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Who Leads the United Nations?

Brett D. Schaefer

The title of this lecture is an interesting starting point for a discussion. I think the answer differs depending on who you ask. My answer would be that no one “leads” the U.N. Certainly, the Secretary-General does not lead the organization. Not even former Secretary-General Kofi Annan—described as a “secular pope” and the “conscience of the world” by his admirers—was able to force the organization in a direction it was unwilling to go. Current Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon is unlikely to be more successful than Annan.

Not even permanent members of the Security Council, clearly the most powerful individual nations in the U.N., can force the organization to adopt their agenda.

Based on my observations, the U.N. has 192 leaders—the member states—which means that it has no leader. Any organization of 192 generals and no privates is going to experience gridlock, but the U.N. exacerbates the problem by ignoring differences among nations.

This is most clearly illustrated by the fact that each member state has one vote in the General Assembly, despite vast differences in military power, population, geographical size, economic strength, and financial contributions to the organization. Under the parameters established by its charter, U.N. member states are granted equal standing and privileges in the organization regardless of these real world disparities.

The U.N. operates under the theory that each member state abides by the founding principles of the

Talking Points

- The U.S. should stop treating the U.N. as if it were a benign organization sympathetic to U.S. interests. The U.N. is a political body and many of the other member states are opposed to key U.S. policies and objectives.
- The U.S. should build coalitions that agree on fundamental principles and take advantage of differences of members of coalitions such as the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement.
- The U.S. should seek to enhance accountability in the U.N. system through transparency, oversight, and voluntary financing of U.N. activities.
- The U.S. should be extremely wary of placing more authority, resources, and support behind U.N. initiatives, legal vehicles, or bodies, since its ability to limit undesirable outcomes in the organization is weak.

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214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
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(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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organization and shares an equal desire to confront and overcome problems facing the world. This theory is evidently false.

The organization includes many members who do not respect the fundamental rights of their people. Disparate levels of development, geographic size, location, power, and other characteristics ensure that members will disagree about the priority and urgency of various issues.

On matters that it cares about, each member state seeks to “lead” the U.N. to adopt its position. On matters of substance, some member states inevitably oppose this effort. The chaos of conflicting priorities and demands in the U.N. does not, in contrast to markets, transform into a spontaneous order leading to “a more efficient allocation of societal resources than any design could achieve,” to borrow a phrase from Friedrich von Hayek. The result is often sly maneuvering and low-level conflict that undermines bold initiatives, increases inefficiency, blocks change, and virtually assures a lowest-common-denominator outcome.

Leadership in this context requires coalitions of member states to move an agenda. The group with the most votes dominates and, by default, “leads” the organization. The most powerful and influential coalitions in the United Nations are the Organization of the Islamic Conference, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Group of 77.

Let me briefly describe each group:

- The **Organization of the Islamic Conference** (OIC) was established in 1969 to “strengthen solidarity and cooperation among Islamic States in the political, economic, cultural, scientific and social fields.”¹ The OIC is also strongly focused in its opposition to Israel and includes in its charter a pledge in “support of the struggle of the people of Palestine, to help them regain their rights and liberate their land.”²

- The **Non-Aligned Movement** (NAM) was founded in 1961 to ensure “the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries” in their “struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, Zionism, and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony as well as against great power and bloc politics.”³ Ostensibly, the NAM sought to distance members from the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In reality, most NAM members were sympathetic, if not aligned, with the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War brought an end to the original stated purpose of the NAM. In recent years, it has become most notable as a vehicle to disparage American policies—led by Iran, North Korea, Sudan, Venezuela, and current NAM chairman Cuba.

- The **Group of 77** (G-77) was established in 1964 by 77 developing countries. The G-77 seeks to coordinate, articulate, and promote the economic interests of developing countries by leveraging their “joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the United Nations system.”⁴ The G-77 offers resolutions and decisions in the General Assembly, its committees, and various U.N. bodies and specialized agencies. It also produces joint declarations and statements on U.N. reform.

Under General Assembly rules, most decisions are made by simple majority. Decisions on important matters, such as admitting new members or approving the budget, require approval by a two-thirds majority. Looking at the numbers, it is very easy to see how these groups can use the leverage of their numbers to push or block various resolutions and reforms.

- The G-77 now has 130 members and represents more than 67 percent of the General Assembly.

1. Organization of the Islamic Conference, “OIC in Brief,” at www.oic-oci.org/oicold/ (November 29, 2007).

2. Organization of the Islamic Conference, “Charter of the OIC,” at www.oic-oci.org/oicold/ (November 29, 2007).

3. Fidel Castro, “Castro Speaks, Meets Officials at U.N.: Departs for Home,” text of U.N. Speech, at <http://lanic.utexas.edu/la/cb/cuba/castro/1979/19791012> (November 28, 2007).

4. Group of 77, “About the Group of 77,” at www.g77.org/doc/ (November 28, 2007).

- The NAM has 118 members and represents about 61 percent of the General Assembly.
- The OIC has 57 members and represents more than 29 percent of the General Assembly.

If these groups vote as a bloc, the membership of the G-77 and the NAM alone are sufficient to pass resolutions in the General Assembly.

I have described the OIC, the NAM, and the G-77 as distinct entities, but in fact they overlap in terms of membership. Unsurprisingly, the groups also share agendas. For instance, all three groups are hostile to Israel, oppose unilateral economic sanctions, demand increased economic transfers from developed countries, and resist critical U.N. reforms to increase accountability, oversight, and efficiency. Therefore, while the OIC lacks the numbers of the G-77 and the NAM, because most of its members are also members of these groups, the OIC can use those groups to advance its agenda.

There is also a strong tendency in the U.N. for regions to vote together as blocs. The OIC asserts its agenda through its strong position in the African and Asian regional groups. Members of the OIC represent a majority of the African regional group and just under half of the Asian regional group. The OIC uses its strong position in these groups to encourage them to support its agenda and also to get them to support regional candidates for various positions on U.N. bodies.

Let me provide a couple of examples of how these groups drive their agendas in the U.N.

Undermining the Human Rights Council

After years of disappointment, Secretary-General Kofi Annan characterized the U.N. Commission on Human Rights as a “shadow on the reputation of the United Nations” and called for it to be replaced. The General Assembly opposed efforts by the U.S. to have the new Human Rights Council apply membership criteria to keep human rights abusers from undermining its agenda (as they had with the Commission). Critically, the new Council shifted

proportional representation of regions from the Commission to the Council, giving Africa and Asia a joint majority. This has dramatically increased the influence of groups like the Non-Aligned Movement and the OIC.

In its first year, the Council voted to end scrutiny of human rights practices in Belarus, Cuba, Iran, and Uzbekistan—all of which have long records of human rights abuses. Specifically, in March 2007 the Council discontinued consideration of the human rights situations in Iran and Uzbekistan under the 1503 procedure.⁵ Country-specific experts focused on Belarus and Cuba were eliminated in June 2007, despite extensive evidence of ongoing violations. Not coincidentally, all four of these countries are members of the NAM.

The OIC held 17 seats on the Council in 2006, more than the one-third (16 seats of 47 total seats) required to call a special session. The Council—led by the OIC—repeatedly singled out Israel for censure, despite ignoring far worse human rights situations around the world. Another example is the OIC effort to constrain freedom of expression through the Council. After a Danish newspaper published cartoons of the prophet Mohammed in 2005, the OIC led an effort to persuade the commission, and then the Council, to adopt a resolution against the defamation of Islam.⁶

Annan’s Reform Agenda

One of the most frustrating priorities of the G-77 has been to block reform of the U.N. In the wake of numerous U.N. scandals, the U.S. and other major donors worked with former Secretary-General Annan to develop a U.N. reform agenda. The General Assembly approved a broad reform agenda in 2005 and asked the Secretary-General to submit detailed proposals to implement the reforms. Most of Annan’s reform proposals were, however, blocked by the G-77.

To put teeth behind the reform effort, the U.S. led a campaign to cap the U.N. assessed regular budget at \$950 million, with the remaining budget to be

5. This involves confidential proceedings to encourage government cooperation. See Brett D. Schaefer, “The United Nations Human Rights Council: A Disastrous First Year,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 2038, June 1, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/WorldwideFreedom/bg2038.cfm.

6. *Ibid.*

authorized if the reforms were adopted. The G-77 opposed the reforms. Compounding the problem, the G-77 led an effort to approve a U.N. budget beyond the \$950 million cap, despite making little progress on U.N. reform in June 2006, thus removing a major incentive for reform.⁷ Most of the reforms have yet to be adopted, including key reforms like reviewing U.N. mandates, strengthening U.N. oversight bodies, and reviewing U.N. practices to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

A recent example is Singapore's effort to eliminate the U.N.'s Procurement Task Force, which was set up in 2006 in response to rampant problems of fraud and corruption in U.N. procurement. In its first 18 months, the Task Force identified multiple instances of fraud, corruption, waste, and mismanagement at the United Nations Headquarters and in peacekeeping missions—in cases with an aggregate value in excess of \$610 million.⁸

Despite its success, Singapore is leading an effort by the G-77 to deny funding for the task force, which runs out this year. Singapore is upset about an investigation and allegations made against Assistant Secretary-General Andrew Toh, who headed the U.N. Office of Central Support Services, which includes the procurement division. Toh is from Singapore.⁹

Some of you might be wondering why the G-77, the NAM, or the OIC might want to block efforts to improve accountability and transparency, improve oversight, and more efficiently allocate resources within the U.N. system. It is peculiar, because these countries are, by and large, among the biggest beneficiaries and focus of U.N. efforts. You would think they would be advocates for improved U.N. operations. But they are not.

There is one overriding reason for this.

The Free-Rider Problem

The one-country, one-vote structure of the General Assembly creates a free-rider problem in which countries that pay little to the U.N. drive its financial decisions. Under U.N. rules, budgetary decisions and related reforms require approval of two-thirds of the General Assembly.¹⁰ Consider the following:

- The combined assessment of the 128 least-assessed countries—two-thirds of the General Assembly—is a paltry 0.919 percent of the regular budget and a minuscule 0.232 percent of the peacekeeping budget.
- The members of the G-77 are assessed a combined 8.8 percent of the regular budget and 5.2 percent of the peacekeeping budget.
- The members of the NAM are assessed a combined 4.9 percent of the regular budget and 1.8 percent of the peacekeeping budget.
- The members of the OIC are assessed a combined 3 percent of the regular budget and 1.2 percent of the peacekeeping budget.
- By contrast, the top eight contributors are assessed 71.1 percent of the regular budget and 77.6 percent of the peacekeeping budget in 2007.
- The U.S. alone is assessed 22 percent of the regular budget and over 26 percent of the peacekeeping budget.

The percentages do not convey the disparities.

Consider that in 2006 the U.S. paid \$439 million to the U.N. regular budget and over \$1.3 billion to the peacekeeping budget (for the fiscal year ending in June 2007). The 54 countries assessed the lowest rate of 0.001 percent of the regular budget each paid less than \$21,000 a year—\$439 million versus

7. For more information, see Brett D. Schaefer, "The Status of United Nations Reform," Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 966, October 3, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/hl966.cfm.
8. U.N. General Assembly, "Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the Activities of the Procurement Task Force for the 18-Month Period Ended 30 June 2007," Summary, General Assembly Document A/62/272*, October 5, 2007.
9. James Bandler and Steve Stecklow, "U.N. Antifraud Unit Is in Jeopardy: Singapore, A Major Force In Voting Bloc, Seeks to Shut Procurement Watchdog," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 8, 2007, p. A3.
10. For more information and the assessments for individual countries, see Brett D. Schaefer, "Keep the Cap on U.S. Contributions to U.N. Peacekeeping," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2067, September 6, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/bg2067.cfm.

\$21,000. The 35 countries assessed the lowest rate of 0.0001 percent of the peacekeeping budget each paid just over \$5,000—\$1.3 billion versus \$5,000.

Nearly all of these countries are in the G-77 and the NAM, and as such are able to greatly influence or block efforts to reform the U.N. to reduce waste, corruption, and inefficiency.

These vast disparities in budgetary responsibilities undermine incentives for most members to ensure that resources are used efficiently and as intended. Why would these nations ruffle feathers? It is easy for them to support the status quo or support an increase in the budget if the cost is inconsequential to them.

Implications for the U.S.

Supporters of the U.N. often blame U.S. policy, or particular Ambassadors in the case of John Bolton, for the difficulties of advancing U.S. priorities in the U.N. The voting peculiarities and the very real differences in policy objectives belie this belief. The differences are fundamental and substantial—most pointedly about what the U.N. is and what role it should assume internationally. Many influential countries in the U.N., particularly in groups like the G-77 and the NAM, see the U.N. as a vehicle for enhancing their influence to balance the U.S.

What does this mean for the U.S.?

For one, it helps clarify why the U.S. has found it so difficult to successfully advance its agenda in the organization. When an organization like the NAM specifically identifies opposing U.S. policies and balancing against U.S. power as one of its key purposes and objectives,¹¹ even benign proposals by the U.S. become targets for obstruction. A more accommodating approach in the U.N. generally results in the U.S. compromising on issues of importance, while getting little reciprocation from groups like the G-77, the NAM, or the OIC.

Second, the U.S. should be extremely wary of placing more authority, resources, and support behind U.N. initiatives, legal vehicles, or bodies as its ability to limit undesirable outcomes in the organization is weak.

Third, the U.S. should seek to enhance accountability in the U.N. system through transparency, oversight, and voluntary financing of U.N. activities. Transparency will better inform U.S. policymakers about the activities of the organization—a necessary step in stopping undesirable activities. Oversight by independent U.N. investigators and auditors helps expose corruption, politicization, mismanagement, and inefficiency without the U.S. having to directly intervene. Direct financing of U.N. activities, ideally achieved by moving assessed funding to voluntary funding, allows the U.S. to support or withdraw financial support as appropriate.

Finally, the U.S. should stop treating the U.N. as if it were a benign organization sympathetic to U.S. interests. The organization is a political body and many of the other member states are opposed to key U.S. policies and objectives. They use the institution to undermine those policies. The U.S. needs to approach the U.N. as it would as a single, albeit powerful, member of a legislature.

Specifically, the U.S. needs to build coalitions that agree on fundamental principles and to take advantage of differences between members of coalitions such as the G-77 and the NAM. For instance, India is a key member of the NAM, but has little in common with virulent anti-American countries like Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela. The U.S. needs to cultivate its relationship with India on those issues on which it is likely to differ with other NAM members.

The U.S. should use its influence and resources to reward and support nations for siding with the U.S. rather than alternative coalitions or regional

11. In the 2006 NAM summit, the group condemned “all manifestations of unilateralism and attempts to exercise hegemonic domination in international relations” and accused the U.S. of committing “a form of psychological and political terrorism” for naming countries as state sponsors of terrorism. The document specifically calls on the U.S. to change many of its policies. No other country is singled out in this manner. The NAM’s Plan of Action aims to “promote and work towards creating a multi-polar world through the strengthening of multilateralism through the U.N. and the multilateral processes, which are indispensable in promoting and preserving the interests of Non-Aligned Countries.” Combined, it is clear that the NAM sees the U.N. as the preferred battleground to confront the U.S. and as a vehicle for weakening it.

groups. Conversely, it should plainly express its disappointment in its bilateral relationship and in multilateral organizations when a nation adopts a counterproductive position in the U.N. These undesirable actions should influence future assistance and cooperation. In other words, the U.S. should be holding nations more accountable for their actions in the U.N. in the overall diplomatic relationship.¹²

—Brett D. Schaefer is Jay Kingham Fellow in International Regulatory Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation. The author would like to thank Heritage Foundation intern Nicole Morgret for her assistance with this material. These remarks were delivered at the American Enterprise Institute.

12. For more information see Brett D. Schaefer and Anthony B. Kim, "U.S. Aid Does Not Build Support at the U.N.," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2018, March 26, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/bg2018.cfm.