

## THE UNITED NATIONS AND CANADA

# WHAT CANADA COULD AND SHOULD DO AT THE UNITED NATIONS 2018: A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

### **Mobilizing for UN reform**

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It has become commonplace in international politics these days to bemoan the impacts of rising nationalism and autocracy, particularly among some of the world's largest and most powerful states. Internationalism, the rule of law and the purposes and principles of the UN Charter have (to say the least) seen better days.

Some governments that have led at the United Nations are no longer doing so. Its most powerful Member State and largest donor, the United States, has withdrawn funding from UN budgets, (including the peacekeeping budget, the UN Fund for Population Activities and the UN Relief and Works Agency), withdrawn from important UN bodies (notably UNESCO and the Human Rights Council), as well as multilateral processes (on climate change and migration, among others). The Security Council too often remains paralyzed with both Russia and the United States casting vetoes to protect their client states. Moreover, Russia and some of its allies run roughshod over major international legal prohibitions on intervention (Crimea) and use of chemical and other weapons of mass destruction. And the current political climate allows China to expand its influence abroad and to restrict even further civic space, including freedoms of association and expression.

And when major powers that have important responsibilities under the Charter shirk their obligations others are tempted to follow suit.

However, there is a resilience to the multilateral system, fortified by a recognition that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the machinery of international cooperation is needed more than ever.

At a time when large powers are doubling-down on militarism, nuclear weapons and trade protectionism, there are significant numbers of small and medium states that need the kind of rules-based order that depends on a flourishing and proper-functioning UN system. Some promising developments include:

- The determination of Secretary-General Guterres who is doggedly pursuing useful reforms to the UN Management structures, improvements in the coherence of the UN Development System and a reorganization of the UN Secretariat's peacebuilding architecture.
- Outgoing General Assembly President Miroslav Lajčák of Slovakia responded to the current crisis in multilateralism by convening an unprecedented series of off-the-record breakfast meetings for UN ambassadors. Mr. Lajčák's successor, Ecuadorian Foreign Minister María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, will also be someone to watch. Her acceptance speech as incoming General Assembly President last June identified UN strengthening and reform among her promised priorities.
- And importantly, a significant number of governments have called for utilizing the upcoming 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations in 2020 as an opportunity to further strengthen the Organization.

This latter development responds to some quiet but persistent campaigning by civil society organizations over the past 18 months, calling for an adequately prepared 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration for the United Nations in 2020, one that includes a meaningful process of stocktaking, review and strengthening for the organization.

Canada is supporting this UN2020 process. In remarks at the General Assembly Canada recognized that, "Civil society has become an essential partner in advancing the goals of the UN," and that governments will need to encourage "multi-stakeholder inputs and thinking creatively about what we hear."

Canada also cited the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals as an example of what multistakeholder diplomacy through the General Assembly can achieve, while noting the essential role civil society will play in the achievement of Agenda 2030.

UN2020 campaigners had hoped that language mandating a formal process for a 2020 Summit could be agreed in a General Assembly resolution this September. However, opposition from the Non-Aligned Movement (notably Cuba, Egypt and Algeria) prevented the Assembly from reaching consensus.

Nevertheless, the idea of a 2020 Summit has considerable traction at the UN, with expressed support among a cross-regional group of states including Brazil, Canada (on behalf of CANZ), Estonia on behalf of the ACT (Accountability, Coherence, Transparency) group of states, Nigeria, Norway, Uruguay and the European Union in a statement that included 8 or 9 East European states, and EU candidate countries Turkey, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, as well as potential candidate countries Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.

Civil society organizations have recognized the opportunity inherent in a 2020 Summit and begun to organize. At the August 2018 67<sup>th</sup> UN Department of Public Information NGO (UN DPI/NGO) Conference, upwards of 1500 NGOs called upon Member States to, *“Advance people-centered multilateralism by developing proposals to revitalize the United Nations on the occasion of its 75th Anniversary in 2020.”*

In the face of very real threats to international diplomacy, governments at the UN cannot simply do nothing and “weather the storm.” The idea of a 2020 anniversary summit offers a political space where those committed to multilateralism can push back, through a mandated stocktaking, re-commitment to the principles and purposes of the Charter, and reforms that strengthen the organization.

Canada can and should help. (1) Support for a 2020 process should be part of the Prime Minister’s remarks at the opening of the 2018 General Assembly. (2) Then, beyond generalities, Canada needs a game plan, a Canadian vision of what a 21<sup>st</sup> century United Nations should look like. Officials at Global Affairs Canada’s UN Affairs Division, preoccupied as always with the day-to-day of UN meetings, resolutions and events, should undertake a consultative process such as the stakeholder dialogues that helped develop the renewed Canadian National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security.