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GLOBAL INSIGHTS

How Not to Reform the
United Nations

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Midway through the most ambitious reform drive in United Nations history, it is high time to revisit and hopefully relearn some of the more painful lessons of past reform campaigns. None of this is rocket science—or string theory, to be more contemporary. The past six decades have seen dozens of reform efforts, most following recurring patterns and producing largely predictable results. As of midsummer 2005, things are not going well, but there is some light at the end of the tunnel. Two years ago, the effort started off on the wrong foot when Secretary-General Kofi Annan, with a puzzling disregard for the history and politics of the world organization, called for a “radical” overhauling of intergovernmental machinery, beginning with the Security Council.¹

Now, fortunately, member states have retaken the reins and, in their methodical, plodding, but purposeful fashion, are building a consensus on a few modest and sensible renovations. In the process, they have demonstrated both that it is their organization after all and that they are not so displeased with the current structure. The results will fall far short of the historic transformation proposed by the secretary-general. Compared to past efforts, however, the product should appear reasonably respectable.

Typically, there are six steps to a cycle of UN reform. First, the secretary-general and a chorus of earnest national leaders bemoan the state of the organization, assert that profound changes in the global situation demand sweeping renovations, and call for fresh approaches and bold initiatives. As Annan warned the General Assembly, “Excellencies, we have come to a fork in the road. This may be a moment no less decisive than 1945 itself, when the United Nations was founded.”² Presumably the gross overstatement was for dramatic effect.

Second, some sort of blue-ribbon commission is assembled to add substantive depth to the instincts of the political leaders. In this case,

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the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (HLP) acquitted itself better than most of its predecessors, though its raft of 101 recommendations proved to be a mixed lot in terms of practicality and desirability.³ It fared far better than two such exercises encouraged by Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who found their conclusions to be unpalatable.⁴

Third, once the eminent ones have articulated their vision, the secretary-general translates their ideas into digestible policy steps for consideration by the membership. How far and on what issues the secretary-general can be an effective advocate is a political judgment. Generally his role fades over the course of a transition period from secretariat to state leadership. This year, given the secretary-general's personal and political liabilities, this shift has been remarkably quick and decisive. Once again, the secretary-general proposes and the General Assembly disposes.

Fourth, the member states become fully engaged as decision points approach and the implications for their national interests become clear. For most, their conservative instincts and fear of change come to the surface. Big and small states alike begin to fret that their relative positions in the UN, built through years of practice and maneuver, could be affected by unpredictable renovations. As long as their corners of the body are well defended, they may continue to mouth rhetoric about sweeping change and historic opportunities, but the hunt for modest measures capable of attracting consensus begins in earnest. As of mid-summer 2005, General Assembly President Jean Ping and his small army of facilitators are deeply engaged in this critical phase of the enterprise, though differences remain on the shape and status of the summit document.

Fifth, some kind of culminating event is convened. Sometimes this will coincide with one of the UN's major anniversaries, though remarkably little reform has actually ever been accomplished during these commemorative years. September 2005's multipurpose convocation of heads of state and government—to mark the UN's sixtieth anniversary, to assess progress on implementing the Millennium Declaration, and to approve the latest reform plans—promises to be a megaevent. Once again, however, the size of the crowning event and the depth of change may not coincide.

Sixth, state leaders and the secretariat always seem to find reasons to paint even incremental reforms in glowing colors—in part for public relations and in part because their expectations tend to be pitched much lower than their rhetoric. These claims are traditionally coupled with declarations about unfinished work and renewed dedication. These

assertions, along with independent commentary about the glaring gaps between the standards voiced in stages one and five, provide an impetus for the next round of UN reform. As it slowly gains momentum, all of the reform steps that could not be agreed in time for the megaevent still need to be addressed. Indeed, such culminating events mark beginnings as much as endings in the ongoing reform process.

Though initially pursued with vigor and imagination, the current reform drive was poorly conceived. It has been the most ahistorical and apolitical effort to date, disabling limitations given the precedent-bound nature of the UN and the intrinsically political character of its decisions. “Historical context is either missing or incorrect” in the HLP report, Michael Glennon has trenchantly observed. It “exhibits all the familiar shortcomings of old-style Platonic idealism, ignoring the real-world incentives and disincentives to which states actually respond.”⁵ Fair enough, but the primary task of the panel was to lay out a comprehensive and compelling vision of how security challenges are evolving. There is nothing unusual about a UN-sponsored study being weak on politics and history, precisely because the dynamics of multilateralism discourage candid analysis. Such an inquiry, heaven forbid, might undercut the assumptions of common interest and common destiny that one school of UN defenders clings to desperately and that is featured by the panel. The parallel defense, that such institutions and norms are needed precisely because profound differences of perspective and interest persist among states and need to be resolved peacefully, is given short shrift in the report.

Equally troubling are the repeated disconnects—in the thinking of both the panel and the secretary-general—between analysis and institutional recommendations. When the panel-fed reform process was conceived in mid-2003, the UN faced a serious political crisis among its members following the divisive and indecisive debate over the use force in Iraq. At that critical juncture, the secretary-general made a serious misjudgment that all but doomed the reform effort: that the problems of the world organization were institutional, not political, and that radical structural reforms were the answer, beginning with the Security Council.⁶ He asserted that there was an “urgent need” to make the council “more broadly representative of the international community as a whole, as well as the geopolitical realities of today.”⁷ Was he saying, however improbably, that an enlarged council would have agreed on what to do about Iraq or other divisive issues?

At a time when military power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the last superpower, what “geopolitical realities” dictate a major enlargement of the council and the addition of six more permanent

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members? Is the unspoken agenda to dilute Washington's influence within the Security Council and to raise the political costs of the United States acting without its blessing? The secretary-general's emphasis on the danger of "unilateral and lawless use of force" in that speech suggests such an interpretation, as does the timing following the Iraq intervention. Predictably, U.S. officials have been unenthusiastic about such a step, which would drive another wedge into the troubled U.S.-UN relationship. How do the panelists and the secretary-general, moreover, reconcile their advocacy of the doctrine of the responsibility to protect with their proposal to elevate some of its chief opponents, such as India and Brazil, to permanent membership status? Indeed, Annan's report, *In Larger Freedom*, seems to complain that the Security Council has been too assertive and has enjoyed too much unity among its permanent members.⁸ His answer is "to restore the balance"—which never existed—among the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and a new human rights council.⁹ Adding six new permanent members would put the Security Council on the track to becoming every bit as effective and relevant as ECOSOC.

According to the secretary-general, "virtually all Member States agree that the council should be enlarged, but there is no agreement on the details."¹⁰ His High-Level Panel dutifully called for council expansion, though they could not agree on a single formula for doing so. Unfortunately those "details" involve profound and persistent divisions about which and how many countries should sit around the table; whether permanent status should be extended; what the balance among regions and groups should be; whether the veto should be retained, modified, or eliminated; how decisions should be made; and whether its working methods should be further refined. The very fact that none of this has been resolved after more than a decade of General Assembly deliberations testifies not to inattention but to the importance of the matters at stake, to the divergent perspectives and interests among member states, and to the value capitals place on the work of the council.¹¹

In 1996–1997, General Assembly President Razali Ismail of Malaysia, under far more propitious political conditions, worked skillfully but ultimately unsuccessfully to find common ground on Security Council reform. Why did the secretary-general believe that this mission impossible would all of a sudden become possible amid the organization's most serious political crisis since the end of the Cold War? Did he have a secret formula? Was he aware that none of his predecessors had dared to tread on this territory, traditionally reserved for member states, by becoming outspoken advocates for an expanded council? As any student of UN history knows, political convergence precedes institutional change,

not the other way around. Did no one foresee that dropping this radioactive issue in the middle of a divided and disgruntled membership was a sure-fire formula to exacerbate tensions both within regions and globally? Whatever transpires in the coming weeks, when states will resolve or, more likely, defer this debate, one thing is clear: to date it has produced some of the nastiest and most destructive public and private exchanges among member states—whether in closed meeting halls, in capitals, or on the streets of China’s cities—since the height of the Cold War. If one of the purposes of reform is to bring member states together in support of a common platform for strengthening the world body, the emphasis on remodeling the Security Council so far has had the opposite effect.

The current round of reform seems to have neglected some of the simplest lessons of earlier ones. As the secretary-general aptly put it in his first reform report in 1997 and several times since, “Reform is not an event; it is a process.”¹² Sharpening the tools of management, implementation, and agenda setting should be a full-time, year-round, and well-integrated task for any public or private organization. Events like September’s summit may be useful now and then to get the blessing of top political leaders and to focus their attention, at least for a few days, on the challenges of global cooperation. But they are not a substitute for, and may well distract attention from, the real business of making the UN work better at headquarters and in the field.

The core operational work of the organization, in fact, tends to get lost as leaders scramble for seats in the intergovernmental bodies and play to the media and publics at home with sweeping and pious declarations of renewed commitment to solving all of the world’s problems. Neither heads of state and government nor most of the eminent personalities serving on the HLP know much about the actual operations or inner workings of the UN system. They are well placed, on the other hand, to weigh the political implications of an evolving security environment and to look for ways of narrowing differences of values and perspectives. A fresh look at these matters was much needed after the Iraq debates. But they have had relatively little to say about reforming or renovating the UN, and some of what they have proposed in that regard has not been helpful.¹³

The history of UN reform also tells us that, although broad packages of steps are sometimes proposed, they are never adopted.¹⁴ The member states, understandably, like to pick and choose. Some elements of comprehensive plans are always more politically ripe than others. In the last large reform drive, in the mid-1990s, the General Assembly convened five parallel working groups on different aspects of reform, in

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addition to the management plans put forward by the new Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, in July 1997. Delinking these distinct efforts meant that the more controversial items, like Security Council reform, did not retard progress in other areas. The rebuff of Razali's council proposals in March 1997, for example, did not preclude a generally positive reception for the secretary-general's management plan four months later. Despite this history, in presenting his latest plan to the General Assembly on 21 March 2005, Annan called four times for his far-ranging proposals to be accepted as a package. "The temptation is to treat the list as an *à la carte* menu, and select only those that you especially fancy," he noted; "in this case, that approach will not work. What I am proposing amounts to a comprehensive strategy."¹⁵

Finally, if six decades of trying to reform the UN has a central lesson, it is that modest expectations are in order. The UN has survived because it is highly adaptable and capable of making midcourse corrections, of championing new agendas, and of learning to employ new tools as the needs, values, and demands of the member states shift. But it adopts formal reforms with great reluctance and glacier-like speed. The founders wanted it that way, and so they placed high hurdles to charter amendment. Now, with the need to seek consensus among 191 members, those hoping to strengthen the institution should be wary of raising public expectations about the rate and depth of likely change. In the current round, the management of expectations has been abysmal.

At the outset, it was irresponsible, not just wrongheaded, to suggest that the UN was confronting such a deep institutional crisis that it could be saved from irrelevance only by radical structural reform. The diagnosis was faulty, as the readiness to entrust the body with growing numbers of peacekeeping, humanitarian, and counterterrorism missions attests. As Mats Berdal underlines, "It is clear that the Panel report firmly rejects the suggestion that the UN may be facing a fork in the road."¹⁶ The very divisions among members that worried the secretary-general ensure that a radical restructuring is not in the cards. Responsible officials should avoid trumpeting problems—particularly imagined ones—for which they have no reasonable answers.

Despite such serious errors of judgment, some good things will no doubt come out of the current reform process. It has tested the member states' commitment to the organization and found it to be fundamentally sound, if as shallow and self-serving as ever. It has helped to forge broad agreement, if not consensus, on the need for far-reaching change in how the UN is managed, so that it will be more efficient, transparent, and accountable. The still unfolding oil-for-food scandal has reminded governments and publics alike that the working methods of the Security

Council and how the secretariat carries out its mandates matter every bit as much as which countries sit around its table. The process has produced some good ideas, such as a Peacebuilding Commission and a smaller Human Rights Council, that deserve elaboration. And it has reconfirmed the continuing validity of the lessons from earlier reform rounds, hopefully so that we will get it right next time. 🌐

Notes

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1. Press conference, SG/SM/8855, 8 September 2003 and Address to the General Assembly, SG/SM/8891, GA/10157, 23 September 2003.

2. SG/SM/8891.

3. High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, UN Doc. A/59/565, 2 December 2004. For thoughtful critiques, see Ernesto Zedillo, ed., *Reforming the United Nations for Peace and Security* (New Haven: Yale Center for the Study of Globalization, 2005); Michael J. Glennon, "Idealism at the U.N.," *Policy Review*, no. 129 (February–March 2005): 3–13; and Mats Berdal, "The United Nations at 60: A New San Francisco Moment?" *Survival*, vol. 47, no. 3 (Autumn 2005), pp. 7–31.

4. Independent Working Group on the Future of the United Nations, *The United Nations in Its Second Half-Century* (New York: Ford Foundation, 1995); Independent Advisory Group on United Nations Financing, *Financing an Effective United Nations* (New York: Ford Foundation, 1993).

5. Glennon, "Idealism at the U.N.," p. 4.

6. The discussion of Security Council reform in this article draws on Edward C. Luck, "Rediscovering the Security Council: The High-level Panel and Beyond," in Zedillo, *Reforming the United Nations*, pp. 126–152; Luck, "The UN Security Council: Reform or Enlarge?" in Paul Heinbecker and Patricia Goff, eds., *Irrelevant or Indispensable? The United Nations in the 21st Century* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2005), pp. 143–152; and Luck, "Reforming the Security Council—Step One: Improving Working Methods," background paper for the Permanent Mission of Switzerland for discussion with UN Member States, 25 April 2005.

7. SG/SM/8891.

8. Kofi Annan, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Security, Development and Human Rights for All*, UN Doc. A/59/2005, 21 March 2005, par. 165.

9. *Ibid.*, par. 166.

10. SG/SM/8891.

11. For the hurdles facing efforts to expand the council, see Thomas G. Weiss, *Overcoming the Security Council Reform Impasse: The Implausible Versus the Plausible*, Occasional Paper No. 14 (Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2005).

12. Kofi Annan, *Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform*, UN Doc. A/51/950, 14 July 1997, par. 25.

13. Of the 105 paragraphs in the "Draft Outcome Document" compiled by the president of the General Assembly on 3 June 2005, only eighteen addressed questions of UN reform. The rest covered a very broad range of substantive issues, most of which come before the world body but some of which do not.

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14. See Edward C. Luck, *Reforming the United Nations: Lessons from a History in Progress* (New Haven: Academic Council on the United Nations System, 2003); and Jean E. Krasno, ed., *United Nations: Confronting the Challenges of a Global Society* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

15. SG/SM/9770, 21 March 2005.

16. Berdal, "The United Nations at 60."