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President Obama at the United Nations: Sending the Wrong Message

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On September 23, President Barack Obama will give his first address to the United Nations General Assembly. Recent statements by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton¹ and U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations Susan Rice² may offer several clues as to the content of the President's speech. Both laid out a wide-ranging agenda that, together, would have the U.S. seeking U.N. action on nuclear proliferation and disarmament, global warming, the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, development, women's rights, and a number of other issues.

While this list may be broad, it contains very few "new" policies: previous Administrations have addressed these issues or themes repeatedly at the U.N. What is different, however, is the tone: Both speeches blamed the previous Administration for tense relations between the U.S. and the U.N. while glossing over, downplaying, or ignoring the U.N.'s many problems. The U.S. does itself and the U.N. no favors with this strategy. Giving the U.N. more responsibilities without pressing for the reforms necessary for them to be successful will only reaffirm the U.N.'s reputation for irrelevance and ineffectiveness.

A Misdirected Reform Agenda. There is no doubt that, historically, the relationship between the United States and the United Nations has been strained. Yet this is to be expected: The U.N. is a profoundly political body with 192 member nations seeking to advance their various, often competing, interests.³ Both Ambassador Rice and

Secretary Clinton, however, assign primary fault for the strained relationship not to the normal stresses of competing agendas but to American policies. Rice stated:

[W]e've seen the costs of disengaging. We have paid the price of stiff-arming the U.N. and spurning our international partners. The United States will lead in the 21st century—not with hubris, not by hectoring, but through patient diplomacy and a steadfast resolve to strengthen our common security by investing in our common humanity.⁴

Rice pledged to "dramatically" revamp America's role at the U.N. by working more closely with other nations on key issues and setting a tone of "decency and mutual respect rather than condescension and contempt."⁵

Based on Rice's comment that "others will likely shoulder a greater share of the global burden if the U.S. leads by example, acknowledges mistakes, corrects course when necessary, forges strategies in partnership and treats others with respect,"⁶ it is hard not to conclude that the Obama Administration sees the past U.S. policies as the primarily problem. Indeed, the Administration has focused not on

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reforming the U.N. but on reforming U.S. policy at the U.N., including:

- Adopting the Millennium Development Goals as U.S. policy, despite their many flaws as a development strategy⁷;
- Joining the Human Rights Council, which the Bush Administration had shunned because it was gravely flawed, anti-Israel, and included countries that use their positions to blunt action to promote human rights (such as China, Cuba, and Saudi Arabia)⁸;
- Rescinding the Mexico City policy prohibiting U.S. funding of abortions abroad, supporting resolutions that use the term “reproductive health” as a code for support for abortion and restoring U.S. contributions to the U.N. Population Fund;
- Supporting references to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in U.N. resolutions despite the fact that the U.S. has refused to join the court over concerns about its vulnerability to politici-

zation and the recent announcement by the ICC prosecutor that he could launch investigations of U.S. troops for actions in Afghanistan⁹; and

- Paying nearly a billion dollars in U.S. arrears to the U.N. without demanding any reforms in exchange, despite extensive evidence of fraud and corruption in U.N. peacekeeping procurement and lack of punishment for peacekeepers involved in sexual abuse or other misconduct.¹⁰

In contrast, the Administration’s agenda for U.N. reform is extremely general or completely absent. For example, Secretary Clinton did not mention U.N. reform once in her speech. Rice stated:

It’s not enough that costs be contained and funds spent without corruption; each dollar must serve its intended purpose.... Our priorities are greater transparency and accountability, stronger ethics and oversight mechanisms, and buttressing Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s initiatives to overhaul the U.N.’s procurement and human resources practices.¹¹

1. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Speech in Advance of the United Nations General Assembly,” remarks delivered at the Brookings Institution, September 18, 2009, at <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/September/20090918142754eaijfas0.2919537.html> (September 22, 2009).
2. Ambassador Susan E. Rice, “A New Course in the World, a New Approach at the UN,” remarks delivered at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs and Center on International Cooperation, August 12, 2009, at <http://paeci.state.gov/usun.state.gov/usun/briefing/statements/2009/august/127953.htm> (September 22, 2009).
3. For instance, traditional U.S. concerns about advancing accountable, representative government raise hackles among the majority of U.N. member states who are not politically “free.” See Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2009: Global Data,” at http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw09/FIW09_Tables&GraphsForWeb.pdf (September 22, 2009). Similarly, efforts by the U.S. to apply an evenhanded approach to Israel and Palestine at the U.N. run afoul of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which is overtly hostile to Israel. Another example is the periodic showdown over the U.N. budget. As the largest contributor to the U.N.—providing more than \$5 billion each year to the U.N. and related organizations—the U.S. is strongly interested in holding down costs and reducing waste, mismanagement, corruption, and inefficiency while other countries who pay very little see this as an attempt to end their favored programs.
4. Rice, “A New Course in the World.”
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. See Ambassador Terry Miller and Brett D. Schaefer, “The Global Poverty Act: The Wrong Track for U.S. Aid Policy,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1878, April 1, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/ForeignAid/wm1878.cfm>.
8. Brett D. Schaefer, “The Obama Administration Will Not Make the U.N. Human Rights Council Effective,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2432, May 11, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm2432.cfm>.
9. Brett D. Schaefer and Steven Groves, “The ICC Investigation in Afghanistan Vindicates U.S. Policy Toward the ICC,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2611, September 14, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalLaw/wm2611.cfm>.
10. Brett D. Schaefer, “Critical Reforms Required for U.N. Peacekeeping,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2313, September 8, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/bg2313.cfm>.

Ambassador Rice knows that most of these reforms have been stalled at the U.N. due to resistance by most member states. Other implemented reforms, like the U.N. Ethics Office, have been hamstrung and ignored by disparate parts of the U.N.¹² Worse, reforms that showed promise—such as the Mandate Review¹³ and the Procurement Task Force¹⁴—were terminated or strangled.

Unless the U.S. pushes hard—including being willing to withhold U.S. contributions based on evidence from previous reform efforts—U.N. reform will continue to fall short. Such shortcomings are a concern because the Administration clearly seeks U.N. involvement in more issues central to U.S. interests. Yet the organization's ability to address these issues is compromised by the lack of reform.

If the United States is to benefit from the U.N., it must lead the reform effort. Unfortunately, the U.S. is instead focused on using its political capital to tilt at multilateral windmills like urging the U.N. to address global warming and nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament—issues that require multilateral action but have historically foundered at the U.N.¹⁵

American Leadership Needed. Secretary Clinton stated, “We, in my view, ignore [the United Nations] and walk away from it at our peril.”¹⁶ Working with or through the U.N. can advance U.S. interests in certain circumstances, but Americans ignore the failings of the U.N. at their peril.

If the U.S. is to protect its interests, it must continue—as Kim R. Holmes argues in *ConUNdrum*, a new book on the U.N.¹⁷—to take the lead in addressing the many problems plaguing the U.N. system and understand when to go to the U.N. and, even more critically, when *not* to. As long as the Obama Administration has its focus inverted, U.S. interests at the U.N. and elsewhere will suffer.

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11. Rice, “A New Course in the World.”

12. Brett D. Schaefer, “U.N. Secretary-General’s Lack of Leadership Undermines Accountability,” Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 1611, September 12, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1611.cfm>.

13. In 2005, the General Assembly agreed to review the over 9,000 mandates of the General Assembly, Security Council, and ECOSOC. Only a very small number of mandates have been eliminated as of today despite the evident need for such a review. For instance, there are still active mandates dating back to the 1940s, including an active, recurrent mandate first adopted in 1946 regarding “the possible transfer of certain functions, activities and assets of the League of Nations.” In August 2008, the co-chairs of the mandate review concluded in their analysis of 279 mandates in the humanitarian cluster that only 155 mandates, or 56 percent, were “current and relevant” and that only 18 of the 52 mandates in the African development cluster, or only 35 percent, were considered current and relevant. Although this review was started years ago, it has completely stalled, and nothing has happened to address these out-of-date or irrelevant mandates that divert resources from other, more relevant activities.

14. For information on the Procurement Task Force, see Brett D. Schaefer, “The Demise of the U.N. Procurement Task Force Threatens Oversight at the U.N.,” Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 2272, February 5, 2009, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm2272.cfm>.

15. For a discussion on the U.N.’s poor record in addressing international environmental, non-proliferation and arms control, and other issues, see Brett D. Schaefer, ed., *ConUNdrum: The Limits of the United Nations and the Search for Alternatives* (Lanham, MD.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009).

16. Clinton, “Speech in Advance of the United Nations General Assembly.”

17. Kim R. Holmes, “Smart Multilateralism: When and When Not to Rely on the United Nations,” in Schaefer, *ConUNdrum*, pp. 9–29.