



Executive Memorandum

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HOW THE OAS CAN EXPORT DEMOCRACY—TO THE U.N.

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The recent failure of the United Nations to deal with the rising threat of weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein suggests that the U.N. needs an overhaul. The Organization of American States (OAS) provides an example of how this might be accomplished. Not that the OAS is a terribly effective organization, but one characteristic does merit particular consideration: Not everyone may join; member states must be at least electoral democracies. That puts OAS treaties, initiatives, and various committees in the context of serving a good beyond simply maintaining peace—a peace that is unachievable until more of the world is democratic. Although U.N. reforms should go deeper than who may join, entry criteria are a good place to start.

Broad Membership, Limited Utility. The United Nations is an international forum, created in 1945, that admits any nation. To its credit, it has championed peaceful discourse among members and has mobilized them to provide humanitarian assistance to starving millions, care for refugees, and deploy peacekeeping forces to nations experiencing internal conflict.

It also consumes significant amounts of money (an annual budget of some \$2 billion), promotes feel-good conventions like those against terrorism that even states sponsoring terrorists feel comfortable signing, and named Libya to chair its Human Rights Commission this year. In addition, it aspires to unelected world power: A 1998 U.N. conference

promoted the creation of the International Criminal Court, which is directly accountable to no one, whose judgments cannot be appealed, and whose inquisitional concept of law is inconsistent with U.S. procedures and safeguards.

The U.N.'s inability since 1991 to disarm Saddam Hussein reveals a core weakness: Not much unites this disparate collection of democracies, constitutional monarchies, autocracies, and totalitarian dictatorships except a low common denominator of assumed sovereignty. As a result, agreements make strange bedfellows and hardly ever help to resolve difficult crises because outlaw regimes and the countries that do business with them make up part of the membership.

The proof is in the structure of the 15-member Security Council. There are two classes of membership: Five seats are reserved for permanent members, and 10 are open to the rest of the General Assembly on a rotating basis. Permanent members like China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom,

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and the United States can veto any Council decision to guard against the eccentricities of rogue interests that could coalesce at any time on the Council.

Limited Membership, Focused Utility. Democracies—even nominal electoral ones—do not generally attack other democracies or tend to threaten each other. The Organization of American States, established three years after the U.N., upholds the concept and practice of democratic rule in its charter, resolutions, and committees. Chapter II, Article 3(d) of the OAS Charter establishes a membership requirement: “the political organization of those States on the basis of the effective exercise of representative democracy.”

In 1962, the OAS suspended communist Cuba from voting and participating in OAS activities. OAS Resolution 1080, adopted in 1991, set up procedures to react to threats against democracy within the Western Hemisphere. These were codified into the Inter-American Democratic Charter and approved by the OAS General Assembly in Lima, Peru, on September 11, 2001—the very day al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the United States.

Although dealing with rogue states may not be much easier in a forum like the OAS—Cuba has been dismissed while Venezuela and Haiti have become intractable headaches—it is not the same as dealing with terrorist dictatorships in the U.N., where they are considered members in good standing.

Granted, the OAS has only recently begun to come into its own. Its General Assembly still avoids tough issues that touch on the sensitivities of its member nations. Its actions are limited by a small budget, and it has no wasteful foreign aid role. In recent years, however, it has provided invaluable support for the institutionalization of elections to determine the heads of state in the hemisphere and has dedicated itself to protecting and strengthening representative governance in each member country.

A Lesson for the U.N. The U.N.'s decade-long failure to check the threat of weapons proliferation

in Iraq suggests that its membership is too diverse to serve a useful purpose—at least on security issues. In November 2002, President George W. Bush encouraged the Security Council to pass a measure calling for voluntary Iraqi disarmament backed up by a threat of “serious consequences.” Instead, Council members with veto power and investments in Iraq, and aided by a weak inspection process, turned Resolution 1441 into a shell game. Fortunately, Council approval is not required if a nation needs to use force in self-defense or to ensure the safety of its citizens.

In the OAS, a state such as Iraq would not qualify for membership. If it had a democratic government that degenerated into dictatorship, it would be suspended. Corraling support for military action to disarm it might still be difficult, but it would not conflict with the goals of the organization. The U.N.'s Millennium Declaration says that democratic governance best assures human rights, but this is no membership requirement.

The OAS shows how the U.N. could be improved to unite members behind something beyond an inoffensive definition of peace. Raising the bar so that U.N. members are at least electoral democracies would allow U.N. conventions, peace-keeping operations, and humanitarian aid to be put in a context of durable peace that is built by encouraging government by the governed and helping non-members to become members.

Conclusion. The U.N.'s inability to confront a harsh dictator and state sponsor of terrorism reveals the need for reform. Although only a complete overhaul will put the U.N. on a more purposeful footing, defining new membership requirements should number among the considerations. The OAS example shows how it can be done.

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