

REINVENTING THE UNITED NATIONS



Poul Hans Lange

D THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS WAS THE FIRST GENERATION OF GLOBAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE U.N. WAS THE SECOND. IT IS TIME TO DESIGN A THIRD-GENERATION ENTITY.

BY TAD DALEY AND DAVID LIONEL

rive from San Francisco across the Golden Gate Bridge and turn left, and you will arrive before long at John Muir Woods, home to the oldest living things on Planet Earth. Walk along the path back into the forest for a few miles, and you will come across a heavy metal and stone plaque set squarely into the earth. It is dated April 29, 1945 — 10 days before the surrender of Nazi Germany, more than three months before the atomic devastation of Japan, less than three weeks after the death of arguably the greatest statesman of the age. The plaque says this:

F O C U S

“Here in this grove of enduring redwoods, preserved for posterity, members of the United Nations Conference on International Organizations met on April 29, 1945, to honor the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Thirty-Second President of the United States, Chief Architect of the United Nations, and Apostle of Lasting Peace for All Mankind.”

The work of that architect has stood the test of time. But the challenge that apostle chose to take on is at least as acute today as it was six decades ago. And a whole host of new challenges have emerged, ones simply not on the radar screen of the framers who met in San Francisco during that fertile spring.

Today the world faces non-state terror networks, failed states, intractable poverty, AIDS and other pandemics, the challenge of governing transnational corporations, climate change and other forms of chronic environmental degradation. Despite promises of “never again,” we see genocides repeated in Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur — places remote from great-power interests and therefore unlikely to motivate international interventions. We witness one state trying to stem the tide of nuclear proliferation while insisting on retaining and indeed improving its own vast nuclear arsenal — seemingly oblivious to both the contradiction in that position and the futility of such an enterprise.

The structure of the U.N., too, has become embarrassingly anachronistic: Britain and France are only medium-rank world powers by any reckoning, yet both hold Security Council vetoes. In contrast, Germany, Japan, India, Brazil, and many other nations possessing significant geopolitical weight have virtually no voice.

Since the U.N.’s inception, those who feel like they

weren’t invited to the party have pleaded to make the United Nations more legitimate, more accountable and more representative of the peoples of the world. Several initiatives marked the organization’s 50th anniversary in 1995, including the Commission on Global Governance, the Independent Working Group on the U.N. in Its Second Half-Century, the “Preferred Futures for the U.N.” symposium, and the South Center’s report, “For a Strong and Democratic United Nations.” Many of these plans were backed by Nobel laureates, former heads of state, and distinguished scholars and practitioners with vast experience in the global governance arena. Yet they all went nowhere.

Nearly a decade later, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change issued a report in December 2004, offering several recommendations to revitalize the U.N. system. A follow-up document, *In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All*, further explored those ideas in March 2005.

At a summit just before the opening of the U.N.’s 60th General Assembly session in September 2005, world leaders intended to inaugurate a package of reforms that, it was hoped, might equip the world organization with at least some promising new tools to cope with challenges likely to arise over the next six decades or so. For six months before that meeting, Amman’s panel focused on identifying politically attainable results that governments might actually adopt. These were compiled in an imaginative 38-page “Outcome Document” that contained many genuine advances.

Enter, stage right, John Bolton, the new U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Despite Republican control of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bolton was so unpopular that President George W. Bush ended up sending him to New York in August 2005 under a recess appointment through the end of 2006. His first act was to reject 35 of the agreement’s 38 hard-won pages. A frantic three weeks of negotiations restored barely 10 watered-down pages, which was all that was left for signing at the summit. Some excellent proposals survived, including a Human Rights Council, a Peacebuilding Commission, and a Democracy Fund. But it was hardly the profound revitalization of the United Nations system it might have been. And thanks to perfunctory media coverage, most Americans barely knew the summit took place —

Tad Daley, who led an initiative called the “Campaign for a New U.N. Charter” during the U.N.’s 50th-anniversary year in 1995, is now Peace and Disarmament Fellow in the Los Angeles office of Physicians for Social Responsibility, the Nobel laureate anti-nuclear organization. David Lionel, president of the Earth Television Public Education Foundation, is a veteran producer of video documentaries portraying the historic U.N. civil society forums of the past 15 years, including those in Rio in 1992, Istanbul in 1996, and the Millennium Forum in New York in 2000. He is developing a weekly digest of the vast quantity of U.N.-produced TV programming that is presently unseen in the United States.

let alone the dimensions of the missed opportunity.

If the League of Nations was the first generation of global multilateral organizations and the United Nations the second, it is high time to begin considering the architecture of a third-generation entity. What kind of United Nations system would we create if we were designing it from scratch today? Here are some of the issues that, for the most part, have been conspicuous mostly by their absence from the global governance policy debate.

The Security Council

In the past decade or so, several important initiatives have advanced not so much by changing the Security Council, but by going around it. The Rome International Criminal Court Treaty and Ottawa Landmine Treaty, for example, were both initially kept off the U.N. agenda by the United States. In response, smart coalitions of middle-power governments and civil-society organizations generated enough political momentum to actually bring into being two brand-new multilateral treaties, despite

Washington's intransigent opposition. The ICC and the landmine ban are clearly here to stay. And we have likely not seen the last of this new technique for changing the international political status quo.

Still, those near-term successes hardly obviate the need for longer-term structural transformations. Perhaps the most important of these is the veto. Few things could be more profoundly undemocratic than a rule that allows a single state to stand opposed to the rest of the world, and command the rest of the world into impotence and inaction.

Even when a veto is not actually cast, veto calculations dominate virtually every decision the Security Council makes. Why? Because it is always necessary to get all five permanent members on board. Has there been any exercise in the past decade more inequitable (or cynical) than the one in December 1996, when the vote to reappoint U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to a second term tallied up at 14-1 ... but the "one" won? If we believe, as Churchill insisted, that "democracy is the

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worst form of government — except for all those others,” then we ought to aspire to democracy at every level of human governance.

Many schemes have been put forth over the decades for modifying the veto. Perhaps it could be limited to only the most vital matters the Security Council considers — rather than extending to everything on its docket. Perhaps for other matters it could be transformed into a supermajority requirement — say, three of the five permanent members and nine of 15 total members. In American elections, after all, 60 percent is usually considered a landslide.

It's often declared as self-evident that the U.S. “would never give up the veto” — that is, give up our ability to prevent the rest of the world from doing something we don't want it to do. But the veto's existence also allows other countries to keep us from doing something, too. Consider an initiative Washington wants very much to pursue, which garners the support of 10 or 11 or even 14 Security Council members. If it is Russia, China, Britain or France that stands opposed, the U.S. is forced to choose between dropping the initiative or pursuing it without council authorization and in defiance of international law. This, of course, is why curtailing Iran's nuclear program has been so difficult, because the five have consistently had very different ideas about how to proceed. This is what happened in early 2003, when the U.S. abruptly dropped its efforts to secure a resolution authorizing a U.S. invasion of Iraq, and launched such an invasion anyway — illegally, in the view of most international lawyers.

Inextricably intertwined with the question of the veto is the question of the composition of the Security Council. Few things could be more profoundly anachronistic than a body owned and operated by the five victors of a war that ended in the first half of the last century. Many schemes for democratizing the council have been put forth over the decades. There is little point in rehashing the respective merits of various plans here, beyond noting that virtually all of them focus on bringing a small number of new great powers to the table, to provide a voice to presently unrepresented regions. Perhaps one day we will see the emergence of enough political will to actually bring one of these schemes into existence.

If humanity wants to avoid some of the cataclysmic scenarios that are all too easy to conjure today, we must try to envision much more dramatic changes in our glob-

al public policymaking processes — changes that will bring a much larger transformation in representation, legitimacy, accountability and universality.

A Broader Democratization

Some have described the often-ineffectual U.N. General Assembly as embodying the principle of “one nation, one vote and no power.” Surely the time has long since come to give serious consideration to a weighted voting system in the General Assembly — similar to those already used in the International Labor Organization, the European Union and the international financial institutions.

One longstanding idea is the “binding triad” proposal, promoted for years by the late Richard Hudson of the Center for War/Peace Studies, under which vote tallies would calculate not only the number of states voting for some measure, but also the number of people represented by those states and the number of dollars contributed by those states. Consider how much legitimacy would be conferred on initiatives that had secured support from a majority of states, a majority of people, and a majority of those paying the bills.

In Hudson's vision, such a system of three simultaneous majorities would have enough credibility to grant to the General Assembly the same kind of power to enact binding international law over other matters that the Security Council now possesses over war and peace matters: the ability to legislate.

Professor Joseph Schwartzberg of the University of Minnesota has done elaborate mathematical analyses of how both the binding triad and other weighted voting schemes might actually operate in practice. Nongovernmental advocacy organizations ought to start counting and promoting those tabulations now — to illuminate the simple proposition that the mechanism for representation decided upon in San Francisco in 1945 is not the only possible kind.

Another advantage of this approach is that it would provide a tangible incentive for nations to fulfill their funding obligations to the U.N. promptly and consistently. The more you pay, the greater your clout. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, under the suzerainty of Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., a few years back, might not have been so quick to withhold our dues to the U.N. had our voting power there been directly diminished as a consequence.

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Incidentally, a variety of other alternative financing schemes has been advanced over the years. The most well-known of these is the “Tobin Tax,” which would fund U.N. activities and other worthy international undertakings through a trivial levy on international currency transactions. Other proposals include similar levies on national defense expenditures, international arms sales or national carbon emissions. Among the most innovative of these is the “International Finance Facility,” a central repository for aid and disaster funds contributed in advance — rather than in panic mode after the fact.

Many ideas have also been advanced to provide a voice at the U.N. for more than just the appointed representatives of national governments. One is to establish a “U.N. Parliamentary Assembly,” where elected representatives from various national legislatures would convene

***A call for an Article 109
charter review conference
could become a powerful
mobilizing force in
civil society.***

Assembly.” Here in Los Angeles, we get to pick our representatives for the city council, the state assembly and state senate in Sacramento, and the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate in Washington, D.C. Not, however, beyond that. Why not? After all, a directly-elected transnational legislature already exists: the European Parliament. A woman in Aberdeen, for example, elects someone to represent her there, in Edinburgh, in London and in Strasbourg. Why can’t all citizens of the

together in an international forum. Even if only advisory, such an assembly could give citizens a more direct voice on the world stage. Such an assembly could lead to the emergence of true transnational political parties — a historic step forward for democratic political participation.

Even better might be to create a directly elected “U.N. People’s

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world do something like this no matter where they live? Even if only advisory, such a world assembly could give people who feel impotent and powerless somewhere to go to express themselves on the great challenges facing the human race. It might even move some to choose this as the vehicle for conveying their grievances — rather than suicide bombings or crashing airplanes into skyscrapers.

Getting the Ball Rolling

One strategy to actualize many of these potential strengths was envisioned by the San Francisco framers themselves in Article 108, which details the process for making particular revisions to the U.N. charter, and Article 109, for summoning “a general conference ... for the purpose of reviewing the present Charter.” Moreover, convening such a conference is not subject to the great-power veto. Such a meeting can be called by a vote of two-thirds of the General Assembly and any nine of the 15 Security Council members. (Incidentally, the language of Article 109, Section 3, indicates that the framers expected the member states to summon such a “general conference” after only 10 years — in 1955.)

A call for an Article 109 charter review conference could become a powerful mobilizing force in civil society. It would provide something tangible and specific to urge upon our governments, while leaving open what might ultimately emerge from the process. It could assemble a broad coalition of supporters who might hold a number of different visions for a world order, but who could all agree on pursuing the process laid out in the charter itself to define the most appropriate vision for the challenges of the 21st century.

In 1945, Robert Maynard Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, feared that the simultaneous dawn of both a timid U.N. charter and a new atomic age meant that “mankind has made up its mind for self destruction.” So he assembled some of the greatest intellectuals of the day, and grandly designated them “The Committee to Frame a World Constitution.” Are there any philanthropists out there who might consider launching a “Committee to Frame a New U.N. Charter” today? It is hard to imagine anything that might better serve as an engine of our global political imagination.

Singapore’s U.N. ambassador, Kishore Mahbubani, says the organization is “based on the strange principle that nation-states pursuing national interests will some-

how take care of our global commons.” John Kenneth Galbraith, who died earlier this year, said not long ago: “The greatest political conflict of our time [is] that of national interest as opposed to transnational concern and responsibility.” And the late George F. Kennan, arguably America’s pre-eminent 20th-century foreign policy sage, floated the idea of a global “House of Councilors,” whose members would explicitly not represent nations or regions, but instead strive to identify the perspective of the whole, the transnational vital interest, the global public good.

Perhaps we can peer even further into the future. Many thinkers have maintained that it is within the power of the human imagination to envision abolishing war itself. Many have suggested that organizing the world into separate sovereign states, each pouring enormous quantities of treasure, talent and often blood into the ability to make war on other states, is perhaps not the end of history. Many have imagined that someday there may be a next step in the social evolution of the human species.

Nearly 700 years ago, in his *De Monarchia*, Dante insisted, “to achieve a state of universal peace and well-being, a single world government is necessary.” That remarkable proposition was elaborated in Immanuel Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*, Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *A Lasting Peace Through the Federation of Europe*, H.G. Wells’ *A Modern Utopia*, Emery Reves’s *The Anatomy of Peace*, Vernon Nash’s *The World Must Be Governed*, Wendell Willkie’s *One World*, Bertrand Russell’s *Toward World Government*, G.A. Borgese’s *Foundations of the World Republic*, Mortimer Adler’s *How to Think About War and Peace*, and Grenville Clark and Louis Sohn’s *World Peace Through World Law*. And that same proposition was forcibly defended — especially around the middle of the last century — by figures like Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Sigmund Freud, Arnold Toynbee, E.B. White, Norman Cousins, Oscar Hammerstein, Carl Van Doren, U.S. Supreme Court Justices Owen Roberts and William Douglas, and future U.S. Senators Alan Cranston, Harris Wofford, Paul Simon and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Many of them felt their hearts as well as their heads moved by the words that had been uttered a century earlier by Alfred Lord Tennyson, who dreamed of the hour when we might “hear the war drum throb no longer; see the battle flags all furled, in the parliament of man, the federation of the world.”

F O C U S

The San Francisco Charter itself, in its very first sentence, states that its principal purpose is “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.” Perhaps we might permit ourselves the intellectual freedom to believe that we might one day live up to that noble calling.

The Pragmatism of Idealism

Few of these global governance reform proposals, admittedly, are likely to be politically realistic in the near term. The veto, for example, might be the single most intractable feature of global governance, because — as *The Economist* magazine put it so pithily several years ago — “the vetoers can veto a veto of the veto.”

But how will we ever get rid of the veto if no one even says that we ought to do so? How can we ever change the political realities of the near term if we don't even discuss what might be desirable in the long term? If politics, as every undergraduate knows, is the art of the possible, then this kind of conversation can serve as

a catalyst for expanding the parameters of political possibility.

We began this article with a visit to Muir Woods. Now get back on the Golden Gate Bridge, cross back into San Francisco, turn left at the Bay Bridge to Oakland, then continue east until you reach the National Mall in Washington, D.C. At the Jefferson Memorial you will find these words: “I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.”

The time has come for us to weave a new coat for a third-generation world organization. We must seize the opportunity to invent a garment of our own, one designed not for our ancestors, but for weathering the storms, exploring the vistas, and reaching for the promise of the uncharted 21st century. ■

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