A New Administration and the UN
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What is This?
Among the innumerable issues the Obama administration in Washington will have to deal with—very rapidly—is the question of how to engage with the globe’s most important security organization, the United Nations. As a much-maligned body under the Bush Administration, the UN has only recently come back into the American public purview as the go-to outfit for security matters. Even Bush himself, following his Iraq imboglio, regularly returned to the UN for help. Nonetheless, it seems that this is an appropriate time to take a fresh look at how new leadership in the White House might think about reconnecting with the UN in the coming years—both to help restore American leadership around the world and to reinvigorate this institution as the globe’s foremost peacemaking enterprise. Here is an agenda for our new president in dealing with the world’s premier governing body.

The first serious gesture toward the United Nations would be for President Obama to travel to New York City in the first few weeks of his tenure and deliver an address at the UN informing the world community that America is back and ready to re-engage with all member-states. As part of that endeavor, the president has already taken the commendable step of naming his trusted campaign national security advisor, Susan Rice, as American envoy to the organization, while returning the position to the Cabinet-level status it held during the Clinton years.

At the same time, the Obama administration must proclaim its support for the continuation of the UN reform movement. Spurred on by then Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in 2005, the UN enacted a number of important changes to modernize the institution and get rid of archaic rules, and most important, to confront the new twenty-first century perils of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and failed states.

A Catalog of Reforms
Two crucial new ventures, the Democracy Fund and the Peacebuilding Commission, were established to help fragile states coming out of conflict, or nations on the verge of falling apart, to obtain direct help from the international community in order to rebuild their societies and set in place democratic governance. So far the Democracy Fund is beginning to have some useful impact, but the Peacebuilding Commission is still attempting to find its way. Member nations, including the United States, should now make sure these crucial reforms work.
The UN is expressly forbidden by its Charter from intruding in the domestic affairs of its member-states. But a new provision, the so-called “responsibility to protect” provision, would allow the Security Council to intervene when a country is committing genocide against its own people. This has been regarded as a real breakthrough for the UN. But, in practice, it has so far not been used in conflicts like Darfur, Somalia, or other disputes. Why? Because usually one of the five permanent members of the council vetoes such action. So, for the time being, the political will is lacking to employ this power. Washington needs to refocus much of its diplomatic skills on making this provision operational.

Another priority should be the Human Rights Council, which was designed to replace the discredited Human Rights Commission that had fallen into the hands of states which themselves were human rights abusers. Unfortunately, though, the new council has its own share of retrograde members and, when it has acted, it has aimed most of its condemnations at a single country—Israel, thereby sidestepping censures of a host of other flagrant violators of human rights. This has to be remedied and should be near the top of the agenda of the new Obama administration. One of the Council’s glaring weaknesses is that the United States refuses to join. If Washington were to enlist in this new body, it might be able to help get the Human Rights Council back on track. But it must, of course, first remedy its own policies and reject torture as an instrument of official policy to regain its legitimacy as a rights crusader.

Some considerable progress has been made on management reforms. Today, the secretary general has more power to hire and fire staffers and get rid of deadwood. Ban Ki-moon himself has released details of his financial assets, setting a good example for future UN leaders. And after the Iraqi oil-for-food scandal, the UN has established an ethics office to look into misbehavior of individuals within the organization. Washington must be on alert to monitor these reforms.

Security Council enlargement is surely the biggest challenge of the reform movement—and its biggest failure. As of today, only five nations are permanent members with veto power: China, Russia, the United States, Great Britain, and France. These states won these privileges as victors of World War II and as the collective authors of the UN Charter. At the 1945 founding San Francisco Conference, smaller nations protested the awarding of the veto and they continue today to maintain that the institution’s most powerful club be opened up to new permanent or quasi-permanent members. Their argument is that the council must better reflect the power realities on the planet in 2008.

Indeed, it does seem hardly fair that states like France and Great Britain are more deserving of a spot on the Security Council than powerful and populous lands like India, Japan, Germany, Brazil, or South Africa, among others. Still, this is a very difficult and, in many ways, insoluble problem. For if one nation is chosen, say, Brazil from Latin America, then Argentina and Mexico will undoubtedly object. And in Asia, Japan thinks it has more right to be on the council than India. And so on. The new administration must lead in responding to these legitimate concerns and attempt to devise proper methods of change on the council. Among possible ideas: admitting permanent members without veto power; creating a special category of semi-permanent, six-year rotating members; or expanding the council to 21 or 22 states.

Democratizing the UN

There are other avenues to reform UN structures. One possibility is the formation of a
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“democracy caucus” within the body. In 2004, some 80 democratic nations, at the behest of the United States, organized a so-called “community of democracies” to fight for human rights, free elections, free speech, and free assembly within the UN. This is as yet embryonic and has had, so far, little success. It recently blocked authoritarian states like Belarus and rights violators like Sri Lanka from joining the Human Rights Council, which was its first modest accomplishment. But one must always take into consideration that the UN is, in some ways, a paradoxical organization with respect to democratic rights. The institution upholds human rights as its highest ideal, but it has never required that new states, as a condition of membership, be democratic. In fact, at the founding conference, the drafters made clear that they were more interested in establishing the UN to maintain global security than to proselytize for individual rights. Their argument was that the UN was a universal body and that all nations, regardless of the nature of their governments, should be included, since any state, whatever its ideology, might eventually become immersed in conflict. Still the aspirations of the UN Charter—such as freedom, equal rights, justice, international law, economic advancement—are more lofty. Happily, democratization has actually spread since the UN’s creation; according to Freedom House: in 1950, 33 percent of the world’s population lived under democratic rule, but by 2000, 67 percent did. So it is in the UN arena where a democracy caucus could play its greatest role. But to become more proactive, Washington should be at the forefront of the movement.

One final thought on democratization: there is now a growing movement to create an elected parliament for the UN. In spring 2008, more than 500 delegates from some
80 countries petitioned for such an assembly. The notion would be that a gathering of legislators could at the outset primarily be a consultative body to the UN and thus not require any immediate charter reform. At a later stage, there might be a push to completely reconfigure the UN into an elective body rather than one, as it is now, where delegates are appointed by their governments—a change which would require ratification by member-states.

This is not the first time such a call has been made. The sponsors in 2008 were worldwide: the Latin American Regional Parliament, the European Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Pan-African Parliament, and the Canadian House of Commons. However, there is no law-making group that represents the United States, Russia, China, or other sizeable Asian states. This surely hurts the effort. Still, the U.S. Congress should examine this issue seriously and the Obama administration should press for such a closer look. Among the considerations: would an elected UN have more legitimacy than an appointive one? Would most states be willing to cede sovereignty to a world assembly? Would an American administration agree to a putative world government?

**Tackling Terror**

Yet another place that the Obama administration must press the UN is on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. The UN has set up numerous committees to address terrorism, but can’t even agree on a proper definition of the term. Still, after much deliberation, it has begun to establish a common framework of rules supported by the UN’s 192 countries, which includes sharing data on suspects, tracking money flows, freezing assets, and coordinating intelligence to help deal with the broader threat.

That achievement doesn’t necessarily transfer to the handling of weapons of mass destruction. The UN mainly has relied on the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor the development and spread of nuclear weaponry around the globe. But the IAEA needs to be invited into a country in order to conduct investigations, and thus has not always been able to keep track of all the activities of countries such as Iraq, North Korea, Iran and, at one time, Libya. Usually, it is sovereign intelligence agencies that do most of the early digging, at which point it has generally fallen to the United States to force UN action to deal with rogue nations. This is not good enough. The UN must take a more central role. It recently set a useful precedent by passing the Proliferation Security Initiative to interdict shipments of disallowed weapons. But even this positive measure still requires the political will of member nations who must together rally their naval forces, as of course the UN has no fleet. But the UN can and should do more. Washington must look closely as to whether the IAEA could be revamped or overhauled both in its inspections and oversight operations.

A related question is whether the UN should set up its own rapid-response military force to deal with crises. This has been a long-debated idea, but so far without any serious resolution due to the unwillingness of the larger states to relinquish control over their own troops to the UN. At the very least, the UN might consider the idea of arranging for pre-equipped peacekeeping units supplied by member-states. The Obama administration should look closely into these various options.

Indeed, settling conflicts has been the UN’s greatest success. The organization has helped end wars in fiery locales ranging from Cambodia to Guatemala to Cyprus. At the same time, the UN has found it cannot always inject itself as a peacemaker in disputes when it is refused entry, as in
Zimbabwe and Darfur. However, the organization is the best—and often the only—option for quelling long-simmering conflict. Today, the UN supports some 19 peacekeeping missions around the globe. It has over 130,000 troops in the field at a cost of some $6.7 billion annually.

And herein lies a problem: some member-states remain behind on their UN peacekeeping dues. The United States is one of the biggest laggards, some $1.2 billion in arrears, which could rise to $2.5 billion by next year. As a good faith measure, the new Obama administration should start paying up. A determined president should be able to wrest the dues from Congress, especially with a progressive majority on Capitol Hill.

But even current funding is barely enough to train, equip, and maintain readiness of UN peacekeepers. UN staffers suffered 25 deaths this year, up from 16 from the previous year—and have been the victim of some 263 physical assaults in 2008. Tarnishing the good work of most UN forces in the field, some troops have committed sexual crimes against the people they protect. Worse, in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo—the UN’s largest and most expensive peacekeeping mission—forces have found it difficult to stop the trafficking of small arms that keeps these wars raging and abets violence against civilians.

The new administration in Washington must make a priority of better funding, supervising, and protecting the UN’s field operations. To this end, the UN should attempt to use such measures as the “responsibility to protect” provision to defuse or confront showdowns more expeditiously. The United States can no longer keep adding fuel to the fire of regional wars: the Obama administration must clamp down on the sale of weapons and military hardware overseas to unsavory allies, thus setting an example for China and other major weapons exporters. A wise first step in this regard would be for Washington to champion a binding treaty on the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons that it has so long opposed, putting greater pressure and restrictions on the transfer and sale of small weapons. Finally, the United States should re-examine its opposition to the recently established International Criminal Court, whose broad authority to try miscreants of various sorts for war crimes has already proven to be a useful deterrent in conflict zones like Serbia and Kosovo. There is much to do.

Across Other Divides
We all are aware of the growing economic divide between the global North and South. In the year 2000, the UN attempted to address this widening gulf with the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). The MDG’s objective, among a half-dozen or so social and economic measures, was to reduce the number of those living in poverty by 50 percent by the year 2015. But the commitment today is purely voluntary for member-states. This must be a summons for the world body. First, the UN must monitor more closely the work of the member states in fulfilling the millennium aims and be prepared to apply public pressure on recalcitrant states. Second, the

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Obama administration and leaders of other countries should consider changing their commitment to the millennium goals from voluntary to obligatory, both to underline the seriousness of the endeavor and to compel nations to expend the resources that are required for the task.

Global warming is increasingly a peril to our planet. Lately, the UN has decided to tackle this matter more directly. The new administration in Washington has a chance to re-energize such an effort at the December 2009 UN Conference on Climate Change. The Bush administration was notoriously opposed to the Kyoto Protocols and to international legislation on climate change. President Obama must immediately sign the Kyoto Protocol, to signal to major polluters like India and China that they must comply as well.

One notable success of the Bush administration has been the level of funding allocated to combating AIDS in Africa. But this is a global scourge, and increasingly curable one at that. So too with malaria, a disease that kills one million people a year in the developing world. Thus far, non-governmental organizations and the World Health Organization have been the real driving forces behind the campaign to eradicate malaria through the massive distribution of mosquito nets and medicine. Member states, and especially America, can and must boost aid for these ventures.

Perhaps most important, however, for America’s goodwill abroad will be a return to respect for the rule of law. During the Bush years, the United States rejected many global agreements, including the Law of the Sea, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the International Criminal Court, and a half-dozen or so others. These pacts have long been regarded as both practical and sensible responses to unregulated, dangerous behavior of various sorts by states and individuals. The new administration must take a second look at these agreements and ratify them promptly. America should also be prepared to participate vigorously in the UN’s five-year review of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which takes place in 2010. It is too soon to judge whether Iran may be another member of the nuclear club by that time, but the next administration must move to strengthen the compact while explaining to world leaders why India has been excused from this agreement. President Obama might even jump-start that process by negotiating with Moscow in advance of the conclave to reduce nuclear weapons.

These are but a sampling of the challenges that will confront the UN in the coming years and that the new administration will need to place on its agenda. The United States has worked with this organization for 63 years, in fits and starts, and it has often managed quietly to find ways to use the UN to further our national security interests. Now it seems the time for the United States to declare openly its allegiance to this body as the most important multilateral organization on earth.

Almost 50 years ago an American president, John F. Kennedy, spoke proudly of his association with the UN as the world’s “last best hope” in his inaugural address. The new U.S. president, Barack Obama, is seemingly following in the JFK tradition. Though he spoke little about the UN during his presidential campaign, President Obama made a promise to re-engage with the UN once in office. The world community will be watching the new administration to see how it redeems that pledge. It could be the centerpiece of a new image for this nation and a beacon to our neighbors, near and far, who have come to view us with so much suspicion and skepticism over these last eight years.