

## The Young Generation Prepares to Support the United Nations

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Today, people throughout the world are experiencing the most severe set of global crises since the United Nations was formed over 60 years ago. They include financial, economic and environmental crises as well as crises of scarcity—of food, fuel and water.

It is gratifying that the new US administration recognizes “that the global challenges we face demand global institutions that work.”<sup>1</sup> By appointing a close associate, Susan Rice, as Ambassador to the United Nations and restoring the post’s Cabinet status, President Obama has signaled the intention of the United States to resume the role of a responsible leader.

What kind of leadership is now needed? It must be able to identify and define the threats and challenges that face the international community and to make full use of the tremendous instrument for negotiation, cooperation and joint action that the United Nations system provides. We must recognize that the Cold War is over. Although significant differences continue to exist between the great powers, there are no longer substantive controversies of such magnitude that would justify military confrontations among them.

The accelerating interdependence of states—including the big powers—is inevitably driving them to cooperate within the framework of the United Nations system. The earth has only one atmosphere, and we have only begun to realize that urgent coordinated action must be taken to maintain it in a shape that is healthy for our survival and for the generations who will succeed us. Viruses travel fast. They need no passports and ask for no visas. Regardless of recognition and diplomatic relations, states must cooperate to stop diseases. Restoring financial equilibrium and economic and social development is no longer just a national or regional task, but one that calls for accommodation and cooperation by all. Preventing terrorism and a further spread of weapons of mass destruction requires global agreements on principles and much common

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<sup>1</sup> Remarks by President-elect Barack Obama: Announcement of the National Security Team, December 1, 2007, in Chicago, Illinois.

action. Action through global institutions like the UN system requires that the music be written with universal notes that all nations can understand. It limits somewhat the scope for solo singing, but it results in a more powerful choir.

The basic principles and mechanisms for cooperative security need not be invented. They are set out in the Charter of the United Nations. An effective functioning of the organization is more dependent upon a readiness to respect existing principles and to use existing mechanisms than upon organizational change. Such reforms as we contemplate must recognize that the world community is no longer represented by some 50 governments, as it was when the Charter was drafted. With the elimination of colonialism and the emergence of new states, the number of governments has grown to nearly 200. There is a dynamic world of corporations and a vital global civic society. Both have important roles in the building of the international community. There is a strong need to inform and educate the public and especially the young generation around the world about the work that is done by UN organizations and their potentials—and limitations.

Facilitating citizen participation in the discussion of central global issues like human rights, environment and disarmament is not only satisfying a right to information. We have seen again and again that the voice of global civic society can be an important driving force for action. Right now these voices are strong and heard in the field of environment. They need also to support new opportunities in the field of disarmament. It is paradoxical that while during the Cold War severe political differences led to arms races it seems that in the past decade arms developments have been leading to political differences! This development needs to come to an end. In recent years world military expenditures have been of the order of 1,300 billion dollars per year. A drastic reduction of that horrendous sum could give badly needed resources to our efforts to restore both the physical and the financial climate of the world.

The UN General Assembly's very first resolution, adopted on January 24, 1946, addressed the question of disarmament. The United States was the leader of the debate and fought for nuclear controls and disarmament. The resolution called for the elimination of atomic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and the assurance that, from then on, atomic energy would be used only for peaceful purposes. Today, however, the existence of thousands of nuclear weapons remains a pressing and potentially dangerous threat to world peace. This threat cannot be eliminated overnight but it is increasingly recognized that it must be eliminated and that the world must start now to take decisive and constructive action on arms control and disarmament.

An important and encouraging shift in thinking has already begun. President Obama wrote in December 2008: "I will not authorize the development of new nuclear weapons. And I will make the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons worldwide a central element of US nuclear policy." He is on record as fully supporting the dramatic appeal by the former US Secretaries of State, George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of Defense, William Perry, and the former Senator Sam Nunn. They called for the United States to take the initiative with Russia and other nuclear weapon states to seek the elimination of nuclear weapons and to begin moving towards that goal by seeking a

number of important arms control and disarmament measures. An essential objective, which President Obama supports, is the recommendation that the US Senate review the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and ratify this agreement that it rejected over ten years ago. US ratification would provide important incentives to others and decisively increase the chances that it will come into force and that the world would see no more nuclear test explosions. No other measure could send a stronger signal that the disarmament process has restarted.

There are those in the United States and elsewhere who do not wish to take these initiatives seriously but continue to play the war games that started during the Cold War. However, like the efforts to tackle environmental issues, these initiatives have broad support in governments around the world and among experts in security and foreign affairs. Nongovernmental organizations, international disarmament groups such as the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission<sup>2</sup> and think tanks within the United States strongly advocate in support of such disarmament proposals.

Here, again civic society is engaged, and demands and deserves to be heard. The generation coming of age today was “born digital” and is more globally connected than any previous generation. We must recognize the value of this engagement and take it seriously. One organization doing this is the World Federation of United Nations Associations (WFUNA) with which the authors of this article are associated. While acting broadly to improve knowledge about how the United Nations works and how it can be put to good use, WFUNA has in recent years led a program focusing on disarmament. Young people around the world inform themselves of the dangers of the nuclear weapons threat and are encouraged to come forward with their own ideas on how to free the world of these weapons. Global essay and other competitions have been held and a special Web site created to showcase the outcomes of the students’ efforts (see [www.disarmamenthub.org](http://www.disarmamenthub.org)).

One of the most successful instruments for engaging the interest of young people in the United Nations and preparing them for a good use of the organization has been and remains the Model UN conference. This type of experiential learning is a very effective method for getting young people motivated, and prepared to give back to their communities. It encourages activism and strengthens the feeling in young people that they own the world’s future—and are responsible for it. The popularity of Model UN continues to grow, and today an estimated half a million students worldwide take part every year. In fact, many current world leaders, including UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and US Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, participated in Model UN events during their student days.

In addition to gaining essential skills and learning about issues that affect them, Model UN participants are linking into a larger network of young activists who share an interest in the United Nations and its goals. Through online forums and connections with local NGOs and youth organizations, Model UN participants become part of a global community of people who increasingly think of themselves as global citizens. This kind of

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<sup>2</sup> Download the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission’s report, “Weapons of Terror: Freeing the World of Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Arms,” at [www.wmdcommission.org/sida.asp?id=9](http://www.wmdcommission.org/sida.asp?id=9).

citizenship is needed if we are to improve the effectiveness and use of the United Nations as the central instrument for global security and cooperation.

We encourage the United Nations and member governments to draw upon the fresh vision, connectedness, creativity and enthusiasm of the young people who are ready to contribute to strengthening the institution, and working towards common goals in new ways.