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John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture

Is a Green UN the Answer to Its Current Blues?

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1 UN Reform

Today, I have the rare honor of giving the annual John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture for a second time, the first time being in 2007.[1] That gives me the distinct opportunity to reflect on what I said the first time, and whether it has held up or not. In the 2007 lecture, I speculated that it would take a big global shock or disruption to create the conditions for a real "San Francisco moment," as it is often called—a major UN reset as momentous as the 1945 conference in San Francisco that led to its birth. Since then, there have been a number of major crises, possible San Francisco moments—the financial crisis of 2008, the

1 The John W. Holmes Memorial Lecture Series was inaugurated in 1989 in honor of one of the founding members of the Academic Council on the United Nations System (ACUNS). If I may, I would like to also honor someone who was very important to the members of ACUNS and to the United Nations: Edward Mortimer, who passed away on 18 June 2021. Edward started life as a journalist, and always retained the reporter's great sense of curiosity. He was also one of the world's natural academics, becoming a Fellow of All Souls, Oxford; I am sure he helped many of you with your research over the years. Today, he is perhaps remembered best as Kofi Annan's speechwriter and director of communications. At the UN, I always found him to be a fierce advocate for peoples whose troubles he felt were too often overlooked, including the Palestinians and Sri Lanka's Tamils. He reminded me of William Gladstone, the nineteenth-century British statesman, whose advocacy for Armenians then living under the Ottomans led him to insist that the national colors of Armenia be draped on his coffin. Edward Mortimer was such a man, a champion of minorities and a great Liberal in the best tradition of that word.

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current dramatic global public health crisis of COVID, and the longer running but no less dramatic crisis of climate change—and yet, if we're frank, the UN remains stubbornly unchanged. There have been reforms at the margin, but we have not seen the response to these crises that we might have hoped for and even anticipated. The financial crisis kicked the Group of 20 (G-20) up a notch or two on the annual calendar of such events, from a meeting of finance ministers to a significant meeting of heads of state. Such a boost in its authority could perhaps have signaled the beginnings of the makings of an economic Security Council. After all, the G-20 brings together the top twenty economies in the world, representing the clear majority of global gross domestic product. But it has been as cautious and conservative as its older sibling, the Group of 7.

The COVID crisis in its turn has led to a landmark report around strengthening public health institutions that may lead to improvements of the World Health Organization and the wider ecosystem of public health institutions—the creation and kick-starting of a truly robust global public health system that might stop a COVID-like crisis in the future. But earlier health crises such as Ebola, SARS, and even HIV/AIDS do not give great cause for hope. The international health sector remains an alphabet soup of organizations, each crisis seemingly spawning a new institution but no future proofing of the overall global health system. We seem to be always fighting the last war.

Climate change has not sparked the creation of new international cooperation and institutions. Despite the efforts in Paris, and other meetings like the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) coming up in Glasgow later this year, we see no real, robust change in the architecture to handle the global response to climate. It is still a voluntary best effort system burdened with free riders whose commitments fall well short of what is needed if climate change is to be contained.

If we turn to the UN itself, I acknowledge there has not been a political security crisis on the same scale as the financial, health, and environmental crises I have mentioned. No San Francisco moment in that sense. And we see no real move to remake the UN Security Council—to make it more representative of the global political economy today. We also see no significant revamping of the Secretary-General's powers. In fact, I think despite the best efforts of both the incumbent and his predecessor we have seen a steady deterioration in the global recognition and power and authority of Secretaries-General since 2007. Moreover, chronic financial difficulties remain across the UN system. The United States' financial withholding under President Donald Trump being an echo of earlier withholdings and debts that we had to contend with during the time I and others served under Kofi Annan at the UN. And even the most supportive donors, such as some significant European countries, contribute in

some cases less financial support to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights than we at the Open Society Foundations provide.

So, even though the current Secretary-General is as reform minded as any of his predecessors, ultimately he has been limited, at least so far in his first term, to tinkering with smaller reforms, such as the Resident Coordinator system, and not bigger reforms. I complained in my 2007 Holmes Lecture that we are "reform obsessed" at the UN. As I argued then, "The world wants more of the UN, and the organization is only able to deliver less." This issue of demand outrunning capacity is a perennial challenge for every Secretary-General and leader of the organization and, of course, explains the continuous promise of reform. The UN is caught in an expectations game that it cannot win.

2 Today's Challenges

Now is a particularly challenging moment. At present, we have as dysfunctional of a Security Council as at any time since the height of the Cold War. We see situation after situation where there is some limited UN engagement in second-tier conflicts, particularly around trying to mitigate some of the worst impacts of those conflicts on civilians, but little successful mediation or conflict resolution of the kind that that we should hope for. We see the UN continue to be essentially locked out of the bigger conflicts, whether it is in Iran or even Venezuela or Syria, with the UN presence limited to the humanitarian side of the field. On these conflicts, I am struck by the reflections of UN Secretary-General António Guterres in his second term manifesto letter, sent to Member States before his successful reelection, compared to that of his first appeal for support.

In the first, now five years ago, we saw the UN Secretary-General position himself as the diplomat peacemaker, who would engage in resolving conflicts. In the second, that role has almost been entirely dropped in favor of the campaigning crusader on issues such as climate change. One can understand that pivot away from the traditional world chief diplomat by this Secretary-General, when solutions from Cyprus to Yemen elude him. Or in Libya, where there has subsequently been some important progress. But his visit to Tripoli as mediator was immediately followed by a bombardment of that city by rebel forces supported by several permanent members of the Security Council. I think he recognized, and I imagine with real personal disappointment, that he simply did not have the authority to bring these different parties to the table.

So why not pivot to climate? At least it offers a more comforting space to work than these stubborn long-term conflicts, even if the victories will only be

felt some generations down the road—long after his term is over. And yes, of course, the UN has been here before. Even when the ice floes were still secure, the UN of the Cold War years was able to busy itself with decolonization and technical assistance to the new governments with a development and humanitarian agenda to substitute for being locked out of the major political conflicts of the day.

Those were the years when I began my UN career. I worked in New York and then in the field and Geneva with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. I was stunned then by how we tried to keep the political side of the UN at arm's length. I found many years later, on becoming administrator of the UN Development Programme, that a predecessor had toyed with even dropping the "UN" from the official name of the organization, changing its distinctive blue UN logo to a more anonymous green, and renaming the organization as the World Development Organization. For years, a tarnished brand and global political gridlock kept the UN on the margins. Development and humanitarian work were its only allowed spaces. Yet humanitarianism without political mediation was too often a Band-Aid not a cure.

This led to my involvement in the formation of the International Crisis Group (ICG), when I saw that humanitarian assistance alone failed address the root causes of conflict. A small industry grew to make up for the political deadlock generally prevailing at the Security Council. Over the years of Annan's leadership, political solutions again became possible at the UN. It was no longer left just to ICG and its peers. In many ways, this reached something of a high watermark in the doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) adopted by the UN toward the end of Annan's tenure as Secretary-General.

We viewed it as a huge breakthrough and triumph. But then, the concept was misused in the Libya context and was allowed to be used to justify interventions that went beyond the expressed purpose of R2P—protecting civilians—in Benghazi. Despite the intention of those in the Security Council who voted for the resolution, it was used by the British and the French, and ultimately the United States, to pursue a much wider agenda of regime change in Libya. In a sense, in many ways, the concept of the Responsibility to Protect has been moribund ever since.

So again, we have entered an era where the main roadways to UN action are constrained and blocked, and we are forced to look at other ways to act. Hence, a Secretary-General embracing climate change, a strengthened public, and an agenda of humanitarian and development activities are back to the future—reminiscent of the Cold War years. The door has been slammed shut again on most of the political work that the Secretary-General might have expected to do.

The story might end here, an old soldier fading away, but it has not because in the same way that the Cold War allowed innovative Secretaries-General and UN colleagues to get their toe in the door in some political situations, that remains the same today.

Now as president of Open Society Foundations, I am struck by how frequently colleagues come to me—often members of my high-powered advocacy team in Washington or Brussels—to inquire about who at the UN should they talk to because there is now an emerging set of crises where the big powers have played themselves out of the game. The two most obvious are Myanmar and Afghanistan; suddenly, in the case of Myanmar the UN special representative of the Secretary-General is again a very significant figure. Other than the Chinese and a few other regional actors, everyone has essentially been sidelined by the change of government. The UN envoy herself has not yet been able to secure real entry points with or access to this new government. Nevertheless, it is the default game in town, particularly with a divided Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Similarly, now in Afghanistan, as the United States withdraws, there is suddenly new interest in how to enhance, expand, and rebuild the UN's mandate. It may not come with a peacekeeping force attached to it, but it is going to be a critical source of diplomatic and regional engagement and eyes on the ground as Western and NATO forces withdraw. In a strange way, even when the world is at its worst, there remain these key geographic pieces and issues that as they fall off the table, the UN needs to be there to try and catch.

3 Four Questions and Ideas for the Road Ahead

How well the UN is able to play a weak hand may rest on four questions. First, the problem of US-China competition has been imported into the United Nations. What does that mean for the survival of UN universality in the face of attempts at capturing the UN by both sides? Second, how might the "values versus interests" debate be resolved? Third, can the ambition of middle powers be harnessed into a coalition, as has often been tried before, to give UN teeth, effectiveness, and impact even as the elephants, the big powers, fight? Fourth and finally, might we see the quiet remaking of the UN into a multiconstituency organization, where civil society and private sector actors start to institutionalize their presence and role, and allow the UN to get beyond the inherent conservatism of governments alone toward a multistakeholder model for the future?

First, regarding the United States and China, in the past fourteen years or so China has begun to turn its economic power into political influence at the UN

and around the world. It took advantage of the Trump administration's retreat from multilateralism and flexed its muscles in the UN, where it is now the second-largest contributor to the assessed budget. These moves have enabled China to strengthen its representation across the secretariat agencies, funds, and programs. In the absence of US engagement, Chinese nationals are now installed at the helm of four of fifteen UN specialized agencies—more than any other state. China pays less than the United States annually—12 percent versus 22 percent of the annual UN budget—but it pays on time and its budget share has increased dramatically since 2010, when it was paying just 3 percent. China ranks as the tenth-largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations and provides more uniformed personnel than the rest of the five permanent members of the Security Council combined. It is the only country listed among the top ten in both troop and financial contributions and has provided a trust fund to the Secretary-General's Office, which also gives added influence.

The United States has woken up to these moves, and the new administration has struck back. The new US ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, gave recent congressional testimony that seemed to suggest that she anticipated taking on China within the UN. It is of vital importance that the United States resists the temptation to return the UN into a Cold War two-sided deadlock.

Instead, I think what we have to see is something of a triangulation between the UN and those middle powers, many in the developing world, trying to hold the UN true to its Charter principles, while on the other two sides of the triangle sit the United States at one end and China on the other. The need to manage this triangle by the UN Secretariat and others is going to critically shape whether the UN can preserve its universality, and its unique legitimacy and access that comes from that.

Second, a word on values. As you know, these are becoming ever more contentious—North, South, East, West. We see human rights and democracy assailed. Freedom House reports their decline over fifteen years. More than half the world now is living under semi- or nondemocratic governments. Even in democratic governments, violent culture wars between left and right are creating highly polarized political environments shaped by fake news and misinformation. Within that, the UN must maintain the inherent liberal internationalism and inclusiveness of its Charter. Every day, that is currently becoming harder to do.

Third, can we stoke the ambition of those middle powers—the Swedens, Singapores, Norways, Ghanas—so many of which are influential in their own regions? The middle powers need to combine in an ambitious effort to save the UN for the great majority of the world who do not live within the borders of

a superpower. I want to be clear that I think the United States under the Joe Biden administration will serve as an ally of the UN, but this leadership must come from others.

Finally, I come to the fourth question of civil society and the private sector. Kofi Annan commissioned from former president Enrique Cardoso of Brazil a report on the role of civil society at the UN, but governments were quick to reject nearly all of its recommendations. The role of civil society, however, in the affairs of the UN continues to grow, despite the efforts of governments to block such groups at every turn from any role of real influence. For the lifeblood of the organization, however, civil society is where the renewal, the ideas, and the campaigns will come from.

As for the private sector, in many ways it has fared much better in responding to the COVID pandemic than many of the world's governments. The speed with which it developed vaccines, admittedly in partnership with critical government research and development resources, shows the power of science and technology harnessed to investment to provide a quick solution to a major global problem; even if now we are confronted with the failure—by governments primarily—to make that solution universally available. That same spirit of invention and entrepreneurship is coming to the fore in climate change, where we are seeing less and less focus on only government-rationed use of resources and more on the application of technology and business to finding solutions that enhance, not limit, livelihoods and lifestyles.

I close with saying that there are, as always with the UN, green shoots of hope and possibility. But they sit within a pretty bleak overall political landscape—a reflection not of failures at the UN, so much as because the UN holds the mirror to the world and, at the moment, that is a broken mirror because it is a broken world.