

Reform of the United Nations Security Council and the Role of Latin America

Whatever one's position during the heated debate over intervention in Iraq, analysts and policymakers generally agree that the United Nations (UN) emerged from the ordeal as a wounded institution. Supporters of the invasion lamented the Security Council's impotence in enforcing its own resolutions, while opponents of the war fretted over the organization's inability to temper the actions of the world's sole superpower. Several traumatic events in 2003 led UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to conclude that the organization was at a "fork in the road." These included not only the bitter Security Council wrangling over Iraq, but also revelations about the oil-for-food scandal and the terrorist bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad. In September 2003, Annan established a panel to assess the changing landscape of threats facing the international community and to recommend UN reforms aimed at effectively addressing these new challenges. The High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges, and Change released its report in December 2004, laying out a broad agenda for reform, including proposals to reconfigure the Security Council to be more 'representative' of the international community.

On April 18, 2005, as part of its project on Creating Community in the Americas, the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars convened several distinguished current and former permanent representatives to the UN to discuss potential reforms and the implications for Latin America. Speakers agreed that a major restructuring was needed

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but recognized that many obstacles still stand in the way of reaching a global consensus on how to effect change.

Former U.S. Secretary of State *Madeleine K. Albright*, who also served as permanent representative to the UN from 1993 to 1997, recounted attempts in the early 1990s to restructure the Security Council to better reflect the global power structure. She noted that many of the factors responsible for scuttling previous attempts at reform remain. A 1993 proposal, for example, to include



Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Ambassador Emilio Cárdenas, and Ambassador Heraldo Muñoz



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Germany and Japan as permanent members met strong resistance from Italy. Chinese opposition to Japan's inclusion and potential Mexican and Argentine opposition to Brazil are major challenges facing current reform efforts. In addition, Albright noted that shifting alliances and voting blocs—such as the EU 'common position'—add a convoluted dimension to Council decision-making. Albright cautioned that enlarging the Council threatened to further complicate this dynamic.

Despite these obstacles, Albright noted that addressing the issue of Security Council membership was central to achieving the larger reform package put forward by the Panel report. Albright stated that the United Nations is both a "flawed



Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright

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organization” and a “very important organization,” and reforming it is vital to its future. She suggested that, regardless of the many challenges confronting proponents of reform, the Secretary-General might be in a better position to push through reforms than at any other time in the recent past.

Argentina's former Ambassador to the UN, *Emilio Cárdenas*, emphasized that the reforms recommended by the High Level Panel go “way beyond the Security Council” and could potentially entail amending the UN Charter. Cárdenas traced the debate over UN reform back to the “quick fix” proposal in 1993 to add Germany and Japan as permanent members to the Council. These two countries, he noted, are still referred to as “the enemy” in the UN Charter, even though they are now the second and third largest contributors of UN funds. Despite Argentine support for the “quick fix” proposal, it was opposed by most states and Security Council enlargement never materialized.

Turning his attention to Latin America, Cárdenas observed that most countries in the region have not sought a position in the Security Council, considering it merely an additional complication in developing foreign policy. Brazil is the only Latin American country that has consistently campaigned for permanent-member status and has been successful in garnering regional support for its bid. In assessing the motives for why an increasing number of countries around the world desire Council membership, Cárdenas identified three factors: the respect and leadership that stems from representing a region; the increased access to the global major powers and the prospect of achieving gains through ‘quid pro quo’ negotiations; and the “cascading effect” of permanent members winning board memberships in all of the various UN agencies and committees.

Everyone needs a vibrant, dynamic, effective UN.

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The project on “Creating Community in the Americas” is supported by a generous grant from the Ford Foundation.

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While supporting the reform efforts, Cárdenas cautioned that the Secretary General's call to develop a consensus on Security Council reform before the next summit was unrealistic and unlikely to produce results. Cárdenas expressed skepticism about the idea put forward in the Panel's report that any changes would be 'provisional,' and he rejected the idea that potential Council reforms would be subject to reevaluation in 2020 as disingenuous. Lastly, he warned that the recent rise of tensions between China and Japan, sparked in part due to debate over Council reform, could potentially have serious economic and security consequences if not resolved.

Describing himself as a "moderate optimist" on the prospect of UN reform, *Heraldo Muñoz*, Chilean Ambassador to the UN, pointed to several factors that make reform efforts more likely to succeed now than in the past. These include the impact of the Iraq war, the oil-for-food scandal, and a growing recognition that the global power structure has changed. Many countries have accepted that it will be impossible to address terrorism and pandemic diseases in a globalized world without strong multilateral institutions like the UN. In short, "everyone needs a vibrant, dynamic, effective UN," including the United States, which has relied on the UN to provide assistance to the Iraqi interim government in organizing elections and helping in the preparation of a new constitution.

Muñoz noted that the Security Council has become increasingly effective in the aftermath of the Cold War, which explains why so many countries desire membership. He also acknowledged that a reform proposal calling for one new Council seat for a representative country from "the Americas" presents a challenge for Latin America. The lack of specified criteria for membership complicates the reform effort and contributes to regional competition for the limited seats available. Muñoz suggested that the criteria could include gross national product (GNP), GNP per capita, financial and other resource contributions, or general diplomatic initiatives.

Strengthening the UN to address new global challenges requires wide-scale reform, but reconfiguring the Security Council is but one component out of many that must be addressed. Other

recommendations that Muñoz described as essential include depoliticizing the Human Rights Commission, developing criteria for the use-of-force (without amending the Charter), adopting the concept of "the responsibility to protect," and the creation of a Peace-building Commission. Since some countries support one reform but not another, making it difficult to develop unanimous support for any one proposal, Muñoz argued that all of the reforms must be addressed together. Muñoz described such a strategy as a "New Deal for the UN," where industrialized states would achieve changes they desire (a more modern Secretariat, a global definition of terrorism, and a global effort to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction) in exchange for supporting initiatives important to developing states (increased attention to development, disease, and poverty-reduction; and a more representative Security Council). By framing the reform package as a compromise where all countries gain support for the changes they desire in exchange for accepting other less-advantageous reforms, Muñoz suggested that a major overhaul of the UN may indeed be possible.

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Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Ambassador Emilio Cárdenas, and Ambassador Heraldo Muñoz

In general, the panelists all agreed that reform of the United Nations was essential to maintain its effectiveness in addressing the changing challenges of the twenty-first century. However, they warned that disagreements over whether the Security Council should be reformed and, if so, how it should be reformed, threaten to undermine the

entire reform package proposed by the High Level Panel. While much progress has been made with regard to sparking open debate about what direction the organization should take, the panelists' analyses suggest that the UN today remains at a pivotal yet uncertain point in its history.

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