

Mr. Ban Ki-moon and the Future of the United Nations

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Theme: [United Nations](#)

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[The] “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Preamble- United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“Today’s human rights violations are the causes of tomorrow’s conflicts.” Mary Robinson, former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

“The United States...simply doesn’t give a damn about the United Nations, international law or critical dissent, which it regards as impotent and irrelevant.” Harold Pinter, 2005 Nobel Laureate for Literature

“The United Nations charter has a provision which was agreed to by the United States, formulated by the United States in fact, after World War II. Its says that from now on, no nation can use armed force without the permission of the U.N. Security Council. They can use force in connection with self-defense, but a country can’t use force in anticipation of self-defense. —Regarding Iraq,...the United States went to war, in violation of the charter.” Benjamin Ferencz, Chief prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials

A new Secretary-General has presided over the United Nations for more than a year, but most people ignore this fact. They can be forgiven, because very little has resulted from the October 13, 2006 election by the 192-member United Nations General Assembly of a shy South Korean diplomat, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, as the U.N. Secretary-General. On January 1, 2007, Mr. Ban Ki-moon took office as the eighth U. N. Secretary-General, succeeding Mr. Kofi Annan, for a first term lasting until December 31, 2011. He was a compromise candidate among seven candidates for the post, and he succeeded in avoiding a veto from any of the five permanent members of the Security Council. He was particularly popular with the Bush-Cheney administration because, in his capacity of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, he had pushed his own government to send South Korean troops to Iraq.

We should recall that one of the first moves by Mr. Ban Ki-moon, soon after he took office, was to reverse a long-standing United Nations opposition to the death penalty as a human rights concern. Indeed, he condoned the death penalty that had been handed down on the deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein by the Iraqi High Tribunal, stating, “The issue of capital punishment is for each and every member State to decide.”

Mr. Ban Ki-moon has also been criticized for appointing a large number of his fellow South Korean nationals to key U. N. posts, and for showing nepotism in appointing his own son-in-law to a key United Nations post in Iraq.

It remains to be seen if Mr. Ban Ki-moon has the vision, the credibility and the moral authority to bring forward the reforms that the United Nations urgently needs, if it is going to avoid the fate of irrelevancy that beset the League of Nations. So far, the only reforms the new Secretary-General has espoused have been minor administrative arrangements—and even those were contested—such as splitting the U. N. peacekeeping operation into one department handling operations and another handling arms. His proposal to combine the political affairs and disarmament department was even rejected outright.

What the United Nations needs is more than simply shuffling the chairs on the deck of the Titanic. It needs a fundamental structural reorganization if it is to play the role it was assigned originally in 1945, that is to say to promote international cooperation and to maintain international peace and security. This overall goal can only be achieved if the United Nations has the legitimacy and the means to prevent wars and to promote human rights throughout the world.

But, what should the Secretary-General, with the support of member states, do? —Logically, Mr. Ban Ki-moon should begin by declaring that the post World War II era is over and that the main obstacle to any substantial reform of the U. N. should be removed. There is, indeed, a relic of the Second World War which is still in place, It is the veto power that the five winning nations (USA, Russia, China, U.K. and France) gave themselves after WWII in the functioning of the U. N. Security Council. Mr. Ban Ki-moon should plead with the five above countries to show magnanimity and, while retaining their permanent status at the Security Council as an historical given, convince them that they should voluntarily forgo the antiquated veto that paralyzes any attempt at reforming the United Nations and at making it a functional organization. Presently, because of the veto feature, each time one of the five permanent member states is involved in a crisis or in an international dispute, the Security Council and the entire United Nations are paralyzed.

The Secretary-General should tackle the task of improving the U. N.'s democratic legitimacy and operational efficiency through fundamental reforms of the Security Council and the General Assembly. Both bodies are antiquated and ill adapted to fulfill their tasks.

First, in a true 21st century spirit, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) should better reflect the new demographic, political, and economic realities that have emerged over the last sixty years. There is a wide consensus that political and economic powerhouses such as Japan, India, Brazil and Germany, the G4 nations, should join the current five permanent members in the Security Council. These countries are large and stable democracies and economic giants that should not be left out of the world decision process.

With the current ten countries that join the Council on a regional basis, in a rotating system, for two-years terms, after having been elected by the General Assembly, a new 19-member Security Council would remain small enough to be efficient. As a substitute to the present veto enjoyed by a few members, a three-quarters majority rule could be implemented in order to guarantee that the Council's decisions reflect at all times a worldwide consensus. This would mean that the decisions and measures, couched in the form of resolutions, and which are arrived at by the Council, would have to be supported by at least fifteen members. Since all Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council, under the U. N. Charter, such a requirement would seem to be necessary if the U. N. actions are to carry a wide acceptance.

One big obstacle to enlarging the Security Council comes from the insistence of some African countries to have a permanent representative of their continent on the Council. While this is a most legitimate claim in principle, it is a difficult one to achieve in practice. First, there is no consensus in Africa about which candidate among three possible candidates (Egypt, Nigeria or South Africa) should be elected. And second, even among the later, none seems to meet the requirements of long-term political stability and economic dynamism and leadership that one would expect from a permanent member. It would be most unfortunate if the movement to reform the U. N. were to be paralyzed because of these facts.

Presently, the presidency of the Security Council rotates among the members of the Council monthly, in alphabetical order. This leaves the U. N. Secretary-General somewhat out of the loop, even though he should be seen as the main spokesperson for the United Nations. An obvious reform would be to designate the Secretary-General as the ex officio presiding officer of the Council. He would then cease to be regarded as simply a dignified bureaucrat who heads the U. N. Secretariat, rather than being the main spokesperson for the whole United Nations.

While it is true that the U.N. is not a world government, but rather a forum for the world's 192 sovereign states to debate issues and determine collective courses of action, this does not mean that it should not improve its democratic legitimacy, especially as the world has become more and more globalized and is in need of new institutions to reflect this new reality.

Presently the General Assembly is composed of all member nations, and each one of them has an equal number of representatives designated by their respective governments. This world parliament, which meets annually from September to December, has important responsibilities, such as to oversee the budget of the U. N., appoint the non-permanent members to the Security Council, and receive reports from other bodies of the U. N. —Such important issues have to be decided by a two-thirds majority of those members present and voting. —The General Assembly can also adopt resolutions on other subjects and this then only requires a simple majority. —Each member country has one vote. —On the other hand, such resolutions are not binding on the member states and the Security Council has no obligation to implement them, with the consequence that in most cases, they remain pious wishes. We can therefore say that the General Assembly de facto functions as a limited world parliament, but only for governments.

A possible reform designed to raise the democratic profile and prestige of the General Assembly among people worldwide would be to assign four representatives to each member country and to encourage countries to have half of them, or better still, all of them, elected in country-wide general elections. This could be the most important step to insure that the United Nations be seen as a truly representative international body.

On the other hand, since there is no proportional representation in the U. N., and to insure that its decisions are made and supported by a large worldwide consensus, and especially to avoid a potentially disastrous structural North-South split, a three-quarters majority or even an eighty-percent decision rule could be mandated for important decisions. Presently, because of the one state, one vote system, it is theoretically possible for small states comprising just eight percent of the world population to pass a resolution by a two-thirds vote. No large country would ever accept to place its fate and interests in the hands of such a small group of people.

This, of course, is an incomplete list of issues and ideas about how to proceed to reform the United Nations. You are most welcome to add your own views to this important subject.

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