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Before

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Agenda Item: United Nations Peacekeeping Operations
"Reflections for the Future"

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Mr. President,

Thank you for inviting IPI to participate in this discussion, I am delighted to be joining my friends Under-Secretary-General Jean-Pierre Lacroix and Comfort Ero from the International Crisis Group.

It is a pleasure to see you preside over the council during this key month—recalling with admiration Slovenia's skillful performance the last time you served here in the 1990s, along with President Danilo Türk and Ambassador Sanja Štiglic. At that time, I had recently arrived in New York, after serving as a UN peacekeeper in the former Yugoslavia.

Thirty years ago, in Croatia, the UN had fifteen battalions or formed units drawn from eleven different countries, representing almost all corners of the world: Canada from North America; Argentina from South America; Kenya from Africa; Jordan, Nepal, and Indonesia from Asia; Ukraine, the Russian Federation, and Poland from Eastern Europe; and Belgium and Denmark from Western Europe.

There was even a US battalion further south, in what was later known as a preventive peace deployment mission in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia). What a time it was then—to have American and Russian formed units working in the same overall theatre, under a French-led UN military command, and all answering to a Japanese SRSG, Yasushi Akashi. There were military observers, civilian police, and civil affairs officers from everywhere. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there was an equally impressive breadth of representation when it came to formed units—France, the UK, Turkey, Egypt, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Sweden, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries, and others.

This is not to say all of it was an assurance of triumph—of course not, far from it. While the UN did achieve some tactical successes in the former Yugoslavia and there was much bravery, regrettably, as in Rwanda in 1994, there was cowardice too, colossal errors of judgment, and eye-watering cruelties, many of which we could not stop or did not stop. But we were there, almost all of us, together—experiencing the pain together, and hopefully learning from it together. Beyond the former Yugoslavia, there were smaller military observer missions, election support missions, and later executive-style missions reminiscent of the first Congo operation—a complete kaleidoscope of UN peace instruments.

I do not need to describe the current situation. The decline in the willingness of states to host missions they consider to be past their sell-by date and the reluctance of others to provide a critical mass of political support to end what are now seemingly interminable conflicts is plain to see, as explained in these briefings by my two distinguished colleagues. At the heart of it, however, lies the UN's flagging belief in itself and its ability to be a peace organization in the hardest of circumstances, and this is perhaps the clearest sign of the UN's low bow before defeatism. This is as obvious as it is painful. And the willingness of many in the UN to sub-contract, in their minds, the difficult responsibilities of enforcement action to the AU, also speaks to it. The AU should be viewed as a strategic partner of the UN and nothing less.

Sadly, the UN today, in peace and security terms, appears then to be a stump of what it once was—and not because the need for the UN's peace function has somehow dissolved either. Unfortunately, some of the signs have been there for many years. When I joined the council ten years ago, out of some eighty-odd agenda items at the time, the focus was almost entirely on Africa. It was as if the UN Security Council was another AU Peace and Security Council, but in New York. It gave the impression that the African states had the monopoly over threats to international peace and security. Were there no conflicts elsewhere in the world, beyond Haiti or Afghanistan, in South America or in Asia, for example, that also merited being on the Council's agenda?

How did it become like this, so lopsided and now so difficult to navigate?

While there are many causes that can be worked into an explanation, with some roots clearly geopolitical, and others deriving from the challenges of counterterrorism, I will focus on just one. When Colin Powell, while serving as the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the early 1990s, made clear his belief that his country should never place its military personnel in harm's way where there was no direct national interest, he inadvertently set in motion a chain reaction.

From the very beginning of the UN, the Irish, the Fijians, the Nepalese, and many others had done just that—sent peacekeepers into theaters where there was no possible motive for being there other than in the service of the collective will, as the Kenyans are trying to do now in Haiti. And yet, almost overnight, the Powell Doctrine became contagious, spreading through capitals—and particularly parliaments—with many asking aloud why they were committing their people to dangerous UN missions? I remember the military head of my country's armed forces shouting and asking that very question over the phone early one morning in 2000.

This inflammation contributed in part to my country's decision, along with India, to withdraw its battalions from UNAMSIL—something then unheard of. The proximate trigger was the mandate being changed by the permanent members with neither Kamlesh Sharma, the Indian PR, or myself knowing anything about it, as we had not been consulted.

Around that time, I told the council that, while we wanted to serve the UN, we were not comfortable being viewed as a sort of underclass of the UN—in a UN divided between masters and servants, a UN stratified between bankers and soldiers, where we would be the only ones relied on to do the riskiest jobs; and especially not when only two out of the fifteen council members at the time were contributing sizable numbers to UN peace operations.

President Obama's trying in 2015 to rally the international community to dig deep and renew its commitment to UN peacekeeping, especially in the most difficult circumstances, seemed to work for a while but came too late to reverse the decline—the rot was simply too well established.

Mr. President, we have two simple points on what could be done. It has always been the case with the UN, if you choose the right people and insert them into even the tightest of spots, often and against all odds, small miracles happen, and they happen fast. As Comfort Ero said, the council should worry less about the precise structure of future mandates and concentrate more on making sure the right people are chosen, in keeping with Article 101, Paragraph 3 of the Charter, and then let them work—unfettered by burdensome instructions finding their way into mandates. The council simply needs to give them the support they require.

Second, with the council so divided, our recommendation is that it go back to basics. When there is an emerging or actual threat to international peace and security, the council should mandate, with absolutely no pre-determination, the secretary-general to go in person to the heart of the hot spot and weigh the situation, before reporting to the council with a battery of suggestions. That is all the Council needs to do—no more than that—as the first step. When the secretary-general reports back, the council can begin to tailor a logical response. In other words, you must allow the wound to determine the type of surgery required, as best understood by your most senior surgeon. The secretary-general is the person who leads the organization. It is the secretary-general who has the most complete grasp of the entire UN system. It the secretary-general who also has the clearest vision of the strategic chessboard.

My last and associated point is this—the Security Council, and particularly its permanent members, selects the secretary-general (while the General Assembly appoints them); the council is therefore duty-bound to trust the secretary-general and in the latter's impartial and good judgement when speaking of matters relating to peace and security. If you believe the secretary-general is capable of it, then respect his abilities accordingly, mandate and send him, listen to him and then respond to the crisis accordingly.

I thank you Mr. President.