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Summit Asymmetry:
The United States and UN Reform

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One of the great, unheralded signs of the institutional development of our emerging "international community" is the phenomenon of global summits. The fading of Cold War hostilities opened the way to substantive, if scripted, convocations of heads of state and government of all countries to launch extraordinary initiatives in global policy. Such summits have become a device for slicing through the bureaucratic and political blockages in national capitals and international bodies in order to chart a common direction for international agencies and concerted action by national governments.

It was James Grant, the astute American at the helm of the United Nations Children's Fund from 1980 to 1995, who realised a summit's potential for mobilising flaccid political will to do end runs around the immobilism of the decentralised international political system. A summit will generate worldwide press attention for the issues as well as for the preening political leaders, Grant imagined, and create a deadline for decisions that does not exist in the General Assembly. The fact that one's national leader will be spotlighted on a world stage could press foot-dragging ministries at home into agreement on unresolved issues, just as it

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would prod their UN negotiators to make the compromises needed for a global accord. Even international agencies allergic to coordination would be spurred to cooperate by the prospect that their collective bosses would make decisions locking in global policy mandates for the system at large.

Grant was dismayed by the harsh impact on children of the rigid "structural adjustment" prescriptions enforced by world financial institutions on the budgetary policies of developing countries, and hoped a summit of heads of government might undertake commitments for children's health, education, and rights that even powerful finance ministries and the international institutions they control would have to respect. Two years after the 1990 World Summit for Children, the "Earth Summit" in Rio de Janeiro mobilised citizen constituencies worldwide to press for environmentally sustainable development policies, resulting in four new environmental conventions. (This proved awkward for United States President George Bush, whose rejection of the summit's global climate change convention drew critical attention at home in a tough re-election campaign.) In 2000, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan won national leaders' assent at the Millennium Summit to ambitious development goals that would require new efforts by both developing and donor countries, and their commitment to reconvene in five years to assess the progress on those millennium commitments.

By 2005, however, the stakes had been raised. What had initially been conceived as a fifth-year stock-taking exercise on economic and social development became a world summit on the future and the capacity of the United Nations itself. The American attack on Iraq, in the face of strong opposition among publics worldwide and most members of the United Nations Security Council, had created a crisis of confidence in the United Nations.

Between March and June 2003 – that is, just before the invasion and just after it – Pew Research Center pollsters found public opinion in Europe and North America had swung sharply from majorities expressing faith in the UN's vital role in dealing with conflict to majorities dismissing it as "not so important any more". UN relevance ratings dropped 8 percentage points in Italy, 16 points in France, 20 in the United States, and 27 in Germany. Favorable assessments of the UN's impact spiraled downward from 2002 to June 2003, from 72 percent to 43 in the United States, from 81 percent to 65 in Canada, and from 78 to 41 in Britain. UN ratings were already negative in most Arab countries except for Kuwait, and did not fall much further after the attack on Iraq.[1] Since public reaction to the invasion was almost uniformly negative outside the United States, and initially quite enthusiastic inside the US, it seems fair to conclude that many Americans became disillusioned with the United Nations because it did not support Washington's war, while the confidence of Europeans and others was shattered because the UN could not stop it.

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[1] Pew Global Attitudes Project, *Views of a Changing World 2003* (Washington: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, June 2003).

Challenges and changes

With his organisation's credibility shattered in the war's aftermath, Kofi Annan warned member states that "we have come to a fork in the road. This may be a moment no less decisive than 1945 itself, when the United Nations was founded." He appointed a High-level Panel to assess the changing threats and challenges to global security, to help determine "whether it is possible to continue on the basis agreed then, or whether radical changes are needed". And he told government leaders they would need to take "firm and clear decisions that…might include far-reaching institutional reforms. Indeed, I hope they will."[2]

The Secretary General's dramatic appeal touched off keen discussion in Europe and other parts of the world about the apparent crisis of international security machinery and the prospects for institutional change at the global level. But the United States government approached the summit with considerable diffidence – and, perhaps more remarkable, there was virtually no discussion of UN reform in mainstream policy and media circles outside of government either. While the deepening troubles of the Bush administration's occupation of Iraq triggered heated political debate in the United States, neither commentators nor congressmen ever connected these troubles to the rupture with UN Charter provisions controlling the use of force. No one in Washington circles called for a UN rapid deployment force for crisis situations; or for conditioning "permanent" membership on the Security Council on actually delivering troops and sanctions enforcers to implement Council resolutions; or for giving the jawboning Economic and Social Council some real authority to direct the UN system's sprawling independent agencies; or for assuring reliable financing of UN activities.

UN structural deficiencies like these, quite simply, were not Washington's concerns. Instead, the capital was convulsed by charges of United Nations "corruption" in administering the Oil-for-Food programme in pre-war Iraq, the unprecedented control mechanism created to contain the government of Saddam Hussein while feeding the Iraqi population. Six congressional committees hastened to investigate the UN's alleged malfeasance (six more than would inquire into the US administration's postwar use of Iraqi oil money, or even US appropriations, for Iraqi reconstruction). Just when Annan's High-level Panel was issuing its recommendations in December 2004, a US senator chairing one of the investigating committees called for Annan's resignation. In June 2005, pre-empting by a week the report of a congressionally constituted study panel on United Nations reform, the US House of Representatives hastened to approve legislation demanding tighter US control over UN finances (including a curious transfer of administrative oversight functions to the UN's crisis-response body, the Security Council) and the elimination of many programmes from the UN's assessed budget, while threatening renewed nonpayment of US dues.

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[2] Address by Secretary General Kofi Annan to the General Assembly, 23 September 2003 <http://www.un.org/apps/sg/sgstats.asp?nid=517>.

The Bush administration's studied reserve toward Annan's UN reform process reflected its ambivalence toward an institution that it saw as foot-dragging on some of its major policy objectives, such as Iraq, and an active agent in creating realities that the administration virulently opposed, like the International Criminal Court. Moreover, the security issues in which Washington might have some interest would inevitably be commingled at the summit with the second issue stream flowing into it – progress on the Millennium Development Goals. President George W. Bush had already made the pilgrimage to Monterrey in 2002 to commit the United States to increase its support for development assistance, and he had persuaded a conservative Congress deeply sceptical of development aid to reverse the post-Cold War decline in American assistance. But the United States is still at the very bottom of industrialised countries in official per capita contributions to development, ahead only of Italy and just below Japan. For Washington, the summit's inevitable linkage of UN institutional reform on security issues to fulfillment of development promises could only create bargaining leverage for developing countries whose main goal, as many Washington politicians believed, is just to get their hands deeper into American pockets.

Status quo power

Moreover, Washington was not sure that there was much in the way of UN restructuring that it really wanted. For many in the capital, strengthening the United Nations could only build up a major counterweight to American power and global dominance. American conservatives had long warned against the very idea of a rapidly deployable military capacity at the disposal of the Security Council (demonised as a dreaded "UN standing army"), and had such success that Annan's High-level Panel quickly agreed not to waste its time on such quixotic reforms. And they have come to see the principal American stake in the United Nations as maintenance of the US veto in the Security Council – an essentially negative and gloomy view of the country's isolation in a hostile world environment that eerily echoes a different major power's view of its position in the early years of the United Nations.

Thus, one of Annan's favorite hobby-horses for institutional reform – revising the make-up of the Security Council – has had little attraction for Washington. Almost every "reform" proposal under discussion in the General Assembly would so expand the Council's membership as to dilute the US voice and make the Council more unworkable and, indeed, ungovernable.

In fact, the Americans had good reason to be satisfied with the performance of the existing Security Council once they got past the unpleasantness about invading Iraq. The Council proved quite cooperative in rallying to press Syrian forces out of Lebanon and UN investigators into Syria. While its members balked at sanctions against Sudan, they did install an African Union peacekeeping force in the country's embattled Darfur region and a UN peacekeeping force in Sudan's south. The Council approved a US occupation regime in Iraq, turned over to it the large unspent balances in the Oil-for-Food accounts, agreed to lift the embargo on the sale of Iraqi oil outside the programme, and in late 2005 extended the authorisation for American forces to operate in Iraq till the end of 2006. True, the Bush administration did have to bargain with other countries on the specifics, and had to accommodate them on a number of issues (for example, unleashing the International Criminal Court on Darfur, accepting oversight by an international monitoring board of US expenditures of Iraqi oil money, and mandating the exit of the US troops from Iraq if an elected Iraqi government called for them to leave). But it proved it knows how to bargain when it really wants something, and its success rate at achieving its goals in the existing Council has arguably been far higher than that of any other member.

There was not, therefore, much that the United States needed out of the reform process – nothing that would outweigh American officials' wariness of what might come out of a UN negotiating process. Like a good bargainer in an Arab *souk*, American negotiators believe the best strategy in UN fora is often to feign disinterest. In the case of the security issues that the Secretary General hoped the reform process might address, many thought they were not feigning.

Searching for stakes

Annan's panel expended much energy seeking issues and crafting proposals that would attract Washington's interest, including recommendations on nuclear proliferation supportive of the administration's proliferation security initiative and a remarkable endorsement of pre-emptive military strikes as an exercise of "self-defence" under Article 51 of the Charter. But American officials have continued to feel confident they have the capacity unilaterally to manage the security crises that concern them. While they acknowledged that many of the panel's recommendations could be useful and even advantageous to Washington's purposes, they did not feel they *needed* any of these proposals badly enough to accept their linkage to other items – renewed commitments, for example, to eventual nuclear disarmament or to Security Council authorisation of the use of armed force. The idea of a "grand bargain" tying increased investment in social and economic development in the global South to swifter and surer security capabilities sought by the North – fancifully floated by optimistic advocates of far-reaching reform — was always a non-starter in conservative Washington.

Indeed, the American negotiating posture in the month before the summit seemed intended precisely to telegraph that US officials had little interest in enhancing UN capacities, and even less in bargaining. It is not that they were rabidly negative, however. Administration officials were supportive of the High-level Panel's proposal for a peace-building commission that could focus continuing political attention and resources on countries still emerging uncertainly from conflict after international peacekeepers go home. They welcomed the panel's initiative to break the deadlock on a definition of terrorism that would trigger international obligations to suppress it. They were pleased that the panel supported the idea of a Democracy Fund, proposed by the President in 2004. They endorsed the principle of a national and international "responsibility to protect" endangered populations, but saw this as little more than a rhetorical gesture; its application in practice would depend on the politics of the specific case. On none of these items did American negotiators feel any pressure from politically relevant constituencies in Washington.

There are, however, two major concerns roiling Washington that the administration has been highly motivated to link to the reform process: the capital's deep distrust of the Commission on Human Rights, discredited in human rights circles by the repeated seating of rights-abusive governments such as Cuba and Sudan, and outrage at reported abuses in the Oil-for-Food program, attributed to endemic management weaknesses in the Secretariat. Proposals from human rights advocates to establish eligibility criteria barring the most defiant violators from commission membership encountered strenuous opposition from African and Asian governments, however, and the administration embraced the Secretary General's imaginative proposal for a replacement Human Rights Council as the most viable alternative. The prospect for raising the bar for membership on the human rights body, however, would hinge on Annan's plan for requiring a two-thirds General Assembly majority for election, which several states resisted.

The administration has also placed a high priority on administrative reforms aimed at increasing the Secretary General's authority, and lessening the General Assembly's, over the assignment of positions within the Secretariat – changes viewed with suspicion by many developing country representatives. Of course, neither of these two concerns had much to do with the security challenges at the center of the summit agenda, much less the Millennium Development Goals, but they would be crucial for Washington's buy-in.

The summit, of course, represented a rare opportunity to set reform policy. The diplomatic community in New York is riddled with vested interests in committees, panels, choke-points, and assertions of "democratic" participation by all missions about which virtually no one outside midtown Manhattan – and usually no one back in the diplomats' own capitals – cares a whit. For fear of the easily immobilised General Assembly political process – as a British diplomat once quipped, the United Nations is the one place where, in defiance of the laws of physics, inertia acquires momentum – Annan and his strategists were eager to get very specific commitments for institutional reform written into the summit declaration, in order to bind the hands of New York ambassadors after the spotlight of world attention moved on.

A traditional multilateral negotiating strategy for the United States – as for the European Union bloc – in complex global decision-making would start by packaging one's own "must-have" priorities to be as appealing and unthreatening to as many other parties as possible, and to establish a positive climate by recognising and, as much as possible, accommodating the goals sought by other blocs of states that are not incompatible with one's own purposes. In the case of the summit negotiations (and countless other UN exercises in political bargaining), this would mean giving symbolic recognition to the need for economic and social development in the developing world, while perhaps deflecting unwanted commitments to its tangible realisation. The goal, presumably, would be a "win-win" outcome, in which all major states or groups could claim success.

This was not to be the course of negotiations, and in the last days of negotiations it began to dawn on many participants and observers that the summit result might prove to be "lose-lose," ending with no substantive declaration at all, just as the nuclear non-proliferation treaty review conference had broken up in May with no agreement on a statement at all. The fact that heads of government were descending on New York would ensure that some sort of statement would issue, avoiding the ignominious silence at the end of the nuclear conference; but an outcome that involved no specific commitments by governments on security, development or reform would be widely seen as regression rather than reform – much less the "radical changes" for which Annan had once hoped.

New on the block

A turning point in negotiations came with the arrival of a new United States representative in New York, John Bolton, whom President Bush installed after the Senate, troubled by his reputed imperiousness and ideological belligerence, refused to confirm him. It was instantly clear that this was not going to be a traditional multilateral negotiation of multiple parties building on each others' priorities. Instead, barely a month before the summit, the United States startled its negotiating partners by demanding hundreds of revisions in the proposed summit outcome document – including deletion of every reference to the Millennium Development Goals and to the 35-year-old target for wealthy countries to channel 0.7 percent of their gross national product to development assistance.

This was a direct assault on even the sub-minimum requirement of the developing countries in this negotiation – lip service reaffirmation of already established goals for development (President Bush himself had reaffirmed the 0.7 percent aid target at the 2002 Monterrey conference on financing for development). And it had the expected result, rekindling suspicions that many developing country representatives had of Western intentions in "reform". Cuba and Venezuela – countries whose relationships with the Bush administration were irredeemably antagonistic – were elated to find larger developing countries often aligned with Washington, such as Egypt and Pakistan, stepping from the shadows to challenge Washington in turn on the reform of human rights machinery and on control of nuclear weapons. In feverish negotiations on the very eve of the summit, specific commitments to which any negotiating party objected were discarded wholesale, prompting the South African who chaired the negotiating panel to exclaim, "I know we want consensus, but I can't accept a process that takes out everything that 170 countries want and support."

Still, in the face of outrage even from the normally docile Europeans, the United States had to backtrack on its demand to airbrush the Millennium Development Goals out of the summit declaration. Indeed, in an apparent acknowledgment that the US delegation had blundered badly in directly challenging the development targets, President Bush felt compelled to tell his counterparts in the General Assembly hall, for the first time, "We are committed to the Millennium Development goals." The US suffered substantive reverses on what were supposedly its top priorities in this debacle, forfeiting from the summit outcome document all the specifics on the Human Rights Council. In return, it achieved elimination of the entire draft section on controlling nuclear weapons, and it avoided reaffirmation of a commitment to the 0.7 percent assistance target: the summit outcomes document watered down the reference to the assistance target, simply offering praise for those wealthy countries that had set timetables to achieve it, with a plea for those that hadn't done so to "make concrete efforts in this regard".

As expected, the question of Security Council revision was put off indefinitely. Employing that distinctive grammatical tense of diplomacy, the future subjunctive, the summit declared:

> We support early reform of the Security Council – an essential element of our overall effort to reform the United Nations – in order to make it more broadly representative, efficient and transparent and thus to further enhance its effectiveness and the legitimacy and implementation of its decisions. We commit ourselves to continuing our efforts to achieve a decision on this end and request the General Assembly to review progress on the reform set out above by the end of 2005.[3]

Summit glacier

Security Council stasis was an outcome quite satisfactory to American policymakers, those in several other member states, and a fair share of the non-governmental community as well. A bit more progress could be claimed for the proposed new Peace-building Commission: the commission was approved in concept, but the summit declaration did not resolve whether it should be subsidiary to the Security Council or to the bloated and dysfunctional Economic and Social Council. This controversy reflected precisely the kind of First Avenue wrangling over organ prestige that is meaningless to the outside world and should have been cleared away before the heads of government left town. The glacial pace of progress toward agreement on a legally enforceable definition of terrorism may have accelerated to a turtle's crawl, but the summit's qualified language was not decisive enough to clear away the last obstacles to the comprehensive convention.

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[3] "2005 World Summit Outcome." General Assembly Resolution 60/1, ¶ 153.

American commentators from mainstream media to the blogosphere were quick to denounce the summit's results as meagre or an outright failure. *The New York Times* expressed dismay that "A once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform and revive the United Nations has been squandered... . Every one of the more than 170 national leaders attending, starting with President Bush, should be embarrassed about letting this rare opportunity slip away."[4]

Explaining why it assigned to the United States "a disproportionate share" of the responsibility for the summit's asserted failure, the *Times* bluntly fingered the President's emissary. When he sent "his notoriously undiplomatic, and Congressionally unacceptable, choice for ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, to New York," the newspaper declared, President Bush "contended that contrary to all appearances and to common sense, Mr. Bolton was just the man to achieve the reforms the United Nations needed. Almost immediately, Mr. Bolton began proving Mr. Bush wrong by insisting on a very long list of unilateral demands," triggering the wholesale deletions of concrete commitments that left the human rights cause, like many others, diluted "to the point of meaninglessness".

The disengagement of official Washington from the reform debate in the 20 months leading up to the summit was, however, dramatically reversed after the national leaders went home. The US delegation focused like a laser on the concerns most combustible in Washington – the human rights political body and the control of Secretariat staffing – in a negotiation from which it had already taken the sweeteners for developing countries, such as recommitment to the development assistance target, off the table at the summit. Having decided to demand immediate adoption of their reform agenda, the Americans fixed a deadline – the existing Human Rights Commission had to be abolished before its next scheduled meeting in Spring 2006 – and embarked on a campaign of brinkmanship to achieve that goal.

Strategic brinkmanship

Doomsday threats and unyielding negotiating stances had long been the stock in trade of the President's representative in New York. Old-timers with memories of the UN's earliest years sensed an eerie analogue with Vyacheslav M. Molotov, the postwar Soviet foreign minister who isolated his country in the councils of great powers. Bolton's adamance distressed European diplomats, while representatives of some Third World countries professed satisfaction that they were at last dealing with a straight-talking American envoy who made no pretense of concealing Washington's lust for world domination behind insincere talk of shared values and global concerns – or, as the ambassador described it to students in a lecture at North Carolina's Wingate University, "They enjoy dealing with someone who tells them exactly what he thinks".[5]

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[4] *The New York Times*, editorial: "The Lost U.N. Summit Meeting", 14 September 2005.

Brinkmanship would unfold on two tracks: a vow to derail adoption of the United Nations biennial budget for 2006-07, and a threat to walk away from the United Nations altogether. "Either we need to fix the institution or we'll turn to some other mechanism to solve international problems," Bolton told listeners in North Carolina. But an American threat to go elsewhere was unlikely to sway votes at the United Nations, at least not in the US direction, because it has already long been administration policy: Washington takes problems to the United Nations, not to do Kofi Annan a favour, but only when it cannot achieve its ends in a more controllable setting. The Bush administration went to the UN over Syria's role in Lebanon, to get peacekeepers into Darfur, to extend legal authority for US troops to stay in Iraq, and even to get a global convention to block embryonic stem cell research, because it could not achieve these goals elsewhere. On the other hand, it steered control of peacekeepers in Afghanistan to NATO, not the UN, just as the Clinton administration had done in post-Dayton Bosnia and in Kosovo. It sought to bar the United Nations from coordinating global tsunami relief in favour of a four-power coordinating directorate, a manoeuvre that collapsed when other states refused to cooperate.

Curiously, just as the US government's mission in New York was hinting ominously at US abandonment of the United Nations, the President's "strategy for victory" in Iraq was invoking the UN's authorisation of an extended American military presence and its support for democratic development there. Despite the bluster about introducing competition among international institutions, one could not take for granted a symbiotic asymmetry in which the United Nations needs the United States far more than the United States needs the United Nations.

The other blunt instrument in the US toolkit – blocking the budget – perhaps had the potential for more traction, at least in the short term. To heighten the pressure on other member states to approve Annan's Human Rights Council proposal before the existing commission's scheduled meeting in March 2006, the Americans proposed adopting only a three-month budget rather than the two-year fiscal plan due for adoption by the end of

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[5] Associated Press, "Ambassador Bolton Catalogues U.N. problems," newswire 15 November 2005 <http://www.jessehelmscenter.org/news/default.asp?ID=78>.

December 2005. This expedient – in apparent imitation of the short-term budgetary extensions to which the US Congress routinely resorts during domestic budget impasses – was rapidly declared unworkable by UN budget officials, who only receive payments from governments after the General Assembly approves assessments; and the government proposing the three-month budget would not make any payment during the first quarter anyway, ensuring financial default. While undoubtedly grateful that the United States was looking for ways to achieve adoption of his reform proposal, Kofi Annan viewed the budgetary threat as so serious to the organisation that he cancelled a long scheduled mid-December trip to Asia in order to shepherd the biennial budget through to adoption. Others recalled the political boomerang in Washington's own politics when determined conservatives forced a shutdown of the US federal government in late 1995, and wondered what the political fallout would be from a similar game of budgetary "chicken" at the United Nations.

Whether the Bush administration would go through with its "nuclear" options of mutual assured destruction on behalf of its newfound reform agenda was uncertain in mid-December 2005. Surely the Europeans would confect a compromise, perhaps a one-year budget rather than the two-year fiscal plan the General Assembly would normally adopt, which the US administration could portray to its political base as a hammer to force reform from a recalcitrant political body. But for many conservative hardliners in Washington, the point of UN "reform" should be to de-fang the beast, not to give it more bite. For these, a summit with meagre results would serve as evidence of the UN's ineffectiveness and irrelevance, and the failure to swallow Washington's reform prescriptions afterward could legitimise nonpayment of dues.

Conclusion

Certainly the same fundamental asymmetry between the stakes in UN reform perceived by Washington's reigning conservatives and the stakes of political leaders in Europe and elsewhere made agreement on concrete measures to strengthen the United Nations nearly impossible to achieve at the summit. As with much else on the international agenda, the Europeans' intense interest in salvaging the besieged rules-based system seemed as likely to be the driver of global policy as the American ambivalence might be its brake. But as the debilitating consequences of military unilateralism in Iraq began reverberating through the American political system late in 2005, the traditional apathy of American public opinion toward the United Nations and its reform could no longer be taken for granted.