

**UN-U.S. RELATIONS 2007:
THE ROLE OF THE
UNITED STATES IN THE UN**



**NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON
AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY**

ROUNDTABLE REPORT
(with NCAFP Policy Recommendations)

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Our Mission

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy was founded in 1974 by Professor Hans J. Morgenthau and others. It is a nonprofit activist organization dedicated to the resolution of conflicts that threaten U.S. interests. Toward that end, the National Committee identifies, articulates, and helps advance American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism.

American foreign policy interests include

- preserving and strengthening national security;
- supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, religious, and cultural pluralism;
- improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds;
- advancing human rights;
- encouraging realistic arms-control agreements;
- curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons;
- promoting an open and global economy.

Believing that an informed public is vital to a democratic society, the National Committee offers educational programs that address security challenges facing the United States and publishes a variety of publications, including its bimonthly journal, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, that present keen analyses of all aspects of American foreign policy.



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Foreword

The present moment in UN-U.S. relations is revealing; both strains and strength are on display. Although controversies between Washington and Turtle Bay are often spotlighted to dramatic effect—notably Iraq and the oil for food scandal—the ubiquity of UN-U.S. cooperation in attaining common interests on a range of critically important international issues cannot be masked. Multilateral engagement is no longer a question of “if” but “how.” Following the National Committee on American Foreign Policy’s (NCAFP’s) August 2006 special report on U.S.-UN Relations, the purpose of this report is to examine UN-U.S. relations, especially the role that the United States plays in the UN, and probe its implications from the point of view of the UN.

On May 7, 2007, the NCAFP hosted a one-day roundtable featuring two consecutive closed-door roundtables with academic, practitioners, and media specialists. It was followed by an early evening panel at which members discussed candidly how the United Nations reacts to and copes with U.S. power. Off-the-record sessions allowed for a free and frank exchange of ideas. The roundtable considered UN perspectives on the U.S. role in the organization with only tangential references to the broader question of the role of the UN in the U.S. strategic equation. The deliberations reflected a diversity of views: some points of widespread and substantive consensus and other areas in which significant discord remains. Respecting the reservations expressed by the latter, the report concludes with the NCAFP’s recommendations for enhancing the U.S. presence in the UN in the spirit of the former.

The National Committee expresses its gratitude to the conference organizers, the Honorable Donald Blinken, NCAFP trustee, and Professor Benjamin Rivlin, project director on UN-U.S. Relations. Thanks also to Peter J. Hoffman who is the author of this summary. The NCAFP acknowledges the invaluable collaboration provided by the UN Foundation in realizing this project. Finally, the NCAFP is especially grateful for the vital support provided by Mutual of America in sustaining our efforts.

For more on the NCAFP’s project on UN-U.S. Relations, see <http://www.ncafp.org/projects/USUNrelations/index.htm>.

George D. Schwab, President
National Committee on American Foreign Policy

The Focus of the Roundtable

The May 7, 2007, workshop concentrated on analyzing the role played by the United States in the UN. Deliberations focused primarily on UN perspectives, though the wider context of multilateral engagement invariably informed the discussion. In brief, the roundtable parsed UN-U.S. relations from many angles—the respective views of the parties; historical ties and the current political configuration; and prospects for the relationship in a rapidly changing world. This report presents, without attribution, an overview of the deliberations and differing perspectives expressed during the workshop and concludes with a set of recommendations reflecting the views of the NCAFP.

The discussions noted that shortly after assuming office as the UN's eighth secretary general, Ban Ki-Moon declared that among the "significant challenges" that "must urgently be tackled" is "bolstering the relationship between and among the Organization and its member countries." He continued: "I look forward to reenergizing our Organization and to turning a new page in relations between the Secretariat and Member States."¹ Foremost among the latter is the United States, whose relationship to the UN is unique by virtue of its being (1) the sole superpower (i.e., the most powerful military and economic power); (2) the largest single contributor to the UN budget; and (3) the host country of UN headquarters in New York. Thus the challenge to the UN posed by U.S. relations stands out as the most pressing among the many challenges coming from the 191 other member states. During his administration, former Secretary General Kofi Annan recognized the serious implications for the UN of this state of affairs when he asked, "in a world that has become 'unipolar,' what role should the United Nations play?"² The basic issue that has been central to this relationship, particularly since the end of the cold war, was characterized by Leslie Gelb's assessment of the UN: that it "can't live with the U.S.; can't live without it."³ That this apt observation was made during the secretary generalship of Boutros Boutros-Ghali is indicative of the chronic challenge that the United States poses to the United Nations.



The Role of the United States in the UN

The United Nations was born in the closing days of World War II out of a grand bargain among sovereign states that agreed to cede some of their authority to an organization that could achieve common goals that individual states could not accomplish on their own. The United States has always played a vital role in the UN, having been instrumental in seeding and sustaining the organization. The United States served as host country for the founding conference in San Francisco in 1945 and has continued to host the organization in New York since 1946, as well as contribute substantial financial resources—from more than 50 percent initially to about 25 percent currently. In recent years a souring of relations has led many in the United States to question the value of the relationship to American national interests.

As international politics changes, so too does the UN, and the role of the United States at the UN lies at the heart of this change. In 2003 President Bush stated that if the UN did not support the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it risked “irrelevance.” Though many at the UN bristle at the thought that not siding with the United States would automatically relegate the UN to oblivion, even Kofi Annan noted at the time that the organization had reached “a fork in the road.” Accordingly, our primary focus is discerning what role the United States does and should play in the United Nations. Before sketching a history of both conflict and cooperation in UN-U.S. relations, examining recent strains, drawing some conclusions from deliberations, and looking ahead to next steps in the relationship, two preliminary comments regarding the nature of the United States and the United Nations as political actors are in order. First, both the United States and the UN are “multifaceted”—each is composed of several parts that may have distinct agendas and therefore may not operate coherently. Second, UN-U.S. relations provide a setting that frames the role of the United States at the UN. A brief review of the UN and the United States reveals their respective complexities as actors.

The United Nations

The world organization was established, in the words of the UN Charter’s preamble, to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war,” charged, in the first instance, “to maintain international peace and security” and to foster “cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural or humanitarian character, and promoting human rights.” The UN is not a world government but an organization of sovereign states. The organization was designed “to be a center for harmonizing the actions of states in the attainment of these common ends.” The organization channels

opinions and builds consensus around ground rules, if not the content of policies, and thus promotes and facilitates coexistence among states. However, the UN is no monolith, and indeed one could easily substitute the phrase “192 member states” for the title “United Nations” in order to convey its diversity accurately. In fact, all states, not just the United States, pursue their own interests at the UN. Grounding the UN on sovereign states is an inherent contradiction—it presumes that a global collective interest has been agreed to and that it can transcend the provincialism of national interests. In addition to this flawed premise, the organization is divided in other ways. One major cleavage is between the “North” (industrialized powers) and the “South” (poor states). Whereas the former directs the UN toward a security and stability agenda, the latter concentrates on development and a more just economic system. This sort of tension is omnipresent and exists in several organs.

- The Security Council (SC): The most powerful body within the organization, it has authority to determine threats to peace and security and when force may be used. It is made up of 15 members—the “Permanent Five” (P5) (the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China), each of which has a veto, and 10 rotating members, who have votes but not vetoes. Since the end of the cold war, the SC has been much more active, authorizing many more peacekeeping operations. In recent years, however, the United States found itself at odds with other members. In 1990 the SC was united in authorizing force to expel the Iraqi military from Kuwait, but in 2003 it refused to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq.
- The General Assembly (GA): This is the most representative body within the organization; all 192 member states have a vote. The GA is capable of expressing the collective political will of members, but it rarely can muster such unity. Given the size and scope of this organ, forging a consensus in this forum is quite difficult. As a result, the GA has become more about political theater than political power. In particular, the developing world of the South may present unity in posturing against U.S. interests, but this masks the separate and at times rival interests within the South.
- The Secretariat and the Secretary-General (SG): Although the power of the SC and the drama of the GA tend to receive most diplomatic and media attention, the Secretariat performs a great deal of the behind-the-scenes administrative work on behalf of the organization. The Secretariat is charged with oversight and management duties. The position of the SG has apparently evolved from being mostly an administrator—though his ability

to hire and fire personnel is restricted because he must have the approval of member states—to being the world’s top diplomat, a widely respected and impartial interlocutor. However, it is important to recognize that he is fundamentally more “secretary” than “general”; he must lead and take initiatives, but he must do so with caution and restraint. As Article 100 of the Charter states, “In the performance of their duties the Secretary-General and the staff shall not seek or receive instructions from any government or from any other authority external to the Organization.” And it continues, “Each Member of the United Nations undertakes to respect the exclusively international character of the responsibilities of Secretary-General and the staff and not to seek to influence them in the discharge of their responsibilities.”

- Specialized Agencies: Aside from the above, there are a host of specialized agencies that have been established by internationally negotiated mandate, some predating the establishment of the UN. Such agencies include the International Labor Organization (ILO), the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the World Bank (IBRD), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Although they are part of the UN family, they have their own charters, budgets, directors, and governing bodies. The workings and activities of the specialized agencies were outside the scope of the roundtable, which was concerned with the workings of the UN organization headquartered at Turtle Bay in New York City.

With such an array of organs and a host of influences emanating from it, the United Nations is a convenient catchall for describing a range of public goods provided by the organization, but it may not be helpful in pinpointing how the UN actually works, including what role the United States plays in it. To that end the roundtable focused on the influence of the United States on the Secretariat, the SG, and any units operating under their authority (e.g., the Human Rights Council) rather than attempt to tackle the entire bevy of UN aspects that dovetail with or potentially affect U.S. interests.

The United States

Although the United States was instrumental in establishing the UN and for many years afterward the UN bolstered U.S. interests, U.S. national interests remain. As *The Economist* reminds its readers, “America’s allies sometimes imagine that America’s superpower state has transformed it, or ought to have transformed it, into some giant disinterested force for peace and good. But America is a nation like any other; its own interests almost always come first.”⁴ The United States has several components that must be considered in evaluating

UN-U.S. relations and conceiving of means to strengthen this relationship. For the purposes of U.S. involvement in international affairs, four actors are important.

- Executive Branch: The president of the United States and his staff conduct the country's foreign policy. This authority includes nominating the ambassador to the UN.
- Legislative Branch: The U.S. Congress shapes UN-U.S. relations in more subtle but often just as powerful means: through budget allocations and formal approval of cabinet and other senior diplomatic appointments. The U.S. Senate also has legal responsibility for ratifying U.S. participation in treaties.
- National Media: In an age when media images shape attitudes and actions, the national press (print, radio, television, and increasingly Internet based media) informs perceptions of the UN.
- U.S. Public: The public is at the fulcrum of power in U.S. politics generally; thus its views of the UN underline long-term sensibilities and in the short term may influence relations.

In addition to being complex actors that have difficulty mustering coherent policies, the United States and the UN have views of each other that are key to determining whether the United States will play a role at the UN and if so, how.

What the United States Is to the United Nations

As stated earlier, the United States established the UN, was and remains its single largest financial contributor, and still serves as the host country for the headquarters of the organization. In reflecting on the U.S. role, Richard Holbrooke dubbed the United States as "the indispensable nation." Although the United States has been a benefactor of the UN, its unrivaled superpower status puts a significant wrinkle in this relationship. Indeed some at the UN have likened the United States to an "800-pound gorilla." A British journalist noted the prevalence of this sentiment: "Everybody around the world, particularly when I go back to Europe, asks, 'Isn't the place just a puppet of the United States? Isn't it just run by Washington?'"⁵ The vision of the UN as a check on power to prevent domination and aggression from dictating world affairs rests on inducing U.S. power to contribute to the UN as a counterweight. Thus there is a contradiction implicit in the U.S. role at the UN; on the one hand, the involvement of the United States gives the UN added capability, but on the other hand, a pronounced U.S. role may diminish other voices and may erode the UN's credibil-

ity. Given the aforementioned multifaceted nature of the UN, the likelihood of a single perception of the United States in the halls of the UN is unlikely. Different perceptions of the United States exist among the 191 other member states and the thousands of UN international civil servants who come from all corners of the globe.

What the UN Is to the United States

Although the central concern of this report is the U.S. role at the UN, its function is affected by its expectations and its experience with the UN. As are issues regarding what the United States is to the UN, the value of the UN to the United States is controversial. Some suggest that the UN contributes to U.S. national interests by developing multilateral decision-making mechanisms that foster political support for the established political order. In this sense, the UN facilitates burden sharing. By contrast, others argue that the UN creates an unwieldy bureaucracy that drains resources and affords states an opportunity and an organization to unite in and undermine U.S. diplomacy.

Models of the U.S. Role in the UN and the Current Moment

The central driver of UN-U.S. relations is the distinct premise of each party—U.S. national interests versus the UN’s transcendent global interests. For most of the UN’s history and still on most issues, U.S. and UN interests coincide. However, where interests diverge, both have suffered a loss of credibility and capabilities. The deep values shared by the United States and the UN, coupled with a centrifugal tension over the scope of U.S. influence and the potential for the UN to impede U.S. actions, have fostered a “love-hate relationship.”

Three models of a U.S. role at the UN have been put forward and have been seen at different times.

1. Engaged Partner: This occurs when the United States contributes resources, participates vigorously, and allows the mechanics of the UN to operate in an unfettered way. Proponents of this approach emphasize that having a forum for multilateral decision making enhances U.S. interests in the long run.
2. Convergent Cooperation: This occurs when the United States nurtures the UN to engender a specific outcome. This model appreciates the distinction that there may be temporary agreements despite long-term interests that may differ.
3. Distant Rival: This occurs when the United States is concerned that UN politics will not facilitate the desired outcome. There are two schools of thought in this camp: The first, which is associated

with Robert Kagan, is that the UN is unimportant and is no real challenge to the United States. The second, usually identified with Charles Krauthammer, is that the UN is important but an obstacle for the United States. Accordingly, this approach is based on the U.S. undermining the UN and convincing others that the flaws of the organization have rendered it ineffective.

UN-U.S. relations can perhaps best be characterized as an ambivalent alliance in which circumstances perennially propel each side to question its value but ultimately to recognize its necessity. Beyond issues of right and wrong are the nuts-and-bolts issues of how to operate under imperfect and often uncontrollable circumstances. Politics has been characterized as the “art of the possible,” and therefore the task undertaken by this roundtable was to survey the history that informs UN-U.S. relations, as well as investigate the current moment, in order to spotlight the content and extent of viable compromise between the two and advance the objectives of both.



The “Roller Coaster” of UN-U.S. Relations

Though the roundtable aimed to address current relations in defining a role for the United States in the UN, virtually all in attendance made references to earlier periods to suggest a range of what is possible in the relationship and to give some context to recent strains. This section briefly reviews conflict and cooperation between the UN and the United States. Two trends are noteworthy: First, U.S. foreign policy toward the UN has ebbed and flowed with the evolution of U.S. interests. It should be remembered that during this time—the 1990s—the United States rose from being *a* world power to being *the* world power. Since the founding of the UN, there have been times when the United States has been a midwife to and a guardian of the UN and periods when the United States was a fierce critic and actively working to weaken the organization. Second, changes in the composition and functions of the UN have affected relations with the United States. As more sovereign states joined the ranks of the UN following decolonization, the expansion affected how the organization conceived of global interests. Furthermore, in the struggle to maintain international peace and security, the UN has taken on new responsibilities and developed new capabilities. In short, over the past 60 years, shifts in the interests and power of the UN and of the United States have produced up-and-down fluctuations—a “roller-coaster” effect—from warm embrace to bitter estrangement.

At the time of the founding of the UN in the mid-1940s, the United States anticipated a strong role that led one senator, Thomas C. Hart of Connecticut, to deem the United States “the essential cog in the international organization.”⁶ Both President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his successor, President Harry S. Truman, thought that the UN was a vehicle for uniting the world behind U.S. leadership and strongly lobbied Congress and the U.S. public to support the fledgling institution. In fact, as pointed out earlier, U.S. support was so strong during this period that during the 1950s, U.S. contributions paid for half of the UN’s budget.

From the start of the UN, the nature and limits of compromise were tested. For the organization to be truly global, it had to acknowledge the sovereignty of all member states, and this became a bedrock principle of the UN Charter. Moreover, for the UN to thrive, it had to give special prominence to the victorious powers of World War II—the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France. The provision giving the P5 vetoes over decisions by the U.N. Security Council ensured that the new organization’s power would

never be used against this group of states. The dual compromises of sovereignty for all states and vetoes for the P5 were accepted by members—a majority of them Western states. At this historical moment the United States was the only nuclear power, possessed the largest economy, and had an anti-imperialist stance. The UN, therefore, provided the United States with stability for what it wished to preserve (its military and economic power) and pushed for change where it sought it (ushering in decolonization and democratization).

The unity of the founding period was short-lived because it was based “on one major premise which proved wrong: that the great Powers would jointly underwrite international peace.”⁷ As the cold war took shape from 1946 through 1948, the United States experienced mounting frustration over the participation of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless there were also some UN accomplishments that bolstered U.S. national interests. In 1950, after North Korea attacked South Korea, the United States worked through the Security Council to obtain authorization to use force to halt the aggression. Moreover, the UN organized a coalition that provided troops and money to realize this goal. In 1956 when Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula concurrent with the United Kingdom and France’s intervention (the “Suez Operation”) in Egypt, the United States sought to defuse the conflict and preserve existing political and territorial arrangements. Again the UN provided a forum for U.S. views, and its rules gave legitimacy and support to U.S. policy as President Eisenhower referred to the UN Charter in opposing Israeli, British, and French actions. In general, the United States benefited from the UN during the cold war because it prevented local disputes from erupting into full-blown world wars. Indeed there was such strong convergence between the United Nations and the United States that during the first 25 years of the organization’s existence, the United States never used its veto in the Security Council. Other early achievements that conformed to U.S. interests include promoting decolonization, establishing the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), development work, and environmental protection.

Changes in UN functions also occurred early with U.S. backing. Although the position of the secretary general had initially been conceived as purely administrative, the SG took on more overtly political roles. SG Dag Hammarskjöld was an innovator who saw the job of SG as “the world’s diplomat,” and where there was need for a credible international negotiator, he crafted a role. For example, he negotiated the release of the crew of a U.S. B-29 that had been shot down on an intelligence-gathering mission over China. Hammarskjöld would later use the political capital produced by this

success to help establish peacekeeping operations.

As stated earlier, decolonization led to many new member states for the UN, and by the early 1960s the West no longer constituted a majority in the General Assembly. Not only did this era see changes in the UN, it also witnessed changes in U.S. national interests. Many new members viewed the United States as oppressive, and the United States came to perceive the United Nations as bureaucratic and cumbersome. The U.S. ambassador to the UN in the late 1960s, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, concisely captured U.S. feelings about the U.N. in the title of his memoirs of that time, *A Dangerous Place*.⁸ The U.S. sense of alienation from the UN deepened during the 1970s. In particular, activities in the General Assembly were cause for concern—exemplifying this were the passing of the resolution equating Zionism with racism and demands for a “New International Economic Order.”

Despite these rifts, UN-U.S. relations improved in the late 1970s. President Carter worked to rebuild the image of the United States at the UN, stressing a shared interest in human rights—a core value in his foreign policy. After Ronald Reagan was elected U.S. president, the relationship was more restrained, but like most of his predecessors, Reagan recognized that there were many points of agreement between the United States and the UN. In a postpresidency speech in October 1993, he even called for the UN to form a standing military force.

The 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq led to a resurgence of UN-U.S. relations. The cold war had ended, and a clear violation of international law had been perpetrated. The threat of a substantial proportion of Middle Eastern oil being controlled by Iraq also likely spurred worldwide interest in this episode. As such there was political convergence at the UN, and the U.S. military operation to oust Iraq from Kuwait was strongly supported. From the U.S. point of view, the UN became a focal point for burden sharing in the war, and a variety of states contributed to the military effort. Believing that the defeat of the Iraqi military in the liberation of Kuwait might result in the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime, President George H. W. Bush sought to include UN peacekeepers for a postwar, post-Hussein Iraq. Within UN circles there was a note of pleasant surprise regarding the “George Bush euphoria about the UN.” Although this never transpired—Baghdad did not fall in that war—Bush would go even further in 1992, offering to train UN military forces at Fort Dix. With the dark days of UN-U.S. relations in the previous decades behind them, the relationship was poised to flourish in the 1990s.

The U.S. public was taken with the UN in the early 1990s; the chal-

lenges of Iraq, humanitarian disasters in Africa, and new states in Eastern and Southeastern Europe highlighted their mutual interests. However, there were several notable shocks during the 1990s that overshadowed traditional UN-U.S. commonalities. In Somalia in 1993, the UN had authorized the delivery of food to combat famine but was hindered by warlords. In an act celebrating a strong U.S. presence in the UN, the United States dispatched troops to assist the effort. Although the operation began as one of humanitarian relief, it quickly morphed into calming a civil war. The U.S. attempt to arrest Somali warlord Mohammed Aided led to U.S. soldiers being overwhelmed by local militia forces and their bodies being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu—the now infamous “Blackhawk Down” episode. Both the United States and the UN blamed the other and resentments returned. The debacle resulting from a feeble response to the genocide in Rwanda further cemented the U.S. perception that the UN was a failure. Typifying the contortion of UN-U.S. relations in the mid-1990s, although President Clinton wished to pay U.S. dues to the UN, the U.S. Congress would not authorize the funds. By 1999, when the United States sought Security Council approval to respond to ethnic cleansing by Serb militants in Kosovo, U.S. patience with the UN was minimal. Therefore, after the Security Council deadlocked over authorizing force, the United States turned to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to showcase broad political support for military intervention. However, many within the UN supported the idea of a military intervention. Even Kofi Annan commented that though he viewed U.S. actions in Kosovo as verging on illegal, they were legitimate.

From the founding of the UN in the mid-1940s through the end of the 20th century, UN-U.S. relations fluctuated. There has not been a linear progression but rather a great oscillation. Part of the difficulty in articulating trends in conflict and cooperation in UN-U.S. relations is that they occur at multiple levels simultaneously. The utility of the relationship may not always be visible in Security Council deliberations; instead the value may derive from ongoing development work. Though it is true that there are highs and lows, it is important to acknowledge what has been and what can be accomplished when the United States pursues its national interests through the UN.



Recent Strains in UN-U.S. Relations

Since the roller coaster of relations underwent its last cycle of engaged partnership and distant rivalry in the 1990s, Washington and Turtle Bay entered a period that featured the rise to an intense apex and then a sliding descent to what some consider an all-time nadir. As noted in the previous section, U.S. reservations about the UN were balanced by its contribution to a stable political order that favored U.S. national interests and the protection afforded by a veto on the Security Council. Nevertheless, there have always been some in the United States, including senior members of Congress, who remained skeptical about the value of the UN. After the tangled and tenuous experience with the UN in the 1990s, the United States expressed its concern about the prospects that the UN would evolve toward a world government. In a statement before the Security Council in January 2000, Senator Jesse Helms expressed the fear that the UN was trying to become “the central authority of a new international order of global laws and global governance.” He then laid out the conventional wisdom regarding the extent to which the United States would work with the organization. “[A]ll of us want a more effective United Nations. But if the United Nations is to be ‘effective,’ it must be an institution that is needed by the great democratic powers of the world. Most Americans do not regard the United Nations as an end itself—they see it as just one part of America’s diplomatic arsenal. To the extent that the UN is effective, the American people will support it. To the extent that it becomes ineffective—or worse, a burden—the American people will cast it aside.”⁹

In the seven years since those words were spoken, the United States and the UN forged new and common ground on terrorism in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks, but in other ways the relationship has become profoundly strained. Each has shown enormous frustration at the behavior of the other. The roundtable assessed the respective grievances of the United States and the UN. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it is illustrative of recent strains.

U.S. Grievances

The framing of most U.S. grievances against the UN critiques a culture of secrecy and unaccountability in the organization. However, these criticisms are not just about the management of the Secretariat but also about the degree to which UN actions reflect U.S. national interests.

1. Oil for Food Program (OFF): Following Saddam Hussein’s initial attack on Kuwait in 1990, the Security Council instituted sanctions to put pressure on Iraq. Years of war and internal strife were

compounded by these economic measures, and by the mid-1990s humanitarian conditions had become abysmal. For instance, from 1991 through 1998, 270,000 children died of malnutrition; 75 percent were preventable, but sanctions limited deliveries of food and other essentials. Starting in 1996 the Security Council allowed Iraq to sell oil to fund humanitarian assistance to civilians, and the “661 Committee” (named for the SC resolution that authorized it) monitored these sales. From 1996 to 2003 (the start of the U.S. intervention) oil exports generated approximately \$64 billion plus a few billions in interest. The program fed many Iraqis—from 1996 to 2001 average caloric intake almost doubled from 1,200 to 2,200. However, there was also corruption. Two investigations were launched into OFF, and both determined that funds had been diverted, though their findings differ over the extent—the Volcker Commission report states that 98 percent of funds went where intended; the Government Accountability Office report puts the figure at 93 percent.¹⁰ Although estimates vary, the total amount skimmed by the Iraqi government was roughly \$1.8 billion.

In the discussion of the OFF, the UN Secretariat and the secretary general were criticized as corrupt and unaccountable. However, it was noted that all members of the SC were fully aware of oil sales that violated the sanctions regime. In fact, several of the P5 had good reasons for permitting Iraqi oil deliveries that sustained key regional allies. For the United States, this meant oil for Turkey and Jordan; and for Russia and France, Syria continued to receive energy resources. Participants were divided over the severity of the crisis presented by OFF. All agreed that reforms are necessary to prosecute those who engaged in mismanagement or other manipulations. Some argued that this was representative of fatal flaws in the organization, whereas others contended that the magnitude of corruption was overblown and bred a crippling myopia.

2. Definition of Terrorism: September 11 reordered the U.S. agenda at the UN and led to important Security Council and General Assembly resolutions and other multilateral actions to address the scourge of terrorism. However, the lack of clarity regarding what terrorism is under international law has limited taking further steps. The United States seeks a definition of terrorism that meshes with its interest in stopping anti-Western Islamic extremists. Although there is mostly a consensus at the UN on a general definition, there remains disagreement over whether to include state terrorism and national liberation movements. In the view of the United States, this is another example of the UN’s preference for an inclusive process over an expeditious and desired outcome

when order and U.S. national interests are at stake.

3. Peacekeeper Involvement in Criminal Activity: UN peacekeepers are deployed to unstable areas to guard against violence and in the course of operations often encounter powerless civilians. Although a vast majority of UN peacekeepers have performed admirably, several high-profile cases involving staff in Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and East Timor have rattled the organization. Some participants remarked that images of peacekeepers in brothels have greatly eroded confidence in the UN. Others noted that such regrettable actions are uncommon and increasingly infrequent despite the tremendous expansion of peacekeeping activities.
4. Human Rights Council (HRC): The United States has traditionally played a prominent part in UN human rights work, sitting on the UN Commission on Human Rights. However, the Commission had two major faults: It allowed violators to hold seats, and its size made the organ unwieldy. Furthermore, the United States saw the HRC's intensive focus on Israel as singling out that state and as behavior suggestive of members' ardent anti-American attitudes. The United States became a vocal critic, and in a round of reforms at the UN, the Commission was dismantled in favor of a new body, the Human Rights Council, which was established in March 2006. However, the new HRC is repeating the key mistakes of the Commission—in size, composition, and incessant condemnation of Israel. Moreover, the United States fears that the HRC will provide political cover to countries such as Iran, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Myanmar (Burma), Sudan, North Korea, or others that have engaged in widespread human rights abuses. Other victimizing states could use membership to silence or stop investigations or other meaningful actions of the HRC.
5. Transparency Practices: With calls for accountability the daily fare, the United States has sought to make the UN more transparent. Congress has been especially vociferous in demanding more information about how the UN allocates resources. Furthermore, some have called for UN senior staff to disclose their finances. In short, by instituting greater transparency—that is, clarifying who gains and how from UN activities—the United States seeks to end demoralizing and debilitating conflicts of interest and ultimately render stronger oversight at the UN.

UN Grievances

The UN is a global organization serving 192 masters, of which the

United States is but one. It does not and will not show preference for one state over others, and most of the UN's criticisms of the United States relate to this fundamental condition.

1. Preemption and the War in Iraq: The most divisive issue in UN-U.S. relations is the war in Iraq, as exemplified in the UN's objection to President George W. Bush's decision to use force without Security Council approval despite numerous SC resolutions condemning Iraq for failure to adhere to them. Preemption, or launching an attack based on another state's ability to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMD), is debatable under the UN Charter. When the United States attacked Iraq in March 2003, several principles of the UN were at stake—restraints on infringements of state sovereignty, conditions governing the lawful use of force, and the premise of multilateral rather than unilateral decision making. These criticisms became magnified as Iraq continued to spiral toward sectarian struggle and civil war.
2. International Criminal Court (ICC): The UN has been discouraged by the U.S. attitude toward international legal agreements regarding war crimes. Although the United States has supported tribunals in many cases, it refuses to sign on to the International Criminal Court. The United States claims its own legal apparatus is best suited to addressing instances of possible U.S. involvement in war crimes and is concerned that its soldiers and diplomats not be subjected to the authority of the ICC. The United States has gone so far as to sign bilateral agreements with numerous states that host U.S. military forces in order to protect U.S. personnel.
3. Limits on Greenhouse Gases: The United States has been rebuked for abstaining from international efforts to limit greenhouse gases, most visibly the Kyoto Protocol. In 1992 when the International Panel on Climate Change first devised voluntary goals to reduce emissions, the United States supported those efforts. But the 1997 Kyoto Protocol requires signatories to decrease their carbon emission by about 5 percent of 1990 levels by the year 2012. Although many advanced industrial states signed the agreement, the United States did not for economic and political reasons. First, such limits have been viewed as curtailing economic activity and thus pose a threat to growth, livelihoods, and prosperity. Second, the United States maintained that emission caps uniquely and unfairly target American interests because other large and rapidly growing emitters such as China and India were exempt from controls. This furthered the perception of the United States that environmental protections are a Trojan horse for other states to use to condemn and constrain

the United States. The refusal of the United States to accept the principles of the Kyoto Protocol, let alone the practices favored by it, has sparked criticisms that the country participates in international institutions only when it can cash in on an immediate gain. However, some participants echoed a belief common in the UN that the United States may lack the vision to recognize that participation in the UN and other mechanisms of global governance yields long-term gains.

4. The Development Gap and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): The gap between rich and poor continues to widen, and many observers have stipulated that until the fruits of development are more widely available, global political turmoil will persist if not worsen. At the forefront of UN efforts to tackle poverty, disease, famine, and other worldwide afflictions are the Millennium Development Goals. The MDGs call for wealthy states to contribute 0.7 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) to promote development in poor countries. Although the U.S. government is the single largest donor of overseas development assistance, it does not give at the rate prescribed by the MDGs.
5. Arrears: The UN relies on the fees and contributions of member states to fund its activities, but the United States has been vacillating in its commitment. The amount of contribution required is determined by the size of a state's economy, and consequently the United States has always paid the largest assessment. Starting in the 1980s and taking hold in the 1990s, Congress used the failure to pay dues to the UN to communicate a political message of disapproval. The difference between what is owed and what has been paid has mushroomed in the last few years, and in 2008 U.S. arrears to the UN will be nearly one billion dollars.

The UN's issues with the United States are also manifest in personnel. The appointment of John Bolton as ambassador to the UN was seen as provocative. Bolton's comments regarding the need to reform the UN, especially those that pertained to the physical destruction of parts of UN headquarters, were viewed as hostile and uninformed. However, as several participants emphasized, UN-U.S. relations did not hinge on Bolton's personality, and there continued to be much diplomacy conducted between the UN and the United States during his tenure.

Thus while tensions in the UN-U.S. relationship garner headlines, other stories reveal significant ties. The case of Iraq exemplifies the dichotomy of divided but mutually dependent relations. Most visibly the OFF scandal brought U.S. frustrations with the organization to

center stage. This culminated in Senator Norm Coleman calling for Kofi Annan to resign. However, when Annan left office, President Bush gave him a surprisingly warm send-off. That happened despite the perspectives of most in the UN, including most member states as well as personnel who worked in the Secretariat, that the U.S. intervention in Iraq was illegal. It took place because it reflected the perspective that UN actions have served U.S. interests. For instance, at Bush's request, Annan dispatched his most effective deputy to Iraq, Sergio de Mello. Iraq remains controversial—some in the United States continue to disparage it, and some at the UN still consider it to be the primary source of global instability. But the need to end the violence there and instill peace in the region has altered the agendas of the United States and the UN. Although strains will linger in UN-U.S. relations, participants agreed that a stronger role for the United States at the UN would be instrumental in protecting national interests.



Conclusions: Change, Challenges, and Common Ground

The roundtable aired a variety of perspectives on UN-U.S. relations—those who see the UN as a long-term partner, those who view it as an instrument when interests converge, and those who believe that the UN is more hindrance than help. This section presents the roundtable’s contemporary snapshot of UN-U.S. relations, assesses what is possible in the relationship, and ends with a look ahead to consider future challenges and shared interests.

Ambivalent Allies? An Evaluation of UN-U.S. Relations

In tracing the “roller coaster” dynamic in UN-U.S. relations and reflecting on recent strains, there was a strong expression in the roundtable that the current moment is filled with ambivalence regarding the U.S. role in the UN. There is a key trade-off at work in the relationship: In terms of gains, the UN contributes to the implementation of U.S. national interests. Although the UN represents the interests of 192 member states, including the United States, which are engaged in pursuing their own interests—its actions benefit U.S. national interests by distributing burdens and acting as a credible interlocutor. For the United States as the world’s superpower and principal beneficiary of stability—peacekeeping, development, and other UN activities that contribute to the maintenance of international order are major assets. On the other side of the ledger, the UN places some constraints on the United States. Some find the lack of U.S. control over the organization troubling, particularly considering the amount of money the country provides. However, most participants articulated the belief that the long-term stability fostered by the UN makes a strong role for the United States essential. A recent Pew survey indicates that respect for the UN has diminished to record lows among the U.S. public. Although such a decrease hints at tension, the numbers also demonstrate that a majority of Americans are adamant in their support for the UN. In addition, many participants commented that the UN recognized the superpower status of the United States and was open to revitalizing UN-U.S. relations. The views exchanged at the workshop underscore the observation that a weakening of ties is more the weathering of age than a fundamental withering: The United States will continue to pursue its own national interest while the UN strives to reconcile all 192 interests. The 191 interests aside from those of the United States may propel the organization to oppose preferential treatment for the United States, but the bonds forged of history and shared interests are stronger than is perhaps routinely acknowledged.

Although a few participants were despondent over the UN and encouraged seeking other avenues to pursue U.S. interests, most stressed that the UN “is easy to break but hard to fix.” The roundtable emphasized that given recent setbacks in the relationship and the stakes of U.S. disengagement from the organization, the United Nations and the United States have much to gain from increased cooperation but have far to go before U.S. goals are realized.

Limits to and Opportunities for Change in UN-U.S. Relations

The roundtable struggled to place U.S. interests into the context of an organization split by the conflicting national interests of 192 member states. A frequent lament is that for the United States to play a larger role at the UN, the organization must be reformed. The question is how—in which ways should the UN be changed and what means can be used to achieve these ends? Such interests must be situated within what is realistic. Participants noted several critical bottlenecks to changing the relationship before considering opportunities.

- Can the United States Change the UN? The United States has considerable influence at the UN—most notably the power of the purse and a veto in the Security Council—but it cannot compel an organization that relies on input from 192 members. In his first press conference since being inaugurated as the eighth secretary general on January 1, 2007, Ban Ki-Moon was questioned on his selection of staff and his approach to Iraq. A reporter underlined the salient concern, “Are you worried, Sir, that you might have given the wrong impression about the level of independence from the United States positions, considering they backed your appointment strongly?”¹¹ This sensitivity demonstrates the visceral desire within the UN to be responsive to the interests of all members, not only U.S. national interests.

In addition to an organizational culture that objects to the overbearing influence of the United States, there are structural limitations to changing the UN. The Charter is virtually impossible to change—it requires a level and range of support among member states that cannot be mustered. Some clauses in the document are historical artifacts that have been held over because of the difficulty in changing the Charter. For instance, the Military Staff Committee meets regularly with one item on its agenda—determining the date of the next meeting. Similarly, there are references to antiquated organs such as the Trusteeship Council and restrictions that allude to “enemy states.”

At its base, the UN is an endless diplomatic negotiation among

member states, and therefore the only way to alter the organization significantly is to change the interests of all parties. The UN is reactive—it is more responsive to the rigors of active crises than well-intentioned forecasts of the future. The UN itself arose out of World War II, and it will likely take another global catastrophe that reshapes the interests of all member states for a dramatic restructuring of the organization to occur. Consequently, the United States should find common ground with the UN rather than push for its wholesale transformation. Such an approach was deemed preferable and possible.

- Chances for Changes in UN-U.S. Relations? Although participants were skeptical that the United States could single-handedly remake the UN, they expressed the belief that improved relations were possible. In particular, there are three sorts of opportunities that could revitalize the role of the United States in the UN.

1. *New Threats:* The UN usually takes a reactive approach to the security problems of the major powers. Hence the emergence of new types of global threats may inspire a new level of cooperation. For instance, the perception of the need for an effective and timely response to global warming would necessarily establish a role for the United States, which is among the largest consumers of energy and producers of chemical agents that result in a rise of temperatures. U.S. power has often dictated the timing and terms of engagement with the UN, but new threats to national interests that cannot be met without working through the UN may change the disposition of UN-U.S. relations. Another example might be a public health disaster such as a pandemic.

2. *New Personnel:* Some participants suggested that in many ways people matter more than reform programs—that is, getting the right type of personnel in place is more effective and realistic than revamping structures and rules. Accordingly the change of administration in the Secretariat creates an opportunity. From the other side, a change of administration in the U.S. government will happen in 2009 when President Bush's term ends. Although no one knows who will be the next president of the United States or what his or her inclination toward the UN will be, it is clear that U.S. political leadership can make a difference in embracing or shunning the organization. John Bolton, who was seen by many in the UN as an intentionally inflammatory appointment, has since been replaced by Zalmay Khalilzad who is viewed as more sympathetic and suited to the position of U.S. ambassador to the UN.

This change has not shifted U.S. interests, but it may make the presentation of U.S. interests more palatable to the UN and in the end may benefit the United States.

Divergent Interests and Common Ground

The final area of deliberations recognized the fundamentally contentious nature of international politics and involved a discussion of the notion that reconciling the divergent interests of the United States and the UN is often elusive. Compromise underlies the “art of the possible.” Implicit in this recognition is the observation that both the United States and the UN make concessions in their interactions. In such arrangements, neither party is uniformly happy or achieves all of its aims. Since the founding of the UN, the position of the United States in the world has not changed greatly. It was and remains a world power with a vested stake in the maintenance of world order. In 1948 George Kennan wrote that the United States has “50% of the world’s wealth but only 6.3% of the population. . . . Our task is to maintain this position of disparity.”¹² By comparison, at present the United States has approximately 4 percent of the world’s population and consumes roughly 25 percent of global oil production. In short, this suggests that U.S. interests will continue to diverge from those of the UN.

However, this divergence does not mean that common ground cannot be found on specific issues. Several participants pointed to democracy as a value shared by both the United States and by many in the UN. Furthermore, many argued that the promotion of democracy should be the focal point for meaningful partnership. Although the United States has sought to establish or encourage democracy around the world, its ambitions have not been as successful as hoped—many democracies were not stable and did not last. Moreover, some would appraise the current attempt to bring democracy to Iraq through the use of force as an abject failure. However, according to a 2005 study by the Rand Corporation, the UN has had some success in nurturing sustained democracies.¹³ Therefore, UN-U.S. collaboration on democracy can be a win-win situation—the United States gains a bigger role in the UN and spreads a most hospitable form of political governance; and the UN receives resources for its work and maintains its position as a hub of multilateral decision making. Crises will continue to wrench UN-U.S. relations, but joint ventures in areas such as democracy permit a mutual pursuit of interests.



NCAFP Recommendations

With global crises pertaining to war, terrorism, poverty, environmental degradation, and international leadership looming, improved UN-U.S. relations are essential. In recognition of the complexity of issues and the multiplicity of actors that shape UN-U.S. relations, the sessions identified three sets of overlapping and corresponding arenas for action—for the UN Secretariat, U.S. foreign policy, and members of the media.

UN Secretariat

Publicize the mechanics, achievements, and shortcomings of the UN: To correct misinformation or misunderstandings, the UN should embark on a major public relations campaign to explain UN decision-making procedures and other management issues. For example, the resolution condemning Zionism was passed by the General Assembly against the wishes of the secretary general. In retrospect the UN has been branded as being uniformly opposed to Israel largely because of the shameful work of the now defunct Human Rights Commission, and issues regarding Israel remain a chronic point of contention in the successor Human Rights Council. The UN Information Center in Washington, D.C., should be given additional resources and authorized to sponsor workshops and lectures, perhaps in cooperation with the U.S. Institute for Peace, to foster greater knowledge of the organization. It is imperative for the UN to put its stamp on its accomplishments and whenever appropriate to be proactive in refuting criticisms.

Furthermore, more regular contacts between senior officials at the UN and the United States should be instituted. The deputy secretary general should be available to speak about her responsibilities to professional conferences in relevant fields and to foreign policy interest groups, especially those on the West Coast and in the Southwest.

Within the UN there should be greater focus on the performance of the UN, not only its principles. The Secretariat must train its personnel to acknowledge not only the gains that accompany UN membership but also the losses experienced. The UN should provide a six-week intensive education course for tour guides so that they can give tour groups a more complete picture of the organization.

The United States

1. Articulate the U.S. role in the UN to the U.S. public: The United States should clarify to the public its manifold interactions with the UN. The merits of partnership should be presented, as should the sacrifices that membership entails. Senior foreign policy offi-

cials—both in the executive and legislative branches—should organize regular briefings to depict what the United States is doing at the UN, what limits the organization is under, and what the net result is.

2. Provide adequate resources to the UN: The United States has explicit responsibilities to pay assessments to the UN. The rift about resources has not completely ruptured the relationship. To prevent that from happening and to restore the confidence of other member states, the United States must meet its obligations. The United States should also consider offering troops for UN peacekeeping operations.

Members of the Media

1. Embed in peace operations: The media can help demystify the UN by offering portrayals of UN work from within. Journalists should embed in peace operations in order to gain that perspective and communicate the position of the organization more effectively.
2. Provide information about the neglected as well as the high profile: Media consumers are notorious for their attention deficiencies, but media professionals can bring about necessary balance. While news coverage of the UN tends to hover around the illicit and the extreme, the day-to-day story of creating order needs to be told. Journalists have a responsibility to be watchdogs, and that means reporting about otherwise neglected issues and aspects that may be less exciting but represent the full tapestry of UN work. In terms of UN-U.S. relations, media coverage must flesh out not only threats found in episodic crises but also the continuity and advantages of long-term partnership.



Notes

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