

A Global Agenda

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Essayists

A Time to Give Change a Chance

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In the 1990s, many ambassadors prevented discussion of changes in the UN system by using the excuse that it would “open a Pandora box.” Not even the modest initiative of creating a military contingent that would be available for deployment in emergencies by the Security Council commanded the will of major member states. Today, however, such closed minds and international public opinion should not obscure the great opportunity presented in Secretary General Annan’s report, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Human Rights and Security for All*. With his proposed package of reforms, based on weaknesses in the UN body, Pandora’s box is now open for all to see just how much major changes are required—and how urgent they are needed.

Sixty years after the *UN Charter* was signed in San Francisco, cracks and metal fatigue in the UN are plain to see and this is precisely the time when a credible and forceful organization is needed more than ever. It has taken an insider to articulate the most ambitious overhaul to reconfigure and energize the world body. SG Annan has thrown his *In Larger Freedom* report like a gauntlet to the General Assembly, challenging its members to find “the glue of common interest...to perfect the triangle of development, freedom (human rights) and peace.”

In Larger Freedom in its full context should translate into greater accountability, mainly by the privileged permanent members of the Security Council whose anachronistic power structure no longer represents the international community at large. This is a well-established fact. What is not clear is to what extent the addition of nine more members, with or without veto, permanent or not, will make a real difference. In my view, the enlargement of the Security Council is the least urgent element in the reform proposals on the table. Accountability and transparency, extremely scarce commodities in the dealings of the most important body of international policy, will not be ensured by increasing its size. Already the proposal is dividing regions instead of uniting them.

It should not be ignored that there are countries which are icons of civility, human rights defenders, large peacekeeping contributors and true and mature democracies which lack the size of bigger countries (e.g., Sweden, Canada, Mexico and The Netherlands). Size, population and GNP alone might not be sufficient to fit the bill in the present times. Except for Brazil—the only non-Spanish speaking South American country—and Mexico, and to some extent Argentina, the enlargement of the Security Council to bring on a Latin American state as a permanent member is a non issue in the region. As one diplomat put it, the proposal “was strangled in its crib,” and the opposition and divisiveness that it has generated worldwide guarantees that the Council’s composition will remain unaltered.

At the 1944 Dumbarton Oaks Conference, Latin America had a chance to join as permanent member of the UN Security Council when then US Secretary of State Edward Stettinius proposed the inclusion of Brazil as the sixth member. But both the United Kingdom and Soviet delegate objected. Sixty years later, Brazil on its own is strongly campaigning for a place in the Council.

Aside from structural expansion, there are several more plausible reforms proposed in the Secretary-General's report—three of which I will address here briefly. First, the idea of a Democracy Fund is a very significant initiative that should include the support of civil society organizations. These groups are often the only ones interested in preserving and defending democracy in their countries. The *UN Charter* states, “we the people,” not “we the governments.” Global interdependence demands and needs a more legitimate and credible organization that can be achieved only by increasingly opening up the organization to civil society—a group that already plays an extremely valuable role in support of UN activities.

Second is the means to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. If done, 500 million people would come out of extreme poverty, 300 million would no longer go hungry and the lives 30 million children below five years old would be saved. If the goals are not met, however, according to Oxfam International, 45 million more children would die between 2015 and 2025, 247 million people in sub-Saharan Africa would live on less than \$1 a day and 97 million children would not have access to schools. These statistics speak volumes of the gravity of the situation and demonstrate that the world is then gambling with its future. SG Annan was quite clear: “We will not enjoy security without development, we will not enjoy development without security, and we will not enjoy either without respect for human rights.”

Third, the human rights council proposed by SG Annan would end the travesty of the present Human Rights Commission, which includes as its members some of the more infamous violators of human rights. Such spectacle has severely damaged the UN's image, despite the fact that the majority of operational human rights work is carried out by the staff of the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights. The commission, rather, is a political body representing the world's governments where positions are fought by many as a means to defend their rights “not to respect human rights.”

It is important to point out that none of these changes can occur unless the Secretary-General is given the authority and the resources to pursue a one-time staff buyout to refresh and reorganize the UN to meet current needs. The specter of the Cold War is still very visible in the composition of its personnel as well as in its management. The UN cannot in any way be hostage to personnel limitations and labor union practices should not have a

role in an entity entrusted by 191 countries with the maintenance of peace and international stability

It is not clear whether the 60th General Assembly will pick up the Secretary-General's gauntlet in fall 2005. The world may very well hear, once again, about the risks of opening up Pandora's box. But unless the Assembly develops the conscience and conviction that prompted SG Annan to present his report, "we the people" will suffer the consequences.

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