

***THE UNITED NATIONS
AND THE CRISIS OF MULTILATERALISM***

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The organizers of this conference have remarkable foresight! Just this week UN Secretary General Kofi Annan announced the formation of a 16-member panel of senior statesmen from around the world to advise him on UN reform. In setting up this panel, the Secretary General said that the international community has reached “a fork in the road” that may be “no less decisive than 1945 itself when the United Nations was founded.” He continued with this blunt appraisal:

This past year has shaken the foundations of collective security, and undermined confidence in the possibility of collective responses to our common problems. The aim of this high-level panel is to recommend clear and practical measures for ensuring effective collective action.

If you are familiar with the public utterances of UN Secretaries General, you know that this is a long way from their usual careful way of speaking. So we meet at an extraordinary time – for the United Nations and for the larger international community. And I thank you for inviting me to join you! I’m told there are nearly 1,000 of you from 50 colleges and universities in the audience, so between us we should be able to come up with some ideas of our own for UN reform.

Let’s start with a basic observation. The United Nations does not exist in a vacuum; its problems are a reflection of the international environment in which it operates.

The UN is in crisis because we are in a period of profound flux in world affairs, which I would attribute to three key factors. *First*, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union had a profound effect on the international system. Because the Cold War ended peacefully, we may not have appreciated just how profound a change this represented. It obviously had an enormous effect on the countries of the former Soviet bloc. But it also had a powerful effect on the Western alliance system, which no longer had a common enemy or sense of common purpose.

Second, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 affected us singularly. Our friends and allies offered sympathy and support, of course, but they did not and do not feel the same sense of urgency that we do, so the international consensus of the previous era has eroded.

Third, the breakdown of consensus over Iraq left the United Nations and the international system profoundly shaken. Never before have the Western allies failed to agree on such a fundamental issue of international security. So the crisis in the UN system is also a *crisis of multilateralism*.

One element of this crisis has to do with what we might call the problem of American power. Other countries have tended to see the UN (and other institutions of the multilateral system) as a means of constraining U.S. power through a system of rules and norms. And the United States for the most part has accepted these constraints willingly because we, too, have a strong interest in those rules and norms. Indeed, for most of the last century, we have been the greatest champions of a rule-based international order. This has been the tacit bargain: we accept constraints on our freedom of action, and in return we derive benefits from a rule-based order that we have had the greatest influence in shaping.

The breakdown of consensus over Iraq called that bargain into question. Some say the United States caused this crisis by acting without UN mandate in Iraq. But there is another way of looking at this. Our Government *also* saw this episode as a failure of multilateralism – the failure of other states to join us in enforcing the UN's mandate in Iraq – a mandate repeated in 16 separate Security Council resolutions over more than a decade. Those who opposed the war but support the UN need to ask themselves: How can one support the UN without upholding its principles – and enforcing them when necessary?

This is the tension between principle and power, and it is something that those of us in public life grapple with all the time. Principle without resolve can be empty posturing or abstract political correctness; power without principle is the law of the jungle that demeans and ultimately destroys us all, weak and strong alike.

Power and Principle in the UN Charter

This tension between power and principle – or between Realism and Idealism, if you like – has been with the United Nations since its founding. It is not just a *characteristic* of the UN: it is the *primary dynamic* which has enabled the organization to evolve and adapt over time. It is the confusing mix of backroom deals and lofty rhetoric in the pursuit of self-interest and high ideals. We see it in the United Nations all the time, and I expect that most of you will experience it here over the next few days.

The UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 are expressions of true idealism. They affirm the ideals of human rights, freedom, peace, education, health, and livelihood – in terms more sweeping than our own Bill of Rights. The fundamental goals delineated in the Charter (Article 1: Purposes and Principles) include some of the most audaciously hopeful language in all of human history:

- “to maintain international peace and security”
- “to develop friendly relations among nations”
- “to solve international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character”
- “to be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of common ends”

At the same time, the Charter reflected the power realities of the day. It carefully granted veto power to the United States along with its World War II allies – Britain, France, and the Soviet Union – with China thrown in for good measure. Some issues were reserved for the Security Council and these five permanent members rather than for the General Assembly. So an organization based on the “sovereign equality of nations” affirmed from the outset that some nations are more equal than others.

In constructing the UN system this way, the framers were drawing lessons from Versailles and the failure of the League of Nations. (And the League's failure, in my view, was not only – or primarily – due to the United States Senate's failure to ratify; the League's core problem was that it was never rooted in the realities of power.) As a political matter, President Roosevelt saw the UN as a means of extending cooperation among the four wartime allies – he saw them as the “Four Horsemen” – into the *post*-war order – and a mechanism for keeping the U.S engaged internationally.

The UN and the Cold War

The new United Nations organization jumped immediately into some of hottest conflicts of the day in Korea, the Middle East, and the Congo. With active U.S. leadership in advancing the principle of “self-determination,” the UN played a key role in de-colonization, welcoming into the international community a host of former European colonies, mainly in Africa, as newly independent states. And it did heroic work in settling hundreds of thousands of European refugees in the aftermath of the war, earning the UN one of its eight Nobel Peace Prizes.

But the deepening of Cold War hostilities made it impossible for the new organization to fulfill its core function of preserving peace and security. The Soviet Union and China used their veto power to effectively block collective action. Meanwhile, the principle of equality of states allowed some, particularly in the Non-Aligned Movement, to dominate the General Assembly – and often reduce it to a forum for anti-Israeli diatribe.

The end of the Cold War in 1990-91 opened up new possibilities for collective action. The ability of the United States to enlist Soviet support in condemning the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait led the first President Bush to advance the vision of a “new world order,” in which the United Nations could function as its framers intended. Indeed the Gulf War of 1991 was only the second time in its history (the Korean War being the first) that the United Nations actually authorized and organized coalitions of the willing to enforce its mandate. There was also a hopeful surge of more elaborate norms of human rights and international behavior, spurred by the spread of democracy across the former Communist world.

But the end of the Cold War also thawed out historical problems that had been frozen over for decades. The disintegration of Yugoslavia and of the

Soviet Union itself were followed by a spate of ethnic conflicts in Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Timor, and elsewhere, overwhelming the capacity of UN peacekeeping operations. From an average of around 10,000 peacekeeping troops throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the number of UN peacekeepers had risen to nearly 80,000 by the mid-'90s. And the character of peacekeeping had grown much harder: whereas before the UN had been called in to *keep* peace between two parties who wanted it preserved (as in Cyprus and the Sinai), the UN was now brought in to *make* peace between warring factions that were not yet committed to reconciliation (as in Bosnia and Rwanda).

The UN – and for that matter, the international community – was similarly unable to meet the challenge posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the growing threat of international terrorism. Although the UN has taken some helpful steps in the fight against terrorism, it was left largely on the sidelines as the United States led coalitions first against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and then to depose Saddam Hussein in Iraq.

Reforming the United Nations

This brings us to the present crisis of multilateralism to which I referred at the outset. There is no doubt that the UN system has been profoundly shaken by the breakdown of international consensus over Iraq. The one thing to which nearly everyone might agree is that the UN system is broken, which is why the Secretary General has stepped forward with his dramatic challenge. Without trying to predict where Kofi Annan's call for "radical reform" will come out, or what conclusions his high-level panel might reach, let me highlight some of the key issues.

Security Council reform. The Security Council reflects the international conditions of 1945. Its five permanent members do not represent the real distribution of power and influence in the world (if indeed they ever did), and the 10 rotating members are often small and unrepresentative, with the result that a new tier of major countries is excluded. The Secretary General has mentioned specifically Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, India, and Indonesia, and others could be added to the list.

Is it actually possible for the UN to agree on a new line-up of members for the Security Council, as politically controversial as that would be? Without trying to place a bet, let me just note that this is part of the larger challenge

of taking an international order that was built for the world of the mid-20th century and refashioning it for a new and very different era. I am referring here not just to the UN but also to NATO, the IMF and World Bank, and other institutions.

UNGA reform. Reforming the General Assembly might be even harder. With the explosion of new states, the number of countries represented is now nearly 200. The sheer size of the body, coupled with the principle of “sovereign equality of states,” gives every state, no matter how small or despotic, the ability to stifle action. And this exaltation of the state as the sole unit of international political life means that other expressions of world affairs – business, foundations, educational institutions, international civil society, etc. – are excluded. These are phenomena of our modern world, and they need to be brought into the UNGA debate. Kofi Annan has also suggested that the General Assembly refer more issues to the specialized committees, where they might actually get acted upon, and to develop new rules that rely less on consensus (whereby a single state can prevent action by the others) and more on majority voting.

Peacekeeping. The crisis in UN peacekeeping to which I referred earlier led the Secretary General to commission a major study on UN Peacekeeping Operations by a panel of experts under the chairmanship of Ambassador Lakhdar Brahimi of Algeria. Issued in August 2000, the Brahimi Report concluded that the UN should never again take on peacekeeping missions without a viable operational environment, adequate funding, and strong backing from the Security Council members. Some have proposed a standing UN peacekeeping force, but it is highly unlikely that the United States or other Security Council members would ever agree to this. A more viable and flexible approach would be to call on regional organizations like NATO to take on peacekeeping responsibilities under UN mandate, as is the case with the Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia.

Collective legitimization. The UN’s function in authorizing or legitimating the use of force obviously has been weakened by the failure to reach agreement on Iraq. Of course, most of the instances in which force has been used since the UN’s founding were *not* sanctioned by the UN, and that did not necessarily make them illegitimate. For example, the international community could not have rescued Kosovo from Serbian aggression in 1999 through the UN, because Russia would have vetoed, so we acted under NATO mandate instead. But it is worth noting that in both cases – Kosovo

and Iraq – the United States and its coalition partners went back to the UN for *post-facto* legitimization. It is critically important – and indeed a key tenet of just war doctrine – that force be used with legitimate authority. And although there are other sources of legitimacy, the UN is uniquely placed to confer collective, multilateral authority.

Conclusion

So whether you line up Left, Right, or Center in your politics, the crisis of multilateralism needs to be taken seriously. The world may be militarily unipolar, with no country or group of countries capable of rivaling U.S. military power, but we live in a globalized economy and an interdependent world. The most critical issues affecting our security and well being – terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, trade, cultural interaction, and many others – can *only* be addressed in concert with other countries.

Ideas for UN reform have been debated for years without progress. But there is reason to believe that the prospects for action are better this time. For one thing, the Secretary General has put his personal authority behind the effort and has appointed a high-level panel whose findings will be hard to ignore. And UN member states themselves are feeling a greater sense of urgency regarding the UN's future.

As the debate takes shape, we should not demand or expect too much of the UN, which after all is but a reflection of the larger realities of international politics. But reform of the UN is *part* of the answer. It was little more than a decade ago that the *other* President Bush saw the UN, freed from the constraints of the Cold War, as contributing to a “new world order.” Let's not give up on that ideal just yet, but let's pursue it with a sense of realism.

Perhaps this conference can show the way. Good luck with it!

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