

UNITED NATIONS 2045 ROUNDTABLE: The UN at 100

23 September 2020

The United Nations and implementing standards and norms for peace and security in 2045

Thank you to Ramu Damodaran, Chief of the United Nations Academic Impact and Tuan Nguyen from the Boston Global Forum for organising this roundtable discussion, and to my co-panelists Marc Rotenberg, Director of the Centre for AI and Digital Policy at the Michael Dukakis Institute, and Derek Reveron, Chair, National Security Affairs, US Naval War College.

Australia has a long and proud history of support for the United Nations and the post-War multilateral system.

We were strong supporters of the League of Nations established in 1919 after the First World War.

Indeed the first international treaty to which Australia was a signatory was the Treaty of Versailles which included the Covenant of the League of Nations – at that time, Australia had only been a Commonwealth for 18 years.

No more is this support true than among the party which I represent – the Australian Labor Party.

Under the Chifley Labor Government, Australia played a leading role in the establishment of the United Nations in 1945.

Labor's External Affairs Minister, Dr H V "Bert" Evatt, was President of the General Assembly in 1948 and 1949.

Under successive Labor governments, we have promoted three vital pillars of Australian foreign policy:

1. Support for the Western Alliance, and in particular, our Alliance with the United States;
2. Engagement with the countries of our region, most obviously China and Indonesia; and
3. Support for the United Nations multilateral system.

Australia has served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council five times, most recently from 2013-2014, on the initiative of the previous Rudd Labor government.

Most recently, Australia served through the 2018-2020 term on the 47 member UN Human Rights Council.

Here, we led the push for the adoption of Resolution 2166 to bring accountability and justice to the 298 victims of downed Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 – including 38 Australians.

We are also a founding member and driving force behind the Asia Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) and its heads of government meeting.

APEC has been a key driver of regional free trade, resulting in great GDP and wealth gains for the countries in our Asia Pacific neighbourhood.

Under the stewardship of former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans we were instrumental in the UN Peace and Resettlement Plan for Cambodia, and more recently we have been heavily involved in the Syrian Humanitarian Response – committing more than \$400 million in aid.

Earlier this year, we saw a localised coronavirus outbreak in China morph into a global pandemic that not only threatened the lives of potentially thousands of Australians, but also social and political stability around the world.

Australia led the call for an independent, multilateral inquiry into the origins of this pandemic.

Instead of this being welcomed, CCP officials – rather predictably – imposed a suite of selective tariffs on Australian exports.

It is hard to see this as anything other than punishment for our temerity.

But sadly, the UN has always had trouble functioning in the way its founders envisaged.

The main sticking point in realising the success of its multilateralst aims has been the lack of will by the majority of its member states – both large and small – to make it work effectively.

There have been almost continuous efforts since the 1940s to reform and improve the working of the UN, but they have almost always come to grief on the rocks of national self-interest.

It is very easy to be critical or dismissive of the UN as an institution, but the fundamental problem has never been the UN itself, and its ideals, but rather, it has always been its member states.

When the UN was founded in 1945, it had 51 member states.

Today the UN has 193 member states.

The majority belong to a loose alliance of African, Middle-Eastern, Asian, Pacific and Latin American states broadly characterised as “non-aligned”.

These states often have little in common, but at the UN they co-operate to protect each other’s interests, often against the interests of peace and security.

In 1945 the permanent members of the Security Council naturally comprised the five victorious major powers of World War II – the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, France and China.

It was envisaged that the Council would serve as a kind of executive committee of the UN, acting to defend peace and prevent aggression around the world.

The onset of the Cold War and the competition between communism and Western liberal democracy rendered the Council ineffective for most of the next 40 years with the US and the USSR both having the power to veto Security Council resolutions.

The same problem persists today with Russia and China forming an anti-Western bloc on the Council.

The permanent members of the Council no longer reflect the real state of the world.

Four of them are culturally European, with only China coming from outside the European cultural sphere.

Britain and France no longer hold major power status, but both still retain great cultural power.

Today, a new Security Council may have as its permanent members the United States, China, India, Russia, Japan and the European Union.

All attempts to change the composition of the Council in recent years have been thwarted by the self-interest of the existing members.

The Security Council also includes ten non-permanent members, elected by the General Assembly for two-year terms.

Naturally, the states elected tend to reflect the composition of the Assembly, with the majority coming from the “non-aligned” bloc.

The irony of critiquing the structural problems of the United Nations at a UN event is not lost on me, however, I do feel it is important that we recognise these deficiencies if we are to begin to address their change.

I also understand I am talking to an audience that is well aware of what the challenges are, and that many of you spend countless hours trying to remedy them.

However, it should be obvious that none of these reforms are possible unless there is strong leadership – and co-operation at the global level is also needed.

As I noted, such leadership has been weak to non-existent in recent years.

It is not coincidental that a range of countries – from Poland to Cambodia, Turkey to the Philippines – have slid back towards authoritarian government, trade protectionism, populist nationalism and disregard for human rights.

They have taken their lead from what they have seen at the level of the great powers.

They do these things because they know they can get away with them.

If this retrograde trend is to be halted and reversed, leadership must come from the democratic powers, which means in the first place the United States, and also by countries within the European Union, Japan and Britain.

Much of the UN's work is done by its specialised agencies.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation, the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the International Telecommunications Union and the World Meteorological Organisation, for example, all do an excellent job without being politicised or controversial.

The same, however, cannot be said of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which has been turned into a forum for anti-Western and anti-Israel propaganda under the influence of the “non-aligned” bloc and some of the staff they have appointed to run the organisation.

This trend prompted the United States to cease funding the UNESCO in 2011 (under the administration of President Obama).

Japan, Britain and Brazil have also withheld funding to UNESCO at various times.

It is also very disturbing that UNRWA (the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) has a school curriculum and supports school text books which mandate that children be trained for belligerence against Israel, to take up arms against Israel. The last thing children need to be taught is hate.

While the UN endorses this activity, it is allowing this to stand.

As we have seen in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, there are signs that the World Health Organisation is also being politicised under Chinese influence.

Even worse is the situation at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC).

The 47 member states elected to the Council for three-year terms are supposed to – quote – “uphold human rights standards”, though states which notoriously abuse human rights are regularly elected to the Council.

As in the General Assembly, these members often collude to protect each other from censure.

As a result, the only country which is regularly condemned by the UNHRC for alleged human rights abuses is Israel, which is the only country subject to a standing agenda item.

Since its establishment in 2006, the UNHRC has condemned Israel on dozens of occasions.

They rarely condemn human rights abuses in, for example, China, Russia, Zimbabwe, Turkey, Sudan or Saudi Arabia.

Israel is the only country in the Middle East with free elections, free media, free trade unions, free civil society, freedom for all religions, and freedom for women and for LGBTI people.

Yet it is regularly condemned by a Council dominated by countries which have none of these things and which demand a far higher moral standard by other states than they do of themselves.

The most astonishing example in recent times of the gross bias and ineffectiveness of the UNHRC is its silence over China's imprisonment in labour camps of over a million Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, its continued repression of the human rights of its own citizens, its increasing disregard for even the nominally guaranteed autonomy of Tibet, and most recently its blatant violation of Hong Kong's status as a self-governing region.

As legislators around the world have observed these violations of human rights, and the inability and unwillingness of established global organisations to address these violations, they have turned to forming alternate organisations; the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China is one such example.

This year IPAC has sponsored research into forced labour and forced sterilisation in Xinjiang, and as recently as this week, research into forced labour in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

When even the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has endorsed China's BRI through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), knowing that many countries have fallen into debt traps resulting from being unable to repay the loans and losing infrastructure and land in order to settle the debt, this has encouraged like-minded democracies to form their own organisations.

Cumulatively and qualitatively, these human rights violations in China represent the most widespread and urgent affront to human rights by any major state in the world.

Far from condemning China's behaviour, the UNHRC has invited Chinese officials to state Beijing's official position, and when there was contestation about the governance of Hong Kong and whether the Treaty signed with the United Kingdom and witnessed by the international community would be honoured, the UNHRC

invited Beijing's appointed Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Carrie Lam, to address the Council – without any debate.

Of course, associations of democratic states need not be formal organisations.

In a recent essay in the *Australian Foreign Affairs* publication, The Australian Labor Party's Shadow Foreign Minister, Penny Wong, calls for – quote – “new, informal associations of countries with common interests, forming compacts on pressing issues where global consensus is elusive.”

She specifies the urgent need to build a stronger strategic and economic relationship with India, something to which the current Australian government has not devoted nearly enough attention.

Here, I would add that we need to work on a new security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region, working not just with India but also with Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, South Korea and, yes, Taiwan.

Since these would be “informal associations of countries with common interests”, it can include Taiwan without violating the One China policy we have adhered to since 1972.

Sadly, I don't think there is much prospect at present of the major democracies having the resolve to seriously take up the challenge of fundamental reform of the UN.

In fact, there has seldom been a moment in the whole Post-War era when, what we used to call the *Free World*, has suffered such a leadership vacuum as we see at present.

This didn't begin, nor does it end with the election or elevation of one leader.

Freedom House found that 2019 was the fourteenth consecutive year of decline in global freedom.

The gap between setbacks and gains widened compared with 2018, as individuals in 64 countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties while those in just 37 experienced improvements.

The negative pattern affected all regime types, but the impact was most visible near the top and the bottom of the scale.

More than half of the countries that were rated Free or Not Free in 2009 have suffered a net decline in the past decade.

A similar finding from the Lowy Institute in 2018 found that only 47% of Australians aged 18-44 years of age say 'democracy is preferable to any other kind of government' – this is what led me to start in the Australian Parliament, the Parliamentary Friends of Democracy, a bipartisan group of like-minded parliamentarians.

And let me tell you, at the time this was a controversial endeavour!

But maybe the unprecedented simultaneous challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, human-induced climate change and the increasingly dangerous belligerence of the Chinese and Russian regimes will inspire a new generation of courageous leadership in the democratic world.

Or maybe it won't, but I'm an optimist here and I live in hope.

Australia cannot, on its own, influence this trend.

But in concert with the countries I mentioned earlier, particularly India and Japan, we can make a contribution.

We should be working much harder to do so.

We can also rely on our strong alliance with the United States.

Australia is one of America's oldest and most reliable allies.

As John Curtin, a former Australian Prime Minister, and much revered wartime leader, wrote in 1941:

"Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom."

We are very proud of our friendship with the United States.

And it is the United States of America on which the United Nations most relies – even if some member states do not wish to acknowledge this reliance.

I do not think it is too strong to say that without the United States' support, there would be a great diminution of the United Nations.

As the recent AUSMIN talks in Washington in July demonstrated, that behind the scenes Australia continues to work constructively with Secretary of State Pompeo and Secretary of Defence Esper.

The AUSMIN communique noted:

"The Secretaries and Ministers reaffirmed that the Indo-Pacific is the focus of the Alliance and that the United States and Australia are working side-by-side, including with ASEAN, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Five Eyes partners, to strengthen our networked structure of alliances and partnerships to maintain a region that is secure, prosperous, inclusive, and rules-based."

That will remain true, and perhaps even more so, after next January.

Not surprisingly, the focus of the AUSMIN talks was Beijing's recent behaviour – both domestically and internationally.

The communique expressed “deep concern about the [Chinese] government's efforts to undermine the “One Country, Two Systems” framework and to erode Hong Kong's autonomy and freedoms in violation of its obligations under the Sino-British Joint Declaration.”

It condemned China's “campaign of repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang.”

It “re-affirmed Taiwan's important role in the Indo-Pacific region as well as their intent to maintain strong unofficial ties with Taiwan.”

It “affirmed that Beijing's maritime claims are not valid under international law.

Specifically, it “affirmed that the PRC cannot assert maritime claims in the South China Sea based on the ‘nine-dash line,’ ‘historic rights,’ or entire South China Sea island groups, which are incompatible with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.”

When addressing these concerns, we must reject arguments which can be construed as xenophobic and racist and combat these evils wherever they may lurk. And these are evil.

Doing this in a way which is not seen as an attack on the Chinese people or on China's legitimate national interests will not be easy but is a necessary discipline.

China is a great power, and entitled to the respect that goes with great power status.

I want to see a strong, stable, united, prosperous and peaceful China with a natural sphere of influence that should be resolving regional problems, not stoking them.

But there is now a broad consensus in Australian politics that the recent expansionist and irredentist tendencies in Chinese foreign policy must be confronted, along with serious human rights abuses within its borders.

Not to do so would be an affront to our own values.

The deterioration in China's relations with the West, including with Australia, is entirely the result of President Xi's neo-Stalinist domestic policies and his belligerent and hegemonic behaviour in the international arena, particularly in our immediate region.

China's blatantly illegal abrogation of Hong Kong's status as an autonomous region, which China willingly signed up to in 1984, is only the latest example of his unacceptable behaviour.

Expert in International Law and former DFAT official Malcolm Jorgensen has noted that:

“China’s rhetorical deference to international law masks the more subversive consequence of its actions: redrawing the boundaries between law and politics in a way that overturns foundational parts of the global order from within.

He goes on to say that:

“It is equally clear, however, that advocates for the rules-based order must take more seriously their own appeals to the foundational authority of international law.

Seemingly legalistic challenges will ultimately transform into political challenges to a more secure and normatively desirable world.”

Of course, the role the People’s Republic of China is currently playing to undermine global adherence to the rules-based order is not the only urgent issue.

The United Nations was founded as an expression of the world’s hope that, after the horrors of two world wars, a new international order could be built based on peace, co-operation, prosperity and freedom for all nations and all peoples.

Sadly, that hope has yet to be fulfilled.

This is partly due to its own structural defects, but mainly due to the self-interested behaviour of its member states – large and small – over the 75 years since its foundation.

Now we are at a critical point in our history.

The global climate crisis, the rise of belligerently undemocratic powers, the rise of ethnic nationalism and protectionism, the decline in the leadership of the democracies, transnational criminality such as human trafficking and undermining cybersecurity and now the COVID-19 pandemic, are all placing unprecedented strain on the rules-based global order which, for all its faults, has kept the peace and allowed seven decades of increasing prosperity for most, if not quite all, the people of the world.

At this juncture we badly need a global organisation capable of rising to these challenges.

The United Nations is reflecting on its coming 100th anniversary, and in that reflection, member States should also reflect on their commitment to the principles of a peaceful world, and the high values to which people of good will have always aspired.

Thank you.