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U.N. Requires Fundamental Reforms

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Concern over the United Nations' management and efficiency is nearly as old as the organization itself—with the U.S. initiating its first review of the organization only two years after its founding in 1945. I'm sure it will surprise no one that the review found problems with duplication, mushrooming mandates and programs, and poor coordination.

In the decades since, the U.S. has made repeated efforts to resolve these problems. One successful effort was the unilateral decision of the U.S. to reduce payments to the U.N. until it amended its budgeting rules to permit large contributors more say in budgeting decisions. This paved the way for consensus-based budgeting and gave the U.S. a theoretical veto over the U.N. budget.

More recently, the U.S. offered to pay its arrears to the U.N. if the organization adopted specific reforms. This deal, known as the Helms-Biden legislation, forced the U.N. to adopt—among other reforms—results-based budgeting. It also led the U.N. to reduce America's portion of the regular U.N. budget from 25 percent to 22 percent and the peacekeeping budget from 31 percent to 27 percent.

You may notice a trend in U.S. efforts to reform the U.N.: frequent use of America's financial leverage as the organization's largest contributor. The reason for this is that America really has few options to force reform on an unwilling organization. In the General Assembly (which approves the budget for the organization) each of the U.N.'s 191 members has only one vote—regardless of how much they contribute to the organization.

Talking Points

- The United Nations has credibility problems that can only be overcome through greater transparency and accountability.
- Central to failures at the U.N. is membership of despotic regimes that habitually violate the founding principles of the organization.
- Until these issues are addressed, the U.N. should continue to expect close scrutiny from the U.S. Congress and repeated attempts to use America's purse strings to impose reform.
- The United States should not hesitate to advance its interests by unapologetically pushing for fundamental U.N. change.

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The one-vote structure inevitably creates inequities with small, poor nations gaining far more from the U.N. than they pay for. Obviously, most of these nations do not concur with America's priorities on reform. On the contrary, most nations see the U.N. as a source of patronage, jobs, financial resources, and a diplomatic force multiplier of sorts. These nations want a bigger U.N.—not a smaller, more efficient U.N. Given these conflicting priorities, it is hardly surprising that progress on reform has been slow and that progress has largely been achieved at the point of America's checkbook.

Yet U.S. criticism and reform efforts do have an impact. In 1997 and 2002, the U.N. announced its own reform agenda. As my fellow panelist from the General Accounting Office discussed, the Secretary General has made some progress on these reform agendas. Despite this progress, the U.N. still suffers from a huge credibility problem in America, particularly among conservatives in Congress (who do not believe the organization is serious about reform).

The U.N. does itself no favors through its public relations blunders. A case in point is the recent flap over letters from Benon Sevan, former director of the U.N. Oil for Food program, to companies involved in that program. These letters instructed them to treat contracts and other information as confidential and turn them over only after receiving U.N. approval. Although this may be intended to ensure that Paul Volker has all the documents he needs to conduct the U.N. investigation, it feeds into the broad perception that the organization intends to obstruct any outside inquiry of the Oil-for-Food scandal—including investigations by Congress and the General Accounting Office.

The bottom line is that the U.N.'s credibility problem can only be overcome through greater transparency and accountability. Until these issues are addressed, the U.N. should continue to expect close scrutiny from the U.S. Congress and repeated attempts to use America's purse strings to impose reform. A case in point is Senator John Ensign's (R-NV) Oil for Food legislation that would cut funding for the U.N. unless it cooperates with the U.S. investigation.

Long-Term Vision

The reform efforts I've described thus far are inadequate if the U.N. is to fulfill its stated principles. They are the equivalent of fad dieting—irregular attempts to fix the obvious symptoms of failure. This is not to say that reform efforts focusing on the number of employees, budget growth, and improved efficiency are not important. They protect taxpayer funds and make the U.N. a more effective organization.

However, they are not the fundamental changes that are needed to resolve the underlying problems of the U.N.

A more fundamental approach to U.N. reform is required: one that answers key questions and defines an overall vision of what the end result of a reform process would be. Questions that need to be asked and answered include: What is the U.N. supposed to do? Is it doing it? Why not? What must be done to return the U.N. to first principles? What means are available for accomplishing this goal and what is the best option?

The first question can be answered by looking at the U.N. Charter, which clearly states the purposes of the organization. The U.N. was founded to:

- maintain international peace and security, including taking collective measures to remove threats to peace;
- promote equal rights and self-determination of peoples without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion;
- help solve problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character; and
- encourage "social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom."

I would argue that the U.N. is not doing as well as it should in championing the principles set forth in its Charter. Consider:

1. As for preventing war, there have been nearly 300 wars since 1945 and over 22 million deaths resulting from these wars.¹ The U.N. has authorized military action to counter aggression just twice: North Korea's invasion of South Korea and Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

1. Mark Falcoff, Fred Gedrich, and Alan Dowd, "Goodbye to the U.N.," American Enterprise Online, at http://www.taemag.com/issues/articleid.17773/article_detail.asp (May 5, 2004).

2. The most urgent threat to international peace and security today is terrorism. Yet the U.N. cannot even agree upon a definition for terrorism—in large part because it counts terror-sponsoring states among its membership.
3. The U.N. counts the world's leading human rights violators and repressive governments among its membership. Worse, those members are disproportionately represented among the 53 countries elected to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR)—with Libya serving as chairman last year. I doubt the billions suffering from human rights abuses are comforted by U.N. efforts in this regard.
4. Equal rights for men and women are not observed among many U.N. members, particularly among Muslim nations.
5. As for advancing social progress, individual freedom, and the rule of law and improving living standards, Freedom House reports that a majority of U.N. members are not politically free and The Heritage Foundation and *The Wall Street Journal* revealed similar results among the U.N. members in terms of economic freedom.

Some have called on the U.S. to withdraw from the U.N. because of these flaws. I do not agree with this. Like it or not, other nations hold the U.N. in high esteem and it has become a central pillar of international relations and law. However, the U.S. would be better served by a U.N. that more closely adheres to its founding principles.

The most direct method for addressing the failures of the U.N. is to amend the Charter. I do not recommend this. Why? Consider the process set forth in Chapter 18 of the U.N. Charter, which states:

Amendments to the present Charter shall come into force for all Members of the United Nations when they have been adopted by a vote of two thirds of the members of the General Assembly and ratified in accordance with their respective constitutional processes by two thirds of the Members of the United Nations, including all the permanent members of the Security Council.

Quite simply, opening up the Charter to amendment would be an invitation for log-rolling that would make Congress blush. Getting at least 128

U.N. members to agree to amendments and then getting their governments to ratify those amendments would require decades of work and would inevitably involve gross expansion of the U.N.'s authority, mandates, and power. This would not be in the interests of the United States and would inevitably aggravate the current problems of overreach, inefficiency, and duplication.

Worse, the *quid pro quo* for Charter reform would be likely to weaken America's power in the Security Council—a situation that would undermine the ability of the U.S. to protect its interests.

The remaining option is to work within the existing framework. Yet what to do and where to start? Past experience gives some clues.

One of the success stories of U.N. reform is the rejuvenation of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This organization was deemed so irretrievably antithetical to U.S. interests that the Reagan Administration withdrew from it. This step, derided in many circles—especially within the U.N.—was critical to turning the organization around. It was so successful that President George W. Bush led the U.S. to rejoin UNESCO nearly 20 years after the U.S. first left. Whether this reform is lasting remains to be seen, but it is one of the few successful examples of reform in the U.N. system.

The U.S. should use this lesson and consider other candidates for withdrawal. The egregious behavior of the Human Rights Commission begs attention. Commission membership by Sudan, Cuba, China, and numerous other human rights violators tragically undermines the efforts of the organization and illustrates that U.N. member states do not take this issue as seriously as they should. The United States is faced with the sad situation of questioning if the cause of human rights is better served by participating in the Commission in order to champion the cause or by highlighting the complicity of the Commission in obscuring human rights abuses by publicly chastising the organization and refusing to lend it the credibility of U.S. membership.

Another step that the U.S. should take is to establish a Democracy Caucus and an Economic Freedom Caucus within the U.N. These groups would bring together countries that share common

values on human rights, freedom of religion, equal rights, representative government, free trade, and economic freedom. As suggested by Kim Holmes, Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, there are nations that agree with the U.S. on economic and political freedom, but who do not vote with the U.S. on these issues due to regional loyalties and other pressures.

However, members of the Caucus would be seen as supporting agreed principles rather than as supporting the U.S. Creating alternative groupings and voting blocs could serve U.S. interests by, hopefully, countering the efforts of a few key nations and establishing reliable allies to support efforts to expand freedom, basic rights, and the rule of law.

Another necessity is to reform the U.N. budget process. While the U.S. may have a technical veto due to the consensus requirement for budgets, it frequently fails to exert its veto due to concerns about the impact this could have on ongoing issues in the Security Council or the General Assembly. It makes no sense that Tuvalu—with its miniscule financial contribution—carries the same weight in budget decisions as does the U.S., Japan, or other large donors. The U.S. should lead an effort to get large contributors greater influence over budget decisions, though not necessarily by amending Article 18. Cooperation among large donors should be sufficient to enact change: After all, a handful of countries fund over 50 percent of the U.N. budget.

To Reform the U.N., Reform the Membership

In many ways the U.N. has fallen short of the hopes of its founders, not because of its staff, but because of its members. As discussed above, many U.N. members do not live up to the Charter's ideals. Unfortunately, over the years, the U.N. has regarded self-rule to be the main prerequisite for membership—rather than whether the proposed new member is a “peace-loving state [that is willing to] accept the obligations contained in the present Charter and, in the judgment of the Organization, are able and willing to carry out these obligations.”²

In reality, some U.N. members honor the Charter principles not at all. Yet they enjoy the privileges of

U.N. membership and take that privilege for granted. For example, under what justification does North Korea merit U.N. membership? It is aggressive; a threat to international peace and security; a proliferator of weapons of mass destruction; and a repressive, undemocratic regime that brutalizes its own citizens. North Korea does not deserve membership alongside democratic, free countries in the U.N. that observe the founding principles of the organization.

Similarly, why should a country that continuously violates U.N. Security Council resolutions—such as Iraq in the 1990s—enjoy the privileges of U.N. membership? For that matter, why should a failed state like Somalia, which has no effective government, retain status as a U.N. member?

The U.N. needs to clean house by reprimanding those countries that habitually violate U.N. principles. The U.S. should raise the issue of ejecting from the organization the worst violators of U.N. principles. Some may suggest that this goes against the spirit of the U.N., but the procedures for revoking U.N. membership are set forth in Chapter 2 of the U.N. Charter, which states:

A Member of the United Nations which has persistently violated the Principles contained in the present Charter may be expelled from the Organization by the General Assembly upon the recommendation of the Security Council.

Obviously, the drafters of the Charter envisioned the possibility of ejecting nations from the organization.

A two-thirds vote in the General Assembly may be difficult to achieve—as would a Security Council recommendation for the ejection of a member country—but the threat alone may encourage better behavior and may shame U.N. member nations into being more vocal and rigorous in support of freedom and human rights.

Conclusion

All nations use the U.N. to advance their national interests. The difference between the U.S. and other nations is that America has a vested interest in mak-

2. United Nations Charter, Article 4, section 1, at <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/index.html> (May 5, 2004).

ing the U.N. work. Otherwise, those problems normally assigned to the U.N. wind up on America's doorstep—mainly because no other nation has the capacity to do anything about them. America is better off with the U.N. heading up election monitoring campaigns, monitoring ceasefires, and rebuilding wrecked nations. Frankly, America is not very good at those tasks. That is no fault: America has rightly focused its efforts on larger security issues, warfare (when necessary), and preserving global security.

The United States should not hesitate to advance its interests by unapologetically pushing for fundamental change—even if that course is controversial. In the end, the efforts for reform I have

outlined here are little more than insisting that the U.N. fulfill its mission. Central to this effort are getting rid of the rotten apples and allowing the U.N. to do its work as envisioned. I believe that these issues must be considered and an overarching vision set forth if reform efforts are to be consistent and effective.

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