Summer 2007

Editor's Note

EDITOR'S NOTE

The United Nations Organization is not different from other structures created by humans—at least in this sense: it is not immune to the vagaries of change. Most modifications are partly induced by external pressures and partly generated by organic permutations. Thus, in 2005, spoke Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General:

> As globalization shrinks distances…issues become increasingly interconnected, the comparative advantage of the United Nations becomes ever more evident. So, too, however, do some of its real weaknesses. From overhauling basic management practices and building a more transparent, efficient and effective United Nations system to revamping our major intergovernmental institutions so that they reflect the world…we must reshape the organization in ways not previously imagined and with a boldness and speed not previously shown.[1]

Before I comment on Annan's call for transformation, a very brief review of the making of the organization's history seems in order. The appearance of the modern nation-state was a momentous happening. At least as far back as the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the nation-state brought with it claims of exclusive and clashing identities and material interest that, in a number of registers, created new tensions which, in turn, necessitated transnational means and institutions of adjudication, if not collaboration. More dramatically, though the tug between the twin phenomena of warring and peace-making have an older pedigree, it was the birth of nationalism and its structural embodiment, the modern state, that at once compounded a contradictory, competitive, and conflictual "Othering" and the possibilities for larger mutualities among the different.

On top of earlier but more limited battles between some (primarily European) nations over territory, imperial ambition, or national pride, the Twentieth Century is quintessentially known for two conflagrations, dubbed world wars. The designation was appropriate mainly because of the geographical scale, the magnitude of the destruction, and the consequences for international coexistence. The war of 1914–1918 has acquired a legendary status based on its unprecedented degree of intimate ferocity; the Second World War, 1939–1945, is best remembered for being the first bloody clash in which nuclear weapons were used. Among the numerous ramifications of each war were

efforts to shorten the duration of blood letting, as well as search for the cessation of hostilities and institutional arrangements that would secure peace in the future.

In an attempt to simultaneously keep the United States out of what was primarily a European affair and to insure that the option of peace would be available, President Woodrow Wilson, on 22 January 1917, announced to the world a perspective of "peace without victory." The structural linchpin of the vision was to be the League of Nations. Though Wilson was neither successful in his objective to avoid American involvement in the war nor the immediate materialization of the League, the idea for the latter was given new visibility by the President's January 8, 1918, announcement of his now famous Fourteen Points. A key item here was the proposition that every nation would "determine its own institutions, be assured of justice and fair dealing by the other peoples of the world as against force and self aggression." This declaration has since become a source of inspiration for, if not the battle cry of, every group that identifies itself as a cohesive community and in search of recognition by others.

Whatever the long-term promise and ultimate value of the League of Nations in creating a new international order, new developments took the wind out of its sails: the rise of an acute resentment on the part of the defeated Central Powers, especially Germany and Italy; the onset of the Great Depression that started in 1929; and the Italian fascist invasion of Ethiopia. The first is illuminated by the reactions of Germany and Italy to the armistice of November 1918 and the completion of the terms of defeat, including the reorganization of Europe, the Middle East, China, and Africa, a year later. In the second case, tens of millions in the industrial West experienced a drastic shrinkage of their material welfare to such an extent that they were thrown into abject poverty, if not destitution and immediate hunger. Third, Italy was a comparatively latecomer to its own national unification and, thus, felt left with meager possibilities to satisfy its own appetite for colonial conquest. It decided to win two victories in one act—that is, redeem its resounding defeat by Abyssinia at the battle of Adowa in 1896 (the first modern time a non-European state vanquished a European power) and establish itself among the colonial club of states.

The League of Nations, structurally so weak, did not survive these pressures. With Japan's launch of full-scale aggression against China in 1937, the galloping nazification and militarization of Germany and its subsequent takeover of Austria in 1938 and attacks on Czechoslovakia

and Poland in March and September of 1939, the League's total ineffectiveness became glaringly obvious. The Second World War was in full swing. In quick time, it will engulf most of Europe, many parts of Asia and North Africa, and directly involve the United States. Though the Axis was crushed, the cost was colossal, particularly in human lives and material assets. Consequently, the old conundrum of how to at once minimize conditions conducive to warfare and cultivate peaceful relations among nations returned with even greater force. Part of the genesis of what we now call the United Nations Organization goes back to August 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Britain signed what was then named the "Atlantic Charter." Nearly half a year later, 26 countries bestowed the words "United Nations" to distinguish themselves from Germany, Japan, and Italy. The main aim was to sketch the policies of the alliance.

Inspired by President Roosevelt's wishes, a conference was convened in the city of San Francisco in April 1945, with the intention of drafting the U.N. Charter. Though President Roosevelt was by then dead, the Truman Administration carried the effort forward. The foundational principle of the new United Nations Organization was to forestall another world war and, thus, secure future generations from a fate potentially worse than that of their ancestors. Notwithstanding the loftiness of the objectives and the sobriety that accompanied the conclusion of the War, a jostling for power among the victorious and the newly ambitious quickly transpired. More specifically, the "Big Three" allies (U.S.A., U.S.S.R., and Britain) ran into significant differences in their respective understanding of the ensuing post-war era and the structure, functions, and decision-making processes of the organization. A number of new arrangements were enacted to clarify important responsibilities. For instance, inequality in power among the members was expressed through the creation of the Security Council, with the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, China, and a weak France given permanent seats and veto power over resolutions. All the founding countries, who in 1945 amounted to fifty-one, automatically became members of the United Nations Organization, with seats in the General Assembly. The greatest expansion of the membership of the U.N.O. came with the decolonization of the 1950s and early 1960s, when many of the people of what we now call the "Global South" became sovereign nations. At the time of this writing, there are 192 members. In addition to the Security Council and the General

Assembly, the other main components include the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, and the General Secretariat. There are also the linked but autonomous organizations and specialist technical institutions (e.g., UNESCO, FAO, WHO, UNEP, etc.). Despite the creation of such a complex structure, there is no question that the U.N.O. has very limited power. Though informed by idealism and a spirit of cosmopolitanism, its effectiveness is highly constrained by two onerous factors: the self-interest of its members (especially the powerful) and the immensity, in the face of meager resources, of the problems that face the world. The first is the familiar syndrome of seeking national particularity and concomitant leadership that thrives on stressing difference as well as a normalization of a zero-sum mindset (first tutored by Nicolo Machiavelli and refined for contemporary international affairs by his epigons called "realists"). Some scholars go even further and postulate that this contradictory dimension was deviously present in the thinking of the United States at the very founding moment of the organization.

> The Roosevelt Administration hit upon a fundamental insight: that international institutions could be constructed to face simultaneously in two radically different directions. One face would be turned in the direction of mass popular politics, both within the U.S. and internationally. This would be the inspiring ethical face, offering promise of a better world. But simultaneously, the internal face of the organization could be shaped in an entirely different and indeed opposite way, as a framework for the power politics of the hegemon. Moreover, this was the key to success in setting up the U.N.—the two would not be in tension: the moralistic mask could both conceal and strengthen the inner countenance of the institution.[2]

The second issue ranges from existing possessions or new acquisitions of weapons of mass destruction; mass poverty and inequality (particularly within nations), in which a distancing of the economy and politics from public influence, if not regulation, commensurate with the power of the citizen, is on the rise; and environmental menaces of biblical proportions that seem to be gathering momentum. In recent years, many have put their faith in the office of the Secretary-General to assume the mantle of global leadership, but this wish has met with severe disappointments primarily attributable to the original design.

> The U.N., writes Samantha Powers, gave equal voice to dictatorships and democracies, but its charter took sides, calling on members to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. The U.N., like any other organization, depended on authoritative leadership, but power was put in the hands of the Security Council, a squabbling committee dominated by five permanent members with widely divergent interests and political systems. The Secretary-General, the nominal face of the organization, was appointed to serve as only the chief administrative officer. He was a servant of the states, a point drive home by his place of work, a secretariat.[3]

There is a lot to cogitate upon in the sobering judgments of Cowan and Powers. But some attribute the shortcomings of the United Nations to other factors. Eminent here are (neo-) conservatives in the United States. They accuse the organization of being guilty of a number of capital offenses: (a) a departure from the "original mission" which was limited to aiding member nations in peaceful resolution of international misunderstandings, if not disputes; (b) an enormous growth of bureaucratic complexity and duplication; (c) a mismanagement of its finances and outright malfeasance; (d) a weakening of administrative competence and, in its place, practices of cronyism; and (e) an undue hostility to its greatest benefactor, the United States. To amplify these defects, American critics have long suggested a return to what they hold to be the primary purpose of the organization and, thus, a retreat from expanding transgressions on the sovereignty of nation-states. Conservatives would not want the U.N.O. to be involved in holding elections or supplying food to the starving, let alone getting ensnared by what they see as ill-advised and bottomless projects of "nation building." Moreover, to discourage "wasteful indulgences," they proffer that the U.N. budget and administrative operations be drastically reduced, perhaps by as much as half in the case of employees. Extreme conservatives are so suspicious of the very existence of the U.N. that they believe that it is simply a Trojan horse for a "totalitarian World Government" bent on usurping American sovereignty and, therefore, destroying its unique institutions of political culture. In light of this perspective, the extreme Right would prefer the U.S. to leave the organization and have U.N. headquarters moved somewhere else. The less paranoid, if not more informed and worldly, demand less onerous financial contributions from the U.S. and a more explicit appreciation from the rest for America's principles, generosity, and willingness to carry a larger portion of the burden.[4]

On the other side, the point of view of the Left is equally critical. With the intense and continuing debate over the invasion of Iraq and other explosive issues in the Middle East in the background, Perry Anderson asserts that U.S. dominance, though not victorious or visible in every instance, still conditions major decision making.

> Today, paramountcy does not mean omnipotence. The U.S. cannot count on always securing UN legitimation of its actions *ex ante*. But where this is wanting, retrospective validation is readily available, as the occupation of Iraq has shown. What is categorically excluded is active opposition on the part of the UN to any significant U.S. initiative. A Security Council resolution, let alone a secretary-general, condemning an American action is unthinkable. Ben Ki-Moon, whose appointment required Chinese assent, may keep a lower profile than Annan, but his role is unlikely to be very different. The U.S. grip on the organization has not relaxed, as can be seen from current UN resolutions on Lebanon and Iran. Anxious voices form liberal opinion, worrying that the organization might become irrelevant if Bush's 'unilateralism' were to persist, and plaintive appeals from the Left to defend the UN from distortion by Washington, are regularly heard today. That can be reassured. The future of the United Nations is safe. It will continue to be, as it was intended to be, a serviceable auxiliary mechanism of the Pax Americana.[5]

If some doubt that the founding of the United Nations Organization was solely a sincere attempt to at once end the hostilities and usher in an epoch of mutual security and peace among nations, the record of the past sixty years displays significant accomplishments. True, there had been numerous local conflicts, regional instabilities, and, of course, four decades of a balance of terror between two nuclear-armed camps. Yet, the U.N.O. rightly celebrated this milestone, legitimately claiming credit for the avoidance, thus far, of a cataclysmic Third World War. Furthermore, the U.N. agencies have taken numerous initiatives to address scourges such as disease, hunger, and ignorance. These achievements notwithstanding, a combination of old and new doubts is haunting the organization. Prominent among the first are the prevailing distribution of power among regions and nations (particularly in the Security Council), a paucity of successful and deliberative thinking that produces impartially binding resolutions, the resistance to electing an autonomous and empowered leadership, and acute inadequacy of financial contributions. The more novel concerns bring forth issues that relate to institutional competence, transparency, and efficiency.

But, as former Secretary-General Kofi Annan had already declared, the epoch of globalization is forging out of the durable worries and the fast-moving developments a deeper and more complicated challenge: the coexistence of at once different yet continuously interpenetrating global histories and intensifying urgencies around specific issues. Robert W. Cox, one of the most original and cosmopolitan thinkers of our time, offers a precious counsel that is worthy of a lengthy reproduction:

> In a multi-civilizational world order, the role of a world organization would be to seek out principles acceptable in the 'common sense' or intersubjectivity of each of the different civilizations—to distill a kind of supra-intersubjectivity from the distinct intersubjectivities of its component parts. This could only come about through a lengthy learning process from experience in reconciling conflicts. Two conditions would be indispensable: the emergence of a core body of people who would cultivate an empathetic understanding of forms of common sense other than their own—who could bridge intersubjectivities; and the development of civil societies capable of articulating the basic sentiments and goals of the people who compose them… . Civil society is the force that develops the intersubjective content of civilizations; and the core group which assumes the task of reconciliation of differences would have to keep abreast of these developments in the dynamics of civilization. This concept of a structure for world order is far from being an institutionalized form of global governance. It envisages a weak centre embodying certain accepted common principles in a world fragmented among peoples guided by different sets of social practices and goals. Such a pluralistic framework of weak centre in a fragmented whole has precedence in world history—in the European medieval Papacy, and in periods of Chinese history, for example. Such a structure would not displace the nation-state system or the international economy. It would provide the framework of principles within which the state system and economic relations could be regulated.[6]

In addition to his call for a cosmopolitan "common sense," Cox identifies specific issues that many agree to be at the heart of a reinvigorated United Nations Organization: protection of the environment, avoidance of violence and aggression, curbing of social inequities, restraining if not extinguishing organized criminal activities, and the establishment of a common understanding and promotion of human rights. The world needs the U.N.O. more now than six decades ago.

The organization also desperately needs the full attention of, and concrete investment from, its members more than ever before.

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Our discussion opens with the keynote remarks of **Janice Gross Stein**. Cognizant of numerous difficulties that confront the organization, including its very legitimacy, Stein focuses on three items she considers to be of great normative weight: "Freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to live in dignity." According to Stein, the U.N. can't be solely responsible for these concerns, but to be part of the solution, the organization must become a more efficient convener and manager at the core of "newly emergent global networks."

Francis M. Deng's main concern is the troublesome disjunction between the pull of national interest and that of transnational solidarity. His essay concentrates on "the crisis of internal displacement and the response of the United Nations." In response, **Tonderai W. Chikuhwa** explores the pivotal concept of "sovereignty as responsibility." He suggests that, "positive dialogue and diplomacy" would have to be coupled with "a structured regime of compliance" if the world is to effectively address the needs of those in greatest danger. **Dianna J. Shandy** stresses three points: the role of colonial legacies and current disparities in global power relations; the ramification of diminished sovereignty as a result of an "ascendancy" of NGO influence in Africa; and the implications of the distinction made between a refugee and an internally displaced person.

Among the severe critics of the United Nations is **Nile Gardiner**. His remarks underscore what he sees as the countless and embarrassing failures of the organization. These range from mismanagement of assets and corruption to ineffectiveness in the face of brutal autocracies bent on using aggression and terror to get their way. Gardiner makes a spirited case for the United States' commitment and material contribution to the birth and sustainability of the United Nations. He stresses that the fate of the organization is, as it were, in its own hands. Its future depends on how competently it responds to the three demons of the present: terrorism, tyranny, and genocide. **Natalia Mari Espejo** concurs with some of Gardiner's contributions and disputes other arguments, including the role of the United States. Espejo reminds us of the "structural shortcomings" of the U.N. as well as the impact of "the current geopolitical reality." **Andrew Latham** begins his response

to Gardiner by digging up the neo-conservative ideological underpinnings of the perspective. Second, Latham deems Gardiner's suggestion to improve the organization to be, in the end, "either irrelevant or counterproductive." This is a fierce engagement that at once acknowledges the necessary reforms the U.N.O. must embrace and yet defends the organization against any crude manipulations by the most powerful.

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The 2007 Macalester International Roundtable returns to the area of the arts, but with a twist. With the theme *The Musical Imagination in the Age of Globalization*, the Roundtable will comprise scholarly essays and discussions on the music of regions such as the Mediterranean and Western Europe, China, and African America, as well as an evening musical performance. We are looking forward to this combination.

Notes

1. Kofi Annan, "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All" (March 2005).

2. Peter Gowan, "US: UN," *New Left Review*, no. 24 (Nov/Dec 2003): 9.

3. Samantha Power, "To Save the World from Hell," *Le Monde Diplomatique* (September 2005).

4. John Bolton, "Challenges and Opportunities in Moving Ahead on UN Reform" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, October 18, 2005).

5. Perry Anderson, "Our Man," *London Review of Books* (10 May 2007): 12.

6. Robert W. Cox, "Thinking About Civilizations," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 26 (December 2000): 230–231.

Further Reading

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2. Skinner, Quentin, and Bo Strath, eds. *States and Citizens: History, Theory, Prospects*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

3. Kennedy, Paul. *The Parliament Man: The United Nations and the Quest for World Government*. London: Allen Lane, 2006.

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5. Ruggie, John. *Multilateralism Matters: The Theory and Praxis of an Institutional Form*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

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16. Falk, Richard. *A Study of Future Worlds*. New York: Free Press, 1975.

17. Bauman, Zygmunt. *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004.

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21. ———. *Invoking Humanity: War, Law and Global Warning*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

22. United Nations. *Global Agenda: Issues before the 60th General Assembly of the United Nations*. New York: United Nations Association of the USA, 2005.

23. Pieterse, Jan Nederveen, ed. *Global Futures: Shaping Globalization*. London: Zed Books, 2000.

24. *Macalester International: The International Community and the Emerging World (Dis)Order*, Vol. 1, St. Paul: Macalester College. Spring 1995.