

The Future of the United Nations and Multilateralism

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Recently, ATHGO International brought some of the top young minds together at the United Nations headquarters in New York to discuss the current state of the organization. The topics discussed were UN reform, the MDG's, the current state of affairs at the global level, and future prospects for multilateralism. After reflecting upon the conference and its outcome, it is clear that the most pressing issue that connects all of the above issues is the need for UN reform. With alterations to the United Nations system, the MDG's can be met, future prospects will be more positive in nature, and the current state of affairs can be escaped in favour of a more cooperative and humanitarian-driven world.

The first major area of reform must be within the Security Council. Without reform to this body, the legitimacy and purpose of the United Nations is truly lost. The Charter states that, "The Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter."¹ Granted, there must be a decision-making body in any organization, but the unlimited power given to the five permanent members of the Security Council is unacceptable. As the Iraqi intervention proved, it is first very difficult for these five powers to come to any consensus necessary to make a decision. The conflicting political agendas between these nations absolutely stall any process of intervention, sanction-making, or peacebuilding if the interests of the permanent members are not made an issue. The Security Council is driven by the Realist perspective of international politics, which is driven by state power. In order for this body to have relevance, the power of the permanent members must be diminished by allowing more permanent members on the Council, and by having such

¹ "Charter of the United Nations," in International Organizations: Principles and Issues (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002), 479.

power checked. Also, non-governmental organizations must be allowed to play a role in the decision making process of the Council, for states are no longer absolutely powerful in the newly emerging global community. Non-state actors are able to inform states of the norms and values that now exist, and that the tone of international politics is changing. More power and responsibility can also be given to the Economic and Social Council, so that the burden of development and environment is taken out of the political sphere and focusing on the issues at hand without state interests. This Council, if to remain powerful and legitimate, must make itself accountable, and it must recognize that it no longer has ultimate power on the international stage.

With reforms to the Security Council must also come reforms in terms of enforcement. The Security Council is responsible for determining when the United Nations will involve itself in conflicts, and just how it will do so. “Plans for the application of armed force shall be made by the Security Council with the assistance of the Military Staff Committee.”² With the politics of the Security Council taking precedence, the resolutions of the United Nations are going unenforced, the decisions of the International Court of Justice are going unenforced, and the burden of enforcement is falling on a small group of nations, who suffer the military and human costs of intervention. Enforcement cannot be a tool of interest. If a decision is to be made, it must be made with the understanding that the United Nations is a governing international body, promoting the interests of all human beings, which should, in practice, take priority over political maneuvering. For legitimacy to be given to international law and organizations, the decisions made must be seen as binding, and if such decisions are not followed, then consequences must become a reality; not simply a threat. With changes to

² Ibid, 483.

the system to enforcement, such as equal share enforcement where every nation must commit troops to the United Nations so that the organization can have its own military force which can be used at its discretion, the legitimacy of the organization and international law will follow, thus giving meaning to its continued existence.

A serious area requiring reform within the United Nations comes beyond the state scope. It has become essential for non-state actors to play a role in the decision making process of the international community. States no longer enjoy the power and comfort they once did at the international level, with the sacredness of state sovereignty. These actors are able to transcend national borders to influence millions of people world-wide so that networks can be established to protect the rights of individuals and small groups.³ No longer is it only the powerful who have a voice internationally, it is also the oppressed, and hungry, and the poor. These groups must be allowed to state their case at the highest level, which is the Security Council. By granting a rotating, one-year, non-voting term on the Security Council for a group of five non-governmental organizations, the individuals of the world will have the chance to reach the supremely powerful, and aid in the proper decision making process, based on morality, norms, and values, combined with precedence. Only by doing so can the United Nations truly call itself international.

Finally, the largest area needing reform at the international level is the focus on the state. The world as it exists today is no longer simply comprised of states. With the spread of non-state actors and the awareness of the global community, the focus now lies with the individual. The primary doctrine which must be adopted for the United Nations to have a successful and purposeful future exists in that of the Responsibility to Protect,

³ NGO Global Network, <http://www.ngo.org/index2.htm>, 2004.

as strongly advocated by the Canadian government. This idea, introduced in 2001, states that if a case like that of Rwanda repeats, then the international community has: **The responsibility to prevent; the responsibility to react; and the responsibility to rebuild.**⁴ This doctrine re-defines state sovereignty as a responsibility to protect the people within a nation. If the government cannot protect its citizens, then the United Nations must intervene, and it is legitimate in doing so because the state has lost its legitimacy by not protecting its people, and is therefore no longer sovereign. By using such a doctrine, the main principles of the United Nations, being collective security and national sovereignty are upheld and the individuals of the world are given the right to life. This idea also allows for the spread and enforcement of human rights, as morality is allowed to play a role on the international level, because if citizens' human rights are being violated, help can be sent to uphold such rights. Unlike Iraq, however, a resolution at the Security Council level must be passed for such intervention to take place, and the legitimacy of such an act would be found in the consensus of an international, governing body, once reforms to the Council take place. The responsibility to protect is necessary for the United Nations to maintain its place on a global scale.

By making the necessary reforms to the United Nations, and placing the focus not on state-to-state interaction based on power, there is hope for idealism in multilateralism. Relevance can still be found in the idea of the United Nations, but it must escape its Realist foundations. By doing so, the UN would be able to meet its goal of implementing the MDG's by 2015, and ensuring the continued existence of international organizations. That future looks far better than the one that is seen now.

⁴ Foreign Affairs Canada. "The Responsibility to Protect," <http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/iciss/ciise/report2-en.asp#synopsis>, 2001.

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