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Representing Bangladesh: My Years at the UN

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The practice of the art of being a diplomat has always been fraught with great circumspection. It is one of the hallmarks, indeed mainstays of the profession. Anecdotes on this score abound. For instance there is this story of Talleyrand, the Grand Old Man of French diplomacy in the nineteenth century. As a retired person, but still very involved in domestic and foreign issues, he was entertaining guests one evening in his Paris apartment. The year was 1830, the month was February, and the second French Revolution was breaking out. There was noise of fighting, emanating from the streets below. Talleyrand walked the steps to the window, with some effort as he had a game foot, and looked down to see. "It seems we are winning!" he observed. "But who are WE, Excellence?" his visitors asked, somewhat puzzled. "Hush!" replied Talleyrand: "I shall tell you tomorrow!!"

Modern diplomacy, particularly multilateral politics as conducted at the United Nations, is somewhat different. One often needs to take positions more clearly, and articulate them more unequivocally, in order to advance one's country's perceived national interests in a global forum. Yet one must avoid stridency that might offend. Unlike in warfare, victories in

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diplomacy must not be overtly celebrated, but merely noted, and factored into calculations, as one moves on to win greater gains. Restraint is a great virtue, tempered by a mature sense of positive initiative, being tough without being aggressive. The challenge is often to convert weaknesses to strengths, and moral force to power, more so if you are representing a country that is large yet poor, intellectually endowed but weak. Like Bangladesh, for instance.

My substantive association with the United Nations began three and a half decades ago, in 1978, when I was on a field trip to the UN headquarters in New York while writing up my PhD thesis in international relations at the Australian National University in Canberra. I was already a public official, nine years into my career as an erstwhile Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) officer, already considered, as one was wont to those days, of appreciable seniority. So, my services were commandeered by Ambassador KM Kaiser, a legendary Bangladeshi Permanent Representative to the UN, for assisting with the lobbying for a seat in the Security Council.

Bangladesh defeated Japan in a straight electoral contest in the UN General Assembly on that occasion, and Dhaka was staggering under the weight of its bewildering success! Eventually I was to be Deputy Permanent Representative (1986-91), then Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN and World Trade Organization in Geneva (1996-2001), and finally, Permanent Representative to the UN in New York (2001-2007). My links with the UN continued as I served as Foreign Advisor (i.e. Foreign Minister) in the Caretaker Government (2007-2009). Since 2009 to date, my connections with the UN have taken another dimension in a different *avatar*. I was no longer representing my country at the UN, but was now involved with this global organisation as an academic analyst and researcher, heading the 'multilateral cluster' as Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore. Understandably, this paper will involve a trip down memory lane, drawing upon my notes and nostalgia.

At the UN, in both Geneva and New York, the myth of 'equality of States' operates as reality. In other words, the ambassador of San Marino or Liechtenstein, if she or he is good, could be as effective a player as those from Brazil or China (there is though some kind of US exceptionalism in New York, also because it is the host country to the UN). So it is not so much what you represent as who you are. There is therefore a premium on diplomatic and negotiating skills, and there is usually considerable peer-assessment. If one can pass muster, one can find for oneself a place at decision-making tables. This is not generally true of

ambassadors in state capitals. The Icelandic Ambassador will have a lower place in the pecking order than that of Japan in Washington. Not necessarily so at the UN in New York or Geneva (or at the UN offices in Vienna).There is greater reward for individual capabilities in the latter places, and if you are seen and clever, you are more likely to be elevated to playing a higher role as Chair of some important committee of peers. This also brings a distinction to one's country in addition to oneself, and that can be doubly satisfying.

As an Ambassador or Permanent Representative to the United Nations one is of course mandated to project the foreign policy of one's country and thereby protect the State's perceived national self-interest. Greek philosophers held that before engaging in any discussion one must define one's key terms. So the expression 'foreign policy' will need to be explained. The foreign policy of a State, irrespective of its power or clout, or whether it is developed or developing, can be described as the sum-total of external interactions flowing from conscious decision to advance its welfare or interests. But this is not as easy as it appears. Such policies are often not clearly articulated or established, and the Ambassador would be required to take decision either through hasty consultations on telephone with the headquarters, or on the spot.

Some theoretical discussion on foreign policy is merited. Contemporary literature on the subject of foreign policy-analysis generally tends to be 'process-oriented' mostly in relation to developed countries, and 'function-oriented' with respect to developing states. The former ('process-oriented') concentrates on the detailed analyses of foreign policy making mechanisms, with emphases on such institutions as bureaucracies, political parties, and pressure groups and the influence they exert on foreign policy outcomes. Examples of such literature would be Graham Allison's 'Essence of Decision', (Boston: Little Brown, 1971), Morton Halperin's 'Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy', (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1974), or William Wallace's "Foreign Policy and the Political Process' (London: Macmillan, 1971).

In case of the developing countries, the argument has been advanced that their institutions, still being rudimentary, deserve less attention than the functions of foreign policy or the purposes they are put to. Their foreign policies are seen as 'function of functions'. Some notable proponents of this view, and examples of their work, are: B. Korany, 'Foreign Policy Models and their Empirical Relevance to Third World Actors: A Critique and an Alternative' (International Social Science Journal, Vol.26, No.1,1974), F.B. Weinstein, ('The Uses of

Foreign policy in Indonesia, World Politics, Vol. xxiv, No.3, April 1972), and Maurice East (Foreign-Policy making in Small States: A Study of the Ugandan Ministry of Foreign Affairs', Policy Sciences, Vol. 4, 1973).

However, on the basis of my own empirical observations spread across well over four decades, I would counter-argue that the pre-supposition that developing countries are so different from those that are developed that they require a distinctly different set of tools to examine their external behaviour-patterns cannot be sustained beyond a point. Such neat categorisation or division into two distinctly separate groups of states, is rendered difficult by the fact that in the contemporary international scene many countries have characteristics of both developing and developed states. This requires analyses that combine the need for the study of both the 'process' and 'functions' in such policy-making of most states.

In total I had spent about twelve years in New York (split between being Deputy Permanent Representative and Permanent Representative), and five more in Geneva (as Ambassador to the UN as well as to the World Trade Organization, a totally separate global body independent of the UN), representing Bangladesh. New York hosts the UN headquarters and the Secretariat, as also the six Main Committees of the UNGA, the Economic and Social Council and the Security Council. The UN in New York (as distinct from its Geneva counterpart) lays down the broad legislative parameters, and calls the political shots. The hundreds of resolutions that have been adopted there reflect the urges of humanity, but, except for those at the Security Council, have only recommendatory value. Decision-making is usually by voting, though 'consensus resolutions' supposedly carry more weight. Some powerful states such as the US take the stand that they are not morally obliged to abide by decisions they voted against, or that domestic laws override UN legislative adoptions. Alone among the UN entities the Security Council has the authority to implement its declarations, if needs be by force (Chapter 5), but there, as is well-known, the Permanent Five – the US, the UK, Russia, China, and France – have the power to veto any decision, a fact that has aroused considerable controversy, and even ire among others. Bangladesh has served in the Security Council twice, and on both occasions, its behaviour has conformed to a pattern of generally playing a low-profile role on high-risk issues, and high-profile role on low-risk issues.

As distinct from the largely political role of its New York counterpart, the UN in Geneva is concerned with economic and social subjects. Geneva hosts the major specialised agencies of the UN (some technically fall outside its purview) such as the International Labour

Organization (ILO, which actually pre-dates the UN), World Health Organization (WHO), World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), as also the World Trade Organization (WTO), which, though distinct from the UN, performs a complementary role in trade, and more recently, in development. The Office of the Human Rights Commissioner is also located there. These bodies legislate within their mandates, collate and transmit 'best practices' and generally perform a role that pertains to daily 'bread and butter issues' of the common man. To that end, it is important to Bangladesh. This is where 'special and differential treatment' in trade for developing and 'least developed countries' (LDCs), such as 'Generalized System of Preferences' (GSP) or the provision of trade-benefits for 'Everything But Arms' (EBA) of the European Union are discussed and negotiated (though Brussels, which hosts the EU, is also concerned with some of these issues). Bangladesh has been an active leader of LDCs, both in the UN and WTO fora; and sometimes by seeking the Chair of relevant committees, and at other times by simply networking with key players, it has sought to retain and expand its market access, mainly for its principal export, garments.

However, there is one major political forum that is based in Geneva, but has not been able to deliver adequately in recent times. This is the Conference on Disarmament, the 65-member body that is the sole negotiating forum on arms control. Though earlier the CD succeeded in negotiating some landmark agreements such as the Chemical and Biological Weapons Convention, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), it has made little progress for years now. Its Rules of Procedure require that every year the Programme of Work has to be determined afresh, as on all issues, by consensus. It rarely succeeds in achieving agreement on such annual agenda. The main nuclear powers say that arms control is being achieved through their own negotiations, which causes them to neglect the CD. This is true except for occasions when the CD is needed to achieve another global agreement such as, in present times, the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT). At the moment Pakistan is successfully opposing it almost single-handedly, as it believes, it would accord its arch-rival India an 'unfair advantage' over it.

Normally Bangladesh's direct interest on such subjects as nuclear issues may be limited. But this forum provides Bangladesh a platform to make itself useful to key global players intellectually by providing 'ideas' (such as in negotiating language for draft decisions) or by playing mediating roles. One example during my tenure (1996-2001) comes to mind. To monitor the CTBT the CTBT Organization (CTBTO) was to have been set up in Vienna. But this could only be done if all Regional Groups had elected their Bureaux. This included the

Middle East and South Asia (MESA) Group, which has both Iran and Israel as its members. It could never elect its Bureau member (Vice Chair) because Iran and Israel refused to meet at all. The US Ambassador approached me if I could help break the impasse by agreeing to stand for the post. I agreed as it gave Bangladesh a leg-up in the Disarmament Forum. Though Bangladesh had no diplomatic relations with Israel, the Israeli Ambassador had no particular objection to Bangladesh, and Iran had no reason to disoblige us. But we insisted on public show of all-round support. As a result, and in pursuance of the deal, we ended up with Iran nominating Bangladesh and Israel seconding it, a truly rare diplomatic phenomenon! The CTBTO was thus able to be launched, and Bangladesh came out of it, smelling like roses, for helping cut the Gordian knot!

The WTO, in Geneva, deserves a special mention. It encompasses a dozen or so agreements, each on a major trade subject. The WTO functions through a General Committee, its plenary body which serves as the main legislative organ, which also has two other faces in the form of the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), and the Trade Policy Review Body (TPRB).The DSB can and does pass judgments on complaints of breaches of agreement, and can also impose penalties. The TPRB reviews trade policies of member states to determine their WTO-compliance, and where this is lacking, can provide countries with assistance in this regard. Developing countries often find this useful. A constraint for Bangladesh was the small size of its global trade, and therefore, of its objective importance. We tried to make up for it by raising our profile through other roles. For instance I chaired the TPRB, and a key body known as Committee of Trade and Development (popularly known as 'CommTD'). Also, by seeking to advance LDC interests by chairing it. Additionally, I was able to play a key role in resolving an impasse with regard to the election of the Director General (which had to be by consensus), by proposing, and thereafter negotiating, a splitting of the term between the two main candidates, Mike Moore of New Zealand and Supachai Panitchpakdi of Thailand. These enabled us to get Bangladesh invited to the 'Green Room', an ante-chamber of the Director General, where key players in the WTO tended to meet and take decisions, which were later mostly adopted without too much debate, sometimes even rubber-stamped, by the General Committee.

The *hochpolitik* ('high politics') of the WTO is, as far as developing countries are concerned, to my mind, two-fold: First, the argument that 'development' is a goal of trade, which found a modicum of acceptance both in the Singapore WTO Ministerial Conference in 1996, and by the cognomen attached to the later Doha Round of Trade Negotiations as 'Development

Round': and the second, that 'implementation' be emphasised rather than new agreements, as the WTO was thought to have already bitten off more than it could chew. Negotiations in the WTO can be intensely technical. This is where developing countries generally tend to feel constrained, and they, including Bangladesh, need to train hard to develop requisite skills. Here on the one hand you have the US and the European Union, highly organised. On the other extreme you have countries whose people would tend not to buy Japanese radio sets because they were afraid they would not understand what the radios were saying!

So, one major problem developing countries face, particularly in Geneva, which has so many multilateral bodies of varied mandates scattered around the city, compared to New York where most are housed together within a single UN structure, is the lack of resources and dearth of personnel to cover the increasing number of meetings. A former head of the UN in Geneva, Under Secretary General Vladimir Petrovsky once told me that in that city there were around 7000 meetings of the UN system annually! The life of a developing country diplomat, is, therefore, NOT at all like how that city's most renowned citizen, the mighty Voltaire, had said of the local elite*: 'Le matin je fais des projets et le soir je fais des sottises'* ('In the mornings I make good resolutions, in the evening I commit follies!')

My induction to the New York scene in late-2001 was a baptism of fire. I presented my credentials to Secretary General Kofi Annan at noon on 6 November. Bangladesh was then in the Security Council, and remained so for rest of the year, and for a small overworked Mission like ours the associated tasks were often harrowing! Even before submitting my papers, earlier that morning I had to make interventions at a Security Council informal meeting on Afghanistan. We were deliberating on the choice of Hamid Karzai as the head of the interim government in Kabul. On 20 December we in the Council authorised the deployment of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, which today, fourteen years down the line, is poised to leave that country. That month I also submitted the report to the Security Council on the Sierra Leone Sanctions Committee, of which I was the Chairman. This function had exposed me to the horrors of trade in 'blood diamonds' in Africa by the elite, many of whom were the subjects of the mandatory sanction measures.

What provides Bangladesh considerable traction as a positive international actor is its role in UN Peacekeeping. By now over 100,000 uniformed personnel would have served as 'blue helmets' in missions as diverse as in Cambodia, Bosnia, Georgia, Rwanda, Cote d'Ivore, East Timor, Congo, Mozambique, Namibia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Bangladeshi general

officers have been in command positions in Mozambique, Georgia, and Cote d'Ivore. It all began in 1988, at a time when I was DPR, with the end of the prolonged Iraq-Iran war. Deployment of a UN Iraq-Iran Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG) was contemplated and approved. Prompted by a Fijian colleague, I approached Marrack Goulding, Under Secretary General for Political Affairs, enquiring about the possibility of our participation. British to his bootstraps, Goulding entertained nostalgic recollections of the old Bengal Lancers, and was very enthusiastic. But problem came from an unforeseen source: Iran. The Iranian Ambassador, on grounds that Bangladesh had (also) congratulated Saddam Hussain of Iraq for ending the war, did not approve. After much 'diplomatic cajoling' (as is sometimes necessary under such circumstances), he relented, and consequently a batch of thirteen Bangladeshi officers was despatched!

While peacekeeping had the advantages of bringing in fame and resources, and kept troops trained and fighting-fit, there was still a price, at times heavy, to pay. This involved sacrifices in terms of deaths and injuries. As I recall, the first casualty was that of a Bangladeshi officer, Lieutenant Colonel Fazlul Karim in Windhoek, Namibia, in 1989. I needed to liaise with South African authorities on that which entailed some issues as there was no diplomatic relations with apartheid-practising Pretoria those days. Nine soldiers were killed in the Congo in 2005. The bodies were flown to Dhaka and we needed to retain liaison with many points in New York, the Army Headquarters in Dhaka, our Foreign Ministry, and the French who provided the coffin boxes for the myriad associated tasks. There were many such other cases of valiant sacrifice that the Bangladeshi troops made for the sake of peace, in faraway lands, away from friends and families. In January 2004 the BBC described the Bangladeshi soldiers as 'the cream of UN peacekeepers'. 'Peacekeeping' has now morphed into 'peace-building' which implies a series of measures in post-conflict societies to prevent the slide-back into anarchy. Many of these activities like non-formal education, women's empowerment, poverty alleviation are what Bangladesh is good at, and should further develop these skills to make itself useful in 'peace-building' as it has done in 'peacekeeping'.

At the UN, developing countries seek to organise themselves through the Group of 77 (and China), a body that now has many more members. The G77 as it is called submits draft resolutions on behalf of its members in the Second (Economic) and Third (Social) Committees. During my time Bangladesh led the LDCs and piloted a resolution for the LDCs through the G77 for adoption in the Second Committee. Though all were developing countries, LDC interests were not always co-terminus with those of G 77. The main

philosophical difference was that the LDCs sought greater global support without wanting structural and systemic changes in the global economy, which sometimes the more ardent G77 ideologues aspired to. Donors therefore felt a tad more comfortable with LDCs. Yet it was necessary to retain a show of developing country solidarity. Hence a bit of tightrope-walking was necessary. This was particularly so at one point in time during my tenure when I chaired both the Second Committee and the LDC group.

The Security Council is, of course, the most powerful organ in the UN system. It is the only one to which the UN Charter provides the authority to enforce its decisions through military force. It comprises the P5 (Permanent Five, i.e. the US, the UK, China, Russia, France), and rotating ten members (jokingly often referred to as the ten 'observers', since all substantive decisions are taken by the veto-wielding five powers), representing various geographical groupings. It is said to no longer be representative of current global realities, and in need of reforms. This would include expansion of permanent membership with newer players. India, Brazil, Japan, Germany and South Africa believe they fit the bill. Their neighbours (or near-neighbours) believe otherwise, since it is rare for a rising power to be a darling in its own region. The latter organised themselves into what was known as the 'coffee club' and now as 'uniting for consensus group' opposing such expansion tooth and nail. For most others, who have no direct interest, it would at times entail having to run with the hare and hunt with the hound. Bangladesh needed, and will need, to be extremely circumspect in not unnecessarily upsetting the apple-cart in terms of relations with any side.

In most member-states of the UN and Bangladesh is no exception, foreign-policy making is largely an elite preserve. This elite, particularly in developing countries, even though they had often led the independence movement of their respective countries, remained linked to, and at times dependent upon, the 'metropolitan' (former colonial) power, from which they continued to draw their intellectual, cultural, and often material, nourishment. The UK continues to exercise influence over the 'Commonwealth', France over the 'Francophonie', Spain on Latin America and Portugal on the 'Lusophone' countries. This is often reflected in cross-regional groupings in both Geneva and New York. This comes to the fore particularly during elections for posts. Bangladesh has to take note of this in its 'electoral diplomacy' at the UN, which takes up a fair amount of its Mission's time and energy.

It is worth mentioning that on this dependence, a whole body of literature developed when we were younger diplomats, known as the 'dependencia school' particularly in Latin America.

Among those associated with it were thinkers like Celso Furtado ('The Brazilian Model'), Johan Galtung ('A Structural Theory of Imperialism'), Andre Gunder Frank ('The Development of Underdevelopment'), and Samir Amin ('Unequal Development').They argued that this dependency relationship between the 'periphery' and the 'metropolis' or 'centre' is exploitative in nature, and impedes development, apart from creating a 'comprador elite' class in post-colonial societies, which must be broken if real development is to be achieved. Such ideas had become less fashionable over the decades, but many feel, have returned again, though in a less extreme form with leaders like Lula of Brazil, Chavez of Venezuela, and Gutierrez of Ecuador.

One agency that was suspect in Western eyes for harbouring views in empathy was the UN Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which was once led by the neo-Marxist, Raul Prebisch of Argentina, who was its Secretary General from 1964 to 1969. After my tenure as Ambassador in Geneva, I served nearly a year as a Special Advisor to one of his more recent successors, Rubens Ricupero of Brazil, yet another thinker of prodigious repute, in 2001. UNCTAD's development philosophy was not seen as being in tune with the major global capitals, and so some of its key functions were hived off and relocated to the UN headquarters in New York, reducing UNCTAD to being something akin to a toothless Think Tank. (Some even unkindly translated the acronym UNCTAD into 'Under No Circumstances take any Decisions' – alas, it no longer had any powers to take any decisions anyway!)

As stated earlier, one way to enhance the relevance and influence of a less-powerful country like Bangladesh was to get elected into key positions in various committees and governing bodies. I chaired the UN Information Committee, the Second Committee, the Population Commission, among others, and sat in governing bodies of institutions like the UN Development Fund (UNDP) and the Children's Fund (UNICEF). As a country committed to women's empowerment, we also got our candidate elected to the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Bangladesh successfully projected itself as a liberal and secular democracy, on its way to achieving the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a model worthy of emulation by countries of comparable milieu. This was a key element in my appointment as a 'Facilitator for UN Reforms' by the UNGA President Jean Ping in 2005, when I helped draft the 'Outcome Document' adopted by the Summit of global leaders in New York in 2005.

It would not be out of place here to mention the role of spouses and families of diplomats at the UN. They offer enormous support, not just in terms of providing encouragement from home, but also networking with their counterparts in the workplace. In this respect I wish to mention in fond remembrance, my wife Nicole, whom I lost to cancer in 2009. She was most certainly the wind beneath my wings, and had a huge contribution to whatever may have been my achievements, by spreading the web of our contacts. Also, effective and targeted entertainment is a very important aspect of diplomacy; it is difficult to quarrel with someone you have broken bread with. It is essential to have good working relationships for the Ambassador with other colleagues at the Mission. The support staff of assistants, secretaries and drivers often work under most challenging circumstances, particularly with meagre emoluments, and they deserve to be recognised for what they do. Rewards need not always be material. Every day at around 9:30 am we at the Bangladesh Mission used to have a meeting to exchange notes with one another at what we referred to as 'morning prayers'. Retaining close connections with Dhaka, with not just the Foreign Office, but other relevant Ministries like Economic Affairs, Commerce, Finance, Labour, Women's Welfare and the Armed Forces Division is essential. Our diplomats at the UN have the advantage of exposure to uniquely significant events and ideas, and would do our system a great service by reporting home on them as best as they can. It is my view that whoever is in government at home – and during my time I saw the Jatiyo Party, the Awami League, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in office – policies with regard to the UN hardly change, and the Permanent Representative and the Mission remain and will remain key elements in shaping them.

So, to sum up, why is the UN important to a country like Bangladesh? First, the UN system buttresses Dhaka's sense of security. For weaker states, it often acts as a protector. When the sovereignty of one member state, Kuwait, was extinguished by a more powerful neighbour Iraq, the UN rallied to restore it. The UN provides for 'rule of law' among nations, and developing countries prefer a Lockean international ambience which the UN seeks to create than Hobbesian circumstances of disorder (The English philosopher saw life in the lawless state of nature as 'nasty, brutish and short'). Second, the UN is a source of material and intellectual support. The Great UN Conferences of the 1990s (including the Rio meet on Climate Change and others), the MDGs, the Monterrey Conference on Financing and Development and the like have inextricably involved the UN as a resource-provider, or at least as a resource mobiliser. It is in the interest of developing countries to bring 'development' to the centre-stage of UN activities. Third, the UN provides us with a forum to

air our views. When our leaders speak at its podium the world gets informed about us. It also enables us to exchange views with others such as the Nonaligned Movement (NAM) or G 77, which avoids having to affront any party singly. Finally, since Bangladesh does not have the resources to deal with most countries bilaterally, the UN provides a convenient venue to do so. Where else could a country like Bangladesh relate to Vanuatu, Costa Rica and San Marino so easily? Particularly when Dhaka's interest lies in getting as many stakeholders with interest in it as possible, even simply, as friends?

There is of course much criticism of the UN that is current. It has not stopped wars, nor has it impeded outrages from being committed, particularly when the transgressors are powerful. Its leadership is too pliant to big powers. Its bureaucracy is large and flabby; a joke making rounds when I was there was one involving a tourist asking a UN guard, pointing to the Secretariat Building: "How many people work there?" Pat came the reply: "Not half of those that are inside!" Nonetheless, for a country like Bangladesh, how it relates to the world is critical to its existence, and the UN is the most useful medium for it to do so. The UN is not there to create a world government, but a world that is governed better. It is not perfect; but it is the most useful multilateral organisation humanity has so far been able to devise and forge. The nineteenth century English poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson, in a long and rambling poem called 'Lockesly Hall' had spoken of a 'Parliament of Man'. The UN is not it. But it is the closest proximate that we can aspire to.

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