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Uniting nations:

*Sukehiro Hasegawa*

By Stéphanie Thomson



Sukehiro Hasegawa started his career with the United Nations in 1969, working in countries such as Somalia, Rwanda and East Timor. Since 2007, he has been teaching courses on peacebuilding and global governance at Hosei University and the United Nations University in Tokyo. He was recently appointed Special Advisor to the Prime Minister of East Timor, or the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste as it is officially called. In this interview, I asked him about his peacekeeping work and his time spent in the United Nations European Headquarters in Geneva.

**Our meeting point, the Palais des Nations — once home to the League of Nations, and now the United Nations — has become a symbol of international Geneva. Why are so many international organizations and non-governmental organizations drawn here?**

It is the unique environment of Geneva that is highly conducive to the work carried out by these organizations. I think this is for two reasons. Firstly, it is a city where people are able to come and talk freely. The different delegations and organizations can be open and honest in the political and culturally free atmosphere of Geneva, which is not necessarily the case in other cities. The second reason is the attitude and generosity of the Swiss people and government. Switzerland works hard to maintain high standards not only in its public service but also its impartiality in the conduct of human affairs more broadly. For both of these reasons, Geneva continues to be the ideal place for international organizations, and that's why more

and more choose to come and remain here. It will without doubt remain the centre of the international community, a place where ideas are born, and where international norms and standards are set.

**You spent some time living and working in Geneva. What was your own personal experience of the place when you were based here?**





During the reformation, people came to Geneva to escape persecution; it was a place of religious, cultural and social tolerance. My time in this city has showed me that this tradition is still very much alive. There are people from many different countries and backgrounds, speaking a variety of languages, but everyone feels welcome, and no one particular group dominates. When I lived in Geneva, I felt free and respected. In this sense, it's unique. This uniqueness stems from its neutrality in inter-state politics but from its impartiality in advancing human rights and social progress. Not just political neutrality, but social and cultural as well.

**So you don't think Switzerland's well-known policy of neutrality is now replaced by its central role in setting norms and standards in global governance?**

On the contrary. The concept of neutrality is at the core of many efforts to build a more peaceful and stable world still dominated by nations states of the Westphalia system. Take the example of peacekeeping missions. In these missions, troops from many different countries work together as an act of global governance to maintain peace; yet they still remain basically under the command of their national headquarters. We have learned to exercise extreme restraint in the use of arms, and avoided taking any sides among parties in conflict. We have learned to stand firm and use arms to protect civilians. Far from impeding our objectives, this approach helps national authorities to exercise their responsibility to protect their own people.

**As you say, you have quite a lot of experience working in peacekeeping missions. What have you found to be the main challenge in these post-conflict situations?**

The main challenge, and the challenge that remains throughout, is to change the mentality and mindsets of local people who have become accustomed to conflict, to behaving in a way that puts their own interests above those of the country. One way of overcoming this is by strengthening democracy and the rule of law. This provides a framework which helps to govern societies by restraining the desire for power and self-interest. To maintain peace and stability until the democratic principles and norms of governance can take their roots. In Timor-Leste, where I served as Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for two years, I found it possible to identify, support and nurture leaders who place national interest about their own. Being able to incorporate universal values and norms into their local community, while preserving their traditional structure of governance and national identity, was key to building democratic governance. But putting these structures in place takes time. This is the real challenge.



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*"the challenge that remains throughout, is to change the mentality and mindset of people...."*  
Sukehiro Hasegawa

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