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Innovative approaches to peace and security from the Stanley Foundation

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United Nations Reform in Context

Summary

How should the effort to boost the United Nations' effectiveness be viewed: as a refinement of institutional machinery or a test of international cooperation? Since the United Nations is a creature of member states, it is as strong or weak as governments want it to be. It is a diplomatic forum and a channel for whatever actions are agreed.

The debate over updates for the 60-year-old body has highlighted the gap between 21st-century challenges (extreme poverty, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction) and the international responses that are clearly mismatched with the scale and urgency of the problems. The United Nations' high-level panel launched the reform debate by calling for "a new consensus," with nations committing to an inclusive agenda of challenges, shared approaches to those problems, and meaningful action.

The reforms prepared for the United Nations' September 2005 summit pointed the way forward for stronger action on human rights, economic development, terrorism, response to genocide, and UN management reform. These are merely first steps toward a United Nations where cooperative problem solving is more prevalent than interminable debate. But member states' presummit deadlock shows that the first steps must be taken to make further progress possible. Since world leaders endorsed the reforms in principle and set timelines for their adoption, negotiators at the United Nations have another chance to equip the world body to build a more secure world.

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What is needed today is nothing less than a new consensus between alliances that are frayed, between wealthy nations and poor, and among peoples mired in mistrust across an apparently widening cultural abyss. The essence of that consensus is simple: we all share responsibility for each other's security. And the test of that consensus will be action.

A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility
Secretary-General's High-level Panel on
Threats, Challenges and Change
December 2004

The current push for improvements to the United Nations was launched by a commission of distinguished statesmen and women, and to put this effort in proper perspective, it is worth revisiting their diagnosis of the international system. To begin with, the high-level panel's report was *not* a UN reform plan in the sense of tinkering with the world body's organizational chart, though some organizational steps are needed and proposed by the panel.

Indeed, the scope of the panel's mandate extended beyond the United Nations itself to the international order as a whole and the system's capacity to deliver security and prosperity. The group delved into what a collective security system worthy of the name would entail. What sort of enhancement and modernization

will be needed to more effectively combat 21st-century challenges such as extreme poverty and disease, terrorism, and the spread of the most deadly weapons?

This is not a technical question of organizational machinery. The high-level panel recognized, quite properly, that it is an essentially political matter. As the lines quoted above stress, the times demand that nations and their leaders make a fundamental commitment to cooperate in tackling today's urgent international problems.

It has become commonplace to point out the structural mismatch between today's threats and a United Nations designed after the Second World War. In the 21st century, what happens within a nation's borders is of international concern and cannot always be treated as an internal sovereign matter as it has been in past. And nations now share the global stage with nonstate actors, many of them as threatening to security as any sovereign state.

These shifts are real and call for significant adjustments, including many modifications that have arisen in the reform debate. Though much has changed in 60 years, one fact remains: states and their governments still hold the real power in this world and thereby hold the key to a more secure world.

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The United Nations' nature as a political body is the source of both its strength and weakness. The political leaders of the world are in the strongest position to mobilize resources and make a positive difference for the world's people. Yet it is also political leaders who often choose to focus on conflicts of perceived national interest rather than on equally compelling common security interests at the global level. The United Nations and its Charter call on leaders to use their collective political power for the highest ideals. Yet too often it is political gamesmanship in the United Nations—finger-pointing and point-scoring—that distracts from this vital work.

Judging the Push for Change

Even at its most idealistic, politics is by nature the art of the possible. It was never expected that the high-level panel's 101 recommendations would be adopted wholesale, nor that the "new consensus" sought by the panel would spring forth in full. As with any significant decision at the United Nations, all proposals for reform were put to the member states in the General Assembly for their consideration and negotiation.

So how should we judge the success or failure of the current push to strengthen the United Nations? The proper test is whether UN member states equip themselves with the decision mechanisms, norms, agendas, fundamental approaches, and implementation programs that will maximize their collective effort and impact on critical contemporary challenges. Given the political dysfunctions that bedevil the United Nations, the challenge will be for member states to maintain a steady focus on problems such as extreme poverty, terrorism, and dangerous weapons. In order to be meaningful, any proposal to update the United Nations must contribute to a new international consensus by combining member states into a unified front against each of today's urgent problems.

Policy Analysis Briefs are thought-provoking contributions to the public debate over peace and security issues.

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Political leaders face a basic choice regarding the United Nations' role and future: is the United Nations an instrument for cooperative problem solving or a debating society? With the failure to agree on proposed changes in time for the September 2005 summit meeting in New York, round one was awarded to the debaters. But the match was close enough that the fight goes on for another round. From human rights to terrorism, poverty reduction to post-conflict peacebuilding, response to genocide to management reform, the changes under discussion would bring greater international leverage to bear on each set of problems.

In the final days before the summit, ambassadors in New York agreed on placeholder statements that kept the proposals alive and set out timetables for their final agreement and implementation. As of the first weeks of 2006, negotiations were still roughly on track, particularly over a new Human Rights Council and management reforms, though with lingering differences and little momentum.

A Grand Bargain?

The UN renewal effort is sometimes portrayed as a grand political bargain—with developed and developing nations swapping support for each other's priorities. This depiction is in some respects true, and in others not.

Situations and threats of armed conflict have historically occupied a place of privilege on the UN agenda. The UN organ mandated to deal with such issues—the Security Council—effectively functions as a 15-nation executive committee, whose decisions can be binding on all governments. The relative attention devoted to “peace and security” issues (as they are called in the Security Council section of the UN Charter) has prompted resentment among nonindustrialized nations over the lack of priority for economic development.

It is only natural that priorities should vary for different countries. An African leader whose country is confronted with a high rate of HIV infection is unlikely to place the proliferation of nuclear weapons as his uppermost concern. In this sense, the push for change in how the entire range of issues is dealt with is a quid pro quo bargain. All countries are asked to lend support for matters that are relatively lower on their agendas and receive support from others in kind.

But to look at it this way glosses over the interconnections between these seemingly disparate problems—and between the nations who feel their impact in different proportions. In the end, an international consensus able to deliver results will emerge only if political leaders appreciate their shared stake in progress on all fronts.

The threats and dangers of today's world are Hydra-headed: attacking single heads will not get to the heart of the problem. For an example of how sources of insecurity can feed one another, we need look no further than Afghanistan, one of the most afflicted locations of our times.

Afghanistan's downward spiral began with its occupation and domination by the Soviet Union, provoking a civil war that was stoked as it served as a Cold War proxy battlefield. After the Soviet Union pulled out, a more local/regional war raged on. Years of devastation were compounded when the Taliban victors were consumed by fundamentalist obsessions that diverted them from normal government functions.

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Thus Afghanistan became a sanctuary and headquarters for Osama bin Laden's terror network. All the while, the economic standout of the country was (and is still to this day) the cultivation of poppies for the international narcotics trade.

So here it all is: war breeding chaos—which, in turn, leads to poverty, human rights abuse, and breakdown of the rule of law—thereby creating an opening for terrorists and other criminal and financial networks. (A very similar, and similarly tragic, sketch could be given for Sudan, though with genocidal mass atrocities and a different natural resource: oil.)

The question of Afghanistan's post-Taliban recovery and future prospects is a separate one. The point here is that 21st-century international security is *one unified agenda* and not a collection of distinct concerns where nations benefit only as their parochial priorities are met. In other words, what is lost in the idea of a "grand bargain" is *nations' demonstrable interest* in the priorities of others.

Given the interconnections of the various threats at play in Afghanistan alone, the surest path to security is an aggressive effort to reduce extreme poverty *and* terrorism *and* weapons of mass destruction. To quote a formulation that UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan often uses: "We will not enjoy development without security, we will not enjoy security without development, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights."

The high-level panel made this point with additional examples. They argued that in today's global economy, terrorist attacks in wealthy nations have serious repercussions in poorer nations. Citing World Bank research, the panel highlighted the estimated \$80 billion cost to the world economy as a result of the September 11 attacks, which was reckoned to push 10 million people into poverty. A nuclear terrorist attack on New York would incur much greater cost, and even lesser attacks could prompt the United States to retreat from a role of international leadership. Conversely, the panel said, "The security of the most affluent State can be held hostage to the ability of the poorest state to contain an emerging disease," as the SARS outbreak showed.

Elements of the Reform Package

The main elements of a reform package had emerged by early June 2005 when General Assembly President Jean Ping distributed the first draft of a statement for world leaders to adopt at the summit three months later. The agenda for the renewal and strengthening of the United Nations remained essentially the same through the summit and into early 2006, except for the total impasse over nuclear proliferation and disarmament. The outcomes sought by proponents of reform include: creation of a new Human Rights Council as well as a Peacebuilding Commission, commitment to a detailed development agenda, an enhanced counterterrorism effort, a new norm for international response to genocide, and reform of the United Nations' management structures.

In the spirit of the high-level panel each of these improvements would foster a broad consensus—establishing shared definitions of the problems, renewing political commitment, and pointing the way toward further action and follow-through.

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In institutional terms, they would also boost the credibility and relevance of the United Nations, which have undeniably sagged (though this problem has also been overdramatized by those who make UN-bashing a blood sport).

A New Human Rights Council

The proposal to replace the existing Commission on Human Rights with a new Human Rights Council is perhaps the centerpiece of the renewal effort, partly because it involves a major overhaul of human rights machinery (can one remember the last time a major intergovernmental body was scrapped?). But the importance of this move stems also from the serious credibility issues associated with the existing commission. UN Secretary-General Annan highlighted the problem in his reform report, *In Larger Freedom*:

States have sought membership on the Commission not to strengthen human rights but to protect themselves against criticism or criticize others. As a result, a credibility deficit has developed, which casts a shadow on the reputation of the United Nations system as a whole.

Both sides in the debate over the Commission on Human Rights say the problem is the “politicization” of the human rights process. The Bush administration sees it as scandalous that flagrant rights-abusing regimes such as Sudan and Zimbabwe are elected to the commission, and it is far from alone in this view. For the other side, the problem is the way the United States uses the commission to affirm its own moral authority and ostracize governments with which it has a beef, while deflecting pressure over abuses committed by allies such as Israel and Turkey.¹

The new Human Rights Council can be designed and set up to alleviate all of these problems and be more effective. Election procedures have been proposed to prevent rights-violating states from becoming members of the council. Election would be by a two-thirds supermajority of the General Assembly, and candidates would be voted on one at a time. Under the old system, the 54-member Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) would vote on entire slates put forward by regional caucuses.

To further promote competitive elections, proponents of the new body seek a requirement that these regional groupings nominate more candidates than the number of allotted seats. The new council is also supposed to have a system to review the human rights records of *all* countries on a regular rotation, beginning with council members, which is meant not only to level the playing field but also deter rights-abusers from seeking seats.

The pattern for meetings of the existing Commission on Human Rights has not been conducive to constructive discussions either. The commission meets once yearly for a frenzied six weeks—bickering continuously over resolutions, many of which single out particular countries for criticism. While some governments seek to fend off any and all outside pressure on human rights—regarding their sovereignty as absolute—it is certainly true that rights protections are often improved through quiet diplomacy rather than public condemnation. This is not to deny the importance of

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¹Supporters of Israel would counter that this country is subject to special attention and pressure in numerous other ways in the United Nations.

“naming and shaming,” especially for gross and systematic violations. But there must be a balance with more cooperative approaches, and a stronger Human Rights Council (along with a bolstering of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and her expert staff) will help strike that balance to bring about better protection for peoples worldwide.

Economic Development and Poverty Reduction

The original basis for the 2005 UN summit of world leaders was to refocus poverty reduction efforts five years after heads of state adopted the Millennium Declaration at a similar gathering. One-third of the 15-year time frame for achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has now elapsed, and with the disappointing results to date, the pace of development needs to be accelerated.

The United Nations is not the center of action on economic development. Its specialized agencies are active in development, but their role is dwarfed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the bilateral aid programs of individual donor nations, and ongoing Doha Round trade talks to improve market access. That said, the United Nations is an important locus of norm- and agenda-setting, the MDGs themselves being a good example.

The September summit Outcome Document filled this function. First of all, the space and detail devoted to the subject is in itself significant; the development section of the document filled 16 of its 35 pages. Given perceptions in developing countries that the UN agenda is skewed toward First World priorities such as terrorism and nonproliferation, this was important and reinforced the idea that development and security go hand in hand.

Substantively, the Outcome Document highlighted two norms for poverty-reduction efforts in the coming months and years: the importance of national plans for achieving the MDGs from recipient governments and 0.7 percent of GDP as a target aid level for donor nations. These complementary obligations echo the so-called “Monterrey Consensus” articulated at the United Nations’ 2002 conference on development financing. Working in partnership, developing nations are expected to spell out how their strategies for, say, broadening access to health care and education, and donor governments are supposed to provide the needed underwriting. An African ambassador told me during the summit that he was glad the United States acquiesced to inclusion of the 0.7 percent of GDP figure, though advocates of the 0.7 percent target would prefer to have the Bush administration commit itself to meeting that target rather than leaving it as a goal for everyone else.

Responding to Genocide

The section of the Outcome Document on protecting populations from genocide and crimes against humanity was one of the few hard-won successes of the summit. The heart of the issue is the willingness of UN member states to intervene with force when a government is complicit in mass violence against its people, either actively or passively.

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The document's language is wordy and far from elegant. It goes to lengths to make clear that intervention is a last resort. But taking a cue from the 2001 Evans-Sahnoun Commission, the leaders endorsed the "responsibility to protect" concept with a stronger statement than they have been willing to make in recent years:

We are prepared to take collective action, in a timely and decisive manner...should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.²

Of course, the summit statement is cold comfort to victims who are still being massacred and ethnically cleansed in Darfur, Sudan. Indeed, the true test of "never again" (or "not on my watch," as President Bush himself pledged) is the political will to act—a test failed in Bosnia, Rwanda, and now in Sudan. But if the most important debates over responding to genocide deal with specific places and perpetrators, they also take place against the backdrop of a broader debate over principles. For many countries—mostly either relatively weak internationally or with problematic human rights records—the purpose of the United Nations is to protect sovereign nations from outside interference in internal affairs.

These governments have two concerns—one valid, and one less so. We need only look at the post-invasion rationalization of the Iraq war, and the Bush administration's frequent references to Saddam Hussein's mass graves, to see how powerful countries can use humanitarian intervention as a pretext. Since Saddam's worst atrocities took place between 1989 and 1991, the 2003 invasion was punishment for past crimes rather than cessation of ongoing violence, which Human Rights Watch President Ken Roth criticized saying, " 'better late than never' is not a justification for humanitarian intervention."

Hopefully the UN summit statement will lay to rest one of the great red herrings of this debate: the idea that humanitarian intervention will be used in cases of less drastic human rights violations. The statement addresses this issue with the unwieldy though precise phrase: "responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity."³ Now that the statement is part of the UN record, the larger principles rather than the finer points of language will hopefully help shape future decisions about genocide.

Combating Terrorism

Given the wide range of countries subjected to terrorist attacks in recent years—Indonesia, Turkey, Kenya, India, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Tanzania, Jordan, the United Kingdom, the United States, Lebanon, Russia, Israel, Pakistan, Iraq—the international coalition to fight terrorism should be strong and broad. But while

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²In a September 18, 2005, column entitled "A Wimp on Genocide," *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof discussed American efforts to weaken the language. While some US officials during the negotiations said the document should describe a moral rather than legal obligation, American negotiators apparently worked to keep intervention from being described as obligatory in any way.

³The bipartisan commission on US interests in UN reform led by George Mitchell and Newt Gingrich actually recommends, contrary to this concern, that the words "massive and sustained human rights violations" be included in the responsibility to protect.

the United Nations has been the channel for a number of important counterterror initiatives, splits over terrorism continue to hamper the effort as the issue serves as a political battleground, particularly over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The reform effort confronted this problem head-on, but did not overcome it. The proposals drew on the United Nations' strength as a source of norms, goals, and intergovernmental coordination. In terms of norms, there are currently a dozen international treaties outlawing various acts and forms of terrorism. A comprehensive convention is under negotiation to consolidate these injunctions into a single authoritative covenant.

The stumbling block for such a treaty, though, is a lack of agreement over what constitutes and characterizes terrorism; in other words, a definition. The debate over how to define terrorism has been a proxy for the Israel-Palestine conflict for many years. The claim that deliberate attacks on civilians are justified in struggles of national liberation is a ritual of support for the Palestinian cause, together with the twin demand for provisions focusing on the actions of states (read Israel).

[A] more effective overall [strategy] to combat terrorism will...broaden the sense of ownership over the problem....

So even though the need to crack down on organizations that resort to terror should be obvious, the high-level panel and presummit negotiators' attempt to define terrorism was, against this backdrop, politically courageous. The drafts of the summit Outcome Document, right through to the penultimate draft, identified the characteristics of a terror attack and then said that these "constitute[d] an act of terrorism." Because of the resistance negotiators met, however, the document that leaders adopted at the summit reverted to a simple blanket condemnation of terrorism. The issue of a definition still must be resolved in order to reach agreement on a comprehensive convention, which world leaders promised to do during the current General Assembly session.

While the development of stronger norms will hinge on a precise definition of terrorism, a more effective overall drive to combat terrorism will need a well-conceived strategy. Not only will this be crucial in order to focus on the key pressure points of this complex phenomenon but also to broaden the sense of ownership over the problem, which is widely seen as an American rather than global priority. Indeed, just such a dynamic took place within the high-level panel during its examination of threats. A participant told *The New York Times* that:

[S]ome of the panel members had been in the habit of faulting the United States for exaggerating the threat of terror and seeking what they called "perfect security." But [the source] said the members had come to a sharp new appreciation of the menace of nuclear and chemical agents.⁴

Secretary-General Annan tabled his own proposed counterterror strategy in a March 2005 Madrid speech on the anniversary of the attack on commuter trains there. It consisted of five "Ds":

- Dissuading disaffected groups from resorting to terrorism in pursuit of their goals.
- Denying terrorists the means to attack.

⁴Warren Hoge, "Report Urges Big Changes for the UN," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2004.

- Deterring states from offering support.
- Developing states' prevention capacity.
- Defending human rights even while combating terrorism.

The UN committees and mechanisms in place to spur and support member state action against terror are currently being upgraded. With the numerous mandates directed at national governments, a participant in a 2004 Stanley Foundation conference on the United Nations highlighted the importance of travel by UN representatives to consult in capitals.

Management Reform

The United Nations' departments and agencies play a supporting role for the decisions made by member states. Some offices service the deliberations in the world body's various councils and committees. Others focus on executing the decisions that result—following through on member states' directives toward the desired real-world end results.

Recent scandals in the conduct of UN operations and administration have revealed serious weaknesses in its management, at a great cost to the organization's reputation. An independent investigation led by former US Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker detailed how Saddam Hussein was able to siphon nearly \$2 billion from the UN Oil-for-Food Program. Meanwhile numerous civilian and military personnel deployed in UN peacekeeping operations, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo, have been sexually exploiting local women and children.

These scandals show acute failures of discipline, financial control, and accountability on the part of UN staff and management. The current reform push includes steps to boost control and accountability. Among the first changes to be implemented: the creation of an ethics office, the new protections for whistleblowers, a panel of outside experts to support the United Nations' internal oversight office, and the adoption of more modern accounting standards.

But even though the failures and misdeeds of UN staff and management should not be taken lightly, they should not bear all of the criticism. As with everything at the United Nations, there is an element of member state culpability as well. The role of the United Nations' member governments in the scandals and mismanagement has received much less attention—in keeping with the consistent political pattern of scapegoating “the United Nations” for any number of failures. Any meaningful remedies for the United Nations' management woes, though, must confront the responsibility of member states.

With all of the attention focused on the United Nations' administration of the Oil-for-Food Program, it is easy to forget that it was an initiative of—and supervised by—the Security Council. To its credit, the independent Volcker panel spread the blame to both UN managers and the governments represented on the Security Council:

Neither the Security Council nor the Secretariat leadership was clearly in command. That turned out to be a recipe for the dilution of Secretariat authority and evasion of responsibility at all levels. When things went awry—and they surely did—when troublesome conflicts arose between

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political objectives and administrative effectiveness, decisions were delayed, bungled, or simply shunned.

For the sexual abuse scandals in peacekeeping operations, clearly the guilt falls on the individual abusers, as well as on their superiors for a failure of leadership. But member states play a part here, too, in terms of accountability. When perpetrators have been identified, too often they are quietly whisked home by their own national governments. The stealth with which any punishment is meted out is little comfort to the local victims or their governments and does not send a strong zero-tolerance message to the troops or the employees.

If the United Nations' management structures are weak and ossified, it is because member states want it that way. Even the smallest matters at the United Nations regularly draw the attention of diplomatic representatives who guard their ability to micromanage jealously. The body in the United Nations responsible for management is the Fifth Committee, which is actually a committee of the whole. In other words, Kofi Annan reports to a board of directors with 191 members. The current reform effort is trying to remedy this by commissioning, on very short timelines, studies to identify some of the rules, regulations, and mandates that serve no useful purpose, as well as those functions that need more resources.

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The Negotiations—What Happened?

While the secretary-general conceived and launched the reform initiative, negotiations over decisions for the September summit were led by General Assembly President Jean Ping, the foreign minister of Gabon. President Ping was supported by a diverse group of “facilitators,” the ambassadors to the United Nations from Australia, Bangladesh, Barbados, Ghana, the Netherlands, Panama, Slovenia, Thailand, Tunisia, and Ukraine. They in turn were divided into working groups focused on development, security, human rights, and institutional reform and were chaired by Dutch Ambassador Dirk Jan van den Berg.

The first draft of the summit Outcome Document was released on June 3, 2005. Drawing heavily on the report of the high-level panel, as well as Professor Jeffrey Sachs' Millennium Project report and the secretary-general's own March 2005 *In Larger Freedom* report, the draft document contained most of the elements described above. It also marked the point of departure for a round of intensive diplomatic discussions.

President Ping and the facilitators released two revised drafts of the document (on July 22 and August 5, 2005) before the frenzied and chaotic final weeks leading up to the summit.⁵ In between, the facilitators collected abundant input from other delegations, both in public debates and private consultations. But what was most striking about the drafts is that the major elements of the reform package—the Human Rights Council, the full development agenda with the aid level target, responsibility to protect against genocide, and a definition of terrorism—remained intact. As subsequent events would show, this was *not* because the package enjoyed universal support.

⁵The World Federalist Movement's <http://www.reformtheun.org> Web site is an exhaustive source of documents from the reform process.

The United States' Negotiating Tack

To have a world summit focused on boosting the effectiveness of the United Nations presented a special opportunity to make serious change. The very purpose of the summit was to build momentum by giving leaders the chance to announce something truly historic. Despite US Ambassador John Bolton's comment that UN reform is not a "one-night stand," there was never a pretense that the summit would be the final chapter of reform. There was, however, an assumption that the unavoidably difficult negotiations would be made easier under the pressure of an impending high-level gathering.

These plans began to unravel in mid-August when newly appointed US Ambassador Bolton put forward a version of the draft Outcome Document with hundreds of proposed changes. We cannot know for certain whether this move was the deciding factor that kept the reform package from being agreed at the summit, but it is worth examining the reasons given for the step and what it conveyed regarding the American approach to the process.

The United States' extensive proposed changes were presented as appropriate for a negotiation that was, from Bolton's perspective, far from concluded. Speaking to reporters on the eve of the summit, Ambassador Bolton described his proposed text as a gesture of transparency, laying out the American concerns for all to see. This was a proper negotiating approach because, "this is not a text that is dictated by nameless faceless text writers. It's a text ultimately that member governments are going to have to agree to."

What this description glosses over is the preceding months of debate on the draft Outcome Document, in which the United States participated actively. Indeed, one of the other justifications offered by the Bush administration contradicted this "we're-just-getting-going" spin. In the same presummit statement, Bolton said the United States had been submitting detailed proposed revisions "for months before I arrived." And while the phrase "nameless, faceless text writers" conjures images of UN staff members running amok, it hardly seems an apt description of ten ambassadors representing countries from all regions of the world.

But there is a supreme irony here—the package of changes for which President Ping and the facilitators were trying to build momentum contained numerous measures that the United States supposedly favored, and the ruckus that followed Bolton's marked-up, mid-August draft took the greatest toll on those. Not only were some of the US positions difficult to understand on their merits, but as a negotiating strategy they fed a destructive dynamic. For instance, the revisions sought by Ambassador Bolton famously called for the deletion of all references to the MDGs. Yet these were a centerpiece of the United Nations' 2002 Monterrey Conference on Development at which President Bush announced his increased commitment to reduce poverty.

The so-called "Monterrey Consensus" also stressed the mutual responsibility of donor *and* recipient governments, and Bolton's supposed substantive concern was a perceived imbalance in the development section of the Outcome Document. Yet beyond some very fussy wordsmithing, it is hard to point to any onerous obligations on the United States (aside perhaps from the 0.7 percent GDP target, on which

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Washington acquiesced)—certainly none worth jeopardizing the Human Rights Council, terror definition, and management reforms. The futility of all this was highlighted when President Bush addressed his fellow leaders at the summit and felt compelled to devote most of his speech to development, declaring: “To spread a vision of hope, the United States is determined to help nations that are struggling with poverty. We are committed to the Millennium Development Goals.”

This brings us back to the concept of a political “grand bargain” and the question of its validity. Instead of assuaging developing countries’ valid fears by showing a shared concern for the importance of development, the Bush administration’s proposals reinforced the “widening cultural abyss” described by the high-level panel. Given the chance to build a positive-sum consensus to tackle all threats, they instead took a zero-sum approach and insisted on minor pet points while the opportunity to enact significant changes slipped away.

In doing so, the Bush administration reinforced the dysfunctional political culture so prevalent at the United Nations. The August proposal signaled that everything—every word, proposed action, and working assumption—was still up for grabs. This was fine with other governments that were resistant to the reform package.

The fundamental choice regarding the United Nations is whether it should be an effective vehicle for action or a debating society.

The Other Spoilers

The United States was hardly the sole source of friction in the presummit negotiations. If the measures contained in the draft Outcome Document enjoyed overwhelming support, they perhaps would have been approved despite American quibbles. But there were several member states that took every opportunity to raise objections and bog down the talks. Washington’s stance made their work much easier.

As discussed above, the fundamental choice regarding the United Nations is whether it should be an effective vehicle for action or a debating society. There are member states for which the prospect of stronger action through the United Nations is viewed as a threat. The United Nations is a place where it is much easier to block action than to take action, and several delegations worked to keep it that way. The most frequently mentioned were Algeria, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, India, Iran, Jamaica, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, and Venezuela.

Obstructionists often couch their positions as “national interests” (just as the Bush administration itself does at times). For countries that are the direct targets of international pressure (for instance, on human rights), some regimes’ interests are understandable, if not legitimate. For other governments, however, the objective is to force greater attention to their minority views. But if in the meantime, nuclear weapons, AIDS, and instability continue to spread, this approach will be exposed as extremely shortsighted.

Too Ambitious?

The September summit agenda included the most extensive set of improvements in UN history. Was it unrealistic to expect so much change to be undertaken all at once? As an analytical matter, the question is whether the vulnerability of the reform push was structural (more organizational change than the system could bear) or political (i.e., a function of freely made decisions). Ultimately, any claim

that the reforms were doomed from the start overstates the scale of change being proposed. The reforms are significant, but hardly radical or unrealistic.

The question can actually be put in a very concrete way: should it have been possible to garner support and momentum for the facilitators' draft document so that it stayed on track? Are the reform proposals reasonable enough—appealing to widely held interests—that they could be adopted by enough UN member states? Yes, and yes.

What the presummit reform push needed was for proponents of more effective multilateralism, particularly the Bush administration, to recognize the package for the very good deal it was and negotiate constructively for its adoption. The diplomatic dynamic needed to be shifted from interminable wrangling to coalition-building. From the United States' vantage, it should have been possible to accommodate the concerns of others while preserving those essentials important to the United States.

The glaring exception in terms of feasibility was the proposal to realign the composition of the Security Council. The political complexity of this issue is an order of magnitude (or two) beyond the others. It is hard to see how the debate over seats at the council table can be kept from playing out as a purely political test of power and influence. That said, it would also have been very difficult to quash discussion of a question that is so prominent for countries who view the United Nations as the tool of a few powerful countries.

The Security Council reform debate in 2005 was largely run in parallel with the other issues rather than being part of the same negotiation. Nonetheless it diverted the attention and energy of important countries and deepened the sense of grievance for frustrated aspirants such as Japan, Germany, India, and Brazil.

But if the package of reforms was not adopted at the September summit, neither was it rejected. The document adopted by world leaders contained agreement in principle on the reforms, with timelines for implementation (mostly within the following year). The summit mood was a mixture of determination to press forward and inevitable disappointment.

Secretary-General Annan was strikingly direct in his comments. He noted that the Outcome Document was silent on the problems of disarmament and proliferation (no language could be agreed upon) and called it “a real disgrace.” He also gave an apt overall summary of the process:

There were governments that were not willing to make the concessions necessary. There were spoilers also in the group; let's be quite honest about that...I must say that during this process in the last couple of weeks I think some delegations focused on the trees and missed the forest.

Annan's reference to spoilers raises the one strategic choice that significantly hobbled the negotiation—the commitment to have a consensus document for the summit that all 191 member states would endorse. With such a process, obviously obstructionists' impact is magnified by their ability to block consensus, and the

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gravitational pull is toward the lowest common denominator. So while the high-level summit of leaders gave the process political salience, it also pushed the organizers to maintain the United Nations' veneer of gentility, at a cost to the reforms. It should be noted, though, that the decisions post-summit are not bound by consensus; reform proponents are reserving the option to put the questions to a vote in the General Assembly.

It now falls to former Swedish Foreign Secretary Jan Eliasson, the current General Assembly President, to help push the reforms through the new General Assembly session, as the summit promised. While he is holding fuller scale debates and negotiations than last year, the timelines are still quite tight. The first success, in December 2005, of establishing the new Peacebuilding Commission to support post-conflict reconstruction was seen as crucial for preserving momentum. At this writing, intensive (and hopefully conclusive) discussion of the proposed Human Rights Council is due to begin.

The Fate of the United Nations

It is sometimes said of democracy that the people get the government they deserve. Likewise, in intergovernmental organizations, world leaders get the United Nations they deserve. The essence of the debate over the United Nations' future has been to ask political leaders very directly what kind of United Nations they want. But whatever their answer, the United Nations is not likely to join the League of Nations in history's dustbin—not any time soon.

The United Nations works best when nations unite. For all of its difficulties, it is remarkable what can be accomplished through the United Nations when governments close ranks behind it: keeping pressure on Syria over Lebanon, immunizing children and helping get them into school, inspecting nuclear programs, caring for millions of refugees, reversing Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The simple fact is that the world community *needs* a vehicle for actions on which they can agree, and as the only body with universal membership, the United Nations is irreplaceable.

Of course, many Western analysts and politicians alike are frustrated by the existing system of caucuses in the General Assembly, which often drag many debates toward the lowest common denominator. In response to this frustration, there are increasing calls by pundits, opinion-makers, and officials to bypass the United Nations entirely and construct a different global coalition for action that would be particularly centered on a community of Western democracies or other like-minded states.

It is fanciful to hope that a community of democracies can be built as an alternative to the United Nations. Greater political cooperation among democratic regimes would certainly be a valuable boost to collective action on the entire range of security problems. But currently, the European Union and NATO countries of Western Europe—arguably, the most central examples of “the democratic West” during the Cold War—are mired in their own disagreements over the future of their Union, not to mention their severe transatlantic divisions with the United States. Hence this is hardly the time for Americans to be threatening to take their business else-

...the fate of the United Nations is not just about the fate of an institution; it is actually about the fate of global and US security in general.

where. Recent American exceptionalism has badly eroded the international image of the United States as a beacon of high ideals and the greater good. It also directly undercuts the United States' ability to win support in the world body. To pick just one example: if the charter of a new world body were being negotiated today, who really thinks the United States would be given veto power?

The important point for leaders to realize is quite simple: the fate of the United Nations is not just about the fate of an institution; it is actually about the fate of global and US security in general. The United Nations is ultimately an expression of the realization by all member states that they cannot secure their own nation without attending to the security priorities of others, and that national security and global security are largely one and the same in today's interdependent world.

Thus the United Nations does not need to justify its existence; it bears no burden of proof. In a very narrow sense, this agrees with the famous Bolton quote that "there is no such thing as the United Nations," with an emphasis on the word *thing*. The idea of the United Nations as an independent entity is a convenient fiction of international politics—convenient because governments and politicians regularly use the United Nations as a scapegoat for international discord and inaction. All of the emblematic "failures" of the United Nations—the Rwandan, Bosnian, and Sudanese genocides and the weakening of pressure on Saddam Hussein—have been failures of powerful countries to pull themselves together.

UN reform is a test of international cooperation in the face of serious threats such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and extreme poverty. Whatever the shortcomings of the United Nations, there is now a serious discussion about how to make it stronger and more effective. The United Nations' member nations have an opportunity to better equip themselves for action. The choice is theirs, but they can no longer pretend that the problem is in the mechanism.

The changes being negotiated are nothing more than important first steps, important mainly to pave the way for further improvements. The underlying geology has to do with commitment. What the high-level panel called for was a new international politics of seriousness about common problems and threats. Interdependence is not merely a trend or feature of the contemporary world. It is a reality of peace and prosperity much more than it was 60 years ago at the United Nations' founding. Unless leaders adapt to this reality and resolve perceived differences in favor of concrete mutual interests, the high-level panel predicted that:

Self-help will rule, mistrust will predominate and cooperation for long-term mutual gain will elude us.

Let's hope not. ■

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