

The U.N. Must Look For a New Secretary-General

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Last week, world leaders met for what Kofi Annan described as a "once-in-a-generation opportunity to take bold decisions in the areas of development, security, human rights and reform of the United Nations." But a reading of the "outcome document" world leaders are signing shows it to be yet another missed opportunity for U.N. reform. John Bolton pushed hard to improve the document and succeeded in modifying its most objectionable clauses. But what remains falls far short of "bold."

The document, for instance, calls for a Human Rights Council to replace the thoroughly discredited Human Rights Commission. But negotiators could not agree on the criteria for participation, leaving open the possibility that this new organ will be more of the same. In the same way, the document does not adequately address critical issues such as establishing a code of ethics, implementing sunset provisions on redundant U.N. programs or a staff buyout to eliminate the deadwood that pervades the personnel system; instead, it merely asks for a report by the secretary-general. And it leaves out entirely essential components of U.N. reform like the installation of a chief operating officer and an independent auditing board.

Instead, we have a document that advocates the implementation of the Mauritius Strategy for small island states, the Almaty Program of Action for landlocked developing countries, the Declaration and Program of Action on a Culture of Peace, and the Global Agenda for Dialogue Among Civilizations. The document, in fact, is structured around such delusions. The first half -- a full 18 pages -- is devoted to amorphous platitudes about development. The superficial treatment of reform is buried at the end. It strains credulity for an organization wracked by corruption and mismanagement to broaden the scope of its mandate when it is supposed to be engaged in self-critique. The U.N. needs to clean house, address its shortcomings and restore its ability to function efficiently and honestly before moving forward.

The problem is not a lack of awareness about the need for reform. The U.N.'s most ardent supporters and even the secretary-general himself publicly acknowledge its urgency. Of course, this is undeniable in light of the widespread abuses and scandals in activities ranging from humanitarian programs to peacekeeping. The report released by Paul Volcker's Independent Inquiry Committee, exposing the corruption in the Oil For Food program and harshly criticizing the performance of the U.N. Secretariat, only provides the latest evidence.

The problem cannot be attributed to a shortage of reform ideas. To his credit, the secretary-general commissioned a high-level panel to put together a U.N. reform proposal earlier this year. Newt Gingrich and George Mitchell produced an excellent consensus document on U.N. reform. So why is the U.N. unable to reform itself? Fundamental flaws in the structure and membership of the organization make not only management reform, but also the mission of the entire organization, highly dubious.

. First, the U.N. is dominated by countries that do not have a vested financial interest in efficient organization. Just eight countries pay almost 75% of the budget. The U.S. alone contributes 22%. Common sense dictates that those who "have skin in the game," who have invested literally billions, have a greater interest in seeing their funds spent properly than those who do not make the same commitment.

. Second, the U.N. has become a jobs program for many countries. Hiring is steeped in patronage and nepotism. This partially explains the waste that pervades U.N. operations, and means that reform that might result in a leaner organization is going to be opposed from the outset. Reforms designed to curtail corruption will face a similarly uphill battle.

. Third, there is the power of regional blocs. These shut out Israel from full membership, yet accord human rights violators such as Cuba, Zimbabwe and Sudan membership on the Human Rights Commission.

. Finally, the General Assembly offers countries that have little influence outside the U.N. a rare opportunity to run the show, as it accords the same rights and privileges to dictatorships as it does democracies. In the Assembly, which will be responsible for turning summit pledges into real action, countries such as Myanmar have the same voting power as the U.S. The taste of power otherwise marginal states get has translated into an unwillingness to delegate sufficient administrative powers to the secretary-general, who ultimately must be afforded the authority to enact U.N. reform.

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If the U.N. is to genuinely reform itself, it needs visionary and credible leadership. Mr. Annan, whose management failures are unambiguous, is simply too weak to muscle through an effective reform package. We should begin looking for new leadership now.

U.N. reform carries a price tag. Those who care about the U.N. can put their money where their mouths are. Mr. Annan has proposed a buyout of some of the U.N.'s entrenched bureaucracy to make way for a new cadre of the world's best and brightest. I would challenge U.N.-supporters with deep pockets, such as George Soros and Ted Turner, to make an investment in reform by helping to reinvigorate the U.N. staff.

The good news is that this summit is not the end of the reform process. There is still opportunity to create a credible human rights body, to achieve transparency, and to develop meaningful oversight of operations. But it is still highly questionable whether this will come to fruition.

And if it does not? Too much of the debate in Congress is focused on whether failure to achieve reform should result in automatic or discretionary withholding of dues. The reality is that this failure may undermine Congress' willingness to appropriate any funding to the U.N. Dollars can easily be targeted to other international organizations dedicated to humanitarian and security efforts -- NATO, the OAS, the WHO, the Global Fund, or the Red Cross. President Bush put it best during his speech to the General Assembly: "If member countries want the United Nations to be respected . . . they should begin by making sure it is worthy of respect."

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