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Needed Reform: The Case of the UN

As part of our examination of how international organizations are adapting to internal and external pressures, today we look at the UN. We present a critique of the latest reform initiatives, look to the future and provide a recommended reading list.

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Since its creation in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has both facilitated and had to cope with a turbulent international system. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the UN played an important role in promoting the decolonization of many former European colonies (see Monday's ISN feature, "[How Do 'The Rest' View Transnational Institutions and Organizations?](#)"). In terms of weathering change, when the Cold War ended both NATO (see [yesterday's discussion](#)) and the UN seemed to adapt to a new security environment defined more by intra-state conflict and less by cross-border threats. But did the UN properly adapt then and has it continued to do so now? "Not necessarily", say some of its own members and outside critics.

To give them a fair hearing, today we would like to present a selected [reading list](#) that outlines the latest reform initiatives proposed by the UN, particularly in four areas: 1) development, 2) peace and collective security, 3) human rights and the rule of law, and 4) strengthening the internal organization and management of the UN.

When perusing this list, there are two particular pieces we would like to highlight - [Victor-Yves Ghebali](#)'s critique of recent UN attempts to embrace development and security reforms, and the results of a Stimson Center workshop entitled [The United Nations in 2015: Some Alternative Futures](#). The overarching and sadly familiar conclusion of these analyses and their cousins is that UN reform has consistently been too little and come too late, if at all.

The UN as a Victim of Sovereignty

Ghebali's criticisms of the *2005 World Summit Outcome* document, which is perhaps the most comprehensive list of proposed reforms the UN ever produced, get straight to the heart of the matter. Or perhaps to be more accurate, the criticisms are not directed so much at the document itself but at its implementation. The needed follow-on reforms were, in Ghebali's words, "incomplete, if not paltry." They also represented a missed opportunity to do something that was long overdue - i.e., take the needed "quantum leap" from a multilateralist institutional orientation towards a globalized one.

But why did member states miss such an opportunity? Ghebali first argues, as have so many before

him, that they were not ready (as they remain unready) to give up their sovereignty in favor of truly joint policy making. (For an examination of the latter topic, please see our dossier, ["Global Interdependence and Effective Multilateralism"](#).)

Second, he reminds us that the US administration at the time of the World Summit thwarted any meaningful reform with its "dogmatic anti-UN stands". That mattered, and still does, because the US, as the largest source of funding for the UN, retains considerable leverage over its reform efforts – for better or ill.

A third and familiar problem is that the UN lacks the actual power it needs to achieve its desired goals. When it comes to development programs, for example, responsible UN organizations have faced a decline in official aid contributions by its member states, largely because they themselves have experienced a reduced capacity to influence the continued development of their own economies in a globalized world. To try and compensate for this trend, the UN has tried to enter into partnerships with the private sector and launched the [Global Compact](#), an initiative which appeals to businesses to assume greater social responsibility. Ghebali is skeptical whether such measures will help the UN to further its mission. He not only questions the long-term efficacy of appealing to for-profit organizations for volunteer funds, he also reminds us that the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) inevitably compete with parallel UN initiatives.

Finally, in the area of security it is not globalization but the post-Cold War security environment that poses a significant challenge to the *raison d'être* of the UN. Alongside the emergence of intra-state conflict, Ghebali identifies three additional specific challenges: 1) state failure, which compromises both the regional and global security environment; 2) non-state actors, which are increasingly capable of endangering the security of nation-states; and 3) civilian populations, who are now the 'privileged' victims of armed violence. As in the case of its development programs, the UN has tried to react to these challenges by diversifying its response. Efforts have included the creation of the [Peacebuilding Commission](#), whose main objective is to prevent post-conflict societies from falling back into conflict. Yet for Ghebali, such innovations are simply not enough. Instead, he advocates the development of a standing UN rapid deployment force and better coordination between UN peacekeeping missions and regional organizations. Additionally, Ghebali calls for a universally accepted definition of terrorism (having over 109 of them just won't do), and the consolidation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Finally, in the wake of the Iraq War, Ghebali demands clear criteria for the use of force in the future.

"Enduring Truths", "New Facts" and Two Scenarios of UN Reform

Ghebali's criticisms of the UN may be several, but his ultimate point is clear – criticizing the UN for its lack of resolve also means criticizing the reluctance of its member states to address the problem. This conclusion resonates with the Stimson Center's identification of a range of "enduring truths" that cannot be neglected when considering the future shape and remit of the United Nations. These truths include the following.

- The UN can only be the sum of its parts - as a nation-state-driven organization, "it can only do (or not do) what its members tell it to do".
- Developed and developing states have different expectations and demands of the UN. The G-77, for example, "opposes proposed shifts in management authority to the Secretary-General and the major donors away from the General Assembly".
- Disagreement over reform might compel the largest contributors to the UN budget to threaten to withhold funds if the process does not accommodate their interests.

- Humanitarian work is consistently viewed as the most effective and most respected work of the UN.
- Large bureaucracies are resistant to change and can be wily and persistent in protecting the status quo.
- Conflict prevention is enormously hard to achieve; the political will and resources will never be allocated for a timely intervention.

To illustrate some of these 'truths', let's begin by remembering that shortly after the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon came into office (December 2006), he was accused of bypassing certain states' interests and concerns when it came to UN reform. Since the new Secretary-General had been elected with the strong backing of Western countries, and in particular the United States, he was emboldened to push through management reforms that the West supported. Yet as the Stimson Center's first "enduring truth" demonstrates, the collision between reform and state interests is difficult to avoid in the UN, as Ban Ki-moon soon found out. His hopes to merge the previously independent Department of Disarmament Affairs (DDA) with the Department of Political Affairs (DPA) came to naught.

Given his experiences, a chastened Secretary-General now appears more realistic about how much change he can bring to the UN. In 2011, for example, he identified three areas that could lead to the strengthening of the UN from within – 1) improve how the UN delivers "on the ground," which acknowledges the Stimson Center's "enduring truth" about humanitarian work; 2) do more with the UN's resources, which obviously responds to the "truth" that the UN does not operate efficiently enough; and 3) increase accountability, which potentially puts the Secretary-General on a collision course with the organization's formidable bureaucracy.

When contemplating these desired reforms the first response might be "fair enough," but the Stimson Center's workshop also identified new facts on the ground that make the overcoming of bureaucratic inertia and further UN reforms essential.

- The rise of China and India will change the UN in ways that are not yet apparent. China will become a more active player in the Security Council and regardless of whether India becomes a permanent member of the Security Council or not, both will play key roles in bridging the North-South divide.
- Reform is already happening, but its achievements are not always recognized or valued by those whose reservations about the UN go deeper than institutional effectiveness.
- If globalization is a defining concept for the 21st century, the UN is an essential part of that process. Many global economic, transportation and communications regulations, for example, have been established under UN auspices.

After identifying the above enduring truths and new facts on the ground, the Stimson Center then developed two alternative scenarios outlining the possible shape of the UN by 2015. While neither scenario has yet to materialize, they nevertheless provide two plausible alternative futures for the United Nations.

In the first and seemingly brighter scenario, the UN is cast as an organization playing to one of its core strengths – i.e., as a facilitator of humanitarian aid and development. The success of the UN's humanitarian initiatives would be driven, as before, by specialized agencies, programs, and funds such as the World Health Organization (WHO) or the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The benefits of these entities, as is widely understood, is that they practice "small governance", are perceived to be effective and efficient problem-solvers, and have the good fortune to attract increased funding from member states. The dark side of this brighter scenario,

unsurprisingly, is that while specialized agencies will grow and shine, main bodies such as the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and the Security Council will "continue to be stymied by stalemates and...derided as little more than debating clubs".

Criticisms of the Security Council's particular inability to reflect the true power dynamics at play in today's international system segues into the Stimson Center's second and darker scenario. As regional rather international organizations increasingly come to reflect the geopolitical landscape, member states will rely less and less on the UN to ensure their collective security. Instead, states will turn to more local organizations that seem better equipped to meet their security needs. The two most important organizations of this type will most likely be NATO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Other organizations, designed for specific constituencies, will also emerge. They might include an emerging economies' version of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a strong Muslim world organization, and "a club for democracies with high standards of admission." As a result of this overall trend, financial and political resources will naturally be withdrawn from the UN and diverted to regional mechanisms instead.

Even though the first scenario seems to be more likely at the beginning of 2012, the second scenario illustrates what could happen if member states continue to suffer at the hands of those negative processes already associated with the UN. In the second case, an increasingly enfeebled UN would lose the support of key member states to regional alternatives or even coalitions of the willing. The cost of these alternatives would of course be inclusiveness. (Consider, for example, the Doha Round on trade liberalization. Since WTO member states were unable to reach a consensus regarding the further liberalization of global trade, diplomats left the negotiations and went back to their regions to work out more exclusive free trade arrangements there.)

It seems apparent that member states (and indeed elements of the bureaucracy) recognize the importance of making the United Nations a more effective and cohesive organization for the 21st century. Yet initial attempts to enhance the effectiveness and reach of the UN appear to be compromised, as before, by questions of sovereignty, the reluctance of key states to provide the organization with unconditional material and moral support, a cynical view of the UN's capacity to respond to the challenges of the contemporary international system, and more. As a counter, the Stimson Center suggests that the UN should address what are new facts on the ground by acknowledging some "enduring truths" and playing to its key strengths. Failure to do so may result in an emasculated UN that will be increasingly superseded by a more fragmented and/or regionalized international system.

Editor's note:

For the rest of our content on "Transnational Institutions and Organizations: Required Adjustments and New Opportunities for Change," check out our [dossier](#) on the topic.

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