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Pearsonian Peacekeeping: Does It Have a Future or Only a Past?

by
Alex Morrison

As the title of my talk is posed as a question, “Pearsonian Peacekeeping: Does it Have a Future or Only a Past?,” let me answer the question immediately and then proceed to explain why I believe my answer to be the correct one. My contention is that Pearsonian peacekeeping has a future because it has a past. Lester Pearson’s principles and practices, his ideals and his acceptance of the realities of life all combined in the autumn of 1956 in his invention of peacekeeping. Since that time, the efforts of military and civilian peacekeepers have combined to accomplish the true aim of peacekeeping: the saving of lives and the alleviation of human suffering.

Mr. Pearson’s work at that time, its embrace by Canadians and by the world, have resulted in the saving of many hundreds of thousands of lives – the exact number can only be guessed. Canadians have enormous pride in peacekeeping. A recent public opinion poll commissioned by the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre indicates that an overwhelming majority of Canadians agree and also that we should continue to share our experience and expertise.¹

Long an admirer of Lester Pearson, his ideas, his goals and his practical results, I retain sharp and vivid memories of what assuredly were fleeting associations but which have acquired a length and permanence in direct ratio to the distance in time of their occurrences. Many were gained in Ottawa conventions, in public speaking competitions and in University and Federal election campaigns. His kindness and affable manner which immediately put one at ease will always be remembered.

During the last six years of my military career 1983-89, which were spent as a member of the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations in New York, I met many UN international civil servants and national politicians and diplomats who worked with Mr. Pearson during the time he spent at the UN in many capacities, including that of President of the General Assembly and during those dark days of the autumn of 1956 when he suggested a UN force be used to solve the Suez Crisis. His invention of peacekeeping at that time and the subse-

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quent bestowal upon him of the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize have ensured that ever since Canada and peacekeeping have been synonymous throughout the world.

Let me illustrate my point of view by using some of Mr. Pearson's words, and setting his view that what he brought about in the latter months of 1956 would be merely transitory unless concrete follow-up actions were taken. He saw that peacekeeping had great potential but knew that much work had to be accomplished for that potential to be realized. In his acceptance speech upon presentation of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, Norway early in December 1957, in reference to the establishment of the United Nations Emergency Force (referred to initially as UNEF, then, after the second force was set up in the same area later, as UNEF I) he said, "We did, however, take at least a step in the direction of putting international force behind an international decision a year ago in the Suez Crisis . . . We made at least a beginning then. If, on that foundation we do not build something more permanent and stronger, we will once again have ignored realities, rejected opportunities and betrayed our trust. Will we never learn?"

Previously, in the journal, *Foreign Affairs*, in a 1957 article entitled "Force for U.N.," he contended that:

The world's alarm last November over events in Egypt – intensified, if that were possible, by the frustrating situation in Hungary – galvanized the General Assembly into establishing a United Nations Emergency Force, an action which until then had not been thought practicable or probable. We must now do everything possible to ensure that this action is successful in achieving the desired results. If we fail in this, a damaging blow – perhaps a fatal one – will be dealt to the whole concept of supervising the peace and avoiding hostilities through the United Nations Assembly. If we succeed, then we must build on that success so that when we are faced in the future with similarly complicated and dangerous situations we can avoid the hasty improvisations of last autumn.²

Writing in *Maclean's* magazine in May 1964, he reviewed the actions (or non-actions) of the League of Nations at the time of the Abyssinian Crisis in the mid-1930s. (It was during the diplomatic discussions in Geneva at that time that Senator Raoul Dandurand made the now-famous statement about Canada being a "fire-proof house.") Mr. Pearson's laments that this initial attempt at putting together "an international police force" failed when individual members of the League refused to seize the opportunity. After reference to the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco in the late summer of 1945, he turned to the Suez Crisis and UNEF I and stated, "There was no precedent for this kind of police-and-peace action . . . UNEF was a heartening experience in restoring and preserving peace by international action."³

UN Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim had this to say about Mr. Pearson: “It is always tempting to speculate on how a statesman from the recent past would have reacted to our present problems. In Pearson’s case it is especially tempting, for his wisdom, objectivity, and far-sightedness were famous even in his lifetime. To give only one example, now more relevant than ever, during the Suez Crisis in 1956, he insisted that a mere cease-fire and withdrawal were not enough. ‘What is the use,’ he asked,

of passing a resolution which brings about a cease-fire and even a withdrawal? . . . In six months we’ll go through all this again if we do not take advantage of this crisis to pluck something out . . . if we do not take advantage to do something about a political settlement, we will regret it. The time has come for the UN not only to bring about a cease-fire, but to move in and police the cease-fire and make arrangements for a political settlement.

Lester Pearson’s whole life and career were devoted to serving his country and the wider international community. He served in the First World War (where he received the nickname “Mike” when his flying instructor decided that “Lester” was not a fit name for a pilot), was a professor at the University of Toronto, joined the Department of External Affairs, was at the Canadian High Commission in London during the Blitz, became the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, and then made the move to political life.

While wishing that the use of force to settle international crises could be abolished, he was practical-minded enough to accept – and advocate – that forceful means will be needed, from time to time, to be employed for the common good. John Holmes, that elegant, extremely-talented and ever so diplomatic Canadian diplomat, in *The Shaping of Peace: Canada and the search for world order 1943-1957*, volume 2 of his absolutely pre-eminent trio of books on Canada in the international arena, described Mr. Pearson during the days in New York when Canada was playing a/the leading role in attempting to defuse the Suez Crisis. He writes:

Pearson’s tactic was simple but brilliantly played. He had the mental as well as the physical power of an athlete. His role was that of quarterback, inventing plays and giving signals, shifting his ground to take advantage of openings and exploiting adversity *pour mieux sauter*. His vast experience and his nimble grasp of essentials gave him the necessary confidence, and his own assurance under pressure inspired the confidence of others – although even his own advisers were sometimes bewildered by the mobility of his tactics.

Holmes continued:

He made no speech in the debate, abstained, and then rose to explain his abstention. He made no judgements except to regret that force

had been used in the circumstances. His approach was ruthlessly pragmatic. He did not disagree with the proposal for ceasefire and withdrawal but thought that the resolution did not go far enough; the opportunity should be taken to link a ceasefire to the absolute necessity of a political settlement in Palestine and for Suez. Then followed one of the most potent conditional sentences in UN history. 'I therefore would have liked to see a provision in this resolution . . . authorising the Secretary-General to begin to make arrangements with member governments for a United Nations force large enough to keep these borders at peace while a political settlement is being worked out.'⁴

Later in the book he says that, "Pearson's footwork in the early stages of the crisis had been dazzling. Quarterback, tight-rope walker, he became also a brilliant choreographer, scenarist, or stage-manager, in partnership with Hammarskjöld . . . and others . . ."⁵

Much earlier in his political career in an address to the Canadian Bar Association on 31 March 1951, Pearson asked: "What should we do if the main aggressor should exploit the provisions of the Charter for the maintenance of the peace everywhere, in order to weaken us so that one day the peace cannot be maintained anywhere? What can we do to prevent the principle of collective security being used to weaken collective security in practice?" He offered four principles as a solution to these questions:

- a) "In every situation, our obligation under the Charter to do whatever we can to maintain the principle of collective security should be discharged. In other words, we must recognize unprovoked aggression, whether committed by great or small powers, for what it is, and take appropriate action. This action may have to vary, however, according to circumstances."
- b) "We should never formally condemn an aggressor until the fact of his aggression is clearly proven by impartial evidence, and until the mediatory and conciliatory functions of the United Nations have been exhausted."
- c) "Commendation of aggression should not mean that in every case economic and military sanctions must follow. The enforcement action to be taken against an aggressor must be related to the practicability of such action; to the general strategic and political situation, and to the possibility of such enforcement action weakening the peaceful and law abiding powers in other areas, thereby tempting another and a far more serious threat to the peace."
- d) "We should recognize our limitations in this way, even when condemnatory action has to be taken. There is nothing immoral in this. It is

immoral, however, when passing resolutions at the United Nations condemning aggressors, to give the impression that they will be followed by strong and effective economic and military action, when we know that, in fact, such action will not or cannot be taken. It was not, for instance, the reluctance of the League of Nations to condemn the aggression of Fascist Italy against Abyssinia, which so fatally weakened that organization. That condemnation was easy and it was given in ringing and defiant resolutions and speeches. The wrong done was in giving the impression that these resolutions would be implemented, and then doing nothing about it.”⁶

What then are the essential words/terms to describe Pearsonian peace-keeping? Let me suggest a few:

- Individual actions, while dealing with the immediate situation at hand, must be a foundation for future, similar actions in the military and political arenas. We must always look where we want to be.
- Force is to be used when necessary and in sufficient strength to deal with the situation at hand but also strong enough to serve as a deterrent.
- Planning, preparation and partnership preventative measures are essential.
- The United Nations must be the organization of choice of the international community to deal with the threat of or actuality of conflict.

In his *Maclean's* article, Mr. Pearson asked, “How can we, within the UN, use the experience we have gained in these actions to improve our future efforts to keep the peace?”⁷ I might also, parenthetically, point out his use of the phrase “to keep the peace.” It is apparent to me from his writing that he understood clearly that “keeping the peace” was a multi-faceted, wide spectrum activity. Not for him the contemporary hair-splitting which concentrates more on semantics than results. He went on to list six “basic principles of action and organization . . . to be worked out in advance and accepted (by the UN).”

- “Advance planning and organization” to ensure orderly processes and actions in the establishment, organization, deployment and employment of a peacekeeping force.
- A UN force should have clear terms of reference.
- There should be a “permanent, military-planning-and-staff group in the secretary-general’s office . . .”
- Peacekeeping should be financed by the UN as a whole, not only by participating states or voluntary contributions.
- Sharing of peacekeeping experience and ideas.

- And, later in the article, groups of UN Member States should organize a force outside the UN – ready to use if the UN asks. The force should be well trained and equipped, and composed of middle power states.⁸

Mr. Pearson's eye was always on the future. He knew that awareness of the present is important but that it must be a foundation for the future.

How are his suggestions being implemented, if at all? Let me refer to the August 2000 *Brahimi Report* commissioned by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in March of that year.⁹ It is a remarkable document. It is clear, concise and outlines what must be done to make peacekeeping professional and proficient. It talks about professionalism, training, organization of UN military staff, financing of peacekeeping operations, terms of reference, sharing of lessons learned – all of Pearson's points. It almost seems as if Mr. Pearson was a member of the Brahimi panel. Much has been done to implement Pearson's suggestions. Much more will be done by the UN, national governments and by the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre.

CONCLUSION

Lester Pearson invented peacekeeping as it is practiced today. That invention and its importance to national and international peace, security and stability were recognized by the awarding of the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize. He knew and acknowledged that UNEF I was a start, a foundation on which to build for the future. He knew it would be changed, developed, enhanced.

There are four certainties about the future of peacekeeping:

- It will remain the instrument of choice for conflict prevention and resolution.
- Mechanisms and modalities of the past will be used in the future.
- New methods will be required.
- Flexibility and positive attitude are key attributes.

Each recognizes a debt to Mr. Pearson.

Pearsonian peacekeeping certainly does have a future. In his 1957 *Foreign Affairs* article, Mr. Pearson wrote:

As always, in the last resort, individual governments must determine whether the best laid plans of the United Nations are to succeed or fail. If a plan anything like that which I have outlined is to succeed, governments must, both within and outside the United Nations, follow policies consistent with its objectives and its capabilities. The very least each of our governments can now do, it seems to me, is to draft, in accordance with our respective constitutional processes, whatever measures are required to place us in a better position to

support agreed decisions of the United Nations in an emergency. Are we to go on from crisis to crisis improvising in haste? Or can we now pool our experience and our resources, so that the next time we, the governments and peoples whom the United Nations represents, will be ready and prepared to act?"¹⁰

Let me conclude with another Pearsonian quote: "The time has come for us to make a move, not only from strength, but from wisdom and from confidence in ourselves; to concentrate on the possibilities of agreement, rather than on the disagreements and failures, the evil and wrongs, of the past." We must continue to follow the path set out for us by Mr. Pearson that autumn of 1956. To do less would be a disservice to him, his ideas and the values of peacekeeping.

Endnotes

1. Goldfarb Report, 2001.
2. Lester B. Pearson, "Force for U.N.," *Foreign Affairs* 35, no. 3 (April 1957), p. 395.
3. Lester B. Pearson, "A New Kind of Peace Force," *Maclean's* 77, no. 9 (2 May 1964), pp. 9-10.
4. John W. Holmes, *The Shaping of Peace: Canada and the search for world order 1943-1957*, vol. 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), pp. 359-60.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 367.
6. Address to the Canadian Bar Association, 31 March 1951.
7. Pearson, "A New Kind of Peace Force," p. 10.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
9. United Nations, Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (*Brahimi Report*) 17 August 2000.
10. Pearson, "Force for U.N.," p. 404.