

Keeping the Peace

Why the US shouldn't go it alone at the UN

By Jason Miks

This month the United States agreed to join China in opposing a proposal by the so-called Group of 4 (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) to allow six new permanent members on the United Nations Security Council. Yet though America's motivation is different from China's, the US still risks undermining the UN and ultimately its own interests by resisting expansion in this way.

That reform of the UN is necessary is recognized not just by member countries, but also by the Secretariat itself. In his acceptance speech to head the organization in December 1996, Secretary General Kofi Annan highlighted the need to make the organization leaner, more efficient and more realistic in its goals. Since then Annan has embarked on a series of reforms aimed at cutting costs and streamlining departments.

But the proposal that is getting the most attention - and where the consensus on change is breaking down - is on how to restructure the Security Council.

The G4 has put forward a joint bid which would give each of its members permanent seats on the Council, along with two more for Africa, but leaving the current permanent five (P5) with exclusive veto rights. This plan has been complicated by the African Union's insistence - re-iterated at a summit in Addis Ababa earlier this month - that it should have two veto-wielding seats.

This is understandably frustrating for the G4, who have worked hard to find a compromise and the AU should drop its veto demand immediately. Adding six more vetoes would risk paralysis of the Council, especially in crisis situations such as authorizing peacekeeping forces - a process which can already be painfully and tragically slow.

If the UN is to maintain any sort of relevancy, and to effectively confront the increasing danger of weapons proliferation and terrorism effectively, then reform of the body with primary responsibility for international peace and security is essential. There has previously been some limited recognition of the need to adapt with an expansion of membership in 1965, but the permanent members have remained the same since the UN's creation sixty years ago.

But while the AU may be too ambitious with its proposals, the US is in turn being far too timid with its stated preference for just 'two or so' more seats, especially if one of those goes to Japan. Japan, though it would meet resistance from China, is undoubtedly a deserving candidate. Yet its inclusion does nothing to re-balance the geo-political make-up of the Council and would not take the first essential steps towards increasing its legitimacy in the eyes of developing countries.

It is for this reason that the US should be championing the candidacy of India for a permanent seat. The Bush administration has rightly, and for some time, recognized the growing importance of the world's largest democracy, both as a useful and growing trade partner and a stable ally in a frequently turbulent part of the world. But while President Bush offered Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh a long hoped for deal on civilian nuclear co-operation at a meeting between the two in July, the US has been reluctant to endorse India's long cherished dream of a permanent Security Council seat.

This is a shame, as it is essential that the Council is seen as representative and even handed, and to be giving developing countries a real stake in the decision making process – in global politics perceptions matter. It has become something of a truism to point out that the pace of globalization means that more than ever decisions affecting one country have knock-on effects in others, so it is therefore essential that developing countries are fully and enthusiastically involved. By thoroughly and permanently engaging the likes of Brazil, India and South Africa in the Council's work the current P5 would be sending a clear signal that they understand the needs of the developing world, and that they will not be marginalized.

Of course expansion of the Council is not a panacea for the problems facing the UN, though many of the perceived problems are in the eye of the beholder. Those who speak as if the UN is some sort of independent moral arbiter, as many seemed to during the lead up to the Iraq war, are destined to be disappointed. Ultimately the UN is a collection of individual states representing their own interests. A reformed and expanded Council should mean more balance in these representations, but in the end a country will not, and can hardly be expected to, act directly against its own interests. And for those who still believe countries set aside realpolitik at the UN, then they only have to look at the unseemly maneuvering which left the UN Human Rights Commission with member countries such as Libya, Cuba and Sudan.

Yet though there have undoubtedly been high profile failings and short comings, most notably in Rwanda and arguably now with Sudan, the UN does a great deal of excellent work, much of it outside its better known remit of peace keeping, and much of it under recognized. The UN offers vital technical advice and assistance to developing countries in implementing sustainable development strategies and

provides useful monitoring, standardization and legal frameworks for environmental and trade issues, as well as fostering co-operation in tackling cross border crime and people trafficking through its Office on Drugs and Crime.

It is for these reasons that the US should be seeking to bolster the UN, by encouraging greater developing country co-operation. Terrorism and weapons proliferation are now no longer confined to a few key countries and the challenges created by genocide, famine and drug trafficking not only place additional pressure on American resources, but can directly and indirectly exacerbate the problem of security for American citizens at home and abroad. Giving developing countries a greater stake in the UN's work at the highest level should allow them to take greater responsibility for their own affairs and enable them to act more as partners in helping shoulder security commitments and peace keeping.

The latest Pew Research report on Global Attitudes shows a slight improvement in the way America is viewed abroad, but its image is still badly tarnished. It is clear from the study that many are still troubled by American military power, with comfortable majorities in several countries believing it would be good for America to have a military rival, and a majority of countries also feeling that US foreign policy does not consider others' interests.

Giving developing countries a voice, but not yet a veto, would therefore go some way to showing America's good faith in desiring to work with other countries and, perhaps, inoculate it from at least some of the accusations of unilateralism which are often leveled against it.

At present the US may think it can shoulder the burdens and responsibility of global leadership alone, and that it can afford to sideline the UN. In the short term maybe it can. But in the long term interests of peace and prosperity it must now start asking itself whether it should.

