant or Indispensable?**

The United Nations remains the principal instrument of international governance, albeit often more respected for what it represents than for what it does.

I know first-hand that the United Nations has all the problems you would expect a 60-year-old institution to have.

I also know that the institution remains far more important and useful than the politically motivated “UN-bashers” would have you believe.

While the world’s aspirations for the United Nations have often exceeded the organization’s grasp, it has, nevertheless, served us reasonably well, and sometimes, very well.

We should not forget that a hundred years ago, the only protection against aggression was power.

The only checks on would-be aggressors were the costs of fighting and the risks of failing.

In the intervening decades, the UN gave birth to a body of international law that stigmatized aggression and created a strong norm against it.

Although the Cold War saw international law breached by both sides, the norm against aggression was much more respected than not.

Through the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN has assisted East and West avoid a nuclear Armageddon.

The UN has helped the world to feed its hungry, shelter its dispossessed, minister to its sick and educate its children.

More mundanely, the UN has regulated the world's air travel, coordinated its mail services, overseen its patents system, regulated its shipping and apportioned its electromagnetic spectrum, among many other unsung but necessary tasks.

Nevertheless, quite evidently, while the UN is not going to hell in a hand basket, all is not well, either.

The organization is hamstrung by profound lack of consensus within the international community.

Most fundamentally, there is, at best, imperfect agreement on the part of the members regarding the institution's purposes and priorities.

For the great bulk of the membership, which both gained independence from colonial rulers and acceded to membership after the birth of the organization in 1945,

the priorities of the UN are, or should be, economic and social development, not security.

Where you stand depends famously on where you live.

Most of the "North" favours security.

But even security means different things to different people.

For the US, post 9/11, a major priority is terrorism,

In 2006, the US National Counterterrorism Center reported to the US Congress that there were a total of 14,338 terrorist attacks around the world, resulting in 20,498 deaths, the lion's share in Iraq.

But for the poorer countries, the security mission of the UN is, or should be, different.

Consider what security looks like from the perspective of the poor.

- Natural disasters killed nearly 25,000 people in 2006, the vast majority in poorer countries. (Source: Red Cross),

[http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/pubs/disasters/wdr2007/WDR2007 - English.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/Docs/pubs/disasters/wdr2007/WDR2007_English.pdf))

- In 2004, that figure was 240,000 people killed, most in the poorer countries.
- Small arms and light weapons were directly responsible for the deaths of about 100,000 people in 2003,

- and indirectly responsible for perhaps 200,000 more, predominantly in the poorer countries.

(Source: Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva, Switzerland (Keith Krause); [smallarmssurvey.org/files/portal/issueareas/victims/victimcost](http://smallarmssurvey.org/files/portal/issueareas/victims/victimcost))

- Intra-state conflict caused the deaths of 100's of thousands more, notably in Africa.
- Pregnancy-related complications killed more than 535,000 women, 99% of them in the Third World.

(Source: WHO Report, [http://www.icrw.org/docs/Maternal\\_Mortality\\_2005.pdf](http://www.icrw.org/docs/Maternal_Mortality_2005.pdf))

- Malaria killed one million people last year, mostly in the poorest countries,

(Source: Centre for Disease Control & Prevention, World Malaria Report 2005, [www.cdc.gov/malaria](http://www.cdc.gov/malaria))

- and HIV-AIDS killed over two million people in 2005, again overwhelmingly in the Third World  
( Source:UNAIDS/WHO AIDS Epidemic Update, November 2007)

Managing this world is harder than it looks.

Even among those countries that see the UN primarily in collective security terms, there is disagreement whether the UN is the transcendent authority for governing international relations

or just one body among several, a foreign policy instrument to be used pragmatically when doing so suits national purposes.

The world has not yet fully assimilated former Secretary General Kofi Annan's insight that there is no security without development,

no development without security

and no security or development without human rights protection,

And that multilateral cooperation is essential to the achievement of all three.

These divisions between North and South and between North and North are part of the reason that the UN has been unable to fashion a consensus on some of the most pressing security issues of our times-- terrorism, the Middle East, and, increasingly, nuclear weapons and arms control.

What common ground there had been shrank with the Iraq war.

Worse have been the conscience-shocking failures of the UN in Cambodia, the Congo, and the Balkans.

In Rwanda, while 800,000 people were being systematically slaughtered, Security Council members, notably the United States, played legal word-games in order not to trigger their obligations under the Genocide Convention.

Former Secretary Powell called Darfur a genocide, but the victims wait on the unhurried collective conscience to act.

And for all the criticism of the west, it is the Africans who are trying to block the international Criminal Court from prosecuting Omar al-Bashir, the President of Sudan, and other senior officials

The UN secretariat has forced the world to confront the unfolding tragedy of Sudan but the reactions of member countries have been, literally, unconscionable.

The old Human Rights Commission had become a caricature of itself, with human rights abusers seeking membership so they could deflect attention from themselves, often to Israel.

It has been replaced by a Human Rights Council, albeit with disappointing results so far.

The United Nations has had some management failures and scandals, too, although fewer and less serious ones than the Wall Street Journal and a handful of right wing American Senators, led by Senator Coleman of Minnesota, and some fevered neo-cons would have you believe.

To put the matter in perspective, sensationalist headlines notwithstanding, far less money went missing in the Oil-for-Food program than in Canada's own sponsorship scandal.

One UN official is accused of defrauding the program of \$140,000; one or two others are accused of irregularities.

Even that amount of corruption is unacceptable, of course, but the figures do help to place the scandal in perspective.

Even Saddam Hussein's kick-back schemes and oil smuggling (outside the Oil-for-Food program, by definition) pale into insignificance compared to the disappearance of the \$9 billion that the UN turned over to the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority,

who lost it.

As Mark Malloch Brown said in his John Holmes Lecture, the real corruption was between the companies that bought Iraqi oil (and sold Iraq goods) and Saddam Hussein, who organized an elaborate kick-back regime, with the knowledge, indeed the participation of some government, notably the Australian.

In trying to get a mental grip on the UN, it is important to know what it is and what it isn't.

The Secretary General is not a Head of State or Government; he does not have the executive authority of a Prime Minister or President.

He cannot, for example, dispatch forces without Security Council authorization.

The General Assembly is not a Parliament—there is not a single elected member present.

The Security Council is not the UN's cabinet.

It is a separate entity with responsibility for peace and security only.

The UN suffers from structural problems that make accountability difficult, even in some respects, impossible.

Unlike national governments or private corporations, no one is in charge of the entire enterprise, literally,

and thus, no one is accountable for it.

According to Article 97 of the Charter, the Secretary General is, the Chief Administrative Officer, not the Chief Executive Officer, a designation that was made deliberately by the Charter's framers.

The Secretary General is, thus, more Secretary than General.

The Secretary General is accountable for the Secretariat's performance but not for the UN's failures to act,

although the Secretary General and the Secretariat are often identified by the public with those failures

even where blame should reside predominantly with the member countries who actually run the place,

especially the five permanent members of the Security Council.

Some, notably India, Japan, Germany, Brazil and certain African countries want the Security Council to reflect contemporary and emerging power realities.

In their eyes, the UN Security Council has a representation deficit.

But in the eyes of others, the Council has a performance deficit—Darfur being a current case in point.

Others, including Canada, have preferred accountability over representativeness,

and would circumscribe or even get rid of the veto and make all states democratically accountable to the membership.

Whatever the make-up of the Council, and the means for determining membership categories, some, mostly in the North, see the Security Council, which they control, as supreme;

Others, mostly in the South, want the General Assembly, which they control, to predominate.

Overlooked in the recriminations stimulated largely by differences over the Iraq war and the Oil for Food Program, and derived in part from colonial hangovers, has been the fact that the UN has substantially reinvented itself, including in military terms.

Since the end of the Cold War, member countries have been much readier to authorize the use force to stop internal conflicts.

From 1945 until 1989, there were 13 UN military operations.

Since then, there have been approximately 45 military interventions under UN auspices, and the UN's annual peacekeeping budget has grown to over \$6 billion.

Partly as a consequence of UN prevention efforts and interventions, the number of armed conflicts around the world has declined by more than 40%, (the Human Security Report of 2005).

The UN has served as mid-wife in the births of more than 100 countries since 1945, the great majority of which came into being peacefully.

It has also supervised scores of elections and otherwise helped many members make transitions to democracy;

According to Freedom House, over two-thirds of UN member countries are now full or partial democracies.

The passage of a half dozen core human rights treaties and their progressive assimilation into domestic laws has made it possible for an increasing share of the world's people to live in dignity and safety.

An extensive international criminal justice system has developed under UN auspices, a major innovation foreseen nowhere in the original Charter.

Four ad hoc courts have been established to prosecute major crimes: the ICTY, the ICTR and the Cambodia and Sierra Leone hybrid courts, Together they constitute a major innovation, found nowhere in the Charter

A further major judicial innovation has been the creation of the International Criminal Court (the ICC), currently presided over by Philippe Kirsch, a Canadian.

Now, the world's monsters can no longer sleep soundly in their beds, confident that they are immune to prosecution.

It is instructive, and in a way, encouraging, that from the jungles of Uganda Joseph Kony, head of the murderous Lord's Resistance Army of child soldiers, has attempted to seek immunity from prosecution by the ICC, as have Sudanese officials.

It was, also, to the UN that Lebanon turned for the investigation of the assassination of former Prime Minister Hariri.

The UN has given birth to concepts we now take for granted such as sustainable development.

Scores of environmental treaties have been concluded under UN auspices, from protecting the ozone layer to climate change.

Perhaps the most visible recent UN innovation has been the creation of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the office that organized the massive international relief response to the Asian Tsunami,

and to numerous other humanitarian crises spawned by major natural disasters and complex emergencies.

Another potentially very important innovation has been the creation of a Peacebuilding Commission and a Peacebuilding Support Office to help countries back from the abyss of failure and conflict.

A standing police capability for the UN is being created, to complement UN military actions.

And, at the 2005 summit, the UN meeting at head of state and government level, endorsed, “the Responsibility to Protect”, the Canadian initiated idea launched in the aftermath of Srebrenica and Rwanda.

Thirteen counter-terrorism treaties have been concluded by the General Assembly, despite the UN’s regrettable failure to agree to a definition of terrorism, and the UN Security Council has twice “legislated” the proscription of cooperation with terrorists by member countries. All told, over 500 multilateral treaties have been concluded under UN auspices.

The point is that from counter-terrorism treaties,  
to human rights conventions,  
to the support of democracy and promotion of the rule of law,  
to coordinating disaster relief,  
to fostering sustainable development,  
to rebuilding states emerging from conflict,

to management reform,

the UN has taken very significant strides into the 21st century.

It is performing a role that is still valued by its members.

Polling conducted for the BBC World Service in 2006 by GlobeScan and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland indicates

that while support for the United Nations on the part of the public around the world has flagged somewhat in recent years as the organization has struggled with intractable issues,

the people in every country polled, including the United States,

had more positive views of the UN than negative

and, in many cases, much more positive views.

The most important major international issues continue to be brought to the UN for deliberation, e.g., the Israeli-Lebanese war, and the Iranian nuclear program.

That the UN does not resolve all issues to the satisfaction of all its members and their publics is not a reflection so much on the UN's incompetence,

as it is on the intractability of some major issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, making consensus scarce.

The lesson to take away from this lengthy explication is that the UN is not the corrupt, incompetent, basket-case of an organization that its critics maintain.

It is doing a far better job than its critics contend and even than its defenders know.

But, it cannot simply command consensus in a divided world and like any 60 year old institution, it needs ongoing updating and innovation to cope with new problems.

## **Conclusion**

So, to get to the point, why doesn't the UN work better?

It is not because some members are more enlightened, or civilized, than others, although that is assumed in many cases and is even arguably true in some.

It is not because, in the case of the Human Rights Council, the structure needs tweaking, although that might help a bit.

It is mostly because the world is becoming increasingly complex and there is a profound lack of consensus within the international community on just about everything but gravity.

The UN is divided, even fragmented, perhaps to a greater degree than ever before.

Certainly more divided and fragmented than I remember it being at any time in my all too long career.

Reform of the UN proper will not come from our telling people to shape up, or to think straight.

It will not come from ratcheting up criticism of High Commissioner for Human Rights or pressuring Secretary General Ban.

Or from proposing yet another structural reform initiative.

Because the problem is not the personalities or the structure.

The problem is the politics.

To put it in its vernacular, and to paraphrase Walt Kelly, in a venerable Lil Abner cartoon, the enemy is not the Secretariat, or the Security Council, or the Human Rights Council;

The enemy is us--the membership--all of us.

It is the political games we play.

Solve the major issues that divide the members and the UN will work much better.