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No Early Retirement

At 63, the United Nations is imperative in the 21st century too

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Critics of the United Nations are hasty to argue that it is outdated and fundamentally ill-equipped to handle the security and humanitarian needs of an increasingly complex world. On the contrary, while the United Nations is undoubtedly in need of reform, it is still an effective force for improving the lives of millions.

“The primary, the fundamental, the essential purpose of the United Nations is to keep peace. Everything which does not further that goal, either directly or indirectly, is at best superfluous.” This is how Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., the US ambassador to the United Nations, summarized the role of the world organization in 1958. Some 30 years later another ambassador expressed a different view: “In the developing countries the United Nations...means environmental sanitation, agricultural production, telecommunications, the fight against illiteracy, the great struggle against poverty, ignorance and disease,” remarked Ecuador’s UN Ambassador, Miguel Albornoz, in 1985.

These two citations sum up the basic dilemma of the United Nations. It has always been burdened by high expectations: to keep peace, fix economic injustice, improve educational standards, and combat epidemics and pandemics. But inflated hopes have been tempered by harsh realities. There may not have been a World War III but neither has there been a day’s worth of peace on this quarrelsome globe since 1945. Despite all the efforts of the various UN agencies (such as the UN Development Program) and related organizations (like the World Bank), there exists a “bottom billion” that survives on less than one dollar a day. The average lifespan in some countries barely exceeds thirty. In 2008, 774 million adults around the world lacked basic literacy skills.

Given such a seemingly dismal record, it is worth asking whether the United Nations has outlived its usefulness. After all, the organization turned 63 in October 2008, an age when many in the industrialized world opt for early retirement. Has the United Nations not had enough of a chance to keep peace and fix the world’s problems? Is not the obvious conclusion that the organization is a failure and the sooner it is scrapped the better?

The answer is no. The United Nations may not have made the world a perfect place—but it has improved it immensely. The United Nations provides no definite guarantees of peace but it has been—and remains—instrumental in pacifying conflicts and enabling mediation between adversaries. Its humanitarian work is indispensable and saves lives every day. Its work does prevent the world from reaching the gates of hell. The real question is how the United Nations can perform better in addressing the many tasks—from safeguarding international security to improving living conditions—in today’s global landscape.

Challenges Abound

The United Nations is plagued with difficulties. It is structurally flawed and operationally cumbersome. Its different programs often duplicate work that might be better done by one centralized agency. Moreover, its funding base is chronically insecure. Indeed, if the United Nations is to have a meaningful future it is in need of both reform and steadfast support from the countries—such as the United States and members of the European Union—that can afford to pay its bills.

The current crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo is but another reminder of how peace is still lacking in many parts of the world, how massive refugee crises can spring up suddenly and throw entire regions into turmoil, and how earlier crises—like Rwanda in the 1990s—have consequences far into the future. At the same time, the political will of a number of rich countries to support the United Nations has been called into question by the global economic and financial crisis. This makes reform and increased efficiency even more important: in the near future the United Nations may have to operate with a diminished budget.

Since the early 1990s there has been talk about the need to reform the UN Security Council in order to make it more democratic and representative. Nor was it an accident that the last decade of the 20th century saw a litany of initiatives and “agendas” that addressed the key functions of the UN system: peace, democracy (and human rights), and development. In the 20th century hardly a day went by without arguments over how development aid is administered, or statements that human rights are not effectively promoted and peace operations are not producing sustained results. A few countries, most notably the United States, treat the United Nations as a mere tool of their own policies that can be used, abused, or ignored.

Front and center of the reform agenda has been the role and composition of the Security Council. Given their veto power, the five permanent members (P-5)—China, France, Great Britain, Russia, and the United States—have a stranglehold on the decision-making powers of the Council. They are unlikely to give up their special privilege, despite the fact that it reflects the global constellation of power in 1945; Germany, Japan, Brazil, India, and a few others clearly play an equally significant role in the world of 2009 as France or Great Britain. But is reform likely? Not anytime soon.

The good news is that the debate about the Security Council is less significant than it may first appear. Reforming the veto power and who has it would provide no miracle cure to the Council’s ineffectiveness. Already, Security Council resolutions tend to be negotiated compromise solutions. The veto has been rarely used because the need for employing it has usually been haggled away prior to any vote; if it has been impossible to do so—as in the case of the US effort to have the Council back its intervention in Iraq in 2003—the resolution has simply been withdrawn before a vote. (Equally importantly, although the veto may represent the biggest “democratic deficit” within the UN system, it also amounts to a guarantee that the United Nations will not suffer the fate of the League of Nations. That is, the P-5 are unlikely to simply walk out of the United Nations should a resolution be passed that contradicted their national interests.)

In fact, reforming the United Nations in the 21st century should not begin with the virtually hopeless effort of revamping the Security Council. Rather, the focus should be on areas where the United Nations does important work every day. Three specific areas—peace operations, development assistance, and human rights—should be at the forefront of a modest but more pragmatic agenda.

Reform 1: Peace and Security

The major international security concerns of the 21st century include state collapse, climate change, international terrorism, and the rapid spread of infectious disease. What matters in this context is not the composition of the Security Council but the performance of the UN field operations; such as the 110,000 “blue-helmets” stationed in various trouble spots around the globe. Yet as the current crisis in Congo reminds us, the peacekeepers often face insurmountable odds.

So how could the United Nations make the most of a limited number of troops in difficult situations? How to make sure that a peace operation makes a positive contribution rather than creates new problems? How to prevent a repeat of the tragic events in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia in the 1990s, or in Darfur and Congo in the new millennium? These and other questions were addressed in the 2000 Brahimi Report on Peacekeeping. The report emphasized the need for more resources, clear and realistic mandates, and general strategic planning of operations. The report itself provided the backdrop for the creation of the UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2006. Almost a decade later, reform along the lines of the Brahimi Report remains limited. To be sure, there are more peacekeepers in more places funded by slightly more money. But UN peace operations rarely benefit from an integrated support network. Equally important, they lack resources and depend, most of the time, on the ability of the Secretary General to raise money for a specific operation.

Whether such tragedies as Darfur could have been avoided with a more intrusive and aggressive UN policy is difficult to ascertain. In the end, when contemplating the lessons of past peacekeeping and how to make future operations more effective, one comes back to another key pragmatic point in the Brahimi report: the need for a rapid deployment capacity. How else but with an ability to send peacekeepers to different corners of the globe at short notice can the United Nations respond to a sudden crisis? Without such capacity it will always be rendered a second-class outfit called upon to police difficult situations or clean up the mess left by “serious” fighting.

Depending on one’s perspective such a plan might seem either utopian or dangerous. But it may also be necessary if the United Nations is to claim the role entrusted upon it by its creators. Otherwise, it is likely that conflicts will fester in a never-ending cycle of violence that has been so evident in countries like Afghanistan and Congo.

Reform 2: Development Aid

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 constituted the first common global agenda for human development. It was much overdue and received an enthusiastic welcome. This was no surprise, as who could seriously challenge the desirability of fighting global poverty? But obstacles remain. Despite decades of development aid, masses of people continue to live in abject poverty. This undermines even the most sophisticated argument in favor of sustained development assistance. Moreover, the manner in which aid is delivered raises the indispensable need for reform. Perhaps because of the complexity of the problem, the effort to combat it has become increasingly fragmented, with the World Bank and the UNDP representing only two of the many organizations involved in administering development assistance. Duplication and overlap have become endemic and have reduced effectiveness.

To fix this problem, previous Secretary General Kofi Annan created a new agency, the UN Development Group (UNDG) in 1997. The UNDG has encouraged the harmonization of UN development activities nationally and globally. A decade later, in November 2006, a high-

level panel report entitled *Delivering as One* went even further, characterizing UN development assistance as “fragmented and weak.” It called for a well-governed, well-funded, and flexible UN development apparatus. The report emphasized nation-level planning and execution. In sum, the report proposed consolidating most UN country activities under one strategic program, one budgetary framework, one strong country team leader, and one office.

This type of clear cut revamping might well augur good for the future except for one important fact: the world is facing the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. Against the backdrop of rapidly rising unemployment and a fractured financial system, the political will to devote resources for development aid is rapidly evaporating. A bad omen of what may be in store is the fact that US President Barack Obama has recently started backtracking on his campaign promise to double US development aid (to 50 billion dollars) by 2012. The potential shortfall in cash, however, only adds to the pressing need to reform UN development practices. Otherwise, the number of people around the globe who continue to exist on less than a dollar a day—estimated at one billion in 2008—may need to be revised significantly upwards.

Reform 3: Human Rights

Like everything on the United Nations’ agenda, the struggle to advance human rights has been an uphill one. Yet, as the UN website itself proudly proclaims: “One of the great achievements of the United Nations is the creation of a comprehensive body of human rights law, which, for the first time in history, provides us with a universal and internationally protected code of human rights, one to which all nations can subscribe and to which all people can aspire.” Indeed. Who could doubt the desirability of having a set of broadly approved texts that “lay down the law” on human rights? The problem is how it can be implemented. As daily evidence—torture, denial of basic political rights, abject poverty of people—clearly indicates, more awareness does not equal practical progress.

The problems do not stem from the lack of appropriate bodies. If anything, there are too many of them: the Human Rights Council, the Commission on Human Rights, the Human Rights Committee, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Committee against Torture are a few examples. The essential predicament goes back to the 1940s. The UN Charter reflected the inherent tension between universalism and national prerogatives. In today’s globalized world that tension has hardly disappeared. The United Nations may have created a detailed body of international human rights legislation. Along the way it has produced bodies that can observe and authoritatively report whether these norms are being adhered to in country X or region Y. But it has left the implementation of these norms largely to the nation states.

The recipe is simple but improbable. We need a recognized body—like the International Criminal Court (ICC)—to truly stand above the specific interests of nation states. So far this has been possible only in rare cases when a leader, such as Liberia’s former president Charles Taylor, has lost both his domestic power base and international patrons. But to imagine that nationals of large countries—most obviously those from the P-5—will ever stand trial at The Hague is difficult.

To put it bluntly: Barack Obama is no more likely than George W. Bush to risk having American citizens dragged into a courtroom in the Netherlands. And as long as Americans “opt out,” many others will assume their right to do the same. When it comes down to human rights violations, universality may be the norm but it is unlikely to become the practice.

More Indispensable Than Ever

The United Nations remains an indispensable part of the global community. If it suddenly disappeared, millions of people around the world would soon be worse off, and thousands would lose their lives. That, alone, is a sufficient cause for upholding and supporting the United Nations. Yet, in gauging the significance of the United Nations and the possibilities for improving it a few salient points should be kept in mind.

First, in its present form the United Nations cannot safeguard peace everywhere on the globe. As long as the concept of nation state is the basic form of organizing the different entities we know as countries, and national governments are responsible for the well-being (or lack thereof) of their citizens, the United Nations will lack the means of acting independently. It remains, in other words, a *tool* of its member states; albeit in a world where the threats to security tend to emanate not from nations but rather from either within them or from various transnational groups.

Second, in its more than sixty years of existence, the United Nations has developed structures that in some ways are its own worst enemy. The United Nations is a place where individuals build careers, compete with each other, establish entrenched positions, and resist change. The United Nations has a tendency not to reform but to build new structures atop existing ones. As a result, meager resources are often squandered. The United Nations is a long way from being able to “deliver as one.”

Third, the United Nations cannot continue to have a positive impact without a sufficient support base. This lays a primary responsibility for funding the organization on the wealthier countries of the globe. One of the greatest future challenges will be for the richest member states—particularly, but not exclusively, the United States and the countries of the European Union—to explain to their citizens why a proportion, however small, of their national income should be used to fund the numerous UN operations. But, and this may be the crucial point, without the support of China, Russia, and a number of other countries that have traditionally not been major contributors to the UN budget, the United Nations will be unable to successfully meet the tasks facing it in 2009 and beyond.

In the end, the United Nations should not be expected to offer solutions to all of the world's ills. Its humanitarian work is essential and the United Nations often provides ways of easing tension and solving crises. It often enables people stuck in poverty to improve their lot. The United Nations is hardly perfect. But it remains an indispensable organization even as its behavior and effectiveness—much like that of individual countries—is in constant need of improvement. As Henry Cabot Lodge put it in the 1950s: “This organization was not created to take you to heaven. It was created to prevent you from going to hell.”

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