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September 18, 2005

What's Next for the UN? 10 Possibilities

Posted by Suzanne Nossel

After an embarrassing fizzle of a global summit intended to tackle UN reform, the U.S. and the world organization need to figure out what's next. Ideas are proliferating: Ivo Daalder at Americans Abroad suggests [replacing the global body](#) with a comparable forum whose membership would be limited to longstanding democracies. The Wall Street Journal editorial page wants to put [Turtle Bay in trusteeship](#) to be run by Former Fed Chairman Paul Volcker.

Before drowning UN HQ into the East River, its worth keeping in mind the many things the UN does well (here's a list of [10 important ones](#)). But its also time for some new thinking on the UN's shortcomings and what might be done to tackle them. Here are 10 ideas - some serious, some slightly fanciful. Please add in your own:

1. Next time, get the Heads of State together without no low-level pre-meetings - It's the endless pre-meetings of middling delegates where all the good ideas seem to get reduced to the proposition-of-the-resolution-of-the-committee-of-the-commission. While plenty of world leaders may prove just as obstinate and obfuscatory as their underlings, my bet is you'd have a more serious group in the room. Have the heads of state meet privately for, say, 3 days, divided into committees they would volunteer for that could take real decisions.

2. Refuse to participate in the UN's Human Rights Council unless and until its done right - The Summit did not kill the idea of a [bona fide human rights council](#) that would make decisions based on legitimate criteria and be comprised of members with proven commitments to human rights. But it came close by kicking all the details into the [General Assembly](#), where a majority is likely to resist such reforms. But if the US, Europeans, Australians and others refuse to take part, any human rights mechanism will be relegated to a sideshow. This is an issue worth forcing.

3. Campaign for Bill Clinton as Secretary General - This notion has been [swirling around](#) for years, and this week's landmark [Clinton Global Initiative](#) will only boost it. It makes enormous sense: Clinton would command a level of respect from leaders well beyond what any administrator or former foreign minister could muster. His influence with the US alone would make his candidacy a win for the rest of the world. Achieving this when Annan's term ends in December 2006 would necessitate a shift in the usual regional order of candidacies, but that's not [out of the question](#). After this week's debacle, the world should be in search of a savior for the UN. If it really wants UN reform, the Administration ought to start lobbying on this one (an interesting sideline would involve implications for HRC's presidential bid . . .)

4. Form an Americas Regional Group - The UN's regional group system (important for candidacies and elections to virtually all UN committees) is both anachronistic and simply weird. Rather than being paired with its neighbors in the Americas, the US is group with Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and a few other strays in a Western European and Other Group. Two big deterrents to possible realignment are Cuba and Venezuela. But all sorts of interesting things might happen if we cast lots with Canada and the Latins: closer relationships with allies like Mexico, Chile, Argentina and Brazil; better ability to influence the UN's developing world blocs, strong Western sway within at least 2 UN regional groups . . .

5. Offer to Fund the Staff Buyout - The Summit ducked on Annan's proposal to offer a one-time buyout to get rid of dead wood within the UN's staff, passing the issue to the General Assembly. The U.S., perhaps with a private donor, should put forward a big pool of money goodies (visas, eligibility for US benefit programs like social security) to support this program, provided the GA approves it. If the offer is attractive enough, staff demand will help propel passage of the program. Those who have worked at the UN know how key an element of management reform this is.

6. Create standing UN capabilities for peacekeeping and peacebuilding - I can hear you now: how can you argue that an organization as dysfunctional as the UN merits standing capabilities?!? As it turns out, the UN's doing [a lot better](#) at peacekeeping and things like post-conflict reconstruction and election running than it is at, say administering sanctions and reforming itself. The UN's capacity has grown significantly in these areas, as has the US's and the

world's dependence on it. But without [standing capabilities](#), the UN will continue to face the problem it did when the US wanted its help in Iraq: inability to attract donations of sufficient qualified personnel.

7. Establish a Peacekeeping Training Center with US Backing - Related to the above, but potentially more palatable: The US would establish a program, seeking financial and in-kind contributions by others, to train several thousand peacekeepers from around the world each year. Trainees would then be seconded by their home governments for UN service for some fixed period of time, though formally remaining on the personnel rosters of their own militaries. This would improve the quality of UN peacekeepers, give an incentive to more countries to participate, ensure a ready flow of qualified personnel, and give the US a measure of control over the whole effort.

8. Make clear that the US views the UN as critical to its efforts on terrorism and WMD - The Summit took some [tentative steps](#) toward a global treaty on terror, and threw up its hands when it came to proliferation. Whereas many of the [preliminary reports](#) that fed into the reform effort highlighted these top US foreign policy priorities, the US itself has sidelined the UN in its fights against terror and WMD. While Bush talked about terror and proliferation during his Summit address last week, the Administration has viewed the UN as too weak and untrustworthy to play a key role and, partly as a result, the UN hasn't [stepped up to the plate](#). While these fights cannot be outsourced to the UN, there's no reason not to convince the membership that the organization's contributions are taken seriously.

9. Air UNTV - One way to make the UN more transparent and accountable would be to introduce CSPAN-style gavel-to-gavel coverage of the tedium of UN committee work, broadcast via satellite worldwide. The cameras might cut down on the hypocrisy and mischaracterizations that go on in UN debates, and incentivize countries to appoint stronger delegates. This [poll](#) on the impact of CSPAN on its 25th birthday suggests some reasons for pause, however. The number one reason cited for Members choosing to speak on the floor is raising their personal visibility.

10. Invoke Responsibility to Protect in Darfur - Probably [the most significant](#) result of last week's Summit was inclusion of language in the outcome document specifying a "responsibility to protect" innocents confronted by genocide and war crimes. The Canadians deserve great credit for pioneering the concept of "duty to protect" and pushing it this far. The next step should be a swift new UN Security Council resolution [invoking this obligation](#) in relation to Darfur. By quickly breathing life into this new provision, the UN membership can see to it that the Summit was not for naught.

September 18, 2005 at 01:17 PM in [UN](#) | [Permalink](#)

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» [Whats next for the UN](#) from Owen's musings

The excellent Suzanne Nossel at Democracy Arsenal proposes ten next steps for the United Nations. Her suggestions are a mixture of sensible and practical, sensible and impractical, and not very sensible. Most intriguing is the proposal that the UN... [\[Read More\]](#)

Tracked on Sep 18, 2005 11:35:20 PM

Comments

Why can't the UN move to something along the lines of the Congress' committee system, where issues are delegated to groups that are empowered to make recommendations that, by and large, stick. It seems to me the organization's biggest problems are rooted in serious overuse of committees of the whole.

Posted by: Eric Zoro | [September 18, 2005 at 10:41 PM](#)

Suzanne,

Why must the forces that make up the standing capability be seconded by their home countries? Couldn't the peacekeeping force be filled by individuals who enlist directly in that force? The main role of the home countries would simply be to ensure that it is legal under the country's domestic laws for its nationals to enlist in the UN peacekeeping force.

Seconding allows the larger contributing countries to scuttle a peacekeeping mission by redeploying the troops that are on loan to the UN. This would diminish confidence in the steadfastness and reliability of UN missions. Intervention,

always a political challenge, would be very difficult. It would be hard for the intervening force to build up alliances among local leaders, since those leaders would fear abandonment to their enemies should any major contributing country decide to pull the plug and withdraw its forces.

Seconding also has the potential to create problems with troop morale and competence, since the contributing countries would determine which troops it sent. They might very well send troops of sub-standard capacity, or troops who are insufficiently motivated to participate in peacekeeping. It would be much better if the troops had enlisted themselves. Indeed, a standing peacekeeping force should be able to attract individuals from around the world of high quality and ideals, who are dedicated to international law and peacekeeping, and who would be eager to participate in such an effort if it did not require signing on the military agendas of their native countries, and making themselves available as soldiers to their own home governments.

Posted by: Dan Kervick | [September 19, 2005 at 08:09 AM](#)

Dan: That idea has fairly significant legal obstacles, however.

Namely, the Geneva Conventions, which would define such troops as mercenaries.

Anyhow: Don't discount just how many people distrust the UN, thinking it might try to become a world government. It's not just crackpots.

An independent force like this, done in any manner other than seconding, would cause such people to go nuts.

Posted by: John Penta | [September 19, 2005 at 08:33 AM](#)

There has to be a certainty about the income of the UN. If the US (and others, but the US is the main debtor) refuses to pay it's due contribution it should face some consequences (loose vote on security council? Pay interest?).

Posted by: Dutchmarbel | [September 19, 2005 at 10:50 AM](#)

John

As a matter of interest, how does the French Foreign Legion work? Are they classified as mercenaries?

Owen

Posted by: [Owen Barder](#) | [September 19, 2005 at 12:09 PM](#)

Owen: The FFL is a unit integrated with the French Army, like the British Gurkhas; They are trained and deploy as regular members of the nation's military forces. Therefore they are not mercenaries.

(The Additional Protocol to the GCs that addresses this topic was written by some of the most abstruse lawyers on the planet, seemingly. It's confusing.)

However, the key point there is that they are regular members of the state military forces. As the UN is not a state and is not a sovereign, it doesn't really have the right to military forces.

Dutchmarbel: The only consequence allowed under the Charter is the loss of the vote in the General Assembly. Nothing can take away the SC vote.

Posted by: John Penta | [September 19, 2005 at 04:33 PM](#)

John,

I don't think the members of a standing, professional UN peacekeeping force would qualify as mercenaries, since among the six criteria laid out in article 47 of the Geneva Conventions, comprising the definition of a mercenary, is the stipulation that a mercenary:

c)is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that Party;

However, it is true that UN peacekeeping falls under a gray area of the current international law of armed conflict. The creation of such a standing force might be accomplished by the ratification of a treaty of some kind, which would then clarify and supercede the current law. And if these forces were to be used to intervene in situations in which some

government has failed to fulfill its "duty to protect", it seems to me we would be talking about an entirely new kind of UN operation: a policing action of some kind rather than a peacekeeping operation.

I understand that there are many people who are opposed to any encumbrance of national sovereignty, and the establishment of stronger institutions for global governance. While I wouldn't mind taking a ride in one of those black helicopters myself, progress is bound to be slow, and must take account of the worries of the nationalists. My notion is that the check on the power of UN forces would come not from the fact that they are seconded by the governments of member states, but from the difficulty of deploying them. However the standing forces are constituted, one would still need Security Council authorization in order to deploy them. Creating a standing capacity for peacekeeping based on professional UN soldier-employees would not thereby create a strong UN executive with the ability to deploy the forces outside Security Council control.

Posted by: Dan Kervick | [September 19, 2005 at 08:00 PM](#)

Would it?

I mean, realistically, the UN isn't going to accept something like that unless the soldiers can be trusted to place their loyalty to the UN *above* their loyalties to their home states.

To a lot of governments, a lot of perfectly rational governments, that would smell like creating a praetorian guard or condottieri (sp?). If those troops don't have loyalty to their home states above the UN, what confidence do the gov'ts have that they might not conceivably be used, however extralegally, for coups and the like?

Posted by: John Penta | [September 20, 2005 at 05:49 PM](#)

"Ivo Daalder at Americans Abroad suggests replacing the global body with a comparable forum whose membership would be limited to longstanding democracies."

I've noticed that idea, lately. Of course, the older and stronger idea in the American right is that of "he's an SOB, but he's our SOB". Along with "those people don't understand democracy, they just understand force". I can't think of anything which would spur the development of democracy in the world today better than the US actually supporting democracies and leaning on dictatorships. As opposed to hopping in bed with non-uppity dictators, and being ambivalent (at best) about democracy.

Posted by: Barry | [September 22, 2005 at 03:36 PM](#)

Dear All,

Please read the following URL for a conceptual response to the Srebrenica massacre:

http://paginas.pavconhecimento.mct.pt/pessoais/dw/Mario_Zanatti

The concept also attempts to conciliate the French political establishment to the US political administration following the Irak furore through the United Nations. The concept includes the presence of French-speaking USAF or USN NATO and Canadian liaison officers in the Ops Room of the Single European Regiment during peace-making operations. A battalion of the Single European Regiment would be deployed in the Mogadishu scenario of October 1993.

Posted by: [Mario Zanatti](#) | [October 06, 2005 at 03:31 AM](#)

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Posted by: [digital camera](#) | [August 06, 2010 at 04:25 AM](#)

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