

STRENGTHENING OUR COMMON ABILITY

TACKLING MULTILATERAL PROBLEMS TOGETHER

Miroslav Lajčák

THE TWENTIETH century brought with it two world wars (three, if we count the Cold War) and two aggressive ideologies—fascism and communism—that devastated millions of lives. It is rightly considered the bloodiest century in the history of mankind. Both wars started on the European continent.

In reaction to them, and in an attempt to prevent another global conflict that could have led to global annihilation, the victorious powers came up with the concept of the United Nations.

Such a global challenge demanded a truly global response. For the past seven decades, the peoples of the world have benefited from the UN as a unique—albeit not always perfect—platform for communication.

Our planet—and the UN, as its most articulated voice—is facing enormous challenges stemming from wars, famine, economic and fiscal turmoil, corruption, populism and failing states, frustrated and unhappy electorates, as well as rapid technological change. Compared to the twentieth century, new forms of conflict and violence have become more commonplace in our times. Armed violence resulting from criminal activity, drug trafficking, local conflicts over land and natural resources, as well as organized inter-ethnic and communal violence, have become more widespread. New conflicts will continue to emerge if the international community does not exert greater efforts to prevent them.

Furthermore, several factors may be pushing the world into a new period of significant danger: the rise of unstable



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regimes; the emergence and expansion of violent non-state actors and terrorism; climate change, migration, and shifts in global power distribution; health epidemics, and natural disasters. A majority of these impact the most vulnerable—the Least Developed Countries, Small Island Developing States, and countries decimated by long-lasting conflicts, to name just a few.

Those who want to challenge the current order are neither unified by ideology nor do they represent a coherent rival system that would be able to replace it. The danger lies in the UN's gradual weakening, lack of integrity,

incoherence in its policies, bureaucracy, and the inability to effectively use the tools at its disposal.

The first issue in any rules-based order is legitimacy. This means that the most powerful actors, who serve as guarantors of order, have to play by the rules to which they have themselves agreed, and do so visibly, whilst respecting the rights and listening to the voices of the less powerful. Otherwise we could easily slide into a “might makes right approach” to policy priorities. The second issue is that the order should work for the majority, not the minority. The third issue is to avoid

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complacency and taking the existing system for granted, with only an occasional need for repair or adjustment.

The UN is 70 years old, and for most of today's generation it is the only system with the legitimacy to organize international affairs. We tend to view it as a sort of natural order of things. However, it is a result of a rather difficult learning process, having already had a failed attempt in the form of the League of Nations during the interwar period. The policymakers of the 1940s recognized that multilateralism is the only effective way to avoid further bloodshed and destruction. The creation of the United Nations was a clear attempt by 51 nations to minimize the relapse of a global conflict, as described in the UN Charter and the agreements reached at Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco.

The end of the Cold War brought us much hope, leading Francis Fukuyama to famously declare the “end of history” and the consequent victory of liberal democracy. More than 25 years on, the future seems more unpredictable and less clear. Power has become more diffuse, non-state actors are playing greater roles in international relations, and the 24/7 news cycle and the in-

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ternet have profoundly changed the way diplomacy is conducted. The last two decades and more have also seen a tremendous increase in the influence of private organizations and civil society groups on relations between states.

Yes indeed, we can find many examples of failure in the history and work of the United Nations. Its inability to address or prevent tragedies before they happen has led to humanitarian disasters, as in Rwanda and Srebrenica. The complexity of current problems, such as the kind we see in Syria, the ever-challenging Middle East, or the appearance and cruelty of new threats to peace and security—such as violent extremism and terrorism—may create the impression that the United Nations is not able to stand up to existing challenges.

Adding to all of the aforementioned are economic and social disruptions, inequalities, an increasing lack of access to clean water and sanitation for billions of people, and the disruption of natural equilibria by aggressive deforestation and the pollution of seas. So, many may ask: is the United Nations really the instrument and platform capable of guiding humankind through the turbulence of the twenty-first century?

My answer is: Yes. I have no doubt about it.

TASKS FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

Over the past seven decades there have been many success stories: lives have been salvaged, dreams that have come true, and projects that have been realized thanks to the efforts of the United Nations. We avoided global nuclear conflict. Dozens of peacekeeping operations around the world have saved hundreds of thousands of lives and UN aid has provided supplies to millions of people. We have also created many instruments for the protection of human rights.

The Millennium Development Goals addressed and advanced issues like poverty reduction and created opportunities for boys and girls to receive an education. The global community has been able to address effectively global health issues like HIV/AIDS—or, most recently, the Ebola outbreak. The signing of the Arms Trade Treaty and the nuclear deal with Iran were both landmark events in disarmament.

The year 2015 has written new pages in the history of multilateralism—especially when it comes to risk reduction and development: the Sendai Framework, the Addis Agenda, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the

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historic Climate Change agreement are all powerful and inspiring achievements of effective multilateral cooperation and diplomacy.

But the story is not over. If we want to be truly successful, we have to implement these agreements, as well as revitalize our peacekeeping operations and the Organization itself. We will have to do that in a way that will reflect global realities on the one hand, and possibilities of Member States on the other. This is the mission of the UN and the role of its top management. It is the challenge and responsibility of the new Secretary-General not to be only the UN's chief administrator, but also to serve as an excellent mediator and implementer of the will of UN Member States.

An example is the case of their will being transformed into the SDGs. They represent a universal, inclusive, and transformative agenda intended to make progress towards greater global prosperity and a fairer, cleaner, and healthier world. Although hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of extreme poverty in the last two decades, inequalities persist and progress has been uneven. The Earth's limited natural resources are being consumed in ways that compromise the ability of future generations

to meet their needs. It is not surprising that about half of the SDGs are either directly environmental in focus, or address the sustainability of natural resources.

A UN FIT FOR OUR WORLD

Achieving the SDGs by 2030 will be a huge task to take on. We need to collectively transform the way we address and finance sustainable development at national, regional, and global levels.

It is important to realize what this means. The United Nations should be effective and innovative in setting the stage for the implementation of the SDGs—to be “fit for purpose,” as well as to streamline its work and the cooperation of its institutions and agencies. The success of the SDGs will be measured by the success of their implementation in the most vulnerable UN Member States. Only then will we be able to say that we left no one behind.

The United Nations system must meet this challenge by helping turn this deal into a concrete form of action. The organization must refocus and pool its strength to assist countries in implementing all dimensions of the 2030 Agenda. It has to create effective partnerships with all stakeholders. For example,

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the establishment of the G20 in 1999 acknowledged the emergence of new actors. Leading powers recognized that global governance needs to adapt to the new international landscape, particularly when it comes to strengthening international financial architecture and fostering sustainable economic growth and development. The global financial crisis has taught us once again how profoundly

interdependent countries have become, and how crucial partnerships are for the implementation of global goals.

PEACEKEEPING EFFICIENCY

The international security environment is becoming increasingly volatile,

with new complex and interconnected threats emerging. The frequency and intensity of armed conflict has been increasing. Violent extremism, global terrorism, and organized crime pose a great threat to regional and global stability. A relapse into violence can easily wipe out decades of sustained international efforts aimed at building peace and stability, and generating real development in post-conflict countries. Today UN peacekeepers increasingly work in a climate of continuing armed conflict. Their numbers have risen tenfold, compared to the levels at the end of the Cold War.

It is clear that today's conflicts overwhelm any single state or organization. The UN's efficacy in maintaining peace and security has been called into question many times, for example when it comes to its ability to address significant violence against civilians. Peacekeeping is one of the critical areas of UN activities, where the organization is most visible, as is public criticism of its performance.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has called for smart and targeted investments to make UN peace operations fit for today's purpose. Indeed, we must work closely together to enhance the capacity of the UN in areas of conflict prevention and mediation, in supporting political solutions in affected countries, and in assisting countries in their nation-building efforts to foster stability, peace, and democracy around the world. It is commonly perceived that now is the opportune moment to rise to this challenge and achieve meaningful progress.

Peacekeeping operations must be ready and mandated for the new kind and scale of threats we face. We must look at how to improve peacekeepers' ability to protect civilians, women and children, increase their credibility in cases of mis-

behavior, sexual exploitation, and abuse. Peacekeepers are, and must continue to be, the real and ultimate providers of safe havens for those in need.

Passionate debate has begun regarding the need to profoundly rethink long-held norms and notions, such as the use of force and collective security, or, for instance, humanitarian intervention

and the Responsibility to Protect. It is important that these discussions are held in a most earnest, inclusive, and constructive manner.

PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY BACK TO THE FORE

I consider conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy

as issues requiring special insight. We must better concentrate our efforts to improve cooperation when it comes to analyzing and observing symptoms that lead to conflict. These are, for example, massive violations of human rights, improving the system of preventive institutions (including early deployment of non-military observance missions), and creating a solid system of post-conflict reconstruction. This should lead to sustainable peace, firmly rooted in pillars of individual and national security, institutional, legal, and economic structures—all based on principles of

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good governance and the respect for human rights.

We are facing the worst global humanitarian and refugee crisis since the end of World War II. The magnitude of such a crisis is putting a huge strain on affected countries and the humanitarian system as a whole—both with respect to international humanitarian law and humanitarian financing. A key word in handling humanitarian and refugee crises is solidarity. But an effective system can only work when countries of origin, transit, and destination cooperate and burden-share responsibilities. Yet, any response to any humanitarian crisis caused by conflict will not be effective without defining its root causes and subsequently implementing effective solutions.

The problem is that 80 percent of today's international humanitarian efforts are directed toward helping people that are not displaced by disasters, but rather by protracted conflicts. In this respect, the first World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul this May is very timely: it offers a unique opportunity for political agreement on the future of the humanitarian system.

UNIVERSAL RIGHTS

Since its establishment in 1945, one of the fundamental goals of the United Nations has been to promote

and encourage respect for the human rights of all, as stipulated in the UN Charter. It is vital that international human rights norms and standards are implemented effectively. The UN must be a leading advocate for human rights in the future, and fight persistent discrimination and violence.

During the last decade, the Secretary-General has initiated substantial reform of the UN's human rights system in

order to strengthen the institutional emphasis on human rights and widen the proactive approach of the UN in this area. Initiatives and policies, such as the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy (HRDDP) or the Human Rights up Front (HRuF) Initiative, were put in place to enhance the ability of the UN to better gather and analyze information, so as to prevent human rights violations in their earliest stages.

At present, the UN human rights machinery is preparing for what I believe could be the most substantial change since the establishment of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in 1993. These significant changes will influence how the human rights machinery will be viewed and managed in the future. I think the institutional consolidation of human rights within the UN system—with its emphasis on stronger early warning and

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peoples' customs, traditions, history, heritage, and convictions.

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Our shrinking world faces great challenges, but we all carry the power we need to solve them—provided we work together.

First of all, we have to be better at listening to each other's motives and beliefs, in an effort to increase our understanding of the complexities facing different countries and peoples.

We have to pay great respect to other peoples' customs, traditions, history, heritage, and convictions. In this sense, I strongly believe in dialogue and

open channels of communication. This is the most effective way of making sure we all work together for the good of our peoples. Only through honest dialogue, careful listening, and keeping an open mind will we be able to build a foundation for mutual trust and cooperation, bridge our divisions, harmonize our actions, and create stronger bonds.

Secondly, the United Nations represents a unique model of international coordination, cooperation, and global legitimacy. I strongly believe there is still room to unlock its full potential to deliver better results and increased effectiveness—as opposed to searching for alternative structures. We have to assess and overcome its current qualitative weaknesses and strengthen coherence,

prevention capabilities—should continue. Human rights should be mainstreamed across all core activities of the UN, including in development, and peace and security. The words of Nelson Mandela should be our guidance here:

thus shall we live, because we will have created a society which recognizes that all people are born equal, with each entitled in equal measure to life, liberty, prosperity, human rights and good governance.

Equality is a crucial element of human rights. When speaking about gender equality, the goal of which is long overdue, we must touch upon the equal opportunities and responsibilities of both women and men. And such equality should be implemented in all pillars of the UN's work: peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights.

DIALOGUE AND MUTUAL RESPECT

UN membership encompasses 193 states, each with its own national interests and agenda. There are sometimes deep political divisions on what the appropriate response to global challenges and opportunities should be. But in times of crisis, we need to strengthen our ability to tackle the problems that confront us all. The United Nations must remain the preferred platform to address, negotiate, and reduce tensions, as well as to solve global problems.

synergy, and convergence across the entire United Nations system.

Since the early 1990s, we have been collectively dealing with the notion that a different world requires a different United Nations. While the principles and primary goals of the Organization remain unchanged, all such calls have been centered on the desire to ensure that the most universal of international organizations adequately reflects new realities and makes the best use of emerging possibilities.

Thirdly, the election of a new Secretary-General this year is another defining moment for an organization that is eager to remain relevant in our new century and effectively advance the causes of development, peace, and human rights. The new Secretary-General will have both the opportunity and the obligation to bring the UN to the next level—building on the strong foundations of his or her predecessors.

We will elect a new head of our Organization who must build constructive partnerships with governments and other stakeholders to achieve cooperation on global issues such as poverty and environmental degradation, as well as crisis management and recovery.

The new Secretary-General must also be strongly committed to reforms. The process of meaningful and purposeful renovation, modern administration, and human resource management should open prospects for change. Improvement commensurate with the wishes of its Member States must remain a matter of consistency at the UN.

Past months have brought forth numerous discussions about the

quality and criteria of selection of the new Secretary-General. Gender and geographical rotation have been at the center of attention. I believe that candidates nominated by countries belonging to the Eastern European Group have a lot to offer in terms of their capabilities, knowledge, and accomplishments. I also believe that we have to look for the most able candidate who is “fit for purpose.”

MISSION FIRST

I strongly support the notion that UN bureaucracy needs to work for the missions, and that the structure of the organization must mirror its strategy. UN personnel must embrace a passion for their mission, and must be given a strong organizational purpose in an environment dedicated to achieving the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity. Human resources management reforms are essential for increasing performance and enhancing

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further the capacity of the UN to fulfill complex and multi-sector mandates in a most effective and efficient manner.

Over the years, there have been numerous initiatives to reform the UN. In fact, seven or eight Secretaries-General have announced some form of reform. The process of renovation, change, and improvement has become a constant at the UN.

Entire new industries have emerged, driven by new technologies, including possible big “game changers” like new means of transport, energy, and climate shifts. The number of challenges in the years ahead will put our conventional wisdom to the test. They will also generate new demands on the global governance architecture as well.

But let me be clear: I am not in favor of creating new or alternative structures. Let us use the system of institutions that we have created and fine-tuned over the years. I am not a fan of ad-hoc arrangements unless there really is no other way. We don’t need new tools before we have given a chance to the existing ones.

There is no need to invent or reinvent the wheel. The wheel is already there.

Let’s use it and change the conduct that sees us perform miserably. We need more goal-oriented thinking, and suppressing irrelevant factors as much as possible for the sake of the common cause. I believe

that a positive change can be achieved even within the existing setup.

The United Nations organization is, and must remain, the cornerstone of the international order. It must be the most effective way of conducting multilateral diplomacy and

various other formats, the only forum where the broadest possible agreement can be achieved, and the only establishment able to confront global challenges that no other party can face alone anymore. The United Nations is a forum of rich and interlinked cultural, religious, and ideological dialogues. It is the only place where all nations have the possibility to present their cultural heritage, explain their values, and build better understanding. Let me quote the words of President Obama during the September 2015 UN General Debate:

Democracy is going to take different forms in different parts of the world. But some universal truths are self-evident. No person wants to be imprisoned for peaceful worship. No woman should ever be abused with impunity or a girl barred from going

to school. These are not ideas of one country or one culture, they are a cornerstone of this institution.

BACK TO ROOTS: DIPLOMACY AS THE ART OF LISTENING

Despite all the modern technologies, it is the right time to come back to some basic diplomatic instruments and methods, such as deep listening and genuine dialogue. As political columnist Rachel Marsden wrote recently:

Diplomacy has been replaced by public relations agendas bent on shoving talking points down the throat of geopolitical adversaries. While it may be fun, it's not very useful or interesting. In an age of social media ubiquity, we are only too happy to blather away rather than use the opportunity to sit back, listen and assess how to proceed more strategically. [...] The more confusing the geopolitical scene becomes, the more reliant we become on human insights. For all the new technology, the foreign policy game is increasingly hinging on old basics.

And we should accept the call of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who wrote earlier this year that it is possible to achieve specific and tangible results, such as the agreement on the Iranian nuclear program, the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons, the agreement on stopping hostilities in Syria, and the development of the basic parameters of the global climate agreement. This shows the need to restore the culture of compro-

mise, the reliance on the diplomatic work, which can be difficult, even exhausting, but which remains, in essence, the only way to ensure mutually acceptable solution to problems by peaceful means.

We should also keep in mind the words of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who said that in the twenty-first century, I believe the mission of the United Nations will be defined by a new, more profound awareness of the sanctity and dignity of every human life, regardless of race or religion.

Focus should be placed on what is achievable, while sidelining what is unrealistic. Taking up initiatives with high consensus potential could bring about concrete change. Pope Francis has said that “diplomacy is the work of small steps,” aptly reflecting a much older piece of wisdom by Lao Tzu, who argued that “a journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”

Let's face it—there is no alternative to the UN. If the organization was not there, we would have to invent it. The UN needs no “big-bang” overhaul, but a set of evolutionary reforms. I wish to say, in conclusion, that it will always be our shared responsibility to ensure that the United Nations is a powerful and transformative force—capable of tackling contemporary problems—and making a genuine difference to the lives of millions of people. ●