

What to do with the United Nations?

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The United Nations is at a pivotal moment in its sixty-year history. Can it become an instrument of democratic global governance? Daniele Archibugi & Raffaele Marchetti draw on the various proposals for UN reform to suggest a new way ahead based on transparency and legality backed by political action.

The United Nations has died”, we are told again and again. In the 1990s alone, we heard this gloomy pronouncement during the siege of Sarajevo, the genocide in Rwanda, Nato’s intervention over Kosovo, the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, and after each terrorist attack. Those proclaiming the mantra include angry, desperate groups vainly seeking its protection: Chechen separatists and African liberation movements, Kashmir and Tamil minorities, landless Kurds and Palestinians.

The almost perverse pleasure in decreeing the UN dead is perhaps rooted in the widespread expectations that the UN would become a much more important centre of power in the post-cold war geopolitical landscape. For four decades after 1945, the organisation had been paralysed by the veto power, formal and substantial, of the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States. The crucial decisions were taken in secret meetings where the respective leaders – Khrushchev and Kennedy, Brezhnev and Nixon, Gorbachev and Reagan – recast the world’s boundaries.

With this era of bipolar duelling gone after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many wished to see the arid, short-term worldview of “realism” give way to a wider project of

controlled cooperation; and to see the cold war’s winning side – the liberal west dominated by the US – undergo a decisive political change.

The result of these hopes was an ambitious project: to make the UN the central institution on the international stage, and in so doing to fill the gaping institutional chasm between the UN’s official responsibilities and its actual power. At the heart of the project was the idea of democracy, but on a global level. International organisations, including the inter-war League of Nations and the United Nations itself, had issued from the dreams of American politicians Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, who envisioned the long-term projection of their own constitutional system onto the planetary level. Thus, the magic word “democracy,” previously reserved for the internal character of states or regimes, came to be applied to an international body and process.

The idea that not just nations but relations *between* nations – diplomacy – could also be democratic was revived in the mid-1990s, at the time of the UN’s fiftieth anniversary. It was exemplified in a host of experts’ commissions charged with elaborating multilateral perspectives compatible with the political and economic interests of the west (and not necessarily

detrimental to the rest of the world). Retired politicians spent their time travelling from one independent commission to another, relaunching from their new perspectives those audacious proposals that they regularly shelved when in power.

In response, realist commentators exercised conservative scepticism, noting with sophisticated arguments that such hopes were naïve. Why, they asked, should the winners of the cold war be so altruistic as to renounce their booty? There was no reason to expect the new unipolar world power selflessly to opt for multilateralism. It is no surprise, then, that such proposals have been ignored as too divergent from the pitiless logic of shortsighted interests.

The American friend

But the failure of the project to put the UN at the centre of democratic global governance has not meant that the organisation has been sidelined. Not even the United States of George W Bush has been able to ignore the UN: witness the then US secretary of state, Colin Powell's multiple visits to the Security Council in the lead-up to the Iraq invasion in search of support for his government's bellicose intentions.

Every television channel in the world showed Powell showing pictures of the truck that was presumed to carry weapons of mass destruction. It has seldom happened that a state felt the need openly to justify its actions in front of the world institution that has the legal mandate to pass a resolution on this kind of international issue. The chambers of the UN have been in the spotlight only when the organisation has been humbled and made irrelevant.

The neo-conservative thesis is, after all, clear enough: the UN can have a role only when there is not too vast a gulf between the will of those holding real power (today, the US) and what international legal norms dictate. From this follows the idea that any change in the organisation must reduce the gap, and make the UN even closer to the politics of Washington. A humiliation such as that inflicted on Washington when the Security Council refused to approve the Iraq invasion should thus never happen again.

In order to make his politics even clearer, the American president unveiled two disruptive appointments: Paul Wolfowitz as president of the World Bank and John Bolton as US ambassador to the UN. The first nomination was accepted unanimously

by the bank's board of directors; the second was more contested and the concern voiced (even by some Republican senators) forced Bush to sneak him in as a "recess appointment" without confirmation hearings. The difference makes clear that the checks and balances *internal* to the US political system are more effective in counterbalancing the will of the Bush administration than those in multilateral institutions.

This is the core of the issue at stake in the debate over UN reform: on the one hand, any formal or substantial change in the UN is unthinkable without the consent of the US. Any institutional change must take into account the agenda of the world's lone superpower, the country that hosts the UN's headquarters and pays about a quarter of its ordinary budget. On the other hand, the US right perceives the devolution of any

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power to the UN as a reduction of its autonomy in foreign policy. The current US government consequently opposes any fundamental restructuring of the organisation.

The dimension of American power helps explain why expectations for reform have so far been disappointed. The grand reform aspirations presented in 1995 have come to naught; the changes proclaimed at the turn of the new millennium have evaporated. Will it be different this time, when a large international gathering assembles in New York on 14-16 September 2005 for the sixtieth-anniversary conference?

Reforms and counter-reforms

To argue for the democratic reform of the UN today has a political meaning that goes far beyond the viability of its own specific targets. Rethinking the UN helps to show that the democratisation of international institutions is as important as domestic democratisation, and that the former might have a crucial role in the latter. It illustrates an alternative political strategy to the "export" of democracy: rather than forcing poor countries to embrace the democratic creed through aerial bombardment, it aims to prove that free peoples are ready to include other peoples who aim at self-government and tolerance within their wider community. There is no better place to advance this goal than in the glass building in New York, the United Nations headquarters.

Despite the failures of the various reform processes since the birth of the organisation, proposals for revision of the UN structure continue to animate the debates of foreign ministries and civil society organisations all over the world.

The plenary session of the general assembly on 14-16 September will meet to discuss progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. In the same meeting, and on the heels of the secretary-general's March 2005 report, *In Larger Freedom*, the discussion will also address the problem of institutional reform.

The newly-appointed John Bolton has presented 750 late amendments to the twenty-six-page "Draft Outcome Document". In thus infuriating the diplomatic corps, he has quite possibly found the most effective way to shelve any progress. But in spite of this abrupt attempt to obstruct its work, the general assembly will deal with a consistent body of proposals on which governments, diplomats and, above all, world opinion should stake out positions – since all will be affected by the outcome.

What can change at the UN?

A huge set of proposals has been presented for the UN system. Concerning the Security Council, Kofi Annan's report recommends an increase of members to make the council more representative. The Socialist International suggests enlarging the Security Council by giving a seat to regional organisations (including the European Union and the Organisation of African States).

More ambitious proposals from civil society, also sponsored by the Socialist International, address the key issue of the veto power, suggesting that it first be limited and in the long run abolished. The experience of the last fifteen years suggests, however, that the Security Council is the most sensitive area for reform and the least likely to approve changes, because of rivalries among member-states. It would, however, be wrong to focus on this proposal only, for many other aspects of the organisation are in urgent need of radical change.

The Economic and Social Council (Ecosoc) is one. The Socialist International has rightly suggested a twofold reform strategy. In the short term, it recommends strengthening the role of the council as coordinator of policy dialogue among the different international economic institutions; in the longer term, it proposes the creation of a new Economic, Social and Environmental Council with equal status to the Security Council.

This renewed council would have a mandate for such action as strategic coordination and assessment of the performances of specialised agencies; supervision of global public goods; and management not only of economic and social problems, but also of environment, development and debt issues. It would

clearly also require greater financial resources and to be open to regional and civil-society representatives.

Another controversial reform proposal on the agenda of the general-assembly meeting concerns humanitarian intervention. Too often the UN's lack of an adequate institutional structure to deal with humanitarian crises has left the door open to individual states, whose interests are always divided between the humanitarian and the strategic. In other instances, like Rwanda, the absence of adequate instruments forced the UN to opt for non-intervention.

The notion embodied in the Responsibility to Protect project represents a turning-point in discussion of the UN mandate. How, why, and when is intervention appropriate in cases involving the systematic violation of human rights, and who can practice it? Can the UN act in an effective and timely manner? These issues are addressed in the November 2004 report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change – as well as in *In Larger Freedom*, which recommends the creation of an intergovernmental peace-building commission.

Reform of the general assembly itself is also on the table. Any democratic reform of the UN should also revise the structure of the general assembly to allow for greater inclusion of three types of international agents: non-governmental organisations, multinational corporations and regional organisations.

Among those who support such enlargement are Kofi Annan himself and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, chair of the High-Level Panel on UN-Civil Society. Many important recent UN events, including the informal interactive hearings of the general assembly with NGOs, civil-society organisations and the private sector (in New York on 23-24 June 2005) can be seen as first steps in this direction. If this sort of forum were to become periodical and institutionalised, it would already form the nucleus of a parliamentary assembly.

Among the various proposals aiming to fill this democratic void, three emerge as the most innovative:

- that both government and parliament nominate national representatives to the UN
- that mechanisms of representation are created in which national members of parliament could take part in the UN
- that an "assembly of peoples" is created alongside the general assembly; this more radical proposal would offer a forum for NGOs, local institutions and for organised civil society

Two additional themes merit mention: human rights and migration. Kofi Annan's report recommends substituting the UN Commission on Human Rights with a reduced but more authoritative Council of Human Rights. This new body would confirm the centrality of human rights as universal, indivisible and interdependent in the UN system.

On migration, Kofi Annan has since November 2003 advocated the creation of a UN agency specifically dedicated to the theme of migration and has called for a high-level dialogue on international migration and development. In this vein, the creation of a world migration organisation (as opposed to the International Migration Organisation that presently exists) would provide a chance to increase international cooperation and secure humane and effective migratory policies.

A new proposal: principles

Beyond these issues, what overall strategy should be adopted to promote democratic reform of the international system, starting with the UN? Two extreme attitudes should be rejected. The first is an anti-systemic perspective, according to which any coordination of international policies (including those carried out at the UN level) is dangerous. This would, if pursued, result in a power vacuum.

The second is the attempt to make international organisations purely administrative devices that serve the convenience of national governments. This would reduce the UN to a mere technical secretariat, a paper-pusher for decisions taken elsewhere.

In contrast to these unsuitable approaches, we instead advocate a genuinely political, multilateral and reformist strategy, where the UN becomes the principal institutional locus of world politics. In full awareness of the current limits of the organisation and its institutional and formal difficulties, our perspective is based on a number of fundamental democratic values embodied in the UN – and largely absent in diplomatic practice. These can be summed up in two words: transparency and legality.

Transparency in decision-making

In the UN system, governments are called on publicly to announce and acknowledge their actions, in complete contrast with the typical procedures of international diplomacy, which are layered with the

dust of *raisons d'état* and grounded in intelligence that can be cited but not shown. The farce of the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction has proved how little correspondence exists between secrecy in foreign policy and the interests of the citizens.

In this context, the UN is one of the institutions that, at least partially, contribute to the dismantling of this well-orchestrated smokescreen, for, if fully empowered, it could allow public opinion a better grasp of international affairs and consequently the capacity freely to assess specific political cases.

Rule of law

Some regard international law as a doormat; yet all international organisations exist because international law exists, however imperfect it is in practice. Without sanctions for transgressors, the significance of international law will continue to be limited, but it remains a critical foundation of any civil interaction. Law remains such even when it is violated. Moreover, it cannot be denied that world politics is today dominated by countries based on democratic law.

Despite this, the last fifteen years clearly show that democratic states can fail in their respect for legality, and are not inclined to introduce democratic reforms into the international system. Even more, a clear paradox has emerged: democratic states (beginning with the US) are often less inclined than authoritarian states to sign international agreements and to comply with their regulations. An unbearable situation thus results in which democratic states define the norms of international law in order to make weaker (often non-democratic) states comply with them. Revitalising the UN thus requires democratic states to increase their level of compliance with international legal norms and to strengthen a shared juridical system which new democracies are reasonably motivated to join.

It is thus reasonable to ask whether the proposals for reform surveyed above are merely going to be a pitiful consolation for beautiful souls; a sort of tribute that political actors proclaim even as they know that they will never be applied.

A new proposal: strategy

It is striking that the themes raised only a decade ago by a small group of political utopians and specialist technocrats have now been adopted by much more

authoritative institutions. UN reform is no longer discussed only among a few diplomats: the language and the proposals advanced by visionary global movements have infiltrated the entire establishment.

But in order to become reality, these reforms need to be supported by political action. The explicit support of the secretary-general is not enough. A democratisation of the UN requires a much greater coalition of political actors.

Recent experience – in particular the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the approval of the treaty on banning landmines – shows that changes in international norms are possible only when a mixed coalition is formed with selected governments and transnational civil-society organisations.

It is difficult to think that the ICC and the Treaty on Landmines could have been approved without the active role of such committed governments in Italy and Canada. Crucial in this is the “small steps” strategy: civil society and state actors pursuing specific reforms while leaving open the possibility of opting out or joining in at different points. Civil society campaigns represent an important, but not sufficient, condition for producing institutional changes at the international level. It is thus necessary for global civil society to find trustworthy partners among governments ready to support such initiatives.

The Socialist International has recently become an important player for UN reform, encouraging the governments headed by its member parties actively to support its proposals. Antonio Gutierrez, its former secretary, has personally taken part in the Reclaim Our UN campaign promoted by the Italian Peace Table.

The Brazilian government of Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva has close ties with the World Social Forum. The Spanish government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, through the initiative for the Alliance among Civilisations, is playing a role as well.

Europe too can play a much more active role. The complex experiment of European democracy is, increasingly, an institutional model for many of the world’s other macro-regions. The European role in the international arena is not based on coercion, but rather on common interest and incentives. In the international arena, the old continent often acts as a balancing force against the extremism of the hegemonic power.

Despite internal divisions, European governments could present a common strategy to foster a more active role for the UN. But above all, it is to be hoped that world opinion will produce the beneficial effect of awakening the American people.

In the 1840s, the American pacifist William Ladd advanced some far-sighted proposals, such as the creation of a congress of nations as a legislative body and an international court as a judicial body. The United Nations general assembly and the International Court of Justice were close approximations of those proposals. Ladd also maintained that the conditions for a world executive power were not in place, and that this should have been left in the hands of world opinion, which he graciously and optimistically called “the Queen of the world”. For many decades the Queen has been a sleeping beauty, but she has eventually woken up. The times are now ready for her to take the place she deserves in the affairs of our planet.

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