

solution. Mexico is a developing country with limited room for maneuver. Therefore, it has in the multilateral institutions the valuable opportunity to forge joint positions and agendas that are important both to it and to other nations.

It is in Mexico's interests that the world be more peaceful and prosperous, but that interest will not materialize by working sporadically with or isolated from the community of nations. **MM**

UN Security Council Is the U.S. Playing at Multilateralism?

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The pledge for multilateralism is the defining feature of Barack Obama's foreign policy as the newly elected president, and it has been used to indicate a radical shift from the George W. Bush administration: a fresh start for the U.S. in the world. The forty-fourth president's personality, beliefs and political career allow him to aspire to effectively launch such a campaign. So far, Obama's multilateralist strategy has been well received by international leaders and an important share of international public opinion; however, every single move is being tested and questioned, and not every initiative —bilateral or multilateral— can be considered totally successful. In this regard, the United Nations (UN) Security Council becomes an interesting arena for observing the United States' "new" behavior and, most importantly, for analyzing the international response and the construction of areas of opportunity for cooperation between permanent and non-permanent Security Council members, Mexico among them. In this sense, it can be argued that Washington's willingness is about to be tested in this very important arena.

As exclusive and outdated as the Security Council is, it remains a fundamental UN body, a sounding board for the U.S. position in the world and a mirror of power distribution among the countries represented. Although unreformed, the Security Council still plays a role, especially in defining positions on the issues that top the international security

agenda: North Korea's nuclear threat, the Arab-Israeli conflict and, of course, humanitarian aid. In order to understand the scope of U.S. action in the Security Council and its grand strategy's trends and risks, it is necessary to analyze the evidence of Obama's approach to the UN and his possibilities for success in a worldwide perspective.

THE MULTILATERAL PLEDGE

During the first months of his administration, Obama has established clear differences with George W. Bush in terms of approach, mechanisms and commitments on foreign policy. On this point, the most eloquent document is the USUN Progress Report: "A New Era of Engagement: Advancing America's Interests in the World" issued by the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Dr. Susan Rice.¹ In this document, the administration makes a clear, direct statement in favor of multilateralism and cooperation by recognizing that the U.S. cannot deal on its own with the threats of the twenty-first century and that the rest of the world cannot succeed without U.S. involvement. In this framework, diplomacy regains a paramount place in foreign policy strategy, and pragmatism overtakes ideology as the main guideline for decision making. The apparent dismissal of ideological tendencies is coupled with a steady attachment to principles. Actually, the debate between former Vice-president Dick Cheney and President Obama on closing Guantanamo illustrates perfectly the opposition between ideology and principle-led foreign policies.²

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REPRESENTATION MATTERS

During his first week in the White House, President Obama restored the UN ambassador's post to cabinet rank and appointed Susan E. Rice. This appointment has several meanings and is crucial for understanding the new administration's position on the UN and its performance in the UNSC, especially if compared with the hardliners John Negroponte or John Bolton, U.S. ambassadors to the UN during the Bush administration.

Negroponte represented the U.S. in the UN during the worst episode of unilateralism. Even though he did not have as strong an ideological identification as Bolton, he was criticized for his involvement in the Iran-contra affair, and his complicity in covering up and implicit fostering of human rights violations during his term as U.S. ambassador in Honduras (1981-1985). He will be remembered as the U.S. ambassador who had to persuade Security Council members to support the Iraq invasion in 2003, and later, as the first U.S. ambassador in post-Saddam Hussain Iraq to cover up the implications of military involvement.

Bolton represented the bitterest kind of radical neo-conservatism and was widely known for his open dismissal of the United Nations, his pledge to withdraw from it and his public statement that the 38-floor UN building was a nuisance. His appointment was not confirmed by the Senate and made a mockery of the UN's authority for the U.S. It should be mentioned that Bolton actively participated in the design of the Project of the New American Century, a neo-conservative initiative that profoundly delineated George W. Bush's foreign policy agenda. Current Vice-president Joseph Biden replied to his nomination saying, "I have always voted against nominees who oppose the avowed purpose of the position for which they have been nominated."³

Rice has had a sound career as an expert on international organizations, peacekeeping operations and weak states. It was thought that her focus on weak states and African affairs would move her away from the priorities of the U.S. security agenda.⁴ However, her expertise on these matters may bring a deeper understanding of the problems that have dominated the discussion about peacekeeping operations and humanitarian crisis relief. This assumption is based on her constant recall of the links between security and development and the risks that weak states represent for world peace in terms of democratic institutions and severe underdevelopment. Her position on Darfur sparked polarized reactions since she supported a tougher response to the alleged genocide by recalling

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It can be understood that this new era of engagement initiated by President Obama has the aim of overcoming the shameful episode between President Bush and the United Nations during the debate on the war on Iraq, by ensuring that the UN is a unique forum for conflict resolution, despite recognizing its limitations. This public acknowledgement is a radical shift from the arrogant, imperialist image that the invasion of Iraq sparked. This kind of rejection of self-assumed imperial faculties may seem unreal, dishonest or merely rhetorical. However, if analyzed through the lens of this strategy, it is pragmatic if the ultimate objective is to enhance U.S. leadership and regain the international legitimacy the previous administration lost. Is there evidence to support the discourse? This remains to be confirmed, since North Korean nuclear threats may pose an important challenge to the Security Council and Obama's multilateral pledge. One example of the commitment is the intention to gain a seat on the recently created UN Human Rights Council, severely criticized by the previous administration for an alleged bias against Israel.

the principle of the “responsibility to protect” in order to avoid another Rwanda. For some hardcore realists, responsibility to protect is just a modern label for intervention, and for advocates, it is the essence of collective security. In this regard, some are concerned about her possible inclination to militarist solutions in the case of humanitarian crises.⁵

Over the past eight years, the regrettable Iraq episode has been by far the worst moment in relations between the international community represented in the UN and the U.S. So, since unilateral action consolidated as the preferred U.S. foreign policy path and disregard for multilateral institutions became so entrenched during the Bush administration, it is difficult for Obama to be convincing about his pledge to multilateralism and the diplomatic resolution of conflicts.

PRIORITIES: CHANGING CONTINUITY

Within the Security Council, the issues will remain basically the same: non-proliferation, humanitarian crises, peacekeeping operations, etc. However, the approach may change according to the Obama administration’s priorities and its mechanisms for action. He has a stronger position on Darfur and the prosecution of Omar Al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court. On peacekeeping, one assertion deserves to be included in the analysis because of its pragmatism: peacekeeping operations are seen as critical for managing international crises while inaction or military intervention are considered ineffective.⁶ On this issue, we see a strong argument, more objective and rational than others based on principles: “UN peacekeeping is also cost-effective for the United States; instead of paying 100 percent of the costs for an unilateral deployment, the U.S. pays about one-fourth of the costs for UN peacekeeping, with other UN members collectively sharing the burden for the rest.”⁷ This is the most objective explanation of why multilateralism is preferable in that it is not only financially effective, but also—and more importantly—in terms of political costs, alliances, trust and international image. For instance, in Iraq and Afghanistan, the UN is playing a major role in conflict resolution and assistance to the internally displaced population and capacity building for consolidating a democratic state.

Just as Iran emerged recently as Obama’s first foreign policy crisis, North Korea may become the first test for his multilateral strategy within the UN. It took a lot of time and diplomatic effort to adopt Resolution 1874 (with the approval

of China and Russia) to tighten political and financial sanctions against that country. Although not as tough as the United States and Japan wanted, it triumphed over China’s concern about reducing commercial exchanges with North Korea, an eventual regime collapse in its neighboring country and the possibility of having a U.S. military presence on its border. It is a considerable improvement if compared with the weak presidential statement the Security Council issued in April condemning the missile trials. A victory for the Obama presidency, indeed, regardless of the ongoing concern about resolution enforcement.

AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY FOR MEXICO

Traditionally, cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico has been carried out in the shadow of bilateral relations. Some-

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times agreement on the bilateral seems to be conditioned to acquiescing on the multilateral, and this undermines Mexico’s possibilities of playing an alternative role *vis-à-vis* the U.S. In any case, the bilateral is unquestionably ubiquitous, and Mexico’s limitations in terms of its lack of an agenda for expressing rhetorical advocacy for international activism increase the effect of the bilateral burden. On the operational front, Mexican activism can only seem to be exercised within the framework of international organizations, with the Security Council as one of its most preferred arenas. It is debatable whether Mexico should pin all its hopes on the Security Council; however, there are some areas where it may find resonance with the U.S. for cooperating and enhancing its activism.

First, the U.S. wants to improve the decision-making process for renewing peacekeeping operation mandates and adopting new ones. Mexico could be an important contributor for capacity building, transparency and accountability activities. Nonetheless, this demands that Mexico define its position on peacekeeping operations, something that has apparently begun to move forward with its recent

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decision to participate with the U.S. in UNITAS military operations. The problem with Mexico's ambiguity stems from its dogmatic attachment to foreign policy principles—particularly non-intervention—as the relatively essential substance of its foreign policy agenda, which has hindered its international maneuvering on humanitarian crises. If Mexico is willing to participate more actively in the Commission for the Consolidation of Peace, it must jettison dogmatic obstacles that do not contribute to making peace sustainable.

Second, Haiti, as described in the report on a new era of engagement, is a weak state close to home for both the U.S. and Mexico. In April, Mexico convened and chaired the debate on the situation in Haiti; it is the shared responsibility of the U.S. and any other representative in the hemisphere to take the lead on humanitarian relief to the island.

And third, Mexico is immersed in a war against drugs that—successful or not—is at least yielding a bilateral commitment to contain organized crime. In this regard, Mexico and the U.S. can promote sharing best practices at the Security Council level to consolidate international efforts against transnational crime. The Mexican emphasis on establishing a regional approach to arms trafficking as a condition for extending the mandate of the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (MINURCAT) is a translation of this area of opportunity.

In the end, there are multiple paths to enhancing cooperation among Security Council members. The Obama administration is still on the way to consolidating both its foreign policy strategy and its mechanisms for action in cases of international crisis. There may be several reasons to ques-

tion whether President Obama and Ambassador Rice will succeed in advancing U.S. interests solely through diplomatic avenues, moving away from interventionist, hard-power tools. This relatively pessimistic—and undesirable—scenario will depend on the direction that events in Iran, North Korea, the Middle East, among other regions, take. It is certain that multilateral pragmatism will be the U.S. administration's most likely approach in the UN; with this approach, the chances for Mexico and the U.S. to become closer in multilateral forums increase. Nevertheless, it is clear that U.S. diplomacy will move forward whether non-permanent members decide to share leadership or not. Whether multilateral pragmatism—à la Obama—will be useful for consolidating Mexico's activism abroad is a matter of its initiative and policy definition. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ Progress Report: United States Mission to the United Nations, "A New Era of Engagement: Advancing America's Interests in the World", U.S. Mission to the UN, April 29, 2009, available on line at http://www.usun.newyork.usmission.gov/press_released/20090429_082.html.
- ² On the one hand, Dick Cheney remains firm in justifying the means by a greater end, criticizing Obama's decision on security as phoney moralizing, driven only by a hunger for international applause that leaves the U.S. partially exposed to further threats. On the other hand, Obama has underscored the need to uphold what he thinks are the fundamental American values because they are what strengthen the country and keep it safe and because acting on principle will not foster anti-American attitudes that could evolve into terrorism.
- ³ Brooke Lierman, "Who is John Bolton?" *Center for American Progress*, March 7, 2005, available on line at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2005/03/b252671.html>.
- ⁴ Susan Rice and Stewart Patrick, *Index of State Weakness in the Developing World*, (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2008).
- ⁵ "The New Team: Susan E. Rice," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2008, available on line at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/07/us/politics/06rice.html>.
- ⁶ "Gentle Questioning for U.N. Nominee," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2009, available on line at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/16/us/16webrice.html>.
- ⁷ Progress Report: United States Mission to the United Nations, op. cit.

