

What kind of United Nations do we want?

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The end of the Cold War has given the United Nations a new opportunity to fulfill the expectations it created in 1946. Yet the context of mistrust between the superpowers prevalent when the UN Charter was drawn up provided for a structure that is no longer needed or desired. The time has come to reform and strengthen the UN's role. It is imperative not only to recognize the UN's achievements, failures and shortcomings, but, most of all, to define the role the international community wants it to perform over the next fifty years.

A new world order?

While everyone agrees the Cold War is over, we don't necessarily know what lies ahead. Since much depends on our ability to imagine a better future, we should dream of a peaceful and prosperous world. Stability requires the strengthening of international organizations.

As far as the UN is concerned, the Secretary General has prepared a document entitled *An agenda for peace* (June 1992)¹ which describes what the organization needs to do in terms of preventive diplomacy, peace-making and peace-keeping. This 24-page document is an extraordinary

summary of the most urgent tasks ahead for the UN which would assist it not only in maintaining peace but in confronting the thorniest problem of international security: foreseeing and resolving the sources of conflict.

The Liberal International praised *An agenda for peace* as well as producing its own report in December 1992² addressing international security as well as economic, social and environmental issues, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and international law. The purpose of the report is to indicate in which fields and in which ways the work of the UN can be strengthened.

While it is difficult to argue against a stronger UN, recent developments should be analyzed with caution. The organization is currently overextended and underfunded. During the last three years it has been involved in 14 peace missions, the same number of missions it undertook in all its preceding 43 years.

The estimated cost of peace-keeping has grown from 750 million U.S. dollars in 1991 to 2.9 billion in 1992. Member nations have contributed only 2 billion towards this cost, leaving a shortfall of almost 900 million for this year alone. These figures do not include United Nations commitments to Somalia and

Mozambique, which could double the UN's expenses.³

The issue is not only who pays and when, but how successful the increased activity has been. UN intervention in Yugoslavia is an example of unfulfilled expectations, especially in light of the difficulties in providing protection to the civil population.

But the case of Somalia will certainly be seen as a watershed. Once the U.S. army leaves, it will be difficult for the UN to take responsibility for the transition to an orderly civil life. The argument may arise that a foreign military presence can disrupt more than it can build. Many more questions may arise in cases where UN humanitarian intervention in a country's affairs may be accepted as a legitimate response to internal aggression.

While the UN experience in El Salvador and Namibia has been of success in ending civil wars, there is still a long way to go in the peace-building operations in Cambodia and Angola. Much has to be assessed and learned from these experiences.

In the 1960s and 70's the decolonization of Africa was seen as one of the UN's greatest successes. It was one of the few issues on which the U.S. and the Soviet Union could agree: limiting European power and influence abroad. As the emerging nations of the world became a battle ground for ideological struggles, it was extremely difficult for them to

¹ *An agenda for peace*. General assembly forty-seventh session. Report of the Secretary General on the work of the Organization. A/47/277.

² *Strengthening of the United Nations*. A publication of the Liberal International. The report was presented to Boutros Ghali, Secretary General of the United Nations, in New York on December 17, 1992, by Otto Graf Lambsdorff, President of the Liberal International and leader of the German FDP.

³ Stephen John Stedman, "The new interventionists," *Foreign Affairs*. America and the world 1992/1993, Vol. 72, No. 1, p. 10.

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develop democratic political institutions.

Two decades later, we are witnessing a continental collapse as a consequence of the breakdown of traditional structures and emerging civil institutions. Today the four horses of the Apocalypse roam through Africa, while humanitarian foreign intervention may be interfering with economic development sustained by indigenous and stable political institutions. If rapid decolonization in

the 60's raised many legitimate questions, let us hope food aid does not hamper the ability of developing countries to provide for themselves.

There is hardly a more positive development within the UN than its capacity to address the global issues that a more interdependent world needs to deal with. In spite of criticisms of last year's Rio Conference, we have to recognize that many great steps forward have been made, standards have been set and, most of all,

international consciousness has been raised. We are familiar now with the concepts of biodiversity and sustainable development, and every country will have to follow international standards sooner or later.

The whole question of development, as viewed from a variety of perspectives, deserves priority attention. So does human rights. One of the main goals of the UN should be to keep setting the standards for conduct. Yet there still

The UN: old and new problems

The challenges, both old and new, facing the United Nations in its mission to preserve world peace can be seen in the following problem areas:

- *Ethnic-religious conflicts and the disintegration of nations.* A UN report published in 1993 reveals that "in 1989 and 1990 there were 33 armed conflicts, each of which produced more than one thousand casualties. Only one of these conflicts was between nation-states. All the others were civil wars: conflicts between ethnic, religious, or other types of groups within nation-states." In 1992, more than 12,000 people in India and 6,000 in the former Yugoslavia died as a result of ethnic confrontations. There are 16 armed conflicts in the former USSR, while 62 ethnic groups are presently in conflict in the 27 nations of Africa.
- *Ecological devastation.* According to the UN report, the deterioration of the environment is a result of the model of economic development that has been in force since the "Second Industrial Revolution." "The pace of extinction of the Earth's species has accelerated in the past two decades. It rose from one species per day in 1960 to one species per hour in 1990, to one species every 12 minutes in 1992." Existing resources are minimal in light of the magnitude of the problem. The Rio de Janeiro Summit stressed that for each dollar spent on saving the ecosystem, 1,000 dollars are invested in projects that are highly damaging to the environment.
- *Trade wars.* In the post-Cold War world, trade war is not limited to the sphere of a single nation but is now waged by groups or communities of countries, which formally or informally mobilize their resources to protect their markets, penetrate others, and obtain advantages for themselves. The multilateral mechanisms that were created beginning in the 1950s, for the purpose of controlling struggles between multinational companies or regional blocs, have been overtaken; today they show clear signs of wearing out and losing step with current problems. A recent example is the failure of the Uruguay Round of GATT trade negotiations.
- *The growing gap between North and South.* The great economic imbalance between the developed nations of the North and the underdeveloped ones of the South is increasingly leading to diplomatic conflicts. The level of poverty in the underdeveloped nations is cause for alarm. In 1985 1.1 billion people lived in poverty in these countries. 75% of them were inhabitants of South and East Asia. In Latin America and the Caribbean 20% of the total population lives in poverty. The "lost decade" of the 1980s had devastating effects. Poverty in urban areas grew, reversing the previous trend: in 1988 the urban poor (94 million people) were more numerous than the rural poor (76 million). In contrast, the population of the developed North grew more slowly, in percentage terms poverty grew much less than in the South, and economies continued to grow at a certain pace. From 1982 to 1991, the per capita growth rate in the underdeveloped countries was half that of the developed countries.

Source: "Informe especial," *El Financiero*, July 31, 1993.

The UN: reforms urgently needed

The United Nations Organization has shown itself to be incapable of adequately responding to the accumulation of international problems which reflect the emergence of a new world order. This has given rise to proposals for urgent reforms of the UN's traditional mechanisms. Yet views are divided between those who propose moderate changes and those who speak of the urgency of "refounding" the UN.

The moderates propose cosmetic changes which would reflect "the new world balances of power":

- Reforming the Security Council so that Germany and Japan may join the exclusive club of five permanent members, as a recognition of their new role on the world stage. In order to provide a counterweight to the developed nations' power, the inclusion of two highly-populated underdeveloped nations would also be sought —India and Brazil in the first place.
- Transforming the system of national representation in the UN Security Council so as to accommodate blocs or communities of nations.
- Reforming the United Nations Charter so as to include the struggle against poverty and the defense of human rights among the organization's central objectives in the post-Cold War period.
- Eliminating obsolete agencies, such as the Decolonization Council, which is currently analyzing only the case of the Palau Islands.

Other nations propose reorganizing the entire UN, arguing that new challenges cannot be met with the logic of power that prevailed before the post-Cold War period. Among their proposals are:

- Abolishing the right of veto in the Security Council, since they consider it anti-democratic.
- Transferring the functions of the Security Council to the Economic and Social Council, which would imply the recognition that the main threat to world peace is the growing international socio-economic imbalance, and that the UN must not be a simple instrument at the service of the most powerful nations.
- Abolishing the principle of "state sovereignty" in favor of "citizens' sovereignty," in order to resolve the contradictions in the United Nations Charter between individual rights and the sovereignty of states, as well as between the idea of equality as a normative characteristic of each state and the real inequality imposed by the Charter's superpower regime.

Source: "Informe especial," *El Financiero*, July 31, 1993.

seems to be a divorce within the UN family. While deliberations in the General Assembly and its specialized agencies seem to drift endlessly, the institutions created at Bretton Woods—the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the International Development Corporation— follow their own criteria.

Fortunately the Third World rhetoric of the 70's has scaled down with the crumbling of Communism. Yet across the U.S. there is still latent distrust towards an institution which was used by many member nations as a forum for Western-bashing. There is work to be done towards upgrading the image of the UN and furthering

the education of younger generations about its work and value for mankind.

Although East-West and North-South confrontations have begun to give way to a more enlightened global cooperation, the fact that the political and economic bodies of the UN family have different governing boards still results in the lack of a coherent policy. An incredible drain of energy, time and money is produced by the endless discussions and resolutions in ECOSOC, the second and third commissions of the General Assembly, UNCTAD, UNIDO and other specialized agencies that seem to live in a world of their own.

Meanwhile, any significant issue regarding trade and finance is resolved by GATT and the Bretton Woods institutions mentioned above. Whereas developing countries support the deliberative forums, with their corresponding bureaucracies and the mountains of papers they generate that hardly anybody reads, the case must be made for a more coherent trade-aid-finance approach to development assistance under World Bank guidance.

Much may be learned from the "UN Nordic Project," which made an assessment of multilateral assistance in 1990. One of its conclusions was that governments consider the UN's approach inadequate because:

- The funds are too widely scattered in small projects.
- The UNDP (United Nations Development Project) does not utilize its network role and potential capacity to address core policy issues.
- The implementation of the projects through the specialized agencies is not adequate as regards quality in general and performance of experts in particular.⁴

⁴ *The Nordic UN Project*. Perspectives on multilateral assistance. Stockholm, December 1990. (In this text, the term "specialized agencies" does not include Bretton Woods institutions.)

Reform or perish

Many of those who study, think or talk about the UN—still a small minority throughout the world—are still afraid to mention the idea of reforming the Charter. They believe that with so many issues of peace and war, life and death, at hand, time and energy should not be wasted on another UN debate.

I would argue the contrary. The world has changed and there is no way to avoid the painful process of questioning the status quo of international institutions—not if we want to be around in the next century. We have to democratize and trim the structure of the UN. We also need to make way for the enforcement of its resolutions.

Although the mere existence of the Security Council is to some degree undemocratic, there has to be a compromise between solidarity and reality in the world community. And it is unrealistic today to ignore major world players like Japan and Germany, particularly given that they are going to be paying for many of the activities that we all want the institution to perform.

Nothing is more dangerous than a bureaucracy serving itself and no bureaucracy is more difficult to control than the “old boys’ network” of the UN structure. Serious steps must be taken towards eliminating some specialized agencies that have proven to have very little impact on the lives of countries or individuals. Both at the international and regional level, there is an enormous amount of duplication, with heavy costs in comparison to what is obtained in return. Certainly a master plan would make the necessary changes easier to achieve.

In the case of Latin America, there are a number of institutions that duplicate functions supposedly covered by the UN. Yet we all want to show support for the long-cherished goal of integration. All around the

world, governments have undertaken structural adjustment programs to reduce spending and become more efficient. The same task, however unpopular, has to be undertaken at the world level, if we want to have working institutions.

Not all is rotten in Denmark. Some agencies need to be praised and receive additional support. The UN High Commission of Refugees is doing an extraordinary task, considering its resources. For example, in Mexico the Agency has helped all parties involved in dealing with Guatemalan refugees.

Commitment?

For over a century, a common saying in my country was “poor Mexico, so far away from God, and so close to the United States.” We have become more pragmatic in recent times and have decided, in the context of GATT, to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement with Canada and the U.S. This agreement complements Mexico’s commitment to global free trade and in no way constitutes fortress-building.

Despite learning how to take advantage of our location and surroundings in a competitive world economy, we still become very sensitive when “interventionist fever” starts heating up on Capitol Hill.

The Clinton administration has given us guarantees that the kidnapping of Mexican nationals to be tried in U.S. courts will not be repeated. It has also expressed second thoughts about the Supreme Court decision backing the application of U.S. law outside U.S. territory—to the relief of Canada and Latin America.

Nevertheless, it seems that the rise in support for greater intervention abroad is not yet over. President Clinton has put priority on domestic matters, but many are shopping around for new causes to fight, such as military intervention to control drug trafficking in the Americas, now that

communism has disappeared. We can only wish that determination would be applied with the same zeal to stopping domestic consumption.

World stability cannot depend on the result of the balance between the extremes of interventionism and isolationism in Washington. We need a stronger UN with a clear commitment to respect and promote the development of and compliance with international law.

This same commitment will have to be evident in the debate that must accompany the reforms needed to strengthen the UN. Moreover, if we really want a UN that is able to prevent the emergence of conflict, we need to provide effective tools and resources for information-gathering and a more active multilateral diplomacy.

If we are going to restructure multilateral aid, it is necessary to increase World Bank lending as well as the bank’s capacity for developing projects in those countries where they are most needed. Sustainable development also means combating extreme poverty to avoid the depletion of the world’s natural resources. After all, we know now better than ever that we are all in the same boat.

Conclusion

Governments, non-governmental organizations, political parties, academic and civil institutions must be consulted as to how, through greater involvement, international cooperation and respect for international law can be furthered.

A new era of greater UN effectiveness should be welcomed, but not for the purpose of serving the whims of one or a very few countries. Participation furthers responsibility, and both should enhance commitment to peace and economic development in the next century. At the same time, care must be taken not to paralyze the decision-making capacity of UN institutions ❧