A Community Worth Saving

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The current world order is under siege. While this may be a slight exaggeration, there are voices of discontent with the current international system, atop which sits the United Nations as its nucleus. For some, the international community is ill-equipped to address our most pressing challenges, notably the need to balance civil and human rights in an age of terrorism, fear, and division, and the need to protect refugees, who are the real victims of our collective inability to end war and violence. These pressing questions – and many others – are difficult problems for which no easy solution presents itself, but they all center on an important an overarching question: *what kind of international community do we want*?

Like it or not, we live in interesting times, and for some, the current turmoil in the international system is evidence that existing structures have outlived their usefulness.

There are some who would tell us, as they have always told us, that the international system is inherently weak, that the only assurance of wealth and survival is power. They would have us believe that the only currency in the international system is, and has always been, power.

Some say that this so-called "international community" we speak of has its limitations, that the above challenges are evidence that the system doesn't work, that these challenges are too great, too complicated, that the self-interest of states and others is too influential, insurmountable, diminishing opportunities to put humanity and community first. That it is folly to do so.

Other voices would warn that we are on the cusp of a new world order, that our world is forever changed by the traumas of the Bataclan theatre or the Pulse nightclub, or the tragedies in Nice and Berlin. Some worry that the international community has been powerless to stave off aggression, as witnessed in Crimea and Syria. All of these events have revealed the limitations and ineffectiveness of our existing structures.

Some point to the exit of Britain from the EU, or the election of Donald Trump and the rise of France's Marine le Pen, and other populist movements, or the new platform that social media is giving to voices of violent extremism and radicalized violence, all as evidence that the world is moving away from harmony and away from the presumptive hegemony of liberal values and norms that shaped, and were shaped by, the international system created so many decades ago at Dumbarton Oaks and San Francisco.

This is an important criticism – that the real challenges to international community may come from an assumption of "transcendent morality." In other words, the system of laws and norms we have created rests upon the presumption of universalism – that democracy and liberal norms and values are shared by all, and that if they are not, it is really only a matter of time before all nations adopt them, along with the benefits that global capitalism brings, of course. But the problem with this assumption is that it has led powerful nations to presume an inherent right to be stewards of the global order, rather than building a diverse system that makes room for all. There are some who challenge the existing world order in important ways. And their arguments are interesting, even powerful.

A key criticism is that the presumption of liberal hegemony is prone to abuse. The expectation that eventually all nations will get on board with the liberal order and bend to the ascendency of western values is problematic. We are seeing critical voices of this order - philosophical ones from scholars, and practical ones from nations on the

periphery of this club, which envision a more inclusive order that allows nations to develop according to their own moralities and socio-cultural paths. We have seen a push back against the presumption of liberalism's divine right to rule:

- We've seen this from Russia, which has more recently become powerful enough to assert its preference for the truly multilateral system it has been advocating for decades;

- We've seen it in the rationale of three African countries (South Africa, Burundi, and Gambia), which have announced plans to withdraw from the International Criminal Court;

- We've seen it among some nations whose religious and cultural traditions may be at odds with liberal values such as the protection of LGBT rights, for example.

There is just not the widespread agreement on values and rights that liberalism anticipated. Some fear that, if a balance is not struck, the global order will continue to decay, mistrust will continue to build, and our institutions may become divided and less effective. To those critics I would say: maybe. But we have heard criticisms of the global order before. What were we saying about the international system after WWI? What were our judgements about collective security after the Great War? And after WWII? But our aversion to war, and the pursuit of peace and justice led us to recognize that these would more likely be gained from collaboration. If we built the right mechanisms, we could design a community of nations in which all nations had a voice, in which challenges could be addressed collectively, and in which the marginalization of voices could be avoided. We founded a system of laws and of shared responsibility, with the UN as the hub of the global order.

But it isn't perfect. People are rarely predictable, and by extension, neither has history been. People surprise us. With hope, the system we have in place should be flexible enough to respond to these surprises. After all, when the UN was created, and the permanent seats were awarded on the Security Council, few predicted Mao's rise in China and the Soviet Union's political transformation. But the community of nations persisted – the international system built after WWII persisted. It has faced, and is

facing, important challenges. But, at the end of the day what we are dealing with is a community of humans. And people surprise us.

The labyrinth of institutions, laws, and norms borne of the UN system has endeavored to respond to all the tests that humans try to throw at it. Sometimes it triumphs, sometimes it succumbs. But I would suggest that we ought not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. There is a tendency, I think, to shine a brighter light on our failures than we do on our accomplishments. And in the context of the international system, it is hard to find a better example of this than critiques of the UN. It was supposed to prevent war and it consistently disappointed.

The current American president has suggested that the UN has failed – it does not enable America to "put itself first." The 2017 "Restoration of American Sovereignty Act" currently before the United States Congress captures these concerns. Though unlikely to pass, its presence is an important reminder that critiques of the UN system, even among the nations that built and which underwrite this system, are real. Former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper agreed that Canada should not be bound by the encumbrances of the UN system, but should instead be bound by its national interests. (Parenthetically, it is worth noting that, despite his criticisms, Mr. Harper recognized the value of partnering with the UN to advance his Maternal Health Initiative in 2014. In so doing, this can be said to have legitimized the UN as an important mechanism of global collaboration). But returning to critiques of the UN, the very suggestion that nations should choose multilateralism or national interest implies that these two goals are mutually exclusive. I'm not sure this has to be so. But I would suggest that the UN is about more than projecting national interests, crudely defined. It is not simply about preventing war (although it was chiefly created to do that very thing).

It is easy to be distracted by the sexier topics of war, security, and terrorism. And why not? After all, these challenges have not yet been eradicated and do merit our attention. But the UN is about much more than that. It is about, to name a few key goals:

- addressing poverty and disease

- assisting victims of humanitarian and ecological disasters

- caring for refugees

- supporting victims of trafficking

- tackling climate change

- building sustainable, safe and inclusive cities

- advocating for those who are unable to bring their struggles to voice

Ultimately, the UN is about life. It is about the human experience, it is about the security and safety of all humans, no matter their citizenship. And its success is going to involve ensuring this security, balanced with a respect for boundaries and socio-cultural differences. This is a difficult challenge, but we ought not put it in the "too hard" basket and give up. The UN is a network of committees, agencies, people, and yes, paperwork and bureaucracy, but it has shaped a community of nations, of humans. Sometimes it fails, and fails miserably. But again, it is a human construction. It doesn't exist in a vacuum. If it fails, it is because we fail. If the community of nations persists, it is because we have willfully made it so.

So to those who herald the demise of the United Nations system, the failures of the so-called "community of nations" I repeat: it fails only if we let it. We constructed it; we have the power to deconstruct it, to make it better. What will we choose? We have the power to shape the international system, to build the kind of international community we want.

Unfortunately, power is sometimes considered to be an abstract thing that we need to acquire for its own sake. I would suggest that power is instead something that can come from collective will, and that this form of power can be transformative. This is the power that built the UN and what has enabled it to persist. This power is the power of ideas – the idea that humanity will succeed or fail together. *What will we choose?*

Of all places, perhaps we can take some inspiration from the words of Beyonce: "Power's not given to you. You have to take it." A strong and effective international system is not beyond our grasp; we only have to make it so.