

WHY THE U.S. NEEDS THE U.N. MORE THAN EVER

BY JEFFREY D. SACHS

It's often said that the U.N. failed in recent years, most notably over the war in Iraq. Yet, what really failed was unilateralist U.S. foreign policy. The Bush Administration's decision to launch a war without the backing of the U.N. Security Council – indeed with the clear international message that the case for war had not been made – weakened the U.N. in the short term, but bolstered the case for the U.N. in the longer term. The real defeat, and hopefully a lasting one, has been to the Bush Administration's unilateralist reveries, which were always divorced from global realities.

The standing of the U.S. in the world has been damaged by this unilateralism, and so too has the reputation of the U.N., at least in the short term. The damage has been amplified by the Oil-for-Food scandal. Yet even in the context of the scandal, U.S. politics is at play. The scandal is being cynically exploited by U.S. politicians to weaken the U.N., rather than to improve its operations. Indeed, the intense criticism of U.N. management is coming from a Government whose own Iraq Occupation Authority cannot account for billions of dollars of Iraqi oil revenues since 2003, with the clear indication that vast sums have in fact been looted.

The Oil-for-Food program was surely flawed in innumerable ways, but most of these had been recognized for years, and the U.N. Security Council members, including the U.S., had ample information had they cared to look. In fact, the U.S. and others deliberately closed their eyes to the mess because they wanted the sanctions against Iraq to persist in the vain hope that the sanctions would help topple Saddam from the inside. The more recent U.S. indignation about the botched sanctions scheme recalls the scene in Casablanca where Inspector Renault is “shocked, shocked” to discover the gambling at Rick's Café. We are a witness to a wonderful burst of moralizing that may depict the opposite of what it suggests on the surface.

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come from U.S. conservatives who simply reject the idea of the U.N. as an institution helpful to U.S. purposes. They have made these attacks because they vastly overestimate U.S. power, thinking that the U.S. is omnipotent and therefore in no need of international cooperation. They view the U.N. as an artificial and unnecessary constraint on U.S. authority and action. In neo-con fantasies, the US can clean up the world on its own. Instead, we are now left with the quagmire in Iraq and the collapse of U.S. prestige abroad.

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The truth is that the U.S. vitally needs global cooperation on a wide range of issues in order to meet essential U.S. security interests. An avian flu pandemic will not be forestalled or controlled by stockpiling drugs in the U.S. Control will require a coordinated international effort of disease surveillance, culling of bird populations, and global cooperation on the testing and development of new medicines and immunizations. Infectious disease control is truly a global challenge, as the AIDS pandemic (and the plague, Spanish Flu, smallpox, and many more epidemics) should have taught us a long time ago.

Similarly, the U.S. will need worldwide cooperation on climate change, lest the American Gulf Coast become a regular victim of high-intensity hurricanes. The Bush Administration sneers at the Kyoto Agreement, negotiated in the context of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, but the U.S. will likely feel very differently, once China is the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide,

with adverse results felt by way of American hurricanes, droughts, rising ocean levels, and more. The U.S. obviously needs considerable cooperation on nuclear proliferation, whether in North Korea or Iran, and benefited from overseas leadership in the success story of Libya's return to the international fold in recent years.

The U.S. will also need global cooperation in the fight against world poverty. This is a fight that Washington has barely acknowledged, and hardly lifted a budgetary finger to address. The U.S. fiscal efforts towards the world's poor are *de minimis*, a few cents in the federal budget for each hundred dollars of U.S. GNP. These fall vastly short of the promises that the U.S. has solemnly made to the international community, and, of course, of what is needed. Global poverty is regarded as a soft issue by the Bush Administration, not worthy of “serious” strategists' time and attention. U.S. negotiators even tried to expunge the Millennium Development Goals from the international commitments in the lead up to the U.N. World Summit in September 2005, an attempt strongly rejected by the rest of the world.

In fact, the issues that do engage the Washington strategists—whether oil, or security, or terrorism, or avian flu, or narcotrafficking—are each inextricably linked to poverty and to the geopolitical instability that results from poverty. The U.S. confronts the fallout from poverty every day in Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, the Palestinian territories, Bolivia, and countless other places. Our government is utterly incapable of—and, to date, utterly uninterested in—meeting the challenge of global poverty on its own. The budgetary costs would be exorbitant compared with the costs of a cooperative approach.

The politics of fighting poverty require multilateralism, lest any single country's development assistance appear too overbearing or intrusive. And the U.S., quite simply, lacks the requisite expertise in

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THE U.N. AND AMERICAN GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

BY NIKHIL I. PATEL

The United Nations embodies an unusual political experiment. It was an attempt, led by America, to combine within a single framework two elemental contradictions in international politics: the equality of sovereignty and the inequality of power. Its structure reflects this tension, most obviously in the counterpoise between a General Assembly open to all sovereign states and a permanent Security Council directorship reserved for the dominant. This fusion sometimes breeds dysfunction, but it also gives rise to a unique virtue: it allows the U.N. to function in a world still governed by power while infusing the organization with an unparalleled global legitimacy.

The U.S. government's recent attitude toward the U.N. seems oblivious to this singular historical advantage. U.S. officials and legislators treat the U.N. either as a hindrance to U.S. policies or as a mere cipher through which to ram U.S. priorities. In the 2002–3 debate over Iraq, top American officials approached the U.N., but only in pursuit of a rubber stamp: they made specious arguments, peddled dubious evidence, and simultaneously declared their conviction that U.N. inspections were pointless. Their commitment to deliberation was clearly unserious.

Now the watchword is reform. Without question, the U.N. suffers from inefficiencies and corruption, all of which demand reform. But only ideological overzealousness can explain, for example, the five concurrent, independent Congressional investigations of the “Oil-for-Food” scandal. In our sometimes chauvinistic preoccupation with every inadequacy of the U.N., we have lost sight of how the U.N. serves U.S. interests.

We discount the value of the U.N. in part because we have misunderstood America's central challenge in the twenty-first century. It is not only terrorism. It is not an abstract “hatred of freedom.” It is a far more profound transformation of world politics—what Zbigniew Brzezinski has called “the global political awakening of mankind.” Advances in technol-

ogy, global communication, and education, catalyzed by great waves of political radicalization and revolution, have aroused the political self-consciousness of the masses of humanity that, for millennia, had known only a life of resigned inaction and subservience to the impositions of fate. Now they know their latent political power, and they want to assert it. Amid this broad historical transformation, moreover, we are witnessing the nascent resurrection of Asia—the re-emergence of China and India as engines of political, economic, and social energy. They are grasping for great power, proud to have lifted off the humiliating yoke of imperialism and resolved to restore their historical eminence.

The combination of the political awakening of the masses and the resurgence of Asian power will generate enormous challenges to America's position. As the global hegemon, America draws the discontentment of the disenfranchised and the envy of the ambitious. The former identify their miseries with a U.S.-led international status quo; the latter seek leadership of a post-American future. At the same time, U.S. well-being is irreversibly tied to that of the world. Our national economy intertwines with the global economy, our political and military commitments touch every continent and contribute decisively to stability, and since the early twentieth century we have proven unable to insulate ourselves from upheavals abroad. In this context, an egoistic foreign policy would be self-destructive. The U.S. must find a way simultaneously to secure its interests, accommodate the rise of new powers while avoiding, in this nuclear age, the earth-shattering eruptions that have punctuated such power shifts in the past, and create a political framework that gives real voice to a politically awakened world.

The U.N. will be an important element in any such strategy. As a June 2005 bipartisan Congressional report recognizes, the U.N. has many practical virtues. It has a range of special expertise that deals di-

rectly with the immediate concerns of the newly aroused world: peacekeeping, elections monitoring, humanitarian aid, disease control, and poverty reduction, among others. It can overcome national rivalries in order to mediate conflicts. Although it cannot easily restrain the powerful, it can help to defuse many of the dangerous, potentially escalatory points of tension among them.

Above all, the U.N. is a unique fount of global legitimacy. A March 2005 BBC poll revealed support for the U.N. becoming “significantly more powerful in world affairs.” Majorities in 21 of the 23 countries polled, including the U.S., would find such an expansion “mainly positive,” with a global average of 64 percent. The U.N.'s legitimacy springs, in part, from its structural affirmation of the equality of sovereign states, and in part from its demonstrated ability to address the needs of those weak and developing sovereigns that comprise the bulk of its membership. Moreover, the U.N. enjoys the benefit of being born in a rare historical moment, when exhaustion, imbalance of power, and the upending of the established order enabled innovative political bargains. In short, the U.N. has a legitimacy that no single nation could generate alone—and that no new institution could replace.

These advantages can be harnessed to promote the imperatives of U.S. global leadership, for several reasons. First, the U.N. is ultimately run by member states, among which America predominates—it has vastly more political influence, economic heft, and military capability than any other state. Second, America led the creation of the U.N., and built into its structure and procedure distinct U.S. advantages. These include the power of a permanent seat and veto on the Security Council, the diffuse benefits of serving as the U.N.'s geographic locus, and the ideological and political usefulness of a U.N. Charter, Declaration of Human Rights, and framework of Covenants that largely reflect American values and priorities. Third, the U.N. depends for its vitality, effectiveness, and solvency on

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FUNCTION OVER FORM

BY NICHOLAS STEPHANOPOULOS

With the organization celebrating its sixtieth birthday this year, there has been much talk of late about how to reform the United Nations. Secretary General Kofi Annan issued a report in the spring calling for an expanded Security Council, a new Human Rights Council, the abolition of the Trusteeship Council, and several amendments to the U.N. Charter. The United States has supported most of these ideas, and has also proposed a new democracy fund, a peace-building commission, a comprehensive convention on terrorism, and stricter auditing of the Secretariat's operations. At the organization's recent summit in New York, U.N. reform dominated the agenda.

The U.N. clearly has major structural problems, and many of the proposals under consideration do seem well-suited to address them. The Security Council, for instance, reflects the power balance of 1945 (and rather poorly at that), and should be revamped so that it captures current geopolitical realities. The Human Rights Commission, similarly, has been disgraced by both its fecklessness and the alarming frequency with which rights-abusing nations chair the body. A leaner Human Rights Council with fewer rights violators among its ranks would represent an undeniable improvement. And stricter auditing, monitoring, and reporting requirements might not transform the U.N.'s bureaucratic culture overnight, but would at least announce that the days of cronyism and waste are over.

U.N. reform, then, is sorely needed. But there is a tendency—both within the U.S. and around the world—to emphasize one-off structural changes at the expense of the steady commitment and effort that are necessary for the U.N. to succeed. Globally, the issue of U.N. reform is often reduced to the question of Security Council composition. Politicians and reporters talk little about how to make the U.N. more honest and efficient, and very much about which particular powers should be represented on the Security Council. Domestically, most of the Bush administration's proposals have related to

the U.N.'s structure, and there is no indication that the administration cares much about the organization's long-term efficacy. If anything, the disdain the U.S. has shown toward the U.N. over the past few years suggests that the administration's goal may be to use the reform issue to discredit and marginalize the organization, not to improve it.

The problems with structural reform are twofold. First, there is a danger that U.N. member states, having overhauled the organization's institutional arrangements, will fail to take steps to prevent backsliding. A leaner Human Rights Council could prove just as feeble as its predecessor, and measures to increase Secretariat accountability and transparency mean little if they are not vigilantly enforced. Second, and more fundamentally, the reason for the U.N.'s poor performance in many areas is not its *structure* but rather its very *nature* as an organization in which every country, large and small, rich and poor, is represented. If the U.N. is inefficient and ineffective, this is largely because the nations of the world are many in number and frequently divided. Smaller committees and crisper lines of authority will not suddenly convert the U.N. into a model of Teutonic precision.

None of this is to say that structural reform is not important. Better to have a United Nations whose institutional arrangements are a management consultant's dream, than the bureaucratic nightmare of today. But those who care about the U.N.'s performance and prestige should realize that structural reform alone is not enough. Rather, the U.N. can only succeed if its member states—the United States in particular—show that they are committed to the organization, and invest substantial political capital (and money) in it. For the U.S., this means abiding by the procedures of the General Assembly and Security Council, frustrating though they may sometimes be. It means halting the recurring kabuki dance in which Congress threatens to withhold funding for the U.N. until certain conditions are met.

Most importantly, it means going through the U.N. to address international problems such as terrorism, weapons proliferation, and AIDS, not operating alone or through ad hoc coalitions.

One might ask why the U.S. would *want* to invigorate the U.N. The cynical answer is that there is no reason why. But the cynics cannot explain the constructive reform proposals that the Bush administration has made of late, or U.S. diplomats' vigorous participation in the U.N. summit. The U.S.'s recent actions vis-à-vis the U.N., then, suggest that key policymakers have recognized the organization's value and are trying in good faith to improve it. This is why the U.S. issued its recommendations for structural reform—and why the U.S. should complement these proposals with a renewed commitment to solving world problems through the U.N.'s auspices.

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tropical agronomy, public health, and many other fields to get the job done on its own.

The U.N. can and should be a locus of global leadership on issues critical to U.S. security. U.N. agencies are vital to addressing the challenges of public health, food production, financial stability, trade, climate change, biodiversity conservation, nuclear proliferation, energy supplies for a growing world economy, and more. The U.S. should stop weakening the U.N. through budget cuts and freezes, brazen political attacks, and other threats. It's time to raise our investments in the U.N. for the sake of national and global security, the very reasons that led the U.S. to champion this vital institution when it helped to establish it over 60 years ago.

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