

Will Calls for Sharing Responsibility in New UN Report Fall on Deaf Ears?

By Ian Williams | December 9, 2004

Allegedly a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Well the “High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change” that Kofi Annan asked to study how the UN copes with the threats of the new century was certainly a committee, and their report, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, certainly has some aspects of a camel. I would guess it to be Bactrian from the two outstanding humps that have been added to get a consensus.

The report panders to the nuclear lobby, spending undue time on proposals for keeping the nuclear genie inside the civilian bottle that it wishes to pass around so liberally. It advocates nuclear reactors as an environmental solution for global warming, when many people would rather not face the choice between boiling to death from rising temperatures and frying to death from radioactive waste—or weapons made from diverted fissile material.

The second hump is the report’s suggestion that the Human Rights Commission simply be expanded to include all UN members, in effect replacing the current outright sabotage by the dictatorial regimes who have packed the Commission with the implied ineffectiveness of a mass meeting.

Sadly, if they do not think the membership can keep the scofflaw infiltrators out of the Commission, it does not augur well for the panel’s expectations of the membership’s conversion to born-again ethical multilateralism, either in elections for the Security Council or in the implementation of the bulk of the report, which is a shame because, humps notwithstanding, the Report definitely has legs.

Beyond Organizational Charts

Most of the report’s proposals are pragmatically based in political reality. The panel of the world’s great and good that delivered the report realized that there is more to reform than simply tinkering with organizational diagrams and flowcharts.

Although many people will focus on the more easily comprehensible sections, like *who* should be on the Security Council, the panel concerned itself even more with the far more important question of just *what* the Council, and indeed, the General Assembly and Secretariat should be doing.

Much of the report is an appeal to member states to live up to the commitments they have already made, whether it be the proportion of their Gross Domestic Product they pledge to overseas development aid, to the sums they devote to combating AIDS, or to the provisions of the Doha Round on the developing country access to Northern markets. And of course to the mechanics of disarmament, which does not mean simply disarming countries that a Superpower may dislike.

Doubtless to the distress of the more imaginative international lawyers retained by the Bush and Blair administrations, the Report reiterates UN Charter Article 51, forbidding the use of force except in self-defense or with Security Council authorization.

More pragmatically, it considers that pre-emptive operations against imminent threats may well be necessary—but not if they are unilaterally conceived. A U.S. president should still have to persuade the rest of the world of the case.

Similarly, it agrees with Tony Blair, and may actually go further than he does, in saying that humanitarian intervention is not only a good concept, but that it is already inherent in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



Once again, it reaffirms that it is not a right to be implemented by individual states but a collective right—indeed duty. What it says elsewhere in an implied rebuke to the U.S. action in Iraq, “Allowing one to so act is to allow all,” is a caution applying to all forms of unilateral action.

However, the proposals represent more than simple U.S.-bashing. The Panel takes the global community to task for its tardiness in responding to Darfur, and for allowing recidivist human rights violators like Sudan to pack the Human Rights Commission. It implicitly validates the message from Washington that democracy is a good thing and that it is the UN’s task to help spread it.

But once again, it does not contain the Washington, D.C. qualification, which implicitly measures the success of democracy by the extent to which it delivers friendly or subservient governments.

Even so, the report does go a long way to address rational American concerns. It offers, for example, a reasonable working definition of terrorism for the first time, emphasizing violence against civilians, and rescuing the much abused term both from those who invoke freedom-fighter status to excuse atrocities and from those in Washington who use it as a pejorative term for any dissent from their imperial project.

Equally welcome should be the panel’s proposal for a peacebuilding commission tasked with monitoring and averting impending crises on all the aspects—economic, military, and diplomatic—that could lead to social and national breakdowns, and drawing from the various bodies and agencies of the UN.

Apart from removing outright anachronisms such as the Trusteeship Council, or the Military Staff Joint

Committee, which has met regularly and futilely for half a century in the basement of UN headquarters, and references to the former (1945 vintage) enemy powers, the Report leaves the UN Charter substantially intact.

This is wise. The Charter has been quite adaptable to changing circumstances, and most changes would not change the function, simply the symbolism.

The Future of the Security Council

It could not take such a robust attitude to the most mooted change of all, the composition of the Security Council, although, in fact that too has more to do with symbolism than effect. The report accepts that if the Council is to wield such important powers of peace and war, it should be more representative of the changed state of the world since 1945.

So the report falls back into camel mode, with two alternative proposals, each adding another nine members to bring the Council total to 24. Implicitly it either agrees with previously expressed American objections to any increase in size beyond that, possibly because the U.S. would veto any further enlargement, and also because the U.S. is, on this occasion, entirely right. The Council can no more function as a mass meeting than the Human Rights Commission can.

The first proposal is for six new permanent members and three new temporary members (two year terms), and the second for eight elected “semi-permanent” members with four year terms, and one new temporary member. Recognizing that it was politically impossible to remove the veto from the existing permanent members the panel was sensible enough to realize that, regardless of any abstract questions of

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equity, adding six additional vetoes would condemn the council to perpetual indecision.

There are members, such as Brazil, Germany and South Africa, whose combined contributions are exactly such as fit them for a Security Council seat. However, those states not chosen will make it difficult to get the consensus necessary from the broader membership, let alone from the U.S., whose warmth toward candidates is in inverse proportion to the degree of independence they showed in the run up to Iraq.

It is a shame that the most immediately graspable part of the proposals is, in reality, also the one most likely to stall the whole reform process as diplomats wrestle for the accolade of permanent membership in the Council.

In fact, the report calls attention to the existing, and all too often overlooked, provision in Article 23 of the Charter that says that Council members should be chosen with “due regard being specially paid, in the first instance, to the contribution of members of the United Nations to the maintenance of international peace and security.”

Presently most “elected” members of the Council are on a rota basis in the regional groups, regardless of qualifications. If the General Assembly paid more attention to Article 23 in selecting Council members, there would be much less pressing need for institutional reforms.

Prospects for Change

So what chance do these reforms have? Not much if the full package has to await the Security Council reform, where jealous rivals of prospective permanent

members may well filibuster indefinitely. In fact, that comes to the nub of the problem with the report. Its complete implementation would require an instant conversion of 191 heads of state to born-again multi-lateralism on the banks of the East River.

But on the other hand, a more gradual conversion may be possible without the traumata and crisis of a Charter Change.

In many ways it would be better if well-intentioned members like Germany would use their undoubted qualifications for a permanent seat to lead other members toward implementing the most important parts of the reforms, those that depend on states living up to their existing pledges and international obligations.

In particular, moving the European Union and its allies in the General Assembly to make that body more effective—more decisive with less grandstand-

ing—and being able to resist bullying from some Council Members would be a good start. Certainly, the Assembly has more to do with attaining the Millennium Development Goals than the Council.

Additionally, with German pressure, the EU should put concerted pressure on the UK and France to behave like modern European representatives instead of anachronistic victors. Both are often better UN members because they know their qualifications for a seat are questionable.

Sadly, the founding member that could do most to implement these reforms has an administration that defines “reform” and “relevance” as instant subservience to the current U.S. policies and would be one of the last to convert. But even that may be feasible if others set a good example.

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However, the sharp-eyed in Washington have already noted that if the Charter is changed, it will have to be re-ratified by the Senate. That is not something to be taken for granted. The U.S. wielding a veto is one thing, but the successors of Jesse Helms doing so does not bode well for easy passage of any UN reforms that need a Charter change, let alone those that need the active cooperation and support of member states.

(Ian Williams contributes frequently to Foreign Policy In Focus (online at www.fpif.org) on UN and international affairs.)

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