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THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY—FACT OR FICTION?

Brian Urquhart

I. The Question

Political systems often invent comforting words and phrases to cover their purposes—and sometimes also their shortcomings. In the United States, "The New Deal," "The New Frontier," and "The Great Society" are familiar examples. They have their counterparts in most other parts of the world. Of course, the interplay of rhetoric and reality is the essence of politics, and such phrases have their political utility. Perhaps no such phrase is as comprehensive — and so overworked — as "the international community," a concept that is also the subject of this roundtable.

When cover is needed for an uncertain international situation; when a nation's foreign policy is being questioned, when practical involvement in a foreign situation is politically unpopular at home, when it is necessary to show that a government is not indecisive or alone; when the appearance of action is needed but real action has to be avoided; when no one really knows what on earth is going on—at all of these times you can be sure that political leaders around the world will invoke the "international community" and its alleged will, its Olympian cadence, its purported actions, and its splendidly vague intentions. What a godsend it is.

The reality of the international community is more elusive, and never more so than when you consider the basic characteristics of a community as normally understood. Taken at their simplest, those characteristics are the following: accepted rules of conduct and effective institutions; common responsibility for all

members of the community; and a shared view of the future. Of course, a working community at any level only emerges gradually by practical experiment and precedent, and, presumably, if there is to be an international community, it will follow the same process.

How does the United Nations, the framework of the "international community" so often invoked by politicians, measure up to these simple criteria? Or, to put it in another way, how has the world organization lived up to its billing as what Dag Hammarskjöld thirty-five years ago called "a venture in progress towards an international community living in peace under laws of justice"? An answer to this question requires a quick and very brief look at the United Nations and the challenges that confront it.

II. The United Nations Organization at a Crossroads

In 1945, the primary purpose of the United Nations was, by concerting the policies of states, to avoid a recurrence of the disasters of the 1920s and 1930s that had led to the Second World War. These disasters were economic depression and collapse; fascism and other forms of totalitarianism; the arms race; aggression; and, finally, world war. The United Nations Charter also added new elements — economic and social development for all, human rights, decolonization, and the development of international law.

Naturally enough, the founders at San Francisco did not foresee many of the most important future developments, quite apart from the Cold War itself. They did not foresee the consequences of a world without empires and the increase in membership of the United Nations from 50 nations in 1945 to 184 in 1994. They did not foresee that the world's population would more than double in the next fifty years. In 1945, instant communication of all kinds and other great technological breakthroughs were only in the very distant future. At San Francisco, it seemed that governments were all-powerful, and the founders certainly did not foresee the erosion of governmental authority and control and the growth of the private sector in such matters as international capital markets or the enormous proliferation of nongovernmental organizations. The possibility that some states

would actually fail was not even considered at San Francisco, nor was the growing threat to the environment, to our life support system on the planet, and to our common resources, even those which had hitherto been taken for granted, such as water, air, and food.

Perhaps the greatest difference, however, between 1945 and 1994 is one of attitude and mood. In 1945, in spite of World War II, there was great optimism about the future. Under the direction of President Franklin Roosevelt, postwar planning had started right at the beginning of the war, so that by the end there was a complete blueprint for the postwar world. At its center was the United Nations system — the U.N. itself, the International Court of Justice, and the specialized agencies. This blueprint was a grand gesture of statesmanship and vision and it was to be led by the United States, then incomparably the most powerful and richest country in the world — also, I might add, the most benevolent. In 1945, there was great confidence, even arrogance, about this new international system, and skepticism was indignantly rejected. As a neophyte civilian in the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations, having just spent six years in the British Army, I remember being strongly rebuked by Alger Hiss, who had been the secretary-general of the San Francisco conference, for expressing some mild skepticism about whether the behavior of governments would in fact change as fundamentally as was suggested in the U.N. Charter. This mood of confidence and optimism, in fact, lasted about one year. Then, the Cold War and governmental business as usual took over with a vengeance.

In 1994, by contrast, in spite of much good fortune and relative peace in the world, there is a sour and uncertain mood, especially regarding governments and international organizations. There is a widespread bewilderment, anxiety, and lack of confidence about the future. There is a noticeable lack of direction and leadership, especially in international affairs, and governments are cautious and reluctant to join in great international endeavors. There seems to be an aversion to long-term vision and to long-term projects both nationally and internationally. It is hard to imagine getting the Marshall Plan through the United States Congress today. Much of this mood is easily expressed by

constant griping at the United Nations. Unlike 1945, there is no post–Cold War blueprint for the world of the future.

Partly as a result of this mood, the media make much of the running in politics and have an enormous influence on action to be taken—or not to be taken—in given circumstances. As in the disastrous 1930s, governments are averse to involvement in conflicts abroad. With one or two notable exceptions, they tend to be pushed by the media and public opinion, late and often ineffectively, into whatever international involvement they are prepared reluctantly to accept. There is an increasing reluctance to risk the lives of soldiers in any situation whatsoever and a parallel reluctance to pay for international organization. It is worth noting that the entire United Nations system—including peace-keeping and humanitarian emergency work—last year cost $2 per capita of the world population in a year when expenditure on arms cost $150 per capita. Governments' assessments for U.N. peacekeeping run at about $1 in every $1,100 for national defense, and yet it is the U.N. operations and the U.N. soldiers that are usually in the forefront and taking the risks.

While there is a great unwillingness to strengthen significantly or empower the United Nations, there remains an irresistible urge to dump insoluble problems and emergencies on the organization. The U.N. also, as always, provides a useful scapegoat and fig leaf for the unwillingness of governments to act. The situation in Bosnia is a classic example of this phenomenon. Thus, the "U.N. Renaissance" of only five years ago has turned into a great disillusionment.

We know all too well that in an interdependent world with modern communications, great human problems and disasters cannot be ignored. We also know that the future of the human race in decent conditions almost certainly depends on tackling various global problems — poverty, population, the environment, the economy, the question of law and order, and so on. We know better than ever before what we have to pool our efforts to deal with. Among other things, we have to achieve a reasonable degree of peace and order; create more equitable forms of economic activity; control pollution and climate change; monitor and control disease; reduce the trade in lethal weapons; address the problem of desertification; maintain biological diversity; halt the plagues of terrorism, famine, drugs

and crime; and so on. The list is a long one. The question that occurs to me more and more often is: What are we waiting for?

We are, unquestionably, whether we like it or not, in a period of transition from the 1945 association of sovereign states toward the international community that Hammarskjöld spoke of thirty-five years ago. In fact, many of the United Nations' present tribulations spring from the difficulties of this transition. The question is whether the world organization will come through successfully to a new and far more effective identity and role.

The United Nations was set up primarily to deal with conflicts between states, and it was quite specifically to stay out of internal conflicts. Now, however, the function of most of the emergency operations of the United Nations is to deal with civil and ethnic conflict and violence within the borders of states or failed states. Because of this, the public and the media see the U.N. more and more as the public service sector of an embryonic world community, and, naturally enough, they deplore its failings in this role. Governments, on the other hand, are reluctant to give the U.N. either the capacity or the mandate to carry out this new task. Indeed, the organization's future may well depend upon governments agreeing to empower it not only to deal with conflict and human disaster but also to cope with the major economic and social issues of our time, that is to say to undertake the assault on the root problems of instability. It would certainly be helpful if the member governments of the United Nations would take advantage of the fiftieth anniversary of the organization to address this basic question of role and identity.

III. Assessment of Criteria for Community

Before I continue, allow me to recall again the record on the three simple criteria for community over the past fifty years: accepted rules and institutions, common responsibility for all members, and a shared view of the future.

A. Rules and Institutions

A great deal has been done in terms of formulating rules and institutions. There is the United Nations Charter with its objectives and principles, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and many human rights conventions. There are countless conventions and treaties, including the monumental Law of the Sea Treaty. In fact, more international law has been promulgated in the past forty-five years than in all of the rest of recorded history. There are Security Council resolutions, some of which are legally binding. There is also much rhetoric about the importance of the rule of law in international life. However, there is not much sign yet of an international legal system. Monitoring of international law is extremely rare and enforcement virtually nonexistent. The precedent of enforcing the final resolution on Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the time, trouble, and expense that had been needed to carry that through are indicative of the size of the job of monitoring and enforcing international law worldwide.

There are, however, some encouraging straws in the wind. The recent United States operation in Haiti, for example, is in pursuit of a Security Council resolution and aims to restore democracy after an election that was monitored and approved by the United Nations and was overthrown by force. The operation is also intended to restore the protection of human rights. The war crimes commissions that have been set up for Bosnia and Rwanda, ineffective as they are at present, again point to the beginnings of an international legal regime. The El Salvador settlement contains many remarkable innovations, including a commission on the truth and international human rights monitoring teams. There is also now increasing interest in establishing a United Nations criminal court and even a human rights court. Although there is much talk about strengthening the International Court of Justice and increasing its involvement in matters of peace and security, at the moment the court remains strangely aloof from the day-to-day crises of the world. Although a start has been made, there is obviously a very long way to go toward a real system of respected rules and laws in the world at large.

As far as institutions are concerned, those related to international peace and security tend to get the most attention. The

Security Council can now reach agreement on almost all the problems that come before it, which is certainly a major improvement. Its problem, however, is to implement its decisions, without which it will become more or less an empty sounding board. In implementing Security Council decisions, the peacekeeping technique developed over the previous fifty years is fine up to a point, but its application is extremely limited since peacekeeping depends upon the willingness of the conflicting parties to keep the peace. At the other end of the scale, as Desert Storm has shown, it is possible for major enforcement actions to be mounted if the political circumstances are right. But, between these two poles, there is a great gray area of civil and ethnic violence for which the United Nations has no convincing capacity or means to deal with. At present, there is not even agreement on the extent of the responsibility of the United Nations for this very prevalent form of violence, so its interventions are often dictated by the media and the public. There are no rules for dealing with failed states. There is also a widespread antipathy to United Nations intervention in very large parts of the world. The Clinton Administration's Presidential Directive 25 is as good an exposition as any of the problems of international involvement when no threat to the national security is involved. And yet the international community so often invoked can never come into existence without a doctrine of common international responsibility. I believe that this is the kind of basic question that needs to be talked out publicly by governments without euphemisms, circumlocutions, or gimmicks.

B. Common Responsibility

Quite apart from the question of responsibility, the U.N.'s capacity to respond is extremely limited. The new concept of "peace enforcement" has not proved to be a happy experiment in either Bosnia or Somalia. The combination of peacekeeping, enforcement, humanitarian relief, and the monitoring of human rights has also proved to be a very complicated one. No one really knows how to cope with genocide or to foresee the kind of events that trigger it, such as, for example, the shooting down of the presidential aircraft in Rwanda.

The United Nations' capacity for responding to such disasters is grossly inadequate. It has little or no infrastructure for contingency planning, logistics, training, or command and control, and it is only just beginning to develop some of these essential features. The United Nations has no reserve funds for peacekeeping. All operations have to start from scratch and on a shoestring. Under these circumstances, it is something of a miracle that the United Nations has managed to maintain and go forward with its eighteen current operations in the field.

Perhaps most limiting of all, the U.N. is entirely dependent upon its member states for troops and other support for operations. As governments become more wary of international involvement, uncertainties and disastrous delays in deployment will only get worse, and as a result the U.N. will not get involved in a critical situation until long after it has gotten completely out of hand.

The United Nations has no built-in capacity for immediate deployment. One has only to think of a police force that has to wait for weeks before going to the scene of the crime to understand how debilitating this is. The U.N.'s representatives tend to go into violent situations without protection. Thus, the trainers and monitors on the *Harlan County* last year were turned back at the dock in Port-au-Prince by a relatively minor demonstration. These shortcomings have had a dismal effect on the respect for and credibility of the United Nations. I personally believe that the best and perhaps only way to deal with this vital problem is to set up a relatively small, highly trained U.N. volunteer force for immediate deployment. This would be a force recruited from the best volunteers all over the world and trained to the highest military and peacekeeping standards. It might, perhaps, have an initial strength of between 5,000 and 10,000 people. It would serve as the spearhead of the Security Council in immediately representing its decisions on the ground and preparing the way for the larger, more conventional U.N. forces that would come after it. It would in no sense be a substitute for peacekeeping, peace enforcement, or combat forces.

There are many objections to such a proposal, and they are virtually identical to the objections that were made in Britain in the 1830s to Sir Robert Peel's proposal of a national police force. It has been argued that a U.N. volunteer force would give the

Security Council and the secretary-general too much power to intervene; that it would interfere with local authorities; that its people would be little better than mercenaries; and that it would be expensive. Of course, governments are likely to be averse to any move that gives the U.N. itself a built-in autonomy and makes it less dependent upon them. If the force were under the control of the Security Council it would be difficult to sustain such an objection. As for expense, there is nothing either effective or inexpensive about the large, belated, and inefficient interventions to which the U.N. has been reduced in Somalia and Rwanda, to name only two cases. There is one insuperable argument in favor of a volunteer international force. The future of the United Nations as an effective element in maintaining a minimal degree of law and stability in the world may depend on it, and its introduction could well be a turning point in the history of the organization.

In the economic and social fields, there has been little progress in creating respected international institutions, although much has been done in the fields of development and human rights as well as in transnational movements such as women's rights, the environment, family planning, and so on. Here, again, there is a strong need for respected rules and effective institutions of an equitable kind that recognize the whole world as their constituency. We should never forget that, at the present time, 1.4 billion people in the world live below the poverty level. I hope very much that the fiftieth anniversary of the U.N. will, among other things, be the occasion for the highest possible level of discussion about what can and should be done to meet the demands of the world economy and its least favored constituents.

I believe that the idea of common international responsibility has developed to an extraordinary degree in the past fifty years, thanks mostly to nongovernmental organizations, public opinion, and the media. Although politicians are reluctant to accept what could well become open-ended responsibilities, there seems to have been a fairly radical shift of viewpoint among the public about what has to be done when large segments of the human race are suffering.

C. Shared View

As far as a shared view of the future is concerned, it seems to me that the question is basically rather simple, especially in our favored, industrialized part of the world. We now have very accurate projections of what is likely to happen to our environment and even to our level of civilization if existing trends continue. In the fortunate, industrialized world, we have two basic options. The first is to hole up, to protect our advantages as best we can, to worry about our diminishing numbers, to consume ourselves to death, and to try to keep the vast majority of the less fortunate out of our privileged but shrinking paradise. If that is our choice, we can forget about "international community" except as a rhetorical device and let the U.N. muddle on as it is, doing damage control, serving as a dumping ground for impossible problems and a place to let off steam, and providing a useful scapegoat and fig leaf.

There is, however, another option. We can, like our predecessors in 1945, aspire to make a success of the future. If we are to do this, it will take all our ingenuity, energy, and experience as well as considerable resources. It will be a very long haul. It should also be an inspiring mission to be involved in. It should be fun. At least it would remove our couch potato feeling that life has become rather meaningless and dull. It might also put to rest the notion of "the end of history" and all that.

If that is our chosen option, the U.N. system — renewed, streamlined, reinvigorated, and, above all, properly led—could provide the framework for the grandest of human adventures: building a successful future in a world community under laws of justice.